Would That Make You Happy?

by OnaDacora

Summary

The 'Reader' character is named during the course of the fic, utilizing some of the thematic elements of the game itself. She is actually an OC, so please take that into consideration before reading.

Frisk is your child, the result of a teen pregnancy, but they've always been told that you're their older sister. In an effort to get away from your own abusive mother, the two of you end up falling into the Underground, where Sans is startled by this abrupt change in what had become a predictable pattern of events. Maybe your presence is what is needed to stop the endless cycle of Resets.

After many struggles, both internal and external, you and your found family reach the surface, only to face even more difficulties from the society you weren't sure you'd ever see again. You meet new friends and encounter people from your past, though for good or ill, you're not sure. Sometimes it's difficult to tell kindness from cunning.

ACT One: (The Underground) Chapters 1-70 --- 171,021 Words
ACT Two: (The Surface) Chapters 71-180 --- 303,988 Words
ACT Three: (The Font) Chapters 181-???
(All smut chapters include warnings. Current number: 9)
We Have Fallen

You were fourteen when you had Frisk. Too young. You're twenty now, and sometimes the c-section scar still itches.

You were afraid to become a mother. How could you be a good one, when your only example was so bad? Recovery from the surgery was harder than you thought it would be, but your mother was there to take care of Frisk at least. You were worried about the idea of breastfeeding, but you were never given the chance to even try. Your mother was selfish, you realized later, by insisting she be the one to feed your child. To 'let you rest' she said.

She stole your baby from you, and in your fear and self-doubt, you let her. You wondered many times if she loved Frisk more than you. Maybe, you hoped, it would mean she would take better care of them than she had of you.

She insisted that Frisk call her 'Mama'. When your baby looked at you, eyes wide with anticipation, you told them you were their sister. When Frisk grinned and babbled out 'Sissa' you hated yourself. Your mother smiled at you.

You finished school right before Frisk started. You began working right out of high school, at your mother's insistence. You needed to start helping to support the family. The only times she acted like Frisk was yours instead of hers was when it came to money. You owed her your paychecks for all the work she had done raising your child.

You didn't dare argue. When Frisk was out of the house, she had no problems hitting you.

You came home from work (a local restaurant, the owner knew your mom and took pity on you) late that night. The night everything changed. Your mother was drunk —God it had been so long, you had hoped maybe, just maybe, it had stopped— and Frisk was crying. They had their back to the living room wall, clutching their cheek and staring up at your mother with saucer-wide eyes.

She turned on you, a bottle of wine sloshing in her hand. "Oh good, you deal with them. I'm sick of this shit," she snarled, glaring at you and then leaving the room.

This had never happened before. She never hurt Frisk, never. Frisk just looked up at you with tears welling in their eyes as you rushed to their side.

You reached out and grabbed their shoulders, suddenly afraid. For both of you. "What did you do?" you hissed.

Frisk's mouth opened and shut, no sound coming out as they stared at you with fear instead of relief. "N-nothing!" they finally stammered out.

"You can't make her angry, Frisk. She'll just hurt you, please you have to be good." You had to make them understand, to protect them. You were so afraid, it was easier to be good, to be quiet, than to try and fight back.

And Frisk had always been strong willed. You had always worried it would get them in trouble, and now it was. You needed to squash it down, for Frisk's sake. They needed to be weak.

Like you.

What... what was that? Something like... deja vu? No, that couldn't have happened.
Frisk was still standing by the wall and you were still in the entryway. They watched you, uncertain about what you were going to do. Seeing the fear in Frisk's eyes, the way they looked at you for help...

It filled you with determination.

You scooped them up, hugging them tight to your chest. Frisk whimpered in your arms, squeezing you as hard as they could. How could you have let this happen? You knew what she was capable of, you should have taken Frisk away from here as soon as you turned eighteen. But you had been afraid. You hadn't been determined enough to make things right.

That was going to change. Now.

"I'm sorry," Frisk mumbled into your shirt, sniffling. "I think it's my fault."

"No," you told them, voice sterner than you expected. "Don't you ever think that. She's wrong. She's always been wrong. It's not your fault."

You felt the hard edges of the car keys squeezed in your fist. That was when you knew, it needed to happen now, while you had the nerve. While your anger was giving you more courage than sense.

"Get your sweater and put on your shoes, sweetie. Be quick," you told them, ruffling their hair and pressing a quick kiss to their forehead.

Frisk looked up at you, confused, as you let them go. "Where are we going?"

Right now you needed to go anywhere but here. Somewhere your mother wouldn't expect you to go while you figured out a plan. You said the first thing that popped into your mind. "Mt. Ebott."

You wake with the echo of what you think might be a laugh ringing in your ears. Eyes blinking slowly open, you can see the shaft of light filtering down from above. Your vision is ringed in yellow. You try to remember what happened. You recall spending the night sleeping in the car with Frisk, and then deciding to take a morning hike up the mountain. You tripped, and—

Gasping, you jerk upright. You realize you're in a bed of yellow flowers. But, where's Frisk? Sitting up so suddenly makes your head throb with pain, and you press your hand to your temple. You twist around, searching as you shift onto your knees, and a short distance away you catch sight of that familiar blue and purple sweater. Frisk has their back to you, hunched over a patch of bare grass outside the bed of flowers. There's some kind of red glow on the other side of them.

As the red glow fades, you see that Frisk is talking to someone. They're tall —taller than you—and... is that... fur? She—they must be a she, you decide—has long floppy ears and tiny horns, reminding you of a goat. You push yourself to your feet and the creature looks up from Frisk, her big bright eyes going wide at the sight of you.

"Oh my goodness," she says in a soft, sweet voice. It's her voice more than anything that puts you at ease. "My child, you didn't say there was someone with you."

Frisk turns to you with a wide grin on their face. It's the most you've seen them smile since before last night, you realize. "That's my Sissa," they say. Even though they could say 'sister' properly for years now, the nickname had stuck.
You know that if you want to, you can tell them the truth. But somehow, right now, it doesn't feel right. Don't the two of you have bigger things to worry about? Like figuring out where the heck you are? And who this goat-lady is?

"I see," the goat-lady says, smiling at you. "I am Toriel, the caretaker of these Ruins. Do not be afraid, I will take care of you both."

At least Toriel gave you her cell phone number before leaving the two of you to wait for her. Your own phone connected to some sort of network down here in the Underground. You can't call anyone on the surface, but you can reach her. Frisk commandeered your phone immediately after that.

They are also incredibly impatient, refusing to wait for Toriel to come back. Despite your weak protests, Frisk starts making their way through rooms of puzzles with you trailing behind. Occasionally you stop to make conversation with a passing monster — they're monsters, how is that possible? It's then that you realize what that red glow around Frisk had been. Something about the monsters draws it out of them, a glowing red heart that they say is their Soul.

The concept horrifies you, and you try to tell Frisk to leave the monsters alone, but they just smile up at you like you're the child. You have to admit, the monsters seem happier after they've talked to Frisk. Frisk perks up too, casting grins over their shoulder back at you. You shake your head but let the matter drop.

Frisk pulls your phone out of their pocket, dialing the only number you have that works. The phone is on speaker as it rings. Frisk is smiling.

"Hello, this is Toriel," she says, with the patience of a saint. This is probably the fifth time Frisk has called her already.

"It's me, Frisk!" they say, grinning. Toriel gives a sweet laugh in reply before Frisk keeps talking. "I just... I just wanted to let you know me and Sissa are still okay... Mom."

It feels as though someone has reached into your chest and is squeezing your heart. It shouldn't hurt you, since Frisk has never called you their mother, and has no way of knowing. But it does.

"Huh? Did you just call me... 'Mom'/?" Toriel asks, her voice quiet. "Well... I suppose... Would that make you happy? To call me... 'Mother'?"

Frisk looks shy all of a sudden, kicking at the stone beneath their feet with their old, ratty sneakers. They touch their cheek, where there's a faint bruise as the only reminder of what your mother did to them. "Yes," they mumble.

"Well then, call me whatever you like!"

Would that make you happy? To call me... 'Mother'? You wonder if it would make Frisk happy to know the truth. But...

...you aren't determined enough to try.
You don't trust Toriel.

Oh, she's perfectly nice to both of you, but you don't trust it. She's like a sitcom mom back before televisions had color. Too perfect, too kind. Maybe you're just jaded because your own mother is nothing like her. But it feels like she's hiding something.

She even baked a pie for the two of you.

You're confident your mom didn't even know how to bake a pie. You taught yourself how to bake a couple years ago so you could make things for Frisk. Because that's what mothers were supposed to do. You are pretty proud of your chocolate chip cookies, thank you very much.

Once you try to go down into the basement, and Toriel is beside you before you have a chance to make it down the steps. She guides you back upstairs with a firm—but gentle—hand on your shoulder.

Frisk adores her. They follow Toriel around like a puppy before finally collapsing for a nap in your borrowed bed. You aren't tired, however. You smooth back the heavy bangs on Frisk's forehead and kiss their temple before leaving. The door closes with a soft click.

Toriel is in the living room where you left her, reading a book in her recliner. Her large, doe-like eyes look up as you enter, and she puts a finger between the pages as she shuts the book. "My child, I was hoping to speak with you," she says, her voice soft.

You don't know how to feel about the way she addresses you. There's a part of you —a part that's Frisk's age with skinned knees and a snotty nose— that wants to curl onto her lap and let her read to you. To call her Mom the way Frisk does. The urge to stay is palpable, an ache in your chest. A longing for the kind of mother you never had but always wanted. But the rest of you rebells against it. You're an adult now, with a child of your own to take care of. You have to be the mother now, after avoiding it for so long. You won't let her take this opportunity from you.

You're determined.

Pulling out a chair from the table, you sit down with your hands balled into fists in your lap. Toriel clears her throat softly.

"Frisk has asked me how to leave the Ruins," she says, her voice careful and measured.

It's hard to contain your surprise. You would have thought that Frisk would be eager to stay here and let Toriel take care of the two of you.

"But you cannot do that," she says, looking down at the book in her hands. It's covered in old, worn brown leather. "It is too dangerous. He... It isn't safe. You must convince Frisk to stay, that it's for the best."

You shake your head. "We can't. We need to get back..." Home? Where was home now? "...to the surface." This place... it's no place for a child to grow up. Frisk has school, their entire life ahead of them. They can't stay down here with only you and Toriel for company.

"You will be safe here. We can be happy."
"Are you happy here?" you ask.

She opens her mouth to answer, but her brow furrows and she can't seem to find the words. Then her expression is sad. She looks up to meet your eyes and she's pleading with you. "You both will be safe here. I will take care of you."

"That's not enough."

Frisk makes a small, quiet groan when you climb into the small bed beside them. They roll over and press in close to your chest and you wrap your arms around them. Sometimes they used to crawl into your bed in the middle of the night, if they had a nightmare or there was a thunderstorm and they were scared. Your mother never let them sleep with her, and you'd never turned Frisk away.

"Sweetie, can I talk to you for a second?"

Frisk leans their head back, blinking up at you sleepily in the dark. You can see the faint light of the room shining in their eyes. "Hrm?"

"Toriel said you were asking how to leave," you say.

"I didn't think you wanted to stay," Frisk answers.

What? Are they trying to say that they did that because of you? "But what about you? I thought you liked Toriel."

Frisk smiles. "I do. She's nice, and makes good food, and cares about us. The monsters care a lot, don't they?"

They do, you realize. Every monster you'd met so far, down to each froggit and the skittish whimsuns. Even that shy ghost, Napstablook. They were passionate and emotional. Maybe that's what made them so fragile, too. It must be hard, wearing their emotions on their sleeves like that. It's an easy way to get yourself hurt.

Frisk's smile fades. "But we can't stay. I know we can't stay."

"What makes you say that, sweetie?"

They close their eyes and rock their head back and forth against your shoulder. They tuck in close under your chin, not speaking. It's quiet for a while, and you think the must have fallen asleep. You should too. It's been a long day, and even though you have no idea what time it is you're tired.

As you start to drift off, you think you hear a quiet voice mumble: "She'll get hurt if I stay."

You're alone in the small, twin-sized bed when you wake up. The rational part of your brain thinks that maybe Frisk just got up to use the bathroom, but nothing about this day has been rational so far. You wait for a few minutes, which creep by at a snail's pace, before you get out of bed. Sleeping in your clothes isn't the most comfortable —you tug a bit on your bra to stop it from digging—but you had little choice.
Your jeans rode up a bit while you were asleep so you pull them back down before slipping on your sneakers. They're your work shoes, designed to reduce slips on wet or greasy surfaces. After all this walking around the Underground, you're sure they'll be ruined by the time you get back. But hey, at least they're comfortable.

There's no sign of Frisk in the hallway. The bathroom is empty. So is the kitchen and living room. You hesitate for a moment before knocking on Toriel's bedroom, but there's no answer. You peek inside and it's empty too.

You woke up the morning after your mother struck Frisk and they were gone. Their bed was empty, not even a note left for either of you. For the first few hours you hoped they would come back when they got hungry.

But nobody came.

You realized that the last time they looked at you was with fear in their eyes.

A chill runs down your spine and you have to swallow past a lump in your throat. Something isn't right. You felt it when you woke up and now it's only more obvious. Where is Frisk? And where is Toriel?

There's only one place in the house you haven't checked. The basement.

You take the steps two at a time, and you're greeted by a long hallway. Walking as quick as you can without breaking into a jog, you follow it until you round a corner. There's a familiar red glow up ahead, and you can hear the low hiss of flames. You can hear Toriel's voice but you can't make out the words.

You're running now.

The hallway opens up into a large room, at the back of which is a tall, arched door. In front of that door is Toriel, kneeling on the ground with her arms around Frisk. A quick glance around the room doesn't reveal the fire you heard earlier, but at the moment you don't care.

Your footfalls slow to a walk, and you come to a stop a few paces away from them. Toriel releases Frisk and stands, looking at you as she does. Her eyes are sad, glistening with unshed tears. You step forward and place your hand on Frisk's shoulder. They don't look back at you, but they reach up to cover your hand with their own.

"Goodbye, my children," she says to you both, and as she walks around you, you can see that the door is cracked open. It must be the way forward.

You turn back, gripping Frisk's shoulder tighter as you pivot your feet. Toriel is hesitating, looking at you both as her tears slip into the soft white fur of her cheeks. Guilt hangs heavy in your chest. For a brief moment you want to scoop up Frisk and carry them upstairs. You want to eat cinnamon butterscotch pie in front of a magical fireplace and have Toriel tell you about all the uses for snails. You want to watch Frisk grow up with froggits for playmates and a large, gentle monster for a mother.

But the moment is gone. You're their mother. You can't keep letting yourself be replaced.

Toriel turns to leave. You don't say anything to stop her.

Now that you've found Frisk and you know they're safe, the fear from earlier warps in your chest and turns sour. You turn them around to face you, crouching so that you're eye-to-eye. They can
tell they've done something wrong; Frisk immediately glances away the moment your eyes narrow.

"Why did you come down here alone, what happened?" you ask, and you realize that the tone of your voice is hurt. Frisk hurt you by running off alone. By not trusting you. But, what reason had you given them to trust you? How much had you really taken care of them since they were born? "Were you going to leave without me?"

Frisk shook their head so vigorously that their hair whipped around their face. "No! Sissa, I just needed to make Toriel understand. And you were sleeping so good, I didn't want to wake you. I was going to come get you, I promise!"

Their eyes are wide as they look up at you, and you can't help but believe them. Frisk had always done things their own way, by themselves. When they were two years old they would fight with anyone who tried to help them do anything, from getting dressed to brushing their teeth. It was a miracle it had taken this long for your mother to reach the end of her patience with Frisk.

"Okay. Okay, sweetie, I believe you," you say, hugging them. You let out a shaky breath.

They hug you back. "We should go, Sissa. I don't want to make Toriel sadder."

You don't either. You wish you could stay in this peaceful home forever, but you can't.
There's another long hallway after that first door. It's quiet, the only sound the scrape of shoes across the stone beneath your feet. Even though Frisk was determined to keep going, they seem suddenly nervous now. They twist their fingers in the front of their sweater, tugging on the cuffs of too-long sleeves.

"You okay, Frisk?"

They don't seem to hear you, despite the way your words echo through the hall. Face scrunched a little, their eyes keep darting to the side like they're looking at something. You touch their shoulder and they jump. Frisk looks up through their bangs (you kept trying to convince them to let you trim them, but they refused) with a startled expression.

"Are you okay?" you repeat.

They nod, then look forward again as you continue walking. You think that maybe you should press the matter, insist that you suspect something is wrong. But you don't. You're not good at this.

You love them, so much it hurts sometimes. But you'd always taken the backseat when it came to the serious stuff. Scolding and lectures; that was your mother's territory. She was practiced. How could you discipline a child when you were still being disciplined yourself?

You ruffle their hair, earning you a familiar, annoyed grimace that you know is just hiding a smile. Being affectionate, reminding them that you're there with them and you love them... that's easier. That's familiar.

"Sissa!" they groan, batting your hand away and smoothing their hair.

You smile and lean down to pull the side of their head to your lips. Frisk grumbles, but they don't fight you. You're like this all the time, and they know it. You give them the hugs and kisses your mother denies. Love is something you have in abundance, and until Frisk there had been no one willing to take it. (Except maybe Frisk's dad... but, no. No, he'd been quick enough to abandon you. Your mother took his parents' money and you never saw them again.)

The hallway opens up into another room, this one with a small patch of empty grass in the center. On the other side of it is a set of pillars and another door. Something about it makes you think this is the last one, the true door that leads to the rest of the Underground. You wonder what it's like, this place where all the monsters live.

Frisk hesitates, coming to a stop as their head twists to search the room. You aren't sure what they're looking for, it's obvious that there's nothing there. Just some grass, somehow. How can plants grow down here with no sunlight? You have no idea. Another mystery stacked upon a dozen others. Your list of impossible questions keeps growing.

"...not here...?" they mutter, words muffled beneath sweater sleeves pressed to their mouth.

"Frisk?"

They look up at you, blinking. Their face is blank for a moment before they smile at you. It makes
you feel a bit better. "Nothing! I thought, for a second... but I was wrong." Frisk starts walking towards the door, leaving you to follow behind. You think you hear them say something like, "Feels familiar."

The light that slants through the door as Frisk opens it is blinding. You wince and shade your eyes, and if you didn't know any better you'd think it was sunlight, it's so bright. At least, it is when compared to the dimness of the Ruins. As you blink and adjust, you realize it's more like a cloudy day. It's just the whiteness of the snow that's hurting your eyes and making it seem brighter than it really is.

**Snow?** There's another addition to that list of questions. When you realize what you're seeing, a gust of wind blows through the door, sending a chill right through your thin jacket. Like this new area of the Underground is greeting you warmly. *Warmly?* You'd laugh but you're so shocked by the sudden change of temperature it makes you gasp. Your fingers fumble with the zipper of your jacket before jerking it up under your chin.

Frisk has already gone outside, so you hurry to catch up. You hesitate, then close the heavy door behind you. It only seems polite. There's a path leading away, through a forest of tall, dark, spindly trees. You wish you could ask someone how the hell all this works. Magic, probably. When confronted with such weirdness, the only solution is *magic*. It's the only thing that can possibly make sense. You left logic back on the surface.

Ahead of you, Frisk takes an exaggerated leap over a thick branch, arms swinging at their sides. Then, they bend down to gather up a handful of snow, patting it into a careful ball. Glancing back at you, you spy the mischievous grin spread over their face.

Oh no. "Don't you do it, kid!"

You duck and the snowball sails over your head, landing with a soft *fssh* of crumbling snow. Frisk is laughing, but they squeal as you lean over to gather up your own projectile. They're frozen in place, looking for someplace to hide.

The snowball hits them square in the chest and they're giggling now, trying to brush the ice off their sweater. Distracted, Frisk doesn't even notice you running towards them. You're careful to jump over that branch in the path, then wrap your arms around their middle. You lift them off their feet and spin. Laughter is filling the air, more laughter than you've heard in a long time from either of you. It's good. In this moment you're happy. Maybe this place isn't so bad.

A sharp crack rings out in the cold air and your laughter dies on your lips. You lower Frisk back to the ground, keeping yourself between them and the sound as you glance over your shoulder. There's nothing there. But... the branch. It's cracked into three pieces. A chill runs down your spine that has nothing to do with the cold.

"Come on, let's keep moving," you say, taking Frisk's small hand in yours.

"Wait," they try to argue, but you're not having it. You're spooked and you want to keep moving forward.

You hope you don't look too scared. Too late, you think that maybe you're only making Frisk more worried. With a quick glance, you see their eyes are downcast, looking at their feet as you hurry them along. You can apologize later, when you feel safer.

There's a small footbridge ahead, over which is some kind of wooden gate. It must be meant to keep out something bigger than people though, because you can already tell it would be nothing to
slip between the posts. As you're about to reach the bridge, you can hear heavy footfalls in the show behind you. Your grip around Frisk's hand tightens as they dig in their heels and you jerk to a stop.

"Wait," Frisk says again, tugging on you.

The footsteps behind you stop. You're certain there's someone behind you, and even though you want to run you can't. Not with Frisk fighting you. You open your mouth to say something, but you're interrupted.

"Humans. Don't you know how to greet a new pal?" The voice is low and quiet, you almost don't hear it. "Turn around and shake my hand."

Taking advantage of your shock, Frisk pulls their hand free and turns around. Before you can register what's happening, the air fills with the wet sound of... a fart? If your heart wasn't pounding you might laugh at the absolute absurdity of whatever the hell is going on.

You turn, and Frisk is giggling at a grinning skeleton in a blue jacket.

"Heheh... the old whoopee cushion in the hand trick," he says, and his voice is different. Louder, friendlier, smooth and deep. "It's always funny."

After everything you probably shouldn't be surprised, but there is a skeleton. A skeleton shaking your baby's hand. You think your mouth might be hanging open.

The skeleton looks up at you—he's kind of short, his eyes are at collarbone level on you—two tiny pinpricks of light serving as pupils inside dark eye sockets. His grin never changes, but something makes you think he looks... confused for a second. "I'd say you two are humans, but are you sure you're not a froggit? You're gonna catch flies with your mouth hanging open like that, buddy."

You quickly close your mouth and swallow. Maybe you're blushing, because all of a sudden your cheeks feel warm and you're embarrassed. That was probably rude of you, gawking at him like that. You hope that the next time you see a new kind of monster you don't make a fool out of yourself.

"Sorry if I scared you," he says with a shrug and lazy tilt of his head. "I'm Sans, sans the skeleton. I'm actually supposed to be on watch for humans right now, but... you know... I don't really care about capturing anybody."

Capturing?!

Frisk doesn't seem worried about that part. They give Sans a big smile. "I'm Frisk, and this is my Sissa." They take hold of your hand again.

"Hmm, what's a sissa? Sounds sorta silly," he says, drawing out the 's's like he's telling a joke. Maybe he is; it makes Frisk laugh at least.

"Sister. I'm their sister," you say, and the lie comes out naturally. You've been telling it for six years.

You don't know why, but Sans gives you an odd look before nodding. What reason could he possibly have to doubt you? Even though you are lying, you feel frustrated. "That's pretty cool, kiddo. I've got a brother, siblings are cool aren't they?"
Frisk gives an enthusiastic nod.

"my brother papyrus, though... he's a bit of a human-hunting fanatic. i think he might actually be coming this way." Sans must notice the worried look on your face because he gives you a wink. Somehow. His skull is a lot more animated than you'd expect a skull to be, but that must be because he's not actually a human skeleton. He's a monster. They just don't play by the same rules. "don't worry though, buddy. he hasn't got a mean bone in his body. and i'll keep an eye socket out for you guys."

Chapter End Notes

I'm doing my best not to completely copy stuff from the game. Sometimes it's difficult. :)


The trip to Snowdin is a long one, thanks to the skeleton brothers. Along the way through the forest you're tested by a variety of puzzles (Frisk insists on solving all of them themselves) and you meet more monsters (quite a few of which are dogs that just want pats). Though at first Papyrus's loud voice and flamboyant behavior are a bit startling, Sans's reassurances are enough to calm your nerves. It helps that Frisk is loving every second of it. They're adapting surprisingly well to being surrounded by monsters. Kids are resilient like that, you guess.

Sans is easy to like, and his love for his brother is endearing. And the jokes. The constant puns that you try so hard to resist. When you finally break —an ugly snort you fight to keep in— Sans's grin widens and he winks at you. Papyrus's loud complaints, even as he's fighting his own smile, just makes you laugh harder.

Papyrus is tall and loud. He switches so easily between boasting about himself, admonishing Sans, and encouraging you that it makes your head spin. But he's kind, and as you move forward you see Sans is right. Papyrus doesn't really want to hurt either of you.

You're standing with Papyrus as Frisk is running over a switch puzzle. Their face scrunches up in concentration as they work on turning X's into O's, and you catch yourself smiling as you watch them.

"So," you say, drawing out the word. Papyrus's head turns towards you as he realizes you're speaking to him. "Why aren't you trying to capture me right now, while I'm just standing here?"

Papyrus's eyes widen, and somehow he looks offended. "I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WOULD NOT STOOP SO LOW! AND YOU CLEARLY MISUNDERSTAND, HUMAN. I AM TRYING TO CAPTURE YOU, RIGHT NOW, WITH THIS PUZZLE, THAT IS A TRAP! A PERFECTLY CUNNING TRAP. A MAGNIFI—OH IT SEEMS THE LITTLE HUMAN HAS SOLVED IT."

Frisk runs back to you with a smile on their face, looking between you and Papyrus.

"EXCELLENT JOB, LITTLE HUMAN. I SHOULD HAVE SUSPECTED THAT— HUMAN, ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

As Papyrus speaks to Frisk, his arm shoots up in a way that's meant to be enthusiastic. But, the sudden movement of a raised hand so close and by someone so much taller than you has you flinching and ducking away against your will. Panic flutters in your chest, because flinching away always makes her angrier, makes it worse. You bow your head and take a step backwards, stumbling and falling onto your backside in the snow.

"HUMAN, WHAT IS WRONG? DID I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, SOMEHOW DO SOMETHING TO FRIGHTEN YOU?" Papyrus is reaching out to you, offering a hand to help you up.

You shake your head and suddenly it's hard to breathe. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it." You're blurring out the words as if she's standing there, glowering over you as you curl in on yourself.

"Sissa? What's wrong?" Frisk sounds worried. You want to tell them you're okay, but you're not.

"hey, bro. why don't you go check on that next puzzle for me, i got this." Sans wasn't there a second ago but he's here now, bony hand curling around Papyrus's wrist and pulling him away from you.
"I... I SEE YOU ARE JUST TRYING TO BE LAZY, SANS. BUT I WILL DO THIS JUST THIS ONCE!" He's hesitating, and even as you bury your face in your knees you can feel him watching you. "SANS, MAKE SURE THAT THE HUMAN IS OKAY, PLEASE. IT WOULD NOT BE FAIR TO MAKE THEM DO PUZZLES WHILE THEY AREN'T FEELING WELL. AND I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AM INCREDIBLY FAIR."

"yeah, pap. you got it, bro." Sans's voice is closer now, and you hear Papyrus walking away. "hey there, buddy. you take as much time as you need, but i just want you to know that everything is okay. you're okay."

The snow is melting and seeping into the seat of your jeans. It's cold, but you can't get up yet. You're sucking in deep breaths but it doesn't feel like you're getting enough air. You're trembling, but if it's from the cold or the panic you're not sure.

"buddy, can you look at me?"

You take in a deep breath and you manage to tilt your head upwards. Sans is squatting in front of you, his elbows resting on his knees. His permanent grin seems strained, and the white lights in his eyes are trained on your face.

"do you wanna hear a joke?"

You blink at him.

"i admit, it's pretty... humerus."

Your lips twitch, and he seems to notice.

"why did the skeleton go to the party alone?"

You swallow, and you notice that it's a little easier to breathe. "Why?" you ask, voice strained.

"he had no body to go with him."

Oh no, this is terrible. Is he going to crack terrible jokes until you feel better?

"why did the ghost get in the elevator?"

You admit that it's a good distraction. You can feel the spring-taut coil of tension in your chest start to unwind. Frisk is a few paces behind Sans, watching you. They press the long ends of their sleeves to their mouth. It's a nervous gesture, one you recognize easily. Seeing that they're worried, that they want you to be okay...

"you gotta ask why, buddy," Sans says, a gentle reminder.

"Why?"

"that's how the joke works, of course." He winks at you as you purse your lips at him.

"Why did the ghost get in the elevator? Tell me."

"to lift his spirits."
You groan, but at the same time you catch yourself laughing weakly. "That's so bad," you mutter, sitting up a little straighter.

"you're smiling. you like it."

"You're awful."

"i'm sure papyrus would agree with you." Sans stands up, holding out a hand to you. Unlike Papyrus, he's not wearing any gloves. "you feel better?"

You do. Now that the fear is gone you're just embarrassed for losing it in front of everyone. Frisk is inching closer. God, Frisk. They didn't know what went on at home when they weren't around to see; you're thankful your mother had the sense to keep it quiet. But they have no idea why you had what you think is a panic attack. It's the last thing you want to explain.

You reach out and take Sans's hand, and you're struck by the fact that it's warm somehow. Smooth, dry, and warm. His grip is firm, and he pulls you up with more strength than you'd expect from a skeleton. As soon as you're on your feet he lets go, and you both shove your hands in your pockets almost immediately.

"it's going tibia okay," he says, and if it wasn't for the wink to punctuate his joke you might think he was being serious. "we shouldn't leave papyrus waiting. my bro is a pretty cool guy, but i'd hate to leave him out in the cold."

As soon as Sans turns away Frisk is wrapping their arms around your middle, leaning forward to press their face into the softness of your stomach. You pull them close and smooth their hair.

"Don't be scared," Frisk mumbles against your jacket. "Papyrus won't hurt you."

"I know sweetie. I got scared, but it wasn't his fault. Not on purpose," you say.

"Are you okay now?"

"I'm better."

"I love you."

You pull them closer, and the tight feeling in your chest is pleasant this time. "I love you too."
Bonetrousled

Chapter Notes

I can't believe all the support from you guys, you're all fantastic and thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When you catch up to Papyrus, he's busy disabling the next puzzle. He turns as you approach, looking a little sheepish. "HUMAN! I... UH..." He looks away, tapping his foot. "THIS PUZZLE WAS NOT SO GOOD ANYWAY. THERE ARE OTHER, BETTER, MORE CHALLENGING PUZZLES UP AHEAD. MANY OF THEM. TO CATCH YOU. AND MORE DELICIOUS FOOD TRAPS FOR YOUR ENJOYMENT. AND TO CATCH YOU."

Sans is beside you, even though he wasn't there a second ago. You jump a little. He has this strange habit of just suddenly appearing when you aren't looking. "isn't this the last one?"

You remind yourself that logic has no place here as Papyrus starts to sweat. "YES."

Frisk steps between you and Papyrus, placing small fists on their hips. "Well, if it's the last one, I want to solve it!"

You hear a small chuff of laughter from the skeleton beside you as Papyrus's eyes seem to sparkle. Or are those actual sparkles? Maybe it's just the snow catching the light.

"YOU DO?"

Frisk nods enthusiastically.

"OH, WOWIE, UH..." Papyrus seems flustered for a moment before clearing his throat (you don't even bother to question this) and striking a pose. Despite the lack of wind, his trailing red scarf gives a valiant flutter. "PREPARE TO BE CONFOUNDED, HUMAN, FOR I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, HAVE CAREFULLY CRAFTED THIS MASTERFUL PUZZLE. AFTER HOURS OF TOILING AWAY TRYING TO SOLVE IT, YOU WILL FINALLY GIVE UP AND I WILL CAPTURE YOU! UNDYNE WILL finally LET ME JOIN THE ROYAL GUARD, AND EVERYONE WILL WANT TO BE MY FRIEND!"

You can't help but smile as you watch Frisk bounce on their toes in anticipation. Papyrus, invigorated, goes to work to get his puzzle back in working order as he tells Frisk not to look. They cover their eyes with their long sleeves, grinning and turning away.

Sans is watching you. He's been doing that a lot, you notice. Whenever you turn to look at him he's already got his eyes on you and he doesn't even bother to pretend he isn't staring. "they seem to be having fun. frisk is a good kid."

You nod, trying not to let yourself feel uncomfortable. It feels like he's scrutinizing you, testing you. Judging you. You wonder what he's seeing.

"must be your good influence. sometimes... kids aren't always so good when they're scared and alone." You'd be more worried about the seriousness of his tone if it wasn't for the exaggerated shrug and sigh he ends his words with. "sometimes they are though. good, i mean."
You're not quite sure what he's getting at, and you don't really want to ask. Instead, you watch Frisk as they study the now-functional puzzle. They're playing at confusion, lamenting how lost they are in a loud voice. Papyrus lets out a "NYEHEHEH!" that you think is supposed to sound triumphant.

"thanks for playing along. i haven't seen papyrus this excited in a while. to be honest, he was getting a bit discouraged."

It's hard to imagine the tall skeleton discouraged. But you remember how worried he sounded about you, and it makes you a little sad. Their concern warmed you as you recovered from your episode, so now you're happy you can return the favor.

"do you want to talk about what that was all about, back there?"

You bite your lip. You really don't. You wondered if Sans was going to ask you about it, and now you have your answer. When he sees you hesitate he doesn't press. You're thankful for that.

"that's cool, buddy. as long as you're okay, i'm chill."

Groaning, you roll your eyes at Sans. "You're getting your jokes from snowdrakes now? Bad ice puns?"

"i'm offended. that was an excellent ice pun."

Papyrus is helping Frisk solve the puzzle now, giving them helpful hints. Each time they ask for his help his smile just seems to get brighter. Frisk really is a great kid. You wonder what would have happened to their indomitable spirit if you hadn't taken them away. It scares you a little bit, so you decide not to dwell on it anymore.

"Maybe I can entice you to make some better ones."

Sans's eyes widen before he starts shaking with laughter. He raises his shoulders as he chuckles, hiding part of his face in the fluffy hood of his blue jacket. It's... kind of adorable.

"i... icy what you did there," he says.

You try, and fail, to hold back a giggle. "Did I ever tell you that it was ice to meet you?"

"snow you didn't."

"OH MY GOD, SANS! THIS IS THE WORST. HUMAN, STOP ENCOURAGING HIM!"

A loud, embarrassing snort escapes you which only makes Sans laugh harder. Even though your cheeks are burning you can't stop laughing.

"come on, bro. don't give me the cold shoulder."

"SANS!!"

Sans warned you that Papyrus was going to want to fight. You hoped that maybe he was joking, but he wasn't. He didn't really want to, you could tell that much, but he was somehow convinced it was the only way to get what he wanted most: recognition and friends.

The bridge to the little village of Snowdin is behind Papyrus. To move forward, you need to get
past him. Before you even realize what they're doing, Frisk is standing in front of Papyrus, their Soul glowing red in front of their chest.

"Frisk, what are you...?"

They look back at you with a determined grin. "Don't worry, Sissa. I'll make him understand that we don't need to fight."

"I just needed to make Toriel understand."

Is this what happened with Toriel too? A confrontation waged by the power of Frisk's Soul? You can only watch as Papyrus tilts his head back to force out a laugh, nervous sweat trickling down his skull. Maybe Frisk can do this.

But they shouldn't have to! You're the adult —their mother— how can you stand here and watch your six year old fight a skeleton twice their size? You take a step forward, but Sans catches you by the wrist.

"I wouldn't do that buddy. I... may not be able to see it, but I can tell that your soul isn't as strong as Frisk's. And down here, that's what counts."

"Why aren't you stopping your brother? Frisk is just a child," you snap, low enough that only the short skeleton can hear you.

"Buddy, Frisk isn't just a kid. They..." He seems about to say something, but he hesitates. Sans shakes his head, like he's trying to shake off a bad memory. He winks at you, smile going crooked. "Trust me, Pap might give them a workout, but he won't hurt them. Papyrus doesn't hurt people."

The way he says that, that Papyrus isn't the one that hurts people, seems to contain a silent accusation. Was he trying to say that Frisk might hurt his brother? Your mind rebels against the very idea, it's just so absurd. Frisk is the kid that comes crying to you when they step on worms by accident after it rains.

Papyrus is still looking nervous, even though he's the one raising bones from beneath the snow. His attacks are slow, which Frisk is dodging with ease.

"I really liked your spaghetti, Papyrus. You should make me some more," Frisk says, smiling at him.

The skeleton looks flustered, blushing somehow. "A-ARE YOU... FLIRTING WITH ME? ARE THESE YOUR TRUE FEELINGS?! W-WELL, I'M A SKELETON WITH VERY HIGH STANDARDS!"

"I can make spaghetti with you, some time, if you want. Sissa showed me how to boil the noodles."

"OH NO, YOU'RE MEETING ALL MY STANDARDS!" Papyrus is sweating more now, wringing his gloved hands. "I GUESS THIS MEANS I HAVE TO GO ON A DATE WITH YOU...? LET'S DATE L-LATER! AFTER I CAPTURE YOU!"

For crying out loud, Frisk is six. "Is he serious?"

Sans chuckles, and you realize that he hasn't let go of your wrist. He must still worry that you might try to intervene. "He doesn't want to hurt the kid's feelings. Don't worry about it."

"We could just go now? I don't want to fight you," Frisk insists, sidestepping a slow moving bone
that sinks back down into the snow.

"SO YOU WON'T FIGHT... THEN, LET'S SEE IF YOU CAN HANDLE MY FABLED 'BLUE ATTACK'."

Papyrus strikes a pose, his scarf fluttering. Then, with a look of concentration, a ring of orange glows within the darkness of his right eye socket. Wisps of magic trail out of his eye like vapor. Frisk freezes in place, just as a flurry of ghostly blue bones surrounds them and passes through them.

Sans's grip tightens on you as you jerk forward without thinking, your instincts screaming at you to go help Frisk. He's stronger than you, and it feels as though something else other than sheer force is holding you back. Like his Soul is overpowering yours.

"Sans," you plead, worry weighing heavy in the pit of your stomach.

"what did i say, buddy? everything is going tibia okay." He's watching Frisk and Papyrus, not even glancing at you when you speak to him.

The blue bones have faded, and for a moment it seems like Sans is right. The attack did nothing to Frisk. But then the bright red glow of Frisk's Soul turns blue, making them gasp and fall down to one knee. They grimace, straining to push back to their feet as though weighed down by something heavy.

What did Papyrus just do? What did it mean that Frisk's Soul changed color?

"Frisk!"

"I'm okay, I'm not hurt," they shout back at you. "It's just... heavy."

"YOU'RE BLUE NOW. THAT'S MY ATTACK!" Papyrus is laughing, though he still looks a bit uncertain.

There's nothing you can do but watch as more bones sweep through the snow towards Frisk. They're much slower now, but they can still dodge, talking to Papyrus through it all. Telling him about how cool they think he is, and how much they want to just hang out with him instead of fighting. The tall skeleton hadn't really wanted to do this in the first place, and you can tell that he's losing more and more of his nerve.

"JUST LET ME CAPTURE YOU!" Papyrus says, wincing as a bone clips Frisk's shoulder. You grit your teeth but don't try to fight San's grip on you, knowing it's pointless.

"But I'd rather go on that date," Frisk answers, still smiling.

"ARGH! FINE, I'LL JUST HAVE TO USE MY ULTIMATE ATTACK!"

You aren't sure what you're expecting, but as Papyrus raises his hand a large bone pops out of the snow... with a fluffy white dog gnawing on it. The skeleton's jaw drops.

He starts stomping his foot. "HEY! THAT'S MY ULTIMATE ATTACK, LET THAT GO!"

The dog's ears perk up and it looks at Papyrus, then starts dragging the bone away. You all just watch it go.

Frustrated, Papyrus clenches his fists and drags them up into the air, the orange glow filling his
He looks shocked for a second as rows and rows of bones raise up from underneath the snow. His shock changes to panic as they rush forward at Frisk. You can see in the look on his face that he didn't mean for this to happen, that he knows he overdid it.

You look at Sans as you feel him release your shoulder and he's smiling at you, a ring of blue in his left eye. One of his hands is outstretched in Frisk's direction, the other holding a finger to his mouth. He winks at you with his right eye, grinning up at you.

Frisk steel themselves before jumping over the first row of bones, and then... just keeps going. They look down as it all passes under them, laughing as they kick their feet in midair. Papyrus looks dumbfounded but relieved, and the orange glow in his eye is gone. When Frisk finally touches down back to earth with a gentle crunch of snow, you let out a breath you don't realize you were even holding.

You glance over at Sans and his eyes are just white pinpricks of light again. He shrugs. "told you."

You could hug him. You almost do, but he releases your arm and walks towards his brother. Papyrus is breathing hard (despite not having lungs) wiping his face as Frisk and Sans approach him.

"WELL, HUMAN... IT'S CLEAR YOU CAN'T DEFEAT ME! YEAH! I CAN SEE YOU SHAKING IN YOUR BOOTS!" Really, Papyrus is the one that seems to be shaking, though from relief or effort (or both) you aren't certain. "THEREFORE I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, ELECT TO GRANT YOU PITY! I WILL SPARE YOU, HUMAN!"

Frisk's now-red Soul vanishes back into their chest, and even after all that they're smiling up at Papyrus.

The smile the tall skeleton gives Frisk is short-lived, and soon his shoulders slump. "I CAN'T EVEN CAPTURE A HUMAN AS WEAK AS YOU. UNDYNE WILL BE SO DISAPPOINTED, AND SHE'LL NEVER LET ME JOIN THE ROYAL GUARD. HOW WILL I MAKE MORE FRIENDS?"

"I want to be your friend, Papyrus!" Frisk slips their small hand into his big one, shaking it back and forth to get his attention.

Papyrus looks down at their hands. For once it doesn't seem like he knows what to say.

You go to stand behind Frisk, resting one hand on their shoulder and holding the other out to him. "I'll be your friend too, Papyrus."

His jaw drops open and tears somehow pool in his eye sockets. "OH, MY, TWO FRIENDS?! I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY!"

"how about, 'let's go back to our place because this cold just goes straight through me.'"

"SANS!"

Chapter End Notes
I still really don't like copying scenes directly from the game, but hopefully this mixes it up just enough to keep it interesting. I'm also going with some of the magic headcanons for Papyrus I've seen online. And I've always liked the idea that Papyrus is probably stronger than Sans, he's just too kindhearted to realize it.
**Scars of Two Kinds**

The bathroom is foggy with steam when you get out of the shower. You were in there a bit longer than you should have been, but the heat was a relief after walking around in cold, damp jeans. You're not exactly sure why the brothers have a bathroom in the first place. The rest of the house is pretty normal, all things considered, and it's easier not to try and figure it out.

The mirror squeaks as you wipe away the steam with your hand. You look at yourself. Somehow, after all the weird things that have happened so far, you still look just like yourself. Like nothing has changed. It's still you. You run a hand over the pale stretch marks that curve on either side of your navel like parenthesis, feeling the divots in your skin. Below those, right beneath your panty line, is a pink, uneven scar. Your finger trails over its surface. It's flush against your skin in places, raised and bumpy in others. The scar is unattractive, you think, but at the same time it comforts you. The marks on your skin are permanent reminders of Frisk. That they are yours, no matter what.

Frisk. You really should get dressed and make sure they're doing okay with Sans and Papyrus. There's a part of your brain that's still trying to cling tightly to some kind of rationality. It's questioning your decision to leave your child in the care of two skeletons, but for the most part you ignore it.

The last you heard, Papyrus and Frisk were going to have their date while you took your shower. You laugh softly to yourself at the thought and finish drying off with a beige towel. Sans promised you he'd make sure they didn't get into any trouble while you took a little time to yourself. It had been easy to succumb to the lure of hot water.

You find yourself wishing you had a brush after you towel off your hair. Frisk inherited your coloring. The long brown locks are a bit tangled now, but you make due with running your fingers through it as best you can. You wind it up into a damp, messy bun and secure it with an elastic tie. That will have to do.

With your own clothes still drying after your trip through the forest, Sans and Papyrus lent you a few things. Papyrus is too tall, and if you're being honest, too thin for any of his pants to fit you. He offered up a loose t-shirt that made you laugh the moment you saw it. The shirt itself is black, with a white, silk screened ribcage on it. Is this the skeleton equivalent of a tuxedo shirt?

The black exercise shorts with the white stripe down the side are from Sans. They're identical to the ones he's wearing, though on him they go past his knees. On you, they fall right above them. You're surprised that they fit you as well as they do. Compared to his brother, Sans is quite literally big-boned. His proportions are all wrong for a human skeleton, at least as far as you can tell from his tibia and fibula.

You remind yourself, again, that Sans and Papyrus aren't human skeletons. They're monsters that look like skeletons.

You're grateful for the borrowed clothes. They'll be perfect to sleep in later. That was another thing that had come up. Papyrus insisted that you and Frisk stay the night with them and refused to hear a word to the contrary.

Honestly, you're happy for the excuse to put off trying to figure out what to do next. You hadn't wanted to stay in the Ruins with Toriel, but Snowdin is a friendly little village. And you've already
made friends here, much to your surprise. What do you really have on the surface anyway? An abusive situation you successfully escaped (albeit in a rather unconventional manner) and a job you tolerate. Frisk seems happy here too.

Maybe...

Well, there will be plenty of time to worry about that. For now your grumbling stomach is more of a priority.

You can hear Frisk and Papyrus in the kitchen, and Sans is sitting on the couch as you come downstairs. The couch is a bit of a monster itself, nearly the length and width of a twin sized bed. You figure this has to do with Papyrus's height. At least it will serve well as a makeshift bed for you and Frisk later.

Sans's eyes shift over to look at you as you enter the room and you think you see his grin widen. It makes you a little self-conscious, so you glance down at your clothes and smooth them a bit. "nice shirt. feeling left out?"

"This was what Papyrus decided to give me. I didn't really want to seem ungrateful," you say, a little embarrassed and defensive.

Sans holds up his hand in a placating gesture. "heh, it's okay. i was just ribbin' ya."

You groan, rolling your eyes.

"it looks good though. better on you than papyrus."

You raise an eyebrow.

He raises both his brows in response, giving you a questioning look. "what, don't believe me? i wouldn't tell a fibula."

That one catches you off guard. You try to stop yourself from laughing but you can't, which makes it come out as an undignified snort. Your face is burning, even more embarrassed, as Sans shakes with laughter. When you collect yourself, you notice that his cheekbones are a little blue, like a blush.

"I'm going to go check on dinner before I make more of a fool out of myself," you say, raising a hand to scrub your face as if you can remove your blush through sheer willpower.

"what, don't be embarrassed. it's cute when you snort on accident."

You cringe. "No, no way. It's awful." It used to happen a lot more when you were younger, when you weren't afraid to laugh around your mother. Her lip would always curl when you snorted. ("My god. Stop embarrassing yourself. I can't stand that sound.")

"it's not. it's even better than applause. i'm making it my new goal." Sans slips his hands behind his head, slouching even further down the couch. His slippered feet are dangling above the floor.

You're not sure how to feel about that. If he was... well, honestly, if he was a human you'd think he was teasing you. The fact that he isn't makes you question his intentions, helps you give him the benefit of the doubt. What reason does he have to make fun of you? Still, it doesn't help you feel less embarrassed. If anything, your cheeks feel hotter.

"A-anyway, I'm going to check on dinner," you repeat, hurrying out of the room.
"suit yourself."

Frisk is sitting on top of the counter, tapping their heels against the cabinet beneath them. Papyrus is watching a pot of noodles boil over as he furiously stirs the contents of a saucepan, water hissing as it hits the stovetop. You resist the urge to both take over cooking and tell Frisk to get off the counter. It isn't your kitchen, and if Papyrus is fine with Frisk sitting up there, it isn't your place to say otherwise.

Frisk grins as you approach, leaning against the counter by their side. They laugh a little and tug on your skeleton shirt, but don't comment on it.

"So, how was your, uh, date?" you ask, glancing over at Papyrus's back.

"It was fun," Frisk says.

"I HOPE YOU CAN FORGIVE ME, HUMAN, FOR SHATTERING FRISK'S HEART INTO TINY, PAPYRUS-SHAPED PIECES. BUT UNFORTUNATELY, I CANNOT RETURN THEIR INTENSE LOVE FOR ME."

Frisk is trying not to laugh.

You pat the top of Frisk's head. "That's okay, Papyrus. It's not your fault."

"PHEW. THAT IS A RELIEF! NOW WE CAN ALL JUST BE FRIENDS, WITH NO HARD FEELINGS."

"Exactly."

Dinner is... indescribable.

Somehow Frisk wolfs down their own serving and even has seconds, much to Papyrus's delight. Sans watches you with that grin on his face as you brace yourself and soldier through your own dinner. You can't bring yourself to hurt Papyrus's feelings, but quickly refuse when he asks if you want more. You never actually see Sans eat his dinner, but when you check his plate it's empty.

Afterwards, you're alone in the kitchen while everyone else piles on the couch to watch TV (an Underground, monster television station, who knew?). Letting Papyrus cook for you was uncomfortable enough, that being one of your many responsibilities back home. Just seeing the dirty dishes in the sink is enough to make you anxious. You can almost hear your mother's voice in your head. ("Lazy, worthless... get off your ass and earn your keep, I don't care if you're 'tired.' What do you think I did all day?")

Maybe it's strange, but scrubbing at the burnt tomato sauce is relaxing. It silences the nagging feeling, and at least for the moment you don't have to worry about anything else. The familiarity is comforting.

You aren't sure if it's because you're distracted, or if it's just how he does things, but you don't notice Sans until he's sitting on the counter beside you. Jumping with a gasp, the soapy glass you're holding slips out of your hand and shatters in the sink. Your heart is hammering wildly in your chest.

"Oh god, I'm sorry!" you blurt out, trembling as you set aside the dripping scrub brush.
"don't worry about it," he says as you start fumbling with the shards of glass in the sink. You're putting the pieces in the remaining base of the cup to try and contain them. "hey, stop, let me do it. it's my fault."

"No, it's my fault," you choke out, tears springing to your eyes. You're still expecting him to get mad at you, for someone to start shouting. You broke their glass, damn it, how could you let that happen? Biting your lip, you try to hold back a shuddering breath but instead a sob escapes you. "I'm sorry, I can't believe I just did that."

As you drop another piece of glass with the others, Sans is standing beside you and pulling you away from the sink. "it was just an accident, buddy. go sit down. i can't get cut, so let me handle it."

You're frozen, unsure of what to do. His kindness is confusing and you don't know what to do with it. Nothing was ever 'just an accident' as far as anyone else was concerned. You broke something, you screwed up. It's your fault.

"c'mon, don't make me patella you twice," Sans says, nudging you towards the kitchen table. His smile is a little strained, you think.

Something in the concerned way he looks at you brings you back to yourself a little bit. You nod, blinking back the tears that thankfully never fall as you go to sit down. Your hands are wet, you realize, so you rub them on your borrowed shorts.

Sans is silent as he turns off the water and scoops up the remaining fragments in the sink. He doesn't even have to be careful about it, because like he said it can't cut skin he doesn't have.

"i came in here to ask if you were still hungry," he says, his back to you as he works. "i appreciate you humoring papyrus, but i know his cooking is pretty terrible. figured you could use some real food, if you're up for it."

"It's fine, I'm used to it," you say, without thinking. Shit.

He goes still for a moment, pausing in his movements before speaking. "used to what? being hungry?"

You don't answer, but he's right. You ate okay, but there was never quite enough to fill you up. Making sure that Frisk had as much as they needed was more important, and your mother would throw a fit if she didn't have enough on her plate. What was a little bit of hunger before bed when it came to taking care of Frisk?

You jump when Sans drops the remains of the shattered glass in the trash. He pulls off his blue jacket and shoves it into your hands. "put this on and get your shoes, we're going to grillby's."
The cold air is bracing, especially against your bare legs. Thankfully, Sans's jacket is nice and warm for the top half of your body. You have the hood pulled up to try and protect your wet hair, but it doesn't do much. But the chill helps clear your head, washing away what remains of your fear.

Whatever lit the Underground during 'daytime' is dimmer now, giving Snowdin the look of a clear winter's night. It's quiet and peaceful, and if you didn't know any better you'd think you're back on the surface. Grillby's isn't far down the road. You can already see the warm orange glow of neon painted across pristine white snow.

Sans is silent at your side, his arms alternating between hanging at his sides and crossing over his chest. Like he doesn't know what to do with them without his jacket. His radius and ulna are about twice as thick as their human equivalents, you notice. If he were human, you'd describe him as 'short and stocky'. Though, really, even without any meat on his bones he still gives off that vibe.

He doesn't say anything to you as you reach Grillby's. He opens the door and for a moment you wonder if he's going to hold it open for you, but he just sort of holds it until you grab it for yourself and goes inside. You follow. The place is busy but not packed, and you recognize most of the dogs scattered at the tables. A few people greet Sans as you both pass, and he gestures at a pair of barstools. You lower your hood as you pull yourself onto a seat.

The owner —Grillby you guess— is quite literally made of fire. You resist the urge to lean towards him when he approaches, his heat warm and pleasant on your skin. You don't even bother to question how he's wearing glasses on his... face?

"you can have anything you want, buddy. well, so long as it's on the menu," Sans shrugs, his halfhearted attempt at lightening the mood falling flat.

You glance down the bar to see what other people are having, and your mouth waters at the sight —and oh, now that you see them you recognize the smell— of a large plate of french fries. "Fries. I'd love some fries," you say, and something in Sans's face relaxes at your enthusiasm.

"that does sound good. grillby, two fries."

Grillby gives a silent nod and walks off to the kitchen. You watch him go, your mind puzzling over how exactly a fire monster works. After a moment of futility you look back over at Sans, and you're not surprised to see he's watching you.

But even though you're expecting it, you can't hold his gaze. You look down at the bar, tracing the polished woodgrain with your finger. Why doesn't he just ask, already? He wants to, you can feel it in the air, the tension hanging between you.
"i wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt, when you had that panic attack in the forest," he says quietly. "i figured, hey, the girl's had a bit of a rough day, who wouldn't be a little on edge, y'know?"

You risk a glance back over at him. The lights in his eyes are a little dimmer, the corners of his mouth canted slightly downwards. "but things are just adding up a little strange. you could say i can... feel it in my bones."

Your lips twitch a little, and you cross your arms on the bar, leaning forward as you look at him. "Boo," you say, your voice falling flat.

He shrugs, his smile looking more like an actual smile and less like a grimace. "hey, they can't all be winners. but what i'm trying to say, buddy, is that i can tell something's going on. so if you want to talk about it, i'll listen. i'm good at that because it doesn't take much effort."

Before you can say anything —though, you're still trying to figure out what to say— Grillby is back with your fries. He sets the plates down in front of you both and pulls out a bottle of ketchup from behind the bar. Sans dumps about half of it on top of his fries before putting the bottle between you two, in case you want some.

You shove a few fries in your mouth, chewing and swallowing as you think of how to answer him. Maybe it's because it's been a long, exhausting day, or because that spaghetti was just so bad, but these fries are the best damn fries you've had in your life. They're hot, fresh, and slightly crispy on the outside while soft on the inside. You have a few more mouthfuls before you can break yourself away from your food to talk.

"Things... weren't good for me back home," you say. You look at Sans again and he's just watching you, patiently. "It's... it happens, not all parents are great. But it doesn't matter anymore. She's up there, and I'm down here."

You go back to picking at your fries, your enthusiasm a little diminished. Sans is quiet.

"so things weren't great for frisk either?" he asks, after a little while. It sounds like he's trying to piece something together, figuring out how the parts fit.

You sigh, debating how much you want to say. "Things were okay, until, well... a couple nights ago. The night before we ended up down here. My mom hit Frisk, it's why I took us away. I grew up with that shit, I was used to it, but..." You realize your hands are balled into fists and your throat is tight. Swallowing, you continue to stare at your food. "I thought she wouldn't hit Frisk as long as she still had me to smack around. I thought, as long as Frisk was okay, it didn't matter what she did to me."

Shaking your head, you let out a slow, steadying sigh. "I almost didn't... I almost wasn't determined enough to leave. But I—I couldn't let Frisk go through what I went through. For some reason I think that... if I hadn't left that night, I would've lost Frisk forever. That they'd, I dunno, run away. I wanted to, when I was younger, but I never had the guts. Frisk would, though, I think." You bite your lip, glancing over at Sans as you say, "Does that make sense?"

For a second you think you see a hint of blue in his left eye, but it's gone before you're sure of what you're seeing. Instead, his eye sockets are dark and there's sweat gathered on the side of his skull, his mouth once again strained into a tight grimace. You realize that he's angry. Before you have the chance to apologize —you're not sure for what. For making him angry? For unloading all your baggage on him even though he offered to listen?— he speaks. His voice is a low grumble, frustrated. "more sense than you realize," he says, and you aren't sure you know what he means.
Sans looks away, and when he turns back to you the lights are back in his eyes. He gives you an uneasy smile. "and humans say we're the monsters... but at least i've never known a monster to beat their own kids."

Shame creeps up the sides of your neck and you look down at what's left of your fries.

A bony hand reaches out and rests on your forearm, giving you a small squeeze. "hey, for what it's worth, at least frisk has a great big sister like you."

The urge to correct him is so strong, you don't even want to resist. You told Sans the truth about everything else, so why not this? There aren't any good reasons, and God, you just want someone to know the truth. Why not him? "I'm not Frisk's sister. I'm their mother."

You shove more fries in your mouth to distract yourself, suddenly afraid of Sans's reaction. Will it change how he thinks of you? Does he still think you're doing a good job with Frisk?

"h-how...?"

You glance at him out of the corner of your eye, swallowing. His eyes are wide, more surprised than you expected. Well, at least he's not disgusted with you... yet. "Well, you see, when two humans like each other—"

"i appreciate a good joke as much as the next guy, but that's not what i meant," he interrupts, squeezing your arm again. "i was gonna ask, how old were you?"

You use your free arm to prop your chin on, leaning with an elbow against the bar. "Fourteen," you admit, looking at Sans's hand curled into the fabric of his jacket. It's easier than looking at his face.

His grip on you tightens, and you aren't sure he does it on purpose. "you were just a kid."

You were desperate for someone to care about you, to be wanted and needed. It was the only way you could think of to feel like you mattered to someone, at least for a little while. "Shit happens."

"but frisk..." There's a pause where you can practically hear Sans fitting the pieces together. "oh. they think your mom is their mom too."

"Yeah. I didn't..." You close your eyes. "I was too scared to do what I needed to. She started taking over everything with Frisk and it was... easier to let her. It made her happy, and when she was happy things were better. And I didn't know what the hell I was doing, Sans."

He doesn't say anything. You open your eyes again and look at him. "I understand if you think less of me. I'm... not really sure what you think of me to begin with, to be honest."

"i think you're doing the best you can with a real fucked up situation," he says, and you're a little startled at his language. But, Frisk was nearby before, maybe this is normal for him. "and all things considered, i admire what you've been able to do."

Admiration is the last thing you expect from your confession, and you're not sure what to say. You remove your hand from under your chin and feed yourself the last few fries on your plate. They've gone a bit cold, but they still taste good.

"You can't tell Frisk."

"i won't, i figure that's something you gotta tell them yourself. but don't you think you should?"
"I... can't. Not yet. I will, though, when the time's right."

"no time like the present."

You make a noncommittal sound, and Sans lets the subject drop.

You look back up when Sans removes his hand from your arm, and you find yourself a little sad at the loss. "i should have said this earlier, but i'm sorry. sorry about all the shit you've gone through. i know that doesn't really help, but..."

"It does," you say, and you mean it. Your chest feels a bit lighter, freed a bit from your burden. Knowing that he understands why you've behaved the way you did, that he knows the truth about Frisk. It helps. "Thanks, Sans."

Before you're too afraid to go through with it, you lean forward to wrap your arms around Sans's shoulders. He goes rigid as you catch him off guard, but after a moment he hesitantly hugs you back. The jacket softens some of his hard edges, and the hug is a lot... nicer than you are expecting. You let your head fall against the cushion of your arm, forehead resting against his jaw as his head turns towards yours.

"Thank you," you say again, because you feel like you haven't done justice to just how thankful you are for him. "Not just for listening. For everything. You're a real friend, even if you do tell terrible jokes."

He rubs a small circle between your shoulders, then gives you a comforting squeeze. "oh, i know you think i'm a bit of a comedian, but i'll admit. i'm a stand-up guy."

You groan and push yourself away, giving him a weak glare in response to his smug grin. "Aaaand the tender moment is over."

He shrugs, winking. "what can i say? i'm just heartless."

"No," you protest, but you're laughing. You hate it, but it cheers you up at the same time.

"what, do you have a bone to pick with me?"

You're shaking now, burying your face in your hands. "I hate you, I take back all the nice things I said," you manage to say between laughs.

"don't bee that way, honey."

Sans gets what he wants. You snort, even as you try to hide it behind your hands. He takes hold of your shoulders and pulls you into another hug, patting your back as you feel him shake with laughter. As your laughter eases away, you uncover your face and hug him back, resting your chin on the stiff curve of his clavicle.

"Thanks," you say again, voice soft. "I really needed that."

"you're welcome."
"So, this is random but I need to know: why is there shampoo and conditioner in your bathroom?"

Sans chuckles at your side as you make the short walk back towards his house, both of you in far better spirits than when you left. "heh, fair question. it's cuz of undyne. she's over here sometimes to hang out with papyrus. occasionally she spends the night and she got tired of carrying the bottles back and forth."

That's a surprisingly boring answer, you think. You were honestly expecting something different. You don't know what, exactly, but just something weird. "Will she be mad that I used them? She's... what did papyrus say? The captain of the Royal Guard?"

"yeah... but if she finds out about you guys, her shampoo is going to be the last thing on her mind." He sighs, and when you glance over at him you're surprised to see him looking serious. Catching you looking at him, he gives you crooked smile. "but don't worry, buddy. papyrus hasn't said anything to her about you guys being here. and she hates the cold so she doesn't come to snowdin unless she has no choice."

You suppose that's reassuring. But, you get the feeling that this Undyne is going to be a problem sooner or later, whether you stay with the skeleton brothers or not. At least for the time being, you don't have to worry about it. No need to rush headlong into more trouble until absolutely necessary. "Speaking of papyrus," you say, pointedly changing the subject, "do you think he'd be offended if i make dinner tomorrow?"

"you really don't have to keep helping out."

"I do if I want something edible," you grumble.

Sans laughs. "okay, fair enough. i don't think he'll mind."

"Cool. Then I'll go to the store in the morning."

"remind me to give you some money before you go."

"I—" you're about to argue when you catch yourself. You and Frisk had picked up a few gold coins along your way to Snowdin, but you're hesitant to spend them. "...okay. Thanks, Sans."

The living room is dark as you follow sans through the front door, lit by the glow of their television. A cooking show hosted by a robot is playing, the sound turned down low enough that you can't make out what's going on. When you catch sight of the couch you smile, warmth swelling in your chest.

Papyrus and Frisk are both asleep. The skeleton is sitting upright, one elbow on the armrest and his gloved hand cradling his head. A fluffy pillow with a flamed pillowcase is in his lap, which Frisk is snuggled into. Their hair fans out around their head like a dark halo. Laying lengthwise along the rest of the couch, Frisk is wrapped up in a thick red blanket, expression peaceful. Papyrus's hand is resting on their side.

You and sans exchange a look, and you can see the fondness in his expression. He made no secret
of how he feels about his brother, but right now you can see it plain on his face.

"I don't really want to move them," you admit, whispering.

"got to, unless you want to sleep on the floor," he says. "i'll get my bro if you can pick up frisk."

You nod. You don't really want to sleep on the floor.

Frisk mumbles a little in their sleep as you scoop them up, still wrapped in their blanket. They're getting a bit heavy for you now, but you manage to lift them and shift them to the other end of the couch. Somehow, they don't wake up. Something about kids just lets them sleep deep like that.

As you take care of Frisk, Sans is pulling a groggy Papyrus to his feet. "c'mon bro, lets get you to bed."

"Sans?" he says, and you realize you've never heard his voice so quiet. Apparently Papyrus is capable of toning himself down a bit. "Ah, you're back."

"yep."

Papyrus glances over at you, and for a moment he seems confused, like he doesn't recognize you. He takes a slow, deliberate blink and the look is gone. "Ah, human, I hope my brother was not poor company. If he was, I will take you for a walk myself instead next time," he says, stifling a yawn. With a quick peek at Frisk, he lets Sans guide him up the stairs.

You really ought to get ready for bed yourself. You take off Sans's jacket and drape it over the armrest of the couch, pulling the elastic band out of your hair. You shake it out. The deepest layers are still damp, which is no surprise. Some tangles catch on your fingers as they comb through.

Catching yourself yawning, you grab the discarded pillow and shift Frisk onto it, closer to the back of the couch. You feel better taking the outside, knowing Frisk can't roll off and onto the floor in the middle of the night. Right as you're about to lay down next to them, you hear a familiar voice.

"hey," Sans whispers, getting your attention without startling you like he normally does. He's at your side before you even notice him approach, and you're starting to wonder how exactly he does that. Monster magic, you decide. Your go-to answer for the unexplainable down here. He has a blanket and pillow in his hands and he's holding them out to you. "thought you might need these. kiddo hogs the blankets."

You take them, glancing down at Frisk and back at Sans. "Yeah, they do. Good guess."

Sans's chuckle sounds a little forced. "right, yeah. pap was like that as a kid too, liked to wrap himself up like a burrito with every blanket he could get his hands on." You laugh softly and Sans shrugs. "actually, he still does that sometimes. some things never change."

"Thanks," you say, gesturing with the pillow and blanket in your hands.

He nods, picking up his jacket and slipping it on. "sleep good." He turns off the television on his way out.

You watch him climb back up the stairs before shaking out your blanket and laying down. As you settle in, Frisk shifts beside you, scooching closer. You roll to your side and pull them to you. Frisk's face burrows under your chin, and a warm, contented feeling fills your chest as you breathe in the familiar scent of their hair. For a moment it doesn't even matter that you're borrowing a skeleton's couch for your bed. Here with Frisk you feel at home.
"Sissa?" Frisk mumbles into your chest, rubbing their face against your shirt.

You smooth back their hair, stroking the side of their face. "I'm here, sweetie. Go back to sleep."

"Mmmm." Frisk's body relaxes, and soon you can tell by their breathing that they're sleeping again.

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Sans hesitates as he reaches the door to his bedroom, and turns to look down over the railing to the living room below. He can just make out the shape of you and Frisk through the darkness.

His jacket smells like you —well, you and Undyne's shampoo. He's afraid to admit to himself that he kind of likes it.

It's been so long that he barely remembers what hope feels like. But looking down at you, he can feel it stirring like buried embers in his chest.

After going through the same motions over and over again, he finds himself at a loss. He doesn't know what to say to you, what to expect when he talks to you. Frisk is a little different each time he meets them, but fundamentally, their path is almost always the same. Usually they're kind. Sometimes, the worst times, they're not. Those times, they've never made it past him. They try and try until they give up and restart again. When Frisk comes back after those times, it takes them longer to warm up to him, as if deep down a part of them remembers. But they don't, not really.

But this time...

*This* has never happened before. *You* have never happened before.

This changes everything.

---

Sans isn't home when you get back from the store with Frisk.

"HE IS WORKING. AS HE SHOULD BE, THE LAZYBONES," Papyrus tells you, following you into the kitchen and eyeing your bags of groceries with curiosity. "THOUGH HE IS PROBABLY JUST SLEEPING AT HIS STATION."

"Oh, okay," you say, trying to hide your disappointment. Papyrus doesn't seem to notice.

"WHAT DID YOU GET FROM THE STORE? THOSE DON'T LOOK LIKE THE INGREDIENTS FOR SPAGHETTI!"

Definitely not. You line up an assortment of vegetables on the counter and hand a bundle of meat (it looks like beef, you try not to think about it) wrapped in butcher's paper to Frisk, pointing at the fridge. Considering a fair portion of Snowdin's population is rabbits, you weren't too surprised at the selection of vegetables at the store. Carrots, bell peppers, broccoli, snow peas, an onion, and some of the largest white mushrooms you've seen will make for a delicious stir-fry. They even had soy sauce and rice. Again, you just accepted it and moved on.

"I'm making veggie and beef stir-fry," you tell him.

"It's really good! Sissa makes it all the time at home!" Frisk adds, smiling.
Your boss used to let you take home food that was about to turn, things that were still edible but not quite good enough to serve to customers. A lot of the time it included a variety of vegetables, and stir-frying was a quick and easy way to make a meal from them.

Papyrus eyes your selection, looking doubtful. But he can't help but smile back at Frisk. "I SEE! WELL, SINCE YOU LOVE MY SPAGHETTI, I KNOW YOU HAVE GOOD TASTE! I WILL TRY IT."

"I'll try not to let you down, Papyrus," you say, biting back sarcasm.

"DON'T WORRY. IF YOU DO, I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WILL HELP LIFT US BOTH UP. I WILL ELEVATE YOUR CULINARY PROWESS TO MATCH MY OWN." He hesitates, resting his hands on his hipbones. "WELL, PERHAPS NOT MATCH BUT I WILL GET YOU CLOSE!"

You can't help but smile. Papyrus's enthusiasm is infectious, and even as he seems to doubt you cooking skills he manages to encourage you as well. Sans is right, his brother is pretty cool.

"Thanks. You're a great friend," you say in all sincerity.

"WOWIE, I UH..." He blushes a little, dropping his hands away from his hips and looking a little flustered. "I MEAN, I AM! THE GREAT PAPYRUS. BUT YOU, HUMAN. YOU ARE ALSO PRETTY GREAT! PLEASE NEVER FORGET THAT!"

His eyes widen when you take hold of his hand. Part of you wants to hug him, but you're not quite sure how he'd react to that. Something about the way Papyrus talks to you, his unbridled enthusiasm and reassurances, they go straight to your heart. How do these two skeletons keep doing this to you? How do they seem to bypass the layers of hurt and fill you with warmth? For the longest time, only Frisk could do that.

"Sissa? Are you okay?" Frisk is looking up at you with concern, and you realize your vision is blurry with tears.

Papyrus looks puzzled as you let him go, feeling embarrassed. You keep letting your feelings get the better of you. "Sorry, I'm fine," you say, rubbing your eyes.

Two long, bony arms wrap around you as Papyrus gently hugs you. "MY KINDNESS HAS OVERWHELMED YOU! I'M SORRY HUMAN, I UNDERESTIMATED THE POWER OF MY FRIENDSHIP. PLEASE DON'T CRY."

You start laughing, because even though he makes it sounds ridiculous, in a way it's true. You hug him back, and when you both pull away he's smiling again, reassured that you're okay.

Papyrus spends the rest of the day with you, keeping you company. The three of you take a walk around Snowdin, made much more entertaining by the skeleton's colorful commentary. You realize, gradually, that none of the other monsters seem to understand that you and Frisk are human. Considering that few monsters seem to look alike, you sort of understand their confusion. To them, the two of you must just be another kind of monster. Papyrus doesn't correct any of them.

Later, Frisk and Papyrus have a snowball fight with some of the local children. You make sure to keep to the sidelines, in no hurry to get your clothes (your own, familiar clothes) soaked again. Happy enough just to watch, an unfamiliar sense of contentment settles over you. Frisk squeals with laughter as they get hit in the side of the face with a snowball, rosy-cheeked from the cold. You can already tell he'll need a change of clothes as soon as you get back home. And a hot shower wouldn't hurt.
You wish every day could be like this. But with that hope comes the fear of this happiness ending. Everything is so uncertain. The Royal Guard wants to capture humans, though you're not sure why. Toriel seemed confident that leaving the Ruins would put you both in danger, and you can only guess it's because of that.

Frisk interrupts your thoughts, running to you and flinging their arms around your middle. "I won!" You smile down at them and push damp hair out of their eyes as they grin up at you, breathing heavily.

"NO, I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WON!" Papyrus is shaking snow out of his skull, tilting his head forward to let it fall out of his eye sockets. If Sans were here, you're sure he'd make some kind of joke about brain freeze.

"How do you win a snowball fight?" you ask them both, gently prying Frisk off of you in an attempt to keep yourself dry.

"You hit everyone else more than they hit you," Frisk says as you put a hand on the back of their neck and start steering them back towards the house.

Papyrus falls into step beside you. "THEN CLEARLY I AM THE VICTOR!"

They argue all the way back, right up until you force Frisk into the shower.

The rice is cooking on the stove top as you gather up what you'll need to prepare the rest of dinner. Digging through the drawers and cabinets (one of which is filled with bones) you thankfully find everything you need.

"Sissa, do you need help?" Frisk asks as you untie the bag of snow peas and set a bowl on the table to put them in as you clean them.

Frisk is dressed in a pair of cotton shorts borrowed from Papyrus, the drawstring pulled tight to keep them around their small hips. On them, though, they're more like pants. A wide-necked t-shirt is falling off one shoulder. The shirt says 'BEST' written in what looks like permanent marker.

You decide not to comment. "Wanna help me by cleaning these peas?"

Frisk makes a face. "That's boring."

It really is. Snapping off the stems is tedious, but someone has to do it. "Fine, how about chopping up those vegetables? I already peeled the carrots if you want to start on those."

"Okay!"

You sit down at the kitchen table to get to work on the snow peas, keeping an eye on Frisk as they carefully start chopping the carrots. You started teaching Frisk how to cook a year ago, and it had been a couple months since you started letting them use knives. You trusted them to be safe. They were a quick learner and took your directions and warnings to heart.

About a third of the way through the peas, Frisk is scraping the carrots off the cutting board into another bowl you had set aside. "Do you remember how to clean bell peppers?" you ask as they look over the remaining vegetables.
"You do it better," Frisk says, sounding doubtful.

"Well then how about slicing up those mushrooms. They're too big to leave whole. They don't need to be pretty, and rinse them first!"

Frisk does as you ask as you keep bending the ends off the peas with a satisfying snap. You're halfway done with the bag when you glance up to check on Frisk's progress, and you see Sans standing in the doorway.

Sans is frozen in place, the white lights of his eyes focused on the knife in Frisk's hand. He looks... frightened. Sweat is beading on the side of his skull.

"Sans?" you say.

He flinches but doesn't look at you. Frisk is too busy carefully slicing mushrooms to notice.

"Sans?" you say again, and this time he turns his head.

For a second he looks lost, but as he focuses on you, you can see him visibly relax. Glancing at Frisk and back at you, he wipes at his skull with a handkerchief pulled from his pocket. "aren't... aren't they a little young to be using knives?" he asks, and you can't help but notice the slight tremor in his voice.

"They need to learn sometime," you say, shrugging. Frisk always wanted to help you, with cooking especially.

"hey kiddo, why don't you let me help your sister, i think papyrus could use some company." Sans holds out his hand for the knife.

Frisk looks up at him, and for a second you think you see a glare flash across their face. But the moment you try to comprehend it the look is gone, and they're handing the knife to Sans, handle-first like you taught them. That was strange.

If Sans saw anything out of the ordinary he doesn't say anything. Instead he just picks up where Frisk left off.

"Hey, come here," you say as Frisk goes to leave the room.

They turn and come to you obediently, a question in their bright eyes. You can't see any traces of anger in their face, just the same sweet Frisk you've always known. "What is it?"

You shake your head, smiling at them. You catch hold of the back of their neck with one hand and pull them down to you so you can kiss their forehead. Frisk gives a loud protest and squirms away, leaving you chuckling as they escape the kitchen.

It takes a few minutes for Sans's hands to stop shaking.

Chapter End Notes
I just want to say again that I'm absolutely overwhelmed with the response you all have been giving me, and how motivated I am by all your wonderful comments! I love all of you!

I debated for a while about putting in tiny bits from Sans's point of view, and decided to do it, at least for this chapter. It's something I'll be doing sparingly in the future.
You don't think you'll ever forget the look on Papyrus's face the moment he tries your dinner. His jaw goes slack after he swallows (nope, not going to ask) and you find out that those sparkles you thought you saw the other day? Yeah, they're actual sparkles. They're the same orange shade of his magical eye, so you think it's got something to do with that. He apologizes to you over and over for ever doubting your cooking prowess, and after every bite he makes an enthusiastic noise of approval.

You're so happy, and proud, and embarrassed from Papyrus's attention. It's hard for you to eat when you can't stop smiling.

It's decided that in exchange for staying at the house, you'll take care of cooking. You could kiss Sans for suggesting it. Now you don't have to worry about hurting Papyrus's feelings, and it helps you feel less like a freeloader.

The next few days pass in a dizzying blur, so distracted by just enjoying your time in Snowdin.

Some of the local kids figure out that Frisk is staying with 'those funny skeletons' and they come by the house to see if they can come out and play. Frisk's eyes are so bright and they barely wait for your nod of approval before they're running out the front door. You wince as you notice one of the monster children stumble and fall on their face (they have no arms to catch themselves) but they just get up and laugh.

One day you and Frisk accompany Papyrus on his rounds through the forest. The two of you help him recalibrate the puzzles you completed, and you check in with the various dogs. You have to scold Frisk to stop petting Lesser Dog before their head clears the treetops.

With their boundless energy, Frisk wants to go out with Papyrus again the next day. Not wanting to stay home by yourself, you leave with them in the morning but find yourself at Sans's station before long. Sans doesn't seem to mind the company. He cracks a few jokes, tells you a story about how Papyrus first started training under Undyne, but most of the day you enjoy a companionable silence.

Sometime after lunch (Sans seems to materialize a pair of hot dogs out of thin air) you find yourself sitting on the floor of the small station. You lean against Sans as you stifle a yawn, and he doesn't say anything when you rest your head on his shoulder. It's so easy to be comfortable with him. He knows the ugly truth of your past and doesn't think you any lesser for it. It helps. He also doesn't pity you, or treat you like you're fragile. He's more considerate about startling you now, and makes sure you're doing okay, but it's not coddling. He cares.

"frisk seems happy here," Sans says, waking you back up as you start to doze.
You make a noise of agreement.

"how about you?"

"I'm happy too."

"how happy?"

"A ton."

"a ton?"

"Yeah. A skeleton."

He chuckles and pokes you in the side. You squirm a little, but refuse to lift your head from his shoulder. "joke stealer," he says, pretending to sound annoyed.

"I was just borrowing it, you can have it back. Skeleton puns are more your style, anyway."

You settle back down against him and close your eyes, nudging the fluff of his hood with your nose. As you start to drift off, you feel him lace his bony fingers through yours.

Sans knows he shouldn't let himself get attached. There's still that ever-looming threat that everything will just be reset. And if that happens, would you even be there with Frisk next time?

He doesn't know why this time is so different. He hopes that it means something, that maybe this will be the last time, once and for all.

And, if it is... can he really afford not to care?

Papyrus finds the two of you a few hours later, startling you both awake with his scolding. You're embarrassed to find yourself nearly laying on top of Sans; you think he must have gradually slid into a more reclined position in his sleep, taking you with him. Face burning, you leap to your feet as though caught doing something scandalous. Sans's cheekbones are blue, and when Papyrus's back is turned he winks at you. Your face gets hotter, and you aren't sure you understand what's going on.

Frisk is unusually quiet on the way back home, and insists on holding your hand.

Your anxiety isn't gone, but it's better than it was. Papyrus's sudden movements and loud voice still make you flinch out of reflex, but if he notices he never mentions it or makes you feel guilty. Sans stops telling you that you don't need to help out around the house. Doing things, feeling productive, it helps keep the (unfounded) guilt from nagging at you in your mother's voice.

A week into your stay with the skeleton brothers you decide to make cookies. Frisk is out playing with the other kids, Papyrus is out tending to his puzzles, and Sans is inside with you.

Sans sits on the counter as you pull out everything you need (you picked up the ingredients the day before), watching you with that grin on his face. You're used to the way he always seems to be looking at you, or at least you thought you were. After napping on him the other day there's been some kind of silent tension in the air. Not for the first time you wonder if he sees you as more than just a friend, but... no, that's impossible. He's a monster, a walking skeleton. How would that even work?
You've been wondering about that more than you'd like to admit.

Cookies. Right. That's what you're supposed to be doing right now. You measure and set aside a bowl with flour and baking soda, and start to combine the other ingredients. But, where's the sugar? You could have sworn you got it out... oh, you spot it next to Sans.

You hold out your hand. "Can you give me the sugar?"

"sure, i've got some sugar for you."

Before you understand what he's trying to say, Sans takes hold of your hand and pulls you towards him, cupping your face with one hand and brushing his mouth against your cheek. You think... you think that was meant to be a kiss? Oh. Oh.

No, this is Sans. It must be a joke. He saw the opportunity and took it, that's all. You pull away, cheeks burning. "Don't tease me like that," you manage to say in a small voice.

"i'm not teasing," he says, and you notice that even though he's smiling, he seems serious. "at least, not in the way you think."

"And what exactly do I think?" Your voice is higher than you like, a thrill of anticipation prickling under your skin.

"how about i just come out and say it, instead of dancing around it by pretending to be a mind reader." He leans forward a little bit, studying your face. You bite the inside of your lip. "i like you. in the 'let me take you on a date tonight' kind of way."

You blink. "Are you... asking me out?"

He raises a brow and his grin widens. "i'm pretty sure that's what i just did, yeah."

"But, I... Sans, I'm a human." This is just crazy. He can't be serious.

"i happened to notice that, yeah. what about it?"

His lack of concern gives you pause, but you press forward. "Even if this whole dating thing works out, what then? Ignoring the fact that Frisk and I are currently freeloding on your couch, how would... things... even work?" Your face feels hotter, but it's better to talk about this now before you get too involved. You also admit that you're a little curious.

Sans chuckles. "i, uh, admit i'm not exactly familiar with how all this," he gestures at you, from your head to your toes, "works. but i'm fairly confident we can figure something out. if, uh, you want to. if it gets to that." He makes a noise like he's clearing his throat and glances away for a second.

There are plenty of reasons you should say no. How much longer will you and Frisk even be around? Granted, the way things are going you don't seem to be leaving Snowdin any time soon, but can the two of you really stay in the Underground? Before, Sans had asked you if you were happy here. And you are. You've never felt happier, more at ease.

Sans scoots closer to you, still perched on top of the counter. He's starting to look a little uncomfortable. "c'mon, buddy, throw me a bone here. you can say no, i'll understand, but can you give me an answer at least?"

Fuck it, why not? You like him, he likes you... who knows what's in store for you and Frisk in the
future, but for now... "Okay," you say, nodding and smiling. "I'd like that, a lot actually."

His smile widens again, and he looks pleased. "cool. i'm sure pap will have a ball with frisk." He holds out a hand to you and you give him yours, smooth bone sliding under your fingers and palm. It's a familiar, comforting feeling now. You wonder how his hands would feel under your clothes. "i promise that you're gonna have a good time."
Frisk holds their giant bowl of popcorn over their head as you tuck a blanket around them, snuggled up with Papyrus on the couch. The popcorn for dinner is something of a peace offering. News that you and Sans were going out alone had gone over worse than you expected. They whined and pouted, complaining that they had barely seen you all day, which you reminded them was because they were out with their new friends. *You* had been at home. Frisk never comes out and says it, but you think that maybe they're jealous of the attention you've been giving Sans. You haven't had a boyfriend (not that you have one now, you don't want to get ahead of yourself) since before Frisk was born. Hell, you hardly have *friends* to spend time with (present company excluded of course). Frisk just isn't used to having to share your attention.

You don't like knowing that Frisk is just going to stuff themselves with popcorn, but it's always cheered them up. They always thought of having popcorn for dinner and watching movies as a treat. In reality, it was because there was nothing else. Your mother would leave the two of you alone sometimes for days at a time with no money, and an empty kitchen. Sometimes you could bring home food from work, but you didn't want to make a habit of it. Your boss might get suspicious. Instead, you kept a bulk container of popcorn kernels stashed away for emergencies.

There were lots of experiments with toppings scrounged up from around the house. You made it into something exciting for Frisk, instead of an act of desperation while you waited for your mother to come home.

Frisk stuffs popcorn in their mouth but doesn't look at you. Papyrus glances at Frisk and up at you, then over at Sans where he's standing by the door. He seems to be thinking about something, his eyes narrowing as he drums his fingers on his leg.

"SANS. I SEE THAT YOU ARE HOGGING THE TALLER HUMAN ALL TO YOURSELF."

You glance back at Sans, who seems to be trying to look casual. Emphasis on *trying*. Frisk frowns at the bowl of popcorn and shoves another handful into their mouth. "SO BE IT. I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, HAVE ALREADY DECIDED THAT FRISK IS MY FAVORITE HUMAN!"

Frisk looks startled as Papyrus wraps his arms around them and pulls them closer. The bowl of popcorn wobbles but doesn't quite tip over.

"aw, darn, bro. and here i was just taking her out as consolation because *i* was going to say that frisk was my favorite human too." Sans gives a dramatic sigh and shrugs his shoulders."but you beat me to it."

Frisk looks up at you, trapped behind Papyrus's arms with wide, confused eyes. You resist the urge to smile, instead putting on an exaggerated pout. "It's okay, you guys. I understand. Frisk is *my* favorite human too."

"Pushing their way past gangly skeletal arms, Frisk leans towards you. "B-but, Sissa...! You're *my* favorite human."

Grinning, you lean down to wrap Frisk in a tight hug. "Thanks, sweetie. You're not just my favorite human. You're my favorite *everything*, you know that right?"
They make a noncommittal noise into your shoulder.

"Right?"

"...yeah."

"Good." You squeeze them tighter, not letting go until Frisk starts whining and trying to wriggle free.

"Sissa, go away!" they complain, red-faced and embarrassed when you finally pull away.

You plant a loud, obnoxious kiss on their cheek that makes them squeal in protest while Papyrus and Sans laugh. "You be good for Papyrus."

"papyrus, you be good for frisk."

"Go away!" "GO AWAY, SANS!"

Sans is holding your hand in his jacket pocket, 'for warmth' he says. You're fairly certain that your own pockets are just as capable, but you don't argue. Part of you wants to tell him he doesn't have to come up with excuses to hold your hand, but you can't quite work up the nerve. You're not used to any of this.

As you get closer to Grillby's, you hear Sans let out a sigh. You look at him and he gives you an apologetic shrug. "sorry, we don't exactly have a lot of options in snowdin," he says. "well, actually there aren't any options. just grillby's."

"That's okay, now I can try more than just the fries," you say, smiling in a way you hope is reassuring.

"there's this place on the border of hotland and the capital that i'd like to take you —i've done a couple comedy shows there before. it's more the type of place you'd go on a date," he says, and he still sounds like he's apologizing. "maybe, once we've got your situation figured out better, we can go there."

You squeeze his fingers, nudging him with your shoulder. "Sure. It's a date."

Sans holds the door open for you this time when you get to the restaurant. He raises a hand to signal Grillby and leads you to an empty booth instead of the bar. When the owner comes to take your order, he seems to hesitate as he glances from Sans to you, then gives you a nod. You think that it might mean 'welcome back'.

The skeleton seems to be more comfortable now that he's in his element. He has you giggling over his jokes by the time your food arrives, and hearing you laugh has him grinning. While you're eating he tones down the jokes at least, so you don't choke.

He sticks more to groan-worthy puns instead.

"No, no, that's terrible," you protest, shaking your head and eating some fries.

Sans holds his burger, waggling the ridges of bone that serve as his eyebrows. "is it really that bunbearable?"

You try not to laugh, half-snorting and half-choking. So much for not choking! Coughing and laughing at the same time as your eyes start to water, you hit your chest a few times. Then, as the
coughing starts to ease a bit, you take a long gulp of your drink. You clear your throat and start to feel better.

Sans waits for you to catch your breath, putting his burger down and reaching across the table to pat your hand. "i know i leave you breathless, babe, but there's no need to get so choked up."

You kick him in the shin under the table. "'Babe?'"

He winks at you and nudges your foot with his slipper. "careful or you'll bruise my funny bone. and is there a problem with me calling you babe? you like something else better? i can always call you honey, since you're so sweet."

Your face feels warm, and you know you're blushing. Covering your cheeks, you glance over at the rest of the restaurant. "No, it's fine. I just wasn't expecting it. And are you doing corny pick-up lines now?"

"i've got a few. like, i might have to throw you a bone, because you're looking quite fetching." Sans winks at you again as you look at him before covering your entire face.

"Oh my god."

"if i had a heart, you would have stolen it by now."

"Sans."

He nudges you again with his slipper, tapping your foot. "yeah?"

Embarrassed and emboldened at the same time, you uncover your face and fold your arms on top of the table. You lean forwards over your nearly-empty plate. "Kiss me if I'm wrong, but, monsters don't exist, right?" As you deliver your own cheesy line, you tease your foot up the side of his leg before pulling away and sitting back.

Sans blinks, slowly and deliberately before he blushes just the tiniest bit and gives a nervous chuckle. Drawing up his shoulders, he ducks the lower half of his face into the fluff of his hood. Then, he slides out from the booth, holding out his hand to you. "c'mon, let's get outta here so i can answer your question."

Oh. "Ah, but, w-what about the check?" you say, stumbling over the words as you take his hand and let him draw you to your feet.

"he knows i'm good for it, i'll take care of it next time. now c'mon." The lights in his eye sockets are wider as he looks up at you, and his voice is canted low. Warmth gathers low in your stomach at his wanting tone, and the hint of urgency in the way he pulls you towards the door.

The chill outside feels good against your flushed face. Sans leads you around the side of the restaurant, and once you're away from Snowdin's main road he stops. "now, about that question."

He turns, and as he reaches up a hand to cup your cheek you lean forward to press a kiss to, well, his teeth. You stay like that for a moment as you slide a hand across the side of his skull, thumb brushing his cheekbone. The hinge of his jaw shifts under your palm, and something warm and soft brushes your lips.

Startled, you pull back and open your eyes, greeted by the blue glow of Sans's left eye. Coming from between his teeth is a tongue of the same shade, glowing faintly. Oh. Monster magic keeps surprising you.
"sorry, didn't mean to scare you. i, uh, hope this is okay," he says, glancing away.

You can't help but think of *other* uses for that tongue, and a few of your concerns about how *certain things* with Sans might work are gone. There's also the question of what else, exactly, his magic is capable of. You'll have to leave that unanswered for now, because there's no way in hell you're just going to ask him.

"It's... no, Sans, it's good," you say, letting your hand drift down to the base of his skull, skimming over his cervical vertebrae. The way he shudders sends a thrill down your spine.

Encouraged by his reaction, you lean forward to press another kiss to his mouth, this time expecting the warmth of his tongue on your lips. It isn't really wet, like it should be. You brush your own tongue against his, and he lets out a pleased hum. His hand that's on your cheek is now sliding into the loose waves of your hair, pulling you closer as he begins exploring your mouth.

You groan and his other hand curls around your hip, tips of his phalanges slipping under the waist of your jacket. He finds skin and drags his fingers slowly across, savoring the feel of you. Moving higher, your jacket shifts up just enough to let cold air hit your side and you shiver, pulling away by instinct.

Sans is looking up at you as you open your eyes, shoving your clothes back down. There's a question in the still-surprisingly expressive lines of his face.

"Sorry," you mumble, breathing a little heavy and tangling your fingers in the furred trim of his hoodie. "It's just, cold out here."

"oh, yeah, geez this really isn't..." The ring of blue fades and he blinks, the white lights reappearing. He's blushing a little bit, pulling his hand out of your hair. "shit, i wasn't exactly planning on jumping your bones right next to grillby's."

You can't help but let out a low chuckle. "I'd hope not. There's no way I'd let you undress me out here."

Sans raises a brow, tugging your hand away from his hood and tangling his fingers with yours. "what about somewhere warmer?"

Raising a brow in return, you press a kiss between his eyes. "Hmm... maybe."

"aren't you just full of surprises? but, as tempting as that sounds... i'm pretty sure papyrus and frisk are still awake. we haven't been gone that long." Sans winks at you. "so how about we continue this date i have planned, and we'll see what happens?"

Chapter End Notes

If I can work up the nerve I might change the rating of the fic to Explicit and try my hand at writing smut for the first time in like... over ten years. Fair warning. ;)
The forest outside of Snowdin is beautiful in the dark. You hesitate to call it 'night', even though according to your phone night and day are at the same times as the surface. There aren't any sunrises or sunsets, just a gradual brightness and darkness. You wonder, briefly, if you'll ever see the sun again.

Whenever you hear monsters speak in wistful tones about the surface, they seem to dwell on the sun. As well they should, there isn't really anything quite like it. But, you think you miss the moon the most. The stars. The chill, wet feeling of the night air; the kind that leaves dew on everything by morning. Fogbanks that hover like lost clouds over fields on the side of the road until the sun burns them away.

Here in the Underground, even the temperature isn't any different at night. The air feels the same against your face. It reminds you that you really are deep within the earth, and despite the snow-covered trees, you begin to feel the press of tons of rock high above you. You take in a deep, pine-scented breath and force the sensation away.

Sans brings you to a clearing near the edge of one of the forest's cliffs. From here, you can see out over the dark expanse of trees, flecked with snow. In the dark, everything is painted in black and white until it's all swallowed in black at the furthest part of your vision.

You stand close to Sans's side, your hand once again in his jacket pocket. He squeezes your fingers. "what do you think of the view?"

Glancing at him, your lips curl into a mischievous smile. "Very handsome. The forest is nice too."

Somehow he seems pleased and frustrated at the same time. "hey, i was trying to set that one up for myself."

"You left it wiiiiide open for me to take, Sans," you tease, grinning. "You're gonna have to try harder."

"well, normally i hate working hard at anything," he says, the lights of his eyes fixed on you, "but for you i'll make an exception."

"I feel so special," you say, rolling your eyes.

"you should. you are." ("You think you're special? You're just another teenage slut. Now no one is going to want you.") You look away, back out over the forest below. "I'm not. Not really."

"hey, yes you are. you've got people who care about you. do i need to get papyrus out here to change your mind?"Sans squeezes your hand, and you can feel him still watching you.

You can't help but smile at the mental image of Papyrus stomping through the snow, outraged at the very idea of you feeling down on yourself. It helps. Turning back to Sans, he looks a little relieved. "Sorry," you say. "Old habits. It's going to take a while to break."

Twenty years of being told you're worthless tends to make you believe it's true.

"so," he says, drawing out the single syllable as a sign of changing the subject. You're grateful for
"That. "I brought you out here to admire the view. I like to come out here sometimes to clear my head."

"Do you need to clear your head when your skull is empty?"

"Ouch. Brutal," he says, chuckling. "Do you always tease your dates or am I just lucky?"

"Ah, well..." You reach up with your free hand and drag your fingers through your hair, feeling awkward. "I don't know. I've never actually been on a real date before."

"Really? You're not still joking around?" he asks, surprised. You wonder if you should be flattered.

"Really. I never had much of a chance." You shrug and kick at the snow under your feet, looking down.

"I just thought, with Frisk..." Sans trails off, but his implications are clear enough.

"I was fourteen, you think Frisk's father took me out on a hot date?" You can't help but laugh a little. "It was a lot less romance, and a lot more rushed, awkward fumbling whenever we could get away from our parents..."

"Well, I guess I'll have to make sure to take you on that hot date then. How am I doing on the whole 'romance' side of things so far?"

You look at Sans again and there's something tender in his expression. Smiling, you lean over to rest your head against his shoulder. "No complaints. Though I'd say this is more of a 'cold date' if you ask me."

He laughs, his shoulder jerking under you. Still holding your hand, he reaches out and pulls you against his chest, hugging you with his free arm. He's smiling up at you, and you feel a fluttering below your heart. "I feel like this is payback for you nearly choking back at Grillby's."

"I like joking with you, Sans. I like making you laugh. I didn't really have a lot of people to laugh with, before," you say, holding on to the back of his jacket and burying your face in the fluffy part of his hood. His jaw is smooth and warm against your exposed cheek, and his jacket has a faint musty smell of bones and ketchup. It's a little strange, but familiar and comforting.

"You can always joke with me, babe. And I'll always try to make you laugh. Maybe it's a matter of pride but I assure you I ain't lion."

You groan at the joke, leaning bodily against him as you let the air out of your lungs. Sans laughs and holds you upright, brushing a toothy kiss against your jaw and down your neck. You shudder. His chuckles fade and he hums next to your ear as you hold onto his jacket a little tighter.

"Hmm, what was that?" he asks, voice dropping noticeably lower. He grazes the curve of your neck with his teeth again, forcing you to gasp and press closer against him.

"Sans," you say, and your voice comes out as a whine. "If you keep doing that, I really will try to jump your bones, cold be damned."

"As great as that sounds, I think I'd rather wait to have my bones rattled somewhere you'll be more comfortable." Sans loosens his grip on you with some reluctance, resting his hand on your hip as you pull away enough to look at him.

"Such a gentleman," you tease, pressing a kiss to his cheekbone.
He brushes his mouth against your cheek in return before you're out of reach. "that's me, a skeleton of class."

You pull away completely, feeling the need for some space to clear your head. Sans lets you go without any complaint, watching you as you turn your back to him to look out over the forest again. Despite your moments of boldness, you feel nervous. It's been a long time since anyone showed any kind of interest in you (aside from strange men hitting on you at work). To complicate matters further, you aren't even sure how to go about being intimate with a skeleton. Oh, the revelation about his tongue will certainly help with you, but what are you supposed to do to reciprocate? He seemed to enjoy you touching the vertebrae in his neck, so maybe it isn't too different for some things.

Forgetting for a moment where you are, you look up and expect to see the sky. Instead there's just darkness, which elicits a sigh of disappointment. You hear Sans take a few crunching steps through the snow to stand at your side, following your line of sight.

"I guess I could pretend it's cloudy, and that the stars are just hidden," you say, mostly to yourself.

"there's this place in waterfall called the wishing room, and the ceiling is covered in crystals. we pretend that they're stars, and well, make wishes on them," Sans says. "it's not the real thing, but it's something, i guess."

You think that maybe he's trying to comfort you, but it just makes you sadder. There's so many things on the surface you took for granted, and now that they're gone you can't help but miss them. "I'm sure I'll get used to it. It's just different, that's all."

Sans shifts on his feet. "are you sure you want to stay down here?" He sounds casual, but when you look over at him the lights in his eyes are so small you can barely make them out. He's looking up at the ceiling, and he seems worried.

"Sans, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that falling down that hole is probably one of the best things that's ever happened to me. This has been... this past week has been one of the happiest I've ever had," you say, reaching out to touch his arm.

Sans looks down at your hand, then takes it in his own as he turns to face you. "i have to admit you saying that makes me happy, but i can't help but feel like it says more about your time on the surface than your time down here."

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"Maybe, but I already told you; I'm happy here. And if that means staying in the Underground, then so be it." You squeeze his fingers, giving him a reassuring smile.

Sans sighs, raising a brow as his grin turns wry. "well, i'm not gonna be the one to convince you otherwise."

"Good. Because I like being here with you," you murmur, cheeks warming at the admission.

Expression softening, he tugs on your hand to pull you close. He reaches up to cup your face and draws you gently down to him for a kiss. "i want you to stay. i want you both to stay. maybe that's selfish, but things have been so good, and i just want it to stay like this, for once." Something in the desperation in his voice at the end makes your heart ache. You wonder what he means, and think that you're missing something important.

Your lips brush against his mouth and he makes a pleased hum, smooth fingers pressing encouragingly against the side of your neck. Pushing past his open jacket, you run your hand along
the side of his ribs. Through his shirt you can feel the bone underneath, and even though you're expecting it it's still a little startling. In his jacket he seems to have so much more *substance*, but under your touch he seems almost fragile as he shivers. You can't help but smile at his reaction, glad that he's enjoying your touch as much as you enjoy his.

You expect the warm touch of his tongue but it doesn't come, instead Sans pulls away, looking up at you with something akin to hunger that makes a thrill run through you. "come home with me," he says, voice low.

Swallowing, you draw in a shaky breath and do your best to smirk. "I have to, that's where I've been sleeping. And your brother has my child," you say, but the way your voice sounds strained to your ears betrays any playful tone you were trying to use.

"you know what i mean." The roughness to the words stokes the heat that's been building low in your belly.

"Yes. Okay, yes," you say, words spilling out of you in a rush. You're still unsure how exactly this is going to work, but you just know you want it to happen. You need this. "Take me home."

You're back at the house faster than you realize is possible. Along the way you seem to somehow skip part of the town, but at the moment you just can't bring yourself to care. Sans opens the door as quietly as he can, and both of you share a look when you see that Frisk and Papyrus are once again asleep on the couch, lit only by the light of the television. Good.

Sans has a tight grip on your hand as he leads you up the stairs, back towards the only room you have yet to see. You can't help but feel a little curious, despite yourself. What is his room like? You don't even see the key as he unlocks the door, and it's pitch black when you enter. Closing the door, he tells you to wait there as you hear him maneuver through the room and then flick on a dim light.

His room is fairly plain, but messy. There's a bit of trash in one corner and a pile of socks in the other, with an old treadmill in the center. The light that Sans just turned on is actually a flashlight stuck into a lamp. His bed has been made with wrinkly sheets. The skeleton gives you a little shrug after you survey the room and look at him.

"sorry, wasn't really expecting much company," he says.

"It's fine, right now I really don't care." You unzip your jacket as you cross the room, draping it over the treadmill.

Sans watches you as you hesitate and then decide to sit on the side of his bed. You fidget, thumbing the edge of the mattress and looking down at your knees. "Are you just going to admire the view, or are you gonna come over here before I start to lose my nerve," you mumble, a nervous laugh escaping you.

You don't even hear him move and suddenly he's standing in front of you, hands stuffed in his jacket pockets and looking a little unsure of himself. "i wouldn't know what that's like, since i don't have any nerves," he says, but the joke sounds a little forced.

You make a small huff of laughter, smiling at the attempt anyway. "Getting cold feet? Do I need to warm you up?" You hope you sound more confident than you feel.

He chuckles a little and seems to relax, easing his hands out of his pockets. "have i told you that i love that little glint in your eyes when you make a joke and wait to see if i'm going to laugh?"
There's that familiar flutter in your chest again, easing away the uncertainty as you smile up at him. "No, but I'm glad to hear it," you say softly, reaching out a tentative hand to rest against his sternum.

Sans shrugs out of his jacket then covers your hand with his own, squeezing your fingers. "and the way you blush, and how your eyes crinkle when you smile."

You reach up and tug him downwards, kissing his jaw. You feel it move as he opens his mouth to speak again, but the words never make it to the air as you run the tip of your tongue along the smooth surface of the bone. He groans softly, leaning towards you. When you pull away, the lights in his eyes are bright and his cheekbones are stained blue. He reaches out towards you but you pull away, tucking your knees up under you as you scoot back on his bed. You sit back on your heels, waiting for him to follow.

Sans doesn't hesitate. You've barely settled into position when he's on his knees on the mattress, one hand burying itself in your hair to pull you back to him as the other plunges under the hem of your shirt. He runs his fingers up your side until he reaches the band of your bra, follows it around to your back and then drags his hand down the curve of your spine. Your shiver has nothing to do with the cold as he tugs your head gently to the side and runs his teeth against your neck. Pausing for a moment, he seems to consider before you feel the warmth of his tongue against your pulse.

Biting back a moan, you grip the back of his shirt with both hands as he slowly pushes up your top, tips of his phalanges trailing over the soft flesh of your stomach. He shies away from your bra again, instead gripping the swell of your hip and stroking your skin with his thumb.

"you're so soft," he murmurs against your throat. "i love touching you."

"Then touch me," you say, arching under his hand, willing it higher.

"where? show me."

Covering his hand with your own, you guide it up over the curve one one breast, breath hitching as his fingers tease you through the fabric of your bra. You whine as he pulls away from your neck, but as you open your eyes to look at him you can't help but feel a pleasant ache in your chest. He's looking at you like something precious, fascinated by the bare expanse of your stomach. You can't even bring yourself to feel self-conscious about your stretch marks, not with the way he's looking at you. His hand shifts over your breast and you bite your lip, arching again into his touch.

Slowly untangling his other hand from your hair, he reaches down to push your shirt higher. You're about to suggest just taking the damn thing off when—

"SANS?"

You both freeze, and your stomach gives a lurch. The blue in Sans's left eye flickers when your eyes meet.

"maybe if we ignore him, he'll just go away," Sans mutters.

You heave a sigh, gritting your teeth. "But if Papyrus is awake, then—"

"Sissa?!"

The fear in Frisk's voice makes your blood run cold, any remaining desire vanishing in an instant. Sans's hands are off of you and you're tugging down your shirt, hurrying to the door with the skeleton at your heels.
"Frisk, sweetie what's wrong?" you call out the second you reach the second-story railing, following it to the stairs.

"bro, is everything okay?" Sans asks, and you feel a surge of affection at the concern in his voice.

Papyrus is standing at the foot of the stairs, glancing between the two of you and where Frisk is sitting on the couch, tears shining in their eyes. He looks confused and uncertain, wringing his hands and failing to find his voice. The tall skeleton moves aside as you brush past him.

Frisk makes a choked sound as you climb onto the couch next to them, pulling them into your arms and stroking their hair. "Shh, baby I'm here, what's wrong?" you murmur, rocking the two of you back and forth.

"what happened?" Sans asks, and it sounds like he's talking to Papyrus.

"I— I'm not sure," Papyrus says, his voice quiet. "They woke up and seemed confused, then started asking for her."

Frisk is trembling in your arms.

"Baby, talk to me. Are you okay?" you ask, fighting to keep fear out of your own voice.

"Nightmare," they mumble into your chest. "I thought... I couldn't find you, you weren't here. And then I woke up and you still weren't here. I thought I was alone."

"You're not alone. I'm here."

"Where were you?"

A surge of guilt rises in your chest, even though you know you didn't do anything wrong. "Sans and I didn't want to wake you. We were in his room."

"Stay with me?" Frisk begs, fingers digging into your clothes.

You rub soothing circles into their back, nodding against their cheek. "Of course, Frisk. Of course I'll stay with you."

As you speak you look up and meet Sans's gaze. You think he'll be upset, but he just looks concerned. He comes up next to you and pats the top of Frisk's head, placing his other hand on your back. It's a small gesture, but you can feel him supporting you. It's a new feeling, one that fills you with warmth.

"sorry we scared you, kiddo. i know what it's like to wake up and feel confused like that."

Frisk eases away from your chest, tilting their head to look up at Sans. They sniffle loudly and rub their nose. "That happens to you? You wake up and feel like you're in the wrong place?"

"sure it does," he says, and you think you hear a little bit of something sad in his voice. His smile seems forced and stiff. "but you'll be okay, kiddo. you're in a good place this time."
"SANS, GET UP YOU LAZYBONES!"

Sans jerks awake, Papyrus's shrill voice and the pounding on his door jolting him out of sleep. An overwhelming sense of deja vu fills him with dread. How many times has he heard Papyrus say those words? A new recurring nightmare haunts the fringes of his consciousness, the feeling of losing you a sharp ache in his chest.

He knew this would happen! He'd let his guard down, he let himself get attached, and now it's all being torn away from him. But why? Why now? Sans drags his hands down his face, biting back a growl of anger.

Damn it, damn it, damn it... No!

Shaking and disoriented, he stumbles out of bed towards his makeshift light, bumping against his treadmill in the dark. His hand fumbles with the lamp, and the familiar sight of his messy room does little to ease his fears.

It must have reset. He's certain of it. Papyrus always wakes him up in the exact same way, the day before Frisk emerges from the Ruins. He has to wait a day to see if you'll be there again, and all at once he's not sure he can bear it.

Feeling the surge of magic welling throughout his body, throughout his Soul, the lamp begins to glow with a blue haze. With a gesture it lifts into the air, and as he turns, snarling, to fling it across the room, he sees something that makes him freeze in place.

Your jacket is still draped across the treadmill.

The light drops back onto the top of his dresser with a clatter, relief surging through him as the magic drains away. For a moment he almost collapses. His knees feel so weak. He picks up your jacket and sits on the edge of his bed, hands trembling as he stares down at it. A short, manic laugh escapes him and then he curls in on himself, burying his face in the fabric clutched tight in his fingers.

Everything is fine. Everything is fine.

You are his touchstone to this reality, and for the moment he feels grounded again.

You're in the kitchen, sitting and eating breakfast with Frisk when you feel Sans wrap his arms around you from behind and hug you. He presses his forehead into the crook of your neck, and you think you hear him let out a sigh. Frisk rolls their eyes from across the table and keeps eating.

You clear your throat, feeling your cheeks warm at the undisguised show of affection. "Um, good morning," you say, reaching up to touch his arms.

"morning," Sans answers, tone casual. He relaxes his hold on you a little bit, lifting his head and resting his chin on your shoulder. You can feel his voice vibrating through his bones. "pap and i have sentry work today. did you two want to come?"

"I promised Frisk I'd spend the day with them today," you tell him, an apology in your voice. "We're going shopping before lunch, is there anything you want me to pick up?"
"nah, babe, i'm good." Sans unwinds his arms from around you, giving your shoulders an affectionate squeeze.

Frisk looks over at the two of you, eyes narrowing. "Sissa," they say, accusingly. "Is Sans your boyfriend now?"

Nearly choking on your oatmeal, you let your spoon drop into your bowl as you swallow and pat your chest. Sans is standing beside you now, and the two of you share a look. Is he? If it hadn't been for the interruption, you're confident the two of you would have slept together last night...

You're sure you're beet red at this point, unsure of what to say. Sans gives you a little smirk, then turns to Frisk. Your child is fidgeting with their breakfast as they watch you, scooping and dumping their oatmeal back into the bowl with a *plop*.

"hey kiddo, what's this feel like to you?" Sans asks, holding out the sleeve of his jacket.

Frisk looks at him like he's grown a second head. You admit that you have no idea what he's getting at, either.

Sans nudges his sleeve closer. Frisk looks over at you, and finding no answer in your own confused expression, looks back at the skeleton again. They reach out and rub his jacket between their fingers.

"Feels like your jacket," they say, shrugging as they stare up at him from under thick bangs.

"you sure it doesn't feel like boyfriend material?" Sans winks at you.

You hide your face behind a hand, shoulders shaking as a snort escapes you, followed by a stream of laughter. How did you not realize that was coming?

"I don't know what boyfriend material feels like," Frisk says, giggling.

"Good, you've got another ten years until you need to know," you say, any force in your tone weakened as you try to catch your breath.

"well, then we should ask your sissa," Sans says, holding out his arm to you. He waggles his brows. "what do you think?"

You reach out and take his arm, rubbing slowly with the pad of your thumb. Pursing your lips, you pretend to think. "Hmm..." Beneath the teasing, you can see affection in Sans's face. You can't help but smile. "I think so..."

Frisk makes a loud gagging noise as Sans leans over to kiss your cheek. "Kissing is *gross*."

You turn your head and give the skeleton a quick peck on the mouth. "Definitely gross. Are you disgusted? I'm disgusted."

"awful."

"Stoooooop," Frisk whines. "Or I'm not going to be okay with this anymore!"

You nudge Sans away with a laugh, his fingers trailing across your shoulder before he leans away. You can't help but notice that he keeps touching you, and he seems hesitant to leave the kitchen. But right now your focus is on Frisk, who is hanging their head dramatically over the back of the chair, making choking noises.
"So you are okay with it, sweetie?" you ask. Maybe you should have talked to Frisk about this earlier... but everything had moved so quickly.

Frisk rights themselves, glancing at Sans. He's looking a little awkward, waiting for the verdict with his hands shoved in his pockets. They look back down at their breakfast, picking their spoon back up to push their oatmeal around the bowl. "Yeah," they say in a quiet voice, looking a little embarrassed. "I like Sans."

You and Sans share a look, and he seems about to say something when Papyrus's loud voice echoes through the house.

"SANS! WE NEED TO GO OR WE'RE GOING TO BE LATE!"

Sans sighs and gives you another quick kiss on the cheek. You start laughing as he leans in to do the same to Frisk. "c'mon, one for you too, kiddo."

Frisk protests and tries to duck away, but as Sans ruffles their hair on the way out the door you see the pleased look on Frisk's face. They look up, see you smiling, then try to frown and go back to eating their breakfast.

Warmth spreads throughout your chest, and you wonder when this all started feeling so normal. Everything feels perfect.

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Sans has his head pillowed on his arms at his sentry station, watching the few snowflakes twirl through the air on their way to the ground. He just woke from a pleasant nap, sometime around midday according to his phone. He thinks about texting you, but decides not to. Frisk tends to hang onto your phone most of the time, and he can't really think of anything to say.

Leaving the house that morning was difficult, but he didn't want to worry you or Papyrus. He must have put on a convincing act, because neither of you noticed anything was wrong. Though, after his conversation with you and Frisk, it wasn't much of an act anymore. Seeing you, reassuring himself that nothing had been reset... it all helped.

He's still worried that he's making a huge mistake, but he can't help but let himself get wrapped up in you. Everything with you is new, and as scared as he is, he feels rejuvenated. Even Frisk is different. They're happier, more content.

Maybe things really can be good this time. Part of him —most of him— doesn't believe it, but it's nice to think about.

The crunch of familiar footsteps through the snow snaps Sans out of his thoughts. Looking up, he sees Papyrus coming his way. So much for his hope for another nap. Sans sits up a little as his brother approaches, cradling his chin in one hand.

"'sup bro?"

Papyrus huffs out a long-suffering sigh, shaking his head. "I SEE YOU ARE SITTING HERE DOING NOTHING, AS USUAL, BROTHER. WE CANNOT AFFORD TO LOWER OUR DEFENSES, THERE IS STILL THE CHANCE THAT ANOTHER, NOT-SO-NICE HUMAN MAY REACH THE UNDERGROUND! IF THAT HAPPENS, WE MUST BE READY!"

"yeah, you're right."

"OF COURSE I'M RIGHT! IF I CAPTURE A DIFFERENT HUMAN, THEN MAYBE UNDYNE
"CAN OVERLOOK THE FACT THAT I'VE BEEN LYING TO HER..." Papyrus grimaces as nervous sweat dots the side of his skull. "I CAN'T KEEP DOING THIS FOREVER, SANS, I CAN'T STAND LYING TO ONE FRIEND TO KEEP MY OTHER FRIENDS SAFE."

If only it could be that simple. Though, Sans suspected that if Papyrus knew the truth about why Undyne and Asgore wanted humans, his brother wouldn't be so keen on catching them. He'd never knowingly usher anyone to their death, no matter how noble-sounding the cause. Sans just doesn't have it in him to tell him the truth.

"we're gonna have to tell her something sooner or later. i don't think the humans are going to be leaving any time soon."

Papyrus lets out another sigh, looking discouraged. After a moment he leans forward, resting his elbows on the counter of the sentry station as he gives Sans a scrutinizing look. Suddenly, Sans feels a little nervous. "SPEAKING OF THE HUMANS... WHAT WERE YOU TWO DOING IN YOUR ROOM LAST NIGHT?"

Sans gives a weak laugh, looking away. "i dunno what you're talking about bro."

"OH, YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT, SANS." Papyrus has a twinkle in his eye as he starts poking his brother in the shoulder over and over. "FIRST YOU GO ON A DATE, THEN YOU'RE BACK IN YOUR ROOM, CANOODLING."

Sans's eyes widen, and he knows that the look on his face is definitely giving him away. "h-how did you know we went on a date?"

Papyrus's expression is positively triumphant. "NYEH HEH HEH! I KNOW YOU, BROTHER, AND I CAN SEE THE WAY YOU KEEP LOOKING AT HER. YOU LIIIIIIKE HER!"

Sans buries his face in his arms as Papyrus cackles, trying his best to ignore the incessant prodding of his brother's gloved hand. "AND HERE I THOUGHT YOU'D BE TOO LAZY TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT!"

"bro."

"NO WONDER YOU'VE BEEN SEEMING SO CHEERFUL."

"papyrus."

"I'M EVEN HAPPIER THAT I FAILED TO CAPTURE THE HUMANS."

"bro."

"WHAT, SANS?"

"now that you know, you gotta help me get the kid outta the house so we can have some time alone."

"HMM, THAT SOUNDS MORE LIKE AN EXCUSE FOR YOU TO BE LAZY. BUT! I WILL DO WHAT I CAN TO HELP. BECAUSE I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, CARE ABOUT YOU AND YOUR HAPPINESS!"

Sans can't help but smile up at his brother, chuckling. "you're the best, bro."

"I KNOW."
"you're making my wishbone come true."

"SANS."

"hey, don't sound so sternum."

"SANS!"

Before Sans can work his way into his next joke, Papyrus's phone starts to ring. The taller skeleton fishes his hand into a concealed pocket in his clothes and retrieves it. Sans raises an eyebrow as Papyrus's face lights up.

"OH, IT'S THE HUMANS!" He pushes a button, holding the phone up to his skull. "HELLO HUMAN!"

Sans can hear the other end of the conversation clearly, because Frisk is shouting. Papyrus's jaw goes slack and if he had flesh and blood his face would have drained of color. "Papyrus you have to help—!"

Papyrus nearly drops the phone as he pulls it away from his head, panicked as he stares at the screen. The call disconnected.

"papyrus—"

Sans is pushing himself over the counter, reaching for his brother's arm. Nervous energy buzzes through his bones, fear needling his spine. Papyrus tries to call the humans back, but it just rings until it goes to voicemail.

Clenching his jaw, Papyrus looks down at his brother and pulls him out of the sentry station, setting him on his feet. "I THINK NOW WOULD BE A GOOD TIME FOR ONE OF YOUR SHORTCUTS, SANS."

You and Frisk are returning home from getting groceries for the next few days. Your hands are full and even Frisk is carrying a few bags. With no foreseeable end to your stay with the skeleton brothers in sight, you're feeling encouraged to make good on your promise to cook for everyone. Aside from dried pasta and ingredients for tomato sauce, the kitchen is lacking in essentials. You've made it a point to remedy that.

A pair of young monsters darts past you, shouting to each other and laughing. As you start to wonder what's going on, you see most of Frisk's new friends gathered around the house. At their center is a tall woman —taller than you but shorter than Papyrus— with a shockingly-red ponytail and blue-green scales. A pair of kids are holding on to her biceps as she lifts them, a toothy grin taking up most of her face.

"C'mon you little punks, I can lift ALL of you at once!" she shouts, laughing.

Two more kids seize hold of her leather jacket and she flexes her arms, lifting them into the air. Who could this be, and why is she in front of the house? Sans and Papyrus never mentioned any other friends, except... Oh no...

You halt in your tracks, but it's too late. The woman and the children have caught sight of you and Frisk. The kids call out for Frisk to come play, and in stark contrast the woman's face begins to twist into a grimace. You drop your bags and snatch Frisk's arm, pulling them to a halt.
"Sissa—?"

"What the hell is this?" the woman snaps, and all at once the children fall silent. She shakes off the ones clinging to her arms, pushing her way past them and towards the two of you. You pull Frisk to your side, putting yourself in front of them. "Humans, in Snowdin?!"

The kids scatter at the pure fury in her voice, and a few of them cast worried glances your way. You don't expect any of their families to be much help. Of course this would happen when Sans and Papyrus are away!

"ARGH! I should have known Papyrus was hiding something from me, but I never expected THIS." She holds out her hand and a glowing, pale blue spear appears against her palm.

"We're Papyrus's friends!" Frisk tries to circle around you, and a shiver of fear trails up your spine as you see the telltale red glow of their Soul in front of their chest.

"No!" you shout, pulling Frisk back behind you. This isn't like 'fighting' Papyrus. This woman — Undyne, it has to be — is glaring at you with the intent to kill.

"We don't have to fight!" Frisk insists, yanking on the back of your jacket.

Undyne sneers, her one yellow eye narrowing. "Oh I'm sure it won't be much of a fight. We only need one more Soul, but I'm sure King Asgore won't mind a spare." She points the tip of her spear at you. "Humans, with your Souls our King will finally free us from this prison! Your lives are all that stand between us and our freedom! Everyone's been waiting our whole lives for this moment!"

She really does intend to kill you. This is the woman Papyrus is so eager to impress? Killing humans is the true purpose of the Royal Guard? Papyrus had just wanted to capture you for her... there's no way he could possibly know this. You take a step backward, one hand still gripped like a vice around Frisk's wrist.

"Now, human! Let's end this, right here, right now!" Undyne steps forward into a fighting stance, and you feel something stir in your chest.

Ever since seeing Frisk's Soul, you wondered if yours would look the same. Now you know the answer. It doesn't. It's red, but darker and dimmer, the color of wine (part of you recoils at the comparison, even in the middle of this situation your mother's face springs to mind). Your Soul is... cracked down the center. Not completely, but the fracture runs nearly to the middle. You recoil, but it follows you, leashed intangibly to your chest.

Undyne seems to hesitate at the sight of it, just for a moment. Then, with a snarl, she makes a slashing motion with her spear. "Your Soul doesn't matter! The other one looks perfectly fine to me."

"I won't let you touch them!" Releasing your hold on Frisk, you throw your arms out wide, glaring as anger pounds in your chest. Maybe it's just the blood rushing in your ears, but it seems like the wind is howling. The idea, the mere thought of Undyne hurting your child...

It fills you with determination.

"Fine, then FACE ME!" Undyne roars, leaping forward.

There's a flash of green light and as you bring your hands in front of you in a futile attempt to protect yourself, a transparent shield springs to life. Your cracked Soul has turned green, and your feet feel rooted to the ground. Undyne's spear glances off the surface, and you hear her laughing.
"Good, good! Let's see what else you're capable of!"
You're not sure which is scarier: when you can move but have no way of defending yourself, or when all you can do is turn in place but have the magical shield. Honestly, no matter what, all you can feel is the thrill of adrenaline and terror thrumming through your veins.

You have no idea why Undyne's magic also allows you to defend yourself from her, but you aren't in a position to question it. All you can do is hold your ground in the face of her onslaught. Frisk stays behind you without question, one hand tangled up in the back of your jacket.

"Papyrus you have to help—! Ah, no, the phone!"

At that moment your Soul reverts to it's normal wine color and you twist to seize hold of Frisk's arm, pulling them out of the way of a flying spear. Your phone tumbles from their hands into the snow, and you almost slip on it. Undyne has you turned around now, with her standing between you and the rest of Snowdin. Even if you wanted to try making a break for the forest where you know Sans and Papyrus are, there's no way you can make it past her now.

Undyne just sneers as she flips a spear in her hand, and you get the feeling that she's toying with you. "Do you really think your lives are worth more than the freedom of every monster? Are you that selfish?!

You don't answer. Shoving Frisk in front of you, you glance over your shoulder and start running the only direction you can —towards Waterfall.

Undyne lets out a growl of frustration and a magical spear plunges into the ground a few feet away from you, humming with magic for a moment before disappearing. You keep running, trying your best to drag Frisk into a zig-zagging pattern to try and dodge spears you can't even see.

"STOP RUNNING!" Undyne roars, and you can feel a familiar buzz of magic in the air.

The tip of a glowing, translucent spear plunges through your chest and through your Soul. Pain sears through your body as you let out a choked cry, your entire body jerking to a halt. Green washes over your Soul again and the spear vanishes, the shield flickering to life before your hands.

Frisk turns at your cry of pain, skidding to a stop and running back to you as you pivot to face Undyne again. You want to tell Frisk to keep running, to leave you behind and try to get somewhere safe, but deep down you know that it would only delay the inevitable. A selfish part of you doesn't want to be alone when (if, you try to tell yourself) Undyne finally kills you.

"Undyne, please! We're not here to fight!" you plead, flinching as you duck behind your hands, flung spears glancing off the shield before they vanish.

"I don't care what YOU'RE here for! I'M here for your Souls!" she snarls, pointed teeth flashing. "Then all of this can finally be over! You should be happy, humans. With your lives, you can right the wrongs your people have done to us!"

"And that's worth the life of a child?!" you scream at her, hands balling into fists. You're trembling with anger and fear, the feel of Frisk holding onto your clothes a tangible reminder of what's at stake.

Undyne uses your moment of distraction and a spear flies at you from the side. You aren't fast enough to catch it with the shield. Frisk screams as you feel it cut deep into your soul, pain
wracking your body as your legs tremble from the force of it. The attacks don't leave any physical trace on your body, something to do with the magic, but the pain is real enough.

You're starting to feel weaker.

Panting, you glare at Undyne through the distorting surface of the shield. She takes a few steps closer and scoffs at you. If she had a nose she'd be staring down it, as if you're beneath her. "We already have six souls. With one more we can break through the barrier. Would you have those six other deaths mean nothing? I'm here to finish what my predecessors started."

You brace yourself as she rears back and throws another spear at you as if to punctuate her words. You're shaking more violently now, from pain and fear and anger. Frisk's hands curl tighter in your clothes. The small whimper they make, it fills you with determination.

Your Soul gives off a red pulse of light, even though it's still washed with green magic. The shade is brighter than the wine color of your Soul, and for a moment you feel a swell of love rise up inside of you. "I won't let you hurt my child!" you scream.

Frisk's sharp intake of breath makes you realize what you just said, but you don't have the time to worry about it. If you can make it out of this alive, you'll be more than happy to explain everything...

Undyne falters for a second, looking down at the only part of Frisk that's visible: a pair of ratty sneakers and scrawny legs. Tossing back her hair, she clenches her hand tighter around the haft of a spear. "Right now, every monster in the Underground is counting on me!" she snaps.

With a slash at the air, the magic locking your body in place drains away, the shield vanishing and leaving you vulnerable. You take a step backwards, one hand reaching behind you to wrap around Frisk's wrist. Undyne raises her hands and two spears are hovering over each of her shoulders, points trained on you. Any sort of pleasure she's felt while fighting you has drained from her face. You can't even bring yourself to try and run.

"I'm ending this," she says.

"Ohmygosh, I can't believe it's Undyne!"

A familiar, high-pitched voice pierces through the air, and right as the spears begin their descent a short, yellow body darts out in front of you. You recognize the armless monster kid that is part of Frisk's group of friends. Before you have a chance to think about what you're doing, you leap forward and wrap yourself around them, protecting them with your body from Undyne's attack. If you're going to die anyway, you don't want this kid's ashes on your conscience.

You brace yourself for the inevitable pain that will slice right through your Soul. A strange feeling of clarity fills you for a moment, and you wonder if the cracks in your Soul will widen and finally split you in half when you die.

The hum of magic fills the air, and you can hear the shriek of Undyne's spears bouncing off something hard. What? The kid runs away when you release them, but you can't make out their words because you're too busy staring up at the wall of bones between you and Undyne. Papyrus? Sans? It has to be them!

Through the gaps between the bones you see Undyne whirl around, another spear appearing in her hand. Papyrus is standing behind her, a pair of femurs held like swords in his hands. Even from a distance, you can see the ring of orange burning in his right eye socket, magic licking the side of
his skull like flames.

"fuck, are you okay?"

Relief floods through your body at the familiar, low voice at your side. Sans is there, thank God, and he's pulling you to him. You tuck yourself under one of his arms and then you're both reaching out for Frisk. He holds both of you close, and for a moment you think he might be shaking.

"shit," he murmurs, and with a sickening lurch in the pit of your stomach you realize that the three of you are now behind Papyrus.

"We both know that you can't defeat me, Papyrus!" Undyne yells, and you can hear the scrape of metal against bone.

"I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, DON'T NEED TO DEFEAT YOU, UNDYNE! I JUST HAVE TO STOP YOU FROM HURTING MY FRIENDS!"

"Damn it, Papyrus! I KNEW you weren't cut out for this!"

Sans pulls away, enough to look at you, pulling you to your feet. He's looking over you, making sure you're okay. His eyes — still just the familiar white pinpricks — stop when they reach your Soul. His mouth opens and closes, and despite the pitched battle going on around you he's hesitating. With one hand, he reaches towards your Soul and then stops, looking you in the eye.

"did she do this to you?" A flicker of blue glows in his left socket, and his raised hand clenches into a fist. There's something menacing in his voice, and it sends a chill down your spine.

"No, it... it was already cracked when I first saw it," you say, and somehow it feels like you're trying to protect Undyne from him.

He glances down at your Soul again, a look of pain on his face. Then he turns his back to you, positioning himself between the two of you and Papyrus and Undyne. "stay behind me, we'll take care of this."

Frisk reaches out and takes your hand, and you pull them a few steps back. You're trembling, and weak, and your whole body aches, but you can't help but wonder why Sans looked at your Soul the way he did. Looking down, you raise your free hand to touch the wine-red heart hovering there, but it pulls back inside your chest before you have the chance.

"I can't believe the two of you. Protecting humans? Did you really fall for that goody-two-shoes shtick?" Undyne snaps, glaring at the two skeletons.

Papyrus jerks his hands into the air, bones appearing in front of him just in time to deflect a flurry of spears. Sans stands at his brother's side, hands shoved in his pockets. As far as you can tell, he's not actually doing anything. But you get the feeling that if things started to shift into Undyne's favor he'd intervene. You know he wouldn't let anything happen to any of you if he could help it.

You realize that, apart from him helping Frisk 'fight' Papyrus, and his apparent ability to teleport, you're really not sure what Sans is capable of.

"Am I supposed to be scared of the two of you? Shouldn't you be napping, Sans?" Undyne snaps, glaring at the two skeletons.

"i might as well be. papyrus doesn't need my help."
"UNDYNE, PLEASE STOP! I THINK IF YOU GAVE THEM A CHANCE, YOU COULD ALL BE FRIENDS!"

"You can't be friends with everyone! That's not how the world works!" Undyne's lip curls, and she slams the ground with the butt of her spear in emphasis.

Papyrus hasn't attacked Undyne at all. He's just holding her at bay, conjuring bones as barriers and knocking spears out of the air with the femurs in his hands. You wonder if she'll tire herself out eventually.

Frisk still hasn't spoken. Right now there's not much to say as you both serve as spectators to the confrontation between Papyrus and Undyne. Frisk squeezes your hand, and you squeeze back.

"Damn it, look at how strong you are!" Undyne yells, lunging forward and slashing at him with a spear in her hands. "$\text{Why couldn't you use this power to capture humans like I asked you to? I thought we were FRIENDS!}"

Papyrus catches her attack with his crossed bones, shoving her backwards. "$\text{WE ARE FRIENDS! YOU TRAINED ME, AND YOU'RE TEACHING ME HOW TO COOK! BUT THE HUMANS ARE MY FRIENDS TOO. I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY YOU WANTED ME TO CAPTURE HUMANS IN THE FIRST PLACE, BUT NOW I'M WORRIED. IT LOOKED LIKE YOU WERE GOING TO KILL THEM! AND YOU COULD HAVE HURT THAT CHILD IF IT WASN'T FOR THE HUMAN!}\$

That makes Undyne hesitate, drawing back a step and lowering her spear. Her chest is heaving as she pants, and she looks past Papyrus to glare at you. "$\text{FINE, forget it. You're too innocent for this shitty world, Papyrus, keep your stupid humans. But one of these days that attitude of yours is going to get you hurt.}" She jabs a finger at the group of you, eye narrowing. "$\text{Don't even bother getting to know the next human that makes the mistake of falling down here, they're MINE.}\$

Undyne thrusts her spear into the ground and turns on her heel, storming off. After a moment, the spear flickers and disappears.

Once Undyne is out of sight, Papyrus's bones fade and he lets out a loud, dramatic sigh. "$\text{WOWIE,}\$ he says, turning around to face you and Frisk. His skull is dotted with nervous sweat. "$\text{THAT SURE WAS SCARY. FOR A MINUTE THERE I WAS AFRAID SHE WOULDN'T LISTEN. BUT I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, DID NOT FAIL!}\$

"you did awesome, bro." Sans says, nudging his brother in the ribs with his elbow. "make no bones about it."

"UGH! SANS." Papyrus shakes his head. "$\text{HUMANS, ARE YOU BOTH ALL RIGHT?}\$

You let out a breath you don't realize you're holding, and as you go to take a step towards the brothers your legs buckle underneath you. Sans is at your side before you hit the ground, catching you with both arms as your vision swims.

"S-Sissa!" "$\text{HUMAN?!}" "$\text{hey, are you okay?}\$

You rest your forehead against Sans's shoulder, squeezing your eyes shut to try and fight off the sudden dizziness. "$\text{Sorry. I'm just... I'm tired and everything hurts.}\$

Sans stoops down to scoop you off your feet. A startled noise escapes you, but he just shifts you in his arms like you weigh next to nothing. "$\text{let's get you home.}\$
Chapter Notes

You wake up on the couch, wrapped up in a soft blanket and propped up a bit by a mound of pillows. Slowly, your eyes blink open and you're greeted by the familiar living room. Sans is sitting on the edge of the cushion, leaning back against the armrest and holding your hand in his lap. His head is facing the television, volume barely high enough to hear, and the smooth surface of his thumb strokes over the top of your hand. The motion is soothing, and almost distracts you from the bone-deep ache throughout your body, radiating from your chest.

Taking a moment to collect yourself, you let your eyes drift over Sans before he realizes you're awake. Even though he's distracted by the television, he doesn't seem to be paying attention to what's on the screen. He's lost in thought. Shoulders hunched, his thumb continues to run over the sensitive skin of your hand. He sighs and gives your hand a squeeze, and you can't help but squeeze back.

That makes Sans turn to look at you, and you can't help but smile at the way all the tension eases out of his grin. "hey, babe. how're you feeling?"

"Like someone ran me over with Papyrus's racecar bed," you say, the corner of your mouth twitching into a wry smile.

"so you're saying you feel a bit wrecked?" he says, but his grin seems as weak as his joke.

You let out a small huff of laughter, smiling at him anyway.

"yeah, i know. sorry. it's hard to come up with jokes when i'm busy worrying about you." He looks down at your joined hands, then back up to your face. He looks tired.

"You were worried about me?" you ask. You feel a warm flutter despite yourself.

"heh, was that supposed to be a joke?" he says, raising a brow at you. Hesitating, his expression turns solemn. "if we hadn't got there in time..."

Sans lets out a ragged sigh as you squeeze his fingers, shaking his head and giving you a weary smile. "lemme go get you something to eat. there's nothing better for the soul than some good food. trust me, it'll make you feel better." As Sans starts to ease off the couch you tighten your grip on his hand, stopping him.

"Where's Frisk?" you ask, realizing that your child is nowhere to be seen.

"they're fine, not a scratch on 'em. they're upstairs with papyrus," he says, misinterpreting your worry.

You're glad to hear that physically they're fine, but you're more concerned about what they must be thinking. That wasn't the way you wanted Frisk to find out the truth. But you couldn't help it. Facing down Undyne, all of your newfound maternal instincts had rushed to the surface and the words had just spilled from your mouth. No one else was ever going to hurt your baby ever again; not as long as you were there to protect them. Your mother had been the first and final straw.

Maybe it's the exhaustion or the way you feel so fragile right now, but your vision blurs as you
look up at Sans. "I need to talk to Frisk."

Sans's brows draw together, giving you a worried look. "you need to rest and eat something," he says, using his free hand to stroke some hair away from your face. "they aren't going anywhere."

"No," you say, with the little bit of force that you can muster. Pushing down the blanket, you sit up with some difficulty, ignoring Sans's protests. You blink back tears and rub your face. "I need to talk to them. Please, I— Sans they know."

His eyes widen the slightest bit. "how did that happen?"

You sigh and sit up against the pillows, tenting the blanket as you draw up your knees. Looking away from Sans, you instead watch your own hand smooth out the fabric over your legs. "I wasn't thinking. I just blurted it out while protecting Frisk from Undyne."

He squeezes your hand. "i know that's not how you wanted it to go down, but maybe it's for the best..." Sans pauses for a second, then leans in to brush his mouth against your cheek. "okay. i'll go get the kid for you."

Looking up at him as he stands, you give him a weak smile. "Thank you."

"don't. promise me that you'll eat something once you're done."

He waits until you nod before heading up the stairs. Watching him as he goes, you realize he was probably sitting with you the entire time you were unconscious. Once you're sure Frisk is okay, you want to make sure that Sans is okay too. You can only imagine how worried he's been... The hand that he was just holding is now pressed to your chest, your thoughts turning to your cracked Soul. You wonder what he saw when he looked at it. Just remembering the look on his face makes your heart ache.

The vaulted ceiling of the house makes it easy for you to hear Sans upstairs. "hey kiddo, why don't you come downstairs? your..." he hesitates, and you can't help but wince. "she wants to talk to you."

"But I'm playing with Papyrus," Frisk answers. You can just picture the stubborn look on their face, avoiding eye contact as they try to dig in their heels. You try not to take it personally. It doesn't quite work.

Papyrus is suspiciously quiet, you realize.

"c'mon, don't make me patella you twice." A pause. "i know you're worried about her, why don't you go check on her, huh?"

There's some muffled words you can't make out.

"FEAR NOT, TINY HUMAN! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WILL KEEP THE WORLD SAFE UNTIL YOUR RETURN!"

Frisk appears at the top of the stairs, staring intently at their feet as they slowly make their way down. Sans shows up a moment later, lingering by the second-floor railing. Catching your eye, he points at himself and then at Papyrus's room, letting you know where he'll be. You give him a small smile and nod. He walks away and closes the door.

To your relief, Frisk comes right up and sits next to you on the couch, facing you but looking down at something in their hands. It's your phone. Their small fingers rub over the dark surface
nervously. "Sans fixed it. He said it just got wet from the snow, but it's fine now," Frisk says in a small voice. "And all the groceries are okay. We put everything away while you were sleeping."

"Thank you sweetie," you say, reaching out to brush their bangs out of their face. They glance up at you and then back down again. "Do you know why I want to talk to you?"

Frisk tucks the cell phone back into their pants pocket, tugging their sleeves over their hands and pressing the ends to their mouth. After a second they nod and mumble an affirmative noise. You swallow past a lump in your throat and realize your hands are shaking.

"I understand if you're mad at me—"

"I'm not mad," Frisk says. Part of you wants to say something about them interrupting, but you know now isn't the time. Their shoulders hunch forward, making them seem even smaller. "I'm just confused. Lying is wrong."

Pulling their hands away from their mouth, you cup those tiny hands in your palms. You know, even though you can't see them, that Frisk has your fingers. They're long and skinny, with nails clipped short so they won't gnaw them off. You think they got that bad habit from you.

"It is. And I'm so sorry, baby, I hope you believe me," you say, and you can feel the tears swimming in your eyes. Pressing your thumbs into Frisk's palms, you pull their hands to your chest. "I never wanted to hurt you. I love you, and I was scared. Your grandmother wanted to take care of you, and I was too scared and didn't know what I was doing, so I let her." Tears are running down your cheeks, and by some act of mercy your voice is still clear enough to speak. "I helped take care of you the best I could, and I know that it wasn't enough—"

Your words hitch in your throat as Frisk flings their arms around your neck, burying their face in your chest. Pulling them into your lap, you curl over your child and press your eyes into their thin shoulder, sobbing. You feel small hands stroke your hair, comforting you, and you only cry harder.

"Don't cry, I'm happy, knowing I have a mom that'll never hit me," Frisk mumbles to your sternum.

"Never," you promise thickly, shaking your head for good measure. "I should have taken you away before she ever had the chance to hit you, Frisk, it's all my fault."

"No. You said it was her fault, and I believe you."

What did you do to deserve this kid? How did this turn into you being the one that turned into a sobbing mess while the six year old does the comforting?

"Nothing has to change, if you don't want it to," you say, sniffing. "You can still call me Sissa, I can still be your sister."

Frisk hugs you tighter, burying their face under your chin. "I'd rather have a mom than a sister."

Your face scrunches up and you bite back a sob, happiness bubbling up under the turbulent waves of conflicting emotions running through you. Fear and regret are smoothed away, overwhelmingly relieved that Frisk still loves you just as much, if not more. You were so afraid of pushing them away with the truth. You never stopped to wonder if it might pull them closer.

"I'll take care of you, the way a mother should, I promise," you tell them, reaching up over their head to try and wipe away your tears. The most you do is smear them across your cheekbones.

"You already do," Frisk says. You tilt your head to press a kiss into their hair.
"How do you know just what to say? I love you, Frisk."

"I love you too, Mom."

Peeking downstairs, Sans can't help but wonder if this is what Frisk was missing all along. If you are what they need to keep from resetting everything again.

He hopes so.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to give a shoutout to all you fantastic commenters and followers, I seriously love all of you!

A quick heads up: My 5-year wedding anniversary is tomorrow, so I don't know if I'll be doing much writing! Also, the husband and I have a tradition of watching Blizzcon (which is this Friday and Saturday) so I'm not sure how much I'll be getting done on those days also. So there might be a bit of a delay for the next chapter or two, but I promise that nothing's wrong. If you want any updates on how things are going, definitely just check out my tumblr (onadacora.tumblr.com).
You're drinking tomato soup out of a mug, fingers a little oily from the grilled cheese sandwiches you already demolished. Frisk insisted on cooking dinner in your stead (thank goodness, because you don't think you can handle Papyrus's spaghetti right now) and grilled cheese is one of the few things they know. The edges were a little burnt, but even you still make that mistake sometimes. Sans is right about the food. The warm, creamy soup goes straight to your Soul, easing away the pain.

Sans watches you as you eat, and it seems like the tension in his face eases away as you feel better. Even Papyrus stops casting you worried glances. Can they feel the difference? Do monsters have some kind of sense about these things?

The four of you are piled on the couch. Your legs are in Sans's lap, back against the tall armrest. Frisk is sitting on your feet, and they giggle as you wiggle your toes against their thigh. They push on your shins and give you an attempt at a glare, ruined by their toothy grin. Papyrus is on Frisk's other side, enraptured with the television.

Sans must have already talked to Papyrus about what was going on, because when Frisk calls you 'Mom' in front of him he does an admirable job of acting like there's nothing out of the ordinary. When it happens, you glance at Sans and he just gives you a wink.

You drain the mug and lick soup off your top lip. You can't help but notice Sans's white pupils following the path of your tongue. As your mouth curls into a smile, his gaze flicks up to your eyes and his default grin warms as he looks at you.

"feel better?" he asks, taking the empty mug from your hands.

"Much. You were right," you say.

"that happens on occasion." Sans nudges Frisk in the shoulder with the mug, holding it over their lap. "hey kiddo can you go put this in the sink? i'm a little occupied."

Frisk giggles. "It's not a cup it's a mug," they protest, but take it and rock forward to slide off the couch.

"my mugstake."

"SANS." Papyrus warns, casting his brother a sidelong look.

Frisk's laughs follow them as they run off to the kitchen.

"Hey, no running in the house!" you catch yourself calling after them. You blink, then can't help but chuckle.

"uh oh, sounds like someone is turning into a monster."

Laughing, the two of you glance over at Papyrus in expectation. Instead of annoyance, you see contemplation settling over his features. Oh, this is something you've only seen twice in the week or so you've been staying with the brothers. Is he... going to make a pun?
A confident grin erupts across Papyrus's face. "NO, SANS. SHE IS MORE OF A HUHUMOM."

Dissolving into a fit of giggles, you cover your mouth with one hand as the other grabs a hold of Sans's shoulder. Sans is positively beaming, making a show of rubbing the corner of one eye socket.

"that was beautiful, bro," he says, throwing his arm around Papyrus's shoulders and pulling him into a sideways hug.

Papyrus's cheekbones reddens slightly, a pleased smile on his face. After a moment, he seems to remember himself, pushing Sans away. "OF COURSE IT WAS, SANS. I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, CAN ALSO APPRECIATE A GOOD PUN, OCCASIONALLY." He gives his brother a stern look. "DO NOT THINK THIS IS PERMISSION FOR MORE PUNS."

Before Sans can speak (you're certain he was about to get himself screeched at by Papyrus by telling another joke) Frisk rushes back into the room. They beeline for Papyrus, grinning and trying to pull him to his feet. "Papyrus! Let's go play some more. You said we would play after dinner!"

"OF COURSE, TINY HUMAN! PREPARE TO BE DEFEATED BY MY SUPERIOR ACTION FIGURE STRATEGIES! NYEH HEH HEH!"

You and Sans watch the two of them run upstairs (you don't even bother trying to scold Frisk again) and disappear into Papyrus's room. You feel a little exhausted just watching them.

"I can't remember ever having that much energy," you mutter.

"i'm pretty sure papyrus has the energy of at least two monsters. it's probably where mine went." Sans winks at you when you look at him. "he got the height and the energy. i got the charm and devastatingly good looks."

With one less child in the room to traumatize, and one less brother to embarrass, you lean forward to brush a kiss to Sans's mouth. You stay like that for a moment, resting a hand against his chest before pulling back and giving him a crooked smile. "Is that why you're so short? You're weighed down by all those puns and your winning personality?"

A blue tinge paints his cheekbones, but he still manages to give you a sly grin. "hey, now. don't start belittling me."

You laugh, a soft snort breaking free. After a moment, the sound dies out in the air between you as you notice his expression sobering. It's not at all the reaction you're expecting. Searching his face, even the pinpricks of light in his eyes seem to dim.

"What's wrong?" you ask him, softly.

"sorry, i didn't mean to ruin the mood. i just..." Sans shakes his head, then wraps his arms around your middle and pulls you closer. "today was... that was a lot closer than i'm really comfortable with. we're lucky that frisk thought to call papyrus or we..." He pauses, letting his head fall back against the couch. "shit, forget it. you're fine, we're fine... i'm sure undyne will get over it eventually. papyrus can be pretty stubborn, i'm sure he'll annoy her into being friends again."

"I'm sorry for scaring you," you say, because you're not sure what else to do.

"you apologize too much. it's not your fault."
"Sorry," you say, unable to catch yourself. A weak laugh escapes you as Sans gives you a look.
"But... are you okay?"

Sans seems to consider your question. His arms relax around you, letting you settle back against the armrest again. One hand lingers at the small of your back and the other rests on your leg, soon covered by your own. You thread your fingers between the slender bones, giving him a reassuring squeeze. "a little rattled i guess you could say. but you're here with me, and that's the best i can hope for." His expression shifts into a worried frown. "but what about you? are you okay?"

"Oddly enough, yeah. I mean, Undyne scared the crap out of me, but somehow it kind of felt like it was a long time coming." Sans gives you a confused look and you shake your head. "I mean, protecting Frisk. It... almost felt like I was standing up to my mother. Ah, that just sounds stupid. It's just that, ever since we got to the Underground, it's felt like I've just been following Frisk's lead. Like they've got everything under control and I have no clue. In the moment, with Undyne, I was terrified, but I knew what I had to do. Looking back on it... it felt... good. To be able to protect them."

Sans nods but doesn't say anything. Comfortable silence settles between you, punctuated only by the muffled sounds of Papyrus's voice upstairs. Fingers gently stroke side to side across the small of your back. He hasn't said anything about your Soul. You try to think of a way to ease yourself into the question, but nothing comes to mind. Reaching up to rest your hand on your chest, you sigh.

"Sans, what's wrong with my Soul?"

He doesn't immediately react. Apparently he was expecting this, judging by the lack of surprise. His gaze falls to the hand over your chest and lingers there. After almost a minute of silence, just as you're starting to get worried, he finally speaks. "you gave me sort of the general idea of what your life was like. now, i'm not stupid, i can sort of fill in the gaps you left. i didn't expect you to give me all the gritty details the day we met, y'know? but that kind of life..." His eyes flick up to yours, and something in your chest aches at the sad look he gives you. "it leaves marks. someone who was supposed to love you and take care of you hurt you instead. over and over, until the cracks started to form. i... ah, shit, babe i'm sorry, please don't..."

The ache is Soul-deep as tears spill silently down your cheeks. You shake your head as Sans tries to comfort you, mouth curving into a humorless smile. "I knew it. As soon as I saw my Soul, I knew that it was all her fault. She ruined me."

"no, you're not ruined. don't you ever think that," he says, squeezing your hand holding your gaze. "the cracks in your soul don't define you. you're wounded, and maybe those cracks will never completely heal, but that doesn't mean that you're ruined."

Drawing in a shaky breath, you reach up with the hand that was on your chest to wipe away your tears. You feel a little sick of crying. "I'm just glad I took Frisk away before she could do this to them too." You smile again; it's weak, but genuine. "Their Soul is so much brighter and clearer than mine. I hope it stays that way."

"me too," he says, a weight to his words you can feel as if it were a tangible thing. San's draws his hand away from your back, and holds it tentatively over your chest. He never breaks eye contact. "do you trust me?"

You nod. "Of course I do."

Sans untangles his fingers from yours, and holds both of his hands over your chest. You lower your
hands to your lap, realizing what he's doing and afraid to get in the way. A strange warmth spreads inside of you, a little fuzzy feeling but not unpleasant. His fingers twitch, and your Soul rises and lifts away from your body, a dark red glow lighting the space between you. It's just how you remember it, heart-shaped with cracks running through the middle. The gap between the top two curves of the heart is wider than it should be, like it started to rip in half. You reach up to touch it and Sans doesn't stop you. Your fingers pass right through, like it's an illusion.

"Wait, what?" you say, startled. "But..."

Sans pulls your hand away, settling it back in your lap. He's careful not to touch your Soul. "only magic can touch it, sorry. it's how monsters can draw it out in the first place."

"Oh."

"your soul is the only part of you that contains some magic. us monsters, our whole bodies are made of it. you humans, you're made up of a lot more stuff. a long time ago there were humans that could tap into their souls, i dunno if there's any that still can." Sans shakes his head. "that's not the point. what i'm trying to say is that magic calls to magic. i can feel your soul even when you can't see it. i told you before that frisk's soul is stronger than yours, and that's still true, but you're not weak. you held your own against undyne longer than a lot of monsters ever could."

You're shaking your head. Sans is giving you too much credit. "But that's only because of that weird magical barrier she gave me—"

"your soul made that shield, to protect you. she used her magic on your soul and it reacted."

You blink. "That... makes a lot more sense than Undyne making things harder on herself."

Sans chuckles. "yeah." His attention is on your Soul, his fingers cupping the air around it like he's holding something delicate and precious. You suppose, in a way, he is. With your legs over him, you can feel a shudder run through his bones. "you can't really know how this feels, i can't even describe it." He sounds reverent, and his voice makes something inside you ache.

"Try," you say, whispering without thinking.

He looks up to your face and there's something hungry in his eyes, affection and lust and fear somehow all wrapped up together. "it makes my bones hum. your soul is everything about you, concentrated into this little ball of magic. it's... wonderful and painful at the same time, overwhelming but i can't get enough. the closer i get..." Sans's fingers inch closer, then he trembles and drops his hands away. Sweat is dotting the side of his skull and he releases a shaky sigh. "shit. sorry it's just... pretty intense. human souls are something else."

With Sans losing his focus on your Soul, it sinks back down into your chest and that strange fuzzy feeling goes away. You feel more solid, somehow. The intimacy of what just happened strikes you hard, a flush spreading rapidly over your cheeks. As you watch, it takes a moment for Sans to collect himself.

"you're not ruined," he says, voice canted low as he reaches out to cup your cheek. "i hope that, ah, little demonstration helped you see exactly what your soul is capable of doing. at least... to me."

You sit up and turn, pulling one leg over his lap so that you're straddling him. Sans's eyes widen in surprise as you arch your back so you can bend forward to press a series of light kisses along his mouth. As you trail along his jaw, you feel his hands find your hips, then tease under the hem of your shirt, along the waist of your jeans. You can hear him release a shaky breath next to your ear.
"you should be resting," he protests weakly, his phalanges trailing higher to find more skin. The hypocrite.

"I'm fine," your murmur against his neck. He shivers. "The food helped, just like you said it would."

"frisk could come down any second."

That makes you pause. With a heavy sigh you pull back, giving Sans an exasperated look. "This is just getting frustrating."

"so eager to jump my bones?" he asks, a blue blush tinting his cheekbones. "your own skeleton inside you getting lonely?"

You make a face. "That's just creepy, Sans."

He laughs. You can feel the sound through your body as you sit on him. Giving your hips a squeeze that makes you bite back an embarrassingly pleased sound, he waggles his brows at you. "i'll talk to papyrus tomorrow. see what i can do about getting us some time alone."

Chapter End Notes

*exaggerated winking*
Much shorter chapter than I'd normally like to post, but I didn't want to just tack these scenes on at the start of the next chapter. I wanted them to stand alone.

Do you honestly think this changes anything?

Frisk laughs, ducking under Papyrus's arm as they imitate flying for the toy they have clenched in their hand. Most of the action figures are robots, and a small, guilty part of Frisk feels a little jealous. They never got to have cool toys like this.

Papyrus gives a stirring speech for the figure in his hand, then pushes a small button to launch plastic missiles. They fall feebly to the comforter of Papyrus's bed.

She lied to you for your entire life.

It doesn't matter. She loves me.

Frisk's smile never falters as they pretend their toy was hit by the projectiles anyway, letting out an over-dramatic cry of despair. The skeleton laughs triumphantly.

Her fear kept her from telling you the truth. What else is her fear going to ruin? What else has her fear already ruined?

She was afraid of Undyne, but she protected me.

Snatching up another toy, Frisk adopts a —frankly terrible— deeper voice and tells the fallen robot that they will be avenged. Frisk nudges the fallen toy and pretends to cough, whispering their dying words.

The performance has Papyrus enraptured.

You're going to slip up. One of these days you're going to let me in, let me take control.

I won't. You just want to hurt people.

I just want to protect you. Protect us.

You wanted to hurt Toriel.

She was keeping us trapped in the Ruins. Don't you want to go back to the surface?

Not anymore. I like it here. Si— Mom likes it here.

"FRISK?"

You can't trust anyone. People and monsters only care about themselves, in the end. No matter how much you think they care about you, how much they promise to be loyal to you...
they'll betray you. They'll let you down.

*That's not true!*

Frisk's fingers tighten around the toy in their hands. They don't notice Papyrus waiting, worried, for them to speak.

**One day, you'll be all alone, crying out for help...**

"FRISK?" Papyrus finally reaches out and takes hold of Frisk's shoulder.

Frisk jumps and looks at the skeleton, dropping the figure they're holding.

"Sorry! I was trying to figure out the best speech for Sparkeroid to give!" Frisk blurts out, trying their best not to look guilty.

"OH, OF COURSE! SPEECHES ARE MY FAVORITE PART OF ACTION FIGURE BATTLES!"

Relieved but guilty of the lie, Frisk snatches the robot back up.

...**and nobody will come.**

---

Sans lied to you. He's not okay. He keeps replaying the moment he and Papyrus showed up in Snowdin and couldn't find you, when he grabbed hold of his brother and blinked forward towards Waterfall in a panic. The sight of you and Frisk facing down Undyne sent a shiver of fear down his spine, and if it hadn't been for Papyrus's lightning fast reflexes... He can't stop the image of those spears piercing your body —your Soul— from running through his mind.

As much as you passing out in his arms scared the everloving crap out of him, he was glad for the time to collect himself. He didn't want you to see how scared he was. He thinks you probably still had an idea, but at least when you woke up he could pretend everything was better than it was. He's good at that. He's had a lot of practice.

He's sitting on his bed, the light still on because he knows he's not going to fall asleep any time soon. For whatever reason, he has no problem napping nearly anywhere during the day, but as soon as it's night he struggles. He stares at a note he has stuck to the wall above his mattress. 'It hasn't reset. She's downstairs with Frisk.'

It helps.

Things are becoming more and more different this time. Undyne never came to find Frisk in Snowdin before, but Frisk never stayed here this long either. And Papyrus always let the news of a human slip to her, but this time he hadn't. What else is going to change?

Part of him wishes that he knew what was coming. But this is what makes this time special, the thing that gives him hope that this might finally be the end.

*No, enough thinking about resets and timelines. Stop worrying, think of something else.*

He thinks about you. The weight of you —the reassuring, comfortable, soft weight of you— in his lap, looking down at him before you started to kiss him. He wishes he could kiss you properly. He remembers the smooth warmth of your skin under his fingers, that little restrained sound you made when he squeezed your hips. He makes a mental note to do that again.
Your Soul is captivating. It is so different than Frisk's, the only other human Soul he's ever seen before. Frisk's is incredibly strong, brighter and clearer, unburdened (though, sometimes, he thinks he feels some kind of echo). In comparison, yours feels more delicate, heavy, and complicated. Your life has altered its composition in a myriad of ways, and despite (or maybe because of) it all, he thinks it's beautiful.

He wanted to touch it, to feel what you feel, but that would have been too much. You were still recovering, and he couldn't be sure what it would do to you. You didn't seem to feel anything close to what he did just being near it, but touching it directly... He can't imagine that wouldn't have some effect.

Hell, he isn't even sure what it might do to him.

Thinking about you makes him feel better, which alone is a testament for how much you've affected him. He should be upset that you're making him more and more vulnerable, but he can't bring himself to do it.

It's good to care again, even if it hurts.
You wake with a pair of tiny feet lodged into the small of your back. Frisk is twisted up in an unnatural position between you and the back of the couch, cocooned in their blanket and sound asleep. You're lucky that they're not a kicker, or you would have found yourself on the floor. Mouth hanging open, they give a small, sleepy snort and duck their chin under the edge of the blanket.

There's a light on in the kitchen, so you decide to get up. A quick check on your phone tells you it's just a little after 8 AM. With some difficulty, you untangle yourself from your blanket and find your feet. The (frankly ugly) blue and purple zigzag carpet is now familiar under your bare feet, the flattened piling old and worn down.

Rubbing your face and yawning, you stumble blearily into the kitchen. The only light is from the stove's hood lamp, dim but enough to see by without disturbing the living room. That was considerate of... oh, Papyrus is there, perking up at the sight of you. He's sitting at the kitchen table, slurping up a bite of spaghetti from his stockpile in the fridge. Judging by the way the sauce is thick and congealed, you think he's eating it cold. You struggle to suppress a shudder.

"GOOD MORNING, HUMAN," he says, far too cheerful for your still-groggy state. He's speaking a bit quieter than usual, but still a bit loud for your tastes. Not loud enough to disturb Frisk, but enough to invoke that sense of presence he has.

You mumble a greeting and dig through the cabinet to produce some instant coffee. Honestly, it's disgusting, but with no way to get the brothers a coffee pot or a French press, you were at a loss for a way to get your morning dose of caffeine. Somehow the shop bunny had produced a container of instant coffee, and you settled for that. The expiration date was rubbed off at some point before it made it to Snowdin's shop. You try not to think about it as you spoon some into a mug, followed by a healthy serving of sugar.

Looking at the container of sugar, you can't help but smile. It reminds you of Sans, and the first time he kissed you.

You fill up the kettle from the sink and set it on the stove, turning the knob for the wrong burner at first, then quickly correcting yourself. With another rub at your sleep-crusted eyes, you turn to face Papyrus and lean your back against the counter. He's turned in his chair, facing you and ignoring his spaghetti. You're a little unsettled to see that he's watching you with a small frown on his face.

"HUMAN. TO BE HONEST, I WAS HOPING THAT I COULD SPEAK WITH YOU IN PRIVATE. AND NOW WE HAVE THAT OPPORTUNITY." Papyrus lets out a worried sigh, wringing his gloved hands. "I WOULD LIKE TO TALK ABOUT SANS."
Before you have a chance to say anything, Papyrus is rising to his feet. He's a good head taller than you, and as he closes the distance you can't help but feel a little trapped. You're a lot more awake now, and frankly a little nervous.

"SANS IS MY ONLY FAMILY, MY BROTHER. I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, TAKE CARE OF HIM, AND TRY TO KEEP HIM HAPPY. AND NOW, YOU ARE HELPING HIM BE HAPPY. TRULY, YOU ARE A WONDERFUL FRIEND, AND SOMEONE SPECIAL TO SANS, WHICH MAKES YOU EVEN MORE SPECIAL TO ME." Papyrus has your gaze held and locked in his, and you feel like breaking eye contact would be a serious offense. His words are kind and part of you is touched at the sentiment, but his tone is still serious. He's not smiling.

"I really appreciate that, Papyrus," you mumble.

"WITH THAT IN MIND." Papyrus's eyes narrow, and there's a flicker of orange within his right eye. You feel a tingle of magic in the air around him. "I HOPE THAT YOU CONTINUE TO MAKE HIM HAPPY. BECAUSE IF YOU HURT MY BROTHER..." The orange ring flares brighter and sharper, and you cringe back against the counter. The trailing end of his red scarf gives an intimidating ripple. "I WILL BE VERY DISAPPOINTED IN YOU."

There was a time when you never understood why your friends in school got so upset when their parents said thinks like 'I'm not mad, I'm just disappointed'. Now you get it. It hits you like a ton of bricks.

All at once the magic is gone, and Papyrus's eyes are both dark. As you try to regain your bearings, the kettle starts to give off the beginnings of a low, quiet whistle. Papyrus turns away from you to sit back at the table, and you hurry to pull the kettle off the stove before it gets louder. Trembling slightly, you pour boiling water into your mug and start stirring. What the hell was that? You've never seen Papyrus that intimidating, not even when he was facing down Undyne.

Oh, but Undyne wasn't threatening Sans, now was she?

Finding your voice again, you pick up your mug and (with great courage, you think) take a seat next to Papyrus at the table. "I... I hope you believe me, when I say that I want Sans to be happy, too," you say, staring at your coffee as you stir some more.

"OH, I DO!" Papyrus says, his voice cheerful once again. You feel like you've suffered verbal whiplash at the sudden change of tone. Like Papyrus hadn't just made you nearly wet yourself. "I BELIEVE IN YOU! I'M CERTAIN THAT THE TWO OF YOU WILL BE INSUFFERABLE TOGETHER, WITH YOUR PUNNERISMS." You look up in time to see him pull a disgusted face, then slurp up another forkfull of spaghetti. "BUT IF THAT'S WHAT IT TAKES TO SEE MY BROTHER HAPPY AGAIN, THEN I SUPPOSE I WILL JUST HAVE TO ENDURE IT."

You sip at the hot coffee, almost scalding your tongue. It still needs to sit a little longer. Brimming with nervous energy, you roll the mug slowly between your hands, the heat warming your palms. "Well, I hope I don't let you down."

Papyrus claps a hand on your shoulder, making you jump and nearly spill your coffee. He's beaming at you, filled with confidence. "OF COURSE YOU WON'T!" He releases you, scooping up his dishes and leaving the table to put them in the sink. "I HOPE THE TWO OF YOU HAVE A GOOD DAY. AT HOME. ALONE TOGETHER," he says, giving you an exaggerated wink. He even says 'wink' in a high-pitched voice as he does it.

You're certain you're blushing. Your face feels hotter than the mug between your hands.
Papyrus nudge you in the shoulder, cackling on his way out of the kitchen. "FRISK! COME, WAKE UP! YOU AND I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, HAVE A FUN, ADVENTURE-FILLED DAY AHEAD OF US!"

You try to sip your coffee again. It's burning.

You're sipping at your coffee on the couch, your legs tucked under you. The house is quiet with Papyrus and Frisk gone. It feels a little strange, sitting there alone while you wait for Sans to wake up. You're thumbing through a book you have saved on your phone, killing time. You wonder if the Underground has ebooks. Maybe you'll find out one of these days.

Going to take another sip of your drink, you realize it's gone cold which does nothing for the already-disgusting taste. Scowling at the mug, you flick your phone's screen into darkness and drop it onto the couch beside you. You unfold yourself and walk into the kitchen.

You rinse out the mug, then pull Papyrus's plate out of the sink and scrape soggy noodles into the garbage. You return the dishes to the sink. After a short mental debate, you decide to leave washing them for later. There's a small niggling in the back of your mind, but it's minor enough to just ignore. You're making progress.

As you turn away from the sink and dry your hands on a dishtowel sitting on the counter, you spot Sans watching you from the entryway. He meets your eyes for a second, just long enough so that you know that he knows you're watching. Then, with exaggerated slowness, his gaze rakes down your body. You can practically feel it, like fingers dragging down your skin.

Flushing, you realize how you must look. You've been wearing the clothes you borrowed on the first day as pajamas, and you hadn't bothered to change yet. That oversized black t-shirt with the goofy ribcage on it, Sans's shorts, bare feet, and you can only guess at the state of your hair. Your fingers are still damp as you try to comb them through your hair, and the moisture causes them to snag. Cursing, you tug your hand out. Real smooth.

Distracted by your hair, it takes you a second to realize that Sans is right in front of you. Grinning, with a hunger in his eyes, he raises up on his toes and brushes the toothy equivalent of a kiss to your jaw. "Maybe this is a dumb question, considering the peace and quiet, but they're gone, right?"

"Um, yeah," you manage to say, caught off-balance by that look he's giving you.

"Good," he says, voice canted low, almost low enough to be considered a growl. You can feel his voice under your skin. "Because seeing you in my shorts is enough to drive me crazy, and I want to get you out of them."

Oh. His words, the wanting look in his eyes, his voice... it's all enough to kindle heat low in your belly. It seems that Sans doesn't want to waste any of the time the two of you managed to get alone.

The moment you lean forward to press your mouth to his, his hands are on you. Like he was waiting for your silent permission. Fingers slide up your back, hesitating for a second where your bra would normally be. You didn't wear it to bed. He continues up between your shoulder blades, feeling the curve of bone under your skin before dragging back down along your spine. You shiver under his touch.

"Use your magic," you breathe against his jaw, tracing the edge of the bone with the tip of your tongue. "Kiss me."

There's a hint of blue as your eyes open for just a moment, then Sans frees a hand from under your
shirt to cup the back of your neck. Your fingers skate along the contours of his ribs through his shirt as he gently teases your bottom lip with his teeth. Your lips part as you groan in response, the familiar warmth of his conjured tongue sliding against yours.

Sans shudders against you as your hand works around his side and down his spine. Your fingers trail lightly over all the curves and divots, the bones warm under your touch. As you trail across the curve of his pelvis, he breaks away from the kiss and presses his forehead to your shoulder, biting back a gasp.

"shit," he breathes, his hand finding the soft swell of the underside of your breast. You tremble with anticipation, waiting for him to move that hand higher. "you have no idea how bad i want you."

The hand that was on the back of your neck moves to take hold of the loose collar of your borrowed t-shirt. Tugging it to the side, you feel his tongue sweep down your neck and to the exposed part of your shoulder. Then, the hard edge of his teeth grazes your skin, before he slowly, carefully, bites down. It's enough to make you moan, the tiniest hint of pain only sending a thrill through your body. Your moan turns into a breathy gasp as the hand on your breast slides up to tease over your nipple, squeezing at the soft weight.

"Sans," you whine, arching into his touch as your fingers twist into his shirt.

"tell me what you want," he says, releasing the collar of your shirt as he looks up at you with one burning eye. You can see the hint of his blue tongue still behind his teeth as he talks. His free hand reaches down to take hold of your hip, and you roll your hips forward against him. Sweat beads on the side of his skull.

"You, Sans. Please, take me upstairs," you plead, a small part of you surprised at the lust in your voice. You can't remember ever sounding like that before.

There's a familiar lurch in the pit of your stomach and you find yourself in Sans's room. He holds you steady as you wobble a bit, regaining your bearings. His hands fall away from you, looking a little sheepish. "sorry, i guess we could have used the stairs."

"It's fine," you say, stroking a thumb across the blue stain on his cheekbone. "Now, I think you said something about wanting to get me out of these clothes?"

Taking a step back to look over you again, his grin widens. "the day we met, i knew i was in trouble. seeing you in my clothes... lets just say, you gave me a bone-er."

You shouldn't be surprised at the pun, but it catches you off guard. You give an unattractive snort of laughter, dissolving into giggles. "I can't believe you just said that."

"yeah you can," he murmurs, moving close again. You take a step back, and feel the edge of the bed against the backs of your knees. "i love hearing you laugh."

Sans hooks his fingers on the elastic waist of your shorts, raising a brow at you. "have i charmed the pants off you yet?"

"Am I going to have to take my clothes off myself?" you ask, teasing.

Sans chuckles. "don't you dare. i've been dying to address this issue myself."

Rolling your eyes at him, you move your hands to take hold of your waistband, but he catches hold of your wrists. "don't. please," he says, the gentleness of his voice making you stop.
With careful deliberation, Sans tugs down your shorts, letting them fall into a pool of fabric at your feet. Then, he takes hold of the hem of your shirt, and you let him pull it over your head. It finds a new home on the floor near the treadmill. You stand there in only your underwear, fighting the sudden urge to cross your arms as Sans just looks at you. Self-consciousness nags at you as you think about the stretch marks on your stomach and thighs, the scar under your panty line. But Sans has this tenderness in his expression that quiets the voices in the back of your head.

He seems afraid to touch you. "can i... will you really let me..." Sans raises a hand, but seems unsure.

You reach out and take his hand, guiding it to the curve of your waist. "Yes, please."

He takes hold of your hips and guides you back onto the bed. Following you, there's a moment where you want to remark on the fact that he's significantly more dressed than you are, but then his hands are tracing over you and the thought flits away. You watch him study you, memorizing the way the hard bones of his fingers press at soft flesh. He drags up your thigh, lingers at the curve of your backside, follows the swell of your hip. You can't help but squirm under his touch, aching for more specific attention as he grazes over the peaks of your breasts. Hands trail down over the softness of your stomach, tips of his phalanges tracing the marks in your skin.

Before you can even dwell on the stretch marks or let the self-consciousness come back, Sans's hands move to your hips. He squeezes, thumbs pressing against the ridges of bone as his fingers curl around the flesh of your sides. You arch your back, biting back a groan.

"Sans," you whine, looking up at him with lidded eyes.

"show me what to do. what do i do to make you come for me?" He pulls off your last scrap of clothing as he speaks to you, his voice humming against your skin.

Guiding his hand down between your thighs, you draw in a shuddering breath as the warm, smooth bones of his fingers press against your folds. Fumbling for a moment, he carefully pushes past your outer lips and traces the outside of your entrance. Moaning, you arch under his touch, and as your hand falls away from his he slowly pushes inside.

"everything about you is so soft," he murmurs, leaning over you to nuzzle his forehead against your cheek. You turn your head to trail lazy, distracted kisses along his skull as his fingers curl inside you. He tries a few different motions, adjusted angles, until your back arches as you moan. Sans makes a pleased sound, and you feel yourself trembling, grabbing at his shoulders because you need something, anything, to do with your hands. "you feel so good, so wet. how are you so amazing?"

Gasping, you can feel the tension start to build, low in your belly, but just his fingers isn't enough. You reach down and as you touch his hand his motion slows, tilting his head to look up at you. "I need..." You bite your lip, having trouble finding the words.

"tell me what you need," he urges, moving inside you with slow, steady strokes of his fingers.

You guide his thumb over your clit, showing him a small circular motion. Muscles in your legs twitch at the overstimulation, and after a few strokes, you realize that the hard surface of his fingers is too much for you. With a frustrated sound, you pull his thumb away. "Damn it, I can't... I'm used to something softer," you admit in a small voice.

"it's fine, babe, don't worry." Sans says, brushing his mouth against your cheek before removing his fingers and sitting back on his heels. He shifts himself to settle between your knees, pulling off his
shorts as he moves. "I know a few ways to make your trip to the bone zone, magical."

"Did you seriously just say bone zo—ohhh!"

There's more blue as the ring in his left eye pulses brighter for a moment, and you feel something warm press inside you, filling you better than his fingers ever could. It takes you a moment to realize that Sans is trembling, letting out a shaky breath. "Shit," he breathes, running a hand down your thigh. Pulling back (you can tell now that he's made himself a cock with his magic, which shouldn't surprise you after that trick with his tongue) he gives another slow stroke deep into your core. "Fuck, you feel so good."

You curl one leg around his, urging him deeper. Sans takes hold of your knee with one hand to steady himself as he reaches down with his other hand. Instead of the hard bone you expect to feel, his fingers are soft against your clit. Curiosity getting the better of you, despite how damn good it feels, you see he's using his magic to form a cushion over the phalanges.

Sans catches your eye as you let your head fall back to the mattress, winking at you with his dark eye. He sticks his tongue out at you. "I can make anything you want, babe," he growls, a wicked grin on his face.

"Right now I don't care," you groan, arching into his hand. "What you're doing now is perfect."

Tension is coiling, hot and heavy in your belly as Sans thrusts and rubs as you instructed. Moaning and crying out, your hands scrabble under his shirt and hook into his ribs, eliciting a hoarse sound from the skeleton. His cheekbones are stained blue and he's watching you, eyes raking over your face as he devours every change in your expression.

"So beautiful," he says, and in that moment you believe him. His fingers are digging almost painfully into your leg as he holds himself up, but something about it arouses you even more. "Come on, babe. Come for me."

You're so close, and his urging nearly pushes you over the edge. Squeezing your eyes shut, a whimper falls from your lips. With a wide stroke of Sans's thumb and a well-timed thrust accompanying it, your back arches, a ragged moan spills out of you, and the tension in your belly fractures. Waves of pleasure rock through your body, made only sweeter as Sans guides you through your orgasm with slow circles of his finger. The clenching of your inner walls make him moan, bowing forward over you as he continues his steady pace.

Soon the feel of his thumb against you is too much as your peak starts to fade away. You reach down and take hold of his hand, pulling it up towards your shoulder. "Please, Sans, I need you closer," you tell him, voice breathy from pleasure. "Come here."

"Heh, was that a pun just now?" he asks, his voice stuttering as he leans forward over you, holding your hand tight in his as he presses his forehead to your collarbone.

You don't even have time to answer him before he thrusts one last time and goes still above you. He moans your name and rocks forward, deeper, to draw out one last moan from you before shifting to collapse at your side. You tangle your legs up in his as he gathers you in his arms, pressing his head to your chest.

"I... that was incredible," he murmurs, and you can only nod in agreement.

You're not sure you can move yet, your muscles in your legs are tingling and your arms feel heavy. "I just want to stay like this forever," he says, quietly like he's afraid the universe will hear him and
intervene. Maybe he is. "I can't believe you're here with me, like this."

"I'm here, Sans. I'm not going anywhere," you promise, running a hand along his back.

Sans doesn't say anything. Instead he holds you closer, and you think he's listening to your heartbeat.
So, for those of you who may not have noticed, I posted some one-shots for an AU set ten years in the future of 'Would That Make You Happy?'. Beware, they are ANGSTY but please go check them out. We'll wait here for you to finish those first.

For those of you who HAVE read them... Here's some fluff as an apology. <3

Papyrus loves the time he spends with Frisk. Oh, not that he doesn't enjoy spending time with you, but there's something to be said for the unbridled joy and enthusiasm of a child. Frisk sits on his shoulders as they walk through Waterfall, gazing up at the sparkling crystals overhead.

"They're so pretty!" Frisk cries, patting at Papyrus's hands as he holds their knees.

"I THOUGHT YOU WOULD LIKE THEM, FRISK! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, ALSO ENJOY COMING TO THE WISHING ROOM." Papyrus feels Frisk cover the top of his skull with their hands, then rest their chin on their fingers. "IF YOU WOULD LIKE, YOU COULD MAKE A WISH! UNDOUBTEDLY, IF YOU WISH HARD ENOUGH, IT WILL COME TRUE!"

Frisk hums, twisting their feet, but doesn't immediately answer.

He's glad that he was able to stop Undyne from hurting his new human friends. He knows that the King needs humans in order to open the Barrier, but... he hadn't suspected that the humans would have to die. Of course he wants to reach the surface, just like everyone else, but not at the expense of his friends. He won't let anyone hurt the two of you.

Especially now that Sans seems so fond of you. Sans never talks about why, but Papyrus knows that his brother hasn't been the same. Not since they decided to move to Snowdin. Something happened, something he feels like he should remember, but can't. There was a time where things were... bad for Sans. He rarely left his room, kept pouring over strange blueprints and not talking to anyone. Then he stopped doing much of anything. He just... gave up. That was when Papyrus urged his brother to take a job with him as a sentry.

Why is he thinking about that? He doesn't like to think about that.

But Sans has been smiling more, he's sure of it. Sans likes to think he can't tell when the smiles are fake, but Papyrus knows his brother. He also knows that his brother doesn't like to talk about what's bothering him, so Papyrus acts like nothing's wrong. Because that's what Sans wants.

"Okay! I know what I want to wish," Frisk says. "Is it like a birthday wish? Do I have to keep it a secret?"

"I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THESE 'BIRTHDAY WISHES' BUT NO, YOU CAN TELL ME IF YOU'D LIKE." Frisk wiggles excitedly on his shoulders. Startled, Papyrus tightens his grip on their legs. "PLEASE BE CAREFUL! I DON'T WANT YOU TO FALL AND BECOME INJURED."

Frisk leans forward and curls their little fingers over his gloves, resting their chin on top of his...
skull. Papyrus can't help the swell of affection that rises inside of him. No, he most certainly won't let anything happen to Frisk. Not if he can help it.

"I wish that me, and Mom, and you, and Sans all stay together and happy. Like..." Frisk tightens their grip on his hands, hesitating. When they speak again, their voice is small and fragile. "Maybe like a family?"

"THAT'S AN EXCELLENT WISH! I HOPE IT COMES TRUE!"

Frisk makes a pleased sound that vibrates his skull. Their surroundings have slowly changed from sparkling caverns to dark, glowing marsh. The water gives off a calming, blue glow.

"Hey, Papyrus, where are we going?" Frisk asks, wiggling the tips of their worn sneakers up and down.

"OH, TO UNDYNE'S HOUSE OF COURSE! SHE..." Papyrus hesitates, nervous sweat springing up on the side of his skull. "SHE HASN'T BEEN ANSWERING MY CALLS. BUT I JUST KNOW THAT THE TWO OF YOU WILL BE GREAT FRIENDS! I KNOW THAT YOU DIDN'T GET OFF TO THE BEST START... BUT SHE IS REALLY VERY NICE!" He pauses again, drumming his fingers on Frisk's leg. "WELL, SHE HAS A BIT OF A TEMPER. AND SOMETIMES SHE'S REALLY RUDE. BUT DEEP DOWN! UNDYNE IS A GOOD FRIEND."

"Do you know when they're supposed to get back?" You're still with Sans in his room, lying naked on his bed. Neither of you are in a rush to go anywhere. You're happy just staying there with him, talking. Glancing at the wall above you, you notice a tiny bit of tape with the ripped corner of a piece of paper under it. You idly wonder what was stuck there.

"papyrus said he'd text me when they're headed back, but i think they're gonna be gone until dinner? sounded like an all day thing," Sans says, shrugging. He reaches over you to grab his phone. He doesn't have any messages, and the clock says it's still midmorning.

"What are they doing?" you ask, looking up at Sans as he lingers above you.

"dunno. didn't ask." He drops his phone back on the end table, then throws his leg over yours, straddling your thighs. You just watch him as he sits back, casual, and grins at you.

Tucking your arms behind your head, you raise an eyebrow at him as his gaze trails lazily down your torso. "Enjoying the view?" you ask, giving him a small, crooked smile. You don't even feel self-conscious anymore as he looks over you. This small window of time, after having sex but before rejoining the 'real world', it feels different. Special. Like as long as you don't open the door to his bedroom, everything will stay just like this.

"sansational," he says, winking. You roll your eyes, laughing just enough for his smile to widen. His fingers trace along the edges of your ribs, making you shiver involuntarily. "so, i hope i kept my promise to you when we went out on that date. did you have a good time?"

"A wonderful time," you assure him as his fingers and his gaze drift down to your stomach. "You were fantastic."

"i'm talented. a skiletton, you might say."

You turn your face into your arm, trying to resist it but snorting anyway, shaking with laughter.

"hey, all that laughing is rattling my bones over here." He waits until you've calmed down and are
looking at him again to continue. "not that i mind a good bone-rattling," he says, waggling his brows at you.

Chuckling, you give his femur a weak shove. "You're ruining this nice, relaxing moment. Haven't you had enough?"

"of you? never." He gives your waist a tantalizing squeeze, and despite the small groan that escapes you, you give him a small swat.

"You're being bad."

"bad to the bone?"

"Ugh, nope. No more, get off me," you tell him, trying your best not to laugh.

With a dramatic sigh, Sans rolls off to the side to sit next to you. Pulling yourself up to face him, you cross your legs under you and reach out to tap him between the eyes gently. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were pouting. If you had lips."

"you should know that there's lots of things i can manage without lips, babe. but, i draw the line at pouting." He cups your cheek with one hand, and his expression softens. "eh, i'm too happy right now to pout."

Nuzzling into the smooth bones of his palm, you cover his hand with yours. "You know that I'm happy too, right? Because I am."

"i figured... but it's nice to hear." As you drop your hand back to your lap, he slips his fingers into your hair, slowly combing through. Closing your eyes, you press into his touch with a pleased hum. "you like that?"

You nod. "It feels nice. I... no one ever really did my hair for me when I was a kid, so it feels good when you play with it."

"i'll add it to the list."

You let out a small laugh, opening your eyes just enough to look at him. "The list?"

"the list of weird things you like me to do."

"It's not weird!"

"whatever you say, babe."

"It's not."

"ok."

"I'm serious."

"ok."

Huffing, you flop over onto your side, then roll onto your back again. Sans scoots closer, right up against you so you can feel his knees against your skin. You try to give him an annoyed look, but fail miserably when you meet his affectionate gaze. Who would have expected the punny skeleton to be such a sap?
You jump slightly when you don't expect to feel Sans's fingers press against your hipbone, then trail low across your waist. He stops somewhere familiar, the spot where you know your scar is. His touch is gentle as he traces over it. "what happened here?"

"Frisk," you say, resting your hand on your stomach. "When I was pregnant, there was an issue when I went into labor. Doctors decided it would be safer for both of us to do a Caesarean section."

Sans is giving you a blank look. You realize he doesn't really understand what you just told him.

"Um. It's an operation. They did surgery to get Frisk out."

"oh." He gives your scar a thoughtful glance, following the line of it with his finger once last time before trailing up to the marks on your stomach instead. "and what about these?"

"Marks from all the stretching my stomach did when I was pregnant. I got pretty huge." You shrug, that nagging feeling of self-consciousness starting to creep back. "Sorry, I know they're not exactly attractive."

"hey," he says, taking hold of your hand and squeezing. He looks up from your midriff to meet your eyes. "i was just asking because i was curious, not because i don't like them. i haven't found a part of you i don't like."

Feeling a faint blush creep across your cheeks, you glance away. "Well, I think that's just because you don't have any frame of reference. I mean, it's not like you've got a wide variety of humans to compare me to."

Bony fingers find the side of your face, gently turning you towards him as Sans leans over you to brush a toothy kiss to your forehead. "i don't need to compare you to other humans. i like you. i like your cute face." He brushes his hand across your cheek. "your hair." His touch shifts to your hair. "your soul." His fingers trace a path down to your chest. "your body." He grabs your waist. "and everything about it. all the marks."

You're beet red by the time he's done, fighting the urge to hide your face.

He seems a little surprised when he looks back up at you, after following a trail down your body. "babe, you okay?"

You realize that your eyes are misting up, and you hurry to blink back tears. "I'm fine! I just... geez, I wasn't expecting that," you say, sniffing a little bit and giving an embarrassed laugh. "Sorry, you caught me a little off guard. I'm not used to stuff like that."

Sans's smile seems a little sad. He cups the back of your head and pulls you to him. "well, get ready to be used to it."
She's Playing Piano

Chapter Notes

You guys should totally check out the fanart I've gotten for WTMYH! I have it all tagged and posted here: http://onadacora.tumblr.com/tagged/fanfic-art

Doesn't this idiot remember that the fish-bitch tried to kill you yesterday?

Frisk twitches as the familiar voice creeps into their mind, but doesn't give it the satisfaction of a response. It had been quiet so far today. Traveling with Papyrus through Waterfall had been fun, and made Frisk happy, and when Frisk is happy the voice tends to go silent. But facing down Undyne's door (a door made of teeth long and sharp like those of the house's resident) sends a little shiver of worry through Frisk. And that worry gives the voice its chance.

There's the sound of piano music coming from within, and it's so pretty that at first Frisk thinks it must be a recording. Then, the notes fall out of tune, stop altogether, and loud muffled cursing fills the silence. There's a sharp banging sound. Silence. Then the piano starts again.

I told you. You can't trust anyone. Everyone is gonna let you down. Even if they're too stupid to realize what they're doing.

Papyrus glances behind him where Frisk is hiding behind his knobby knees. Crouching down so he's at eye-level, a big gloved hand ruffles Frisk's hair. They hide the urge to reach up and smooth it out again. Why is everyone so obsessed with doing that?

"DON'T WORRY, FRISK! I'M CERTAIN YOU AND UNDYNE WILL BECOME THE BEST OF PALS. AFTER ALL, YOU BOTH HAVE EXCELLENT TASTE IN FRIENDS ALREADY! YOU'RE BOTH FRIENDS WITH ME!" Papyrus grins at them, beaming for a moment, before he glances away, suddenly looking a little unsure. "AT LEAST, I HOPE THAT UNDYNE IS STILL MY FRIEND..."

Though they're not sure why, Frisk feels confident that everything will be just fine. There's something familiar about all this. As Papyrus lets out a little, worried sigh, Frisk reaches out and pats the big skeleton's shoulder. "Of course she's still your friend! And I'm sure she'll be my friend too," they say, grinning.

The voice is quiet, but if Frisk wanted to put a name to the strange feeling in the back of their mind... they'd call it 'bored'.

Papyrus hesitates, and then his huge smile is back. He shoots back up to his full height, rests his hands on his hips, and the trailing end of his scarf gives an enthusiastic wave. "THAT'S THE SPIRIT FRISK! OKAY, TIME TO HELP YOU TWO BECOME FRIENDS!"

Frisk steps up beside the skeleton, who rests an affectionate hand on top of their head. He uses his other hand to knock loudly on the intimidating, toothy door. The piano music stops, and a moment later the smooth scrape of teeth replaces the sound as the home's entrance opens wide to reveal Undyne. She's dressed casually in a pair of jeans and a black tank-top that shows off the toned muscles in her arms.
For a split-second her mouth breaks into a friendly smile, then instantly sours as she looks between Papyrus and Frisk.

"HELLO UNDYNE! YOU WEREN'T ANSWERING MY CALLS SO I THOUGHT—"

Undyne turns her back on them with a look of disgust, and the jaws of the door slam shut. There's a moment of stunned silence as Papyrus just stares, confused. Frisk gives the skeleton a wide-eyed look, unsure of what to do.

"Um..."

A muffled roar of anger comes from inside the house. Then a loud bang that rattles the windows. Frisk is about to suggest that maybe they should come back later, when the long fangs of Undyne's door snap back open.

"I should be kicking your ass right now, you JERK!" Undyne shouts, jabbing a sharp-nailed finger into Papyrus's face. Her yellow eyes flick down to Frisk, narrowing to dangerous slits. "And YOU. What are YOU doing here, you little squirt? Your mom know you're here?"

"I THOUGHT WE COULD ALL HANG OUT! MAYBE YOU CAN GET TO KNOW FRISK BETTER...?" Papyrus says, giving Frisk an extra pat to the head for emphasis.

Undyne sneers at him, crossing her arms over her chest. "What so we can be friends? I'll NEVER be friends with your humans. They are the ENEMY of everyone's hopes and dreams!" She starts to turn away again to go back into the house. "So why don't the two of you just give up and go home."

Papyrus huffs a loud, overdramatic sigh. "DANG... WHAT A SHAME, FRISK. I THOUGHT UNDYNE COULD BE FRIENDS WITH YOU. BUT I GUESS... I OVERESTIMATED HER. SHE'S JUST NOT UP TO THE CHALLENGE."

Freezing in place, Undyne slowly turns to look over her shoulder. "CHALLENGE?! What?!" She turns all the way to face the human and monster outside her door, gritting her teeth. "Papyrus, you think I can't be friends with THEM?" Her head falls back with a humorless laugh. "What a joke! Fine, I ACCEPT. And when I'm done with you squirt..." Crouching down, Frisk doesn't even flinch as she presses close, fixing them with a piercing stare. "We're not just going to be friends. We're going to be BESTIES."

There's a feeling of disgust from the back of Frisk's mind, and they have to resist the urge to laugh.

An odd feeling creeps into the back of your mind, like something is wrong. You mull over it for a moment, unsure of the cause, but eventually put it aside. You're with Sans, Frisk is with Papyrus... Everything is fine.

Sans is asleep. Given his track record of napping so far you aren't surprised in the least, especially considering your earlier activities. Now that you think bout it... that's probably the most physically active you've ever seen him. His head is pillowed on your shoulder, one arm threw over your middle and his feet tangled with yours. As you watch him, he makes a small noise, frowns, and his arm twitches. His fingers curve around your hip and he tightens his grip on you, then slowly relaxes.

You're not tired, though you feel a bit hungry. It's around lunchtime, you suspect, but you can't bear the thought of moving. Closing your eyes, you think that maybe you'll try to get a bit of a nap, too.
Your stomach lets out a long, low, droning gurgle. Sans trembles, a soft, sleepy laugh warming your skin. "if you're hungry, babe, don't let me keep you. go get yourself a bite," he mumbles, nipping your collarbone for emphasis.

Huffing a quiet chuckle, you roll away as he releases you. "I guess it would be pointless to lie and say that doesn't sound good. Do you want me to make you anything?"

Sans makes a disinterested grunt you take as a 'no'.

You hear him shifting to get comfortable as you scour the floor for your clothes. You don't feel like walking around the house naked. That's just asking for someone to come home early and walk in on you. As you keep searching, you almost miss seeing your underwear draped over the top of the treadmill. How did it get there?

"Want me to turn off the light?" you ask, pulling your shirt over your head. Maybe you'll take a shower and change after you eat something.

"this is fine," he mumbles, burying his face into his pillow. "i'll get up soon."

"Don't worry about it."

Sans lets out a weak sound of protest, but you're pretty certain he's asleep. As you close his bedroom door behind you, you wonder if there's a reason he always needs a nap to get through the day.

---

After an awkward —and very hot— cup of tea, Frisk and Undyne watch each other from across a rather damaged table. Papyrus is making a racket in the kitchen, getting out pots and pans to start cooking at the fish-monster's instruction. As far as she was concerned, if he was going to be at her house, the least he could do was show her how his skills were coming along.

Undyne is much calmer than she was when Frisk and Papyrus arrived. Instead of being angry she just seems uncomfortable.

Eager to lighten the mood, and try to get on Undyne's good side, Frisk gives her a bright smile. "You play the piano?"

Undyne's eyes narrow. "Yeah, what about it squirt?" she says, like she's suspecting an insult. Catching herself, she forces herself to relax, giving Frisk an admirable attempt at a smile. "Do you like the piano?"

Frisk never shows any sign that they notice her initial reaction, instead nodding enthusiastically. "I always wanted to try and play an instrument, but we could never afford it. I heard you play earlier, it was really pretty!"

Expression softening, Undyne's smile eases into something a lot more genuine. "Yeah? Thanks, kid." Her grin widens and she jumps to her feet. "Hey, you want me to show you some things? Papyrus and I really bonded when I was teaching him stuff. THAT'S the best way to make friends! And as you learn more and more about the piano..." Undyne circles the table, seizing Frisk by the shoulders and pulling them out of their chair. "WE'LL ONLY BECOME CLOSER THAN YOU CAN EVER IMAGINE!"

Undyne throws her head back with a laugh, carrying Frisk over to the piano and shoving them down on the bench. "Afraid?! We're going to be best friends!"
"THAT'S THE SPIRIT, UNDYNE!" Papyrus calls excitedly from the kitchen.

Despite her loud, boisterous enthusiasm, Undyne is surprisingly patient with Frisk as she goes through a few scales. When Frisk is able to pick out a short tune, she gives a whooping cheer, clapping them on the back. Even though the wind just got knocked out of them, Frisk laughs, giving Undyne a blinding smile that the monster can't help but return.

"Not bad, squirt. You may be a pathetic weenie, but at least you've got something going for you," she says, laughing. Her expression softens. "Hey. I'm not exactly good at this kind of stuff, so just... whatever. Look, I just want to say that I guess I'm sorry for trying to kill you. And your mom."

Frisk nods, giving Undyne a quick look and picking at the piano keys again. Not quite sure what tune they're trying to replicate, Frisk feels strangely nostalgic and part of them thinks they should be hearing the sound of rain. "It's okay. I forgive you."

"That simple huh?" Undyne makes a disbelieving 'tch' sound between her teeth.

"Yeah. You just wanted to help everyone."

"I guess so. I don't think your mom is going to be quite so forgiving."

Frisk shrugs. "Probably not."

"Not that I blame her." Undyne pauses, then nudges Frisk with her shoulder. "Don't tell her I said anything, but she was pretty badass yesterday. I'll give her some credit, I admire her fire."

Nodding, Frisk gives a pleased laugh. "Me too."

There's a loud hissing sound coming from the kitchen, and Undyne looks over at Papyrus. With an annoyed noise, she gets up from the piano and goes to see what the skeleton is doing.

"You're doing it all wrong!" Undyne shouts, trying to push Papyrus out of the way.

"I'M DOING IT THE WAY YOU SHOWED ME!"

"You have to stir harder!" Undyne grabs his shoulder. "Harder!" Papyrus is stirring so hard the sauce is sloshing out of the pan. "HARDER!"

Frisk is starting to get a bad feeling about this.

"Let me do it!"

"BUT UNDYNE!"

"Argh, no wonder! The heat isn't high enough. It needs to be HOTTER!"

Frisk is definitely getting a bad feeling about this.
Afraid to be Happy

Sans jerks awake, fingers digging into a balled up pillow he doesn't remember grabbing. His bones are humming with fear as his eyes fly open and he takes in his empty bedroom. He spots the bit of tape stuck to his wall, a remnant of the note he made sure to remove before you had the chance to see it. It would just confuse you. But even without the note still attached, it's a tangible reminder of where —when— he is. He slowly relaxes his grip on the pillow.

A sharp-toothed grin, wicked glowing spears, and flashing yellow eyes haunt the back of his mind. Fucking Undyne. Part of Sans is still furious with her, even though he knows that he should have expected what happened. Hell, there had been times that... Well, it's pointless to keep track of how many times Undyne and Frisk killed each other. But seeing her facing you down was terrifying. He can still remember the first thought that entered his mind when he caught sight of your cracked Soul, the rage he felt at the belief that Undyne had done that to you.

But Undyne is one of Papyrus's best friends. If anything happened to her, his brother would be heartbroken. Sans is glad that things were resolved the way they were, for everyone's sakes.

Sitting up in bed, he checks his phone. His hands are shaking slightly, and he feels jumpy, but he tries to ignore it. No messages from Papyrus, but he sees one from you sent ten minutes ago.

'Made you a sammich anyway. Left it in the kitchen. Taking a shower. <3'

The goofy little heart makes him smile. Then, he feels an uncomfortable lurch in his chest, making his grip tighten on the phone. He squeezes his eyes shut.

He's making a huge mistake. This is so damned hard, and God, if this ends up in a Reset... Why is he doing this to himself? To you? He's so happy, and so fucking scared, and he has to set the phone down before he cracks the screen with how tight he's squeezing it. It was so much easier to be numb to it all, to just go through the motions and not care so damn much. Over and over...

He wishes he hadn't survived the lab accident.

That intrusive thought makes his eyes fly open and he forces himself to his feet. No. He's not letting himself go there. Today is supposed to be a good day, and he's not going to let these fucking thoughts ruin it.

Fuck.

He shoves everything he's feeling down into what would be the pit of his stomach, if he had one. All the fear and worry, even his happiness gets caught in the middle and tamped down. If he lets any of those emotions through to the surface, he feels like they'll all come rushing out together.

Sans gets dressed, shoving his phone in his pocket.

You're still in the shower. He can hear the water running, and as he hesitates outside the door he can hear you humming an unfamiliar tune. Probably some song from the surface. He thinks about knocking on the door, but decides to leave you be.

He heads downstairs.

The house is quiet, even a little lonely without Papyrus's voice carrying down from his bedroom, or shouting at the television. Thinking of Papyrus, Sans walks over to his pet rock, takes the rock out
of the box, and shakes the sprinkles into his hand. He puts the rock back. The sprinkles are tossed into the trash when he enters the kitchen. That way his brother thinks he's been doing something good by 'feeding' it.

He spots the plate you left him sitting on the kitchen table. Beside it is a bottle of ketchup. The sandwich is perfect, like a photograph. The fillings are layered carefully, placed exactly in the center of the bread. Just the right amount of lettuce poking out the sides, a glimpse of a corner of cheese. You took time with this. You cared about making this for him.

On top of the sandwich, in bright red ketchup, is the outline of a heart.

Sans can't stop it. His eyes swim and he's sobbing into his hands, sinking down into the chair in front of the plate you set for him. It hurts. Everything hurts. Everything he shoved down is rushing back up, overwhelming every thought and every sense.

He's so happy.

He's so scared.

He doesn't want to lose this moment to a Reset. He doesn't want to lose you.

He thinks he's falling in love with you, and it might just break him apart.

---

Freshly showered and dressed in some new clothes (thankfully Snowdin's rabbits are fairly human-shaped) you emerge from the bathroom with a puff of steam. You feel clean, refreshed, and if you're being honest with yourself, pretty damn great. There's a certain satisfying soreness to your thighs, and you haven't been able to stop smiling.

You wonder if Sans is awake, but if he's still napping you don't want to bother him. If he's up he's probably in the kitchen, if he saw your text from earlier. Patting at the wet knot of hair tied at the back of your head to make sure it's still in place, you head downstairs.

When you hear Sans, you take a second look at the dark television to make sure it's not on, because the last thing you expect to hear is crying. A few quick steps takes you to the kitchen. Freezing in the entryway, you see him sitting at the kitchen table with his face in his hands. Your heart squeezes painfully in your chest.

"Sans?" you murmur, taking a tentative step into the room.

He jumps at the sound of your voice, head jerking up to look at you. His face is tear-stained and the pinpricks in his eyes are dim, sockets wide in surprise. Pushing himself to his feet, hands gripping the table for support, he shakes his head, cursing under his breath. He rubs at his face with blue sleeves. You can see he's trembling.

You cross the room with long strides, ignoring the hand he raises to try and ward you off. "Sans, what's wrong?" you ask, fear making your voice pitch high. You take hold of the open flap of his jacket. "Is it Papyrus and Frisk? Did something happen?"

Sans looks up at you, confused. "w-what? no, i haven't heard anything..." He starts fumbling with his pockets.

"Then what's wrong? Are you okay?" You ease your grip on him, unsure of what to do. Reaching out, you run a hand along his side.
He pulls out his phone with one hand, rubbing at his face again with the other. He turns away from you, just enough to angle his shoulder towards you. You let your hands fall back to your sides.

"shit, i didn't... papyrus sent me a message a few minutes ago, they're almost back." Sans shoves the phone back in his pocket, patting his face with his sleeves. "fuck."

"Sans. What's wrong?" you ask him, worry making your stomach do somersaults in your belly. "Talk to me."

"i can't do this right now." he's shaking his head, trying to push past you out of the kitchen.

You grab his sleeve, and you can hear the blood rushing past your ears. "Did I do something wrong?"

Sans stops, looking up at you with an unfathomable expression. "no, babe. you didn't do anything..." He blinks, letting out a slow, shaky breath. "i'm just scared."

"I don't understand. About yesterday?" You want to hug him, but Sans is rigid and closed off from you.

He lets out a humorless laugh. "it's so much more than that. i just..." Sans grimaces. "please, i can't do this right now. i need to get my shit together before pap gets home."

"What? Sans, your brother cares about you, I care about you. Talk to us." You reach out to try and embrace him but he shrugs away, shaking his head.

"you weren't supposed to see me like this," he says, giving you a pleading look. "please, babe, i can't do this right now. and you can't tell papyrus. just..." His eye sockets start to water, and he lets out a frustrated sound. "i don't want him to worry about me. i don't want you to worry either, but i guess it's too late for that, huh?"

"Yeah," you say, feeling your own vision start to blur. You take a deep breath and swallow back your tears. "Please talk to me. Later?"

He nods after a moment of hesitation, glancing away. When he looks back at you, he has his trademark grin fixed on his face, and if you didn't know any better you'd think nothing was wrong. The knowledge that he's so skilled at hiding behind those smiles fills you with sadness.

You jump when you hear the scrape of keys in the front door, and it takes you a second to realize that Sans has vanished from your side and is back at the table, eating his sandwich. For a moment you panic, trying to think of something to do so you're not just standing in the middle of the kitchen, but the door is already opening.

"Mom, we're home!" Frisk cries out, catching sight if you in the kitchen and running straight for you.

You don't get a good look at them before they've wrapped their arms around your middle, and you take a step backwards to keep yourself from getting knocked over. Their blind excitement gives you a second to catch yourself and rearrange your face into a smile. "Hey, sweetie! Did you have a good time? What did you..." You look down at them, catching a strange scent. "Why do you smell like smoke? Papyrus where did you—"

You look up towards the door in time to see Papyrus come inside, followed by a very familiar — and very unexpected — face. Your grip on your child tightens as your gaze meets Undyne's, a backpack slung over one of her shoulders. She looks a little annoyed, then breaks eye contact to
stare at something in the living room.

"GUESS WHO'S GOING TO BE STAYING WITH US, BECAUSE HER HOUSE ACCIDENTALLY BURNT DOWN?!!"
Two questions immediately form in your mind. You waste no time in voicing both of them. "What do you mean her house burnt down and what is she doing here?"

Sans is at your side before you notice him there, hands clenched into fists at his sides. "bro, what were you thinking, taking frisk to undyne's?" he asks, surprisingly stern. You're reassured by his presence. "do you realize how bad that could have gone?"

Frisk tries to protest as you pry their arms off of you and move yourself bodily between them and Undyne. You and Sans close the gap between you, forming a protective barrier. The fish-monster frowns, still staring elsewhere. Papyrus wrings his gloved hands, looking between the two of you as nervous sweat springs up on the side of his skull.

"Mom—"

"Papyrus!" you snap, in what you think might be your 'mom voice'. It makes Undyne finally look at you, her eye narrowing.

"bro, c'mon," Sans says, sighing.

"AH, YOU SEE... I TOOK FRISK TO GO SEE UNDYNE, BECAUSE SHE'S MY FRIEND! AND I KNEW THAT IF ONLY THEY HAD THE CHANCE, THEY COULD BE GOOD FRIENDS, TOO." He starts to wither under your furious stare. "BUT I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WAS RIGHT! THEY WERE HAVING A VERY PLEASANT TIME, AT LEAST UNTIL THE KITCHEN CAUGHT FIRE. AND THEN THE REST OF THE HOUSE. AND IT WAS PARTIALLY MY FAULT, SO I TOLD UNDYNE SHE SHOULD COME STAY HERE WITH US!"

"Papyrus I told you this was a bad idea," Undyne says, going to his side and patting his arm. She's still glaring at you. Instead of feeling guilty for upsetting Papyrus, you're more pissed off that she's acting like she's comforting him because of you. "I'm sure I can talk Alphys into letting me stay with her."

"Good," you mutter under your breath.

"maybe that's for the best," Sans adds.

"BUT UNDYNE, YOU HATE HOTLAND!"

"Well, I'm clearly not wanted here," Undyne says.

"Mooooom!" Frisk protests, the 'o' sound rising and falling in a long, drawn-out whine. You grit your teeth. "You shouldn't be so mad at Undyne."

"I have every right to be mad with her! She tried to kill us! Yesterday!"

"But she said she was sorry. She apologized to me and everything," Frisk says, tugging on the back of your blouse.

"HUMAN, WHILE I UNDERSTAND YOUR CONCERN, I MUST PROTEST." Papyrus is looking oddly serious, reminding you of his behavior that morning. "UNDYNE IS MY FRIEND, AND SHE IS IN NEED OF MY ASSISTANCE. IF YOUR PLACES WERE REVERSED, I"
WOULD DO THE SAME FOR YOU. AND, WELL, THIS IS MY HOUSE AND IT IS WITHIN MY RIGHT TO OFFER IT TO UNDYNE, JUST LIKE I OFFERED IT TO YOU WHEN YOU NEEDED OUR HELP."

You aren't sure what to say to that. He's not wrong, but the thought of Undyne staying in the same house as you and Frisk just sends your blood pressure skyrocketing. You're fumbling for some other argument, aside from 'she tried to kill us' since you've already used that. As you search for the words that don't come, you feel another hand on your back. Glancing over, you see Sans looking up at you, a question in his eyes. You feel his support slowly slipping away.

"bro's got a point," he says, shrugging. "trust me, i know how you feel. but i've got a feeling that if you talk to her, you guys might come to some kind of understanding."

Betrayal bites deep, looking down at Sans. Him too? "How can you be okay with this?" you hiss, feeling more angry than rational. "Especially after earlier." You look pointedly at the table, and you see Sans flinch.

"if she still wanted to kill you, she wouldn't be wasting time on being nice to frisk. undyne is many things, but she's not subtle," he says, trying to make you understand. But you don't want to understand. The kind way he's speaking just pisses you off. Why doesn't anyone else but Undyne see what a terrible idea this is?

The sudden sound of Undyne's roaring laughter catches you off guard. She rolls her shoulders, grinning at you. "Well, Sans isn't wrong!" she says, laughing a bit more. "Trust me, if I still wanted to kill you, you'd know it! But I meant what I said when I gave up on fighting you yesterday, and I'm not going back on my word to Papyrus." She flings her arm across Papyrus's shoulders, pulling him off-balance and digging her knuckles into his skull.

"AHH, UNDYNE! PLEASE DO NOT NOOGIE ME!" he cries, struggling but hopelessly caught in Undyne's grip.

"Look," she says to you, releasing the skeleton. He takes a step away from her with a nervous look. "I get it. If you don't like me, I understand. But I won't do anything to upset this doofus," she jerks a thumb at Papyrus, "and that means being friendly with you two weenies."

Frisk giggles from behind you. Undyne smiles at the sound, and you feel a little bit of your fire start to sputter out.

"So if you don't want me to stay, I respect that. Just say the word. But do you really want to disappoint Papyrus?" She gives you an accusing look, challenging you.

Papyrus has a pleading look on his face. Frisk is making a high-pitched whine. Sans sighs and shrugs his shoulders. Undyne just waits.

You're honestly feeling a bit attacked right now. With a frustrated sigh you feel the last remnants of your resolve fracture into tiny bits and scatter to the wind. "Fine. I know when I'm beaten," you blurt out, shaking your head and scowling.

You look at Sans and he gives you a small smile of thanks. With your anger and shock diminished, your thoughts turn to just minutes earlier, and you're glad that you didn't make things worse for Sans.

"OH EXCELLENT, I'M SO HAPPY!" Papyrus exclaims, and Frisk lets out a high-pitched cheer. "IT'LL BE JUST LIKE A SLEEPOVER!"
Undyne flexes her arm, grinning and punching Papyrus in the shoulder. The skeleton's grin turns to a wince.

"hey bro, so where is undyne gonna sleep?" Sans asks.

"WELL, FRISK AND I AGREED THAT THEY WOULD STAY WITH ME! MY BED IS MORE THAN BIG ENOUGH FOR THE TWO OF US. AND I DON'T SEE WHY YOUR GIRLFRIEND CAN'T STAY IN YOUR ROOM." Papyrus gives his brother a sly look, and you hear Sans splutter next to you.

"h-hey, now, i dunno if that's a good idea... you can't just make those kinds of assumptions for her," Sans says, his voice sounding a little higher than normal. You look over at him and he's blushing blue. He ducks part of his face into the fluff of his hoodie.

"WAIT hold on a second!" Undyne's eyebrows shooting up. "Sans. This human is your girlfriend?"

"OH YES! THEY HAD ALL THIS TIME ALONE TOGETHER. I CAN ONLY IMAGINE WHAT SORT OF SALACIOUS ACTIVITIES THEY WERE GETTING UP TO. NYEH HEH HEH!" You're starting to feel your own face start to turn beet red as Papyrus gives a knowing wink (again, saying 'wink' in a high voice as he does it).

"Mom, what does 'salacious' mean?" Frisk asks, with the kind of innocence only a child can muster.

You feel your sins crawling on your back.

"hey kiddo, why don't you go change into some clean clothes, huh?" Sans blurts out, giving an awkward laugh. He gives Frisk a nudge. "maybe go take a shower before dinner? get that smoke smell off of you?"

Frisk makes an annoyed sound. "Mom do I have to?"

Papyrus looks confused. Undyne's lips are twitching, and it looks like she's trying not to laugh.

"Yes sweetie." You turn to put your hand between their shoulders, pushing them towards the stairs. "Go on."

Frisk takes a few steps, then casts a suspicious look at you over their shoulder. "You just want to talk about something without me listening."

"Yes. Now go."

Frisk stomps up the steps, letting out a loud groan of annoyance but doing as they're told.

Sans clears his throat, glancing up at you and then away. "you don't have to stay with—"

"I want to," you blurt out, interrupting him. Your face feels even hotter than before. "If that's okay with you."

Sans's eyes widen slightly as he looks up at you, blue spreading across more of his face. He gives a little nod, shrugging his shoulders to hide his face in his jacket for a moment. "yeah, of course," he mumbles.

"OH MY GOD! You two are such DORKS!" Undyne roars, howling with laughter.

You're seriously starting to rethink your decision.
With the house nearly full to the brim with people, it's hard to find a moment alone with Sans. It doesn't help that he seems to be avoiding any space that isn't occupied by at least one other person, probably for the sole purpose of making sure you can't question him. Even worse, he's going out of his way to crack even more jokes than usual, going so far as to drive Papyrus into a fit of shrieking.

It takes a few minutes for him to calm down again, after much coaxing from Undyne. You never would have thought that she was capable of being so kind with Papyrus, though your knowledge of the fish-monster is rather limited. You imagine she must have to do this often, judging from the practiced way she puts herself between the brothers and casts Sans an annoyed glare. Sans just gives her a big, wide grin, chuckling as he slouches on the couch next to you.

You don't like this. You can't get the image of him with his face in his hands, sobbing, out of your head. He's not okay. But he keeps acting like he's just fine. How long has he been doing this? Long enough to be a master of it, at least. You hope he trusts you enough to tell you what's wrong.

Sans looks at you, raising an eyebrow as he slips his fingers between yours. You let him, but feel your frown deepen. With Undyne and Papyrus distracted, he leans closer to you. "stop looking at me like that. i'm fine," he murmurs.

"You're not fine," you hiss.

"babe, let's not do this right now," he says, giving you a frustrated look.

"Fine," you say, voice flat. You take back your hand and stand from the couch, ignoring the startled look on Sans's face. "I'm going to go start cooking dinner," you say, loud enough for everyone to hear you.

You don't bother waiting for a response before leaving the room.

You're being unreasonable, you know, but you're having trouble caring. You're frustrated, worried, and trying to adjust to the fact that the woman who just tried to kill you yesterday is now one of your new temporary housemates. What had happened to your life?

Pulling ingredients out from the fridge (you actually use it to store things other than numerous containers of spaghetti now) you nearly squash a tomato on accident as you move it out of your way. Grimacing to yourself, you remind yourself to be more gentle with the rest of the produce.

Normally Sans would be keeping you company in the kitchen, or Frisk. But everyone else is out in the living room, and you're in here alone. Their voices carry through the small house, but suddenly you're struck with a familiar sense of loneliness. But you have no one to blame but yourself. You came in here, you're the one that snapped at Sans just for doing his best at his way of coping with whatever's wrong...

You let out a frustrated sigh and get to work on dinner, letting your mind empty as you focus on the task at hand. This is better. You pour a dollop of oil into a frying pan and turn on the heat as you slice up some strips of chicken (you're fairly certain it's chicken).

"So, what's cooking?"

You jump, startled by Undyne's sudden presence in the kitchen. Her voice is loud (not quite as loud as Papyrus's) and forceful, much like herself. Sans is right; Undyne is not subtle.

The fish-monster comes up beside you, squinting down into the pan as you start frying up thin strips of chicken. She's never been this close to you before, and you realize that she's of a height with Papyrus, if not almost taller than him. Your eyes are right at the level of her collarbone. Now
"You know how Sans must feel when he's talking to you."

"Chicken," you say, lamely. It takes you a moment to gather your wits, feeling yourself a bit on edge with the monster towering over you. "Chicken and rice, with broccoli," you clarify.

"Hmm," she says, sounding unimpressed.

Yes, well, it may not be a fancy dish, but it's one of the few things that you had on hand that would feed an extra unexpected mouth. You resist the urge to tell her that. You also make a mental note to go shopping (again).

With all the sliced chicken sizzling in the frying pan, you turn your attention to a large head of broccoli. As you fetch yourself a knife to start chopping, you catch sight of Undyne fiddling with the stove.

"What do you think you're doing?" you demand, pushing her hand out of the way and turning the heat back down. "You're going to burn it."

"You're doing this all wrong! It needs to be hotter!" she insists, reaching for the stove again.

Without thinking, you smack her hand. "What did I just say?"

Undyne gives you an incredulous look, like she can't believe you just touched her. Honestly, you can't believe you just touched her. Shit.

"Look, I know what I'm about here," you say, pushing forward with sheer determination in lieu of sense. "I've been cooking for my family since I was Frisk's age. I've got this."

"Fine, whatever," Undyne says, giving you a scrutinizing look and raising her hands in a mock surrender. She doesn't take her eye off you as she moves away to lean against the back of a chair. "How old is Frisk, anyway?"

"Six," you say, turning back to the cutting board and the waiting broccoli.

"And you're their mom right? How old are you? You don't seem that old." You can feel her bright yellow eye poring into the back of your head.

"Twenty," you answer, grudgingly.

You hear Undyne exhale sharply. For a moment you're not sure if she's going to say anything. "Frisk is a good kid. Better than me at that age, I was a bit of a punk," she says, and you can hear her shift her legs, judging by the scrape of denim. "Picking fights with anyone that looked at me funny. Even went so far as to challenge King Asgore to try and prove I was the strongest. Emphasis on TRIED. I couldn't land a single blow on him! And worse, the whole time, he refused to fight back!"

You glance over your shoulder to look at Undyne. She's got a reminiscent grin on her face, and the way she's just standing there in the kitchen with you, keeping you company... You can almost think there's a chance you might be friendly. This must be the side of Undyne that Papyrus became friends with. The side that Frisk saw when they went to her house.

"I was so humiliated," Undyne continues, shrugging her shoulders. "Afterwards he apologized and said something goofy... 'Excuse me, do you want to know how to beat me?' I said yes, and from then on, he trained me."
"The King? He trained you?" you ask, surprised.

"Yeah. He's tough, but he's got a big heart," she says, and you can hear the friendly affection in her voice. "So, one day, during practice, I finally knocked him down. I felt... bad. But he was beaming! I had never seen someone so proud to get their butt kicked. Anyway, long story short, he kept training me. And now I'm the head of the Royal Guard!"

You look back at her again, and she's got a faraway look in her eye. After a second, she catches you looking. "Sorry, the point I was trying to make is that you kinda remind me of him."

"Of Asgore...?" You're not really sure how you feel about that. You don't know much about him, to be honest.

"Yeah," she says, snickering. "You're both total WEENIES."

You level an annoyed look in her direction. "At least I don't go around trying to kill little kids and setting my house on fire."

Undyne just laughs. "Look, I said it to Frisk, so I'll say it to you: Sorry for trying to kill you yesterday."

"I accept your apology," you say carefully, looking back down at the cutting board. "But I hope you understand if I can't just forgive you as easily as they can."

"I think I'd be disappointed if you did," she says.

You can't help it, but for some reason that makes you just a tiny bit proud.
If you aren't already following my Tumblr, I highly recommend it! I answer lots of Asks relating to WTMYH and post progress stuff occasionally. onadacora.tumblr.com

You know that if you want to, you can rejoin everyone in the living room. Dinner is simmering, and will be for another twenty minutes, but you're just not ready. Sans will just be avoiding the one thing you want to talk to him about, and you're feeling conflicted about Undyne. Now that she's not chucking spears in your direction, you sort of understand how Papyrus is friends with her... But you don't like this.

A loud squeal of laughter you instantly recognize as Frisk's reminds you why you agreed to this at all. Did you really have a choice? Everyone you care about was telling you to reconsider, so didn't you owe it to them to listen? Your only real option would have been to leave, and that thought terrifies you. Where would you go? This home has been the first place you've felt safe in... far too long.

And Frisk likes Undyne. Not that you set your life choices by the whims of a six-year-old, but Frisk has been so happy here with these people... How can you be the one to put that at risk?

It doesn't take much for you to start second-guessing yourself. ("Just listen to me! You may think you know what's best, but you don't. Look at where your choices have gotten you so far, clearly you need someone to make sure you don't mess it all up even more.")

You bite your lip, digging your nails into the meat of your palms. You're not sure what to think anymore.

"if you glare any harder at the stove, it's gonna catch fire. and then between the lot of us we'll be down two houses in one day."

Gasping, you nearly jump out of your skin when Sans seems to appear out of nowhere on the counter nearby. Heart hammering in your chest and panic singing under your skin, you clutch a hand over your sternum and grab the edge of the stove to keep yourself steady.

"God damn it," you snap, a sudden rush of shame making tears spring to the corners of your eyes. "Don't do that," you choke out, squeezing your eyes shut.

"babe, shit, i'm sorry," Sans says, and you can feel him standing in front of you, taking your hands in his. He slowly rubs your knuckles to try and get you to relax your fingers. "i thought we were getting better with that. i'm just screwing up a lot today, huh?"

You give him a weak glare, blinking back tears and drawing in a shaky breath. "Was that a joke? 'Screwing'? Really?"

Sans stares blankly up at you for a second before making a face. "oh, no! that was an accident," he blurts out, anxious.

You can't help the weak laugh that escapes you, and Sans gives you an equally pathetic smile in
return. It takes a moment, but you're starting to feel okay again.

"better?" he asks, still rubbing your hands.

You nod. "Did you want something? I know you're not here to talk about earlier," you say, sounding more bitter than you intend. He lets go of your fingers as you pull them back.

"i wanted to thank you for not saying anything to papyrus, and for agreeing to let undyne stay. i know that wasn't easy, and i really don't know what my bro was thinking... actually, i do know, but still," Sans shrugs, looking a little uncomfortable. "he can be a bit of a bonehead."

You give a humorless chuckle. "It's not like I had a choice, Sans."

"what? of course you did," he says, brow bones raising.

You shake your head. You really don't want to argue about this. It's not like you can waltz into the living room announce that you've changed your mind, and tell Undyne to leave.

"hey," he says gently, and after a moment of hesitation you let him wrap you up in a hug. You pillow your head against your arm, resting on his bony shoulder. This feels good, but you feel guilty for letting him comfort you when you should be the one comforting him. "if you're really not okay with this, i can talk to undyne. she has other friends she can stay with."

"No," you blurt out in an anxious rush, tensing. At this point it just feels like that would make everything worse. You just want everything to be okay again. "I'll deal with it. She's... not as bad as I thought. Not entirely."

"pap and i won't let anything happen."

"I know."

"and i know it doesn't make it better, but what she did wasn't personal."

"I know."

"...i'm sorry."

You hesitate, pulling back enough so that you can see his face. He looks distant, withdrawn. "For what?"

"today was supposed to be a good day," he says.

You hug him again, tighter this time. "Talk to me," you whisper, and you feel him tense against you. "I'm worried about you."

"later. i promise. now isn't the time," he says, and there's a note of desperation to his voice. "and i hate making promises, so i hope you appreciate that."

"I'll hold you to it," you tell him, with an extra squeeze for emphasis.

"right now i think you're just holding me to yourself."

You give a quiet laugh, and he brushes a toothy kiss against your cheek.

"c'mon, get out of the kitchen and join the rest of us. enough skullking in here all alone," he says, pinching your side and making you give an undignified squeak.
Your squeak dissolves into a mess of giggles despite yourself, thanks to Sans's well-placed joke. You catch sight of him grinning at you as you pull away, covering your face. How does he do this? He's not faking this smile, you can feel the happiness in him. How can he be so happy? What is he afraid of? You just have to trust him to keep his promise.

It's Sans's idea to start playing card games. At first you're so caught up in teaching Frisk how to play gin rummy that you don't see it for what it is. He's stalling. Everyone has already had dinner, sat around watching television, and now it's getting late and he's trying to buy himself more time.

But the cards are already dealt so you might as well play a few rounds. Besides, Frisk seems excited to play.

The table isn't big enough for all of you, so you're sitting in a ring on the floor in the living room, between Frisk and Sans. Papyrus is on Frisk's other side, and Undyne is between the brothers... almost directly across from you.

Frisk leans over close to you, tilting their cards so you can see them. "Mom, are these good?" they ask.

"Hey!" Undyne yells, making you both jump. She leans forward into the center of your human-and-monster circle. "No cheating, squirt!"

"Is there a reason you're shouting at Frisk?" you snap back, eyes narrowing.

"take it easy on the kiddo," Sans says. "they're not quite the card shark that you are, undyne."

A groan travels around the circle, and Sans just grins and shrugs his shoulders. But it has the effect you're sure he was hoping to achieve; the mood lightens and you start playing the game. Between hands he makes a point to touch you. A nudge with his shoulder or a light touch on your leg when he talks to you. Whenever he tells a joke he glances over at you to gage your reaction. Every time he does it you give him the same 'I know what you're up to' look.

Eventually, about an hour later, he finally starts to get the point. It helps that Papyrus has started yawning, Frisk is about to nod off with their cheek smooshed against your arm, and Undyne has a sort of faraway look in her eye. You're finding it hard to fight back your own yawns, too.

"Okay sweetie, it's time for bed," you say to Frisk, who looks up at you with bleary eyes.


"Love you too. You gonna be okay sleeping in Papyrus's room?" you ask.

"Yeah."

Everyone around you is slowly climbing to their feet. Undyne gives a particularly loud groan as she stretches her arms over her head and flexes her legs.

"If you need me, don't hesitate to come knock on Sans's door. I'm right down the hall," you tell them, fussing over them as they try to pull away.

"Mom, I'll be okay," they say, sounding insulted.

"I'm just making sure."
"I slept in my own room by myself for six years. I'll be fine." Frisk uses your shoulder to push themself to their feet, rolling their eyes.

That's not true, you want to say, but you're afraid of sounding too smothering. Frisk is already rolling their eyes at you, acting too 'grown up' for your affection. They don't want to hear about how they slept in a bassinet at the side of your bed for the first four months of their life, getting up with them in the middle of the night when they cried. Your mother was more than happy to take care of all the responsibilities that didn't involve interrupted sleep. You were the one that fed them at two in the morning, before they started sleeping through the night. You rocked them back to sleep, and held your breath when you set them down, afraid of waking them. When they got colicky, you were the one who slept in the rocking chair with them on your chest, because it was the only way they'd sleep.

You remember your baby, as you watch your child walk up the steps with Papyrus to go to bed.

Sans touches your shoulder, and you take his hand as he helps you to your feet.

"c'mon, let's go talk."
Someone Really Cares About You

You change into your borrowed pajamas in silence, glancing over at Sans as he strips off his jacket and drapes it over the treadmill. He kicks off his slippers and yanks off his socks, throwing them into a growing pile in the corner. Giving your clothes a lazy fold, you set them on top of his dresser, unsure of where to put them since there isn't a hamper in sight. You can worry about that tomorrow.

Your stomach is fluttering nervously, unsure of what to expect from this conversation. He assured you that you didn't do anything wrong, and despite everything he'd been attentive and affectionate this evening. So you're pretty sure that whatever's going on shouldn't jeopardize your relationship. But... you're worried. What could have happened to turn the happy Sans you shared the morning with into the skeleton you found crying in the kitchen?

Sans climbs onto his bed, going to sit with his back to the wall. He props his hands on his knees, like he's bracing himself. With a small, hollow thunk against drywall, his skull falls back with a sigh. He takes hold of a crumpled pillow and props it up beside him, looking at you and gesturing at it. You accept his offer in silence, crawling across the mattress to join him with the pillow wedged behind your back.

His expression is unreadable, closed off from you behind a tight grin that seems more like a grimace. The little lights in his eyes are dim, searching your face like it might hold the answers to what he should say. He seems unsure of how to begin. Reaching out, you cover his hand with your own, threading your fingers between his. You give him a gentle squeeze, and he looks down at your joined hands. Something sad ghosts across his face. In lieu of muscles, it shifts the shape of his eye sockets, and a crease of bone forms between his brows.

"this wasn't supposed to happen," he says in a low murmur. "i wasn't expecting us."

Your heart twists in your chest. "What was supposed to happen?" you ask, swallowing past a knot in your throat.

"i thought the two of you would leave. keep moving forward. try to find a way out. i don't..." He looks up to your eyes, sandwiching your hand between his. "i don't know how to do this. i don't know how to be happy like this anymore."

"Sans," you whisper, leaning close to him.

"i can't trust this. it feels too good to be true. like i'm waiting for the punchline to some sick joke," he says, shaking his head and pressing his forehead against your shoulder. "the happier i let myself feel, the more it's gonna hurt when you're gone."

"I'm not going anywhere," you say, but he just shakes his head more, like he doesn't believe you. "I know how you feel, about it seeming too good to be true. i've felt it before. And it was too good to be true, then." It was so easy to be foolish at fourteen. But with Sans... this doesn't feel foolish.

"you can't understand how this feels. waiting for all this to end." Sans pulls back, looking up at you. His eye sockets are watering, and he looks down at your hands again. With slow deliberation, he picks up your hand, pressing it to the side of his face. "i don't want you to understand. i don't want you to know what it feels like to have all your hope stripped away."

Reaching out, you cup his skull with both hands, pressing soft kisses along his forehead. He lets
you pull him close, his arms finding your waist. "What happened to you, Sans? What did this to you?" you ask him, your voice thick with tears gathering under your eyelids.

"i don't want to talk about it, please," he says, and you can feel warm, wet tears running over your hands. He's shaking. It makes your heart ache, and you feel your own tears slipping down your cheeks. "just... i've lost people. people close to me. i think things will be okay, and then it's just... gone. it's been a long time since i let myself care about anyone other than my brother."

"I'm sorry," you say, because what else can you say? You don't press for details he doesn't want to give. Releasing his skull, you move on the bed to settle yourself between his legs, kneeling as you pull him forward into a hug.

You feel him go a little limp against you, easing into your support and clinging to the back of your shirt. He said that Papyrus doesn't know about any of this, and if he doesn't have anyone else close to him... how long has it been since anyone has comforted him? The thought brings on a fresh wave of sadness, hugging him even tighter. How long would he have kept this from you, if you hadn't stumbled on him in the kitchen? Why does he feel like it's so necessary to suffer in silence?

Sans takes in a rough, shaky breath, a strangled noise escaping him as he tries to calm his voice. His fingers flex against your back, then relax slightly. He still hasn't let you go. You don't want him to, not until he's ready.

"I'm not going anywhere," you tell him again, rubbing soothing circles along his shoulder blades. "I'm right here."

"this scares the shit outta me, babe," he says, when he finds his voice. "i'm happy and i'm scared of losing you." His voice takes on a hard edge, and you feel his grip tense again. "it was so much easier before i let myself care."

"Maybe," you admit, pulling back and pushing him away so you can look down at him. He blinks, tears still slowly trailing down his face and the lights in his eyes are dim. "But isn't it worth the risk, to be happy? The worst possible outcome isn't the one you're always going to get."

"i wish i could believe that," he says, and he sounds so gutted and hopeless.

"Try," you tell him, leaning forward to press a hard kiss to his mouth. He doesn't respond. You trail your lips across his face, and somewhere in the back of your mind you realize his tears don't taste like anything. They're not salty. "You don't need to put on an act for me, but please... don't give up on me."

"it's not you i'm giving up on. it's the universe. it's everything." One of his hands brushes against your cheek, finding its way into your hair. "it's out of our hands."

"You don't have to stop worrying, but let yourself be happy, too. For your own sake. You can't know for sure what will happen, so don't keep looking for the future. Just be here right now. With me."

"i'm trying. i want to," he says, and the life is coming back into his voice. You press kisses to his jaw and he turns into them, sighing.

"i'm trying too. Let me support you, the way you support me. Please, let me give you back some of the happiness you've given me," you murmur. He's leaning back to rest against the wall again and you follow him, one arm resting against his sternum. "You don't have to stay strong all the time."

"i... i care about you, so much," he says, and you wonder at the reason for his hesitation.
Something in your stomach flutters, but you try not to dwell on it. Now isn't the time. "I am happy with you. I don't want you to think I'm not. It just scares me."

"I know," you say. "I know happiness can be scary. But I'm here with you. You're not alone."

You're not alone either. Sometimes it's hard to remember that, but as Sans folds you up in his arms and pulls you snug against his chest, you feel it. He's spent so much time taking care of you, you're glad for whatever comfort you can give him right now. You don't completely understand why he's so scared, but there's no denying what he's feeling. You can't understand unless he tells you everything, but right in this moment it's not important. You just want Sans to be okay.

You feel Sans slowly relax, his breathing growing easier. He's not trembling anymore. He sounds sleepy when he mumbles into your hair. "Thank you. For being here. For caring about me enough to not put up with my shit and making me talk."

"You're welcome," you say softly, trailing your fingers across his ribs. He makes a pleased little hum. "Do you feel at least a little better?"

He makes a weak, affirmative noise, nuzzling the top of your head. "It helps."

"You need to take care of yourself. And let us help, because you have people who really care about you."

Sans doesn't answer. You realize he's fallen asleep.
Sans wakes up, and for the first time in a long time, doesn't remember what he dreamed about. He thinks that maybe it was something pleasant, or comforting. Light is slanting through his window when he opens his eyes, and he's surprised that it's already morning. He actually slept through the night, undisturbed by nightmares or insomnia.

You're laying beside him, still asleep. He can't help the smile that widens on his face as he takes in the sight of you, your expression peaceful. A hand is tucked up under your chin, fisted against the pillow. Hair is spilling over your shoulder, an unrestrained tangle of brown. Sans reaches out and pushes it away from your face, hesitating as he takes a moment to brush his fingers against the curve of your cheekbone. Your lips twitch a little, curving into a small smile and then relaxing again, a small pleased hum sounding deep in your throat.

He removes his hand, not wanting to wake you. You nuzzle into the pillow a little and continue sleeping.

This is better than any note he might leave himself to tell him that the timeline is still stable. Waking up with you beside him, a soft and wonderful reminder that the two of you are still together... he could get used to this. He feels grounded instead of disoriented. You're a tether that keeps him steady.

He just hopes it never snaps.

Frowning at himself, Sans lets out a small sigh of annoyance. No. He's not going to do that. He's going to do his best to listen to what you told him, to focus on the happiness in the moment. This moment of waking up and seeing you here with him is a good one, and he doesn't want fear to sour it.

He's thankful that you didn't press him for more of the truth, for why he's so worried. He doesn't like lying to you, but... how can he tell you that he's certain your child has been somehow manipulating time? And that they don't even remember doing it? He's thought about confronting Frisk about it before — actually, he did once, and it didn't go well. All he can do now is hope that as long as the kid is happy, they won't do anything drastic.

He's certain that the truth won't do you any good. Either you won't believe him, or you'll want to know answers to questions he's afraid you'll ask. How does he tell a mother that he's killed their child before? How does he explain that he thinks that child was somehow... wrong. Not themselves. He still doesn't understand why Frisk is so different sometimes.

No. If everything ends up the way he hopes it does, with no Resets and everyone happy, then what's the point in telling you? He'd rather you just not have to deal with that truth. It isn't your burden to bear.

And then there's the reason for why he remembers the Resets in the first place... He doesn't want to think about it, let alone tell you.

But knowing that you'll be there for those moments where it all just overwhelms him, for the days that are harder than the others and it's difficult to keep on the mask. It's more of a comfort than he thinks you may realize. You aren't trying to fix the problem, like he thinks Papyrus would. If Papyrus knew that something was wrong, his brother would throw himself wholeheartedly into trying to make him happy again. And it just wouldn't work, not in the way he'd want. Papyrus has
enough to deal with when it comes to Sans for him to want to add any more. He'd rather just admire his brother's upbeat and outrageously optimistic attitude. Seeing Papyrus happy— and even affectionately annoyed with him— is a comfort for Sans. It's a constant facet of the Resets he never gets tired of. He's been one of the few things keeping him from just giving up entirely.

Careful not to disturb you, Sans brushes a soft, toothy kiss to your forehead and scoots off the end of the bed. As he pulls on his blue jacket, he takes a moment to consider you as you lay there on his bed, sleeping.

The blanket is rucked up around your waist, leaving your top half exposed. Sans takes hold of it and pulls it up to your shoulder, smoothing it down along your side. His hand rests against the curve of your hip as he pauses, hesitant to leave you. "I'll be back soon. you keep sleeping," he murmurs to you, knowing that you can't hear him.

He closes the bedroom door as quiet as he can when he leaves the room. The lights are still off in the living room which surprises him. But Undyne never was much of an early riser. What time is it? He never even thought to check. But Papyrus is an early riser, so he's surprised that his brother hasn't woken the others up.

As Sans goes down the stairs, hands shoved in his pockets, he realizes that he doesn't even have to remind himself to put that grin on his face. He's already smiling.

Undyne is sprawled out on the couch, blanket half crumpled on the floor, clinging to one blue, scaly leg. Sans got used to the sight of Undyne sleeping in shorts and a tank top a long time ago, but the sudden realization that he wouldn't mind seeing you in comparably little clothing makes him a little uncomfortable. Undyne should not be inspiring any of those kinds of thoughts. It's just strange.

Distracted as he is, it takes him a moment to spot Frisk curled up on the couch with her. She's got one arm tucked around their shoulders, and the kid's back is wedged into her side. Sans is glad to see the two of them getting along at least, though he isn't sure how you might feel about it.

The faint sound of scraping coming from the kitchen catches his attention, and Sans continues through the room. Papyrus is standing at the stove, carefully stirring a pot of— that's not spaghetti. It takes Sans a moment to register what it is because he's so surprised. It looks like oatmeal. You make it so often for Frisk that he's familiar with the tan-colored goop.

Papyrus catches sight of him out of the corner of his eye, looking over at the entryway with a startled look on his face. "BROTHER, YOU'RE UP EARLY," he says, like he can't believe his eyes. Sans supposes that this is rather out of character for him. "IS THE HUMAN STILL SLEEPING?"

"yeah, bro. seems like we're the only ones up," Sans says, jerking he head back towards the couch. "what's up with frisk and undyne?"

Papyrus frowns down into the pot. "I TRIED TO GET FRISK UP WITH ME WHEN I WOKE, BUT THEY BARELY MADE IT TO THE COUCH BEFORE FALLING ASLEEP AGAIN. I WAS HOPING TO BE A BETTER INFLUENCE!"

"you're a great influence. maybe they're just not feeling very frisky this morning."

"UGH," Papyrus groans, throwing a glare at Sans. Sans just grins at him.

Skirting around his brother, Sans opens up a cabinet, rising to his toes to reach the container of
instant coffee he's seen you use before. "you making breakfast for the kiddo?" he asks, frowning up at the mugs before pointing a glowing finger at the shelf and lowering one within reach with his magic.

"YES. AND SANS, THAT IS A WASTE OF ENERGY. YOU CAN JUST ASK ME TO GET THINGS FOR YOU, YOU KNOW THAT," Papyrus chides.

"you're busy. i don't wanna leave you short handed." Sans fills up the kettle and sets it on an open burner, giving his brother a companionable elbow in the ribs. He has to reach up awkwardly with his arm to do it, but it's the thought that counts. "i know it's not exactly a tall order, but..."

"I'M NOT ONE TO ENCOURAGE YOUR LAZINESS, BROTHER, BUT I THINK I WOULD PREFER YOU TO STILL BE SLEEPING THAN SUFFER THROUGH THESE HORRIBLE JOKES," Papyrus says in a deadpan voice that makes Sans laugh.

"i didn't know you were learning to make things other than spaghetti," Sans says, shuffling back around Papyrus to the silverware drawer. He fishes out a spoon.

"I HAVE BEEN OBSERVING THE COOKING YOUR HUMAN DOES, WHEN SHE LETS ME. THOUGH THE WAY SHE COOKS IS MUCH DIFFERENT FROM UNDYNE'S WAY OF DOING THINGS, I MUST ADMIT THAT THE RESULTS ARE A LOT LESS... FIERY." Papyrus gives a nervous little cough. "I'M HOPING THAT AN ENTICING BREAKFAST WILL ENCOURAGE FRISK TO WAKE UP."

"you and the kiddo have plans today?" Sans scoops a healthy serving of sugar into the mug, hoping that he has the amount right. He's seen you make this a couple times before, and doesn't want to get it wrong.

"YOU AND I HAVE WORK TO DO, AS YOU WELL KNOW, BROTHER!" he says, brandishing his stirring spoon at him accusingly. A small blob of oatmeal falls to the counter. "YOU CANNOT KEEP SLACKING OFF WITH UNDYNE HERE."

"i dunno what you're talking about, bro. i'm always working hard." Sans grins at his brother, leaning against the counter. "though i guess that's because there's nothing soft about me."

The low whistle of the kettle cuts off any outburst Papyrus might make. Sans fetches it from the stove and pours the boiling water into the mug, stirring. He's not sure what Undyne's plans for the day are, but he has a feeling you won't want to stay home with her. He thinks he'll invite you to spend the day with him at his station, if you're up for it.

"welp, i'll be back down in a few," Sans says, taking the hot mug in his hands and heading to the living room.

"DON'T FALL ASLEEP AGAIN."

You wake to the feeling of warm, smooth fingers stroking up and down your arm, Sans's low voice coaxing you out of sleep. When your eyes open to reveal an empty half of the bed, you roll over to your back and onto the skeleton's leg. He's sitting beside you, dressed and with a steaming mug in one hand. You catch the familiar scent of coffee.

Giving him a drowsy smile, you arch your back as you stretch, reaching out to rest your hand against his femur. "Morning," you mumble, making a pleased hum.

Sans pushes your hair out of your face, giving you an affectionate smile. The lights in his eyes are
bright and wide as he looks at you. You feel a giddy warmth bubble in your chest, your cheeks starting to flush with pleasure. You've never had anything like this before. Never had the luxury of waking up with someone you... You catch yourself hesitating. Care seems like too weak of a word, but...

"morning sleepyhead," Sans says, holding up the mug for you to see. "brought you some coffee. i hope i made it right."

"You didn't have to do that," you say, pleasantly surprised at the gesture. You're really not used to this.

"well, if i had to, it would sort of take the intent out of it, now wouldn't it?" he says, teasing.

You sit up, letting the blanket pool around your waist. Taking the mug, you blow on the steaming coffee and sip gingerly. Sans watches you, trying to gage your reaction.

"it ok?" he asks, and you think you see a small furrow of worry between his eye sockets.

"It's exactly how I make it," you assure him, smiling. Which is to say, it still tastes pretty terrible, but it's as good as this instant coffee is going to get. "Thank you."

Pleased, his smile perks up again. "pap and i have to work today, and i'm not sure what undyne is gonna do, but if you want you and frisk can come with me. i offer all the hotdogs you can eat in exchange."

Laughing, you shake your head. "I think I can handle Undyne. She's... okay. Now that I've gotten a little more used to her. I never would have guessed she'd be so terrible at rummy."

There's something to be said about watching someone who tried to kill you get absolutely decimated at cards. It helped humanize —or monsterize you suppose— her a bit, in your eyes.

Sans looks a little surprised. "are you sure? i mean, i know that she'll behave herself, but you don't —"

You take hold of his hand, cutting him off. "It'll be fine. Besides, I have to do some more shopping anyway. I have an extra mouth to feed." You feel a little flutter in your chest, and you look down at your coffee, feeling a little shy. "Thank you for thinking about me, though. It's... I really appreciate it."

"it's the least i could do, babe. and isn't that how this whole thing works? taking care of each other?" You look back up at him, and his cheekbones have a faint blue shade to them. "at least, it seems to be the trend so far."

"Yeah. I suppose it is."

The brothers head their separate ways, Papyrus into Snowdin's forests and Sans towards Waterfall, leaving you and Frisk with Undyne. Sans reminds you that he and his brother are both just a phone call away if you need them, and you reassure him that you'll be fine. He flushes bright blue when you kiss him goodbye in front of Papyrus and Undyne.

You think you catch Undyne trying to hide a toothy grin when you turn around to face her. She doesn't ask you anything about Sans after he's gone, but whenever you mention him she has this glint in her eye.
Undyne insists on going shopping with you. She pays for everything and carries all the bags by herself, waving you away and acting insulted when you try to help. It seems like she's going out of her way to try and be nice to you, but she's so aggressive about it it just sort of makes you nervous.

After about two days of Undyne's forceful kindness, you finally work up the nerve to tell her to knock it off. At first she's taken aback by your bluntness, but then gives you a big grin and flexes her arm at you. She seems... impressed by your attitude. You think you might never understand the fish monster.

With that out of the way, things between you and Undyne are more comfortable. She still makes you a little nervous, especially when she gets worked up over something (she and Papyrus seem to get into shouting contests regularly, and angry shouting makes you anxious). But to your surprise, you start to soften towards Undyne. She's a bit rude sometimes, and energetic, but watching her with Frisk is endearing. You can't help it.

Papyrus is glad to see everyone getting along. He and Undyne spend regular time going to her house to work on getting it fixed back up. Papyrus tries to get Sans to help, but of course he doesn't. You're told that it'll still be a while until Undyne can move back into her own house, but you're starting to get used to her presence now. It's just another part of your new normal.

Things with Sans seem even better than they were before your talk. He has a lot of good days, and you start to get better at noticing the bad ones. There are a few times you wake up in the middle of the night and he's not there. You find him more than once down in the kitchen, reading through some books. He apologizes when you wander down to look for him, bleary from sleep and worried. He tells you he didn't want to disturb you while you were sleeping. He lets you drag him back to bed to sleep (sometimes not to sleep, too).

Before you realize it, a little over two weeks have passed, and you've been in the Underground for a month. Part of you wonders if your mother worries about you, but mostly you don't care.
You feel fingers carding through your hair, pulling it away from your face as you wake up. The mattress is sunken in beside you, where you know Sans is laying as he slowly eases you awake with his touch. He's being especially gentle with you this morning. A swell of affection makes your chest feel full. There's a familiar ache in your thighs, but there's also a dull pain low in your belly. You frown.

"you okay?" Sans asks, prompting you to blink your eyes open to look at him.

You reach down to rub your stomach, a tight cramping pain prickling down your thighs. Sans is watching you, his expression neutral but leaning towards concerned. He trails his hand along your arm, studying your face.

"I just feel a little uncomfortable, I think it's—" as you roll over onto your back, you feel a cold, wet sensation on your backside. Oh no. No, how could you forget? You should have known the second you felt the cramps. Rolling out of bed before Sans can even react, you toss aside the blanket to confirm your fears. There's a dark red blotch on the sheets, about the size of your palm. Now that you're out from underneath the covers, you can feel the unpleasant moisture against your thighs.

Flush with embarrassment and shame, you just stare at it a moment, frozen in place as you scramble to think of what to say.

"is that... blood?" Sans asks, sitting up and looking at you, his eyes falling to your legs. You fell asleep in just your underwear, and you can only watch as his eyes widen. "babe are you bleeding?"

"I'm sorry! I completely forgot—" you blurt out, turning away to fetch some clean clothes from the dresser.

"are you hurt?" Sans asks, and he must have teleported because he's taking hold of your waist and turning you towards him, worry written in the lines of his face.

"I'm fine it's just—" Your face is burning, and part of you just wants to curl up in a corner and hide.

His hands run down the outsides of your thighs, and he looks like he's not sure what he should do. The guilt on his face makes you forget your mortification for a moment. "i knew i was too rough with you last night. i know you said you liked it, but—"

"Oh my God, Sans I'm not injured!" you say, interrupting him before your face can get any hotter. You go back to the dresser, fetching a clean pair of underwear, some shorts, and a shirt from your drawer. (It's very domestic, you having your own drawer in Sans's room. He cleared out the space for you and everything, even letting you borrow a few more things to sleep in. Sometimes it still feels surreal.)

"but you're bleeding, there must be something wrong." Sans is hovering now. You see him out of
the corner of your eye, keeping close like you might topple over at any moment. If you weren't so ashamed and embarrassed by this whole fiasco, you might think it was sweet. "what can i do? how do i help?"

"No. This is normal, I just forgot it was time," you say, knowing you probably aren't making any sense. "It's a human thing, and, shit there's nothing here I can use."

"what do you mean this is normal?" he demands, sounding horrified. There's a slight crackle of magic in the air around him, and as you watch you see a flicker of blue in his left eye.

Pulling the oversized shirt on over your head, you tug it down around your knees and make your way towards the door. You need to get to the bathroom before you can do anything else. "I mean exactly what I said."

He follows you out into the hall as you shuffle to the bathroom. As you slip inside, you look back at him, his expression a warzone of confusion and concern. Feeling taken aback, you hesitate before closing the door.

"i-is there anything i can do to help?" he asks in a quiet voice.

"Get Frisk for me, please," you tell him, resisting the urge to shudder as you feel more moisture between your thighs. "You'll need to take them to the store."

"ok, no problem," he says, rushing off to do as you ask.

Closing the door and dumping your bundle of clothes on the counter, you hike your shirt up and settle down onto the toilet. You ball up your sodden underwear and put it on the floor, careful to keep the wet part off of the tile. You'd rather not have to clean blood off the floor. Finally feeling like you're somewhere safe for the moment, you lean your head on your arm, resting against the counter beside you.

Oh my God. Could this be any worse? Not only did you stain the sheets — and probably the mattress— but Sans seems to think that you're going to bleed to death. You're going to have to explain it to him. That'll be a fun conversation. How did you forget that it was time for your period? You suppose that falling into the Underground has something to do with it, and you've always been a little irregular. Maybe it's a fleeting hope, but you think you remember seeing some products at Snowdin's shop. You wonder if the monsters even understand what they're for. Most likely not, considering the eclectic collection that the shop seems to supply.

There's a soft knock on the door. You jerk the large shirt down to cover your knees, tenting over your front. "Come in," you say.

Frisk pokes their head inside, still dressed in their pajamas but alert. You wave them in, and you catch sight of Sans in the hallway as the door opens and shuts. He's pacing outside. You'll really need to explain this to him.

"Mom, is something wrong? Sans said you needed me but he wouldn't say why. I don't think he wanted to say anything in front of Papyrus and Undyne," Frisk says, glancing down at the stretched shirt clenched tight in your fingers. You thank heaven for small mercies. "Is your tummy hurting?"

"No, sweetie. But I need you to go with Sans to the store. Do you remember that talk we had when you found my tampons a few months ago?" You hadn't exactly expected to have to give Frisk 'the Talk' at the age of six, but you wanted to make sure you told them the truth. And you really wanted them to stop messing with your tampons. They're not exactly cheap.
Frisk nods, but doesn't say anything, looking a little uncomfortable.

"Good. I need you to try and find me tampons or pads at the store. Sans won't know what to look for so I need you to do it, okay?" You pray to whoever might be listening that you're remembering correctly, or you're not sure what you'll do for the next four days.

Frisk nods again, looking away from you. "Okay."

"Thanks, Frisk," you say, feeling a little relieved. This whole morning—all ten minutes of it—has been a bit of a trainwreck so far. "Can you tell Sans to come here for a second?"

"Okay." Frisk hurries out the door, leaving it cracked open as they speak to Sans.

Before you can even say anything, Sans has his arms around your shoulders, hugging you tightly. Then, just as suddenly, he lets you go and backs away. His cheekbones are blue and sweat dots the side of his skull. "are you sure this is normal? this doesn't make any sense, i thought humans only bleed when they're wounded," Sans blurts out, clenching and unclenching his fists. "losing blood can't be good for you, right?"

"Sans, I promise you, I'm fine. This happens all the time," you tell him, and though you feel bad for scaring him, you can't help the awkwardness of this whole situation. You're sitting on the toilet. "But Frisk knows what I need, so just take them to the store okay?"

Sans seems to hesitate, like he wants to believe you, but worries you're going to pass out the second he looks away. You haven't seen him fuss over you like this since after the fight with Undyne.

"I promise. I'm fine," you repeat, holding his gaze firm with your own.

"...is there anything else you want? something you don't need but might help?" Sans fidgets with his hands, then shoves them into his pockets.

As if on cue, a dull ache twists in your belly. You shift slightly, wincing. "Chocolate? Or maybe, something salty? Chips or something?"

Sans blinks. "junk food will help?"

"Well it won't hurt."

"then i'll get you junk food."

You're in the shower, letting the hot water rush over you when Sans and Frisk get back. You peek around the curtain as the door opens, and your poor, clueless boyfriend has his hands full of bags. He puts one set of them down on the floor, glancing up at you and looking a little overwhelmed. Now that you've calmed down, you really do feel bad for how worried he was earlier.

"frisk wasn't sure which ones you wanted? so we, uh, just got everything that seemed like what you needed," he says.

"Thank you," you say, with all the appreciation you can muster. "Really, Sans. You've been a big help. I'm so sorry for scaring you."

Sans shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders. "i'll take the rest of this downstairs."

"Sans... how much food did you buy?" you say, eyeing the other set of bags. From what you can tell, there's quite an assortment of bagged snacks and candy.
His face turns a faint shade of blue, and he looks down at what he's carrying. "I realized I don't actually know what you like. So, I got a little bit of a few things."

You're not sure that Sans can get any sweeter. If you weren't in the shower you'd hug him. "Thank you, hun," you say, the endearment just slipping out without you realizing it.

Sans's eyes dart up to yours, brow bones raised in surprise. After a second to process what you said, his expression relaxes into a smile. "Hun?"

You give a nervous laugh, fidgeting with the curtain between your fingers. "Yeah, you know. Short for 'honey' cuz you're so sweet?" Biting your lip, you don't wait for Sans to respond because all of a sudden you feel silly and unsure. "If you don't like it, I can just—"

"No, I like it," he says, reassuring you. "Really."

"Okay." You offer him a relieved smile. "Um, I'll just be a few more minutes. Aren't... aren't you supposed to be working today?"

Sans shrugs. "I told Pap and Undyne you weren't feeling good, and that I was gonna stay home with you. They left a little bit ago, think they're doing more work on her house. They hope you feel better, by the way," he adds.

Sans leaves you to finish your shower, looking a lot more relaxed than he was when he came in. You're struck, again, by just how much Sans cares about you. You wonder if you'll ever get used to it. Any number of other guys—including Frisk's biological father—would have been absolutely disgusted at what happened. Just the mere mention of your period sent male acquaintances into horrified protests, making you afraid to even mention it in mixed company. Or at all. But even though he didn't understand it, Sans's first concern was your well-being.

You're not used to anyone putting you first.

Feeling clean and refreshed, you stow away your ample supply of tampons and pads under the sink and take a quick detour to put your dirty underwear with the laundry. Frisk catches you before you can head downstairs, glancing down into the living room where Sans is sitting on the couch. They bite their lip. You can tell that Frisk wants to tell you something, but isn't sure that they should.

"What is it?" you ask, gently encouraging them. You know if you try too hard that they'll just clam up, but if you don't say anything, they won't talk.

Frisk fidgets with the long sleeves of their sweater—pulled on over their pajamas, you can tell. They look down at their hands, then back up at you. When they speak, it's in a quiet, cautious voice. "Sans seemed really worried. The last time he was like that was when you got hurt. Are you okay?"

"Oh, sweetie, I'm fine," you say pulling them close against your stomach. Frisk's arms go around your waist, and you ignore the dull cramp of pain as they burrow their face against you. "He just didn't understand what was happening. That's all. But he's not worried anymore, right?"

Frisk seems a little unsure, but doesn't disagree. You stroke their hair as they pull away from you.

"Hop in the shower, we have stuff to do today, remember?" You lean down to press a kiss to their temple, and it speaks to how concerned they were that they let you without a fuss.

As Frisk goes into Papyrus's room to fetch clean clothes, you head downstairs. Sans meets your eyes as you reach the living room, holding out a hand for you to come to him. You were going to
head to the kitchen, but you can't resist the look he's giving you. Slipping your hand into his, he pulls you down onto the couch next to him. He doesn't let go of your hand and puts his other arm around your shoulders, hugging you close. You settle against him, tucking your head against his jaw. If your wet hair bothers him he doesn't say so.

"are you still in pain?" he asks, squeezing your hand.

"It's fine. Nothing I'm not used to," you say.

"you should stay home today."

You can't help but laugh. "Sans, if I stayed home whenever I was on my period, I'd never get anything done. It's just a little bit of cramping, I'll manage."

He makes a disapproving noise that you can feel more than hear. "and this is normal for you?"

"Yes. Here, let me explain..."

With a little bit of awkward fumbling on your part, and polite attention on his, you manage to give a basic explanation of human biology. When you finish, he's silent for a little while, but you can't see his expression to try and gauge his reaction. He's just running his fingers up and down your arm.

"and you go through all that every month?" he asks, his mood difficult to decipher from his even tone.

"Yes. From about thirteen until my fifties or so. It kind of depends."

"i'm not sure what else to say, other than can i get you some of that chocolate?"

You burst into laughter, wrapping your free arm around Sans's ribcage and giving him a hug. You tilt your face up to press a row of kisses along his jaw. "You're wonderful, hun."
A Day Out

Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for being so patient while waiting for this next chapter. This week has had a few ups and downs, paired with the holidays and family coming to visit.

After some convincing, Sans finally relents in trying to get you to stay home. You compromise with an hour of cuddling on the couch and an agreement to go to Grillby's for lunch so you don't have to worry about making anything. Honestly, the thought of some greasy burgers and fries sounds amazing right now.

The first order of business is taking Frisk to get set up at Snowdin's school. With no foreseeable end to your stay here, you need to take Frisk's education into consideration. You have no idea how a monster school compares to a human one, but it has to be better than nothing. You can also tell that Frisk has been lonely during the day. With the other children of Snowdin attending school, it left them with no one but adults. You'd rather see them spend time with kids (monster or not) their own age.

Sans tags along with you and Frisk, walking hand-in-hand with you on your way to the school. It's a small red building, like something you'd see in a picture book. Inside you discover an office right off the entrance, and two classrooms. With a quick peek through the classroom door windows, it looks like the older children are grouped in one room and the younger are in the other. It's like the frontier schoolhouses you learned about when you were a kid. You guess Snowdin is small enough that they don't have the number of students to feasibly separate them into grade levels.

It turns out that the principal and administrator for the school already knows who you are. She's a squat, brilliant orange reptile of some kind, and as it turns out the mother of that armless monster kid —whose name just so happens to be Kid— that you saved from almost getting speared by Undyne. Offering you a warm smile, you shake her hand and take a seat across from her at her desk. She has an assortment of papers that she shifts through as you speak with her.

She hands you a few forms which you start filling out, glancing over at Frisk as they take in the monster's eclectic office. They seem particularly interested in a group photo dated last year; mostly kids, but with a few adults you assume are the school's staff. Sans is standing behind your chair, and you think you hear his bony fingers tapping on his phone.

"I've been meaning to thank you, for what you did to help Kid," she says, breaking the silence.

You look up from the papers, pen stilling between your fingers. She's giving you a kind smile, exposing a row of wide, dulled-point teeth. "You're welcome. It was more impulse than anything, but I'm glad that no one got hurt in the end," you say.

"Captain Undyne came by a few days after the incident —I suppose she's staying with all of you?" The principal glances over your shoulder at Sans, who doesn't say anything. You think he must have nodded, because she continues. "Well, she came by to apologize. She also cleared up that odd rumor that the reason she attacked you and your child is because you're human! I never believed it for a second, because what human would risk their life to help a monster? And I was right, the
Captain told me herself that she was mistaken." She raises her scaled hands and lets them drop with a sigh. "She really ought to be more careful! Imagine, turning you both to dust over such a terrible misunderstanding!"

Oh. So that's why things didn't seem to change with any of the residents of Snowdin. Undyne went out of her way to make sure that she didn't completely wreck your cover, since no one aside from Sans and Papyrus understood that you and Frisk are human. You try to remember to thank her later.

You also try not to take the principal's comment about humans too personally. If your entire species was trapped under a mountain, you'd probably have some opinions on the people who did it. Besides, you aren't exactly sure that she's wrong about the majority of humanity. You just nod in response and drop your attention back to the forms.

"after we're done here, you wanna hit up the store for some school stuff, kiddo?" Sans asks while you're busy.

"Yeah! I..." Frisk hesitates. "Mom, can we?"

"Sure. We need to do that anyway, no reason not to go today," you answer, hesitating over a question on the form. It says: 'Magic Manifestations (if any). Frisk's Soul comes to mind, but... you fill in the answer with 'none'.

Sans rests his hand on your shoulder, making you crane your neck to look up at him. He holds his phone in front of your face, and there you can see a text message he's typed out but hasn't sent. 'lots mstrs dont have magic manif. frisk will b fine.' His typing makes you want to cringe (you always write properly in your texts), but you get the gist of what he's trying to say. That Frisk not having magic won't make them stand out, or make anyone suspicious. It's a relief.

You nod, giving him a quick smile. "Good. Thanks." Glancing at the principal, she doesn't seem to think anything is odd about your exchange, her focus on a small pile of papers.

Sans nods back at you, squeezing your shoulder and pulling away again.

You finish up the last few questions. Handing over the paperwork, she lets you know that Frisk can start joining class tomorrow if that's fine with both of you. You let her know that it is.

You watch Frisk as they sift through the eclectic collection of Snowdin's shop. The rows and shelves seem organized by function as best as the owner could manage, but they're still a bit chaotic. It reminds you of the thrift stores your mother would take you to. She almost never bought you anything brand new if she could help it and everything from clothes to toys tended to come second-hand. Actually, your favorite pair of jeans —the ones you're wearing now— came from a thrift store.

Despite your mother's intentions, you can't help the warm, familiar feeling in your chest. She always seemed happy when she bought things. Some of the best memories you have of the two of you together are of shopping, before you got pregnant.

"Mom, look! They have pencils in all these weird colors! Like, the wood part is a funny color but not the lead part," Frisk says, holding up the package up for you to see. They're smiling from behind their outstretched arms.

The blister packaging is a bit worn at the edges and the cardboard is faded, but the pencils inside seem to be in good shape. They remind you of the fancy school supplies you always wanted to get
as a kid, and you'd love to give something to Frisk you never had the chance to own yourself. But a nagging voice in the back of your mind hates the idea of spending more money than you need to. Wouldn't a regular pack of pencils serve just as well and probably cost half as much?

"Why don't you get some normal pencils, sweetie. You can get a lot more for the same price," you tell them, trying your best to not feel guilty as Frisk's bright smile starts to dim. Your best really isn't good enough, you realize.

Frisk seems as though they want to protest, and at the same time you're thinking about changing your mind. But before either of you can say anything, Sans takes the pack of pencils from Frisk's hands and places them on top of the small stack of notebooks in your arms. You give him a puzzled look and he just smiles at you like he always does.

"don't worry about the cost. we can afford it," Sans says. He looks over at Frisk, shoving his hands back in his pockets. "pick out whatever you want, kiddo."

You're feeling a little dazed as Frisk looks up at you for permission and you give them a small nod. Their smile brightens again and they turn back to the shelves with renewed vigor. Sans doesn't seem to think anything of what he just said, standing beside you as you both watch over your child. 'We can afford it.' You suppose he could have meant himself and Papyrus, but you don't think so. You're fairly certain that the 'we' meant you and him.

A familiar swell of affection fills your chest, right as Sans sidles closer and presses a hand to the small of your back. You glance over at him but his attention is on Frisk, white pinpricks following them as they flit back and forth across the aisle. He looks content.

The hand on your back slides lower until his fingers are curved over your butt. This is a new habit for him, one that you don't dislike, but the fact that you're out in public makes your cheeks flush. You nudge him with your shoulder, but he doesn't move. Sans looks up at you with an expression akin to innocence.

"what? i can't help that you're taller than me. this is arm-level," he says, his toothy grin widening. "besides, i gotta keep hold of you to make sure you don't leave me behind." He punctuates his joke with a small squeeze.

Laughing, you nudge him harder, turning away just enough to move his hand. Raising his arm back around your waist, he pulls you back to him and leans up to brush his mouth against your cheek.

"Do I need a ruler?" Frisk calls back to the two of you, unaffected by your behavior with Sans.

"i wouldn't rule it out," Sans answers, earning himself a giggle from Frisk. "i'd hate for your supplies to not measure up to the other kids'."

Sans pulls away from you, walking over to help Frisk pick out the rest of their supplies. You're not surprised in the least to discover that the skeleton has a wide variety of situation-appropriate puns at his disposal. You just watch the two of them, following at a distance with a smile on your face.

There have never been any issues between the two of them, but Frisk tends to favor Papyrus andUndyne. And while Sans has supported you with Frisk, he hasn't really gone out of his way to try and spend extra time with them either. Sometimes it seems like there's a little bit of a barrier between them, but you can't imagine why.

But as Sans catches Frisk off-guard with a whoopee cushion hidden between two notebooks, you think that they're getting closer. You actually mist up a little bit as Sans reaches out to ruffle Frisk's hair the way you like to do. You blame your reaction on hormones.
When they finally finish up picking out what Frisk wants, you head over to the clothing section. You want to make sure that Frisk has appropriate clothes to wear to school and help make a good impression. Picking out a few things—all a little oversized the way they prefer—you lead the way to a selection of striped sweaters.

"Do you want to get a new sweater, Frisk? That blue one is getting a little worn out from you wearing it so much, and I'm not sure it's thick enough," you say, eyeing the mentioned sweater that Frisk is currently wearing.

"Hmm, maybe," Frisk says, running their hand over the garment rack and thumbing their way through the different colors.

As you watch, they hesitate over a particular sweater. They pull it out a bit from the others, and you catch a glimpse of green with yellow stripes. You don't remember Frisk ever being partial to green or yellow, but they seem to be considering it anyway. After a moment, they shove it back into place and turn to you, shaking their head.

"No, I'm fine like this," Frisk says.

Sometimes Sans forgets that this Frisk and the Frisk from the worst timelines are the same child. As he watches the two of you talk as your little group heads to Grillby's, he remembers. He doesn't want to, but the images of that child silhouetted in the darkness between shafts of golden light come to him unbidden. The cold glint of a knife blade clutched in small fingers. A wide, delirious smile.

Tears streaming down light brown skin as something within Frisk seems to fracture and they drop the knife and run into Sans's arms. (Sometimes. The times Frisk gave him mercy were some of the hardest. Killing them when they refused his offer weighed less on his heart.) Blood on the floor. A tiny broken body.

He's jolted back to reality as he feels tiny hands pry his fingers away from yours and thread themselves in your place. Looking down, he sees that Frisk is now between the two of you, holding your hands. You look over the kid, meeting his eyes, and he notices how bright your smile is and how there's a little bit of color darkening the roundness of your cheeks. It only makes Sans feel even more guilty of his memories, but he smiles back at you anyway.

His eyes flick back down to Frisk. They're looking up at you, but as he watches they turn to face him, squeezing his fingers. Heavy brown bangs (not quite the same shade as yours, and the strands are straighter) fall away from their eyes, and he's struck with how Frisk's eyes look so much like yours when they smile. He thinks that should make him feel worse, but... this isn't the child he's fought before. It can't be. He doesn't see any of that person in Frisk's face. He mostly just sees you.

Frisk swings their arms back and forth, tugging on both of you. You start to raise your arm and Sans quickly follows suit, stretching up as high as he can to get Frisk's feet off the ground. The cold air fills with the sound of Frisk's laughter as he helps you swing them back and forth. Soon the memories sink back down below the surface and his smile is genuine.

And damn him if he doesn't realize that now he has one more person he's afraid of losing.
Sans takes Frisk to school on their first day because your period cramps are worse than yesterday and the idea of walking across Snowdin makes you want to cry. He tries to stay home with you again, but Papyrus won't have any of it. Undyne tells him you'll be fine with her watching out for you while the brothers are gone.

So you stay home curled up on the couch with a small stack of books you checked out from the library a few days ago. Undyne is at the other end of the couch, doing something on her phone and occasionally glancing up at the television. The silence between the two of you is companionable and undemanding.

Right as you start to open the first book sitting next to you (‘History of the Underground’) your phone chimes. You pick it up to find that Sans sent you a picture. You didn't even know that Sans's phone has a camera. Now that you realize it, you feel a little curious about all those times he had his phone out when you were around...

It's a picture of Frisk, grinning and waving in front of the school. It makes you smile and you're sure to save it. When you exit the image, you see Sans sent you a text right after. 'didn't want u 2 miss out. feel better.' Your smile softens, and you text back, 'Thank you, hun! It's a great picture! <3' Pausing for a second, you take another look at the thumbnail of the picture before setting the phone back down.

Burrowing down into the couch cushions to get more comfortable and resting your hand against your aching abdomen, you open the book in your lap. It makes for dry reading, but your own curiosity makes up for it. You want to learn about this place you've come to think of as your home. You've always been a quick reader, and while the book itself is written plainly enough, you keep finding yourself distracted. Undyne flips channels on the television, and you get a few scattered texts from Sans. There's also the necessary trips to the bathroom that pull you up from the couch. By the time lunch rolls around, you've gotten about three quarters of the way through. You feel like you have a good handle on how the Underground came to be, as well as how Asgore moved the capital from the Ruins, originally called Home, and into New Home.

Wait, but if this is the same Asgore... and the Ruins were nearly decrepit. How can that be possible? Can monsters live for hundreds of years? You take another look at the book in your hands, flipping back to the front to try and find some kind of publishing information. But there isn't any date that you can find. The book looks fairly old.

"Need anything?" Undyne asks, interrupting your thoughts. She's uncurling herself from the couch, stretching up on her toes and raising her arms above her head with a loud, luxurious groan. Rolling her shoulders, she raises an eyebrow at you.

"Uh, no, I..." you trail off, frowning down at the book. You glance up at her, and she's watching you with a curious look. "Is the Asgore that led the monsters back when everyone was sent into the Underground the same one that's king now? Is that possible?"

"Yeah, one and the same," she says, crossing her arms over her chest. "Though he doesn't really like to talk about what it was like, before. When monsters still lived on the surface. Him and Gerson are the only people I think that still remember."

"But how? How long have monsters been down here?"
Undyne laughs, shaking her head and shrugging. "Do I look like a history nerd to you? I don't know, TOO LONG." Grimacing, she looks away, then back at you. "Asgore is a special type of monster. They're called Boss Monsters. The only way they age is if they have a kid. As the kid gets older, it makes their parents age too. But, Asgore's son died a long time ago."

Before you can react, she reaches down to scoop the book out of your hands, flipping through the section that you haven't read yet. Her expression hardens, then softens again, and she hands the book back. "Read the rest, if you want to know what happened." And with that, Undyne heads into the kitchen, leaving you alone.

And so, with a growing sense of sadness, you learn about what became of Asgore's son, Asriel. How the king's family took in a human child (the child's name is never mentioned, neither is the name of his wife) who fell just like you and Frisk did. The writing is dry and emotionless, but you can gather enough to think that the monster family must have cared about that human very much. Enough to consider them their own child. For a time it seemed that the hope of all the monsters rested on the idea that this single human might help bridge the gap between their two peoples. And then they got sick, and died. Asriel took that human's Soul to try and fulfill their would-be sibling's last wish, and was struck down. And the Dreemurrs were left without either of their children.

You blame the tightness in your throat and the tears in your eyes on hormones. But you snatch up your phone and take another look at that picture of Frisk anyway, to make yourself feel better. You can't imagine what it must be like to lose a child, let alone two. You don't want to ever know what that pain is like.

Undyne never left the kitchen the entire time you were reading, and now that you're done you wonder what she's doing. You also have questions you're hoping she can answer. As you get up from the couch you bite back a groan as a cramp tightens in your abdomen. This is why you're staying home, especially without any painkillers to help.

As you approach the kitchen, you hear Undyne talking in a low voice. "Okay Undyne, just be cool," she says, and you think she's talking to herself. But why? You tuck yourself against the wall next to the television, afraid of interrupting her. "Just talk to her. She likes talking to you."

Who is she talking about? For a split second you think she might mean you but that doesn't make any sense. As far as you know, she's never had any problems talking to you. And right now Undyne sounds downright nervous. Who could possibly inspire that kind of anxiety in someone as unflappable as her?

"Just... ask her about something nerdy. She likes that shit. Okay, okay, just call her!" Undyne snaps at herself, and you can hear her give a low growl.

Maybe you shouldn't be listening to this. But now you're afraid to move and give yourself away.

"H-hey Alphys! It's me, Undyne!" she says, and you can hear her pacing across the tile floor. "I mean, of course you know it's me. I'm sure my name came up on your phone. ANYWAY, how's the, uh, weather in Hotland today?" There's a pause. "Hot? Yeah, I thought so! I needed to know for, er, Royal Guard reasons!"

Is she serious right now? The embarrassment just from proximity is almost more than you can bear. You cover half of your face with one hand, grimacing.

"Yeah, I'm doing just fine! We're probably half-done with the house, I really need to stop setting it on fire, huh?!" Undyne lets out a loud bark of laughter, and it sounds like she's finally starting to relax a little.
"Yeah! You should TOTALLY come visit sometime! I know that Papyrus would love to see you, and you can finally meet Sans properly. You should stop buying those terrible hot dogs from his stand, Alphys." Her voice quiets a little. "And I always like seeing you. OH, and you can meet Sans's girlfriend, too! She's pretty cool, I think you'd like her. So's her kid. Yeah, a kid, crazy right?"

You flush a bit at the compliment, coming from Undyne you know it's genuine. You're also feeling even more guilty for snooping. Biting your lip, you step away from the wall and give an exaggerated sigh, stretching and pretending like you're just now approaching the kitchen. Undyne turns on her heel, looking a bit like a deer stuck in the headlights as she catches sight of you.

"OKAY ALPHYS, I have to go, so just tell me later when you want to come over. BYE." She jerks the phone away from her ear, pressing a button and shoving it into the pocket of her jeans. "HEY PUNK, uh, was there something you needed?"

"I finished the book," you tell her, opting to pretend you didn't hear any of her conversation. Thinking back on what you just read, it sobered your thoughts, and you feel a small frown tugging on your mouth.

You see the tension leave Undyne's body. She looks away, and you swear she looks a little sad. Crossing her arms over her chest, she rubs her fingers over her elbow absently. "So then you know exactly how much humans took from us. What they took from Asgore."

"I can't blame him for wanting revenge on the humans who killed his son," you say, your hand drifting to cover your chest.

Undyne's head jerks to face you, a hard look settling over her face. Her eye flicks down at your hand. "Who said anything about revenge? He just wants to see everyone happy, the big softy. He's collecting Souls to try and free us, not because he's angry."

Guilt twists in your stomach and you pick at the front of your shirt. "And I really am standing in your way. If you had—"

"HEY," Undyne snaps at you, and you're surprised to see her glaring. "Don't start that shit now. You're a friend, and this just means we have to wait a little bit longer."

"But—"

Undyne takes a step forward, jabbing a sharp-nailed finger in your face. You lean backwards, eyes widening in surprise. "No buts. Never feel bad for protecting yourself and Frisk. You're just as important as any of the other monsters down here."

Your face scrunches and you can't quite meet her gaze. "How did he get the other six Souls? Did you...?"

She pulls her arm back over her chest, cupping her elbows. A frown furrows her brow. "Did I kill anyone?" She pauses and you nod, feeling bad for even asking. "No. You two are the first humans I've ever seen. And, he doesn't like talking about the Souls. He's doing his best to try and free us from this prison, but that doesn't mean he likes that people have to die. Even though humans did this to us in the first place." Undyne grimaces, then relaxes with a sigh. "I'd rather step up and make sure he doesn't have to do any of that again. So the next human that falls down here better be a jerk, so I don't feel bad about killing them!"
You try not to dwell on the idea of Undyne trying to kill anyone else, even if it's for an arguably good cause. "You and Asgore are close? So then... are you lying to him about Frisk and I?"

She looks away, and you think you see a flicker of guilt cross her face. "Look, I know him well enough to get that he doesn't really want to fight anybody. I'm doing him a favor by keeping you punks a secret. got that?"

"Thanks," you tell her, smiling.

"Whatever," she grumbles. "Since we're playing twenty questions apparently, is there anything else you wanted to know?"

Your thoughts to back to Asriel. His story in particular struck a cord in your heart. "How long ago did Asriel and that human child die?"

Undyne gives you an odd look, like she's surprised at your question. "I don't know exactly. I don't really make a point of asking about sad stuff. He's only ever mentioned Asriel to me once, and it was on accident."

"What did he say? If... if you don't mind me asking."

Looking up at the ceiling, Undyne hesitates. After a moment you think she decides not to answer, but she does. "He told me that he wished that I'd been around back then to keep Asriel safe. That I would have made a better protector, instead of hunting down humans. I dunno about that last part, but I know I would have stopped Asriel! I would do anything to help Asgore and his family."

You're startled by the passion in Undyne's voice. She catches herself, clearing her throat and glancing at you. "But it's just him now. He doesn't need me to protect him, because he's tough! Tougher than me!" She shrugs her shoulders, turning away and heading to the fridge. "I think you'd like him, but for your sake and his, I hope you never meet."
"i can't believe you keep sending me those texts while i'm at work, what if the kid sees them?"
Sans's voice cants low as he flings your shirt onto the floor of his bedroom, one hand around your back to fumble with the clasp of your bra. He's pressed in close to you, teeth grazing the crook of your neck.

You untangle one arm from around his shoulders to help him. He nips your neck and you suck in a gasp. "I delete them from my history. I can't believe you just teleported home like that." One moment you sent him an admittedly teasing message (your period ended yesterday, and you knew he'd been getting impatient) and the next Sans was there in the living room behind you. You'd never seen him look so riled up.

"what did you think i was gonna do? you were driving me crazy," he growls, pulling your arms free from him so he can tug off your bra.

"You've never done this before," you say, grabbing for his jacket to try and help him undress. He pushes your hands away and shrugs out of it himself. Your fingers find the front of his shirt instead, tracing down his sternum and making him give a pleased hum. You smile at him and he hooks his fingers into the waist of your jeans.

"yeah, well there's no one to bust me for skipping out this time," he says, stepping out of his slippers and gently pushing you towards the bed. "lay down."

You eye his still very-clothed body but he ignores you, so you do as he asks. Once your back is against the mattress, he undoes your pants and pulls them off, climbing onto the bed after you. His warm, smooth hands slide up your thighs, making you sigh and arch your back just a little as you savor the feeling. Sans shifts higher, fingers dragging up your sides. You shudder, seeing the hungry look on his face as he watches you shift under him and let out a small whine.

There's a flicker of blue and then his tongue is circling your nipple, his head bent over you as a hand grabs your hip. "Sans," you moan, reaching for the hem of his shirt and slipping your hand under it. As your fingers trace the warm surface of his ribs, he shudders and groans against your breast. He takes hold of your hand and threads his fingers between yours, pinning it to the mattress beside your head. Somewhere in the back of your lust-fuzzy mind you wonder why he stopped you. But it's hard to care as you press open-mouthed kisses to the side of his skull while his free hand finds its way beneath your underwear.

Grazing over your clit and sliding past your folds, Sans teases at your entrance. You moan, pressing against his hand but he just keeps tracing lazy circles. He pulls his head away just enough to look at you, the blue of his left eye studying your face as he gives you a pleased grin.

"i love listening to those sounds you make. i love knowing i can make you feel good," he says.
You bite your lip because you're too flustered to speak, but you know that Sans doesn't expect you to say anything. Instead, he makes a shallow thrust into you with his fingers, eliciting a cry as one hand tightens on his and the other fists into the sheet. You whine as he pulls out with a satisfied hum. He tugs your underwear off as he moves away.

Sans leans back and shifts to settle himself between your legs, squeezing your thighs with his fingers. You watch him, eyes locked on his, as he nips gently down from your knee, anticipation making you want to squirm the lower he goes. He pauses right at the thickest part of your thigh, chuckling as you let out a frustrated noise.

You get the impression that this is revenge of some kind.

Then, finally, you suck in a gasp that bottoms out into a moan as his tongue drags its way up your folds until finding your clit. He's warm, warmer than a human if you remember correctly, but at the moment that doesn't matter. Nothing matters except the feel of that blue tongue and Sans's strong hands kneading your thighs. It's like he can't get enough of the softest parts of you, he always touches you whenever he can.

As he finds a steady rhythm of gentle strokes, he leans his skull against one thigh making a low hum you can feel more than hear. It makes you shiver and bite your lip. Keeping hold of the leg he's resting against, he brings his other hand under his chin. Just knowing what's coming makes you shift closer in anticipation, and you hear Sans give a low chuckle.

"were you feeling as bonely for me as i was for you?" he teases, finger tracing along your entrance again. You let out a small groan that's more of a whine. "okay, babe. i know what you want."

Everything seems to narrow down to the smooth warmth of his fingers sliding inside of you, dragging out a moan past your lips. His other hand squeezes your thigh as he nuzzles against it, and you get the feeling that he's pleased with himself. Honestly, you're pretty pleased with him too.

As his fingers thrust slowly in and out of you, curling at just the right angle, you feel heat start to pool in your belly. You're getting close, and you think Sans can tell. The strokes of his tongue become more focused and he lets out a soft groan against you that makes you shudder.

Sans flattens his tongue, dragging it across your clit as he strokes his fingers inside of you and the heat finally crests and breaks free. Moaning and crying out, your back arches off the mattress and your fingers clutch at the sheet. Sans holds you and eases you through the waves of pleasure, his motions gentling but not stopping, eking out as much as he can from you. When your body finally starts to relax, he pulls himself from you and leans back to rest on his knees, using the hem of his shirt to dry his face. He's grinning, and all you can do is give him a bleary smile in return as you stretch your legs with a contented groan.

"that sounded good," he says, trailing his hands up and down your thighs, watching you as you come back to reality. He gives a low chuckle as you hum contentedly. "i'm glad. but you know we're not done yet."

As he shifts a little between your legs, you press your wobbly knees together. "Wait," you say as he gives you a puzzled look. You pat the bed beside you. "Can you just lay with me a minute?" you ask, your voice soft.

"is everything okay? i thought you liked when i don't wait too long after you come," he says, moving to lay next to you. Sans rests on his side, blinking his sockets so that the blue is gone and the white pinpricks are back. He covers your stomach with his hand, rubbing next to your navel with his thumb.
You move his hand away, and with as much energy as you can muster in your pleasure-limp state you roll yourself over to sit on top of him. Sans's eyes widen, startled as you look down at him from your seat on his legs. "I'm fine," you tell him, leaning forward and pressing your hands into the mattress on either side of his head. Blue sweeps across his cheekbones, and you see traces of nervous sweat gather at his temple. "But you're always doing all the work, and I want to do something for you for a change."

"babe, you don't have to. really," he says, shivering as your hand trails down his chest.

"I know I don't have to. I want to," you tell him, a small groan escaping him as your fingers duck past the hem of his shirt and trace the curve of his pelvis.

"you don't have to do this, i'm sure you're uncomfortable." Sans reaches down to cup your legs, glancing down between you as best he can.

You're not sure if he's talking about you being on top of him, or uncomfortable with being more in control. Either way... "I'm not. Unless you are?" You pull your hand away from his pelvis, suddenly concerned you overstepped a boundary you weren't aware of.

"n-no, i'm not, but... babe i'm all hard edges and you're... soft." He holds your gaze for a moment before falling away, the lights in his eyes dimming slightly. Turning his head, he runs a hand over his face, looking uncertain.

Oh.

"Hun," you murmur, ducking your head to press a trail of kisses down the side of his face. "Sans," you say, your lips against his jaw. He turns his head a little, leaning into your touch. "Is that what this is about? Because I like you, just the way you are." You reach up to tug his hand away from his face, tangling his fingers with yours and pressing them against the bed. "I want to learn your body the way you learned mine."

Sans turns to look at you and you pull back so he can, searching each other's faces. He still looks unsure, but you hope that he can see the sincerity and affection you feel. His face scrunches up as best it can, a tiny furrow forming between his brows, and the blue on his cheeks darkens. It seems like he doesn't know what to say.

"Please," you say, squeezing his hand. "I care about you, just like you care about me. Help me show you."

His mouth opens, like he's about to say something, but he can't find the words. With an expression akin to pain, the lights in his eyes flicker as he studies your face, until finally you're startled to see tears gathering in the corners of his eye sockets. "i..." Sans blinks, shaking his head and giving a self-deprecating laugh. "shit, you..." He blinks again, looking away and back at you. "you keep surprising me. you'd think i'd be used to it by now."

"Are you okay?" you ask, shifting yourself so that you can stroke the side of his head with your free hand.

"i'm... i love... i love everything about this right now, babe. you just, make me so happy." Sans fumbles over his words for a moment, still flushing and flustered. He leans up to nuzzle against your cheek, and you smile.

"You make it sound like no one's ever done this for you before," you say, giving a weak laugh in an attempt at lightheartedness.

Sans doesn't answer. His grip on your hand tightens and you hear a small sigh.
Things start to make more sense. Why would he assume that you'd be uncomfortable, if someone hadn't already told him something similar? Feeling determined now, you slide towards his pelvis, straddling him and rocking your hips. Encouraged by his startled groan, you pull back to sit upright, looking down at him. "Tell me what to do," you tell him, fingers tugging his shirt up to expose the bottom of his ribcage. You're tempted to reach for his spine, but you decide to start with the bottom ribs instead. Sans trembles under you. "Please."

The lights in his eyes are bright, and he's having trouble holding your gaze. His hands shift a little on the bed, like he goes to reach for you and then stops. Then, in a hurried rush, he arches his back and pulls his shirt off over his head, leaving himself exposed to you for what you realize is the first time. Everything about his bones has always been different from human anatomy, and his ribcage is no exception. He has more substance to him, a solidity you don't get from a lifeless skeleton. You catch yourself staring, and Sans is watching you with uncertainty.

The significance of this moment isn't lost on you. His trust in you feels like a tangible thing, cupped between your hands in the same way that he regarded your Soul weeks ago. You feel something well up inside your chest, and you think... you think it might be love.

Your fingers trace over his ribs and you try to put every bit of what you're feeling into the smile that you give him. It might be love, it might not be, yet, but whatever it is you hope it's enough to let him know that you want him to be happy. That you're happy with every bit of himself he might offer to you.

You think he must see what you're trying to show him. You delight in the relieved sigh he tries to hold back, leaning down to press kisses along his clavicle. His hand cups the side of your head, burying itself in the thick waves of your hair. Your slide your tongue along the length of bone, eliciting a small groan that makes you smile.

Sitting up again, you shake your hair free of his fingers, sliding your hands down his chest. You grind against his pelvis, feeling the fabric of his shorts shift against your thighs. "Tell me what to do," you say again, because he still hasn't answered you.

His mouth opens and closes, a small ragged noise escaping him. His eyes are heavy, his face bluer than you've ever seen him. In a word, he looks overwhelmed. His hands reach for you, and then hesitate, and then he finally takes hold of your wrists. You watch as he guides one hand to the base of his spine and the other to the wing of his pelvis.

Sans releases you as you stroke along his vertebrae, his hands falling back to his sides. You gently drag your fingernails across his hipbone and he gasps, closing his eyes and arching into your touch. He covers his face, unable to keep his arms still. Raising up onto your knees, you take a moment to tug down his shorts a bit to give you easier access to his pelvis. While you're off of him, he reaches down to grab hold of your hips, making you stop. Confused, you look up at his face, and as you catch sight of his glowing left eye, you feel a familiar pressure against your leg.

You shift yourself above him covering the hands on your hips with your own as you slowly lower yourself onto him. He moans as he fills you, his grip on you tightening as you gasp. Smooth fingers drag down your thighs as you rock against him. His eyes are closed again, head pressed back against the mattress, teeth parted. You reach down for his spine again and he cries out, arching up to you. His motion buries his cock deeper inside of you and makes you moan, a surge of pleasure making you feel off-balance. You scrabble for a grip on his ribs but he catches your hand, holding you steady. Looking down at him, he's peering up at you with so much desire and affection that your chest aches in response.

Sans reaches for your other hand, a ragged breath escaping him as your fingers drag away from his
spine. Tangling your fingers together, he takes your weight onto his arms. His hands squeeze yours. "if you... keep doing that, it'll be over too quick," he says, his voice thick and low as he stumbles over the words.

"Okay," you breathe, using the stability of his arms to help you drag yourself upwards and press back down again.

"aah, shit," he bites out, caught off-guard. He grinds up against you and you lean over him, trusting him to keep you up as your hair spills over your shoulders.

There's tension coiling in your belly again but you're not focused on that. You're taking him in, watching the affect you're having on him with a swell of affection and pride. This is about him. Right now he's all that matters.

"Sans," you say, groaning as you rock your hips. "I..."

"i... wait, i can't..." Sans bites back a moan, gritting his teeth. "no, not..."

You realize what's happening a moment too late, a low cry breaking free from him as you lean back to press him deep into you. He arches up and goes rigid, eyes squeezing shut as he trembles beneath you. The light in his eye fizzles out as he goes limp against the bed, the pressure inside of you gone without warning.

"shit," he breathes, taking in a shuddering breath. For a moment you're worried he's disappointed, but he's smiling up at you as he carefully separates your hands. He reaches up for your face and pulls you down to him, nuzzling you as he strokes your cheeks with his thumbs. You press kisses to his face when you feel bone against your lips. "you... i..." he falters and you can feel him trembling still. "that was..."

"You always say the sweetest things," you murmur, laughing softly. You roll off to the side and he turns to follow you, unwilling to let you go.

"i've never... babe, sometimes i think there's no way you can be real," he says, his forehead pressed against yours. You reach up to brush your fingers along the side of his face.

"I'm real. I'm here, I'm real, and I'm yours," you tell him. "For as long as you'll have me."

"and what if i never want to let you go?"

"As long as you'll have me," you repeat, kissing between his eye sockets for emphasis.

"i..." Sans leans back so he can look you in the eyes, bright white points flickering as he searches your face. "i'll keep that in mind."

Chapter End Notes

Please don't forget to follow me on Tumblr! I'm always answering questions and posting stuff about WTMYH! <3

onadacora.tumblr.com
Hesitating, Sans looks up at the massive stone doors, erected long ago to seal off the Ruins. He's watched these doors open hundreds of times by now, but he's never seen the woman he knows is waiting on the other side. There are few places his magic can't reach, like through the Barrier, and something about the Ruins just sets his bones on edge. He thinks it has something to do with the dark, purple stones.

Sans sighs, turning his back to the door and leaning against it. He feels nervous, more nervous than he ought to. His head thunks back against the stone and he thinks he hears something shift on the other side. No sense in delaying the inevitable. He knocks twice.

*Knock, knock.*

"Who's there?" The woman's voice is muffled like it always is, but he can hear the smile in her voice. She always sounds happy to hear him, and it helps settle the nervous buzzing in his chest.

"dozen," Sans says, turning his head to the side so his voice will carry through the door easier.

"Dozen who?"

"dozen anybody want to let me in?"

There's a beat of silence, and her laugh sounds a little weak. One of those days then. Probably should have started off with something a little less on the nose.

*Knock, knock.*

"who's there?" Sans asks obediently.

"Cash."

He knows this one. She's told this to him before, in some of the timelines that lasted longer than the others. "cash who?"

"I did not realize you were some kind of nut!" she says, and he can hear her trying not to laugh at the end of her own joke.

He laughs along with her, because her sincerity never fails to make him smile. There was a time — damn it feels like ages ago — that he thought he might have had a crush on her. Just a little one. But as he got to know her better he realized that she was more like a mother. Matronly, in the best kind of way. He still feels a little swell of affection when he talks to her, but it's nothing like what he feels towards you.

What he feels towards you... that's part of the reason he wants to talk to his mysterious friend behind the door. Because if there's anyone he thinks might be able to help him sort out whatever is going on inside his skull, it's her.

There's another beat of silence. It stretches on because Sans can't think of any more good jokes, and he really isn't feeling up to it. She's a great audience, but that's not what he's after right now.

"You seem distracted, my friend," she says, and he can hear something brushing against the door.
He pictures a hand, reaching out towards him but blocked by stone.

"the kiddo started school since the last time i talked to you," Sans says, avoiding her unspoken question. Besides, he knows she wants to hear all about the two of you.

"Oh," she says, and he thinks she sounds a little sad. "So they really are going to stay with you."

"seems like it. hey, if you'd rather not—"

"Oh, no! Do not mind me, I am just feeling a little selfish. I had only hoped to be able to teach them myself."

"you know, if you'd only come out of there..." They've talked about this before, but she's never budged. He's certain she won't now, but he says it anyway.

"Please, I would rather hear about how Frisk is doing at school," she says. Her tone brooks no argument.

"they're doing good. it's only been a few days, but they already knew a bunch of their classmates so friends aren't a problem. and i'm sure you remember how frisk is, so everyone loves 'em."

Sans chuckles to himself, fishing his phone out of his pocket. He'd barely been able to keep the kid still long enough to take that picture for you before they ran off into the school. Frisk was just as excited at the end of the day, too.

"I am glad to hear it. Though, no one knows that Frisk is human?" She sounds worried. He doesn't really blame her.

"nope. not many folks still around that know what they look like, after all. i mean, maybe if it was
the capital we'd be in a bit more trouble, but... so far so good."

"I suppose it has been quite some time since the last time a human was here." She pauses, and Sans can't help but wonder how long she's been in those Ruins. How many humans she's seen fall down. Maybe all of them. "And what about Frisk's sister? How is she?"

He hasn't corrected her. Maybe one day, when her regret at letting you go isn't so fresh he might. "she's good, she..." he trails off, thumbing through the pictures on his phone. He has a few of you, taken when you weren't looking. In the kitchen cooking, or on the couch with Frisk. There's one of you sitting on his bed, head tilted down as you look at your hands against the mattress, smiling. He pauses on that one, then flicks to the next. "she's happy," he says, and he can't keep the tenderness out of his voice.

"Thank you," she says. "Thank you for keeping your promise and protecting them for me when I could not."

"to be honest, i haven't been doing this for you. at least, not anymore. i've been doing it for her... and i guess for me, too." Sans grits his teeth, looking up from his phone to stare out over the snowy path. "i never really mentioned it, but... she and i are sorta... involved. romantically."

"Oh! My friend, I am happy for you! I never took you for the romantic type, but I am glad that I was mistaken," she exclaims, and her enthusiasm gives him a little courage.

Sans thumbs to the next picture. It's his favorite one of you. You're standing outside Grillby's and it's snowing, the snowflakes caught up in your wild brown hair. The orange neon paints across you, making you glow against a backdrop of black and white, the warmest, brightest thing he's ever seen. You're looking up, searching for stars you won't find down here. He wonders if you'll ever
lose that habit, but part of him hopes you don't. You were waiting for him, meeting him for dinner and he caught sight of you before you saw him. He almost missed his chance to take the picture because he was so caught up in just looking at you. Something familiar stirs in his chest. He feels fuller as he looks at you. "lady... have you ever been in love?"

He expects her to hesitate, or maybe not answer at all. He doesn't know that much about her, but for her to want to stay in the Ruins alone... he can't imagine her story is a happy one. But her answer is immediate. "Once. A long time ago," she says, and she doesn't sound sad so much as melancholy.

"how did you know?" He's never felt like this before. Scared, and happy, and like he can never get enough of you. Sometimes he wakes up and just stares, part of him wondering what he ever did to deserve you.

Sans wishes he could see her, to try and pick apart the look on her face as she thinks of what to say. Instead, all he has is silence until she speaks. "Love is different for everyone. For me it was... realizing that every moment we were apart, I was waiting to see him again. I measured time by the days we were together." She laughs softly, and Sans can hear the memories in her voice. "He told me, once, that he used to spend hours picking out the perfect flowers to bring me. Only the most perfect blooms were considered worthy..." A pause. "Forgive me, I know that is not very helpful. But, I think that you must know the answer, if you have thought enough to ask the question."

"but how am i supposed to know for sure? i've never done this before, and it just feels like... so much." Sans's grip on his phone tightens, and he nudges the screen to keep it from turning off. Nervous energy makes him clench and unclench the fist in his pocket. "she's beautiful, and i want to keep her happy, and she makes me happy. and then there's times where i just look at her, and i can't believe that she's real."

Sans realizes he's starting to ramble as he hears the woman on the other side of the door start to laugh. A flush rises to his cheeks as he falls silent, shoving his phone and his hand into his pocket. "My friend, it sounds like you are most certainly in love. Do you agree?"

Closing his eyes, he leans his head back against the door with an audible thunk. He sighs. "yeah. i think you're right, lady. i do love her."

Somewhere in Hotland, inside of a lab, a certain someone lets out an audible gasp followed by a high-pitched squeal.

This is followed by a digitized sigh.

Papyrus is busy rearranging one of his switch puzzles, deep in Snowdin's forest, when he hears a familiar voice.

"Howdy!"

With one final shove at a hunk of ice, Papyrus dusts off his hands and turns towards the speaker with a bright smile. There, in the shade of a tree, is a smiling yellow flower waving a leaf at him. He crosses the distance between them in a few long strides, crouching down and resting his hands on his knees.

"FLOWEY! I'M SO GLAD TO SEE YOU! I WAS GETTING WORRIED THAT IT HAD BEEN SO LONG SINCE YOUR LAST VISIT!" Papyrus says, beaming at his friend.
"Oh gosh, Papyrus! I'm so sorry that I scared you," Flowey says, his smile falling into a sad frown. "I didn't mean to, I hope you can forgive me."

He chuckles. "OF COURSE! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WOULD NEVER HOLD A GRUDGE AGAINST A FRIEND! I'M JUST HAPPY THAT I WAS WORRIED FOR NOTHING."

The flower heaves a sigh of relief, smiling up at the skeleton and giving a little shake of his leaves. "It means a lot that you were thinking about me. You're such a great friend."

Papyrus flushes with pride, clapping a hand to his chest and pushing his shoulders back. "WHY THANK YOU! I AM PRETTY GREAT, AREN'T I?"

"Of course!" he agrees with a laugh of delight. As his laughter fades his expression sober, worry etched into his face. "But Papyrus, I'm a little worried! Are those humans still living with you?"

"YES, THEY ARE. BUT FLOWEY, YOU DON'T NEED TO CONCERN YOURSELF! THE HUMANS ARE VERY NICE. IN FACT, MY BROTHER IS ACTUALLY DATING THE OLDER ONE. I HAVEN'T SEEN HIM SO HAPPY IN A LONG TIME." Papyus reaches out and gives the flower a reassuring pat. He doesn't seem to notice the grimace that flickers over his features.

"But what if Undyne finds out? Isn't she going to be disappointed?"

"OH, UNDYNE ALREADY KNOWS! AND, WELL, SHE WAS A BIT UPSET AT FIRST, BUT NOW SHE'S STAYING AT THE HOUSE WITH US TOO! SHE AND THE HUMANS ARE FRIENDS NOW!"

"Wow, that's great, Papyrus!" Flowey says, his smile seeming a little forced. "So does that mean that Undyne let you into the Royal Guard? I mean, she must have, since you found those humans!"

Papyrus's smile fades a little and he stands up, reaching up to adjust his trailing, red scarf. "NOT YET, BUT I'M CERTAIN SHE WILL WHEN I'M READY! THESE THINGS TAKE TIME."

Flowey gives the skeleton an indulgent look, swaying back and forth where he's rooted to the ground. "Maybe, but... you did fail to capture the humans, like she wanted you to." The flower sighs, a little crease forming between his eyes. After a moment, he gasps. "Oh! But what if you went straight to Asgore with the humans? I'm sure he'd let you into the Royal Guard if you went right to the king!"

"THAT'S A GOOD IDEA, FLOWEY, BUT I CAN'T DO THAT! THEY'RE MY FRIENDS, AND I DON'T WANT TO SEE THEM GO." He paces a little back and forth, shaking his head. "THERE ARE... MORE IMPORTANT THINGS THAN GETTING INTO THE ROYAL GUARD. AND I'M SURE THAT UNDYNE KNOWS WHAT'S BEST."

With a noncommittal sound, Flowey gives a shrug with his leaves. "If you think so."

"I KNOW SO! I HAVE FAITH IN UNDYNE, SHE'S BEEN TRAINING ME AFTER ALL!"

Papyrus is grinning again, resting his hands on his hips. "BUT YOU'RE A WONDERFUL FRIEND, FLOWEY, FOR TRYING TO HELP!"

"Of course, Papyrus. You know me, I just want to see you do well," Flowey says. There's a pause, and the flower lets out a small gasp. "Oh gosh, but what about that friend of Undyne's you told me about! If Undyne is staying with you guys, have they been able to see each other?"

Papyrus looks a little puzzled at the sudden change in topic, but takes it in stride. "OH, YOU
MEAN DOCTOR ALPHYS? UH, I DON'T THINK SO. WOWIE, NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT, THAT SURE IS BAD. UNDYNE IS SUCH A GOOD FRIEND THAT SHE MUST HAVE BEEN TOO WORRIED TO IMPOSE ON US BY INVITING HER OVER! I'LL HAVE TO TELL HER THAT IT'S OKAY!"

"Maybe she could even bring that friend of hers, the robot! I'm sure they'd all get along great!" the flower says, swaying excitedly. "You have such a great group of friends, I bet they'd all love to meet!"

A tiny, orange-tinted blush spreads across Papyrus's cheekbones as he wrings his hands. "OH, YOU MEAN METTATON? WELL, MAYBE, I SUPPOSE... SHE DID MAKE HIM AFTER ALL, SO I'M SURE THEY'RE CLOSE. BUT, UH, I KNOW THAT UNDYNE DOESN'T LIKE HIM VERY MUCH..."

"But wouldn't the humans be so excited to meet him? A real live robot! It doesn't hurt to ask."

Papyrus brightens. "YES, THAT'S TRUE! YOU HAVE A VERY GOOD POINT! I'LL DO MY BEST, FLOWEY, TO BRING ALL MY FRIENDS AND MY FRIENDS' FRIENDS TOGETHER!"
Alphys

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Undyne informs you that a friend of hers named Alphys is going to be coming over this weekend, specifically when everyone will be home from work and school. Papyrus enlists your help to get the house spotless for her visit. There isn't much to do, because between the two of you the house stays generally tidy, but you of course agree to help. You're not sure why but he seems a little nervous.

Sans seems unaffected by the news, though you think his eyes narrow just a little at the mention of someone named Mettaton. Actually, now that you think about it, that name does sound familiar. Then, you realize that Papyrus is talking about that robot from his favorite television shows. He's quick to inform you that Doctor Alphys is the one who created Mettaton, and that he might come with her on her visit. You hope that he does, just because Papyrus seems so excited about it.

So for the next two days, whenever Papyrus is home, you spend your time cleaning and re-cleaning every possible surface in the brothers' home. His boundless enthusiasm turns to nervous energy, and the day before Alphys's visit you find Frisk sleeping on the couch with Undyne. Apparently Papyrus wouldn't stop tossing and turning in his sleep.

Not wanting to clean the kitchen for the fourth time in two days, when Papyrus corners you near the sink, wringing his hands, you cut him off before he can start speaking. "I was just about to go clean Sans's room! You said you wished he would keep it cleaner, right?"

Papyrus stares at you, blinking owlishly before nodding. "OH, OF COURSE! I DOUBT ANYONE WILL ACTUALLY SEE HIS ROOM, BECAUSE HE DOESN'T REALLY LIKE PEOPLE GOING IN THERE... BUT IF YOU CAN DO IT, THEN PLEASE!"

You try not to sound too relieved as you skirt around him to flee the kitchen. Sans's room can definitely use a bit of cleaning, though from the way Papyrus talks about it sometimes, you'd think it was a warzone. But, you've lived with the brothers for over a month. You learned early on that Papyrus is a stickler for cleanliness. You admit, the idea of cleaning the room that you now share with Sans is something you've been tossing around for a while. You fetch the laundry basket from the closet where the washer and dryer are hidden and enter the bedroom.

First order of business is the pile of laundry (clothes and an inordinate number of unmatched socks). You shove it all into the basket and get it started in the washing machine. The two of you don't make enough laundry to bother separating out colors and whites, so you just wash it all on cold. As you head back towards the bedroom with the basket, Sans catches you in the hallway. He's in your way, leaning against the wall with his hands shoved in his pockets. He raises a brow at you. "you know, you don't have to do all this just because of my bro."

"I do," you say, resting the empty basket against your hip. "Unless I want to scrub the stovetop for the fifth time." Pursing your lips, you glance down into the living room. It's empty. You look back at Sans and lower your voice to just above a whisper. "Is he always like this with company?"

"nope. just mettaton," Sans says, his mouth twitching. He turns and leads the way into the bedroom, knowing you'll follow. "you know. you can always just pretend you're cleaning in here. i'm sure pap won't come check." He circles around you and closes the bedroom door, waggling his
brows at you and winking.

Blushing, you let out a flustered laugh. "Sans, really. You're impossible."

"I'm completely possible. C'mon babe, you've been working yourself to the bone." He comes up to you and tugs the laundry basket out of your hands, setting it down on the treadmill. His grin turns sly, reaching out to take hold of your hips. You let him pull you close. "Wouldn't you rather I take care of you with mine?"

You snort, dissolving into a fit of giggles until he tucks his head into the crook of your neck and you feel teeth against your skin. Sighing, you lean against him. "I do want to wash the sheets. I guess it would make more sense to get them dirtier before I wash them."

"Exactly," he murmurs against your neck.

The first load in the washing machine is done by the time you get around to stripping the bed.

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Sans's grip on you is a bit tighter than normal as the two of you sit on the couch, waiting for Alphys (and Mettaton?) to show up. Papyrus tries to sit next to you but stands back up, pacing over to give the pet rock near the door a long, serious look before sitting back down again. Undyne is seated on the stairs, leg bouncing anxiously as she fiddles with her phone. Between the two of them, you start to feel nervous yourself. You can't help it.

Frisk is sitting on the floor with their back pressed against your shins, playing a game on your phone. "Are they gonna be here soon?" Frisk asks, vocalizing the thought that seems to be in everyone's mind.

Everyone jumps—even Sans— when a hurried knock at the door interrupts your answer. Undyne and Papyrus both leap up from their seats and rush to answer it, running into each other as they have a silent, hurried fight. The fish monster manages to shove herself past the skeleton and fling open the door. Sans follows you as you pull yourself to your feet and help Frisk stand. His hand never leaves your back.

"ALPHYS! You made it!" Undyne says, backing up into Papyrus as she tries to make room to let her friend into the house.

After another confused scuffle in the entryway, there's finally enough space for a short, lumpy figure to make their way inside. She's wrapped up in a huge coat with a long lizard-patterned scarf wrapped around her head. The only visible part of her face is a pair of wide, bespectacled eyes.

"OH, I THOUGHT METTATON WAS COMING WITH YOU," Papyrus says, unable to disguise his disappointment.

Undyne is busy helping Alphys unwind her scarf, gradually revealing a yellow reptilian monster (something between a lizard and a dinosaur) just a smidge taller than Sans. She's looking up at Undyne, face flushed and sweating.

"M-M-Mettaton was busy today, so he c-couldn't make it," Alphys stutters out in a nasally voice, adjusting her glasses and looking at Papyrus as though grateful for the distraction. "I h-hope that's okay!"

You think you feel Sans relax a little bit at your side, but you aren't sure why.

"Of course it's okay! YOU'RE the one I invited," Undyne blurts out, giving Papyrus a sharp look.
She helps Alphys out of her thick winter coat, oblivious to the way the doctor starts trying to babble a thank you as she hangs up her coat and scarf for her. She has a polka dot sweater on underneath.

You give Alphys what you hope is a reassuring smile as she looks at you, but it probably comes off more nervous than anything. Just watching the two monsters try to interact with each other makes you want to wince.

"H-hello!" Alphys says, trying her best to smile back at you.

"OH!" Undyne blurts out, circling around Alphys and gripping her tightly by the shoulders, pushing her towards the three of you. "This is the human I was telling you about, the one dating Sans! And her kid, Frisk!"

"Hi!" Frisk says, giving Alphys an energetic wave.

She raises a small clawed hand and gives a weak wave in response, her smile widening a little. When she looks at you again you raise your hand as well. Normally you'd offer to shake her hand, but she seems so nervous and jittery that you think it might be better to not make her any more uncomfortable.

Sans just nods. "hey alphys," he says casually.

"H-hi Sans," she says, looking between the two of you and the way that he's pressed in close to your side. She clasps her stubby fingers together and shifts on her feet, expression brightening. "I-I hope you're doing o-okay!"

He shrugs, looking away. "sure. what can i say, i got no bones to pick."

"UGH," Papyrus groans.

"Oh, do you two know each other?" you ask, giving Sans a confused look. He never really said anything to you about Alphys.

"one of my stations is by the lab," Sans says. "we bump into each other sometimes."

"Y-yeah!"

You're about to ask about Hotland (you've only heard about it in passing) when Undyne interrupts. "I'm really glad you came, Alphys! I know you don't like the cold, but that sweater is cute on you!" Undyne releases Alphys's shoulders and leans over a bit as she talks to her. The doctor gets noticeably redder and sweatier the closer Undyne gets.

"I-it's okay! I d-don't mind so much... I mean! It would be w-worse for you to c-come to Hotland!" Alphys stutters.

Sans tugs the back of your shirt and flops back down onto the couch with a shrug. With a last glance at Undyne and Alphys (they're wrapped up in small talk, Undyne speaking with intensity as Alphys fights to maintain some semblance of composure) you take a seat next to him. He threads his fingers between yours and you nudge him with your shoulder.

"It's a little painful to watch," you mutter under your breath, Sans huffing a laugh in response.

"even papyrus knows, you'd think one of them could pick up on it," Sans says, shaking his head. "but what can ya do?"
As you watch, Frisk walks up to the two female monsters and inserts themselves in their conversation, getting Undyne to give Alphys a little bit of space with just their presence. Looking a little relieved, Alphys smiles at Frisk and starts talking to them. You think you hear her mention anime.

With introductions out of the way, everyone seems to relax a bit. Papyrus pulls the chairs out of the kitchen so there's more room to sit and passes out the lunch that you prepared earlier. Sans doesn't have much to say except to interject well-timed jokes that make Papyrus and Undyne groan. Much to your surprise, Alphys actually finishes one of his punchlines for him. After a startled pause, Sans and Undyne start laughing (even though Undyne hadn't laughed at any of Sans's other jokes) and Alphys flushes with pleasure.

You like Alphys. She's nervous and a little jittery, but once she gets started on a topic she's passionate about it's hard to stop her. At one point she starts talking to Frisk about a show she must love, and it takes her a few minutes to realize she's been rambling nonstop without even a single stutter. Undyne just watches, enraptured as she talks. You have no idea how Alphys doesn't notice the way Undyne looks at her. It reminds you of the way Sans looks at you when you catch him staring.

You think you catch Alphys watching you and Sans a few times. Whenever your eyes meet she just gives you a nervous smile, looking from you to Sans, and then away. As you rise to your feet to take your plates to the kitchen, you think you hear Alphys let out a happy squeak as Sans's hand lingers on your back until you walk away. Glancing back at the sound, you catch Sans blushing a little as Alphys covers her mouth with her hands.

When you get back to settle in on the couch again, Sans has the barest hint of a frown on his face. Following his line of sight, you see Alphys typing up something on her phone as it buzzes in her hands. She looks nervous.

"Everything okay?" Undyne asks, frowning at the phone.

"O-oh, yeah! E-everything is fine!" Alphys blurts out, jumping a little in her seat and shoving her phone in her pocket. You can still hear it buzzing.

"you sure?" Sans asks.

Undyne leans forward in her seat. "Who's blowing up your phone?"

"I-it's nothing!"

"Is someone bothering you, Alphys?"

"N-no, really U-Undyne it's fine," Alphys says, but she doesn't look fine. Her hands fidget in her lap and sweat is gathering on her forehead.

"Cuz I'll beat them up if someone's hassling you!" Undyne grimaces, flashing pointed teeth and flexing her arms.

Alphys opens her mouth to answer when there's a loud, insistent knock at the door. You look at Sans, Sans looks at you, and you both look at the others. Undyne and Papyrus both look as confused as you feel, but it's Alphys that has the most visceral reaction. Her eyes are wide and her hands are clutched tightly in her lap, staring at the door.

As Papyrus gets up to answer it, Alphys lets out a startled sound. "W-wait!" she says, but he doesn't listen.
The moment the door opens, a familiar rectangular robot rolls his way into the room. Papyrus's jaw drops open as the red and yellow squares of his front display blink into the shape of an 'M' and a pair of comically large hands wave enthusiastically at the room. Sans is on his feet in a rush, angling himself between you and Mettaton. You stand up and take hold of his hand, confused.

"Alphys, Alphys, Alphys!" Mettaton says. His voice is friendly and charismatic, overlaid with a robotic distortion. His long arms curve to rest his fists on the sides of his body, as if he had hips.

"M-M-Mettaton!" Alphys squeaks, looking guilty. "I-I thought you were b-busy with the show t-today!"

"And miss out on meeting these two marvelous humans?" Mettaton's display blinks a few times before settling back into the 'M' pattern. "Darling, you know I couldn't bear to miss an opportunity like this!"

Chapter End Notes

Thirty chapters, holy cow you guys. Huge thanks to everyone I'm so happy you guys have been with me on this awesome ride so far! <333

Another shameless plug for my Tumblr here, I love answering asks and interacting with you guys, I also have fanart for the story there!

onadacora.tumblr.com
"Alphys, darling, you of all people should know how much I admire humans. I'd kill for the chance to meet one." Mettaton waves a hand in your direction and Sans's hand tightens on yours. "Thankfully it looks like I won't have to!"

"R-right, of course!" Alphys says, giving a nervous laugh. She wipes the sleeve of her lab coat across her forehead. "I j-just thought you'd be b-busy today, is all..."

"Plans can always be rearranged," Mettaton says, laughing.

"WELL I'M GLAD YOU COULD MAKE IT, METTATON!" Papyrus's voice sounds a little higher than normal, and he hasn't managed to move from his spot by the door. He seems to realize it after a moment, because he quickly shuts the door and comes to stand with the rest of the group. "WOWIE, IT SURE IS NICE TO SEE YOU AGAIN!!"

Mettaton tilts his body just enough to give what you can only describe as a glance at Papyrus, though he doesn't have any eyes. You figure he must have some way of seeing, maybe it has to do with his blinking display. Said display flashes a boxy exclamation point for a second before setting back to alternating red and yellow.

"Oh, Papyrus, isn't it? It's always a pleasure to see such an enthusiastic fan!" the robot's words are kind and gracious, but his attention seems to be set on you and Frisk. You feel a little bad for Papyrus.

But Papyrus doesn't even seem to notice the way Mettaton dismisses him. The skeleton's grin is so wide and he presses his gloved hands to the sides of his face. A set of sparkles hover around his eyes. You're glad that Papyrus isn't upset, but it seems a little unfair.

"HE REMEMBERED MY NAME!"

Undyne rolls her eyes, giving Mettaton an annoyed look. "Of course he remembers your name. It's not like he has that many fans."

Mettaton's screen goes dark, flashes red, and then turns all yellow. There's a moment of silence as the robot refuses to acknowledge Undyne's comment. Alphys clears her throat, eyes darting between her two friends.

Frisk slides off their chair, walking up to Mettaton and holding out their hand. Sans makes an abortive gesture, like he wants to reach out and pull them back. What is it about Mettaton that has Sans so nervous? You give him a scrutinizing look, but his attention doesn't waver from the robot.

"Hello! It's nice to meet you," Frisk says politely, arm outstretched. "I'm Frisk."

"Oh! Why hello there, darling, aren't you precious!" Mettaton exclaims, wrapping an oversized hand around Frisk's tiny one. They share a vigorous handshake that makes Frisk laugh, grinning brightly.

You think you feel Sans relax by a fraction as he settles back, no longer looking like he wants to dart forward. Even though Sans has his normal grin on his face, you can see the tension still there
in his mouth.

"I'm a fan too! We watch you on TV all the time," Frisk tells him.

"I always knew humans had good taste," he says with a short, robotic laugh.

While Frisk and Mettaton talk, Undyne leans in close to Alphys and says something you can't make out. Whatever it is makes the doctor jump and flush bright red, mumbling something to Undyne in response. If you didn't know any better you'd think that Undyne said something flirty or provocative, judging from Alphys's reaction. But considering that's just how she responds to Undyne in general, you think that she was just asking if she was okay. Between Undyne and Mettaton, Alphys looks about ready to keel over from sheer anxiety.

You shift a little on your feet, unsure of what to do with yourself. Sans isn't helping, standing there in silence at your side, unmoving. You're caught between being sensitive to his clearly negative reaction to Mettaton, and Frisk's cheery excitement. But either way, you're starting to feel rude for not introducing yourself. Sans looks at you but doesn't say anything as you free your hand from his, walking up to stand behind Frisk. You rest your hands on their shoulders.

"I'm sorry, I haven't introduced myself," you say, telling him your name. "I'm Frisk's mom."

Mettaton takes your hand from Frisk's shoulder, tugging you to the side like he wants to get a better look at you. If he had eyes you think they'd be looking you up and down, and you can't help but feel a little self-conscious, heat rising to your cheeks.

"Well aren't you stunning!" he says, and you can't help your pleased and embarrassed smile. "I absolutely adore humans, and you darling are just magnificent. I dare say that no one in the Underground can possibly compare, there's just something fascinating about humans."

"Well, I don't—" you begin, stumbling over your words until you're interrupted.

"Not a word to the contrary, darling! I won't hear it. One of these days I hope to get to the surface, but in the meantime I suppose I'll just have to get my fill of you." Somehow Mettaton's voice lowers into something of a purr, punctuated by a low whirring noise somewhere inside his body.

"M-Mettaton!" Alphys squeaks.

"I, well—" you're feeling flattered, but all this attention is getting you flustered.

"I can't believe you're tucked away here in Snowdin of all places! You should be somewhere warm, with people! Let me take you to the capital one day, beautiful, I'll show you a great time..."

Mettaton tugs you a little closer and you stumble a bit, catching yourself on the edge of his rectangular body.

You blink, trying to figure out exactly what just happened as your face feels like it's burning. But you don't have time to think before Sans is at your side again, one arm around your waist to pull you back. You glance at him, startled to see a flicker of blue in his left eye.

"Listen here you overgrown calculator. get your hands off of her or alphys is gonna have to build you a new set of arms," he snaps, and you can feel a hint of static in the air, a crackle of magic.

There's a beat of silence, where no one seems to know what to say. Then, everyone seems to react all at once.

"SANS, THAT WAS VERY RUDE!" "M-Mettaton, maybe you should..." "Hun, I think you're
Over it all, Undyne is roaring with laughter. As you glance back at her, she smacks her knee and brushes the back of her hand over her eye, shaking her head. "That was HILARIOUS! Great one, Sans!"

Alphys is watching Sans, and you think she looks a little scared. She's on her feet and inching towards Mettaton. When you turn back to the skeleton at your side, the blue in his eye and the tingle of magic are gone. His face is broken out in a wide grin and he gives Mettaton a lazy shrug, though the hand resting on your side is still holding on tight. You feel even more lost than before.

"you caught me undyne," Sans says with a chuckle you think sounds a little forced. "sheesh, mettaton, lighten up! stick around here and you'll be sure to hear a mettaton more jokes."

"SANS THAT WASN'T VERY FUNNY!" Papyrus grumbles, crossing his arms over his chest. Alphys mumbles something you can't quite hear, and Frisk looks from Mettaton, to Sans, and back to Mettaton with a confused expression. The robot's display flickers a bit, and he sways a little side to side. You hear a quiet grinding sound, then Mettaton reaches out to pat you and Sans on your shoulders.

"I see, I see! Well, darling, you let me know if you ever want a tour of the capital. I spend all my time there," he says, sounding just as cheerful as he had before Sans's threat.

"not enough time, if you ask me," Sans grumbles. He gives you a gentle tug towards the kitchen. "babe, can i talk to you for a minute?"

"Yeah, please," you say flatly, following him away from the others. "I could really use an explanation."

As you pass between Papyrus and Mettaton, you notice Alphys slip over to go speak to the robot, and you think her hands are shaking.

The moment Sans has you away from the others and out of sight, he turns around and takes hold of your hands. His expression is serious as he looks up at you. "don't trust mettaton."

You know he's not joking, but you can't help the incredulous laugh that slips out. "Sans, are you jealous? What was that all about back there?"

He frowns. "this has nothing to do with how i feel, i'm saying that you need to be careful and not trust him."

"So you are jealous."

"babe, are you listening to me?"

"Hun, I am. And I want you to know that I'm not into short, metal, and rectangular." You can't help the smirk that quirks your lips, and you tug on his hands as you lean forward to press a kiss to his mouth. "My type is short, punny, and skeletal."

Sans huffs an exasperated sigh, but he's smiling when you pull away. A hint of blue stains his cheekbones. "promise me you'll be careful."

You still think that he's overreacting, but you don't want to tell him so. Instead you give him a reassuring nod. "Okay, I promise."
"are you just saying that to placate me?"

Yes. "No!"

"i'm serious," he says, narrowing his eye sockets at you. "please, don't let your guard down around him. make sure you keep frisk away from him too."

The mention of Frisk sobers you a bit. Generally Sans isn't one to overreact, so if he's pressing you this much about Mettaton... he must have a reason. You give his hands a squeeze, nodding. "Okay," you say. "I'll be careful. Can you tell me why?"

"i just..." he looks away, shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head. "he's dangerous. i can't trust him not to have an ulterior motive with you."

"Because he's so interested in humans?" That was a little odd, but he didn't come across as threatening.

"yeah, that's one way to put it." Sans turns back to you, looking at your chest. He frees one hand, tapping your sternum. "you read that monster history book, right? and you remember what undyne was after when you first met? more than just asgore might be after your soul, so protect it. i'm a little partial to it staying with the rest of you."

He thinks Mettaton might be after your Soul? The robot isn't nearly as intimidating as Undyne is, and doesn't come off as threatening in the least. But you trust Sans. He's watched out for you and Frisk for almost a month and a half, and you know he cares about you.

You cover his hand, holding it to your chest. "Me too. Besides, I think my Soul is a little spoken for."

Sans's grin widens and affection softens his face. "is that so?" He tilts his head up to nuzzle against your cheek.

You can feel a flush rising to your cheeks as you press in close to him, turning your face to his. "I told you already. I'm yours. So don't feel worried, or jealous."

His thumb strokes your chest, right under your clavicle. "you know i'm yours too, right? cuz, i—"

"SANS? HUMAN? STOP DAWDLING IN THE KITCHEN, METTATON AND DOCTOR ALPHYS ARE GOING TO LEAVE. SANS YOU SHOULD APOLOGIZE FOR BEING RUDE."

Papyrus's shrill voice makes you both jump, startled apart. You share an exasperated look, but you realize that maybe this wasn't the best time to be having a private moment. Sans is a little flushed, fidgeting slightly before shoving his hands in his pockets.

"c'mon, he'll just come get us if we stay in here."

Chapter End Notes

You guys didn't really think Mettaton would try to do anything with an entire room full of people now did you? ;)


"on days like these, kids like you...
"Sh o u l d  b e  b u r n i n g  i n  h e l l."

Frisk's eyes fly open, fear making their skin prickle as they jolt awake. Blood is pounding in their ears as reality sharpens into harsh focus, acutely aware of the dark shadows in Papyrus's room. Uncurling themselves from the tight ball they were in, Frisk tries to slow their frantic breathing. The lanky skeleton next to them is still fast asleep.

Raising a small hand to their chest, Frisk can feel their heart pounding behind their ribs. A ghost of an ache echoes through their nerves, a half-remembered memory of their dream. No, their nightmare. Sitting up, the soft blue glow of a night light greets Frisk, and something about the color makes the skin on their back crawl. They squeeze their eyes shut, hands fist into the blanket covering their legs.

Hollow eye sockets, bones flying at them, huge fangs, golden light...

Frisk's eyes shoot back open and they shake their head. The more they try to scrabble for pieces of the nightmare the more they seem to slip away, until all they can remember is fear and a stabbing pain all over their body. Despite the blankets and oversized pajamas, they feel cold. Frisk shivers and their muscles twitch until they finally give in to the nagging need to be on their feet.

Padding quietly towards the door, Frisk glances back at Papyrus. He's curled up on his side, a pillow crushed between his arms and shoved under his head. The soft creak of hinges goes unnoticed, as does Frisk's absence as they slip out of the room.

The house is dark, but there's just enough light filtering in through the windows for Frisk to see. With a deep breath, they walk down towards Sans's room. You told them that if they ever needed you that they could come get you. And after that nightmare, even though they can't remember it anymore, they need you. Yours was always the room they'd creep to in the middle of the night, even before they knew the truth. That you weren't 'Sissa' but instead, 'Mom'.

But it isn't just your room anymore. You aren't alone, and for some reason the thought of Sans makes them a little nervous. Frisk freezes outside the door, hesitating with their hand outstretched for the knob. Their toes clench and unclench the matted fibers of the carpet's piling.

Skeleton got your tongue?

Frisk flinches, lowering their hand and balling it into a fist.

Afraid you can't trust him? I would be too. But then again, I don't trust anyone. It's safer.

I'm sorry that you still feel like that. I'd hoped you might have changed your mind by now.

Don't be an idiot. You can't change my mind.

I don't believe that.
The voice falls into frustrated silence when Frisk doesn't rise to their bait. Each passing week has left them with less and less to needle Frisk with, and now they go entire days without speaking. A month and a half ago the voice's promises of protection and power were tempting, the fears they latched onto were frightening. But now the voice is more of an annoyance; a niggling in the back of their mind. Almost a familiar companion.

Frisk wonders what it must be like to be trapped inside someone else's mind, with no control. They can only imagine it must be frustrating, and sometimes they feel bad for the voice. But those feelings just make the voice lash out, until it's hard for Frisk to be sorry for them anymore. They learned weeks ago that pity is something the voice hates the most.

Distracted by the discourse going on inside their own head, Frisk doesn't realize that there's movement going on behind Sans's door until it starts to open. They jump, startled, as a hollow-eyed skull peers out into the hall. Sans stutters to a halt, halfway through the door as he catches sight of Frisk. He's pale in the darkness, all white bone and a white shirt, interrupted only by his black shorts. There's a moment where they just stare at each other, unsure of what to say.

"what's up, kiddo? can't sleep?" Sans asks, blinking as the lights in his sockets brighten, trained on Frisk's face.

Frisk isn't sure why, but Sans's presence isn't as comforting as it should be. Standing in the hall with the skeleton peering down at them, they feel a little... anxious. They don't understand this feeling bubbling deep under the surface.

"kiddo?" Sans says, and when he reaches out with his left hand to touch their shoulder, Frisk flinches away. He lowers his arm, his movements a little stiff. Cautious, even.

Tugging on the ends of their sleeves and pressing them to their mouth, Frisk looks off to the side, fidgeting. "...Had a nightmare," they mumble.

The tension seeps out of Sans's body, though Frisk doesn't see it. "do you want me to get your mom? she's still sleeping, but i can—"

The vigorous shaking of Frisk's head cuts him short. Biting their lip, they glance back at him. "Did you have a nightmare too?"

Hesitating, Sans steps fully into the hall and eases the door shut behind him. "not this time," Sans admits, shrugging. After a pause, he gives Frisk a kind smile. "but i think i know something that might help. c'mon, let's go to the kitchen."

Not bothering to wait for a reply, he skirts around them, heading for the stairs. Confused but curious, Frisk follows obediently behind him. They want to ask what he's doing, but as they pass through the living room the sound of Undyne's soft snoring reminds them to be quiet. Soon, Sans is flicking on the stove's overhead light and filling the teakettle from the sink. There's just enough light to see each other clearly without disturbing Undyne.

"sit down, kiddo," Sans murmurs, waving a hand towards the kitchen table. Frisk doesn't flinch at the movement this time. "this'll only take a minute."

Doing as they're told, they sit down with their back to the kitchen's doorway, watching intently as Sans rummages in one of the cupboards. He pulls out a big blue canister and sets it on the counter. Then, with a faint blue glow, the skeleton points his left hand at a pair of mugs on a high shelf and
whisks them down with his magic.

"What are you making?" Frisk asks, tapping their heels together as their legs dangle above the kitchen floor.

"you'll see," Sans says, looking over his shoulder and winking.

He pulls open another cupboard and Frisk hears the rustling of a plastic bag. They try to see around Sans's body to get a peek at what he's doing, but he's keeping the view blocked on purpose. Frisk plunks their elbows down on the table and cups their hands under their chin, watching.

Putting the bag away, Sans turns to face Frisk, leaning back against the counter. Two mugs sit beside him, spoon handles poking up out of them. One mug has the words "WORLD'S GREATEST BROTHER" written on it in familiar, slanted handwriting. The other has a slightly worn-off image of an orange cartoon cat biting into a broken, yellow smiley face. Written in bold letters, it says "Have A Nice Day".

"How come you couldn't sleep if you didn't have a nightmare?" Frisk asks, giving Sans a curious look.

Sans raises a brow, like he wasn't expecting the question. "that's uh... that's a lot more complicated than you think, kiddo."

"Does Mom know?" They fidget, dropping their hands to the table and picking at their nails, looking down.

"she knows more than most."

"Does it help?"

Sans lets out a soft chuckle, shaking his head. Not in disagreement, but like he can't believe what he's being asked. "yeah, it does, frisk. having someone who understands me, at least a little bit. it helps."

Frisk looks up, peering through a curtain of heavy bangs. They bite their lip. "Then wouldn't it help more if you told more people?"

Blinking, Sans almost doesn't notice as the kettle starts pluming steam. He turns and yanks it off the stove before it starts to whistle. With his back to Frisk, he pours boiling water into the mugs and the clinking of metal against ceramic fills the silence. Then, carefully, Sans picks up the mugs and brings them to the table, setting the one with the cat in front of Frisk.

They don't press Sans for an answer, taking the warm mug between their hands with a bright smile. There's a thick layer of melting marshmallows on top and the sweet smell of sugar and chocolate wafts up. The skeleton takes the a seat at an angle to Frisk, rolling his own drink between his hands and grinning.

"hot chocolate is the best remedy for nightmares," Sans says, leaning back in his chair. "i used to make it for papyrus all the time when we were kids. always cheered him right up."

Frisk doesn't say anything. They just watch Sans through the thin curls of steam from their mugs, waiting for him to continue.

Sans seems to realize this, so he sighs and shrugs his shoulders. "i don't really remember too much about our childhoods, but i think he was getting bullied at school. something about our..." he
frowns, trying to remember, but he gives up with a sigh. He shakes his head. "I dunno. Doesn't matter. Anyway, he used to get real upset, worried he'd never make any friends. Got himself so worked up he'd have these awful nightmares. So I'd take him downstairs in the middle of the night, just the two of us, and I'd make him hot chocolate and just sit with him until he told me what was wrong."

Frisk looks down at their mug and breaks the layer of marshmallows with their spoon, then picks it up and takes a sip. It's rich and sweet, still a little too hot but they don't care. They take another drink anyway.

Sans chuckles, pointing a finger at Frisk's mouth. "I mustache you a question kiddo. Do you know you've got a bit of marshstache goin' on?"

Giggling, they lick away the sticky, melted marshmallows caught on their upper lip. Sans gives them an exaggerated wink and raises his own drink to his mouth, carefully pouring since it's hard to sip with no lips. As he sets the mug back down Frisk's giggles get louder, covering their mouth with a sleeve-covered hand. He's got marshmallows stuck to his teeth. Frisk points.

"Huh? Have I got something, too?" Sans asks, eyes widening. Grabbing a napkin, he dabs at the corner of his mouth. "Did I get it?"

Frisk shakes their head, pointing again. "Right there!"

He wipes the wrong place again. "Here?"

"Noooh!" Frisk squeals, thankfully muffled by their hand. They realize their mistake, looking abashed as they glance towards the living room. When they look back at Sans the marshmallows on his teeth are gone.

Still smiling and feeling a lot better, Frisk sucks in a mouthful of melted marshmallow off the top of their mug and then washes it down with a gulp of cocoa.

"You know you can talk to me, kiddo. Do you wanna tell me what's eating you?" Sans is watching them, and Frisk can almost feel the way those pinpricks of white light are studying their face. He looks concerned.

Frisk ducks behind their mug, taking a long, slow sip.

**You know he doesn't actually care about you? He only cares about her. He knows that being nice to you will make her happy.**

That's not true.

**Are you sure about that? Really sure?**

I can tell when you're just trying to be mean. You don't believe it either.

Petulant silence fills Frisk's mind.

Can they tell Sans the truth? Would he believe them if they told him about the voice that they've heard since falling into the Underground? Magic and monsters is one thing, but hearing voices? Frisk thinks the truth would just make everyone worry, and they know that Sans would tell you.

"Kiddo, you can trust me," Sans presses gently. "Everyone here: me, your mom, Papyrus, Undyne... we all care about you."
Frisk doesn't even need to hear the voice in their head to know what they'd say. They can feel them listening, digging into the doubt in their mind.

Eyes dropping to the mug clutched tight in their hands, Frisk can't do it. "I know. But it's no big deal. I can't even remember the nightmare anymore."

Sans lets out a small, disappointed sigh and Frisk feels guilt twist their insides. They wonder if Sans can tell that they're hiding something. "don't worry about it. did the hot chocolate help at least?"

When they look up, Sans is smiling like nothing's wrong. Relief floods through Frisk, and they smile back. "Yeah, a lot! Thanks, Sans."

He nods, winking. "any time kiddo. glad you're feeling better. do you—" Sans looks away towards the living room, his expression brightening. "hey babe, we were just... is everything okay?"

Frisk pivots in their chair and sees you standing in the doorway, an unreadable expression on your face. Your arms are crossed over your chest, hugging yourself, as you look in at Sans and Frisk. You bite your lip, and Frisk thinks you look a little upset.

"Oh," you mumble, giving Sans a weak smile. "I just wanted to check on you, hun. I didn't expect to see Frisk down here with you." Your eyes shift to Frisk. "Is everything okay, sweetie? What are you two doing up so late?"

"kiddo had a nightmare and i happened to catch them in the hall when i got up," Sans tells you, but your gaze never leaves Frisk. They start to feel a little nervous, but they aren't sure why.

"Why didn't you come get me? Are you okay?" you ask, coming into the kitchen and crouching beside Frisks's chair. Reaching up, you brush their bangs from their face and stroke their cheek.

Frisk nods, glancing over at Sans. He's just watching the two of you. "You were sleeping, and Sans helped. He made me hot chocolate!" They smile at you, wishing that you would smile back. You don't.

You look over at Sans, something silent passing between the two of you that Frisk doesn't understand. They're not sure that Sans understands either, judging by the puzzled look on his face.

"Well," you say, looking back at Frisk. "If you're feeling better then why don't you try to get some more sleep? Do you wanna come back and sleep with me?"

Frisk nods at you, and is relieved at the smile that finally softens your face. They throw their arms around your shoulders and you pull them into your arms, standing and picking them up. You let out a soft sigh.

"Are you coming back to bed?" you ask Sans.

There's a pause, then the soft scrape of the chair against tile. "sure, if you want me to," he says.

Frisk feels your arms tense as you hold them. They hug you tighter, unsure why everything feels so uncomfortable.

"Of course I do. I just... Sorry, let's just all go to bed."
As always, check out my tumblr for updates, questions, and fanart!
onadacora.tumblr.com
You wake up shivering. It takes you a moment to realize that it's because Frisk has the blankets wrapped around themselves, leaving you bare. Gray light filters in through the window, the dim color of morning in Snowdin. No soft orange sunrises here.

Frisk is laying at an angle, their backside pressed into your ribs. You realize that if you tried to roll over you'd fall off the bed. Sans's arm is under Frisk, and you feel him holding your hand. The three of you fell asleep like this, with Frisk wedged between you and snuggled up to your side. Sometime between now and then, they rolled over to Sans instead.

Jealousy coils in your stomach, twisting your insides. You hate it, you know you shouldn't feel this way but... Lately it feels like everyone has been taking more and more of Frisk away from you. Part of you knows that they're just trying to help, that they care about Frisk too, but the more they help, the less needed you feel.

Sometimes it feels like no matter how hard you try, it's just not good enough.

Laying there sulking isn't going to do you or anyone else any good. Carefully rolling off the bed, you decide to borrow Sans's jacket and slippers to help warm yourself up. With a quick glance at your phone, you realize it's almost time for Frisk to get up for school. You lean over the bed, brushing hair out of their face as you coax them awake.

With a soft groan, Frisk blinks up at you, rolling away from Sans and onto their back.

"C'mon sweetie, time to get up," you whisper. "I'll make you breakfast."

Nodding and rubbing their eyes, Frisk lets you help them out of bed. Sans rolls over onto his chest with a sleepy grumble, burying his face in his pillow. Hesitating, you decide to leave him be. He doesn't have work today, and with him getting up in the middle of the night, you know he can use the extra sleep.

Besides, right now you could use this extra time with Frisk.

But, it seems it's just not meant to be. Papyrus is already awake, busy making breakfast. Even Undyne is up, sitting at the table bleary-eyed and drinking tea, already dressed. The two of them look at you as you walk into the kitchen, and thankfully Papyrus doesn't seem to notice the way you grit your teeth.

"OH, GOOD MORNING! I SUSPECTED FRISK WAS WITH YOU LAST NIGHT, I'M GLAD TO SEE I WASN'T WRONG!" Papyrus says, smiling and waving with the spoon in his hand.

"I hope we didn't worry you, Papyrus," you say, nudging Frisk towards the table as you start to prepare yourself some coffee.

"NOT AT ALL! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, HAD NO DOUBTS THAT FRISK WAS JUST FINE."

"Oh, is that why you woke me up as soon as you got out of bed, demanding to know if I knew where Frisk was?" Undyne grumbles into her tea, yellow eye narrowing at the skeleton.

Papyrus turns his back to the kitchen, staring down at the pot of oatmeal as nervous sweat beads on the side of his skull. "I-I MAY HAVE BEEN A LITTLE CONCERNED," he admits with a small
Breakfast is a little livelier than normal with the four of you sitting at the table together. Papyrus and Undyne command most of Frisk's attention, and once again you start to feel the pangs of jealousy. You tamp them down, instead focusing on your food. You're forgotten once again as Frisk runs back up the stairs when they're done eating to go change their clothes.

Fine. As Papyrus leaves for the morning (he gives you a big hug before he heads out, which makes you feel a little better) you decide to go ahead and make Frisk's lunch. But when you open the fridge, you see there's already a paper bag put together and waiting.

"You've got to be kidding me," you mutter under your breath. "Of course this is already done. Why do I bother?"

"Having trouble finding something?" Undyne says, draining the last dregs of her tea and slamming the mug down on the table. The sound makes you flinch.

"Oh, uh, no... I just thought I'd..." You let out a short sigh. "Frisk's lunch is already made. I was going to do it."

"Papyrus made it this morning before you got up. Doesn't he usually do that?" she asks, raising an eyebrow at you.

She's right, he normally does. You shouldn't be so surprised. Ever since he started picking up on your way of cooking, he's been trying to help out more and more.

The sound of feet tromping down the stairs signals Frisk's return to the kitchen. They run up to your side and as you stand there with the fridge still open, reaching around you to grab their lunchbag. They give you a quick hug, then turn to Undyne with a grin.

"Ready to go, squirt?" she asks, pushing away from the table.

"Yeah!" Frisk looks over their shoulder and gives you a small wave. "Bye Mom!"

"I love you!" you blurt out, taking a step forward but they're already headed for the door. Your hands ball into fists at your sides as Undyne follows them.

"Love you too," they call back.

Undyne looks back at you as she takes hold of the door after Frisk opens it. "See ya later," she says.

The most you can manage is a friendly nod.

You're soaking in the small tub in the bathroom, wallowing in hot water and your own self-pity. You wish you could shake this nagging feeling, but it just won't leave. Frisk has known that you're their mother for a little over a month now, but lately it hasn't really felt like it. At the same time that they accepted you as their mom, they were also adjusting to living with Sans and Papyrus, and then Undyne shortly after. It feels like you're all getting lumped together into this parental unit. You feel like a fragment, instead of being whole yourself.

But it makes you feel guilty and petty for reacting that way. Which only makes you feel worse.

With a sigh you tip your head back into the water, letting the warmth seep into your scalp. You
almost miss the muffled sound of a knock at the door with your ears submerged. You sit up and pull back the opaque curtain so you can see the steam-filled bathroom.

"babe?" You can hear San's voice.

"Come in!" you call out.

Sans peeks inside before the rest of him follows, shutting the door behind him. He seems relieved at the sight of you, giving you a weak smile. The lights in his eyes are dim, making them seem more hollow than normal.

"Hun are you okay?" you ask him, sitting up a little straighter and pushing the curtain open a bit more.

He goes to shove his hands in his pockets but he doesn't have any. Instead he grabs at his ratty black t-shirt, glancing at the fogged mirror and then back at you. "it's nothing. just..." he sighs, running a hand over his face. You can hear the scrape of bone against bone. "i'm used to you being there when i wake up."

"Oh," you say, a little confused. You're also a little happy that your absence was so noticed, but you're not glad for the way he seems so shaken. "I just got up to see Frisk off to school. And I wanted to let you sleep."

You reach out a hand towards him, beckoning him forward. Water drips off your arm and down onto the tile floor. He hesitates for a moment, but Sans comes and sits down on the covered toilet next to the tub. You thread your fingers in his, and he leans down to nuzzle your temple.

"i know. i just wanted to check on you. makes me feel better." You hear—and feel—him give a low chuckle after a pause. "and i can't say i mind the view."

Laughing, you give him a playful shove away from you. "You're getting a little off track—"

"what can i say? you're distractting."

"Sans. Are you doing okay?" you ask him, trying your hardest to fight the smile off your face. You can't let his puns make you laugh.

"i'll be fine. just a rough start to the morning is all," he says, shrugging. His smile lessens just a little.

"I'm sorry," you say, squeezing his hand.

"don't be. i'm fine, really."

Sans is a little withdrawn for the rest of the day, so the two of you spend most of it on the couch. You try to see if maybe he wants to go to Grillby's for lunch, just to get him outside, but he plays the flattery card and says he'd rather have one of your sandwiches. And how can you say no to that? At least Sans seems to need you.

You think that maybe you've gotten over this petty jealousy. After time alone with Sans you're starting to feel better. But the moment Frisk comes home with Undyne you feel it rush back to the surface. Frisk barely takes the time to give you a hug before tossing their backpack into the corner and rushing out the door again with Undyne to go 'train'.

Sans doesn't seem to notice that there's anything wrong. He's absorbed in some book with a worn
cover you can't quite make out. You think it's a sci-fi novel of some kind. Suddenly frustrated, you get up to go start preparing dinner. Something to keep you busy until you calm yourself down. He doesn't say anything to you as you leave the room.

You wish he'd follow you, check on you to make sure you're okay. Can't he tell that you're upset?

By the time you finish getting dinner prepped and simmering, Frisk and Undyne are back. As you leave the kitchen, the fish monster is on one end of the couch, propped against the armrest. She's staring at her phone, typing in a message. After a second, she scowls and deletes it. Then, after another second, she starts typing again. You think she must be texting Alphys. You wonder, briefly, if things between the two of them are just as awkward as they were last week. Probably, judging by the uncertain look on her face.

Sans and Frisk are napping on the other end of the couch. Frisk has Undyne's pillow in the skeleton's lap and is stretched out across the middle cushion. Their feet are resting against Undyne's leg. You should be happy, seeing the two of them getting along so well, but you're just reminded of last night. Frisk always comes to you when they have a nightmare but... Sans had taken care of them instead. It bothers you, more than it should. That was one of the few things that was explicitly yours, for as long as you can remember. It was something that your mother couldn't take away from you.

You turn and go back into the kitchen to sit by yourself.

Sans finally seems to realize that something's wrong while you're all eating dinner. Once everyone finishes and leaves the kitchen —Papyrus and Frisk head upstairs to play a game, Undyne decides to take a shower— Sans stays behind to help you clean up. The silence between you is thick and uncomfortable for the first few minutes as you pass clean dishes for him to dry.

"you know you can talk to me," he says finally, giving you a tentative glance as he puts away a glass in the cupboard next to you.

You sigh, struggling to find the right words. You want to tell him, to just vent some of your frustration and worries. That's what couples do, right? Talk about things. But your voice feels trapped in your throat, afraid to say anything. You don't know why this is so difficult. Didn't you want him to check on you?

The longer the silence sits between the two of you, the harder it feels to speak. Finally, as you scrub vigorously at the pot clutched tight in your hand, you just force yourself to say something. "I feel like everyone is doing my job for me. As Frisk's mother," you blurt out, anxiety buzzing in your chest.

"Sure, I guess," you say, sighing. "But I just... I keep feeling jealous. Like, I can't even take Frisk to school in the morning because one of you is always out of the house and it's 'on your way' so you might as well do it. And that makes sense, so it seems stupid to complain about it, but..."

"yeah. but you can just take Frisk yourself, you know." His voice is a little dismissive, and you can't help but feel a prickle of agitation.

"That's not what I'm trying to say, Sans," you say, frowning.

"what are you trying to say? we all care about frisk, and you. you don't have to do everything on
your own. we're just trying to help out, babe." He takes the pot that you shove in his direction, giving you an odd look as he starts to dry it.

"I'm just trying to help you, dear. Let me take care of the baby. You should rest." Your mother's voice comes unbidden, drawing up anger from deep inside of you.

"I don't need help! I need to take care of my own child," you snap. Your shoulders hunch as you lean forward over the sink, chest starting to feel tight.

"you are taking care of frisk! you're their mom. no one is ever going to replace you. kids need their moms." He's staring at the dish in his hands, toweling it a bit harsher than necessary. So when your expression shifts as the bottom drops out of your stomach, he doesn't see it.

"Giving birth doesn't make someone a mother. You have to earn that title, and I need the chance to do that!" Yanking your hands out of the sink, you turn to fully face Sans, anger flooding your senses.

"you are babe," he says, thrusting the dishtowel onto the counter and looking at you.

"You just don't get it. I don't want to feel this way, Sans!"

"you're right, i don't get it. and i don't understand why you're getting pissed off at me."

"Because you're acting like it's all no big deal. I thought you'd try to help me feel better!"

"i'm trying!" he snaps, brow furrowing with frustration. "and it's not a big deal. you're making this out to be a lot more than it really is."

"Oh, so now I'm just exaggerating? Why are you being such an ass?" You try to take the words back as they leave you in an angry rush, but it's too late.

Sans's frown twists into a glare. He shoves his fists into the pockets of his jacket, shaking his head and looking away from you. "forget it. you're not listening and i don't have to put up with this. maybe when you take a second to calm the fuck down you'll realize i was just trying to help."

"Sans wait—!" you cry out but it's too late. When you reach for him he blinks just out of your grasp and storms off for the door. He yanks it open and slams it shut behind him, leaving you behind in shocked silence.

You sink back against the counter, a wet hand almost slipping against the smooth surface as you hold yourself up. No, no no no. What have you done? All the anger leeches out of you in seconds, leaving behind an overwhelming sense of fear. You screwed it up. He's furious and it's all your fault. You feel paralyzed, torn between frustration at him and yourself, desperate to go back and apologize. You wish you never said anything at all.

He left you, and you're scared it means he's left you for good.

Sliding down to the floor, you bury your face in your damp hands and start to sob.
Sans is still fuming when he gets to Grillby's. It must be written all over his face because when Dogamy goes to greet him Dogaressa pulls him back and shakes her head. Greater Dog gives a low, resonating whine and his ears droop. Sans pulls himself up onto his normal barstool, waiting for Grillby. He caught sight of the flame monster ducking into the back as he came in, probably to get something for one of the other patrons.

Holding his head in his hands, Sans presses the tips of his phalanges into the back of his skull. What the hell was that all about? You've been acting strange since last night, and he just doesn't get why you're so worked up over nothing. If you'd just take a second to see how ridiculous you're being...

He feels the warmth radiating off of Grillby across the bar. Looking up, Sans drags his hands down his face and folds his arms on top of the counter, sighing. Grillby just stares at him, arching a brow over his glasses and cocking his head to the side. With a refined air, he gestures to the empty barstool beside Sans in silent question.

"yeah it's just me tonight," Sans says. "i could really use a drink."

He hesitates for a moment, but Grillby produces a short tumbler from beneath the counter and fills it halfway with dark amber liquid. He pushes it towards Sans, who gives him a grateful nod before taking a drink. The thick glass makes a solid thunk as the skeleton sets it down none-too-gently.

Grillby is watching him, waiting for him to speak. The bartender has seen enough of Sans's bad days in the past to know what's coming, though with you around it's been a while since the last time it's happened. But he's patient, cleaning a row of glasses with a white cloth. Sans tips more of his drink into his mouth.

"don't look so sternum," Sans says, forcing a grin and an exaggerated wink.

Grillby never was a good audience. He just watches him.

"not feeling so hot tonight, grillby?"

Silence.

"all right, all right, i admit that one's getting a little old," he says, shrugging amiably. "doesn't quite have the right spark."

The glass in Grillby's hand gives a sharp squeaking sound as he dries it. He sets it down a little harder than normal.

"fine. fine. we got in a fight," Sans finally admits, sighing and resting his forehead in one hand. "i mean, who gets upset because people are helping out too much? and when i try to tell her that, she gets mad at me?"

Raising the glass to take another drink, he lets out a startled sound of protest when Grillby takes it away. He dumps it out into the sink and fills it with water instead, plunking it back down in front of Sans. He waits.
"what the hell, grillby?" Sans says, frowning up at him. He can't even feel the alcohol yet. He guesses that's probably the point. "i came here to cool off, not get roasted by you too."

Grillby frowns back, leaning an elbow against the bar.

"so what, this is just the icing on the cake of my crappy day? you cutting me off before i can even feel a buzz?"

The bartender shakes his head.

"she's making something out of nothing. i was trying to help but any time i made a suggestion she just got more annoyed with me. which was pissing me off! how am i supposed to help her if she doesn't want to listen?" Sans grumbles, glaring at his glass of water before picking it up just to have something to do with his hands.

Grillby shakes his head again.

"y'know, this would be easier if you would just tell me what you're thinking." No response. Just a pair of glasses staring blankly at him.

"if she doesn't want us helping with the kid, all she has to do is say so. but that's just it, she knows she's being jealous for no reason," Sans grumbles, drumming his fingers.

"...So you're frustrated with her because she's having an emotional response to what you think should be a logical situation?" Grillby murmurs. His voice is thin and a little rough, like fine sandpaper. Dry, even.

Sans raises a brow at him, a little surprised to hear him speak. Grillby's response is a little too on the head, and Sans shifts uncomfortably on the barstool. "i came here for a sympathetic ear, not for help."

Grillby lets out a breathy huff, stacking the dried glasses and taking them down the bar to put them away.

Frustrated with you and now with his friend, Sans nudges his glass of water absently with his fingers. He just needed some time to cool down, maybe get a little sympathy. What he didn't need was Grillby trying to tell him that he'd screwed up. He knew that already. Knew it the second you started getting mad at him. But he was just so damn frustrated that he couldn't stop himself. What were you even mad about? It didn't seem like it had anything to do with Frisk by the time he finally gave up.

Why wouldn't Grillby just let him vent instead of...

Oh. "oh my god i'm such an ass," he says.

Grillby turns back to Sans and has an expression on his face that seems vaguely smug. Which is a feat in of itself with no mouth.

Sans drops his forehead to the counter with a hollow sound, holding his skull in his hands. "i told her she could talk to me, and then i didn't fucking listen. i just... wanted to help." He groans. "and then we both just got mad..."

"...Well you aren't going to make anything better by sitting here," Grillby says.
His anger and frustration is gone, replaced by worry. He'd stormed off, leaving you all alone. You tried to stop him and he didn't listen. Thinking of how he'd react if you did the same thing to him, it leaves him with a twisting feeling in his chest and a nervous buzzing in his bones. He wishes he could go back and do today over again.

"i know. just gimme a minute to figure out how the hell i'm gonna apologize," he mutters.

You're in love with Sans.

You have been for a while now, but now you know for certain. It's why this all hurts so much. It's why you're so scared that now it's all over. Because you screwed up and he left, and he has to come back because he lives here but you're not sure he's coming back for you.

It's all your fault. It's always your fault. If only you had been more careful. If only you hadn't said anything. If only...

Your face is wet and your vision is blurry, and you're distantly aware of the sound of the faucet still running. Oh. You're in the middle of doing dishes, that's right. You latch onto that fact like a lifeline, smearing tears across your face with the back of your hand, pushing yourself to your feet. Hands shaking, you snifflie to try and stop your nose from running. You feel a little calmer with a scrub brush in your hand.

No matter what happens, the dishes need to be done. That's your responsibility. You can't screw this up too, on top of everything else.

"...no way! I'm telling you, that last show we watched was—!"

You jump as Undyne walks into the kitchen, talking on her cellphone. She's changed into her pajamas —shorts with little fish on them and an orange tank top— and has her hair wrapped up in a towel. As you meet her eye she stops dead in her tracks. "Alphys I have to go. I'll call you later," she says, hanging up the call.

Turning your head away to hide your face, you try to focus on the dishes but you know it's too late. You catch Undyne setting her phone down out of the corner of your eye as you try to dry off your cheeks with your shoulder.

"What happened? Where's Sans?" she asks, coming up to stand beside you.

You shake your head, your throat feeling tight as more tears make your vision swim. Don't cry. Don't make even more of a scene than you already have. You rinse soap off of a plate and put it in the drying rack.

"Are you okay?" she presses, firmer this time.

Your lip wobbles and you shake your head again. You start to cry, face screwing up as your grip on the scrubber tightens.

"Okay punk, come on, leave this for later," she says. You're shaking and you can't see through your tears, but you feel Undyne's hands gently pry the scrubber from your fingers and rinse the soap from your skin. You hear the water shut off and she hands you the dishtowel. "Where's Sans? Did HE make you cry?"

You can't even answer. Clutching the towel in your hands, you're starting to have trouble breathing. You gasp in air between sobs. Undyne takes hold of your shoulders and guides you over to a
kitchen chair, sitting you down. Through your blurred eyes you can make out the shape of her crouched down in front of you, putting her at eye-level. She's still holding your shoulders with her firm grip, and the presence is comforting. Her thumbs rub small circles against your clavicle until you start to get a hold of yourself.

Rubbing at your eyes to try and clear them and rubbing at your nose with your sleeve —you're such a mess— you meet Undyne's steady gaze. "I'm sorry," you mumble, hiccuping.

She ignores your apology, brow furrowing. "Tell me what happened."

You tell her everything as best you can. How you were worried about things with Frisk, and how you just wanted some reassurance and sympathy from Sans. But instead he treated you like you were overreacting and dismissed your concerns. She listens as you tell her about how you snapped at each other until he finally stormed out of the house, and how scared you are. Her frown deepens, but she doesn't interrupt.

"Undyne you've known him longer than me, did I mess everything up?" you ask, more tears welling up in your eyes. You sniff to try and fight them back. Your head is starting to ache.

Undyne sighs, grimacing. "Look, punk. I'm not good at this kind of stuff. But I have a few things to say so I want you to LISTEN, okay?"

It takes you a second to realize she's waiting for an answer. You give a shaky nod.

"You had one fight. That shit happens. If he's gonna let ONE argument ruin your relationship, it wasn't worth having." She makes an annoyed sound, then sighs as some of the tension leaves her face. "He's not going to let that happen. The whole time I've known Sans he hasn't let anyone else in other than Papyrus. He keeps everyone at a distance, until you. And that means something."

Giving her a tremulous smile, you open your mouth to say something, to thank her, but she narrows her eye at you.

"I'm not done," she snaps, letting go of your shoulders and rising back up to her full height. "If you were worried about us helping out with Frisk you should have said something! No one wants to make you or the squirt unhappy."

"I-I didn't want to make a fuss over it, or upset anyone," you say, clearing your throat.

"You didn't have a problem speaking your mind to me before, what's different now?" She fixes you with a scrutinizing look.

You look away, biting your lip. "We're friends now. I didn't want that to change."

Undyne lets out a short bark of laughter. "You WEENIE, it's BECAUSE we're friends that you should be able to tell me when I'm ticking you off!"

"Oh," you mumble, because you can't think of anything else to say.

"Do you feel any better?" she asks, and as you blink up at her you realize she looks a little worried.

"Yeah. Thank you, Undyne," you say, giving her a watery smile. Oh no, you don't want to cry again.

You both flinch at the sound of the front door opening. Red faced and puffy-eyed from crying, you stand as your heart starts pounding in your chest. Undyne turns towards the living room just as
Sans shuts the door behind him. You catch a glimpse of his downcast expression just before Undyne's back fills your line of sight.

"What the HELL did you think you were doing, running off to Grillby's and leaving her here crying in the kitchen by herself?!" Undyne shouts at him.

"Undyne, wait. Don't!" you protest, following her out into the living room.

She's glaring at Sans, cornering him by the door. He shoves his hands in his pockets and glances over at you, and you see the lights in his eyes dim a little. His mouth tightens.

"well i'm back now, so if you can just—"

You hear the sound of a door opening upstairs. With a quick glance you catch sight of Papyrus and Frisk looking down into the living room. Oh no.

"I ought to kick your ass!" she snaps, her arms tensing as she balls her hands into fists. The muscles seem to pop under her scales.

"undyne, i'm not in the mood to play along with your little game," Sans says, hunching his shoulders and narrowing his eye sockets.

"Don't!" you say again, trying to get her to listen. You reach out to take hold of Undyne's arm and she glances down at you. Something about the sight of you seems to encourage her instead of calm her down, however. She flashes her pointed teeth at Sans.

"YOU should have been the one here to fix what you did!" Undyne jerks her head in your direction.

"you need to stop shouting at me," Sans bites out, his own voice getting louder.

"Then don't give me a reason to shout at you! Don't you realize what you did?!" she takes another step forward, looming over Sans.

"i didn't try to hurt her on purpose!" he yells back, yanking his hand out of his pocket to jab a finger in Undyne's direction. "i love her!"

The room falls into stunned silence, and you feel like someone just knocked the wind out of you.

Chapter End Notes

As always, check out my tumblr! I've been posting drabbles and my husband's comments on each chapter. onadacora.tumblr.com
"Mom? What's going on?"

Frisk's voice pulls you back to your senses, breaking the shocked silence that fills the room. Undyne looks down at you with one wide, yellow eye and then over at Sans. He's cursing to himself, turning towards the wall and ducking his head behind the fluff of his hood. Did he just...?

"What did you say?" you ask him, letting go of Undyne's arm and taking a step closer to him.

Undyne turns on her heel and starts marching for the stairs. "OKAY squirt, how about we all give your mom and Sans some privacy, huh?!"

"undyne, hold on, you don't need to do that," Sans blurts out, and you can see the blue starting to creep across his face. He closes the gap between the two of you, and as your eyes meet you feel unsure again. Did he really mean what he said? Did he just blurt it out to catch Undyne off-guard? "can we go back to our room and talk, please?" he asks you gently, reaching out to take your hand. You let him, and something in your chest gives a pleasant squeeze. 'Our room' he said.

"Mom?" Frisk asks again, worry plain in their voice.

"I..." You and Sans search each other's faces for a brief moment before he releases your hand. "Let me talk to Frisk. Then I'll meet you there, okay?"

He looks relieved. He's not smiling, but his expression relaxes. "of course."

You approach Undyne on your way to the stairs. You're nervous, and don't really know what to expect from your talk with Sans, but you know for a fact that Undyne helped you. Drained from crying and feeling a little numb from the emotional roller coaster of the last hour, you wrap your arms around her middle and give her a hug.

"Thank you for helping me earlier," you tell her. You realize she's a little cool to the touch.

"Really, it's fine," she says. She gives you an awkward pat on the back for a second before succumbing and bending over to wrap her arms around your shoulders. You can't help the surprised laugh that escapes you as she leans back and lifts you off your feet. With a squeeze almost tight enough to hurt, she sets you back down and lets you go. She fixes you with her eye and you're close enough to see her slit pupil narrow as she leans forward. "Don't you let him off easy. Make sure he apologizes."

You smile, glancing down at the floor. Her sudden affection has you feeling a little embarrassed. "Okay," you mumble.

A surprised cry erupts past your lips as she gives you a firm smack on the shoulder. "Now go talk to the squirt!"

As you climb the stairs you notice Sans standing by his —no, your— door, waiting for you. He must have teleported up there while Undyne had your attention. Frisk is standing with Papyrus, staring up at you with wide, concerned eyes.

"Why was Undyne yelling at Sans?" Frisk asks you, reaching out and taking hold of the front of your jeans. Their face scrunches up as they look up at you. "And why do you look like you were crying?"
You pull Frisk to you and stroke their hair as their arms go around your waist, hugging you. "Don't worry about it sweetie. There was an argument, but everything is going to be fine. Sans and I just need to talk. But it might take a while, so I don't know if I'm going to be able to say goodnight later."

"Is everything really going to be fine, or are you just saying that?" they ask, squeezing you tighter and grumbling into the softness of your stomach. "I don't want anything bad to happen!"

"Everything is going to be fine," you echo back to them, and when you look back over at Sans down the hall you can see him watching you. He's fidgeting a little, and he seems nervous. You're not sure if that's a good thing or not.

"Do you promise?"

"I promise."

"...Okay. Because I like it here."

"Me too."

When Frisk finally lets you go, you and Papyrus look at each other. There's a moment where you wonder if he's going to say something to you, and you can't help but think back to the morning that he warned you not to hurt Sans. But your concerns are quickly dashed as the tall skeleton claps his hand on Frisk's shoulder. As he asks them if they would like to return to their game that Undyne's shouts interrupted, you realize he's willingly serving as a distraction. You give him a silent 'thank you' and he nods in return before ushering Frisk back into the bedroom.

Alone in the hallway, you look at Sans. As your eyes meet again he opens the bedroom door and steps inside. You're caught between worry and anticipation, wanting to know if he meant what he said before but afraid to know if he didn't. You only hesitate for a moment. Staying out here in the hallway won't solve anything.

Sans is standing in the middle of the bedroom, waiting when you shut the door behind you. "I'm sorry," he blurts out, and he moves towards you as you rush towards him and you wrap each other up in your arms.

"I'm sorry too, I shouldn't have snapped at you," you say, burying your fingers in the back of his jacket as you tuck your head against his. You feel your throat tighten and tears prick your eyes.

"no, i should have just listened to you. you were upset and i was a jerk about it," he tells you, one hand buried into the thick waves of your hair to hold you close.

"I was just being dumb and insecure."

"no, no you weren't," he says, firmly. He tilts his head towards yours, smooth bone brushing your face. "you've been through so much, and sometimes i forget. that's my fault, not yours. of course you'd worry about that stuff with frisk. i'll talk to undyne and papyrus, we'll figure something out. i just want you to be happy, babe."

"I already talked to Undyne about it, earlier," you say, sniffing. "I just..." You swallow and try to resist the tears again, but you can't. Your voice cracks as you speak and you feel Sans hold you tighter. "P-please don't do that again. I can't... I thought you left!"

"i'm sorry," he says, rubbing small circles between your shoulders. You lean your weight on him as you cry, and he holds you up.
"Be mad at me, be **angry**, but please don't l-leave."

"i won't. if that's what you need, i won't."

"I'm sorry I snapped at you," you say again, because you just want everything to be okay.

"don't be. i screwed up."

"We both screwed up," you concede, sniffling and lifting your head enough so you can try to dry your face on your sleeve. "I... I guess this was going to happen eventually."

Sans pulls away enough so that he can look at you, and as the white lights of his eyes study your face he looks sad. "i hate knowing i made you cry," he says, voice low, and the frustration you hear is directed at himself.

You must be such a mess. Swallowing and sniffing to try and clear your nose, you turn away from him and wipe your face. Pulling yourself from his grip, you walk over to the bed and sit down, dragging your fingers through your hair. Your fingers catch on a tangle and you take a moment to pull it out.

Taking in a deep breath, you clear your throat once you feel a little put back together. Blinking and rubbing your eyes again, you look back up to see him watching you. His expression is solemn. "Are we okay?" you ask. You need to hear him say the words, or you'll keep worrying.

Sans comes to stand in front of you, nudging your knees apart so he can stand between them. He tucks your hair behind your ear as you look up at him, then he leans down to press his mouth to yours. You don't try to kiss much anymore, not in the traditional sense. You litter his face with kisses and he nuzzles you in return, because over the past month and a half you both figured out that unless tongues are involved, 'normal' kissing just doesn't work out. So when he 'kisses' you on the lips this time it feels significant. Like he's trying to show you something.

"of course we're okay," he says, pulling back just enough so that he can look you in the eyes. He cups your face in his hands and rubs a thumb along your cheekbone. The warmth of his bones is familiar and soothing. "i... i hope you know that i meant what i said earlier."

You can only stare as you wait for him to say more. You feel a little numb from everything, but even so something squeezes in your chest. "Do you?" you ask, your voice barely audible as you urge him to speak.

His eyes flick back to yours. "**yes**. i... shit, i never meant for you to hear it like that. i was gonna... i dunno, do something. anything other than shout it at undyne."

"why do i...?" A small frown creases his brow and his hands fall away from your face. Your cheeks feel cold without his touch. "you don't believe me?"

Leaning forward, you rest your forehead against his sternum. His hands press against your shoulders, smoothing your hair down your back. He clears his throat. "or do you not feel..."

"No! That's not..." You hook your hands behind his legs, holding onto him. "I do, Sans. I just... It doesn't feel real. You said, before, that you were scared to be happy. I'm..." Your voice falters, and you press close against him. He hugs you. "I want to believe you, **so much**. But I'm scared."
"you told me not to be scared. you asked me if it was worth the risk."

"I know, it's just..." Squeezing your eyes shut, you draw in a shaky breath. "The last time I thought I was in love he left me. I thought I finally had someone who cared about me, who told me he loved me, and the second I found out..." Your grip on Sans tightens. He doesn't speak, like he knows you have more to say. "I understand why he left. Frisk and I weren't worth his future."

Sans eases you away from him, cupping your head in his hands and tilting you up to look at him. There's so much tenderness in his expression that it makes your chest ache. "I love you," he says, with so much sincerity you almost believe him. "and I'll gladly share my future with you. with both of you."

Your eyes well up with tears again, and as you smile an embarrassed laugh escapes you. "You're gonna make me cry again," you mumble, looking away and blinking to try and clear your vision.

"if they're happy tears, I'm okay with that," he says, leaning down to nuzzle your forehead. "but... I think you still have doubts."

You do. You want to tell him that you love him, because you do, but the admission catches in your throat at the thought of giving in. The parts of you that are afraid to give up that last scrap of safety, as if refusing to speak the words will protect you from heartache... they cling tight and refuse to let go.

"I think I know a way that I can show you, if you'll let me," he says. Sans removes a hand from your cheek to press over your chest. A tingling, warm feeling spreads under your skin.

It takes you a moment but you remember this feeling. You felt it when he coaxed your Soul from your chest before. What did your Soul have to do with this? But you trust Sans, and if he knows any way that might help... "Okay," you say.

Sans pulls his hands away from you and the tingling stops. He climbs onto the bed, sitting cross-legged as he gestures for you to join him. Obediently, you shift to sit directly in front of him, knees touching. You can't help but feel curious. "How is this going to help?" you ask.

Holding his hands out in front of him, you start to feel that warm, fuzzy feeling again. "I'm going to touch your soul. if it's anything like what I think it'll do... it'll give you an idea of how I feel."

Before you can think of anything to say, he crooks his fingers and pulls his arms back towards his body.

Your wine-colored Soul lifts away from your chest and fills the space between you with a rich red glow. You aren't phased by the sight of it this time, or by the cracks that trace down the center, but... "Oh," you breathe, reaching up to try and cup your Soul in your hands, forgetting for a moment that it won't work. But you're so surprised, because the fracture at the top of the heart seems a little narrower, and you can almost swear that some of the smaller cracks look healed. Something like scars have mended them.

"That's... something I never thought I'd see," Sans admits, staring. He looks over your Soul to catch your eye, and when you look back at him he's smiling. "Your soul started healing."

"Oh," you say again, because what else can you say to that?

Sans chuckles. "the healing power of love," he says with a wink.

You groan and he laughs harder.
"okay, sorry. while i'm glad, this isn't what i wanted to show you." Still grinning, looking more like his normal self, he returns his attention to your Soul. He raises his hands and as he inches closer towards it sweat starts to bead at his temples. "this might be, uh, a little intense."

That's the only warning he gives you, and it's an understatement. As his hands reach out and grasp your Soul, you gasp and reach forward to grab his legs. You can feel Sans, and you're aware of the fact that he can feel you too. His magic hums through his bones and fills him up, warmth spreading through him and through you, wrapping you up and making you feel safe. Safe. Safe and cherished and precious. Your eyes slide shut as your senses blur out of focus because it feels like you're seeing through two sets of eyes at once and it's making you dizzy. You choose to focus on that safe feeling instead, like being wrapped up in Sans's arms.

The more you pull the safeness around you, the more you start to feel. Passion and affection and wanting. The swelling fullness of love fills your chest until you think you might burst, and you think that maybe you might be crying. Or is Sans crying? You have no way of knowing, everything is smudging together and right now it doesn't matter. It's so overwhelming but so good and you feel yourself drawn deeper under the surface.

But as you slip beneath the happiness and love you begin to feel sobered. An uncomfortable buzz of static prickles through you, making you feel uneasy. Feelings brush against you like something slithering, sadness and fear and worry.

Then, all at once, it's gone. You snap back to yourself and you feel wetness on your cheeks and the dull ache in your head from all the tears you've shed today. Your eyes open in time to see your Soul slip back inside you, and when you look up at Sans he shakes his head. He's trembling beneath you, drawing in a shuddering breath.

"i'm sorry," he says, blinking hard. "that's not... that's not what i was trying to show you. you went too far. i wasn't expecting it."

"Did I...? I didn't mean to," you mumble. But that doesn't matter, because you felt everything on the surface, the love swelling up inside him —inside both of you.

Before he can say anything else, you're crawling into his lap, wrapping your arms around him and holding him close. He melts under your touch as you press kisses along the side of his face and down his jaw. "i love you," he breathes. "i love you so much."

"I love you too, Sans," you finally answer, and you're smiling so wide you can't even stop to kiss him any more.
When Sans wakes in the morning he's exhausted, despite the uninterrupted night of sleep. *Bone-tired* one might say. He can't even appreciate his own joke.

Touching your Soul was more overwhelming than he could have ever imagined. Everything about you, all your love and fear and hope swallowed him up and it was all he could do to keep his head above water. You overpowered him just by being human, leaving him vulnerable as you delved into him. If it had been anyone else, he would have been terrified. But it was you. You told him, before, that your Soul was his and now you know that his is yours too. He'll leave his Soul bare for you if that's what you need; the only reason he pulled away as you delved too deep is because he didn't want to worry you. You already know that he has problems, you've already offered him your support. Right now, you don't need to feel them too.

The experience left him drained. But afterwards you needed him, and damn him if he didn't need you too, so he urged himself through it for both of you until you collapsed together in an exhausted tangle of limbs and fell asleep with mumbled 'I love you's on your lips. An echo of your lovemaking still resonates through his bones, a struck chord that hums under the natural tone of his magic. Yesterday was a mess but... what the hell. Everything turned out for the best.

Hopefully he can get some more sleep while he's at his station in the forest today.

Sans feels you begin to stir, shifting your leg that's pressed between his. Your thigh brushing along his pelvis elicits a weak groan. You give a sleepy hum in response, hugging yourself against him and tucking your head under his chin. He trails his fingers up and down the bare curve of your hip, then reaches around to cup your backside. Soft flesh fills his hand and he gives a gentle squeeze.

"Good morning to you too," you mumble, chuckling. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Assuredly," he says, grinning as you shake with laughter. "How did you sleep?"

"Like the dead," you say. He loves when you play along, he knows it means you're in a good mood.

He huffs a laugh. "Me too. I'm bone-tired," he quips, certain you'll enjoy his mental joke from earlier. You do.

Trailing kisses along his clavicle, you shift your leg against him again, your fingers slipping between his ribs. He gasps as your touch sends a shudder through him, tightening his hold on you without thinking. "Babe, I have to get up. Pap is gonna come banging on the door any second," he says, his protest sounding weak even to himself.

You let out a resigned sigh and let him go, rolling away onto your back.

"Hey," he says, propping himself up on an elbow to look down at you. You give him a small smile, so he knows you aren't actually upset. He leans down and nuzzles against your cheek and you make a contented sound. "Lemme take you out tonight, after I get home."

"Grillby's?" you ask.
"yes, grillby's," he says. "but, i thought i might take you somewhere after. someplace you haven't been before."

"Oh?" you say, eyebrows raising.

"yeah. someplace i think you'll like."

Sans looks a lot more tired than usual, and when you ask him about it he says it's because of last night. From touching your Soul. You suppose it must have to do with him being a monster, because you feel just fine. Great, even. When your face pinches with worry he reassures you that he's alright.

Papyrus and Undyne are talking (loudly, as always) in the kitchen when you and Sans make your way downstairs. Frisk is nibbling on a piece of toast, eyes ping-ponging back and forth between them as Papyrus paces and Undyne leans back in her chair across from the six year-old.

"UNDYNE, AS YOUR FRIEND, I MUST INSIST! YOUR CONTINUED DAWDLING ISN'T HELPING ANYBODY!" the tall skeleton says, raising a hand in punctuation, the other tucked behind his back.

Grimacing, the fish monster takes a loud sip of her tea. "You know what else isn't helping anybody? Your nagging."

Papyrus turns on his heel and catches sight of you and Sans, his expression transforming from disapproving frown into a bright smile. "AH! GOOD MORNING! I..." he hesitates, bringing both hands in front of him as he glances between the two of you. "I HOPE EVERYTHING IS OKAY?"

Sans looks over at you and then back at his brother with his usual lazy grin. "everything's great, bro. but i appreciate you checking on us, that's really considerate of you."

"OF COURSE! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AM THE MOST CONSIDERATE BROTHER!" he exclaims, shifting out of Sans's way as his brother heads for the cabinet he's standing in front of.

You take the kettle off the stove and fill it with more water from the sink.

"definitely. now, uh, i don't mean to brother you, but would you mind getting two of those mugs down for me?" he says, winking and pointing.

Papyrus narrows his eyes slightly, but does as he's asked, setting them down in front of Sans. "IS THIS YOUR WAY OF FINALLY LISTENING TO ME, INSTEAD OF WASTING YOUR MAGIC ON BEING LAZY?"

"isn't it even lazier for me to ask you to do it for me?" He glances over at you as you sidle up beside him. "you can go sit down, babe, i got this."

You're about to protest but he's already scooping sugar into the mugs before you can say anything. You take a seat next to Frisk, stealing a half-slice of toast from their plate and biting into it. It's gone cold, but the butter is melted into the bread and it still tastes good. Frisk leans their head against your shoulder and you rest your cheek against it, smiling. You feel a swell of affection in your chest.

"UNDYNE, DO NOT THINK THAT I HAVE FORGOTTEN WHAT WE WERE TALKING ABOUT," Papyrus says, plunking a bowl of oatmeal in front of you. You glance up at the skeleton and over at Undyne, dunking your toast in your oatmeal and taking a bite. "YOU SHOULD TALK TO ALPHYS."
Sans is behind you, reaching over your shoulder to set your mug down in front of you. You twist in your seat to kiss his cheek. He grins, leaning against the wall beside you and raising his own drink to his mouth.

"I talk to Alphys all the time!" she retorts, staring down into her mug.

"NOT ABOUT THE RIGHT THINGS!" he says, shaking his head. "IT'S JUST LIKE A PUZZLE! YOU HAVE TO UNLOCK HER TRUE FEELINGS!"

"I HATE puzzles!" she says, glaring. After a moment, she lets out a frustrated noise. "Besides, what if her true feelings aren't what I think they are? ARGH that would be even WORSE than not knowing at all!"

You can't take this any more. It's just so obvious to you, how can she not see it? "Undyne, Alphys definitely likes you," you say between bites, pointing at her with your toast.

Undyne's face scrunches up and you think you see the scales of her cheeks darken to a purplish shade. Oh, wow, is she... blushing? You never thought you'd see the day. Sans gives a low chuckle behind you.

"SEE! EVEN THE HUMAN CAN TELL! HUMAN, YOU TALK SOME SENSE INTO HER WHILE MY BROTHER AND I ARE GONE," Papyrus says. You give an obedient nod, sipping at your coffee. You're starting to get used to the less-favorable taste. The skeleton taps his foot, glancing over at the clock on the stove. "OH! FRISK, WE NEED TO LEAVE SOON —YOU TOO SANS— SO YOU SHOULD GO CHANGE! WE DON'T WANT TO BE LATE!"

The loud sound of Undyne clearing her throat fills the kitchen, and as you look up from your breakfast you see her giving Papyrus a stern look. Frisk stops mid-motion as they start to slide out of their chair, looking confused.

Papyrus hesitates, just as perplexed, until his eyes widen. "OH! I MEAN. HUMAN!" he turns to you, gesturing. "IF YOU DON'T MIND, WE WILL TAKE FRISK TO SCHOOL."

You blink. "Oh, uh, of course. That's fine."

"EXCELLENT! NOW FRISK, WE WILL WAIT FOR YOU HERE!"

You glance over at Undyne as Frisk rushes out of the kitchen. When you catch her eye, she gives you a toothy smile and a forceful blink. Oh, wait, was that supposed to be a wink? You hold back a laugh. You see what they're trying to do, and you can't help but smile. Nodding back at Undyne, you wonder how you ever could have been frustrated with your friends. They're so sincere.

"hey, bro. do you mind watching the kiddo tonight?" Sans slides into Frisk's vacated seat beside you, tipping his drink into his mouth. "we were kinda hoping to go out, y'know?"

"OF COURSE! NO PROBLEM AT ALL! IN FACT, I THINK THERE IS A METTATON MOVIE MARATHON ON TONIGHT! WE COULD HAVE A MOVIE NIGHT!" Papyrus says, grinning.

"Ugh," Undyne groans.

"NO ONE IS FORCING YOU TO STAY HERE AND WATCH MOVIES WITH US," Papyrus says. "HMM. IN FACT, YOU COULD ALWAYS GO SEE ALPHYS INSTEAD!"

Her face cracks into an anxious smile. "WHAT? No way, and miss out on all those... GREAT
movies?"

The tall skeleton is about to say something more when Frisk comes stomping down the steps, shrugging their backpack over their shoulders. They slide past Papyrus to come give you a hug and a rushed kiss on the cheek. Then, they turn to Sans and fling their arms around his neck, surprising him. He meets your eyes from over Frisk's shoulder as he gives them a quick hug, and you feel a swell of affection in your chest. You smile at each other. Then, Frisk lets go and circles around him to stand next to Papyrus.

"I'm ready!" they announce.

"no you're not, kiddo, you almost forgot your lunch again," Sans says, draining the last of his coffee and standing. He opens the fridge and pulls out a brown paper sack, unzipping Frisk's backpack and stowing it safely inside. "now you're ready." He ruffles Frisk's hair.

"IF WE ARE ALL PREPARED, WE SHOULD GET GOING!" Papyrus says.

"just a sec." Sans comes to your side and leans down to hug you. You turn to press a handful of kisses against his jaw. As he lets you go, he gives you one last, quick brush of his mouth against your temple. "have a good day. i'll see you tonight... i love you."

Your smile widens, your cheeks warming as your heart feels full in your chest. "I love you too."

Blue stains Sans's cheeks as he pulls away, shoving his hands in his pockets. "good. that's... good," he mumbles. He clears his throat. "ok, i guess we're gonna go now."

"Okay, hun," you say, covering your mouth in an attempt to stop yourself from laughing. His sudden shyness is too endearing.

"see you later."

"Okay."

There's an adorably awkward pause and then Papyrus finally seems to take pity on him and ushers him towards the front door. Sans gives you a tiny wave and you respond in kind, laughing. When the three of them finally leave, you realize that you must have a goofy smile on your face because Undyne is staring, grinning at you.

"What?" you ask her, blushing deeper and snatching up your coffee in an attempt to hide your face.

"You two. Shit, you've got it bad," Undyne says, barking out a laugh.

You arch a brow, taking a sip from your mug and setting it back down. You give your oatmeal a stir. "Look who's talking. Or should I say not talking. As in, why haven't you talked to Alphys yet?"

Her expression sours, frowning into her own cup. "Oh come on, I really don't want to talk about this."

"I'm under strict orders from Papyrus. Besides, what are you worried about? We can all see that she likes you. She can barely string two words together when you're around, and aren't you two texting like, all the time?" You eat a spoonful of your oatmeal. It's cold, but still tastes good. Besides, you're hungry.

"You AND Papyrus should really mind your own business," she snaps, but there's no real venom in her voice. She rolls the mug between her hands, hunching forward with her elbows on the table.
"Undyne... are you... worried about something?" you ask, carefully.

She doesn't answer, so you decide not to press any further. It won't do either of you much good if she just gets mad at you. You finish the rest of your breakfast in silence, with Undyne casting periodic looks at her cellphone. She stays tense, glancing up at you like she's waiting for you to say something. But you don't.

Finally, as you get up to wash your dishes, Undyne lets out a ragged sigh.

"She..." Undyne clears her throat, the chair scraping along the tile as she pushes away from the table and joins you at the sink. "When Alphys really gets passionate about something, she just BLURTS everything out without thinking! But when she talks to me, she clams up and starts getting sweaty. Sometimes I think I'm just making her scared and uncomfortable. If she really liked me, like she cares about those other things, wouldn't it be the same? Maybe I'm just intimidating her into talking to me."

You look over at her, surprised at the uncertainty in her voice. "Well, you are kind of scary," you admit, chuckling as she shoots you a glare. "And I'll bet you ten bucks— er, gold that she's just as worried as you are. I'm sure if you just took the chance and talked to her you'd work things out in no time."

Undyne grumbles, setting her mug beside the sink and turning away, crossing her arms over her chest. "And what if you're wrong?"

"I can try to talk to her for you, if you want. Find out for sure," you say, shrugging.

"NO WAY!" she blurts out, whirling back around to face you. You jump a little, splashing water on the counter. "Don't you say ANYTHING to her, punk!" Undyne clenches her fist in front of her, baring sharp teeth.

"Okay, okay, got it," you say, trying your best to placate the angry fish monster. Undyne fixes you with her glare, and you wait a few moments for her to suck in a deep breath before she finally lowers and relaxes her fist. "But I'm serious. If you ever need any help with Alphys, you can talk to me. I like to think I'm at least a little more reasonable and, well, tactful than Papyrus. It's the least I can do after you helped me."

"Tch. FINE. If I ever change my mind, which ISN'T likely, I'll let you know." Then she turns on her heel and stalks off.

You shake your head, wondering if those two will ever manage to work our their feelings. You really hope so.

Chapter End Notes

As always, check out my Tumblr for more stuff! onadacora.tumblr.com
You're standing outside of Grillby's, waiting for Sans and watching your breath leave your mouth in puffs of white. Part of you would rather wait inside where it's warm. Most of you, really. Especially the cold bits. But you've caught Sans looking at a particular picture of you on his phone, outside Grillby's and lit by orange neon just like this. Usually you hate having your picture taken, and if you had known he was taking it you probably would have fussed. But even you have to admit it's a lovely shot of you, and if you can recreate that image for him, you'll do it. You've even got on that green, waterproof army surplus jacket that you're wearing in it. You picked it up from Snowdin's shop a few weeks ago when you realized you'd be staying.

"hey beautiful, come here often?"

Turning at the sound of Sans's deep voice, you can't help but smile, flushed from the cold and his compliment. He gives you a charming wink the second he sees you looking, grinning wide. You think he must have slept at his station because he seems a lot more rested than he did earlier. Hopefully Papyrus never caught on.

You make a noncommittal noise as Sans comes closer, shrugging and trying to tamp down your smile. "Yeah, but only because my boyfriend doesn't know anyplace better."

"oh, then he must have excellent taste. everyone knows that grillby's is the best place in town."

"It's the only place in town," you say, trying not to laugh.

"keep talking like that and i'm gonna tell grillby you don't like his cooking. and trust me, you don't want to see him all fired up." Sans is at your side now, pulling his hands out of his pockets to reach out and take hold of your jacket. He tugs you close, then pulls you down so he can graze toothy kisses along your jaw.

You're giggling from the joke and his ministrations, tucking in close against him and wrapping your hands around his wrists. "i'd hate to ignite any arguments," you murmur against his skull, pressing your cold nose against warm bone.

"i'm sure i could douse him before he gets too hot under the collar," Sans says, eliciting a snort from you that makes him chuckle. He releases your jacket and pulls away, brushing a bit of hair from your face. "c'mon, lets get you inside. you didn't have to wait out here in the cold."

You take his hand and let him lead you to the door. "Well, I wanted to."

The rush of warm air inside the bar is welcome against your skin. You let out a sigh of relief as you step in, glancing around to take in the familiar surroundings. Dogamy and Dogaressa are both missing, but you give Doggo a vigorous wave, making sure he can see you. He tips his head and raises a paw in greeting. Greater Dog gives you puppy eyes and scoots in his chair to lean towards you until you walk over to pet him. His tongue lolls out of his mouth and he tilts into your fingers. After a few moments of this you give him one last pat and go to join Sans at the bar in your usual place.

"yeah, yeah, no need to give me that look," Sans is saying to Grillby as you take your seat.

Grillby's expression is decidedly smug, one hint of an eyebrow arched above his glasses. It lowers as he glances over at you, giving you a welcoming nod. Though he doesn't have a mouth that you can see, something about his face seems to crinkle into a smile.
You smile in return. "Hey Grillby. Hope you're doing well?"

He nods again, then glances over at Sans again before disappearing back into the kitchen.

"I ordered the usual, hope that's okay with you," Sans says, leaning forward to rest his elbows on the bar.

"Sure, that's fine," you say. You gesture at the door Grillby went through. "What was all that about? With Grillby?"

Sans shakes his head, smiling. "nothing, just a little bit of gloating on his part."

"Gloating? From Grillby?" You give him an incredulous look. "What could he possibly be gloating about?"

"helping me out last night. I came here," he says, tentatively. He makes a sound like he's clearing his throat, shifting a little bit on the barstool.

"Oh." You hadn't really given much thought to where Sans went when he stormed off last night, but... "Well, at least now I know where to come looking if you're upset," you say, trying to sound casual.

"I told you I wouldn't do that again, and I meant it," he says, holding your gaze as he searches your face. You give him an affectionate smile and he seems to relax.

"Duly noted," you say, brushing aside the topic. There are other things you'd rather talk about. "So, where are you taking me after dinner?" You arch a brow, giving him him a playful look.

Sans leans towards you, sliding his elbows across the bar and grinning. "If I wanted you to know, I would have told you this morning," he says. The lights in his eyes are bright with amusement.

"You're no fun."

"You'll see soon enough, babe." Sans leans back in his seat as Grillby returns with your food, setting the plates down in front of you. He puts down a fresh bottle of ketchup on the bar and leaves the two of you to your —relative— privacy. Sans picks up a crisp French fry and points at you with it. "I wouldn't want to spoil the surfries."

You try your hardest to resist the urge to smile, but you don't think you quite manage. San's grin widens to shit-eating levels. "And what would you have said if Grillby didn't just so happen to bring our food out right at that moment?"

He gives the counter in front of him a pat with his hand, his bones giving a soft clatter against wood. "I hope the wait isn't too unbarable." You think you can hear his bones rattling with how hard he's trying not to laugh at the look on your face.

"I'm torn between laughing and crying, I don't even know what to say to that," you say, shaking your head.

Sans finally splutters out a laugh, and you can't resist any longer; you're laughing too.

You should have expected this, since you've been mentioning wanting to come here since Frisk told you about it over a month ago. Sure, you could have taken it upon yourself to make the walk, but it feels much more special coming here with Sans. Waterfall really is beautiful.
The contrast of dark stone and grass against the glowing water is ethereal and otherworldly. Bright faceted crystals sparkle far above your head, and you can see how the monsters might pretend that they're stars. Between them and the glow from the water there's just enough light for you to make out your surroundings. Up ahead, tucked along the dark, winding path are tall, large-petaled blue flowers.

It's damp and a little humid here in Waterfall. Definitely warmer than in Snowdin; you had to strip off your outermost layer and tie the sleeves around your middle before you started to sweat. You're much more comfortable with just your light cotton jacket.

Sans has his arm around your waist as you walk, your own curled around his back. Tucked under his other arm he has a telescope that he picked up from the passageway you just exited. It had been tucked behind a few rocks for safekeeping. When you asked him what it was for, he just smiled and evaded your question. You're sure you'll find out soon enough.

"if you're quiet, you'll be able to hear voices from those blue flowers up ahead," he tells you, giving you a small squeeze. "they're called echo flowers. they repeat the last thing that they hear."

As you approach the first one Sans lets you go, nudging you forward. You hesitate, unsure of what to do, but go up to it and lean down to press your ear close to the blossom. You can hear a quiet, tinny voice. "I hope I find something cool at the garbage dump today!"

"What, that's it?" you blurt out, frowning at the flower. It echoes your own words back to you in that same high voice.

"what were you expecting? they just echo anything," Sans says, speaking just above a whisper. He shrugs at you as you return to his side.

You continue walking, passing by mushrooms glowing the same shade as the water. The lily pads and water sausages growing in the slow-moving streams are so dark in contrast they're nearly black. Finally, picking a spot near the water, Sans pulls the telescope from under his arm and gets to work positioning the legs. You crouch down next to the bank, staring down into the liquid. Cupping some of it in your hand, you tilt your palm and watch the glowing water shift along your skin. There must be something in it that makes it glow like that. It must be bioluminescent or something. When you empty your hand back into the stream, a few bright blue droplets cling to your skin. Without thinking you wipe your palm against your jeans, leaving a wet streak that glows for a few moments before starting to fade.

Sans is just about done tightening the now-extended legs of the telescope when you stand back up. He wiggles the body of it experimentally to make sure it's stable, then stands back, satisfied. "do you wanna get a closer look at some of those crystals?" he asks you, gesturing to the eyepiece.

As you lean over to take hold of the telescope Sans makes a startled noise and stops you, pulling out a handkerchief. He wipes down the eyepiece and the lens at the end, checking and double-checking before finally offering it back to you.

"sorry, almost forgot. woulda been a bit of an eyesore if i hadn't remembered. red ink on the telescope is pretty classic," Sans says, looking a little embarrassed.

You rub your finger around the edge, and when it comes away clean you let yourself finally look. The view is a little fuzzy. With a vague idea of how it works, you twist a knob one way and then the other, until it starts coming into focus. Crystals of all colors are embedded into the stone, large and small, casting light down into the caverns of Waterfall. You wonder how something so strange can exist down here without anyone on the surface knowing. But then again, the monsters have
been down here so long that humans don't even remember that they exist. How much of the world have humans just forgotten? Well, magic, for starters, you suppose.

The crystals are beautiful, but... the telescope just reminds you that what you're seeing aren't stars. Layers of rock separate you from the real stars, and all at once you feel their loss heavy in your chest. Not even for yourself, but for Sans and Papyrus, for Alphys and Undyne and even Mettaton. For Frisk.

Leaning back, you straighten and look back up unassisted, and you think you prefer the illusion.

"this is probably the prettiest place in the underground. snowdin's nice and peaceful, and the capital has some interesting architecture if that's your thing. but there's something special about waterfall. there's actually a room further in where water drips down, like it's raining," Sans says, and he sounds pleased. You feel his hands on your waist as he comes up behind you, resting his chin on your shoulder.

"It's beautiful here," you agree, threading your fingers between his and pulling his arms to enfold you completely. You lean back into the sturdy weight of him behind you, tilting your head to touch his. "But I wish you could see the real stars. And real rain. I wish there was an easier way to get everyone to the surface. Something that doesn't involve... killing one of us."

Sans's grip on you tightens. "i'm more than happy to stay down here if it means having you and frisk with me, safe. that's not a trade i'd ever be willing to make."

"I wouldn't ask you to. I just want to show you so much. I want to take you to the beach and show you the ocean, and into the city where we have skyscrapers that literally reach the clouds. And clouds you've never seen clouds!" You squeeze your eyes shut, sighing. "Rain, and thunderstorms that make the windows rattle they're so loud. And sunlight, and rainbows. The moon! You have pretend stars, but you don't have a pretend moon down here..."

Sans is quiet as you trail off. You squeeze his fingers between yours. He makes a quiet hum before speaking, his voice hesitant. "do you miss it? being on the surface?"

Releasing his hands you twist around in his embrace to face him. His eyes are a little dim as he looks up at you, and his smile seems forced. "Of course I miss it," you tell him, catching the side of his face as he tries to look away. "But I'd never give this up to go back there. Not without you. I..." You push through the hesitation; it's still hard to say the words. You feel an unwarranted thrill of fear that this will be the time he doesn't say them back. "I love you."

"i love you too," he says, and his smile turns genuine. You smile back as he leans forward to nuzzle into your neck with a sigh. "let me show you more of waterfall. maybe our rain down here will remind you of home."

"Of course it will. Because this is my home."
Maybe standing around in the rain at Waterfall isn't such a good idea. Sans tries to keep you under the umbrella but you keep wandering away, until finally your clothes are soaked straight through. Not to mention your socks are wet and squishy in your shoes, which is making you cringe.

You spend about half an hour walking back home, and the closer you get to Snowdin the colder you get. You don't want to complain because it's your own fault you're sopping wet, and it takes a few moments before Sans realizes you're shivering. Chastising you gently, he pulls you close and you feel the familiar lurching sensation in your stomach as you're suddenly somewhere else. Closer to home, but much colder. You let out a startled gasp at the change in temperature and you teleport again with Sans murmuring an apology in your ear. He can't move too far in one go.

Shivering more violently than you'd like, you're back in your shared bedroom, stripping out of your wet layers with the help of your concerned boyfriend. Sans's hands are blissfully warm against your cold skin as he peels off your shirt and dumps it on the treadmill. You use your feet to wedge your sneakers off, then get to work on wriggling out of your jeans. Sopping wet denim has to be one of the worst things in the world. Your underwear ends up pulling off along with your pants but you don't really care, they're soaked too and not in a good way. Reaching around behind you, you unhook your bra as Sans turns to grab the thick comforter from the bed.

"come here, babe. you're chilled to the bone," he says, draping the blanket around your shoulders and pulling you close.

You let out a weak laugh, pressing in close and tucking your ice cold nose under his jaw. He's completely unfazed by the contact, and his inhuman warmth feels so good against you. But you need more. You duck your chilled hands under his jacket and shirt, hunting his ribs with your fingers. He lets out a small groan as you press as much of your arms to his body as you can.

"You're so nice and warm," you murmur, humming with pleasure.

"here, let me..." Sans trails off, pulling away and wrapping the blanket around you. You let out a small sound of protest before realizing what he's doing. He's pulling off his own clothes, and if you weren't still so cold you might muster up a suggestive brow waggle. But at the moment you're just holding the comforter in fisted hands and waiting for him to finish so you can wrap him up with you.

Stripped down to bare bones, Sans takes a seat on the edge of the bed, holding a hand out to you. You crawl onto his lap, straddling his legs and wrapping your arms—and the blanket—around his shoulders. Shoulders hunched and shivering, you let out a pleased sigh as Sans rubs his warm hands up and down your body. From your knees pressed into the bed beside his hips, up your thighs, along the curve of your backside, to your back and shoulders, spreading out to both your arms, and then back again.
"Ahh, that feels so good," you groan, arching into his touch. As the cold starts to seep away and your shivering lessens, you trail open-mouthed kisses along his clavicle. His hands spasm against you, fingers grabbing at your thighs in a way you don't think is intentional. You smile to yourself.

"you keep doing that and i'm gonna warm you up in other ways, babe," Sans says in a tight voice, hands dragging up your legs to take hold of your hips.

"Mmm," is your only answer, rocking your hips and grinding down against the jut of his pelvis. The hard pressure on the outside of your folds is sweet against your clit. You feel a thrill of pleasure from the sensation and the choked noise that escapes Sans.

"so that's how you want it, then?" he asks, his voice canted so low you can feel it in your chest as you're pressed against him.

You raise your head in time to see a flicker of blue ignite in his left eye as the white lights vanish. A familiar, warm pressure rests against you, and soft blue light fills the darkness inside the blanket. You give another rock of your hips to brush against his cock, and Sans's eye flickers as he bites back a groan. He tugs on your hips and you let him urge you up onto your knees, positioning yourself over him. But you wait, kneeling. Taking hold of both ends of the comforter in one hand, you free your right and reach for his face, trailing your fingertips lightly over the curve of his cheekbone.

Sans holds your gaze for a moment until your hand slips down to the vertebrae in his neck. A weak moan escapes him and he tilts his head to the side, his grip tightening on your hips as he presses down. But you refuse to budge. Instead you lower your head to replace your seeking fingers with your tongue, eliciting a gasp.

"shit," Sans breathes, shuddering. "babe..."

Your free hand slides down his spine and whatever Sans was going to say dies in his throat. As you reach lower he reaches higher until he's cupping the soft weight of your breasts in his hands. You give a breathy moan as his thumbs brush across your nipples, and you wrap your hand around the length of his spine. Then, you stroke down with your fingers at the same time that you lower your hips to drag the head of his cock between your legs, teasing him at your entrance for a moment before shifting just enough to rub against your clit instead.

Sans's moan turns into a deep growl of frustration, and he squeezes your breasts. As you raise yourself back up only to give him another teasing stroke, he drags his fingers down your sides to take hold of your waist again. When you resist the guiding pressure on your hips, he tucks his head into the crook of your neck. Then, he makes a low sound as his teeth press into the soft flesh of your shoulder.

Gasping, your head falls to the side, savoring the pleasure that heats your skin and the small bit of pain that makes it that much sweeter. "Ahh, that's cheating," you say with a sharp intake of breath as he relaxes his jaw and then bites down again, softer this time.

He lets go of your shoulder and you feel the warm softness of his tongue laving over your skin. "you're one to talk," he mutters, pulling down with his hands and rocking his hips to try and meet you.

With an amused hum, you tease him at your entrance again, and right as Sans starts to let out a relieved sigh you angle away. You brush your fingers along his spine as he pulls back his head to look at you. His left eye is bright, his brow furrowed and dotted with sweat. "What?" you ask, innocently.
"babe, please," he groans, searching your face. He tries to pull you back up onto your knees but you just rub against him. "please, i need you. come on."

"If you don't like it," you murmur, lips curling as you look at him with lidded eyes. "Then do something about it."

You can see the cogs turning in his head, the struggle between what you know he wants and what he's afraid to do. He's always so in control, and you want to push past that. He's almost there. Letting go of the blanket and shrugging it off of you, you arch your back and put yourself on display. Both your hands come to rest on his shoulders, making him look up at you. "You just have to take what you want," you press. "I'm giving you permission."

The hungry look on his face turns ravenous as you feel him tense beneath you. Then, he wraps his arms around your hips, lifting you up with a startled noise and dumping you over on the bed beside him. You end up on your hands and knees, and as you're about to right yourself you feel the mattress shift behind you.

"i think i want you just like this," Sans says in a low voice that goes straight to your pelvis. One hand grabs your hip, and you feel his knees between your calves.

His free hand squeezes your ass and then dips down to the join of your legs. You gasp and press back against his touch as he slides the tips of his fingers along your folds. With a low hum, two fingers slip inside of you with ease. But before you can even savor it they're gone again. A weak whine escapes you and you settle down onto your forearms, forehead resting on the bed.

"you look so sexy like that," Sans groans, and then he's holding onto both of your hips and he eases himself inside of you.

You moan, twisting the sheets beneath you in your hands. As much as you've been teasing him you've been teasing yourself and having him finally inside of you feels so good. Sans starts a steady rhythm, holding you in place as he thrusts. Each breath comes out as a gasping cry, muffled by your arm.

"shit, you were driving me crazy," he breathes, pulling you hard against him as you moan.

Sans grinds against you, pressing deeper until you let out a ragged cry. He relaxes his grip on your hips and pulls back, resuming his steady pace. One arm curls around you. He rolls a nipple between his fingers and drags down your stomach, making you shudder. Then, with a familiar soft texture over his phalanges, he starts rubbing small circles against your clit.

Heat pools low in your belly but your legs are trembling and you're struggling to focus. "Sans," you gasp, another thrust deep inside you making you forget what you were going to say.

"come for me, babe. i want to hear you," he says, running the hand that was on your hip up your spine.

"I can't," you whine, desperate for release. "I can't like this."

"i've got you, i know what to do," he murmurs, dragging his hand down your back as he pulls out of you.

Sans eases you over onto your side and then onto your back, spreading your legs as he settles between them. You're trying to push damp hair away from your face, breathing deeply as he grabs hold of your ankle and hooks his elbow under your knee. He pulls you closer and thrusts deep, eliciting a gasp that bottoms out into a moan as his fingers find your clit again.
With slow strokes of his hand and cock, you're soon pushed over the edge, back arching as you cry out. The tension in your core slowly unwinds as Sans eases you through the waves of pleasure. When your body starts to relax, he pulls his hand away and falls forward over you, groaning as he thrusts his hips. Trembling and nearly euphoric, you manage to hook your ankles around his back.

He presses his forehead to yours, and as you blink your eyes open you can see the bright glow of blue in his left socket, almost hidden behind heavy lids. Settling down onto his elbows, he slips his forearms under you and takes hold of your shoulders. His fingers dig in almost painfully as he pumps into you at a fevered pace. Your eyes squeeze back shut as you're overwhelmed and moaning beneath him, hooking your fingers into his back.

With one last, deep thrust Sans lets loose a ragged moan, gasping as he goes still. He stays rigid for a moment before letting out a shaky breath, tilting his head to nuzzle your cheek and throat. You smile and let out a breathy laugh, pressing lazy, open-mouthed kisses along his skull. Slowly he relaxes his hands and eases his arms out from under you, collapsing beside you on the bed. His eye gives one last flicker before going out, soon replaced by familiar pinpricks of white.

"babe, that was..." he begins, sucking in a steadying breath. "i love you."

"Yes," you agree, smiling at what he's unable to say. "And I love you too."

He reaches out and cups your hip, which you realize feels a little tender. You glance down and notice some suspiciously finger-shaped red marks on your skin. Sans follows your line of sight and manages to sit up, hand trailing lightly over your body. His brow furrows in concern.

"Don't you dare," you say, catching his hand before he can speak. "That was amazing, and don't you dare feel bad."

His eyes flick up to your face but then fall down to look at your shoulders. "you've got marks there too," he says, expression tense as he reaches up to trace the slope of your shoulder.

"Good," you insist, reaching up to pull him down to you. "I'd do the same to you if I could. I like knowing where you've been."

"you're sure you're okay?" Sans asks, but you think he sounds a little more at ease. Maybe a little pleased with himself.

"Yes, hun. I swear. You need to stop worrying so much and just enjoy yourself. You can't be careful all the time," you say, rolling close to him as he settles down beside you. He drapes his arm over your side, holding you.

"is that what you were trying to do? frustrate me enough to stop being careful?"

"Exactly. And it worked. Wonderfully."

Sans nuzzles against you, yawning. "i'll forgive you for teasing me like that, but don't think i'm not gonna get some payback later," he mumbles.

"Wait, don't fall asleep yet, we need the comforter," you protest, trying to move from his grasp but it's too late. His arms are heavy around you and he doesn't answer. Thankfully, your boyfriend is nice and warm.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the delay! Those of you who follow my Tumblr (onadacora.tumblr.com) knew I was away visiting family this past weekend, but I forgot to post a message on the last chapter about it! I missed you guys, so I hope you enjoyed this smut. ;D
It takes a few days for the marks to fade enough for you to risk wearing anything that might show your shoulders, and almost a full week for them to completely disappear. You're a little sad to see them fade, the traces Sans left on your body. You were honest with him when you said that you liked knowing where he's been. But by the end of the second week since that night you've got a nice bite mark that has Sans apologizing the morning after. Honestly it looks worse than it feels, and you don't regret getting it in the least.

Unfortunately it's right in the crook of your neck, so unless you wear turtlenecks for the next week someone's going to see. When you make your way downstairs Papyrus and Frisk seem to buy your lame excuse of tripping over the treadmill in Sans's room, but Undyne just gives you a toothy grin and holds back a laugh. Later, when the two of you are alone, she teases you about it. You retaliate with way too much information on your sex life until she makes a hasty retreat into the bathroom.

Frisk hits the one month mark at Snowdin's school (and two months in the Underground). In honor of the occasion, their teacher throws an impromptu party for the class and invites you to come along. You bake some of Frisk's favorite chocolate chip cookies and spend the day helping out. Afterwards, the teacher surprises you with a handful of photos from the past month. On the top of the stack is one from today, with Frisk laying across your lap as the two of you talk to Kid. It's strange, because in the moment you remember feeling drained from helping wrangle children. But in this picture you look happy, and Frisk's easy affection with you makes you smile. Sometimes it takes an outside perspective to make you reflect on these simple joys.

The rest of the photos are of Frisk at school, playing with Kid and the others. There's one where they're focused on drawing something at their desk, tip of their tongue poking out the corner of their mouth in concentration. You decide to add the collection to Frisk's drawings stuck to the fridge. You're sure that Sans will want to see them, too.

You've accompanied Undyne to Alphys's lab a few times now, with and without Frisk. At first Sans isn't too keen on the idea, and one time while he's working in Hotland he pops in to visit. Eventually he seems reassured that you're safe enough with the two monsters. So now, as you and Undyne head out alone to catch a ride with the Riverperson, Sans just reminds you to call him if you need him and tells you to have fun.

It's nice getting away from Snowdin from time to time, and out of the house. You make friendly conversation with the Riverperson as they take you through the waterways of the Underground, answering polite inquiries about Frisk. You're flattered that they remember the two of you.

When you step off the boat and into Hotland proper, you cast a questioning glance over at Undyne. "So, is today gonna be the day you finally say something?" you ask her, just like you do every time you come here with her.

And just like every other time Undyne casts a fierce glare at you. "Let's just get out of this heat, punk," she snaps, leading the way up to the lab.

Chuckling to yourself, you follow obediently. As much as you'd just like to lock these two dorks in a closet until they work out their feelings you promised Undyne to stay out of it.

Alphys has a day of anime planned for the three of you, which is pretty typical. But, it seems she's finally decided it's time for you to partake in her absolute favorite show, Mew Mew Kissy Cutie. She'd started you on some classics once she found out that you'd never watched much anime
before. You have to admit, most of it is pretty good. And thankfully you like to read because Alphys refuses to watch any of it dubbed.

While you spend the day watching TV in a corner of the lab, you're also sneaking peeks at the two monsters. Undyne keeps leaning in close to talk to Alphys to try not to disturb you, and every time she does it the doctor just breaks out into a sweat and giggles nervously. At one point when Undyne scoots closer, Alphys lets out an anxious squeak and exclaims, "O-oh this is my favorite part!" interrupting the fish monster's attempt at putting her arm behind her on the couch. Frustrated and looking a bit put out, Undyne meets your gaze. You try to give her a reassuring look, but she just grimaces and leans away from Alphys.

Pulling out your phone, you send a text to Sans out of your need to vent. 'I swear I'm going to just blurt out that they should kiss just to put them out of their misery...'

A few moments later your phone buzzes with his reply. 'u shd. at this rate theyre nvr goin 2 do it.'

'I can't... I promised Undyne I wouldn't.'

'thelyll 4give u aftr seein u helped.'

Alphys clears her throat noisily and you know you've been caught. You pocket your phone, returning your attention to the television.

As you're heading back to Snowdin later, Undyne finally cracks under the pressure while floating through Waterfall. She leans forward in her seat on the boat, elbows on her knees and fingers digging into her hair. Staring down at the wood beneath her feet, she lets out a ragged sigh of frustration. "FINE, I give up!" she blurts out, making you jump. "Do something, anything, please! Help me with Alphys!"

You give her an incredulous look, silent long enough for her to look up at you to see why you aren't speaking. Running your hand through your hair, you let out a sigh, giving her a wry smile. "You couldn't have said this before we left Hotland?"

"Tch! Are you going to help me or not, punk?" she snaps, gritting her teeth.

"Of course I am."

The next day you decide to take Frisk with you and drop by the lab to surprise Alphys. Sans is working and Papyrus and Undyne are busy at the fish monster's house so today is as good as any for the two of you to go to Hotland.

The Riverperson is humming a jaunty tune as Frisk reaches over the side to run their fingers through the water. You hold their other hand, mostly to make yourself feel better. The rational part of you is sure that they won't fall out, but you'd rather not risk it. Frisk doesn't seem to mind your fretting, glancing over their shoulder to give you a toothy grin.

"Maybe I can ask Alphys to help me with my science homework?" Frisk asks you, wiping their wet fingers off on their jacket. It's a newer one, a light zip-up hoodie in orange and yellow stripes (the kids you've seen here in the Underground all wear stripes, and Frisk is eager to fit in). It's enough to keep them comfortable until you reach Hotland. Underneath they're wearing a matching striped tank-top.

"Sans already said he'd help you with your homework tonight after he gets home," you tell them, squeezing their small hand. "Besides, you didn't bring it with you."
"But I can still ask her questions. About what I remember," they say, freeing their fingers from yours and shoving their hands in the pockets of their jacket. You're sure that they picked up the habit from watching Sans. It makes you smile.

"Sure you can, sweetie," you say, brushing their hair out of their eyes. Their thick hair is longer now than it was when you first arrived in the Underground, but they still fuss when you talk about trimming it. "I'm sure Alphys would love that."

Alphys has a soft spot for Frisk a mile wide, barely stuttering when they talk. She's also gotten better when talking to you, especially about Sans. Her eyes go starry and distant when you discuss your relationship, in the same way they do when she goes off on a tangent about anime. It's a little strange, but endearing at the same time. You see why Undyne likes her passion. And it's nice to have someone to talk to that doesn't live in the same house.

Not for the first time you debate if you should text Alphys to let her know you're coming. But you really want your visit to be a surprise, especially with Frisk in tow.

As you stand in front of the lab, sweating in Hotland's arid heat, you realize that this may have been a poor decision. Your faded, rose-colored jacket is knotted around your waist, but your jeans and button-up blouse are still too hot. Even Frisk, down to their tank-top looks sweaty and uncomfortable.

There's no answer at the door when you knock, and with another cursory glance you see there's no sign of a doorbell. Just a button to open the mechanical door. Thinking back, you remember that Undyne never bothers to knock, just lets herself in. Personally you think it's a little rude but... you're desperate to get out of the heat. You give one last loud bang on the door, before shrugging at Frisk and pressing the button. The entrance opens with a soft whirring noise and you usher the two of you inside.

"Alphys?" you call out, your voice echoing off the smooth metallic surfaces that make up most of the lab. You use the sleeve of your jacket to wipe the sweat from your brow as you glance around. There's no sign of the short yellow lizard anywhere that you can see. "Alphys, are you home?"

Silence.

"Maybe she went out," Frisk says, glancing up the escalator that leads down from the second floor.

You're about to speak when the door that you thought is supposed to lead to a bathroom slides open.

"Close but no cigar, darling!" Mettaton croons, wagging an oversized finger as he rolls into the room. He stops just past the door. "She actually went down. Down this elevator, in fact! I can take her to you if you'd like."

Mettaton has dropped in on your visits with Alphys on more than one occasion, so seeing him now is surprising but not unusual. He's always been polite and flattering, if maybe a little excessively so, and over the past couple weeks you've chalked up Sans's concerns as thinly veiled jealousy. Besides, what reason could he possibly have to hurt you?

"I didn't realize that there was a downstairs," you say, earning yourself a friendly chuckle from the robot.

"It's where the good doctor keeps all her real work, you see," he says, his red and yellow display blinking to show a crude smiley face.
Nodding, you take hold of Frisk's hand. They look up at you, a little uncertain. You flash a reassuring smile. "C'mon, let's go find Alphys."

"Excellent, just follow me, my beauties!" Mettaton says, gesturing with his noodle-like arms.

The two of you follow the rectangular robot into the elevator. It's a little crowded, but you manage. Frisk gives you another uncertain look and you squeeze their hand.

When the doors open, the room in front of you is dark. It takes a few moments for your eyes to adjust as Mettaton urges you out of the elevator. Blinking and rubbing your face, you realize that it's strangely quiet down here. The only light comes from thin green emergency lighting strips set into the walls near the floor. The air is dusty and tastes stale on your tongue.

"Mom?" Frisk's grip on your hand tightens, right as you hear the elevator slide shut behind you. You turn to face Mettaton, nervousness prickling across your skin. Something doesn't feel right. The robot has his hands pressed to what might be his hips, drumming his fingers against his metal surface with a soft, hollow sound. His display alternates red and yellow squares like a chess board, then goes dark.

Mettaton heaves a robotic sigh, and something in you makes you take a step backwards, tugging Frisk along. "Now, darlings. I hate to do this to you, but if I'm being honest... You're quite an obstacle." Mettaton spreads his hands and gives something akin to a shrug. "You see, Asgore only needs one more Soul to break the Barrier and, well, we just can't have that now can we? I dread to think what might happen to the humans on the surface if all monsters were freed. And if I were to take your perfect little Souls, then I can protect the humans and get to the surface myself! Then I'll finally become the star I always dreamed I'd be!"

"Sans was right about you, you ass!" you shout at him, shoving Frisk behind you and taking another step backwards. You try to gauge if you can dart around Mettaton to get back to the elevator but there's just not enough space. But, he must not be ready to attack you yet because you don't feel the telltale tug in your chest of your Soul reacting.

He sighs again, his display blinking yellow with a red checkmark. "Yes, he was right to warn you! You should have listened, but it's too late now isn't it? Now, don't take this the wrong way, it's nothing personal, darling."

With a snap of his fingers a spotlight illuminates the space around him, making you cry out and shield your eyes. You take a few more steps back, and when you can see again there's a floating camera hovering at Mettaton's shoulder. He also has what looks like a chainsaw gripped in his hands, tip resting on the ground. But still, you don't feel anything stirring inside your Soul. Is it because he's a robot and not really a monster?

"But you're in luck! Your final moments will be captured forever in what will likely be my greatest movie yet! I'm certain it will be absolutely thrilling! I'll even give you a head start, I'd hate for it to be over too quickly, that would just spoil the dramatic tension!" Mettaton lets out a stilted laugh, raising his chainsaw into the air. "Oh, and do be careful. You're not alone down here. But I suggest you start running!"
You should have listened to Sans. You let your guard down and now you're running for your life with Frisk's hand clutched tight in yours. How many people are going to try and kill you here in the Underground?

The lab is dark and you can't stop thinking about what Mettaton said before he let you get a head start. That you're not alone down here. What does that mean? Other monsters? He made it sound like they might be just as dangerous to you as he is...

Ducking down another hallway you come to a room with what looks like another elevator. Glancing behind you, you don't see anyone following, yet, so you skid to a halt and start smashing the call button. Nothing happens. That's when you notice four different-colored circles embedded in the door, one of which —the red one— is glowing.

You take a second to look over at Frisk. They're pale and trembling, clinging to your hand and looking back over their shoulder. You've never seen them look so scared. Even when Undyne was trying to kill you, Frisk was more collected than this, even going to far as to try and talk her down. You feel your own panic start to temper, your instinct to protect your child hardening your edges.

"Come on," you tell them, tugging them to the right. "We have to keep moving."

Heart pounding, you lead Frisk down another hall, through a door marked with a red light that slides open as you approach. Yet another hallway opens up before you, punctuated with black screens set into the wall. They flicker to life as you get near, glowing green text casting dim light across your face. You don't have time to read them, but as you pass you catch the words 'Soul power' 'determination' 'humans' 'monsters' 'bodies'... What the hell is this place? What connection does it have with Alphys?

Distantly you hear the buzz of a chainsaw, and fear twists so hard in your stomach you're almost overwhelmed with the urge to vomit. Frisk's hand tightens on yours and they whimper.

You need to get back to the first elevator, the one you know works. Maybe, once Mettaton follows you far enough inside, you can circle around and head back there. Right now it's the only thing you can think of. But, at the moment all you can do is keep running.

The hall opens up into a room full of empty beds. There's two ways you can go so you just pick one, hoping that maybe Mettaton won't know which way you decide. You wind your way through them and down another hallway. There to greet you is a series of mirrors and a row of bright yellow flowers. Frisk jerks to a halt, causing both of you to almost fall forward as you try to keep running. When you look back at them, they're staring wide-eyed at the flowers.

"What? Frisk, we can't stop!" you tell them but they don't seem to hear you.

You try to pull them further down the hall but they turn towards a panel set into the wall between the mirrors, which flickers to life at their presence.

I've chosen a candidate. I haven't told Asgore yet, because I want to surprise him with it... In the center of his garden, there's something special. The first golden flower, that grew before all the others. The flower from the outside world. It appeared just before the queen left. I wonder... What
You're not sure if it makes any sense to Frisk, but the entry seems like nonsense to you. And it doesn't matter. None of these things down here in this place matter except getting back out alive. You give Frisk's arm a hard yank, drawing them out of their daze. They look up at you with wide eyes that finally seem to see you again.

"Baby we have to keep running!" you tell them.

"We... we can call for help. Maybe someone can help us!" Frisk blurs out, jumping as you hurry them past more mirrors.

Of course. Why didn't you think about your phone? You pull it out of your pocket, fumbling with shaking hands as you bring up Sans's number. The phone tries to dial but it doesn't even start ringing. Frustrated tears spring to your eyes as fear overwhelms your senses. You take a deep breath, trying to steady yourself as you dial again. Silence and then the call fails.

"It's not working! It won't connect to Sans," you blurt out, voice tight. "I... I'll try Alphys."

You let out a frustrated noise as you flick through menus to retrieve Alphys's number. You hit the call button, and after a stomach-twisting moment of silence it starts to ring. Will this actually work? You nearly sob when the ring cuts off as Alphys answers.

"H-hello?" Alphys's voice is slightly garbled and staticky.

"Alphys! Thank god, Alphys, Mettaton has Frisk and I trapped under the lab. You have to help! He's trying to kill us!" you blurt out in a rush.

Frisk pulls you to another halt, tugging on your hand. But you're focused on trying to talk to Alphys, so you don't turn around to look at them.

"M-M-Metta—" Static cuts her off. "—you? ...—lab?" You can barely make out what she's saying but what you can hear is panicked.

"Alphys you're cutting out! We're under your lab, and Mettaton is trying to kill us!" you say, louder than is probably wise. Frisk's tugging gets a little more insistent.

"P-please d-don't... —rt him! Switch..... —ck! Flip—"

"What? Alphys I don't—"

"H-his back! There's— switch... —ip it! —op him. Don't h-hurt—" Another rush of static cuts through the call. "—ry t-to ...—lp you!"

More static. Right when you think that the call is going to disconnect, you hear voices on the line, suddenly sharp and clear. Clearer than Alphys was. "Come join the fun."

"Mom!" Frisk cries out and you finally turn at another sharp tug on your arm.

There, in front of you, are three... things floating in the air. Pale and amorphous, they look like brains with a trailing spinal cord curled beneath them, eyes and mouths blinking and twisting along the surface. A strange, garbled, watery sound echoes from their many mouths as you hear voices in the phone again.

"You'll be with us shortly," they say.
"W-what? Please..." You take a step backwards, pulling Frisk with you. The things just hover there, almost as if they're contemplating you. They don't move closer as you back away.

"That's a shame," they sigh through the phone. They bob up and down in the air a little. "Be seeing you."

The call disconnects and they float away back down the hall, leaving you staring after them. After a moment you try to call Alphys again but it refuses to even ring, just like it did with Sans. You pocket your phone and with shaking hands lead Frisk further down the hall.

"Is Alphys coming to help us?" Frisk asks. Their voice is quiet and thin.

"I don't know, sweetie. She said... something about a switch on his back. Maybe it'll shut him down." You hope so. Alphys also seemed to be asking you not to hurt him either, but... he's trying to kill you. This isn't just some little misunderstanding!

Frisk doesn't answer.

You're in a room full of fridges when Mettaton catches up to you. It's a dead end with no way out except past the robot. He actually has the gall to seem disappointed. Pressed back against a wall with Frisk tucked into your side, you ball your hands into fists and watch as he cuts off the chainsaw.

"Well, this is it then. Our grand finale! Well, don't you have anything exciting to say? It's amazing what the magic of editing can do for a movie, I'll be sure to make this all very dramatic," Mettaton says, waving absently at the hovering camera. "Oh, and do look at me darling, it just ruins the scene if you look at the lens."

"Why are you doing this?" you demand, glaring with sudden fury. How can he treat your deaths so callously?

He sighs, followed by a small buzz from somewhere inside his body. His display goes red. "Weren't you listening the first time? I need your Souls to get through the barrier. To get to the surface and become a star! If I don't take them someone else will, probably Asgore." He gives an idle flick of his wrist, sounding bored. "And if the barrier breaks, who knows what'll happen to my new audience?"

"But what about the audience you have now?" Frisk asks, clinging to the jacket tied around your waist. "You're gonna leave them?"

Mettaton lets out a frustrated sound, a grinding noise echoing inside his metal frame. He hefts the chainsaw in his hands, yanking on the cord. It roars back to life. "What was that darling? I couldn't hear you over the sound of your impending death!" He lets out a manic laugh that sounds a bit over-the-top, even for him. "Enough stalling!"

This time you feel the tugging sensation in your chest, and your cracked Soul pulls free. Your glow paints the room around you, a sickly mix of dark red and green from the lights. Nearby one of the fridges seems to shudder. Your fingers curl tightly around Frisk's wrist, frantically trying to look for some sort of escape when Mettaton rolls forward... then screeches to a halt.

He kills the chainsaw and lets it fall to his side, his display blinking twice before showing a yellow question mark. "Is that...?" He gestures at your Soul. "What the hell is wrong with your Soul?"

Your anger swells forward in a rush. "There's nothing wrong with me!" you shout at him. "Why do
you people keep trying to kill me and then feel it's necessary to fucking criticize!

Frisk lets out a small gasp at your slip of the tongue. But really, there's more pressing things to worry about. The fridge shakes again.

"Darling please, I know we're shooting a horror movie but is the language really necessary?" Mettaton says, his question mark swapping colors. "And, well, at least I've got a spare." He wags his fingers at Frisk. "Now. Where was I?"

As Mettaton reaches for the cord of the chainsaw again, the fridge starts to melt. It forms a puddle of white, shapeless sludge on the cracked floor, making the robot backpedal to keep his wheel free from the mass. Slowly, the liquid runs upwards, coalescing into a large shape between the two of you and Mettaton. A hint of blue colors its dripping body, taking shape into something that looks like a snowdrake. Parts of its head are replaced with two vegetoids where its eyes should be.

With their back to you, a thin, quiet voice fills the air. "You....... should not...... hurt..... chill....dren." She pauses, her body starting to ripple and quiver with faint laughter. "Chill...dren... Haha..... oh..... Sn... o... wy......"

Mettaton goes a little limp with a frustrated noise. "You shouldn't be getting in my way," he snaps, but there's no real bite to his words. He seems to look past the dripping creature, gesturing at you. He must see the look of horror on your face. "Do you like her? This is Alphys's doing you know. Researching a way to try and break the barrier. This is what sweet, shy Alphys is really capable of." Mettaton starts to laugh. "And of course she never told you one of the real reasons she made me, did she? To impress Asgore. And she designed me to eradicate humans. Never expected that now did you? No, I didn't think so. Yes, your friend was going to help Undyne stop you and Frisk, to collect your Souls to break the barrier. But then she just got too attached, especially once you started that little romance. Oh, I was so sick of listening to her talk about it." He sighs dramatically. "And then there was that half-baked plan to have me pretend to try and kill you so that she could swoop in and play the hero. But that never happened either."

You don't know what to say. You don't know if you believe any of it. Frisk squeezes your arm.

Mettaton jabs a finger in your direction. "That's the Alphys you're friends with. That's the person who made me, and her."

The amalgamate quivers, her body shuddering. "Saved...... me.... Saved..... us.... Was..... going to...... die..... Was..... dying....."

Frisk lets you go. You feel their absence and see as they slip behind the dripping mass shielding you from Mettaton. You don't dare to say anything to them and risk drawing attention from the distracted robot.

"And this is the life she saved. Trapped down here in this abandoned laboratory, forgotten by everyone. Well, I refuse to resign myself to this same fate! I will not die down here under this mountain, forgotten!" He doesn't even notice Frisk duck around behind him, and with one quick motion, slide something on his back.

Mettaton freezes, the chainsaw falling from limp fingers. "Did you. Just flip. My switch?" he demands in a clipped voice. Then, he starts shaking, hands gripping top corners of his body.

You seize the opportunity, running past the amalgamate and snatching Frisk's hand as you both start running. Smoke starts pouring out of Mettaton, obscuring him in a cloud of white behind you. A metallic whirring noise fills the room.
"Ohhh my. If you flipped my switch that can only— Hey! Where do you think you're going! You're supposed to be here for the premiere of my new body, get back here!"

You don't stop. With Mettaton at the back of the lab, the path to the elevator should be clear, and hopefully your means of escape.

Chapter End Notes

As always, check out my Tumblr at onadacora.tumblr.com for fanart, questions, and progress updates. :D
When you make it back to the elevator an electrical barrier blocks your path. There's no way past it that you can see. And whatever that switch on Mettaton's back did, it certainly didn't shut him down. So now you're trapped down here with no way out and you have no idea if Mettaton is any less dangerous than he was before.

You turn and run back the way you came, because you don't have any other choice. Passing through the room full of beds (there's a lump under the covers of one of them, you don't stop to examine it) you head down a hallway you think you haven't been down yet. Monitors blink to life, casting green light along the hall as you pass them, then fade back to black. You catch more of the same words: 'Determination' 'bodies' one of them just says 'no' over and over again... God, what happened down here? Why are there things *living* down here?

You pass another monitor and spot the name 'Mettaton' on the display. Slowing to a stop, you skim over it to see if maybe it has some information on how to deal with him. Frisk squeezes your hand and gives you a silent, questioning look. You squeeze back.

Now that Mettaton's made it big, he never talks to me anymore... Except to ask when I'm going to finish his body. But I'm afraid if I finish his body, he won't need me anymore... Then we'll never be friends ever again... Not to mention, every time I try to work on it, I just get really sweaty...

It doesn't help you in the least. All it tells you is more of what you've already figured out: that Mettaton is a selfish, arrogant prick. You just feel bad for Alphys...

The not-too-distant buzz of a chainsaw has you running again, past a wall of whirring fans. A cloud of white, like hovering snow, twists around the spinning blades. When you reach the end of the hallway, all you find is a locked door and another dead end. Shit.

In an act of desperation you pull your phone out and try to call Sans again. Your hands are shaking as you fumble with the menus, and you suspect the only thing keeping you going right now is adrenaline. Pressing the phone to your ear, all you hear is silence until the call fails with a dull beeping tone. You try Alphys again too, but you get the exact same result. Swallowing down a sob of fear and frustration, you shove the useless phone back in your pants pocket.

Though your instincts are screaming at you to find someplace to hide, to not go back down the hall you came from, you don't have a choice. There's nothing else that you can do. There's nowhere else to run.

The cloud of white shudders as you reach the fans, then goes absolutely still, despite the swirling air tugging at your hair and clothes. Grinding to a halt, all you can do is backpedal away with Frisk at your heels. The pale fragments collapse together into a central point, forming a huge, undulating mass of white that comes crashing down to the floor with a slick, wet plop. Then, quivering, the viscous substance starts to run upwards, forming legs —too many legs— and a head that swivels to face you. In the center of it is a gaping hole where there should be a face.

Frisk gasps and clutches your hand tighter.

The amalgamate shambles towards you, and something about it —and the space between the legs
— reminds you of dogs. Even as you suck in a shuddering breath, trying to think of what to do, the air is filled with the scent of dog. It's watching you, or at least it feels that way, despite not having any eyes. Wiggling anxiously, it stops a few feet from you, a wet, dripping tail perked up and at attention as it waits.

You steal a glance at Frisk. They're watching the creature intently, and while there's fear in their eyes, there's something else in their expression. As if sensing you watching them, Frisk looks up at you and relaxes a little.

"Mom... it's like the dogs," they murmur, returning their attention to the amalgamate.

It perks up slightly, cocking its head to the side. But instead of stopping it just keeps curving until its head is upside down. You try to stop yourself from shuddering. Then its head snaps back into place and its tail sloshes hesitantly from side to side.

The sound of the chainsaw is closer, you realize. You even think you can make out Mettaton's voice over it, making you jump. The amalgamate whines, the pitch starting out low and then getting higher and higher until it sets your teeth on edge. Remembering how the last oozing creature had protected you from Mettaton, you wonder if maybe this one might too.

Holding out your free, shaking hand, you curl your fingers, beckoning. "C-c'mere pup," you manage to say, squeaking out the words.

Tail thrashing from side to side, it surges forward and shoves its head into your hand. Fighting the urge to jerk back, you force yourself to run your fingers over its ear-like protrusions and down its neck. The texture reminds you of putty, warm and fluid, but not wet. As you pet it, it begins leaning into you, swallowing up part of your arm. Pulling back as slow as you can while trying not to panic, the amalgamate's body starts to still, calming. Then, all at once, it leaps away from you and oozes up the walls. It clings to the ceiling by its feet, the gaping orifice in its head trained on you as it sways side to side.

"Ah, there you are darlings!"

Fear wrenches your gut, yanking your attention away from the amalgamate as an unfamiliar body with a familiar voice starts making his way down the hall. Mettaton's new look is humanoid but distinctly robotic; he's all shiny silver metal, glossy black, and lacquered pink. Black hair covers the right side of his face, and he flashes you what would be a winning smile if it wasn't for the malice in his eye. The hovering camera trails behind him in silence.

His tall, pink heeled boots tap across the cracked tiles as he approaches you, cutting off the chainsaw with a sigh. "Now look here, my beauties. You went through all that trouble just to get me into this body, and the least I can do is let you enjoy it for a moment before I kill you. Let's be honest, I really am to die for!"

His laugh cuts short and turns into a frown at your poor reception. You glare at him, tugging your hand free from Frisk's grip. Filled with more anger, adrenaline, and frustration than sense, you storm up to Mettaton. Ignoring the tug of your Soul leaving your body at the proximity, you shove him in the chest with both hands. You manage to twist the dial on his chest, and the robot is caught off balance as he stumbles backwards.

"You son of a bitch!" you scream, pressing after him.

Startled and furious, he lashes out and backhands you across the face. Pain bursts across your skin and your hand reflexively covers where he hit you, eyes widening in shock. When Mettaton starts
to speak, his voice comes out high and shrill. "Hands off the merchandise!" he snaps. Gasping in horror, he reaches for the dial you knocked out of alignment, twisting it and muttering to himself.

The pain in your cheek and jaw is starting to fade, and when you pull your hand away there's a streak of blood on your fingers. Carefully probing with your tongue, you let out a hiss as you find where your lip split.

"Mom! Mom are you okay!" Frisk says, at your side again and tugging on your shirt. They turn to face Mettaton, hands fisting in your clothes. "Don't hurt her! Stop being so mean!"

Mettaton's eye narrows, satisfied with adjusting the dial on his chest. "I'm not being mean. I'm not doing any of this to be mean. It's a means to an end; the only way I can get out from under this miserable rock and become a star!"

"But you're already a star! What about all your fans down here, like... Papyrus! A-and..." Frisk mumbles to themselves for a second. "And what a-about Napstablook!"

You're not sure what the shy ghost has to do with anything, but something about the name makes Mettaton flinch.

Frisk keeps talking, determination filling their voice. "All the people down here that care about you would miss you if you left!"

"Of course they would! Who else can possibly be as fantastic as... I... am..." The robot seems to waver for a moment, his anger slipping away by degrees.

"No one can! The rest of the monsters need you!" Frisk presses, and for a moment it seems like Mettaton might be changing his mind...

But the robot's expression twists into a grimace, hefting the chainsaw in front of him. "I've already made my decision! I'm going to the surface to become the biggest, brightest star the humans have ever seen!"

As he reaches for the starter cord, a dripping white tendril lashes down from the ceiling and coils around Mettaton's wrist. Before the robot can even startle, another tendril wraps itself around the base of his arm. Together, the two thin appendages yank upwards and rip Mettaton's arm out of its socket. All you can do is gape as the amalgamation oozes back down the wall, pulling the sparking metal into its undulating body. It fills the space between you and Mettaton, letting out a growl that climbs and plummets in pitch.

"Get out of my way you mangy pack of mutts!" Mettaton snaps. But before he can do anything else, the creature lunges forward and knocks him flat on his back.

Still growling in a wavering pitch as unstable as its body, it covers Mettaton on the floor.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he shouts, and all you can do is watch as the robot tries to struggle and fight his way free.

With the sound of crushing metal and snapping wires, the amalgamate lifts off of the ground, and with one last look back at you, trots off on its too-many legs. All that's left behind of Mettaton is his torso and head. The places where his limbs were attached are a mess of frayed wires and sparks. He tilts his neck so that he can look at the two of you, glaring for a moment before letting out a sigh of resignation. His head falls back against the ground.

Are you safe now? You look down at Frisk and feel surprised to see them looking a little
remorseful. They try to approach Mettaton but you stop them, clinging fast to their hand. It takes you a moment to realize that your Soul has vanished.

"You're right, you know," Mettaton says, weary. "No one else has ever tried to be a star for the Underground like I have. If I leave, then what will everyone do?"

Frisk bites their lip. They seem about to say something but you can't keep silent any longer. "You arrogant, selfish bastard!" you snap, rage fueled by your sudden lack of fear boiling over. "I couldn't care less about you or your stupid fame. And even if you did make it to the surface, you'd probably get disassembled in a lab somewhere by greedy scientists the second they figured out what you are! And you know what? You'd fucking deserve it."

"Mom!" Frisk gasps, and a cold stab of guilt serves to cool the edges off your anger.

"Come on," you mutter, tugging Frisk in a wide path around what's left of Mettaton. Your cheek is throbbing and when you reach up to touch it you think it's started to swell.

"Wait," Mettaton says, and you're too frustrated to care. You keep walking. "Wait!"

Frisk yanks on your hand, pulling you to a stop. You bite the inside of your mouth to keep yourself from snapping at them. "Mom," they say, in a tone that suggests they're scolding you.

"Before I... run out of power," Mettaton says, and now that you're listening to his voice you realize that his words are starting to slur. Like an electronic toy with dying batteries. "This form just... drains so quick it's... such a hassle..." He sighs. "Please... don't judge Alphys too harshly... She was... just trying... to... help..."

"When?" you cut out.

He's silent for a moment, and you think he might have shut down before he speaks again. "Always... With everything..."

"I'm not mad at Alphys. I don't understand any of this, but at least she's never tried to kill me."

You wait for Mettaton to answer with some annoyed remark, but you see his eye is closed now and his torn limbs aren't sparking anymore. He must have run out of power.

"Undyne tried to kill you," Frisk says quietly.

"Undyne was honest about it from the start. Don't compare the two," you say, your tone too harsh for you liking. "Let's just... get away from here, sweetie."

Mettaton might be out of commission but his electric barrier is still in place between you and the elevator. For now, you tell Frisk that you'll just have to wait for Alphys to find a way to come get the two of you. For about ten minutes you wait beside the barrier, but soon you seem to be getting antsy and Frisk timidly suggests that you explore a little bit. Much to their surprise, you agree.

Frisk hasn't seen you that upset since Undyne, and has never heard you cuss like that in front of them before. Your movements as the two of you walk through the lab are stiff and jerky, and small noises make you jump. Frisk squeezes your hand to try and comfort you, but you barely give them a small smile before looking away. A frown tugs down on the corners of your mouth.

After a little bit of searching, you find a room with a television and video tapes. You have to explain to Frisk what they are because they've never seen them before. There's a numbered set and,
curious and eager for the distraction, you try to find the first one, but end up settling on the second.

The voice in Frisk's head has been alert but silent most of the day, watching and waiting. They had been the one to insist on saying something to Mettaton about Napstablook, and when they told them Frisk felt an odd sense of deja vu.

The tape starts off with a loud burst of static that makes you and Frisk jump, and then the screen goes black. But then, there's the sound of a young boy talking.

"Okay, Chara, are you ready? Do your creepy face!" There's a short pause. "Ahhhh! Hee hee hee!"

**No. I don't want to hear this.**

"Oh! Wait! I had the lens cap on... What?! You're not gonna do it again...? Come on, quit tricking me! Haha!"

**Frisk. I don't want to watch these.**

You eject the second tape and insert the third, looking confused. Frisk starts twisting the sleeves of their knotted jacket in their hands.

"Howdy, Chara! Smile for the camera!" Childish laughter fills the room. "Ha, this time I got you! I left the cap on... on purpose! Now you're smiling for nooooo reason! Hee hee hee!"

**Please, make them stop! I don't want to listen to him...**

*Are... are you Chara?*

"What? Oh, yeah, I remember. When we tried to make butterscotch pie for Dad, right? The recipe asked for cups of butter... But we accidentally put in buttercups instead."

**No no no no no...**

"Yeah! Those flowers got him really sick... I felt so bad. We made Mom really upset. I should have laughed it off, like you did... Um, anyway, where are you going with this?"

**I said to make it stop! Are you some kind of idiot?!**

*I don't understand. But...*

"Mom, should we be watching these?" Frisk asks, voice soft.

"Huh? Turn off the camera...? Ok," the boy in the video says, and then it stops.

You hesitate, ejecting the third one and looking at the fourth. "I... No, we probably shouldn't." You sigh, putting the tape back in the stack where you found it. "I don't even understand what they are..."

The voice (that Frisk thinks is named Chara) feels like they're starting to cry. But when Frisk tries to reach deep inside to comfort them, they lash out until all they can do is pull away and wait for them to fall silent.
Happy Holidays everyone! Sans will be back next chapter, I promise! <3
Holding Together

You're sitting up against the wall near the electric fence, Frisk curled up in your lap. Sharing a bag of chisps because you haven't eaten since breakfast, your busted lip stings but you do your best to ignore it. The two of you sit in silence, save for the crackling of electricity and the crunch of chewing. This is how Alphys and Undyne find you when the monsters rush out of the elevator.

The sight of Undyne's fanged grimace and magical, glowing spear cause you to flinch, conflicting relief and the sharp jolt of fear warring in your chest. Admonishing yourself silently, you pull Frisk and yourself to your feet, giving her a tremulous smile. It doesn't last long, sucking in a breath as pain shoots through your lip.

"Undyne! Alphys!" Frisk says, grinning. You have a tight hold on their hand to keep them from getting too close to the arcing electricity.

"WHERE IS HE?!!" Undyne bellows, looking past you down the hallway, pacing her side of the barrier like a wildcat.

"A-a-are you o-okay?" Alphys asks you, glancing at the two of you before hurrying to a small panel set into the wall. With a few quick presses of her stubby fingers, the fence shuts off with a low, fading hum.

Undyne storms past you, gripping the spear in both hands as she positions herself between you and the rest of the lab. With your initial, embarrassing rush of fear gone, you feel safer just knowing she's nearby. Frisk rushes after her and flings their arms around her leg. Hesitating, she looks down at them and then takes one hand off her weapon to ruffle their hair. "You okay, squirt?"

Frisk nods.

You feel a small, dry hand on your arm, making you jump. As you turn at the contact, Alphys snatches her hand away from you, wringing it in front of her. Her eyes are watery behind thick glasses as she studies your face. "O-oh god, are you okay?" she asks, her gaze falling to your lip.

"I'll be fine," you murmur, reaching up to touch your cheek. It's definitely swollen, and when you look down at your hand you see dried flakes of blood on your fingers. You must look awful. A distant, muffled part of you remembers that this isn't the first time this has happened, but your mother was more careful to not leave any lasting marks. But, her hand wasn't made of metal, either.

"Um, w-what happened w-with M-Mettaton?" she asks, glancing past you at Undyne. "W-where is he?"

The fish monster has Frisk sitting on her hip, the way you used to carry them when they were a toddler. You're not strong enough to do that much anymore, but she makes it look effortless. She grimaces at the mention of Mettaton's name, fingers tensing around her spear.

"We left him in that room full of fans. We flipped his switch like you said, but it just made him look different. One of those things that lives down here —the one that looks like dogs?— tore off his arms and legs and he ran out of power." You shake your head, pressing the knuckles of a trembling hand against your sternum. "I don't... Alphys, what the hell is this place?"

"Yeah, I had no idea there was anything like this under your lab," Undyne adds, looking over her shoulder.
Alphys's scales seem to pale, her expression twisting with guilt. "L-let me get M-Mettaton. You sh-should take Frisk upstairs a-and I promise I-I'll explain everything." She glances over at Undyne, who's watching her with an unreadable expression. "T-to both of you..."

You're crashing from the lack of adrenaline, so you don't have it in you to argue. You just nod and beckon Frisk to your side. Undyne lowers them to the ground and gives you a nod before you turn to take the elevator back up.

You have three missed calls from Alphys, placed after you called her from down in the basement lab. There's nothing from Sans. You think about calling him, but... guilt twists in your stomach. You should have listened to him. He told you this would happen! Somehow he knew that Mettaton was a threat, and you chalked it up to jealousy. You're certain that he's going to be angry with you, and you think you deserve it.

Sitting on the couch off in a corner, Frisk almost starts dozing off in your lap when Alphys and Undyne come up. Undyne has Mettaton's body hefted under one arm, his head hanging slack. The doctor follows quickly behind, her arms wrapped around a bundle of metal you recognize as his limbs. She must have tracked down the amalgamate and retrieved them. The monsters take all the parts upstairs.

When they return, Alphys fetches a bag of frozen corn from the freezer and offers it to you. You thank her and press it to your cheek.

After a moment of unintelligible stuttering, Alphys tells you everything. About the True Lab, her experiments with Souls and Determination to try and gather enough Soul power to try and break the Barrier. How she gathered up monsters that had 'fallen down' with the help of Asgore to use them for her tests. How horribly wrong it had all gone, with the Determination-filled monsters melting together to form the amalgamations you found. And how in her fear she had hidden them away in the True Lab, taking care of them but hoping that it would all be forgotten because she was too afraid of telling everyone the truth.

She tells you about how she's been watching you and Frisk since you left the Ruins via cameras set up throughout the Underground. That everything Mettaton told you about her is true. She really was going to help Undyne take your Soul, but after watching you she decided not to tell her about you (even though she found out on her own). Alphys looks at Undyne after admitting this part, but Undyne doesn't say anything. Just looks at her.

And finally, she says that she had even come up with an elaborate plan with Mettaton to try and trick you into thinking he was going to kill you, but with a way for Alphys to swoop in and 'save the day' to win you over. But she had decided against it.

Burying her face in her hands, Alphys blurs out in a hurried rush, "But I've enjoyed being friends with you and Frisk so much, and now I'm afraid I've ruined everything! I just wanted people to like me! I wanted Undyne to like me! And I just wanted you to like me! I'm so horrible, and Mettaton hurt you, and I don't expect you to forgive me!"

You glance over at Undyne, but she seems stunned into silence. Sliding Frisk off of your lap and handing them your makeshift icepack, you stand up—a little wobbly but you manage—and walk over to Alphys. Maybe you should be angry at her, but you can't bring yourself to. Mettaton was the one who hurt you, not Alphys. It might just be the exhaustion talking, but despite everything, she never lied about being your friend. And right now that feels like the most important thing. So, carefully wrapping your arms around her as she lets out a startled gasp, you hug her.
"Thank you for saving Frisk and I, Alphys. I don't know if we could have been able to make it out of there without your help," you tell her.

Alphys lets out a startled squeak. You let her go as she starts trembling, looking up at you with watery eyes. "I-I didn't d-do that much..." she mumbles, looking down and scuffing the claws of her feet along the floor. "Endogeny is the one that r-really saved you."

"You were a big help!" Frisk says, at your side and giving Alphys a bright smile. "Really!"

Alphys gives Frisk a hesitant smile in return, fidgeting with her claws. "U-um, if you s-say so..." She glances over at Undyne, and then back at you and Frisk. "B-but I've b-been wondering... What w-were you doing h-here? And Undyne, h-how did you know th-that they'd b-be here, too?"

Undyne goes a little purple and if you were feeling any better you think you'd start laughing. Instead all you can manage is a weak smile. "You told me the truth about everything, but there's something you can do for me to help make up for it."

The doctor looks confused, glancing from you, to Undyne, and back again. "W-what's that?"

"Tell Undyne how you really feel about her," you say.

Flushing deep red under her scales, Alphys stutters helplessly for a moment before giving you a panicked look. "I-I can't d-do that, now! N-not after e-everything I've d-done!"

"What better time to do it than after telling her the truth about everything else? If she's going to accept you, then at least you know she's accepting the real you. Flaws and all."

You feel a hand on your shoulder, and Undyne pulls you away. She's still flushed, but gives you a determined look. "I think I can take this from here," she tells you.

Relieved and honestly exhausted, you give her a nod and take hold of Frisk's hand to lead them away and give the two monsters some privacy. If anything, you hope that those two are honest with each other after all this. But now, you think you need to call Sans.

You're more nervous than you ought to be, but you can't help but feel like this was all your fault. He's going to be angry with you for not listening, but you so badly want to hear his voice and see him that you don't care if he yells at you. You'll accept his anger if only it means going home where you feel safe. Drawing in a steadying breath, you pull out your phone and press the shortcut on your screen that dials his number.

Frisk swings your hand back and forth as you listen to the first ring. They glance up at you but mostly they're just watching Alphys and Undyne, smiling.

Sans picks up after the second ring. "what's up, babe? getting bonely without me?" he asks, and you can hear the smile in his voice.

Just the sound of him sends a wave of relief through your body. Your throat tightens as tears prick your eyes. You have to take in another deep breath and tilt your head upwards, as if you can keep the tears from falling just by defying gravity. "Hey, hun," you say. Your voice wavers and you know that your voice is betraying you already.

"what's wrong? is everything okay?" he asks, the concern in his voice making you feel like someone is squeezing your heart in your chest.

You squeeze your eyes shut as they start to swim. Frisk reaches up to stroke your arm. "We're
okay; Frisk and I are okay," you tell him firmly, despite the way your voice is cracking. "But I-I need—" you bite back a sob, "I need you to come get me and Frisk and take us h-home."

"of course i will, babe. where are you?" His voice is so calm and reassuring you almost can't hear the worry underneath.

"Alphys's lab. We're inside," you tell him, then the call disconnects.

Blinking hard, you fight back the tears threatening to spill and shove your phone back in your pocket. Frisk tugs on your hand gently.

"Mom, are you okay?" they ask in a soft voice.

"I will be, sweetie. Try not to worry about me too much, okay?" you say, looking down and giving them a watery smile.

The door to the lab slides open and Sans walks in, barely taking a moment before spotting the two of you. He's at your side so fast you think he must have teleported part of the distance across the room. The fabric of his jacket is still cool to the touch from Snowdin when he reaches out for you, one hand brushing over Frisk's head before focusing his attention entirely on you. The white pinpricks of light in his eyes are dim as he meets your gaze, the furrow of his brow deepening when he sees your tears. Then his eye sockets go dark as you know he sees your swollen cheek and split lip. He raises a hand and gingerly traces his thumb over your cheekbone, careful not to hurt you.

"what happened?" he asks, his voice forced into evenness. "who did this?"

"Mettaton, he—"

Sans pulls his hand away, balling it into a fist as blue sparks in his left eye. "where is he?"

"He's broken and out of power, hun, please," you reach out with your free hand to curl your fingers in his jacket. You lean towards him and he takes hold of your waist. It feels like he's shaking, but you're trembling yourself so it's difficult to tell. Maybe it's both of you. Your throat is tight as tears spill down your face now that Sans is here to hold you as you start to feel everything that just happened. "Please, I just want to go home. This was all my fault, I-I should have listened to you..."

"i dunno what happened, but it's not your fault. him...doing this to you is not your fault," he tells you, his tone firm. "did... did he attack you and frisk?"

You nod, face crumpling as you try and fail to bite back a sob. You want to hug him, to let yourself finish breaking apart so you can start putting yourself back together, but you can't. Not yet. You want to be home where you feel safe when it happens.

Magic buzzes in the air between you as his eye starts to glow in earnest.

"S-Sans!" you hear Alphys squeak from behind you, followed by two sets of footsteps. "P-please put that d-down!"

Even with your blurred vision, as you glance to the side you can see the outline of Alphys's fridge glowing blue. It's also hovering a few feet off the ground, straining against its cord. Sans's grip on your waist tightens, one arm circling you to cover the small of your back.

"did you know what was going on, alphys?" Sans demands, a harsh bite in his voice.
"I-I was d-doing my best t-to g-get them out o-of the lab," she stammers. "H-he had them t-trapped downstairs..."

"why didn't you call me?"

"I-I don't have y-your number!"

"Sans, this isn't her fault!" Undyne cuts in, frustrated.

"and how long have you been here? why didn't you let me know what was going on?" he snaps.

"We were taking care of it! Everything is fine!" she says.

The fridge slams back down to the ground, making you jump and cry out. Sans pulls you closer. "this isn't fine! she— they could have died! and i wouldn't have even known..."

"Sans, please!" you beg, pressing your forehead against his jaw, flinging your arm around his shoulders. You're crying and Frisk is clutching tight to your hand, silent and uncertain, and more than anything you just... "Please, I want to go home."

You feel the tension in Sans's body and in the room, the staticky buzz of his magic prickling your skin. Then, slowly, it all starts to fade as Sans wraps his arms around you completely and hugs you close. "ok. ok, i'll take you home. i've got you."

He pulls one hand away from you to reach for Frisk, and with a familiar —and welcome— tugging sensation in your stomach, the three of you leave the lab behind.
Regaining Control

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frisk must be made of tougher stuff than you, because as the three of you appear in the living room back home they just give you a concerned look, a quick hug, and announce they're going upstairs to get started on their homework. Maybe they know you need some time with Sans, or they're uncomfortable seeing you cry. They've always been good at picking up on emotions, but... You don't know, but they've been fine since Mettaton ran out of power. You're not sure how they manage, but they do.

Sans pulls you onto the couch, holding you as you cry into the fabric of his jacket and tell him what happened. He listens, one arm wrapped around you while his other hand rubs up and down your back. You leave out some of the parts with Alphys (the cameras and her abandoned plans) because you don't want him to be more angry with her than he already is. But you tell him about what happened with Mettaton and why you were in Hotland to begin with. When you apologize again for not listening to him, he shushes you and runs his hand through your hair, nuzzling the top of your head.

As you fall silent, finished with your story, you feel empty, like you've been wrung out. It's better; better than being scared and sorry and angry. Part of you just wants to burrow into Sans's jacket and fall asleep, but he hasn't said anything and slowly you start wondering why. He's tense against you, and as you start to pull back so you can look at his face his grip on you tightens, refusing to let go.

"Sans," you murmur, turning your head so that your nose brushes his cheekbone.

He's trembling, you realize. "i should have been there to protect you," he whispers, leaning into your touch.

"Hun..." You shift as much as he'll let you, cupping the back of his head so that you can hold him the only way you can. "You didn't know."

"that's the worst part," he says, shaking his head weakly and burying his face into your shoulder. "i don't know what i would do... if this all ended. i can't go back."

"I'm sorry," you say, because if you had listened he wouldn't be so shaken. "We're okay. We're still here."

"this was too close. way too close. how many times am i gonna almost lose you?" Sans's voice cracks and he shudders.

You stroke the back of his head as he draws in a slow, deep breath, trying to steady himself. "I think two near-death experiences— no wait, three if you count falling down that hole. Um... I don't think that sounds any better," you mutter, giving a weak laugh. "I was trying to say that, I think I've had enough for one lifetime. I mean, an ordinary person doesn't normally deal with this much in the space of two months."

Sans's laugh is bitter and humorless. "well, babe, i always knew you were extraordinary." He sighs, and his grip on you relaxes a little. "but, can you do me a favor? can you promise not to leave snowdin without letting me know? and just... stay away from the hotland for now, unless i'm
with you."

"But Undyne can—"

"babe, please. for me," he says, and there's no way you can argue against the desperation in his voice.

"Okay. I promise," you tell him, carefully brushing reassuring kisses along his cheekbone.

After a few moments of this he takes hold of your sides and eases you away from him. He studies your face, the white lights skimming over you, before he tenderly cups your injured cheek. He seems calmer, but something hard settles into his unreadable expression, tightening the line of his mouth. "is there anything i can do for you? for your lip, or..."

"Just stay here with me. Maybe we can watch a movie." You hesitate, wincing. "Something without Mettaton, and happy. I just... I'd rather not be alone."

Sans brushes a toothy kiss against your forehead with a tenderness that makes you feel warm and loved. "that can be arranged."

As it turns out, Sans and Papyrus have a small collection of animated children's movies (mostly Disney). While your boyfriend gets everything ready, you go upstairs to clean the dried blood off your face. You didn't notice before, but some of it had dripped down and stained your shirt. Your lip still stings and you can taste the faint coppery tang of blood when you swipe your tongue across the split skin. Your cheek is starting to bruise, the swollen flesh purpling. It's throbbing a little, but you think you look worse than you feel.

You take a moment to drag your brush through your hair, working through the tangles. It helps you feel a little more put-together as you pull it back into a ponytail. With it out of the way, you wet a washcloth and take careful dabs at the dried blood flaking down your chin. The water runs an unpleasant reddish-brown as you rinse it under the faucet. You also take a moment to try and blot at the bloodstains on your shirt, but it doesn't do much good. Unfortunately you don't have any peroxide to work with.

Making a quick detour to change shirts (one of Sans's, the baggy black t-shirt is comforting) you go check on Frisk. They're sitting in the middle of the floor, carefully filling out a worksheet. They glance up as you stand in the doorway.

"Wanna come watch some movies with Sans and me?" you ask them. "Happy stuff only, no scary allowed, I promise."

Frisk leaps to their feet, abandoning their homework on the ground. Normally you'd say something about them putting it away, but... after everything you just don't care. And so, a few moments later, Sans wraps the three of you up in a big blue blanket to snuggle on the couch. You're caught in the center, laying against Sans with your knees folded up under you. Frisk is using your hip as a pillow, one arm tucked under their head while the other drapes over your calf.

You don't actually remember the middle part of the movie because you think you fall asleep, then wake up somewhere during the climax of the story. You glance up at Sans but much to your surprise he's still awake. His eyes are fixed on the screen, but he seems to be looking past it as his thumb rubs slow circles against your ribs.

About halfway through the second movie you hear the rattle of keys in the door and Papyrus lets himself inside. "HUMANS, I AM HOME! UNDYNE WENT TO GO SEE ALPHYS EARLIER,
SO I DO NOT KNOW WHEN SHE WILL BE— OH, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HOME ALREADY SANS?"

Papyrus frowns at his brother, glances at you and Frisk, then back at Sans, and then, finally, with a loud gasp, looks back at you. "WHAT HAPPENED? ARE YOU INJURED? I DON'T THINK YOUR FACE IS SUPPOSED TO BE THAT COLOR! UNDYNE'S FACE DOES THAT SOMETIMES AFTER SHE GETS HIT VERY HARD. HAVE YOU BEEN FIGHTING SOMEONE?"

The tall skeleton falls to his knees in front of the couch, leaning in close to inspect your face. You take hold of his hands, letting him help you sit up straight. "I'll be fine, Pap. It hurts a little—" this is an understatement, but you don't want to worry him, "—but in a few days I'll be back to normal."

"BUT WHAT HAPPENED?" he asks again, looking from you to Sans.

"it was mettaton," Sans says flatly. "he hit her."

"HE H-HIT YOU? B-BUT I DON'T... I'M SURE THERE MUST BE SOME KIND OF MISUNDERSTANDING." Papyrus searches your face, as if he can find the answer in your expression. You feel bad for him, and while you don't want to lie, you don't really want to tell him the truth either. You wonder if Sans is as conflicted as you are.

"bro, i don't think she wants to talk about it right now," Sans says, shrugging and deflecting the question. He slides off the couch and stands up. "but for now i'd appreciate it if, if you see mettaton, you keep him away from them."

"SANS, THAT SOUNDS A LITTLE—"

"papyrus," Sans snaps, cutting him off. As his brother goes silent and snaps his mouth closed with a click, Sans winces. "please just do that for me, ok?"

"ALL RIGHT..." he says, wringing his hands.

Sans puts his hand on Papyrus's shoulder, jerking his head towards the couch. "why don't you take my spot and watch the movie? i need to go check on something since i had to leave my post early."

Something about Sans's words ring false, and you think you see a small frown crease Papyrus's brow, but neither of you say anything. Instead, the tall skeleton just does as his brother suggests and takes the spot next to you, wrapping you up in a careful hug. You hug him back.

"I'M SORRY THAT YOU ARE HURT," he says.

"Thanks, I'll be okay," you tell him again.

As you pull away, Sans is waiting in front of you. He reaches out and takes hold of your hand, looking down at your fingers instead of your face. "i won't be gone long. you want me to pick up some food from grillby's on my way back so you don't have to cook? i'm sure i can get him to bag it up for me."

Papyrus scoffs before you can even answer. "NONSENSE, I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WILL COOK DINNER! WHAT YOU NEED MOST, HUMAN, IS A BIG, COMFORTING PLATE OF SPAGHETTI! IT'S LIKE A WARM, NOODLY HUG INSIDE YOUR STOMACH!" He clears his throat. "AND I PROMISE TO MAKE IT THE WAY YOU SHOWED ME."

"Ooh, I want spaghetti!" Frisk says.
"Well, who am I to argue," you concede, shrugging and giving Sans a weak smile.

Sans glances up from your joined hands, meeting your eyes for a moment. Then he leans forward to nuzzle your temple, cupping your jaw with his free hand. "i love you, i'll be back in a little while."

"I love you too. Is everything okay?" you ask, squeezing his fingers as he pulls away.

He gives you a squeeze in response before letting go of your hand. "yeah. don't worry about it."

With a short little wave, he vanishes before you can say anything else.

Sans arrives inside the lab and —greeted by the sight of Alphys and Undyne kissing on that ratty old couch— promptly teleports back outside so he can knock first. Shoving away the sudden rush of embarrassment, he gives three hard raps on the metal door and then pushes the button to let himself inside. It's enough of a warning because both the monsters are on their feet, though they look a little dazed and flushed. Even if he hadn't seen them in action, he would have had a good guess just from their familiar expressions. But as much as he'd like to congratulate them for finally mucking through the quagmire of their feelings, he has more important business to attend to.

"alphys, i need to talk to you," Sans says, shoving his hands into his pockets and striding up to the two of them. He glances at Undyne. "in private."

Undyne frowns, looking from Sans to Alphys. "If this is about what happened earlier, that wasn't Alphys's fault. And I'm not going to let you—"

"oh, i'm gonna have words with that pile of scrap here in a moment, but no. i want to talk to alphys about something else," Sans cuts in, frowning but doing his best to remain calm. His anger isn't for them. He's not angry at Undyne being protective of her new relationship with Alphys. If anything, he understands that strong urge to protect very intimately.

Alphys is just watching him for a moment, studying his expression before turning to Undyne. "I-it's okay. Just let me talk to him alone, p-please?"

Undyne hesitates, looking between the two of them for a moment before giving a curt nod. "Okay, I'll just be over there in the, ah, kitchen," she says, gesturing at Alphys's fridge. It's a little banged up on the bottom, but as far as he can tell it's still running.

With the fish monster out of earshot, Alphys rings her hands, sweat dotting her face. She glances away, like she can't bring herself to look him in the eye. "H-how are they doing?" she asks.

"they're fine," he says curtly. "she told me what you were up to down in the old lab."

Alphys flinches, pulling off her glasses and wiping them with her sleeve. It's a nervous habit, one she hasn't lost over the years. "I had to do something to try and break the b-barrier."

"but experimenting on people, alphys? you never would have done that before," he says, eyes narrowing and balling his hands into fists in his pockets.

"You l-left, Sans. You left and wouldn't answer my calls so I did the only thing I could think to t-try," she says, defensive. "And soon I'm going to make it up to them and take them home to their families... Undyne said she would h-help me."

Sans is more than a little surprised to hear that, but pleasantly so. But from the way you described
the amalgamates, he's a little uncertain. "are they safe enough to be let out?"

"Y-yes! They can get a little confused sometimes, b-but they're still them." Alphys sighs, finally replacing her glasses on her face and looking at Sans. She looks... not confident but maybe more resigned. At least it's something. "I just want this to be over. I want to stop l-lying and stop hiding. At least... at least I know I won't lose all my friends. N-not that I have very many..."

He hesitates, frustrated with himself and the sudden wave of guilt that he feels. "you know that it's not your fault we stopped talking, right? it was just too much of a reminder..." Sans grimaces and looks away, shaking his head. He doesn't want to talk about this. This isn't why he's here.

"I-I still wish you would have stayed here. If we had worked together on a solution, even after the a-accident—"

No. "look, i need to talk to mettaton," Sans says, cutting her off.

Alphys withers under his cold stare. "I-I don't think that's a good idea, Sans..."

"what kinda monster do you take me for? i'm not gonna hurt him." He forces himself to grin, shrugging his shoulders. "i just need to impress upon him the gravity—" his eye flashes blue for a moment, "—of the situation."

"He's still incredibly damaged, I haven't even t-turned him back on yet!" she protests, wringing her hands.

"you do realize what he tried to do? he was going to take their souls and leave. he doesn't care about anyone but himself. why are you protecting him?" he says, gritting his teeth.

"Because he's my friend," she says weakly.

"he's been using you for your talent. you have to know that."

"At least he needed me to help him!"

There's a moment of stunned silence, and Sans isn't sure what to say. He never thought that he and Alphys were that close before, but... is it possible that she had considered them more than colleagues? Had she considered him her friend? She was always so awkward, he'd never been sure, and if he's entirely honest he was a little bit full of himself back then. The only thing greater than his intelligence had been his own inflated ego, which made the accident that much more devastating. He's not proud of the person he used to be.

"alphys..." Sans starts, but the words die between his teeth as she shakes her head.

"He's u-upstairs on my worktable. There's a small switch next to his charger that will boot up his system," she says, crossing her arms over her chest and hugging herself. "Just leave him there when you're done. I should probably t-talk to him too."

"thanks," he says, and after a brief hesitation Sans blinks himself upstairs.

All this teleporting is starting to tire him out a little, but he knows he has enough in him to get home. He takes in a steadying breath, reminding himself that this is the real reason that he's here. Because Mettaton almost killed you and Frisk and took away everything good he's had over the past two months. He's never made it this far in a timeline before. Each one of Frisk's visits lasted at most a little over a week, and that was only if they really took their time. Others it was as little as two days. Two months... two months is long enough that he's almost getting used to
actually living his life. Long enough to start feeling real hope that this might be real.

And he was this close to losing everything, all because of this stupid robot and his selfish aspirations. The worst part, the part that scares him, is the fact that if it had happened, he would have never known why. He would have been at his sentry station, and then he would have woken up back in his bed with no trace of you and no clue why it all reset.

His renewed anger is enough motivation to approach the workbench where what's left of Mettaton's EX body is propped up. He's hooked up to an outlet on the wall by a thick cable, and with a quick glance Sans is able to find the small toggle switch. He flicks it and takes a step back.

Mettaton's speaker crackles for a second as his head lolls from one side to the other. He groans, the sound cutting in and out for a moment before stabilizing.

"hate to interrupt your beauty sleep," Sans says, shifting from one foot to the other. His grin is icy. "though, uh, damn it sure looks like you could use it."

The robot tries to toss his black hair out of his eyes as best he can without hands. He manages to clear his left eye enough to give Sans a scathing look. "What is it you want, Sans? Are you looking for some kind of petty revenge? We both know you're not going to hurt me."

Sans raises a brow. "oh? buddy, you really don't know me that well. but, lucky for you i'm mostly just here to talk."

Mettaton rolls his eyes, letting his head fall back against the wall. "Spare me the idle threats, you're not intimidating anyone. Everyone knows you're just a lazy comedian."

Magic surges to his left eye socket and Sans yanks his left hand out of his jacket pocket. With a curl of his fingers he has his power wrapped around Mettaton's Soul, blue magic forming a faint aura around his body. He increases the weight of gravity pulling down on him, and Sans hears the whine of metal starting to warp. That seems to wipe the bored expression off his face, replacing it with something close to fear. Good. He should be afraid.

"let me make one thing clear, mettaton. if you ever come near either of my humans again, i won't hesitate to turn you into a pile of scrap metal. there won't be enough of you left for alphys to fix."

Sans pulls his hand slowly downward, and he can hear the creaking of the thick wooden table holding him up.

"Okay, okay!" Mettaton cries out, glancing frantically around the room as if someone might come help him. "For goodness' sake, Sans, you've made your point!"

"but i don't think i have." Sans flicks his fingers upwards, raising the robot up into the air. He bobs up and down as he reaches the end of his cable, like a balloon. "you have made a dangerous enemy today, pal." Twirling his finger, Mettaton spins until he's hanging upside down. "and if you ever even think about putting one finger on either one of them..."

Sans twists him back so that he's right-side up and lets his magic dissipate. Mettaton crashes back down to the table, teetering for a moment before rocking back to steady himself against the wall. He's staring at Sans with wide eyes as the skeleton's sockets go dark.

"you're gonna have a bad time."

Chapter End Notes
As always, check out my Tumblr for questions, answers, and fanart. <3 onadacora.tumblr.com
When Sans gets home, he finds you in the kitchen, washing dishes. Your back is to him, and for a moment he doesn't say anything. He doesn't want to interrupt, and right now he's just happy watching you. Your ponytail has fallen a little loose, the band sitting at the base of your neck instead of tight against the back of your skull. Some loose strands must have broken free near your face because you pause for a moment to swipe the back of your wrist along your forehead. Your hips sway a little as you shift to put something in the drying rack.

Out of all the rooms in the house, the kitchen has the second most notable changes in the two months since you and Frisk moved in. (The first being the bedroom he now shares with you, of course. You're much tidier.) There's pictures from Frisk's school stuck on the fridge, accompanied by childish drawings. He can't make half of them out, but there's one in particular that's fixed in a spot of honor, right in the center of the door. It's a collection of stick figures: you and Frisk in the center, with Sans at your side and Papyrus on Frisk's. And Undyne is there too. ("The teacher said that we should draw our family! And... I hope this is okay.")

Inside the fridge is actual food instead of an unbelievable amount of barely-edible spaghetti, and the kitchen table is being used more regularly than it ever has before. Sans would always go out to eat, and Papyrus hates Grillby's food, and so they didn't eat together much. Now dinner is the one time that everyone is almost guaranteed to be together, and he can't help but think that it's all thanks to you. Well, you and Frisk. There's a folder with Frisk's name on it sitting on the table, and he remembers that he promised to help with their homework tonight.

He almost lost all of this today. He wouldn't have just lost the two of you, and this life that's started to form around everyone. He would have lost the pictures and drawings on the fridge, the smell of coffee first thing in the morning (because he never bothered with it until you started keeping it in the cabinet), waking up with you beside him. No oatmeal on the stove, or bright-eyed Frisk ready for school and waiting and almost forgetting their lunch again. The kitchen table would go unused, save for collecting dust. No more dinners as... well, as some kind of family.

He knew, two months ago, that you would change everything about this timeline. But he had never truly realized what that meant.

Before, he knew what was going to happen. He'd done the same things over and over again more times than he can count. He knew his role, played his part. There was a sense of control, through nudging Frisk along their path or stopping them. But once again the universe sees fit to remind him just how powerless he really is. How he's fumbling in the dark, trying desperately to clutch your hand and keep you with him, knowing that it would take just one mistake to lose you.

Sans walks across the kitchen, coming up behind you. You turn your head just enough as you sense him there, and he slides his arms around your waist, rising up on his toes to rest his chin on your shoulder. He pulls you close and you lean back against him, tipping your head to rest against his. A damp hand covers his and he strokes your fingers with his thumb, closing his eyes and just feeling you.

"hey," he says.

"Hey," you answer, nudging him with your forehead. "...Everything okay? Did you do what you
"yeah. everything's fine," he says. He's grateful that you don't ask him what he was doing, even though he knows you want to. But you've never pressured him about his secrets. Not even when they were tearing him apart and you found him breaking here in the kitchen. You press just enough, but not too much.

"You took longer than we thought. I left you a plate in the fridge." You squeeze his hands. "It's pretty good. Pap is getting a lot better."

"of course he is, with you teaching him instead of undyne."

You let out a soft, pleased laugh. It makes him smile. "Yes, well, I always thought his cooking skills seemed a little fishy."

"i'm glad you could reel him back in," he counters, turning and nuzzling into the side of your neck.

Giggling and flinching away, you try to bump him away from you with your butt but he just holds on tighter, laughing and rubbing back against you. It just makes you laugh harder, and he's glad. He just wants you to be happy.

"Stop, stop! Smiling hurts," you complain, trying not to laugh.

"whoops, sorry babe," he says, squeezing you as way of an apology.

You lean forward back over the sink, letting him stay wrapped around you as you finish up the dishes. After a moment he releases your waist, instead taking hold of your sides and rubbing his thumbs into your lower back. You sigh and lean into his touch.

"you should have let papyrus do the dishes, i'm sure he offered."

"He did, but he cooked dinner. Besides," you say, shrugging your shoulders, "I like taking care of the dishes. It's sort of relaxing."

"now that you mention it, dishes something you've told me before." As you start to laugh again, Sans leans forward and presses his forehead between your shoulders. "...how are you doing?"

Your laughter fades and you give another weak shrug. "I'll be okay. Life marches on, right?"

Sans doesn't need to say that it almost didn't.

Undyne never turns up that night and Sans can only assume she's staying over at Alphys's. When you and Sans go to bed, he wraps you up in his arms and never lets you go. It's the only way he can fall asleep, knowing that you're here and safe.

Undyne and Alphys come over the next day, partly to check on you but mostly because Alphys needs to speak with the families of some of the amalgamates you encountered in the lab. It turns out that the two who helped you the most (the snowdrake and Endogeny) are related to residents of Snowdin.

You're happy to hear that Alphys is going to be telling everyone the truth and letting the amalgamates finally go home. Though, you're a little worried about what kind of reception they're going to have. There had to be a reason that the doctor was so worried about being honest in the first place. But, you give Alphys a reassuring hug and remind her that she's doing the right thing.
And that no matter what, she has people who care about her. She blushes and stutters for a second before thanking you.

Undyne also announces the news that by next week her house is going to be ready for her to move back home. Apparently she and Papyrus are getting ready to finish up the last bit of work on the interior and replacing some of her furniture. Frisk seems disappointed, but she gives them a big bright grin and an affectionate noogie, reminding them that the two of you are welcome over anytime. In fact, she expects both of you to be over often, and if you don't she'll come find you! Laughing, you reassure her that you'll be sure to visit.

It turns out that your first visit to Undyne's house will be for a housewarming party scheduled a week from today. As you ask her if she wants you to cook anything, she gives you a sheepish grin and requests a few dozen of your chocolate chip cookies. You're more than happy to oblige.

In regards to the amalgamates, it seems that Alphys's fears were mostly misplaced. A few days after her initial visit to Snowdin she returns with Endogeny and the snowdrake and their families seem more frustrated with how long it took than what had happened to them.

You, Sans, and Frisk tag along on these reunions for moral support. Endogeny in particular seems happy to see you, rushing forward through the snow to greet you. Right as you think it might bowl you over it's body changes shape so that all its legs are in a straight line, flattening itself and making the silhouettes of dogs between its legs all the more prevalent. It vibrates excitedly until you finally reach out to pet it, this time expecting the way its body seems to meld around your hand.

"Thanks for your help back there," you tell it, smiling as its tail starts wagging furiously. "Sorry I couldn't thank you sooner. You're a good dog."

Endogeny's body folds back in on itself, taking a more canine shape. Frisk comes up to your side to pet it too, and after a moment Sans does as well. It doesn't seem sure of what to do, it seems so excited and happy to have so much attention its amorphous body just quivers and ripples as its tail wags with enough force to make its body wobble back and forth.

"i should thank you too, no bones about it." When Endogeny's head whips around and snakes close to Sans's arm, he pulls away and shoves his hand back in his pocket, looking a little nervous. "hey there buddy, i said no bones, got it?"

Endogeny's family turns out to be the entire dog population of Snowdin. It makes you wonder exactly how many dogs ended up inside of the amalgamation. The reunion is a happy one, with lots of tail wagging, barking, sniffing, talking, and a few happy tears. Dogamy and Dogaressa take the time to thank Alphys for bringing Endogeny home.

The other amalgamate's reunion is more private and emotional. You're able to take a moment to thank her for protecting you down in the lab, but you don't want to interrupt. When Snowy and his father arrive the three of you take your leave.

Like you told Sans, life marches on. The first few days after your encounter with Mettaton are the hardest. You feel jumpy and nervous, and you can tell that Sans is hesitant to leave your side. One day you even go with him to work while Frisk is at school, just because you can't bear the thought of being apart. You end up taking a nap inside his station, and it reminds you of that brief time before you started dating.

But gradually things are more or less back to normal. Though, your normal is about to change again with Undyne moving back home. Though you never would have thought you'd feel this way
when she first started staying on the couch, you realize you're going to miss having her around every day. You're happy to consider her one of your friends.

And, before you know it, her housewarming party is just around the corner.

Chapter End Notes

A slightly shorter chapter, but one that wraps up some of the things from the last little plot arc nicely. :)


Nightmares

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's cold and dark. You're strapped to a frigid metal exam table and you can't move. There's someone moving in the shadows but you can't turn your head to try and look. All you can do is wait, dressed in a hospital gown and shivering from the cold and from fear.

You're blinded by a large round surgical lamp as it cuts on without warning. Gasping and squeezing your eyes shut, you struggle to move but you're strapped down too tight. The click of heels against concrete echoes through the room, and the hard fingers of a metal hand give you a firm pat on the cheek.

"None of that, darling, open your eyes."

Wincing, you open your lids enough to start to adjust to the light. Those cold, metal fingers grip either side of your face, digging almost painfully into your jaw. You feel the strap across your forehead go slack and the hand jerks your head to the side. Mettaton is frowning down at you once you can finally see, blinking at the brightness of the light still hurting your eyes.

He purses his lips. "We were so rudely interrupted before. Now, where were we?"

You're standing in front of a wall of whirring fans, and you know that Frisk is behind you, clutching onto the jacket tied around your waist. Your skin feels grimy with sweat and your cheek is throbbing. The coppery tang of blood fills your mouth.

Mettaton is in front of you, sighing dramatically and spreading his hands wide. He twirls his chainsaw from one finger like one might do with an umbrella. "Hmm, you know what, this isn't nearly glamorous enough. How about a little change of scenery?"

Lights are blinding you again, spotlights trained on you and Mettaton. The roar of thousands of cheering voices is immediate and deafening. The robot has his chainsaw in one hand and a microphone in the other as he struts to the edge of the stage, blowing kisses to the crowd and waving. You try to run but you can't. It's like you're glued to the ground even though there's nothing restraining you.

He turns back to you and rests the microphone on his hip, his bright smile going sour as he looks at you. You try to open your mouth to speak but you can't. Your throat won't make any sounds.

"Every time you've survived down here, it's because someone's come to your rescue. Sans, Papyrus, Alphys, Undyne, the amalgamates... you're absolutely pathetic on your own, aren't you?" he says, taking slow, swaying steps towards you across the stage. "It was only a matter of time before someone managed to get you alone and defenseless. And no one is here to protect you. No one is here to save you."

You're shaking, panic singing through your nerves but you can't move, you can't scream, you can barely breathe. You can only watch as Mettaton prowls closer, throwing the microphone aside as he reaches for the starting cord on the chainsaw.

"Now, darling, I think it's time to see if I can't find some use for that fractured little Soul of yours."

The grating roar of the motor coming to life drowns out all other sound, filling your head and
consuming everything around you in static. The world has narrowed down to Mettaton's manic grin and the blurred teeth of the chainsaw as it swings upwards, poised to fall upon you. Then, as it falls and you feel yourself swallowed up in thick, strangling darkness, you wake up.

Struggling to sit up, you're held down by something wrapped around your middle. For a moment you start to panic, pushing against it with your hands until you recognize the smooth warmth of Sans's arms. Your skin is tingling as you fight to bring yourself back to your senses. You thought you were doing better. But it seems that your subconscious has other ideas. The pounding of your heartbeat is so loud that you almost can't hear Sans's voice as he mumbles in his sleep.

"no..." he says, and through the darkness you can barely make out the deep furrow in his brow. He's sweating, and you feel his grip around you spasm and tighten. "please, no..."

With some effort you're able to roll over onto your side to face him, chest to chest. "Sans," you say, reaching up to press a hand to his cheek. He shakes his head, turning away from your touch and into his pillow. Your own lingering fear is still there, but it feels distant as you're caught up in wanting to help the man you love.

"no," he says again, hands twisting into the back of your shirt. You feel a familiar hum in the air, prickling over your skin. Shivering, goosebumps raise on your arms as you stroke your hand along with curve of his skull.

"Hun, you're having a nightmare," you say, voice tight in your throat. You give him a weak shake, trying not to startle him. "You need to wake up."

Sans shudders and twitches, and the humming feels more like a buzzing. Like something angry and ready to lash out. You think you feel your Soul tugging inside you, reacting to his magic. He's woken you up with his nightmares before. It's rare, but it's happened a few times though never like this. If he hurt you, even on accident, he'd never forgive himself.

"Sans," you say, firmer this time. "Wake up!"

Gasping, his eye sockets fly open and blue light fills the space between you. You flinch away, squinting at the sudden brightness and you're forcibly reminded of your nightmare just minutes ago. A shiver of fear runs down your spine. The tension in the air presses down on you, and for a moment the pressure in your chest grows until you think your Soul is going to tug free, but then, all at once, the buzz of magic is gone and you're plunged back into darkness.

Unable to see until your eyes readjust, you hear Sans take in a shuddering breath and feel him press his forehead to yours. "shit, i'm... are you okay? did i...?"

"It's okay, I'm fine," you tell him, wrapping your arms around his back and hugging him close. "We're both fine."

His fingers slowly uncurl from the fabric of your t-shirt, flattening his hands and pressing them along the curve of your spine. "you're trembling," he says, and you realize he's right.

"I just woke up from my own nightmare," you admit, and he rubs a small circle between your shoulders. " Seems like this was a shitty night for both of us."

The two white pinpricks of light glow faintly in his eye sockets, so close that his face is a pale blur. You stop trying to focus on him, closing your eyes and sighing as you try to calm your still-racing heart. Sans shifts lower so he can rest his head against your chest. He told you once that listening to your heartbeat was soothing. Something about the way your heartbeat matches a pulse in your Soul
that he can feel when he's close. You don't really understand it, but you don't need to.

"what was your nightmare about?" he asks, after a moment.

"Mettaton, what else," you mutter, curling forward to press your cheek against the top of his skull. "Probably the same as you."

Sans doesn't answer.

"Do you want to talk about it?" you ask, certain you know what he's going to say.

"no," he says, like you expect. He never wants to talk about his nightmares. But you still offer, because you never want him to doubt that you're willing to listen. "...do you want to talk about yours? i may not have any ears but..."

You smile at his attempt to lighten the mood. Your lip feels a little tight from where it's still healing, but it doesn't hurt much anymore. You shake your head, kissing the smooth curve of bone under your cheek. "I'm okay."

"you should try to get some more sleep. undyne's party is tomorrow —well, today i guess. and i know you have baking to do." He pulls away enough to scoot back up so that you're at eye level. You shift your hips and slide your leg between his, opening your eyes so you can look at him. An arm drapes over your waist.

"I'm too awake to fall asleep yet," you say, resting a hand on his side. Your thumb traces the curve of one of his ribs through his shirt. "I'd rather just talk for a bit, if that's okay."

"sure, babe," he says, his fingers slipping under the hem of your shirt. He traces lazy shapes against the small of your back with his phalanges. "what do you wanna talk about?"

"I dunno," you mumble, shrugging. "Whatever."

Sans huffs a laugh. "throw me a bone here."

"Ugh," you say, unimpressed.

"are you saying you don't find my bone puns humerus any more?" Even in the dark you can see his pale grin widen, the lights in his eyes growing brighter.

"Hun, please," you say, groaning and shaking as you hold back a laugh.

"because i have a skele-ton of them."

Maybe it's because you expect it that you let out a snort, burying your face in your pillow to muffle your laughter.

"no, don't do that," he says, reaching to cup your cheek with the hand that isn't on your back, wedging his fingers between your head and the pillow. "you know i love to hear you laugh."

Weak giggles still escaping you, you press kisses along the bones of his palm. "Listen to those honeyed words! Do you have a sordid past that I should know about?"

"not so much. what can i say, you bring out my sweet side," he says, winking. As you shake your head weakly, he leans in close to brush a toothy kiss to your cheek. "tell me something about the surface. or about your childhood. anything you want."
You hesitate, trying to search his face but there's only so much of him you can see in the dark. "What about your childhood? You're always asking about me, but don't you want to talk about yourself, too?"

Sans shrugs, blinking. "there's not much to talk about. just normal kid stuff, y'know?"

"What about..." you pause, thinking. "What about your parents? I don't think you've ever mentioned them to me before."

"well, we uh... we lost our mom when pap was still a baby..." he says, sounding a little uncomfortable.

Well, you can't blame him for not wanting to talk about it. "Oh, I didn't... My dad died when I was little," you say, shifting a bit in his arms and stroking your cheek against his hand.

"you've never mentioned your dad before. do you remember him at all?" he asks gently.

"He... um..." you chew the inside of your lip, thinking as your toes traces along the bones of his feet. He twitches a little. "I was five. He had brown hair and brown skin —darker than mine. He wasn't home that much, I think he worked a lot. But on the weekends, he'd take me to the park and push me on the swings."

"he sounds nice."

"Things didn't get bad until after he died. I think..." you sigh, closing your eyes for a moment and reopening them. Sans just lays there with you, watching your face. "Losing him changed her. I wonder sometimes, what things would have been like if he was still alive."

"loss does things to people," he says, running his thumb down the length of your nose. It tickles a little and you scrunch up your face.

"Did losing your mom change your dad?"

He hesitates. "i don't remember what he was like before. so, i dunno."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to talk about sad things," you say, feeling guilty. You sigh, trying to think of something else to talk about. "Um... oh, I can tell you about another sci-fi movie I've seen. I think I told you about, uh..."

"you told me about planet of the apes last time," he says, grinning. "i remember you were pretty passionate about... what was the line? 'get your paws off me—'"

"No, no, it's 'get your stinking paws off me, you damned dirty ape!' You have to remember 'stinking' it's very important." You smile back at him, ruining your serious tone.

"of course, i apologize. my mist-ape." He laughs as you dig your fingers into his ribs in retaliation, pulling you close against him as he squirms. "and that's the older one, right?"

"Right! Yeah, that one's a classic. We don't talk about the remake... Um... oh, how about Stargate..."

Chapter End Notes
Here is your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my Tumblr. ;)

onadacora.tumblr.com
The Party

Most of the guests have already arrived by the time that you, Sans, and Frisk get to Undyne's house. You and Sans overslept, which threw off your timing for the rest of the day and you're just glad you aren't later than you already are. Papyrus and Undyne spent the day getting everything ready, and you two were still asleep when they left in the morning.

You hadn't seen Undyne's house before it caught fire, but whatever you were expecting, it hadn't been a giant fish. A set of massive teeth makes up what you think is the door, and your suspicions are confirmed when Frisk darts forward to knock on them. After a moment, the teeth retract (not unlike a mouth opening) revealing Undyne.

Her bright red hair is loose and wavy down her back, bangs swept over the left side of her face to partially conceal her eyepatch. There's a tight braid along the right side of her head, curving over her fin-like ear. Her lipstick is the same vibrant shade as her red eye makeup, and her black eyeliner is thick and striking. You've never seen her cleaned up quite like this, but she looks amazing. If you had done yourself up like she had you'd be feeling self-conscious at looking so different from normal, but she's just as confident as always, flashing you a big smile.

By comparison you feel hastily put together. You picked out some of your nicer clothes and took what little time you had to put your hair back in a French braid to keep it tamed for the party. Pushing away the creeping feeling of embarrassment, you smile back at the fish monster and gesture with the plastic container of cookies in your hands.

"FINALLY, I was wondering where you guys were," Undyne says, reaching out to take it from you. As she turns to lead you into the house your eyes fall to the dark green skirt swaying around her calves. The spiraling ruffles remind you of the ocean; of scales, or a swaying bed of seaweed.

Frisk darts past her and through the gaps between clusters of partygoers, most likely looking for Papyrus. Judging by the unmistakable, shouted greeting from the tall skeleton, you're right. You fight the urge to call Frisk back. They'll be fine with Papyrus.

Sans nudges you gently after Undyne with a hand on the small of your back. "yeah, we were running a little behind," he says, and you squirm away before he can pinch your butt. You shoot him a playful glare and he just winks at you.

"I'm onto you, mister," you mutter, snatching up his hand and lacing your fingers together. For safekeeping, you tell yourself.

"onto me, huh? in front of all these people? can't wait 'till we get home?" he says, grinning wider as your cheeks darken. You shove him with your shoulder and he starts to laugh, gripping your hand tight.

"You two are such DORKS," Undyne says, laughing and glancing back at you. She pops the top off the container and sets it on a table full of other assorted food, turning around to face you. With a vague, bored flourish, she gestures to the room that houses her living room, dining room, and kitchen. "So this is it! It's, uh, pretty much back to exactly how it was before."

"It looks great! You and Papyrus did an amazing job," you tell her, scanning over the room.

You and Sans share some small talk with Undyne before she leaves to go rejoin Alphys where she's sitting on the couch, looking a little nervous and uncomfortable. The doctor visibly brightens as
Undyne approaches, and you can't help but smile when the fish monster stoops down to pull her to her feet and kisses her on the cheek. Sans brings you a drink as you watch the two monsters, his hand finding yours again. You turn to lean against his arm. Undyne leads Alphys over to a burly pair of monsters and though you can't hear what she's saying you think she's introducing her to them. Alphys's cheeks flush bright red and she covers her face with her hands as Undyne grins down at her and strokes her shoulder.

Sans leads you over to the buffet table to go get some food, then over to where Frisk and Papyrus are talking. They're off in a corner of the room, munching on handfuls of cookies. You notice that some of the other monsters are casting Papyrus odd, dismissive looks as the tall skeleton's voice carries through the room. It reminds you of when you first met him, and he lamented over not having many friends. Now that you think about it, who does he ever spend time with outside you, Frisk, Sans, Undyne, and Alphys?

Papyrus glances over at you and Sans as you make your approach, beaming at the two of you. Frisk has a half-eaten cookie in their mouth and the good sense to look abashed as you raise an eyebrow.

You hold out your empty hand palm-up in front of Frisk. "I know for a fact that there's more than cookies on that buffet table, hand them over and go get yourself something to eat," you say, curling your fingers.

Frisk obediently places their last three cookies in your hand. "Okay..." they mumble, skirting around you to do as you said.

"YOU WERE LATE, SANS," Papyrus chastises, shaking his head and crunching a cookie between his teeth.

"It's my fault, I had to finish up my baking before we could leave," you say, glancing down at the confiscated snacks before taking a bite. Your plate of food from the buffet table is momentarily forgotten. "But," you begin loudly, "I hope you can forgive me, your second-favorite hum —__person__... and very good friend."

"OH, WELL, IN THAT CASE..." Papyrus says, flushing with pleasure. "OF COURSE I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, FORGIVE YOU!"

"babe, i'm gonna need you to take the blame for everything from now on. clearly he likes you best," Sans says, plucking one of the cookies out of your hand and eating it.

"YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO TRICK ME, SANS! I AM JUST TOO CUNNING! TOO BRILLIANT!" he hesitates, resting his hands on his hips. "BESIDES, YOU KNOW THAT I LIKE YOU BEST."

"you got me, bro," Sans says, giving his brother an affectionate smile.

You spot Frisk finish putting together a plate, but instead of returning to the three of you, you spot them going over to the two large monsters Undyne and Alphys were talking to a few minutes ago. Again, you fight the urge to call them back. Frisk is all smiles and seems to be having a good time. You don't want to let your own fears hold them back, at least not right now. Parties have never really been your thing, but you're trying your best to have a good time too. You pick at the food on your plate as you watch them.

You don't hear the rest of Sans and Papyrus's conversation, because you're too focused on Frisk. But as you turn back to the two of them Papyrus excuses himself to go speak to Undyne.
"you done with that?" Sans asks you, gesturing at your empty paper plate.

"I thought I'd hold onto it. For sentimental reasons," you say, raising an eyebrow.

"well, i wasn't sure if you wanted to get more food or not," he says, raising a brow back at you. Sarcasm was never really your humor of choice, but it seems especially lost on Sans. Well, not lost, but... unappreciated.

You flush a little, feeling uncomfortable. "Yeah, sorry, I just..." He takes your plate from you as you search for something to say, then hands you his drink. "Sorry, I'm just feeling a little... defensive? I dunno, there's a lot of people and—"

"babe, it's fine. really. i mean, i'm not a huge fan of sarcasm but i don't want it to cause a rift between us." His smile widens as you laugh and start to relax. "i'll be right back. gonna go throw these plates away."

You nod and he leaves you there holding his drink. You finished yours a little while ago so, sure he won't mind, you take a sip. Immediately you start coughing, wholly unprepared for the sharp bite of alcohol mixed in with his punch. Shaking your head, you clear your throat and take in a deep breath.

"A-are you okay?" Alphys asks you, coming to stand with you and giving you a concerned look.

You pat your chest and clear your throat again, nodding. "Yeah, I just wasn't expecting the booze in Sans's drink. Took a sip without knowing," you explain.

"Oh, do you not drink?" she asks, glancing down into her own cup clutched in her hands.

"Technically, on the surface, I'm not old enough, but... I have before. But I try not to make a habit of it anymore." You shrug and there's a beat of awkward silence. You gesture at Alphys's polka dotted dress, giving her a friendly smile. "You look really cute! It's nice to see you out of that lab coat."

Alphys's cheeks flush with pleasure, glancing down at herself. "Oh, thank you! A-ah, Mettaton actually helped me pick this out a while ago..." She looks a little uncomfortable at the mention of Mettaton's name as she looks back up at you. You realize that your expression has gone a bit sour.

"Oh." There's another moment of uncomfortable silence. This is going really well... "Well at least he has good fashion sense," you offer.

"I wanted to t-tell you that he's been a lot better since what h-happened," Alphys blurts out, taking a step closer to you as she searches your face. "He's been a lot n-nicer to me than he was after he started getting famous, and he's even been h-helping out around the lab. It doesn't make up for what he did! B-but I think he feels bad about what happened. He doesn't come out and say it, but I think that's just his p-pride..."

"He should feel bad," you mutter, looking down into Sans's drink. "But I'm glad that he's at least being good to you."

Alphys shifts from foot to foot, the tip of her tail swaying a little. She just nods.

"you sure he's not just trying to trick you?" Sans says coming up beside you and taking his drink back. His free hand is shoved in his jacket pocket, and his grin looks forced. "or that he's just gonna go back to his old ways once he gets tired of playing nice?"
The doctor shrugs her shoulders, meeting Sans's gaze. "I don't know. B-but I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. It's the least I can do after everything that I've done. Am I r-really that much better?"

"you are," Sans says with an intensity in his voice that surprises you. "you were trying to help everyone, not just yourself."

"By t-toying with people's lives." She winces at her own words, and you can't help but reach out and rest a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Alphys jumps at the contact, eyes widening when she looks up at you.

"Okay, I think that's enough about serious stuff. This is a party, right? Let's try to have some fun!" you say, looking between Sans and Alphys.

Sans nods, taking a long pull from his drink. "good point. no point in skullking over here."

After about an hour of mingling you're feeling a bit overwhelmed and in need of some air. Sans is on his third drink, a blue tinge to his cheekbones. He's not drunk, but he's definitely starting to feel the alcohol. You tap him on the shoulder and he gives you a big grin as he turns to look up at you.

"Hun, I'm gonna step outside, okay? Just out the front door, I promise I'm not wandering off," you tell him. "It's a little hot in here."

"well, it is a housewarming party," he says, winking at you.

You groan and roll your eyes, about to turn away.

"hey, wait," he says. Sans reaches up and cups his hand around the back of your neck, pulling you down for a kiss. You make a startled noise, caught off guard. He's always been affectionate, but not usually when surrounded by so many people. "babe. are you a magnet, because i'm attracted to you."

Blushing, you cover your face awkwardly as he embraces you. "Sans, I think you've had enough to drink."

"negative, i have had just enough to drink. i'm positive."

"You're certainly more positive than normal," you agree, patting his shoulder. "I'm glad you're having a good time."

"positively," he says, laughing. "well, you go outside, but don't be too long or i'll be bonely. love you."

"I love you too," you assure him, embarrassed and giggling as he hugs you close. You wait a moment, but he's still holding you. You give his side a soft pat. "Sans you have to let me go."

"huh? oh!" he blurts out, chuckling as he gives you a parting nuzzle before releasing you. "sorry, i guess you're just too magnetic."

You shake your head, groaning. "Okay, I think that's been done to death now. Think of some new ones for when I get back."

"ok."

Picking your way through the room, you make it to the front door without incident. With a quick
glance back, you make note of Frisk over by the piano with Undyne and Alphys before stepping outside. At least everyone else seems to be having a good time.

The air outside is cool and moist against your skin, a pleasant change from the stuffy warmth in the house. You take in a deep breath, steadying yourself and looking up towards the faraway ceiling. Even here, away from the wishing room, you can see the faint twinkle of crystals.

"Oh...... Hello."

You lower your eyes at the faint, wispy voice, looking for the source of it. It takes you a second, but you spot a vaguely familiar white shape floating in the shadow of Undyne's house, looking at you with two large, circular eyes. They float over to you, hunched forward a little and glancing down at the ground.

"I don't know if you remember me...... but we met once before......" they say, hovering a few feet away from you. "You...... probably don't......"

You bite your lip, hesitating before it comes to you. "Oh! Napstablook, right? We met in the Ruins!"

A tremulous smile lights up the ghost's face and they nod a little. "Yeah...... it's nice to see you again...... Though, oh no...... I don't remember your name...... oh no......"

"Hey, it's okay! Don't worry about it. What are you doing out here?" you ask, glancing around Undyne's front yard. The two of you are alone out here. "Were you getting some air, too?"

"Oh, I haven't even gone in yet...... Undyne invited me, but...... I don't really do well with crowds......" They glance at the house, eyes watering, then back at you.

You give them a reassuring smile. "I'm not really a big fan of parties either, to be honest. If you want, I can keep you company for a little bit."

"Oh...... That's so nice...... But you don't have to if you don't want to......" You're about to protest but then Napstablook's eyes widen a little. "Oh but...... I'm sorry if this seems random...... But I think Mettaton mentioned you the other day when he came by to visit......"

What? You freeze, giving the yard another quick glance with wide eyes. "You know Mettaton?" you answer carefully, nails digging into your palms.

"He's my cousin...... Though, I didn't know it until he came by...... He used to be a ghost too...... He, um, left one day without saying anything...... But he came by to apologize, which was really nice of him...... I missed him a lot...... And he said he'd come by more often to see me......" They bob up and down a little in the air, and they seem happy. You relax your hands at your sides. "I guess I should thank you and...... Oh no...... Is Frisk not here......? I wanted to thank both of you...... Oh no......"

It's surprising to think of Mettaton and Napstablook as related at all, they're just so different. "You don't have to thank us," you say, feeling a little uncomfortable. You're glad that the shy ghost seems so happy, and even Alphys had nice things to say about Mettaton after what happened. But you just can't find it in yourself to see him any different. At least, not anytime soon, if ever. "But, Frisk is inside if you want to talk to them. You could stay with the two of us, if that would make you more comfortable inside."

Napstablook gives the house an anxious look, then their eyes start watering again. "Oh no...... That's okay...... I think I'll just head home...... But tell Frisk that I said thank you...... Or don't......"
don’t want to be an inconvenience......"  

You open your mouth to reassure the ghost that you don't mind at all, but they fade away before you can. Alone and a little confused about how to feel, you decide to head back inside to find your friends.  

Later that night after you get home, you mention to Sans what Napstablook told you but he seems unmoved. It makes you feel a bit better, and less strangely guilty. You don't have any nightmares.
Sans takes Frisk to school in the morning, giving them a hug at the front door and an affectionate hair-ruffle before he leaves. Grumbling to themselves, they comb their fingers through their hair to flatten it back out as they go inside to join their classmates. It's still early so everyone that's there is talking and playing. The teacher greets them from her desk, and Frisk gives her a polite smile.

"Yo, Frisk!" Kid calls out, swaying back and forth in their best approximation of a wave. They run over to meet Frisk by the door and end up tripping over the corner of a desk, but Frisk catches them around the shoulders before they fall. "Thanks! That was awesome!"

"You're welcome," Frisk says, smiling at their friend. "You should be more careful."

"Haha, I know, right? Everyone keeps telling me that," Kid says, shifting from foot to foot and looking a little sheepish. "But hey, I wanted to ask you something. So, uh... I can't believe I have to know... Is Sans your dad? He's always walking you to school and stuff, and I've seen him with you and your mom a lot."

Frisk twists the sleeves of their sweater in their hands, fighting the urge to cover their mouth. "Um, no. He's not."

"Oh," the armless monster says, unfazed. "Well, is something going on with Sans and your mom?"

"They're dating, if that's what you mean."

Kid looks about ready to say something, but before they can the teacher stands up from her desk and claps her hands together to silence the room. "Okay everyone, good morning! Let's take our seats because I need to tell you about King Asgore's visit to the school next week before we get started with class!"

Frisk is grateful for the interruption, but the reprieve from Kid's questions only lasts until lunchtime. The moment they're allowed up from their desks Kid is at their side again, following them to the cubbies where they keep their lunches.

"Yo! So, I was thinking, if Sans and your mom are dating, then that means he could be your dad. You know, if he wanted to. That's what happened to Izzie!" Kid says, grinning and nudging Frisk with their shoulder as they snatch up their lunch between their teeth. "Dahd ood dee ool ight?"

Frisk picks up their own lunch, looking down at their name written in big, messy letters with red marker. They have no problem recognizing Sans's bad handwriting, not after weeks of seeing it in the margins of their scrap paper while working through sums together. He's been there for the two of you like no one ever has before, and Frisk's gotten used to it. His help with homework, watching movies together on the couch which end up turning into naps on accident, seeing you happier than
they've ever seen you before... Frisk smiles. "Yeah, I think that would be pretty cool!"

You're in the kitchen, getting an early start on dinner when Sans and Frisk get home. Your child shouts a cheerful greeting the second they're inside. By the time you hear the door shut, Frisk is already in the kitchen, dumping their backpack on the table and rushing over to you, flinging their arms around your waist. You raise your hands up with a disgruntled sound.

"Sweetie be careful! I've got a knife in my hand and I could have cut you," you say, lowering your empty hand to rest on top of Frisk's head. "Did you have a good day at school?"

"Mhmm!" they say, glancing over at the counter where you're working. "What's for dinner?"

"Chicken noodle soup." You grab a handful of the carrots you've already chopped, dumping it into the stockpot placed on the stove. Sans comes into the kitchen, making his way to the two of you.

"I thought chicken noodle soup came in a can," Frisk says, giving you a dubious look.

"Well they don't really have that down here," you say. You tried to see if maybe the rabbit's shop had any somehow, but no luck. So you finally decided to try your hand at making it from scratch. "So I'm doing what I can."

"hey babe," Sans says, and the two of you lean over Frisk to share a quick kiss. Frisk groans in protest to being squished between you. "so looks like next week asgore's coming to visit the school. frisk's gonna have to take a sick day or something."

Surprised, your eyebrows raise as you give Sans a cautious look when he pulls away. "Is that going to be enough? Won't that look suspicious?"

"kids get sick all the time, even monster kids. the two've you will just have to stay inside that day is all."

Sans's lack of concern is reassuring, but you're still nervous about the idea of having the king here in Snowdin. As far as you know, he's the only other person with a reason to want your Souls, and one of the few people that can recognize you and Frisk as human on sight.

"If you're sure..." you say, looking back down at the cutting board. You slowly start chopping up the rest of the carrots.

"i'll make sure nothing happens. i'll even take the day off if that'll make you feel better," he offers, leaning against the edge of the stove.

"It would, but I get the feeling that Papyrus won't like that very much," you say, giving Sans a wry smile.

"Mooom!" Frisk whines, tightening their arms around your middle. You glance down at them then back at the cutting board. "I wanna talk to you about something."

"Well I'm right here sweetie, what is it?" You scoop up more carrot slices in your hands and dump it into the pot. The celery is next.


Sans shoves his hands in his pockets, shrugging amiably. "ok, ok, i can take a hint. i'll be on the couch if you need me." He turns and beats a lazy path out of the kitchen to give the two of you...
Curiosity piqued, you look down at Frisk as they let go of your waist and start twisting the ends of their sleeves in front of them. Whatever it is they want to talk about, it has them nervous. You return your attention to chopping celery, not wanting Frisk to feel like you're scrutinizing them too much.

"You can talk to me about anything, you know that," you say, guiding the chef's knife with smooth motions. For a moment the only sound the fills the kitchen is the crisp sound of the blade slicing through celery.

"Now that I know you're my mom," Frisk starts, speaking slow and carefully measuring their words. You start to feel tense, but you fight not to show it. "I was wondering who my dad is."

You hesitate for a second, caught off guard, but resume chopping. You don't want Frisk to feel like they've asked something wrong, and honestly you should have expected this. Maybe part of you was expecting this. "He's... Well, his name is Christopher," you say, and it feels strange to tell Frisk about him. "He um... sweetie I'm not sure what you want to know about him."

"Is he still alive?" Frisk asks, and when you glance over at them their expression is earnest and curious.

"Yes, he is," you say, bracing yourself.

"Why don't I know him?"

You have to be careful. How you answer this question is too important. But the more you hesitate the more Frisk will pick up on your worry, and that might do just as much harm as giving the wrong answer. *Is* there a right answer? You don't think there is. All you can do is your best. "When I got pregnant with you, he and I were very young. And he just wasn't ready for the responsibility. He... decided it would be best for him to not be involved with us. And that's not your fault! You hadn't even been born yet, so don't ever think that it's because of you, sweetie."

Frisk seems to mull this over, chewing on the inside of their lip. You scrape the chopped celery off the cutting board and into the pot, then brush off your hands and crouch in front of them. In this position they're a tiny bit taller than you, and Frisk meets your eyes. "So he didn't want to be with us?" It's less of a question and more of a statement, like they know the answer but they want to be reassured it's the right one. Frisk doesn't sound sad, or upset, and you're not sure if that's a good thing or not.

"That's right," you say, taking hold of Frisk's shoulders. "But that's his loss, isn't it? Because there isn't a greater kid anywhere in the world."

Frisk smiles, looking shy all of a sudden. "You're really great too, Mom," they mumble, bashful. "But... Sans *does* want to be with us. Does that mean he can be my dad?"

You don't even have time to think of how to reply to that question, because of course Sans chooses that moment to come back to the kitchen. He's obviously heard Frisk because he's stuck in the doorway with the expression of a deer caught in headlights. The two of you lock eyes, and you can feel the weight of Frisk's question weighing down on both of you. Sans looks like he'd like nothing better than to be anywhere else right now, and can you really blame him? There's no good way for either of you to handle this right now.

"Sweetie it's... it's not really that simple," you say, looking back down at Frisk.
"Why not? My real dad decided he didn't want to be my dad anymore, so can't Sans decide to be my Dad instead?" Frisk's eyes are wide and innocent, chewing on their lip as they try to figure out this puzzle you've laid before them.

"That's something that he and I would need to talk about. It's a big responsibility, being someone's parent," you say, feeling the weight of Sans's eyes on you. What if this isn't something that Sans wants? But, he knew that being with you included Frisk, so surely this can't come as a complete surprise.

This isn't something you were expecting to deal with today.

"So... is that a maybe?" Frisk asks you, their expression brightening.

"Frisk, is that something you'd want? For Sans to be your dad?" You fight the urge to look up at Sans, to try and see what he's thinking.

Frisk flings their arms around your neck, catching you by surprise as they give you a big hug and bury their face into the side of your neck. You fold them up in your arms, cradling them against your chest as you sink to your knees, and when you finally let yourself look up at the doorway Sans has one hand hanging in the air, like he was going to reach out for the two of you but caught himself halfway. There's something in his face that you can only describe as longing. It's painful and bittersweet, and you wish you knew exactly what he was thinking so you knew what to say.

"Yeah," Frisk says, their voice muffled between your two bodies, pressed close. "I wished, a while ago, with Papyrus... Back in Waterfall. That the four of us could be a family. And if Sans was my dad then Papyrus would be my uncle! And we'd all be a family like I wished."

You feel your eyes start to well up with tears, and you shut them to keep yourself from crying. You want that too. You want to be a real family, but how can you make that promise so soon? It's only been two and a half months since you started dating Sans and just shy of three since you even met.

There's too many reasons to say no, and too many reasons to say yes.

Swallowing and taking a moment to breathe, you give Frisk an extra-tight squeeze. "I'm not sure we can decide that just yet sweetie, but I promise I'll talk to Sans about it. Just... keep this between us now, okay? I don't want you to surprise him."

"Okay," Frisk agrees, nodding. They try to pull out of your hug, pushing against your shoulders.

You open your eyes and when you blink to clear them Sans is gone. Letting Frisk go, you give them an affectionate smile.

"You promise?" you ask, leaning forward to press your forehead to theirs.

"I promise," Frisk says, grinning and pushing back.

"Okay, how about you tell me about your day while I finish getting dinner started?" You push yourself onto your feet and hoist Frisk up by their hands, nudging them over to a kitchen chair.

And with the easily-distracted nature of a six year old, you and Frisk change topics without a backwards glance.

Chapter End Notes
Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters (including the Reader/Hope) and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
More Choices Than Yes or No

Papyrus spends most of his day with Undyne and Alphys in the garbage dump, helping them pick through trash while periodically wandering off to give them some time alone. He's glad that the two of them finally worked out their feelings, and he can't help but feel a bit responsible for this excellent turn of events. Granted, you helped out a lot, but surely it was due to his own urging.

Their day ends with the three of them jogging back to Alphys's lab, Papyrus shouting words of encouragement the whole way. Afterwards, he and Undyne take a much more relaxed pace back to the fish monster's house. The heat of Hotland always takes a toll on her, even without her armor.

After spending some time with Undyne, making sure she gets plenty of water (she rolls her eyes at him, but accepts his hovering with only a little argument), Papyrus decides that he should head home. But, as he leaves the small enclosed space that makes up Undyne's front yard, he spots a familiar, rectangular shape.

Mettaton doesn't seem to notice Papyrus as he rolls on his single wheel away from Napstablook's house. If it's possible for a metal rectangle to look contemplative, Mettaton is managing somehow. His screen is dark save for a single row of yellow through the center.

Pushing through a small bout of nerves, Papyrus jogs after him with long-legged strides. "HELLO METTATON! FANCY SEEING YOU HERE!"

The robot does an odd little jerk, a whirring noise tapping away inside his body. It almost sounds like a computer fan getting stuck. Spinning around to face Papyrus, the line of yellow contracts to a single square, then changes into an exclamation point that fills the center of his screen. "Oh! Ah, Papyrus! You startled me, darling," he says, resting a hand over his row of dials. "Your... brother isn't with you, is he?"

"SANS? NO HE SHOULD BE AT HOME RIGHT NOW. BUT NOW THAT YOU MENTION HIM, SANS IS VERY ANGRY WITH YOU STILL!" Papyrus frowns, resting his hands on his hipbones. "HE SAID THAT YOU TRIED TO HURT THE HUMANS."

Mettaton's screen floods with yellow, then three red squares fill across the center, like an ellipsis. "Ah, yes, well... that's true."

"HE NEVER TOLD ME WHAT HAPPENED, BUT I THOUGHT MAYBE IT WAS SOME SORT OF MISUNDERSTANDING." Papyrus sighs, wringing his gloved hands.

"Not exactly. Though, the entire situation is all rather regrettable, in retrospect," Mettaton says, giving a helpless shrug with his arms.

"MAYBE IF YOU APOLOGIZED, THEN THINGS WOULD BE BETTER! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AM SURE THAT IF YOU TRY—"

"Darling that's... adorably naive of you," Mettaton cuts in, his voice sweet and placating, "But I'm certain that your brother would much rather never catch sight of me anywhere near—"

"BUT YOU'LL NEVER KNOW UNLESS YOU TRY! IF YOU FEEL BADLY ABOUT WHAT YOU DID, YOU SHOULD TELL THEM. MAYBE THEY'LL FORGIVE YOU!" Papyrus strikes a gallant pose, the tail of his scarf fluttering in a non-existent breeze. "THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED WITH UNDYNE! AND YOU ARE SORRY, AREN'T YOU?"
Mettaton just stares, his screen changing to a pair of dots for eyes and a flat line for an expressionless mouth. "Yes, well, that may be true. And I would like to apologize... But I really don't think that Sans wants an apology. He just wants me gone."

"NONSENSE! MY BROTHER IS MUCH KINDER THAN THAT!" With enough courage and enthusiasm to break past what shyness he might feel around his robot idol, Papyrus reaches out and takes hold of Mettaton's hand. "TRUE, HE MAY NOT BE AS KIND AS ME! BUT I THINK THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION IS TO LET THEM KNOW YOU'RE SORRY!"

Even without eyes, Mettaton seems to look down at the way Papyrus has latched onto his hand. "You're a sweetheart, Papyrus, but really. I think it's best if—"

"COME WITH ME! I'M SURE WE CAN GET ALL OF THIS SORTED OUT IN NO TIME!" Ignoring the robot's protests, Papyrus turns on his heel and pulls Mettaton after him, determined to make everything right again.

What the hell had Sans walked into?

The only bit of comfort he found was in the equally shocked look on your face the moment your eyes met. But, did that mean that you didn't want him to take on that role?

God, what did he even want?

Dad.

He's sitting back on the couch where he should have stayed, rigid with his elbow propped up on the armrest, holding his forehead in his hand. He supposes this was inevitable. With the way things have been progressing with the two of you, it was only a matter of time before the discussion turned towards Frisk. But he hadn't expected to get blindsided by it, and from the looks of it neither had you. You didn't tell Frisk 'no', but was that because you didn't want to upset the kid, or because you didn't want to make that choice for him? What would your answer have been if he hadn't walked in at that moment?

What does he want your answer to be?

He's hurt (killed) Frisk. He's taken care of Frisk. And now... he's started to love Frisk. It's been weeks since he realized that he was afraid of losing both of you, but can he really step up to that plate? Sure it's been something he's thought of before, especially considering his relationship with you, but to hear the idea spoken out loud, by Frisk no less. He didn't realize that the kid thought of him that way.

He doesn't deserve to be thought of that way. How can he ever look Frisk in the eye and not see what he's done? Just the thought of something like that happening again, of them coming back and Sans having to put them down like an animal again after all this... it tears him up inside. He doesn't deserve to be called 'Dad' by a kid he's killed more times than he wants to remember.

But Frisk wants him. They want him to be the person he isn't sure he can be. After everything, maybe he owes it to the kid to try. Maybe he owes it to you to be Frisk's other parent.

But how can he be a parent to the child that could take all his happiness away in an instant? How can he even try to control a kid with that much power? Power they don't seem to realize they even have...

How can he let himself make it that much more unbearable if there was a Reset? Not only would
he not even know if you'd come out of those Ruins with Frisk, but having to go back

to absolutely *nothing* with both of you all over again...

But part of him —*so much* of him, the parts that let you in to begin with— wanted to say yes.

He wanted to wrap you both up and tell you yes and swear that the three of you —no, *four* because
Papyrus would be an amazing uncle— would be a family, just like Frisk's wish. The family that
you've never had but he knows you want. A family that would give Frisk the love that they
deserve.

Is this what Frisk needed? You and a family and love? Is that what this all was working towards?
Would this stop the Resets and finally give them all peace and a future?

But he doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know how to make this decision. This isn't some small
thing. This is something permanent. And it's not just his choice, if anything it's yours. And he has
no clue what you think about it.

If you told him that you want him to be that person for Frisk, to be *Dad*, could he say yes?

But he's not sure that he wants to hear you say no, either.

"Alright, I'm gonna leave this pot on the stove because it has to simmer for a while, but leave it
alone, okay sweetie?" You shift the heavy stock pot full of soup on the burner, making sure the lid
is in place before turning to Frisk.

Frisk is sitting at the kitchen table, worksheets spread out in front of them as they scratch away
dutifully with one of those gaudy colored pencils that Sans let them pick out. The more expensive
ones you tried to talk them out of, but Sans insisted he'd pay for.

You think that some people might be bitter over how much Sans and Papyrus have taken care of
you and Frisk. Knowing that in your situation, you'd have nothing without them. No money,
nowhere to live, and honestly, you're not sure that you and Frisk would be okay in the Underground
without them. But you've never had an independent streak. You're not bitter or frustrated that right
now you don't have the means to take care of yourself or Frisk on your own. Instead you're just so
grateful. They took you in and cared for both of you and loved you. Treated you like family.

Family.

You lean down and press a kiss to Frisk's forehead through the curtain of their bangs, earning
yourself a half-hearted protest. "You stay here and finish your homework. Just holler if you need
me," you say.

"Okay, Mom."

Sans is in the living room, sitting on the couch and looking like he's bracing himself. He's holding
his head with one hand, elbow propped on the armrest and his other arm is buried deep in his jacket
pocket. Nervous sweat is dotting the side of his skull and the lights in his eye sockets are dim as
they flick over to you. You can only wonder at what he must be thinking right now.

He loves you, but is it enough to commit to you and Frisk, completely? The last time someone you
cared about was offered the title of 'dad', they left. You can't help but feel the anxious twist of fear
in your stomach at the thought.

You and Sans look at each other, and the uncertainty you see mirrored back at you makes you
realize something. "Hey," you say, approaching the couch. Sans straightens his back, lifting his head from his hand.

"hey," he echos back, shifting a little to turn towards you as you take a seat beside him.

"So... I just want to say that... we don't have to talk about this yet," you say, fumbling over the words as you search his face. A little bit of the tension eases away from his eyes, but he's still a bit shaken.

"i get that. but... i don't want you to make any decisions that you're not ready to make, i mean..." Sans reaches out and takes your hand, pressing your palms together before tangling his fingers with yours. He looks down at your joined hands, staring at them and studying them in a moment of heavy silence.

"I don't want you to feel pressured either," you murmur, leaning forward and tipping your head up to try and get him to look at your face. "The last thing I want is to scare you off, like..."

Sans's head jerks up to meet your eyes, the white lights glowing brighter. "i'm not going anywhere," he says, reaching out with his free hand to cup your cheek. "it takes a lot more than this to get me rattled."

You don't realize the true extent of your fear until relief floods you, sweetened by the comforting familiarity of Sans's pun. Smiling, you let out a breath you didn't know you were holding. "Good," you say, leaning forward to press your forehead to his, twisting the fingers of your free hand in the thick fluff of his jacket and holding tight. "Because I don't know what I'd do without you."

You expect a joke. Maybe a quip about you being bonely without him, or something similar. But instead he buries his hand deep into the thickness of your hair and cradles your head, tilting so he can meet your lips with his mouth. A kiss for your sake. "i love you. i love you, and i love frisk. i want you both to stay here. with me. and when we're both ready to make this more, ah," Sans fumbles for a second, and you think you see a hint of blue on his cheekbones, "permanent, i'm willing to make that commitment to both of you." Your cheeks feel warm, and Sans pulls away enough that he can glance away, then back to you. For a moment he seems almost shy. "so, uh, this isn't really a yes or a no. but maybe more of a someday."

You didn't think it was possible, but somehow your heart swells with even more love than before. Tears well up in your eyes at the sheer strength of it, and your smile is wide across your face. "I think 'someday' sounds perfect."
Frisk joins you and Sans on the couch after they finish their homework, squeezing themselves between the two of you. Sans has his arm around your shoulders and he catches your eye as Frisk settles in and leans their head against your chest. You think you can see a hint of blue on his cheekbones and you feel a warm flutter in your chest. You share a tender smile over Frisk's head, then go back to watching the TV.

The scrape of keys in the door draws your attention and you glance over to see Papyrus poke his head inside. He glances behind him, then steps in and quickly shuts the door. Standing there in the entryway, Papyrus looks at the front door, over at you and Sans, and then clears his throat.

"HELLO SANS! AND HUMANS!" he says, but he looks like he's rooted to the floor.

Sans pulls his arm off of your shoulders, leaning forward to give his brother a quizzical look. "what's up, bro?"

Papyrus looks at the door again and hesitates, raising a fist up to his mouth as he frowns. He looks more serious than you've seen him in a while, and you give Sans a confused and slightly worried look. Your boyfriend just gives you a small shake of his head, just as lost as you are. Then, seemingly resolved to his course of action, Papyrus lowers his fist to press it to his hip.

"I HAVE SOMEONE HERE TO SEE YOU!" he says, his expression determined but nervous sweat dots the side of his skull. "I KNOW THAT YOU SAID YOU WANTED ME TO KEEP HIM AWAY, BUT—"

"what?"

You feel a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach and Sans rocks forward onto his feet, shoving his hands in his pockets as his eyes narrow slightly. Frisk gives you a confused look and tries to follow you as you stand, but you push back against their chest to keep them seated. They frown and look at Papyrus but stay there.

"I RAN INTO HIM ON MY WAY HOME, AND WE WERE TALKING, AND I THINK HE DESERVES THE CHANCE TO APOLOGIZE!" Papyrus blurts out, looking between the two of you anxiously.

"he doesn't deserve anything," Sans says, fighting to keep his tone even and failing.

"BROTHER!"

"Are you saying that you brought Mettaton to the house?" you blurt out, drawing both sets of eye sockets over to you. "And that he wants to apologize?"

"YES, HE DOES," Papyrus says, nodding and smiling at you. Bless him, he's so earnest it's hard to be mad at him. But Sans seems to be losing a bit of patience.

You feel a gentle tug on the back of your shirt. You don't have to look to know that it's Frisk. "Mom, that's good."
Sans shakes his head, gritting his teeth. "papyrus, this isn't as simple as an apology. i know you mean well—"

"I want to hear what he has to say." The room goes silent, both skeletons looking at you. Sans's brow furrows in confusion, searching your face. Papyrus's smile widens. "Both Alphys and Napstablook said he's been acting different," you add, glancing towards the door and feeling a little uncertain now that all attention is on you. "I want to see for myself."

"babe, you don't have to do this. i know you're not..." Sans trails off, shoulders hunched. He doesn't want to say it in front of Papyrus and Frisk, but you know he's talking about the nightmares. About how you still refuse to watch any shows with Mettaton (which pretty much limits you to the brothers' collection of battered DVDs).

"I know I don't have to," you say, sounding more confident than you feel. "But maybe this will make things easier for me, and everyone. Besides..." You offer him a small smile. "You're here with me this time. You'll keep me safe."

His expression is unreadable, a passive mask with a hollow smile. "i'm trying to."

"OF COURSE YOU'LL BE SAFE! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AM HERE TO PROTECT YOU!" Papyrus's body relaxes a little now that the initial fallout is through. Sans looks back over at his brother, shifting to stand closer to you as the taller skeleton turns to the door. "NOT THAT THERE'S ANYTHING TO WORRY ABOUT. HE'S HERE TO APOLOGIZE AFTER ALL."

You look for Frisk. They've moved from one side to the other, standing behind and between you and Sans. "You stay behind us, sweetie. Okay?" you say.

Frisk nods, taking hold of your pocket. The small weight of their hand on your clothes is reassuring.

Papyrus opens the door and you feel tension coiling in your chest. Anxiety makes your skin tingle and your heart is beating fast. Not pounding, but near enough as your body braces for fight or flight. You can see the gray corner of Mettaton's rectangular body through the door, and in the back of your mind you think that Alphys must still be working on his more humanoid one after what Endogeny did to it. In a way, this makes it a little easier. Not much, but it's something.

Mettaton doesn't move. "Papyrus, I really think I should just go..."

"NONSENSE! METTATON, YOU SAID YOU WANTED TO APOLOGIZE AND NOW IS YOUR CHANCE!" Papyrus reaches out and takes hold of Mettaton's arm, dragging him inside. You're starting to wonder if this was really Mettaton's idea in the first place... "YOU CAME ALL THIS WAY."

The robot mumbles something that sounds like, "Yes, because you pulled me the entire way." He rolls a bit closer to Papyrus, putting the skeleton between himself and you. Or maybe it's himself and Sans. You look over at your boyfriend and his eye sockets are narrow, his hands still shoved deep into his pockets.

"so. pap says you wanna apologize, huh?" Sans says slowly, rocking forward onto the toes of his slippers and back down to the heels. He sounds casual on the surface, but there's something threatening underneath.

"I did, I do! I, ah..." Mettaton's display changes from a large 'M' into a blocky frowny face. You actually have to fight the urge to laugh. "Sans, please stop looking at me like that I'm trying."
"I still haven't heard an apology." Sans raises a brow as you watch the two of them, surprised at the way that Mettaton seems scared of Sans.

The display goes red with a yellow exclamation point. His arms go wide, but he doesn't move from behind Papyrus as he focuses his attention on you. "I'm sorry! Darlings, really, like I said before it was nothing personal, I was just—"

"Too wrapped up in your own bloated ego to think that maybe your own fame wasn't worth two lives?" Sans isn't rocking back and forth anymore. He seems to be enjoying watching the robot squirm. You're not sure you blame him after everything that's happened.

Papyrus wrings his heads, looking a little uncertain. You can't imagine this is how he thought this would play out.

Mettaton flinches and his screen goes dark. "Yes, and—"

"Your selfishness only hurts the people around you?"

"Yes, that's fair, and—"

"You don't deserve what friends you do have, let alone forgiveness for what you've done?" Sans is gritting his teeth now and you feel Frisk tug on your pocket, making an anxious noise.

"Sans, please!" Mettaton blurs out, his screen lights up again, blinking between red and yellow in agitation.

"Hun," you say, reaching next to you to slip your hand into the crook of Sans's arm. He glances over at you, some of the tension in his face easing away. "As much as Mettaton deserves every word..." Without thinking, you reach up to rub your cheek where the robot hit you, now completely healed for almost a week. "You're not letting him speak."

"Thank you!" the robot says, sighing and throwing his hands up in the air.

"Oh no, don't thank me," you say, frowning and dropping your hand from your face. "You owe me a damn apology. And Frisk. Do you realize what you did?"

Mettaton's arms go limp at his sides as he rocks back and forth on his wheel. You can only compare it to nervous shuffling. He makes a noise like he's clearing his throat and goes still, clasping his hands in front of his dials. "I do, and for that I am sorry. For someone who admires and loves humans, I certainly haven't treated you that way. I think it goes without saying that trying to kill both of you was selfish on my part, and that despite my insistence that I was doing it to protect the humans on the surface... I know that I wasn't being entirely truthful with myself."

He twists his hands and his screen goes dark. "And to make matters worse I tried to use our... confrontation as another means to an end to boost my own ratings. I'd like to let you know that all the footage I took down in the True Lab was destroyed, in part from Alphys's insistence. You've done a lot for her and as her friend I'm grateful. I'm trying to do better because of everything that's happened. Especially with my friends and... family." Mettaton trails off, sounding genuinely remorseful.

There's a beat of silence as you soak everything in. You've been tricked by Mettaton already, but he seems sincere. He's not posturing, or being grandiose. It didn't even seem like Mettaton even wanted to be here at all, like he knew he wasn't welcome. Maybe this is a peek at the Mettaton at his core; the ghost inside the robot body. You glance over at Sans and he seems unimpressed. You wonder if you should be feeling that way too, but you can't help but feel the smallest bit touched by
Papyrus's eyes widened about halfway through Mettaton's apology. He turns on his heel to face the robot, hands clenched into fists at his sides. "YOU TRIED TO KILL THEM!!" He lets out a dramatic, frustrated sigh.

Three red dots flicker to life across Mettaton's screen. "Yes darling. You... never gave me much of a chance to explain that little detail." Mettaton gives a nervous little laugh and you cover your mouth in an attempt not to smile.

"THIS IS THE SECOND TIME SOMEONE HAS TRIED TO KILL THEM, AND FRANKLY IT'S GETTING QUITE TIRESOME!!" Papyrus shoots Mettaton a stern look and the robot's screen goes dark again. A high-pitched whining sound comes from deep inside his rectangular body. "BUT I'M GLAD THAT YOU HAVE APOLOGIZED, AND THAT THIS HAS BEEN RESOLVED PEACEFULLY!"

You and Sans exchange a look, eyebrows raised. Frisk giggles behind you.

"Well, yes, about that," Mettaton says, making a throat-clearing sound again. "I would just like to repeat that I am sorry for everything that happened. And to try and make it up to you I have something of a gift!!" The robot raises his hands, familiar enthusiasm returning to his voice as an exclamation point glows on his display. "There's a resort near the Core that I own, the two of you could come stay there, free of charge! The room, food, amenities, everything! All taken care of. Just let me know when and I'll make it happen."

"Two of us?" you ask, frowning slightly. "There's three of us. Four if you count Papyrus."

"You're more than welcome to bring the whole family, but I assumed that you and Sans would prefer a romantic getaway," Mettaton says, his display turning into a question mark. "Whatever you decide, it will be taken care of, if you're interested."

You expect Sans to refuse immediately, but instead there's silence. Glancing over at him, you see Sans looking up at you, a calm, steady expression on his face. "well babe, how do you feel about the calculator's apology?"

Mettaton seems to bristle at the remark, but doesn't say anything. You chew your lip, squeezing Sans's arm and looking back at the robot. "I accept your apology... but I can't forgive what you did, and especially not what you tried to do. But... I appreciate that you apologized. It puts my mind a little more at ease." Your eyes flick back to Sans and he gives you a small nod.

"well, then i'll be the one to accept your offer mettaton. we'll let you know when we wanna take you up on that." San's smile turns into a grin, but it doesn't reach his eyes and there's something predatory about it. "we'll be sure to take full advantage of you covering the bill."

"Yes, I expect nothing less," Mettaton says flatly.

Frisk takes a few minutes to ask about Napstablook and you can hear the affection in the robot's voice as they speak. Mettaton leaves shortly after, now that things are as resolved as they're going to be. After Mettaton is gone Papyrus gushes over how happy he is that everything has been cleared up, and neither your or Sans has the heart to tell him that things aren't exactly perfect. But, you're certain that they're better. Frisk is also all smiles, beaming up at you.

As things settle back down, Sans starts chuckling. "you know what's funny? the resort is where that restaurant i was telling you about is. the one for the hot date i wanted to take you on. looks like it'll
finally happen."

Frisk doesn’t seem very interested in a trip to a fancy hotel and Papyrus agrees that whenever you two decide to take advantage of Mettaton’s offer, he’ll stay home to take care of them. For now you’re in no hurry, so the two of you keep it in mind for later. Besides, you still have Asgore’s visit to Snowdin’s school to worry about.

Frisk says their schoolmates won’t stop talking about it. Apparently he’s visited before and makes it a regular habit to make the rounds throughout the Underground. If it wasn’t for the fact that he would likely kill you or Frisk on sight, he sounds like a nice guy. All the residents of Snowdin seem to think so. Even Sans and Papyrus have nothing but decent things to say about him.

You wonder, one day while mulling over the upcoming visit, if visiting schools is difficult for him. After losing two children, what must it be like to surround himself with them? Is it comforting? Is it hard? Maybe it's both.

It’s two days before Asgore’s visit and you’re home alone with Papyrus, helping him clean when Sans comes home with a sopping wet and freezing Frisk. You can literally hear their teeth chattering as they come into the house and you shove the broom into Papyrus’s hands in your rush to reach the two of them.

"Sweetie what happened?” you ask, looking from Frisk to Sans and then taking your child by their ice cold hand to lead them upstairs. "Come on you're going to take a hot bath right now."

"W-we were p-playing in W-Waterfall and I s-slipped into a p-pond and then e-everyone else j-jumped in t-too and we had f-fun!” Frisk blurts out, shivering so violently they're having trouble speaking.

"What were you doing in Waterfall? I thought I told you to stay here in Snowdin," you say, frowning. Sans clears his throat and you look back at him as you flick on the light for the bathroom.

Sans pulls the door closed save for a crack to give you and Frisk some privacy as you turn the knobs to run a bath. You have to help Frisk get undressed because they're shaking so much. "i was at my station on the border, i told frisk and the kids it was okay," he says, his voice slightly muffled by the door between you.

"And you didn't stop them from getting soaked to the bone?” you ask, wrapping Frisk up in a towel as you wait for the bathtub to fill, rubbing your hands up and down their arms and sides to try and warm them up.

"was that supposed to be a joke?"

"No, Sans, it wasn’t," you snap, gathering Frisk's wet clothes and shoving the dripping wad of them into Sans's chest. He gives you a wide-eyed look, grabbing the clothes as you let them go. "I know we're having Frisk take some sick days from school, but I didn't want them to actually get sick."

You don't give Sans a chance to reply before shutting the door most of the way again and checking on the bathtub. It's not full enough yet.

"sick?"

"Yes, sick."
"they were just playing around in the water, i didn't think it would be a problem. they were having fun." Sans sounds confused.

You sigh. "It's the freezing cold after getting soaking wet that's the problem. Okay sweetie I think that's full enough to get you in the tub come on."

Unwrapping Frisk from the towel, you help them step into the tub. They flinch away, yanking their foot out. "It's too hot!"

Reaching your hand in, it feels pleasantly warm to you. "No it's not, it just feels that way because you're cold. Come on, you need to warm back up."

With some gentle coaxing you get Frisk submerged, letting the tub continue to fill until it's nearly to the top. Sighing, you make sure they're situated before turning to go peek out into the hall. Sans is standing there with his hands shoved in his pockets, rubbing the toe of his slipper into the carpet. Frisk's clothes are nowhere to be seen so he must have taken them to the laundry and come back.

He looks up as you open the door just enough to lean out of the bathroom. "i'm sorry, i didn't realize stuff like that can get humans sick. you didn't get sick after our trip to waterfall."

"I'm older and my immune system is better," you say, sighing and shaking your head. "But I could have."

Frisk sneezes and you turn away from Sans to go check on them. Sniffling, they look up at you, rubbing their nose. You go to check their forehead but then realize the futility of your attempt between the hot water and the fact that they were ice cold moments ago. There's no way to tell if they have a temperature until later.

"How do you feel?" you ask, pushing wet hair out of their face.

"Warmer," Frisk says, letting themselves slip lower into the water, up to their chin. "My throat feels a little itchy."

Wonderful. At least now you know how to make chicken noodle soup from scratch.

"babe? is frisk okay?" Sans asks from his spot outside the bathroom.

You sigh again. "If anything I'm sure it's just a cold. They'll be okay."

Chapter End Notes

Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters (including the Reader/Hope) and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
In Sickness

Frisk isn't okay.

Papyrus comes to get you in the middle of the night because Frisk is coughing and he's worried. The sound is rough and wet and has you almost certain that this isn't just a cold. When you and the skeleton brothers go back to Papyrus's room they're sitting up in bed with the comforter wrapped around them, looking at you piteously and breathing through their mouth. They shiver as you reach out to feel their forehead and you're not surprised to find that they're hot to the touch and sweating. Definitely a fever. Frisk makes a pathetic whining sound as you push damp hair from their face. They try to draw in a deep breath through their nose but it just makes a horrible squelching sound until they give up and swallow.

"Okay sweetie, let's get you something to bring this temperature down. Stay right here," you say, doing your best to not sound worried. As you lean down to kiss their clammy forehead you hesitate, realization dawning on you as you pull back. "Do we have any medicine in the house? Or even a thermometer?" You turn to look at the two skeletons waiting at the foot of the bed. Papyrus just gives you an uncertain look and wrings his hands, Sans shakes his head.

"Do you know what I'm talking about? Have you heard of Motrin, or Advil, or Tylenol?" you ask, searching Sans's face.

"no," Sans says. "maybe there's some at the shop? if it's an emergency i'm sure i can—"

"I'll check in the morning when they open," you say, turning back to Frisk. They're looking up at you with wide, worried eyes. "It's not an emergency, it's just a fever," you add, trying to reassure Frisk and Sans both. Maybe yourself, too.

"I don't feel good," Frisk whines, coughing and leaning forward to press their forehead into your chest. Each loud, wracking cough makes your heart twist painfully as you wrap your arms around them, stroking their back until it subsides. "My throat hurts."

"I think Undyne left some of her tea here. Why don't we go make you some? It'll help." As you help Frisk to their feet you snatch up an extra blanket from the foot of the bed and wrap them up in it. You can't remember if bundling up is a good or bad thing for a fever (you've heard both) but you can't stand to watch them shiver.

Sans disappeared when you weren't looking, and you think you can hear the distant sound of the kitchen faucet. Papyrus watches the two of you as you head for the door.

"IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO TO HELP?" he asks, reaching out and touching your shoulder.

You cover his hand with your own, giving him a comforting squeeze and an attempt at a smile. "We've got it from here, Pap. Why don't you get some more sleep, I know you have puzzles to calibrate and a forest to patrol."

Papyrus shakes his head, frowning. "THAT ISN'T MORE IMPORTANT THAN DOING MY BEST TO MAKE SURE FRISK IS WELL! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, MUST DO MY UTMOXT TO HELP MY FRIEND!"

Frisk starts coughing again and you wince. You grip their shoulder with your free hand, still looking at Papyrus. "The best thing you can do right now is get some sleep. I get the feeling that
we're gonna be up the rest of the night, so knowing you'll be well-rested in the morning will help, I promise."

"...IF YOU'RE CERTAIN," he says, pulling away and clasping his hands in front of him. "THEN I WILL BE SURE TO GET AS MUCH SLEEP AS POSSIBLE SO THAT WHEN YOU NEED ME, I'LL BE READY TO HELP!"

You make your way downstairs and get Frisk settled on the couch with a Disney movie (Dumbo, as it turns out) and go into the kitchen to check on Sans. He's gripping the edge of the counter next to the stove, staring vacantly at the kettle with his shoulders hunched and his weight leaned forward onto his arms. You can see the guilt written all over him, weighing on his back and darkening his eye sockets. As you enter the kitchen and push your sleep-mussed hair out of your face, he shoves away from the counter and straightens to look at you. His mouth is thin, the corners pulled down into a grimace.

"this is all my fault," he says, shaking his head. His tone is harsh, his frustration directed inward.

You close the distance and reach out for him but he pulls away, shoving his hands in his pockets. You hesitate for a second, thinking about leaving him be. No, this isn't right. You close the distance again, reaching out with both hands and taking hold of the sides of his skull, turning him to look at you. "You didn't know," you say, giving him a small shake. "Please don't do this right now, I can't worry about you blaming yourself and Frisk at the same time."

Sans scoffs, eyes flicking downwards. "then don't worry about me. i don't want you to."

You shake him again, scowling. "Tough shit, Sans. I'm gonna worry about you, because I love you." Letting go of his head, you wrap your arms around his neck and hug him tight. After a moment you feel him relax, giving you a weak hug in return.

"i love you too," he says, sighing.

"Go sit with Frisk." You can hear them coughing as you pull away. "I know how to make tea the way they like."

A few minutes later you join the two of them in the dark living room, carefully passing Frisk a steaming mug and setting a box of tissues on the couch beside them. You settle yourself between them, stroking Frisk's hair as they lean heavily into your side and sip their tea. With a tired and weak contented noise, they take another sip.

"This tastes good," they mumble, voice thick.

"Good. That means you'll drink it all, right?" It better taste good. You put in enough sugar that it's almost syrup.

"Yeah." As they start coughing you reach to steady the mug, worried that they're going to spill hot tea on themselves. As Frisk's tiny body seizes against yours and goes stiff with each hacking cough, you rub soothing circles into their back. Worry tightens in your chest and you feel Sans touch your shoulder in an attempt to comfort you.

Frisk finishes off their tea by the pyramid scene and Sans takes the empty mug and tucks it on his other side in the couch cushions. Their coughing is a bit better, but not by much. With a weak, pitiful groan, Frisk crawls into your lap and tucks their head under your chin. You wrap your arms around them, holding them close and swaying back and forth. The coughing subsides and slowly they feel heavier against your chest.
As if conspiring against you, Dumbo's mom starts singing 'Baby Mine' and you feel yourself start to tear up. Even if Frisk wasn't sick, you think this song would go straight to your heart. Your throat tightens and you stop rocking so you can lean against Sans. He Pulls you in close with an arm around your shoulder and when you look up at him you bite your lip in an attempt to not to cry.

"babe," he says gently, cupping your cheek with his free hand, tracing his thumb over the curve of your brow.

You give a small shake of your head, closing your eyes and leaning into his palm. "I'm fine, it's just the movie," you whisper.

"try to get some sleep." He coaxes you to lay your head against his shoulder and you let him, shifting to find a comfortable spot. Sans takes hold of Frisk's legs and pulls them into his lap.

Closing your eyes, you will yourself to try and do as Sans says.

The rabbits may have tampons and pads stocked in their shop, but you don't have any luck with the medicine. The best you can do is more ingredients for chicken noodle soup.

You text Alphys on your way back from the store. 'Do you have any medicine to help reduce fevers? Frisk's sick.'

There's a small delay, and by the time you get back to the house Alphys has responded. 'What's a fever?'

You stare at the screen blankly for a moment as you set the bag of groceries down on the kitchen counter. Sighing, you type back. 'Do you have any human medical books?'

Shoving your phone in your jacket pocket, you pull out a cutting board to get to work. Sans appears at your side, but you feel so distracted you're not sure if he walked up or teleported. It doesn't really matter.

"any luck?" he asks, sounding hopeful.

You shake your head. "I tried asking Alphys if maybe she has anything, but she doesn't even know what a fever is. I thought you said monsters can get sick?"

"it's different. our illnesses are magical, but from what you told me last night, they sound sorta similar." He reaches out and rests his hand on your back. The pressure is comforting, but you continue chopping off the ends of the celery and carrots so you can rinse them in the sink.

"How's Frisk?" you ask, glancing over at him as you scoop up the unusable bits and carry them over to the trash can.

You check your phone before picking the knife back up. Alphys responded. 'I think so, I'll see what I can do.'

'Thanks.'

"sleeping again. they finished some breakfast and i got 'em tucked back in pap's bed."

You nod, focusing your attention on the smooth motions of the knife through the carrots. "Good. The best thing they can do is sleep right now."
Frisk's been asleep for a few hours and you're starting to worry. It's lunchtime and they need to eat something. When you peek into Papyrus's room they're still tucked into the center of the racecar bed, rolled onto their side and facing the display of robotic action figures. It takes you a moment to realize how quiet the room is.

Struck with a sudden swell of fear, you rush to the bed and kneel on the edge, leaning forward to push hair out of Frisk's face. They're still burning up and as you roll them onto their back they don't wake. The hissing sound of their breathing through barely-parted lips finally reaches you, but it does little to quell your fears.

"Frisk, wake up," you say, stroking their face. They groan a little and scrunch up their face but don't open their eyes. "Baby, wake up!"

Their eyes flutter for a moment but Frisk's head just rocks back and forth before settling again, fists balling into the blankets covering them. Fear squeezes your heart and you feel a chill run down your spine. Panic threatens to break through to the surface as you're frozen there, staring, desperately trying to think of what you should do. If you were on the surface you'd call a doctor, or take them to the hospital but down there they don't even know what a fever is!

"what's going on?"

You look up to see Sans in the doorway, framed by the light in the rest of the house. You shake your head, trembling as tears start to swim in your eyes. "Frisk isn't waking up."

Sans's sockets go dark and he's at your side in an instant, kneeling on the bed and reaching for Frisk's face. The similarities in the pale white of his bones and the washed out color of your child's face make you bite back a sob, fingers twisting in the blanket under you. "c'mon kiddo, this isn't funny. you can't just fall down like this, you gotta get back up," he says, shaking his head. He looks up at you and you can barely make out the two tiny lights of his eyes. "they were just sleeping earlier. kid said they were tired so i brought them up here to sleep."

You pull Sans's hand away and fumble for Frisk's pulse in their neck. The skeleton falls silent, watching you as you fight to keep yourself calm. It takes you a moment to find Frisk's heartbeat; it feels slower than you think it should, but you realize you honestly have no frame of reference. Right now your own pulse is pounding in your ears.

"what are you doing?" Sans asks, his voice thin.

"Just... checking Frisk's heartbeat. I don't..." You draw in a shaky breath, covering your face with your hands. "Sans I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how to make this better."

He tries to pull you into his arms but you lean away, digging your fingers into your scalp and dragging back. You have to do something. You can't stay here and cry, Frisk needs you. "I have to... I have to try to bring the fever down somehow," you mutter, standing up and walking out of the room.

You remember movies and TV shows, cold compresses and ice baths, something, anything you can try. An ice bath sounds like overkill and being that cold was what did this in the first place, so you opt for the first choice. You head to the linen closet to fetch a set of washcloths, then go to the bathroom to run them under the faucet.

Sans is still there on the racecar bed, sitting now instead of kneeling, staring down at Frisk. He doesn't even glance over at you as you come up beside him, tugging the blanket down off of their chest. You hand the cool, damp washcloths to Sans and strip Frisk to the waist so you can place
one of the compresses on their chest and another over their forehead.

"babe," Sans says softly, reaching out and touching your side.

You turn to him, eyes swimming with tears. Part of you wants to let yourself crumple and let him comfort you, but you can't. You swallow down the tightness in your throat and blink back the tears, wiping them away with the heel of your hand. "I need to call Alphys. She's the only one that I think can help." You're back on your feet again, pulling away and fumbling for the phone in your pocket.

Sans lets his hand fall back into his lap and looks back at Frisk. As you flick through the menus on your phone, you hear him murmur, "c'mon kiddo. you're more determined than this."
Alphys and Undyne are at the house within the hour. The fish monster has a tin of tea to restock your supply and she pulls you into a crushing hug the second your eyes start to water and you thank her. The doctor wastes no time heading upstairs to check on Frisk and the two of you follow in her wake.

Sans is still with Frisk. The two of you agreed not to leave them alone, making sure that someone was there in case there are any changes. He's fidgeting with one of the cold compresses when you enter the room. Sliding off the bed to give Alphys some space, he moves to stand next to you. A warm, smooth hand slides into yours and squeezes hard. After a moment you squeeze back.

Alphys adjusts her glasses as she looks over Frisk, pressing a small, scaled hand to the side of their face and fumbling a little awkwardly at their wrist. She mentioned having gone through a few books she found during the few hours between your early morning texts and your call. She must have picked up on a few things, at least.

"Do you know what's wrong? Is Frisk going to be okay?" Undyne asks, clenching her fists and grimacing. The muscles in her arms are tense under smooth bluish scales and her body is rigid. She's angry, but she doesn't have anything to do with it.

Alphys doesn't answer her, instead turning to look at you and Sans. "The books I have are old, and some of them are damaged. But from what I was able to read, cooling them off with these cloths is a good idea. I'm sure it'll help a lot while I try to figure something out," she says, more composed than you've ever seen her. Frowning, she looks away. "I'm not sure what's wrong other than Frisk's elevated temperature —the fever— but I'm going to do everything I can! I-I'm going to do this."

"So what do I do?" you ask. Desperation tightens your voice, tenses your muscles.

"What you're already doing. Make sure they keep cool to try and bring their temperature down. That's the best advice I found aside from medicine I don't have. Yet." She frowns deeper, running a hand over her face. Her expression softens as she glances at Frisk. "Their Soul doesn't feel sick from what I can tell, so whatever it is, it's not magical. If they start to get hotter, wipe them down with more cool water. It should help."

"That's it? Alphys, there has to be something I can—" You cut yourself off, covering your mouth with your free hand as your eyes swim with tears. Sinking down onto the edge of the bed, tears spill down your cheeks silently as you start shaking. Sans sits down beside you, putting an arm around your shoulders and pulling you against him.

"I'm sorry," Alphys says, reaching out to timidly brush your knee. "But I'm going to do everything I can. I have to get back to the lab."

"thanks for coming over Alphys," Sans says.

"Of course, Sans. What're f-friends for?"

Undyne hesitates as Alphys leaves the room. You feel her watching you, then the weight of her pressing down on the mattress beside you. When you steal a blurry look at her, she's kneeling over Frisk, taking hold of one tiny hand between both of hers and squeezing. "Okay, squirt! You have to
get better! We still have lots of training to do until you're as tough as me! No, tougher! I know that one day you're going to be able to kick my ass, do you hear me?!!" She shakes Frisk's hand, her muscles tensing as her voice cracks. "Alphys is gonna find a way to make you get back up, I know she is... But you know what would be even more badass? If you got better all on your own and showed that nerd of mine just how tough you are."

She turns to look at you and you draw in a shaky breath as you try and clear your eyes. It's not working very well but you think Undyne's good eye is glassy. "You're tough too, punk," she says, letting go of Frisk's hand so she can squeeze your shoulder. "Do you want me to stay here?"

"No," you say thickly, sniffing. "No if there's nothing I can do... I'd feel better knowing you're with Alphys if she needs help."

"You got it. You call one of us if you need ANYTHING okay?" She squeezes your shoulder again and you wince before she lets you go.

"I will."

A few more hours must have passed because you hear the front door open and shut and Papyrus shout a greeting to the house. It was a haze of silent tears and reapplying cold compresses, listening to Frisk's breathing and waiting anxiously for some sign of them waking up. At one point they groaned and squeezed your hand, but just as you felt hope stir in your chest they went still again.

Sans mumbles a curse and pushes himself to his feet, vacating one of the two chairs you brought up to the bedroom. He slips out into the hall.

"HOW IS FRISK DOING?"

You're sitting on the edge of your chair, weight leaned forward onto your elbows as you hunch over the bed, holding Frisk's hand. They make a small, faint sound but go quiet as you stroke your thumb across their knuckles. For the first time since falling into the Underground, you really, truly wish that you were on the surface.

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN?"

Flinching, you barely glance up at the door as Papyrus shoves it open, rushing into the room with Sans trailing behind him. You expect him to push his way to the side of the bed maybe, or to reach out for Frisk's limp body. Instead he lingers in the center of the room, staring with wide, scared eyes.

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND. HOW COULD FRISK FALL DOWN?" he says, voice trembling.

"they didn't fall down, we don't know that for sure," Sans says, his tone soothing. He reaches up to pat Papyrus's shoulder. "they're just sick. it doesn't mean..." Trailing off, Sans gives his brother a comforting squeeze.

"What does that mean?" you ask, voice hoarse. You feel scraped out and emptied, hollow. "Falling down. You said something about that too, Sans. And I think I saw that phrase in the True Lab."

Papyrus bites back a small sob as you see tears gather in his eye sockets, hugging himself. Sans looks down at the floor. "it's a monster thing. before we die, like from illness or old age, nonviolent things... we fall unconscious. we're still alive for a little while like that, before we turn to dust."

"Oh," you say.
"BUT YOU SAY THIS ISN'T THE SAME, SANS? FRISK CAN STILL WAKE UP, RIGHT?"

Papyrus wipes his face with his gloved hands.

"absolutely. alphys is hard at work in the lab right now trying to help, too. we've just been here with frisk, waiting for them to get better." Sans rubs his face and muffles a yawn, which snaps Papyrus's attention to him.

"BROTHER YOU LOOK EXHAUSTED. LET ME STAY WITH THE HUMANS WHILE YOU GET SOME SLEEP."

You look at Sans and realize that he's right. Sans is exhausted; you can see dark circles under darker eye sockets, dim lights scanning yours. How had you not noticed? You nod at him weakly. "You should rest. I get the feeling it's gonna be another long night," you say.

"what about you? you need sleep too, babe," he says, frowning.

"Even if I tried, I don't think I could sleep right now. Maybe later." You shake your head, squeezing Frisk's hand.

Sans comes up beside you, running his fingers along the curve of your cheek and pushing loose strands of hair behind your ear. "are you sure?"

Nodding, you lean a little into his touch. It's more for his sake than yours, letting him know you aren't upset with him. Even though a small, scared, angry part of you wants to lash out. If he had been more careful, if you had told him more... This wouldn't have happened. You force a small, reassuring smile that isn't much more than a twitch at the corners of your mouth. "I'm sure."

You let him lean down to nuzzle the side of your face, turning a little and reaching up to cup his jaw in return. "get me if you need me."

"Okay."

Sans leaves the room, glancing back at you before closing the door behind him. Light filters in from behind a drawn curtain, but for the most part you're in calm, quiet darkness. It reminds you of your stay in the hospital when you had Frisk. The nights were quiet in the maternity wing, save for the hum of the air conditioner. But there was always light peeking in from under the door and from the equipment in the room.

Papyrus lowers himself onto the chair next to you, hands gripping his knees. You glance over at him but return your attention to Frisk's face, then down to the slow, shallow rise and fall of their chest.

"Sans blames himself," you say, softly. You realize this is the first time that Sans has willingly left your side. You were the one leaving him; to go check the store, to cook, to re-soak the washcloths. He wasn't even letting himself sleep. Did he sleep at all last night, even after he told you to?

Papyrus shifts in his seat. His voice is quiet when he talks. "Do you blame him?"

Looking back at Papyrus again, you let go of Frisk's hand so that you can lean back in your chair. You realize your back is aching. Biting your lip, you wrap your arms around yourself. "A little," you admit. "I know I shouldn't, he didn't let it happen on purpose..."

"He should have been more careful," Papyrus agrees, much to your surprise. "I cannot tell you how to feel, and I don't think that you are being unfair. But I can tell you Sans loves you both very much, and if he had known he never would have let anything bad happen. He may be very lazy
about many things but..." He smiles at you, reaching out to touch your arm. "When he cares about something, or someone, he tries. He tries for you and for Frisk. He's tried more in the last three months than I've seen from him since... well since we moved here to Snowdin."

But what about when all his trying isn't enough? You think you'd be crying if you didn't already feel wrung dry. Instead your chest just aches and you hug yourself tighter. "I don't know what I'm gonna do, if Frisk..." You can't finish the sentence. Your throat won't let you. Papyrus strokes your arm as you shudder.

"You don't need to know. Hopefully you will never know. If I lost Sans, I wouldn't know what I would do either. How do you prepare to lose someone that you love?" Papyrus sighs, turning his head to look at Frisk again.

You don't know what to say to that. Unwrapping your arms from around yourself, you lean forward on your elbows again, taking hold of Frisk's hand. Papyrus smooths your hair down your back, and the motion is soothing. You don't say anything, and he doesn't stop, content to sit there in silence with you as you wait for something, anything, to change.

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**Frisk, you have to stay determined. Don't give up.**

The voice and the words, they're both distantly familiar but they're not sure why. But the voice is loud and it was so quiet and peaceful before. Frisk pulls away, deeper into the darkness. It's warm and comfortable, their throat doesn't burn and their body doesn't ache.

**If you stay here, you're going to lose everything.**

*I like it here. It doesn't hurt here.*

**Frisk, you have to stay determined.**

*Why does that sound so familiar?*

Chara hesitates.

*Chara, why do you care?*

**Because I know what it feels like to die, and I don't want to feel it again through you.**

*How did you die?*

Chara's consciousness buzzes angrily, pushing against Frisk's. Frisk draws away, confused.

*It doesn't matter how! What's important is that you don't die, you idiot! Stay determined!*

*You didn't answer me before, when I asked you why that sounds familiar.*

**You're right, I didn't.**

*Tell me.*

*...My father said those words to me before I died.*

*Your dad? Was he nice?*
Frisk starts to feel themselves slipping away, Chara's voice sounding more and more distant.

**Frisk! You have to stay determined! Don't give up!**

Sans knows that even though you haven't said the words, you must be blaming him. He deserves it. This is his fault. If he had been more careful, more cautious, Frisk would be fine. They wouldn't be unconscious, draped in wet cloth and burning with fever.

He sent you and Papyrus to go eat and sleep about an hour ago. The house is quiet and he's alone with Frisk, slouched back in a chair with his hands shoved deep in his pockets. He watches them, notices how still they are. They haven't groaned or shifted in the last forty-five minutes, their breathing is frighteningly shallow. It's been a long time since he's seen a monster that's fallen down, but this is far too similar for comfort. He can't help but keep checking for the presence of dust.

You've barely spoken to him since Frisk wouldn't wake up. He can't blame you. He can't even muster up the energy to be frustrated or defend himself. Because he's too busy agreeing with the words you won't say. *His fault. He should have tried harder. This shouldn't have happened.* Did his laziness do this to Frisk? Had he just not cared enough to bother trying to tell the kids 'no'? Was it just easier to let them do as they pleased?

He wishes he could tell himself it isn't true. But if he tried, he wouldn't believe it.

Some dad he'd be.

The room is too quiet. He can't make out the faint hiss of Frisk's breathing over his own. Bones humming with a sudden lurch of fear, Sans leans forward and reaches for Frisk's neck the way you did, probing gently at the line of their throat for their heartbeat. For one maddeningly-long moment he can't find it but then, finally, he can feel the slow but steady rhythm under his phalanges. Their Soul pulses in time with their heart, but he thinks that underneath the low tone he can feel a faint fluttering. Something strange and secondary. But, now that he's leaning closer, he can hear the faint drag of air between parted lips.

Sans buries his face into the blankets at Frisk's side, gripping the back of his skull with both hands. The feeling of utter helplessness is maddening. He's at the mercy of the universe, caught up with no way of fighting back, completely powerless.

*please. please don't take frisk away from me. from her. even if a reset doesn't happen, i'll still lose everything. how can she ever forgive me? whatever, whoever, is out there tormenting me. tell me what you want and i'll give it to you, as long as you don't take my humans away.*

He feels tears gathering in empty sockets as he squeezes them shut, scraping the back of his head with his fingers. He feels beaten and broken, punished for every moment he has that he shouldn't. Is this his final penance for surviving the accident? To finally find this happiness only to have it stripped away?

*i'll try harder. i'll do more around the house. i'll... i'll pay off my damn tab at grillby's for fuck's sake, whatever you want! what do you want from me?!*

"Dad?"

Sans's head jerks up at the sound of Frisk's thin, hoarse voice, tears slipping down his cheekbones as his eyes open wide. They're looking at him from beneath heavy lids, moistening dry lips with their tongue. "kiddo?"
"I don't feel good. And I'm tired," Frisk mumbles, their eyes fluttering as they threaten to close.

Sans lurches forward, cupping their cheek and patting gently. "no, stay awake kiddo, c'mon! stay with me," he begs, panic swelling inside of him, only to be joined by relief as their eyes open and meet his again. He gives the kid a shaky smile. "there ya go. how about i go get your mom, okay? i know she'll be thrilled to see you awake."

As he pushes away from the bed and goes to stand, he's stopped by a tiny hand grabbing his fingers. "Wait, I don't... I'm so tired... Dad."

_Dad_. So it hadn't just been a single slip of the tongue.

"anything you want, frisk," Sans says, sandwiching that tiny hand between his, covering it. "i'm here."

"Anything?" they ask, and Sans can't help but huff a weak laugh at the hopeful sound in their voice. Like he wouldn't pull down the mountain if he could, just to keep that kid happy.

"anything."

"Mom said not to say anything to you, but maybe it can be a secret. But... I really want you to be my dad, Sans." Frisk gives a slow blink, and their eyes are a little unfocused. Sans can't help but wonder if the kid is a little out of it, if they'll even remember this conversation.

But it doesn't matter if they do or not. How can he say no? "of course. but we can't keep that a secret from your mom, and she has to say it's okay. deal, kid?"

Frisk blinks again, but this time their eyes don't reopen. Sans squeezes their hand.

"kid?"

He reaches up to cup their face. They're still burning up. Shallow breaths hiss past their teeth. Whatever made them regain consciousness, it's gone now.

**Chapter End Notes**

Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters (including the Reader/Hope) and fanart!

[onadacora.tumblr.com](http://onadacora.tumblr.com)
You're woken up by the loud, blippy music of your phone ringing and the vibrations in your back pocket. Papyrus jerks awake under you, nearly tossing you out of his lap as he tries and fails to stand up from the couch. Shoving against the pillow in his lap to sit up, you fumble for your phone, heart leaping into your throat.

"WHO IS THAT?" Papyrus asks, taking hold of your shoulders and helping you right yourself. He leans forward over you to get a look at your screen as you answer the call.

It's Alphys. "H-hey!"

"OH IT'S ALPHYS! I HOPE SHE HAS GOOD NEWS!" he says, squeezing your shoulders and bouncing on the cushion behind you.

"Do you have something?" you blurt out, pushing hair out of your mouth and clenching your fingers tight against your scalp.

"I do! I mean, I think so!" she says, and you can hear the hopeful smile in her voice. You swallow hard, tamping down a swell of optimism but still smiling a little despite your best efforts. It won't do you any good to get your hopes up but... "Undyne and I are on our way! The Riverperson is making good time, so we should be there in the next half-hour."

You close your eyes, freeing your hand from your hair to cover your face. "Alphys, I can't thank you enough for doing this," you say, voice thick. Papyrus wraps his arms around you and hugs you. You tip your head against his.

"Of course! I just hope that this works," she says, going quiet. She sighs and you rub your eyes. "We'll be there soon."

You hang up the call and start to cry, hoping despite knowing that you shouldn't. Because there's no guarantee, but at least now there's something. A chance.

Papyrus stands at the foot of the bed, next to the door as he watches you tell his brother the news. He can tell Sans has been crying at some point and he thinks you notice it too. You sit on the chair beside him and tenderly take his hand in yours, smiling through the tears in your eyes as you speak to him. Whatever blame you held against Sans is gone in this moment of hope. He's glad. Maybe everything will be okay.

Sans doesn't smile back. He squeezes your hand and pulls you into his arms, but Sans doesn't smile. He doesn't even try to fake it. The brothers look at each other from over your shoulder and Papyrus gives him a disappointed look. A look that says, 'You should be happy right now. Why aren't you?'

Sans just looks away and lets you go.

Alphys sits on the edge of Papyrus's racecar bed while you cradle Frisk's head and shoulders in your lap, stroking hair away from their eyes. Sans stands at your side, one hand on your back, the other clenched into a tight fist in his pocket. He's watching you; the way you're biting your lip as you scour Frisk's face for some kind of sign, the way your fingers brush delicately over the kid's forehead, how you're leaning ever so slightly in his direction.
Sans can't be happy until the furrow in your brow smooths away. Until the worry that shadows your face is gone. You and Papyrus might be clinging to optimism, but that's never been his strong suit. The last few years have soured him.

Undyne hands the doctor a small, rectangular bag then steps back to stand with Papyrus. From in the bag, Alphys withdraws a large syringe and a small bottle filled halfway with a bright green, glowing liquid. Her hands are steady as she fills the needle.

This had better work. If all this just serves to get your hopes up, raising you so that the fall is that much harsher... Sans pushes the thought away. Alphys is doing her best. Everyone is just doing what they can to help.

"What's in that?" you ask, eyes darting up in alarm.

"It's a mixture of human medicine and healing magic. Normally healing magic only t-targets physical wounds but infused with the medicine it should, ah, work to fight whatever is making Frisk sick." Alphys says, taken aback. She presses on the plunger to expel any extra air until a bead of green liquid appears at the tip, then looks at you, a question in her eyes.

"Oh," you say, tipping your chin towards your chest. "Sorry, I wasn't expecting it to, um, glow. I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. Please, go ahead."

The doctor nods, setting the bottle and bag aside so she can take hold of Frisk's arm. Inserting the needle into the kid's bicep, she presses the plunger.

Sans makes a silent plea to the universe for this to work.

You wait.

You adjust the cold compress on Frisk's forehead for what must be the fiftieth time, watching the tiny movements of their eyes beneath closed lids. Your other hand smooths away damp hair from their temples. They started sweating about fifteen minutes after Alphys gave them the injection, and it's been almost an hour now. You think the sweat is a good thing. You don't know enough to be sure one way or the other.

Sans is sitting on the chair closest to you, his arms folded under his head with one hand resting on your leg. Your eyes flick over to him to see if he's fallen asleep but he hasn't. He's watching Frisk, his expression closed off.

Alphys is in the other chair, reading something on her phone. Her other hand is resting on the back of Undyne's neck. The fish monster is sitting on the ground next to her girlfriend, her head resting against the doctor's thigh. A small, quiet snore lets you know that she's fallen asleep. You can't blame her. There's not much to do right now but wait.

Papyrus is sitting cross-legged on the floor near the head of the bed, between Sans and the wall. He's been staring at his action figure collection for the last ten minutes.

"Mmm..."

Your stomach twists and your heart leaps in your chest as you stare down at Frisk, hands seeking their shoulders. Their face scrunches a little and their head turns to one side and then the other, before their eyes finally flutter open. They blink up at you owlishly, reaching up to rub their eyes.

"Mom?" they ask in a tiny, raspy voice.
"Hey sweetie," you say, your eyes swimming with tears, grinning from ear to ear.

Sans’s grip tightens on your leg and he lifts his head up. Papyrus whips around to look at Frisk and Alphys puts her phone away and gives Undyne a gentle shake. But no one says anything. The room is quiet save for your sharp inhalations of breath as you try to quiet your crying, and Frisk's voice.

"Why are you crying?" they ask you, reaching up to wrap their arms around your neck.

You cradle Frisk's head in your hands, letting them pull you down to press your foreheads together. Laughing because you can't help it, because you're so giddy with relief, you say, "Because I'm so happy."

"Mooooom I feel fine now!" Frisk complains, frowning at you from their spot on Papyrus's bed. They lean back against a pile of pillows, crossing their arms in a magnificent pout.

"You are going to humor me and stay in bed at least until dinner. I don't want you exerting yourself and relapsing," you say, holding out a steaming mug of tea. Frisk just gives it a dirty look, like it's offended them somehow. "I want you to drink this, Alphys says you need plenty of fluids because you got a little dehydrated while you were unconscious."

Alphys and Undyne left shortly after Frisk woke up and declared that their fever was gone. It was the middle of the night, Alphys in particular was nearly falling asleep on her feet. It's midday now, a little bit after lunchtime. Frisk obediently ate a huge bowl of chicken noodle soup, and after decided that they were feeling back to normal and wanted to get up.

You're having none of that.

"If I drink it all, then can I get up?" Frisk asks.

"This is not up for debate," you say, digging in your heels. "I just said, you are staying in that bed until dinner, and then if I decide you can, you can get up. And you are drinking this tea."

Frisk lets out a long-suffering groan, throwing their head back. You fix them with a stern look, hoping that you look more like a loving but concerned mom and less like your own mother. "Fiyyyyine," Frisk says dramatically, and you wonder if six is old enough for them to be acting like a pre-teen already. They take the mug from you and give it a careful sip.

Sans appears in the doorway, leaning against the frame and raising a brow at you. You just give him a stern look, hoping that you look more like a loving but concerned mom and less like your own mother. "Fiyyyyine," Frisk says dramatically, and you wonder if six is old enough for them to be acting like a pre-teen already. They take the mug from you and give it a careful sip.

Sans appears in the doorway, leaning against the frame and raising a brow at you. You just give him an exasperated look and shake your head. His smile widens and you can't help but smile back even though you try not to. Frisk slurps their tea loudly and gives you a wide-eyed look.

"you giving your mom a hard time?" Sans asks, entering the room and sinking into the chair beside you. He slips one arm behind you and his fingers slide underneath the hem of your shirt, finding the small of your back. The touch is familiar and reassuring. Normal. Like the last two days never happened.

"No," Frisk says petulantly, taking another loud sip to hide their face.

"i think you're telling me a fibula. i can feel it in my bones," Sans says, leaning forward for emphasis.

Frisk giggles and nearly chokes on their tea, earning Sans a frown from you.

"whoa there kiddo, no need to go breathing in the tea. unless humans can do that. it's a mysteary to
me," he says, glancing over at you and winking. "or maybe it's a mysteritea."

Yeah. Things are definitely getting back to normal. You crack a smile despite your best efforts, hiding your face and laughing. "Well, if this is what you're gonna do, I might as well take my leaf," you say, earning yourself a grin and a chuckle from Sans.

Frisk's eyes narrow as they look up at you, pursing their lips. "I don't get it."

"Tea comes from leaves. They're dried, and—"

"Eew!" they blurt out, holding the mug away from their face. ".Leaves?"

"right? it's hard to beleaf."

"Frisk, please. A lot of things are—"

You're interrupted by a loud knock at the door. You and Sans look at each other, sharing twin expressions of confusion.

"Did Papyrus forget his keys when he left?" you ask.

"he shouldn't have. did undyne or alphys say they were coming?" he asks in return, his grin fading.

"No. Neither of them have—"

You're interrupted again by another loud knock, this time followed by a muffled voice calling from the other side of the front door. "Howdy! Anyone home?"

You don't know the voice but Sans's eye sockets go dark and he goes stiff beside you. You start to ask him what's wrong but he bolts up from the chair, turning to the door but then back to you. "stay in here and don't open the door. if anything happens i swear i'll come get you before he can find you."

The hairs on the back of your neck prickle and raise and you get a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. "Sans, what—?"

"it's asgore. of all the f—" He bites off the curse with a quick glance at Frisk. "trust me, and stay here."

Sans closes the door behind him before you can say anything else.

"Mom?" Frisk asks, their voice making you jump.

Shushing them, you reach out to put your hand on their leg and give a reassuring squeeze. "Sweetie I need you to be quiet okay?" you whisper. "We can't let Asgore find out that we're here."

Frisk nods and you squeeze them again. Then, heart hammering in your chest, you get up to press your ear to the bedroom door.

"—children were saying that one of the other students was out sick! I thought I would pop by to say hello and perhaps offer them a cup of tea." Asgore's voice is a low rumble, deep and warm. You vaguely remember illustrations of him in the few history books you read. What stuck out most — literally you suppose— were his gigantic horns.

"that's really kind of you, but they're sleeping right now." You look over at Frisk as they watch you, wide-eyed with their mug clutched in their hands.
"Ah, I see. By the way Sans, I had no idea that you and Papyrus were taking care of a child! I am happy for you, children certainly do brighten up a home." He sounds a little wistful. You might feel sorry for him if you weren't so worried.

"Yeah, they sure do. the kid and their mom have been staying with us. it's been real nice. it's too bad the kiddo's feeling sick right now. they'll have to be sure to catch you around next time."

"Oh, I do not mind waiting." You grit your teeth, resisting the urge to hit the door.

"Oh, you don't have to do that. really, they just fell asleep a little bit ago so it'll probably be a while. i'm sure you've got, uh, important king stuff to do."

"Yes, well, I suppose that I do," Asgore says, chuckling. "But truly, lifting the spirits of a sick child is something I hold in high regard."

"Well, your highness, I just can't bear the thought of you going so far out of your way for us. you're just too kind, i know that the kid will be okay waiting until your next visit. or, ah, maybe we can visit new home sometime, yeah?"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea!" You breathe a sigh of relief. Maybe now he'll go. You give Sans your silent thanks. "Perhaps when they are feeling better?"

"Sure. Absolutely."

"Give my well wishes to the child, if you could."

"Of course."

"Oh and their mother as well."

"No problem."

"Have a good day, Sans."

"You too, asgore."

There's a moment of silence and then the sound of the front door closing. You reach for the doorhandle when—

A loud knock, followed by, "Oh! Sans, I almost forgot!"

There's a beat where you squeeze your eyes shut and clench your hands into fists, grimacing. Why won't he leave?! You hear the door open again.

"Yeah?"

"The other day, I found this pair of teacups in the shape of skulls. I should have brought them with me, because they reminded me of you and your brother. I want you to have them."

"I can't wait to see them, that sound really great," Sans says, and you can tell without even seeing him that his casual tone is forced.

"Please, remind me when I see you when you visit so I can give them to you."

"Absolutely. i'm sure papyrus will get a real kick out of 'em. it'll be a teareat."
Asgore laughs, a deep rumble that makes the hair on your arms raise. In any other set of circumstances, maybe you'd appreciate the sound more, but right now it just feels you with unease. "Always making jokes, Sans. I hope you have a pleasant day."

"you too, pal."

Silence. The sound of the door closing. You don't bother reaching for the handle. A few moments pass and then you feel and hear a small rap on the bedroom door. You jump to the side, opening it just enough to peek out and see Sans. He's grimacing, nervous sweat dotting the side of his face as he lets out a haggard sigh.

Sans pushes his way through the door and shuts it behind him, hooking his fingers in the pockets of your jeans and tugging you close. You cup the side of his face as he rests his forehead against your sternum, pillowing his head on your chest. He lets out a long, frustrated groan and tenses against you.

"I need a break," you agree. "This has been the most exhausting two days. This is just..."

"we're gonna go to the resort this weekend. that's it. text alphys to tell mettaton."
Grillby is sweeping up the bar when he hears the door open. He glances up at the clock; ten minutes until closing time so he doesn't have any right to be frustrated. But he is, maybe just a little. The bar is empty and he just wants to get everything cleaned up so he can lock the doors and head upstairs to his apartment. Asgore's visit to Snowdin had stirred up his regulars and the guard dogs in particular were especially excitable this afternoon.

All in all, it had been a busy day and he's ready to relax.

He turns to give a stern look at the intruder but is surprised to see Sans sauntering over to the bar to take his place at the usual barstool. Suddenly curious and a little concerned, Grillby stops sweeping to man his post behind the bar.

Sans gives him a lazy smile. "how's it hangin' grillby?"

The fire elemental just raises a brow, resting his hands on the bar. He's known Sans for about two years now, ever since he and his brother moved to Snowdin. From what he gathered from Papyrus (because Sans never talks about before) they used to live in New Home. He wonders sometimes what brought them all the way out here to the fringes of the Underground.

But in the past two years the skeleton brothers have become a familiar facet of Snowdin. He's happy to see Sans. He's been suspiciously absent the past few days, though lately he's been showing up less and less than he used to. While Grillby's gotten used to the skeleton's company, he's glad to see him spending more time at home with his brother. And you and the child.

When he does visit, he talks about the two of you often. Usually this ends up with him leaning over the bar and showing Grillby pictures from his phone. It's a nice change of pace from his usual barrage of jokes and lazy grins. When he talks about you his smile is brighter, his voice lighter. He seems happy. Real happiness that isn't gleaned from making the other customers laugh.

"that great, huh? well, i've got a surprise for you." Sans leans forward to rest his elbow on the bar, then reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small pouch full to bursting. He sets it on the wood countertop and it tips over, spilling out three gold coins.

Grilly just stares at the money for a moment before fixing Sans with a puzzled look. He gives a tiny shake of his head and jerks his chin at the bag in silent question.

"i'm fulfilling my promise to the universe," he says, like that's supposed to explain everything. Sans gives the pouch a firm pat, then breaks out into the biggest smile Grillby's ever seen. "paying off my tab."

Then, Sans starts to laugh. It's giddy and a little manic and all of this is starting to scare the bartender and he doesn't know what's gotten into his friend. The skeleton hangs his head so that Grillby can't see his face, shoulders shaking as he holds his forehead in his hand. The laughter starts to turn strained. Sans takes a moment to suck in a breath before another flood of giggles breaks loose. The fire elemental reaches out to take hold of San's shoulder, gripping maybe a little too tight.

The skeleton wheezes, shaking his head and looking up at Grillby. He's got tears running down his
face and an exhausted look in his eyes that startles him into letting Sans go. The skeleton's grin goes slack at the edges, but he gives another weak laugh and shakes his head. "what, never thought i was gonna pay you, buddy?"

Grillby's hands clench into fists on the bar top, furrowing his brow and giving Sans a pointed stare. He leans forward a little. What could possibly have Sans in this state?

Sans's smile falters a little more, raising a brow. "what's gotten into you, grillby? you keep staring at me. have i got something on my face?" He reaches up to touch his face, still grinning until his fingers brush over the trail of tears down his cheekbones. His smile is gone when he pulls away and looks down at his hand.

"...What happened?" Grillby asks, his dry, breathy voice filling the space between them.

Sans is silent for a moment, then his cheeks bloom with color as he gives his face a rushed wipe with his sleeve. "shit, that's a little embarrassing isn't it?" he says, forcing a new smile as he shrugs.

"...Sans."

"hey, no need to give me the 3rd degree."

"...Is everything alright?"

"i told you, i'm just keeping my promise to the universe. maybe now it'll stop trying to eat me alive," Sans mutters, the smile slipping away again as he heaves a sigh. His shoulders fall and he rests his weight on his arms, visibly deflating.

After a moment of hesitation, Grillby walks around the bar and sits next to Sans. He rests a hand gently on his shoulder, and waits.

Alphys is sitting on her ratty couch in a corner of the lab, watching anime with Undyne's legs across her lap. She's still trying to get used to this, being with her, well, her girlfriend. That itself is just weird. Girlfriend. And not just any girlfriend. Undyne. She has Undyne on the couch with her and they've been sitting here for the last hour just watching anime together.

Someone pinch her, is this really her life?

Even better, the two of them had only recently woken up from napping together upstairs, still recovering from their long night of helping Frisk. It was all worth it of course. Saving Frisk had bolstered her own confidence and it felt like she was repaying you for everything you've done for her. Not that that was the reason she did it! There's no way she would have let anything bad happen to Frisk if she had anything to say about it. She's just glad that her desperate idea of blending human medicine with healing magic had paid off.

She lets out a squeak as her phone starts to vibrate in her pocket. As she fishes it out with a sigh to settle herself, Undyne pauses the DVD and sits up. The fluid movement makes the muscles in the fish monster's stomach tense and through the skin-tight tank top Alphys can see the shift of muscle. It distracts her for a second, her eyes flicking up to Undyne's mouth before giving her girlfriend a nervous smile and answering the phone.

"H-hello?" Alphys says, forcing herself to look away and down at the floor so she can focus on talking.

"Hey Alphys. I hope I'm not bothering you," you say, sounding a little worried.
"Oh no, not at all!" she blurts out. Gosh, you're always so nice and considerate. "What's up?"

"Well, first I want to thank you again, so much. I don't know what we would have done without you, honestly."

"Please, it's o-okay! Of course I was going to help you!" Alphys says, feeling her face go a little red. Long, calloused fingers reach out to cup under her chin, turning her head to look at Undyne. She's smiling at her. The doctor feels the blush spread further across her face. "B-but you said that was the first thing?"

"Yeah, um... Sans and I were talking and I don't know if he said anything to you but Mettaton offered to let us stay at his hotel whenever we wanted? As like, an apology. Oh god I just realized, you don't even know." You let out a long sigh and Undyne's smile falters. She must be able to hear what you're saying. "Asgore came by the house today."

Undyne's hand falls away from Alphys's face and her eyebrows shoot up in alarm. "Are they all okay? I mean, they must be, but—!"

"Oh, is that Undyne?" you ask, giving a weak laugh. "Let her know we're all fine. He, uh, came by to visit because he heard one of the kids was out sick. Sans was able to get him to leave without seeing either of us, thankfully. But I admit, between what happened with Frisk and then Asgore... Sans and I decided that we could really use a weekend to relax. I don't exactly have his number, so—"

"Oh, he's actually here, i-if you want to talk to him," Alphys says, sitting up a little straighter so that she can see her small, makeshift kitchen. Mettaton is busy cooking, 'practicing' for his cooking show. He'd been making excuses like that a lot lately. Cooking meals for Alphys to get ready for a show, cleaning up her workshop slash bedroom so that he can get in the right 'mindspace' for an upcoming scene...

You make a sharp, agitated noise. "No. If that's okay, I'd rather not. Can you just give him the message?"

"Y-yeah, sure. Of course. When should I tell him you want to go?"

"Sans wants to go this weekend. It's a little soon after what happened with Frisk but... Alphys you wouldn't believe how quick Frisk is back to normal. I don't know what you did, but it's like they weren't even sick!"

Alphys can't help but smile, pleased at how happy you sound. Undyne's smiling again, nudging her shoulder proudly. "That's g-great!"

The fish monster reaches for the phone, pulling it out of Alphys's hand and pushing the button to put it on speaker. "Hey punk! Glad to hear the squirt's back to normal!"

You laugh, voice a little distorted by the phone. "Me too, Undyne. Believe me."

"So you guys are going to go on a date, huh? Like, a real date, not just going to Grillbys for once." Undyne throws her arm around Alphys's shoulder, leaning in close so they can both speak into the phone. Alphys bites the inside of her lip to keep from letting out a nervous giggle, her stomach doing flip flops.

"We went to Waterfall before. That was really nice," you say, a little defensive but laughing at the same time. "But yes, this will be a 'real' date."
"GOOD you guys deserve it!" Undyne pauses, then lets out a loud gasp. "Wait, what are you going to wear? You don't exactly have a big wardrobe there."

"Oh, I didn't really... I guess I'll have to find something at the shop."

Alphys lets out a startled squeak as Mettaton appears beside the couch, a large rectangle looming over them and wearing a chef's hat. He has a skillet in one hand, and whatever's inside is still sizzling. "Oh no, no, no darling! You will not be wearing any second-hand rags on this date! You let me handle this! When I'm done with you, you'll be absolutely ravishing!" He lets out a laugh, which cuts off abruptly. "I suppose I can find something for Sans as well. I don't want him to look bad on your arm."

Chapter End Notes

Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters (including the Reader/Hope) and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
Today is the day. You're more nervous than you were expecting, spending the morning and early afternoon fretting over Frisk. Despite their repeated reassurances that they're fine — and they are, really — the idea of being away for the weekend has you anxious. Maybe you should call Alphys and just...

No. No, you agreed to this date and lord knows you need it. Besides, Frisk seems ready to get you out of the house. They keep asking when Alphys and Undyne are coming to take you back to the lab to get ready. They must be tired of your hovering.

Sans is nervous too, but you think that's more because Mettaton is involved. But after many reassurances that Undyne and Alphys will be with you the entire time, he finally relents and stops openly complaining. Though that doesn't stop him from frowning when he thinks you aren't looking. His complaints about the robot picking out clothing for him fall on deaf ears, however. You have to admit that you're curious about what Mettaton has in store for both of you. Maybe a little apprehensive as well. You've never really been one to dress up. Though, you've never had much of an opportunity to do so.

You're pacing in front of the couch, running through the mental checklist of the luggage you packed earlier. Shoes, socks, pants, shirts, underwear, extra bra (just in case), pajamas, toiletries... Did you pack your hairbrush? Wait, should you bring it with you to the lab? Mettaton said to pack everything the two of you needed for the weekend, but did that mean—

A loud knock and the muffled sound of familiar voices jolts you out of your head and Frisk leaps up from the sofa to answer the door. Alphys and Undyne step inside, bundled up in thick jackets and followed by Mettaton. He's in his humanoid 'EX' form today. Alphys must have finally fixed it. With a garment bag in one hand draped casually over his shoulder, he gives you a bright smile that makes you a little more apprehensive.

Sans is beside you before you notice, brushing your arm with his. "welp, looks like it's starting," he mutters.

Papyrus pokes his head out of the kitchen, brightening. "OH, WHO IS THIS NEW FRIEND ALPHYS?"

Alphys and Undyne are distracted talking to Frisk so it's Mettaton who ends up answering. The robot closes the distance between himself and the skeleton, sliding the garment bag off his shoulder and holding it up off the ground with one finger. His other hand taps Papyrus on the chest as he gives a playful laugh. "Oh sweetheart, it's me! Alphys finally fixed up my new body." Winking, he shifts his weight onto his other leg, quirking a hip to the side. "What do you think? Should I do a little turn so you can have a better look?"

Papyrus's cheeks have gone a dark shade of orange. "M-METTATON I HAD NO IDEA THAT WAS YOU! YOU, UM, LOOK SO DIFFERENT!"

"i'm gonna disassemble that calculator," Sans mutters.

Sensing danger, you walk over to Papyrus and Mettaton, pushing your way between them with a
sweet smile. You hold your hand out for the garment bag. "Is that for Sans or for me?" you ask.

"Oh darling yours is back at the lab." He smiles at you but his expression quickly sours, his voice falling a little flat. "This is for Sans."

"OH, LET ME TAKE THAT THEN, METTATON. I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WILL BE HELPING MY BROTHER GET READY LATER SO I CAN GO PUT THAT UPSTAIRS!" Papyrus offers enthusiastically.

"Oh you really are the sweetest thing, aren't you? Well if you insist," Mettaton purrs. Actually purrs. You can feel Sans's glare from across the room. The robot passes the bag around you to where Papyrus is waiting and he hurries away.

Mettaton's visible eye—the iris is pink, the same bright shade as his boots and chestplate—flicks back to you and you can see the aperture that makes up his pupil narrow as he focuses on you. It's a little unsettling, how human yet not he is. He reaches out to touch your shoulder, about to say something when you flinch away with a wince. Freezing, he slowly pulls away and folds his hands over his midriff. His expression softens into something apologetic and a little sad.

There's a moment where the two of you just look at each other, your heart pounding from being startled, and then Mettaton turns away to go talk to Sans. "Did you pack everything like I asked?" he asks your boyfriend in a clipped tone.

"yep," Sans says, looking up at him with a tight smile.

"I'll be back later to get your things and make sure you're dressed properly." Mettaton rests his hands on his hips, looking down his perfectly sculpted nose at Sans.

"i know how to dress myself."

"Do you know how to tie a tie?"

"HEY, how about we get going, huh?" Undyne cuts in. You give her a relieved look, but she's got her eye fixed on Mettaton.

You go over to where Frisk is hanging from Undyne's flexed bicep. Smiling at them, you poke them in the ribs with both hands which makes them dissolve into giggles, dropping back down to the ground and clutching their sides. You wrap them up in a tight hug. "You be good for Papyrus okay?"

Frisk hugs you back, hands tugging on the back of your shirt. "Okay."

"I'll miss you. You gonna miss me?"

"...Maybe," they grumble into you stomach.

"Maybe?" you echo with feigned shock.

Frisk laughs. "Okay... yes."

You're sitting on top of Alphys's bed in a bathrobe with your legs tucked under you, some thick sweet-smelling product soaking in your shower-capped hair, and Undyne sitting cross legged in front of you with an array of makeup spread out in front of her. You wonder exactly what you did in life to bring you to this point: being given a makeover by two monsters and a robot. Wait, if
Mettaton is actually a ghost, does he count as a monster too? Three monsters. Giving you a makeover. For your date with your boyfriend, the skeleton.

This is normal now. This is your life. You have to admit, you can't think of anywhere else you'd rather be than here with your friends. And Mettaton.

"I still think I should be taking care of her makeup," Mettaton says with what you imagine is a pout. You can't look at him to check because Undyne will yell at you. Again.

The fish monster takes hold of your chin and tilts your head to the side so that she can do something with a thick makeup brush along your cheekbone. You honestly have no idea. "You don't even have skin Mettaton, what do you know about doing makeup? NOTHING!" Undyne snaps, grimacing a few inches away from your face. You try not to focus on her long, sharp teeth. "Don't worry punk, we're gonna take care of you."

"Y-yeah, don't worry! I promise you're going to look great!" Alphys says at your side. Your hand is on her knee as she hunches over it with two bottles of nail polish. One is clear and the other is a shade of blue that reminds you of Sans. It's cold as she swipes the polish down the length of your nails.

Mettaton grumbles —a mix between his voice and a grinding sound somewhere in his chest— and flops down dramatically in a nearby chair. "Well, once you're finished, I can get back to work," he says petulantly.

"Who do you think painted that pretty face of his anyway?" Undyne mutters under her breath to you, tilting your head back a little. "That's right, Alphys. You know all those figures she's got on her desk?"

You make an affirmative noise in your throat, too afraid to speak and move your face.

"She painted all of those herself."

Alphys lets out an embarrassed laugh. "I'm not so great with, um, makeup though. But I like doing nails!"

You've seen Undyne's handiwork in person so you're confident with her abilities with makeup (though you can only guess that Mettaton was the one to supply the foundation in the correct shade of brown for your complexion). You think that's what she's working on now, smoothing out a powder to set the foundation. Makeup has never really been something you spent much time on, just the bare minimum to clean yourself up for work. Natural colors, nothing too bright. So when Undyne puts down the big powder brush to rifle through a few sets of eyeshadow, you balk a little at the colors.

Undyne catches your change in expression, raising a brow at you. "What's up?"

"Aren't some of these colors a little, uh, bright?" you ask, biting the inside of your lip. You don't like questioning her judgment, you trust her, but you can't help it. ("Wasting your money to paint yourself up like some harlot? Your reputation is already bad enough, what are you thinking? Wash that crap off your face and don't come out here again until you look decent.") Is your mother's voice ever going to go away?

"Oh, I think I'm going to stick with blacks and browns for the eyeshadow, something smoky," she says, setting a few compacts aside. Balling her hand into a fist she flexes, leaning back a little to look at you. "But you have to look fierce! Preparing for a date is like preparing for battle! This is
you WAR face and you need to CONQUER him!"

Her enthusiasm is so literally in your face that you can't help but smile, looking away from her as you flush a little, pleased and a little embarrassed. "I mean, I already sort of have him, so... Um..." A small giggle escapes you. "Sorry. Right. You're right."

"YEAH!" she whoops, making Alphys jump. Thankfully she was just blowing on your nails to dry them. "Of course I am! Which is why you're going to let me take care of this and you can see once I'm done. And not a second before! Now close your eyes."

You look down at the makeup still laying on the bed, including several shades of very vibrant lipstick. A small thrill of rebellion stirs in your chest and you smile, pressing through your apprehension. You close your eyes and let Undyne work her magic.

There's a three-piece suit in that garment bag. A damn three-piece suit. He isn't sure what he was expecting, but Sans hadn't expected Mettaton to go this far. It's laid out on Papyrus's bed as he stands there, looking at it. Gray, black, and two shades of steely blue. Tucked away inside a little bag is a set of cufflinks and a tie pin in the shape of little dark red hearts. He isn't sure if Mettaton is trying to be funny or just a little heavy-handed, but Sans is reluctant to admit that he likes them. But he does.

The black slacks fit just right, even the length. Well, at least the bucket of bolts seems to know his way around clothing. As he slips the dark, steely blue shirt over his shoulders he can't help but wonder what Mettaton has picked out for you. It takes him a second to realize he should have put the shirt on first when he has to undo the button and fly so that he can pull his pants up over it. He grumbles a bit to himself as he does up the long row of buttons down his chest.

Knowing that Papyrus and Frisk are waiting impatiently out in the hall, he picks up the blue, black, gray, and burgundy striped tie and pulls it around his neck. "Alright you two, come in," he calls out, holding the ends of the tie in each hand, hesitating.

He knows how to do this. He used to wear ties all the time. He fumbles with the tie for a moment, getting a little frustrated. Has he worn a tie since the accident? Shit, has it been that long?

Papyrus pulls his gloves off and tucks them over his collarbone, plucking Sans's hands away and taking over. "LET ME TAKE CARE OF THAT, BROTHER," he says, adjusting the length and knotting the fabric with deft motions.

"thanks, pap," Sans mumbles as Papyrus smooths the tie down against his sternum. He flashes his brother a wide grin.

"YOU LOOK VERY HANDSOME ALREADY, SANS! OH, AND THERE'S MORE! QUICK, PUT ON THE VEST AND COAT!" he exclaims, hurrying over to the bed and picking up the remaining articles of clothing.

Chuckling, Sans shrugs into the black waistcoat with his brother's help, tucking the tie underneath as he buttons it up. He makes sure to fetch the tie pin before Frisk flops down on the bed and accidentally loses it. With the little red heart fastened in place, he slips on the gray blazer and tugs on the front of it, stretching his arms experimentally. So far so good. He pats against his sides and fumbles for a second but finds the pockets, sliding his hands inside. There, that's not too bad.

Shrugging, he looks up at Papyrus. His brother has sparkles in his eyes as he covers his mouth with both hands. "SANS YOU LOOK VERY NICE! I'M SO HAPPY TO SEE YOU DRESSED UP
Speaking of slippers, he looks down at his feet. Wriggling bare toes, he glances over at the bed to see Frisk holding a pair of socks and black, glossy dress shoes. "i dunno, i think i'd rather be wearing some comfy slippers than those," he says, giving the shoes a hesitant look.

"YOU CAN'T GO OUT IN SUCH A NICE SUIT AND THEN YOUR RATTY OLD SLIPPERS, SANS!" Papyrus objects loudly.

"i dunno, i just don't get their appheel," Sans says with a wide grin, giving Frisk a wink as they start giggling.

"I THINK THAT THEY SUIT YOU, BROTHER." Papyrus lets out a triumphant laugh at the pleased look on Sans's face. "NOW, LET ME GO FETCH AN ASSORTMENT OF APPROPRIATE DATING PRODUCTS FOR YOU! OH, AND DID YOU REMEMBER TO GET A GIFT? YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO GIVE GIFTS ON DATES, DON'T FORGET!"

Papyrus is rushing out of the room before Sans can get a word in edgewise. There's no way in hell he's using any of those MTT Brand anythings for his date with you. Mettaton might have an eye for fashion, he'll give him that, but who knows what he puts in that stuff. Knowing that there's no point in delaying the inevitable, Sans puts on the socks and ties his shoes.

With one final brush of his hands down the front of his slacks, he looks up at Frisk and raises a brow, holding out his arms and turning a little from side to side. "well what do you think, kiddo? think your mom'll like it?"

"You look amazing!" Frisk exclaims, smiling from ear to ear and clapping their hands, full of so much enthusiasm that they wiggle a little on the edge of the bed.

Sans flushes a little bit, dropping his hands and shrugging. "ok, ok, i got it. no need to go overboard," he says, feeling a little embarrassed but happy.

Frisk's smile relaxes a bit, but the kid is still beaming up at him, kicking their feet. "Dad...?"

"c'mon now, don't let pap hear that yet," Sans says gently, walking over to Frisk and giving them a weak punch to the shoulder.

"Have you talked to her? You said you were gonna talk to her!" Frisk says, frowning and puffing their cheeks.

"we're gonna talk, i promise." Sans chuckles. "keep making that face and it's gonna get stuck that way."

Papyrus hurries back into the room with an armful of assorted jars and bottles, and Sans knows he's going to have his work cut out for him in order to escape this unscathed.

PAPYRUS

Considering she's the only one with years of experience in the matter, Undyne is the one that styles your hair. The treatment they put in it earlier was at Mettaton's suggestion, but Undyne is the one that washes it out and dries your hair after the robot leaves to go attend to something. She still won't let you look in a mirror, even as she's pinning back the smooth, sweet-smelling waves of brown. They're pulled out of your face but fall down your back. You catch sight of a deep red, silk flower before she fixes it along the side of your head. That's your first hint of what else is to come.

Mettaton comes back by the time that Undyne finishes and he fetches a garment bag from Alphys's
closet. Draping it over your arms, he ushers everyone out of the room so that you can get dressed. "Don't you dare look in a mirror, we want to see your reaction!" he orders, then hurries out.

Overcome with curiosity, you pull down the zipper to reveal your dress. On the hanger it's all gauzy, rich red chiffon from the high waist down. The top is pale with silver embroidery and matching red glass beads picked out into a vined, floral pattern. You're glad for the thick straps instead of leaving you strapless, but the plunging sweetheart neckline makes your stomach twist unpleasantly. You're supposed to wear this? It's beautiful but... this isn't something you'd ever choose for yourself.

But what would you choose for yourself, really? You never even got to go to prom in high school, you have no idea what kinds of dresses would look good on you. Besides, it's too late to do anything about it now.

You lay the dress out on the bed and notice a brand new set of lacy underwear in the same red color. How does Mettaton know your sizing, and where in the world did he find sexy underwear? You're not sure you want to know the answer to either question, and instead focus on changing. The underwear fits perfectly and so does the dress, though it takes you a moment to awkwardly step into it and hike it up over your shoulders. Fumbling a bit, you zip up the back as much as you can before calling the others back in.

Alphys gasps and Undyne's face breaks out into an enormous grin as she rushes forward to help you with your zipper. Mettaton lets out an exaggerated cry of joy that makes you flush with embarrassment, smoothing out the pleated, gauzy fabric at your waist. He pulls out another bag with a set of black boxes inside. "Just the finishing touches left," he says, grinning and handing the smaller one to you.

You open it and inside is a pair of silver dangle earrings with gray-blue crystals. You hook them into your ears and by the time you're done the robot is holding out a matching pendant. He holds it out for you, and a part of you is grateful that he doesn't offer to help. It saves you the trouble of declining. Clasped at the nape of your neck, the diamond-shaped pendant rests against your chest, right above your cleavage. And it's certainly more cleavage than you're used to showing with that neckline... You fight the urge to cover yourself, ignoring the nagging feeling in the back of your mind.

"Isn't this all a bit much?" you ask Mettaton, fidgeting with the necklace.

"For my hotel? Absolutely not, darling!" he says, sweeping black hair elegantly across his face.

"You look AWESOME!" Undyne says, giving you an enthusiastic flex and a huge smile.

"Y-you really do!" Alphys adds, and you think she looks a little sweaty.

"Alright darling, time for the big reveal! I'm dying to know what you think!" he says, opening up Alphys's closet to access the hidden, full-length mirror inside the door.

Taking a deep breath and expecting the worst, you walk up to Mettaton's side and look at yourself in the mirror.

You have to remember not to touch your face as you fight the urge to cover your mouth and gasp. The dress is gorgeous. No, not just the dress. You. You've never looked so beautiful in your entire life and you have to take a moment to breathe so you don't cry and ruin the amazing makeup that your friend did for you. You don't even notice the way that Undyne and Alphys grin at each other, or the pleased look on Mettaton's face.
Why didn't you notice before that the dress is the exact shade of red as your Soul? Carefully, like you're afraid you might ruin it somehow, you trace your fingers along the high waist of the dress, enamored with the way it accentuates your curves. The neckline doesn't seem quite as shocking from the front rather than from above. Even your makeup, while it was intimidating when you couldn't see it is breathtaking now that you can. Is this even you? How had they taken the woman you saw in the mirror this morning and transformed you into this?

It's liberating. You feel polished and new and you have to force yourself to look away so that you can turn and smile at your friends. You try to speak, to thank them but for a moment you can't find the words. Alphys and Undyne give you warm, affectionate smiles, and Alphys even lets out an excited squeak before covering her mouth and blushing.

Mettaton takes a few steps back, looking you over and nodding to himself. When he catches you looking at him, he meets your eyes and smiles warmly. "Well darling, what do you think?"

"It's..." Beautiful. Wonderful. Better than you could have hoped for. "Mettaton, it's perfect. Thank you."

The robot claps his hands together in front of his mouth, pressing the sides of his fingers to his lips for a second as he struggles to keep his smile in check. Then, after a moment, he lowers them and says, "You're very welcome. I hope you like the burgundy, it matches your Soul perfectly, I think. Sans doesn't—" Mettaton cuts himself off, sighing. "Sans isn't going to know what hit him."

As if on cue, there's a sharp rap downstairs on the lab's door. Mettaton flashes you a bright smile. "Put your shoes on and come downstairs."

You feel giddy and beautiful, jittery and trembling as you pull on a pair of modest shoes. You thank the robot silently for getting you something almost practical, with thick, low heels. You're already taller than Sans, no need to make the gap in heights any wider, and you don't think you'd be able to walk in anything taller.

Then, with one last glance at Alphys and Undyne —they grin and Undyne gives you a thumbs-up — you head downstairs.

You see Sans before he sees you. He's talking to Mettaton, frowning a little while the robot gestures with his hands. He's wearing a suit and suddenly you don't feel overdressed at all. It's tailored to fit him perfectly, framing the set of his shoulders and painting a smooth, cut line down his body. You're a little warm just looking at him, and you feel the urge to slide your hands under his blazer. Even the familiar way he's got his hands shoved in his pockets is different. It feels confident instead of casual and you want to hook your arm through his and feel the smooth, trim fabric under your hands.

Then, with a gesture from Mettaton, he turns to look at you right as you step off the escalator. His eye sockets go wide and his jaw goes a little slack, dropping almost imperceptibly. The white lights of his eyes brighten as they sweep you from head to toe, and he pulls his hands out of his pockets in a reflexive motion to reach for you. After a moment he finds himself, grinning one of the brightest grins as he crosses the room to meet you. Reaching out to take your hand, he bends over it to press a toothy kiss to your knuckles. You blush, fighting the urge to laugh from the way your happiness is bubbling up inside you.

"you look beautiful," he says, looking up at you with something akin to awe.

"You clean up pretty good yourself, handsome," you say, and you can't help but notice that his shirt is the same color as your jewelry and nail polish. Upon further inspection you spot the little red —
burgundy— heart fixed to his striped tie. Your hand finds the pendant resting against your chest. "Hey, look. We go together."

"of course we do. always."

Chapter End Notes

There's new fanart that will be posted shortly specifically for this chapter. :3 Be sure to check it out! <3

http://onadacora.tumblr.com/post/137199405825/wrechie-ona-said-i-can-post-this-now-a-lot
Mettaton's face is everywhere.

Not his new humanoid one, but the rectangular one. Little neon Mettaton's flank the big ‘MTT’ sign out front, and there's even a fountain of him in the lobby (there's some water damage on the carpet but it looks old). As the host confirms your reservation and leads you and Sans to your table, you can't help but notice that the walls are dotted with stills from various Mettaton movies. The menus look like Mettaton. The *tablecloths* have Mettaton on them.

Sans glances up at you, the smile that's been affixed to his face since the lab fading just a little. "you okay, babe?" he asks you as you trail behind the host, your hand in the crook of Sans's arm and pressed close to his side.

"He... really likes looking at himself, doesn't he?" you ask, murmuring low enough so that only he can hear. You'd rather not have any of Mettaton's employees hear you.

"there's so much of it you just kinda stop seeing it after a while. it's sorta like a nasty smell; you just get used to it," he says, giving a weak chuckle. "does it bother you?"

You take another cursory glance around the room, more amused than unsettled. "No, not really. It's just so..."

"mettaton?"

You snort, nodding and hiding your face behind your hand as you try to muffle your laughter. The host glances back at you but doesn't say anything as you lean against Sans and take a steadying breath. "Yeah," you say, giggling. "God it's just so outrageous."

Arriving at your table, the host pulls out your chair with a manicured set of claws, pushing it in as you sit down. That's the first time anyone has ever done that for you and to be honest its a little awkward and you think you sit down a bit too soon. You end up having to scoot yourself a little closer, fidgeting with the gauzy layers of your skirt. Sans takes off his blazer (oh, you think that he might look even better in just the collared shirt and waistcoat, and are those heart-shaped cufflinks too?) and drapes it over the back of his chair, shooing the host away with a flick of his hand.

"Your server will be with you shortly," they say, giving you a nod and leaving you with your Mettaton-shaped menus.

Sans raises a brow and reaches out to take hold of a brass cube sitting on the table. There's a tealight candle inside and it —of course— also looks like a little Mettaton. He twists it a little from side to side, then lets go and sits back in his chair. "wanna make a bet on how many mettatons we find in our room later?"

It takes a moment for his words to register in your brain because you're staring. You want to tug at that knot in his tie and pull him over the table, or take hold of his waistcoat and start to undo the buttons. By the time your eyes flick back up to his face he's giving you a crooked smirk, and you think you see a hint of blue painted over his cheekbones. Your own face is starting to feel a bit hot, too. "That, uh, depends. How big is the room?"

Sans's smile widens, but if he notices your blush he doesn't say anything. "it's a full suite. sitting room, bedroom, bathroom."
"What are we betting on?" you ask. You lace your fingers together and rest your arms flat on the table, leaning forward a little. Sans's eyes flick down to your cleavage, lingering for a second before returning to your face.

"I get the feeling we both want the same thing," he murmurs, reaching up to trace his finger from the knot in his tie to the top of his vest. To the casual observer it might seem like he was just smoothing his tie, but no. That was definitely something suggestive.

You level your gaze at him, raising a brow and fighting the urge to find his leg under the table with your foot. Plenty of time for that. "Thirteen," you say.

Sans blinks. "Huh?"

"Thirteen Mettaton's." You smirk a little, pleased with yourself. "What do you think?"

"Oh, uh..." He looks a little flustered as he glances down at his menu. "Well, this is Mettaton we're talking about. I'm gonna say twenty."

As you wait for your server, you decide to take a look at the menu as well. The moment you open it you're greeted with a quarter-page sized glossy photo of a steak in the shape of Mettaton's face. "I think I may have underestimated the strength of Mettaton's narcissism."

Laughing, Sans flips to the back to the drinks and desserts. "Too late now. You've already guessed. He takes the ton in Mettaton very literally I guess."

You turn the page. "Oh good, there's some food that isn't shaped like a rectangle."

"I don't care what it looks like, I'm getting the most expensive thing on the menu."

"Oh wow, Sansy is that you?"

Sansy? You and Sans look up from your menus as your server arrives. The first thing your brain comes up with is 'sheep'. Her thick, wooly hair is styled into a soft, fluffy bob that's shockingly pink. It matches her vibrant collared shirt and the little rings of wool around her wrists. She reminds you of a groomed poodle. The rest of her that you can see is trim, cream-colored fur that's especially fine on her face. Two big, watery blue eyes are fixed on Sans, flashing blunted teeth in a bright smile.

"Oh, hey Bo, long time no see," he says, giving her a friendly grin.

You wonder how they know each other, then vaguely recall that he said something about doing comedy here at the resort before. It doesn't help the little annoyed feeling that's building in the back of your head.

"It sure has been a hot minute since I've seen you around here, and I almost didn't recognize you in those clothes! Aren't you handsome?" She reaches out to rest a hand on his shoulder, giggling before she lets him go. You fight the urge to grit your teeth. Bo turns to look at you, giving you the same sweet smile that she gave him. Maybe... maybe she's just friendly. You feel the little twinge of jealousy start to settle a bit. "Never would have thought to see you back here. With a date no less! I haven't seen anyone like you around, honey, where are you and your family from?"

"She's from Snowdin," he cuts in, answering for you. You're glad, because you hadn't even thought of coming up with any kind of backstory for yourself. No one ever really asked you anything about it back in Snowdin.
"Oh golly, isn't it cold for you there? I mean, you don't even have any fur to keep warm," Bo says, pretending to shiver. "I don't know how you stand it, I love being here by the Core. It's nice and warm."

Sans gives her a big smile. "are ewe saying that i should be cold in snowdin? i don't have any fur, you know."

Bo giggles again, giving his shoulder a playful smack. Oh, there's that ugly feeling again. You look down at your menu so you don't have to see the way she's smiling at him. "You joker, not everyone is all warm bones like you!"

How does she know he's warm?

"i know, the cold just goes right through me." You can hear the wink in his voice. He's this way with everyone, but for some reason it's grating on you. "but it's sweet of you to worry about my girl, bo. but you don't need to, i make sure she stays nice and warm."

Oh. You blush, looking up in time to see Sans give you an affectionate smile. Bo titters behind a raised hand, beaming at you. "Aren't you two adorable!" she says, looking thrilled. "Now, now, I'm sorry to interrupt your date, let me get your drinks while you take a look at the menu." Bo pulls a small notepad and pencil out of her pocket, shifting closer to you with an expectant look.

"do you wanna split a bottle of wine?" Sans asks, looking at the drink list.

You feel Bo's big watery eyes on you and you fidget a little, an unsettled feeling stirring in your stomach that has nothing to do with Sans or Bo. "Um, no I think I'll just stick to water."

"Well you just tell me if you want anything different, honey," Bo says, shifting her hips and reaching out to touch your arm. She winks at you. "I can get you whatever you want."

You blush a little and you hear Sans chuckle. "i'll have water too, for now. we'll let you know if we want something else, bo. thanks."

"Sounds great, I'll be back."

"in the shake of a lamb's tail?" Sans winks at you and you smile.

"Now there's one I haven't heard in a while," Bo says, laughing. "Leave it to Sansy."

You wait for Bo to walk away before raising a manicured brow at Sans. "Sansy?" you ask.

Sans shrugs. "bo's like that with everyone."

"I noticed," you say, rubbing your arm and giving an embarrassed laugh.

"hey, you know you don't have to worry about the cost of any of this, get whatever you want, wine, mettaton-shaped steak, anything," he says, reaching across the table with his hand palm-up.

You slip your hand into his and he gives it a squeeze. Had you not mentioned this before? But, when would it have come up? "That's not why I didn't want wine. It, um... I can't stand the smell. Mom used to, well I guess she still does... She drinks wine. More than she should." You bite the inside of your lip and Sans squeezes your hand again. You look up at Sans, feeling suddenly selfish. "But you get whatever you want! I don't want you to worry about me, it's fine."

"babe, c'mon. i'm not gonna do anything that might make you uncomfortable. especially not if it
has something to do with her." The way he grimaces and growls out the word makes you smile.

"Thanks," you say, a swell of affection pushing everything else you're feeling away. You're here, with Sans, on a fancy date. It's all that matters.

The tension leaves his face and he rubs his thumb across the back of your hand. "so," he says pointedly. "maybe we should figure out what we want to eat."

Dinner is amazing and Bo is the perfect amount of attentive yet absent as you make your way through an appetizer and the main course. About halfway through your Mettaton-shaped steak (there's something oddly satisfying about cutting him into little pieces, and you have to admit it's a damn good steak) you slip a foot out of one of your shoes so that you can snake your toes under the hem of Sans's trousers. He shifts his leg closer to you with only the barest hint of a smirk as he picks at his food. Turns out that the most expensive thing on the menu isn't necessarily the tastiest.

He doesn't make the same mistake with dessert. But before you realize it Bo is taking away your plates and you and Sans sit there and regard each other across the table.

"So, what now?" you ask him, folding up the napkin in your lap and setting it on the table in front of you.

Sans balls up his napkin and puts it beside his unused silverware. He glances over at the stage set in the corner of the restaurant where there's a trio of monsters playing some light music. There's also a small dance floor, where a handful of couples are swaying together. "um." He looks a little uncomfortable.

"I'd rather not worry about stepping on your feet," you admit, much to Sans's relief.

"we could go for a walk. the resort's pretty big. i dunno about you, but i'm happy just spending time alone with you. doesn't need to be anything fancy." Sans shrugs, but then gives you a hesitant look. "unless there's something you wanna do."

You're smiling —probably blushing a little— happy and most certainly loved. "That sounds perfect."

"ok. cool," he says, and he sounds so pleased that you can't help the way that your smile widens even more. You love seeing him this way. You love seeing him happy and knowing that it's because of you.

It swells inside your chest almost painfully, the affection and joy you feel as he gets up from his chair and shrugs his blazer back on before coming to offer you his hand. You let him help you to your feet. He crooks his arm for you to take it but instead you lace your fingers together and guide your joined hands into his pocket, leaning close to rest your other hand against his sleeve. "I love you," you murmur, soft and private, because it's the only way to alleviate this pressure in your chest. You need to tell him, need him to hear it and know it before you burst.

As the two of you start heading for the exit, wrapped on his arm, he looks up at you like you're the most beautiful thing he's ever seen. "i love you too. are you having a good time so far?"

"Of course. Can't wait to see what else you've got in store for me," you say, making a pleased sound.

Sans hesitates, but you're not sure why. He nods at the host as they hold the door open for you as you head into the main lobby of the hotel, but he makes a noise like he wants to say something but
can't think of the words. That's strange. You're about to ask him if something's wrong when he starts to laugh. Really laugh. "i can't believe it," he says, shaking his head and laughing some more.

"What, what's so funny?" you ask, smiling and curious.

"i'm sure i should have had a joke there, but..." He meets your eyes and another happy chuckle escapes him. His smile has taken over his eyes, and no matter how hard you look you can't see anything hidden behind that grin. "i can't think of anything. all i can think about is you."
The resort is bigger than you realize. After some exploring past a few gift shops (bursting with Mettaton-themed merchandise) and a fast food place, down a winding hall and out a pair of stained glass doors (which unsurprisingly look like Mettaton) you find yourselves in a courtyard. It's dark, lit by a string of lampposts picked out along a curving path, winding through squat hedges and decorative trees. Scattered throughout the space are little flower beds, but you can't make out the colors of the blooms.

Squeezing your hand tucked in his pocket with his own, the two of you share a glance before starting a slow pace down the path. As far as you can tell the two of you are alone, quiet save for the humming of the lampposts. It's romantic and peaceful, the kind of scene you could only imagine from love stories and romantic movies. But now you're here, with Sans, and it's so surreal and so amazing you can't stop smiling. Neither can he.

Sans clears his throat and you glance over at him, his eyes like little stars in pools of black. "so," he says, studying your face for a moment before reaching up to brush some loose hair from your eyes. You lean down a little to make it easier, and he traces the curve of your cheek before dropping his hand. "it hasn't really come up, and it just sorta worked out this way, but uh... i dunno if you remember it's our three month anniversary. well, technically it's tomorrow, but close enough, right?"

"Wow, three months?" you say, letting out a wistful sigh. "Feels longer. Or shorter. It kinda feels like both at the same time, you know?"

Sans nods. "lot has happened in the past three months."

"I didn't even realize. I guess this trip was good timing then!" you say, grinning. "I'm surprised you remembered."

He looks away, out over the path ahead of you. It's enough of a shift in the lighting that you can't quite make out his expression. "i like keeping track of dates. you will too once you see how papyrus gets about his birthday," he says, in that tone that makes you feel like there's something more to what he's saying. Something you don't quite understand. But he looks back at you and smiles. "besides, i think it's a pretty important day to remember."

"Well, I suppose," you say, a little coy.

He squeezes your hand again, stroking your skin with his thumb. "there's, ah, actually a couple things i wanted to talk to you about," Sans says, sounding a little nervous. You think, in the yellow light from the lamps, that his cheekbones have colored. "i promised frisk that i would."

Your eyebrows raise, curious. Rubbing his arm through his sleeve with your unoccupied hand, you give him a warm, reassuring look. "I'm listening."

Sans sighs, reaching up to scratch the back of his skull. After a moment of fidgeting, he shoves his hand in his empty pocket. "when they were sick, the kiddo asked if they could call me 'dad'."

"Oh," you say, more than a little embarrassed at Frisk's boldness specifically after you asked them not to say anything. The two of you had already decided to leave that conversation for later, after
all. "Sans, if it makes you uncomfortable, I can—"

He comes to a halt, pulling your joined hands out of his pocket and turning to face you. Holding your gaze with an intensity that wasn't there a moment ago, you realize that you're holding your breath. "i told them yes, so long as it's okay with you. i promised them i'd talk to you about it."

Something happy and confused and timid curls in your chest, resting right beneath your ribs. "Sans, I thought..." You swallow past a lump in your throat, a ball of giddiness you have to fight back down. Don't get ahead of yourself. "I thought you were more comfortable with someday," you say in a small voice.

"yeah, i thought i was too, until i almost lost both of you this week. again," he says, clenching his jaw for a moment before his face relaxes. "babe, you're..."

You watch him as he struggles with something you can't see, shifting forward to stand closer to him. Silently, you wait.

Sans lets out a slow breath, untangling your fingers so he can press your palm to his chest, covering your hand with his. "i've shared my home with you, my bed, my soul. and i've said this before, but... i'm more than happy to share my future with you too. it's all already yours, if you want it."

"Sans," you breathe, tears threatening in the corners of your eyes as you draw a shaky breath. "If you're saying what... what I think you're saying..." A small, frantic voice is screaming at you inside your head, repeating 'yes' over and over again. "It's... you just said it's only been three months."

"i haven't wanted to let you go since i realized that losing you might be the thing that finally tears me apart. maybe it's different with humans, but you felt what i felt when our souls touched. i don't need more time to figure out what i want. i want you. i want frisk, and i want us to be a real family." Sans cups your cheek, searching your face with bright, hopeful eyes.

Something within you breaks and you're nodding and throwing your arms around his neck, laughing and crying and so overwhelmed. "Yes," you whisper into the side of his face, pressing kisses along his cheek as he wraps you up in his arms. "I want that. I want you. Yes."

"you want me," he echoes, burying his face into the crook of your neck and taking a deep breath.

"Of course I do," you say, giddy laughter breaking free as you rest your head against his. "You're mine."

"and you're mine," he says. You feel teeth against your neck and your fingers curl into the back of his jacket, making you gasp. "my soul is yours and yours is mine."

"I love you. I can't..." You're laughing again, pulling back so you can look at him through blurry eyes, taking hold of his shoulders. "I can't think of anything else to say. My mind just keeps saying 'yes' over and over again."

"then say it. i want to hear it," he says, cupping your face and pulling you back down to him, and you go because he wants you close and how can you ever deny him that?

You rest your forehead against his, circling his wrists with your fingers. You're so close that his face is blurred, the bright sparks of white that should just be two are instead a field of stars. He fills your sight and nothing else matters but him and you and this bright thing that the two of you have found together. "Yes, yes, yes..."

"i love you," he murmurs.
"I love you too," you say, your voice breaking a little and it makes you laugh. You keep laughing and you're smiling so wide it almost hurts.

"you're sure? you're sure you want this? this future, with me? you want me to be frisk's dad?" He punctuates his questions with tiny brushes of his fingers, delicate touches that make you shiver.

"Yes. Yes, Sans." You'll say it as many times as he needs to hear, so long as he finally believes you.

"you promise?"

"Yes. Is this what you want, too?"

"more than anything. i want this life. i want this future." His voice is thin and he's holding you tighter, closing his eyes. "i'd given up on hoping. i thought that this was all there is. and then you fell down here with frisk and you've made everything so different and wonderful."

"I never thought I'd ever have love like this. I thought this was stuff made up in the movies or in books." You tilt your face to kiss the corner of his mouth, rewarded with a pleased hum as he melts under your touch. "Everything in my life, everything was worth it to reach you."

Silence fills the space between you, and slowly, gently, you pull apart to look at each other. Not too far, though, because Sans drops his hands to your waist and takes hold of your hips, keeping your body pressed close to his. He's smiling and thankfully you didn't get any makeup all over his face and oh no... You dab at your still-wet eyes with the back of your hand, expecting a smudge of black but instead you only see the gleaming wetness of drying tears on your skin.

"Oh," you say, surprised.

He blinks. "what?"

You shake your head, giving a weak laugh. "I thought for certain I'd be a huge, smudgy mess," you say, tilting your head from side to side. "How do I look?"

"beautiful. perfect," he says, and when you meet his eyes there's that look of awe from earlier. It makes your heart flutter and your cheeks warm with pleasure.

"Leave it to Undyne to have waterproof makeup," you say, and now that you've said it you realize that makes pretty good sense. As a fish, it seems only logical that she'd want to make sure it wouldn't run.

"you'd still look beautiful even if it did get ruined."

"Now you're just trying to flatter me," you say, but despite your attempt at seriousness you're smiling.

Sans rubs his thumbs along the curve of your hips, giving you a firm squeeze for good measure. Your eyes flutter and you bite your lip, rocking forward a little as you take hold of the lapels of his blazer. His eyes flick down to your mouth and then back up to your eyes, bright and hungry. "well, i think it's working," he says, his voice canted so low that you can feel it hum through your body as you're pressed against him.

"Sans," you say, realization hitting you now that you're feeling more steady again, a bit calmer than a few minutes ago. "Sans oh my God you just proposed."
"i, uh," he stumbles, glancing away and back again, and even in the poor light he's definitely blushing. "yeah, i suppose i did. i hope you don't mind that i wasn't actually prepared for that to happen." He covers his face with one hand, groaning. "shit that just makes it sound bad! babe, i love you, and i want this, i just hadn't expected all this to happen today. i'm just so happy, and——"

"Hun. You're the one who confessed your love for me to Undyne. At least you proposed to me instead of, say, Alphys." You're grinning, and Sans gives you a look that you can only describe as scandalized. Laughing, you pepper his cheekbones with kisses. "Don't worry. There's plenty of time for worrying later. For now, I want to get you out of this suit."

Mollified at least a little, Sans's face relaxes into a familiar, hungry look. His eyes scan over the bare expanse of your chest, down to the dip of your dress's neckline, then back up to your eyes. "i'm listening."

Blushing but emboldened by the sheer joy of everything that just happened, you let go of his lapels to slide your hands beneath his blazer, dragging a path up to his shoulders and down again. You follow the path of your hands with your eyes, lingering over him before looking back up to his face. His gaze is heavy on you, thick with tension. It makes you feel powerful. "Well, maybe not completely out of it. Because, damn it looks good on you."

"we'll figure something out." There's a flash of blue and then before you realize it you feel him pressing against you, a stiff curve that wasn't there a second ago.

You stare at him, meeting his blue, glowing eye for a moment before you start laughing. "Oh my God I can't believe you conjured it just to do that."

"hey, i just wanted to get my point across."

"Point taken," you say, rolling your eyes.

"oh you will be taking it."

You let out a loud, undignified snort and Sans looks far too pleased with himself.

Chapter End Notes

Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters (including the Reader/Hope) and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
"I have definitely underestimated Mettaton," you say, surveying your suite. Your room door opens up into a small sitting room through which you can see the bedroom and its massive bed —bigger than a king! Littering the two rooms (you can't even imagine the bathroom) are Mettatons.

Throw pillows, the lamps, even the pictures on the walls... You take another look at the bed and you're just happy that he isn't all over the crimson bedspread. But, if you overlook the sheer tackiness of having Mettaton quite literally all over the room, it's pretty nice. Actually, it's very nice. Even with your shoes on you can feel the plush, cream carpet and everything looks brand new.

You turn at the sound of Sans setting the heavy key to the room down on the coffee table, watching him straighten up and shrug off his blazer. He might be a skeleton, but he's built so broad (not to mention how thick his bones are compared to yours) that he manages to fill out that collared shirt in a way that has your pulse quickening. You watch his shoulders shift beneath two layers of fabric, staring as he throws the jacket over the back of an armchair. Caught where you're standing, entranced, you feel your cheeks start to burn when he turns to look at you.

Sans raises a brow, the corner of his mouth quirking up a little. "you were saying something about mettaton?" he asks, his voice canted low in a way that goes straight to the lowest parts of your belly.

Is it warm in here? You blink. "Uh, was I?" you say, stumbling over the words enough to make you blush even more.

Sans's smile widens, eyes bright as they give you an appreciative sweep from head to toe. After a lingering moment he turns his attention to his wrists, raising his hands as he starts pulling at his cufflinks. He jerks his chin towards the bedroom. "why don't you take off those shoes? go sit down. get comfortable."

You leave him in the sitting room, smoothing your skirts along the back of your thighs as you take a seat on the foot of the bed. Kicking your shoes off to the side, you fight the urge to tuck your knees up to your chest as a giddy rush of anticipation thrills through your nerves. Running bare toes through the thick carpet, you look up as Sans follows you into the bedroom. The cufflinks are gone and as he walks towards you he's rolling up his sleeves, watching you intently as you follow the motions of his hands with your eyes.

It's such a simple thing but damn if it doesn't make your mouth start to water. You swallow. From your seat on the bed he's taller than you and you have to look up at him. You've never felt like he was smaller than you, even though he's shorter. He's broad and sturdy and and he makes you feel safe, but right now you feel small in the best way possible.

"i want you to relax and let me take care of you," he says with an intensity that makes you melt.
"Okay," you breathe, reaching out to hook the fingers of one hand on the waist of his slacks.

He circles his hand gently but firmly around your wrist, pulling your hand away. He sets it down on the bed, then reaches up to your hair. You feel him pull out the long pins and the silk flower, tossing them aside as he focuses on loosening your long waves so that they fan out across your back. His fingers scrape across your scalp in a way that makes you hum, and he runs the strands through his hands as you tilt your head back.

You're putty in his hands as he smooths your hair out of your face, cupping your jaw with both hands as he pauses to just *look* at you. Biting your lip, you love the way his eyes flick down to the movement then back up. "Don't worry about me. Don't worry about *anything*. Just enjoy yourself and let me handle everything. I need you to do this for me."

"Yes," you say. There's a tension in your chest that unwinds, and all at once you realize that it's been days since you felt like you could give away everything and just let yourself relax. Right here, right now, with Sans, there's nothing to worry about. It's easy to loosen your grip on it all when Sans is there to hold you up. "Yes please."

He traces the fingers of his left hand down the curve of your neck, following your shoulder before dropping to your breast. You tilt your head into Sans's other hand, exposing more of your throat as he lowers his head to trail little nipping bites down the line of your jaw. You turn enough to press open-mouthed kisses along his bony palm. His teeth graze down the side of your neck, making you shiver as he drags the edges against your skin. Sliding from your breast to your waist, the gauzy fabric is a weak barrier between the warm press of his fingers as he squeezes your hip. Then, with almost agonizing slowness, he opens his mouth and takes the flesh at the join of shoulder and neck between his teeth and *bites*. Your gasp bottoms out into a moan as he releases you only to shift and bite down again, holding you tight. Then he eases away, his soft, smooth tongue lapping at tender flesh.

Sans dips down to your collarbone so you tip your head back, leaning back on your hands to hold yourself upright. He alternates between teeth and tongue across your chest, pushing the necklace aside. As he makes his way to the other side of your neck he slips his hand around to the back of your dress to tug down the zipper. He helps you shrug the dress's straps down your arms, then lifts your hips with one hand so he can pull the dress off and away, a puddle of red and silver on the floor.

Sans pauses long enough to take off his shoes, and as he does so you reach up to start unbuttoning his waistcoat. He lets you ease it off of him, then gives you a throaty laugh as you take hold of the end of his tie and pull him down so you can pepper his face in wet kisses. Love swells in your chest and you ache for him between your legs as you stop kissing him so you can scrape your teeth along the length of his jaw. He shivers and pulls away, looking down at you with hooded eyes as he reaches up to tug on the knot of his tie. Your lips curve into a sultry smile as you watch him, wrapping your arms around his chest as he slips the loosened tie over his head and discards it.

He runs his hands from the sides of your breasts and down to your waist and up again, the smooth warmth of his bones familiar against your skin. He's smiling down at you, blue left eye bright as he runs the tip of his magic tongue along the edges of his teeth and the tips of his canines. You make a pleased hum deep in your chest in response.

"As pretty as this new underwear is, it seems uncomfortable. Better take it off of you," he says, feeling his voice in your chest as he pinches the hooks of your bra to unclasp them. He's gotten better at that over the past few months, that's for certain.

You have to let him go in order for him to get rid of your bra and he takes the opportunity to slide
you further onto the bed before slipping your panties down your legs. Then he follows you onto the bed, still mostly dressed as he settles in next to you. You roll on your side and tug at the collar of his shirt, unbuttoning the top two buttons so you can reach his neck with your lips. Sans groans and tilts his head to the side, drawing in a ragged breath as your tongue laps at the bumps and ridges of the vertebrae. Smiling, you're pleased with yourself as you elicit a soft moan when you graze bone with your teeth.

But then he's pushing you gently away, pinning you to the bed as he straddles you. You take a second to pull your hair out from under your back, fanning it beside your head as he watches, looking down at you as blue stains his cheekbones. Reaching up, you cup your hands under his then slide your fingers up his forearms, stopping when you reach his rolled-up sleeves. He pulls his arms away and takes hold of your hands, leaning forward to pin them on either side of you.

He stares at you so intensely that you think he's about to say something, but instead he lowers his head to your breast, circling the nipple with his tongue and then swiping across, making you gasp and arch your back. Taking it gently between his teeth, he tugs just enough not to hurt as he swirls the tip of his tongue in a rough circle that has you squirming. Flushed and desperate, you rock your hips under him, letting out a weak cry as he moves to your other breast. You give a weak press against his hands but he's still holding you in place, taking his time. It's driving you crazy.

"Sans, please," you whine, shifting under him.

"ok, babe. i've got you," he murmurs against your skin, letting go of your hands so that he can scoot down towards your hips. He leans back, dragging his fingers down your sides as he goes, making you squirm more as he watches you with a satisfied look on his face.

You and Sans make a practiced shift, you pulling your legs out from between his as he settles between yours, cupping your thighs and humming. Resting down on his chest, he has one of your legs over his shoulder, holding it there and leaning his head against it as he looks up at you. The fingers of his other hand find your folds, teasing around your entrance in slow, languid circles until you let out another whine. Then, you let out a low moan as he slides inside of you.

He curls his fingers, stroking you as you squeeze your eyes shut and gasp. The hand on your leg lets go and reaches up to cup your breast, circling your nipple with his thumb to spike your pleasure even higher. You twist to the side to make it easier for him to reach. Bucking your hips, you're desperate for his tongue on your clit but he's not doing it. You take hold of the arm at your breast with one hand, your other sliding down to take care of yourself, but before you can reach something warm and smooth circles both your wrists and presses them above your head. Startled and more than a little aroused, you crane your neck to look and find yourself restrained by bands of glowing, blue magic.

Sans is giving you a smug grin as you look down at him, curling his fingers inside of you as he nips at your inner thigh. You can't help the soft groan that escapes you as you press down against his hand. "i told you to let me take care of you," he says, and you can feel his breath against your skin.

"I feel like you've been holding out on me," you say, letting your head fall back against the bed. "How come you've never done anything like this before?"

"my hands were busy," he says, followed by a low chuckle.

You're about to retort when you feel his tongue press against you and slowly drag over your clit, and any words you might have spoken die on your lips as you moan. Already wound so tight by the time he circles the bundle of nerves, you know it won't take much longer for you to reach your
peak. He alternates between slow, wide strokes and focused flicks of his tongue. No longer curling his fingers, he withdraws and thrusts back inside of you in time with his thumb on your nipple. Soon enough you're letting out a ragged moan and arching your back, Sans's hand pulling away from your breast to grip hard at your side, focusing his ministrations to draw out your orgasm before backing off to ease you through it as long as possible.

Trembling as you slowly start to relax, you expect to find the magic around your wrists gone but it's not. You flex your fingers and look down at Sans as his tongue slides back behind his teeth and he pushes himself up onto his knees, grinning down at you. You smile back, laughing weakly at the pleased look in his face. He always looks so happy and satisfied with himself when he gets you to come. It's adorable.

"that's the look i love," he says, humming as he starts to undo the buttons on his shirt. You try to sit up and help but you're still held down by his magic. His blue eye darts up to your wrists and back down to your face, smile widening a little.

"Oh yeah?" you say, too fuzzy to think of anything better.

"yeah," he agrees, tugging his shirt out from his pants and shrugging it off. His fingers get to work on his belt. "definitely one of my favorites."

"And what are your other favorites?" You shift your hips back and forth, running your toes up and down the sides of his feet. Part of you is so contented that you could probably doze off if he let you... but you don't want him to let you. You're watching him pull the belt free from his trousers.

"hmm... probably that little embarrassed look you make right after you snort. i've been fond of that since before i ever saw what you look like after i get you to come for me," he murmurs, waggling an eyebrow at you. You giggle. "and that one right there. when i make you laugh."

"I love you," you say, nudging his hips with your knees.

"i love you too, babe," he says, pushing his pants down past his pelvis before leaning down to nip at your thighs. You sigh as he grabs your legs, pressing in closer to bite down before letting go. You have the distinct impression you're going to be covered in marks in the morning, but you're finding it difficult to care.

With a little bit of difficulty he gets his trousers past his knees while kneeling and reaches around behind him to yank them off, followed by his socks. As he turns back around to face you his left eye flares brighter for a moment and his cock manifests from his pelvis. The two of you have spent a lot of time perfecting the shape and size of it over the past three months, and you think that it's just about perfect. Different positions tend to do better with slight alterations, but he's learning to anticipate that too. In the early days it was a bit... plain. Like he knew the sort of general shape but none of the details. But why would he? He hadn't needed one before. This is something he made for you, to please you. Sure he gets pleasure from it too, since —as he explained it— it's basically an extension of his magic and his Soul. But he doesn't need it. You've learned firsthand how to get him to come without anything but your two bodies and careful attention to his lower spine.

If he let you go you might show him how much you've learned, but he seems to have other intentions. Not that you mind too much.

"comfortable?" he asks, glancing up at your hands before he bends over you to nip at the soft skin of your stomach, trailing weak bites towards your side and up to your ribs.

Circling your legs around his back, you hook your knees on the wings of his pelvis, pulling him
closer to you. "Worried about me?"

"just making sure. don't be afraid to tell me if there's something you don't like," he says, tilting his head up to look at your face even as his tongue flicks over your nipple. You squirm, sucking in a breath.

"I know. I will," you say, tugging him closer again and bucking your hips.

He lets out a low chuckle, finally settling into position over you. Rocking his hips a little, he brushes against your folds and watches your face as you frown down at him.

"I thought you said you were going to take care of me, not tease me," you whine.

"sorry, babe. sometimes i can't help it," he says, nuzzling into the crook of your neck and giving you a few shallow bites. He follows with a slow swipe of his tongue, then reaches down with one hand to take hold of your hip.

Slowly, carefully, he eases inside of you, filling you up as he breathes out a moan next to your ear. Your head presses back into the mattress, biting your lip and then gasping as his fingers dig into your side, lifting you up so he can angle deeper. He pulls back, all the way to the tip before thrusting back in, making you cry out as he hits your already-sensitive inner walls. You try to reach for him but you can't, a small desperate sound escaping you.

He groans your name and you feel your hands go free as he begins a steady rhythm, bent forward over you with one hand twisted into the bedspread next to you. You reach up to circle him, hooking your fingers between his ribs. You hold yourself against him, hard bones against soft flesh.

Lowering his head next to yours, he turns into your cheek before you press open-mouthed kisses along his cheekbone and jaw.

He's close. You can tell by the ragged way he's breathing and how his fingers are tensing even tighter on your hip. He thrusts once, twice more and then he moans and goes still, shuddering. You let your fingers relax, stroking his sides as he slowly starts to unravel. After a moment he lets go of your side and you unwrap yourself from his hips, letting him collapse onto the bed beside you.

You turn to look at him, smiling as he blinks hard to bring back the little white lights in his eyes. He lets out a heavy, satisfied sigh, meeting your gaze with a bleary smile.

"this whole weekend. this trip. this was a good idea," he says, reaching out with a shaky hand to cup your cheek.

You cover his hand, nodding. "Definitely."

"you know what would make this all even better?" he asks, eyes twinkling with mischief.

You laugh at the look on his face, smiling. "What?"

"overpriced room service."
"Okay, is a set of slippers one or two?" You bend over to pick up the pair of rectangular, Mettaton-shaped slippers, then turn around to face Sans where he's sitting on the bed. His eyes are stuck on your hips, and you realize that he must have gotten an eyeful of your ass when you leaned over, his dress shirt not quite long enough to cover you or the red, lacy underwear. Smirking, you clear your throat. "Hun?"

Sans blinks, looking up at your face. "huh?"

You hold up the aforementioned slippers, chuckling. "One or two? It's a pair."

"uh, two," Sans decides, shrugging.

You purse your lips. "Okay, but you said the curtains was just one, and there's two panels."

"then the curtains are two," he says. He goes back to picking at a large, ornate slice of chocolate cake with a Mettaton-stamped fork. ("That wasn't in the room when we got here, that one doesn't count.")

"Well I guess it doesn't matter. We were both wrong. There's at least twenty-five of them so far and I haven't made it through the bathroom yet." You sigh and shake your head, dropping the slippers down on the floor.

"c'mon, we got all this food—"

"You. You got all this food."

"i got all this food for both of us, come and have some," Sans says, jabbing his fork at the myriad of desserts sitting on the bedspread. About four plates in addition to the one in his hand; one of everything off the restaurant's menu.

"No, I'm determined to see how many I can find," you grumble, ducking into the bathroom. You're greeted by two Mettaton-patterned towels, and two robes with little Mettatsons scattered over the fabric. You let out a loud groan. "Oh my God."

"okay, i think that's enough," Sans says from your side, and you start laughing as he ducks down to wrap his arms around your thighs.

With a cry of surprise, he lifts you off your feet and you grab hold of his shoulders to hold your self steady. "Sans!" you yelp, giggling down at him as he carries you back into the bedroom.

"what can i say, i always wanted to sweep you off your feet," he says, grinning up at you with an amused expression. With his hand planted on one butt cheek, he gives you an appreciative squeeze before setting you back down on the ground beside the bed. "now, stop scouring the room and have some cake. or pie. or whatever that other thing is. with the weird filling you said is made of some kind of cheese."

"The cannolis," you say, shaking your head.
"sure. that one."

You give him a lopsided smile, brushing one of his cheekbones with your hand and kissing the other before giving in and crawling onto the bed. Propping yourself up with some pillows, you decide that the cannolis do sound good and grab one of them off the plate. Instead of following you, Sans goes over to the suitcase that was here waiting for you when you arrived. Mettaton brought it up and left it so that neither of you had to worry about it while on your date. As you pick pastry crumbs off your cleavage (very sexy), Sans fishes out a pair of gray sweatpants and tugs them on.

"you know," Sans says as he takes the spot next to you, squashing a pillow behind his back. He picks up the plate with the half-eaten cake and settles in comfortably with his leg against yours. "if you're gonna make a habit of wearing my dress shirts like that after we go somewhere fancy... i might have to find some reasons to dress up more often."

"Well, I can think of something that you need to wear a suit for. Well, a tux really." You pause, licking sweetened ricotta filling off your fingers. Nervous all of a sudden, you glance over at Sans as he watches you. "I mean, unless monster, um, weddings are different."

"sort of. depends on the monsters," Sans says, shrugging. "can't say i've been to any human weddings though. seen 'em in movies."

"I know you said you weren't exactly planning on proposing. Maybe we should..." You trail off, pulling your knees up to your chest and wrapping your arms around your legs. "i dunno... take a step back I guess."

"is that what you want?" he asks, and you feel his hand on the side of your face as he pushes your hair over your shoulder.

You tilt your head to look at him and his thumb brushes the corner of your eye, making you smile. "I just don't want you to feel pressured. I don't want to pressure you."

"is that what frisk's dad told you? that he felt pressured?" Sans says, an edge to his voice even as his expression is warm. His hand on your cheek is tender and affectionate.

You shrug, resting your chin on your knee. "Yeah, basically."

"hey, look at me. come here." He tugs on your arm gently, unwrapping you from the tight ball you wound yourself into. He sets his plate aside so he can pull you to him and rest back into the pillows. With a hand under your chin, he tilts your head up to meet his eyes. "if i feel pressured, i'll talk to you about it. we'll find a solution and we'll move forward. together. i'm not gonna just run away. look, i don't make the choice to commit to anybody casually, and i committed to you a long time ago, even if there weren't any fancy words spelling it out. so don't think i'm gonna give up on us just cuz things get a little uncomfortable, which right now they're not. ok?"

"Okay." you mumble and he lets you go after giving you a tight squeeze. You're a little flushed, a fluttering feeling making your chest feel light as you smile at him. How does he know the perfect things to say?

"anything else bothering you that i can reassure you of?" he asks, grinning.

You bite your lip, settling into the pillows at his side as you glance at the cake next to him. Watching your face, he picks up the plate and fills his fork, holding it out for you. Leaning forward, you let him feed you, giving him a shy smile as you pull away. He follows the path of
your tongue as you lick chocolate icing off your lips.

"Um... there is actually one thing," you admit, shaking your head as he offers you another bite. He eats it instead, scraping it off with his teeth. He gives you a curious look. "Usually people talk about like... plans for the future before making these kinds of commitments. Things like... kids?"

Sans blinks. "what about kids?"

You sigh, running a hand through your hair and tugging it out from behind your back. "Like if we want to have any. Or any more in my case." Your eyes flick up to his face, his expression is blank. "If that's even possible."

"it's not. your biology and my magic don't really mix the right way. not for a kid at least," he says, winking. His smile seems a little forced as his attempt at a lewd joke falls flat.

"And are you okay with that? With the fact that I can't give you a child of your own?" Something uncomfortable twists in the pit of your stomach. Maybe this is the thing he didn't think about, the thing that might make him second-guess this decision. Kids are really important to people, and when those hopes don't line up—

"you already did. i have frisk now."

"Oh," you say, startled and smiling. The twisting in your stomach fades and is replaced by a swell of affection in your chest, so full it makes you tear up a little. You give a small laugh, blotting your eyes with the ends of Sans's sleeves, embarrassed. "Sans, that's... Thank you. Really. I never thought that Frisk would ever get a dad as great as you."

He reaches out to take your hand, threading your fingers together and giving you a tender look. "i dunno about great, but i admit i never really thought about kids." Sans gives a weak shrug. "i didn't think i'd have the chance to have a family, other than papyrus."

"Why not?" you ask, searching his face as you squeeze his hand.

His eyes are on your joined hands, watching his thumb trace over your skin. A small furrow forms between his brows before it smooths away, then he looks up at you. "never thought i'd meet anyone who'd wanna put up with my hilarious jokes, i guess," he says, giving you a grin.

There's something he's not telling you hiding behind that smile, but you don't push. Things are too nice right now for you to want to spoil them. Instead you lean in close as Sans fills up his fork with chocolate cake, and let him feed you another bite.

Refreshed from a nice hot shower, you take a moment to survey the marks left on your neck and shoulders last night. You trace the bruises with your fingers, smiling to yourself as you stretch from side to side. He definitely did a number on you, but damn if it wasn't worth every last mark. You feel claimed, wanted and desired. The familiar ache in your thighs has nothing to do with the bruises there from his teeth and fingers.

You blow dry your hair enough that it's not dripping anymore, too impatient to finish all the way. Your hair is so thick it always takes forever. Then, wrapped up in a towel, you head out to the bedroom. It's already noon but Sans is still asleep. He has your pillow locked in a vice grip and he's curled up near the side of the bed where you were before getting up. Despite the absolutely enormous bed the two of you slept right next to each other, starting out cuddled together before you drifted apart to get more comfortable, but still touching.
Passing the bed, you head to your shared suitcase and get dressed. Your normal clothes are less glamorous than your dress from last night, but it's nice to be back to normal. At the very least, it's a lot more comfortable in jeans and sneakers instead of chiffon and heels.


Nothing.

You stroke up and down his arm for a moment until he finally blinks his eyes open, looking up at you and squinting. "hrmm?" he grumbles, crushing the pillow tighter to his chest.

"It's noon, I'm gonna go get something to eat. Do you want anything?" you ask, smiling.

"where are you going?" he asks. The lights in his eyes get a little brighter as he wakes up a bit more, but they're still dim and a little blurry at the edges.

"Just downstairs. There was a burger place in the lobby, I think." You reach up to stroke his brow and he closes his eyes again, burrowing back down into the pillows and blankets.

"don't worry about it. i'll get room service later or something. don't forget the room key."

"I got it, hun."

"and take your phone."

"Already in my pocket."

"ok. i love you."

"I love you too. Get some more sleep."

He gives you a sleepy grumble of agreement that has you chuckling as you give him a quick kiss on the crown of his skull. Then, snatching up the room key from the coffee table, you head out of the room by yourself.

The lobby is quiet when you reach it, save for the monster at the check in counter and a few more waiting by the elevator into the city. You pass them in silence, heading into the fast food restaurant emblazoned with a MTT logo and a picture of a burger.

It's empty except for a single employee behind the counter. He's leaning against it with one hand, taking a lazy drag from his cigarette. The sound of the door makes him jump, and the shift from bored to panicky happens in less than a second. The catlike monster's hand slips on the edge of the counter and he almost doesn't keep his balance, stumbling a little as he drops the cigarette to the floor and snubs it out with a foot.

Plastering a smile onto his face, he manages to blurt out, "Welcome to MTT-Brand Burger Emporium, home of the Glamburger. Sparkle up your day."

"Uh, hello," you say, looking up at the menu in an attempt at letting the employee regain his composure. You fight the urge to cringe from second hand embarrassment, wishing you could go out and come back in again and do it all over again. "Sorry about that."

He makes a little squeak in the back of his throat, like he wants to say something but decides against it. You look at him again, standing rigid behind the register, and notice his nametag. 'Burgerpants' huh? That's... different. "How can I help you?"
Studying the menu again, you're a little put off by the picture of a bright purple burger and, oh God, are those sequins? You're fairly certain that edible sequins just don't exist. The sandwich looks normal enough, even if it is shaped like a sword. "I'll have a, uh, legendary hero I guess," you say.

"Coming right up, little buddy," he says turning to a prep station with a look of relief.

Realizing you didn't think to bring any money, you clear your throat to get his attention again. He glances over his shoulder as he grabs what looks like a sword-shaped baguette. "Do you have a way of charging the bill to my room?"

"Sure thing. What the number and the name the reservation is under?" he asks, starting work on the sandwich.

"Uh," you mutter, pulling the key out of your pocket to check the tag. "404. It might be under 'Sans' but Mettaton is the one that made the reservation so I'm not sure."

Burgerpants freezes, his shoulders going rigid before he turns slowly to face you, a look of horror on his face. "Y-you're friends with Mettaton? You're not gonna tell him you caught me slacking off are you?" he asks, his voice a hissing whisper as he glances around like he's looking for someone watching him.

Your eyes widen in surprise, taken aback. "Oh, no! Look, it's okay, calm down. Mettaton just owed us a favor. It's a long story. Please, he's... definitely not someone I'd call a friend," you say, shaking your head and grimacing.

His relief is palpable, his entire body going limp as his face goes slack. Shit is this guy high strung. "Oh good. Look, lemme tell you, you do not want to work for that guy. He's..." Burgerpants starts trembling, shaking his head and turning back to work on your hero. "He's the worst boss I've ever had. I'd quit if I thought I could do anything else. I wanted to be an actor! But now I'm nineteen and I've wasted my whole life and all I have is this horrible job. When I said I wanted to work with Mettaton this isn't what I meant." He turns to look at you, pointing with a leaf of lettuce. "Take it from me, buddy. Be careful what you wish for."

"I'll keep that in mind," you tell him solemnly, wondering how this guy got so jaded at nineteen, just a year younger than you. You think you blame Mettaton.

A moment later he has your sandwich all wrapped up for you and he's punching your reservation information into the computerized register. "You have a good one on my behalf, okay little buddy? Since I'm stuck here." Burgerpants gives a half-hysterical laugh that cuts off abruptly, then his mouth curls into a wide smile.

A little creeped out, you just nod and take your food. "Sure thing. I'll do my best." Then you make a quick exit.

You pause outside the door, taking in a deep breath as you shake your head to yourself. That was... just strange. Pausing to check your phone, you don't have any new messages so you decide to try and find that little courtyard from earlier. You think it'll be nice to eat outside (well, outside by comparison) with the trees and flowers instead of trying not to wake Sans. Besides, he can use the sleep after all the work he did last night. With a self-satisfied smile, you head down the hall you know leads to the courtyard.

The stained glass doors swing open as you approach them, and you're pleasantly surprised to see Bo coming in. She's dressed in her waitress uniform, flicking through a cell phone before glancing
up and spotting you. Her face breaks out into a bright smile. "Oh my gosh, imagine bumping into you again! How are you? Where's Sans?" she asks, bouncing a little on her toes.

You can't help but smile back, her giddiness infectious. "He's upstairs, still sleeping. I just wanted to get some lunch," you say, gesturing with your sandwich.

She covers her mouth with a hand, giggling. "Oh I bet he's tired," she says, winking at you. You barely have time to blush before she's gasping and looking at her phone again. "Sorry to gossip and run but I have to get back to work. It was great seeing you again, honey!"

And with that Bo runs off after giving you a rushed and awkward, shoulder-squeezing hug. You watch her turn the corner before heading out into the courtyard, chuckling to yourself. This place sure is filled with some... interesting people.

The courtyard is pretty much the same as it was at night, just brighter. The lampposts are off and crystals far overhead illuminate the Underground with pale light that you can almost mistake for sunlight. With no one else in sight, you take a spot on a nearby bench, right next to a bed of red flowers. You take a moment to just relax into the seat, sighing before you look at the sandwich in your lap.

Your sock feels a little tight around your ankle all of a sudden, so you set the hero down on the bench beside you and lean down to tug on the leg of your jeans. The pressure is uncomfortable. What you don't expect to find is a thin, bright green vine curling right above your shoe.

"Howdy!"

Chapter End Notes

Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters (including the Reader/Hope) and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
There's a golden flower smiling up at you.

Startled, you jerk back and leap to your feet with a yelp, trying to yank your foot away. But the vine tightens around you and you realize you're stuck. The flower just gives you a placid look, something like amusement on its face.

"Whoa there, pal! I didn't mean to scare you!" he says in a sweet, childlike voice. He tilts his head. "I'm Flowey. Flowey the Flower!"

You force what you hope is a friendly smile in return, pressing a hand to your chest as you take in a steadying breath. Your heart is pounding beneath your palm. "Hi, Flowey. Um, do you think you can let me go?" You give your leg an experimental tug, but the vine doesn't budge.

There's a tickling feeling on your other ankle and your jerk your leg away, crying out in surprise. A second vine that had been trying to wrap itself around your leg without you noticing twitches on the ground. Then, like a coiled snake, it lashes out and wraps itself around your knee, circling up your thigh to lock you in place. Fear and confusion overwhelms your senses, urging you to try and flee but you're stuck.

"I don't think so," Flowey says. His grin widens into something sinister, the golden petals circling his face rippling and swelling like a bird fluffing its feathers. He seems pleased with himself, and panic prickles down your spine.

You open your mouth to cry out for help but your scream cuts out as another vine snaps around your throat from behind, yanking your head back. The pressure on your neck is painful and you suck in a ragged breath, coughing as you feel the tendril tighten. You try to pry at it with your fingers, and you hear Flowey laugh. The sound is familiar somehow, and you realize, with a hollow drop in the pit of your stomach, that you've heard this laugh before. Right as you woke up in that bed of golden flowers back in the Ruins. But what does that mean? What's going on?

"Why?" you rasp, forcing yourself to breathe past the tightness circling your throat, digging at the vines with blunted nails.

"Why?" he echoes back at you, giving you an incredulous look. "Don't give me that innocent act, I'm a master at it. You've been screwing up everything with this timeline, and you know what? It's time to start over."

"W-what?" you say, coughing as tears flood your vision from the horrible pain as you struggle to breathe. Your head is pounding and you're starting to see spots.

"You think you and Frisk,?" Flowey raises his leaves like he's making quotes in the air, like he's trying to imply something about your child, "can just settle down with those dumb skeletons and act like everything is fine? I'm not done with them. And if I have to kill you to get them to Reset so we can try again, then that's what I'm going to do! I'm not going to let you stand in my way anymore."

You don't know what he's talking about. There's a tugging sensation in your chest and you try to cup your hands around your Soul to hide it but it's no use. It slips right through your fingers and hovers there, cracked and vulnerable between you and Flowey. Your lungs are burning and you let out a desperate, choked sound. "Reset? I don't— please I don't understand! I didn't do anything."
The vines around your throat loosen just enough for you to suck in a deep breath, coughing again as Flowey stares up at you with a blank expression, eyes narrowed. Then as you still try to wriggle your fingers between your throat and the tendrils choking you, your wrists are yanked away and bound fast to your sides. The flower sways a little from side to side, an amused smile on his face.

"Did he really never tell you? Oh wow, that's rich. He gave you all those mushy lines about spending your 'future' together but he hasn't even told you what's really going on? That's..." Flowey laughs, baring pointed teeth. "That's pretty cruel. I'm almost impressed."

Something cold stirs in your chest, writhing beneath your ribs and tensing. "Tell me what?"

"'Frisk' has been messing around with time. Repeating their little adventure down here over and over. Oh, no one else seems to remember but me and that idiot skeleton, but... I would have thought he'd tell you. Especially since he 'cares' about you so much." Flowey twitches the tips of his leaves again, mocking. "They've been doing this for, oh, probably a couple years at this point. It's hard to keep track when you're living the same few days over and over again. And everything happens almost the same way each time, give or take a few deaths. But then you showed up. I'm not even sure why. What did get you to act different this time?" His expression is honestly curious, staring up at you and swaying a little on his stem.

"That doesn't even make sense!" you snap, trying to jerk forward angrily but the vines tense again, making you gasp. "You're lying! Sans wouldn't hide something like that from me!"

"Oh? Are you telling me you don't remember all the times that you didn't even come here? All the times that 'Frisk' must have left you behind? Not even a little? I mean, sometimes the others around here, they seem like they remember stuff. Sometimes." Flowey's grin sends a chill up your spine. "Are you sure you're supposed to be down here in the Underground?"

When you were staying at Toriel's house, you felt like Frisk had left you. That you'd waited for them to come back, and they never did. When you came home from work and found Frisk and your mother, hadn't there been a moment where you remembered reacting differently? Instead of comforting Frisk and leaving, you had made things worse instead? Was that... were those moments real? Did you really do that to Frisk?

You feel sick to your stomach.

Your thoughts must be written all over your face because Flowey starts cackling, his face twisting into a menacing, sick and delighted smile. "You see? You're not even supposed to be here," Flowey says, sneering. "And Sans never even told you. That's rich. But that smiley trashbag would latch onto you, wouldn't he? I mean, he must get bored with the same things over and over again, and then you came along. So is it really you that he cares about or just that you're something new? Well, it doesn't really matter. I guess we'll never find out, now will we?"

You don't even have time for his words to sink in before a pair of thin, thorny vines lash out and wrap themselves around the two curves of your Soul, slipping between the cracks. Sharp, stabbing heat lances through your chest, wrenching a sob of pain from your throat even as Flowey's grip around it tightens. Your Soul feels like it's being pulled apart, you can barely breathe, and the squeezing on your arms and legs is almost too much to bear.

"Don't worry. You won't stay dead for long, I'm sure. The second that kid finds out you're dead they'll Reset. Or, you know what, maybe they won't! Who knows? You're a variable I haven't encountered before, but either way, you're an obstacle that I'm going to remove." Flowey is laughing again, and a ring of white seeds or pellets circle your Soul.
"Y o u." A dark, low and dangerous voice fills the air in the courtyard, and you're not sure if you should be relieved or more frightened. But it's hard to feel anything as dark spots start to swim in your vision.

Flowey's laugh halts suddenly, his eyes going wide. "Not now!" he cries, but then all at once the vines holding you up are gone, and Flowey is vanishing into the soil beneath him. A split second too late, a trio of sharp-edged bones plunge into the ground in front of you as you collapse to your knees.

Hunching forward, you cough and suck in air as you press a hand to your throat, aching even though the pressure is finally gone. You gag and fight back the urge to vomit, forcing yourself to breathe in steady and slow even as you start trembling. You almost died. You had almost lost consciousness and it felt like your Soul was about to be ripped in two. Your encounters with Undyne and Mettaton pale in comparison to this. Everything hurts.

Your other hand flies to your chest as your Soul slips back inside, filling you up but you feel wounded. Vulnerable and weak. Curling over yourself, you grab a fistful of your shirt, squeezing your eyes shut and rocking back and forth.

"babe." Sans's voice is at your ear and you feel his hands on your shoulders trying to pull you to him. "you're okay, i've got you."

You let out a sob, curling in on yourself further as Sans tucks his head next to yours. No, don't... You have to fight the urge to pull away, torn up inside by the possibility that he's been hiding all this from you, ever since you met.

"you're safe. i'm here," he murmurs. "come on i'll take us back to our room."

There's a familiar lurch in your stomach as he slips you both through reality. Left, forgotten on the bench, is your sandwich.

"if i had thought there was anyone here who might wanna hurt you, i never would've let you go by yourself," Sans says, helping you sit back against a mound of pillows on the bed. He's dressed in his normal clothes, but the sight of that familiar blue jacket isn't any comfort. It's like some kind of spell has been broken. The romance of your weekend alone feels far away.

"How did you find me?" you ask him, because you can't bring yourself to ask him what's really bothering you. Not yet. It hurts too much. Everything hurts so much. Tears well up in your eyes again as he looks at you, and you see the guilt etched into the lines of his face. Part of you doesn't care, and that scares you.

"i ran into bo. i came downstairs to find you cuz i thought you were gonna come right back. she said she saw you." Sans shakes his head, gritting his teeth and running his hand down your arm with a tenderness that just makes you want to weep. "it was lucky. if i ever see that fucking flower again i'm gonna tear his petals off and rip him to shreds."

You swallow and it aches, making you whimper despite yourself. It wipes the angry look off of Sans's face and replaces it with something frightened and anxious as the tiny lights in his eyes drop to your neck. "I don't understand," you choke out, pressing a hand to your chest. You're still shaking. "Nothing makes any sense."

"what doesn't make sense?" he asks, voice quiet.

"Everything he said. I can't..." you shake your head, then try to blink your tears from your eyes.
"Do you know him?"

Sans looks away, his eyes darkening. You reach to take hold of his hand, squeezing hard to keep his attention. "sort of," he admits. "i've seen him before, a long time ago." He trails off, looking down at your hand.

You wait for him to speak, anger building inside your chest. "Talk to me!" you finally snap, making Sans jump and his eyes dart up to yours. "Stop being so damn vague all the time and just tell me what's really going on, Sans!" You're crying in earnest now, frustration and betrayal cutting deep. "What did Flowey mean by 'Resets'? What did he mean that Frisk has been doing something to time, and that you remember it all when almost nobody else can?"

He stares at you in disbelief, and his expression alone is enough to confirm his guilt. "babe..."

"Please tell me he was lying," you beg him. Your grip on his hand is so tight it's just hurting yourself. "Tell me that you haven't been lying to me this whole time, Sans. Tell me that I didn't really push Frisk away into coming to the Underground without me over and over again."

"i never lied to you," he says softly, hanging his head. "...and i can't start now."

"No," you breathe, covering your mouth with your other hand. "This is too... God dammit." You look away from him as your shoulders start to shake, refusing to release your hold on him. "But you hid this from me. You hid everything. You and Frisk both have. Is that what you talk about when I'm not around? How to keep all this some big secret from me?"

"the kid doesn't remember. every time, it's like the first time all over again," he says, his voice weary and resigned. You think that, maybe, now he'll finally be honest. At least he's not trying to fight you.

"So it's just you, then. You've been keeping this secret. Why didn't you tell me?" You turn to look at him again, anger bubbling back to the surface.

"i hoped you'd never have to know. that there wouldn't be any more resets now that you were here." Sans strokes the back of your hand with his thumb, but he's trembling. "this is the longest one of these timelines has lasted," he mumbles.

"And I've never been down here before? Ever? Frisk's been alone?" you swallow past a lump in your throat, trying to ignore the pain.

"it's always just been frisk. until this time," he says, nodding weakly.

"I want to go home."

His eyes widen, darting back to your neck and up to your face again. "babe you're injured, and not just your body. you need to eat something, get some rest. we've got another night here and i promise i'll keep you safe. just—"

"Sans I want to go home to my child!" you snap, yanking your hand free from his and balling it into a fist.

Stunned, Sans just looks at you for a moment like you slapped him across the face. Then, crumpling with what you can only describe as guilt, he nods his head. "whatever you want, babe."
Papyrus and Frisk are both expecting you when you get home. Sans called ahead to let them know, and they're both waiting in the living room when you go inside. The taller skeleton gasps at the sight of you, no doubt you look like hell and you can only imagine what your neck must look like. You hadn't bothered looking in a mirror. He moves to wrap you up in a hug but Sans cuts him off and for that you're grateful. Everything hurts and a pair of hard, bony arms is the last thing you want pressing into your myriad of bruises.

"HUMAN, WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?" Papyrus says, eye sockets wide.

"Mom, are you okay?" Frisk asks in a small voice, carefully slipping their hand into yours and giving a weak squeeze you can barely feel.

"I'll be okay, sweetie," you say, your voice a little hushed because your throat is still aching.

You look down at them and give them what you hope is a reassuring smile, but all that's spinning through your head is 'time travel'. Something that sounds like the plot of a movie or book, caught in a loop repeating over and over —and according to Flowey and Sans— because of Frisk. Your child, at the center of it all. You don't understand. You're not sure you can.

"Pap, i need you to go to hotland, get some more of that medicine that Alphys made for Frisk. It's got healing magic in it so it'll help with her injuries," Sans says, and God his deflecting just makes you want to scream. But you let him have this with Papyrus. He had to beg you while you were still in the hotel not to tell his brother, and he was so desperate you just relented.

"I..." Papyrus looks uncertain, his eyes darting from you to Sans and then back again. Then, he nods. "I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, CAN DO THAT! HUMAN, SOON YOU'LL BE FEELING MUCH BETTER, I PROMISE!"

"Thanks Papyrus," you say, giving him a watery smile as he reaches out to carefully pat you on the shoulder. Then he rushes out the door, in true Papyrus fashion. At least you can count on him to be nearly transparent.

As soon as the door closes Sans has his phone out of his pocket, heading for the kitchen. You watch him from the entryway as he pulls open the fridge, digging through the contents. Oh, right, he wants you to eat. Your stomach twists, hungry to the point of discomfort but you're so anxious and upset that you feel nauseated. But, you know you should eat something. It'll make the throbbing ache in your chest —your Soul— go away.

"Undyne— no the date was good, listen— undyne please!" Sans snaps, and you feel Frisk's hand tighten on yours. You're not used to hearing him raise his voice either. "We're home, i can't go into details right now but i need you to stall papyrus. i just sent him to alphys to get more of that medicine she used on frisk. no, frisk is fine... i just said i can't go into details right now, just please do this for me, okay? i need him out of the house for a little while... ok. ok thanks. if anyone can keep him busy it's you. yeah. everyone's ok. i will. ok."

He hangs up his phone and pulls out a plastic container of spaghetti, shoving it into the microwave. You and Frisk make your way into the kitchen. Frisk pulls a chair right up beside yours and the
two of you sit down. You can tell that they want to be sitting in your lap but they're afraid to hurt you. You wrap your arm around their shoulders and pull them close, ignoring the dull ache throughout your body.

"What happened?" Frisk asks, looking between the two of you with wide, worried eyes.

"flowey," Sans says, resting his hands on the counter and hunching forward, his back to the two of you.

You feel Frisk go rigid against you. ".What?"

"babe, are you sure you wanna do this with frisk here?" he asks you, glancing over his shoulder.

"This involves both of us. Frisk needs to know what's going on," you say, pulling them closer.

The microwave beeps and he pulls the container out, getting a fork and giving the spaghetti a stir before sliding it across the table to you. You look up at him, studying his closed-off expression and you're torn between calling it all off or crying. But you can't do either. All you can do is wait. You look down at your food, stomach growling despite yourself so you decide to just eat.

"ok then," Sans sighs, running a hand over his skull. He looks at the chair across from you but then seems to decide to stay standing, shoving his hands in his pockets. "you know flowey, don't you frisk? you've met him before?"

"...When we first landed in the Underground. He tried to hurt me," Frisk says.

"Baby why didn't you tell me?" you ask, trying to keep the accusation out of your voice. But everything is so raw inside of you, it's difficult.

"I didn't want you to worry," Frisk mumbles, tucking their face into your side. You don't say anything, just going back to eating.

"frisk, you've been down here before. probably hundreds of times by now. you fall, by yourself, make your way through the underground, and usually you leave. but for some reason, at the end, or even sometimes in the middle, you reset. you start time back over from right before you fall. i've tried asking you before but you never remember. i'm sure you don't remember any of these things, even now." Sans's eyes flick between the two of you, but mostly linger on Frisk.

Frisk doesn't say anything.

"you've met all of us before. you've made friends with me and papyrus, alphys and undyne. hell, you've been there to see undyne's house burn down god knows how many times. you've gone on that silly date with papyrus..." He looks at you and he trails off, the weak, reminiscent smile slipping away as quickly as it came. "it's how i knew mettaton was gonna try to hurt you guys, babe. he's tried to take frisk's soul before. so has undyne. so will asgore. frisk, do you remember anything? anything at all?"

You expect Frisk to say no. Maybe there's still a chance that this outrageous scenario isn't true. But Frisk bites their lip, pressing the knuckles of their hand to their mouth. ".Sometimes," they say, in a small voice. "Sometimes I know things are gonna turn out okay. Or it feels like something is supposed to happen, but then it doesn't." They wince a little, turning their head as though something loud startled them but there's nothing there.

Sans nods, like he's expecting this. You're reeling, but you force yourself to keep eating. At the very least, some of the hollow feeling in your stomach and Soul is starting to fade. "but this time is
different. because your mom is here with you."

Frisk nods. "I... think so."

Sans's expression turns pained, looking down at the ground before back up to meet your eyes. There's something desperate there. "I didn't tell you because I thought that this would all finally be over. That's why you're here Frisk wouldn't have a reason to reset anymore. How was I supposed to explain that time was resetting over and over again and that I don't understand why Frisk is doing it? Frisk doesn't even remember, why would you believe me?"

"You could have tried. Sans, I... I trust you," you murmur, but even with Frisk agreeing that they've noticed things, it's still hard for you to believe. Monsters and magic are one thing but time travel? You shake your head. "I don't know. I don't know what to believe anymore."

"Believe that I thought I was doing the right thing," he begs, taking a step closer to the table. "I didn't— I don't want to hurt you. How could knowing this do anything but hurt you? I live with the fear of everything resetting every day and it kills me. That's the reason being with you scares the shit outta me, babe. Because when I say that I'm afraid I'm gonna lose you and I won't have a way to stop it, it's because I know it might happen. I could lose you and you'd..." He chokes up for a moment, shaking his head and taking in a steadying breath. "You'd never even remember me."

The weight of the realization is heavy in your chest. This is why. This is why he needs you there when he wakes up in the morning. Why he keeps looking through all those photos of you on his phone. Why he clings so tightly sometimes and why he was so scared when you found him crying in the kitchen months ago. And you told him that you weren't going anywhere... how hollow your reassurances must have sounded to him. You don't notice how quiet Frisk is, how still they are. You're caught between wanting to get up and comfort Sans and the lingering sting of his deception.

"Were you ever going to tell me the truth?" you ask, even though you're sure you know the answer. And it hurts.

Sans hangs his head, pressing a hand to his forehead and turning away, just a little. "No. if nothing ever changed... no. I would have just left it all alone. Hoped for the best."

"You were just going to keep hiding behind these half-truths? Forever? When I asked you about your nightmares, you'd just keep this up?" Your chest feels tight, anger and bitterness writhing behind your ribs, making you feel sick. You push the half-eaten spaghetti away, sated enough for now.

Sans nods and you bite the inside of your lip as your eyes swim with tears.

Flowey's words come unbidden to the back of your mind. They spill out before you can even think. "Do you even love me? Or is it just because I'm the one unique thing that's happened after all this time?"

His head jerks up and his eyes widen, startled. "I love you. You know I love you. You felt it in my soul, you have to know that."

You do. You remember. You remember all of that love and happiness, and how underneath there was that pain and fear and sadness that he wouldn't let you see or feel. Biting your lip, you nod. You can't deny that. But it makes this hurt so much more.

"How do you know? How do you remember when no one else does?" you ask. Frisk's head lifts up. Sans's expression darkens and his hands go back into his pockets. He glances away and back to
you. But his vision is distant, like he's looking through you. "there was an accident. at the lab. we were running an experiment, studying timelines—"

"The lab?" you blurt out, your free hand balling into a fist. "You used to work at the lab? Alphys's lab?"

Sans nods. "yeah, we... we worked together a few years ago. um, real years not, repeated years. if that makes sense."

"So when you said you only knew her from your station in Hotland, you lied." With a frustrated sigh you shake your head. How much do you really know about Sans? How much is he hiding from you? "Fine. Whatever. There was an accident."

He hesitates, then continues. "we lost a lot of people that day. including someone... close to me. i don't..." He shakes his head, gritting his teeth. "i was the only one that survived."

"What happened?" you press.

Sans shakes his head again, frowning. "an accident. something i think i could have prevented but i don't..."

"And this accident lets you remember, what, the different timelines?"

He nods, but the furrow in his brow is still there. "i just wake up here at home, no matter what was happening before. and i remember," he says in a clipped tone.

"But how did you survive the accident? What happened to you?"

"i just woke up."

"Don't keep hiding things now. Why can't you just tell me the truth, Sans?" you snap, making Frisk flinch.

"because i can't remember!" he snaps back, startling you.

Your surprise quickly twists into more anger, snowballing the tension in the air. "You can remember all these repeated timelines but you can't remember the one thing that makes it all possible?" you ask, sharper than you intend.

"i barely remember anything from before the accident," he retorts, echoing your frustration back at you. "i don't remember who it was that i lost at the lab but i feel like i should! i barely remember my own mother and i can't remember my father at all! you want to know why i never tell you about my childhood? it's because it's a patchwork quilt with half the patches ripped out. i can remember things with papyrus because he's still here. but other things? i lost them." You can only stare, taken aback as he shakes his head and gives you a humorless smile. "you know what's funny? i used to wear a tie for work at the lab. every damn day. and then i try to get dressed up for our date and i'm just standing there, holding it in my hands, staring. and i know i should know how to do it. but my hands just, won't work right."

What can you even say to all that? You just shake your head, guilt settling inside you. There's too much to wrap your mind around, too much to try and absorb. Your anger is dulled but the pain isn't. You feel like you barely know Sans. You know his heart and how he feels for you, but... you barely knew anything about him and now it's all laid bare at your feet and you don't know what to do with it. Silence fills the room.
You told him everything. You've always trusted him with all of the awful things that happened with your mother, the reasons you're the person you are. But Sans didn't do that with you. You opened up while he stayed locked up tight, giving you just enough scraps to keep you from looking for more.

"Mom," Frisk murmurs, pulling away from your side to look up at you. "Are you okay?"

You shake your head again, wiping your eyes and face with both hands as you pull in a shaky breath. "I should be asking you that question, sweetie. How are you doing? This must be a lot for you to understand."

They shrug, looking away. You find yourself envying their childish acceptance. "I dunno. I mean, I don't know how I did those things before." Frisk looks over at Sans, their mouth set into a stern line. Something about their expression is so much older than them, and it's a little startling. "But I'm not gonna do it again. I promise."

Sans nods, all of his frustration seeping out of him and leaving him looking wrung out. "I appreciate it, kiddo."

You push up from the table, Frisk and Sans both turning to look at you. "I'm going to take a shower," you say, because right now you just need to get away from this. You need to think. You're feeling too much and you need to sort your way through it, and you don't know how long it's going to take.

"babe, can you talk to me, please?" he asks, and the pain in his voice makes your heart ache.

"Sans for right now, just... please leave me alone."

Chapter End Notes

Just a friendly note from me to you. Please don't judge Hope/Reader too harshly just yet. Keep in mind that she still needs to process everything that's just happened in like, the last two hours and doesn't know how to feel. I'd like to think that doesn't need saying, but... See how this all plays out before taking sides.
Make Sure

Things had been perfect, just for a little while. Yes, maybe what had ended up being a proposal had been a little rushed in hindsight, but Sans was just being honest. He loves you, and wants to spend his future with you and Frisk.

Now he's not so sure that's going to happen. And he can't even entirely blame Flowey.

Flowey.

Seeing those vines wrapped around you —around your Soul— had awakened something furious and frightening inside of him. It also reminded him of something he had forgotten. He has stacks of notebooks tucked away inside the remnants of an old machine, hidden in the back of the house. They're full of notes about the Resets and the timelines, things he was trying to keep track of until he finally just... gave up. But there's two stacks that he doesn't remember writing. Back then, before Frisk, he didn't know who had been manipulating time. He'd had suspicions, and there were mentions of a golden flower. In the last one, in the final entries before he somehow forgot, it seemed like he'd been onto something. Getting closer to figuring out just what was going on.

And then it all ended. He didn't even realize he'd forgotten until the Resets started again and he'd come up with the same idea to start keeping notes in the only physical place free from these manipulations in time. That's when he found out it had happened before, just without the kid. But that flower was nowhere to be seen, so he assumed that maybe it had vanished.

He suspected that the flower was behind the Resets, or that he was involved somehow. Now Sans knows for certain. Flowey is the thing that started all of this, the threat he'd nearly forgotten existed. That's a mistake he won't be making again. Whatever the flower wants, he'd decided to make you a target, and Sans isn't gonna let him get away with it.

Even if... God it kills him to even think it, but even if you decide you can't forgive him for his lies, he'll keep you and Frisk safe as best he can. He loves you, both of you, too much to just leave you at the mercy of the Underground. For Flowey or Asgore or any other number of things to find you.

He always expected to lose you, but he never thought it would be his fault.

"Dad?"

Sans realizes that he's staring at the entryway, stuck there in the middle of the kitchen unable to look away from the last place he saw you. Frisk is tugging at the side of his jacket, looking up at him with wide brown eyes. He looks down at them, searching the kid's face and finding more sympathy than he expects.

"yeah, kiddo?" he asks, giving a weak shrug. He feels exhausted all of a sudden, even though he just woke up a couple hours ago. He just wants to go to sleep. Maybe it would get rid of this horrible, hollow feeling in his Soul.

"How long have I been doing this? Resetting time?" Frisk's brow furrows, giving them a serious expression that Sans thinks doesn't suit them. They look better when they're smiling.

"a couple years, i think. two, maybe three. i sorta stopped keeping track after a while." Sans sighs, shaking his head.

"So... does that mean that I'm actually eight?" That frown of concentration is still on their face and
despite everything Sans can't help but laugh.

"heh. nah it doesn't work quite like that. maybe you're a little older up here," he says, tapping the side of his skull, "but you're still a little kid down here." Sans reaches out to poke Frisk square in the chest, making the serious look melt off the kid's face.

Frisk lets out a weak laugh, but after a moment they sober again. "Are you and mom gonna be okay?"

He's wondering the same thing. "i hope so. but i dunno. she's... really mad at me and i can't say that i blame her all that much."

"But you love each other," they protest, yanking on Sans's jacket.

He nods. "yeah. but it's not always that simple."

Frisk falls silent, mulling this over. "...I'm sorry I can't remember. If I could, then maybe I could help make Mom understand."

"it wouldn't have made me lying to her any better. don't worry about it too much, it's not your fault," Sans says, resting his hand on top of their head.

Pushing Sans's arm out of the way, Frisk reaches up with both hands, the universal signal for a hug. Something inside of him, the thing keeping him from falling apart, starts to fracture. He wraps Frisk up in a tight embrace, kneeling as they throw their arms around his neck. Part of him wants to hold onto that numb feeling, the way he distanced himself from the pain. But he can't, it's slipping through his fingers just like he feels you pulling away from him and it kills him. Frisk squeezes him so tight, as hard as the kid's little arms can manage and Sans starts shaking, willing himself not to cry in front of them.

"I'm gonna help. I promise I'm gonna help and make things better, Dad," Frisk says, and it's just enough to push Sans over the edge.

Hugging Frisk close to his chest, Sans squeezes his eyes shut as tears threaten to spill down his cheekbones. "i'm just scared i'm gonna lose her. to this, or a reset..."

"I'll never Reset again. I'll make sure."

You wish you didn't know the truth. It would be so much easier to go back to how things were before, when you were happy and things were almost perfect. You feel adrift, tossed into open waters with nothing to hold onto. Let Sans have his lies if only it meant the two of you could be happy again...

But that wouldn't be right, would it? It wouldn't be fair to you, or to him. The thought of him reliving the same few days over and over again tears you apart, the realization of just how scared he must be sits like an iron weight in your stomach. He's been through so much, and you don't want to make that worse. You love him, so much that it hurts sometimes. It certainly hurts right now.

You just need... something. Time. Space to think. You have it right now, here in the shower but you can't stay in here forever. Hot water runs down your back, soothing some of the aches from your muscles but your throat still burns. It hurts to swallow and you're sore all over.

Sans isn't the person you thought he was. In retrospect it all makes sense; the half-truths, the deflecting, the reasons he avoided talking about his past. You should have urged more, tried to get
him to talk to you instead of being afraid of pushing him away. Maybe if you had been more insistent, he would have opened up to you on his own instead of thrown in your face by a damn flower. Instead of the lazy sentry with a hot dog business on the side you thought you knew, you're left with an ex-scientist, traumatized by an accident he doesn't remember and haunted by the memories of repeated timelines.

How had it not driven him crazy?

That quantum physics book in the living room and the odd scraps of paper with what you think are formulas balled up in his pockets suddenly make a lot more sense. God, too many things just make a lot more sense. You try to tell yourself that this is still the same Sans that you love, just more. All of these extra pieces have been fitted into empty spaces you hadn't even noticed, and in a way you understand his behavior so much better.

Besides, would you really have believed him if he had told you the truth? If he came to you and told you that your six year-old could manipulate time itself, would you really have listened? You'd like to think you would have but...

And what about Frisk? Had something happened to them down here for them to get this power? Had they always had it and you just never knew? They said that they don't remember, not really, but did some part of them remember all the times —oh God, hundreds of times—that you drove them away? You cover your face with your hands and let out a choked sob, imagining Frisk coming down here into the Underground alone. Had Sans taken care of them? He'd seemed familiar with Frisk even at the start, but you had assumed that was just his friendly nature. But in reality, he knew. No wonder he'd asked you if things had been rough for Frisk at home, back when you told him about your mother. He'd wanted to know why they were here.

And how do you fit into all this? It had been the memory of the previous timelines that had triggered your change in behavior, you know that now. Some kind of fortunate deja vu. Flowey said you were ruining everything, how, by making it so that Frisk had no reason to Reset? Because they were happy?

You realize that you've somehow accepted everything that Sans told you about the timelines. A part of you still trusts him, though you can't help but wonder what else he might possibly be hiding from you. So far it seems like it just has to do with these Resets and manipulations of time, but is that where he draws the line? He said he's never outright lied to you and you desperately want to believe that.

The water is starting to run cold and you're not sure how long you've been in here. You shut it off and step out of the shower, not even bothering to grab your towel as you stand in front of the mirror. You need to finally do this. To let yourself look. Rubbing at the fogged up glass, you push dripping hair out of your face to survey your bruises. Layered over the marks left on your neck by Sans's teeth are distinct, angry, purpling lines circling your throat. There's more of them around your forearms, even your legs where Flowey held you rooted to the ground. Had it been less than twelve hours since you had looked at your bruises from Sans with such fondness? The flower had taken them and turned them ugly, twisted them into something cruel. You hate him for it.

When you finally get out of the bathroom Papyrus is back. Sans is the one to take care of injecting you with the blend of medicine and healing magic. He's careful as he touches you, his eyes searching your face for some hint of your thoughts but you can't think of anything to say to him. Realizing that his familiarity with needles must have come from his time working the lab — something else he hid from you— sours whatever affection you were feeling for the tender way he's treating you.
But he's trying. And much to your frustration so is Frisk. They keep trying to force you together and eventually, after dinner they loudly suggest to Papyrus that they should go upstairs to play. But you're just not ready yet. You don't know what to say. The most you can do is sit beside him on the couch and when he rests his hand timidly on your leg you don't pull away. You cover it with your own and Sans makes a small sound like he's letting out a sigh, a little bit of tension leaving his shoulders. It's not much, but... it's something.

After a few hours the medicine seems to have done its job. Most of the pain is gone and as you get ready for bed and check yourself in the bathroom the bruises are almost completely faded. You'd be more impressed if you weren't so exhausted. You make a mental note to tell Alphys the next time you talk to her.

Frisk and Papyrus are still awake when you stop to knock on the doorframe. But right as you raise your knuckles to tap on the wood you catch yourself. Sans is sitting beside the bed with a book in his hands, feet propped up on the mattress as Frisk and Papyrus lay there with the comforter up to their chins. Some nights he reads them both a bedtime story, and apparently this is one of those nights. You linger there in the door, leaning against it as you watch them. So far none of them have noticed you. Sans is focused on the book and the other two are too focused on Sans and the story.

For a moment you can almost forget everything that happened. This is just a normal night, the sound of Sans reading aloud is familiar and comforting. Any other time you would go to sit on the edge of the bed and stroke Frisk's hair while you and Sans stole glances at each other, patiently waiting for your chance to retreat to your bedroom. It's while you're caught up in this thought that he looks up from his book to see you standing in the doorway and gives you a small, timid smile. Your mouth gives a small twitch in response but soon you're looking away.

Frisk notices your exchange, turning towards the door. "Mom you should come and listen to the story too."

You shake your head. "Actually I wanted to ask you to come sleep with me tonight, sweetie. I'd really appreciate it."

Don't look at Sans, you tell yourself.

"With you and Da—" Frisk's eyes flicker over to Sans, for just a fraction of a second. Your heart gives an uncomfortable lurch. "—Sans?"

"No, downstairs on the couch. I could really use some company," you say, ignoring the two sets of eye sockets you feel staring at you.

Frisk hesitates, looking like they want to refuse. Chewing on their lip, they watch you for a moment before nodding. "Yeah, okay Mom."

"I'll be downstairs whenever your story is done," you say, and then careful not to look at Sans or Papyrus, you walk away.

You wake up in the middle of the night, alone on the couch. Your hand gropes for the small body you know is supposed to be with you but you only feel the couch cushions. Maybe they went back upstairs to sleep with Papyrus, or went to the bathroom. As you start to sit up to look blearily around you, your hand crinkles against a sheet of paper. It's too dark to read so, with a sudden thrill of dread, you grope blindly for your phone and turn it on so you can use it as a flashlight.

Mom,
I'm going to make sure that I can't ever Reset again. I don't know what made me do it before, but I'm scared I might do it without meaning to. So I'm going to see King Asgore—

No. No no no.

—so that he can use my Soul to open the Barrier. Then you and Dad and the other monsters can go to the surface and Dad won't have to be scared any more. Please don't be sad.

I love you,

Frisk

Your shoes aren't laced and you're still tugging on your jacket as you run out the front door.
New Home

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

How could Frisk decide to do this? How could they possibly think that this was the right thing to do?

You're running through Snowdin in the middle of the night, past Grillby's dark windows and the silence of a sleeping town. All you can hear is the crunch of snow beneath your sneakers and the pounding of your heart in your ears. Adrenaline sings through your veins, lending you speed fueled by fear as you take the familiar path to the small dock where you hope the Riverperson is waiting.

To your relief the little boat is there, along with the cloaked and hooded figure that turns their head at your approach. You skid to a halt, almost slipping in the snow near the riverbank. That black hood just watches you, curious as you throw your leg over to climb inside.

"Did you take Frisk anywhere?" you ask, trying to catch your breath after your sprint through Snowdin. A little voice in the back of your mind tells you that you ought to be in better shape.

"Hotland," the Riverperson answers, tilting their head to the side. "Is that where you wish to go?"

"Yes, yes!" you say, lowering yourself to sit down. You don't even try to hide the frustration in your voice. "Why didn't you stop them! They shouldn't be going anywhere alone in the middle of the night!"

"It's not my place to question," they answer placidly. Then as they turn away from you, the boat seems to rise up out of the water. "But if you are in a hurry, I can do my best to accommodate you."

You let out a yelp as the boat darts forward, almost knocking you off your seat as you grab at the wooden board to steady yourself. Cold wind tears through your hair and, once you're sure you're not going to go tumbling, you wrap your arms around yourself and hunch forward to try and stay warm. Looking up at the Riverperson's back, you clear your throat. "How long ago did you take them to Hotland?" you ask, trying not to sound too demanding. You don't do a very good job of it.

"About twenty minutes ago, I'd say."

Shit. "Do you know the quickest way to get to the King from Hotland?" You're starting to tremble, from the cold or adrenaline (or both) you're not sure. You bounce your heel, then realize you still haven't tied your shoes. You lean over to do so.

"There's an elevator by the Royal Scientist's lab, oh wait you know Doctor Alphys don't you? Anyway, you take that elevator up to the MTT Resort—" You resist the urge to tell them you know this part. "—and then if you pass through and head to the Core, there's another elevator that leads right to the castle! It's very convenient, I was just telling Frisk about it. You see the King just loves visitors..."

Twenty minutes behind, how are you going to catch up to them in time? Reaching into your pocket you pull out your phone and flick it on. Opening your address book, you call the first person on your list that might pick up. Alphys's phone rings a few times but then goes to voicemail. Gritting your teeth you hang up and try Undyne, wondering if she might be at the lab with her. You get the same result.
Your hands are shaking and your chest is tight, adrenaline making the muscles in your legs spasm. You need to be moving, to be doing something. You flick through your phone again, desperate. As you scroll up from Undyne's name you come across a number that you haven't looked at in months, though you think Frisk has tried calling her a few times and left her messages.

Toriel.

You dial the number and raise your phone to your ear, cupping your hand over the mic to protect it from the wind. It rings, and rings, until finally, it goes to voicemail. You listen to Toriel's polite message until it clicks over to let you record. You don't know what you're doing. You're scared and panicked and... "Toriel," you say, your voice thick as you squeeze your eyes shut to fight back tears. "Toriel, I... God I could really use a mother right now. Frisk ran away, they're headed for Asgore. They mean to give him their Soul to break the Barrier and... I'm terrified. I'm trying to follow them now but I'm afraid I'm not gonna make it in time."

You swallow past the lump in your throat, hunching forward over your knees as your shoulders start to shake. "He's who you were trying to protect us from, isn't he? We never should have left..." A small sob escapes you, and you take in a shuddering breath as you press the sleeve of your jacket across your eyes. "I should have asked Sans for help. I shouldn't have left by myself. I'm... I'm gonna call him."

Hanging up, you pull your phone away from your ear and lift your head, fumbling a little as you page over for the shortcut you have for Sans on your home screen. It's got a tiny thumbnail picture of him, making this silly winking grin at you. He took the picture himself, ages ago, just for you to use on your phone. He'd made you do something similar for him, too. Just thinking about it makes your heart ache. As you press the icon with your thumb your screen goes dark, trying to bring up the call display. It hangs there for a second, and then you hear a loud beep you recognize as the battery warning. Your phone goes dark.

"No!" you snap at it, pressing the power button. A red image of an empty battery flickers to life for a few seconds before vanishing. It's dead.

You fight the urge to fling the thing into the river, instead shoving it back into your pocket.

("You're not old enough to care for Frisk properly anyway. It's for the best, if they think I'm their mother. You're just not cut out for this.") She was right. You're just not good enough. If you were good enough then Frisk wouldn't be out there about to sacrifice themselves like this. They'd trust you to make things right, to take care of them. Instead they'd left you behind, just like they had in all those other aborted timelines. Maybe it's fate. Maybe Frisk is always meant to leave you.

No. You're not going to let that happen. You're going to find them and bring them home before they have the chance. This time you're going to keep them safe, no matter what.

You're determined.

Sans's eye flares bright as he jolts awake and something in the room drops to the floor with a muffled bang. He thinks it might have been the lamp (he's broken it in his sleep more times than he can count, through the timelines). But he hasn't had a nightmare bad enough to cause a flareup like that since... since you started sleeping in the same bed with him. With a shaky breath Sans gropes blindly at your side of the bed, reaching for you.

"babe, are you okay?" he mumbles, afraid that he must have scared you. There's a moment where he wonders how you're not already awake, and then his hand finds the empty space beside him.
Jjerking upright, his bones hum with fear until his fingers close around something familiar. One of your shirts. Then he remembers. He brought one of your shirts to bed with him just in case of this exact situation; the disorienting feeling of waking up alone. Sans draws in a steadying breath, balling up the shirt in his fist as he hunches forward and rests his head in his free hand. Shit.

He's so used to you being here with him, helping him settle back down from the bad nightmares. Even after the ones that didn't wake you, he took solace in you just sleeping beside him. Jittery and anxious, he pushes himself out of bed, suddenly desperate to at least look at you just to know you're still here.

Only, when he looks down into the living room, you're not.

The couch is empty.

Did you leave? Had you finally had enough? He thought that things would be okay. You'd held his hand and, even though they were weak, you'd returned a few of his smiles. You still hadn't talked to him but he didn't want to force you into a conversation you weren't ready for. But this? He hadn't expected this.

You're gone. He's lost you.

He should have fought harder. Gritting his teeth, Sans goes back into his room to grab his phone and his jacket. Maybe you were just down at the inn. You couldn't have gone far in the middle of the night. He tries to call you but it goes right to voicemail. The phone gets shoved in his pocket as he hurries down the stairs.

As he crosses the living room, he hears the crinkle of paper under his foot. The sound makes him stop and, slowly, he bends over to scoop up the note.

That's when Sans realizes what Frisk meant when they said they'd make sure things never Reset. And now he knows where you must have gone. He doesn't bother with the front door, and starts on the first of many teleports to get him across the Underground.

Frisk.

Asgore's house is almost an exact replica of Toriel's. Frisk finds the first key to the basement in the kitchen, beside a note written in tidy block letters. The second is down the hall, on a table between two of the bedroom doors. They ignore it for now, going into the first bedroom.

Frisk please, listen to me.

There's two twin beds, children's drawings on the walls, and a bin of old, dusty toys. Frisk feels Chara flinch in the back of their mind, but they're still anxiously flitting around just beneath the surface, watching. They cross the room, looking down at the faded bedspread, the stale smell of disuse filling their nose. There's a scuffed, golden heart-shaped locket sitting in front of the pillow. Frisk reaches out to pick it up, running the thick chain through their fingers.

Leave that alone and listen to me!

They slip the necklace over their head and then tuck it under their sweater. The metal is cold against their skin. With a sudden feeling of deja vu, Frisk reaches carefully under the pillow and isn't surprised to feel the handle of a knife under their fingers. Pulling it out, they glance over the dull and scratched blade, but decide to leave it behind.
You don't have to do this. What about the people who care about you? Are you really okay with disappointing them like this?

Frisk hesitates as they pick up the second key from the hall, weighing the heavy metal in their hand.

I thought you said that no one really cared about me? That I can't trust anybody?

That's not... Getting yourself killed isn't the answer, you idiot!

It's the only way to break the Barrier. Asgore needs one more Soul and he can have mine. That way I can't ever Reset again either.

The basement, too, is almost identical to Toriel's. It doesn't take them long to make their way through. Soon, they find themselves in a beautiful golden hallway, lit by ornate stained glass windows. Huge pillars flank either side, rising up far overhead to an arched ceiling. Hesitating at the entrance, Frisk takes a moment to let another swell of deja vu pass before continuing to the other end. At the halfway point their skin prickles with goosebumps, but they make it through unimpeded.

If you keep doing this no one is going to come help you! Nobody will come!

Frisk is close now. They're certain of it. They're deep within the castle now, and through a massive door they spot a grassy room filled with dappled light and golden flowers. Standing in the center with his back to them, is Asgore. Curving horns sweep back over his head, adding at least an extra foot to his already towering presence. For a moment, Frisk feels a little waver of doubt.

Frisk please! He doesn't want to hurt you, but he will if you let him! Just go back home!

No. They're determined to see this through. Frisk steps into the throne room, feet shifting from stone to grass with a soft rustling sound. Asgore perks up, raising his head and straightening to even greater heights.

"Oh? Is someone there? Just a moment, I have almost finished watering these flowers. Even though it is late, I find it relaxing," he says in a low, soothing voice. He brings his arm through an arcing path and Frisk can hear the sound of water hitting petals and leaves. Then, he bends down to set down the watering can. "Here we are!"

The huge monster turns, a bright smile on his white-furred face. "Howdy! How can I..." His voice fades, large eyes going wide with shock. He takes a step backwards, knocking over the watering can with one paw-like foot. "Oh."

Frisk bites the inside of their lip, unsure of what to say. They expected Asgore to be... they're not sure. Not happy but... Not so stricken. Chara writhes in the back of their head, letting out a pained cry.

Asgore looks away for a moment, then back again, his expression settling into something sad. "I so badly want to say, 'Would you like a cup of tea?' But..."

"I'm not here to fight," Frisk says, taking a step forward and planting their hand on their chest. "I want you to take my Soul, so that you can break the Barrier!"

The king can only stare, hooking his fingers in the clasp of his cloak. "Child, are you... you cannot be..." Asgore shakes his head, sighing. "I suppose that makes things simple, then. If you... are
Frisk, don't do this!

"I am," Frisk says. They take a few more steps into the throne room, careful not to crush any of the golden flowers. "I just want everyone to be happy, on the surface. I want to help."

He gives Frisk a sad, kind smile. "You are very brave, for one so small." Asgore frees his left hand from beneath his cloak, holding it out. A huge, red trident materializes in his hand, reminding Frisk, briefly, of Undyne. "I wish... Well, I am afraid that my own wishes are irrelevant. I just want to say that... I am sorry."

The king takes a careful step forward, raising his trident in one hand as he looks down at Frisk with what can only be described as grief. Then, as he's poised to strike—

"Stop!"

You shove your way past Frisk, thrusting yourself bodily between your child and Asgore's trident. The king stares down at you, frozen, as Frisk feels rooted to the floor. How—?

She came.

Chapter End Notes

Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters (including the Reader/Hope) and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
Losing Hope

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In this moment, staring up at Asgore with your arms flung out to the sides to protect Frisk, you don't feel any fear. Fierce love swells inside of you, filling you up and making you more than you were before. An absolute certainty of what you're doing gives you courage. You'll never let anyone hurt Frisk, so long as you're alive to stop it.

There's a pause where you and Asgore just regard each other, and then he lowers his weapon back down to his side. But it remains there in his hand. You know that this isn't over.

Your chest is heaving as you fight to catch your breath, legs aching and heart hammering in your ears. "Take mine!" you yell at him, buoyed by adrenaline. You press your hand to your chest, fingers splayed over the front of your jacket. "If you need a Soul, then take mine. You know what it's like to lose a child. Please don't make me go through that too, take my Soul instead."

The king's eyes widen, paling under his white fur. He glances down to your side, where you can feel Frisk's fingers grasping at your clothes.

"Mom, no! I'm doing this for you! I just want you and Dad to be happy," they protest, giving you a sharp tug.

"This would never make me happy! Frisk, I'm your mother, I'm the one that's supposed to take care of you not the other way around," you snap, turning enough to look down at them. Your vision blurs, and you realize that your eyes are swimming with tears.

When you look back to Asgore, he's watching you with sorrow etched into the lines of his face. "I know the wish of wanting to take your child's place so that they might live. If that is what you want, then I will respect your choice."

"Mom!" Frisk says, and though it hurts you to do so, you refuse to look at them. They come around to your front and ball their fists in your jacket, shaking you.

"What I want is for you to stop this," you murmur, and slowly you start to feel the icy trickle of fear run down your spine. Your hands are trembling as you rest them on Frisk's shoulders. They release your jacket and instead fling their arms around your middle, repeating 'no' over and over into your stomach.

"I cannot let you go. My people have been waiting for this, and now it is out of my hands," Asgore says softly, hanging his head as his huge fingers tighten around the shaft of the trident. "My course is set."

You nod, biting your lip as you blink back tears. "Are you going to hurt people, when you get to the surface?"

"No, I never wanted..." Asgore's face falls. You didn't realize he could look any sadder, but he does. "No, that is not true. When the pain was fresh and the dust and blood of my children was still clinging to my fur I wanted vengeance. I wanted to pay back that loss a hundred times over. The humans had taken so much from us. We had lost hope. But now... I just want to prevent my people from plunging further into despair. I want them to see the sun that only a few of us remember."
You think about Sans. Oh God, he never wanted to lose you in order to see the surface, but if it means saving Frisk you'll do anything. You hope he understands.

"It's cruel, what humans have done to your people," you say.

Asgore can only nod.

You bring your hand back up to your chest, and suddenly doubt creeps into the corners of your mind. You remember how Undyne and Mettaton both reacted when they first saw your Soul. "I don't..." Your words catch in your throat. You have to swallow before you can continue. "I don't know if my Soul is good enough. I don't know if it'll be strong enough for what you need."

"What do you mean, little one?" Asgore asks, his brow furrowing.

"It's cracked. Down the center. Please, it's yours if you can use it," you say. You swipe bitterly at the tears that spill down your cheeks.

"A damaged Soul does not equal a weak one," he says, his frown smoothing away into a small, comforting smile. At another time, you might feel more reassured. You shouldn't be happy that this means he can still kill you. "You are so strong, to be here. Both of you. I only wish that things did not need to end this way."

"Then please, do this while I'm still strong. I don't..." You bite back a sob, wrapping your arms around Frisk and hugging them to you. "Waiting isn't making this any easier."

"I understand," he says solemnly, bowing his head.

"Frisk..." you murmur, pressing a kiss to the top of their head. "I love you. And you have so many people who love you and will take care of you."

"Mom, please," Frisk begs, tears streaming down their face as they squeeze you as tight as they can.

You let them go, reaching around yourself to pry away their fingers as they plead with you to stop. Then, taking hold of their shoulders, you push them away with a stern look. "Be good, Frisk. Promise me."

Frisk wipes at their face with their sleeves, shaking their head. "I won't! Not if you're not here!"

"Frisk," you say gently. "Please."

"It's supposed to be me!" Frisk shouts, glaring at you through their tears.

"Never. I'll never let it be you. I love you." You have to stay strong. You have to do this, for them.

They bury their face in their hands. "I love you too," they choke out, shuddering. "I promise."

You look at Asgore, and he's watching the two of you with tears in his eyes. With a feeling of detached numbness, you almost wish you could comfort him, the way he comforted you. You thought he would be more frightening in person. "Please, do it before I lose my courage," you say, dropping your hands to your sides.

"Human..." he says, grief marring the kindness in his eyes. "It was nice to meet you. Goodbye."

You don't feel the faint tug of your Soul in your chest until the last second. As the crimson trident pulls back, the world seems to narrow down to those three points, coming towards you shockingly
fast and impossibly slow at the same time.

It hurts, more than you thought it would. The pain is sharp and sudden, your heart lurches and shudders. You cough, and you taste blood in your mouth. Your fingers curl around the shaft of the trident, and you feel a large hand as your palm slides down the smooth, humming surface.

"hope!"

Sans?

"hope, no!" His voice is a ragged cry, desperate and pained.

The trident pulls back and out of you, and you feel like you're drowning. You can't breathe, and your heart gives a weak flutter in your chest. Knees buckling, you feel a pair of arms wrap around you and catch you before you fall. Darkness creeps into the corners of your vision and you're faintly aware of being lowered to the ground.

"no, babe, no," Sans begs, and you can barely make him out above you.

You open your mouth to speak but you can't breathe. *I'm sorry.*

Darkness takes you.

Sans watches the light leave your eyes. Shaking, he pushes your hair away from your face and cups your cheek. You can't be... no you can't. "hope, don't do this to me!" he begs, dragging his hand down the side of your face to fumble at your throat.

He tries to find your pulse, the way you showed him when Frisk was sick. If he can find your heartbeat then maybe there's still time. Maybe he can take you to Alphys and... He can't find it. Blood is soaking through your clothes and he can feel the dampness under his fingers as he presses against your chest.

A rich red glow bathes over you and for a moment Sans thinks it's more blood but no, it's your Soul. It's hovering there, cracked above your body. Before Sans can even react, a large, white hand reaches out to cup it and pull it away. Asgore looks down at Sans, cradling your Soul close to his chest and stepping away. He's wracked with sorrow, and all Sans can do is stare.

Anger swells up inside of him, bright and furious at the sight of your Soul in Asgore's hands. His magic swirls, electric in his left socket as it licks up the side of his skull. "give her soul to me," Sans says, his hands tightening on your body. "you have no right to it, she swore it to me!"

Asgore shakes his head, cupping the cracked heart a little tighter in his hand. "Sans, I cannot do that. With this Soul we can finally go free, you know this."

He doesn't care. None of that matters. How can it matter if you're gone? "don't make me fight you, asgore. give her back to me," Sans says, his voice deepening as his eyes narrow. Tears spill down his cheekbones unchecked, from anger and grief in equal measure. The magic in the air starts to thicken, prickling over his bones.

"You would make her sacrifice mean nothing, if you do this," the king says, but the sadness in his voice just makes Sans angrier.

*I said, give Hope back to me..."*
Sans raises his left hand, stained red and glowing brightly with blue magic. He feels them begin to coalesce behind him, the massive skulls pulled from the space between. His blasters, the last resort he's only ever used against Frisk at their worst. He's desperate. Asgore finally seems to realize just how desperate as his eyes widen in shock at the sight of them.

Humming fills the air as the blasters' mouths open wide, light gathering between huge, curving fangs.

"Sans, please," Asgore tries again, gritting his teeth and widening his stance, raising his free hand as a ring of floating fire forms a halo around him. "Know that I do not wish to do this. We are so close."

It doesn't matter. He just knows that he needs your Soul, he needs it because it's all that's left of you. He'll take it inside himself, keep you with him in the only way that he can. What do the consequences matter?

He can't lose you now. Not after everything.

"I'll make this right."

Sans's head jerks to the side at the sound of Frisk's voice, forgetting until now that the kid has been here the whole time. Their eyes meet, and through their tears they look at each other, and sudden realization shocks Sans to his very core.

"wait!"

Sans wakes up in his bed back in Snowdin.

Chapter End Notes

If you're curious as to the addition of Hope's name, please see this post on Tumblr for more information:

http://onadacora.tumblr.com/post/138060875205/about-hope
Memories

Frisk stares, their face blank, as Sans cradles your body in his arms and begs you not to leave him. Tears roll down their cheeks but they feel numb, sleeve-covered hands pressed over their mouth. This wasn't supposed to happen. You weren't supposed to be here.

**Frisk. Listen.**

They twitch a little at the sudden intrusion in their mind, somehow forgetting Chara's presence. They're close, closer to the surface of their consciousness than they've ever been before. It's almost as if they can feel their breath tickling their ear. Goosebumps raise on the back of their neck.

**I can help you, if you let me.**

Sans is yelling at Asgore. Frisk takes a step backwards as Chara flinches, reacting to the crackle of magic permeating the air.

*No. Whenever you want to help you just want to hurt people.*

Frisk can feel a child's hand on their own, small fingers ghosting across their skin. They jerk their hand away but when they look down there's nothing there.

**Let me help. I want to help her. I know that you want to bring her back. I can feel you reaching back, but you don't have to do it that way. I know something better. But you have to trust me.**

*I don't trust you. You're not a nice person, Chara.*

There's a beat of silence within their mind as a shudder of fear runs through Frisk and the person in their mind. Sans is calling forth his blasters, and Frisk feels a wave of deja vu. Something from the past timelines? Something they ought to remember?

Then, that hand is at theirs again, fingers wrapping around their palm with a gentle pressure.

**You don't have to be a nice person to do the right thing. I'm going to help you, idiot, whether you like it or not.**

Chara *pushes* inside of their mind, and then the floodgates rush open.

"I'll make this right," Chara says with Frisk's voice.

Then everything ends.

Frisk is standing at the beginning of that golden hallway, and Chara feels quiet and distant in the back of their mind. They reach up to feel their cheeks and find them dry. They grope around their neck to feel the thick chain of the golden locket resting against their chest.

They *Loaded a Save*. They know exactly what Chara did, and they know *how* they did it. Echoes of memories are bouncing inside Frisk's skull and, wincing, they press a hand to their forehead. For a moment it's too much, too much all at once but it settles into the background. They'll have time to sift through everything later.
You did this. You kept all my memories from me.

Chara stays silent, but the waver of guilt is enough to know that they're right. They're hiding in the back of their mind, and Frisk can almost see a child in green and yellow curled into a ball, if they close their eyes and focus hard enough.

Why?

Nothing. Just silence and guilt. They stay there for a few minutes, with Frisk regarding Chara, waiting for them to speak. Eventually, they do.

It's fine if you hate me. It's probably for the best if you do, after everything I've done to you.


Why?

Why did I do it? Or why is it fine if you hate me?

Both.

Chara doesn't answer. They press their face into their knees and cover the back of their head with their hands. Their image starts to wash out inside Frisk's mind, growing fuzzier until it hurts to try and focus on them.

Frisk opens their eyes, taking in a deep breath to calm their nerves. Then, lifting their head, they look down the hall through shafts of warm, dappled light.

Sans is standing there with his hands in his pockets, staring. Sweat is dotting the side of his skull and the pinpricks of light in his eye sockets are so dim they're hardly there at all. His mouth clenches into a tight grimace. His cheekbones are wet and he's trembling.

"what did you do, kid?" Sans asks, squaring his stance as Frisk meets his eyes. His voice is rough, either from tears or anger they're not sure. Maybe both.

"I Loaded a Save. I undid what happened, without Resetting," Frisk says. Their own voice somehow rings a little hollow, like they're reciting lines they've memorized somewhere.

"and how did you just so happen to know how to do that all of a sudden? i thought you didn't remember what you've been doing?" Sans is stiff as he watches them, tensing even more as Frisk takes a few careful steps towards the skeleton.

"I..." Frisk looks down at their hands, tugging them out of their sleeves. They press their knuckles against their lips as they think of what to say, and something about the gesture seems to make Sans relax a little. "I remember now." They look up to the towering pillars and the stained glass. "This hall... you've killed me here before, haven't you?"

Sans flinches, eyes narrowing before he gives a slow blink. Then, he nods. "yeah, kiddo."

"How many times?" Frisk frowns, thumbing through the memories in their head. They can remember, but it feels distant and... separate. Like remembering a movie they watched, or a book. It's someone else's story that they know by heart. "It all sort of... mixes together in my head."

"it's happened a lot more than i'd like to think about," Sans mutters, sighing and looking down at
the tiles underfoot. He rubs the surface with the toe of his slipper, and Frisk can't help but wonder what he's seeing there. What part of their past is he remembering?

Probably nothing good.

"...It wasn't me. It was... someone else. They've been here in my mind this whole time, and sometimes..." Frisk winces, shaking their head and shoving the memories back.

Sans is watching them again, something sad etched into the lines of his face. "i sort of had a feeling. but i'm still sorry."

"Don't be. You stopped them from getting what they wanted." Frisk gives them a bright smile, remembering happier times. Eating at Grillby's, timelines' worth of bad jokes. A tower of hotdogs twenty-nine high because thirty was just too much. "Dad... you helped me here too, didn't you? You've always been there, watching out for me. No matter what."

"yeah, i have." Sans seems to come back to himself a little, the lights in his eyes brightening and he takes a few steps to close the distance between the two of them. He rests a hand on Frisk's shoulder, the barest hint of a smile curving the corners of his mouth. "hey. how about we find your mom and we go home?"

Frisk's smile wavers, suddenly anxious. They glance at the doorway behind them. "I don't want to tell Mom about the bad times. She won't understand why you... why you had to do what you did."

He squeezes their shoulder, but it feels more like an involuntary spasm of his hand. "i think that's probably for the best."

You're in Asgore's house, running down the steps to the basement when there's a sudden lurch in your chest and it feels like you can't breathe. Stumbling but catching yourself on the small landing between the two flights of steps, you lean against the wall and suck in a deep breath. Your fingers press against your sternum, the echo of a sharp pain slowly beginning to fade. What was that? A strange sensation of deja vu overwhelms you for a moment and it feels like something's wrong.

But the more you focus on the feeling the further and further away it gets until you're not sure why you've stopped running. The ache in your chest is gone, your lungs are clear as you catch your breath. That was strange but... you have to keep going. You don't have time to stop.

You feel that odd, familiar feeling again as you make your way to the basement but you think it's just because the house is identical to Toriel's. Distantly, you wonder at the connection there but it's the last thing you have time to worry about.

There's a curving path on the exterior of the castle before you find yourself at another doorway, but you don't stop to wonder where it might lead. **Forward** is the only direction you can see. Forward to Frisk. You dart inside and you're greeted by two rows of huge pillars like the ones you saw back in the Ruins. The golden light pouring down over the ornate tiles reminds you of the bed of flowers you landed in. But the most important thing about the hall, the thing that makes your heart leap into your throat even as cry of joy breaks loose past your lips is the pair standing in the very middle.

Sans is standing in Frisk's way, his hand on their shoulder as they talk. Your outburst makes Frisk turn and as the two of them look at you both of their faces break out into huge smiles that bring tears to your eyes. You don't stop running, not until you wrap Frisk up in a huge hug clutching them tight to your chest.
"Mom!" Frisk exclaims, and though you expect them to be upset with you they sound so happy.

Another set of arms wrap around the both of you and you release your grip on Frisk with one hand so that you can hug Sans too, crying as you're enveloped in the two people who mean the most of you. In this moment the lies don't matter. None of it matters because you're just so glad that Frisk is okay and Sans is here. "You found them," you say, tucking your head down into his shoulder as one of his hands cradles your head. "I can't believe it. Thank you. Sans, thank you."

He's shaking, and you're pulled out of your all-encompassing relief at the sound of Sans letting out a choked sob into your shoulder. His grip on you is so tight it's almost painful, and something about this makes that feeling of being unable to breathe come back again. "hope, why didn't you ask me for help?"

"I tried to call you but my phone died," you say. But that can't be the reason he's upset. There's something more. Something you don't understand. "Sans, what's going on? How did you know we were gone? Did... Did something strange happen? I feel... odd."

You feel Sans draw in a deep breath, shaking his head into the crook of your neck.

"Dad," Frisk murmurs, and from within the tight knot of your bodies they manage to reach his arm and take hold of his jacket. "Dad you're crushing us."

The tight hold he has on you goes slack, and he takes hold of your face in both his hands. He stares up at you, disbelief and happiness warring for control as the lights scan over your features before returning to your eyes. With one arm still tight around Frisk—you're afraid to let them go—you free hand cups his jaw. He leans into your touch, letting out a shaky sigh.

"you... i..." Sans shakes his head, wiping his face on his sleeve without letting you go. "shit, just... gimme a second. i'm just so happy you're ok."

You feel a lurch in the pit of your stomach. "Am I not supposed to be?" You try to look at Frisk but you can't, not with the way Sans has you between his hands. "Hun did something happen?"

"yeah. yeah, something happened. babe..." He meets your eyes again, looking at you with an expression so solemn you're almost wishing you didn't ask. "hope. you... asgore killed you."

Your chest hurts. "No, I haven't even seen him yet," you protest, hand fisting in the shoulder of Frisk's sweater.

"frisk did something, went back a little bit instead of all the way," Sans says, and the desperate sound in his voice scares you. "you protected them. made sure that asgore took your soul instead of theirs."

You start to tremble, and you know that he's not lying. Why would he lie about this? Frisk's grip tightens on you, burying their face into your stomach. It's familiar. Too familiar but because you feel like you should be remembering something.

"But you're okay now," Frisk mumbles. "I wanna go home."

Staring at Sans, he slowly lets you go, his hands brushing against your skin like you're something fragile. You don't know how to feel about this. Everything about this day has been so much. Too much. He takes hold of your hand and you grip it tight like a lifeline.

"are you okay, babe? i know it must be a lot to take in," he says.
"You just told me I died, Sans. I don't know how I'm supposed to be," you mutter, shaking your head.

"Is someone there?"

The new voice is deep and rich, filling the hall and making you jump. Sans whirls around, still clutching your hand as Asgore ducks through the doorway and freezes mid-step at the sight of you. There's a beat of silence as you all regard each other. You wonder for a moment why Sans doesn't teleport you away but you realize that even if you did it would be too late. Asgore knows Sans. He'd know where to find you.

"shit," Sans breathes, and you can't help but silently agree.

"Oh," Asgore says, shifting on his feet as the initial shock wears away. "This is... unexpected."
Asgore

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Asgore killed you.

Sans's hand spasms and clutches yours tighter as he puts himself bodily between you and the king. Frisk tenses against you, refusing to let you go. You realize that both of these people that you love, and who love you, watched you die. You can feel the hairs on your arms stand on end as magic prickles across your skin. Sans's entire body has gone rigid.

Asgore's eyes flick from you, to Frisk, and then back again, then finally settling on Sans. His expression slowly shifts from shock to something apologetic, tucking his chin against his chest and hunching his shoulders. "Good evening, Sans," he says, his friendly tone ringing false in your ears.

"asgore," Sans answers, reaching behind him to pass your hand from left to right. He shifts just a little, to cover you better. It would have been easier to just let go and take hold of you again, but... it's as though he isn't willing to break that contact, not even for a moment. "i think this might count as 'good morning' if you wanna get picky."

"Hmm, I suppose you are right," he says, the corners of his mouth twitching but not quite managing a smile.

The two of them stare at each other for a moment, tension thick in the air. You have to fight the urge to squirm, it's almost unbearable.

"i guess i did promise that we'd come visit you once the kid was feeling better." The forced levity in his voice makes you cringe. Asgore looks at you and you duck down a little without thinking. Even the king's partial attempt at a smile is gone now.

"I see. So this is the mother and child that you spoke of?"

All of this careful avoiding is about to drive you mad. Your fingers tighten on Sans's hand and he squeezes back. You're not sure if it's meant to be reassuring, but if it is it's not doing the job. Your chest feels tight and there's a part of you that feels sad, though you're not sure why. If Asgore really wanted to kill you, wouldn't he be acting different?

"yeah. and i gotta tell you, if you think you're laying a hand on either one of them, lemme give you some advice." The magic in the air thickens, and even from behind him you think you catch the glow of blue. "don't."

Asgore raises his head, his shoulders shifting back and suddenly the king seems bigger. Your eyes follow the curve of his horns and a little, panicked voice in your head tells you you shouldn't be here in this place. But even as the king's arms tense at his sides, there's still that deep sadness in his eyes. Eyes that are older than his face. You're reminded of just how old he really is, and you feel dwarfed by his presence. In size and age you're just a child in comparison. Tiny and... insignificant. What are you to him against the weight of his people? Of their freedom?

Is this why you were able to offer your Soul up to him before? Why you didn't try to fight if it meant Frisk was safe?

"Sans, this is bigger than you or myself alone. We only need one more Soul and then everyone can
"go free." He raises a hand and gestures towards you. "There are two here."

"yeah, two people. If I wanted to, I could take them away from here before you could even think about trying to stop us, but I thought that you might take a second to listen. Because I don't wanna have to try and hide them from you. It's not the ideal future I have for my family."

Asgore hesitates, his eyes widening just enough for you to notice. "...Family," he says, and it's not a question. It's a fact.

For the first time you start to feel a little bit of hope that maybe, just maybe this might turn out okay. Sans shifts a little on his feet and you think he feels it too.

"yeah, asgore," Sans says. "family."

There's a beat of silence and then you hear the soft hiss of feet against tile. A sharp intake of breath comes from behind you and before you can even turn to look a fireball shoots over your head to smack Asgore square in the chest. The king stumbles back, taken by surprise as Toriel storms past the three of you. You can only stare, dumbfounded as she fixes him with a withering glare.

"Dreemurr, you miserable creature," she snaps at him, raising her hands as fire fills the space above her palms. Glancing over her shoulder, she takes the three of you in. "Do not be afraid, my children. I realized that I could not allow you to do this alone any longer, so I am here."

"Toriel, you... you got my message," you blurt out, leaning out from behind Sans to get a better look at her.

She gives you a quick, kind smile, nodding. "Yes, my child. I simply could not allow any further loss of life, is that not what I have been trying to prevent all along?" Toriel turns back to Asgore, meeting his gaze as he stares at her with something akin to awe. Now that you look at the two of them together, you realize how similar they look. "This includes Asgore, as terrible as he might be. He deserves mercy, too."

The magic in the air around Sans starts to ebb. He rubs his thumb across your hand, a small comforting gesture. "I was only going to do what I had to," Sans mutters. "Because, well, aren't you the lady who wanted them to be safe?"

The flames flicker and die in Toriel's hands and she shifts her stance enough to give Sans a proper look. Her large eyes are wide in surprise. "Oh my, your voice! You are my friend from the door, are you not?"

Sans doesn't get a chance to answer. Asgore takes a step close to her and she catches his movement out of the corner of her eye, drawing her attention back to him. He's smiling. "Tori. You came back!"

"Do not 'Tori' me, Dreemurr! You pathetic whelp," she snaps with a viciousness so unlike her it's jarring.

"HEY! NOBODY FIGHT ANYONE!"

You whirl around at the sound of Papyrus's voice filling the hall and can't believe your eyes. Papyrus and Undyne are there, followed shortly after by a very out of breath Alphys.

"IF ANYONE FIGHTS ANYONE... THEN I'LL BE FORCED TO ASK UNDYNE FOR HELP!" Papyrus finishes, gesturing dramatically as he strides up to stand beside his brother.
"Papyrus, you know you're tough enough not to need my help!" Undyne takes up the spot on Sans's other side, glancing over her shoulder back at you. She gives you a toothy smile. "Sorry Alphys and I missed your calls, but we're here now!"

"Y-yeah! Papyrus came to get us and we all came together," Alphys says, standing beside you and giving you a wobbly smile.

Toriel looks delighted at their arrival, giving them all a friendly smile. "Oh goodness, my children are these all your friends? Hello, I am Toriel."

"PSST. SANS. DID THE KING SHAVE? AND... CLONE HIMSELF?" Papyrus asks in a stage-whisper, looking at his brother.

The sudden and absurd release of tension has you and Sans laughing, and even Frisk is relaxing their grip on you. "nah bro," Sans says, giving Papyrus a wide grin. "i'm pretty sure that's the queen."

Undyne lets out a startled noise. "Wait, Asgore, this is your EX?" she blurts out, looking from one furred monster to the other. "Jeez. That's rough, buddy."

Asgore regards all of you with a look of bewilderment. You can only imagine how confused he must be. With the sudden return of his wife (which, by the way, you're still trying to take in) and the realization that his own captain of the Royal Guard is helping defend you from him, you can only imagine what he must be feeling. But you get the impression that he's relieved. He looks... happier than he ought to at being so opposed.

"It... would appear that I will not be gaining the final Soul we need to break the Barrier today," he says slowly, and you swear he's trying not to smile.

Toriel's face twists back into a disgusted grimace, shooting him a look that could curdle milk. "If you truly wished to free our kind, you could have gone through the Barrier after you had one Soul, taken six Souls from the humans, then come back and freed everyone peacefully. But instead you made everyone live in despair, because you would rather wait here, meekly hoping another human never comes."

Asgore's face falls, chastised. "Tori... You are right. I am a miserable creature."

"Wait a second," you say, and suddenly everyone's eyes are on you. Even Frisk is pulling away, taking hold of your hand. You swallow past a nervous lump in your throat. "Um, why can't you do that to get the last Soul?"

"...what do you mean, babe?" Sans asks, turning to look at you better. "you don't want asgore to just go kill someone, do you?"

"What? No, I mean..." you give Sans a frustrated look. "Humans die all the time. You'd probably have your choice of Souls just by going to the hospital."

The monsters all stare at you. Just as you're starting to think that maybe you said something wrong that you just don't understand, Sans's mouth twitches into a smile. "i dunno about the rest of you, but... that sounds worth a shot to me."

"Wait, you mean that the humans might just GIVE us a Soul?" Undyne blurts out.

Alphys clears her throat. "I-it would be worth a try!"
"WOWIE! YOU MEAN WE MIGHT ACTUALLY GET TO THE SURFACE?"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," Asgore says, and he's smiling again. "But, who would go to get the last Soul?"

Sans is standing there looking at the six Souls, sweat dotting the side of his skull. Hands shoved deep in his pockets, he glances over at you and then back at the glass cylinders, then up at the hazy, pulsing surface of the Barrier. It's smooth and oily, like the surface of a bubble blocking a tunnel through the side of the mountain. You can feel the hum of magic fill the space here, and you wonder if it's even stronger to the others. They all look uncomfortable, though from the magic or what's about to happen, you're not sure.

"does it really matter which one i pick?" Sans asks, glancing over at Asgore. 

Asgore shakes his head. "The colors reflect the... people they once were. But any of them will get you through the Barrier."

"Children," Toriel whispers, and her expression is solemn. She's been staring at the softly glowing Souls since Asgore raised them from where they were stored beneath the ground. "They were just children."

People spoke of kids going missing on Mt. Ebott. Now you realize the full scope of where they went. Why no one ever saw them again. They're right here, waiting. You feel a chill run down your spine and you can't help but squeeze Frisk's hand tighter in your own. Frisk had almost been the seventh. For a little while, before they turned back time, you were the seventh.

Papyrus leans in close to Undyne. "WHAT DOES THE QUEEN MEAN?"

Undyne looks away, shaking her head. You wonder if she's thinking about the implications of what she almost did to you and Frisk. The tiny flick of her eye up to yours makes you think she is.

"T-there was that theory that the colors have to do with different, uh, attributes. Like p-patience, and justice, or um kindness," Alphys adds in a small voice.

"which one's justice, do you think?" Sans asks.

"The yellow one, m-maybe," she whispers.

"sounds good to me."

"Sans," you say, and he looks up at you. The lights in his eyes are small. He's nervous. "...Are you sure this is a good idea. I don't... Why you?"

He gives you what you guess is meant to be a reassuring smile. "i know it's heart to think about, but i'm the skeleton for the job. asgore'd be too obvious. if we only wanna send a soul monster out there, you know my shortcuts'll come in handy."

"Is this really the time to be making puns?" you ask, frowning.

"no time like the present. and what can i say, it's just a gift of mine." He's smiling wider now, watching you to see if you respond.

Your mouth twitches involuntarily but you let out a frustrated sigh. Shaking your head, you fix him with a worried look. "Sans I don't like this."
Fishing his hand out of his pocket, he reaches out and takes your hand. "i'll be careful. i'm not gonna let anything happen to me, not after what i just went through. you're never gonna know what that feels like."

You let him tug you down so that he can nuzzle the side of your face. Kissing his cheekbone, you squeeze his fingers tight between yours. "Frisk could just... go back, right? If something goes wrong?" you murmur, low enough that the others can't hear.

"i don't like counting on those loads. i still don't understand how that shit works, to be honest." Sans pulls away, looking at Frisk. "don't do any loading unless you have to, okay kiddo? emergencies only."

Frisk bites the inside of their lip, but nods. "Okay. Be safe, Dad. Promise."

Dad. You're still getting used to the sound of that. Sans winks. "'course, i promise."

"Asgore, I mean... Your majesty," you say, turning to where the king is standing on the other side of the Soul containers. "Once Sans gets back, you're sure he'll be able to just... release the Souls. He'll be back to normal."

"He should be able to, yes," Asgore says, after a moment of hesitation.

"...I don't like 'should'. Hun are you sure?" you ask, looking at Sans again.

"if it means that you and frisk stay safe and everyone goes free? yeah i'm sure," he says, grinning. "not having to worry about anyone trying to take your souls any more? getting to the surface? you said there was so much you wanna show me."

You don't say anything. All you can do is steal another kiss, this time on his mouth. "I love you, Sans."

"i love you too, hope," he says, giving your hand one last squeeze before letting you go.

"You better come back safe."

"hopefully." He winks.

You and Frisk take a step back, and all eyes are on Sans as he approaches the container with the glowing, yellow Soul. He stares at it, hesitating, as nervous sweat once again gathers at his temple. With a steadying breath, he reaches out and touches the glass.

It shatters. All of the cylinders shatter and thorny vines coil tight around the Souls, yanking them away and out of sight. There's a moment of stunned silence.

Thick, massive vines bigger than tree trunks erupt from the ground, red thorns glistening against green. None of you even have time to react. Quicker than should be possible thinner tendrils coil around all the monsters, pinning their arms to their sides and lifting them off the ground and into the air. Only you and Frisk are free, cowering in the middle of a a nest of jutting spikes.

Flowey pops out of the ground at your feet, baring his fangs in a menacing smile. "You idiots."

Chapter End Notes
Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters (including the Hope) and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
"No!" Frisk shouts, yanking their hand free from yours and taking a step towards Flowey. The flower just laughs as you dart out to grab their shoulders, pulling them back against you. "You're not supposed to be here this time! This time is different!"

You look up around you at the monsters held suspended in the air. Some, like Undyne and Asgore are struggling. Alphys looks terrified, her eyes fixed on Undyne. Papyrus is saying something to Sans but his brother doesn't seem to hear him. Sans watching you and Frisk, his sockets dark and unreadable.

Flowey gives a little shake of his leaves, swaying on his stem. The massive vines swell and rise higher around you, closing you in even further. You have nowhere to go, no way to run, and everyone you care about is caught in this trap.

"So you remember now, do you? It must have something to do with that little trick you pulled earlier." Flowey's smile turns sweet, hiding his fangs. "And you're right, things are different this time! Instead of just the human Souls, I'll have all of your friends' Souls too!" He giggles, sneering. "And you know what the best part is? It's all your fault. It's all because you made them love you. Without that, they wouldn't have come here. Just one word to Papyrus that you were in danger and he couldn't run fast enough to go get Undyne and Alphys."

"We're going to get out of this, Alphys!" Undyne shouts, struggling to flex her arms and try to rip through the vines. But she's held fast. "Don't panic!"

"SANS, I DON'T UNDERSTAND. IS THIS MY FAULT?" Papyrus is shaking his head, hands clenching and unclenching uselessly at his sides.

Flowey's face twists into a thin smile, eyes glittering with malice. "They don't even realize how pointless their fighting is. Because with all of these Souls, I'll finally achieve my true form."

"Why are you doing this?" Frisk demands, trying to step forward again but you hold them back. "Why won't you just leave me alone?"

The flower fixes them with an impatient look. "Don't you get it? This is all just a game. We've been playing it over and over again, but if you leave the Underground satisfied you'll 'win' and you'll never come back. You won't be here to play with me anymore! What would I do then?"

"This isn't a game! These are people's lives!" you snap.

"You're really good at messing up the way things happen around here, aren't you?" Flowey glares at you, petals bristling. "You made friends, played house, and had the nerve to just sit around and stop playing the game. I may not have been able to kill you before, but that doesn't matter. Because now, thanks to you, I have all these Souls. I wonder how strong I'll be with two more?"

A ring of white pellets forms a halo around the two of you, and you feel the familiar tug of your Soul free itself from your chest. The brighter, purer red of Frisk's Soul is there too and you fight the urge to hide it somehow. There's no denying Flowey's intentions as he starts to laugh. "I'll kill you a million times if I have to! You're never going to leave this place happy!"

Your grip on Frisk tightens, one arm circling their chest in some futile effort to protect them. But the pellets are coming from all sides, there's no way to stop their approach. Flowey cackles even louder over the frustrated cries of your friends, but then, just as you're squeezing your eyes shut in
the face of the inevitable, the laughing cuts off abruptly. Hot air buffets your face.

"What?" Flowey says.

You open your eyes to find yourself surrounded by a messy tangle of magic. Fire and bones and spears, shades of blue and orange and green all twisted together to form a barrier around you and Frisk.

"we've got you," Sans says and you look up to see him giving you a strained smile, the familiar ring of blue flickering in his eye.

"Do not be afraid, my children," Toriel says. "No matter what happens, we will always be there to protect you!"

Another ring of pellets forms, this time trying to come at you from above but the web of magic shifts to absorb the blow. Flowey is glaring, the thorns all around you growing and sharpening.

"THAT'S RIGHT, HUMANS!" Papyrus shouts, anxious sweat dotting the side of his skull despite his enthusiasm. "YOU CAN WIN! JUST DO WHAT I WOULD DO! BELIEVE IN YOU!"

"How can we win?" you cry out, shaking. "You've always... you've always saved me..."

"Hey, Hope! If you were able to stand your ground against ME, you can take out this overgrown weed!" Undyne says, giving you a big, pointy smile. "And don't worry! We're still with you all the way!"

"frisk, you've had everyone here to protect you this time, even your mom, but you remember before. you fought all your battles yourself, don't forget how tough you are!" Sans says, smiling wider.

There's another barrage of pellets and Flowey is writhing in anger. Again his attacks are deflected away, and you feel something stir in your chest. Frisk lets out a cheer and pumps their fist in a way that they must have picked up from Undyne.

"I know it seems impossible, b-but I know you can do it!" Alphys says.

"Human," Asgore's voice fills air, and you catch Flowey cringing at the sound. "For the future of humans and monsters, you have to stay determined!"

Flowey lets out an impotent cry of rage, shaking his leaves as he glares up at the two of you through your messy shield of magic. "No! Unbelievable! This can't be happening! You... You...!"

His expression makes a sudden, startling shift into a maniacal grin, splitting his face so wide that you take a step backwards. "I can't believe you're all so stupid! You can't stop me! All of your Souls are mine!"

Flowey's horrible laughter fills the air as your friends all cry out in pain. The vines twist and writhe all around you, tightening around their bodies as a harsh, bright light starts to fill the room. It's blinding in intensity and you have to squeeze your eyes shut, leaning over Frisk to try and shield them from whatever might be coming. You feel their hands grip your arm and they cry out in pain.

Your chest feels too light. Something inside you shudders and shivers and for a moment you think you might faint. You feel like something is trying to pull you apart through your Soul.

Even through your eyelids everything is just too bright.
Then you're plunged into darkness.

Silence.

Where once you were warm from the magical fire that helped protect you, now you're... nothing. You're not hot or cold, just there. But Frisk's hands are warm on your skin and you know that they're here with you. You can hear their breathing, now that it feels like your senses are slowly returning to you. Straightening your back but not letting go of your child, you blink and look around.

Blackness. Nothing. You can see Frisk as though lit somehow though there's no source of discernible light. They blink up at you, equally confused. There's a floor beneath you —you can feel it under your feet— but you can't see it. Or, you can, but it's the exact same color as everything else around you. There's no shadows to give it any sense of dimension.

Frisk gasps and you look up. There's a child standing there in the darkness with you. A monster child in a green and yellow striped sweater, facing away. White fur covers his head and his long ears that remind you of Toriel and Asgore. His small hands move just a little, curling and uncurling his fingers like he's not used to the movement. He turns his head from side to side, slowly as he rocks forward onto his padded toes and back down to his heels.

The child's shoulders shudder as he lets out a humorless, relieved laugh. "Finally," he breathes in a voice you've never heard before. It's soft and sweet and for a moment you forget the danger because he's just a child and where did he come from? You unwrap your arm from around Frisk and step out from behind them so you're side-by-side. "I was so tired of being a flower."

This child is Flowey? What the hell is going on?

He turns around to face you, blinking large green eyes as he focuses all his attention on Frisk. He doesn't even glance at you. "Howdy! Chara, are you there? It's me, your best friend."

"Asriel," Frisk whispers, eyes going wide as their hand flies up to their neck, clutching something through their sweater. It's then that you spot the glint of a gold chain, and you wonder where it came from.

"Asriel? Asgore's son—?" A bright flash of light blinds you, cutting you off as you cover your eyes and let out a surprised yelp.

When you can see again Asriel is still standing in front of you, but he's different. He's taller, bigger. Horns have sprouted from his head and though you see some of Asgore and Toriel in him he's nothing like them. He makes a chill run down your spine. Eyes the color of pitch stare down at Frisk as he bares his teeth in a wicked smile.

"Once I defeat you, I'll regain total control of the timeline," Asriel says, rising slowly off the ground. He hangs there in the air, looking down at both of you, raising his hands as magical fire fills his palms. It shifts colors, refusing to settle on any single hue as it swirls between his fingers. "For a while I wanted to destroy everything, but... I'd rather just Reset it all."

Frisk snatches up your hand and drags you to the side just in time to dodge a hail of tiny fireballs. The all-too-familiar red glow of both your Souls fills the space around you in response to Asriel's assault. You remember what Sans said to Frisk, that they've been through fights with monsters before. Their speed is incredible, reflexes faster than you could ever imagine. Are you just holding them back? After hundreds of timelines of practice, how can you ever keep up?
Asriel laughs, materializing a pair of sabers from the air around him. The darkness is starting to shift, twisting and surrounding you with ever-changing color. "I'm going to undo all the work you've done. All the friendships you've made. You won't remember anything. None of you will, not even Sans. I've done it to him before, and I'll do it again."

He lunges forward and lashes out at you with both swords, eyes flashing in the glow of the light all around you. You manage to stumble backwards just in time to avoid the conjured blade, but a flurry of small sparks travel in the wake of it and they pepper you across the chest. They burn, a sharp pain like staring into the sun and you cry out and bring your hand up to feel for wounds that aren't there. The magic went straight for your Soul.

"Mom!" Frisk yelps, whirling around to check on you.

"I'm fine," you say, gritting your teeth.

"Asriel, stop!" Frisk shouts at him, tugging at the chain around their neck. Their fingers close around something glittering as they whirl around to face down the hovering monster.

"You can't stop me, Chara! I'm going to Reset and we're going to do this all over again," he snarls, twirling one of the blades in his hand before giving a half-hearted slash for emphasis. "And the best part about all this is that you'll do it. You won't remember and we'll get to do this again and again!"

A halo of stars, bright facets of light, forms around Asriel in a pattern that reminds you of Flowey's pellets. Frisk yanks on your hand and you follow them to the side but the stars follow you, too fast to get out of the way. You wonder how many of these attacks you can take before you—

It happens so fast you almost can't comprehend it. Someone steps out of Frisk. For a moment they're like a blurry afterimage but the colors are all wrong. Instead of blue and purple they're green and yellow, pale skin, auburn hair. In the light of your Souls their eyes seem red. They dart between you and the stars and fling their arms out wide, taking the full brunt of the attack.

They stagger back as Asriel stares, wide-eyed at this new child. A new Soul adds its light to the space around the three of you, red like Frisk's but... It's cracked like yours but so much worse. It's split almost entirely down the middle with fractures branching into both halves. Entire chips are missing and you don't know how the Soul is even staying together at all. And what were they doing inside of Frisk?

"Chara!" Asriel cries out, his face breaking out into a huge smile. "I knew you were here, I knew it!"

"Asriel, you idiot, this is all your fault!" the child shouts, balling their hands into fists.

Asriel's smile falters, the sabers fading back into nothingness as his arms go slack. "...What? I... I've been calling for you. I've missed you!"

"If you had listened to me in the first place we wouldn't be here like this! You... you betrayed me! You betrayed our plan and we died for nothing!"

Frisk is standing beside you and all the two of you can do is watch. You're faintly aware that your three red Souls have started pulsing in the same rhythm.

Asriel shakes his head, balling his hands into fists. "No, we... I didn't want to hurt those people..."

"So now it's okay? What happened to the stupid crybaby I remember?" Chara says, shaking their
head and making a derisive noise.

Staring, the monster's expression is blank as he struggles with something to say. You don't understand what's going on. Is this child, Chara, the human that Asgore and Toriel adopted? The child that died with Asriel?

He bares his fangs, snarling down at Chara. "I started seeing the world the way you always said it was. I listened to you and now you don't want me to?"

"You didn't listen soon enough! It's too late now!" Chara snaps.

"It's not too late! I'll show you! I'll purge this timeline and next time you'll see," Asriel snarls.

His body starts to warp in front of you, and you're blinded by a bright flash of light before everything is plunged back into darkness.
Hopes and Dreams

You can't move. You're not sure why, there's nothing you can see or feel restraining you but... your body isn't listening. All you can do is watch as the shifting, colored light from before coalesces into a pair of massive wings. Asriel's body is twisted into something horrible, a monstrous head perched atop black, pointed shoulders. He flexes his fingers (each nearly as long as you are tall) like he's testing them before looking down at the three of you.

"This is my true power," he says, his voice resonating through the blackness all around you. "I'm going to kill you, as many times as it takes to strip the determination from your Soul so I can Reset it all. And this is where you're going to die, here where no one will ever remember you."

"Asriel, stop being such a selfish crybaby! How many times are we going to keep doing this over and over again?!" Whatever's holding you in place doesn't seem to be affecting Chara. They put themselves between the two of you and Asriel, squaring their shoulders and staring up at the creature with the prince's face. "How many timelines are we going to fight each other?"

Asriel lets out a howl of rage, lunging forward and digging his hands into the blackness on either side of your group. Wings pulsing with every color flare out at his sides, filling your vision as he bares enormous fangs. "You have no idea what this is like! To live without a Soul! I tried so many things but nothing ever worked!"

"Then tell me! Stop sitting there feeling sorry for yourself." Chara brings one hand under their Soul, the other balling into a fist. "Because I might understand better than you think."

Growling, he digs his fingers deeper into the ground before shoving himself away, raising his hands as swarms of multicolored fireballs swirl between his fingers. His black eyes narrow down at the three of you. "No! NO!"

You try to cry out but you can't even open your mouth. All you can manage is a strangled yelp as Chara takes the brunt of Asriel's assault. The bright red of their Soul starts to dim, and they cross their arms over their chest as they heave out a shuddering breath. The glass-like fragments tremble, fighting to hold their heart shape as the color loses some of its intensity, paling.

Frisk shudders beside you, eyes wide as their hand twitches in your grip. "I can't..." Their voice is tight, forced from between their lips. "I can't reach my Save. I can't Load back."

Asriel snarls and repeats his attack, peppering the three of you with magic. Chara still takes the worst of it but you and Frisk are hit too, the bright, searing pain making your Soul shudder. You have no idea how much more of this you can take. Pain is lancing through your body, radiating from your chest and you still can't move. You're caught there, at the mercy of this creature looming over you. The color of Chara's Soul is even paler, more pink than red. They're trembling, sinking down to one knee.

Frisk takes a few shuddering steps, pulling their hand free from yours and going to Chara's side. With great difficulty, they reach out and thread their fingers through Chara's, squeezing and giving the other child a bright smile. "I need your help. You can feel them, can't you? Help me reach them."

They look at Frisk, bright red eyes meeting brown as their pained grimace smooths away. With a look of pure determination, Chara gives them a sharp nod. Together, they raised their joined hands and something white begins to glow from the pulsing heart in Asriel's chest.
Asriel stares down at the light, then lifts his head to glare at the two children. He pounds his fists into the ground hard enough that you can feel it resonate through your body. "What are you doing? Stop this!" he shouts, baring his teeth.

The light gets brighter and suddenly you can move again. You step forward to rest your hands on Frisk and Chara's shoulders, the latter child flinching at the touch. They give you a sharp glance, something strange in their eyes as they look from your face down to your Soul. Then they return their attention to Asriel.

"Mom and Dad first," Chara snaps, a crease forming between their eyes.

"I want my dad," Frisk argues back, frowning.

"I'm not asking." They jerk their joined hands a little and you have squint and turn your head as the light increases in intensity.

You're not sure what's going on but something about the space around you seems to shift. Your grip on the two children tightens and you feel Chara try to shrug away but you hold fast. As the light starts to fade enough for you to risk a glance, you realize that Asriel is nowhere to be seen. Instead, in his place, are two familiar figures.

Toriel and Asgore are standing there, faces obscured by something like fog. The white mist swirls and twists, curling in on itself and refusing to dissipate. Frisk drops Chara's hand and runs to Toriel, reaching out to take her hand. You can't hear what they're saying. Chara tries to stand but their knees wobble and they collapse back to the ground, letting out a frustrated growl.

You squeeze their shoulder and their eyes dart up to look at you. They can only meet your gaze for a second before looking away, one hand going to their Soul reflexively as if to hide it from view. You reach down and wrap your arm around their middle to pull them to their feet. "Let me help you," you say, and you're surprised to see that their eyes are a little glassy. "I'm not sure what's going on, but it seems like you and Frisk know something."

"We need to get Asriel to listen," Chara mutters, shaking their head. They seem to resent your assistance, but aren't saying anything as the two of you approach Asgore. "But he's hiding behind your friends. We need to save them first, to get through to him."

"What were you doing inside of Frisk?" you ask. "Are you the reason they can alter time?"

Chara chews the inside of their lip and it reminds you so strongly of Frisk that you take a quick glance at where your child is speaking with Toriel. She's turning away from them, bowing her obscured head and clutching her hands to her chest.

"I was surviving. And yes," they say petulantly.

If you had more time you'd say something about their tone. But Asgore is looming over the two of you, hanging his head as his hands ball into fists at his sides. Chara stares up at him, looking more worried about facing him than they were of Asriel. They push your hand away and step forward, legs wobbling a little.

"Asgore," Chara says in a weak voice, hesitating. "...Dad it's me, Chara."

"Chara is dead," he says in a low, mournful voice. "Asriel is dead. My beloved has left me. I once had a family full of love, and all that remains is a bed of golden flowers where my children sowed the seeds with their blood and ashes. Do not tell me that you are my child."
Your heart aches at the deep, ancient sorrow in his voice. Chara's hands are shaking as they start to reach out to touch his hand but then recoil, shaking their head. "I am dead. But that doesn't mean I'm not... You always told me that I was welcome! That you would take care of me like I was yours too!"

"I am alone. I have been alone for so long," Asgore murmurs, rocking his head from side to side. "I cannot afford to care for you, child. We only need one more Soul. Forgive me for what I must do for my people."

Asgore raises his left hand and Chara takes a shaky step back. You're not sure how you know he's reaching for some kind of weapon but somewhere deep inside you know that he is. Darting forward, you cover his hand with your own, grasping at his huge fingers. Asgore stills at your touch.

"We're going to save everyone without killing," you tell him, staring up at him through the mist covering his face. "You don't have to hurt anyone ever again, Asgore."

His hand tenses but he doesn't move. You glance back at Chara but they're walking away to stand by themselves, their back towards you and Frisk both. Their shoulders are shaking.

You turn back to Asgore and you think you catch a glimpse of his eyes for just a moment. "We have a plan, remember? A way to get the last Soul so then the Barrier can be broken. I need you to remember." You squeeze his fingers. After a long moment of silence, he brings his other hand to cover yours.

When you look up at him the mist is gone and he's smiling at you. "I remember. You and your child are the future of humans and monsters."

With a sigh of relief, you smile up at him. "That's right. But I think there's someone who wants to see you."

Asgore follows your hand as you point, and you can tell the moment he sees Chara. His eyes go wide and his hands fall away from yours. "Chara?"

They turn and you can see the trail of tears wetting their cheeks, staring in disbelief. "Dad?"

There's another cry of joy and you look for the sound to see Toriel cover her mouth with both hands. Chara seeks her out too, eyes sweeping over her almost hungrily. "...Mom?"

Both of them start to go for Chara but before they can make it their bodies start to fade. They turn to something like smoke that swirls together to form solid, pearlescent white hearts, upended in the air with their points facing upwards. They hang there for a moment before vanishing. Chara turns away again, sinking down to their knees and burying their face in their hands.

You start to go to them but Frisk comes to meet you, taking hold of your hand. "We have to help the others," Frisk says, and there's a pulse in their Soul that echoes in yours. You can feel it, resonating between the two of you. "Help me reach out for Dad."

"What do I do?" you ask, squeezing their fingers between your own.

"Um..." Frisk mumbles, biting their lip. They reach out towards the blackness with their free hand, splaying out their fingers and wiggling them. "You just... reach out. With your Soul."

"I'll do my best, sweetie," you say, because you don't know what they mean.

Bringing you free hand to your chest, you close your eyes but before you can even try to do
anything Frisk lets out a gasp. Your eyes fly back open and instead of Sans you're greeted with Papyrus, all by himself. His face his obscured just like Asgore and Toriel's were.

"I MUST CAPTURE A HUMAN!" he exclaims, taking a quick step towards the two of you as he rests a hand on his hip, pointing at you with the other. "BECAUSE THEN... THEN I'LL FINALLY..." His voice wavers, his hand dropping to his side. "THEN I'LL FINALLY BE IN THE ROYAL GUARD, AND MAYBE SANS WON'T HAVE TO WORRY SO MUCH."

"Papyrus," you breathe, and the way his voice is shaking tears at your heart.

"AND I'LL BE POPULAR, AND HAVE FRIENDS. BECAUSE I WANT SANS TO KNOW THAT I'M HAPPY. AND MAYBE, IT'LL MAKE HIM HAPPIER TOO." Papyrus puffs out his chest again, and you can see the tail end of his scarf give a weak flutter, even here in this place. "SO I MUST CAPTURE YOU!"

"You already have friends!" Frisk exclaims, giving the skeleton a bright smile. "And family! We never got the chance to tell you, but Sans agreed to be my dad, which means you're my uncle now!"

Papyrus flinches away, shaking his head. "BUT I HAVEN'T... I NEED TO CAPTURE YOU! IT'S THE ONLY WAY... THE ONLY WAY I CAN PROVE TO SANS THAT I'M NOT... THAT I'M NOT A BURDEN. THAT HE DOESN'T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT ME."

"Papyrus, your brother loves you. He's going to worry about you no matter what," you tell him, swallowing past a lump in your throat. How can he think of himself that way? How can he even consider for a moment that Sans thinks like that? "Because that's what you do with family. You worry and you care so much that it hurts. And you worry about him too, don't you? Do you think that he's a burden?"

He hesitates and some of the fog starts to lift away. "...NO. NO, I..."

You cut him off with a fierce hug, flinging your arms up around his neck to pull him down to you. He wraps you and Frisk up and squeezes you tight. "Papyrus, you know that we love you, right?"

"I... YES!" You steal a glance and you can see that the fog is gone. He's grinning. "YES OF COURSE, HUMAN!" he says, and right now his odd nickname for you just feels wrong.

"I told you before, to call me Hope," you tell him, hugging him tighter. You know that in a moment he's going to vanish just like Toriel and Asgore did.

"HOPE. I ALSO LOVE BOTH OF YOU! PLATONICALLY, OF COURSE," he adds as an afterthought.

"Of course," you agree, laughing a little as you give him one last squeeze. The second you pull away his body starts to wisp off into the air, before solidifying into a white heart and then vanishing.

Frisk takes hold of your hand, and you feel that odd pulsing in your Soul again. You look down at them and meet their eyes, a stubbornness there that you're so affectionately familiar with. They raise an eyebrow in silent question and you can't help but laugh. It's so much like something Sans would do that you think they must have picked it up from him. You give them a nod.

"There's still the others, right?" you ask.

They nod back. "We have to save all our friends."
"What about... your dad?" The title feels a little strange on your tongue but Frisk's eyes brighten at the sound of it. You'll need to get used to this.

Frisk looks back out into the darkness and their eyes go distant. Seeing something that isn't there, or feeling for something. "I can't reach him yet. He's there but... The others are in the way."

"Then let's help them," you say, squeezing their hand.

Frisk nods again.

You blink and Undyne and Alphys are standing in front of you. Undyne clenches her hands into fists and you can catch the flash of teeth even through the mist obscuring her face. Alphys cringes away, wringing her hands in front of her.

"Humans! I'll kill you to free us all!" Undyne snarls, widening her stance. "You're our real enemy!"

"We're not, Undyne, we're your friends!" you snap at her, lashing out like you did when you were starting to know her. Back when things were still difficult between you. You have to show her that fighting spirit she seemed to admire. "Are you telling me you don't remember all the time we spent together? The times you fought for me?"

"Undyne, do you remember the time you taught me how to play piano?" Frisk chimes in. "And then you and Papyrus burned the house down?"

She hesitates, arms tensing but waiting. Alphys trembles at her side, shaking her head.

"You... y-you all hate me, don't you?" Alphys mumbles. "I have to keep lying... if they learn the truth everyone will hate me."

"Alphys, you made mistakes but you've taken responsibility for them. We know that you tried to do the right thing," you tell her, watching Undyne as she flinches a little.

"I just wanted to impress Asgore. E-everything is my fault. All I do is h-hurt people," she says, covering her face with her hands.

"The amalgamates are happy and back with their families. They'd be dead if not for you." You watch as Alphys's shaking starts to ebb, her hands pulling tentatively away from where her eyes are hidden behind the fog.

"We care about you Alphys! We like you," Frisk says, smiling.

Alphys is silent, hesitating at Undyne's side. They're both standing there, waiting for something.

You look from one to the other, giving Frisk's hand a squeeze to steady yourself. "Both of you are our friends. Undyne you helped me when I argued with Sans, and were there for me when I was scared. You showed me how to be stronger when all I could think about was how weak I was. Alphys, without you I don't know if Frisk would have come back from that fever. Your brilliance saved their life. I am so grateful to know and be close to both of you."

The fog lifts from both of them at the same time, leaving them blinking at you in unison.

Undyne flushes purple, glancing away. "Oh come on, I didn't do all that. You've always been strong, you punk," she says, but you can tell she's secretly pleased.

Alphys is blushing too, hiding behind her hands. "I-I only did what I could. It's the least I could do
after all the s-support you've given me too!"

They turn at the sound of each other's voices and Undyne scoops Alphys up in her arms, grinning. Their relief is palpable and you can't help but smile as Alphys gives a nervous giggle. As they check on each other to make sure they're okay, their edges start to blur and they too fade away until there's nothing but two white Souls hovering there, resonating together, before they vanish.

"Can you feel him?" Frisk asks you, their voice a soft murmur.

You close your eyes, raising your free hand to cup underneath where your Soul is hovering. You can feel that familiar prickle of his magic, his Soul, across your skin. The way his voice makes your whole body hum, the warm feeling of love that swells in your chest when he's looking at you or when he's spending time with Frisk. It's intimate and warm and tender, and everything is undeniably him it's like he's standing there with you.

Then you open your eyes, and he is.
Sans is standing there in front of you, his face hidden behind the twisting fog. Hands shoved into his pockets and shoulders hunched, he looks like an enormous weight is pressing down upon him and he's sagging under the pressure. Frisk lets go of your hand and you go to him, reaching out to wrap your hands around his arm. He doesn't even seem to register your presence.

Now that you're touching him you can feel that he's trembling. "Sans, we're here for you," you say gently.

"It doesn't matter. None of this matters," he says, his voice ringing hollow. Emotionless. None of that warmth or even sadness.

"Of course it matters," you tell him, squeezing his arm as if you can get through to him with your touch. He doesn't react. "Everything we've been through, everything that we've built together, it all matters."

"Why are you even trying? It's so much easier to just give up. It can't hurt you if you don't care. If you don't have anything it can't get taken away." He's shaking more now and his voice is cracking. You feel tears gather in your eyes and you fight the urge to wrap him up in your arms and hug him close. "Just give up. I did."

"That's not true!" Frisk says, taking hold of his other arm and tugging sharply. "You were always there for me! You... helped me. No matter what, you made sure that... that things would be okay. And sometimes it was hard, really hard, but you did it."

"I could have done more. Maybe if I did more, things wouldn't be so bad. If I had worked hard enough to stop the accident, people wouldn't have died. It's not enough. It's never enough," Sans says, and you can hear it in his voice that something inside him breaks. He's crying. "No matter what I do, I'm always gonna lose them. I hold on as tight as I can and they slip through my fingers. Happiness is temporary."

You're crying, too. Tugging on his arm, he doesn't fight you as you free his hand and wrap both of yours around his. His fingers twitch against your skin. "Happiness is important because it's temporary. You can't be afraid to be happy just because it might be gone someday. You need it to get you through the bad times." You pull his hand up to cup your cheek, holding it against your face. "Stop blaming yourself, Sans. None of this is your fault. You can't bear the weight of this forever."

"It's mine to bear. No one can understand how this feels. No one understands what it's been like, living this over and over again, remembering things no one else can. I can remember all of these timelines but I've forgotten so much. Who am I anymore?" His fingers curl against your skin, pressing so hard it hurts but you refuse to let him go.

"You're the man I love. You're the person who despite everything telling you that you shouldn't, let yourself love me back. Even though you were so scared of losing us, you chose to accept me and Frisk as your family," you say, voice cracking. Trembling, it feels like a hand has reached into your chest and squeezed. It aches. "Don't let this undo all the work you've done. Let us help you. You don't have to be alone."

"I am alone. One day it's all going to be reset and you'll be gone. You'll never remember I even existed. I never should have let myself love you," he says, trying to pull his hand away.
You don't let him. You hold him fast but *God* his words sting, like a slap to the face. Blinking through your tears, frustration starts to bubble beneath the surface. "If you lose us right now it really is going to be your own damn fault! You're letting this happen. If you pull away from me you're just making your own worst fears come true. Fight this! Fight this and come back!"

"i can't..." he says but you can see through the gaps in the mist obscuring his face. For a moment your eyes meet and a surge of hope fills you. "b-babe it's too much."

He's almost there, he's so close that you can almost taste it but he needs something else. Something more than words. Your Soul lets out a bright pulse of red and you remember. When you couldn't bring yourself to believe that he loved you he showed you the truth. Linked his body, his magic, to your Soul and bared enough of himself for you to understand.

"I've got you," you tell him, and bring his hand down to where your cracked Soul is still hovering in front of your chest.

You have to reach out to steady yourself on Sans's chest because he's right; it's too much. His grief and fear, sadness and self-loathing threatens to drag you down and swallow you whole. The last time you had only felt a fraction of how deep this went. The full scope of it, the reality of just how helpless Sans must feel hits you square in the chest, knocking the air out of your lungs. You flounder under it all and he shudders, trying to pull away but you hold on tight. You can't let this stop you. You have to show him that you're here. Distantly, you're aware of Frisk grabbing at the side of your jacket, holding onto both of you as they watch with wide eyes.

"I'm here too," Frisk says, and you can feel a small surge of *something* swell inside of you, timed with a flare of red from their bright and radiant Soul.

It's enough. Just enough to remember yourself and focus on why you're doing this. That you love him and that you know it hurts. You might not be able to fix it but he doesn't have to feel this alone, because you're here. You'll always be here because this isn't like the other timelines. Frisk remembers and they *promised* and things are going to be different. They have to be because you're a family and nothing is going to take that away. Not with the three of you holding on tight to this future together.

"It's okay to be scared, and afraid, and worried," you tell him, fistng your hand in the front of his jacket, your grip like iron on his hand at your Soul. You can feel his hand in yours and at the same time feel the pressure of your fingers on his bones. The lines between the two of you are blurred and you squeeze your eyes shut because you're seeing through two sets of eyes at once. "Maybe that will never go away but I'm here. Whenever it's bad I'll be here. You're not alone because I've got you."

The coiling, writhing darkness inside of Sans's Soul recedes all at once, and you know the fog has lifted from his face. It's like being able to breathe again without realizing that you were even drowning. The relief is so sudden and welcome that you let out a sob, releasing Sans's hand. The connection between your Souls is gone and you take a moment to steady yourself before opening your eyes to look at him.

He's smiling through his tears, searching your face as you smile back at him, flinging your arms around his neck and hugging him as tight as you can. Frisk lets out a cry of joy and you feel them latch onto the two of you. Sans has an arm around you and another around Frisk, holding you both.

"you got me," he says, and you tuck your face in against his jaw, unwilling to let go.

"I'm gonna see you again soon, okay?" you tell him, knowing what's coming.
"what are you talking about?" he asks, his hand clutching tight to the back of your jacket.

He's starting to lose his substance. You pull away so that you can look at him, holding his gaze as his edges start to blur. "I love you."

Sans opens his mouth to reply but he's faded, gone, a lone white Soul hovering in front of you for just a moment before it vanishes. Taking in a shuddering breath, you wipe at your cheeks to dry your tears. You and Frisk are alone in the darkness.

No, that's not true. You turn, remembering Chara. They're watching you with an expression that's unreadable, eyes flicking between you and Frisk. Frisk lets you go, walking over to where the other child is standing, waiting for you. You follow.

Chara is cupping their Soul in their hands. It's not shivering anymore, but the color hasn't come back. It's still pinkish, the color of blood diluted in water. "He's waiting," they say. "It's time to save Asriel."

You feel the space around you shift and Asriel is there, staring down at the three of you with his teeth bared. He looks confused, one hand raised to shield the bright light pouring out of his chest. Chara pushes their way in front of you and you try to catch their shoulder to stop them but they shake you off, glaring back at you.

"W-what are you doing?" Asriel crys out, and there's a waver of uncertainty in his voice. He sounds raw and exposed, more like the child he should be. "W...?"

"This isn't you, Asriel," Chara says, shaking their head and fixing him with a stubborn look. "This isn't the person that saved me after I fell. Who held me up as you took me to meet your parents. This isn't my friend! My... my brother! My brother's a huge crybaby, that never wanted to hurt anyone."

The light in Asriel's chest flares red and his eyes widen. He recoils, shaking his head. "What did you do? What is this feeling...?" His huge, black eyes well with tears. "What's happening to me?"

"We're trying to save you, Asriel! Let us help you," Frisk says, resting a hand on Chara's shoulder. They flinch but don't pull away.

"No. No! I don't need anyone!" Asriel howls, wrenching his hands away from his chest as multicolored flames spring to life in his palm.

He lashes out, a barrage of magic that strikes uselessly at the ground around you. Except for what hits Chara head on. You reach out for their other shoulder, helping Frisk steady them but they jerk away again, snarling as they take a step forward. You should stop them, do something to help but...

You can't. All you can do is watch numbly as this broken child stands against their equally broken sibling.

Chara walks towards Asriel, trembling as they hold the fragments of their even-paler Soul between their hands. "You don't need to do this. You don't need to be like this anymore. You don't need to be angry like me."

"Stop it! Get away from me!" he sobs, tears streaming down his cheeks. More fire from his hands streaks towards Chara but this time none of them find their target. "Do you hear me?! I'll... I'll tear you apart!"

Asriel digs his huge claws into the darkness on either side of Chara but they keep approaching, staring up at him. They reach out with one hand to rest it on his arm, fingers trailing up it as they
walk closer. He flinches away, dragging backwards away from the touch as the rage drains from his face.

"Chara, don't you see why I'm doing this? Why I keep fighting to keep you here?" Asriel hangs his head, covering the light coming from his chest. Trying to hide it. "I'm doing it because you're special, Chara. You're... you're the only one who understands me, now. You're the only one who's any fun to play with anymore."

Fire flickers over his hands but falls feebly to the ground, raining down like tears. You realize that you're crying. The sheer hopelessness and pain in Asriel's voice cuts you deep, straight to bone. No child should feel this way. No children should ever have to go through what Asriel and Chara have been through.

That huge head tilts back up, black eyes peering through tears to watch Chara as they keep moving forward. "No, that's not just it. I... I... I'm doing this because I care about you, Chara! I care about you more than anybody else!" He shudders and lets out a gut-wrenching sob, tossing his head violently from side to side. "I'm not ready for this to end. I'm not ready for you to leave me again. I won't... I won't let you!"

"Asriel!" Chara calls out, spreading their hands out to either side of them, baring their shattered Soul. "Don't do this!"

"So, please... stop fighting me... Just listen for one... I'm not... I'm not an idiot!" Asriel begs, covering his face with his hands and dragging down his snout. Pulsing light starts to gather in his palms, bright and swirling with color like his wings. "Please just let me win!"

The light pours from his hands in a concentrated beam, it's path set down a line that should consume all three of you. You seize hold of Frisk's hand and pull them to your side, but the magic never comes. Instead, it stops at Chara. They're taking the full force of it by themselves, and you cry out in dismay. How can they possibly withstand it?

The magic swells as Asriel roars, the sharp sound of the beam and his cry mingling together and filling the air around you, deafening you. "STOP IT! JUST GIVE UP!"

All at once the magic is gone. Silence overtakes you so suddenly you wonder if you really have gone deaf but you hear Frisk's sharp intake of breath next to you. Chara is still standing, shuddering with deep, heaving breaths as Asriel slumps to the ground. Laying there, his head on the floor, his arms are starting to blur at the edges. His body is fading as he cries.

"Chara," he says, his voice thick and weak. "I'm so alone, Chara... I'm so afraid..."

Darkness is creeping in closer, swallowing the light from the wings you can barely see anymore. The space is narrowing down to just you and the three children, Asriel's head towering over you, even as he's collapsed on the ground. You don't know what to do, or even say, but you don't think there's anything you can do. You're a just a spectator to their despair.

Chara reaches him and rests their hands on his muzzle, pressing their face into his fur. "I'm here."

"I..." Asriel whispers, and a soft, bright white glow emanates from what's left of him. He shrinks and shifts and when the light is gone, all that's left behind is that small, scared child clad in a green and yellow sweater. "I'm so sorry."

Chara's legs give out beneath them, collapsing to their knees. You and Frisk rush forward to steady them, and they're so weak they can't even muster up the strength to shrug away or even look at
you. Their hands lay useless in their lap.

The color has drained from their Soul, all that's left is gray. The color of ashes.
You kneel next to Chara, wrapping one arm around their shoulders as they slump to the side, leaning against you. Their breaths are shallow but they're still alive... But, is that even right? This child has been inside of Frisk, clinging to whatever it is they are now. Is it possible to die twice? What's happening to them?

"Chara! No!" Asriel cries out, wide-eyed and staring. He's frozen in place, his arms still raised to wipe his face.

"You're... you're pretty tough with all those Souls," Chara says, letting out a weak laugh. "Even if... you're still a big crybaby."

The prince whimpers, tugging on his long ears. He takes a small step forward but seems afraid to get any closer. "Chara, I didn't... I didn't mean for this to happen!"

They let out an exhausted sigh and they feel even heavier against you. Dead weight, you think with an ache in your chest. Your Soul gives a small pulse of red and Chara's shudders in response but it isn't glowing. The shattered gray heart reminds you of a lightbulb that's burned out. It twitches in Frisk's direction but Chara makes a frustrated grunt of effort and it stays in place.

"Don't be so stupid," Chara says. "I was already going to fade. I'm all out of Determination and anger and with those gone, there isn't that much left of me, is there?"

"This is all my fault!" Asriel says, shaking his head while holding onto his ears and crying.

"It's not your fault. None of this would have happened if I hadn't..." They trail off, hands balling into weak fists. "I'm... I'm sorry, Asriel. I did this to us."

"I could have told you no. I could have stopped you," he says.

"You always tried so hard to make me happy. You always gave in, to whatever I wanted. I'm sorry for that too, for taking advantage of you." Chara groans, shuddering. "You deserved to be happy, too."

Fresh tears well up in your eyes and you wrap your other arm around Chara's body and pull them into your lap. They go rigid at your touch, grumbling in protest but they don't have the strength to fight. "I should have done something. You shouldn't have been the one to protect us, I should have protected both of you," you say, fighting back a sob. "You're all just children."

"You should hate me. Don't... don't feel sorry for me, I don't deserve it," Chara says, shaking their head against your shoulder. "Besides, you already helped me."

"I'm sorry I can't do more," you say, and you mean it. You don't understand what Chara has done, to Frisk or Asriel or why you should hate them. But they're a child. How can you hate a child? Hugging Chara closer, you're surprised to feel their arms slip around your waist and hug you back.

They're trembling, crying silently into your shoulder. "Thank you," they whisper. "It was nice to meet you in person."
Chara's body is becoming lighter. You relax your hold on them in time to watch their edges blur, crumbling away like dust as they let out one final, long sigh. There's nothing left of them but the colorless remnant of their Soul. It hangs there for a moment, but instead of shattering all the way, or disappearing, it floats back over to Frisk and slips inside their Soul. Back where it came from. The vibrant red starts to shift, gray veining the surface like marble.

Frisk's hands are shaking as they cup their hands beneath their Soul, tears slipping down their cheeks as they look at you. Sniffling, they give you a weak attempt at a smile. "I should be happy that they're gone. But I didn't think it would happen like this," they say. You reach out to pull them too you but Frisk shies away, shaking their head. "There's still more to do. We're not done."

You turn to Asriel, where he's sniffling and rubbing at his face. The white fur on his cheeks is wet and mussed. You try to stand but your legs shake and you fall back down, weak and exhausted. Frisk goes to Asriel in your stead, reaching out and taking hold of his hand. Startled, his watery green eyes open wide and he stares at them, chin wobbling.

"Frisk, I did such terrible things to you, when I was a flower. To everyone," he says, a pleading note to his voice as he tries to explain. "I couldn't feel love anymore, I don't... I don't have a Soul of my own. It's been so long since I've felt this way."

Frisk squeezes his hand and Asriel manages a weak smile. Nodding, Frisk encourages him to continue.

With his free hand, the prince covers his chest, right over his heart. "With all these Souls inside me, I have my own compassion back. But, I can feel everyone else's too. Everyone cares about each other so much, and... they care about you too, Frisk." Asriel looks over their shoulder at you. "And you, um..." His face scrunches up, cocking his head like he's trying to hear something. You can see it dawn on him when his expression relaxes into a small smile. "Hope. That's... that's funny, isn't it? That's a really nice name." Wiping his face, he turns his attention back to Frisk. "I wish I could tell you just how much everyone cares about you, but... I think you kinda know already. They've had so many chances to show you."

"We care about them too. We just want everyone to be safe again," Frisk says.

"I'm sorry," Asriel says again, and for a moment you feel a lurch of fear in your stomach. That he's apologizing because he can't bring everyone back. "I understand if you can't forgive me. I wouldn't blame you for hating me. I acted so strange and horrible. But there's no excuse for what I've done."

It was easy to hate Flowey. He had been a monster in the truest sense of the word, cruel and manipulative, reveling in the pain of you, Frisk, and your friends. But Asriel is different. Maybe it's the Souls inside of him, the return of his capacity to love. But you can't see them as the same person. They're not the same person. This is a hurt child, desperate for help.

"I forgive you," Frisk says, without even thinking. "I forgive you and Chara."

"W-what?" Asriel gives a nervous laugh, looking away. He sniffs loudly, rubbing his snout. "Frisk, come on. You're gonna make me cry again. But, even if you do forgive me... I can't keep these Souls. I owe it to everyone to return them."

A guilty swell of happiness rises up inside of you, knowing that Sans and the others are going to be okay. That Asriel can let them go. "But what happens to you?" you ask him.

He looks up at you, giving you a wistful smile. "It doesn't matter. There's something I have to do first. Everyone's hearts inside of me, they're all beating as one, and they all want one thing. To
finally shatter the Barrier."

Asriel tugs his hand free from Frisk's and closes his eyes. The blackness all around you shifts until suddenly you're at the Barrier. You're right there in front of it, and with a quick glance over your shoulder you can see the shattered remnants of the Soul containers. Your friends are nowhere to be seen. When you look back at Asriel he's rising up into the air, arms outstretched. Light pours from his chest, white shot through with the colors of the human Souls inside of him. It swirls, so bright that you have to shield your eyes and you can feel the rush of air all around you. Tension is building, thick and heavy until all at once it snaps, and that uncomfortable press of the Barrier's magic is lifted. Then, everything goes still and quiet.

Lowering your hands, you watch as Asriel sinks back down to the ground, wobbling a little before steadying himself. He glances behind him at the unobscured path out of the mountain, smiling to himself and then at Frisk. "I... I did it! Now everyone..." His smile falters, looking down at the ground. "Everyone can go free. But I... I need to go. It'll be better if the others don't see me. I can't keep maintaining this form without the Souls. I'll... go back to being a flower again. So, maybe it's best if you just forget about me, ok?"

"No," Frisk tells him stubbornly, reaching out and wrapping Asriel up in a fierce hug. "Because together, Chara and I can still save you."

"W-what? Frisk, Chara's gone, there's nothing they can—"

Letting him go, Frisk takes a step backwards with a huge grin on their face. They bring their hands around their Soul, looking down at it and curling their fingers. "Chara wanted to save you, more than anything. They might not have been a very nice person, and for... a long time they were angry. But deep down, I know they cared about you, Asriel," Frisk says, their face scrunching into a look of concentration. Their arms are trembling as they're trying to pull. The marbling of gray on the red surface starts to shift, pulling to the left.

You force yourself to your feet, your muscles spasming in protest but you manage. "Frisk, what are you doing?" you ask them, worry tightening your voice. They don't acknowledge your hand on their shoulder as you squeeze, fighting the urge to pull their arms down. "What are you doing to your Soul?"

With a gasp, Frisk's hands pull apart and instead of just one Soul between their hands, now there's two. Two, solidSouls. The one on the right, the one you can only assume is Frisk's, is that same familiar red. Only now, there's a gray streak slashed across the center, like a scar. The other is what was left of Chara's, but all the cracks and chips are filled in with bright crimson, leaving it whole again. They pulse together and your own Soul beats in response, filled with awe.

Asriel can only stare, dumbfounded at the two Souls, then past them to where Frisk is grinning at him. Frisk laughs. "Go on. Take it," they say, somehow nudging the gray and red Soul towards him.

"Frisk, how did you...?" Asriel reaches out timidly for the Soul but hesitates, mouth hanging open.

"I dunno. I just knew I had... more than I should. So I'm giving it to you. It's what Chara would want," they say.

Gently, Asriel's hands close around the Soul, like he's handling something precious. Tears well up in his eyes and he starts to cry, clutching it close to his chest but not letting it go.

"Asriel," you say, reaching out to touch his arm.
"Sorry," he mumbles through his tears, looking up at you. "I just... thought it might still feel like them but... They're gone. Chara's really gone."

Lowering yourself back down to your knees, you put your arm around his shoulders and pull him close, your own tears slipping silently down your cheeks. Frisk scoots in close to you and you put your other arm around them too, hugging them both as tight as you can. Asriel presses the mended Soul into his chest and shudders, drawing in a deep breath. As if sensing that this is all finally, finally, over, your and Frisk's Souls disappear too. All the tension, all the fear, all the grief, it washes away as you feel whole again and then everything goes dark.

"hope, c'mon babe, wake up. we're not doing this again."

Your eyes flutter open, groaning as you reach for the bony hand pressing uncomfortably on your throat. Sans lets out a sigh of relief as he wraps his arms around your chest, lifting you partway off the ground in a crushing hug. Grabbing at his jacket, you bury your face into the fluff of his hood, taking in a deep breath. That familiar, musky smell grounds you, lets you know that everything is okay. You're not sure where you are but...

It all comes rushing back. Your eyes snap open and you scramble into a sitting position, leaning back enough so that you can try to look around. "Where's Frisk, and Asriel?" you ask him, craning your neck.

Sans pulls away so that you can see, studying your face as he reaches out to push some wild strands of hair out of your face. He sits back on his heels, squashing his slippers as he stays there on the ground with you. "everyone's fine, though they don't really remember what happened," he says, trailing his hand down your cheek and then taking hold of your hand.

Toriel is holding her son on her hip, stroking his face and running her fingers down the length of his ear, smiling brighter than you've ever seen her. Asgore hovers nearby, and as he steps closer she looks at him, not even hesitating to hand Asriel to him. He cradles him close to his chest, laughing with shining eyes when Asriel hooks his arm around one of his horns to pull himself up to Asgore's shoulder. Toriel watches them both fondly, wiping tears from her eyes.

Frisk is sitting on Undyne's shoulders, flexing their arms and laughing. She tries to make a grab for Papyrus's legs and he shies away, trying to wave her off but finally going to duck behind Alphys for cover. Alphys lets out an alarmed squeak and tries to twist around and look at him but Undyne snatches her up and lifts her off her feet, laughing.

You let out a weak chuckle. "Looks like you're the only one worried about me," you say, returning your attention to Sans.

He hasn't taken his eyes off you. The white lights in his eye sockets are taking you in, hungry for every last detail. You can tell he's trying to calm himself down, hiding as best he can behind a smile. "everyone said you were fine, that you just needed a little more time to recover than the kids cuz your soul's a little more fragile."

"I don't think anyone has a Soul tougher than Frisk's. And, now..." You frown, thinking. "Have you seen Asriel's Soul? Or can you sense it?"

Sans tears his eyes away from you to look over at the Dreemurrs, a small frown settling between his brows. "Frisk sorta told me what they did. cobbling a soul together from a broken one and sheer determination... that's something, but it feels fine. whatever they did, it's working. i think i'm more surprised that flowey turned out to be the king's dead kid."
"Yeah," you murmur, leaning forward to rest your head on Sans's shoulder. He puts his arm around you, hugging you close as you watch the others. "You said that the others don't really remember, but... what about you?"

Sans gives a weak shrug. "not really. i mean, i remember flowey, which is more than can be said for the others. and then i remember your voice, calling out to me. did you..." He sighs. "forget it. i'd rather worry about the here and now. and the fact that somehow you guys broke the barrier."

You jerk back with the realization, staring up at him. "Has no one gone outside yet? Why are you all just sitting here when you can finally go out and see the surface?"

He laughs, his expression so full of love and affection that you feel yourself start to blush. "because we were waiting for you."

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Chapter End Notes

Only one chapter left in ACT One you guys. Let's bring it all in.

(And stay tuned, cuz there's gonna be an ACT Two after this!)
You don’t realize just how much you missed the surface until it’s staring you in the face, bearing down on your skin, and shining down on you from the sky. Ebott’s forest spreads out beneath you from the ledge you and the others are perched on, faintly lit by the pre-dawn light. The sky is still inky, the crescent moon hanging low in the sky and the brightest stars are still shining. The moist air of the summer morning makes you feel sticky but it’s so welcome you don’t even mind.

Even the air is crisper, fresher than in the Underground. The smell of earth and trees fills your lungs as you take in another deep breath, staring up at the sky. The hum of insects feels louder than you remember.

"THE STARS SEEM SO SMALL! BUT THERE ARE SO MANY!" Papyrus exclaims, breaking the silence and making you jump.

"There's actually even more than this," you say, glancing over Sans's head to look at where his brother is standing beside him. "You can't see them all because the sun is going to be coming up soon."

"WOWIE, YOU MEAN WE GET TO SEE THE SUN SOON?" He's still staring up at the sky, transfixed.

You chuckle, and Sans's arm tightens around your middle, pulling you closer to his side. Papyrus falls silent again and you glance over to where Asriel and his parents are gathered together, speaking in soft voices and looking up at the stars. What must it be like for them, to see the surface again after hundreds of years? And on top of that, to have their son back and be able to show all of this to him. You pull Frisk against you with one arm wrapped around their shoulders, feeling them tilt their head back to rest against your stomach.

"i'm not sure what i imagined it'd be like," Sans murmurs. Turning to look at him, you're happy to see him smiling. "but so far, so good."

With a weak laugh, you lean over to kiss his cheekbone. "Just wait until the sun comes up," you say.

"It needs to hurry up!" Undyne snaps, pacing impatiently. "This is taking too long!"

"I-it shouldn't be too much longer. Look the sky is already starting to get b-brighter," Alphys says, pointing to where, yes, the darkness is starting to bleed away on the horizon.

"So what do we do now, Mom?" Frisk asks, tipping their head back to look at you.

You open your mouth to answer but Toriel turns to look at the two of you, glancing from Frisk to you with a startled look on her face. You catch her eye, then give her a sheepish smile. "Oh. Um, yeah. I'm actually Frisk's mom, not their sister," you explain, glancing away and then back again. "Though, at the time, Frisk didn't know either. I... don't know if that makes it any better, actually."

Toriel just gives you a warm smile, looking down at Asriel and stroking his ears. She meets your eyes again. "I am sure you had your reasons, my child. So long as you both are happy."
"But, if you're okay with it... Maybe you can be Frisk's grandmother instead?" Suddenly embarrassed, you chewing the inside of your lip and look back up at the stars.

Nudging her son over to Asgore, she walks up to you and Frisk, holding her arms out. Meeting her eyes again, she's smiling brightly. "That would make me very happy, my child, to include you both in my family."

Sans lets you go and you and Frisk are wrapped up in Toriel's embrace. She's warm and soft, bowing her head over you and for a moment you feel a little like a child again. Protected and cherished by someone who cares about you. She reminds you of better times, back when your own mother used to smile.

"Thank you both, so much, for everything," she whispers, giving you one last, tight squeeze before she eases away. She looks at Sans, something mischievous sparkling in her eye. "Please continue to keep them safe and loved, as you have been. I am glad that my advice helped."

Turning to Sans and raising a brow, you're surprised to see his cheekbones darken as he scratches the back of his skull. "Yeah, thanks Tori."

Toriel makes a pleased sound, glancing over at Asgore. He's watching all of you, one hand resting on Asriel's shoulder. When he notices that you're looking, he clears his throat. "There will be much work to be done in the future on behalf of both humans and monsters," he says. "I would extend to you and Frisk the opportunity to serve as our ambassadors. But I will understand if you decide to refuse."

You blink, glancing over at Sans. He just gives you an equally confused look back, shrugging his shoulders. So much for that. Frisk looks from you to Asgore, waiting. Biting your lip as your mind turns the idea over, after a moment you have to shake your head. "I don't think that we'd be very good ambassadors, your majesty. I don't know the first thing about politics, or anything like that. And I don't think that the government would listen to me, to be honest."

Toriel hesitates, frowning. "Why is that?"

"I'm too young. Not to mention that I became a mother at fourteen, it just doesn't look good on a resume," you say, giving her a wry smile. "And to be honest, I'm just not cut out for it. I'd be in way over my head. Not that I won't help out!"

Asgore chuckles, nodding. "I understand. Do not fret over it any further."

Toriel turns her frown on Asgore. "You should not have put her on the spot like that, expecting so much from them. They have been through enough," she says sharply.

Asgore shies away, looking out over the trees instead of meeting her stern look. He doesn't notice the confused look that passes over Asriel's face. "Of course, Tori."

She gives an agitated sigh but doesn't correct him, and you wonder if it's because of the way that Asriel is watching them. You hope that the two of them can come to some kind of agreement, for their son's sake, at least. She walks back over to join her family, leaning down as Asriel tugs on the front of her robes to say something. They're too quiet for you to hear, so you turn to give them some privacy.

"Mom, you didn't answer my question," Frisk says.

What do you do now? Monsters are on the surface and you can't imagine that's going to go perfectly. You've seen enough movies to know the worst possible outcome and now that you're
here, facing the reality of it, it's making you nervous. You're struggling for some kind of answer when Sans wraps his arm back around your waist and hugs you close. With his other hand, he ruffles Frisk's hair, receiving a frustrated grumble in response as they comb their fingers through it and try not to smile.

"right now, kiddo, we're gonna watch the sunrise. we've got plenty of time to worry about what comes after," Sans says, and there's a certain weight to his words. 'After'. How long has he been waiting for an after?

Putting an arm around his shoulders, you lean against Sans and look out over the forest. The sky is starting to turn orange, chasing away the stars. You've seen hundreds of sunrises, more than you can count and you hardly paid them any attention. So when the sun starts to peek over the horizon, you don't bother to watch. You watch Sans instead. The way the lights in his eyes get brighter, the way his jaw goes a little slack. You watch the light paint across his face and you engrave this moment in your memory. The first time you see him in the sunlight.

His grip on you tightens but he can't tear his eyes away, transfixed. You're smiling and all of this, everything that's happened, feels so worth it. To bring him here where he can see the sun. You cup his jaw with your free hand and press another kiss to his cheek. "What do you think of the view?" you ask him, remembering your first date on another ledge, overlooking Snowdin's forest.

Sans's mouth twitches. You can almost see the realization on his face as he begins to turn to look at you. "very beautiful. the forest— oh." The white lights in his eyes search your face, follow the waves of your hair. He reaches out to run his hand through it before cupping your cheek, his smile going tender. "oh, hope. you're even more beautiful in the sunlight. look at you."

Blushing and happy, you give an embarrassed laugh, turning your head away. "Hun, come on," you mumble.

"i'm serious. babe, c'mon don't turn away," he says, laughing now too as he pulls your face back towards him.

Frisk lets out an exaggerated gagging noise and you give them a weak glare as they walk over to go stand with Papyrus instead. Rolling your eyes, you and Sans share a lingering, affectionate look.

"we're on the surface," he murmurs, turning to nuzzle into your cheek.

You press a trio of kisses to his jaw, giving a long, contented sigh. "Yeah, we are."

After an exhausting night with very little sleep for all of you, you end up napping in the midday sun, warm and content. Because heaven knows you'll need your rest for the coming days.

It's two days before a park ranger stumbles upon you and your little group. Another two before some men from the military hike out to meet with Asgore and Toriel (and you, at their insistence). They're nervous at the sight of the king and queen but you think that being there yourself really does help. How can they bear not to be braver than a young woman and a six year-old?

Things are tense for a few weeks. The government sets up a perimeter around the mountain and the surrounding forest, refusing to let any of the monsters leave the area. There's talk of putting up some kind of permanent wall or fence but Asgore manages to convince them not to. They compromise on an armed patrol instead. The monsters are willing enough to cooperate, much to your relief. A checkpoint is set up on the only road leading in and out.

Magic, old-fashioned brute strength, and (to your surprise) help from some of the soldiers gets the
rough beginnings of a settlement started on the surface. Many monsters opt to stay in the
Underground until things are more stable, not that you blame them. Alphys regularly travels back
and forth with Undyne to check on the lab and the Core, and there's talk of running energy from
the Core up to the surface.

For the most part, there isn't much that you can do. During the days you help with construction
where you can, or sit in on Asgore and Toriel's meetings with the government. You don't really
understand everything that's going on, but there seems to be talks of giving the monsters the
already sectioned-off part of the forest as some kind of gesture of goodwill. You suspect it's also to
keep them from scattering into the nearby cities. There's no talk of removing the checkpoint.

It's not until the military sets up a small signal tower that your cellphone reconnects to the surface
network. The moment it happens your phone lets out an overwhelming series of chirps and chimes,
nearly four months of notification backlog. You barely know where to start. There's text messages
from old coworkers wondering where you are, a slew of emails (most of them are spam), and a
handful of voicemails.

There's five voicemails from your mother. You wait until you have a moment alone with Sans to go
through them. He sits with you on the cot you've been sharing, one arm around your shoulders as
you swallow past the lump in your throat and enter the password for your mailbox. The first three
are of her screaming at you. You delete them as quick as you can but you can tell she blames you
for running off with Frisk. She accuses you of 'stealing' them from her. You grit your teeth and
move on to the next.

Your finger is poised over the number to delete the next message but you're caught off-guard by
the sound of sobbing. You turn to look at Sans and he meets your eyes, giving you a reassuring
squeeze before raising the phone to your ear.

"I'm so sorry," she says, and it's been so long since you've heard your mother cry you don't know
what to do but just listen. "This is my fault. I drove you away. They... they found the car at the base
of Mt. Ebott and all I can think about is those horrible stories they tell about that place. All the kids
that've gone missing." She pauses, taking in a shaky breath. "Sweetheart, why did you go there? I
can only hope that maybe you did it to throw everyone off. That maybe you and Frisk are safe
somewhere where no one will find you. I just... If you are safe you probably won't tell me, so I just
keep praying that you're all right. I love you. Both of you."

There's a click and the message ends. You squeeze your eyes shut to try and stop the tears that have
gathered in your eyes. The next message starts to play.

Silence stretches on for a few moments before you hear your mother let out a long sigh. "I miss
you," she says, and then it ends. The robotic voice notifies you that you have no more unheard
messages.

You end the call and Sans strokes your back as you cling to him, trembling.

A week later you have clearance to leave Mt. Ebott. All of your friends want to go with you,
especially after you explain the situation with your mother. Undyne in particular wants to make
sure she doesn't try to touch you, but it takes a bit of back and forth for them to agree to
just one monster going with you and Frisk. Of course it's Sans.

You only call your mother the morning before your scheduled trip, just to let her know that the two
of you are coming to see her and to get some of your things to take back with you. It's hard to get a
read on how she's feeling. Her voice is a little flat but you think it's because of shock. She mentions
seeing you and Frisk on the news and she tries to ask you about the monsters. You cut her off and
tell her when you'll be arriving and hang up the call. She tries to call you back and you don't
answer.

A pair of soldiers take you, Frisk, and Sans through the checkpoint in an unmarked, tinted SUV. It's your first time off the mountain and you're surprised to see a small crowd of press gathered outside what the monsters have started calling the Line. (The fact that they've gone from being behind the Barrier to the Line is not lost on you.) The woman sitting in the passenger seat tells you that it was a lot worse in the first two weeks, but a lot of them have given up. The monsters stay too far inside the forest for anyone to get any pictures or video.

Sans looks nervous. The soldiers don't seem to notice, but you do. But after four months together you think you can read his expressions pretty well, despite the smile he uses to hide his discomfort. He has a hand clutched tight to the seatbelt across his chest and he keeps casting anxious glances out the window. Reaching over, you take his hand and squeeze his fingers. You realize this is the first time he's ever ridden in a car before.

"i'm fine," he mutters under his breath, glancing over at you.

"I know you are. It's just new. There's been a lot of new stuff this past month, huh?" you ask, running your thumb across his bones.

"and plenty more coming." He looks down at your hands, squeezing you. "it's just taking some getting used to, after..."

He doesn't need to finish his sentence. You nod.

It takes about thirty minutes for you to get... no, not home. It's not home anymore. Your mother's house is in a small, cheap suburb in the foothills, about an hour outside the city. It's the house your father bought before you were born, paid off by his life insurance after he died. That's the only reason your mother never lost it. She'd never be able to afford it on her own. It's slowly deteriorated over the years, and as the SUV pulls into the driveway next to the car you'd abandoned on Mt. Ebott the first thing you notice is that the bushes are overgrown. The second is that there aren't any news vans. You're thankful for that.

The soldiers wait in the SUV as the three of you get out. Your heart is hammering in your chest and your hands shake as you reach into your pocket for the keys you haven't had to use in months. You still don't have to use them. She still has her bad habit of leaving the door unlocked. You used to have to check the doors after she went to bed because it made you nervous.

Sans and Frisk follow you inside, holding hands. You feel his other hand on the small of your back, a gesture of support. It helps.

"Hope? Sweetheart is that you?"

Steeling yourself, you follow the sound of her voice to the living room. She's pushing herself up from her recliner, turning off the TV. Rounding the couch quicker than you'd expect, you freeze up as she throws her arms around you and pulls you into a tight hug.

"Oh, God when I got your call this morning I couldn't believe it! Are you okay?" she says. She sounds so... relieved. Happy, even. It makes your eyes water, even though you told yourself you weren't going to let her do this to you.

"I'm fine," you say, because it's all you can manage while keeping your composure.

She pulls away before you even have a chance to think about hugging her back, ducking around
you to try and get to Frisk. "Frisk, my baby—" She freezes and jerks backwards. You turn to shift out of her way and see that Frisk ducked behind Sans. Oh, she must have finally noticed him. "I thought those things weren't allowed off the mountain!"

Sans raises a brow. "s'cuse me, pal?"

"Mother," you snap, harsh enough to make her jerk her head to look at you. It makes a small part of you want to step back out of fear but you force yourself to stand your ground. "This is Sans. And you won't refer to him or any of the others as things. Sans, this is my mother, Kimberly."

Sans makes a noncommittal, unimpressed noise.

"Kim," she corrects you, giving Sans only half a glance as she looks down at you. "And don't take that tone with me, young lady."

Kim is bigger than you. Heavier set with pale, blotchy skin. She's taller by a couple inches, but she's no Undyne. Your mother is smaller than you remember. After spending so much time around Toriel and Asgore, with their impressive height and gentle strength, she doesn't seem nearly as intimidating as before. You've faced down death. You've died, and suddenly this woman is tiny. Right now, at least, you feel stronger than her.

"I wouldn't have to take this tone if you could show some basic human decency towards the people I care about," you snap, seething. "Frisk and I didn't need to come here today. I thought that maybe I owed this to you, but now I'm not so sure."

She stares at you, clearly taken aback. You've never stood up to her like this before. Clenching your hands into fists at your side, you feel Sans's hand on your shoulder. Kim's eyes flick to it and back to your face, her surprise melting away into confusion, and then finally frustration. "Frisk, sweetheart, you haven't even said hi to your mommy yet."

"You're not my mommy," Frisk says, without hesitation. You think you hear Sans make a satisfied noise.

It takes a moment for the words to register in her mind. Now she's glaring at you, her red cheeks getting blotchier by the second. "So you finally told them, did you? Finally decided to step up to the plate and take responsibility for what you did?"

Your hand twitches as you fight back the urge to slap her across the face. No. You're not her. You'll never be her and you won't resort to that. Not with her at least. She'll never see you sink to her level. "Don't you dare act like I was the one who gave up Frisk. You took them from me when I was scared and alone. You should have been there to support me! To help me!" Full of righteous fury, you have to restrain yourself to keep from screaming at her. "I am their mother, not you, and I will never let you hurt them again, you hateful bitch."

"I don't have to listen to this!" she bites out, gritting her teeth.

Sans steps up to stand beside you, shoulder to shoulder as you feel a hint of magic prickle over your skin. His sockets are dark as he glares up her. "How about you back off, kim? This doesn't need to get any worse than you've already made it," he says, his voice low and bordering on threatening.

You're not sure if it's his tone or the look on his face, but she blanches and takes a step back, eyes flicking between the two of you. Then she looks at Frisk and you see her expression change to something panicked. "Wait, you're... you're not coming home, are you?" she asks, and you think she's finally realized the power that you have over her right now. You're not ashamed to admit that
it feels good.

"No, I'm not. This isn't my home anymore," you tell her, fighting to keep yourself steady. "It's on Ebott, with Sans and the others. The people who love me."

"That's no place for a child—"

"This is no place for a child! And it's not for you to decide anymore," you say. You glance over at Frisk. "C'mon, sweetie. Let's get our things and get out of here. Make sure that this trip wasn't just a huge waste of time."

"Hope, wait—"

"No. I'm done waiting. When you're ready to treat me with the respect I deserve, let me know," you say, turning on your heel.

The look on Sans's face is so insufferably smug, so proud of you that you can't help but smile. You're pretty proud of yourself too.

Chapter End Notes

Holy cow you guys. Here it is. The end of ACT One.

I cannot thank you guys enough for all the love and support you've shown me and how enthusiastic and wonderful you all continue to be! I couldn't have done all of this without you, I'm not even exaggerating.

Right now the plan is for me to take about a week to maybe work on some one-shots and get ACT Two outlined a bit, but stick around right here in this same place for ACT Two!

As always, follow me on Tumblr (onadacora.tumblr.com) for updates on the fic, fanart, etc... I'll be posting links to the one-shots there and of course they'll be posted here on AO3.

I love you guys, and thank you again. I hope you stick around to enjoy the next leg of Sans and Hope's journey. <3
Welcome back everyone! I know it wasn't quite a week, but I was itching to get started. If you didn't see it, I posted a 'What-If' chapter in my Undertale One-Shots collection that accompanies Chapter 63. Yes it's sad.

"Y-you need to buy Hope a ring."

With a loud scrape of metal on metal, Sans misses the bolt he's trying to tighten. He looks over the two-foot wide metal pipe he's trying to fix onto one of the Core's turbines, narrowing his eye sockets. She doesn't even look at him, busy trying to sort through a rat's nest of wiring. Sweat dots her brow; the inner workings of the Core would be unbearably hot if they weren't a skeleton and a reptile.

"...what was that?" Sans asks, thinking for a moment that he must have misheard her. He slips the wrench into place, snug around the bolt as he turns it.

Alphys adjusts her glasses, sighing at the wires in her hands and glancing up at him for half a second before returning to her work. "You're engaged, right? Humans give r-rings when they propose," she says. "It's romantic! A t-tangible sign of your commitment and a signal to other humans that they're taken. Since they can't feel Souls the way we can."

He watches her pull a pair of wire-strippers out of the pocket of her lab coat and start snipping and reattaching. With one final turn of the wrench, Sans gives the pipe a shove and it holds fast.

Hopefully they can get this extra turbine spinning again to help boost the energy to the surface. Mettaton has been complaining to Alphys about outages at his new hotel in Ebott's downtown, and normally Sans would just ignore him. But the overgrown calculator is right. The power has been a bit unstable as more and more buildings get hooked onto the grid. Trying to maintain power Underground for those monsters that chose to stay behind (or even moved back) as well as for their new city of Ebott on the surface is proving to be a bit more than the Core can handle. He and Alphys have been working on making improvements on the old design over the last few months to make it more efficient.

"she's never said anything about wanting a ring," Sans says, walking over to Alphys and setting the wrench into the toolbox beside her. She gives him another quick look but returns her attention to the snipped wires fanned out in her stubby fingers.

"Maybe she doesn't realize you don't know? Have you t-told her about monster weddings? Or how our proposals usually go?" She twists two ends of some wires between her fingers, fixing it together with some electrician tape.

"we haven't really talked about— alphys you're getting distracted. you're wrapping those wires all wrong," he grumbles, shifting closer but shoving his hands in the pockets of his lab coat to stop himself from reaching out and correcting her.

Alphys shoots him an annoyed look over her glasses. "I've been maintaining the Core for the past three years, I know what I'm doing," she sniffs. Then, realizing what she just said, she gives an
awkward little cough and starts stripping another wire. "B-besides, now it just sounds like you're trying to change the subject."

"I'm trying to make sure you don't blow up half the core—"

"Were you always this d-dramatic? At worst the turbine just w-won't spin," she grumbles under her breath.

Sans catches himself before he says anything else, giving Alphys's handiwork another look. He feels himself falling into old habits with her, and it's... not good. He needs to get better at listening. "Sorry. You're right, you've been doing this a lot longer than me. Just cuz you're doing the wires different than me doesn't mean you're doing it wrong."

She gives him a surprised look, a pleased smile slowly easing its way onto her face. "It's nice to have you back. I'm glad you agreed when I asked."

Shrugging, Sans looks away, studying the blades of the turbine under the harsh lighting. The other turbines aren't too far away, filling the huge room with a steady whir of noise. But they've been at this for a few hours now, and the sound hardly registers to them anymore.

"It's important work, and you could use the help. Would seem pretty rude of me to turn you down. And besides, it's not like I'm needed for sentry duty anymore," he says, rocking back on the heels of his thick-soled shoes. What he doesn't say is that it finally feels like working at the lab isn't pointless anymore. He wants to help. But he can't explain that to Alphys, not without telling her more that she needs to know. The others just wouldn't understand. "So how did you know that I proposed?"

Alphys lets out a little laugh. "You think that Hope never told me or Undyne in the four months since it happened? Sans you've been engaged longer than you ever dated," she says, smirking up at him from her seat on the floor. "We've been wondering when you guys were going to finally do something about it."

Sans clears his throat, trying to fight the pleased feeling rising to color his cheekbones. It doesn't really work. "It's, uh, sort of complicated," he says, and damn if that isn't an understatement. Not only had the proposal been on accident in the first place, but immediately after... well. Things hadn't gone very well. It was only when things started to get more permanent on the surface that he'd even dared to bring it up again. It seemed odd to try and ask you if you were still his fiancée when you were sharing a cot in a glorified tent. "Did she tell you how it happened?"

"Well then you know I didn't exactly plan it out in advance," he says, sighing. "So we agreed to wait a little while to make things official. Give us time to adjust to all this up here, together."

With a hum of approval, Alphys bobs her head up and down, smoothing a few frayed wires with her fingernails. "It's been a busy few months."

"Besides, you know we can't get married right now. We aren't even allowed off the mountain yet, you think an interspecies marriage is gonna fly?" Sans grits his teeth, shaking his head.

"Maybe not yet but you know that Asgore is doing his best to make things better. These things don't happen overnight. The humans have been really a-accommodating, all things considered..." Sighing, Alphys tears a bit of tape between her teeth, her tail giving a nervous sweep across the floor. "It's not perfect, but... things could be worse."
"yeah, i guess. if you wanna get technical," he says, nudging her tail away from his foot.

His phone starts to buzz in his pocket, and he realizes that it must be getting close to dinnertime. It's easy to lose track of time in the Underground, now that he's grown more accustomed to the sun. Your picture fills the center of the screen, letting him know that you're calling. It's a new one, one from the surface. He dragged you out of bed early one morning to watch the sunrise with him on the balcony of your new home, looking out over the budding town of Ebott and the old, flourishing human cities in the foothills and beyond. Even further in the distance, out on the horizon, was the barest glimmer that you said was the ocean. In the picture you're leaning forward against the railing, your hair catching the light like it did that first morning on the surface. You're giving him a wry, embarrassed smile.

He answers the phone.

You smile when Sans picks up on the fourth ring. Sometimes he gets so caught up in his work at the Core that it takes a few calls for him to answer. Propping the phone up against your ear with your shoulder, you continue peeling a small pile of potatoes on the counter in front of you.

"hey babe. that time already?" he asks, as has become habit these past few weeks.

"Yep. Just getting started. Pap is on his way to pick you up," you say. Sans still hasn't bothered to learn how to drive, and hasn't shown any interest in getting his own car. But Papyrus loves the excuse to use his brand new, shiny red convertible and you suspect that's part of the reason Sans has been putting it off. With the Line still keeping all the monsters on the mountain, there's only so much driving any of them can do. "Don't forget, Tori and Asgore are coming over for dinner tonight."

"I remember. they wanted to talk about that conference coming up, right?" He sounds distracted, and you can hear Alphys muffled in the background. "yeah, night alphys. i'll see you tomorrow."

"No, you won't, because the conference is tomorrow," you tell him, sighing.

"Sorry, no i won't. yeah. okay, later." There's a pause where you can hear the steady drone of the Core start to get quieter as he walks away from whatever machinery he was working on today. "hope, you still there?"

"Yeah, hun. I'm here." You carry handfuls of potato peels over to the trashcan, stepping on a little paddle to open the lid. Chef's knife in hand, you start chopping. "You have a good day?"

"Yeah, the usual. we're trying to get one of the defunct turbines spinning again, been a little slow going. but it should give the power to the city a nice boost once we're done," he says, and you can practically hear the shrug in his voice.

"The lights flickered at the school like four times today. It's real distracting for the kids. They make such a big deal out of it. One of them let out this obnoxious screech when it happened and scared Asriel almost out of his skin. He made the most pathetic bleating sound, I felt so bad. Uh, anyway," you say, realizing that you're rambling a little. "I mean, I guess it's better than the blackouts we were having."

"I know. hey do you need us to stop at the store on the way home?"

"No, I don't think so." You hear a polite knock on the front door, and then the sound of it opening. "Oh, hun they're here, I've gotta go. I love you."
"love you too. see you in a bit."

You hang up your phone and slide it into the back pocket of your jeans, glancing over your shoulder as Toriel comes into the kitchen. She has a few bags clutched in her hands, along with a pie balanced carefully on the pads of her fingers. You hurry over to help her, plucking the dessert from her hand and putting it into the fridge.

"Oh, thank you my child. I am afraid I must be carrying more than I ought to," she says as you come back to her to take some of the bags and set them on the counter. It takes both arms to lift what she was able to carry with just one.

"Tori you know you don't have to bring all this food every time you and Asgore come over. You're always feeding us," you say, feeling a little embarrassed. You know she's just going to wave you away, but you feel obligated to tell her anyway.

"Nonsense. It is my pleasure," she says, giving you a warm smile. "Besides, you are always feeding Asriel as well, it is the least I can do to make it up to you."

And Frisk is always over at her place too, but she never lets you bring over any groceries to make up for it. You decide to just drop it for now. You've had so many different versions of this polite back and forth you know it's pointless. Sensing your silent acceptance, Toriel just gives you an approving, motherly look and gets to work putting everything away. She knows your spacious kitchen like the back of her hand, wasting no time. Working together, the counters are soon cleared up and you get back to preparing dinner. She busies herself with your kettle and collection of novelty teacups Asgore keeps giving you and your family.

"Where's Asgore?" you ask, glancing over at her to gauge her reaction. Things between them have still been a little strained, and some days are worse than others.

Her expression remains placid as she shifts to the side to reach where you keep the tea. "He is running late, finishing up preparations for the conference tomorrow," she says, sighing. A small furrow forms between her brows. "Some days I think that he is working himself too much. I understand that this event with the humans is very important, but we cannot have him spreading himself too thin. Our people rely on him too much."

"Have you talked to him about it? That you're worried about him?" She colors a little under her pristine white fur at that, giving you a chastising look. You look back down at what you're doing, avoiding her eyes. "I'm just saying that if he'd listen to anybody, it's you."

"I will not use his lingering affection for me against him," she says, and you can feel her frown. You swallow. "I'm not saying manipulate him. I'm just saying that he respects you."

Toriel doesn't respond. She skirts around you to fetch the kettle before it starts to whistle, and pours water into two teacups. One for each of you. After a moment, she lets out a small sigh. "Perhaps, after the conference tomorrow, I will speak with him. It is only... there are so many things our people still need from the human government, my child." Her shoulders sag and you wish there was something you could do to help. Even though you know it's not your fault in the least, you feel an odd sense of responsibility for the behavior of your fellow humans. The monsters didn't quite realize just what they were getting themselves into by coming to the surface. She shakes her head, giving you a forced smile that doesn't reach her eyes. "Forgive me, I am only concerned about tomorrow. I fear it is weighing heavy on my mind."

You give her a small, comforting smile in return. "Trust me, you're not the only one. It's gonna be a
big day for all of us. But the army is doing its best to protect us. They did all those background checks, Asgore said. And it's not like just anybody off the street is getting let over the Line."

"The surface was not nearly so... complicated the last time we were here," she says with a wry twist of her mouth. "But it is good that we are finally encouraging visitors. It will do us little good to remain hidden away. How is that any different than when we were in the Underground?"

You open your mouth to answer but she cuts you off with a soft laugh.

"Aside from the obvious. I know you were about to say something about the sun," she teases, her smile finally becoming more genuine.

You chuckle. "Absolutely not. I was gonna say something about the moon."

She shakes her head at you, giving you an affectionate look. It's nice, spending time with her like this. You and the others have fallen into this almost ordinary life together on the surface, and it's more than you could have expected months ago. This beautiful, brand new house that you share with Frisk, Sans, and Papyrus is more than big enough for all of you. The ceilings on the first floor are even vaulted to accommodate Toriel and Asgore's regular visits. Some days, the days when you don't see any of the soldiers or feel the constraints placed on your friends and family... it almost feels normal.

"It has been more difficult than I expected, I admit," Toriel says, giving her tea an absentminded stir. "But I would not give up any of this. Especially now that we have Asriel back. I never thought, even when he was a baby, that he would be able to grow up under the light of the sun."

You think she's going to start reminiscing, as she usually does when she gets that distant look in her eye. But after a brief moment of hesitation, she glances around the kitchen like something's missing. She cocks her head to the side, listening to the peaceful silence of the house, and that's when it dawns on you.

"Where are Asriel and Frisk?" she asks.
Chapter Notes

Of the roughly twenty-thousand monsters living under Mt. Ebott, about a fifth of them stay in the Underground. Those that chose to live on the surface opted to stay with familiar faces, and so two neighborhoods sprung up outside of downtown. These are affectionately referred to as Lakeside and Mountainside, in monster (or Asgore's) tradition of naming things a little too on-the-nose.

Lakeside is, as one might assume, next to a huge lake within monster territory. A mix of runoff from winter snow and a hotspring from Ebott's volcanic activity, the waters are a pleasant, lukewarm temperature most of the year. The residents of old Waterfall chose to move there, along with the Riverperson. Well, they go by Lakeperson now, giving people rides from one end to the other.

Mountainside is situated higher up Mt. Ebott's slope, overlooking downtown in the small valley below. It's here that most of Snowdin's residents chose to make their home, including you and your family, and Toriel and Asriel. Asriel and Frisk insisted on staying close to one another, having become nearly inseparable. And how could Toriel deny her son? Their house is a quarter mile down the road, your closest neighbor.

Well, technically your second closest neighbor, but the little house in the opposite direction of Toriel's has been empty for about a month. A small family of three had their house built there but they just couldn't adjust to being on the surface. They rarely ever came outside and every time you saw them they were nervous and jittery, casting anxious glances at the sky and the wide open spaces. Not everyone could adjust to being above ground and they were some of the few hundred that chose to go back.

"Frisk, I don't think this is a good idea," Asriel whispers, casting the vacant house's back door an uncertain look. He's got one of his ears in his hand, rubbing the pink pads of his fingers over the short, velvety fur.

Frisk gives their best friend a bright, confident smile. They take hold of his hand, pulling it gently away from his ear and lacing their fingers together, giving him an encouraging tug. "C'mon, no one lives here anymore and there's all that stuff just sitting there. None of it's getting used," they say, not even bothering to keep their voice down and reaching for the doorknob. It's unlocked. It's a habit that you've complained about, just how trusting the monsters are of each other.

"I guess..." Asriel says, and that's when Frisk knows they've got him on their side again. He looks down at their joined hands and lets them pull him through the door.

The house is a little dark despite the afternoon light. All the windows have the curtains drawn and the air inside is stale. It's quiet, which makes the scuff of Frisk's shoes against the kitchen tile all the louder. The tough, catlike pads on Asriel's feet are silent.

"Hmm. So, what should we look for?" Asriel asks, sounding more confident than he did a moment ago. Frisk glances over their shoulder at him in time to see him square his shoulders a little, trying his best to look... tough, maybe? They stifle a giggle, not wanting to upset him.

"Something to sit on. Something that isn't rocks," Frisk says, making a face.
"What's wrong with rocks? They're nice and warm by the time we get out of school." He frees his hand and moves to the other side of the kitchen, where there's a small table.

"Yeah and they're cold in the winter. And hard."

"Winter's coming soon, right? That's why it's getting cooler? That's what Mom said."

Frisk gives Asriel an amused look, but the innocent, genuinely uncertain expression on his face reminds them that he's being serious. Sometimes they forget just how much their friend doesn't know about the surface, things they take for granted. Like rain, and seasons, and the leaves changing color. He'd been so confused when the familiar greens had started turning to yellows, reds, and oranges and even asked if there was something wrong with the trees. The hurt look in his eyes when Frisk started giggling was enough to remind themselves to take his questions seriously.

"Yeah. It's still fall now, but it'll be winter soon. And it'll look just like Snowdin!" Frisk misses Snowdin, just a little. The perpetual Christmas tree and lights made the little town feel magical, and Mountainside... well. Mountainside is nice, but it's no Snowdin.

"How soon?" Asriel asks, tugging one of the chairs out from the kitchen table. "And what about chairs? We can sit on chairs."

"Well it's October now. So, um... two months? I think?" Frisk shrugs, turning away from the empty pantry they're snooping in to look back at their friend. "I don't wanna carry a bunch of chairs through the forest, do you?"

Wrapping his hands around the edges of the seat, he lifts the wooden chair with ease, raising an eyebrow at them. "They're not that heavy."

"Well not to you! You're, like, boss monster strong," Frisk says, without even the barest hint of jealousy. They just laugh, giving him a look of admiration that has Asriel blushing.

He sets the chair back down, tugging an ear over his snout to hide his face. "Well, I mean, I can carry them for you if you want," he says, his words slightly muffled.

Frisk shakes their head, sighing. "Nah, I think that might be a bit too much. I was thinking something smaller. Something soft." They shove their hands in the pockets of their blue and red striped hoodie, thinking as they bounce the toe of their sneaker on the floor. Staring at the chair, an idea comes to them. "Oh! What about the chair cushions! We could just take those off."

"Do we want all of them?" Asriel asks, looking at the set of six chairs ringing the table. "Just two should be okay, one for each of us!" As Asriel gets to work on untying one of the squishy, green cushions from the slats on the back of the chair, Frisk starts on another one. "Or... should we get a couple more, in case we bring other friends with us?"

Frisk doesn't notice the little crease that forms between Asriel's eyes. "...I thought you said this was just for us?" he asks in an even tone.

"Oh, yeah that's true. Just two then. These are perfect though, to make those rocks at the clubhouse more comfortable!"

Clubhouse is a bit of an exaggeration. In reality it's more a collection of granite boulders that Frisk is determined to put some kind of roof over at some point in the future. It's a good fifteen minutes away from home, out in the middle of the forest, nice and secluded from any pesky adults. The second Frisk spotted it about a week ago they decided that it was theirs and got to work clearing
out the space between the biggest boulders to establish some kind of 'floor'. Asriel still didn't seem to get the appeal. But after Frisk said it was something special just for the two of them, it was easy to get him to help.

Neither of them seem to notice the sunlight starting to fade as they reach the clubhouse with their spoils. Frisk immediately starts scaling the biggest boulder, climbing up a smaller one to reach the top. It has a nice, flat top worn almost level and perfect for sitting. Plopping down the cushion they carried all this way, Frisk sits down and surveys their little spot. It's nice, and quiet, and theirs. Just the two of them. Frisk never had a chance to have anything like this back when the two of you were still living with... um, their grandmother. Frisk still isn't sure what to call her, 'Grandma' is reserved for Toriel, and they haven't seen Kim since that brief visit where you yelled at her. She'd been so angry... they're not sure they ever want to see her again any time soon.

Realizing they're frowning, Frisk glances over at Asriel as he takes a seat beside them. He gives them a bright, happy smile and Frisk smiles back. No reason to dwell on bad things. Not when there's good things here, like Asriel and their clubhouse.

"Isn't this neat?" Frisk asks for probably the hundredth time since they found it. "Maybe next time we can start trying to find branches or something. We can put them across the top, like a thatched roof or something!"

Asriel gives the uneven, crooked circle of stones a dubious look. "I don't think we'll find branches big enough. Um, maybe one of those, uh," he gestures with his hands, spreading his fingers like he's smoothing something. "Those big plastic sheet things?"

"Oh! You mean a tarp?" Frisk looks over the clubhouse again, trying to visualize it in their mind. Tapping their chin for effect, they squint a little. "Hmm..."

Asriel looks away, tilting his head to the side and stroking his ear. "Or, maybe that's not a great idea, I mean, where—"

Flopping over to the side, Frisk stretches themselves out in Asriel's lap, ignoring his startled yelp. They reach up and take hold of his ears, gently, flapping them a little as they smile up at him. "That's a great idea! We just have to find one. Maybe... maybe Dad has one in his workshop."

Asriel takes a handful of Frisk's hair, pulling a hank of it over their eyes. Giggling, they have to let go of his ears to smooth it out again, pushing neatly-trimmed bangs off their forehead. The rest of it is longer than it was in the Underground, settling past their shoulders. Here on the mountain, they don't have to worry about anyone mistaking them for a girl. Or a boy, for that matter.

"I don't think we should go into Sans's workshop without permission," Asriel says, poking Frisk in the ribs with a blunted claw. "Besides... I still don't think he trusts me."

Frisk makes a face, but can't bring themselves to disagree. Sans is nice to Asriel, and hasn't said anything to make them think he doesn't like him but... There's something weird there. The ghost of Flowey still haunting Asriel's footsteps. He seems to feel it too because his smile fades and his big green eyes go a little distant. Frisk pokes him in the nose and he starts giggling. There, that's much better.

Their laughter is cut short, however, when Frisk's cell phone starts to ring. And half a second later, so does Asriel's. They share a look as dread settles over both of them.

"Oh no," they say, in unison.
"We're sorry—"

"We lost track of time—"

"We didn't mean to be out so late—"

"I know you said to set an alarm the last time but—"

"Frisk and I just got distracted, and—"

You hold up your hands for quiet, trying not to smile at their desperate and heartfelt attempts to get themselves out of trouble. Glancing at Toriel, you see her trying to do the same and you know that neither of you really have it in you to scold them. They were just being kids, after all.

"We were just worried about you," you tell them, propping your hands on your hips.

"Yes, please try to remember that you have family at home who love you and want to know that you are safe," Toriel says, a little sterner than you.

Asriel hunches his shoulders a little, hanging his head. "Yes, Mom."

"Yes, Grandma," Frisk echoes. You reach out and give them a nudge on the shoulder, pointing to the sink. The unspoken message is clear; they both dart off to go wash their hands.

You and Toriel exchange a look. It's been like this for the past four months, worrying about wherever those two might have run off to. Things got a little easier on both of you once you got them their own cell phones. They might be a bit young, but your peace of mind is more important. Not to mention, in their cases, 'young' feels a bit relative.

Hearing the front door open, Toriel waves you off with a hand.

"WE'RE HOME!" comes Papyrus's voice. You follow it out of the kitchen and into the living room.

Sans is kicking off his work shoes by the door, replacing them with his familiar slippers. It's the only thing he wears different when he goes to help Alphys. Aside from that small change, he's still got on his jacket, a pair of track shorts, and a t-shirt. Baby steps, you think. A lot has changed, for both of you, and his clothes are the least of your worries. At least you know he's got good traction.

Papyrus, in comparison, has embraced the idea of living on the surface and adapting to human culture with his trademark enthusiasm. It took a little convincing to get him to stop wearing his 'battle body' but once you and Sans told him he might be a little intimidating to the other humans, he took to new clothes easily. He's wearing a pair of skinny jeans (specially made for him, of course, since god knows no human on earth exists with his measurements) and a red flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He's a beard and a pair of thick glasses away from looking like a hipster, but at least he's a well-dressed hipster. The only bit remaining from his old wardrobe is that red scarf he's still got wrapped around his neck.

"Hey you two, have a good drive?" you ask, giving Papyrus a quick smile as you cross the room.

"OF COURSE! THOUGH I HAD TO WAIT FOR THIS LAZYBONES FOR ALMOST TEN MINUTES. I THINK HE FORGOT ABOUT ME," Papyrus says, giving his brother a frustrated look.

"i told you i didn't forget about you, bro. i had to put away my stuff, got a late start," Sans says,
shrugging before smiling up at you and giving you a hug and a quick brush of his mouth against your cheek. "hey babe. dinner's smelling great."

"Pap, Tori and the kids are in the kitchen if you wanna see if she needs any help finishing up dinner," you tell him.

"OH, THE QUEEN IS HERE ALREADY? I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AM MORE THAN HAPPY TO HELP!" He makes a beeline for the kitchen, leaving you and Sans with a moment of privacy.

"nice one," he says, wrapping his arms more snugly around your waist and pulling you close, grinning.

With a contented hum, you lace your hands behind his neck, leaning down to press a few, slow kisses to the side of his face. "I wanted to get a moment alone with you before dinner, since it'll be a few hours until we get another chance."

One of his hands drops to your butt, making you blush and give an embarrassed laugh. "any reason in particular? did i do something good? cuz if i did, lemme know so i can do it again." He nips at your earlobe and you let out a little gasp.

"Do I need a reason to want to show you a little affection?" you murmur.

"Mom! Dad! Quit being gross!"

Sighing, the two of you separate just enough to frown at Frisk as they enter the room, trailed by Asriel. He's staring very pointedly at the floor.

"Aaaand the moment is over," you mutter under your breath.

A loud knock on the door signals that the moment really is well and truly over, followed by a friendly, "Howdy!" to herald Asgore's arrival. You and Sans have to sidestep to get out of the way as it starts to open. With one last look at each other, the two of you separate completely in order to get this family dinner underway.

Chapter End Notes

Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters (including the Reader/Hope) and fanart!

 honadacora.tumblr.com
"They're still not willing to talk about letting anyone over the Line?" you ask Asgore, disappointment settling heavy in your stomach. You try to ignore it as you take another bite of your dinner.

Asgore shakes his head, rubbing a hand across the bridge of his snout. He looks exhausted, more exhausted than the last time you saw him, about a week ago. You can see why Toriel's worried about him. Getting this conference set up on top of dealing with the government, it's weighing him down. You wish that there was more that you could do to help, but you know better. You'd just get in the way.

With a look that you can almost describe as tender, Toriel brushes his arm with her fingers and pushes a steaming cup of tea closer to his hand. He looks at her, a little surprised but pleased all the same as he picks it up. "I think that they wish to see how this conference goes, first. A test of sorts," he says, looking over at you again.

"we're not the ones who're at fault here," Sans says, squirting ketchup onto his mashed potatoes in lieu of gravy. Frisk takes the bottle and does the same, much to Asriel's clear disgust from their other side.

"Technically, neither are the humans. We cannot blame them for the behavior of those that came before them. They do not even have any records that we even existed, aside from wild myth," he says, nudging his food with his fork. Smoothing down the front of his oversized sweater, he leans forward to take a bite.

"I'M CERTAIN THAT ONCE THEY GET TO KNOW US BETTER, EVERYTHING WILL BE JUST FINE," Papyrus chimes in, between bites of pasta salad. ("COLD PASTA? PASTA ISN'T SUPPOSED TO BE COLD!")

"In time, I am certain that may be true," Toriel says soothingly, giving Papyrus a kind smile. She looks over at Sans. "Right now it is crucial that we make the best impression that we can, show them the best we have to offer. Because no matter where blame may lie, the fact is that we need the human government. We require their cooperation."

Nodding your head, you tuck some hair behind your ear as you glance at Sans. He meets your eyes, that little furrow of frustration between his brows smoothing away. You reach under the table to give his leg a reassuring squeeze and he relaxes a little. He hates knowing that all of you are at the mercy of the government, only living this relatively peaceful life because they allow it. That it can change with little warning, despite all your efforts. It hits him a little too close to old hurts.

"They've already taken advantage of all of you, though," you say, frustration plain in your voice. "Look at what they did with the gold exchange. They basically got a load of free money from you just because they could!"

Asgore gives you a patient look, like he might give a child. It's irritating sometimes, just how calm he can be about all this. "Yes, we received less than the true value of the gold, but we all have more than enough money even so. They did not have to let us into the surface economy at all. Without it, bringing in contractors to work on our city would have been much more difficult."

"Sure, but why wouldn't they take all that gold off your hands? They had nothing to lose."
"We have all this land to call our own, and they are protecting us from those humans that might wish us ill," Toriel says, giving you that same, indulgent look she gave Papyrus. You feel what little fight is left in you getting buried under the surface, your frustration on their behalf unwanted.

"you mean keeping us trapped," Sans says, between bites.

"I know that your feelings are well-intended, both of you, but we can only do the best with what we have been given. Pushing back with demands of our own will not help our situation," Asgore says, a slight edge to his voice. "You are not the only ones wanting more freedom to see the surface, but with things the way they are now I fear for the safety of those that might cross the Line. Things are... calm now with the humans, but I worry."

His eyes are on Asriel, and you realize, with a tight squeeze in your chest, what he must be thinking. If it wasn't for those humans, long ago, Asriel wouldn't have died. Silence hangs heavy over the table as Sans finds your hand and gives you a quick look to check on you. Asgore reaches out to stroke his son's head and Toriel touches her husband's arm, and you feel like you're intruding on something private.

"But people are gonna be coming here, right? So that's good. They can see how nice everyone is," Frisk says, reaching over their plate for their drink. "And maybe some will stay and live here."

The tension lifts, with Toriel giving Frisk a pleased smile. "Exactly, my child. We want other humans to come live here in Ebott, just as you and your mother do. There are plenty of jobs, and there is still so much we can learn from them. I am hoping to get some new teachers for our schools to help fill in the gaps in our knowledge, so that our children can learn more than ever before."

"AND METTATON TOLD ME THAT HE WANTS TO HIRE HUMANS TO WORK AT HIS HOTEL. TO... UM..." Papyrus frowns, thinking. "OH! TO 'ENCOURAGE HUMAN TOURISM' HE SAID. I'M NOT SURE WHAT 'TOURISM' IS, BUT IT SOUNDS EXCITING!"

Sans sighs, frowning again. "it means he wants to exploit humans coming to gawk at us."

"YOU'RE BEING RUDE AGAIN, SANS! THAT DOESN'T SOUND LIKE METTATON AT ALL!"

That sounds exactly like Mettaton. But in this case you have to agree with his means, if not his motives. The more humans coming to Ebott to see how nice things are here the better, in the long run. At least you hope so. Not that Sans can see anything past his own lingering... 'dislike' is too weak and 'hatred' seems too strong. But he's never forgiven Mettaton for trying to kill you and Frisk, and to be honest you still haven't quite either. Sans is just better at holding a grudge than you are.

Speaking of grudges, he still follows you around whenever Asgore is over. But, considering that he did kill you, you can't really fault him for his caution, as misplaced as it might be at this point.

"Any way that we can get human visitors is worthwhile," Toriel says calmly, ever the peacekeeper. "The more people that see us in a positive light, the better. Even if the intentions behind coming to Ebott are less than ideal. They may wish to, well, gawk at first, but in time they should see us as people instead of..." Her expression falters, and she pushes one of her long ears over her shoulder. "Instead of animals."

"Mom, do I have to go tomorrow?" Asriel asks, looking over at her and toying with his ear with one hand while pushing his food around on his plate with the other.
"Of course you do, Flufftail," she says, making Asriel grimace. You think the pet name is adorable, but her son doesn't seem to think so. "You are the prince, your father's heir. It is expected of you."

"But I'm not a prince anymore. Not really," he grumbles, shoving a forkful of his dinner in his mouth.

"And what makes you think that?" she asks, raising a brow.

"Ebott isn't a kingdom. It's just a city," he says, shrugging. "Our people still look to me, just as they will to you when you are older," Asgore says, giving his son a patient smile. "It is part of our duty to lead them. Perhaps by the time that it is your turn to take up my mantle it will be called something different." He chuckles. "Would you rather be the 'president' of all monsters?"

Asriel pulls a face. "Presidents are elected, not kings."

"This is all beside the point," Toriel says, giving Asgore and her son both a stern, silencing look. "People will want to meet you. We are all going to be at the conference tomorrow."

"I don't wanna go," you whine, pulling the covers over your head and rolling yourself face-first into your pillow.

Sans leans over you and shuts off the alarm on your phone, then tries to pull the comforter out of your hands. "i know you don't babe, but you gotta," he says, reaching beneath the sheets to run a hand up and down your back. That feels nice, but he's just trying to make you let go. You're not going to fall for that.

"No," you say petulantly, rubbing your face back and forth. "You can't make me."

"we've only got an hour to get ready and you need to eat breakfast." He ducks under the covers and you feel his warm hand grab at your thigh, squeezing as he nips the curve in your waist. Yelping, you giggle and squirm to the side, dragging the comforter with you as you try to escape to the far side of your new, much bigger bed. He drags you back towards him, rolling you over onto your back and unwrapping you from the tangle of sheets. Straddling you, he gives you a self-satisfied grin from his seat on your legs.

"Well how am I supposed to get ready with you on top of me?" you ask him, pushing hair out of your eyes and giving him a wry smile.

"maybe i've changed my mind. we can stay here in bed instead," he says, lowering himself to trace a path down your ribs with his teeth, holding your gaze the entire time.

It stirs something low in your belly but you wiggle beneath him, pushing half-heartedly at his shoulders. "We can't, Asgore and Toriel want me there to help make a good impression," you say with a sigh.

"yep, exactly," he agrees, sitting back up. Oh that tricky skeleton. Sliding off of you, he helps you sit up and presses a quick kiss to your cheek. "trust me, i don't wanna go either."

"You're not the one that's gonna get ambushed by reporters the second you turn your back," you mutter, swinging your legs off the side of the bed. "Getting asked god knows what about... I dunno, stuff in the Underground." This is going to be your first time speaking with anyone that isn't strictly
military or government. You have your 'official' story of what happened thoroughly memorized, leaving out, essentially, all of the violent bits, but you don't know what kinds of questions to expect. What are these people going to want from you? From Frisk?

"I'll be there with you. You don't have to answer anything you don't want to," he says, but his reassurances ring a little hollow.

"And how will that look? Avoiding the tricky questions? They must already think that you and the others are feeding me lines," you say, letting him pull you to him as he sits there on the edge of the bed.

He slides his arms around your waist, pressing little nipping kisses along your collarbone. "Are we swapping roles today? I thought I was the one with the defeatist attitude."

You give a huff, resting your chin on the top of his skull. "Does this mean you have to be the one trying to motivate me instead? That I'd like to see."

"Don't get your hopes up," he says, chuckling at your annoyed grunt.

"My name is not supposed to be fuel for your puns," you grumble.

"I held out for months on hope puns. Seemed too obvious, but I couldn't resist any longer. It was hopeless."

"Ugh!" You pull away and he lets you go, chuckling as he follows you into your adjoining bathroom.

The bathroom is probably your second favorite room in the house (the first is the living room with its floor to ceiling bookshelves). With a garden tub, a big stall shower, and huge double vanity, Sans had let you pick out everything yourself when planning out the house with the contractors. Because, really, you're the one that uses it the most out of the two of you. You're just happy not to have to share a single bathroom between four (and for a little while five) people anymore.

Your playful agitation with Sans beginning to fade, you reach into the shower and turn the knob. The bathroom fills with the sound of spraying water. As you start to take off your underwear your fiancé beats you to it, sliding his hands down the outsides of your thighs. Kicking them away, you feel his thick, warm arms slide around your middle, pulling you back against his broad ribcage. You trace your fingers in the gap between his radius and ulna as you wait for the water to warm up.

"You're gonna do just fine," Sans says, nuzzling the side of your neck.

"But what if I don't? What if I screw everything up?" you ask softly, as though speaking out loud will alert the universe to your fear and make it reality.

"Everything? How are you gonna screw up everything?" His hands drift higher, his fingers tracing the lines of your ribs. You shiver a little.

"I don't know," you sigh, tipping your head back to rest against his shoulder.

"I can see it now. You, single-handedly undoing everything that Asgore and Tori have done. You answer one question wrong and they'll take away all the land, tear down all the houses..."

"Sans, I'm being serious," you say, wrapping your hands around his forearms and trying not to smile.
"oh, so am i. i just didn't realize you had so much influence," he teases and you twist around in his arms, fixing him with a stern look that's threatening to crack. He's grinning, holding back a laugh. "you alone, destroying everyone's hopes."

"Augh, I hate you!" you blurt out, shoving his shoulders and laughing.

"no you don't." he says, hugging you close and tucking his head into the crook of your neck.

Fighting him for a moment, you give in to his strong hold on you and wrap your arms around his shoulders. "Fine, I don't," you admit, kissing his cheek.
The Conference

The conference is held at the school in downtown Ebott, partially because it's the largest of the city's three schools but also because it's in the only part of town that's designed to handle this much traffic. The fields next to the school are packed with cars and the crowd spills outside from the gymnasium. It's more than Asgore ever expected but he seems pleased by the turnout. You wish you could share his enthusiasm, but all of this just makes you nervous. Scanning the crowd inside the gym, you find comfort in the sight of familiar army fatigues.

The soldiers have been remarkably supportive of you and the monsters, for the most part. The same unit has been working the Line since the very beginning, and as such built up a familiarity with many of the residents. Plenty of the rank and file frequent the shops downtown, and you've even seen some of them enjoying leisure time down at the lake. They're invested, you think, and that makes all the difference. You can tell by their focused expressions as they pass by that they're determined to make sure everything goes smoothly.

Even Sans seems reassured by their presence, and that's saying something. His opinion of the Line soldiers is indifferent at best, regarding them as a constant reminder of just who is in control (not him, and not Asgore).

You, Sans, and Frisk stand off to the side, watching Asgore and his family handle a group of curious humans. You haven't seen any cameras yet, which is a relief, and so far people haven't been too keen to approach you. You think that Sans has been scaring them off, but you're not sure if he's doing it on purpose or not. He looks distinctly uncomfortable in a pair of dress slacks (wrinkled) and a button-up shirt (top button undone and missing a tie), his hands fidgeting at his sides before hooking on his belt loops. You know he's perfectly capable of dressing nicely, you've seen it firsthand. Maybe this is some kind of silent protest of this whole ordeal.

Asgore and Toriel were born to this kind of work, you think. They've handled everything thrown at them since first reaching the surface with remarkable poise and diplomacy. You still have no idea why Asgore thought you might have been any good at being some kind of ambassador, not when the two of them have been doing so well on their own. Though, remembering just how exhausted the king looked the night before, you admit that maybe he should have more help. Hopefully, once today is over, Toriel talks to him like she said she would.

The only member of the Dreemurr family that seems out of sorts with all of this is Asriel. Wedged between his parents, he's got one hand on his mother's skirt and the other wrapped tight around one ear, watching. You run your fingers through Frisk's hair, a futile wish of going to fetch their friend away from all that pressure flitting around in the back of your mind. You can feel Frisk's anxiousness, the way their whole body is tensed against yours as they lean into your side. The two of them have been close, almost uncannily close since reaching the surface. You think that it might have something to do with whatever Frisk did with Chara's Soul. That Soul mortared together with some of their own and given to Asriel so he might stay the child he should be, instead of returning to being Flowey.

"He hates this," Frisk mumbles, fidgeting with the hem of their oversized vest.

Frisk had been the hardest to pick out clothes for, barely edging out Papyrus. You and Frisk settled on a long-sleeved shirt, a nice vest, and a pair of black shorts paired with leggings. Papyrus, on the other hand, had tried to get out of the house in pants inexplicably patterned with eye-destroyingly bright paisley and a crop top that read "CHILL" in big block letters. Sans tried to convince you to let him go like that but you just couldn't. Not in good conscience. So after some desperate
bargaining, you got him to change into some jeans and a paisley shirt (he was very set on paisley for today) instead. In retrospect, maybe Papyrus was the more difficult of the two.

"I know, sweetie," you say, sighing as you look away from Asriel and his parents. "But this is something he's going to have to get used to."

"But why?" Frisk asks, tipping their head to look up at you.

"It's... complicated. I know it's not fun, but he has to learn how to handle these situations. As Asgore and Toriel's son, he's going to get a lot of attention," you say. You let out a soft sigh. "It's like... well, you know that I don't really want to be here either, but it's important that people see that you and I are happy here. As much as I'd rather be at home, just spending a nice day with you and your dad, I have to be here, to help."

"And I'm helping too!" they say, grinning.

You smile back at them, nodding. "Exactly. We're both helping. And so is Asriel."

"oh you've got to be kidding me," Sans hisses between his teeth, prompting you to look up. There's Mettaton, in all his glossy, black and pink glory, strutting across the gym and headed straight for the three of you. Following in his wake are a handful of people with microphones and cameras. A heavy sense of resignation settles in your chest. This was bound to happen sooner or later.

"Hope! Frisk! My darlings, here's where you're hiding!" Mettaton exclaims, making you cringe. It's bad enough that he's bringing reporters over to you, but does he have to announce your presence to the whole room? His visible, pink eye flicks over to Sans and he purses his lips just enough for you to notice. "And Sans, of course. Never far away, are you?"

"nope," he says, and you can feel the insult he's holding back for the sake of appearances. You brush your hand against his arm to let him know you appreciate it.

Mettaton slides in next to you, putting an arm around your shoulders and smiling at the cameras. Oh he must be loving this. "Hope and I have been friends since the Underground—" that is a bit of an exaggeration, "—I just couldn't get enough of her then—" true, but not for why the reporters must think, "—and things have been so busy here on the surface I just hate how little time we've been spending together." That's nice of him to say, but you're not sure how much of that is true and how much of it is for the cameras. Either way, you're certain that Sans is perfectly content with the very limited time either of you have spent with the robot.

"And how did the two of you meet?" a woman with a microphone asks, holding it out to the two of you.

"Well we met through the brilliant Doctor Alphys, she created me, you know," Mettaton says, flashing a bright smile. You just stand there next to him, feeling more than a little uncomfortable.

"And where is Doctor Alphys today? Is she here at the conference?" a second reporter asks, this one an older man.

Mettaton falters for a second and you suspect he must have no idea. For acting like he's so close with her, he's terrible at keeping up. Clearing your throat, you give the small group of people —all of them watching you intently— a nervous look. "Um, she's at the Core, I'm sure. She's been working very hard to keep things running smoothly for everyone in the Underground and here on the surface," you say, fighting to keep your voice steady. This is a lot more nerve-wracking than
you thought it would be.

A third reporter is about to ask something when Mettaton gives a charming laugh, smoothing his hair. "Now, I know that some of you are just dying to see my plans for the new MTT Resort and I actually have some models set up just for this opportunity! If you'll just follow me— my beauties it was wonderful to see the two of you, I just had to stop by to say hello when I saw you," he croons, giving you a one armed hug and Frisk a quick pat on the shoulder. You just stare as he flits off again, the reporters trailing in his wake.

Well, all except one and her cameraman. She gives a you a polite smile that you do your best to return, giving the lens over her shoulder an apprehensive glance. She seems nice enough, with stylish brown hair, a smart pantsuit, and an air of patience about her distinctly separate from the ravenous energy you assume most reporters have.

"Hope —is it okay if I call you Hope?" she asks, tracing her finger down the lapel of her blazer. For some reason the hint of nervousness sets you a little at ease.

You give her a nod, swallowing. Your hand finds Frisk's shoulder and you can feel Sans touch your back. You give him a strained smile, then return your attention to the woman. "Um, that's fine. What should I call you? I mean, what's your name?"

"Gloria is fine," she says, glancing over at Sans. "I was hoping to ask you a few questions, the people have been curious about you. Would that be all right?"

"I sorta figured this would happen eventually. It's okay," you say, giving a nervous laugh. Gloria's smile widens just a little in response.

"Now, if you don't mind, for this I'd rather just have you and your... child in the shot alone." She looks at Sans again, raising her hand and making a quick little gesture. "If you could just take a few steps to your left, please."

Sans looks at you, a silent question in his eyes and you nod, doing your best to look like everything is fine. Everything is fine, you're just nervous. Anyone would be nervous talking to a reporter, right? Well, maybe not Mettaton, but... He gives you a tight smile you think it supposed to be reassuring and takes a few steps back, waiting until Gloria gives him a thumbs up before stopping.

"So, Hope," she says, coming to stand beside you and Frisk, looking over at her cameraman to check her position. "You've been living here in Ebott for the past four months, since the very beginning. How has that been like for the two of you, being the only humans here?"

Oh, that question isn't too bad. Maybe you really have been worried for nothing. You glance down at Frisk, smoothing their hair nervously as they watch Gloria. "It's been pretty great, to be honest. I mean, at first it was a little, uh, rustic before they were able to start construction," you hesitate as she gives a polite laugh, "but now things are really coming together. And all the monsters are so nice. I don't think I've ever met a kinder, more compassionate group of people. Frisk and I couldn't ask for a better place to live."

Gloria nods. "Of course. And what have you been doing in your spare time? Helping with construction? Staying home with Frisk? Or do you work at any of the local businesses, the ones seeking outside employment, such as Mettaton's new hotel?"

"Oh, I work at Frisk's school, actually," you say. Then, realizing what you might be insinuating, you add, "Not as a teacher or anything, I'm just more of an aide."
"So you work here at this school we're in now?" she asks, gesturing at the walls of the gymnasium.

"No, the one in Mountainside. It's closer to where we live."

"That's right, I believe there are three schools here in Ebott?"

"Yes, this one in downtown, the one in Mountainside, and the one in Lakeside."

She nods again, still smiling kindly at you. This is getting a little easier, you think. You can feel the jittery stage fright starting to ebb away. You've been through worse than this. Gloria looks at Frisk, leaning down a little to speak to them. "And how do you like your school, Frisk?"

"It's great! All my friends are there, and the teachers are really nice," they say, beaming.

"And how old are you?"

"Almost seven!"

Gloria looks back to you, straightening. "What about you, Hope? You've been through a lot for someone so young. How old are you?"

You swallow. "Twenty-one."

"Oh, you've had a birthday since you stumbled into the Underground. Your missing person's report listed your age as twenty," she says. If she knew how old you were then why did she ask? "How was your birthday? Did you do anything special?"

You glance over at Sans, though maybe you shouldn't with the camera on you. His expression is unreadable, his body a tense line with his hands shoved in his pant pockets. You look back at Gloria. "It was great. My friends took us down by the lake and we had a big cookout. There was a lot still going on with construction back at the beginning of August, so I was just really grateful that everyone took the time to do anything at all."

"They sound like a good group of friends," Gloria agrees, looking over at the camera and smiling. "That must be why you agreed to help bring down the Barrier, am I right? To help your friends?"

The 'official' story is that you, as a human, had helped break the Barrier in a way that monsters alone had been unable to. It was sort of an over-simplified version of the truth, without having to mention six dead children... "It's a lot more than that," you say, your grip on Frisk's shoulder tightening. "All of these people, including my friends were trapped underground. For generations. They didn't deserve any of that. I think any decent person would have done what I did."

"Some people might disagree. Have you been keeping up to date on people's opinions on this whole monster situation?" she asks. You realize her smile is faded, her eyes more focused and intent. "How do you feel about the negative reactions people have been having?"

"There's not a 'monster situation'," you say, a little too harshly. "They're just people trying to live their lives. And if these humans would take a moment to just understand that, I think more opinions would change. That's why we're having this conference in the first place."

"These humans,'" she echoes back to you, something odd playing around the corners of her mouth. "You say that like you consider yourself somehow different from the rest of us."

What? You give the camera an anxious look, your confidence slipping away. "That's not what I'm trying—"
"How does Frisk's father feel about all this?" she asks, interrupting you sharply.

"What?"

Frisk tries to take a step towards her but you're still holding their shoulder. "My dad—!"

"Frisk, please," you say, trying your best to control this situation that's rapidly getting out of hand. "I don't know how he feels, we haven't spoken since before Frisk was born."

"But Mom!" Frisk protests, looking up at you, alarmed.

"So why did you take Frisk up to Mt. Ebott? Did you not take the rumors seriously?" she presses, moving in closer.

You feel cornered. You look at Sans and all he can do is look back at you, gritting his teeth. Why isn't he helping you? What could he even do to help? His pupils are almost gone and you think for a second you see a spark of blue. Oh no. "I'd rather not discuss that," you say.

"There was talk that you had a... troubled situation at home. Is that the reason?"

You shake your head quickly. Too quickly. "Talk from who? My personal life isn't any of your business."

"As I said before, the people are curious—"

"Well the people can go stick their nose somewhere else," you snap, grimacing.

An unfamiliar voice cuts through the air. "Hope, is that you?"

You and Gloria both turn. There, dressed handsomely in a green button-up shirt and tie is a pale, blonde man you've never seen before. He's approaching quickly, one hand raised in greeting as he flashes you a bright, charming smile. "Hope! Oh my god, I was hoping I'd run into you here, how are you doing? It's been so long!"

Gloria is just as taken aback as you are as he comes over and clasps your free hand in both of his, wedging himself between you and the reporter. He gives you a wink and then turns to face her instead, oblivious to the confused looks that you and Frisk are giving him. "Oh, hey there miss, sorry to intrude but could you give us a few minutes? That would be fantastic."

Gloria fixes him with a glower that clearly says that it would not be fantastic but the man just ignores her, putting his arm around your shoulder. He's just as strong as he looks as he tugs you close and starts leading you away. You're not sure who this guy is but part of you wants to kiss him for rescuing you from that horrid woman. At least, you hope that's what he's doing and not leading you to something even worse. Frisk trails along with you silently, turning their confused expression towards you.

Once you're a short distance away Sans appears at your other side and you realize he must have teleported. He shouldn't have done that, not with all these people around. Someone might have seen him and Asgore wanted everyone to be careful not to do anything that might seem threatening, like use their magic. He's giving the man with his arm around your shoulder an unreadable look.

With a good crowd now between you and where you left Gloria, the blonde lets you go and gives you an apologetic smile. You can't help but notice his pale blue eyes. "Sorry about all that, it just seemed like you could use some help," he says, running his hand through his hair. It gives him a slightly ruffled look that's more handsome than it ought to be.
"No, thank you so much," you say, touching your face a little self-consciously. "I expected reporters, but I didn't think... I dunno what I thought."

"Well, hopefully that's the worst of it for you. Try to be a little more cautious next time, okay? I won't be there to help next time," he says with a wry smile.

Feeling a little dazed, he wanders off as quickly as he appeared, giving you a little wave before he vanishes back into the crowd. All you can do is stand there, bewildered, wondering what just happened.

"who the hell was that?" Sans says, reaching out to wrap his arm around your waist.

You shake your head, covering Sans's hand with your own and squeezing. "I don't know."
Honesty and Trust

Sans knows he should feel grateful to that guy for helping you out when he couldn't, but he's not. He just feels bitter. It should have been *him* coming up with an excuse to pull you away, but he'd been so worried of somehow making everything worse that it was like he was paralyzed. And something about the human just bugs him. There's a nagging feeling in the back of his head. Something that sets his teeth on edge. This whole mess feels like a huge mistake, letting all these humans in here, giving them the run of the place, it's not—

You lace your fingers between his and he takes a moment to ground himself. Looking up at you, he notices the way your lips are pressed into a thin line, your warm brown eyes darting over the crowd anxiously. He gives you a small squeeze with the arm already around your waist.

"babe, you ok?" he asks you.

"I'm fine," you say, but he's not sure you're being entirely honest. You stroke your fingers through Frisk's hair and won't look at him, keeping your eyes on the blur of people and monsters all around you.

"i should have helped you."

"How, by getting mad at Gloria? That would have just made things worse for the rest of you," you say, sighing. "I'm not sure what she wanted. Why would she bring up my mother? Or Frisk's dad?"

"Sans is my dad," Frisk blurts out, turning so they can fix you with an angry frown. "Why didn't you tell that lady the truth?"

Your lips part, hesitating and taken aback. Sans knows why you didn't mention him to the reporter, that it's a delicate subject and right now none of you can afford to complicate things. Not with a woman who was already quick to accuse you of setting yourself apart from the rest of humanity. But he admits that it stung a little, to have everything the two of you (three of you) have built swept under the rug and kept secret. Maybe this is why you never said anything to him about wanting a ring. No questions from other humans that would recognize its significance, because then you'd have to explain that your fiancé is a monster.

"Sweetie, of course he's your dad... but she wasn't gonna understand that," you tell them gently, casting worried glances around the three of you to see if anyone might be listening. Or is he just being paranoid?

"It's not that hard to understand," Frisk says in a petulant tone that makes Sans's mouth twitch. "It's more complicated than that—"

"Why is everything so complicated all of a sudden?" they snap at you, and now their attitude isn't quite so amusing anymore.

"hey kiddo, don't talk to your mom like that," Sans says, earning himself a look of betrayal. He frowns back at them. "i don't like it either, but we gotta stick together, ok? your mom is doing her best and we need to support her."

You squeeze his hand and he squeezes back, a silent 'thank you'. He knows you don't like any of this, just as much as he does, and you need to be united. He's frustrated, but it's at this situation, not you. He has to remember that.
Frisk looks from you to Sans, their expression turning guilty. Looking away, they cover their mouth with their hand. "Sorry," they mumble.

You're not letting that pitiful apology slide, however. He just watches as you purse your lips, realizing just how much more confident you've gotten at being a mom than when you first met. Feeling a little proud, he lets go of your waist to let you do your thing, hooking his thumbs on his belt loops.

"What was that?" you ask Frisk, raising an eyebrow and resting your hands on your hips.

Frisk starts to let out a frustrated sigh but cuts themselves off, looking down at the ground and dropping their hand before looking up again. "I'm sorry for getting mad at you," they say.

"You're allowed to be mad at me, but I don't appreciate it when you interrupt me when I'm trying to explain," you say, tucking some of Frisk's hair behind their ear. "And right now isn't the time to talk about this, okay?"

Frisk nods, taking hold of your wrist. "Okay."

"How about we go find Asriel and his parents, see what they're up to?"

That seems to brighten Frisk's mood, a good tactic on your part. He also thinks that maybe, with Toriel and Asgore there with you that the reporters might at least be a little more respectful with their questions. Hopefully. Or at least they'll be better at helping you than he was.

The next few hours pass with few ripples in the calm yet optimistic air permeating the conference. There's a short break for a catered lunch and then a few more hours of talking with ordinary visitors as well as more reporters. Questions remain polite for the most part. Any time they start to stray off-topic Toriel or Asgore politely yet firmly guide them back to something more appropriate. You, Sans, and Frisk stick close to the Dreemurrs and Papyrus finds his way back to the rest of you after having wandered off to go 'make a good impression'. As far as you can tell he didn't cause any trouble, in fact he seems even more energetic than usual. Sans seems glad at that, at least.

By four in the afternoon Frisk and Asriel are wilting, stifling yawns and casting wistful glances outside. There's still a few hours left in the conference, but you're more than happy for an excuse to leave early. You tell Toriel that you and Sans are going to take the kids home. Frisk asks if Asriel can stay the night at your house and after pleading looks from both of them you and Toriel agree. You don't even have to stop over at their house to pick anything up; you think that half of Asriel's clothes must already be at your house anyway. The two of them keep swapping clothes so much you hardly know what belongs to who anymore.

Toriel and Asgore say they'll bring Papyrus home later, since he wants to stay.

The moment you all get back to the house the kids make a break for the living room. They flop down on a plush rug in front of the TV, Frisk getting it set up so that they can play some video games. You and Sans follow at a much more leisurely pace, taking the time to kick off your shoes by the front door and share a brief kiss, relieved to be back home in one piece. The day could have gone better, but it also could have gone a heck of a lot worse, too.

Sans follows you to the living room, trailing behind so he can give your butt an affectionate squeeze while your back is turned. Casting him a playful glare, you settle into your spot on the couch and wait as he grabs the book he's been reading from the end table and sits down next to
you. Sans has been slowly working through your collection. Now that you have a real space to call your own, they're all finally on display instead of tucked away in cardboard boxes in the back of a closet. You never really realized just how many you had. Almost all of them came secondhand from used book stores, so they're not the prettiest, but they're yours. When you asked him why he wanted to bother reading them instead of, well, literally anything else, he just smiled at you and said 'because they're yours'. And how could you argue with that?

With the pretext of reaching for you own book, you settle across San's lap and stay there. You squish a throw pillow behind your back to get more comfortable and Sans rests one hand on your stomach, which you promptly cover with your own. Tangling your fingers together, you cast the kids a quick look before you start to read.

Much better. This is how you'd rather spend a Saturday afternoon, not surrounded by people who may or may not wish ill of you.

It's about half an hour later when you realize that you're not hearing any of the sound effects of Frisk's game. It's just the same background music on loop. Glancing up, Frisk is laying on their stomach with Asriel's head pillowed on the small of their back, arms wrapped around their middle. They're both fast asleep. Affection tugs at your heart and you glance over at Sans, hoping to get his attention so he can look for himself, but he's asleep too. Apparently it's naptime and you never got the memo. His head is tipped back against the cushions and he's breathing softly, fingers holding his place in his book. Trying not to wake him, you ease it out of his hand and mark the page, setting it aside.

Doing your best to stay as still as possible, you fish your phone out of your pocket and flip it to silent, then take a picture of Frisk and Asriel. You're sure Sans will want to add it to his growing collection. You also send it to Toriel with a short message. 'Looks like they were pretty tired. :)'

A few minutes later you get a reply. 'Thank you for taking him home. :)'

'Are things going okay still?'

'Yes. Please do not worry, I will let you know if there are any changes.'

'OK.'

Sans shifts under you and you look up from your phone to see him looking at you, smiling. "hey," he says quietly, blinking a bit as his pupils brighten. He must have just woken up.

"Hey," you whisper, glancing pointedly at the kids and back at him.

His eyes flick over to them and you see something tender soften his expression. "guess it's naptime," he says.

"I was just thinking the same thing. Thought you'd be out longer," you say, shifting to tuck in closer against him.

He hooks his hand around your hip, giving you a little squeeze. With a shrug, he makes a noncommittal noise. "i'm doing ok. how about you, you tired?"

You shrug back. "More hungry than tired. Those people earlier were a lot more interested in asking me questions than letting me eat lunch."

"once the kiddos wake up we should go to grillbys. asriel was not-so-subtly hinting that's what he wanted for dinner in the car," he says, leaning forward to nudge your forehead with his own.
Nudging him back, you give him a wry smile. "Sounds like what you want for dinner."

"Well sure, but you know that Tori never takes him out to eat. She's constantly got something baking at that house, like she can make up for all those missed, home-cooked meals."

"Can you really blame her though?"

Sans glances over at Asriel where he's sleeping, the short fluffy tail poking out of the back of his pants giving a little twitch. "Not really. I'm not saying it's bad, just that sometimes it's nice to have some greasy burgers and fries."

You study his face, the way the corners of his mouth go a little tense even as his eyes hold nothing but affection for the two kids curled up together. "He's still not Flowey, you know," you breathe, the quietest whisper you can manage. "You don't have to keep looking at him like that."

"I know. I'm... trying," he says, giving you a guilty look. "Asriel is a sweet kid."

Stroking the side of his face, you give him a comforting smile. "Do you trust Frisk?"

His eyebrows raise. "Of course I do."

"You didn't used to. Just give Asriel time."

He looks away, sighing. He doesn't say anything.

You bite your lip. "Maybe 'time' wasn't the best word I could have used."

Sans looks back over at you, his mouth twitching into a smile as a soft chuckle rumbles against you. "I know what you meant, though."

You run your thumb along his chin. "Hey."

"Hey," he answers, wrapping his hand around your wrist.

"I just want to remind you that I love you."

"Ok. Then lemme remind you that I love you too."

"Sounds good. Glad we're on the same page."
The walk to Grillby's takes you about twenty minutes, perfect for the kids to burn off some energy from their nap. It's nestled in the more crowded part of Mountainside, near the school and the eclectic shop run by the family of rabbits. Even the library (spelled correctly this time) made the move to Mountainside's little town center. Come winter, you think it'll be almost a spitting image of Snowdin.

Grillby's new place is nearly identical to the old one, just a bit more polished and a little nicer on the inside. Everything is brand new of course, from the bar to the benches. The only things brought up from the Underground are some of the decor and the glassware. It's still a little odd to you, walking into the bar and seeing the same, familiar layout with everything just slightly different. Same faces, same Grillby, same menu, new place.

Well, there's actually a newer face waiting the tables so that Grillby doesn't have to do it all himself anymore. A green fire elemental is flitting from table to table as you walk through the door, looking over as a little bell signals your arrival. She raises a hand and gives your group a cheerful wave, her green coloring flaring yellow for a moment around her face.

"hey, cindy," Sans says, raising his hand in reply. "usual table okay?"

"Of course! I'll let my uncle know you're here," she says, looking at the door leading to the kitchens. You realize that Grillby isn't in his usual place at the bar.

"no need to bother him if he's busy," he says with a shrug. He gives you a soft press on the small of your back to go follow Frisk and Asriel as they dart off towards the booth closest to the juke box.

"Sans you know you and your family are never a bother," she says, looking fondly over at the kids as they crawl onto the faux leather bench.

It's a bit busier than normal, which is a surprise. You figured a lot of them might be at the conference, but in retrospect you realize that only a fraction of Ebott's population actually showed up. Either out of fear of the humans or just casual disinterest, the humans had easily outnumbered the monsters. You catch a few snippets of conversation as you pass by other tables on the way to yours. Most of the other patrons are actually talking about the conference, from what you can tell. Not going didn't stop them from being curious or having their own thoughts on the matter.

Asriel is pushing Frisk away from him as you slip into the bench opposite them. He's got his hand on their shoulder, trying to keep them at arm's length as he looks over a small laminated menu. "Stooooooooooop!" he whines, trying to turn to put his back towards Frisk.

But Frisk is having none of it, taking hold of his arm and pulling him back towards them so they can look over his shoulder. "C'mon, I wanna see it too!"

"You always get the same thing, why do you need to look?" Asriel says, frowning and hunching his shoulders to try and dislodge their friend.

"Because maybe I'll change my mind," Frisk says stubbornly. At first you think they're just horsing around, but you realize that they're both frowning.
"Frisk, stop bothering Asriel and wait your turn. You can look at it when he's done," you say, just as Sans slides into the seat next to you.

Frisk does as you ask but doesn't look too happy about it. They scoot away from Asriel and give him an annoyed look. That's unusual for them, normally they're always getting along. It's like they exist on the same wavelength, in touch with how the other is feeling in a way that isn't quite normal. But, you suspect, they're still just kids. And kids bug each other.

Sans slides another menu across the table to Frisk. "here kiddo, knock yourself out," he says with an amiable shrug. It defeats the purpose of you trying to get Frisk to be patient, but you understand that Sans is just trying to keep the peace. Frustrating but well-intentioned, you let it drop. It's been a long, trying day and bickering won't help anyone.

The kids sit in silence for a few minutes, wearing matching frowns and staring at their menus in what you think is exaggerated focus. You and Sans share a look and you shrug. "The usual?" you ask him, choosing to leave Frisk and Asriel alone for the time being.

"is there anything else worth getting?" Sans replies as he sits up a little straighter so he can slide his arm around your shoulders.

You lean into his side right as Cindy comes to the table and passes out your drinks. You're here often enough that she doesn't need to ask what you want. In retrospect you're not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but Grillby and his niece are always happy to see you which makes the trips here worthwhile.

"You two are always so cute. I hope I have that someday," Cindy says, pressing one hand to her cheek and smiling.

Sans hugs you closer, giving the fire elemental a grin. "y'hear that frisk? at least somebody thinks we're cute."

Frisk makes a face, not even bothering to look at you. "You don't have to see them kissing," they grumble.

"Your parents are sweet, one day you'll understand," Cindy says with a giggle. "So, the ususals for the two of you?"

Sans nods. "yup."

"And how about you two? I don't think you've quite worked your way through the entire menu yet, Prince Asriel, if you want something new." She fidgets with her vest a little, and doesn't notice when Asriel flinches at the title.

"Um, the usual for me too," Frisk says, giving their friend a timid look.

"See, you always get the same thing," Asriel says, frowning at them.

Frisk just rolls their eyes and crosses their arms over their chest. "Yeah because I like it."

Asriel pinches his ear between his fingers, rubbing and finally looking up at Cindy. "Um, just a burger and fries is fine for me too."

"No problem, i'll get that started for you guys!" she says, then heads off.

You and Sans distract the kids from their bickering with questions about school until Grillby
himself arrives with your food. Sliding the plates across the table, he gives off a bright flare of heat and showers Frisk and Asriel with a light spray of sparks, making them laugh. You're glad that they're enjoying it —smiles are much more preferable to frowns— but every time Grillby does that you expect someone to catch fire. But, you suppose you can trust the fire elemental to know what he's doing.

"place is bouncing tonight, grillby. looks like the conference was good for business at least," Sans says, gesturing at the crowded bar.

Grillby just gives a good-natured shrug, adjusting his glasses.

"things still going good?" He gives you a quick squeeze before pulling his arm back, letting you sit up so you can start eating.

Gesturing up at the lights, Grillby seesaws his hand in the universal sign for 'so-so'. Then he crosses his arms over his chest and raises a brow at Sans.

"yeah, we're still working on boosting the power from the core, should have it fixed up in the next week. hope the power outages haven't sparked any outrage in your customers," he finishes with a wink.

You snort and almost choke on your food. Even Frisk and Asriel start giggling, hiding their faces behind their dinner as they share a glance. Grillby just sighs, huffing more sparks as the glow of his eyes behind his glasses narrows to thin lines. Sans just smiles up at him, all innocence and amusement.

Sans glances over at you and you're trying to swallow, washing your food down with a gulp of your drink. Thankfully he waits until you're finished before continuing. "hope, you know i love you, but grillbz is the light of my life."

Grillby shakes his head and walks away as you snort again, resting your forehead in your hand as you can't stop laughing long enough to breathe. Pleased with himself, Sans rubs your back as you wipe away a few tears, wheezing.

Dinner is uneventful, aside from Asriel almost laughing hard enough to have soda go up his nose. The burning sensation from the bubbles is enough to put him back in a sour mood, though. He and Frisk end up bickering some more, even as they both get up from the table to go mess with the juke box. You and Sans exchange a look as you pick at your few remaining fries.

"are they ok?" Sans asks.

You're flattered that he thinks you'd know, but you realize that even your greater familiarity with Frisk and Asriel isn't helping you here. Sighing, you shrug your shoulders. "i dunno. maybe it's just the stress from earlier."

"frisk was pretty mad with you about that whole 'dad' thing," he says, leaning back and slipping his arm behind you.

"And Asriel wasn't doing too well after all that attention," you add, nodding. "Add that to however their... Soul thing works..."

"i still don't get that. i don't think anybody does. no one has ever seen anything like it before." He traces a circular pattern against your side with his fingers, running his other hand along the side of his skull. "but usually it makes them more considerate of each other's feelings, doesn't it? not fight."
"They're still just kids. We can't expect things to be perfect all the time, even with... whatever is going on between them," you say, sighing again and resting your head on Sans's shoulder.

He readjusts to run his fingers through your hair. The feeling of his phalanges scraping over your scalp is relaxing, and after a moment your eyes close and you let out a contented hum. Sans is quiet for a moment before he speaks. "if you had known what it was gonna do to frisk, would you still have let them split their soul with asriel? hell, we still don't know if there's any long term effects from—"

"Hun, don't," you say gently, putting your hand on his leg. "Please, I don't want to think about that right now, just be here with me. 'What-ifs' aren't going to change anything."

"sorry, you're right, babe," he says, turning to nuzzle the side of your head.

"It's okay. It's just that analytical part of your head forgetting to take a breather once in a while." You tilt your face so you can kiss his jaw, then settle against his shoulder again. "I'll be here to gently remind it to shut up."

"heh. thanks."

Sans's phone buzzes and chimes in his pocket. Wondering if maybe you missed something from Toriel, you check your own phone but don't see anything. As you put yours away, you glance over in time to see a text from Papyrus. 'GOING OUT WITH METTATON FOR DINNER. WILL BE BACK LATE.'

"i knew we shouldn't've left him there," Sans grumbles, staring down at his phone.

"Sans, he loves spending time with Mettaton," you say cautiously.

Frowning, Sans types out a simple message: 'ok. have fun.' Well that was better than you expected, and you know that there's plenty more he'd like to have said. But he's been careful not to say anything to Papyrus about Mettaton, choosing to vent to you about him instead. "i know he does."

"They're just going out as friends, I'm sure," you say, immediately regretting your choice of words as Sans tenses beneath you. Sitting up, you give him a a worried look.

"of course," he says, shaking his head and pocketing his phone.

"Sans..."

"pap is an adult, he can make... friends with whoever he wants."

"Do you want to talk about this?" you ask him, resting a hand on his shoulder.

He looks at you then shakes his head again. "it's fine. papyrus sees the best in everybody, i just worry about it getting him hurt."

"He's tough, I know—" You cut yourself off as you hear someone say Asgore's name in the booth behind you.

"This is just getting out of hand, the Line should be gone by now!" a high-pitched voice says, followed by a loud sigh. "He should be doing a lot more. How many times is he going to let the humans trap us?"

"I'm not even so sure this is just the humans' doing. I think he's keeping us all here on purpose
because he's afraid. Maybe the humans are ready to start talking about compromise but he's the one holding everything back?" The second, deeper voice makes a frustrated sound.

You and Sans exchange a look, talk of Mettaton forgotten.

"Do you really think Asgore would do something like that? But why?" the first voice asks.

"He just got his son back, do you think he's really above doing whatever it takes to keep him safe, even if it's at everyone else's expense?"

Asriel can't hear this. You flick your hand, gesturing for Sans to let you out of the booth. He slides out quickly, standing aside as you get to your feet. With a quick glance to make sure the kids are still messing with the juke box, you go to stand next to the other booth. You recognize the two monsters. The higher voice belongs to a member of the extended rabbit family, the deeper one to a green-scaled monster covered in spines. They both look over at you and have the good sense to look a little embarrassed. It's no secret that you're close with the Dreemurrs, and most of the monsters recognize you on sight nowadays.

"Oh, Hope! We didn't know you were here," the rabbit says nervously, eyeing her companion.

The spiny monster gives you a weak, toothy grin. "Y-you aren't at the conference?"

"If you're so worried about what King Asgore has been doing about our situation, why aren't you at the conference?" you ask, shoving your hands in your pants pockets to avoid crossing your arms over your chest.

"'Our' situation? You can get over the Line any time you want," the spiny monster says, scoffing.

"Alone, maybe," you return, pressing your lips into a thin line. "Or with Frisk. But I can't take Sans, or Papyrus, or any of my friends with me unless they get special clearance from Captain Prasad."

"But you're not stuck here. You can leave," the rabbit chimes in, nodding.

"The people I love are here, you think I'd just leave them all behind?" you snap, glancing over at Sans as he sidles up next to you. "Look, Asgore is doing everything he can and he's working his ass off. If you're so worried, why don't you go downtown on Monday and offer him some help. I know he can use it right now."

The rabbit looks away but the other one keeps their eyes on you. "You're a human, why don't you talk to them?" they ask.

"I'm one human out of billions," you say, frowning. "I've helped where I can but I can't just magically change everyone's minds. No matter how much I'd love to."

"Hope, we're just frustrated, that's all," the rabbit interjects, giving her companion a warning look. "We don't mean to talk bad about the king."

"I'm sure," Sans says, raising a brow. "c'mon babe, let's go get frisk and asriel and get outta here."

Both monsters seem a little surprised when San mentions the prince, looking behind you as though he might appear out of thin air. You hope that means they'll watch their mouths in the future, or be more careful of who might be listening. The last thing Asriel needs to worry about right now is people doubting his father.
Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
"I needed that power-up!"

"You can get the next one."

"Frisk, I'm going to end up dying now!"

"Well just be more careful, then."

You can hear the kids fighting in the living room all the way in the kitchen. Normally Asriel just sleeps in Frisk's room but you wonder if he's going to end up in the guest room after all this. When was the last time you washed those sheets?

Making yourself some tea to help get you through the last few hours of the evening, you stir in some milk and put the jug back in the fridge. For a moment you debate offering the kids some ice cream just to distract them from bickering. But do you really want to give them sugar right now? You think it'll just make things worse.

When you make your way back into the living room, Sans is trying his best to focus on the book in his hands but you can see he's having trouble by the tension in his jaw. He glances up at you as you approach, a pleading look in his eyes. As if you have the ability to diffuse the situation. You've been wracking your brain trying to come up with some way to do just that, but aside from sending Asriel home to his parents you can't think of anything. You're not even sure that separating them is the best thing to do. It might be good for a set of ordinary kids, but Asriel and Frisk are far from ordinary.

Setting your tea down on the end table to cool down for a little bit, you take a seat next to Sans. "If you want you can go upstairs, I'll stay down here to make sure they don't murder each other," you say softly, stroking his arm.

"tempting, but i'll stay here with you," he mutters, looking back down at the book and turning the page. He's been working his way through your collection of fantasy novels, having already finished up your meager selection of sci-fi. You'd always been more partial to magic and mythology, not that you ever thought you'd get caught up in the middle of it. "how can i complain to you about how wrong all the magic is in these books if i'm up there?"

Rolling your eyes, you give him a lopsided smirk. "In my —and humanity's— defense, we didn't realize that magic was real. Or at least, not in the right way."

Sans makes a noncommittal noise somewhere low in his chest, rumbling next to you. Well, he's back in the book zone, no point in trying to talk to him now.

"We're supposed to be working together!" Asriel says, hunching his shoulders. The fur on the back of his neck is standing on end, hackles raising like a dog's. "Stop going so far ahead without me, I'm going to—"

"Then just keep up! Ignore the bad guys and let me kill them," Frisk says, focused on the game and somehow oblivious to their friend's frustration.

Chewing the inside of your lip, you shift on the couch. "Maybe you two should—"

"AUGH! Frisk, I told you I was going to die!" Asriel shoves the controller away from him, letting
it fall to the rug he and Frisk are sitting on. He crosses his arms tightly over his chest, glaring.

"And I told you not to fight any of the bad guys!"

"They were ganging up on me, I couldn't get away! If you had let me get that power up earlier—!"

"It's not my fault you died!"

Asriel bolts up to his feet, balling his hands into fists and baring his teeth down at Frisk. "You didn't help me! Quit being such an idiot!"

There's a beat of stunned silence and a chill runs down your spine. Then, you're up from the couch a moment after Sans, pushing your way in front of him and meeting his eyes. The sockets are dark, the lights so dim you can barely make them out, his mouth pulled tight into a grimace. You stare at each other for a moment, a crackle of blue dancing around the fingers of his raised left hand before he drops it to his side. He's scared, you feel it too because how could you not feel Flowey's presence just as much as he did? But as you hear Asriel start to cry, you know you made the right choice in stopping Sans.

Sans nods and draws in a steadying breath and you take that as your sign to check on Asriel. He's standing there with his hands wrapped around his ears, crying.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it!" he says, pleading. Shaking his head, he covers his eyes. "Please, I'm not... I'm not him anymore!"

The desperation in his voice makes your heart ache. You kneel on the ground and go to reach for Asriel to pull him into a hug, but Frisk beats you to it. They put one hand on his chest, over his Soul you think, and throw the other arm around his shoulders. Asriel lets go of his ears to take hold of Frisk, burying his face in their shoulder as he cries.

"You're not him," Frisk says, hugging him close. "You're Asriel, my best friend."

"I'm sorry," Asriel sobs. He clutches tight to the back of Frisk's shirt.

"I'm sorry, too." Frisk is sniffling, and you can feel most of the tension in the air start to lift. Whatever had the two of them at each other's throats finally broke.

"Asriel, sweetheart," you say softly, waiting for him to rest his chin on Frisk's shoulder, blinking up at you with wide, wet eyes. He's so timid, you reach out to stroke his head, running your fingers through the soft tufts of white fur. "You know that you can talk to us, right? If there's anything that's bothering you. We care about you. You've been through so much and you don't have to deal with it all on your own. You've got me, and you've got Frisk. And you've even got Sans."

"I know," Asriel says in a quiet voice, relaxing his grip on Frisk so he can wipe his eyes.

You wonder if you should press more, try to get Asriel to open up to you. Maybe he's afraid to talk to his parents. But he doesn't say any more and he looks so sodden and pathetic that you can't bring yourself to make him feel even worse. With a weak smile, you stroke both their heads and then give them soft pats on their shoulders.

"Why don't the two of you go get ready for bed? It's been a long, stressful day and I'm sure you're both tired," you say.

Surely seeing this as their chance to escape having to talk to you about what just happened, Frisk takes Asriel's hand and leads them upstairs. You watch them go, feeling a little... excluded. You
realize that you'll never understand the bond between those two, or ever be able to compare. You wonder, not for the first time, how much their bond might be hurting them, just as much as it helps.

Sans watches the kids climb up the stairs, passing the ever-growing collection of family photos decorating the stairwell. Seven months worth, and then some. There's a few pictures that survived his and Papyrus's childhoods, not to mention a few from yours and Frisk's. He itches to call Frisk and Asriel back where he can keep an eye on them, but he resists. It's hard to let them go.

He almost let his own shock and fear get the better of him. That's not like him, not at all. If you hadn't been there to catch him, he's not sure what he might have done. Something stupid, probably. But hearing those words come out of Asriel's mouth had been like the other shoe dropping, proof that all of this on the surface, even with its challenges, was all too good to be true. It was like being in the Underground, trapped and powerless... But no. He was just overreacting. He's still overreacting. It takes him a second to realize that you're watching him as he stares at the empty stairwell, too wrapped up in his own head to see that he's worrying you.

"He's not Flowey," you say, and he's not sure if you're talking to him or yourself. Or both.

"i know," he says, lowering himself back onto the edge of the couch.

You're still on the floor so you crawl back over to him, sitting cross-legged and resting your chin on his knee. "I don't think it was Chara either. I... I watched them die, that Soul lost all its color," you say, wrapping your arms around his legs as you look up at him.

He hadn't even considered that. He was so caught up in the idea of Flowey, the person Asriel was at his absolute worst, that he didn't even stop to think that the prince has the fragments of Chara, fucking Chara, as their base. You don't understand the implications of that, who Chara really is. The kid that took over Frisk's body and killed so many people, including his brother, over and over again. They might have helped Frisk unlock their memories (memories they themselves had locked away in the first place, according to Frisk) and Load to save you. Helped you and Frisk stand against Asriel and thus shatter the Barrier, but that didn't make up for everything else. Not to him. Chara was the true root of all his worst nightmares, and that isn't something he can just forgive. But he can't explain any of that to you without delving into things he and Frisk agreed not to tell you. You saw Chara and Asriel as broken, hurting children, and he's not sure that anything he might be able to say will change that. He's not sure he wants to.

But if Asriel has Chara's Soul, what was left behind after they chose to help all of you, he can't imagine it's affecting the prince's behavior. At least, not in the way he's afraid of.

Sighing, he shakes his head. "no, like you said, chara's gone for good." Thankfully, he thinks to himself.

"Sans," you say carefully, like you're worried you're going to upset him. He looks down at you and runs his hand through your hair, eliciting a fleeting smile as you lean into his touch. "Sans, I think that it was just Asriel. Asriel under a lot of pressure, and very upset, but just him. You can't keep expecting the worst from him, it's not fair."

You say that like he's worrying because he wants to. Like he can just decide that everything is fine. He knows you're right, but it's just not that simple. It's easier to just agree though. With a small nod, he sighs and slouches against the back of the couch. "i know, babe," he says.

You climb up onto the couch beside him and he lifts his arm so you can tuck yourself in against his side. It feels good, to have your head on his shoulder, needing to be close to him just like he needs
to be close to you. It's a little thing, but it calms and comforts him. He relaxes, just a little, and wraps his arms around you.

"You had me worried there for a minute," you admit. "It's been a while since I've seen you like that."

"I wasn't gonna let anything happen to you or Frisk, no matter what," he says.

"Don't say that," you say, pulling back to look at him, your brow furrowed. "Don't talk like Asriel is an enemy. He's Frisk's best friend, family even."

He wishes he had your blind faith in the kid, he really does. He tries to pull you back against him, wishing you would just let this go, but you resist. You sit there, tensed against him and frowning. "I'm not saying he's an enemy, babe. I just... got spooked, alright? I saw the look on your face, you were just as worried as I was."

"But I wasn't getting ready to attack anyone," you hiss, low like you're afraid someone is going to hear you. Your eyes dart to the still-empty stairwell.

Sans sighs, biting back sharp words in favor of trying to placate you. There's no winning here, for either of you. All he can do is try to cut this off before it gets worse. "You're right, and I'm glad you stopped me," he says, because it's true. He almost acted without thinking and that scares him a little. "I'm sorry."

You look a little taken aback, like you were expecting more of an argument from him. But at the same time you seem relieved; he knows you hate confrontation, even though you had no problem standing up to those monsters at Grillby's earlier. When it comes to standing up for the kids, you've got just as much determination as Frisk. It's part of what he loves about you.

After a moment of studying his face, you let him pull you back down to his shoulder, stroking your back. It's only after a few minutes of silence pass that you bolt upright with an exclamation of, "My tea!"

It's been an hour since the fight, teeth have been brushed and goodnights have been said to you and Sans. Tucked under the covers, Frisk and Asriel lay in bed facing each other, a hand over the other's heart. Their eyes are shining from the moonlight filtering in through the window and they're looking at each other, silent.

Frisk doesn't need to speak to know how scared and sorry Asriel still feels. They can feel it echoed in their chest, their own regret mingling with his and growing bigger, filling more of the space in their heads. Covering his hand with their free one, they give Asriel a weak smile in an attempt to be reassuring. It's not strong enough to pass through their connection, though. Only the most powerful feelings can do that.

They know he's been like this since the conference, and then it got worse at Grillby's, but they're not sure why. All they know is that they've been feeling his frustration and anxiousness all day, which only made their own worse when they snapped at you. And maybe, because they were mad too, they just made Asriel feel worse at the same time. Frisk doesn't like that, the thought of making anything harder on him. They're almost certain that Asriel feels the same way about them, now that they're thinking about it.

"This is hard," Asriel whispers, blinking and rubbing his eyes. "The Soul stuff, I mean."

"I was just thinking that," Frisk whispers back.
"I kinda thought so."

"Yeah."

"...Frisk?"

"Yeah?"

Asriel fidgets a little, pinching Frisk's pajamas between his fingers. His hand is warm against their chest and they squeeze it. "The rest of this stuff is hard too. Being a prince again, trying to be there for my parents... I'm not sure I want to do it. I don't think I should." His face scrunches up, staring at his hand on Frisk's chest instead of looking them in the eye. "I remember what I did when I had power before. I'm not sure I should get any more. I made a lot of bad choices."

"That wasn't your fault. Flowey wasn't really you, you were... you were hollow, and now you're not any more," Frisk says stubbornly. They've had this argument a hundred times now, and they hope that one day Asriel will finally listen. But they know that this isn't it, even as they say the words.

"I'll stop blaming myself for what Flowey did if you stop blaming yourself for what Chara did," Asriel says, blowing air out his nose.

Biting their lip, Frisk doesn't say anything.

"Your mom keeps asking me to talk to her, but she's never going to understand all the horrible things we've done."

"I don't want her to," they say, frowning.

"Yeah..." Asriel shifts a little, trying to get more comfortable.

"You could talk to Sans though. He understands." Frisk pulls their hand away as Asriel rolls onto his back with a sigh, breaking their contact.

"Maybe," he says begrudgingly, though Frisk is sure he won't do it. Not unless he was desperate. "But I think he's just as messed up as we are."

Frisk shifts onto their back too, staring up at the shadows on the ceiling. Silence fills the room, save for the distant sound of wind rustling through the trees outside. They feel calm again, they both do. After a few minutes of listening to each other's breathing, Frisk feels Asriel's hand seek theirs out under the covers. They lace their fingers together and don't notice that they're breathing in sync.

"I heard some of the monsters talking bad about my dad at Grillby's," Asriel whispers to the ceiling. "They think he's keeping things like this on purpose. Because he's afraid. But he's not. They're lying about him."

"Maybe they're the ones that're afraid."

"I think they're just angry."

"Lots of people get angry when they're scared. Mom does. You did." Frisk glances over at Asriel right as he turns to look at them. Their eyes meet.

"Your mom does too?"

Frisk nods, giving Asriel a conspiratorial grin. "You should have heard her cuss at Mettaton..."
Sans only manages two hours of sleep before the nightmares wake him up. Trembling, he rolls away from where he's curled against your back, rubbing his hands down his face. You shift a little in your sleep but don't wake. That's good at least. As long as one of you gets some decent sleep. After a steadying breath, he uncovers his eyes and takes a look at the clock. It's a little after midnight, not too late. Once he winds back down he might be able to get a few more hours. He's careful not to disturb you as he slides out of bed, grabs his phone from the nightstand, and closes the door behind him.

The first thing he notices is that Papyrus's bedroom door is still open, down at the other end of the hall. He checks his phone for any messages but there aren't any. Frowning, Sans resists the urge to call his brother, reminding himself that he said he'd be back late. He just hadn't realized that it would be this late.

He makes his way down to the kitchen, hoisting himself up onto a plush barstool and grabbing the laptop that's sitting on the counter, charging. There's a nagging feeling in the back of his mind, a little paranoid voice that won't let him rest until he does some checking. The internet here on the surface is incredible compared to the undernet. It's easy enough to pull up what he's looking for with just a few searches. He sifts through news articles about the conference, watches videos of interviews. Most of the focus is on Asgore and Toriel, and there's a few fluff pieces featuring some random monsters and humans. Most of the articles mention you and Frisk at least in passing, but that's to be expected. Some of the videos have short clips of your various interviews, and so far everything has been fairly positive. There's no sign of Gloria or her rude questions anywhere that he can find. He hopes that's a good thing, but he can't help but worry. If it had been released then the two of you could deal with it, move past it. As it stands, all he can do is wonder.

He tries to focus on the good. That the media representation of the conference should help paint a better picture of Ebott and the monsters to the humans. That's exactly what Asgore was hoping for, and it seems like it's paying off. Maybe it means changes are on the way. He just hopes that they're good ones.

Closing out the tabs in the web browser, Sans checks the instant messenger on a whim and notices Alphys is online. Watching anime, knowing her. He thinks about messaging her but stops as he hears the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. It has to be Papyrus getting home, there's only a few cars on Ebott and unless it's the military... No, it's got to be Papyrus.

He teleports over to one of the front windows, the black and pink monstrosity outside confirming his suspicions. Peeking through the curtains, he watches as Papyrus and Mettaton get out of the car, meeting beside the driver's side door before starting up the path to the house. Mettaton threads their arms together and gives Papyrus a winning smile. Sans can see the bright flush of orange all the way in the house. Frowning, he grumbles to himself. Of all the people Papyrus had to have a... crush? Is it really a crush? Fine, whatever, of all the people he had to have a crush on, it had to be Mettaton.

Sure the overgrown calculator has been doing a lot of work to help the monsters look good, but surely that's all been selfish on his part. It's not like he can become a celebrity while monsters are still trapped behind the Line. So it would be in his best interests to help long enough to get himself out, right?

Sans presses closer to the window as the two of them get nearer, trying to listen to their conversation. Maybe he shouldn't be snooping, but he can't help himself.
"—know that you were expecting something a little more fun," Mettaton says, his smile wilting dramatically. "But I just want to thank you for always listening, Papy."

"OF COURSE, METTATON. I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WILL ALWAYS BE HERE TO HELP YOU. YOU'RE..." Papyrus hesitates, glancing down at Mettaton's arm entwined with his own. "YOU'RE MY FRIEND. AND THAT'S WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR."

"You're such a sweetheart, listening to me whine like this. It's just..." He pulls away, and to Sans's surprise he crosses his arms over his chest and hugs himself. Is that... is Mettaton actually upset about something? "This isn't what I expected at all, up here. On the surface," he says, with a small wave of his hand. Shrugging, he gives Papyrus a weak smile. "I thought I'd be a star by now."

"METTATON, YOU'RE ALREADY A STAR TO ME! AND I'M SURE THAT THE HUMANS WILL SEE THAT TOO ONCE YOU HAVE THE CHANCE." Papyrus strikes a confident pose, hands poised on his hips as that old scarf gives a dramatic flutter. Sans sighs but can't help smiling. Papyrus really is the coolest person he knows, he just hopes that Mettaton realizes it too. He'd say that the robot doesn't deserve his brother's attention, but that's part of Papyrus's charm. He honestly believes that everyone deserves this kind of care and support. He's not sure how it doesn't wear him out.

"You're simply a delight, I'm not sure what I'd do without you, darling," Mettaton croons, smiling again as he relaxes his hold on himself. They're almost at the front door, and Sans has to shift his angle to keep an eye on them.

"WELL, LUCKILY FOR YOU, YOU'LL NEVER HAVE TO FIND OUT," Papyrus says, blushing again as he grins.

"Lucky for me," he agrees, resting his hand on the skeleton's shoulder.

There's a moment where they look at each other and Sans is torn between going back to the kitchen to give them some privacy or staying right here. Before he can decide, Papyrus wraps Mettaton up in a huge hug, and Sans can see the startled expression on the robot's face. Was he really not expecting that? Wasn't this some kind of date? After a moment, Mettaton hugs him back, his face softening. Relaxing. Sans feels suddenly like he's intruding on something very private.

"DON'T GIVE UP, METTATON. I KNOW YOU'LL GET YOUR CHANCE. I BELIEVE IN YOU!" he says before he lets him go, beaming.

Looking embarrassed of all things, Mettaton smooths his hair and gives an awkward little laugh. "Papy, I just don't know what to do with you," he says. Then, after a moment, he leans forward and plants a kiss on his cheek. Papyrus is practically glowing when Mettaton pulls away and waggles his fingers at him. "I need to get going, if I don't get back home soon I'm going to run out of power. Thank you again for humoring me, darling."

Papyrus just watches, a little dazed as Mettaton hurries away to his car. Well, that sure was something. As his brother comes back to himself and starts fumbling in his pocket for his keys, Sans realizes that he's just standing there by the window, waiting to get caught eavesdropping. He teleports back to his seat at the bar, making a show of messing with the laptop as Papyrus opens the door.

Sans glances over his shoulder like he just noticed him, waiting for his brother to come into view. When he does he raises a hand in greeting. "'sup, bro?"

"WHAT ARE YOU STILL DOING UP?" Papyrus asks, fixing Sans with a concerned look. He
comes into the kitchen to stand beside him, resting his hands on his hips. "YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO WAIT FOR ME. YOU SHOULD TAKE BETTER CARE OF YOURSELF, SANS."

Shrugging, Sans closes the laptop, pushing it away so he can rest his elbows on the bar. "yeah, you're right," he says.

"WAIT, BUT YOU'RE IN YOUR PAJAMAS ALREADY. WERE YOU NOT ABLE TO SLEEP AGAIN?" he takes hold of his shoulder, leaning in close to take a look at his brother's face.

"i got a little. had a nightmare," Sans admits. "but what about you, how was your night?"

"DO NOT CHANGE THE SUBJECT!" Papyrus scolds, making Sans smile. "IF YOU WON'T TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, AND YOU AREN'T LETTING HOPE DO IT EITHER, THEN IT'LL JUST HAVE TO FALL TO ME."

The taller skeleton turns and plucks the kettle from the stovetop, filling it at the sink and turning on a burner. Sans can only sit and watch as he hurries over to the cabinets and starts pulling things out onto the countertop. He recognizes the canister of hot chocolate mix and a bag of marshmallows.

"bro, c'mon you don't have to do all that," Sans says, feeling a little embarrassed but pleased.

"I DO! YOU USED TO DO THIS FOR ME AND NOW I CAN DO IT FOR YOU," he says, ignoring his weak protest.

"yeah, back when you were just a baby bones. c'mon pap, you had a long night, i'm sure you're tired." He rubs the back of his skull.

"I'M NEVER TOO TIRED TO TEND TO MY BROTHER," he says, giving Sans a stern look over his shoulder.

Chuckling, Sans holds his hands up in mock surrender until Papyrus turns back around. He leans forward against the bar, his grin widening. "well if you insist. then why don't you tell me how your night went?"

Papyrus hesitates, fidgeting with the mug in his hands. Oh that's new, normally he'd be more than happy to run through every little detail. He's not sure if he likes this change in behavior. "IT WAS VERY PLEASANT. I HAD A GOOD TIME WITH METTATON. HE DOESN'T NEED TO EAT BUT HE TOOK ME OUT ANYWAY WHICH WAS KIND OF HIM." He goes quiet, like he wants to say more but isn't sure if he should. "WHAT ABOUT YOU? HOW IS EVERYONE?"

"fine. they're fine," Sans says. It's not a lie, but... Papyrus really doesn't need to worry himself with all that stuff. But he must seem to sense that Sans isn't saying something because he looks back at him with a skeptical raise of his brow. "hey, bro?"

Papyrus blinks. "YES, BROTHER?"

"i'm glad you had a good time. and thanks for this."

Taken aback, it takes him a second to nod and give Sans a smile. Whatever he might have been about to say is gone. "ME TOO. AND YOU'RE WELCOME."

The sound of your phone going off wakes you and Sans. He grumbles and wraps his arms tight around your middle, pressing his face between your shoulders as you reach out and fumble for your phone. It's nine, late enough that you'd normally be awake so you can't get too mad when you see
Toriel's name on the caller ID. You're frustrated anyway, but you feel a little guilty about it.

Answering the call, you hold the phone up to your ear. "G'morning Tori," you say, clearing your throat when you realize how sleepy you sound.

"Oh, my child, did I wake you?" Toriel asks, apologetic.

"No, I mean, yes but it's fine," you mumble, rubbing your eyes and settling back against Sans.

"what time is it?" he asks, muffled by your back.

"It's nine," you tell him quickly, before returning your attention to Toriel. "Is everything okay? No one's come to wake us up so I'm guessing the kids are with Papyrus."

"probably," Sans says.

"Everything is fine, I am just calling because I wanted to let you know that we will be getting a new neighbor! You know the vacant house near yours?" She sounds excited. That in addition to the promise of someone new has your attention piqued, waking you a bit more. After you make an affirmative noise, she continues. "Well, I found someone to start working at our school to teach human history. His name is Mr. Stuart and he was very keen to begin as soon as possible. I thought it might be best for him to live nearby, since you are the only other human here in Ebott right now so I offered him that vacant house."

She blurts out everything in a pleased rush, leaving you a little lost by the time she's finished. It's too early for this. "Wait, okay, hold on. I just woke up, remember? So you hired a new teacher, a mister..."

"Stuart," she supplies quickly, and you can hear the smile in her voice.

"And you just gave him the vacant house?"

"No, I sold it to him. Cheaply, I must say, but no I did not just give him the house."

Sans shifts so his chin is resting on your arm, looking down at you and listening. You're sure he can hear Toriel's side of the conversation because you tend to keep your speaker louder than necessary. "when did she meet this guy? yesterday at the conference?"

"Yes, precisely," she says. "And good morning Sans, I apologize for disturbing you."

"s'ok," he says, hugging you closer.

"He seems like a very nice young man. I was hoping that you might take some time to meet with him, help him adjust to living here and get to know Ebott," she says, in a tone that implies that you could refuse if necessary, but she doesn't expect you to.

This isn't what you were expecting to be hearing first thing in the morning, but you're glad to hear Toriel so happy. This was part of the goal of the conference after all, to encourage humans to come to Ebott. "Sure, of course I can. When is he moving in and starting work?"

"Today, and as I said, he was happy to start as soon as possible..." She actually sounds a little embarrassed.

"So he's starting on Monday. I mean, tomorrow?" You cover your face with your hand, doing your best not to let your mild frustration color your voice.
Toriel gives a polite laugh. "Yes, I suppose so."

"I guess I should talk to him today then, huh?" you say, seeing where this is going.

"If you could. I can bring him over after he arrives, maybe the boys can help him move in?" she asks hopefully.

Sans tucks his head into your side, using the softness of your waist to muffle his protests. You try not to laugh. "I think that can be arranged," you say, draping your arm over his shoulders and stroking his skull.

"Thank you, Hope. It means so much that you are so willing to help," she says with enough gratitude to make you blush. "He is supposed to be here around noon, but I will call you to let you know."

"Of course, Tori. Anytime."

"Then I will see you later. Give my love to Asriel."

"Always. See you later."

You hang up the phone and plunk it back down on the nightstand before rolling over to wrap yourself up in Sans and tuck your head under his jaw. "I thought I was done doing the social thing for the weekend," you complain, groaning as he runs a hand through your hair.

"you coulda told her no," he says.

"You know I couldn't," you retort, grumbling. "No more than you could have if she asked you. She's got us wrapped around her fingers."

He makes a noise but doesn't disagree. "so, what do you think about all this?" he asks, his tone measured.

"About what? A human moving in next door?" You trail your fingers along his ribs, close to his spine. He shivers. "I mean, we see the soldiers on a regular basis, it's not like I'm a stranger to dealing with... my own kind."

"this is a bit more permanent though, don't you think? i mean, the soldiers are hopefully gonna go away."

"Sans, I'm fine. This is what we want, mingling of the species," you say, sighing.

One of his hands trails down your side, getting suspiciously low. He gives a lewd chuckle. "i can think of some species mingling i want..."

Giggling, you give him a weak shove. "C'mon, be serious. What about you, how do you feel about this?"

He brings his hand up to a more respectable spot on your side, rubbing your hipbone with his thumb. "like you said, this was always part of the goal. i'm glad it's working out so far, i just worry about if something goes wrong. and i don't wanna be walking on eggshells around this guy, worrying that he's gonna run off and go... i dunno, sell all our secrets to the highest bidder."

You can't help but laugh at that. "Our secrets? Like what?"

"like us. look, i know you've been keeping our relationship quiet, and i understand why, but i'm not
gonna be your dirty little secret, hope. not in our own neighborhood."

Pulling back enough so that you can look at his face, you can't help but feel hurt. "I never... Sans I never meant to keep you secret. You're not—" You bite your lip, shaking your head as Sans tries to pull you back against his chest. Pulling the sheets up to cover yourself, you sit up and wrap your arms around your knees. "Is that how I made you feel?"

"shit, babe i didn't mean it like that," Sans says, sitting up beside you.

"Then what did you mean?" you ask, looking at his hand, the contrast of white against the brown of your skin as he strokes your arm.

"i don't want either of us to have to put on some kind of show for this guy. i just want to be us. yeah, maybe we don't need to flaunt it in front of the reporters, but here at home? this is where we get to be ourselves," he says, leaning in close to kiss your cheek. You let him.

"I'm sorry," you mumble, still feeling terrible. "Sans I never wanted any of this to make you feel bad, that's the last thing I meant to do. I hate that."

"it's fine. like i said, i understand why. just promise me it's not gonna start happening here, okay? if this guy is gonna be our neighbor, then he's just gonna have to get to know the real us." He gives you a reassuring smile.

"I promise. This Mr. Stuart isn't going to change anything."

It's a quarter to one when Toriel shows up at the house, a little later than you were expecting but not so much that you'd consider them not on time. She knocks politely on the door and waits for you to answer instead of just coming inside like normal. Sans is on your heels as you open it, greeted by her smiling face.

"I am sorry that we are a little later than I expected. I know the soldiers are just doing their jobs but they gave Mr. Stuart a little trouble at the checkpoint," she says, frowning a little. "But everything is all taken care of. They were just not expecting anyone with a trailer."

"It's fine, Tori, really. It gave me some extra time to finish some laundry," you say, smiling.

"so where's the new guy?" Sans asks, resting a hand on the small of your back.

"Oh goodness, of course!" Toriel turns, stepping out of the way to reveal the person behind her. "Mr. Stuart, this is Hope and Sans, two of your new neighbors!"

Standing there behind her is your mysterious blonde rescuer from yesterday. His polite smile widens with amusement as recognition dawns on your face, running a hand through his hair before hooking his thumbs on the beltloops of his jeans.

"you," Sans says, his tone rougher than you'd expect. You give him a confused glance and are surprised to see a smile you recognize as forced.

"Me," the man says, winking at you. He offers you a hand, shaking as you offer yours. "We weren't properly introduced before. My name's Deacon."
"Oh, so you have already met!" Toriel says, beaming from Deacon's side.

You're distracted by what seems to be a hint of a black tattoo on his right arm, peeking from under his long sleeve as you shake hands. Realizing that this moment is stretching out a bit longer than necessary, you let go and look at Toriel, fighting an embarrassed blush. "He helped me out with a nasty reporter at the conference," you tell her, then turn back to Deacon. "Thank you again, by the way. How did you know my name?"

"Don't mention it, really," he says, waving away your thanks. "And last I checked you've been in the news, it wasn't hard to recognize you."

"My child you should have told me you had trouble yesterday. And thank you very much Mr. Stuart for helping her," Toriel says, giving you an admonishing look.

"I didn't want to worry you, it got handled," you say. Not to mention you didn't need Toriel and Asgore going on the defensive for you on such an important day. You glance between the monster and human on your doorstep, feeling a little unsure. "Um, did you want to come in, or...?"

"Oh, you know what, my car is parked in the middle of the road outside," Deacon says, jerking his thumb behind him towards the driveway.

"Yeah, and don't we have some moving to do?" Sans says, with no hint of whatever frustration that was you heard earlier. As you give him a curious look, he just returns with his normal, lazy smile. Maybe he was just surprised earlier. You hadn't expected to see Deacon again either.

"Oh, yes of course. I am sure everyone can relax and get to know one another better afterwards," Toriel says, glancing inside the house over your head. "Are the children upstairs?"

"They ran off into the woods after lunch. I made sure they had their phones if you want them to come back early, but I thought it might be easier to do all this without them underfoot."

"That is fine, I was hoping they might meet their new teacher a little early, but there is still dinner. Maybe we can—"

Deacon raises both his hands, shaking his head and looking a little startled. "Whoa whoa whoa, okay no need to make a fuss, really. I don't want to intrude."

"Yeah, Tori, no need to pressure the guy," Sans says with a shrug.

"Please, I insist!" Toriel presses.

"I'll be busy unpacking and you've already been more than generous, Ms. Dreemurr," Deacon says, and you almost feel bad for how desperately he's trying to get out of this. Toriel can come on a little strong.

"Just Toriel, if you do not mind Mr. Stuart."

He gives an awkward half-smile, resting his hands on his hips. "I'll make you a deal. You drop the
'Mr. Stuart' and I'll drop the 'Ms. Dreemurr'."

With a polite laugh, she nods. "Very well, Deacon."

Deacon gives a little nod in return, running his hand through his hair. "See? Much nicer. Now, how about I get out of the middle of the road—"

"You are trying to change the subject," she counters, narrowing her eyes and wagging her finger. "Please, let us welcome you to Ebott with dinner. You should not have to worry about food on your first evening here."

"Really, I've got some stuff I brought from my old place, you don't have to do that," he says, reaching up to rub the back of his neck.

"I'm gonna go get papyrus, babe. Be right back," Sans says, running his hand along your back before pulling away. He waits for you to give him a nod to show you've heard him before he vanishes. Shit, he really wasn't kidding about not hiding anything from the new neighbor, was he?

You glance over at Deacon to gauge his reaction and aren't surprised to see him staring a little wide-eyed at the spot where Sans was standing a second ago. He catches you looking and blinks, clearing his throat and hooking his thumbs on his jeans.

"You get used to it," you offer, accompanied by a nervous smile. "And, um, trust me, it's easier to just give in to Tori, she's gonna get you over for dinner sooner or later."

Deacon glances from you to Toriel, looking a little cornered. Then, with a sigh and a dramatic shrug of his shoulders, he relents. "Okay, okay, I can see when I'm beaten. You're both just too much for me."

Beaming, Toriel clasps her hands together in front of her chest. "Oh wonderful! I should run to the store then, now that I will be cooking for eight."

"Eight?" Deacon asks, his eyebrows shooting up.

"You go ahead, I think me and the boys can take it from here," you tell her, trying not to laugh. "We'll see you tonight."

"Of course. Thank you again for doing this, and be sure to thank Sans and Papyrus for me," Toriel says, bending down to give you a warm hug.

As she says her farewell to Deacon and heads down the path away from the house, you can see the wheels spinning in the man's head, wondering just what he got himself into. You finally do laugh, tucking some hair behind your ear. "Yes, she's always like that," you say.

"It's like she walked out of a sitcom. I didn't think people like that existed," he says, giving you a bewildered expression. "It just isn't human."

"Nope, it's not," you agree. "The definition of 'monstrous' needs to be updated in the dictionary."

"No shit..." He stares down the the road, following Toriel with his eyes before his head whips around to look at you, startled. "I mean, I don't mean to imply that she's inhuman I was just saying that..." He trails off as you start giggling, narrowing his eyes. "You knew what I meant, didn't you?"

"Yeah," you say, nodding.
"Well, I'm going to pick up the shattered remnants of my dignity and I'll meet you and, um... the others down at the house," Deacon says with a good-natured chuckle. "Thanks again for the help, I'm sure Toriel wrangled you into this..."

You hold up a hand, shaking your head. "Don't worry about it. It's nice to have another human nearby and we're glad to help. Besides, what's family for if not to strongarm you into being nice?"

Deacon raises a brow at that. "Family, huh? Sounds like a long story. Maybe you'll have to explain that one some time." He shrugs. "Anyway. Car. Middle of road. Going now."

With a little wave he turns on his heel and walks off.

A few minutes later you and the brothers are walking down the road towards Deacon's house. Papyrus won't stop talking about how excited he is to meet your new neighbor, having already scolded Sans for not getting him sooner. Sans, by contrast, is quiet at your side, fingers laced together with yours. He seems fine, but you can tell something is bugging him.

"Well, Deacon seems nice enough," you say, testing the waters.

"I guess so," he says, glancing up at you. He doesn't seem convinced.

Well, you've only just met the guy, it's not fair to expect much more than that. There's a break in the trees lining the road as the driveway comes into view, leading up to the little house a few minutes' walk from yours. The three of you turn up it, and parked in front of a small carport is a small U-Haul trailer. You can't see the car that pulled it from this angle, but it must be a truck or something because it's pretty big. Deacon has the back door open, eyeing the boxes inside as he rolls up the sleeves of his shirt. You can see more of his tattoo now, a blackwork sleeve down to his wrist from what you can tell. As you get closer you can make out birds — ravens, or crows maybe? — and forks of lightning. That must have taken forever to do, and you wonder just how much of him is covered.

"HELLO NEW HUMAN!" Papyrus calls out, waving energetically even though Deacon isn't looking yet.

"Oh, hey there— Oh." He turns to look at the three of you, eyes widening as his gaze falls on the center of Papyrus's chest then moves up to his face. "Shit, okay, taller than I was expecting."

"YES I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AM QUITE TALL. I WORKED VERY HARD TO GET LIKE THIS, THANK YOU FOR NOTICING!" He's grinning, striding up to Deacon and offering his hand.

With an amused expression, Deacon shakes it. He glances at Sans, and you see his eyes flick down to your joined hands. "If it wasn't for the striking family resemblance I'd think you two weren't related."

"What can I say, I got the short end of the stick," Sans says. "This is my bro, papyrus. Papyrus, deacon."

"You sure that he didn't just get the whole stick?" he asks, smirking.

"Nice one, pal." He sounds friendly enough. Like he's at least giving him a chance. "Now, as much as I'd love to sit out here swapping jokes, I think we've got some boxes to move."

"Of course. Deacon, please tell us where you would like my brother and I to put these boxes. We have plenty of practice moving from when..."
WE GOT OUR NEW HOUSE SO DON'T WORRY!" Papyrus rests his hands on his hips, beaming. He might look a bit more impressive if he wasn't wearing a neon striped shirt and acid wash jeans. It looks a bit like the 90's threw up all over him.

"That's very reassuring," Deacon says, chuckling. "Really, a huge comfort. Well, all the boxes are marked by room, so I guess just pick one and— oh, okay." He stares as Papyrus walks past him and grabs a stack of three boxes, hefting them up and carrying them with ease. "That works too."

"my bro's pretty strong for someone without any muscles," Sans says with a wink. He releases you, and with a flick of his left hand he's got his own stack of boxes wreathed in a faint blue glow. What the hell is he doing? As you restrain a noise of protest, Sans just nudges you with his shoulder. "i have to admit, i prefer a different approach."

"Well aren't you a small package full of surprises." Deacon is taking this all remarkably well, you think. Part of you wants to shove Sans for showing off, but you resist.

"i like to think i'm fun sized," Sans retorts, giving you a wink with his dark right socket. "c'mon babe, grab a box."

"Okay, but how would you know if you ever met someone with invisibility?" he points out, giving you a crooked smile.

Now you can't help but laugh. "Touché. There are ghosts though, did anyone tell you about the ghosts?"

"Why not ghosts? Shit you've got a walking skeleton for a..." he hesitates, raising a brow at you. Sans doesn't want any secrets. Not here at home. Swallowing, you feel a little nervous as you say, "Fiancé.""

"Fiancé, thank you and congratulations I suppose." He doesn't even blink at that, maybe Toriel talked to him about you? She must have, before bringing him to meet you, right? Well, no matter what, it's a relief. "So why not ghosts too. Next you'll be telling me there's, oh I dunno... vampires?" Deacon turns to the trailer, wrapping his arms around a smaller box and offering it to you. "Here, this one's not too heavy."

"Thanks," you say, smiling. "And no, thankfully no vampires. Actually, not many monsters that look human, now that you mention it. I mean, human shaped maybe." You turn to head towards
the house but stop halfway, biting your lip before facing Deacon again. "Look, I've had a lot of
time to adjust to all of this, and trust me when I say that everyone is great. But it'll be really nice
having another human around, so if you need to talk or have any questions, I'm just next door. And
I'll be at the school too. You know what, remind me to give you my cell number just in case. It's a
huge adjustment, and I at least had Sans to help me."

"Really, I'm..." Deacon's smirking, but as he catches your eye it falters a little. Rubbing the back of
his neck, he nods. "Yeah, sure. Thanks."

As you start to head towards the house again you see it. The car that's pulling the trailer. It's a little,
pea soup green Civic coupe from... you don't even know. Before you were born. The roof has rust
spots and the paint is faded and cracked. It looks like there's some duct tape on the rear
bumper. It's the kind of car your friends got in high school and replaced as soon as they could. To
put it plainly, it looks like a piece of shit.

"Oh my god, how did you get up the mountain in that car, let alone pulling a trailer?" you blurt out,
giving Deacon a horrified look.

"What, Sylvie?" he says, giving the car an affectionate look. Because of course it has a name.
"We've been through a lot together. There's a lot more to her than it looks, believe me. Pulling a
trailer is a piece of cake... as long as you don't want to go more than forty."

"You can afford a house but not a new car?" you ask, raising an eyebrow.

"A cheap house, and—" he lets out a mock gasp. "Have you no respect?"

Rolling your eyes but smiling all the same, you turn back to head towards the house. "Okay, okay.
Weirdo."

"Pot meet kettle," he calls after you.

You suppose that's true.

Chapter End Notes

Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about
the characters and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
With Papyrus's enthusiasm and Sans's uncharacteristic showing off, emptying the trailer doesn't take long. It also helps that Deacon doesn't have much in the way of furniture. Thankfully the house is still fully furnished from the previous residents, so at least he has places to sit and sleep.

Seeing as you still have a couple hours until dinner, Papyrus suggests you all stay to help him unpack. Sans shrugs and you both agree, despite Deacon's weak protests. So you find yourselves in the kitchen, with Deacon opening boxes and directing things as you and Papyrus put everything away. Sans just sits at the kitchen table with his feet up in the chair next to him.

You wish he'd help. Between him and Papyrus's unique way of doing things, you can't help but feel anxious. You just want everyone to get along, largely in part of the fact that you almost forgot what it's like to have another friendly human around and you don't want them to scare him off. As friendly as the soldiers can be, there's always that bit of distance with them. Like they're keeping themselves at arm's length just in case. Because at the end of the day they have a job to do and no matter their personal feelings about you and the monsters, they're soldiers first. But you don't feel any of that from Deacon. He's a human, throwing his lot in with the monsters just like you.

"HUMAN, YOU DON'T HAVE MUCH IN THE WAY OF FOOD. I'M GLAD YOU'LL BE JOINING US FOR DINNER!" Papyrus says, his voice filling the room.

He's not so much loud as forceful, but for the first time in a long time it has you wincing, glancing over at Deacon to see if it's bothering him. Outside it wasn't so bad, but in here it echoes. Deacon doesn't seem too fazed by it, but maybe he's just being polite. Maybe all of this really is freaking him out and he's just good at hiding it for the sake of propriety.

"Pap I'm sure he didn't want to move a bunch of stuff from his old place. We've got plenty of stores up here for him to get food at," you say, biting your lip as you stand up on your tip toes to push a few things into the cabinet over the stove.

The cookbooks are lifted out of your hands as a blue glow surrounds them, sliding effortlessly into their new home. You sink back down onto your heels, casting a frustrated look back at Sans. "I could do that myself. Stop wasting your magic."

Sans raises a brow at you, blinking as the blue fades from his eye and the white lights flicker back to life. "helping my girl isn't a waste of magic."

"Hell, if I had magic like that, or a girl, I'd probably do the same thing," Deacon chimes in, sifting through a box of what looks like dishtowels and pot holders.

You watch Sans give him an appraising look that Deacon thankfully doesn't notice. You wish you knew what was going on inside that skull of his, because whatever it is he doesn't say anything.

"I AGREE WITH HOPE. IF YOU KEEP USING YOUR MAGIC SO MUCH YOU'RE GOING TO FALL ASLEEP IN THE MIDDLE OF DINNER," Papyrus scolds.

Deacon pulls out one of the chairs from around the table to set a box down on it but hesitates, frowning. "Huh," he says.

"What is it?" you ask, coming up beside him.

He pulls out another chair, looking down at the seat. "Two of these seat cushions are missing."

A Seat at the Table
That's weird.

"NOT AS WEIRD AS THE FACT THAT YOU DON'T HAVE A COLANDER. HOW DO YOU STRAIN YOUR SPAGHETTI?"

You're trying not to cringe, suddenly embarrassed. Did he have to bring up spaghetti already? All these little idiosyncrasies are normal to you now, but you're starting to realize just how strange they must seem to other humans. "Papyrus, not everyone—"

"Tongs," Deacon says, laughing under his breath. He's back to sorting through boxes again, the cushions forgotten. "You can grab the noodles right out of the pot, shake the water off a little, and put it right on the plate. One less thing to wash."

"OH, THAT'S A BRILLIANT IDEA! BRILLIANTLY LAZY, SANS THAT SOUNDS LIKE SOMETHING YOU WOULD DO," Papyrus says, impressed.

Sans is smiling at his brother, shrugging. "yeah, bro. you got me."

"So, I know that Hope works at the school, what do you two do?" Deacon asks, pushing the box of dishtowels towards Papyrus and pointing to a drawer near the fridge.

"I AM THE HEAD OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH. WELL... ACTUALLY I'M THE ONLY MEMBER."

"You have a neighborhood watch?" Deacon asks, surprised.

You wince. "Not exactly. He used to be a sentry back Underground," you say, trying to explain this in a way that makes sense. "He sort of does patrols around Mountainside, just to make sure everyone's okay. I joked with him that it was sorta like a neighborhood watch and it stuck."

"IT IS NO JOKING MATTER. I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, TAKE MY JOB VERY SERIOUSLY," Papyrus says, posing as his scarf gives a dramatic flutter. You hate how embarrassed it makes you feel, just wanting Papyrus to act a little more normal for once. God that isn't fair to him at all, is it?

But Deacon is grinning, looking at Papyrus like he can't believe his eyes. "Hey, you guys can't count on the soldiers to handle everything. Monsters got to look out for themselves."

"EXACTLY!" he says, beaming. He clears his throat after a moment, dropping out of his pose. "NOT TO DISCREDIT THE SOLDIERS, I'M SURE THEY'RE WORKING VERY HARD."

You gently remind yourself that even you adjusted well to being around the monsters. Deacon came to Ebott of his own free will after all, unlike you. You had adjusted out of necessity and he's doing this all willingly. Why are you expecting him to not take it all in stride? Just relax, let him get to know them. Besides, how could anyone not like Papyrus?

"So the big guy here is head of the watch, that's pretty cool," Deacon says picking up another box and using his pocket knife to slit the tape sealing it shut. "What about you, Sans? What do you do, if you don't mind my asking."

"not much," Sans says, shrugging.

"He's a scientist," you say, nudging his shoulder. "He's been helping Alphys out at the Core."
"i was just an intern, babe, c'mon." He gives you an odd look, and you wonder if you said something wrong. "dunno that what i do is official enough to be considered a 'scientist'."

"The Core? That's... what supplies power to Ebott, right?" Curiosity piqued, Deacon looks up from what he's doing. "i think the news said it was geothermal energy, enough to keep you guys off the grid? I mean, you guys were self-sustaining before, might as well stay that way."

"it's better than relying on the humans," Sans says, looking away. "but yeah, what you heard is right."

"It's amazing what you managed to do down there. I mean, you survived, hell, thrived for what, hundreds of years without anyone knowing you were there? That's pretty impressive," Deacon says, not noticing the way that Sans's smile is turning forced.

"yeah, i suppose we did do pretty well for ourselves, considering all we had to go off of was human garbage." He pulls his feet off the chair next to him, sitting up straighter as he regards Deacon. "not sure i'd call it thriving though."

Deacon opens his mouth to say something but catches himself, glancing from Sans to where Papyrus is standing next to the fridge, wringing his hands. Even he can feel the tension building in the room. His Adam's apple bobs a little as he swallows. "i... Oh, I didn't mean to..."

You rest your hand on Sans's shoulder, squeezing. He relaxes a little under your touch, reaching up to take hold of it. "forget it, pal."

Sans and Deacon don't say much to each other after that. There's still plenty of chatter between the four of you, but you take note that very little of it is directly between the two of them. You hope this is just a small bump in the road, and that they'll move past this. You just want everyone to get along.

Sans doesn't like Deacon. The easy way he talks with you and Papyrus, his casual sarcasm, everything about him just rubs him the wrong way. The most frustrating part of it is that he doesn't even know why. The guy hasn't done anything worth disliking him for, aside from one insensitive comment he was more than eager to jump all over just to make him feel like shit. What the hell has gotten into him? He likes to think he's a nice guy, easy to get along with, good at making people comfortable. But not with Deacon. Just being around him sets him on edge.

So it's even more irritating when, as everyone is sitting at dinner together, that it seems like he's the only one with a problem. You and Papyrus already like the guy, and Tori and Asgore can't get enough of their first outside resident. Even the kids seem to like him.

There was one moment that struck Sans as a little odd, though, as the kids arrived at Tori's house. The second they came home Deacon's head jerked up and he gave Frisk and Asriel this weird look for just a little too long. But maybe it was just because Asriel was carrying Frisk on his back, with both of them announcing their arrival with loud shouts for their mothers.

But the moment passed and with a flurry of activity (Deacon hung off to the side, looking a little overwhelmed) all eight of you sat down for dinner.

Tori outdid herself, as usual. After who knows how long spent alone in the Ruins, Sans imagines that these huge family dinners must be like heaven to her. Sitting between Asriel and Asgore, she's all smiles as she watches heaping dishes of food get passed around the table.

"Deacon, please, do not be afraid to help yourself," she says, looking at the small portions he's
doled out to himself.

Deacon shifts a little in his seat as Papyrus hands him another bowl. "There's just so much, I just want to make sure I get a bit of everything," he says, barely loud enough for Sans to hear him.

As he sets the bowl down Asgore clears his throat, reaching for it. "If you do not mind, can you pass that down here please?"

"Oh, right!" he blurs out, flustered.

Sans has to fight the urge to roll his eyes. Hasn't he ever had a big family dinner before? It's not like this is some weird monster tradition. In an attempt to distract himself, he nudges Frisk with his elbow.

"so what did you do today, kiddo?" he asks, taking another serving dish from you and spooning some steamed vegetables onto his plate. He makes sure to give some to Frisk, too.

"Just more exploring," Frisk says evasively, stuffing their face with a mouthful of food to avoid saying more.

"yeah? soon enough you're gonna know every rock out there in the forest. find anything interesting?" he presses.

Frisk just shrugs.

Kids.

That's fine, at least he tried. Now that everyone has been served and all the dishes are set down on the table, Sans starts working on his own dinner. You're quiet at his side, focused on your own meal but nudging his knee with yours. Just a little reminder that you're there. He nudges you back, smiling.

"I hope everything went well with the move," Toriel says, trying to strike up a conversation.

"OH YES, OF COURSE! WITH MY OWN MOVING EXPERTISE AS AN EXAMPLE, WE HAD NO TROUBLE WHATSOEVER," Papyrus says, twirling some buttered noodles on his fork and taking a bite. It's become something of a tradition for there to always be some kind of pasta at these big family gatherings.

"That is good to hear. I am glad that there were no problems," Asgore says. "I hope the house is to your liking, Deacon."

When Deacon doesn't reply, Sans looks up from his dinner and sees that he's being watched. What, is there something— Oh, no he recognizes that look from the first few days he knew you. He's trying to figure out where the food goes. Meeting Deacon's eyes and unable to keep from smirking, he takes a big forkful of dinner and takes a slow, deliberate bite, then tips his head back as it vanishes. The human just blinks.

"Deacon?"

He snaps back to attention at the sound of Toriel's voice and Sans has to stop himself from laughing. Oh, he feels a little bad for messing with him, but not bad enough to not want to do it again.

"Sorry, I was... Yes ma'am?" Deacon says, cheeks reddening.
"Asgore just wished to know if the house is to your liking." She gives him a polite smile, but shoots Sans a narrow-eyed glance.

As Deacon stumbles through the appropriate pleasantries, Sans starts to feel more guilty. He shouldn't be messing with the guy, Tori has every right to be annoyed with him. He should be trusting her instincts. She's had lots more practice dealing with humans and hundreds of years of experience as queen. From the way old Gerson tells it she was the real brains behind the throne before she left, and if she likes Deacon, who is he to disagree?

Not to mention he doesn't want to screw this up for you. You seem so happy to have another human nearby, and he owes it to you to play nice, doesn't he? He doesn't want to not like the guy... But at the same time he's a little... oh, fuck is he jealous? Jealous of the easy way the two of you get along, and how you just seem to understand each other in a different way just on the merit of being humans. No matter how long he spends on the surface, he's never going to really understand what it means to be human.

That's a stupid thing to be jealous of. He shouldn't let this bother him. What did he think was gonna happen after you got to the surface, you'd just never talk to other humans again? You deserve to have someone who understands you, in ways that he can't. He can't be your entire world. He shouldn't expect to be.

But out of all the people did it have to be this guy?

Asgore's phone starts to ring, pulling Sans out of his own head. As the king excuses himself from the table, he glances over at you. You're watching him, dark eyes searching his face.

"Are you okay?" you ask him in a soft voice.

"yeah, i'm fine," he says, reaching under the table to squeeze your knee. Your lips twitch into a smile.

"So," Deacon says, looking at Asriel and Frisk. "I guess you two will be some of my new students?"

The kids exchange a look before Frisk nods. "Yeah I guess so."

"It will be so nice having someone with more knowledge of what has happened up here on the surface. It is important that the children learn these things now that we are up here too," Toriel says, stroking Asriel's head.

"Well there's a lot of history to cover, I still need to sit down with you and some of the other teachers to try and get a lesson plan ironed out. I know you want me starting tomorrow, but I'll just have to wing it for the first few days," Deacon says. He rubs the back of his neck, looking anxious. "Normally the type of history kids learn is determined by their grade, but you want me to teach a little bit of everything, I think?"

"Yes, from my understanding human schools are split by grades, but our three schools are all ages. It is my hope to get more human teachers in the future, but in the meantime I hope that you can teach a wide variety of students. As long as you think you can, I would hate for you to feel overwhelmed, especially so soon," she says, apologetic.

"Oh, no don't worry about that! I'm sure I'll think of something." He gives her a reassuring smile.

"Hey, if you're going to be teaching at our school, you'll get to meet Undyne!" Frisk says, perking up. "She's our gym teacher!"
"Undyne, huh? Is she cute?" Deacon asks with a wink.

Asriel laughs. "I guess? Her girlfriend thinks so at least."

"Ah, figures," he says, frowning. "All the cute ones are taken." Then, he glances over at you and gives you a wink.

You start laughing at that, and Sans gives a small, frustrated huff. Yeah, that's right you're taken. And this guy better not forget that.

But before he has time to get any more annoyed with the situation, Asgore comes back into the room. He's grinning, happier than Sans has seen him in a while. Raising a brow, he glances over at you and nudges you to get your attention.

"So," Asgore begins, clapping his hands together. "That was Captain Prasad. She wanted to inform me that the government has decided to let humans through the Line. They'll still be required to go through the checkpoint and submit to a search, but we will officially be open to the public. She said it's thanks to the positive response to the conference."

Toriel lets out an excited gasp. "Oh, Asgore that's wonderful news!"

"METTATON WILL BE HAPPY TO HEAR THIS! NOW HE CAN FINALLY GET CUSTOMERS AT HIS NEW HOTEL," Papyrus says, grinning.

"It will go into effect a week from tomorrow. They will be doing an official statement in the human news in the next few days." Asgore takes his seat again, beaming proudly.

Sans frowns. "but what about letting us out?"

Asgore and Toriel's expressions falter as they look at him. The king clears his throat. "I know this is not what everyone is hoping for, but it is still progress. This is something that will take time."

"it's been months already," Sans says, trying to keep his tone even. He looks at Deacon, wondering what he's thinking about all this. He doesn't trust himself to ask without making an ass out of himself.

Deacon keeps his eyes on his dinner, and doesn't say anything. He looks uncomfortable and out of place.

"Come now, we can speak of this later. We are here to welcome our new neighbor," Toriel says curtly, and Sans knows better than to try and argue.

Besides, this doesn't have anything to do with Deacon.
You're finally alone with Sans. If it were up to you this is how you'd spend every weekend, locked away in your bedroom together without the outside world and its complications. This business with the Line, as much as it's a step in the right direction it doesn't feel like enough. The monsters have been trapped too damn long and you just want to show them so much. Like the beach, for starters. Or a big city. The movie theater, or even just a shopping mall. There's so much that the world has to offer and it's just out of their reach. They can see it but can't get there and in a way it's almost crueler than not knowing at all.

But this is exactly what you don't want to encroach on this space. It feels like you've been getting less and less time to just the two of you, now that you're both working. You're glad he has the motivation to do something meaningful to him. So you savor these moments alone as time to reconnect and regroup, to check in and make sure he's doing okay.

Right now, you just want to spend some time with your favorite skeleton without real life getting in the way.

You watch Sans kick off his slippers in the middle of the floor, pull off his shirt and then flop face-first onto your bed. After a second he groans and turns his head, watching you as you make your way to the bathroom, pulling off your shirt. "hey, why can't you do that where i can watch?" he complains as you flip on the dim light over the shower.

Stripping down to just your underwear, you stuff everything into your hamper. You leave the bathroom door open just a crack to let some dim light filter out as you turn off the bright light over the bed. Much better. It's dark but not dark enough that you can't see each other, and the two white pinpricks in Sans's eyes follow you as you crawl onto the bed beside him. Laying on your stomach, you're conscious of your breasts pressed together between your arms, close to his face as you lean forward to press a kiss to his temple.

"Okay, talk to me. We're finally alone, let me in this head of yours," you murmur, brushing your lips gently over his brow.

"i'm sorry. i'm trying my breast to listen but i'm having trouble focusing," he says rolling onto his side and grinning.

"Sorry, should I have put on a shirt first so you can hear me better?" you ask, smirking as you cross your arms under your chin and pillow your head on them. It obstructs his view quite nicely.

"no way, you're perfect just like this." Sans reaches out and trails his fingers along your arm. It's on the cooler side in the house and his hand is nice and warm. He waggles his brows at you. "but are you sure you wanna talk?"

Laughing and poking him in the forehead, you give him as reproachful of a look as you can manage. "At least a little. You've been off all day, talk to me," you say, keeping your voice low and
"Have I? I mean, we were pretty busy today. A lot was going on," he says. He's watching his hand on your arm as he twirls his finger around a section of your hair.

You tilt your head to the side, leveling your eyes with his and getting his attention back to your face. "You were a little rude to Deacon at dinner," you say, more a question than an accusation. Maybe he didn't realize it.

"He was staring," Sans answers evenly.

"He was staring," Sans answers evenly.

So maybe it was on purpose. You admit, the look on Deacon's face almost had you choking on your food, but if Sans was going to start pranking your new neighbor he could at least have done it where he wouldn't get embarrassed in front of Toriel and Asgore. "I stared too, at first."

"Yeah, but I don't wanna bone Deacon," he says, smirking a little.

"Yeah, but I don't wanna bone Deacon," he says, smirking a little.

You laugh. "Oh, he's not cute enough for you, is he?" you tease, tracing one finger along the curve of his jaw.

"Nah, I like my humans on the softer side." He winks.

"Nah, I like my humans on the softer side." He winks.

Flattered and blushing a little despite yourself, you do your best to resist his charms. "Well, lucky for you I don't share your preferences."

Sans rolls closer, smiling and covering your hand to press it to the side of his face. Then, after a moment, his expression falters. "...Wait did you say he was cute?"

Oh no. Sure Deacon's attractive, but you didn't mean it like that. "I'm pretty sure I said that he wasn't cute enough," you say, leaning to kiss the spot between his eyes.

"I, uh, I'm sure it wouldn't hurt."

"Because you are," you tell him, kissing between his eyes again and trailing down to the side of his face. "Nothing is going to change that."

"I know." Your lips drag down to the vertebrae in his neck. He turns his head, allowing you easier access as he shudders under you. "There's no one I'd rather be with. You know that." As your teeth graze over the join between spine and shoulder, you reach down for his hand and bring it up to your chest, over your heart. "You know my soul is yours."

"I know." His breath hitches, the hand still on your waist squeezing as your tongue traces his clavicle. "I know."
"I love you," you murmur to his sternum, pressing a kiss in the center of his chest as you press his hand tighter to yours.

He lets out a short, rumbling chuckle you can feel through his bones. "I know," he says, smiling down at you.

You huff a breathy laugh, rolling your eyes. "No more Star Wars for you. Not until you apologize."

"You set that one up yourself, don't give me that," he says, sliding his hand out from under yours and to your breast.

Your grumble turns into a soft gasp as he brushes across your nipple with his thumb. Pulling both his hands away from you, you lace your fingers with his and pin them to the bed on either side of him. He raises a brow, his mouth quirking to the side as he watches you shift to the side to focus your attention on his ribcage. Laving your tongue in the gap between two of his ribs, he stifles a groan and shifts beneath you. The sound makes you smile, and goes straight to your pelvis.

Then you release his hands, leaning forward over him to reach for the pillows at the head of the bed. Sans takes hold of your waist again, holding you in place above him. You glance down in time to see his tongue slide from between his teeth and, in a way distinctly inhuman, circle your nipple and tug. Gasping, your hand grabs at the comforter beneath you. This wasn't what you had in mind but god if it doesn't feel good. You're frozen there for a minute, letting him continue before you remember your original goal. Right. Pillows. You try to reach for them again but his grip on you tightens, a noise of protest rumbling low in his chest. He shifts his attention to your other breast and you bite your lip, groaning.

You're trembling when he finally relaxes his hold on you and pulls his tongue away. "Sorry, I couldn't resist."

Grabbing two pillows, you drag them across the bed as you sit up, kneeling between Sans's legs. Then, without warning, you reach down to circle your hand around his spine and stroke upwards. He moans and rocks his hips upwards, jerking into your touch. His tongue is gone as his jaw goes slack, his pupils bright from beneath heavy lids as he watches you. His cheeks are glowing faintly. You could just stare at him, soak in the way he's looking at you like he just can't get enough but you have more important things on your mind. You're just getting started.

Tugging on the waist of his shorts, you both shift so you can get them off and you notice the way he's eyeing your underwear. He sits up, legs bent on either side of you as he circles his arms around your waist. His fingers slide between your skin and the thin fabric as his mouth finds your neck. You let him push down your panties and nip at the side of your throat, humming with pleasure even as you pull the pillows into place behind him. With that task done, you take a moment to wrap your arms around him, tracing his ribs with one hand and sliding your fingers along the curve of his pelvis.

Moaning as he shudders under your touch, he bites down on your shoulder, eliciting a gasp as you let your head fall to the side. One of his hands cups your backside and raises you up as the other pulls your underwear down to your knees, as far as they can go in your position. Then he slides back up your thighs, pulling your legs apart just enough so his fingers can slip between your folds. Again he keeps sidetracking you but you savor the sweet heat of him teasing at your entrance. He rubs gently at your clit, just enough to make you groan and press against his slick fingers, eager for more.

No, wait, this isn't what you wanted to do, you wanted to make him come undone, not the other
way around. You pull away, having to tug your shoulder out of his mouth even as he tries to clamp down harder. "Wait, wait," you breathe, taking your hand off his pelvis so you can move his hand out from between your legs. "Stop being so... amazing for two seconds."

"one..." he counts slowly, making you laugh.

You put your hands on his shoulders, straightening your back and pushing him down onto the pillows you set up a minute ago. They're beneath the center of his back, arching him up at just the right angle to expose as much of his spine as possible. You tug your underwear off the rest of the way and toss it aside, then lower yourself to your side.

"two— ohhh," Sans moans as you hook your arm under his leg and circle your fingers around his spine again, your other hand taking hold of the curve of his pubic bone. Your mouth joins your second hand, sucking gently as he moans again. Your core throbs in answer, and you hum against him. "shit..."

He melts under your touch as your tongue drags a slow path towards the left wing of his pelvis and your hand goes right. This is what you want, him turning to putty beneath your hands and mouth, quivering. His breathing hitchs as you shift higher, sliding your hand up his spine to leave room for your teeth as you graze them along his vertebrae. Gasping, he groans and his hand buries itself in your hair, scraping your scalp as you swirl your tongue over sensitive bone.

There's this one spot, low on his spine where it meets his pelvis. You lave your tongue down to it, then tilt your head to fit your mouth around it and suck. Sans jerks beneath you, crying out louder than you're expecting. With a self-satisfied noise in the back of your throat, you unlatch yourself from the bone and give a long, slow lick across the smooth surface, making him shudder as his grip on your hair tightens.

"h-hold on," he stammers, trembling. "babe i want to make you feel this good too."

"There's time after, let me do this for you," you say, stroking your fingers feather-light up and down his spine.

"but i can do this for you now," he says in a low voice, and you feel something warm and soft caress your cheek. As you pull away a little to look at it, you find a thick blue tendril, something like a tentacle glowing beside your face. It's snaking out from inside his ribcage, and as you watch two more faze into existence, waiting. You raise your head to look up at him and he's watching you with his blue eye, cheekbones flushed. "if you'll let me."

Your lips curl into a heated smile. He's been getting more adventurous with his magic over the last couple months but he's never been quite this forward. It has you curious, and very turned on. "Are you sure it won't be too distracting for you?" you ask, hoping he doesn't change his mind but wanting to make sure.

"i could never mind getting distracted by pleasing you," he says, a tendril sliding down the column of your throat and down towards your chest. "just tell me you want this, hope."

"Yes," you breathe as his magic curls around your breast just like his tongue did, caressing your skin and eliciting a soft groan. "Yes I want it."

He pulls your head back down towards his spine and you go willingly. You feel the tendrils slip over you and down your body, wrapping around your arms as they go, then around your middle. They're not holding you in place, or pulling, just tangling themselves on your body, embracing you. You curl your fingers tighter around his vertebrae and press your lips to bone as you stroke,
enjoying the feel of him shiver under you. At the same time a tentacle hooks itself around your knee, pulling your legs apart as another one slides between them.

Your fingers fumble against his bones as he pushes inside you, making you gasp and rock back against him. Maybe you should have been more worried about you getting distracted as he's everywhere at once. His hand in your hair, magic tendrils at your breast, around your body, on your clit and inside you. It's so much you barely remember that you're hunched over him with your lips on his spine. Moaning against him, you latch onto one vertebra and suck, scraping a path down with your fingernails as he thrusts inside of you. He bites back a moan of his own, a shudder running through his bones and even his magic as the motions on your clit falter.

You let go of his pelvis and fumble for his free hand, entwining your fingers as you gasp and squeeze your eyes shut. Tension is winding low in your belly and you can barely focus enough to continue your ministrations, listening as both of your breathing starts to go ragged. He lets out a frustrated noise and his grip tightens on your hair, his thrusts and strokes growing more insistent.

"come for me, babe. let go," he urges, and damn him this was supposed to be you doing this for him.

But it's so much and it's so good, and you're pressing your forehead against his spine as the tension snaps and you crest the peak. "Sans," you moan, crying out as it overwhelsms you and leaves you a shaking mess. The tendrils loosen their grip on you even as he eases you through, eking out as much pleasure as he can. When your muscles start to relax his magic slips out of you, wrapping instead around your middle, something like an embrace.

"i don't think i'll ever get enough of that sound," he says, relaxing his grip on your hair and running his fingers through it.

Your arms are trembling but as you return to your senses you start trailing open-mouthed kisses down his spine. This isn't over. Sans is about to say something else as a strangled noise escapes him. Your hand strokes him as your tongue traces the divots in his bones, and then you wrap your lips around that one spot low on his spine and suck, hard, hollowing your cheeks.

Sans cries out and you feel him finally come undone, caught a little off-guard you think by the intensity of it. His magic vanishes all at once and you realize why he wanted to take care of you first. He shudders as you swirl your tongue, his hand spasming in yours as the other grabs the back of your neck. Finally, as he makes a little gasping whine that lets you know it's finally too much for him, you give one last small kiss and stroke of your fingers before you pull away and rest your head against his leg. He's twitching a little, humming contentedly in his post-coital haze. That's always a good sign. Pleased with yourself, you lift his leg over your back and crawl under it to collapse at his side, satisfied and a little tingly.

His eyes are still closed, his jaw slack as he rolls onto his side, off of the pillows and wraps you up in his arms. He tucks his head under your chin, nuzzling your throat. "i love you," he mumbles sleepily.

"I know," you answer, smirking.
Sans knows this nightmare. He's intimately familiar with it, but it doesn't lessen the impact of the limp weight of you falling back into his arms. Doesn't make it any less terrible to watch you stare up into his face until the light leaves your eyes as your body sags, lifeless. Blood soaks your chest and coats his hands, slippery and warm.

Your Soul leaves your body, but instead of Asgore's large white hand, a pair of pale human hands cup the air around it and pull it away. Deacon is standing there, smirking down at him. Then, as Sans stares, he crushes your Soul between his hands, grinding it to dust. He rubs his hands together to clean them, ridding himself of any trace of you. As the human's eyes bore into him, Sans jerks awake.

It's dark and for a moment Sans thinks he's back in Snowdin, back in his messy room with its bare walls, shitty mattress, and no you. He's shaking and he sits up to scan the room, sweeping over all the tangible signs that he's still in the same timeline. The new bed, the squishy lounge chair in the corner that the two of you read in sometimes, the glowing clock beside him that shows the date in bright red numbers. But none of it helps. Everything feels wrong. His magic is prickling over his bones and he can't stop trembling.

You're laying beside him, arms wrapped around your pillow, asleep on your stomach. Like this he can't tell if you're breathing, and a surge of panic urges him to wake you. He needs to know you're okay, needs to see you look at him with life in your eyes and feel the smooth, unmarred surface of your chest where no trident ever pierced it because that never happened in this reality because Frisk fixed it. Frisk and Chara fixed it and you're okay and he still can't stop himself from reaching out for you and shaking you.

"hope," he says, desperation tightening his voice as fear overwhelms his senses, honing in on one singular goal. "babe, please!"

You startle awake, gasping and jerking away from him, eyes wide as you take a moment to regain your bearings. "Sans? What's—" He doesn't let you finish as he pushes you over onto your side, pressing your chest hard with his fingers. "Ow! What are you doing?"

You're fine. He knows, knew, that you were fine but he still feels like something is tensing to snap inside of him. Like he's going to break apart into pieces and sift away to dust and he almost wishes it would just happen because maybe then he'd stop hurting.

"Sans? Honey? Oh god..." Your voice sounds like it's coming from far away but he's hyper-aware of the feel of your hands on either side of his skull, soft skin against hard bone.

You must have sat up because you're pulling his forehead to your shoulder, one hand on the back of his head as the other rubs a slow circle against his back. He squeezes his eyes shut and tries to concentrate on the feel of you, circling you with his arms and clinging tightly. You're fine, you're fine, you're fine. He repeats it in his head and he thinks he's repeating it out loud because you're nodding, brushing your nose up and down his face.

"I'm fine," you echo back to him, and your voice sounds clearer now. "Sans we're both still here on the surface and I'm fine. Just breathe with me."

He listens to the sound of air filling your lungs, clear and strong. He feels you exhale and he tilts his head to press closer to your chest so he can hear your heartbeat too. This close he can feel the
strong hum of your Soul, pulsing in time with your heart. The three sounds — blood and air and Soul — pull him back down as he times his breaths with yours, forcing himself to slow down to match you.

Four months isn't nearly enough time to get over seeing you die and you know it. How many times have you had to comfort him after being woken up like this? It's not the first, not by a long shot and he thinks it won't be the last. How long are you going to be willing to put up with this? He's not getting any better.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, and then he realizes how tight he's holding you. Sans forces his arms to relax, afraid he's hurt you. "I'm sorry," he says again.

"It's not your fault," you say, stroking the back of his head. "Hey, I think that's the longest you've had between attacks. It was two weeks yesterday."

Is it? He files that away to mull over later, the thought that maybe he is improving, if only a little. "It's not good enough. I can't keep scaring the shit out of you in the middle of the night." He sighs and pulls away, far enough to look at your face. You're regarding him with tenderness and patience he doesn't think he deserves. "Maybe I should—"

"If you suggest sleeping in the guest room one more time I'm gonna smack you," you say, but there's no weight behind your threat. Just weariness and frustration. "What happens when you wake up alone? It'll just make it worse."

He doesn't have an argument for that. You're right and he knows it.

How long would he have gone without another recurrence of that nightmare if Deacon hadn't waltzed into your lives with his stupid, charming attitude and pretty face? Is he really so scared of... what, him stealing you away? Scared enough that his subconscious is warping his dreams to accommodate it, apparently. But that's stupid, you're not some thing to steal. You chose him, just like he chose you and you've been through worse together than him.

But right now that's not going to stop him from holding you close, like he can keep you with him through sheer willpower alone. Because if he knows anything after all you've been through together, it's that losing you would destroy him.

You've been distracted, worrying about Sans all morning when you should be paying attention to the classroom. The teacher you assist, Ms. Leveretta (a cousin, you think, of the rabbit family) has to struggle to get your attention, to the point of pulling you aside and asking if everything is okay. She's a little older than you but not by much, short but lean with brown fur and tall ears, more like a hare than a rabbit.

Frisk and Asriel, who are part of Leveretta's class, even wander over to try and help you wash glue out of one student's fur (an incident that only happened because you've been so distracted!). You put on a reassuring smile and send them back over to their own crafts. You need to get yourself together, the last thing you need is a six and seven year old worrying about you.

His panic attacks always leave you feeling so disoriented afterwards. Even after you both finally got some sleep, your breakfast and coffee couldn't break the haze settled over your brain. You can only imagine how he must feel. Worse than you do, you're certain. Between the attack itself and then his guilt afterwards, you wish you both could have just stayed home. But once daylight rolled around and the immediate effects faded, he insisted that he needed to go help Alphys and you knew that you should be here for Deacon's first day.
You haven't seen him yet. He has his own classroom on the second floor with the older kids, the ones who need more specialized classes than the little ones. The way Toriel explained it is he'll alternate days between teaching the older kids in his own room, and coming downstairs to do shorter lessons for the younger ones. You're not sure what he's doing today, you haven't heard anything.

"So," Leveretta says, sidling up next to you as you survey the room. So far no one else has managed to gum themselves up with paste. "Have you met the new teacher? The human?" She arches an eyebrow, clasping her hands behind her back. Her ears swivel towards you, listening intently.

"Yesterday, the three of us helped him move in," you say, mouth quirking into a wry smile as you adjust your ponytail. "He moved into the vacant house next door, you know the family that went back to the Underground?"

She bobs her head up and down. "Right, right. So how is he? I know that Toriel handpicked him herself, but I'm just a little curious."

"He's nice. I think you'll like him. Cute too, if you don't mind them without any fur."

You're a little surprised when her nose scrunches up. "That just sounds messy and complicated," she blurts out, shaking her head. After a second she must notice the look on your face because she lets out a little gasp and covers her mouth. "Oh, Hope I didn't mean it like that, just... Look at me running my mouth before thinking."

Waving away her words with a forced smile, you do your best not to take it personally. "Hey, humans are as complicated as they come."

"You and Sans are an adorable couple, I just don't think I've got the patience is all."

You look pointedly at the room of fifteen children, all talking at the same time in varying levels of volume. You glance back at her and she's turning a little pink under her fur.

"You know what? It's almost lunch time, why don't you go on ahead? I'll try to find a way to remove my foot from my mouth while you're gone," she says, fidgeting with the lanyard for her plastic ID. You bought it for her a month ago, it's decorated with little carrots.

"Okay, Levey. I'll see you after lunch," you say, giving her a reassuring look. She gives you an awkward smile in return and walks off to avert another glue crisis in progress. One of the kids is rolling a glue stick over their palm and eyeing their neighbor a little too suspiciously.

After a quick check in with Frisk and Asriel to let them know you're heading to lunch and you'll see them after, you head to the break room. You used to eat lunch with Frisk. But after realizing that they probably didn't want to spend every second of their day with their mom, you stopped. Besides, eating with the other adults is much quieter than in a cafeteria full of kids, or outside on the playground.

As you make your way through the quiet halls, you realize that you never really gave much thought to how the monsters felt about your relationship with Sans. No one had ever acted like it was strange. Papyrus just teased Sans a little, Undyne could be downright nosy, and Alphys was one of your biggest supporters. Asgore and Toriel never said anything about it either. Leveretta, someone you considered if not a friend at least a close acquaintance, is the first person to say anything that might be considered negative. 'Messy and complicated' how? Because of how the humans might react? The differences between your species? Emotionally? ...Sexually?
How many other monsters think that way when they see the two of you together? You tell yourself that 'messy and complicated' doesn't mean 'wrong' but the reassurances feel empty. Maybe you should ask Undyne about it if you catch her later. You can rely on her not to pull any punches.

Pushing open the door to the break room, you find Deacon sitting at a table alone, eating instant noodles out of a styrofoam cup. He's got chopsticks in one hand and stapled packet of papers in the other, reading while he eats. He glances over as you enter, slurring a little in his rush to swallow so he can let out a sigh of relief. Setting down the papers and pulling off his black-framed reading glasses, he rubs his eyes.

"Thank god," he mutters, ruffling his hair even more than it already was as he runs his hand through it.

You head to the fridge, giving a weak laugh as you find your floral-print lunchbag. "Rough day?"

"Yes, but let me elaborate," he says, gesturing to the seat beside him at the table. You take it, pulling out your lunch as he continues. "First I'd like to say that everyone is very nice, and I don't think there is a woman on this planet that is nicer than Toriel Dreemurr. I reiterate that it's like she walked out of a sitcom—one of the nice ones, you know, before TV was in color—and it's bordering on a little creepy if I'm perfectly honest."

You're trying not to laugh too loud as you pull out a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, a twin to Frisk's own lunch. "I felt the same way, when we first met," you admit. "I mean, Frisk and I had just fallen into the Underground and she was the first monster I ever met. She was so sweet and kind, I felt like she was up to something, you know? But maybe that says more about us than her."

"At least now I don't feel like the only one!" Deacon says, tipping his cup of noodles into his mouth. "So anyway, she's been taking me on the rounds through the school right? Helping get me settled, introducing me to the other teachers on the second floor, letting me sit in on classes. So I'm talking to some of the kids and then all of a sudden one of them just bursts into flames and no one even bats an eye."

"So I'm thinking to myself, 'Is this some kind of test? Do kids normally catch on fire here? Are they checking to see if I do something? And all the while this kid is just carrying on a conversation with his buddy next to him and I'm staring like an idiot—which is apparently becoming a bad habit of mine, did you have that problem too?'"

You nod as he pauses, taking a bite of your sandwich.

"So I'm there, this kid is on fire, and it's all I can do to not freak out because no one else in the room even seems to notice and while I'm having this fight with myself the fire just goes out. Problem solved. Kid keeps talking to his friend, I'm staring at Toriel wondering if I've started going crazy." He pauses again to take a swig of water, smoothing down his button-up shirt with his other hand. You notice he's got his own school ID already hanging from his neck. "That's weird right? Please tell me I'm not the only person on this mountain that thinks that's weird?"

You pat his arm, doing your best to try and look like you aren't about to start cracking up. "Yes that's... weird. Does it make you feel any better when I say you'll get used to it?"

"Not really. What does that say about us?" He laughs, shaking his head and sighing again. "Well, actually I guess it does make me feel better. At least you're here too, and you've already been through the adjustment period."

"Yeah, now I only stare sometimes."
Deacon leans forward, resting his elbows on the table as he looks at you. He's smiling. "How do you do it? I can only imagine everything you've gone through in the past seven months, how do you wrap your head around it all?"

*You have no idea what you're really asking, Deacon.* "One day at a time. I know it seems like a lot, with everyone looking so different but they aren't as strange as you might think. They're just people."

"People with magic. Doesn't that bother you?" He seems legitimately curious. There's no accusation in his voice.

"Why should it?"

The door opens and Deacon goes quiet as he looks up. You turn to look, and there's Undyne, followed by Alphys and Sans. Your fiancé smiles at you, glancing over at Deacon.

"oh, don't mind us. please, continue."
Kindness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans wasn't expecting to find the two of you in the break room together but, well, this just makes things easier now doesn't it? Curious and perhaps a little anxious to have someone share his opinion of your new friend, he asked Alphys to join him in surprising you and Undyne for lunch. He considered mentioning him to them in advance but the scientist in him didn't want to taint the results of this... test of sorts. If they didn't like him he wanted to know it was on Deacon's own merit.

He'd heard the tail end of your conversation as Undyne pushed open the door, but not enough to get any real context. If Deacon has a problem with being around magic, then he sure is on the wrong damn mountain. The reasonable part of his mind thinks that maybe he's just trying to understand you better, but it's squashed under his own growing dislike of the guy, coupled with the lingering funk from his nightmare. Maybe this wasn't the best day for him to be around Deacon again but it's too late now. He's here, he dragged Alphys here, and Undyne is already headed towards the two of you.

"Hey Hope!" Undyne says, flashing a toothy grin as she waltzes up next to you and wraps her arm around your neck to give you an affectionate noogie. You yelp and try to duck away but she's too strong for you. You're a little flushed when she lets you go, trying your best to smooth your hair. "Look who I found: a couple of nerds that wanted to surprise us on our lunch break."

Deacon is still leaning forward on the table, taking it all in as Sans and Alphys approach him. He admits to himself that seeing the two of you sitting there together, with him giving you that friendly smile and sitting just a bit too close for his tastes, caught him off guard. It must have shown on his face because when Deacon looked up at the door their eyes met for just a second before he could find his smile. He thought he'd be able to muster up some casual indifference for the guy. Some sort of neutral emotion for your sake. But the second Sans walked into the room he could feel that uncomfortable, gritty, nagging feeling he's started to associate with Deacon. And no matter how hard he tries he just can't shut it off.

Well, if there's anything he's gotten good at after years' worth of Resets it's faking a smile.

You're watching him expectantly as he walks up behind your chair, reaching up for him as he leans down to nuzzle your cheek. You make a small, pleased sound, kissing the side of his face before he straightens and rests his hands on your shoulders. "This is a very nice surprise, hun," you say reaching up to squeeze his hand. Then you turn to look at Alphys and Undyne. "Guys this is Deacon, Deacon this is Undyne and her girlfriend Alphys."

Sans watches carefully as the three of them regard each other. Deacon gives a friendly smile, standing up from his chair to circle around you and Sans and offer Undyne his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you both," he says.

He has to give him a little bit of credit for not appearing more intimidated by the fish monster. Even in her red and black tracksuit with the jacket tied around her waist she cuts an imposing figure. It's the eyepatch. And the teeth. And the fact that she's almost a full head taller than him and could suplex him with hardly any effort (that's an amusing thought). She looks at his hand and after a moment she takes it and gives him a firm handshake.
"I'm the gym teacher, gotta keep the little squirts in fighting shape!" she says, grinning. The muscles in her arm bulge as she tightens her grip on his hand, and she laughs when he winces a little. "You're pretty strong," she says, her smile fading as she gives him a scrutinizing look. "Do you fight?" She hasn't let him go.

"S-sweetie you don't just go up to people and ask them if they f-fight," Alphys says, giving Undyne a small touch to her side.

"What, why not? Fighting is cool!" she says, looking over at you. "Is that a rude question?"

"No, it's fine," Deacon says with a good-natured laugh. "I wouldn't call it 'fighting' it's more for self-defense. I know some aikido."

Undyne blinks. "That sounds made up, like from an anime."

"Oh, that's a type of martial art! Th-that's so cool!" Alphys says with a quiet gasp.

Releasing Deacon's hand, Undyne gives him a soft punch in the arm that makes him wince, though he hides it well. "So it is like something from an anime! Hey, punk, you'll have to show me sometime."

Deacon rubs his arm, but he's still smiling as he nods. "Sure, no problem. I mean, I'm not an expert or anything but I know a thing or two about teaching. If you want, I can tell you about the philosophy and how it was developed—"

"That sounds like nerd stuff," Undyne says, throwing her arm around Alphys's shoulders. The doctor makes a little squeak of surprise, blushing. "I'm sure you'd love it, you nerd."

Alphys bobs her head up and down enthusiastically, giving a nervous laugh. "Y-yeah I would, actually!"

Offering his hand to Alphys, Deacon shakes her hand too. "I'll see what I can do. I've got some books at home, I'm sure I could loan them to you." He rubs the back of his neck. "I just... have to find them first."

As they're talking, Sans can practically feel the happiness radiating off of you. He shifts to stand at your side so he can look at you, meeting your eyes as you turn to him. You're smiling, relief plain on your face. Guilt settles heavy in his chest. Why had he wanted Alphys and Undyne to not like him? So that he wouldn't feel like the only one, that's why. What the hell is wrong with him? He shouldn't be so frustrated that they're getting along so well, but he can't help it.

He's being ridiculous. His smile falters as he lets out a quiet sigh and your brow furrows a little as you watch him.

"Hun are you okay?" you ask him quietly while the others are distracted.

"I'll be fine," he says, hoping that it's true. He still doesn't want to admit to you how he feels about your friend because that's just it. He's becoming your friend now and he doesn't want to get in the way of that. Besides, what can he even say when you ask him why he doesn't like him? That he just has a bad feeling? That isn't a good enough reason. It's not even bad enough that he feels like Deacon's a threat it's just... annoying. Like a fly that just won't go away, buzzing around his head.

"HEY, are you two dorks coming?" You and Sans both turn to look at Undyne as her voice cuts through the room. She jerks her thumb towards the door. "Deacon's going to show us some of his fancy aikido."
"What? Guys, I don't think that's a good idea," you say, rushing to your feet and shaking your head.

As much as Sans thinks it would be funny to watch Undyne suplex Deacon into the ground, he has to agree with you. Any sort of fighting can't look too good...

"You're right. It's a GREAT idea! Come on, the gym is empty right now, it's the perfect time," Undyne says, walking over to you and throwing her arm around your shoulder. She drags you along with her, ignoring your protests. "It'll be fun."

You both know that once Undyne sets her mind to something it takes a hell of a lot to get her to back down. So with a resigned shrug, Sans follows you and the others, mildly amused with this turn of events.

You think this is a terrible idea. As you watch Undyne drag out a set of tumbling mats (at your insistence) you try to think of something else to say to try and get them to stop but she and Deacon seem to have their minds made up. He's kicking off his dress shoes and rolling up his sleeves before pulling off his ID and sticking it in his back pocket. The lanyard hangs out but he doesn't seem to mind.

"Alphys can't you say something?" you ask her, biting your lip and giving her a pleading look.

Alphys is hugging Undyne's jacket to her chest, wide-eyed with anticipation as her gaze follows her girlfriend. "I'm sure they'll be fine," she says, not even looking at you. Oh wonderful, so that's why Alphys was going along with this. Doesn't she get enough of Undyne now that they live together?

Sans is quiet on your other side, standing with his hands in his jacket pockets. You nudge his shoulder and he looks at you. "Sans, can you make sure that he doesn't get hurt? I'd rather apologize to him about you using your gravity magic on him than apologize to Toriel for Deacon getting beaten up by Undyne on his first day while I watched."

"sure, babe. i'll make sure no one gets hurt," he says, shrugging. He pulls his left hand out to hang at his side.

Deacon and Undyne both step onto the mat, facing each other. She's giving him a wide, toothy smile that makes you nervous. You silently hope that she restrains herself, and doesn't go too overboard.

"Okay, let's do this!" she says, curling her hands into fists and flexing her arms.

"So, I won't go into the boring nerd stuff," Deacon begins, winking at Undyne. She barks out a laugh. "But I will say that the idea behind aikido is to use your opponent's strength against them. It's very... reactive. It's a style meant to disable and immobilize, not harm."

"What? That's not very cool..." Undyne says, looking a bit less enthusiastic than she was a minute ago.

"It would be good to use if, um... if a h-human tried to attack you," Alphys says, her voice trailing off as she gives Deacon a nervous look. "J-just in case. Asgore said he doesn't want any humans getting hurt, if we can help it. Even if they try to instigate something."

Undyne makes a face, shifting on her feet. "Yeah, I guess that's true," she says begrudgingly.

"Here, I'll show you. Pretend you're going to punch me," Deacon says, gesturing towards his chest and widening his stance.
Shrugging her shoulders, she draws back her fist and then lunges forward a lot faster than you know Deacon meant. You flinch, biting back a gasp as he twists out of the way, holding his hands up. "Hey, hey, whoa! I said pretend!"

"That was me pretending," Undyne says, grinning.

"Okay well pretend a little more gently, please. I want to show you this slowed down, so you see what I'm doing." Deacon positions himself in front of her again, taking a deep breath. "Okay, try again."

"Undyne, be nice!" you call out to her, giving her a stern look as she glances over at you.

"I am being nice!" she says, rolling her eye.

"And no magic!"

"I wasn't going to!"

"Okay, I'm just making sure."

"Are you done, Mom? Can I play now? Or am I in time-out?" she asks, sticking her tongue out at you.

You mimic her, then laugh. "Fine, go ahead," you say, making a shooing gesture with your hand.

She looks at Deacon and he nods patting his chest. "Okay, slowly this time."

Undyne goes in for the fake punch, a bored look on her face until he reaches out and, with practiced motions, twists her wrist, slides past her, and grabs her elbow and turns with his other hand. It forces her down onto one knee as she grunts in surprise. Then he immediately lets go and takes a step back, offering her a hand to help her to her feet. She regards him for a second and takes it, eyeing him with curiosity as they settle in across from each other again.

"Okay, how did you do that?" she asks.

He walks her through the steps, even slower this time as he explains each movement. It's fascinating to watch, and you can see that Deacon really is a good teacher. He's patient and repeats the steps few times until Undyne seems to get it, then lets her practice it on him in return. For a moment you're worried that she's going to hurt him on accident, but she's careful with him. You feel some of your nervousness start to ebb.

"I like him. He's so nice," Alphys says, fidgeting beside you.

"We definitely could have gotten someone a lot worse," you agree. "I'm glad he and Undyne seem to be getting along, I was a little worried. She can be a little..."

"S-scary?" she finishes with a laugh.

"Yeah." You glance over at Sans, and he's just watching Undyne and Deacon. "What'cha thinking?"

The lights in his eyes flick over to you, then back to the two on the mat. "trying to decide when would be the best time to introduce our new friend to my old pal, the whoopie cushion."

You snort. "Well, thank you for not doing it at Tori's last night."
"good comedy is at least half timing."

"What's the other half?"

He looks over at you again, holding your gaze. "knowing your audience," he says with an affectionate smile.

You smile back, cheeks warming. Shifting a little to stand closer, you nudge him gently. He wraps his arm around you and pulls you close, letting you lean against him. "That was cute, good job."

"i try."

Undyne dances away from Deacon as he feigns a grab at her, a wide grin splitting her face as she rolls her shoulders. "OKAY, how about something really cool! Show me something AWESOME!"

Running his hand though his hair, Deacon is getting a little sweaty but doesn't show any signs of getting tired. He smiles back at her, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. "Alright, something awesome..." He reaches his arms over his head and stretches up on the balls of his feet before settling back down with a satisfied groan. Then he narrows his stance, turning his side to her. "Do you want to see it at full speed or slowed down?"

"Full speed!" she says, flexing and pumping her arms.

"Okay, then run at me and try to grab me," he says, beckoning her with a flap of his fingers.

With a loud bellow, Undyne charges forward, arms outstretched as she reaches for his middle. Deacon sidesteps and grabs one of her wrists, folding it towards her stomach and shoving down, flipping her over her own hand. She lands heavily on her back and you can hear the air get knocked out of her lungs.

"Sweetie are you o-okay?" Alphys calls out, taking a step forward.

"That was AWESOME!" Undyne crows, raising her arms in the air from her spot on the ground.

Alphys laughs nervously, wiping her forehead and sighing.

"We're doing that again," the fish monster says, leaping back to her feet and turning to face Deacon again.

Laughing, he nods but is barely in position when she starts barreling towards him again. This happens twice more before Deacon starts to look a little winded, and goes to try and tell Undyne to stop. But she doesn't hear him and, with a roar she launches herself at him again. Right as she's about to reach him Deacon lets out a loud gasp and something bright, glowing, and green pulls free from his chest. Caught off-guard, she runs right into him and with a loud smack from their impact, they fall to the mats.

Undyne quickly rolls away, scrambling to her knees and staring at the green Soul hovering over Deacon's chest. "That isn't me, I didn't use my magic on it I just... ARGH I'm sorry I got carried away," Undyne blurts out, gritting her teeth.

"Deacon, oh my god are you okay!" you call out as he groans, then stares wide-eyed at his Soul.

As you rush forward to check on him you can hear Sans and Alphys behind you.

"alphys... what does green mean again?" Sans asks, hesitation in his voice.
"Uh... k-kindness, I think."

"shit."

Chapter End Notes

Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
You hadn't even thought about Deacon's Soul when they started this. Didn't think that this might draw it out of him. He's pushing up onto his elbows, gaping at the green heart-shaped Soul when you reach him, kneeling down beside Undyne.

"Deacon?" you ask, with a gentle touch to his shoulder.

His eyes dart to yours and then back at his Soul. It's bright, brighter than yours and a pleasant shade, like pine needles still on the tree. The type of green you associate with Christmas. But the surface is... it looks scuffed. Scratched in places and clear in others. He sits forward and tries to cup it in his hands but his fingers pass through it.

"Is this...?" he murmurs, and you can't tell if he's scared or maybe... reverent?

Undyne pushes herself to her feet, taking a few steps back. "Shit, Asgore told me to be careful," she blurs out.

"W-we know you didn't do it on purpose," Alphys says.

"It's your Soul," you say, wracking your brain for the best way to explain. "I know this is sudden, and I'm sure you never expected this, but I promise that this is normal. It happens sometimes when you're around monsters, but I—"

Deacon's Soul sinks back into his body, now that Undyne calmed down and backed away. He holds a hand to his chest, staring at the ground and taking in a deep breath. "I never thought I'd see it," he says under his breath, barely loud enough that you can hear.

"Deacon, are you okay? I know this is just one more thing to add to your list of weird stuff that's happened to you today, but I know it's a big one." You lean in a little closer to him, trying and failing to gauge his reaction. His expression is unreadable.

But then his brow furrows a little, and he pulls his hand away from his chest and looks at it, like it holds some kind of answer. "But why was it scratched up? Is it supposed to look like that?" He finally looks at you again, his blue eyes searching your face.

Your lips part, hesitating before you speak. "I can't say exactly what caused it. It's very... personal, and probably none of my business. Mine is..." You turn to look over your shoulder at Sans where he's standing a little way off to the side, watching you. Undyne and Alphys are talking to each other quietly, and you think that Alphys is trying to comfort her. "Sans, can you help me show Deacon my Soul? I want him to—"

"no. no way," Sans snaps, frowning and walking over to you.

Taken aback by the harshness in his voice, you don't notice the other two monsters turning to look at you. "What? Why not?"

"i don't want you exposing yourself like that, it's not right," he says, his expression darkening.

You're confused, and feel like you're missing something. Did you say something wrong?

"Sans is right," Undyne says, looking a little uncomfortable. "You guys are engaged. You shouldn't be sharing stuff like that with other people, that's just... weird."
Oh. Suddenly embarrassed, you pull back a little from Deacon and curl your hand into a loose fist over your heart. "I'm sorry, I didn't... I didn't think of it like that," you say, cheeks warming and feeling stupid.

Deacon is pushing himself up to his feet and Sans helps you to yours, clutching your hand and threading your fingers together. The blonde still seems shaken, a little paler than normal you think. He's so fair skinned already it's hard for you to tell. He's not looking at any of you, instead focusing on unrolling his sleeves and tidying his hair.

"We should probably head back, I'm sure our lunch break is almost over," he says, reaching for his back pocket for his ID. He falters a little when he doesn't find it, but then Alphys bends down to pick it up off the floor and hand it to him. "Thanks." He meets her eyes for just a second and gives her a distracted smile.

You bite your lip. "Deacon if you need to talk about it—"

"Nope. I think I've got it," he says, looking for and finding his shoes. He kneels down to put them back on. "I just need a few minutes to make sure I don't have an existential crisis before my next class, I'm sure I'll be fine."

"Hey, I'm sorry if I freaked you out," Undyne says, walking up to him as he stands again. He hesitates to meet her eyes at first. "This Soul stuff isn't exactly a secret, but I know that Asgore and Toriel don't want to make a big deal out of it for as long as we can..."

Deacon's expression softens a little as he seems to realize what she's getting at. "I'm not going to go sell my story to the news, if that's what you mean. Come on, I just moved all my stuff. Talk about a hassle to pack everything up again."

Visibly relaxing, Undyne gives him a big grin. "Cool. Good, I mean... Yeah, good." She gives him a soft jab to his arm. "You should show me some more of that aikido stuff again."

You think he's going to refuse but he nods. "Yeah, sure. But, uh, really though. I'm going to go. This was fun, if not a bit... overwhelming. Hope, I might take you up on that offer to talk later." He glances over at Sans, then back to you. "If you don't mind."

"Of course not. Just let me know," you assure him.

"I-it was nice meeting you!" Alphys squeaks out, and Deacon gives her a little wave before leaving.

When the four of you are alone in the gym, you let out a loud groan and cover your face with your hand. "Oh my god, could that have gone any worse?"

"Undyne could have suplexed him into the ground," Sans says, shrugging.

"HEY, I didn't hurt him!" Undyne says with an indignant look.

Alphys is twisting her girlfriend's jacket in her hands. "I think it went o-okay."

"It wasn't okay! Undyne you can't just fight everyone when you first meet, that's not how it works up here," you blurt out, your anxiety giving way to frustration now that Deacon's gone. "You could have hurt him, god knows he's probably even more freaked out than he already was. I don't think you guys realize just how much this is to take in all at once. No one is bothering to try and tone it down even a little bit to try and make things easier on him."
"hey, he knew what he was getting himself into coming to ebott. he wanted monsters, he's getting monsters," Sans says, frowning in the direction Deacon went.

"No, what he got was an eyeful of his Soul, and you guys don't seem to get the impact of something like that. We aren't raised with this concept of Souls being real. Like, yeah some religions talk about them but not in a tangible, physical way." You let out an agitated sigh. As much as you wish they'd understand, you don't think they can.

"I apologized, I'm sure he'll be fine," Undyne says with a shrug. "I mean, look at us! Great friends and I tried to kill you when we first met."

"That isn't the sort of example you should be using, Undyne," you say, feeling some of your frustration slipping away. "I guess I'll just talk to him later, like he said. Make sure he's coping."

"hey," Sans says gently, squeezing your hand. You meet his eyes and you can tell he's trying his best to be reassuring. "if anyone knows how to help him it's you. you're great at making people feel better. i speak from experience."

With a weak smile, you wrap your free arm around his shoulders and hug him. You let yourself sag against him as you exhale, willing yourself to relax at least a little. "Yeah, you're right. Thanks, hun." He gives a small noise of acknowledgment and you let him go, then look at Undyne and Alphys. "I'm sorry for snapping at you guys, it's just... I want things to go well."

"Of course you do. W-we do, too. Especially with the Line opening next week," Alphys says, nodding. "I think we're just so used to you knowing most of this s-stuff. Having more humans around that aren't soldiers is going to be an adjustment for everybody."

"I don't feel like I know all that much, especially after that mess with my Soul. Did I just... what did I imply when I asked you to help me show it to him?" you ask, wincing.

Alphys clears her throat and Undyne turns towards her, looking away from you. Sans reaches out for your other hand, so he's holding both of them. His cheekbones are the barest hint of blue as sweat dots the side of his skull. He looks uncomfortable, gritting his teeth. "do you remember when i said to you, 'my soul is yours and yours is mine'?

"Oh. Oh, Sans I'm sorry!" you say, trying to reach up to cover your face but Sans tightens his hold on your hands. Instead you just lean forward, hunching your shoulders as you try to hide. "You meant that literally, didn't you?"

"Oh my god Sans, you didn't explain your proposal to her?!!" Undyne blurts out, and when you glance at her she looks offended.

"I-I thought you didn't do a traditional proposal, Hope said it was on accident," Alphys says, wide-eyed.

"guys, do you mind?" Sans says, gritting his teeth.

"Oh!" the doctor reaches for her girlfriend's hand, tugging her away towards where her shoes are still sitting beside the tumbling mat. "M-maybe we should give them some space."

"But I want to hear him explain in case he gets something wrong," Undyne protests, but lets Alphys pull her along. You expect those two are going to grill you later on what he's about to say to you. You're not sure if you love the idea or hate it. Maybe both.

"Sans, you should have said something," you murmur, blushing as you look at him. "I wouldn't
ever have suggested it if I knew what my Soul meant to you. I... I should have known, shouldn't I? You've always been so protective about—"

"babe, it's fine. it's not your fault," he says, pulling on your hands to tug you closer.

"I just... asked you to help me... I dunno, cheat on you or something," you say, shaking your head.

"he didn't know that. it would have only sounded like that to a monster," he reassures you, giving you a nipping kiss on your cheek. It tickles a little and makes you smile.

"So what's a traditional proposal for monster then?" you ask, feeling a little better but still embarrassed.

Sans glances away, shifting a little on his feet. "uh, well. the part i said to you is normally the bit after you say yes. which we did. usually the asking part is a bit more clear and... not on accident," he says, blushing a little bit more. "instead of 'would you marry me' it's, um, 'would your soul join its song with mine?' because—"

"Yes," you say, smiling at the surprised look on his face. "I will."

His smile widens and he squeezes your hands. "you did that on purpose," he says, raising a brow.

"Maybe," you answer, giving him a coy look. "But I interrupted you, I'm sorry."

"um... what was I saying?" He blinks, looking a little lost. "oh, right. uh, because to us, when we sense souls, it has like... a humming sound sort of. it's more of a feeling, but it's hard to explain when you don't know what it's like. so when two monsters get married and commit to one another, a sort of harmony forms between their souls. like, when i hear toriel's soul, i hear a little bit of asgore's too. it's fainter than it normally would be because they... well you know."

"That's beautiful, but..." Your smile falters a bit. "Will we... can we do that?"

"your soul has a sound, too, so i don't see why not," he says, but he seems a little uncertain. "even if we can't, that doesn't matter. all that matters is we're together, right?"

"Yeah, of course," you say, but it feels like one more thing you won't ever be able to understand. Something else that makes you different. You push the thought aside, because like Sans says, it doesn't matter. You won't let it matter.

"we can just do the ring thing humans do. alphys was talking to me about that the other day. i've been meaning to ask you, if you wanted a ring," he says, looking a bit sheepish.

You'd be lying if you said you hadn't given it some thought. "I didn't want to make a big deal out of it, but... it would be nice."

"you're allowed to make a big deal. you're a big deal."

"HEY. HOPE! We're gonna be late, we have to go!" Undyne yells, breaking you and Sans out of your little bubble there in the middle of the school gym. The last place you thought you'd be having a conversation about proposals and marriage.

"I guess that's my cue to leave," you say, giving Sans an apologetic look.

"yeah, i'm sure alphys and i need to head back to the core," he says, nodding.

"DORKS! Let's go!"
"Won't it look suspicious if he comes home and the cushions are back?" Asriel is clutching the two cushions to his chest, staring at the back door to the house that until yesterday was abandoned. How were they supposed to know that some human was just going to move in this soon?

"Maybe he never noticed they were gone in the first place," Frisk says, testing the door handle. Still unlocked.

"We can just leave them on the back porch."

"Then he'll know they got taken."

"...Okay. You're sure he's not home?" Asriel asks, peeking inside the kitchen as Frisk opens the door.

"His car wasn't here. He's probably still at school with your mom." They grab Asriel's sleeve and tug him along as they slip inside.

Flipping on the lights, the kitchen isn't much different from the last time they were here. There's an empty package of noodles sitting on the counter and a bowl and chopsticks in the sink. A closed laptop is on the table beside some papers and another dirty bowl with what looks like the remains of some cereal. The door to the pantry is open.

"Didn't his mom ever tell him to clean up after himself?" Asriel says, wrinkling his nose.

"Come on, let's hurry up." Frisk reaches out and takes one of the cushions from their friend, then starts to check the chairs to find the right ones.

It turns out that none of the chairs have cushions anymore. Deacon must have taken them off.

"Well now what do we do?" Asriel asks. "Do we just take them back with us?"

Frisk opens their mouth to answer, but right then they hear the sound of the front door opening. The two of them stare at each other, wide-eyed for a moment before Frisk darts out and grabs his hand, pulling him into the walk-in pantry. They push the folding door closed most of the way, afraid to make too much noise.

"Frisk we should have gone out the back door!" Asriel hisses, and Frisk can feel their joined fear prickle down their spine.

"He would have heard us. Shh!" Frisk hisses back, wrapping their hands around his snout.

He huffs through his nose and pulls Frisk's hands away, but doesn't let them go. They squeeze his hands and Asriel squeezes back, looking at each other in the dim light. They huddle there in the pantry as they listen to the sounds of Deacon shuffling in the living room, and dropping something that sounds like a bag on the floor.

"Look, I thought you'd want to know—" Deacon says in the other room. He must be on the phone. "Well it seemed important to me."

More silence. There's the faint sound of him pacing in the other room, followed by a frustrated sigh. "Yes, it's exactly like we— Fine, fine. You know what, I don’t know why I bothered
calling. I won’t waste any more of your time, Grant."

Another frustrated noise and the clatter of plastic against wood. Deacon's footsteps shift from carpet to tile as he comes into the kitchen, and Frisk can see him through the cracked door. He picks up the bowl from next to his computer and takes it over to the sink, shoving the lever for the water a little harder than strictly necessary.

"Arrogant son of a bitch," Deacon says to the sink, reaching for a bottle of soap. "After years you'd think... No, of course not." He takes in a slow, deep breath, hunching forward over the sink with his hands gripping the edge of the counter. His muscles tense for a second before he exhales and relaxes. "Forget it. This is why you're here, to get away from that crap."

"We'll sneak out when he leaves the room or something," Frisk whispers, looking at Asriel again. He just nods in response.

After a few minutes of running water and the clatter of dishes, Deacon shuts off the faucet and dries his hands. Asriel takes a step back, further in towards the back of the pantry and pulls Frisk with him. He looks nervous, feels nervous and he's holding on so hard that Frisk's hands hurt a little. They feel bad for dragging Asriel into this. They keep doing this to him, bringing him on these stupid things that might just get them in trouble, knowing that Asriel will go along with it because that's what Asriel does.

The light in the pantry is suddenly brighter and Deacon is looking down at the two of them with a bewildered expression. "Uh, hi. Do you mind if I ask what you two are doing in here?"

Asriel lets out a quiet, strangled bleating noise and Frisk doesn't wait. They'll fix this. Reaching back in their mind, they find the bright point there, the safe spot. A Save point, Chara called it. They reach for it and pull and Frisk and Asriel are standing in the middle of an imperfect ring of granite stones. Back at their clubhouse.

Asriel closes the distance between them because they were standing apart when the Save was made, wringing his hands. They found out the first time that Frisk Loaded a Save after getting to the surface that Asriel can remember them too. Probably a side effect of his time as Flowey, or having the remnants of Chara's Soul. "Sans is going to be mad at you, you know he said— Frisk are you okay?"

Frisk presses a hand to their forehead, taking a step back to rest against one of the rocks. They feel a little dizzy, and their chest is sort of... light. Asriel presses his hands over their heart, then grabs their shoulders. "Asriel, I'm fine," Frisk insists, taking in a deep breath.

"You're not, this doesn't feel right," he says, and the worry in his voice just makes Frisk nervous. Or are they just feeling Asriel's concern? Or is it both? It's hard for Frisk to separate their emotions sometimes, it's confusing.

But Frisk is already starting to feel better. They push away from the rocks and grab Asriel's ears, tugging gently. "Look, I'm fine, I was just a little dizzy that's all."

Asriel leans forward as Frisk pulls on his ears, nudging their foreheads together. "Do you promise?"

"I promise. It was just for a second," Frisk insists, pressing back against him with their head.

He takes a step back, letting Frisk push him back a little even though they know he could hold his ground if he wanted to. Then, catching him off-guard, Frisk presses a loud, obnoxious kiss that's
more sound than contact to Asriel's snout and then twists away.

"H-hey that's not fair!" Asriel protests, blushing under his fur as Frisk laughs at him.

As he goes to reach for them to retaliate they both freeze when Frisk's phone starts to ring. For a second Frisk thinks about just not answering, pretending they forgot to take it off of silent after school but no. That would just make it worse. They knew this was gonna happen, but they couldn't let them get caught in Deacon's kitchen. Not even just for themselves, but for Asriel. He'd be in so much trouble if his parents found out.

"Frisk what are you going to tell him?" Asriel says, looking anxiously at their pocket as they reach for the phone.

"I dunno, I'll think of something," they say, wincing. Looking down at the screen, it's just who they thought it was. With a sigh of resignation, they answer the call. "Hi Dad."

"what happened? are you okay?" Sans asks, his voice is tense and low, like he's trying to make sure no one else can hear him. "did somebody...? no, just tell me what happened."

Frisk doesn't want to lie but they don't want to tell him the truth either. They give Asriel a desperate look, wracking their brain for an excuse as their friend walks up to them and leans towards the phone. "Sans it was my fault, I fell off a rock and hurt my knee. Frisk did it to help me," he blurts out, fidgeting with his ear.

"you loaded over... kiddo we've talked about this! emergencies only, what were you thinking?" he snaps, letting out a frustrated noise.

"I know, I'm sorry." Frisk says, tapping the toe of their sneaker in the dirt as they tug on their sleeve with their free hand.

"the two of you go back to the house and just... wait there until i get home. and don't think i'm not going to call your mom and tell her. you know how we both feel about this," says, making Frisk wince.

"Okay," Frisk mumbles.

"'okay' what?"

"We'll go back to the house."

"go on. i have to redo all the work you just undid. i just got this d— darn conduit fitted properly." Sans sighs into the phone. "forget it, just get going."

"Dad, I'm sorry," Frisk says again, biting the inside of their lip. And they mean it, because even though they didn't think about it earlier, they know how much the Loads bother him.

"...i know kiddo. today's just been a rough day, it's not just you," he says relenting a little. "but don't think that means you're getting away with this. we're still having a talk when i get home."

"I know."

"bye kiddo."

"Bye Dad."

Asriel takes Frisk's hand as they pocket the phone, pulling them back towards home.
"Yes, that's everything he said Undyne, you interrupted us, remember?" you say, rolling your eyes at your phone on the counter as if she can see you. You're sitting at the bar, browsing the internet as you talk to her, looking at nothing in particular. Just passing the time while the kids are out playing.

"I still can't believe he never explained that stuff to you," she says, and you can hear the sound of wind against the microphone. You think she's out by the lake, jogging. She sounds like she's breathing a little heavier than normal, but it's hard to tell.

"Well I'm not exactly a monster. I don't... I can't understand that stuff the way you guys do. I can't hear or feel or whatever it is you guys do to sense Souls." You sigh, resting your chin in your hand. "Hey, what does my Soul sound like?"

"I think that's something you should ask Sans. He knows it better than I do," she says, sounding a little uncomfortable.

"What about Sans?"

"Ah, look I really don't... okay the best way I can explain it is that it's sort of this low tone or uh, maybe like a vibration? Quieter than most, but when you can feel it it sort of resonates, like his voice." She makes a frustrated sound. "This isn't the best way to explain it but it's not... there's just no good way to describe it. It's like trying to explain what something tastes like to someone with no mouth. It just doesn't translate, I'm sorry."

"No, no, that's more than I knew before," you say. But part of you feels like you've heard this before, which is strange. "I think I sort of understand. At least as best as I'm going to."

"Alphys might be able to describe it a little better, she's wordier than me."

There's a beep on the line and you glance at the screen. "Hey Undyne, I have to go. Sans is calling. So I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Sure, no problem," she says, and you hang up the call and answer Sans.

"Hey hun, is everything okay?" you ask, leaning closer to the phone.

"if you had a weird feeling like you just did something twice, that's because frisk loaded about half an hour's worth of time," Sans says, irritation plain in his voice. "Worry twists in your chest. "Did you call them already? Is everything okay?"

"they're fine, asriel just fell off a rock or something. you know frisk has a weak spot when it comes to him, i'm not surprised." He sighs. "they're headed back to the house, told them to wait for me to get home so we can talk."

"Again? They promised not to do that, they know— Sans are you okay?" This is the last thing he needs, on top of his panic attack in the middle of the night.

"just scared the crap outta me once i realized it happened. thought something bad happened, you know? the little jumps... they aren't so bad. i just have to redo an entire section of conduit that i just finished. but i'm fine, i just wanted to keep you in the loop. i know how much it annoys you not knowing what's going on with frisk."

"As long as one of us does, I guess," you mutter, rubbing your eyes. This stuff reallyis over your
head. Resets, Loads... without Sans here you wouldn't be aware of any of it.

"i know," he says soothingly. "but i have to get back to work. oh, shit, you're supposed to be talking to deacon later, aren't you? or did you do that already?"

"Not yet, but he hasn't called me so I'm not sure. I can just tell him I'm busy with the kids, this is __" 

"no, you were right earlier. about the soul stuff being a bit overwhelming for him, i remember what your reaction was to yours. you should talk to him if he needs you, especially after today."

You hesitate, a little surprised. "Are you sure?"

"yeah. i can take care of frisk and asriel. it's not like we haven't had this talk before... anyway, i love you and i'll see you in a few hours."

"I love you too."

As you hang up the call, that's when you notice that you missed a text message. It's from Deacon, sent about five minutes ago.

'Hey, you still ok to talk later?'

Speak of the devil. Well, Sans said he would talk to the kids, so you suppose you have time.

'Yeah, sure.'
Be Safe

The kids are quieter than normal during dinner. Because they know what's coming after, Sans is certain. They were quietly doing their homework at the bar when he came home. Kept working on it until dinner was ready, and now they're slowly eating their food as if they can delay the inevitable.

Papyrus wolfs down his food, thanks you for making dinner like he always does, and excuses himself to his room. He's always been more observant than Sans gives him credit for sometimes, and lately has been better at giving his brother room to be a parent. ("IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU TAKING SOME RESPONSIBILITY FOR ONCE. HOPEFULLY YOU TAKE CARE OF FRISK BETTER THAN YOU TAKE CARE OF YOUR PET ROCK. WHEN IS THE LAST TIME YOU CHANGED ITS WATER?")

Shortly after Papyrus leaves, you get up from the table and pack up a plastic container of leftovers to take with you to Deacon's house. Then, with a kiss for Sans and a stern look at the kids, you head out the door. A tiny, irrational voice in the back of his mind wants to call you back and keep you home with him. It's the same voice that worries whenever you go to work in the morning without him, and whenever you're apart. Too many instances of you getting hurt when he wasn't around (or when you died, but he tries so hard not to think about that) has made him too wary, too... he hesitates to say paranoid. He knows he's being irrational and that's what makes the difference, right? He can shut those thoughts down and move past them. You've spent more time apart here on the surface than you ever did in the Underground, and he thinks he's getting better at it. Now that your humanity isn't a closely guarded secret from the rest of monsterkind.

Besides, he knows you have your phone. He felt for it in your pocket when you kissed him goodbye. You've made it a habit of checking in with him when you're away and he's thankful for that. It helps, even if he feels a little guilty that you feel like it's necessary. He never asked you to do it, you just started one day and haven't stopped.

Frisk and Asriel share a worried look and Sans leans back in his chair, raising a brow. "welp, now it's just the three of us. i shouldn't have to have this talk with you again, frisk," he says, and they look down at their dinner, avoiding his eyes.

"Asriel was hurt. If I can make it better, then shouldn't I do that?" Frisk grumbles, pushing at their food with a fork. Asriel fidgets with his ear, glancing over at Frisk and then back down at the table. "kiddo you can't go around trying to fix everything. that's not how things normally go," Sans says, sighing. "i know your heart is in the right place, but—"

"But I'm not normal," they blurt out, looking up at Sans with wide, hurt eyes. "And neither is Asriel. You and Mom and Grandma and Grandpa should stop expecting us to be normal."

A little taken aback, Sans sits back up in his chair, leaning forward with his elbows on the table. "trust me, i know you two aren't. i know how that feels. i'm just saying that if you were, these little accidents would just be part of life. we deal with them and we move on. you have to let yourselves handle the consequences of your actions, because even though it may not feel like it, messing with time affects more than just you."

"But it's not like anyone remembers," they say petulantly, but Asriel gives them a worried look and it seems like Sans's words are at least getting through to someone.
"that doesn't mean it's ok," Sans snaps, frowning. Frisk's shoulders hunch and they glance away again. "it's not fair to your mom, to your uncle, to our friends. you're undoing parts of their lives and even if they don't know it, you're still doing that to them. you change things that aren't meant to be changed."

"You didn't complain when Chara and I changed things to bring Mom back!" Frisk blurts out, but Sans can see on their face they instantly regret saying the words. Asriel blanches, clutching his ear tight in his hand.

Sans feels something dark and angry settle in his bones and he fights to keep his voice even, gritting his teeth. "that's not the same," he bites out, and both the kids flinch.

"I'm sorry, I know it's not," Frisk says, cowed. "Dad I'm sorry. It's just not fair, having this cool power and not being able to use it."

"Frisk maybe you should just stop, like Sans says. I'm... I'm glad I don't have that power anymore," Asriel mumbles, glancing at Sans and then looking at his friend.

Rubbing his face with one hand, Sans forces out a frustrated sigh and wills himself to calm down. They're just kids, dammit. "kiddo, we don't know what all these loads might be doing to our timeline. there's too many variables we don't understand and can't control and i don't trust it. what if something goes wrong? what if you try to load and it resets instead? we don't know what it might be doing to you either."

Asriel flinches a little at that last bit, but whatever he might be thinking he doesn't say anything.

"asriel, i need you to help me and help frisk, do you understand? you remind them not to mess around with that stuff unless it's a real emergency," Sans says, eyeing them both as they watch him.

"I don't need Asriel babysitting me," Frisk mutters, frowning but only just.

"apparently that's not true, considering what you did today. somebody has to be there to tell you what you're doing is wrong, and i can't be with you as much as asriel is." Frisk hangs their head and Sans looks pointedly at Asriel. To the prince's credit he holds his gaze. "now can you help me help frisk?"

Asriel nods. "Yeah. I just want Frisk to be okay, too. Because like you said... we don't know what this might do."

"thanks. you're the only other one here who really knows what that power is like. we all know that was under a different set of circumstances, but it doesn't change that you used to do it too. now, is there anything either of you want to tell me?" he asks, raising a brow.

They hesitate, but he's not sure if it's because they're hiding something or they're just thinking. But after a moment Frisk shakes their head, and a few seconds later Asriel does the same. Sans waits a little bit longer, watching them carefully before giving up.

"well i don't have anything else to say that wouldn't just be me repeating myself. asriel, go get your things and i'll take you home. frisk..." Sans grits his teeth, wondering what you might do if you were still home. "go to your room. no games tonight."

"But Dad!" Frisk whines, jaw dropping as their face scrunches.

"no buts! you know you're in trouble."
With a loud, agitated sound, they push away from the table and take their plate to the kitchen. Sans can hear the angry clatter of stoneware against the metal sink and he restrains himself from snapping at them. Let them be upset. It'll make two of them.

Deacon's house is two stories, tall and narrow like a townhouse. The original owners hadn't wanted anything too big, just enough space for their small family. It's perfect for a bachelor living on his own, you think. A big step up from wherever he was living before, judging by what you and the brothers moved inside yesterday. His car —Sylvie, you remember with a wry smile— is parked in the carport. It's already starting to get dark outside but it looks like Deacon left the porch light on for you. That was nice of him.

You texted him before leaving the house and as you walk up the steps to the front door it looks like he was waiting for you. The door swings open to reveal Deacon, dressed more comfortably in a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. He catches you looking and gives you a crooked smile.

"Hope you don't mind that I changed into something a little more casual," he says, stepping aside to let you in. He takes another look outside as he starts to close the door. "Maybe I should have walked over to get you, since it's getting dark. I'll take you home when you leave."

"That's very chivalrous, but unnecessary," you say, handing him a plastic container of meatloaf, potatoes, and carrots. "Ebott has to be one of the safest places I've ever been. Have you had dinner?"

Deacon turns the dish over so he can see inside, and you see his expression brighten a little. "Technically yes, but I think I'm about to have seconds."

Laughing and flattered, you follow him through the quaint living room to the kitchen. He's made himself a little bit at home it looks like, though with everything already furnished when he moved in there isn't much to change. At least not in the span of a day. Deacon makes an exaggerated throat-clearing noise and dumps an empty package of noodles in the trash can. As he turns to put the leftovers in the microwave, you steal a peek into the garbage.

"Deacon how much ramen have you had in the last twenty-four hours?" you ask, trying not to sound like you're criticizing. But you are.

"In my defense I haven't managed to go to the store yet," he counters, not answering your question. He's watching the container spin on the turntable inside the microwave very intently. "I promise I'm not that stereotypical of a bachelor that all I eat is ramen." He finally casts you a quick glance. "I do like ramen, though," he admits.

You make a noncommittal noise, not sure you believe him. "Well if you ever want dinner, there are two mothers just down the road from you. You can always come to me or Tori if you need anything."

"You guys don't need to do that, really," he says, shifting his weight on his feet. "But, uh, that's kind of you. Thanks. Um, did you want something to drink? I have... well, water and coffee. Pick your poison."

"Coffee sounds good."

Deacon ignores the sound of the microwave beeping in favor of rummaging through his cabinets to find you a mug, some sugar, and oh wonderful... instant coffee. When you start laughing he gives you a curious look, filling the mug with water and exchanging it with his leftovers. Does he not
own a kettle? You guess not.

"Sorry," you say, gesturing at the coffee. "I haven't had any of the instant stuff since getting back to the surface. It's all we had in the Underground and it was terrible. Granted, I think it was stale... or expired."

"Oh, well then not to worry. I only carry the finest, non-expired instant coffee here in chateau Stuart," he says, winking as you laugh. He puts the lid from the plastic container into the sink, making a pleased sound as a waft of steam rises up. "Oh man, this looks great. Thank you."

"You're welcome." You watch as he finds a fork in a drawer and starts to eat on his feet, waiting for your water to boil. "As good as it looks?" you ask after the first few bites.

"Mhm," he says in approval, nodding and chewing at the same time.

You shoo him aside as the microwave beeps again, deciding to prepare the coffee yourself. "So are you okay? After all that stuff with your Soul, I mean."

"Yeah, sure. I mean, yeah it was a little freaky but I guess that's pretty par for the course up here. Kids catching on fire, literal Souls. I'm sure there's still plenty of exciting things for me to learn tomorrow," he says, raising a brow at you. "Sorry, I know I called you over here to talk, it's just... We don't need to talk about the Soul thing. As long as I don't think about it too hard, all this stuff is almost starting to seem normal."

"Are you sure?" you ask as you start stirring the mixture of coffee and sugar. "I mean, I'm not an expert but if you have any questions I might at least be able to give you another human's perspective."

Deacon jerks his head towards the living room. "C'mon let's take this party to the couch. Much more comfortable." As you follow him out of the kitchen he keeps talking. "Oh, I hope I didn't upset your friend. Undyne. I know she seemed a little worried about everything."

"Oh, no way, I hope she didn't upset you!" you say, lowering yourself onto one end of the couch after Deacon flops down on the other. It's big and overstuffed and comfortable, upholstered with something like suede. "When we first met she tried to—" You catch yourself before saying 'she tried to kill me', taking a sip of your coffee. Still a bit too hot but already tastes better than you remember. "Well it was a rocky start. But she's just very..."

"Intense?" he offers.

"That's one way to put it."

"Nah, she's fine. We'll have to hang out again with less, ah, sparring in the future," he says with a chuckle. "Hey, so speaking about Souls, can I ask you what color yours is? Unless that's personal, I hope that wasn't rude. Your fiancé seemed a little upset about that earlier."

"Oh, yeah, that was my fault," you say, cringing a little with lingering embarrassment. You shake your head. "Don't worry about that. But, uh, mine is sort of a burgundy color."

"Well with our powers combined we're Christmas," Deacon says, making you laugh. "How about Sans?"

"Oh, monster Souls don't have colors. They also don't, um, pull free like ours do? The way he explained it to me is that Souls are magic, right, and their whole bodies are made of magic. I don't really understand it, but monster Souls are white," you say, sipping at your coffee.
He seems to mull that over for a little bit, looking down at the dish in his hands. Pulling his legs up on the couch, he sits cross-legged and leans a little closer to you, frowning. "Wait, so how do you know they're white if their Souls don't leave their bodies?"

You blink, caught off-guard. Shit, how did you slip up like that? Well you can't tell him the truth, that entire mess with Asriel and the monster Souls is just... too much. "Sans told me," you lie, clearing your throat.

Deacon nods, leaning back again. If he noticed anything he doesn't give any sign.

"So, what brought you up here to Ebott?" you ask in return, trying to change the subject and honestly curious.

"Curiosity, at first. I mean, who wouldn't be curious about all of this," he says, gesturing with his fork. "But you wouldn't believe how tough it is for newer teachers to get a job. Schools are very political and seniority is everything. So far it doesn't seem that bad up here at least."

"That's good," you say. "I mean, good that it's not bad up here, not good that you had a hard time before now."

"Heh, I know don't worry," he says, giving you a reassuring smile. "How's the coffee? Just as bad as you're expecting?"

"Better, actually. I mean, it's no fresh ground coffee, but it's drinkable."

"Will you think less of me if I admit I can't tell the difference?" he asks, smirking. Deacon leans against the back of the couch, sitting facing you and resting his arm along the top of it before running his hand through his hair.

You feel your cheeks warm a little, looking down at the mug in your hands and clearing your throat. Trying to think of a smart comeback, you find yourself falling short for some reason. "No, not really," you answer lamely.

Deacon gives a small shrug. "So, since we're asking questions. You and Sans." You give him a dubious look, expecting the worst. "How did you guys hit it off? Girl falls down hole, girl meets skeleton boy, seems a little cliché. I've heard that one a thousand times."

You snort, glad you weren't drinking at the time. Covering your mouth, you give Deacon a playful glare as he chuckles at you. "Well if you must know. He and Papyrus took care of Frisk and I after we fell. Well, uh, after Toriel. We lived with them for almost the entire three months we were down there."

"Living together before marriage? Scandalous," he says with a mock gasp. "Well that raises another burning question. What's the Underground like?"

"It was actually really beautiful in places," you say, leaning back against the couch. You tap on the lip of the mug with your fingernail, thinking. "I lived in a village called Snowdin. It was always winter, snow all over the trees—yes trees underground I know. And snow. Um and then there's Waterfall, which was probably my favorite. There was this spot where everything was dark but the water glowed. And these mushrooms too, this really pretty blue shade."

"And up in the top of the cave were these crystals in all sorts of colors, almost like stars. That's what lit the Underground, these magic crystals. They even operated on a night and day cycle somehow."

"I'd love to see it all one day. I know it's strictly off-limits, even to the military. Toriel told me as
much,” Deacon says, leaning back to put his empty dish on the end table behind him. "That's a lot of diversity for a glorified cave under a mountain."

"I guess that's what happens with magic. The entire time I was down there that was the only explanation I could think of, but I'm not exactly a scientist."

"Well they were trapped underground by humans. Um, mages I think they said? What if they did something to the mountain when the Barrier was put up? That might explain it," he says, shrugging and giving you a curious look.

Your face scrunches up with distaste. "No way. They locked an entire species underground after all they did was defend themselves. Why would they bother trying to make things better for the monsters?"

Deacon puts his hands up in mock surrender, eyebrows raising. "It was just a random observation. But I mean, if they wanted to get rid of the monsters, then why didn't they just kill them? Why lock them up and put up a complicated magic prison?"

"I dunno Deacon, you're the history teacher. Why do humans do anything?" you say, sighing.

"Fear, usually." Deacon rubs the back of his neck, shaking his head. "But there's always those people that stand apart, you know? I mean look at you, you and Frisk have adapted just fine. I hope that this time around it's different but you can't help but wonder: would the monsters be safer in the Underground than up here?"

"Maybe, but you heard Sans. They were surviving down there but they weren't thriving. You don't..." You grimace, tucking some hair behind your ear. "They were doing the best they could but despite the challenges, they're happier up here. Don't you think everyone should be free to live on the surface?"

"Don't get me wrong, I do! I wouldn't be living here if I wasn't okay with monsters," he says, giving you an apologetic look. "But between you and me, as humans... I worry about their safety. Don't you?"

"Every day."
Deacon changes the subject when he notices your somber mood and soon has you smiling again. About an hour into your visit you shoot Sans a quick text to let him know you're going to be a little longer, and his reply is just a single letter: 'k'. You hope his talk with Frisk and Asriel went alright. An hour after your text you realize that it's past Frisk's bedtime and you ought to be getting home. Despite your insistence that you don't need him to, Deacon walks you home.

There's a moment at your front door that feels awkward for some reason you can't quite pin down, where you both hesitate and look at each other. He rubs the back of his neck and glances at the doorknob and you cross your arms over your chest. It's like you're waiting for something but you're not sure what.

"Well, thanks for coming over, and for the food," he says, shifting his weight between his feet. "It was nice to just... talk to another human after today."

"Yeah," you agree, nodding. "It's been a long time for me too. It was fun."

"Well, you should get inside. It's dark and perfectly safe out here, I wouldn't want anything bad to happen," he says with a smirk.

You each take a step towards each other and then you both stop and an awkward silence fills the air. Then, you both laugh, feeling a blush spread over your cheeks before you wrap your arms around his shoulders and give him a quick hug. His hands brush your back and you pull away after a few seconds, looking away and back at him as he smiles at you.

"Take care of yourself, Deacon. I know it's been a crazy first day but I'm sure things will get easier. Don't forget you have friends here," you say, tucking some hair behind your ear. It seems like he's doing much better than he was earlier, and you're glad for that.

"I'll keep that in mind." He raises a brow and starts to walk backwards away from your door. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow, Hope, have a good rest of your night. Tell Sans I say hi."

You give him a small wave and he returns it before turning his back to you and walking towards the road. You watch him for a few seconds as he shoves his hands in his back pockets and then head inside. There's this warm, giddy feeling in your chest and you're smiling when you find Sans reading on the couch. He's sprawled out across the cushions, a pillow wedged under his neck and shoulders. He looks up at you with a question in his eyes, giving you a slightly confused smile in return.

"Have a good time?" he asks, making his place and setting his book aside as you kick off your shoes.

Shrugging off your jacket and leaving yourself in your short-sleeved blouse, you crawl onto the couch. He scoots back so that he's sitting up a little more and you settle your chest against his, kissing him between his eyes. Then you slide down to rest your head on his ribcage. You can hear the faint creak of bone as you both shift to get more comfortable. He slips one hand into your hair as the other one tangles your fingers with his. The feel of his phalanges against your scalp has you humming and closing your eyes, nuzzling into his jacket. Hm, that's a little odd for him to be
wearing inside, especially this late. Sometimes he keeps it on if he's feeling cagey or defensive, like a suit of armor. Or a security blanket.

"I did have a good time," you say. You push your free hand inside of his jacket, tracing the curve of his ribs. He twitches a little but settles back down, making a quiet, pleased sound. "I'm sorry for being gone so long. How are the kids, is Asriel still here?"

"nah i took him home after we talked. frisk spent the evening in their room sulking and they should be asleep now. don't worry, i think i got it all handled," he says with a soft sigh. "asriel's starting to seem uncomfortable with these loads too, so i think he's going to help keep frisk on track."

"That's good. We'll see how long he's able to keep that up," you say, a little doubtful. You've watched Asriel cave to Frisk's whims too many times to put much stock in him standing up to them, but there's always the chance he might surprise you. "Oh, Deacon says hi, by the way."

Sans makes a noncommittal noise deep in his chest. He's been polite to Deacon, you know, but you struggle to think of any of their interactions as anything close to 'friendly'. As you look up at his face to try and see what he's thinking, he gives you a slow, sleepy blink. "how's he doing after all that stuff earlier?" he asks, still running his hand idly through your hair.

"He's fine. Adjusting. Hun if you're tired we can go to bed, I know you had a rough day too." You rest your chin on his chest, giving him a worried look.

It doesn't take much to persuade him to go upstairs, the subject of Deacon forgotten. Sans wraps himself around you, his chest flush against your back and his hand between your breasts, right over your heart. Keeping you and your Soul safe, you think, as you start to drift off.

Alphys doesn't give it much thought when she gets home from work on Wednesday to find Undyne watching the news. Human news, by the looks of it, but with a double-take as she passes by the television, she sees a familiar sight behind the reporter. The checkpoint at the Line, manned by its usual crew of Army National Guard. Setting her bag behind the couch, she circles around it to sit down beside Undyne.

It's the coverage of the Line opening for general human access. Undyne tells her that they've been covering it most of the afternoon, after a press event held by Governor Williams and Captain Prasad. The fish monster makes a crude comment about loving to see a woman in uniform, which makes Alphys a little uncomfortable. She makes it up to her by slipping a hand underneath her lab coat and tucking her face close to Alphys's ear.

"Don't worry, my favorite uniform is still that one with the short skirt you put on for me sometimes," Undyne growls in that way she knows Alphys likes.

Blushing furiously and giggling, she nudges Undyne's shoulder like she's trying to push her away. But she's not, not really. "S-stop it, we should be p-paying attention to the news."

"Everyone at school was talking about it and they just keep repeating the same thing over and over. Besides, you already knew about all of this from Sans already," she presses, shifting herself onto her knees so that she has better leverage to push Alphys over onto the couch.

"B-but it would be nice to see what the humans are saying about it. You know a d-different perspective?" She doesn't actually care about the news, Alphys just loves to see Undyne get this way. It makes her feel wanted, desired. It's been almost five months since they started dating, two since they decided to live together, and it still surprises her that Undyne wants her.
The sound of the front door banging open, followed by heavy footsteps and then it slamming shut again pulls Alphys out of her reverie. Undyne sits up and Alphys watches as her girlfriend's face scrunches up into an annoyed grimace, baring her teeth.

"Mettaton, go away," Undyne snaps. "You're interrupting."

Alphys sits up to peek over the back of the couch. Mettaton is sauntering over, ignoring Undyne as he catches sight of his target: her. He shoves silky black hair out of his face and for a moment two pink eyes meet hers before his hair slips back into place. There's a perfect little crease forming between his brows and his lips press into a thin line. Coming to a stop behind the couch, he shifts his weight onto one leg and rests his hand on his hip.

"Why did I have to find out about the Line opening on television, Alphys? Why didn't you let me know personally?" he asks, pressing his other hand to his chest in a perfect, textbook display of someone who's offended. She wonders if he practiced that look in the mirror before coming over.

"W-why do you think that I'd know about it?" she counters, ducking back down and out of sight. With an echoing, metallic sigh of frustration, Mettaton circles the couch to stand in front of her, blocking the television with his hips. He leans forward so that his eyes are level with hers in a position that looks more like a pose for a photoshoot than something natural. "Because you work with Sans, and Sans is always speaking with Asgore and Toriel. Please don't play coy with me, it doesn't suit you."

"I've been busy with the Core. And I thought that P-Papyrus would tell you," Alphys says. She scoots away from him and gets up from the couch. He follows her as she heads to the kitchen, pulling off her lab coat and draping it over a chair.

"What makes you think that Papyrus and I are on regular speaking terms?" he asks, but there's something funny in his tone.

"Sans told me the t-two of you went out for dinner on Saturday." She opens the fridge to pull out a can of soda, jumping a little when she turns to find Mettaton almost literally on her tail.

"And what did Sans have to say about it?" he asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

Not much, if she's being honest. Just that they went out and a few snide comments regarding Mettaton's character. Essentially, nothing that she's too keen on sharing with the already-irate robot. "He just mentioned it to me. You've t-talked about him before, I just thought maybe there was more to it."

"I've said this before and I'll say it again: if you break Papyrus's heart I'm going to break your ARMS," Undyne calls from the living room, fixing Mettaton with a menacing glare.

"Yes, you have explained that before. Exhaustively." He shoots her a dismissive look before focusing on Alphys again. His expression falters a little, and for a moment he seems upset. "Besides, it's not like that. I'm not sure what this is. We're just... friends."

"D-do you want to be more than friends?" Alphys asks, raising her brows. She takes a sip of her soda, watching as Mettaton gapes a little, for once at a loss for words.

After a moment he frowns, shaking his head. "I didn't come all the way to Lakeside to talk about Papyrus, I came because of this business with the Line! If humans are going to be allowed free access—"
"Not totally free. Residential areas are off-limits and they still have to submit to a search and go through the check point to get in," Undyne adds.

Mettaton's jaw clenches. "As I was saying, if humans are going to be allowed free access, that means I'll finally be getting business for my hotel. Not to mention I still need to attract more human employees and work on proper advertising..."

"M-Mettaton I'm not sure what this has to do with me..." Alphys taps on the side of the aluminum can, looking up at him over the rims of her glasses.

"I'm finally going to be able to open up my hotel, and I'll be stuck plugged into a wall three times a day because my body can't last more than five hours in one go! Darling, please you need to do something." His face crumples into a look of desperation, pulling out a dramatic pout.

Oh, of course. He's been better than he used to be about keeping in touch, but with all this work on his hotel he's fallen back into old habits. Once again he's only coming to her because he needs something. She looks away, inches from giving in but doing her best to stand her ground. "M-Mettaton, there's no reason you can't use your o-other body if you have to. I have lots of people relying on my work on the Core."

His eyebrows shoot up in what she thinks is a genuine display of surprise. His lips part, revealing perfect, gleaming teeth before they snap shut again. The aperture in his visible eye narrows a little as he glances away. "I don't... Alphys please, that's not me anymore. I don't want to keep switching bodies. You know that one was only meant to be temporary."

"I can't prioritize you over the rest of Ebott," she mumbles, her tail sweeping across the tile floor. "I'm s-sorry. Don't you want the power to your hotel to be stable for your guests?"

His face scrunches a little, still not looking at her. Crossing his arms over his chest, he lets out a sigh. "Fine, I suppose I'll just make due."

"I'll try to think of something when I can, I just c-can't promise anything before Monday," Alphys concedes. She can't stand that dejected look on his face. It's not like anyone else can help him.

His face lights up with a bright, winning smile and he wraps her up in a hug, his arms extending to loop around her. She lets out a startled squeak when he lifts her up off the ground. "Oh thank you, darling! I know I can always count on you."

Later, after Mettaton leaves, Undyne asks her why she let him get his way. Complains that she lets him walk all over her. But Alphys can't forget the ghost he was when they first met, and how he'd stuck by her, even through all the horrible things. Maybe it was because he was using her, or just because he needed her, but she doesn't think that's entirely true. She tells Undyne that she just wants to make her friend happy.

Chapter End Notes

Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
It's Friday, just three days before Ebott is scheduled to open for human visitors and Frisk and Asriel are with Toriel, doing their homework. They'd rather be outside playing, but it's cloudy and cold outside. Toriel insisted they stay indoors, despite their protests.

She's been distracted all afternoon, flitting from one room to the next. Frisk thinks she's worried about Monday. Asriel won't stop watching her and they can feel his anxiousness every time she comes into the room only to leave again. While he's distracted, Frisk puts their pencil under their nose and curls their top lip underneath it to hold it in place. Then, going cross-eyed, they nudge Asriel's shoulder. He turns to look at them and then erupts into giggles. There, that's much better. At least for now.

Toriel sweeps back into the room and slows to a halt, pausing whatever she's working on to look at the two of them. Frisk looks at her and there's something tender in her expression. They recognize it from you, when they catch you watching them sometimes. It's this weird mix of happy and sad that Frisk doesn't understand. How can you be happy and sad at the same time?

She comes up behind Asriel and ruffles the fur on his head. "I hope that the two of you are also finishing up your schoolwork," she says, but her attempt at a reprimand carries little weight. "You and I are going to be busy this weekend Flufftail, so it will be best for you to finish this tonight. Especially since you will be missing school on Monday."

Asriel's smile fades as he looks up at his mother. "Mom I thought you said I wasn't going to have to miss school?"

"I said that I would think about it, and your father and I agree that it would be best for you to attend," she says, folding her hands over her stomach. "This is a good opportunity for you to handle your duties as prince."

"But no one else is going to be missing school," he protests weakly. When Toriel's expression refuses to waver, he hunches his shoulders and looks back down at his worksheet, tapping it with his pencil. "And I'm just going to be standing there while everyone stares at me. I'd rather be at school."

"Asriel," Toriel says, her voice growing stern. "It is just one day. You never used to have a problem with attending these sorts of formal events back in the Underground."

"Back then I had Chara with me. And I hadn't become a Soulless flower," Asriel mumbles under his breath, his brow furrowing.

Toriel's eyes widen, and she seems to be unsure of what to say. Frisk knows that she hasn't spoken much to Asriel about what happened. With Chara or Flowey, or his death. There was a night that Asriel called them because his parents were arguing about it. Asgore wanted to ask him more about his time as Flowey but Toriel forbade it. She didn't want to dig up the past. It reminds Frisk of how Sans never brings up Chara either, or what they did to him. Tried to do to him.

It's a bruise that Toriel refuses to touch. An old hurt she's trying to ignore until it mends, but Frisk knows that for Asriel it won't ever go away. He's always going to have that scar. He's never going to be the Asriel she remembers because that Soul is gone and he has a new one, a patchwork of two humans that care about him.
Frisk isn't sure they've ever heard Toriel talk about Chara. They don't think it's because she doesn't care, but because she doesn't want to make Asriel sad.

"I know that many things have happened..." she says carefully. "But Asriel none of that changes who you are. You are still our son, no matter what. We love you and just want to do our best to prepare you for what is to come."

Asriel's frustration guts out as quickly as it came, and he gives his mother a weak smile. "I know. I'm sorry Mom, I'm just nervous," he says. He looks back down at the table and fidgets with his ear.

She lets out a soft sigh, her brow furrowing a little. Then, after a moment, she bends down to kiss the top of his head. "You know what? I think there will be plenty of other opportunities for you to learn these things. Perhaps you should go to school instead. Besides, your education is important, is it not?"

Relief floods Asriel's face and Frisk smiles.

"Forgive your stubborn mother, my child. Sometimes she forgets that it is also important for you to be a child as well as a prince." Toriel's eyes are a little glassy as she pulls away and smiles down at her son, and Frisk looks down at their homework. They feel a little out of place, like when you and Sans are kissing but not nearly as gross.

There's a knock at the door and she hurries off to go answer it, leaving Frisk and Asriel alone for a moment. They share a look and they're both smiling, glad for this small concession. She's been so serious lately, sometimes it's hard for Frisk to remember the kind, gentle monster they remember from when they first fell into the Underground. But, then again, everyone has seemed serious. This stuff with the other humans is making everyone nervous, even Frisk can tell that much. It seems complicated, and a little scary, and there's things about why it's scary that they don't understand, but they know this is important.

"—wonderful, thank you for bringing this over, Deacon. There was no reason to rush, but I admit it is one less thing for me to worry about," Toriel says as she walks back into the room, carrying a small stack of papers.

Deacon follows close behind her, his hands in his back pockets. He's still dressed in his nice clothes from school, and Frisk feels a little strange about having one of their teachers in Toriel's house. Seeing a teacher outside of school is always weird, but it's easier when they're not still dressed up. They feel like he's going to ask them a question, or like they need to raise their hand before speaking.

"Exactly, and I didn't want to worry about it any more either. Every time I passed by my desk I could hear it taunting me," Deacon says, chuckling. "Nothing like filling out a bunch of complicated employment paperwork to file with the government to start off the weekend. How else am I going to get into the partying mood?"

"Oh, are you attending a party this weekend?" Toriel asks, turning to look back at him.

"Ah, no," he says, shrugging awkwardly. He looks over at Frisk and Asriel. "You two working hard, I see?"

Frisk bobs their head. "Sooner we get done the sooner we can play."

"That's the spirit. Sorry about the homework, but rules are rules. I have to give you guys homework
or I'll lose my teaching license," he says with a wink.

"Really?" Asriel asks, wide-eyed.

Toriel laughs and Deacon raises his brows and shrugs. "Maybe. I wouldn't doubt it. When you grow up and become a teacher you let me know, okay?"

He frowns, making his snout wrinkle a little. "But what if I don't want to be a teacher?"

"Then I guess you'll never find out."

"Mooom, is that true?"

Shaking her head, Toriel smiles at her son. "No, that is not true. He is only teasing. Now, Deacon, you were saying something about a human holiday earlier? Something that would be fun for the children?"

Deacon snaps to attention, turning back to Toriel. "Oh! Right, yes. Halloween. It's on the 31st. I talked about it a bit with Hope and between the two of us I think we could put together a little something for the kids. Do you have a computer that can get online? I'll pull up some pictures to give you an idea."

Toriel and Deacon wander off into another room and Asriel gives Frisk a confused look. "What's Halloween?"

Asgore's house on the surface is a small, quaint thing with a manicured lawn and a vibrant flowerbed under a large picture window. Well, small is relative, but it's no sprawling estate. It's not something that might come to mind when thinking of the title 'King of All Monsters' but to Undyne this house is unmistakably Asgore.

Picking her way up the cobblestone path, she isn't surprised when the door opens before she can even knock. He called her the moment she got off work and asked her to come over, after all. He's expecting her. Even though she's anxious to get home for the weekend, there's no way she can deny the big fluffy pushover anything. (Except two particular human Souls but that had turned out for the best, right? That hardly counts.)

He's dressed in a big, pastel, floral-print shirt and it suits him and she hates it at the same time. She gives it a pointed look and he just chuckles and ushers her inside. There's a teapot steaming on the coffee table and two delicate porcelain cups waiting. As she sits down she sees that hers already has the right amount of sugar inside and he fills it with tea before she can even get comfortable. He's such a big, kindhearted softy that it just makes her angry when she sees how tired he is. There are dark circles under his eyes, almost hidden under the fine layer of white fur but not enough that she doesn't see.

"You look terrible," she says, which makes him laugh. She wishes he wouldn't laugh because she's telling him the truth.

"It is good to see you as well, Undyne. I am sorry that it is more difficult for me to see you as often as I would like," he says, lowering himself carefully into his huge armchair and picking up his tea. Asgore blows on the surface and gives her a kind smile. "How are you and our Doctor Alphys doing? Well, I hope."

Undyne gives him a crooked attempt at a smile, more of a grimace, she thinks. She's not good at these false pleasantries, she just wishes he'd get to the point. But he taught her better than that.
Insisted on better than that when she was just a brat with scraped knees, frustrated and angry with the world and determined to take it out on the king. What had she ever done to deserve his patience? "We're good, yeah. About as well as anybody right now, waiting to see how this whole thing with the humans goes." She leans forward to rest her elbows on her knees, picking up her teacup. Staring down into the amber liquid, she raises a brow and looks back at Asgore. "Is... that what this is about?"

He sighs, and after a moment of hesitation he nods. "Yes. That and... something else that I wish to make you aware of. But first, I would consider it a personal favor if you might get in touch with the old Royal Guard and ask them to keep an eye on our new human visitors. We will have the Army watching out for us, but I would feel more comfortable knowing that some of our own are also on alert. I could ask them each personally, however—"

"Of course! Asgore, leave it to me, I'll call them," she blurts out, leaning towards him in her enthusiasm and then blushing purple under her scales when she realizes she cut him off. Undyne leans back again, not quite managing to relax against the couch cushions. "Is there anything in particular you want me to tell them?"

"Focus on the residential areas. Some humans may get lost and wander where they are not supposed to be. I do not want anyone getting frightened, on either side," he says, sipping at his tea. "Human or monster, one does not behave to their utmost when afraid..."

"No problem! It'll be great to get the Royal Guard back together, I can't WAIT to—" Undyne cuts herself short and sits back down on the couch, realizing that in her enthusiasm she had risen to her feet. Asgore is holding up his hand, a patient smile on his face.

"I should add that this is entirely unofficial and should be handled with discretion. I do not want the military thinking that we are mobilizing any sort of organized combat force of our own. It would go against our current anti-hostility agreement," he says, watching her carefully. Asgore reaches up to stroke his beard. "With that in mind, those that you approach should be given the chance to decline, and this is for volunteers only. I do not wish anyone to feel beholden to me in this regard."

Undyne looks down at her tea, finally taking a sip. It's sweet, just right like he always makes it. "I understand. I'll make sure everyone else does too. No violence, I take it?"

He nods. "Yes. Unless, heaven forbid, it comes to a life-threatening situation, please do your best to make sure that the humans are handled peacefully. No matter how they might behave."

Wincing, she looks up at him. "You really are expecting the worst, aren't you?"

"No, not the worst. We would be... well, things would be much bleaker for us if things were at their worst. No, I simply expect that not all humans will be as kind or polite as Hope."

"Yeah I guess we can't expect all the humans to be that ridiculously nice. I don't think many of them would forgive us as easily as she did after trying to kill her," Undyne says, laughing until she sees the grim look on his face. That was tactless. Could she have said anything worse? She knows he still feels the guilt of those other Souls, like weights around his neck. "Hey, uh, you said there was something else you wanted to talk to me about?"

Asgore slumps a little in his chair, heaving a weary sigh. Oh, she's not used to seeing him like this at all. She straightens her back and sets down her tea, reaching over the corner of the table to wrap her hands (they look so small compared to his, he's always made her feel small) around one of his. She squeezes and he forces a smile for her, though that's not what she wants. She doesn't need his
reassurance, she wants to help.

"Forgive me, I hate to see you fret over me, but I need you to know this. We have talked of it before, but Captain Prasad has approached me once again about allowing monsters to serve alongside the military—"

Undyne's expression hardens, baring her teeth. "You already told her no! Do I need to go have a TALK with her to get her to listen to you?"

"My child, please," Asgore says, sitting up and setting down his tea so he can reach out and hold her shoulder. It doesn't make her feel any better. "I know that it is not the Captain's wish to keep pressuring me in this way, but I fear that her superiors are growing more insistent. That is my concern, not with her."

"Fine, then just let ME go join. I'm sure I could beat up any of their soldiers anyway!" she says, her snarl turning into an arrogant grin.

"No, never," he says, with an ache so deep that Undyne is caught wholly off-guard.

It takes her a second to recover, shaking her head. "Come on you big loser, it'll make them happy and I can start fighting again. I trained my whole life with you and Gerson to be a warrior! I became the Captain of YOUR Royal Guard! To serve YOU! To..." She grimaces, looking away. "To make you PROUD, and what am I now? A stinking GYM TEACHER! This isn't the person I thought I'd be when you were teaching me how to fight, Asgore! This isn't ME."

She's glaring at him, suddenly angry because this is his fault. He brought them to the surface and then she wasn't allowed to be herself anymore. Sparring with Deacon had been the closest thing she'd had to a real test in months and no wonder she went overboard. Undyne is almost ready to come up with more to say when he rises from his chair and pulls her to her feet, wrapping her up in an enveloping hug.

"I am proud of you. Of the strong, courageous woman that you have become. I could not ask for a fiercer Captain or a nobler ally. But you cannot keep holding onto that anger, Undyne. You have to let some of that go, so that we can move forward in peace. The humans are not our enemy," he says, stroking her hair like he used to when she was a child.

"Some of them are, or you wouldn't be so worried," she grumbles, but hugs him back anyway.

"I cannot bear the thought of sending you to them, alone. No, they will not have any of us, least of all you. Perhaps it is unbecoming of a king, to care about some of his subjects more than others, but I cannot help it. Not when you are like my own daughter." She hears him sniff loudly, and she wonders if he's on the verge of tears. Oh this big fluffy idiot is overworked and exhausted, to be getting all emotional on her like this.

"Okay you giant mushy wimp." Undyne's voice is weak, and comes out more affectionate than she expects. "You win, DAD."

He chuckles, and squeezes her tighter. "You only ever call me that to tease me."

"Yeah, well, WHATEVER," she yells into the front of his chest, doing her best to hide her smile.
Monday comes and goes quietly. You weren't sure what you were expecting from the human visitors with the Line opening to allow them access, but a relatively normal day wasn't it. Toriel tells you later that she's glad she sent Asriel off to school instead of joining her because even though she and Asgore had spent the day greeting visitors, there were far less than anticipated. Less than a hundred, milling around downtown and visiting the lake. According to the rumors you heard from Leveretta the next morning, everything went fine. The humans had been cautious and curious and peaceful.

In an odd pessimistic streak that you think you might have picked up from Sans, you wonder how long this is going to last. It can't be this easy, can it? Things just aren't going to keep going this smooth, sooner or later someone is going to slip up. Someone is going to rub someone else the wrong way and when it comes down to it the world is going to blame the monster. Because they're different, they're new. The outsider and the threat.

When had you started bracing yourself for the worst? You had never been what you'd call an optimist, but this is a bit grim. It's definitely Sans. It has to be.

So on Tuesday, as you're picking at your lunch and thinking about the Line and humans and monsters and the whole mess wrapped around it all, when Deacon comes into the break room with a single word on his mind, you can only give him a blank stare and ask him to repeat himself.

"Halloween. You know, that thing that happens at the end of October?" he asks, raising an eyebrow as he flops into the chair next to you with his cup of instant noodles. You wish he'd eat something healthier for lunch but bite your tongue. "Pumpkins, typically carved with varying degrees of skill. Candy, costumes—"

"Yes I know what Halloween is," you say, rolling your eyes and giving him a weak glare that just makes him smile at you. He's such an ass sometimes but you can't help but smile back. "What about it?"

"Well, we talked about it a little last week, remember?" He taps at the styrofoam cup containing his lunch, waiting the appropriate three minutes for the noodles to soften. You nod, recalling him mentioning Halloween at some point and asking you if monsters celebrated it. You hadn't given it much thought since then. "Well I talked with Toriel about maybe putting together something for the kids, like a fall festival sort of thing. You know, carnival games, trick-or-treating, costumes, pumpkin carving... Thought it might be a fun way to introduce them to some human traditions."

You raise a brow. "I take it she said yes?"

"Yep. So I was hoping that you'd help me get things put together, seeing as we are the two resident experts on all things Halloween."

And that's how you end up getting roped into helping put together a festival for Mountainside School with Deacon.

Your time after school is spent in Deacon's classroom putting together plans for the Halloween Festival. The kids go home with Toriel and you're so wrapped up in taking down notes and deciding what to include that you don't realize what time it is until Sans calls you to let you know he's on his way home.
When you walk in the door he and Papyrus are already in the kitchen, with Sans at the bar while his brother is cooking. Your fiancé is browsing the news on the laptop, something about Ebott, from what you can tell from the title.

"Hey hun, I'm sorry I wasn't here when you two got home," you say, coming up behind him and wrapping your arms around his middle.

"s'ok, you were busy," Sans says with an evenness that tells you he's distracted.

Resting your chin on his shoulder, you skim over the article but can't glean much from it. "Something happen? What are you reading?"

"just more of the same vague shit they keep publishing. guess a couple of reporters came in yesterday to do some pieces on ebott, you know for the curious ones who want to know more before they come themselves. only bit that stands out is an interview with mettaton, but all he talked about was his hotel," Sans says. He scrolls down on the article, and there's a picture of Mettaton beaming at the camera.

"THE HOTEL IS VERY IMPORTANT TO HIM. HE SAID THAT IF HE CAN'T GO TO THE HUMANS, HE MIGHT AS WELL BRING THEM TO US." Papyrus glances over his shoulder at the two of you, dutifully stirring a pot. Looks and smells like it's going to be spaghetti for dinner.

"yeah, well, good for him i guess," Sans says with a shrug. "so you and deacon are working on some kind of thing for the school?"

"Yeah, and I think it's going to take up a lot of my time getting everything together, actually. This whole staying after school thing might be pretty regular for the next couple weeks," you say, kissing his cheekbone. He turns into the contact, raising a hand to cup the side of your face.

"hm. is it just you and deacon?" he asks, and you're not sure if his casual tone is natural or forced. He's been sending you mixed signals about your friendship with Deacon. Sometimes, usually after he's been around him, he seems frustrated or moody. You think it might have to do with Deacon's sarcasm. Others, he's just fine, even encouraging. He says he's glad that you have another human you can relate to.

"For now, we're going to try and get some of the other teachers to help too," you say, though you're not sure who. Maybe Leveretta. Not Undyne because she told you Monday that she's been busy after work keeping an eye on things for Asgore. Which is a shame because she and Deacon have been getting along pretty well all things considered, but you know that her other duties come first.

"and what about frisk? i mean, i know tori has them today."

"They can stay at school with me if necessary, but you know that she doesn't mind having Frisk over there. If you get home before I do maybe you can go get them?" You start to pull away from him but he slides his hand from your cheek to the back of your neck, stopping you with a noise of protest.

"no, i'm not done with you. and yeah, i can do that," he says, closing the laptop. He lets you go and turns on the barstool to face you, grabbing your hips and pulling you towards him. "how long is this gonna be for?"

"A little over two weeks. Until the end of the month. Is that okay?" you ask. Looping your hands behind his neck, you bump his forehead with yours.

"i think i can manage."
The rest of the week Sans doesn't see you until after it's dark. You're enthusiastic about this whole Halloween thing and he'll be the last person to stop you from enjoying yourself, even if it means seeing less of you. You're tired but happy when you come home, filling him in on everything you and Deacon have planned for the kids. He doesn't understand some of it, things like pumpkin carving or trick-or-treating. He'll just have to see what all that is in person.

He misses you being there when he gets home, but he reminds himself that this is just temporary. Soon enough, once November rolls around, things will be back to normal.

Papyrus is busier too with the humans visiting Ebott. He had already taken it upon himself to patrol Mountainside and now he's taking it even more seriously. Two nights he even goes back out after picking up Sans from work. Sans eats at Grillby's with Frisk those nights, and brings you some leftovers for whenever you get home.

By the time that Saturday rolls around he's ready to spend some quality time at home with you, but then he remembers you said you had to do some shopping with Deacon. Maybe... maybe he should go with the two of you. Frisk is with Asriel for the weekend since those two can't go two days without being together, and he knows that Papyrus is going to be off 'patrolling'. The idea of being at the house alone is suddenly unbearable enough that the idea of spending the day with Deacon seems worth it just to be with you.

You're eating breakfast together when he decides to ask.

Eyebrows shooting up, you choke a little on your coffee and have to clear your throat before speaking. "Are you sure? I mean, you can if you want to. Actually, yeah! That would be great! Maybe you and Deacon can get to know each other a little better."

"yeah, maybe," he says with a shrug. "just thought that i could tag along. feel like i've barely seen you this week, babe."

"Oh," you say, looking apologetic. "Yeah I guess you're right."

"hey, don't worry about it, it's fine. it's not like you're not with me every night." He gives you a reassuring smile, feeling a bit guilty for being so selfish. He reminds himself again that this is just temporary. This isn't normal.

But you seem happy to have him join you and Deacon, which is reassuring. There's still that little voice in the back of his head that keeps whispering stupid, jealous shit now that the two of you have been spending time together and he just knows that if you hadn't wanted him to come along that the voice would have had a field day. But you do want him there. You even still have this misguided hope that the two of them might be friends, though Sans can't see that ever happening. The guy just grates on his every last nerve and it's only for your sake that he's been civil around him.

You let him know that part of your plans were for lunch, and at almost eleven there's a knock on the door. You're in the bathroom so he goes to answer it. There's Deacon, standing there with that practiced casualness that makes Sans grit his teeth, hands in his back pockets. He's in a pair of jeans and a zip-up jacket, and he wipes the surprised look off his face and replaces it with a lazy smile.

"Hey there, Sans. Mind if I borrow your fiancée for the day?" he asks with an infuriating wink.

Giving Deacon a big grin, he shrugs his shoulders. "actually i'll be tagging along."
Sans can't help but feel a little satisfied at the slight falter in Deacon's expression. He recovers quickly though, nodding. "Cool, cool. Well, the more the merrier. Hope is insisting that we go to that spider bakery for lunch, but she won't tell me if they actually make the stuff out of spiders." Deacon gives Sans a conspiratorial look, like they're friends or something. "Can you just tell me one way or the other so I'm prepared?"

"oh, you want me to throw you a bone there, pal?" Sans asks, raising a brow and chuckling. "i dunno if i should be spoiling hope's surprises. i like her more than you."

He doesn't seem to know what to say to that. He just gives this forced laugh and glances over the top of his head, which isn't difficult given their difference in height. Sans turns at the sound of you coming down the stairs, right as Deacon raises a hand in greeting. "Hey, we ready to go?"

"Oh hey Deacon! I just need to get my shoes on, you can come in," you say, picking your sneakers up from next to the door and going to sit on the stairs to lace them.

Deacon slips around Sans and heads over to you, pulling his hands out of his pockets and running his fingers through his hair. Sans shuts the front door and follows him, pausing a second to slide his feet into his slippers. The blonde is looking at the arrangement of photos hanging in the stairwell, and Sans realizes this is the first time he's been in the house.

You glance up to catch Deacon looking, smiling to yourself. "Find anything interesting?"

He leans in close to a little battered frame with a faded photograph Sans recognizes. It's one of you and your father, one of the few you have of him, you said. At first you hadn't wanted to hang it up on the wall with everything else because you didn't think it fit in with all the photos of you, Sans, Frisk, and Papyrus. But of course it does, because it's got you, and he likes to think that if your dad was still around that he'd be part of your life and your family right now. He scanned the picture into his computer and printed a copy to store in that broken machine in his workshop out back, just in case.

You had been curious about the machine, when he finally showed it to you. It was during the move to the surface, because until then it had completely slipped his mind. With everything that happened in rapid succession after telling you the truth about the timelines, it just hadn't been high on his list of priorities. But with the move, he'd had to make the choice of what to do with it and as much as he wanted to he just couldn't give it up. Just in case, he keeps telling himself. If something were to happen, at the very least he'd have the contents of that machine to go off of. All his journals and photos from hundreds of timelines. (He's thankful that you haven't asked him about all the journals. There's too much in them that he doesn't want you to read, things about Frisk that neither he nor the kid want you to know.)

Deacon's eyes shift to the next picture, and scans up the stairwell at the handful more that are hanging there. He arches a brow and chuckles. "You know they have these things called photo albums, right?"

You roll your eyes and smile, but Sans grits his teeth. He passes those pictures every day, and there isn't a day that passes that he doesn't look at them to remind himself just how far he's come. How far all of you have come in the past seven months together. Sans is about to say something with you beat him to it.

"Oh we have those too. But we can see these all the time without having to go digging through them. Were your parents not big on pictures? Sans loves them," you say, standing up and straightening your jeans.
Deacon doesn't say anything, just gives the pictures another once-over. Then, he shrugs and turns to face you and Sans, glancing at the door. "Nah, my parents weren't the sentimental type, I guess. We ready to head out?"

Sans catches the deflection because he knows those tricks. He used them on you all the time in the first three months you were together and, well, still does on occasion. Either Deacon is lying or he just doesn't want to talk about it anymore, and Sans wonders which it is. Maybe both.

"Yeah, let's go! I'm really excited for you to try out Muffet's," you say, laughing at the disgusted expression on Deacon's face. "I promise, it's good."

"I'm not sure I believe you," he says, scrunching his nose.

"Trust me."
Muffet's Bakery

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Muffet's bakery is a pastel wonderland of lace, ribbon, and soft, squishy poufs and armchairs. The atmosphere is cozy and welcoming, like a parlor from a fairy tale. Delicate, crystalline chandeliers like spun sugar confections dangle from the ceiling on gossamer strands of what you think is spider webbing. There's a fire crackling in the huge Victorian-style fireplace. Muffet herself is striding across the room on dainty heels, pouring tea for two separate tables with her many arms.

You saw a few humans milling about outside, taking in the shops and sights, but there aren't any in here. Not that you can really blame them, it had taken a little persuasion on Sans's part to try a spider donut for the first time. So for Deacon you consider this like a rite of passage. After everything he's seen in the past two weeks, is a pastry baked by spiders really so strange anymore?

A tiny bell rings as you open the door and Deacon and Sans follow you inside. Muffet looks over at the table with her big, glossy black eyes and her tiny mouth widens into a smile. "Well hello, dearies! Welcome back to my parlor," she says, looking from you, to Sans, and then to Deacon. She tilts her head a little to the side as she studies him, her expression brightening. Covering her lips with one of her empty hands, she gives a soft laugh. "Ooh, and who is this? Looks like fresh meat to me."

Still holding two teapots, she closes the distance to meet you in the foyer, eyeing Deacon closely. You glance over at him and he seems a little nervous, but to his credit he takes her hand when she offers it to him. Touching his shoulder, he gives you a hesitant look as you smile reassuringly. "Muffet this is Deacon, he moved to Mountainside two weeks ago. Deacon, this is Muffet," you say, dropping your hand back to your side.

"Ooh, I could just eat you up," Muffet says, baring her fangs in what you think is supposed to be a smile. "Lucky for you I already ate." She slips her hand free of Deacon's and he seems a little relieved, taking a step back so that you're a little ahead of him. With another amused giggle, she turns to you and Sans. "Sit wherever you like, dearies. I'll come get your orders in just a moment."

Once she's out of earshot, Deacon clears his throat and when he speaks his voice is a little higher than usual. "Does she, uh, always act like that? Like she wants to spin you up in a web and save you for later?"

"don't worry, she's harmless, unless you owe her money," Sans says, taking your hand and leading you over to a table.

You and Sans claim a small loveseat while Deacon cautiously lowers himself onto a pink pouf, taking in the decor. He leans forward with his arms on his knees, trying to look casual you think but failing. His shoulders are too rigid and his eyes keep darting around the room. He clasps and unclasps his hands, and as Sans settles easily into the couch beside you Deacon reaches up and rubs the back of his neck before clasping his hands together again.

Taking a little pity on him, you push the menu sitting on the table towards him. "Anything that's marked with a little spider is made of spiders. Everything else is 'normal'."

Deacon gives you a thankful look, letting out a small sigh as he picks up the laminated sheet. He
skims down the selection of pastries and beverages, then glances over at the two of you, arcing a brow. "Do you not need to look?"

You and Sans shake your heads. "We always get the same thing."

"And what's that?"

"spider donut and a spider cider," Sans says, taking hold of your shoulder and pulling you back against his side. His arm slips down around your waist and your hand closest to him automatically rests on his leg. "can't go wrong with the house specialty."

Deacon's eyes flick down towards your hand, taking notice but he doesn't say anything. He's never really said much about your relationship with Sans, and you're not sure if that's a good or a bad thing. You don't get the impression that he has anything against the two of you, and maybe he's just afraid to be rude. One of these days you just keep expecting him to ask, in that casual, friendly way of his, 'So how do you bone the skeleton?' He must be wondering. It was a question you had yourself.

His attention returns to the menu, and his eyebrows twitch a little before looking back at the two of you. "Those, uh, have little spiders next to them."

"yep." Sans kicks his feet up onto the coffee table in front of you and you nudge his leg with your knee. He puts his feet back down on the floor.

Deacon looks at the menu again. "Okay, I'm not afraid to admit defeat here. I think I'm going to stick to a croissant and a cup of coffee that the menu promises absolutely does not have spiders in it."

"We'll work you up to it. One of these days you'll be eating spider donuts like the rest of us," you say, grinning.

He sets the menu down on the table and slides it away, shaking his head. "Maybe..."

Muffet comes back and takes your orders, not questioning Deacon's choices but giving him a knowing look. Before she turns to walk away you remember part of the reason you came here and let out a small sound that has her stop to look at you.

"Something the matter, dearie?" she asks, resting two of her hands on her hips while two more rub together in front of her chest.

"I almost forgot, we're putting together a festival for Mountainside School and I wanted to as you if you'd be interested in being a vendor there. We've already talked to the Nice Cream guy and a few others," you say, tucking your hair behind your ear. "It's on the 31st of this month, in the afternoon. It's a Saturday."

"Ooh, I'll have to think about that. The spiders and I would have to close up early," she says, frowning a little.

"If it doesn't work out I understand, I know you have a business to run." You give her a smile you hope says there's no hard feelings.

She nods. "I'll let you know. Now, I'll be right back with your orders."

Sans squeezes your side and you turn to look at him. He jerks his chin after Muffet and raises a brow at you. "didn't realize you were putting together such a big event. vendors? isn't that a bit
"Yeah, it was Deacon's idea. We're hoping to maybe get some humans to come too, you know that 'family-friendly' angle," you say. "I mean, what better way to spend Halloween than getting to know actual monsters?"

"I s'pose," he says, shrugging. "I know Tori's a little worried about how few people have shown up since Monday. Maybe you've got the right idea."

Deacon looks a little surprised. "I'm glad you think so, Sans. Because Hope and I have been working really hard on this."

"Yeah, I know you have, pal. So what other big things have you two been cooking up?"

You and Deacon share a look. "Um," you begin, thinking. "Well Deacon was the one that came up with the idea to get the local businesses involved to try and attract more people. I was just thinking about something like a costume contest. I've already told you most of our other ideas, hun."

"Hey, don't downplay the costume contest, that's a great idea," Deacon says, leaning towards you and grinning. You look away, pleased but a little shy of his enthusiasm. "I've already started talking to the kids in my classes about putting together costumes. Should be interesting to see what they do since there's really no way to get store-bought ones up here."

"Oh god I hadn't even thought about that. I always had store-bought when I was a kid," you say, shaking your head.

"Hey, nothing quite like a wrinkly, mass-produced polyester costume out of a plastic bag, am I right?" He laughs, giving you a conspiratorial grin.

You're laughing too, leaning forward and pointing at him. "And they were so cheap you'd wear them once and then have to throw them away half the time." You pause for a second, hit with a sudden realization. "I need to do something for Frisk. And what about Asriel?"

Sans shifts a little bit beside you and you remember he's there with you too. You lean back against him as he clears his throat. "I can handle that, if you're gonna keep being so busy. I mean, you remember Papyrus's old outfit. I told you I helped him make that."

"Oh! Sans that's right, you did! I'd love it if you could help with that, thank you so much," you say, breathing a sigh of relief and kissing his cheekbone. He looks pleased with himself as you pull back.

"Speaking of, are you going to be dressing up for Halloween, Hope?" Deacon asks, giving you a lopsided smile and raising a brow. "I can think of some ideas that Sans might like."

You can feel your fiancé bristle beside you even as you're blushing at Deacon's thinly-veiled suggestion. "And what makes you think you know what I might like, pal?"

"Oh, are you saying you wouldn't want to see her in something low-cut? I mean, I'm sure she'd look fantastic." The blonde gives a good-natured shrug, still smiling.

"Guys..." you say, glancing between them and biting your lip.

"I know she would," Sans says, his expression twisting into a smirk. "I'm intimately familiar with how good she looks."
"Oh, so you two are intimate—"

"Okay, I am right here," you blurt out, your face burning. "At this rate I'm not gonna be dressing up at all."

Deacon looks away, rubbing the back of his flushed neck. He looks ashamed, as he should, you think. As he glances over at you again with an apologetic expression, Muffet shows up with your order. You're not sure if you should be thanking or cursing her timing, but you're hiding behind your big glass of spider cider and taking a big gulp to distract yourself.

The three of you end up eating in relative silence, the air thick and uncomfortable. Sans nudges you with his shoulder as you take a bite of your donut and mumbles a quiet apology. You nudge him back and nod.

"So, uh, this stuff is pretty good," Deacon says, clearing his throat and giving you a careful glance. "Thanks for making me give it a chance."

"You're welcome," you say, giving him a tentative smile.

The bell hanging above the door chimes and you look up out of reflex in time to see a pair of humans, a man and a woman, walk in. They give the place a curious look, but you're annoyed to see the woman openly recoil as Muffet walks over to greet them.

"I told you we should have gone somewhere else," the woman says, loud enough that you can hear her across the room. She gives her partner a disgusted look. "This can't be sanitary, are those spiders crawling across the walls?"

"Why of course, dearie. This is a spider bakery after all," Muffet says, and to her credit she sounds perfectly polite. "They're invaluable help."

"Help?" the man asks, incredulous. "How has this place not been shut down by a health inspector?"

You glance around the room and while the other patrons are watching the exchange, none of them seem willing to intervene. They're too nervous, you think, about causing an incident. Of jeopardizing their chances of getting past the Line. It makes you angry just thinking about it. Sans moves to get to his feet, eliciting a strangled sound of protest from the back of your throat but Deacon is faster.

Standing, he looks over at the two of you, raising a hand. "I got this."

"I'm not sure how you expect humans to be able to eat here," the man says. He shakes his head, like he's disappointed.

"Maybe they don't want us in here at all," the woman says. Her sour expression falters as she catches sight of Deacon approaching.

"I don't like this," Sans says, his eye sockets narrowing as he watches.

"What are they going to do, complain that another human was rude to them?" you mutter under your breath.

"Hey Muffet, are these two giving you a hard time?" Deacon asks, coming up beside her and looking at the two humans.

"Oh, goodness you should be enjoying your meal," Muffet says, surprised.
"Well, I was. Must be all those little spider legs that get those flaky croissant layers just right. Delicious, by the way," he says, smiling. The human couple is looking distinctly uncomfortable. Deacon's expression shifts as he regards the pair in the foyer. "You can't control who might come in and disrupt this nice, pleasant atmosphere."

"I still feel obligated to apologize for the interruption," she says, giving the humans a pointed look.

"No, please don't. I mean, I'm sure this whole situation can be resolved with just a little bit of human decency, don't you think?" he asks, smiling at the couple.

The two humans look from Deacon to Muffet, seemingly at a loss for words.

"Now, would you like a table, dearies? I'm afraid I have customers to tend to, so if you'd like to stay just find a seat," Muffet says, and with a click of her heels she walks over to clean off a table.

There's a beat of awkward silence between Deacon and the couple before the man leans in and jabs your friend in the chest with his finger, saying something quiet enough that you can't hear. With a fluid motion, Deacon grabs his wrist and twists it down, making the man gasp and bend forward to follow his arm. The woman lets out a soft cry and covers her mouth.

"Don't make me find a soldier to escort you and your wife off this mountain," Deacon snaps, then lets him go. The humans shoot him a glare and hurry out the door.

Silence accompanies him as he crosses the parlor back to your table. You and Sans watch him as he sinks down into his seat, then take hold of your half-full glass of spider cider and take a long pull before setting it down. He lets out a loud sigh and runs a hand through his hair, glancing over at the two of you as you stare at him.

"What?" he asks, raising a brow. When you don't immediately answer he points at the drink. "That's pretty good, by the way, considering it's made from spiders."

"What did that guy say to you?" you ask, wondering what it could have been to get Deacon so angry.

He grimaces, looking down at the table and away from your eyes. "He made a very crude remark, insinuating something about myself and Muffet. And how disgusting I am," he says, shaking his head. "Racist asshole."

Oh. Frustration and anger twists in your stomach as you frown at the floor. Because how could anyone ever stand up for a monster unless they were screwing, right? Is that what they'll say about you, when they find out about you and Sans?

Sans threads his fingers through yours and you glance at him. The lights in his eyes are dim but he's regarding Deacon a little differently, you think. "you did good, helping her out of a tight spot."

Deacon shrugs. "Someone had to do it. Might as well have been me."

When Muffet comes back to clear away your table she tells you not to worry about the check, and that she'll be more than happy to host a table at the school festival.

Chapter End Notes
Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about the characters and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
The rest of your shopping trip goes much smoother than your visit to Muffet's. You encounter a few more humans while you're out but they're all perfectly civil from what you can tell. You don't see the couple from earlier again. With a trunk full of supplies for decorations and carnival games, you head back to the house to unload everything.

Sans and Deacon are getting along a bit better, you think. You know you can't exactly force them to be friends but you're glad to see them being civil and polite. You can work with civil. As long as you can spend time with both of them you'll be happy. The last thing you want is to be caught in the middle between two people you care about.

It's almost dinner time when you get home and as Deacon makes less-than-subtle glances at the clock you invite him to stay. He hesitates, looks at Sans, and when your fiancé doesn't offer any suggestions he agrees. He reaches into the pocket of his jacket and moves his phone to his jeans, and as he's shrugging off his outer layer a slip of paper falls to the floor.

"hey pal, you dropped something," Sans says as he hangs his coat up next to the front door and follows you into the kitchen.

"Huh? This isn't—" Deacon picks it up and looks at it, his eyes widening before looking at you. "Muffet slipped me her number."

"What? Like... so we can get in touch with her for the festival?" you ask, watching him as he stares down at the paper again. It takes him a few tries to hang his jacket before it catches, and he wanders into the kitchen after you and Sans.

"Uh, no. Unless 'call me dearie, I'd love to have you for dinner sometime' with a little upside-down heart is entirely platonic. I mean, I have my doubts but I'm no expert on monsters. Also, it still sounds sort of like she plans on eating me," Deacon says, taking a seat at the bar and pressing the paper flat on the counter.

"Oh my god, what?" you blurt out, not even bothering to close the fridge, stopping in the middle of getting out ingredients as you hurry over to look at the paper. There, just like Deacon said, is Muffet's message in a thin, curling script accompanied by a little upended heart. Like a tiny doodle of a monster Soul. "When did she slip you her number? You didn't even notice?"

"No, it was just in my pocket," he says, giving you a baffled look.

Sans chuckles at the two of you, peering over the fridge door as he finishes what you started. "well with six hands, i'm sure it's easy for one or two of them to go unaccounted for."

Deacon runs his hand through his hair, staring back down at the paper again. "...Should I call her? Would she be offended if I don't?"

"Do you want to?" you ask, raising a brow. Then you remember your conversation with Leveretta, and your amusement at the situation starts to falter. "Unless you think getting in a relationship with a monster might be too... complicated."

"No it's not that," he says, shrugging and meeting your eyes again. He seems to catch the shift in
your expression. "Hope, it's not that she's a monster. It's that she's a giant spider. It's just a little... unnerving. And I'm not a hundred percent certain she doesn't intend to actually eat me."

You can't help but laugh but laugh as he rests his chin on his hand, a little spooked. "Just in time for Halloween," you tease, shoving his shoulder and circling the kitchen island to get back to starting dinner. You're a little surprised that Sans is helping out, getting to work on peeling some potatoes. Normally he'd be the one sitting at the bar, keeping you company while you cook. "Six hands though. Think of the possibilities."

His ears turn a little pink, and Deacon pockets the phone number.

"who needs extra hands when you've got magic, though," Sans murmurs, glancing over at you and waggling his brows.

"Sans oh my god," you say, mortified as you look up over the island at Deacon. He's still got his chin in his hand, trying to hide his smile behind his fingers. Certain that you're blushing, you look back down at the stovetop and pour some oil into a pan. "You don't have to call her. She was probably just flattered that you stood up for her."

"I think I will, actually," Deacon says, and when you steal a glance at him he's watching Sans. "Just promise me that when I go out with her, if I don't check in with you, you have to come find me. Assume she has me wrapped up in her basement for a midnight snack."

Laughing, you shake your head but agree anyway. "Sure, I promise. In the unlikely event, I will form a rescue party and come save you."

"Thanks, you're a real friend."

"You could see if she wants to go out tomorrow. I think the bakery is closed on Sunday afternoons and you could use the break. We've been working on this festival stuff all week," you suggest.

"you should take a break too," Sans says, pointing at you with the potato peeler. "a nice, lazy sunday has a certain apeel."

Deacon groans and you laugh, shaking your head as you hold your hand over the pan to check the heat. Almost but not quite.

"I'll call her later. For now I think I'll just enjoy some pleasant company," Deacon says, making you smile. "Though you didn't warn me about the puns. I thought you said he was funny?"

"well, i guess there's no accounting for taste."

"I've been told I have a pretty dry sense of humor."

"like sandpaper."

Their banter seems friendly enough, but something about it makes you uneasy. As you're about to change the subject your cell phone chimes in your back pocket. Pulling it out and flipping on the screen, you see a message from Toriel. 'Thought you and Sans might like this. ]: )' Attached is a picture of Frisk with their arm around Asriel's shoulders, both of them dusted with flour. In front of them is a lumpy, uneven pie you can only assume they made themselves. They're both grinning, and instead of looking at the camera they're looking at each other. You feel a swell of affection in your chest.

"Oh goodness, Toriel has them baking pies, look at this," you say, grinning and turning your phone
so Sans can see. The lights in his eyes brighten and he smiles, chuckling. "I'm sure she'll send Frisk home with one tomorrow."

"looks like they're having a good time," Sans says.

As you go to pocket your phone Deacon lifts his head from his hand, craning his neck a little. "Picture of the kids?" he asks, curious.

Nodding, you bring the picture back up and hand him your phone as you open a package of chicken, laying it out on a cutting board. "They're over at Toriel's for the weekend," you say, seasoning the meat as you talk. "We might as well have joint custody of the kids, they're almost always together."

Deacon smiles at the picture and goes to hand your phone back to you but you give a vague gesture with your hands. Realizing that you're covered in raw chicken, he turns off the screen and sets it aside for you to retrieve later. "So Frisk and Asriel are really close, then?"

"What was your first guess?" you ask, chuckling. "Yeah they've been inseparable since..." Catching yourself, you shrug. "Well, since we got to the surface."

"Frisk is a good kid, I'm sure you're proud."

"we both are," Sans adds, not turning to look at Deacon.

You lay out the chicken in the now-hot pan and as it starts sizzling you head over to the sink to wash your hands. "We are," you echo, a little puzzled by Sans's defensive tone. "Thank you."

"Not everyone has it in them to do what you've done. Either of you. Becoming a mom at such a young age, and choosing to step up to the plate and be a father to someone else's kid," Deacon says. He catches your eye as you head back to the stove, unsure of what to say to that.

Fishing a pair of tongs out of a drawer, you nudge the chicken around the pan to distract yourself. It feels strange to accept his praise, like you're lying. You weren't a mother to Frisk for so long. "It's... more complicated than that," you admit. "But thank you."

"Well, whatever happened, you guys seem really happy now and that's what's important, right?" Deacon says, maybe sensing your discomfort. "And I'm guessing you didn't get much help from Frisk's biological father."

"If by 'much' you mean 'any',' you say, sighing. You shake your head. "No, he was fifteen. He didn't stick around."

"Ah. Sorry, maybe I shouldn't have brought it up," Deacon says, looking apologetic.

"I... had help from my mom. It's not like I was alone," you say, leaving the details vague. You don't need to go into that whole mess with Deacon, not right now. If ever. That's in the past.

"hey, babe, are these good?" Sans asks, turning to you and showing you the potatoes he's finished. He glances from you to Deacon, his expression a little tense. You go over to his side to check and his hand is at your waist the second you're close enough, and in a low voice he murmurs to you. "you ok?"

You nod at him, an answer to both of his questions. "Those are great, thank you."
Sans knows that Deacon didn't mean anything by it, that he was just being curious. But he can't help being protective of you. The second you started feeling uncomfortable he had to resist jumping in. Until talk turned to Kim. That had been the final straw. You didn't need to explain anything to Deacon you didn't want to, and he was more than happy to interrupt.

Conversation turns to more pleasant topics and Papyrus gets home before long. He's excited to have Deacon over for dinner and sounds positively scandalized when he finds out that your friend hasn't been given a proper tour of the house. Not that there's much to see that he hasn't already, but Sans just gives Deacon a little wave as his brother whisks him away. While you have a moment alone he hugs you and double checks to make sure you're okay. You reassure him that you are, and that just the mere mention of your mother isn't enough to rattle you. He's glad, and kisses you before he lets you go.

When the four of you sit down for dinner, Papyrus can't contain himself around Deacon.
"UNDYNE TOLD ME THAT YOU FOUGHT HER TWO WEEKS AGO! SHE SAID THAT YOU WERE VERY IMPRESSIVE FOR A HUMAN."

"Did she now? And it wasn't so much a fight as like, practice," Deacon says, gesturing with his fork.

"SHE SHOWED ME SOME OF THE THINGS YOU TAUGHT HER..." He trails off a little and sweat dots the side of his skull as he frowns. "THEY WERE VERY UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT QUITE EFFECTIVE. I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WAS THROWN ONTO THE GROUND MANY TIMES AT HER INSISTENCE. THOUGH, I ADMIT IT WAS BETTER THAN BEING SUPLEXED."

"Sounds like you two hang out a lot."

"OF COURSE! SHE IS ONE OF MY BEST FRIENDS, NOT TO MENTION THE ONE WHO TRAINED ME IN COOKING, AND COMBAT. I WAS GOING TO BE IN THE ROYAL GUARD, YOU KNOW, BEFORE IT WAS... DISBANDED," Papyrus says with a wistful sigh.

Deacon raises a brow. "Cooking and combat? That sounds intimidating."

"IT TURNS OUT THAT UNDYNE IS ONLY GOOD AT ONE OF THOSE THINGS. AND IT'S NOT COOKING."

"And here I thought you were going to have me guess."

Papyrus's eye sockets widen. "OH! I'M SORRY, I SHOULD HAVE LET YOU."

The blonde is laughing as his sarcasm goes right over Papyrus's head. Does he think he's being funny, teasing his brother like that? Sans grits his teeth and bites back a snide remark, doing his best to ignore that nagging feeling that's been buzzing like static in the back of his skull all day. Dealing with Deacon might be easier if he didn't feel so literally on edge every time the guy was in the room. Part of him wishes you hadn't invited him to stay, but after his part in defending Muffet how could he say anything to the contrary. He should like Deacon. There's no good reason for him not to.

Around the time that Sans is finishing up his dinner there's a knock on the front door at the same time that he hears it swing open. He looks over at you, you look over at him, and Deacon has this confused look on his face as he watches you both. Papyrus leaps to his feet to go greet whoever it was that just waltzed into your house. Was it Toriel? She's the first one that pops to mind.
But no, it's not Toriel.

"Hope, darling, you'll never believe what I heard from Alphys this afternoon and I would very much like an explanation as to why I didn't hear it from you personally." Sans groans at the voice, because if there's anyone that grates on his nerves more than Deacon it's Mettaton.

You roll your eyes, muttering, "Doesn't he know how to use a cell phone?"

"not nearly dramatic enough for him," Sans says, gritting his teeth. He's watching Papyrus's face light up, and he can't help but feel a little bit of his frustration diminish. It might be Mettaton, but he can't deny that happy look on his brother's face. Damn that robot.

Papyrus hurries out of the dining room to go meet him, and Deacon watches him go, bewildered. He looks over at you, brow furrowing. "Who is that? It sounds like—"

Mettaton strides into the room with Papyrus trailing behind him, beaming at you once he spots you at the table. "There you are! Now, what is this about a Halloween Festival and why did you not come to me for help?" He presses a hand to his chest and gives you a scandalized look. Sans resists the urge to roll his eyes. "I know what it must have been. You were worried that I'd spread myself too thin between this and the hotel, weren't you? Well, don't you worry darling, I'm here for you."

"Mettaton, I really don't think—" you start, but he cuts you off.

"No no, I insist. With my help we'll make this entire event the talk of the town. No, the talk of the mountain. Trust me, if there's anything I know it's how to put on a good show," he says, teeth gleaming as he gives a confident laugh. He finally seems to catch sight of Deacon, gasping. "Oh my, now aren't you new? Hope is this your new neighbor Alphys told me so much about?"

Deacon pushes himself back from the table and stands up, holding out his hand to Mettaton and giving him a winning smile. "That would be me. I'm Deacon."

Mettaton looks him over from head to toe with an expression Sans can only describe as 'thrilled'. It sort of reminds him of the way he looked at you the first time you met, even if he'd been a giant rectangle back then. "Mettaton," he says, giving Deacon his hand as their eyes meet again. "The Underground's best and brightest star."

"you mean the underground's only star," Sans says. He gives the robot an amused grin at the glare he shoots his way.

"Hope you never told me you're friends with Mettaton," Deacon says to you, looking impressed. "You own the big hotel downtown, right? The one with the fancy restaurant?"

"The one and only. How wonderful that you already know." Mettaton has gone from thrilled to ecstatic. "Now, you must be the one who came up with the idea for this festival in the first place. You must tell me more."

Sans hears your sigh of resignation and knows there's nothing he can do to stop this situation from snowballing out of your control. This is just the type of thing that Mettaton lives for, though he can't help but wonder if maybe this is for the best. You and Deacon are trying to do a hell of a lot on your own. Would the robot's help make things easier or harder on you?

Deacon has already started in on what sounds like a sales pitch while you watch the two of them with a defeated look on your face. Sans reaches under the table to give your thigh a reassuring squeeze and raises a brow when you look at him. You give him a weak smile and shrug your shoulders. With a quiet hum he leans in to nuzzle your cheek and murmur into your ear.
"let him help you. he's gonna do it anyway and maybe you won't be so busy," he says, pulling away again to look at you.

Your lips twitch and you lean in closer to whisper back. There's this little amused twinkle in your eye as you fight back a smirk. He loves it. "You say that now, but I would bet actual money he ends up making more work for us in the end."

"Hope darling, be a dear and show me everything you've bought for this festival so far, and please tell me you still have the receipts," Mettaton cuts in, leading Deacon out of the dining room.

tell me to kick him out and i'll do it. whatever you want, babe," he says, suddenly rethinking his earlier suggestion.

You laugh and kiss his cheek as you stand up from the table. "You're sweet to offer, but no. I think Deacon's too far gone now. With any luck I can just sit there while the two of them make moon eyes at each other."

Sans watches you go, then realizes that Papyrus is standing in the doorway. He's been suspiciously quiet this entire time, watching Mettaton. Sans goes to his brother's side, trying to slip his hands into his pockets on reflex only to remember he left his jacket by the door. He tugs on the hem of his shirt and lets his arms fall back to his sides before nudging Papyrus's elbow.

He jumps a little and glances down at Sans, then looks back up at where you, Deacon, and Mettaton are standing, going through shopping bags. Crossing his arms over his chest, he looks... disappointed. Maybe even a little sad. Had Mettaton even said anything to Papyrus since he got here? Sans bristles at the thought. As much as he wishes the overgrown calculator would stay away from his brother, he wishes even more for him to be happy. And right now, he doesn't look happy.

"bro, what's wrong?" Sans asks, doing his best to sound concerned instead of angry.

"IT'S NOTHING," he says, shaking his head.

"you know that you can talk to me, c'mon." Since when did Papyrus start keeping things from him?

He shifts a little on his feet, glancing down at the floor and back up again. "HE HASN'T TALKED TO ME SINCE THE HUMANS STARTED VISITING. I'M SURE HE'S JUST BEEN BUSY. HE WAS VERY EXCITED ABOUT THE LINE LETTING HUMANS THROUGH!" Papyrus is smiling again, but it's a little forced. Sans can tell that much. "IF HE NEEDS ME, I'M SURE HE'LL LET ME KNOW. I SHOULDN'T WORRY."

"pap—"

But Papyrus doesn't stop to listen. He gives Sans an even brighter smile and walks off, leaving him to stand there alone. He wishes he could tell his brother that he shouldn't have to wait for Mettaton to need him. That he's allowed to need people, just as much as they need him.

Chapter End Notes

Here's your regularly scheduled reminder to check out my tumblr for silly tidbits about
the characters and fanart!

onadacora.tumblr.com
"We're going to dinner at the MTT Resort tonight at 7."

You look at the text from Deacon, an amused smile curving your lips. He'd spent most of the morning sending you sporadic messages, waffling between calling and not calling Muffet. Looks like he finally made up his mind. Before you can reply you get another message. 'Don't forget you promised to come save me if I don't check in. I'm counting on you. You're my only Hope.'

Rolling your eyes, you type in a response. 'Just for that I'm gonna let her eat you.'

'I'm serious you have to come save me.'

'Fine you wimp.'

"he still bugging you about muffet?" Sans asks. He's sitting on the floor with Frisk in his lap, going through pictures on the laptop. Toriel sent them home with a small USB drive with shots from the weekend (mostly of the kids baking) for Sans to add to his growing collection. You know that later tonight he'll print out his favorites to store in his workshop.

"They're going out to dinner tonight. I'm sure I'll get a full report," you say, checking the time on your phone. "Hey, it's almost dinner time. Is Papyrus still up in his room?"

"he said he was trying to come up with the perfect idea for his costume. i told him he could put his 'battle body' back on but he wants to do something new." Sans opens up an IM window on the laptop, typing a message with his arms around Frisk. "probably lost track of time. hey kiddo, you gotta come up with what you wanna be for halloween, too."

"A skeleton!" Frisk says, bouncing a little on Sans's legs in their enthusiasm. "Asriel and I decided that I'd be a skeleton like you and Uncle Papyrus and then he'd be a hero."

"a skeleton, huh?" he asks, and you can almost feel the pride in his voice. Smiling, you brush Sans's side with your foot from your seat on the couch. "aren't you a little soft to be a skeleton?" Sans starts poking Frisk's stomach, making them dissolve into giggles as he tickles them.

"Dad! No!" they gasp between laughs, struggling to break free but Sans wraps his arms around their chest and holds them tight.

"what's wrong? did i find your funny bone?"

Shrieking with laughter, Frisk squirms in Sans's grip until, laughing, he finally relents and lets them catch their breath. They leap up out of his lap and rush over to you, climbing on top of you and wrapping their arms around your neck. "Mooooooooom," they whine.

"What makes you think you're safe with me?" you ask, grinning and pinching Frisk's sides.
Squealing, they slide off of you in a hurry. "Nooo!" they exclaim, running out of the living room and towards the foyer. "You're both evil!"

"WHO IS EVIL? DO I, THE GREAT— WHOOPS!" Papyrus scoops Frisk up into his arms as he comes down the stairs, ignoring their protests as he carries them back towards you and Sans.

"No, you're taking me back into the den of evil, Uncle!" Frisk cries out, giggling.

Sans is chuckling, scrolling through some search results on the laptop. "nah kiddo this is a living room, not a den. nice try, though."

"A DEN OF EVIL YOU SAY?" Papyrus says, ignoring Sans's interruption. He sets Frisk back down on the ground, resting his hands on his hips as he looks down at the two of you where you're lounging on the floor and the couch. His scarf gives a valiant ripple from a nonexistent breeze. "HALT YOU VILLAINS! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AND MY SIDEKICK, THE ALSO GREAT FRISK..." He trails off, nudging Frisk with one hand. "NO, YOU HAVE TO POSE."

"Oh!" Frisk blurts out, looking up at him and then flexing their arms in a good imitation of Undyne. They try to make a serious face but start giggling.

"VERY GOOD. NOW! AS I WAS SAYING!" He points at Sans, orange sparkles glittering near his eyes. "VILLAINS! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AND MY SIDEKICK, THE ALSO GREAT FRISK WILL VANQUISH—" He cuts himself off with a loud gasp, a horrified look on his face as he hunches forward to wrap his hands around Frisk's head, covering their eyes. They let out a muffled sound of protest as they try to pry his fingers away. "SANS WHY ARE YOU LOOKING AT NAKED SKELETONS ON THE COMPUTER?!"

You have to cover your mouth as you let out a loud, undignified snort of laughter and bury your face into the armrest of the couch.

"s'not naked skeletons, pap. it's skeleton costumes. for halloween," he says, turning the laptop towards his brother. "see? they're like, black jumpsuits with bones painted on 'em."

"OH. WELL, IT'S STILL IMPOLITE!" Papyrus says, mollified but still offended. Frisk gasps dramatically when he releases their head.

"i'm looking for a way to do a skeleton costume for frisk."

With an excited squeak, the tall skeleton claps his hands to either side of his face. The sparkles are back. "YOU WANT TO BE A SKELETON? JUST LIKE YOUR UNCLE PAPYRUS?"

"or you know, their dad."

"I HOPE YOU'RE NOT GOING TO DRESS UP AS A NAKED SKELETON..."

"we can get some facepaint and fabric paint, some black gloves and you've still got those old black leggings, don't you kiddo?" He sits back a little as Frisk climbs back into Sans's lap, looking down at the computer screen and nodding. "you can wear one of your old sweaters so you don't get facepaint on any of your nice stuff."

"WELL, SPEAKING OF COSTUMES, I KNOW WHAT I AM GOING TO BE!" Papyrus sits down on the floor beside Sans, grinning and resting his hands on his knees. "A PIRATE!"

"don't you mean a pa-pirate?"
"SANS!"

It takes Sans about half an hour to convince Papyrus not to change his mind on his costume, eventually distracting him with dinner when the oven timer goes off. The two of them discuss what they'll need to put together a pirate outfit as the four of you sit down to eat. Then, you realize that they're not going to find it all here on Ebott. If you left the mountain and went down into the foothills, you'd have a much easier time getting things like a plastic cutlass and pirate hat for Papyrus, or Frisk's face paint.

Before, you never would have even considered leaving without Sans with you. The Line was shut down from both sides, and though the soldiers would let you through if you asked, you had fears that if you left they wouldn't let you back in. Back in the first month on the surface, when things were more uncertain than they are now, you and Frisk were almost taken away. The soldiers were convinced you were there against your will and that if they separated you long enough you'd admit the 'truth' and let them help you. You understood that they thought they were doing the right thing, but that's what made it that much more terrifying. These men and women wanted to help, to do what was best for you against your wishes.

It took almost four hours for them to finally let you go back to Sans and the others. By the then Sans was literally buzzing with tension and pent up magic, and when he asked you what took so long you lied to him. You never told Sans just how close you were to being taken off the mountain. The last thing either of you needed was Sans angry at the soldiers you were going to be stuck with for the foreseeable future. So instead you told him they were just checking to make sure you and Frisk were okay and asking some questions about what happened. Not a lie but… you think you understand a little better why Sans kept secrets from you before. To protect you.

You found out later it had happened on his birthday. He'd almost been separated from you on his damn birthday, which he only even remembered because Papyrus asked the date two days later. His brother was beside himself with guilt, and threw together a hasty celebration that, despite Papyrus's best attempts, was a sober occasion. It was difficult for Sans to feel happy to finally see his 27th birthday while soldiers watched you all with suspicion.

But the Line is open for humans now. Any humans, so long as they have identification and submit to a search. You can't think of any reason they might have to keep you out, and the soldiers are better now. They know you, you know them, and they don't doubt that you're safe on Ebott with Sans and the others anymore.

"Whatever you can't get here, let me know and I can head down the mountain to some costume shops. These big warehouses always open up around Halloween with all sorts of stuff," you say, slipping into a gap in the conversation.

Sans turns towards you, looking a little surprised. "you sure? i mean, we can't exactly go with you, babe." Hesitating, a small furrow forms between his brows. "they made a special exception for us to go see kim, but i don't think that extends to shopping trips."

"Yeah, I'm sure it'll be fine. Deacon would probably go with me if I asked, that way I'm not alone."

His frown deepens before he looks down at his plate and nods. "yeah, that's not a bad idea," he says, shrugging.

"Mom, can I go with you?" Frisk asks, giving you a wide-eyed look.

"Sure, sweetie," you say with a smile. "We'll talk to Asriel about what he needs for his costume too so we can pick it all up at once."
"what about you babe? what are you gonna wear?"

You've been trying to think of something, but so far you haven't had any good ideas. At this rate you're going to end up as something typical like a witch. You sigh, shaking your head. "I don't know yet, I'm sure I'll find something when we go shopping."

"i don't mind helping out, you know," he says gently.

You smile at him. "I know, hun. But hey, this way I can make it a surprise. Frisk will help me pick something out, won't you?"

Frisk is enthusiastic about that idea, and starts asking you a bunch of questions about the costume shops. Sans, on the other hand, seems uninterested and talks to Papyrus about the details of his pirate costume instead.

It isn't until you're finishing up with the dishes and everyone else is serving up slices of butterscotch-cinnamon pie (brought over by Frisk when they came home) that you remember Deacon and his date. Your phone goes off in your back pocket, three chimes in rapid succession. Wiping off your hands on the front of your jeans, you check your messages.

'Okay, I'm doing it.' 'Wish me luck.' 'Or is it break a leg? No this isn't a stage performance.'

Another chime.

'At least I hope not.'

Laughing to yourself, you type in a reply. 'Good luck. Have a good time.'

It's an hour later and you and your family are watching a movie (one about pirates, at Papyrus's insistence) when your phone goes off again. You switch it to silent when Papyrus gives you a dirty look at the interruption, but check your messages.

'I think she just vaguely threatened to eat me again. I'm not sure if she's being suggestive or actually wants to kill me.'

You cover your mouth with your hand and try not to burst into laughter in the middle of a very dramatic swordfight on the television. 'Did you know that some spiders eat their mates?'

A few seconds later you're muffling a laugh with a pillow. 'Hope you are not helping me. If you weren't my only friend I'd stop talking to you right now.'

'You shouldn't be talking to me. You should be focusing on your date.'

Sans slides his arm around your shoulder and pulls you close, nuzzling your temple and glancing down at your phone. You turn it to him and scroll through last few messages and you're pleased to hear him bite back a laugh.

Your fiancé is asleep, head pillowed on your shoulder near the end of the movie when you get another text from Deacon. 'I know it's getting late for you so I'll leave you in suspense with this. Muffet invited me over after dinner so if you don't see me at school tomorrow, send help.'

'Letting her lure you into her web?' You're grinning as you hit send.

'GOOD NIGHT HOPE.'

'Don't let the bed bugs bite.'
'I SAID GOOD NIGHT.'
Deacon texts you in the morning to let you know that he's alive. Specifically: 'I know you stayed up all night worrying about me but I'm fine. No need to send out a search party.'

'I'll call off the hounds. So how did it go???'

'I'll talk to you at lunch. Getting ready.'

You spend the first half of your Monday wondering how his night went. Did he stay over? Are they going to go out on a second date? You admit that a small part of you is just relieved at the idea of there being another interspecies relationship going on in Ebott aside from your own. Maybe it's the first step in making these things seem more normal to outsiders.

Things won't ever be perfect, you know that. There are still people who side-eye interracial couples, or gay couples. No matter how normal society as a whole regards something, there will always be those who refuse to accept it. Being of a mixed race yourself, you've faced this closed-mindedness before. You'd think it should make it easier to face the thought of people judging you for your relationship with Sans, but it's not the case. You wish you had a thicker skin.

Deacon seems like the type of person who would face that kind of thing head-on. If anyone tried to question his relationship with Muffet, or any monster, he'd push back. You'd seen him do it first hand, and he wasn't even dating her yet. If push comes to shove you like to think that you'd be the same way, that you could stand up for yourself and for Sans, but just the idea makes you nervous. It's easier for now to just not draw any extra attention to yourself.

Well, at least you hope this means you might have another human on your side when it finally does happen.

Lunch rolls around and when you get to the break room Deacon is already there, standing beside the microwave. You take quick stock of his appearance before he notices you: unwrinkled pants, smooth sleeves on his dress shirt, an argyle sweater-vest, and his hair is at the proper level of disheveled for being halfway through the school day. All in all a normal, everyday Deacon with no signs of having to rush to work after waking up at someone else's house. You're not sure if that's a good thing or not.

He glances behind him as you shut the break room door. Recognition smooths out the slight frown between his eyebrows and he gives you a half smile as you head to the fridge to retrieve your lunchbag. You take your usual spot at a table in the corner and, hearing the microwave beep, wait for Deacon to join you. As he sets down his lunch and pulls out his chair, you're pleased to note that he is not in fact eating ramen. Instead it's a frozen burrito. The kind you can get from the grocery store for less than a buck and you think is just a tortilla and questionable refried beans.

"Do I need to start packing lunches for you to get you to eat something healthy?" you ask him, arching a brow.
"I make up for it with dinner," he says, turning the burrito over on its little plastic sleeve and then shaking his hand, wincing. "Okay that's hot."

"Ramen with an egg in it is not a healthy dinner." You peel open a cup of applesauce, stirring it with your spoon before taking a bite. "How do you look so good while living off garbage?"

Deacon grins at that, waggling his eyebrows at you. "So I look good, do I?"

You roll your eyes. "You know you do, and that's not what I meant." Gesturing at him while waving your hand up and down, you punctuate the motion with a shove at his toned arm. "Muscles take a lot of calories to maintain, don't they?"

"Contrary to what you might think, I really don't just eat ramen, Hope. Do I need to invite you over for dinner so I can cook for you?" he asks, picking at his burrito again. It must be at a more manageable temperature because he lifts it to take a bite. "Also, beans have a good amount of protein."

You give him a scrutinizing look as you scrape at the bottom of your applesauce. Considering you're eating a lunch identical to an elementary school kid (namely your own) you wonder if you should be criticizing. Then, with a sigh, you shake your head. "Sorry, I'm coming on a little strong, aren't I? I'm not your mother."

"I sure hope not. Number one, you're younger than me by three years. Number two, I wouldn't want to tell my mother about my date with a spider-woman," he says, winking.

"Yes! Tell me about your date!" you say, grinning as you free your sandwich from a plastic bag. Settling back in your chair, you give him your full attention.

"So, in retrospect, that whole winking thing implies a lot more than what actually happened. So, uh, let me just say that I didn't end up staying the night and there won't be a second date," he says, shifting in his seat. He shrugs and takes another bite of his burrito.

"Oh," you say, and can't help but feel disappointed. So much for another interspecies relationship right now. He raises a brow in response to the tone in your voice as he chews. "What happened?"

"She, uh..." Deacon runs his hand through his hair, then rests his elbow on the table and cradles the side of his head on his palm. He sighs. "Sorry, it's kind of funny. I'm not used to anyone asking me about my dates. Well, she invited me over to her place, like I told you, and I just wasn't expecting there to be so many spiders. Did you know that she has this pet spider that sort of looks like a muffin? A muffin spider. With teeth. Probably the size of a great dane."

You nod, eating your sandwich.

"So I was already a little uncomfortable at this point. We're sitting on the couch and she starts getting a little handsy—I know, stop laughing. Note to self: six hands is at least two too many. Stick to four hands or less. And she wouldn't stop giggling. I wasn't sure if she was enjoying herself or laughing at me. Or both. Don't get me wrong, Muffet is a sweet lady. And you should have seen the dress she wore to dinner," he says, picking his head up off his hand and staring off into the distance for a second. Remembering himself, he clears his throat and looks back at you. "But, uh, she's got my shirt mostly off and I have no idea what to do with myself because she's distracting me by whispering in my ear and then there's hands everywhere..."

Deacon trails off as the break room door opens and one of the other teachers nods at the two of you and heads to the fridge. You give them a little wave and your friend is leaning in closer to you, ears
pink and eyes wide. Lowering his voice, he continues. "I would have gone with it, if she hadn't bitten me."

"She bit you?" you hiss under your breath, eyebrows shooting up. "Are you okay? I mean, I know she's a spider, so..."

"I'm fine, she just scared the shit out of me. I, uh..." Deacon shakes his head, letting out a distressed sound and pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. He slumps a little in his chair. "I might have screamed a little and left."

"Oh no."

"I texted her when I was sitting in my driveway, apologizing for freaking out and bolting. She apologized for scaring me but... Nope, I can't do it. I thought I could get past the spider thing but I couldn't. Nope." Deacon shakes his head again, and when he lifts his head from his hands he gives you a haunted look.

You reach out and pat his shoulder, giving him a sympathetic smile. "Hey, you gave it a shot. It just didn't work out," you say, trying your best to be placating. "And I'm sure she won't hold it against you with the Halloween thing."

He makes another distressed noise, leaning back in his chair. "Oh god I didn't even think about that..." Scowling, he reaches up to rub his neck. Then, his expression suddenly shifts as he exclaims, "Oh! Now that we're talking about that, let me latch onto that change of subject and never speak of this again. So let me show you what Mettaton's been doing downtown. He works fast, let me tell you."

With a feeling of apprehension, you watch Deacon pull out his cell phone and flip through his pictures. Then, he hands it to you so you can look at what appears to be a poster taped to a window. It's a huge, colorful advertisement for the Halloween Festival, complete with pumpkins, fall leaves, candy, and a big picture of Mettaton's face right in the center.

"They're all over the place, especially around the hotel," Deacon says, taking his phone back. "I think we've got our work cut out for us, but you've got to admit, he knows how to draw attention. I mean, we want people from outside of Ebott to show up too, right? He's definitely working that angle."

Mettaton had swooped in and already started making the festival his own, so honestly you shouldn't be surprised. This had turned from a small, school event into a city-wide spectacle, and you're not sure you're happy about it. But your own feelings aren't the most important thing here. You should be using this to encourage more humans to come visit. This is an excellent opportunity to put on a fun, joint experience for humans and monsters and Mettaton jumped on that. Though you're certain at least part, if not most, of his motivation is more self-serving than Deacon seems to realize.

"Well, I guess we better get some more work done this week, shouldn't we? We don't want to fall behind," you say, hoping that the two weeks you have left is going to be enough time.

Sans gets home early on Friday, and picks up a pleasantly surprised Frisk and Asriel from Toriel's house. You've been working late at school with Deacon for the past week and he has to take comfort in the fact that there's only one more week of this left to go. Then things can go back to normal.
You, Frisk, and Deacon went shopping in the foothills past the Line yesterday, which was thankfully uneventful. The thought of you leaving Ebott without him made him nervous. What if something happened? What if you couldn't get back? But his worries were unwarranted. The three of you returned with shopping bags (one of which you hid in the closet and ordered him not to look at) and now Sans can get to work on putting together costumes.

His new workshop is much nicer than the one hidden in the back of the house back in Snowdin. It's a separate building in the backyard, with tinted windows and lots of workspace. Opening the door, he flicks on the overhead lights as the kids push past him to get inside. They make a beeline for the broken machine in the corner.

"hey, c'mon we're not here for that. come back over here," he says, dumping a few bags on top of one of the worktables.

Instead of the dingy purple and blue and cracked tile floor he became intimately familiar with after years of Resets, this space is much more welcoming. Everything from the floors to the walls and the tables are made from the smooth, warm wood of the trees cleared to build the house. He can't imagine bringing that cold, sterile lab feeling up here now that things are different.

The only thing in here that reminds him of before is the machine. It nearly reaches the ceiling, a hulking mass of metal lurking under a huge, faded purple tarp. It's the only physical object he knows of that can resist the Resets, at least for inanimate objects. He can't remember what it was supposed to do, he lost those memories in the accident that broke it in the first place. He spent almost a year before moving to Snowdin trying to pick the damn thing apart and fix it, but he doesn't think he was the one that built it. The blueprints he found never made any sense to him. Every time he thought he might have figured out some piece of the puzzle the thought would slide between his fingers like sand. Like... dust. The thought comes unbidden and he shoves it aside. Just like he told the kids, this isn't why they're here.

Frisk and Asriel give the machine one last look and do as they're told, wandering back over to Sans. "Dad?" Frisk asks, tugging on his sleeve.

"what is it, kiddo?" Sans says, sifting through the contents of the bags. Some of it is the supplies he was able to find around the house, the rest is the new stuff you bought. He pulls out what he needs for Asriel's costume first.

"Do you have any extra tarps? Like what you put over the machine?" When Sans looks over at Frisk, they're looking down at their hands and toying with their sleeves.

"what do you need a tarp for?" he asks, raising a curious brow.

"Stuff," they say, shrugging their shoulders.

"stuff isn't an answer," Sans says, hunching down under the table to pull out a hard plastic case. It's been a while since he's had to use this beat up old sewing machine.

"We're building something secret," Asriel says, still evasive but better than Frisk at least.

"It's not gonna be a secret if you *tell* him," Frisk says, grumbling. "And it's nothing bad."

"i never thought it was anything bad. just curious." Sans shrugs. What's the harm in giving them a plastic sheet, anyway? "there's a spare one over there in the corner, bottom drawer. knock yourselves out."

The kids rush over to find their prize as Sans gets to work fashioning a t-shirt into a tunic for
Asriel's hero costume. He tried to figure out if Asriel meant a knight instead, but he was adamant that it was a 'hero' costume. Like from the video games. Well, that covered a lot of territory, so for now he's going with vaguely medieval in style and hoping it works.

Frisk and Asriel watch Sans as he works, badgering him with questions (as kids do) that he takes in stride. It's nice to have company. Keeps him from getting lost inside his own head as he measures, cuts, and sews. But after about half an hour of this they start to get bored.

"Dad I wanna look through the pictures," Frisk says, edging closer to the machine in the corner.

"we've got albums in the house," he says, and points at another worktable behind him. "and there's another one i'm working on right there."

"No, not those pictures. What about the ones from before this timeline? I remember you taking some, did you save them?"

He did, but he didn't realize that Frisk remembered. They'd talked about some of the past Resets, the things they'd done together and the good times. They didn't talk about the bad ones, not unless they had to. Sans looks over at Frisk, then at the machine.

"yeah, i saved them. what do you wanna see them for?" he asks, sitting up a little straighter on his stool.

"I thought maybe Mom might want to look at them."

"have you been talking to her about the other timelines? you know she doesn't like thinking about all those times you ran away," Sans says, frowning a little.

Asriel is quiet, toying with the handle of the plastic sword you bought to go with his costume. It's not like he has any happy memories of those times.

"No, but I was thinking she might like to see that it wasn't all bad. That even though she wasn't there, you were." They're toying with their sleeves, looking away and shrugging.

He's not sure that you'd like that very much. You're still a bit sensitive to the fact that there were hundreds of instances where you let Frisk down, drove them away into coming to Mt. Ebott on their own. Knowing that any of those happy memories began with such a bad one, how would that make you feel? But the kid's heart is in the right place, and he's not sure how to explain his reservations to them.

With a small sigh, Sans slides off his stool and drags his knuckles across his forehead. "i guess i could use a break. let's look through them together."
Photographs

Chapter Notes

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Tumblr --- Twitter

Even though Mettaton seems to have coerced most of his employees into helping out with the festival, there's still plenty left for you and Deacon to do. Right now the two of you are puzzling over a layout for all the booths, vendors, and events. The janitor kicked you out of the school about an hour ago, so now you're sitting in Deacon's living room, both hunched over a crude map of the school grounds. You're chewing on the end of a pen as he starts tracing a large rectangle you think is supposed to be the stage for the costume contest.

Your phone chimes in your pocket and you check it as Deacon glances over at you. 'will u b home 4 food?'

You realize it's almost six-thirty already. Where did the time go? Sighing, you rest your chin in your hand and look at Deacon. "We need to finish this tonight, don't we?"

"Mettaton said he wanted to start getting things ready to put up this weekend. And to do that, he needs a layout," Deacon says, letting out a frustrated noise as he starts to furiously erase what he just drew. "This isn't going to work."

"And if we let him do it everything will be focused around him... I guess I'm not going home for dinner," you say. Looking back down at your phone, you bite your lip.

"You could always go home and then come back," he suggests with a shrug.

"If I go home I'll want to stay there." You shake your head. "Let's just get this over with."

You type out a quick response to Sans as your friend watches you, tapping the end of his pencil on the paper. 'Not tonight, we have to finish this stupid thing for MTT. I'm sorry, I love you. <3'

Deacon stands up as you pocket your phone, grumbling and stretching his arms over his head. "Speaking of dinner, let me cook for you. I can finally prove that I eat more than ramen."

"You cook for me? This I have to see," you say, smiling as you rub your eyes.

He picks up the school map and brings it with him into the kitchen as you follow behind. He sets the paper and pencil down on the kitchen table and pulls out your chair before heading to his walk-in pantry to collect ingredients. Watching him, you wonder what he's planning on making. Well, whatever it is, it involves orzo and vegetable oil. A quick stop at the fridge adds chicken thighs to the list, along with a bunch of fresh parsley. Pouring oil in a deep pan, he gets to work seasoning the thighs with a blend of spices from a container with a yellow cap.

Your phone chimes again. 'luv u 2. will tke kids 2 toris 4 food.'

'Okay hun. Have fun and say hi to her for me.'

'k.'
"I know that once we're done with all this it'll probably be worth it, but right now I kind of hate this damn festival," you say, setting your phone down and slumping down over the table. Burying your face in your arms, you let out a frustrated whine.

"Is Sans upset?" Deacon asks, glancing over his shoulder at you.

You pick your head up and rest your chin on your forearm, looking at him through some hair that broke free from your ponytail hours ago. "I don't think so. I dunno, this whole mess is just stressing me out. He's usually pretty short with his texts so I'm just being oversensitive."

"Well, if he wants to be mad at anyone he can blame me," he says, sidestepping to the sink to wash his hands.

"He's not mad at you. I'm sure everything is fine," you mumble, sitting back up again to look down at the map.

Deacon doesn't answer. Instead he pulls a pair of tongs out of a drawer and starts placing the chicken into the pan. A satisfying sizzling sound fills the kitchen.

"Deacon," you say, raising a brow even though you know he can't see you.

"Hope," he answers, mimicking your tone.

"Do you think Sans is mad at you?"

He shrugs. "I'm just saying that if he's mad at anyone I guess it might as well be me. This was all my idea."

"Well don't worry. He's not mad at you. Besides, in a week this will all be over anyway," you say, for Deacon and partly for yourself. "Now, what are you making?"

Dinner is delicious, and you finally admit that yes clearly Deacon is eating more than ramen and premade, packaged food. He makes you say this out loud as well as apologize for assuming, which he graciously accepts with a laugh. Afterwards he confides that the dish was actually the most complicated thing he knows how to make, and please don't stop bringing him leftovers.

Reinvigorated by food, you and Deacon spend another half hour working on the layout for the festival. You're just about done when his phone rings. He checks it, makes a face, and excuses himself upstairs to take the call. You take a quick break to text Sans and let him know you're almost done. When you don't get a reply within a couple minutes, you get back to work on plotting out the last few booths and tables lining the main thoroughfare. Maybe he's just distracted.

After about fifteen minutes you've gotten everything labeled on the map, but Deacon isn't back yet. Chewing on your lip, you check the time and realize it's after eight and you really want to get home. It's already past Frisk's bedtime and you haven't seen them since Toriel took them home with her. You decide to go let Deacon know you're going to leave, taking the map with you to show him.

You haven't been upstairs since the day he moved in. The two bedrooms are up here and not much else. A hall closet is open and inside you can see a compact washer and dryer. A basket of laundry is sitting on top of the machines and it's not folded so you aren't sure if it's clean or dirty.

The master bedroom is open and dark so he must be in the other bedroom, the one you know he turned into an office. It's closed, and there's light peeking from under the door. Inside you can hear
Deacon's voice, muffled.

"—haven't been avoiding you. Look I told you everything I know... Yes, exactly. It's been three weeks, I'm not sure what you were expecting." Deacon lets out a sigh as you raise your hand to knock. You really shouldn't be eavesdropping, but you hesitate. "I'm not going to jeopardize this because you're being impatient. Well considering the last time I fucking called you you brushed me off—"

You knock on the door, suddenly uncomfortable now that he's starting to get angry. You'd rather not listen anymore to his private conversation that you shouldn't have been listening to in the first place. "Deacon?"

"Come on in, Hope," he says, and as you open the door he's running his hand through his hair and turning his back to you. "Yes I told you I had company. I need to go, Grant. Yes, fine. Goodbye."

Deacon hangs up the phone and shoves it back in his pocket, turning to look at you. His hair is distinctly ruffled, like he'd run his fingers through it multiple times and his brow is furrowed. "Sorry about that, I wasn't expecting to be long," Deacon says, shaking his head.

"Oh, no, it's okay," you say in a rush, trying to dissipate the awkward feeling in the air. "I just wanted to let you know that I was finished with this and needed to head out." You hold up the paper in your hand.

"Yeah, no problem. Let me check this out real quick."

His eyes flick to the map and he reaches for it. You give it to him and glance around the room as he looks over the layout. Deacon might not have changed much with the living room and dining room, but this space has changed a lot from what you remember. He set up his bookshelves in here, along with an old, battered desk. The twin bed that was in here already is shoved into a corner, the childish bedspread replaced with a worn quilt made with patches of varying shades of green, patterned fabric. Two frames above the desk catch your eye. One holds his college diploma, granted two years ago according to the calligraphy in the bottom corner. The second is a picture from his graduation. He's standing alone in his cap and gown, smiling at the camera on a green lawn outside. Other graduates and their families are milling around in the background.

But, don't these types of pictures usually have friends or family in them too?

"Looks good to me. I'll take care of giving it to Mettaton, you spend some time with your family tomorrow," Deacon says, coming to stand beside you as he sets the map down on his desk. He looks at you and then follows your eyes, chuckling. "You know they make you pay for your cap and gown in college? Had to buy the stupid thing so now it just takes up space in my closet."

"You could use it as a Halloween costume I guess. Is that your plan?" you ask, looking at him. He's still looking at the picture, studying it.

"Nah, I've got something much sexier planned. I'm sure I'll have to fight them off of me before Halloween is over," he says, winking at you.

You roll your eyes. "I'm sure. Well, I should head out." Hesitating, you give him a weak smile. "Is everything okay with whoever that was?"

Deacon's eyebrows raise and for a second he looks surprised you asked. "Huh? Oh, yeah, don't worry about that. Nothing I can't handle."

"Okay," you say, reaching out to touch his arm. He turns to face you, and you give him a quick
hug. It's not nearly as awkward as the first time you hugged him, but he still seems a little hesitant about it. Like he knows you want to hug him, and he doesn't want to disappoint you. You pull away after a second and smile up at him. "I'll talk to you later, Deacon. Let me know if you need anything."

He rubs the back of his neck, giving you a crooked smile in return. "Will do. Good night, Hope."

When you get home you find Sans and Frisk in the living room, asleep on the couch. Frisk is curled into his chest, straight brown hair partially obscuring their face. Sans has his arms around them and his mouth is hanging open a little, emphasizing the dull points of his canines. Smiling, you pull out your phone to take a picture. As much as you wish you'd been home with them tonight, finding them here like this warms your heart. Here's your little family, the two people in the world you love most of all.

As you put your phone away, you notice the assortment of pictures spread out on the rug in front of the couch. Kneeling down, you pull them towards you and gather them into a small stack so you can look at them. They're from the Underground, as far as you can tell. Frisk's hair is shorter and they're wearing that old blue and purple sweater, grinning at the camera with ketchup on their face. It looks like they're in Grillby's.

The next one is in Waterfall, a close up shot of Sans and Frisk's faces. Sans is grinning and pointing at Frisk's eye, which is circled in bright red paint. Smiling, you wonder when he had the time to prank them with that telescope. You don't remember either of them telling you about this.

There's another one in Waterfall, with Frisk standing alongside a monster you recognize as Shyren. You never met her when you were in the Underground, but were introduced here on the surface. It looks like Frisk is singing with her. When did this happen?

The next is in Hotland. Frisk is standing in front of what looks like one of Sans's sentry stations, with a stack of hotdogs impossibly balanced on their head. Another hotdog is on its way to the top of the teetering pile, glowing blue with what you realize is Sans's magic. Did Frisk go to Hotland with Sans without you?

You flip to the next one. Frisk is standing outside the MTT Resort, looking disheveled in an old apron with dirt smudged on their face. They're looking up at the marquee, the lights glistening in their eyes. They look tired, and you think you spot cobwebs on their clothes. You don't remember any of this. This doesn't seem right, and you realize that there's something missing out of all these pictures.

You.

On a whim, you turn the picture over and realize why. In Sans's cramped, messy handwriting you can make out: '23rd reset. just left hotland.' You check the other pictures. '41st reset.' '19th reset.' One of them doesn't even say which Reset it is, it's just blank.

"hey babe."

You look up, and realize there are tears in your eyes. Sans must notice because he's carefully extricating himself from Frisk and eases himself off the couch to sit on the floor with you. Wiping your eyes, you shake your head and give a small embarrassed laugh as he puts his arm around your waist.

"I'm fine," you say, before he can ask.
"we were gonna show those to you together, i didn't mean for you to find 'em alone," he says, pulling you against him.

You glance over at Frisk to make sure they're still asleep before you rest your head on Sans's shoulder and whisper, "You had these in your machine?"

"yeah," he says, stroking your arm with his free hand. "frisk wanted you to see some of the good times we had. helped me remember too, that not everything about the resets was bad."

Your grip on the pictures tightens as you stare down at them. "But none of this actually happened."

Sans reaches out to take the pictures from your hands, setting them aside where you can't see them. "sure it did. frisk remembers. i remember."

"I don't know how you keep all of this straight. It's too much for me to wrap my head around," you say, closing your eyes and turning your face into the side of Sans's neck. He holds you tighter, resting his head against yours.

"it's easy. the timeline that matters is the one with you in it."
This is wrong.

Your fingers drag down the slick skin of someone's back, pressing into muscle and flesh. There are lips against yours and a warm, wet tongue dips into your mouth before drawing back again. Soft hands cup your breasts, and the man above you groans and trails kisses down your chest. His lips circle your nipple and he swipes over it with his tongue, but what makes you arch your back and gasp is the gentle sucking. It's been so long since you've felt that, something that requires cheeks and lips.

This is wrong.

You shouldn't be doing this. There's this feeling in the back of your head, rebelling against it but you can't stop. It feels too good and your body isn't listening. You feel hazy and content and you just want to feel that release. Trying to focus, you look down at the pale skin pressed into your breast and the blonde hair obscuring a familiar face. You push the damp strands out of the way and cup his cheeks and blue eyes meet yours. He raises his head and gives you a crooked smile, bending over you again to kiss you.

The insistent chiming of your cell phone pulls you out of your dream, leaving you disoriented. You fumble for your phone to shut it off and, drawing in a shaking breath, clutch your hands to your chest. What was that dream? Oh god, who was... No no no... Squeezing your eyes shut, you grimace and try to ignore the lingering ache of arousal between your legs. But closing your eyes just brings back the images of... oh no... of Deacon flushed above you.

Opening them again, you stare at the window and the pre-dawn sky as a feeling of dread coils low in your stomach. No, you can't be thinking that way about Deacon. He's your friend, and you're in love with Sans for crying out loud! What the hell is wrong with you?

This can't be happening. Fear tightens your chest and you wonder what this could mean. For you, for Sans. Oh god, Sans. Is this some kind of subconscious sign that there's something wrong with your relationship? If you really loved him, how could you possibly be having dreams about someone else?

You move to scoot out of bed and a thick, bony arm wraps around your waist and pulls you back against a hard ribcage. Sans nuzzles the back of your neck, burying his face in your hair and grumbling.

"don't go," he says, muffled by your skin.

You could cry. Your throat tightens and guilt presses down on you, heavy and stifling. Part of you wants to pull away and lock yourself in the bathroom and wonder what the hell is wrong with you. The other part wants to roll over and wrap him up in your arms and kiss him and tell him how much you love him until you feel better. Sans's hand drops to your hip and squeezes, pulling you
back against his pelvis as his teeth graze your shoulder.

Your second want ends up winning.

You can't avoid Deacon at school. It's not his fault you're having weird dreams, and the two of you have work to do to finish up a few things for the Halloween Festival. Which is tomorrow.

You blame the dream on spending so much time with him. You've probably seen him more than Sans for the past three weeks, so that has to be the reason. After this, things will just go back to normal. How many times have you told yourself that this month?

The two of you are carrying pumpkins from the gym where they were stored out onto the field where everything is set up. There's a small stage decorated with spider webs (courtesy of Muffet and her spiders) and carved pumpkins, a small network of stalls and tables for games and food. It's an impressive setup. Mettaton and a small team of his employees from the hotel have been getting things put together all week. The robot is suspiciously absent today, but you see a handful of other monsters still working.

You're technically on your lunch break but you don't have time to sit around and talk, much to your relief. Deacon keeps trying to make conversation but you're so distracted that you're missing his jokes half the time. He finally stops you when you head back into the gym to get more pumpkins, the final straw being when you unconsciously flinch away when you both reach for the same one and your hands touch.

"Okay, what's wrong?" he asks, crossing his arms over his chest and raising a brow. You meet his eyes for a second and look away, shaking your head. "You've been completely out of it this whole time and you'll barely even look at me."

Of course he noticed. You've been acting totally different than you normally do, and he's your friend, isn't he? You force yourself to look at him, really look and you expect to feel something, anything, different. But it's just Deacon. He looks a little worried, with a small crease between his brows and his shirt is a bit wrinkled up from lifting and carrying but it's still him. You think about your dream, try to imagine him kissing you and aside from a slight queasiness you don't feel any different. That's good, right?

You sigh and rub your forehead, shielding your eyes. "I'm sorry, I just... had a weird dream. It's been messing with my head all day," you admit, grimacing.

"What kind of dream?" he asks, uncrossing his arms and stooping down to pick up another pumpkin. His expression relaxes a bit.

"I'd... rather not talk about it."

"Well, unless you have some kind of prophetic powers you never told me about —which would be kinda cool, I admit— it was just a dream."

You need someone to talk to about this. You obviously can't talk to Deacon, that would just be uncomfortable and you get the distinct impression he might just tease you about it. And you can't talk to Sans. Well, you probably could, but you can't imagine it going well. He has horrible nightmares about you dying, or of things Resetting and him losing you. He just had one two nights ago. How can you tell him that you're worried that something's wrong with your feelings for him?

Maybe you could get him to share your Soul, to make sure your love is still as strong as ever, but
what if it wasn't? It would crush him, crush you and you just can't handle that right now. You love him. You know you love him, and like Deacon said, it was just a dream.

Just a dream.

You track down Undyne before she leaves at the end of the day, sending Frisk home with Toriel. You really ought to do something nice for her, she's been taking care of them for you almost every afternoon for the past three weeks. At first Undyne says that she's going to be busy the rest of the day, but once she sees the look on your face she sends a few texts and tells you to give her a ride. Normally she jogs to and from work, even though she lives at least five miles away. Maybe it's closer to ten.

Once you're in the car you try to start telling your friend about what happened, but she tells you to wait until you get to the house. When you get there you realize why. Alphys is standing in the dining room, wrist-deep in the back of Mettaton's torso with a screwdriver between her teeth. He's slumped forward on the table, seated sideways on a chair. An assortment of metal bits and electronic hardware are spread out beside his head.

"Hello darling!" Mettaton's voice comes from behind you and you let out a startled squeak, nearly jumping out of your skin as you turn around to face the sound.

He's back in his old rectangular body, waving at you with an oversized hand as his red and yellow display flashes a crude smiley face. It's a little jarring; you haven't seen him use that body in months. Not since the Core's power was routed to the surface and he had a stable way to recharge.

Undyne scowls at him. "Buzz off, we need to have some girl talk," she says, putting her arm around your shoulders and leading you to an empty chair at the table.

You try not to stare too much at Mettaton's limp humanoid body. It's kind of creeping you out a little.

With an agitated, metal grinding noise, Mettaton rests his hands on his flat equivalent of hips. "I'm not leaving the house like this."

"Go visit Napstablook. They were asking about y-you the other day. You've been n-neglecting them again," Alphys says, sounding distracted as she leans forward and squints at something inside the robot's back panel.

He doesn't say anything. Taking the hint, he rolls down the hall and out the door. Undyne makes a rude noise between her teeth, something like a sharp hiss before looking at Alphys. You can't help but smile at the way her expression relaxes before she leans over to wrap her arms around her girlfriend and kiss her cheek, ignoring the doctor's squeak of protest. If anyone might be able to help you, it's these two, right?

"Wait, aren't you supposed to be at the Core still?" you ask Alphys, your mind going to Sans.

"We've just been in maintenance mode, no new testing until after Halloween. With the i-influx of humans we're expecting, Asgore asked me not to change anything. And I p-promised Mettaton I'd do something about his power issues," she says, then yanks a tangle of wires out of the robot's back. It makes you cringe. "Sans said he'd h-handle it this afternoon."

Undyne hoists herself up to sit on the table, wrapping her fingers around the edge and hunching her shoulders. She's watching Alphys for a moment before her eye meets yours from over where her girlfriend is working. "So what's up? Seems like something is really bothering you."
Alphys wipes her hands on the front of her labcoat, leaving greasy smudges. She adjusts her glasses with the back of her hand and looks at you. "We're both here for you, Hope. I know we've been really busy lately..."

"Yeah, trust me I know what you mean. This past month has just been one thing after the other," you say, sighing. You cross one arm over your chest, cupping your elbow as you rest your cheek in your hand. You grimace as the two of them watch you. "I'm... I'm worried that there's something wrong. With... with me and Sans."

"WHAT? No way!" Undyne blurts out, her own surprise mirrored on Alphys's face. "Did he do something again? If it was just a fight—"

"No, it wasn't a fight. He hasn't done anything wrong. It's me, I—" you feel yourself blushing, embarrassed and upset and guilty all at once. "I had a dream about Deacon."

"I don't get it. What's so bad about a dream?" Undyne asks, raising an eyebrow.

"O-oh! You mean like a..." Alphys is blushing too, wringing her hands together. "A naughty dream?"

"Oh, what?! You had a sex dream about Deacon?"

"Guys, please!" you blurt out, wondering if this was really a good idea. The doctor's brow furrows, her tail sweeping the floor as her eyes go distant. You recognize that as her 'problem solving' face. "Oh gosh. Do you have feelings for him? Is this like a love triangle? You know they use that plot device in a lot of animes, I could give you a list—"

"No! Not like a love triangle. I don't have a crush on Deacon, I just had this dream. But I don't know what it means," you blurt out, groaning and burying your face in your hands.

"Hey, okay," Undyne says, and you hear footsteps approaching you before you feel her hands on your shoulders. Peeking between your fingers, she's crouching in front of you putting herself at eye-level. "It was just a dream. It's not like you went and did anything."

"Y-yeah, you can't control your subconscious," Alphys adds from behind Undyne. She gives you a weak smile.

"Well my subconscious needs to knock it off." Your voice is strained as you shake your head. "If I really love Sans, why would I be having dreams about someone else?"

The fish monster scowls, baring pointed teeth. "Nothing is dumber than, 'if I really love somebody, blah wouldn't happen.' Or would happen. Come on, Hope. You know that love isn't just perfection and fucking sunshine all the time. It's WORK."

"Exactly. Like, I've had dreams about other people. Well, characters. Um, anime characters," Alphys says, and when you glance up at her she's going a bit redder in the face. "There was this time, uh, I had a dream I was in Mew Mew Kissy Cutie and you know how she has that power where if she kisses someone she can control them? Welltherewasthisdreamwhereshekissedmeand—"

"OKAY babe I think she gets the point," Undyne blurts out, and you think you spot some purple staining her cheeks as she winces.

"O-oh! Sorry..." the doctor mumbles, turning away and hiding her face behind her hands.
"Ohmygod that was embarrassing..."

"No, uh... That actually makes me feel a little better," you admit, folding your arms over your stomach and giving Undyne a weak smile.

Undyne looks away, frowning a little and sighing. Then, as she collects herself, she fixes you with a steady gaze. "Okay, listen. When Alphys and I had this dumb fight a bit after we moved in together, I went and talked to Asgore. He had some advice that might help. Sorry if I mess up the exact wording but it was something like this..." She clears her throat and behind her you can see Alphys watching her. "Love isn't always easy. I think you already know that part, though. You and Sans have been through a lot and I don't think that something like this is going to mess you guys up unless you LET it. Asgore said that sometimes love is a choice. At first it feels like this all-consuming thing, like a fire. But you can't keep burning like that forever, so it dies down, I guess. Sometimes you have to choose to keep it going. Sure you could walk away to go stand at someone else's fire, or you can feed yours."

She grits her teeth and looks away, shaking her head. "I don't know if I said that right... He had this whole fire metaphor going and—"

You wrap your arms around Undyne's neck and hug her, hunching forward in the chair. She makes an odd noise in the back of her throat and hugs you back, standing and pulling you to your feet. And then off your feet because she's so damn tall. With a yelp of surprise, she squeezes you tight and sets you back down on the ground.

"I think I get what you're trying to say," you tell her, smiling weakly. "Thanks, Undyne. And Alphys, you guys are both great friends. I guess I'm just overthinking this..."

"Y-yeah, exactly! Hope, we all know how much you love Sans."

"Yeah, punk. Just remember that it's your choices that are important. I mean, sometimes I think about other people but that doesn't mean I love Alphys any less," Undyne says, clapping her hand on her shoulder. "Just means I still have one good eye left."

Alphys frowns a little behind Undyne's back but you can't help the small, anxious laugh that bubbles up inside you.

That whole fire metaphor thing Undyne was trying to tell you was all about choice, right? Of course you choose Sans. You'll always choose Sans.
When you come downstairs, fully decked out in your costume, Sans is putting the finishing touches on Frisk's face paint. Your little skeleton-clad child is sitting on one of the barstools while your fiancé smears the white makeup along their forehead, close to their hairline. Sans is focused, not even noticing when you stand in the entryway to the kitchen. Seeing the two of them together makes your heart give a pleasant squeeze, like it always does. You're certain that feeling is never going to go away, not even when you're old and Frisk is grown.

You feel a little misty all of a sudden and you catch yourself. Okay no need to go all mushy right now, you just put on your own makeup like five minutes ago and you're not sure it's waterproof.

"ARE WE ALMOST READY TO GO NOW? I DON'T WANT TO BE LATE!" Papyrus says from the living room behind you.

Glancing over your shoulder, Papyrus is pacing back and forth, fiddling with his eyepatch. His costume turned out great, you think. Old leather boots from the rabbits' consignment shop, some red and black striped pants, a big white shirt with a large v-neck to show off his ribs, a tri-corner hat from the costume shop, and last but not least his plastic saber. He even has his red scarf tied around his waist like a sash belt. Well, it's sort of hanging off part of his pelvis, but it's staying on. He flips his eyepatch up and down over his left eye, fidgeting.

"it's gonna last until almost midnight, being a little late isn't gonna matter, bro," Sans says. You look back at Sans right as he glances over at you, just in time to see him do a double-take. Your lips slowly curl into a mischievous smile as you watch the lights in his eye sockets brighten and the tense look of concentration melt away into a big grin. Resting your cloth-wrapped hand on your hip, you raise your eyebrow at him in silent question. Does he get it? You think he does, and that he's admiring more than just the skin-tight beige bodysuit and many strips of linen.

"a mummy," he says, and you can't help but feel proud of the delight in his voice. "hope, marry me."

"That's the plan."

Frisk gasps, then starts giggling. "A mommy mummy!"

Sans sets down the stick of face paint on the bar and walks over to you, taking hold of your hips and pulling you towards him. Resting your arms on his shoulders, you lace your fingers behind his neck and smile. Ignoring Frisk's protests that the two of you 'stop being gross', you lean down to press a kiss to his cheekbone.

"I thought you might appreciate the joke," you say.

"i do," he murmurs, close to your ear. "does this mean i get to unwrap you later?"
Pulling away, you give him a coy smirk. "Maybe."

"Dad, am I done?" Frisk asks loudly, scowling at the two of you.

Sans, remembering himself, turns back to Frisk and retrieves the white paint. "almost. gotta make sure you're the best looking skeleton at the festival, right?"

Papyrus makes a noise like he's going to protest, but changes his mind. "I SUPPOSE I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, CAN SETTLE FOR SECOND BEST."

There's something missing, and after a second you realize what it is. Sans is standing there in his normal clothes, just without his jacket. "Sans, where's your costume?"

He stops mid-stroke across Frisk's cheek, hesitating.

"Do you not have a costume?"

Sans clears his throat. "i, uh, i didn't think about it. i wanted to make sure everyone else had theirs all put together, and i guess i just forgot about mine."

That's just like him, isn't it? To take care of the three of you at the expense of himself. You should have been here to help out with Frisk more, to make sure that Sans wasn't doing everything on his own. It wasn't fair to him or your child that you were gone so much. And on top of that you had that dream about Deacon... Guilt twists in your chest and Sans must see it on your face because he gives you an affectionate look and shakes his head.

"hey, babe, don't worry about it. really, it's not a big deal," he says, shrugging.

"I'm sorry, this month has been—" You cut yourself off, spotting San's full-sized camera sitting on the bar next to him. Normally he just uses his cell phone to take pictures, same as you. It's just more convenient for those spur of the moment things. But you bought him that proper camera as your house was being built. You gave one of the contractors (one that you trusted enough) some money and a model number and they got it for you down in the foothills. Sans had been so excited. But the sight of the camera with its thick neck strap gives you an idea. "Papyrus can I go get one of your shirts out of your room?"

Bewildered and impatient, Papyrus nods. "I SUPPOSE SO."

"Thanks, I'll be right back," you say, hurrying up the stairs.

When you come back down, Frisk is standing with Papyrus, face paint finished. Sans is fiddling with his camera, giving you a questioning look as he spots the bright yellow, short sleeve, button up shirt decorated with smiley faces. He raises a brow as you shove it towards him and pluck the camera out of his hands.

"Put that on, over your shirt," you say, pointing at the plain black t-shirt.

Confused but unquestioning, he shrugs it on. It's actually a little loose on him, which is what you were hoping. As he goes to button it up you bat his hands away and put the camera over his head, letting it rest over his sternum. You smile and nod to yourself.

"There, and you can even wear your slippers," you say, patting his shoulder.

"wait, i don't get it," Sans says, looking down at himself and then back up at you. "what am i?"
You meet up with Toriel, Asgore, and Asriel outside of the entrance to the festival where they're waiting for you. Toriel is dressed in a glittery, purple witch costume and looks beautiful, in your opinion. You've never seen her more dressed up than she is at school, which while tasteful and pretty, is nothing like this flattering dress. For one, you can tell that Asgore keeps stealing glances at her. He's wearing a big poofy mane made of orange yarn, topped with a plastic crown. Is he... the cowardly lion? Judging by the orange clothes meant to match his mane, you think so.

Asriel looks positively beside himself with excitement, clad in his medieval-style garb complete with his toy sword. He runs up to meet Frisk the second he spots them, grabbing their hands and gushing over their costume. They're itching to rush off into the festival but first Sans insists on pictures first before everyone scatters. The kids know this routine, so with minimal whining photos are done and the two of them give you and Toriel expectant looks.

"Okay you two, you remember what Toriel and I talked to you about, right?" you ask, glancing at the queen as she meets your eyes. You nod at each other in solidarity.

"Yes, Mom," Frisk says, clutching Asriel's hand tight in their own. Asriel nods but stays silent.

"Stay together. I know that probably goes without saying, but you watch out for each other," you say, looking from one to the other and making sure they're both meeting your eyes.

"And don't leave the festival," Frisk says.

"And if we need help, we can ask any of the other monsters," Asriel continues. "And we both have our cell phones."

"And if we see anyone suspicious, be sure to tell you right away."

"And only take candy from the booths, not anybody else."

You look at Toriel and she steps forward, crouching down so that she's at eye-level with both of them. Placing a large hand on their shoulders, she smiles at them. "Be safe, my children. And have fun."

That's all they need to hear. Before you can even blink the two of them bolt off into the crowd, playfully arguing over where to go first. If this was a human event, you'd never let Frisk run off without you. Not at their age. But you trust the monsters, know that they'll keep an eye on the kids. Everyone knows Asriel and Frisk. On top of the everyday citizens of Ebott there are the old members of the defunct Royal Guard, not to mention the few soldiers you know are wandering the grounds.

"This turned out wonderfully. It is difficult to believe that this is in fact our school grounds," Toriel says as the five of you head into the festival. Her big, bright eyes are catching the strings of lights lining the main thoroughfare as she takes it all in. "Thank you for all of your hard work. It has certainly paid off."

"Oh, I just helped," you say, smiling despite yourself. "I mean, it was Deacon's idea and Mettaton arranged a lot of it. Without the two of them, I'm sure it wouldn't be like this."

You raise your hand to gesture at the lines of booths and tables, the crowd milling about and laughing over games and food. Music is playing from a speaker system hoisted atop wooden poles, and you recognize some of Napstablook's music. You wonder if Mettaton talked his cousin into
letting him use it. You have to admit 'Spookwave' is a perfect track to celebrate Halloween.

Toriel just gives you a patient smile. "Do not discredit yourself, my child. I know how hard you have been working these past three weeks. I am proud of the work you have done."

Blushing, you let out an embarrassing squeak as Sans wraps his arm around your waist and tugs you against him. He looks around you to meet Toriel's eyes as you walk. "I'm just happy to have her back to myself after this. I don't like to share."

"You may not like it, but you did an excellent job of it, thanks."

Turning at the sound of a familiar voice, Deacon takes advantage of your pause to slip between you and Toriel and circle around to face your little group. You burst into laughter at the sight of him. His self-described 'sexy' costume is a flowing gray wizard's robe, long fake beard, and a pointed hat. With a flourish, he produces a spray of fake flowers from within his flowing sleeve and hands it to you.

"Ta da!" Deacon says, grinning and winking at you.

Sans takes the flowers from your hand and shoves them back at Deacon, rolling his eyes. "Who the hell are you supposed to be? Gandalf?"

Laughing, he shoves the flowers back into his sleeve, then waggles his fingers in Sans's direction. "I'm impressed! You know the Lord of the Rings?"

"Yep."

"Your costume is ridiculous," you tell him, unable to keep from smiling.

"Why thank you," he says with a tip of his hat. "You all look fantastic by the way. And I saw Frisk and Asriel a second ago, those costumes turned out great."

Realizing that the six of you are blocking the main path by standing around talking, Deacon wanders off again with a wave and a smile. You're a little relieved that he didn't linger. You feel better about this whole situation with the dream, but it doesn't stop you from being a little uncomfortable due to no fault of his own. Right now it's just... easier to not worry about him.

Asgore and Toriel break off to wander the festival on their own, and Papyrus spots Undyne and Alphys and rushes over to meet them. The couple is wearing matching outfits, undoubtedly inspired by Mew Mew Kissy Cutie. Alphys looks pretty cute, you think, in the ruffly skirt and oversized bow, though she might fit in better at an anime convention than Halloween. Undyne, despite wearing the same outfit, looks badass. Honestly, she could probably wear a potato sack and look badass. But Papyrus heads off with the two of them, leaving you and Sans to yourselves.

"So, what should we do?" Sans asks, looking up at you and threading your fingers together.

Smiling, you squeeze his hand. "You know, I've always wanted a cute guy to win a prize for me from a carnival booth. Like in the movies."

"Well, I guess I can go find Deacon," he says, looking away and making a show of trying to pull away from you.

Wincing, you wrap your other arm around his and tug him back. You know he's teasing, but right now it hits you right in that spot where guilt is still burrowed under your skin. "Hun, I meant you," you say, unable to tease him back.
He meets your eyes and his smile falters a little bit. "I know you did. sorry, are you ok?"

"I don't like Deacon as more than a friend, you know that right?" you ask, unsure why you're asking him this right here, right now. You shouldn't be bringing this up in the middle of a damn festival. This is so stupid and—

"I think you've made that pretty clear before, yeah," Sans says, raising a brow. He's searching your face and you wonder if he can tell what you're thinking. "I was just joking."

"Sorry, no, I know you were. I just..." Sighing, you shake your head and force a smile. "We're supposed to be having fun. All this work is finally over, I'm here with you and we're going to have fun."

He squeezes your hand, giving you an uneasy smile back. "Yeah. c'mon, I think I have a cheap stuffed animal to win for you."

You're feeling much better by the time you walk away from the ring toss with a teddy bear wedged under your arm. You think Sans cheated a little on his third attempt, but if the monster running the booth noticed they never said anything. This is nice. It's like a date, you think, as you spot a food stall run by a familiar face. Bo is busy decorating a row of tiny chocolate cakes with orange icing when the two of you approach.

She glances up as you enter her periphery, letting out a delighted gasp. "Oh look at you two! It's been ages, Sansy, you need to come by the hotel some time," she says, pressing herself across the booth's counter to wrap her hands around each of yours. Her pink woolen hair is longer than it was the last time you saw her, and she grew out a fluffy collar around her neck. Considering she lived on the edge of Hotland before, the change in seasons on the surface must have prompted the winter coat, so to speak.

"Hey there, Bo," Sans says, "how's it shakin'?"

Rolling her eyes, she lets you both go, resting forward on her elbows. "Same as always. Working. At least this is a nice change of scenery. Though you wouldn't know it with the way that Burgerpants keeps going on when Mettaton is out of earshot." She glances pointedly to your left where the 'New and Improved' Glamburger stand is.

Burgerpants is standing behind his own counter, wringing his hat between his hands as... Oh wow. Deacon is standing there, leaning forward and cupping his chin in one hand, tugging down the false beard with the other. They're just far enough away that you can't hear what they're saying, but you recognize that amused look on Deacon's face and the confused but... flattered look on Burgerpants'.

"Oh wow. I guess I shouldn't be surprised," you say, eyebrows shooting up as you look back at Bo.

She smiles at you, laughing. "Do you know that human? He's kinda cute, but I've been watching him go from one booth to the next for the past hour. You know I actually waited on him a week or two ago. He was on a date with Muffet," she says, her muzzle scrunching a little. "Is he always like this?"

"Um, I don't think so..." you say, a little unsure. "He's a bit of a flirt, I guess."

Bo raises a hand, gesturing across the thoroughfare. You follow her gaze to where the Nice Cream guy has his pushcart set up. The blue rabbit is watching Deacon's exchange with Burgerpants pretty closely, you think. "He's been hitting up Burgerpants for months with no luck. I'll be shocked if
your friend's flirting gets through his thick skull, let me tell you."

To everyone's surprise, you watch as Deacon hands his cell phone to Burgerpants and the catlike monster enters something into it. Presumably his phone number. *Well, that sure is something. You'll have to ask him about it later because curiosity is whirling around in your head. After your friend wanders away, never noticing you at the stall next to him, you buy a pair of tiny pumpkin cakes from Bo and head off to eat them.

You run into Toriel and Papyrus a little later, the latter looking particularly downtrodden. He brightens a little at the sight of you and his brother, and when Sans instantly questions him he tries to deny there's anything wrong.

"pap you were having a great time when we saw you last time, what happened in the last two hours?" he asks, and you can tell he's struggling to keep the frustration out of his voice. "i can't help if you don't talk to me."

Toriel has her hands clasped over her stomach, watching the exchange with a look of concern. The two of you meet each other's gaze but don't say anything, knowing better than to intervene.

"I'M FINE, REALLY. I'M SURE WHEN THIS IS ALL OVER, AND HE'S NOT SO BUSY ANYMORE—"

"wait, 'he'?' Sans asks, bristling. "what did mettaton do this time?"

Papyrus wrings his hands together, hesitating before he speaks. "HE JUST TOLD ME HE WAS BUSY AND COULDN'T TALK. THAT'S ALL. I'M SURE WHEN HE'S NOT BUSY..."

"nope. not ok. we're going to go talk to that overgrown calculator, i've had enough of watching him make you upset." He's gritting his teeth when he looks up at you. "sorry babe."

"No, no. You go ahead," you say, letting go of his hand and giving him a gentle push. "Don't worry about me."

"WAIT, BROTHER I DON'T THINK THIS IS A GOOD IDEA," Papyrus begins but it's too late. Sans is already walking away. With a distressed noise, he trails off after his brother.

You and Toriel share another look. "Do you think we ought to follow them?"

You're about to open your mouth and say, 'no, I'm pretty sure Sans can handle Mettaton just fine on his own,' when you hear a shrill, angry yell and you see the sudden flare of fire from the other side of the nearest row of booths. Toriel's eyes go wide and she whirls around on her feet as the people nearby fall silent.

"Asriel," she breathes, and takes off at a run.

It's all you can do to keep up with her.
Frisk holds tight to Asriel's hand as they dart through the crowd, fingers sticky from cinnamon bunnies, spider donuts, and nice cream. Their pockets are loaded with brightly colored candies in crinkly wrappers. The sheer delight at the festival echoes back and forth across their connection until, giddy, they come to a stop beside a game booth and erupt into fits of giggles.

As Frisk tries to catch their breath, Asriel flings his arms around their middle, hugging tight. He's so happy. So happy that it makes Frisk's eyes water which is weird.

"Halloween is the best!" Asriel says, not letting them go. "I had no idea human holidays could be so much fun!"

Frisk starts laughing again as he picks them up off the ground like they're nothing. They're taller but Asriel is stronger. A lot stronger. "Hey! Quit showing off!" Frisk protests, but they're not mad. Not even a little.

He puts them back down and presses his forehead to Frisk's, looking at each other in the eyes even though they're so close it's all blurry. Asriel smells like cinnamon and sugar layered over his familiar smell of warm fur and after a moment like this Frisk thinks they're blushing. Then, with a happy sound, Asriel ducks his head to nuzzle under Frisk's chin and pulls away. He's a little pink beneath his white fur and he fidgets with his ear.

"We're going to be together forever, right Frisk? No matter what?" Asriel asks, giving them an anxious smile.

Frisk reaches out to lace their fingers together again, rubbing the pink pads on his hands with their thumb. "Of course! No matter what," they say, determined for it to be true. They poke him in the chest with their free hand. "We'll always have this."

"Do you promise?" he asks, tilting his chin towards his chest. Their mingled happiness is fading just a little, Asriel's desperation for reassurance winning out. He gets like this sometimes, especially when he's happy. They wish he could just stay happy.

Frisk butts their forehead against his again. "I promise. I pinky promise, cross my heart and hope to die, super duper promise that we'll always be together."

Laughing, Asriel pushes back against them then pulls away. "Okay. I promise too."

He's happy again, Frisk doesn't need their link to tell that much. Squeezing his hand, they tug him down a gap between two booths. "C'mon, there's still lots left to see."

Asriel follows their lead, content to tag along wherever Frisk might take him. Off the main thoroughfare it's a bit darker. There are tables set up where a few families are scattered, sitting and taking a break or eating. Carved pumpkins cast dim light through the area. It's quieter here too.
Frisk frowns, taking it in. "It doesn't look like there's that much—"

A nasaly voice interrupts them from a few tables away. "Wow, what the hell are you supposed to be?"

Looking for the owner of the voice, Frisk spots a trio of humans in dark clothes and masks. They've formed a loose semi-circle around someone, a short monster wearing a red cape. It takes them a second but Frisk recognizes them. It's Kid, one of their friends from Snowdin and now at Mountainside School. They're looking up at the humans, a little uneasy but still smiling, backed up against a table.

"I'm a vampire!" Kid says, baring plastic fangs and wobbling back and forth.

The first human, a teenage boy, leans forward and laughs in Kid's face. "You monster freaks are weird looking enough as it is. Why even bother trying to dress up? Isn't like, every day Halloween for you weirdos?"

The other two teenagers start laughing. "Nice one! What a little freak," one of them says, a girl this time. "Do you think you're supposed to be scary? Because none of us are scared of you or any of you other monsters."

Kid just blinks up at them, their smile faltering. "No, we're not scary. We don't want anybody to be scared."

"Hey," the third one says, stepping closer and tugging on Kid's cape. "Halloween is a human holiday, you shouldn't even be dressed up in the first place. Take this off!"

As the other two start joining in, Frisk has had enough. Letting go of Asriel's hand, they run towards the teenagers and slip between them and Kid, shoving their hands away. "Hey! Leave them alone!" Frisk snaps, balling their hands into fists.

The teens, taken aback, glance over at each other like they're not sure what to do with this new development. Then, the first one starts grinning, resting his hands on his hips. "Move outta the way, pipsqueak. You don't want people thinking you're friends with any of these freaks."

"I am friends with them, and they're not freaks! I live here." Frisk glares up at them as best they can, and they realize, dimly, how strange it is not to have Chara egging them on. They'd leap all over this chance, if they were still there in Frisk's head.

"Don't be stupid, no humans live here," the girl says, laughing.

"Don't you watch the news? You're such an idiot, there's that mom and her kid that live here, the ones that went missing. Remember?" the first says, rolling his eyes. He returns his attention to Frisk. "So is that who you are? The one with a deathwish that should have stayed missing along with all your monster freak friends?"

The third teen reaches out and tugs on Frisk's hair, laughing as they bat his hand away with a snarl. "This is hilarious. Why don't you just go run along? We're not hurting anybody."

"Don't touch me!" Frisk yells, shoving him hard in the stomach with both hands.

"Watch it you little brat!" he snaps back, grabbing hold of Frisk's arm and throwing them to the ground.

"Frisk!" Kid yelps, trying to take a step towards them but the first teen cuts them off. "Leave them..."
alone!

Wincing, Frisk sits up, cradling their arm. Their elbow hit the ground hard and now their whole forearm is tingling, sharp pain shooting up and down. When they look up Asriel is rushing forward, baring his teeth at the third human. Hands outstretched, he shoves them backwards, harder than Frisk could and he falls back into his friends.

"Whoa, what the hell!" he yelps as the other two almost topple over but manage to keep him on his feet. "You freaky little shit! How are you strong enough to do that?"

"Hey, wait a second," the girl says, sounding worried all of a sudden. "I think that's the prince or whatever."

"I don't care who the hell he is." He balls his hands into fists and closes the distance between himself and Asriel again. "Don't fuck with me."

Frisk pulls themselves to their feet, reaching out for Asriel. He's shaking with rage, they can feel it pounding in their chest, strengthened by their own. But this isn't right, they can't let Asriel do anything bad! "Asriel—"

"I won't let you hurt Frisk!" Asriel yells, the fur on the back of his neck standing on end. He tenses his hands and there's a red flicker of magic between his fingers. "I won't let anybody hurt them!"

"I'd love to watch you try," he says, sneering.

Fire bursts to life in Asriel's hands as he bares his teeth, letting out a loud, shrill cry of frustration. The flames flare high for a moment before gutting out to a low, steady burn, waiting in his palms. Frisk wraps their arms around Asriel from behind, hugging him close with their hands over his chest. They will him to calm down, try to think of some way to force the feeling through their connection but it doesn't work. All they feel is anger and fear.

"You can't!" Frisk says, squeezing him tight. "Asriel you're better than this!"

"Chara was right," Asriel growls, low in his chest.

"No they weren't!"

"Asriel!"

Frisk could cry from relief as Toriel throws herself between her son and the humans, falling to her knees and taking hold of his hands. The fire doesn't even faze her, she just squeezes his palms and the flames die away. You appear a moment later, eyes wide as you take in Frisk and Asriel, then turn to face the three masked humans.

"What the hell is all this?" you snap at them, wild brown waves of hair catching the light from the pumpkins as you circle around them to stand in front of Kid.

Asriel crumples as Toriel cups his face with one of her hands, pulling him and Frisk close to her chest. He starts crying, sobbing into her dress as Frisk refuses to let him go.

Sans finds Mettaton by the stage, because of course that's where he is. A pair of monsters with clipboards are taking down notes as he talks, gesturing in that pompous way that right now makes Sans want to snap off his fingers. Papyrus grabs the back of his shirt and he jerks to a halt.

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"SANS, YOU SHOULDN'T DO THIS," Papyrus says, putting his hands on his brother's shoulders.

"I've kept quiet, bro. I've tried to give him chances to show that he's good enough but all I've seen these past few weeks is him upsetting you," Sans says, gritting his teeth.

"I DON'T THINK HE'S DOING IT ON PURPOSE."

"That doesn't make it any better! if he's supposed to care about you, even a little, he should make time for you." Sans balls his hands into fists. "If you can't stand up for yourself, then I'll do it for you. Like when we were kids."

Sans tries to duck around Papyrus but his brother isn't having it. He twists his fingers into Sans's borrowed shirt and stops him again, pushing him back as he stoops down to eye level. "I'M NOT A CHILD ANYMORE! METTATON IS NOT A BULLY YOU CAN THREATEN INTO BEING NICE TO ME."

Sans's eyes widen, taken aback. He didn't think that Papyrus knew about the times he'd gone behind his back, especially when his brother's nightmares had gotten worse. He'd been bullied so much as a kid, and even though he can't remember why thanks to the accident, he remembers that it happened. It had reached the breaking point where Sans had to choose between watching Papyrus suffer in silence or taking matters into his own hands. And he'd never been good at not getting involved, especially back then.

"You keep letting him push you around," Sans says, frowning at his brother. "You can't just keep making puppy eyes at him and expect him to pay attention. Damn it, Papyrus, your feelings matter too!"

"BUT HE'S FINALLY HAPPY AGAIN!" With his grip still tight on Sans's shirt, Papyrus turns them both so they can see where Mettaton is still talking to his assistants, oblivious to the skeleton brothers. "YOU DON'T KNOW HOW HARD THINGS HAVE BEEN FOR HIM ON THE SURFACE."

He does. He remembers how upset Mettaton looked that night after the conference, when he brought Papyrus home. They way that he'd seemed so surprised when Papyrus hugged him, and how he slowly melted. But that doesn't matter. Not to him. "And now that things are finally looking up again, he doesn't need you? Is that it? He expects you to just sit there and pick up the pieces when things are bad, but the second they're good again he ignores you."

Papyrus flinches, and Sans feels his fingers tighten on his shoulders for just a second. He doesn't say anything. He doesn't need to.

"He's using you, Papyrus. Just like he uses everybody. He was like this in the underground, and he's like this now. I mean, for god's sake, he tried to kill Hope and Frisk, you really think he's above all this?" Sans says, unable to stop. He should stop. He knows he should because now Papyrus just looks even more upset than before, but part of him just wants his brother to see the truth. To see Mettaton how he sees him.

But that won't ever happen. Papyrus is just so much better of a person than he is. "HE APOLOGIZED FOR THAT. YOU CAN'T KEEP HOLDING THAT OVER HIS HEAD!"

"It's gonna take a hell of a lot for me to forgive him for that, and right now he's just making himself look worse." Sans jabs a finger in Mettaton's direction, and he can feel the crackle of magic in his eye as his temper flares. He fights it back down, clenching his jaw. "This is the Mettaton that tried to hurt my family before, and he's doing it all over again. Now he's hurting you."
"I DIDN'T TELL YOU THIS BECAUSE I DIDN'T WANT YOU TO BE ANGRY," Papyrus says, smiling. How can he smile right now and be so damn genuine? "I NEVER WANT YOU TO BE ANGRY BECAUSE OF ME. IF I PROMISE TO TALK TO HIM ONCE THINGS CALM DOWN, WILL YOU BE HAPPY AGAIN?"

His anger gutters out, snuffed in an instant. He keeps so many things from Papyrus: the Resets, his nightmares, the panic attacks, how broken and battered he's felt some days more than others... He's trusted all of that to you, away from his brother because he just wants to see him happy. He doesn't want him to have to shoulder that burden. Now he sees that Papyrus has done the same to him and he doesn't know how to feel.

What's worse is he's starting to suspect that you're doing it too. Something was bothering you, something with Deacon, but he didn't want to push. He just wanted today to be *good*.

But it just wasn't meant to be.

His phone starts to ring.

---

You're aware that a crowd has started to form as you face down the three teenagers as Toriel tends to the children, but you don't care. "Picking on kids? Is that why you came all the way up here, to pick on *little kids*?" you demand, filled with more anger than sense.

The teenagers look at each other and start to back away, but like a pair of saviors two soldiers break away from the crowd. You watch as the teens realize just how trapped they are, and the girl bursts into tears, pleading that they weren't doing anything wrong. That Asriel threatened them for no reason. But it's not until you catch the flash of a camera that you're filled with dread. Searching the crowd, you see too many suspicious human faces, watching. There's another camera flash and a few people are holding up cell phones now, not even bothering to disguise what they're doing.

Whatever. You can't worry about this now. Turning, you glance over your shoulder in time to see Kid rush over to their mom at the edges of the crowd. At least they seem okay. You go to Toriel's side and rest your hand on her shoulder. She flinches, looking up at you with wide, scared eyes. She's clutching the children tight to her body, rocking them gently. Asriel is sobbing and Frisk looks up at you, tears in their eyes.

"Tori, they're fine," you say softly, smoothing the fur on her arm. Her witch hat fell off; it's laying on the ground at her side. She doesn't seem to register your words. It's starting to scare you. "Mom, everyone is safe. *Mom*."

She blinks and focuses on you at last. "Oh," she breathes. The muscles in her arms slowly relax and Frisk slips out of her grip, wrapping themselves around you and burying their face in your stomach.

"You have to call Dad. I need to ask him what to do," they say, groping for the pocket in your costume where you have your phone.

One of the soldiers breaks away, approaching you. Sergeant Wilkes; you recognize him from his times on duty in Mountainside. You thank whatever higher power that might be listening for sending one of the good ones to help you. "I know this might not be the best time, but we need to talk to the children," he says, giving you an apologetic look. "Please. It'll make things go much easier."

As he glances down at Asriel, Toriel tightens her grip on her son, shaking her head. Your stomach twists. "They need to tell them what happened," you say, hating that you have to tell her that. You
wish the kids didn't have to go through any of this.

Frisk gets your phone out of your pocket, and you're faintly aware of them calling Sans.
Sans is sitting on one of the picnic table benches, his arm around Frisk's shoulders as he watches you and Asgore speak to the soldiers. There's more of them now; Sergeant Wilkes is kneeling on the ground and talking to Asriel while Toriel hovers over him, two others whose names he doesn't know are questioning the teenagers that started this whole mess. The rest of them are dispersing the crowd, sending them back to enjoy the festival. No reason to stop the event, they said, not for a minor scuffle.

He supposes that it should be telling, that the soldiers seem unfazed. Oh, they're frustrated, even a little angry, but they aren't surprised. Frisk shifts a little and tucks themselves closer, resting their head against his chest. He brings his hand up from their shoulder to their hair, stroking it in a way he knows is soothing. His eyes stay fixed on you and he watches you nod at whatever the soldier you're talking to is saying. She reaches out and squeezes your arm. You accept it with a smile and he makes out a 'thank you' on your lips.

Most of the humans Sans has encountered have been okay. Some of them he'd even call good. But things like this and the incident at Muffet's leave a sour taste in his mouth. It doesn't take much for the bad to outweigh the good.

"I can Load, go back to before all this happened," Frisk mumbles, holding onto his borrowed shirt. They tug on it absently. "It's just a couple hours."

Sans sighs. He'd already told them no, but he knew they wouldn't drop it so easily. "those humans came here to cause trouble. if it wasn't with kid it woulda been with somebody else. maybe do something worse."

"But that girl keeps lying and saying that Asriel started it. That he was gonna attack them." Their body tenses, anger in their voice. "He was just protecting me."

"i know kiddo. i'm pretty sure the soldiers know that too," he says. The two men talking to the teenagers look plainly disgusted, to Sans's relief. At least they have the military on their side.

"But we could go back, stop them before they do anything at all. Make it so there's nothing bad for people to take pictures of. Mom's worried about what people are gonna say," Frisk presses, tilting their head to look up at him with wide brown eyes.

Sans pulls his arm away and sits back, fixing Frisk with a serious stare. They rub their bruised arm, wincing a little and trying to look away but he catches their chin and turns them back to look him in the eye. "we can't keep relying on your power to make things perfect. the world isn't gonna be perfect, no matter how hard you try, and we're never gonna move forward if you keep pulling us backwards. bad things will happen. things we wish didn't, but we just have to hope some good comes from it. if people don't remember their mistakes then they're never gonna learn from them."

Frisk bites their lip, glancing down and then back up again as their brow furrows in concentration.
"Like how I did the same things over and over again, when I couldn't remember the Resets."

"yeah. just like that, kiddo."

You're drained by the time you're done talking to the soldiers. This is the first time they've have had to interfere with an incident, and thankfully they're taking it as seriously as you could hope. But you just want to go home and bury yourself under a pile of blankets and forget the outside world. You've had a very real reminder of just how shitty humans can be to someone different, and it stings.

Seeking out Sans and Frisk, you're making your way towards them when Deacon pushes his way past a few lingering onlookers. He's tugging off his fake beard and stuffing it into his hat, tucking them under his arm as he hurries to meet you. With mussed hair and wide eyes, he looks over you, then searches for Sans and Frisk, and then finally Toriel and her family before meeting your gaze again.

"Are you okay? I only just heard, I was over on the other side," he says, gesturing vaguely behind him.

"We're all fine," you answer, not stopping as you continue walking. Deacon follows you. "Give me a second, I need to talk to Sans."

Your fiancé looks up as you approach, frowning a little as he spots Deacon. Frisk reaches out and grabs your hand. "are we good to go?" Sans asks. "and what are they doing about those humans?"

"Yeah, I think so," you say, rubbing your forehead. "They said they're going to escort them off the mountain but it's not a bannable offense. They're just getting off with a warning, but their names are being recorded and flagged for if they come back again."

"what do you mean it's not bannable? they were harassing kids," he says, the furrow in his brow deepening.

"They can't do anything unless we choose to press charges, and—"

"so we press charges!"

"—and if we do that it will just makes things worse for Asriel," you say, biting your lip. "Sans he threatened them with magic."

"But he didn't do anything wrong!" Frisk protests, gaping up at you.

"I'm not saying he did, sweetie, but that's not how it's going to look to other people. And I know that's not fair," you say, cutting them off as they open their mouths to argue more. "Believe me. I know it's unfair. But that doesn't stop us from needing to be careful."

Sans is shaking his head, gritting his teeth but keeping silent. You know he's just as frustrated as Frisk is, but your hands are tied. You're at the mercy of the government, and if people start thinking monsters are more dangerous than they already do, things will just get worse. It's best to keep your heads down and not draw any more attention to yourselves, even if it's not your fault. It's not lost on you that this is how you've lived your entire life with your mother. It's stifling.

"Where's Papyrus?" you ask, realizing that the taller skeleton is nowhere to be seen. They had arrived together after Frisk called Sans.
"he went with undyne and alphys. he's gonna stay here and help her and the others keep an eye on things until the festival is over. you know pap," he says, rubbing the side of his skull.

Frisk pulls away from Sans and stands up, looking past you. Before you can look to see why, Asriel appears, rushing to wrap Frisk up in his arms and bury his face in their shoulder. They're talking to each other, too quiet for you to hear, so instead you meet Sans's eyes. He pulls himself to his feet and reaches for you, tangling his fingers with yours and squeezing. You give him a weak smile, appreciating the small gesture.

"The important thing is that everyone is okay," you say, for his sake and yours. He nods.

"Hope," Toriel says, and as you turn towards the sound of her voice she comes up alongside the kids. Her eyes look a little glassy and you think she's been trying very hard not to cry. You can't imagine what it must have been like for her, seeing Asriel standing in the way of those three humans. "If it is okay with you I would like to take Frisk home with me. I think Asriel would be —"

"Of course," you blurt out, grasping her hand with your free one. "I totally understand."

She gives you a watery smile, nodding. "I will feel much better, knowing that they are together where I can watch over them."

Frisk is looking up at you, still holding onto Asriel as you go to hug them both. "Frisk, I'm proud of you for standing up for Kid, did I tell you that?"

"But didn't we just make everything worse?" Frisk mumbles into your shoulder, freeing one arm to hug you back. Asriel doesn't let go of Frisk, but he rests his head against you for a moment. It's enough.

"No, sweetie. Of course you didn't," you say, pressing a kiss to their temple. "Now, you go with Toriel and be good, okay? I love you."

"I love you too."

"Asriel, thank you for protecting Frisk. That was so brave." You lean to kiss the top of his head and he makes a small, embarrassed noise, ducking his head.

"It wasn't. I was just angry and scared," he says quietly, glancing up at you and then back down again.

"That doesn't mean I appreciate it any less." You let them both go and they look at you for a moment before Toriel reaches for their hands. You smile at them and she leads them away.

It's harder than it should be, watching Frisk leave with her. You know that they'll be safe and that Asriel needs them right now, but you were scared too. Your child was hurt and you weren't there to protect them. It's not right that they should have to deal with this kind of prejudice so young.

"babe, you ok?" Sans asks you, touching your waist.

You turn at the contact, wiping your eyes as you take in a steadying breath. "Yeah. Yeah, I'll be fine. This is just..." You grimace, shaking your head. "This is such bullshit. This was supposed to be something fun for the kids and just... ugh."

Deacon clears his throat and you remember that he's been standing there this whole time, waiting patiently. "So, what happened exactly?"
You give him an abbreviated account of what Frisk told Sergeant Wilkes, about Kid and the teenagers. How they treated Frisk and what Asriel almost did. You expect him to look angry or shocked but Deacon looks gutted. He shakes his head and turns away for a second, composing himself before turning back.

He opens his mouth to speak but then closes it again, pinching the bridge of his nose before running his hand through his hair. "Shit," he breathes, staring at the ground. "This is my fault."

"Deacon, there's no way this is—"

"yeah. it is," Sans says, his voice low and harsh.

Shocked, you gape at Sans as he glares up at Deacon, clenching his jaw. "What? Sans this isn't his fault," you blurt out, stepping away from him to put yourself between him and your friend.

Sans doesn't even seem to hear you. He jabs a finger at Deacon. "this whole thing was your idea. if you hadn't done this, nothing would have happened."

"Technically Mettaton is the one that did all this," you say, frowning at him.

"No, Sans is right. If I hadn't gone to Toriel, or listened to Mettaton and encouraged him to use this as a way to get more humans here the chances are this wouldn't have happened," Deacon admits, his tone even.

"Deacon, that isn't fair! The only people we should be blaming are the ones that caused the problem in the first place."

"who decides to throw some huge fair together their second week on the job, anyway? why were you so interested in doing this?" Sans presses, narrowing his eyes. The lights in his sockets are small pinpricks, fixed on Deacon. He isn't even listening to you.

That gets Deacon, though. Crossing his arms over his chest, he cocks his head to the side, squaring his shoulders and looking down at him. "Are you trying to insinuate that I wanted something like this to happen?"

"yeah, why the hell not? you show up, move in with no notice whatsoever..."

"Sans!"

"Have I given you a reason not to trust me, Sans?" Deacon demands, lip curling. "Tell me what I've done."

Sans doesn't seem to have an answer ready for that. Taking advantage of his moment of silence, you put yourself bodily between the two of them, facing your fiancé. "Sans this is ridiculous! You can't possibly blame Deacon for all of this."

"why are you defending him, hope?" Sans snaps, fixing you with a cold, angry look.

But you're not backing down, not when he's being so completely irrational. Where the hell did this anger towards Deacon come from? "Because he's my friend!"

"are you sure that's the only reason?" he says, gritting his teeth.

You feel like a bucket of cold water was just dumped on your head. Something inside you panics, even as another part is outraged. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" you manage to cut out,
throat tight.

"I mean the two of you have been spending a lot of time together."

"There is nothing going on between us," you hiss, hands clenched into fists at your sides. "It was just a dream!"

You clap a hand over your mouth as the words tumble past your lips. Oh no.

"What?" "What?"

Sans's sockets are wide and he's finally looking at you, his jaw hanging open as he processes what you just said. You don't dare look at Deacon. You can't. You won't.

"Sans, it's nothing—"

"I'm not talking about this here," he says, and the emotionless tone of his voice has you trembling. "We're going home."
He's silent the entire way home, hands fidgeting with the camera in his lap. Sans won't even look at you. The faint, barely visible lights in his sockets watch the trees as they pass his window. You try, twice, to start explaining yourself but he doesn't seem to hear you. Instead, his hands tense and clutch at his camera strap. You resign yourself to silence for the last few minutes home.

When you park your car in the driveway you hesitate before pulling your keys out of the ignition. You look over at Sans and he's already opening his door and stepping out. Your hands are shaking as you shove the keys in your purse and you take a second to pull the linen wrappings off from around your head. You feel ridiculous in your costume all of a sudden. It just makes this all that much worse somehow.

Sans is waiting on the porch with his back to you, holding on to the support column at the top of the steps. You realize he didn't bring his keys—he barely ever takes his keys anywhere—but if he really wanted to get away from you he could have teleported inside. He's not storming off, not yelling at you... you wish he'd just do something instead of making you suffer through this silence.

Unlocking the door, you lead the way inside and he follows close after. As you shut it and turn the deadbolt you're aware of the silence in the house, the only light the one above you in the foyer. Everything else is dark and the two of you are alone. Your heart is pounding in your ears and you hesitate, your fingers still pinched around the lock as you try to gather yourself.

Taking in a deep breath, you turn in time to see Sans set his camera down on the small table in the foyer, press his back up against the wall, and bury his face in his hands. It takes the sound of him drawing in a soft gasp of air for you to realize something's wrong. He's shaking.

You dump your purse next to his camera and reach out for him, barely brushing his arm before he sinks down to the floor. "Sans. Oh god, honey talk to me," you say, falling to your knees in front of him and pulling his hands from his face. You're so scared, but it's not for yourself anymore.

He lets you take his hands and hold them between the two of you and you can feel just how badly he's trembling. Staring up at you with wide, dark eyes, the two tiny lights are searching your face, flickering for a moment as his face goes slack. Then he crumples, tears welling up in his sockets. "i'm sorry. babe i'm so sorry, i can't believe i did that," he says, his voice thick. "i just... god you must be so disgusted with me."

Sans tips his head back against the wall as tears slip down his cheekbones, leaving wet trails across bone. When he squeezes his sockets shut you reach out and pull him to you, letting him bury his face in your chest. He wraps his arms tight around your middle, pulling you close as you kneel on the floor between his legs. His broken sobs tear at your heart and you cradle his skull in your arms, holding him. Your vision blurs.

"I love you," you say, because you can't think of anything else. Because you mean it and you know he needs to hear it. "I love you so much. I've got you. Talk to me."
His fingers spasm against your back, clutching at the bandages of your costume. "I've just been trying to keep all my shit together," he says, through his tears. "For you, and Frisk, and Papyrus. I just couldn't... I just couldn't do it anymore. I fucked up. Shit."

You don't know what to say. You're not sure if there's anything to say that might help. So you wait, stroking the back of his head and bowing over him to rest your cheek on top of his skull. Sniffling, you squeeze your eyes shut.

After a few minutes Sans relaxes just a fraction, rubbing small circles into your back to soothe the spots where he was digging in with his fingers. You hear him draw in a deep, shaky breath before turning his head so he can speak clearer. "He can offer you so much more than I can. You wouldn't have to keep him a secret, and he can leave eBott with you. He's not gonna wake you up in the middle of the night and scare the shit outta you or fall to fucking pieces. I can't stand him and the worst part is I don't even have a good reason."

"I love you," you say again, holding him tight. "Sans I'm not going anywhere, no matter what. It was just a stupid dream. It scared me too, but it didn't mean anything."

"I know," he mumbles.

"He'll only ever be a friend."

"I know and I feel like such an asshole. I was trying to play nice, for you, and then I... I took everything out on him." He buries his face in your chest again and lets out a long, low, frustrated sound. "It was everything with those humans hurting Frisk, and then having to talk them out of loading to undo everything... and ugh, Papyrus. He doesn't... he's dealing with this shit with Mettaton and he hasn't been talking to me. Because he doesn't want me to be upset and it's just..."

"I guess that runs in the family," you murmur and he nods against you.

"And you've been so busy, and you've been so happy being friends with this guy and I didn't want to drag you down with me. So I just..."

"I know," you say, trying to blink away the tears still blurring your eyes. "Hun I'm so sorry, I should have realized. You should have told me."

"I know. I..." He's trembling again, reaching up to cup the back of your head and pull you down so he's the one holding you. You let him shift you into his lap, wrapping your arms around his shoulders and tucking your head under his jaw. "I can't stop feeling scared of losing you."

You press soothing kisses along his jaw, doing your best to try and comfort him. "Did you honestly think I was cheating on you? After everything we've been through together?"

He doesn't answer. He just hugs you closer and won't let go.

"I'm sorry," you say softly.

"No, I'm sorry," he says, sighing as he buries his face into the side of your neck. "I knew better. It's not a good excuse, but I felt like if we could just make it through today everything would be fine. I'd get you back and I'd feel okay again."

"You never lost me. I was always here." You lay one hand against his chest, pressing gently.

"I love you. So much," he whispers, like he's afraid the universe might hear him and take you away. Just to punish him. "And I'm so sorry. I'll... shit I need to apologize to Deacon, don't I? I need to try"
You can't help feeling guilty, that Sans is only having all these extra doubts and fears because of you. Because you were so excited to have a new human next door, a friend. But even as you're feeling guilty another part of you rebels against the injustice of it. You're allowed to make friends with whoever you want. He should trust you and respect that. You chide yourself with the reminder that he was trying. "I do think you should apologize. But I'm not expecting you to befriend him. Or even like him. I just... don't want to be caught in the middle." You hesitate, biting your lip. "With him or anyone I might be friends with in the future."

"Ok. I can do that. I promise," he says, nuzzling your neck.

"And talk to me when something upsets you. Don't bottle it all up. No matter how busy you think I am, you're more important," you press, trying to pull away so you can look at him but he just follows you.

"Ok."

"Sans are you going to let me go any time soon?"

"Depends, do you think deacon is home yet?" he says, and his voice is muffled by your neck so for a second you think you misheard him.

"What? Hun, you don't need to talk to him tonight," you protest, surprised. You manage to pull your head back enough to look at him, and you're relieved to see that the lights in his eyes are brighter than before.

He gives a stubborn grumble, clenching his jaw. "I do. I wanna get this over with while I still feel bad. Maybe then I won't act like such an ass."

"...Okay... I guess I can text him."
'I'm sure you can't look at your phone right now because you're busy, but please let me know everything is okay when you can.'

'He's being an ass, but I hope this isn't serious.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Hope I don't care what time it is when you see these, just text me back ok?'

'If you need me I'm at home.'

Deacon is sitting on his couch, one hand fisted in his hair as he scrolls through the texts he sent you half an hour ago. In retrospect it kind of makes him look a little desperate, but he's worried. Are the two of you still fighting? How mad is Sans? He doesn't think that your fiancé would do anything to hurt you but... well he doesn't exactly know the monster that well. It's hard to get to know someone who's keeping you at arm's length all the time.

Oh, not to mention Sans clearly has it out for him.

Not that he's entirely blameless for that. After repeated attempts to endear himself to the skeleton Deacon just stopped trying. What was the point? Sans had made up his mind and there was nothing he could do to change it. But, maybe giving up had been a mistake. Maybe he could have done something so at least you wouldn't end up feeling the brunt of Sans's anger when it should be him.

What is this going to mean for his friendship with you? Is Sans the kind of person that would try to force you into not talking to him? The very thought makes Deacon grimace, hunching forward over his knees. He'd still see you at work every day, he can't just keep you apart. But would you let him? Is that what this is going to come down to; polite conversation and doing your best to ignore him in the halls? The break room?

It makes him feel nauseous. He can't even appreciate the humor of you having some kind of dream about him. Is that what you'd been so weird about yesterday? It must be.

He even knows just how he wants to tease you about it if (when, when) this all blows over. If (shit) you're still talking to him after.

He doesn't know how to handle this. Waiting, hoping that this doesn't end up biting him in the ass. He's never been through anything like this, had a friend he's been afraid of losing. Is there something he should be doing? He... damn it, you mean more to him than he was expecting and he doesn't know how to deal with it.
Deacon thumbs through the texts again, as if staring at them will make you respond. Should he go
over there? You're just next door, it's not like— no that's a stupid idea. There's no way that
wouldn't just make things worse. But if Sans would just listen—

There's a knock on the door and he leaps to his feet, still clutching his phone tight in his hand. It
has to be you. Who else would come knock on his door at ten o'clock? Hurrying to answer it, your
name is on his lips as he pulls it open.

"Hope— oh."

Sans just raises a brow up at Deacon, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets (he changed out of
that ridiculous shirt). The human's expression goes from relieved to disappointed in an instant, and
Sans takes in the fact that he's standing there with his phone in his hand. He really was waiting for
you to text him back, wasn't he? He's not sure how Deacon's concern for you makes him feel.
Annoyed that he seemed to suspect Sans might do something stupid, yet pleased that you have
people that care about you. Like everything else where this human is concerned, it's complicated.

"expecting someone else?" Sans drawls, unable to stop himself from making a smartass comment.
Huffing a sigh, he looks away and back again.

"Is everything okay?" Deacon asks, looking at his phone. He tugs at the collar of his t-shirt. "Hope
never texted me back."

"i know, i asked her not to," Sans says, trying not to enjoy the annoyed look on the human's face. "i
was hoping we could talk."

He seems to mull it over for a second before begrudgingly stepping aside to let Sans pass. "Talk.
Right, sure," he mutters, closing the door behind him.

Sans glances at the couch but decides against sitting. He doesn't exactly want to be here that long,
and there's no way he can get comfortable. That familiar nagging feeling he gets from Deacon is
back and he's wondering if this was a good idea. He doesn't want to apologize even though he
knows he should. For you dammit, he needs to clear the air and reach some kind of resolution with
this—with Deacon.

Deacon sets his phone down on the coffee table and turns to face Sans, crossing his arms over his
chest. "Well? This better not be some kind of threat to stay away from Hope, because you can't just
boss her around."

Sans grits his teeth. "that's not why i'm here," he mutters, balling his hands into fists.

"Because there's nothing going on. She's a friend, a good friend and I'm not going to jeopardize that
by trying to turn our relationship into something it's not," he says and Sans can see the muscles in
his arms tensing. "And you can't just blame her for some stupid dream, even I could tell she was
worried about it yesterday and I didn't even know what it was about."

"i don't blame her for it. i blame you," Sans says, even as he curses himself for saying it. But it's
too late.

"Oh! Fine, blame me! What else is new," Deacon blurs out, throwing his hands into the air.

"well if you didn't keep flirting with her all the time—"

"She knows I'm just playing around. Besides, it has the added bonus of pissing you off," he says,
"You've been looking for a reason to hate me since the moment we met and you know what? I figured I might as well give you one."

"Well I hope you're satisfied, because the person who's getting caught in the middle is the one you supposedly care about," he snaps, glaring right back. "I don't give a shit if you don't like me, but I'm trying to make amends for her. I didn't fucking come here to fight with you, Deacon."

With a frustrated huff, the human shifts uncomfortably on his feet. The two of them stare each other down in silence before Deacon speaks again. "I never meant to cause trouble for Hope. I was just pissed off at you for being an asshole."

"Right back at you, pal."

"Then why are you here? Do you really think I wanted something bad to happen at the festival?" he asks, uncrossing his arms and letting them hang at his sides.

He doesn't want to say it. But he has to. Pulling his hand out of his pocket to drag his fingers across his forehead, Sans looks down at the floor. "I came here to apologize. For blaming you for what happened. For being a jerk. Today was shit and I took it out on you and then I almost took it out on hope and it's not fair to either of you. And as much as it pisses me off, you haven't done anything to deserve my suspicion or anger."

He runs his hand down his face and forces himself to look at Deacon. The human's expression is unreadable. "So I'm sorry. I don't want things to keep being ugly between us."

For a moment Sans thinks that Deacon is going to shove his apology back in his face. To reject this attempt at reconciliation. But before he can do more than feel his frustration start to build, the human holds out his hand to him. Sans stares at it and then meets Deacon's eyes. He's not smiling, but... he just looks sort of relieved. Like a weight has been lifted off his shoulders. Sans feels it too.

He shakes Deacon's hand, ignoring the sudden twinge of agitation as they make contact.

"Thanks, Sans. And, well, I guess I'm sorry too. For making this harder for both of us. No, for all three of us," Deacon says, letting go of his hand. Both of them immediately shove their hands in their pockets —Sans into his jacket, Deacon into his sweatpants.

"Good. Fine," he says, nodding a little and willing himself to relax. This might not have started off as well as it could have but... he apologized. He did what he came here to do. Sans glances at the front door, wondering if he should just go. He really wants to get back home to you, doesn't like the thought of leaving you alone right now after everything that happened. Besides, there's something he's been meaning to do.

"So everything is okay with you and Hope? Did she ask you to come over here?" He sounds a little uncomfortable, but concerned. Sans can't even feel annoyed that he's being nosy.

"Yeah. We're ok. It's just been a hell of a month," he says with a shrug. "And no. She didn't ask me to come over here."

Deacon seems to understand the implication, but doesn't say anything. Though it looks like he wants to. "Cool," he says, reaching up to rub his neck. "So, where does this leave us, then? I care about Hope, as her friend, and for her sake I want us to... I dunno, be okay with each other?"

"Yeah. That's what I want too," he says a little begrudgingly. He gives Deacon a forced smile. "I can respect that you're friends with her, because her happiness is important to me. We may not like each other, but we've got one thing in common. Hope."
"Yeah. Exactly. So we put our differences aside, understand each other a little better, and just move forward. I can do that," Deacon says, giving Sans a fleeting smile in return. As it fades he looks away, running his hand through his hair. "Well, okay, this is just awkward now, so uh, unless there's anything else you want to say..."

"no. i should get home," Sans says, more than happy to seize the opportunity.

"Yeah. Definitely. Uh, let Hope know I'm glad everything is okay. Or, you know what, I'll just text her. It's fine. Forget it. You go." Deacon clears his throat, glancing over at his phone.

"ok. yeah. bye."

"Bye."

Deacon goes to head towards the front door but Sans doesn't bother. He just teleports back home.

You're laying on your bed, right in the center on top of the covers. Your pillow is bunched up under your chest, arms wrapped around it as you fiddle with your phone while you wait. Sans has already been gone for a little while and you're not sure how long he's going to be. But you can't relax, not until he's back home.

You tried to fill the time while he was gone with getting ready for bed. But washing makeup off your face and changing into a baggy nightshirt didn't take up that much time. So now you're trying (and failing) to not check the different news sites. As far as you can tell, none of them have run a story. You doubt that you're going to be that lucky, though.

Kicking your bare legs back and forth, you try to focus on the feeling of your calves brushing against one another to distract yourself. It helps to keep your mind from wandering too much. There's no point in trying to dwell on what might happen, right? It's not like you can do anything about it now.

Your phone buzzes and chimes in your hands and you jump, heart leaping into your throat before you chastise yourself. Pull it together, it was just a text message. Pulling up the notification, you're surprised to see it's from Deacon.

'Glad everything is okay with you guys. I was worried. Talk more later. Have a good night.'

You're about to type in a reply when you hear Sans's voice downstairs. "I'm up here!" you call out, turning off your phone's screen and looking at the door.

He's in the doorway a second later, appearing out of thin air. He left his jacket downstairs, which is a good sign at least. Between Deacon's text and the neutral expression on Sans's face, you think things must have gone okay. You sit up as he walks to the bed, standing at the foot but not climbing up next to you. Instead you go to him, crawling over and sitting back on your heels.

"How did it go?" you ask, wrapping your arms around his neck and pulling him towards you.

He comes to you willingly, nuzzling the side of your face and leaving little nipping kisses along your cheek. His hands, instead of hugging you back, go to your bare thighs. Warm, smooth fingers give you an appreciative squeeze as he lets out a soft sigh. "good. fine. we talked for a bit, came to a mutual understanding," he says, sounding distracted.

"And what understanding was that?" you ask, pulling back so you can meet his eyes. He makes a small sound of protest and tries to follow you but you lean back on your hands, far enough away
that he can't reach you.

Sighing, he raises a brow and squeezes your legs again. "that neither of us were exactly on our best behavior. and that, for you, we'd do better and put this shit behind us."

"I take it you still don't like him? I mean, I don't expect you to, but..."

"it'll be fine babe. don't worry about it," he murmurs, leaning over you to grab your wrists and pull you back up to meet him. "he... i believe him when he says he cares about you, as a friend. and that should be good enough for me."

You wrap your arms around his ribcage, resting your head against his sternum. He runs his fingers through your hair as he nuzzles the top of your head. "Thank you for doing that. It means a lot to me, Sans."

"i know. i love you."

"I love you too. Do you feel better at least? Now that you've gotten all that off your chest?"

"a bit, yeah." He sighs a little and hugs you closer, then makes a startled sound. "oh. shit, i almost —"

He pulls away from you and you give him a bewildered look, surprised to find yourself no longer in his arms. Sans opens his mouth, then closes it again, looking over at his dresser and back to you. He seems torn about something. "Sans?" you ask, confused.

"i was gonna..." He trails off, rubbing his jaw. Then, with a sigh of resignation, he walks over to the dresser and opens one of the drawers. He pulls something out and, keeping it hidden behind his hands, comes back over to you. "i imagined tonight going a lot better than it did, but what the hell. i don't wanna wait any longer. i'm just sorry that instead of this being the last good thing to top off a good day, it's more like the only good thing on a shitty day."

You touch his hands, smiling as a thrill of anticipation coils in your chest. "Did you...?"

Sans lifts one of his hands away, and in the palm of the other is a small black box. He holds it out for you, nodding as you reach for it but hesitate. "i sat down with alphys to sort out the design. she does lots of work with figures and stuff, so i figured she'd have a good idea of colors and—"

"Sans, shh."

"—and she's good at fabricating metal parts, so i knew she could make it and—"

"Sans," you blurt out, laughing and giving him a playful glare.

"sorry."

He watches you expectantly, and now that you're sure he's not going to interrupt you open the box. Inside is a ring. The band is a silver-colored metal, white gold maybe, studded with tiny round diamonds. The center stone is shaped like a heart, but he has it turned upside-down. No, not upside-down, just turned like a monster Soul. On either side of the diamond are two triangular stones the same bright blue as his magic.

"what do you think?" he asks quietly.

"It's perfect," you say, looking up at him again. There's tears in your eyes but they're happy tears
this time and a laugh bubbles up from inside your chest. "Sans it's beautiful."

He takes the box from your hands and pulls the ring out, setting the box aside. You hold out your hand and he slips it on your finger. It fits perfectly. "you've already got me wrapped around your finger, but now everyone else can know it too," he says, grinning. The lights in his eyes are bright as he searches your face, relieved. "i know this doesn't make up for what happened, but—"

You silence him with a kiss to his mouth, wrapping him up in your arms and pulling him close. He tilts to rest his forehead against yours, cradling your head in his hands and burying his fingers in your hair. He's so close he's blurred in your vision, the lights of his eyes multiplied into a field of bright points like stars.

"i know that traditionally, guys don't wear rings until the wedding, but i thought, since..." He trails off, but you know what he means. That you don't have any idea when you might be able to legally marry. "well, alphys made mine already."

He pulls away from you and picks the box back up, pulling out the little insert that held yours in place. Underneath is another ring. It's made of the same silver metal as yours, surrounding a thick band of smooth, polished wood. Picking it up, you turn it to find a silver heart fitted flush into the wood part of the band, inlaid with a dark ruby.

"the wood is from some of the leftover from when they built the house. it's from one of the trees that used to be here," he says, brushing your hands with his left one. "and alphys put rubber on the inside so it won't slide off my hand. if you want, we don't have to wait until—"

You take his hand and slide the ring onto his finger, admiring it for a second. Then you cover his hand with yours, setting your rings side by side. Tapping the little ruby on his band, you smile at him. "My Soul is yours, and yours is mine."
Bathed and ready for bed, Frisk and Asriel sit on Toriel's lap as she rocks back and forth in her chair, reading them both a story. She has her arms around them both, holding them close and pausing between pages to nuzzle the tops of their heads or squeeze them close. Once she has to set the book down on Asriel's legs so she can wipe her eyes. Her voice is a little shaky as she continues to read.

Frisk watches Asriel, their head pillowed on Toriel's chest and not paying much attention to the story. Their best friend is holding their hand between his, running the soft pads of his thumbs along the lines in their skin. Tracing them, rubbing their palm like it's a worry stone. He's calmer now, but Frisk is worried about him. He almost did something horrible and they're not sure he feels bad about it. What troubles Frisk more is that they're not sure if they feel bad about it either.

It's late, Frisk and Asriel are tired, but Toriel doesn't seem to notice. Or if she does she doesn't care. She seems content to hold them the entire night, rocking them in her chair and warmed by a magical fire. Frisk squeezes Asriel's fingers and he looks up to meet their eyes, blinking as confusion spreads over his face and then promptly disappears. He squeezes his eyes shut and buries his face in his mother's chest.

There's a soft knock at the door which makes the three of them jump, Toriel's hold on them tightening. She tenses as they hear it open, the flames in the fireplace flaring for a moment. Then, the low, deep sound of Asgore's voice makes her relax, but the wary look on her face remains as she watches the doorway to the sitting room. He's still dressed in his costume, but the yarn mane is gone. Visibly exhausted, the frown smooths away from his brow as he spots them.

"It is late, Asgore," Toriel says, an unspoken warning in her voice.

"I wished to be here sooner, but I had to be certain things back at the festival were handled with care," he says. He bows his head, stooping down over them to cradle his son's head in one hand and Frisk's in the other. "I am not sure that it will be enough."

Asriel lets go of Frisk so he can reach up to his father, grabbing at his broad shoulders. Asgore picks him up, holding him against his chest. "Dad, I'm sorry. I made things worse," he says, tucking his head under Asgore's chin.

Toriel sets aside her book, sliding Frisk off her lap as she stands and rests her hand on the small of Asriel's back. "Of course not, Flufftail. Everything will be fine," she soothes.

"Tori that is not true," Asgore says, and Frisk sees her bristle, but if it's from the nickname or his disagreement, they're not sure. "What happened tonight—"

"What happened tonight was unfortunate but it is over," Toriel says. Frisk tries to step away, uncomfortable with the way they're speaking to each other but she scoops them up and rests them on her hip. "Can we not be content with the fact that the children are safe?"
Frisk meets Asriel's eyes, watches his fingers tense in his father's shirt. They don't need their connection to know that he's distraught. Why can't his parents see it?

"Because what Asriel almost did cannot be allowed to happen again," he says, shifting his son out from under his head so he can look down at him. "I know that you care for Frisk, and you were trying to protect them, but threatening humans with magic will only make them fear us more than they already do."

He withers under his father's stare, blinking back tears that well up in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he mumbles.

Toriel makes a frustrated sound in the back of her throat, reaching out for her son with the arm that isn't holding Frisk. Asriel hesitates, but lets his mother take him from Asgore. The children look at each other again, wishing that they were in bed instead of caught in the middle between the king and queen.

"Asriel, you do not need to apologize. Asgore, you cannot blame him for this!" Toriel says, hugging them close to her sides.

"I am not. But he must know that what he did was dangerous," Asgore presses, brow furrowed.

"He is just a child. How can they blame him for being scared?"

"He is not just a child. He is our son, the prince of monsters—"

"He is seven years old and those humans threatened them," Toriel hisses, baring her teeth. Frisk and Asriel both flinch. "Who knows what might have happened if he did not do as he did? Hope and I would not have known they were in trouble and we might not have—"

She lets out a soft, strangled noise and bows her head, holding the children closer to her body and sinking to the floor. Frisk clutches tight to the front of her shirt, pressing their cheek to her shoulder. Tears spill down her face, wetting her soft white fur as she trembles. She had been trying not to cry all night, Frisk could tell that much, and now she can't hold it back any more.

"Mom, it's okay," Asriel says softly, tucking his head under her chin and nuzzling her.

"I cannot lose him again! I will not!" Toriel blurs out through her tears. "Asgore, I do not think I can bear it."

Asgore crouches down on the ground with them, wrapping one arm around her back and pulling her to him. He rests his chin on top of her head, stroking her back as she cries. "Do you think I do not feel the same as you do? When I heard what happened, it took much of my strength to remain calm. I did not wish to stay there at the school to speak to the soldiers, I wanted to be here with you and the children." He hesitates, his free hand cupping the back of Asriel's neck. "But the humans, most of them, will always place the blame on our shoulders. We are monsters, and as such will always be seen as the aggressors. We all have to be careful. Every single person, every single child. Our fate rests on how the world sees us, and lashing out will only bring their ire down upon us."

"That's not fair," Asriel says, wrapping his hand around his father's finger.

"They're the ones who were picking on Kid!" Frisk continues Asriel's thought.

"The humans started it!"

"No, it is not fair," Asgore agrees, stroking his son's cheek with his thumb. "It is a harsh lesson for
you children, but Asriel you must know. The world is not fair. I wish it were, then your mother and I would not fear so much for your safety. But you must not do anything like that again. It could be more dangerous for all of us if you do."

"But they were the ones who were wrong," Frisk protests, frustration building in their chest.

"Let them be wrong. Say whatever you must to appease them so long as you come home safe to your mothers. One day, perhaps, things will be better for us. But until that day comes, your safety is more important than being right."

"He's wrong," Asriel murmurs, staring up at the ceiling as he lays in bed beside Frisk. His hands ball into fists around the edge of the comforter, resting on his chest. "If someone tries to hurt us, we can't just sit there and let it happen."

Frisk is on their side, studying Asriel's face in the dark room. There's enough light from the crack under the door that they can see his eyes searching the air above him, the way his muzzle is wrinkling and his fangs peek out from behind his lips. They touch one of his hands, try to ease it away from the covers but he won't budge. "He's not saying we should let anyone hurt us."

"He's saying we shouldn't fight back! Defend ourselves, defend you!" he snaps, eyes darting over to Frisk's. "It doesn't work like that. I've seen what happens when you don't fight back."

Frisk feels a twist of fear in their chest that they know isn't their own. They watch their best friend let go of the comforter to reach to his neck for something that isn't there, fingers closing around air. Rolling out of bed, Frisk goes to the dresser and gropes blindly for something buried down at the bottom. After a moment, they climb back into bed, pulling Asriel into a sitting position and pressing Chara's locket into his hand. Sitting facing one another, he leans forward to press his forehead to Frisk's, looking down at the dim glint of gold.

They gave it back to Asriel after they got to the surface. It was never meant for Frisk, not really. They just borrowed it for a little while. Once Chara was gone for good, it was Asriel who needed it the most. He wore it until his new home on the surface was built and there was a safe place to keep it. He doesn't like to talk much about Chara, knowing what they mean to Frisk. A reminder of all the horrible things that happened. Chara and Flowey both seem to haunt their steps.

"Chara may not have been completely right about humanity," Asriel says, turning the locket over in his hands. "But they weren't wrong. If those are the types of people they knew before, I can't blame them for being so angry."

"Chara didn't know any other way to be but angry," Frisk says, cupping their hands under Asriel's. "But you do."

"Maybe. Maybe I should have listened to them more. If I had, then maybe I wouldn't have gotten us both killed."

They're not sure what to say to that.

There's a moment of heavy silence, and Frisk feels that twist of Asriel's fear again, his fingers closing over the locket. "They yelled at me, fought me, called me an idiot as those humans pelted me with rocks. At the time I didn't know what hurt more, my wounds or Chara's words. But I knew I couldn't let them hurt anyone. It was... the right thing to do, wasn't it?"

"I don't know. I know that Chara didn't want you to be like them, though. Remember? Chara apologized to you," Frisk says, gripping Asriel's hands.
"When I saw them hurt you, when you were in pain, I couldn't feel it but... It was like being back there again. In that village where the humans attacked me. But instead of just being afraid, or wanting to not hurt anybody, I was just... so angry. I wanted to make them stop." Asriel closes his eyes, shifting his forehead from Frisk's down to their shoulder. His back shudders. "I'm not going to let myself get hurt again. I won't ever kill... but I'm not going to be killed either."

"We'll protect each other, Asriel. I'm here with you."

Asriel wraps his arms around Frisk, scooting closer on the bed so he can hug them tight. "We promised to be together forever, so I'm not going to let anything happen. I won't. I can't lose another best friend."

He sounds angry and... determined. Is this because of Frisk's Soul? The fragment of themselves inside of Asriel, keeping Chara's Soul together for him? If it is, there's nothing they can do about it now. That Soul is the only thing keeping him from turning back into Flowey. Better to have Asriel this way than not at all.

"Don't worry," Asriel says, like he can feel what they're thinking. Maybe he can. "I'm fine, it's just... I'm not sure if it's me, or you, or some part of Chara that's left inside of me but I'll be careful. I don't want mom or dad to ever be sad like that again. Or you, Frisk. I don't want to make you sad either."

"Then try not to let them make you mad. Let me help you. Don't ignore me when I tell you to stop," Frisk says, taking hold of one of Asriel's ears and giving a sharp tug.

He lets out a startled sound, almost a bleat but not quite. "I just wanted to protect you. To do what... what I couldn't do before."

Before? Does he mean for Chara? The way that Frisk can feel the locket being pressed into their back, they think that's what he means.

"This isn't like before. You aren't on the surface alone, and the humans are mean but they're not trying to kill anybody."

Asriel doesn't answer.
You're supposed to be reading. You have your book open in your right hand, propped up against the pillow, but you can't stop looking at your left. Flattening your hand and splaying your fingers, you wiggle your ring finger just enough so that the gemstones catch the light from the bedside lamp. Smiling, you let out a pleased sound as Sans nuzzles into the crook of your neck.

"it's not gonna go anywhere if you stop looking at it," he murmurs, sounding pleased with himself despite his words. "you've been on that page for five minutes, i wanna know what happens."

He hugs you close, pulling you back even closer against his ribcage as you lay in bed. One hand is up your shirt, between your breasts, while his other arm is under your neck. His unoccupied hand reaches clumsily for your left hand, not quite able to twist the right way to manage it so you close the distance, threading your fingers together. You turn his hand so you can see his ring, smiling. Even if you might be able to leave your presence on his Soul the way monsters do, you'll never be able to sense it, but this. You can see this. It's a little selfish, and territorial, but seeing this physical sign that he's yours... you like it.

"Sorry, it's hard to not get distracted," you say, turning your head so you can kiss his jaw. "It's pretty engaging."

Sans chuckles, a low rumble you feel against your back. "i admit, the idea of calling you my wife... it has a nice ring to it."

You set the open book down on the bed beside you, freeing your hand so you can reach back to cup the side of his face. Giggling, you try to turn and face him but he's holding you tight. "Do you vow to dress up for the wedding? I'd love to see you in a tux..."

"i promise to be properly groomed for the occasion."

You snort and dissolve into laughter. While you're distracted, Sans buries his face into your shoulder, shifting the hand in your shirt to cup your breast. You don't think much of it, trying to collect yourself as you're shaking, giggling so much tears are gathering in the corners of your eyes. God it's so good to just have something to laugh about. To forget everything that happened earlier, just for a little while.

So when his hand squeezes and his thumb drags over your nipple, the sudden jolt of pleasure makes you gasp. Arching your back more out of reflex than anything, you push your chest forward into his hand as your hips grind back against his pelvis. He groans, digging his fingers into the soft, giving flesh of your breast.

"i know i've said this plenty of times before," he says, mouth close enough to your ear that it makes you shiver. "but i love hearing you laugh like that."
"Hmm," you purr, tipping your head back to press your cheek against his, exposing your throat. "Tell me more things that you love. I think I need you to remind me."

"everything, hope, there isn't a single damn thing about you that i don't love," he says with such conviction that it makes you blush.

"Now you're just exaggerating," you protest weakly.

"everything," he says, almost growling as he takes your ear between his teeth. You let out a squeak that makes him chuckle. "the way we're late half the time we wanna go somewhere because there's always one more thing you forgot to do. how even though it drives me crazy sometimes, you're not afraid to stand up to me anymore when you think i'm wrong. your terrible taste in movies—"

"Hey. Titanic is a beautiful, tragic love story—"

"and every time you watch it you start bawling." You let out a playful grumble and he hums against you, squeezing your hand and toying with your ring. "i just want you to be happy. i always want you to be happy."

'T'm happy so much more than I'm sad," you murmur, using your free hand to trace down the length of his arm. He shivers. "I've got you, and that makes all the difference, Sans."

His grip on you tightens, kneading the breast in his hand and shifting his hips against you.

"i want you," he says, his voice low and rumbling against your back. He makes tiny nipping kisses along the line of your neck. You shudder, your breath hitching. "it's not enough just to hold you right now."

You want that too. A few minutes ago you were content to lay there in his arms, trying to read your book before going to sleep. But now you feel overdressed, frustrated with the layer of clothing separating you. Sans must feel the same way because he frees both his hands from you and starts tugging on the hem of your shirt. You sit up and pull it over your head, throwing it blindly towards the foot of the bed. Sans uses the opportunity to shimmy out of his boxers, yanking them out from under the comforter to toss them after your shirt. Then, before you can turn around to face him, he wraps his arms around your middle and pulls you back into the position you were laying in before. Your underwear finds itself joining the other clothing.

His teeth are on your shoulder, grazing your skin. The arm beneath you gropes at your chest, teasing the taut peak of your nipple between his fingers. You don't know what to do with yourself. You want to kiss him, to hook your fingers in his ribs, to lave your tongue across bone and make him shudder. But like this, with your back to his chest as his right hand dips down your belly and seeks out the aching heat between your legs, all you can do is grasp at his forearm with one hand while the other tangles in the sheets. A needy whine escapes your throat.

"i want you just like this, so i can feel every little shudder and hear every little gasp while i get you to come for me."

You're melting at the sound of his voice, the feel of the soft, magical pads over his fingers massaging over your folds, teasing at your entrance. He's so warm, you're starting to feel too hot under the covers and you lift your leg to kick them off of you. Sans takes advantage of the movement to grab your knee and pull it over his thigh, opening you up for him. Arching your back, you angle yourself against his pelvis for a cock that isn't there.

"I want more than your hand," you breathe, gasping as that hand drags down the inside of your
"tell me what you want." He rolls your nipple between his fingers, teasing over your outer lips and toying with the hair between your legs.

Sometimes it's still difficult for you to say these things out loud. To vocalize what you want him to do to you, with you. You shove the shy, anxious voice aside, willing yourself to ignore it. "I want you inside me, I want to feel you inside me as I come."

"shit babe, how can i say no to that?" he growls, taking hold of your hip and shifting a little bit to give himself a better angle. You know he doesn't need to, that technically he can do any angle, any position with his magic. But you have a certain fondness for the way the two of you did things in the start. As if he had the restrictions of a human. And he knows you.

You feel the telltale hum of his magic, against your shoulder as his tongue swirls against your skin. Then, as his fingers part your folds and he presses you back against him, he slowly eases his cock inside of you. Gasping, you rock against him, fisting your hand in the sheets as your other tightens around the arm at your breast, the band of your ring scraping against bone. He groans beside your ear, taking your shoulder between his teeth, biting down as he draws himself out and back in again. You moan his name.

It's slow, languid lovemaking. He wants to take his time with you, to savor the feel of you as he massages your clit. He sighs as he elicits a sharp gasp when he thrusts deep inside and stays there, then eases out again to continue the slow, gentle pace. You wish this could last forever, just wrapped up in his arms, filled, his teeth at your throat and thoroughly succumbed to him. You're cherished, and desired, and most of all loved.

You thread your fingers between his at your breast, your rings clinking together as you hold onto him. You're getting close, the tension is pooling low in your belly and and your legs are starting to tremble. "I love you. God I love you so much, Sans," you breathe, voice thick as you groan, then gasp as he focuses more intently on your clit with his fingers.

"i love you too," he murmurs, burying his face into your neck. "more than anything. i don't know what i'd do if i lost you."

That sobered you a little, pushes your orgasm just a little further out of your reach. But you don't mind, you have time for that. All the time in the world, here with him. "You've got me. I'm here," you tell him, letting go of the sheets to reach back and cup the side of his face.

He turns into your touch, sighing against your skin and nipping at the heel of your palm. "i've got you," he echoes back, nuzzling into your shoulder again. "you're mine."

"I'm yours," you agree, heart aching that you'd ever done anything for him to doubt it.

He's quiet again, save for the soft groans as he begins to pick up the pace of his thrusts, pressing deeper into you. That heat is pooling again, threatening to spill over as he circles your clit with a focus that lets you know he's trying in earnest. He closes his teeth on your neck, right where it joins your shoulder, the spot that makes you gasp and rock your hips back against him. Then, as he times a deep thrust with the stroke of his fingers, you cry out and come undone. He stays there, deep inside of you, biting back a groan into your shoulder as your inner walls clench around him. His fingers trace gentle circles, easing you through your climax until you let out a tiny whine. Pulling his hand away, you can feel the dampness on his fingers as he grabs your hip and draws a long, slow stroke out of you.
He takes his hand from your breast, turning it over so that he can hold yours properly, fingers tangled tight together. His jaw clenches, refusing to let you go and it hurts in the sweetest way, leaving you gasping. His thrusts are more urgent, his grip on your hip tighter, and finally, with a low growl deep in his chest, Sans reaches his peak.

Spent and trembling, Sans's magic fades, emptying from you as his body relaxes. You wince a little as he unlatches himself from your shoulder. Running your fingers over the tender flesh, you can feel the individual indentations from his teeth. He makes a small, worried sound, letting go of your hip and bringing his hand up to inspect the spot for himself.

"that's... going to be really obvious in the morning," he says, running his thumb gingerly over your skin. He lowers his hand to stroke up and down your arm, hugging you close. "are you ok?"

"I'm fine," you say, thighs still twitching as you will yourself to get your leg off of his. Somehow you manage. "I'm..." You breathe out a long, satisfied sigh. "I'm great. That was great."

He gives a weak chuckle, sounding relieved. You're glad. "good. that's... god i needed that."

You twist in his arms, finally getting the chance to look at him. His eyes are bright, a little fuzzy around the edges as he gives you a dazed, almost drunken smile. Peppering his face with kisses, you keep at it until he lets out a pleased hum deep in his chest. "I needed that too."

"today was—"

Silencing him with a kiss to his mouth, you cup his head in your hands and stroke the sides of his skull. "Don't think about today. Don't think about tomorrow. Just be here with me right now."

He closes his eyes, leaning towards you and sighing. You press your forehead to his as he wraps his arms around you. "ok."
"HEY! Wake up you two!"

Undyne's voice and the sound of her fist pounding on your bedroom door jolts you awake. You're still wrapped up in Sans's arms, held tight to his chest as you were when you fell asleep. He grumbles, shifting and lifting his head to glance at the clock.

"What the hell," you breathe, burrowing your face under Sans's jaw as you try to get your heart to stop pounding. "Is that Undyne?"

"ugh, it's eight am undyne, go away," Sans calls out, settling back down into the mattress and hugging you close.

But she does the opposite. She opens the door and you let out a startled squeak, grabbing for comforter. Sans beats you to it, pulling it up to your neck with a curse.

"shit, undyne get out!"

"Look, I'm covering my eye. But you two losers need to— HEY!" With a flare of blue, Sans raises his left hand. You watch, amused, as Undyne is wreathed in blue magic and swept off her feet, deposited neatly back in the hall. With another flick of his fingers the door closes and locks behind her. "FINE but I hope you realize you were only able to overpower me because you caught me off guard! If that was a real fight you'd NEVER stand a chance!"

Sans makes an amused sound, and not for the first time you find yourself wondering just how strong his magic actually is. You've never seen him actually fight before. "yeah, i know. but you shouldn't go barging into people's bedrooms."

"I'll be in the kitchen, helping Papyrus make breakfast," she says, followed by the distinct sound of her stomping down the steps.

*That* has you rolling out of bed, ignoring Sans's noise of protest. "No, no way, I'm not letting her. She'll make a huge mess and then won't clean it up and I won't be able to find half of my stuff for a week after..."

"pap'll clean it up, come back to bed," Sans grumbles, reaching for you across the mattress. You will yourself not to look at him and succumb to what you can only describe as puppy-dog eyes. Normally you'd be more than happy to indulge him, but...

"Hun there's got to be a reason she's here. When's the last time Undyne barged into our bedroom like that?" you ask him, retrieving your underwear from the foot of the bed and yanking them on. You go to the dresser to find some clothes, not wanting to waste time showering.

"uh, you mean when she had to tell you about alphys agreeing to move in together?" he asks, propping his head up on his hand and watching you as you pull a sports bra over your head.
"Right. It was really important to her," you say, adjusting your chest as a distracted smile starts to curve Sans's mouth. Rolling your eyes, you turn your back on him again, finding a pair of yoga pants you like to wear around the house. "Sans, whatever it is, it's probably about yesterday."

You hear him let out a sigh of resignation, followed by the creak of the mattress as he hoists himself out of bed. Pulling on an off the shoulder t-shirt from the top of your shirt drawer, you grab a hair tie from on top of your dresser and pull your hair back into a messy bun.

"I'll meet you downstairs, I have to stop her before she starts trying to cook anything," you say, hurrying out the bedroom door before Sans can say anything.

In the kitchen you find Papyrus stirring a big bowl of what looks like batter while Undyne pulls a carton of eggs out of the fridge. Oh no, no way. You're not letting—

"Deacon what are you doing here?" you blurt out, stopping dead in your tracks as you spot him sitting at the bar, resting his head in his hand and sipping at a cup of coffee. It doesn't look like he had much time to get dressed either. He's in sweats and a threadbare t-shirt that's a little too small for him. You can see part of his lower back as he hunches forward. The skin there is mottled and pink on his right side. Is that a burn scar?

"Undyne dragged me over. It's, uh, about the—" Deacon glances over his shoulder at you as you come up alongside him, eyes widening. "Wow are you okay?"

You're aware of Papyrus and Undyne turning to look at you as you realize, with growing embarrassment, that he's looking at your neck and shoulder. You reach up to put your hand over the tender spot that, in your hurry to dress, you didn't even think to cover. "Yeah I'm fine," you say, with forced casualness.

"It looks like a wild animal used you as a chew toy," he says, raising an eyebrow at you.

Undyne lets out a sharp, knowing laugh. "OH, you could say that," she says, flashing you a big, toothy grin. You blush harder.

Papyrus lets out a loud sigh, turning back to his breakfast preparations. You'd finally had to admit to him a couple months ago why exactly you kept ending up with bruises on your neck. It had gotten to the point where he was trying to help you with every little thing because you were 'so clumsy' when he wasn't around. You couldn't take it any more. So now, when you forget to wear something to cover the marks, or Sans doesn't keep to the easier spots to hide, Papyrus just gives the two of you a weary sigh and goes about his business.

Undyne, however, is a different story.

"Nice big one this time," Undyne remarks, still smirking. "Don't forget to wear a turtleneck to school tomorrow."

"You're one to talk. How are your wrists, by the way?" you say, raising an eyebrow as you fight to regain your composure. "Still sore?"

She crosses her arms over her chest, going a little purple before ducking back into the fridge. "That was ONE time. A MONTH ago."

"WHAT HAPPENED A MONTH AGO? DID YOU HURT YOURSELF?" Papyrus asks, sounding concerned. He finishes pouring a row of pancakes onto the griddle set on top of the gas stove, then turns to Undyne. "ARE YOU OKAY?"
Undyne casts you a glare from over the skeleton's shoulder. You just smile sweetly in return. While Undyne works on placating Papyrus, you glance back over at Deacon. He's grinning, watching the two of them as he sips his coffee. After a second he meets your eyes again.

"Nice job. Expertly deflected," he says, winking.

You roll your eyes. "So she what, went and woke you up too?"

"Mmm." He bobs his head, swallowing. "Nothing quite like the sudden terror one experiences when an angry fish-woman starts pounding on your front door and yelling at you until you get up."

Bewildered, you shake your head. "I don't understand, why—" Undyne, you blurt out, cutting into her conversation with Papyrus and closing the fridge. With what you hope is believable nonchalance, you pick up the carton of eggs and pull out a frying pan. "What's all this about?"

"a better question is what is deacon doing here?" Sans asks, and as you look up across the island he's pulling himself up onto a barstool, leaving an empty one between himself and Deacon.

Deacon gives Sans a sideways glance, setting his mug down on the bar. "Currently drinking coffee, eagerly waiting for some pancakes and eggs. Oh, and I'm not picky about how my eggs are done, whatever's easier for you, Hope."

Sans gives you a weary look, refusing to acknowledge Deacon's sarcasm. Well that's... okay you guess.

Undyne extricates herself from Papyrus, pushing him back towards the stove next to you to tend to the pancakes. Seeing that you've commandeered the eggs and she has nothing left to do, she circles the bar to stand next to Sans. You're a little surprised when she takes hold of your laptop.

"The news finally broke this morning. About what those humans did," Undyne says, typing something. "There's been some... interesting stories popping up."

The room is quiet for a moment, save for the sounds of Papyrus flipping pancakes and you cracking eggs into a big bowl. You knew this would happen, the only question is...

"and what are they saying?" Sans asks, leaning closer to look at the screen.

"Some of them are on our side. Actually, like half of them. They say that, uh..." She squints down at the laptop. "The actions of the human teenagers were 'deplorable and not representative of humanity as a whole'."

"And what are the rest saying? That it was Asriel's fault?" you ask, frowning as you bite your lip.

"A couple, but uh, that's not what they're focusing on. Which is good for Asriel, but..." Undyne trails off, clicking the button below the computer's trackpad.

"what?" Sans blurs out, pulling it away from her so he can get a better look. Startled, you watch as his eyes scan down the page. "this is—"

"What, what is it?" you ask, ready to circle around so you can read over his shoulder, but he holds up a hand. You dump the carton of eggshells in the trash, grabbing milk from the fridge.

"if a mere monster child can inspire this much fear, then what exactly are the adults capable of? we beg the government to reconsider allowing innocent people access to these—" Sans grimaces. "ugh. 'to these creatures, and hope that they realize just how much of a threat they pose to decent
you. You swallow, anger making your chest feel tight. "Gloria?"

He nods.

As far as you know, she still hasn't run the interview she did with you. Maybe you didn't give her any answers that she wanted. You'd been careful, but you know that you started to lose your temper. Was she waiting to use it for something else? Your stomach churns.

Undyne pulls the laptop back as Sans slides down off the barstool and heads over to the coffee maker. The carafe is still almost full and as you glance back at him he pulls two mugs down from the cabinet. You pour your scrambled egg mixture into the hot pan and start stirring, doing your best not to slosh any of it over the edge in your frustration.

"She's not the only one, but they all sound pretty similar," Undyne says, grimacing. "The comments on the articles are even worse."

"I'M SURE IT'S ALL JUST A MISUNDERSTANDING. THE REST OF THE HUMANS LAST NIGHT WERE ALL PERFECTLY POLITE!" Papyrus says, scooping the finished pancakes off the griddle and pouring a second batch.

"Well, most of them," Undyne adds with a sigh. She catches your eye and shakes her head, doing her best to sound reassuring. "Nothing anywhere near what happened before. Just some... rude comments."

"i don't understand what this has to do with deacon," Sans says slowly, coming up alongside you and setting a mug of coffee next to the stove. As he rests his hand on the small of your back you give him a weak smile.

"OH! Well, a couple of the articles mention him and Hope, since the two of them organized everything." Undyne is grinning, which has you curious and a little concerned. "Mettaton talked about the two of you, during his interviews. I'm surprised he didn't just take all the credit for himself, but—"

"undyne, what did they say?" Sans interrupts, setting his coffee down next to yours.

With a bark of laughter and a few clicks on the laptop, Undyne tells you. "They think Hope and Deacon are a couple!"

Deacon chokes on his coffee, smacking his chest and coughing. "What?" he splutters, echoing your own thoughts perfectly. "How?"

"We were nowhere near each other the entire night," you protest, gaping. "Undyne stop laughing! This is horrible!"

"Normally I'd be offended but I have to agree," Deacon says, wiping his mouth. "Didn't we just go over this?"

Undyne is still snickering, scrolling through something on the laptop. "Oh, oh, here it is. This is
what Mettaton said. 'They spent countless hours together, including time after school, working tirelessly to organize this event.' Then he just starts going on about how much he helped the two of you and how selfless he is —what a joke. But they really latched onto that first part, didn't they?"

"Is it because we're the only two humans in Ebott? No, that's not right, Mettaton hired some new people at the hotel, didn't he? I remember him saying something just last week..." Deacon trails off, shaking his head.

"Should we say something to them?" you ask, scraping the finished eggs onto a plate, glancing over at Deacon. He doesn't answer, running his hand through his hair and glancing at Sans.

"just ignore it," Sans says, cupping your elbow. To his credit, he sounds unfazed. After last night, you certainly hope this wouldn't bother him. "it doesn't matter what they think."

"Exactly. Besides, all they have to do is look at you two DORKS together to realize how disgustingly in love you two are," Undyne says, grinning at you and Sans. "They could probably get his dental records—if he had any— from that bruise on your shoulder."

You're blushing again, giving her a warning look. Turning towards Sans, you rest your hand on his arm. "Can you get me some more plates so we can—"

"WHOA, when did you give her the ring?!!" Undyne blurts out, coming around the bar to stand next to you, snatching your hand so she can get a better look. "I saw it while Alphys was working on it, but look at that! It looks perfect on you."

"WHAT RING? LET ME SEE! WHAT'S GOING ON?" Papyrus says, coming up behind you and craning his neck over your shoulder.

"bro, c'mon, give her some space. you've got her cornered up against the counter," Sans says, chuckling.

Undyne turns your hand towards Papyrus, clapping him on the back. "It's a human engagement ring! They exchange them before they get married."

"OH LOOK HOW PRETTY IT IS! I APPROVE WHOLEHEARTEDLY OF THIS STRANGE HUMAN TRADITION. SANS DO YOU HAVE A RING TOO?" Papyrus asks, and as you twist your neck to look up at him you catch a hint of sparkles dancing around his head. Does he have to think about making them, or do they just happen automatically? You've been meaning to ask...

Sans gives a lazy gesture with his left hand, giving off an air of nonchalance, but you can tell he's pleased. "yeah, bro. y'wanna look?"

Papyrus gasps, snatching his hand and yanking Sans's arm upwards. Sans just laughs, letting him do whatever he wants. "BROTHER I'M SO HAPPY FOR YOU!"

You glance over at Deacon, realizing that in all the commotion he's remained silent and seated at the bar. Catching his eye, you try to gesture him over with a tilt of your head and a grin, but he shakes his head and sips at his coffee. He gives you a weak, lopsided smile.

"DOES THIS MEAN THAT THE TWO OF YOU WILL FINALLY BE GETTING MARRIED SOON? WHAT SORT OF OTHER WEIRD TRADITIONS DO HUMANS HAVE WITH WEDDINGS?"
"not yet," Sans says, his smile fading a little. "it's sorta complicated, with how things are with the humans right now."

"HEY Pap, don't forget the pancakes," Undyne says, letting go of your hand after giving you a friendly squeeze. You think she sensed the change of mood just as easily as you did.

"OH, YOU'RE RIGHT!"

No one brings up questions about a wedding again during breakfast. Instead you discuss the articles about Halloween. You suppose that things could have been worse. Much worse, actually, but it seems as though the military did a good job of reassuring the reporters. The negative stories are mostly wild speculation and fear mongering, which is the sort of thing that you'd expect from the websites in question. Instead, you choose to feel reassured by the many supporters the monsters have.

As you're helping clear away the table, you watch as Deacon stops next to Sans, leaning against the back of your empty chair next to him. He gestures at Sans's left hand, at the metal and wood band circling his finger. Your fiancé glances up at him, raising a brow in silent question.

"Can I see it?" Deacon asks politely.

You see Sans mull the request over in his mind, and you do your best not to seem like you're eavesdropping as you stack a pair of coffee cups on a plate. "sure, pal, knock yourself out," Sans says, spreading his fingers and holding his hand up in the air.

He leans in a little closer, not reaching out to touch him like Undyne did with you. After a moment Deacon gives a small, appreciative nod. "Undyne said her girlfriend made the rings?"

"yeah. i had a few ideas, but she's the one that put them together," Sans says with a shrug. He closes his hand and sets it back down on the table.

"Well they look great. Good job," Deacon says, straightening his back. Glancing up, he gives you a wry smile across the table. "And you can stop hovering, we're playing nice."

Laughing, you roll your eyes and sweep yourself out of the room. "Fine, fine."
It's November.

Technically it's been November all day, but it's just now starting to sink in. October, Halloween, all the long hours working on that damn festival, it's finally over.

What you fail to remember, at this moment, is that Halloween is just the beginning.

Papyrus left with Undyne, and Deacon went home shortly after breakfast to grade some tests he'd been putting off. So when Toriel brings Frisk home, it's just you and Sans alone in the house. He's napping on the couch and you're folding laundry on the floor, mostly ignoring the soft sound of the television playing in the background. Frisk flings their arms around you from behind, kissing your offered cheek as you smile. (You made sure to change into a shirt with a collar before Frisk got home.)

"Hey sweetie," you say softly, cupping their cheek and kissing them back. "Did you have a good night?"

"Yeah," Frisk says simply, refusing to elaborate.

As they start to pull away you put your arm out to catch them, pulling them around to stand in front of you. You give them a now-practiced 'serious mom' face that you never could have managed just a few months ago. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay." They fidget with the sleeve of their sweater and rub their elbow.

"Your arm feel okay?" you ask, touching the arm in question.

Frisk nods. "Yeah. Grandma checked it last night and used her magic to make me feel better."

You raise your hand from their arm to their face, brushing hair from their eyes. "And how's Asriel?"

They look away, raising a hand to their chest. "Mostly okay."

You're not going to get anything worthwhile out of Frisk this way. With everything that happened last night you're not surprised that they're being a little cagey, not that it stops you from feeling frustrated about it. But if you push any more they're just going to pull away. You grab the piles of Frisk's laundry and stack them into the basket, handing it to them.

"Okay, why don't you go put your clothes away? Then come back downstairs and you can help me pick out what you want for dinner," you say, smiling.

Giving you a smile in return, you feel a little better as you watch Frisk hurry off towards the stairs. Toriel is waiting patiently in the foyer. As Frisk disappears from your sight she walks over to kneel
beside you, tucking her skirt under her legs. Without speaking, she starts helping you fold what's left of your pile. If it were anyone else you'd be embarrassed, but this is just how she is. You've given up on polite refusal of her help.

Her presence is comforting. She has this motherly air about her, something that, months ago, intimidated you even as it soothed you. Now it's welcoming, like a warm embrace. Peaceful, even. You look over at her as she deftly folds one of Sans's t-shirts, and after a moment you lean to the side to rest your head against her arm.

Toriel sets the shirt in her lap and reaches to envelop your hand in hers. The two of you sit in silence for a moment, save for the soft voices coming from the television.

"Mom," you say, the word still feeling a little foreign on your tongue. You don't always call her that. It's times when you need her to take on that role for you that you use the title. Or sometimes, like last night and right now, when you think she needs to hear it. "How are you doing?"

She lets out a soft sigh, and you feel her body sag a little against you. "Better than last night. It is kind of you to ask, my child."

"And Asriel?"

"Having Frisk with him was a comfort, I know that much. But..." Toriel squeezes your hand. "He has been through so much. Sometimes I forget, choose to forget, and that is not fair to him. To answer your question, though, he is much better. Still a little shaken, perhaps, but he will be fine."

"You've been through a lot too," you say, sitting upright again so you can look her in the eye. She looks tired, and you wonder if she got much sleep last night. It makes you feel guilty, considering how your own night went. You'd been so wrapped up in how upset Sans had been, and then the rings, and then, well, after the rings, that you'd just taken comfort in the fact that Frisk was with Toriel. It wouldn't have done anyone any good for you to sit around worrying, but part of you feels bad that you didn't.

Letting go of your hand and picking up the shirt in her lap, she resumes her folding. You watch her for a moment and decide to do the same. "I still cannot fully comprehend what happened to Asriel," she says, and though you can't tell her, you know that feeling so well. "But I know that he is back. Only, he is not the same child I remember. I am not certain if that is because my memories are flawed or because of his new Soul, but some part of me cannot stop mourning the child I lost."

You don't know what to say. Her words ring with an admission of guilt, and your heart aches for her. How horrible must she feel, to love the son she has now, but also yearn for the one she remembers? You wonder if Asgore feels the same way.

Biting your lip, you stare down at the shirt in your hands. "Getting him back isn't going to undo all the time you spent grieving for him."

She nods, and lets out a soft sigh. "Forgive me, I did not mean to speak of such sad things. I would much rather put it behind us." Straightening a stack of shirts, she straightens herself and clears her throat. "Frisk asked me about something curious this morning."

Glancing over at her, you see her doing her best to smile. You do the same. "Oh? And what was that?"

"Something about Thanksgiving? They asked me if we would be doing anything for the holiday," she says, frowning a little. "Though after Halloween, I admit that I have my reservations..."
"Oh! No, Thanksgiving is just a day most people spend at home with their families, having a big turkey dinner and taking a long weekend from work. It's nothing like Halloween," you say, smiling at the look of relief on her face.

"I think that perhaps we ought to go over a calendar and sort through all these human holidays," she says with a soft laugh.

"That's probably a good idea. Especially since this is the beginning of the holiday season..."

It's Wednesday. Hump day, a tiny voice in the back of your mind says, reminding you of the two years you spent waitressing. Not that any of your coworkers called it that, it's not like a restaurant has a middle of the work week. No, it was the customers, the ones dressed in business casual and joking about ordering cocktails on their lunch breaks.

None of your coworkers now call it that either. It's just not a term in the monster vocabulary, you guess.

But apparently it's in Deacon's.

'Hump day! Meet me in the parking lot, I want to blow this popsicle stand for lunch.'

You give Leveretta a small wave as you trail after the kids flooding out of the classroom, headed for lunch themselves. The monster's long, hare ears swivel in your direction as she waves back. Things have been pretty normal at school, despite the incident on Halloween. You've caught some of the teachers talking about it, but they discuss it like any other rumor or interesting story that gets passed around this place. Though, you guess that when it comes down to it, all it was was some teenagers being jerks.

You find Deacon outside, leaning against his car with an autumn breeze ruffling through his hair. He's so photogenic it's disgusting. You can't help but laugh as he glances over at you and raises his hand in greeting.

"What?" he asks you as you approach, pulling down his sunglasses to peer at you over the top of the frames.

You shake your head, grinning. "Just you, standing there like you're so cool."

"I am cool," he says, winking and pushing his glasses back up. He pats the roof of his car, making a hollow metallic sound. "How can I not be cool with Sylvie here?"

"Deacon I hate to break it to you, but I think that car is older than both of us combined," you say, laughing. "I can drive us, where are we going?"

"She's aged beautifully, how dare you imply otherwise. And no way, you've been resisting Sylvie's charms for too long, I insist that I drive." He opens the passenger side door for you, making an exaggerated sweeping motion with his arm to steer you inside. "And, uh, I still don't know the area that well so wherever you want to go."

Of course you've been resisting riding in Sylvie —the car, when did you start thinking about her, it, by name? The old thing looks like a rolling deathtrap. With a quick glance inside, you can only be thankful that he put covers over the seats so you won't be sitting on forty-plus years of whatever might have happened in this car. You open your mouth to protest again, but with one look at the earnest expression on Deacon's face you know you can't do it. With a sigh of resignation, you watch his face light up as you take a seat.
"Watch your fingers and toes, I have to slam the door to keep it shut," he says, making you rethink your decision. Once he sees that your extremities are safely inside, he flings the door shut with a loud bang that makes you jump, wincing. Oh no, this was a terrible idea. You can't help ducking your head and raising your hand over your face, heart pounding as your nerves light up in anticipation. For a split second you wait for raised voices that never come.

"Sorry, I know that was loud," Deacon says, his voice muffled by the car. "Everything okay?"

Balling your hands into fists, you shove them into your lap, willing yourself to give him a weak smile. "Yeah, sorry I'm fine."

You take a deep, steadying breath as he circles around to the driver's side, already feeling your pulse start to slow as he climbs inside. You're fine, no one is slamming any doors out of anger. As Deacon pulls his keys out of his pocket you take in your surroundings. The roof liner is missing, leaving you staring up at bare metal. The seats are so worn down you can feel the individual springs behind your back even through the cover. As the engine rumbles to life he reaches over to fiddle with a much newer stereo system that doesn't match the worn interior at all.

"So, where would you like to go?" he asks, left foot seeking out the clutch as, with practiced motions, he shifts the car into gear. You're rolling slowly out of the parking space as he glances over at you.

"Um, have you been to Grillby's yet?" you ask, because really, where else is there?

"What, you mean the bar down the street? I was thinking someplace downtown." There's only a handful of cars in the parking lot, but he follows the marked lanes anyway as he heads to the main road. The monsters can get special permits to drive, but not many of them have taken advantage of it. They're used to walking—or flying, in rare cases.

"I mean, if you want to—"

"No, no, if you want to do Grillby's that's fine with me. I've just never been there before. Is the food good?"

"Okay forget the food, why didn't you tell me about the hot bartender? Uh, no pun intended," Deacon says, stopping in his tracks. You have to push him inside so you can close the door.

"Trust me, I've heard them all. And so has Grillby, ad nauseam." You lead the way to a pair of stools at the bar, the usual ones you and Sans take when the two of you are alone. You sit in Sans's normal seat, pointing Deacon to yours. "They're old friends from the Underground."

Grillby comes to greet you, surprising you by reaching out for your hand where it's resting on the counter. His hands are hot but not unbearably so, and softer than you'd imagined. He adjusts his glasses, sliding his fingers under your palm and bringing —oh he's looking at your ring!— it closer to his face. Smiling, you wait for him to finish studying it. Looking up and returning your smile, his face brightens for a moment in a show of happiness. Then, he pats the back of your hand and lets you go.

"Did Sans tell you?" you ask him, looking down at your hand and back up again.

He nods.

"I think he's told more people than I have. He's so proud of himself, it's adorable," you say, eliciting a soft, crackly laugh from the fire elemental.
Grillby gives Deacon a questioning look, and as you look at your friend you realize he's staring. You tap him on the shoulder, making him jump. "Huh? Oh! Hi, I'm Deacon," he says, holding out his hand and turning on that winning smile.

You try not to laugh as Grillby just stands there, looking at his hand. "He moved in about a month ago, next door to us. Uh... did Sans mention him to you?"

Nodding, he takes hold of Deacon's hand and gives him a polite shake. The bartender gives him a scrutinizing look, not letting go for a moment. Then, without a word, he releases Deacon and looks at you.

"The usual for me," you say, recognizing the questioning expression.

"Uh, what's your usual?" Deacon asks you, and you're amused to see his ears turning pink.

"Burger and fries. Coke to drink."

"I'll have the same thing. Do you make the food yourself?" he asks, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the bar.

Grillby nods, smoothing down the front of his vest.

That winning smile is back on Deacon's face. "I can't wait to try it."

You have to resist the urge to hide behind your hands, even as Grillby lets off a tiny shower of sparks and walks off to the kitchen. Waiting until the fire elemental is through the door, you give your friend an agonized look. "What was that?"

"What was what?" he asks innocently.

"Didn't you just get Burgerpants's number like, on Saturday? Which, by the way, Burgerpants?" you counter, beyond bewildered.

"First off, he seems like a very nice —if not a little strange— guy. Clearly someone thinks so because, secondly, it seems like someone beat me to him. I called him yesterday and he turned me down because he started seeing someone," Deacon says with a wry smile. Well, he certainly doesn't seem heartbroken over it. "Do you know him?"

You hope that the someone who scooped Burgerpants up was the Nice Cream guy. He'd seemed a little upset when Deacon was flirting with him, so maybe that had given him the motivation to finally make his intentions clear. Maybe you should stop by the MTT Resort and ask Bo about it sometime...

"We've met," you say, pursing your lips. "And Burgerpants aside, now you're making eyes at Grillby?"

"I make eyes at everyone. I'm making eyes at you right now," he says, batting his lashes playfully.

Barking out a laugh, you shove his arm and he rocks away from you, grinning. "Fine, do whatever you want. After that fiasco with Muffet I'm sure you're in need of a good lay."

Deacon lets out a soft gasp. "How vulgar. Listen to you, aren't you somebody's mother?"

"You know very well that I'm not some innocent little flower," you retort, rolling your eyes.

"Yes, please, do tell me more," he says. He grins and leans towards you. "One of these days I'm
going to find out exactly how that whole thing works, with him being a skeleton."

You arch a brow. "Why are you so curious? Should I be worried? Maybe Sans was wrong about which one of us you were really after. Clearly you're trying to figure out if you can bone Sans."

Deacon's face twists into a look of horror, pulling away from you as you laugh at him. "No thank you, you can keep him and your little secrets all to yourself," he says, shaking his head vehemently.

Grillby returns just in time to see Deacon shaking his head while you try to stifle your giggles. Your friend tries to catch his eye again but he wanders off towards the other end of the bar, much to Deacon's disappointment. The two of your start eating, which lifts his spirits back up as he tastes the food.

You share an amiable silence until, your burger finished, you start picking at your pile of fries.

"So we're getting Thanksgiving off now," you say conversationally.

He balks, eyebrows shooting up. "Wait, we weren't getting Thanksgiving off?"

"Yeah, Tori didn't know any better. We actually went over all the holidays on Sunday so she could adjust the school calendar to be like the outside districts," you say, nodding to yourself. "We're doing dinner at her house. You should come."

Deacon hesitates.

"Unless you have other plans," you add with a casual shrug.

Taking a deliberate drink of his soda, he looks down at his food for a second before meeting your eyes again. "Who's 'we'?"

You smile. "Uh, the four of us, Tori, Asgore, and Asriel. I bet Undyne and Alphys too. Maybe Mettaton? He doesn't eat but who knows."

"That's like, ten people," he says, looking a little uncomfortable.

"So what's one more? Come on, agree you'll come," you urge, poking his arm with a fry.

"Hope, I don't know... They're your friends..." He trails off, rubbing his neck.

"Undyne thinks you're like the coolest human ever, after me of course," you say, smiling. "She's always bugging you about showing her more aikido. And Alphys has borrowed how many books from you now? Oh, and let's not forget that if Tori found out you were sitting at home alone, she'll throw a fit."

He sighs but doesn't say anything. You think he's starting to come around.

"Deacon, if I know you're home alone on Thanksgiving, I'm gonna throw a fit," you say gently. "It's just dinner. I'm making the turkey."

Deacon's expression finally cracks into a smile, letting out a soft laugh. "Okay, fine. Just because of the turkey."

"Good. Because it's pretty awesome, if I say so myself."

Grillby comes back around to gather up your plates and you realize that you ought to head back to work anyway. Your break is over soon. As you start to slide off the barstool you realize that
Deacon isn't following you. Instead he's leaning forward to talk to the bartender some more.

"So, what time do you get off?" Deacon asks him, grinning.

Grillby stops, looks at him, and in a soft, serious voice replies, "Why don't you come back here at four and we'll find out?"

Covering your mouth and turning away to keep from gasping out loud, you watch as, with a bounce in his step, Deacon heads to the door and waits for you to follow him.
"Deacon you can't go back there," you blurt out the second you're out the door, trailing after him as you head to the car.

Arching an eyebrow, still grinning like he just won the lottery, he glances over his shoulder at you. He slows his pace to let you come up alongside him. Then he pulls his sunglasses out of his jacket pocket and puts them on. "What happened to 'I'm sure you're in need of a good lay'? Bring that Hope back, I liked her."

"Grillby is one of Sans's best friends," you say, giving him a serious look as he unlocks the passenger door. You wave him away after he opens it, knowing you'll handle the loud slamming sound better if you do it yourself.

He circles around to his side and slides into his seat, watching you as you yank your door shut. "Push on it, make sure it's latched," he says, reaching for his keys. You test the door and it holds fast. "And I'm sorry, I didn't realize that Sans could just call 'dibs' on people. Does he lick things to claim them? Can he lick?"

"Yes he can lick, and—"

"Ooh, one more question answered. How does that work?" he asks, smirking over at you as he puts the car in gear.

You're blushing now, caught off guard. He tricked you! "That is not what we're talking about."

"It's absolutely what we're talking about. If you tell me a bit more about how Sans works, maybe I'll know what I'm getting into later. Or, well, what's getting into me." He waggles his eyebrows but keeps his eyes on the road as he pulls out of the parking lot.

You tip your head back against the seat, groaning in dismay. "Deacon no."

"Deacon yes."

"You two just agreed to put that animosity behind you, this isn't going to win you any points with him," you say, doing your best to try and sound serious.

Deacon seems to finally pick up on your tone, his expression growing more solemn. "Hope I'm not going to live in constant fear of pissing off Sans. He doesn't control me or his friend," he says, glancing over at you for a second. "I mean, you get that right? Not letting other people tell you what you can and can't do?"

You do. It's only in the past seven, well, almost eight months that you'd really been able to let yourself live your life. To be the mother you were afraid to let yourself become, to be independent from Kim, to work a job you technically didn't need to, but because you wanted to. No one told you to do those things. You did them for yourself, sometimes in spite of what others wanted.
Sighing, you purse your lips and roll your eyes. "That's a pretty serious point to try to make for the sole purpose of trying to get laid, Deacon. But yeah, I get it."

"So speaking of getting laid—"

"I'm not explaining to you how I have sex with Sans," you say, trying not to smile but failing.

"Fine, fine. Then we can talk about that dream of yours instead. I've waited four whole days without saying a thing!" He's grinning again, arching an eyebrow and drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. "How was I?"

"Deacon!" you splutter, embarrassed but laughing. "I never said it was a sex dream."

"Your mouth says 'no' but your beet red face says 'it was totally a sex dream',' he teases, wicked smile widening as he shakes with laughter.

"You're the worst," you say, wishing that you could be angry but failing spectacularly.

Deacon chuckles to himself, shaking his head as the two of you fall quiet. The radio is turned low, playing some classic rock song you recognize but can't name. The sun is warm on your skin and even in the car you can smell the crisp, fall air. Settling down into the seat, you can feel the rumble of Sylvie's engine. You're struck with the sudden urge to roll the windows down, blare the music, and play hooky from school like you did as a kid. Christopher had a friend three years older than you with a car, who was more than happy to take the two of you along with him. It was one of those days, skipping school, that had gotten you pregnant.

The wave of nostalgia passes and you let out a soft sigh, a small ache in your chest. You'd never give up anything you have now to go back to those days, but you don't regret them. How can you, when they gave you Frisk?

"Hey," Deacon says, sounding hesitant to break the silence between you. He glances your way, then focuses back on the road. "I just want to say that I'm glad that we're still friends. After that whole dream thing."

You shift a little in your seat. "What? Why wouldn't we be?"

He runs his hand through his hair, clenching his jaw. "I didn't know if things were going to go bad with Sans. If he was going to try and tell you not to spend time with me anymore. I... I was worried."

"He never tried to tell me not to hang out with you, even when I think he wanted to," you say, biting your lip. "I never even knew for sure that he didn't like you until Saturday. He... he knows that I've been happy, being friends with you, and he didn't want to ruin that. He obviously still doesn't."

Deacon nods, letting out a slow breath. "Yeah. No, I get that. I mean, why else would he come apologize? But I just wanted you to know that I'm happy we're friends, too. You're, uh, kind of my only friend. Definitely my best friend."

You rest your hand on his arm and he looks down at it, mouth twitching a little into a smile. He pats your hand for a second and takes hold of the steering wheel again. "I'm glad you moved here, Deacon," you say.

"Yeah, me too."
It's nice to have your normal evenings back. You get home at your usual time (around three) and spend the next hour reading while Frisk plays outside with Asriel. It's familiar. The old routine, just enjoying the peace and quiet of having the house to yourself for a little while. It reminds you of the good times back in Snowdin, waiting for everyone to come home from work and school. Family dinners. Speaking of, you start dinner around four, interrupted only by a text message from Deacon. 'I'll let you know how it goes. ;)'

You shake your head and reply, 'Good luck. Try not to get any more scars.'

It takes him a minute or so to answer. 'Wait, how did you know about that? The only time you've seen me naked is in your dream.'

'Saw it on Sunday. Your shirt was riding up in the back. Also, I'm not dignifying that second part with a response.' You send the long message, then, biting your lip, send a second one. 'Sorry, should I not have brought it up?'

'It's fine. Just surprised.' 'Anyway, talk to you later.' 'Or tomorrow.'

You stare at your phone for a second, trying to decipher if he's upset or not. It's not like you have any idea how he got that scar, it's probably personal. God how wouldn't it be? It was sort of big, you think. Grimacing, you go ahead and text him again. If anything he'll see it later.

'I'm sorry, I hope I didn't upset you. It was a dumb joke.' You stare at the words, drumming your fingers on the counter before just hitting send. There. The apology is out there, you can't take it back. Just get back to cooking.

You barely have time to measure something before you get a response. 'Don't be sorry, please.' 'It's my fault.' 'Somehow.' 'LOOK JUST DON'T WORRY.'

Letting out a small sigh of relief, you key in a reply. 'lol okay. Got it. Have fun.'

'That's the idea. ;)'

Frisk and Asriel dart into the kitchen, trying to find snacks before you shoo them out again empty-handed. They don't need to eat a snack, not when dinner will be ready in less than an hour. You're struck with how motherly that whole scenario was, and it makes you smile despite yourself. It's nice. This, your life, your home, your family. It's more than you could have ever dreamed of just a year ago.

God, a year ago you'd be waiting tables, scraping together tips to help support Kim and Frisk. Listening to your mother scold your child and get frustrated with their homework while you cooked. Serving yourself up the smallest portion at dinner and still not losing any of the baby weight as your mother liked to remind you. Or, as she liked to say, "It stopped being baby weight five years ago, now you're just fat."

Why are you thinking about her? You haven't thought about her in weeks, you think, but no that's not true. You thought about her earlier, when Deacon slammed the car door. It's unfair, the way that just one simple thing, one completely innocent act can just send you into a tailspin. Leaving you apologizing for little things, being oversensitive... Normally you can go weeks without feeling this familiar weight in the pit of your stomach.

You finish preparing dinner and do all of the dishes before Sans and Papyrus get home, even though the dishes aren't normally your responsibility. Even though in your head you know that it's okay to just leave the mess in the sink, your chest feels tight at the sight of it. You're in the middle
of scrubbing the stovetop when the brothers arrive.

Sans notices immediately that something is off, eyeing the dishes in the drying rack and you working diligently on the burners. Leaving his jacket in the foyer—he must have had a good day, you're glad—he sidles up next to you and takes hold of your hands. "hey, where's my welcome home kiss?" he asks, tugging you away from the stove.

"Hun, I'm in the middle of—" He cuts you off, wrapping a hand behind your neck and pulling you down to him. With a brief press of his mouth against yours, you're distracted enough that he manages to lead you a few steps further away from the oven.

"look at me. hey, i said look at me," he says, holding your face in his hands as you try to glance back at what you were doing. "what's bothering you, huh?"

"I was just—" No, you weren't 'just' anything. Catching yourself, you let out a ragged sigh and look down at the wad of paper towels in your hand. "Bad day. No, not a bad day. Just feeling anxious. Y'know?"

"did something happen?" he asks, letting go of your head and running his hands up and down your arms instead. The feeling is soothing.

"Just got startled by a loud noise. It's stupid..." Biting your lip, you just feel ashamed. You'd been doing so well, not letting these feelings get the better of you.

"it's not stupid. do you want to take it easy tonight? watch a movie or something?" He gives your wrists a gentle squeeze, studying your face.

You nod, glancing back at the stove again. You got half of it done, it looks uneven with grease splatters still marring the stainless steel finish.

"will you feel better if you finish that?" he asks quietly.

You nod again. "Yeah. But, you could keep me company. Dinner still has another ten minutes in the oven anyway."

"sure, babe. sounds good," he says, but seems hesitant to let you go. But he does.

"Okay, because I guess I should tell you about something. About Deacon." You get back to scrubbing the stove, spraying the top with cleaner as you avoid Sans's eyes. He circles around the island to sit at the bar, folding his arms on the counter.

"what about deacon?" Sans asks. His tone turns suspicious. "wait, does he have something to do with why you're upset?"

"Sylvie, dammit, the car is old and he has to slam the doors to keep them shut. That's all. But that's not what I need to tell you," you blurt out, glancing up at Sans. His expression is passive, if not a little curious. "He's going out on another date tonight. Or, god, I think it's a date? Honestly they might just be hooking up, it's unclear."

"and i need to know about this because...?"

"...I took him to Grillby's for lunch. He was hitting on Grillby," you admit, cringing. Oh god you shouldn't have said anything, but that would have just made it worse. He's going to be angry, right? Why isn't he—?"
Sans starts laughing. You weren't sure what you were expecting, but that definitely wasn't it. As you look at him, bewildered, his shoulders are shaking. "sorry, i know you were probably nervous about telling me, but good for him. grillby, i mean. been a while since he's bothered being with anybody," he says, resting his head on his hand. He's smiling at you. "he can, uh, let off some steam."

Relieved that he's not upset, you give him a weak smile. "Okay, but what's so funny? Why are you laughing?"

"you just had me worried babe. i thought something serious happened."

"I thought this was serious!" you blurt out, embarrassed. "Grillby is like, your best friend. I thought you'd be mad."

"grillbz is his own monster. he wants to screw your friend? fine by me," he says. He gives an amiable shrug. "i mean, no accounting for taste, i guess."

You roll your eyes at him but leave it at that.

Later, after Frisk and Papyrus are both in bed, you and Sans are watching a movie on the couch as promised. Laying against his chest, wrapped up in a blanket and content with your lot in life, you've all but forgotten about Deacon until you hear your phone chime. With a flash of blue and a flick of Sans's wrist, he guides it from the coffee table and into your hand.

'I think I burned my tongue.'
Deacon is sitting at your usual table in the break room, waiting for you. His mouth curves into a wide grin, and you feel his eyes watching you as you go to the fridge to get your lunch that you left here yesterday. You're not sure if you've been anticipating or dreading this moment all morning. Part of you is dying of curiosity, the other equally chilled by that self-satisfied look on his face. His food is sitting on the table, untouched, when you take your seat under his watchful eye.

He looks like he's about to explode.

"Okay, let's just get this over with." "So I'm sure you're dying to know what happened!"

You look at each other, and you cover your mouth as you start to laugh. "Oh my god, were you always this much of an oversharer?"

He blinks at you, looking a little abashed. "Am I oversharing? Is this not what friends do?"

Oh god, was he really not exaggerating when he said you were his only friend? How can that be possible? Look at him, how could anyone resist this sweet human being? You give him a reassuring smile, wishing you could go back and show him the enthusiasm he was clearly hoping for. "It is. Absolutely. I was just teasing, I want to hear how things went," you say with all sincerity, leaning forward a bit in your chair and resting your elbows on the table.

There's a moment where you think he's not going to tell you. He glances away, rubbing the back of his neck, but when he turns back around to face you he's grinning. "Do you want me to tell you everything, or should I just explain that text from last night?" he says with a wink.

"Please keep in mind we are in a school," you warn, trying not to laugh. "And other people use this break room."

He waggles his eyebrows at you. "You didn't answer my question."

Settling back in your chair, you sift through your lunch. "Everything. Within reason," you add quickly, seeing his smile turn mischievous. "I don't need a blow by blow recount of your night."

"Oh, you have no idea how accurate 'blow by blow' is," he says, making you blush as he shakes with laughter, trying, you think, not to be too loud.

"Deacon oh my god," you say. You cover your face with your hand as you accidentally squash part of your soggy sandwich in the other.

"So I go over there around four, like he said, and the place is empty. I guess he closes early on Wednesdays?" He gives you a questioning look and you nod. Grillby closes early on Wednesdays and opens late on Sundays, to give himself some time off. "Anyway so the place is empty, except for Grillby cleaning up the bar. I'm not really sure what to expect, and he doesn't say anything when I get there, just points at a barstool. I realized he wanted me to wait while he finished what
he was doing. So I'm trying to make small talk which is going as well as you can imagine —I don't normally go for the strong, silent types but uh, I'm glad I made an exception let me tell you— anyway so I'm sitting there, trying to make conversation, and then he just comes over and grabs my shoulders, turning the barstool around so that I'm facing him. For a second I thought maybe I was annoying him, you know?"

He pauses, giving you a chance to respond. It takes you a second to realize it, and you hurriedly swallow the food in your mouth. "Yeah. He just doesn't say much. So what did he do next?"

"He, uh," Deacon actually hesitates, his sly grin turning a little embarrassed as color rises up the sides of his neck and up to his ears. He swallows. "He kissed me. I didn't even realize he had a mouth. It felt a little weird at first, but he was really warm, as you'd imagine. And, for the record, he has a tongue. I have intimate knowledge of Grillby's tongue and I'm not at all ashamed of it."

"If you guys had sex at the bar I'm going to scream," you say, torn between amusement and horror. Deacon laughs, that sly look coming back at your discomfort. "Okay, that's jumping ahead but no we didn't do anything inside or around the bar area. Relax, your favorite restaurant is safe and undebauched. Well... mostly."

"Deacon."

"I love when you say my name like you're all scandalized. It's probably my new favorite thing," he says, downright giggling at you. "So I don't even care if this ends up sounding like one of Sans's puns, because it was hot okay? Like, he wasted no time. It was all hands and mouths and it was great."

"Did he talk to you at all?" you ask, feeling a little confused. "Did you... just hook up? Was there a date anywhere in this encounter?"

Deacon shrugs. "He made me dinner after. Upstairs in his apartment. And I mean we know that I can do enough talking for the both of us, I guess," he says, some of his amusement fading away as he starts to pick at his lunch. Catching himself, he gives you a crooked smile, his tone lightening. "Hey, you're getting me off track again. So we're at the bar, making out, things are getting steamy, clothes are unbuttoned, unzipped, etcetera. And right as he's got his hand around—"

You flash him a warning look as the break room door swings open. Glancing behind you, you and Deacon give the other staff a polite greeting as they claim a table on the other side of the room. He rolls his eyes. "So we go upstairs instead, at that point. Which was good because I was starting to get uncomfortable with the edge of the bar pressed into the middle of my back. And considering you don't want a 'blow by blow' retelling, I'll just say again that 'blow by blow' is exactly right," he says, with a shit-eating grin that might put Sans to shame.

"Thank you, for sparing me the details," you say, chuckling and taking a drink of water. "Also his cum burned my mouth."

Choking, and barely managing to avoid not spraying Deacon with a mouthful of water —though maybe you should have— you gape at him. "Deacon! Oh my god."

Somehow he manages not to dissolve into laughter. Instead he just gives you this placid look, the corners of his mouth twitching. "I'm fine, by the way. It was more like... really hot coffee."

"Please stop," you beg, coughing and wiping tears from the corners of your eyes as you're trying
not to laugh because it hurts.

"Hope, are you okay over there?" one of the other teachers asks from across the room.

"She's fine, her water just tried to attack her lungs," Deacon says, waving them away. He reaches over to pat you on the back, trembling with suppressed laughter. "Really, are you going to be okay?" he asks in an undertone, doing his best to look concerned.

You draw in a few shallow breaths, nodding as you clear your throat and take another careful sip of water. "Yeah, I'm okay. But, what the hell?" you blurt out, eyebrows shooting up towards your hairline.

"I'd apologize but that would be insincere," he says, eyes twinkling with joy as he picks at his lunch again.

Shaking your head, laughing weakly, you rest your chin on your hand and you give him a scrutinizing look. You're not sure if he's happier about the great sex or being able to tell you about it. "Are you going to see him again? Maybe go on a date?"

"I don't know about a date, but absolutely. I'm going over again tomorrow after they close."

"Grillby's closes at two am on Fridays."

"It's the weekend. I will sacrifice sleep for amazing sex in a heartbeat," he says dismissively, finally starting to eat his lunch in earnest now that he's finished his story.

"So is that all it is? Just sex?" you ask, feeling a little sobered as you look down at what's left of your own food.

He arches a brow, chewing. He covers his mouth to speak as he swallows. "Yeah? Is that a problem?"

You shrug. "No, I mean, if that's what you want. Sorry, I guess I just assumed you'd want a relationship."

"With Grillby? Hope, I tried talking to him, I really did, but I can't get a read on the guy. You say he's friends with Sans?" He pauses, waiting for your nod of affirmation. "How does that work?"

"He's a great listener?" you offer.

Deacon shakes his head. "My brilliant sense of humor doesn't do well in a vacuum. I need someone to play off of. When I was talking to Grillby I just ended up getting nervous and I start rambling when I'm nervous. You know."

You do know.

He lets out a heavy sigh, running his hand through his hair and slumping back in his seat. After a second he gives you a small, resigned smile. "I'm just going to enjoy this while it lasts. Because unless he starts talking to me, which I don't think he will, it isn't going to work. Which is fine. Things don't need to last for the long haul to be good for the moment."

That's true, you guess, but you get the feeling that this says more about Deacon's life than he intends. He came to Ebott with no friends, no family that he's told you about, and a small trailer full of belongings. Just what were things like for Deacon before he came here? Maybe, one day, he'll tell you.
Sans has been feeling better since Halloween. Better about you, even though he had no real reason to worry. Better about Deacon, if only through his own desire to put it behind him. Just better in general. But there's one thing that he's still worried about. One person. Well, two people.

His brother and Mettaton.

As far as he knows Papyrus hasn't spoken to the robot about how he's been feeling. Things there seem to have stagnated, or maybe he's just waiting. All he knows is that if Mettaton does one more thing to hurt his brother's feelings—accidentally or intentionally—he's not going to stay quiet again.

It hasn't even been a week since the festival, so maybe his brother is just trying to be patient. But when has Papyrus ever been patient? If he wants something he does everything in his power to seek it out, almost immediately. Is he nervous? Well, he's always been sort of shy when it comes to that stupid, overgrown calculator.

"—Mettaton's expecting me."

Pulled out of his own head by the sound of Mettaton's name, Sans glances over at Alphys where she's sorting through some schematics. He's supposed to be helping her, but after sifting through a second stack his mind started to wander.

He blinks. "run that by me again, alphys? sorry."

She adjusts her glasses, shoulders sagging as she sighs. "I need to get going a little early. Mettaton's expecting me," she says, the tip of her tail twitching distractedly. "Not right now, but maybe an hour early."

"ok," he says, trying to squint down at the papers beneath his hands and hope they make more sense. It's not doing much good. The handwriting is small, cramped, and nearly illegible, which renders the diagrams almost useless. He thinks these were done by whoever built the machine sitting in his workshop. With a frustrated noise, he looks up from them and rests his elbow on the table, cupping his jaw and looking over at Alphys again. "so what's going on with mettaton? he asks with what he hopes is a casual tone.

Alphys flips through a few pages, tail tapping against the floor as she compares a few items before glancing over at him. "Huh? O-oh, I uh, I need to fix one of his arms," she says, picking absently at one of the ridges at the back of her head.

He arches a brow. "what happened to his arm?"

"Undyne broke it," she says, pointedly not looking at him as she peers down at the schematics in front of her.

"what?" he blurs out. He tries to keep the happiness out of his voice, and thinks he does a pretty good job.

"L-last night. He came over, wanting to talk to me about something for the hotel, and she wanted to talk about Papyrus," she says, and that certainly grabs his attention more than she already had. Alphys casts him a cautious glance, and he spots a few dots of sweat gathering on her brow. "Your brother t-told us a little about what happened, on Halloween. With Mettaton. U-Undyne was pretty upset, but he asked us not to say anything to him about it."

Sans nods, clenching his jaw. "yeah. i don't doubt it."
"But you know Undyne. She thought she might try to say something anyway? Indirectly. At least, indirect for her," she mumbles, shaking her head. "So she asked him when the last time he talked to Papyrus was, and he said on Saturday, and she started yelling at him, and accidentally sort of... broke his... arm."

"so, uh, what did he have to say for himself after that?" he asks, unable to keep from grinning.

"They just sort of yelled at each other and Mettaton stormed off," she says pitifully, hiding her face behind her hands. His own amusement is tempered by just how miserable she looks. "I had to ask Undyne to not be home when he comes over later. I hate being caught in the middle."

Sans feels guilty, knowing that this is how you must have felt getting stuck between him and Deacon. He also just feels bad for Alphys. Trying to deal with Undyne and Mettaton at the same time must be like dealing with two forces of nature. It wouldn't faze him too badly, but Alphys...

He gets up out of his chair to come up next to her, rubbing between her shoulderblades. "where's she going?"

"Probably to your house. She might be going home with Hope after work. I talked to her at lunch and she said that she'd catch her before she left," she says. She lets out a ragged sigh, peeking between her fingers to look up at him.

Sans grits his teeth, wondering if he's going to regret the words about to come out of his mouth. "how would you feel about me sending pap over to your place?"
Alphys is starting to think that maybe this isn't a good idea after all. Mettaton is in a foul mood; he's barely speaking to her, which is unlike him. She can't imagine that Papyrus showing up unannounced will help him any.

They're sitting at the dinner table, her chair turned to face him as he rests his good arm on the tabletop with his chin in his hand. She has her tools and supplies spread out beside her. She really ought to see about getting a proper workshop on the surface, like the one Sans had built for himself. Especially since Mettaton's body seems to be in a constant state of maintenance (no thanks to her overzealous girlfriend).

The tense silence between them is almost unbearable. She feels responsible for Undyne's behavior, which is silly but she can't help it. Maybe she could have said more to try and calm her down, done something but instead she just froze and watched the argument escalate to the point of violence. Yes, Mettaton's body is easily —sort of— repairable, but that doesn't excuse what she did. Not that a small part of her doesn't think that in some small part he deserved it. At least a little.

"H-how have you been doing?" she manages to say, her voice tight and too quiet.

But he hears her. Mettaton rolls his eyes, jerking his head to the side to flip his hair out of his face. It slides back to where it was a moment later. "Well darling, I've got a broken arm, I should be back at the hotel making sure that my new human employees are adjusting well, and right now I think you're the only person who I don't pay that's willing to speak to me. How are you?"

Normally Alphys would pull away at his tone, fall silent and just get back to work. It would be easier. But he's just so wrong that she can't help but protest. "What are you talking about? P-Papyrus keeps trying to talk to you. He's been upset that you've been brushing him off."

He turns his head away from her, and she thinks that if she wasn't in the middle of repairing the split wires and crushed metal in his arm he'd get up and walk off. "That's fine," he says coldly. "What's one more person that's mad at me?"

This isn't right. This isn't like him at all! Her fingers tense on his arm and she looks up at him, trying to see his face. But he's hidden behind his hair. "Mettaton, you can always t-talk to me. What's bothering you?"

His nose scrunches up and he casts her a disapproving look. "No, because then I'd just be using you. Just like I use everyone," he says, baring his teeth with a curl of his lip. "That's what Undyne said, isn't it?"

"I'm o-offering you my help. There's a difference," she mumbles, going silent for a second as she yanks out some frayed wires so she can replace them with new ones. "You're my friend, even if you're a-ah bad one s-sometimes."
He flinches a little at that. If she looked up at his face she'd see the slight widening of his eyes and the way his mouth twitches. Instead of protesting, the way she expects, he lets out a small sigh. "Friend," he says simply.

Alphys pushes her glasses up her nose, frowning up at him and tugging on his arm. "Yes, f-friend!" she says, raising her voice by a fraction. "Mettaton I s-sent Undyne away just so you'd b-be more comfortable! Undyne! The woman I l-love more than anything, for you. You make it s-so frustrating and hard sometimes, but I c-care about you too, you know."

His expression softens, meeting her eyes before he hangs his head and stares down at the table. Shoulders sagging, he buries his hand in his hair and searches the woodgrain, like it might help him find the right words to say. It's strange, seeing him like this. Vulnerable. "You're right, I am a bad friend," he says quietly.

"Only s-sometimes," she protests, returning her attention to her work. "Mettaton, what's going on with you and Papyrus?"

"Nothing," he says, too quickly. His face crumples.

"You've been avoiding him," she presses.

"I've been busy."

"You've been avoiding him," she repeats, tugging on his arm again.

"Yes, because it's easier to avoid him than try to figure out what he wants from me! Or what I want from him," Mettaton blurts out, jerking his head up and twisting to look at her, wide-eyed and desperate. He tears his good hand from his hair, slapping his palm against the table as he grimaces. "I don't even think that I should want anything from him. I don't deserve him, Alphys."

Her grip on him relaxes but she doesn't let go, too stunned for a second to say anything. But after a moment she finds herself. "What do you m-mean?"

"I mean that I tried to kill half his family. Every time I go over to the house Sans watches me like he thinks I'm going to do something, and I can tell Hope still isn't comfortable either. Oh she hides it better than Sans does, but she hasn't forgiven me," he says, searching her face. "Not that I blame them, I suppose. And then there's Papyrus. How can he possibly not hold that against me?"

Alphys can't help it. She smiles at him, a patient smile that she follows up with a small sigh as she pats his shoulder. He gives her a confused look, the apertures in his eyes tightening as he focuses. "Because he's Papyrus. He sees the b-best in everyone. Maybe you should let him show you what he sees in you."

He doesn't seem to know what to say to that. Tears well up in his eyes before he blinks them away, catching himself and looking up at the light fixture hanging over the table. Alphys lets her hand rest on his shoulder, and to his credit he actually leans a little into her touch. He covers her hand with his, squeezing gently.

"You don't have to know w-what you want from your relationship right now," she says, after a moment. "And, trust me, avoiding him isn't going to help either of you. J-just spend time with him. You'll figure it out."

"Thank you, Alphys," he says quietly, glancing over at her and giving her a weak smile. "You're a good friend. Much better than I deserve."
"You're r-right," she says, letting him go and getting back to work on his arm as he watches her. "But you've got me anyway. So maybe you should remember that once in a while and visit, instead of only coming to me when you need things."

Chastised, he purses his lips and flicks his hair out of his face. "I suppose that can be arranged, if that's really what you want."

Alphys smiles at him, a twinkle in her eye as she double checks her work on the wires and inner workings of his arm. It's looking good, she thinks she'll be able to replace the broken pieces of the outer shell here in a moment. "There's this new anime I think you'll like. It's been giving me ideas for some upgrades to your body!"

His eyes widen and he looks scandalized, pressing his hand to his chest. "You keep your grubby little hands off my fabulous chassis," he protests, fixing to launch into a full-blown tirade before he notices that she's giggling. True to form, he arranges his face into a magnificent pout. "Oh, I see. You're just trying to tease me now, aren't you?"

Nodding, Alphys gives him a quick glance up from her work and smirks at him. But before she can say anything there's a loud knock at the door, followed by a loud, friendly greeting. Her eyes widen and she and Mettaton share a similar, shocked expression. She completely forgot that Papyrus was coming over!

"What is he doing here?" Mettaton hisses, gripping the edge of the table. "Undyne is at his house."

Sweating, her expression turns guilty. "S-Sans sent him over so that m-maybe you two could sort things out," she admits carefully.

"HELLO? DOCTOR ALPHYS?" Papyrus calls out to the house, and she can hear him getting closer.

"When you said I should spend time with him I didn't think you meant right now!" He casts an anxious look over his shoulder, towards the direction the skeleton's voice is coming from.

"Y-you can do this Mettaton. He didn't even know you were going to b-be here," she says. He doesn't have time to say anything else —though he looks like he'd like to— because Papyrus walks into view. The skeleton catches sight of her, opens his mouth to say something, and then promptly snaps his mouth shut again with an audible click of teeth the moment he sees Mettaton. There's a moment where the two of them look at each other, unsure of what to say. Alphys pretends to busy herself with the complex wiring, but mostly she's just listening. Waiting for one of them to speak. She desperately wants the two of them to just be happy together, be it as friends or maybe something else.

"Why hello there, darling!" Mettaton says, flashing him a bright smile. "Fancy seeing you here."

Papyrus frowns a little, hooking his fingers on the collar of his v-neck shirt. He glances down at the floor. "YOU DON'T HAVE TO PRETEND TO BE HAPPY TO SEE ME. IN FACT, I WOULD PREFER IT IF YOU DIDN'T PUT ON THAT ACT, SINCE WE'RE IN PRIVATE," he says, and Alphys can feel Mettaton flinch beneath her hands.

Mettaton's smile is gone. Instead he looks as though he was slapped across the face. "Papy I just wasn't expecting to see you, but I'm not unhappy," he says softly, twisting around in his seat so that he can look at him better.

Papyrus tugs on his shirt, glancing back towards the front door. "IF YOU DON'T WANT ME
HERE, I CAN LEAVE." He takes a step backwards, and before anyone can say anything, he turns on his heel and heads back the way he came. Alphys lets out a startled squeak as Mettaton rushes to his feet, chasing after him. "Papyrus wait!" he calls out, his broken arm dangling uselessly at his side as he hurries down the hall.

Hesitating for a second, torn between wanting to give them some privacy and dying to know what's going to happen, Alphys gets up from her chair and peeks around the corner. Mettaton has his good hand wrapped around Papyrus's wrist, stopping him before he can reach the door. The skeleton isn't struggling, but he isn't looking back at him.

"MAYBE SANS IS RIGHT ABOUT YOU. I HOPED THAT ONCE HALLOWEEN WAS OVER YOU MIGHT COME TALK TO ME ON YOUR OWN BUT YOU HAVEN'T. IF YOU DON'T WANT TO BE... FRIENDS... THEN JUST SAY SO!" He hesitates, shaking his head as his shoulders sag.

"What did Sans say about me?" Mettaton asks, his tone icy.

"THAT YOU ONLY WANTED TO TALK TO ME WHEN THINGS WERE BAD FOR YOU. AND NOW THAT THINGS ARE GOING WELL, YOU DON'T... NEED ME ANYMORE," he says. His hands clench into fists. "BUT I... I THOUGHT THAT MAYBE YOU STILL WANTED TO SPEND TIME WITH ME. I DON'T WANT YOU TO BE UNHAPPY."

"I don't want you to feel obligated to cheer me up." He lets him go, shaking his head. "You, out of everyone, don't owe me anything, least of all your time. What do you want?"

Papyrus finally turns, just enough so he can look at Mettaton. If he sees Alphys watching them, he doesn't make any sign. He relaxes his hands, bringing them up in front of his chest. "I DON'T UNDERSTAND..."

"What do you want? What would make you happy? Not me, not Sans, not anyone else on this damn mountain. You, sweetheart," Mettaton says softly, spreading his fingers and holding out his hand to Papyrus.

The skeleton's jaw goes a little slack, looking down at Mettaton's hand and then back up at his face. He's silent for a moment before his mouth shuts with a small click of teeth. Then, with more hesitation than Alphys is used to seeing from Papyrus, he reaches out and takes Mettaton's hand. Even from here she can tell the grip is tight, solid as he curls his fingers around the robot's palm.

"I WANT TO SPEND TIME WITH YOU AGAIN. LIKE WE DID BEFORE," Papyrus says, straightening his shoulders.

Mettaton lets out a small sigh of relief, smiling as some of the tension seeps out of his body. There's a small whirring noise as he relaxes, and he looks embarrassed for a second. "Papy I'm so sorry. I am, I swear it darling."

It's as though Mettaton said the magic words. Papyrus's face breaks out into a big grin, and he wraps him up into a big hug. Mettaton barely even hesitates; his good arm circles the skeleton's chest twice over as he hugs him back, resting his brow on his shoulder.

"I FORGIVE YOU."
You hadn't known it was possible for Papyrus to be more energetic and happy than he already was on a day to day basis. Apparently all it took to reach a new peak of unbridled joy was Mettaton apologizing to him and agreeing to go on a 'date' on Sunday. You picture the word 'date' with finger-quotes, because the last time Papyrus went on a 'date' it was with Frisk.

As far as you can tell, the situation with Papyrus and Mettaton is in an ambiguous gray area. Not quite just friends, but you hesitate to ascribe anything romantic to their relationship. Whatever it is, Sans is conflicted. He's glad to see his brother happy, as expected, but you know that he'd prefer it wasn't with Mettaton. But, he also confided in you that he had been the one to get Papyrus over there to talk to him in the first place. Maybe reconciliation hadn't been his intended purpose, but if so he doesn't tell you. A resolution, one way or the other, had been needed.

But Papyrus's enthusiasm is infectious, and even Sans can't stay too moody about it for very long. Not that he doesn't reiterate to you, in private, that if Mettaton hurts his feelings again he's going to wind up with more than just a broken arm. Undyne may have gotten to him first this time, but Sans has no problem finishing what she started.

You've already resigned yourself to Mettaton's presence in your life. For the most part, you've let the fact that he tried to kill you and Frisk go. It doesn't do you any good to try and hang it over his head and, generally, he's treated you with a good deal of respect and consideration. Staying angry wouldn't help anyone, least of all you.

And so on Sunday, with Papyrus out for the day with Mettaton, and Frisk not coming home from Toriel's until later this afternoon, you and Sans have the house all to yourselves. It says something about the comfortable, relaxed stage of your relationship you've reached that instead of pawing at each other, Sans starts reading on the couch while you play a game on your phone. It's a dumb, free puzzle game, and currently it's frustrating you. There's some kind of match you need to make with the little, brightly colored pieces but you just don't see it.

Sans puts his arm around your shoulders and pulls you closer, then uses the same hand to point at your screen. "move the purple one to where the blue one is," he says, nuzzling into your hair.

"I thought you were reading," you grumble, annoyed that you didn't get to figure it out yourself. But you do as he says, and you watch the cascade of colors as new pieces slide down to refill the screen.

"i am reading." He holds up the book in his hands, flashing the pages at you as if to prove his innocence.

A few words stand out to you in the brief glance you get at the book. Most of them are not suitable for polite company, to say the least. Feeling heat creep across your cheeks, you set down your phone and wrap your hands around his so you can turn the cover towards you to confirm your fears. On the cover are a scantily clad man and woman in horribly inaccurate period wardrobe you
think is meant to be medieval. Instead they look more like renfaire rejects.

"Oh my god, why are you reading this?" you blurt out without thinking, blushing in earnest now. Oh god, you could curl up in a hole right now.

Sans just gives you a confused look, glancing back at the book and up at you again. "should i not be? you never said there were any of your books you didn't want me to read."

Covering your face with your hand, you peek at him through your fingers. "I never thought you'd want to read the romance novels," you say.

Among your collections of sci-fi and fantasy, you'd amassed a small collection of cheap, trashy romance novels. The used book stores always seemed eager to get rid of them and, well, you were just as eager for new things to read. You'd always had a soft spot for a good romance, and sometimes, amidst the mediocre paperbacks full of 'heaving bosoms' and 'straining breeches' there were some gems. Ones you'd dog-eared to mark your favorite scenes, and read over and over again. Despite the horrible cover, Sans happens to be reading one of the good ones.

"i'm learning some new things," he says, raising a brow at you and giving you a wide, smug smile. Flipping back a few pages, he finds a spot you'd marked, including the fine line of pencil you have traced around a set of paragraphs. "including some things i'm wondering if you wanna try sometime."

Mortified, you groan and fall to the side, burying your face in the couch cushions as you fold your arms over your head. "No, oh my god this is so embarrassing!" you cry out, muffled.

He's chuckling softly, and you feel him wrap his arms around your middle and pull you back upright. You hide your face in his shoulder as he settles you onto his lap, holding you. "why are you embarrassed, babe?"

"Because it's...! I dunno, sex stuff. From before I met you," you say, trying to put into words why you feel this way but struggling.

"ok, but we do 'sex stuff' all the time," he teases, resting his chin on top of your head. "i like seeing the things you liked from before. the books, the movies..." He trails off, chuckling to himself. "'sex stuff,' he repeats again, like he can't help himself.

You let out a distressed whine, a wordless sound of protest. This is horrible. As if to save you from your misery, your phone starts to ring. Scrambling out of Sans's lap to snatch your phone off the couch beside you, you cast your fiancé a mildly scathing look as he settles back into the cushions and makes a show of reading more of the offending novel. You're so flustered you don't have time to wonder why Deacon would be calling you just before noon on a Sunday.

"Hello?" you say, trying to sound composed as you answer the phone, walking across the room because you feel the need to be standing right now.

"Hey!" Deacon answers, sounding energetic and downright perky. "You at home?"

"Yeah, what's up?" you ask, rubbing your cheeks as if you can remove the lingering blush through sheer willpower.

"You doing anything?"

"No, not at the moment. Do you need me?" You glance over at the couch and see Sans watching you. "It's Deacon," you tell him. Understanding flickers over his face and he returns his attention to
"I was wondering if I could come over. I'm leaving Grillby's right now," he says, punctuated by the familiar sound of Deacon starting up his car's engine. It's a loud, low rumble, unhindered by insulation.

"Grillby's opens late on Sundays," you say, confused for a second before he starts to laugh. You quickly catch on to his meaning at that point, pressing your hand to your forehead. "Oh. Right." You peek at Sans and he's watching you again. "Would you be okay with Deacon coming over?"

Sans shrugs.

"Yeah, you can come over. Have you eaten yet?"

"Not food, but—"

"Deacon, I swear to god," you hiss into the phone, earning yourself a loud laugh from your friend.

"No, I haven't had lunch. Did you want me to pick anything up?"

"Doesn't he normally feed you? Isn't that your arrangement now?"

"Is that what you think of me? Prostituting myself for food?" He feigns offense, and you can just imagine the look on his face. It makes you smile. Then he clears his throat. "No, I just didn't want to sit there trying to fill the awkward, post-coital silence."

"Is he still not talking to you?" you ask, frowning a little.

"Hey, it's surprisingly tricky trying to drive a stick while also juggling a cell phone so let me focus on this, okay? I'll be over in a few," he says, not answering your question.

"Yeah, okay. Be safe."

"I think I'll somehow manage on these busy Ebott streets," he says, dripping with sarcasm. "Later, Hope."

"Later," you say, and hang up the call.

"trouble in paradise?" Sans asks, marking his place in the book and setting it on the end table beside him, face-down.

"Sounds like Grillby isn't talking to him," you say, pocketing your phone. "I mean, it's only been what, five days? And this is the third time he's seen him, at least. But... I dunno."

Sans mulls this over for a bit, folding his hands over his chest as he looks at you from his spot on the couch. You run your hand through your hair, sighing and glancing towards the front door. "it's not gonna work out. grillbz isn't gonna just change," he says. "but didn't deacon already tell you that?"

"I know, but..." You trail off, brow furrowing. "I dunno, I just kinda hoped maybe it would? He seems lonely."

He huffs a little at that. "isn't that why he's coming over here? to hang out with you?"

"Yeah, I guess."
Sitting up, Sans holds his hand out to you, beckoning you over. After a moment of hesitation you go to him, letting him tangle his fingers with yours. His other hand comes to rest on your hip as he looks up at you. "it's not your job to fix him, hope."

"I know it's not. But I want to help if I can," you say, willing him to understand. "He's my friend."

"i know you do, that's part of what i love about you. you care about people. but—"

You cup his jaw with your free hand, giving him a wry smile. "No buts. Just let me worry about him. I'm allowed to do that, and you don't need to try and solve this. It's not a problem."

His expression relaxes, squeezing your hand. "right. sorry. just venting?"

"Just venting," you confirm, nodding your head.

He tugs you down towards him, and you lean down so he can press a toothy kiss to your cheek. "so what are you guys gonna do?"

"Maybe watch a movie?"

Watching a movie was a bad idea. Deacon found out that Sans hadn't seen the movies for Lord of the Rings and insisted that they start watching Fellowship (extended edition, of course). Well, it turns out that Sans hadn't just read the books, he'd nearly memorized them. You don't have the heart to tell him that you couldn't get out of the Shire the first time you tried to read it.

You have to escape the quasi-friendly bitching back and forth between the two guys, and retreat to the kitchen to make sandwiches. When you get back with a trio of plates, Deacon is sprawled across half the couch, grimacing at Sans. Sans is sitting on the far end, leaning forward in his seat and in the middle of a frustrated tirade.

"there's no reason they should have left out tom bombadil."

"There was every reason to leave him out. What did he even do? Gave the hobbits some daggers and sang some songs." Deacon doesn't even notice you as you enter the room, shaking his head and resting his jaw in his hand.

"and why did they add arwen into these scenes? she wasn't here," Sans presses, demanding answers as though Deacon were solely responsible for the changes.

"Well, without her the only female character we’d have in the whole movie is fucking Galadriel so pipe down," Deacon retorts in a clipped tone.

"He's got a point," you say, and both of them look over at you as you pass out plates. "Eowyn doesn't show up until the second movie, and that's still only like, three named female characters out of how many men?"

Sans and Deacon thank you for making lunch, returning their attention to the movie. You eye Deacon's legs, stretched out over your spot between the two of them, and when he doesn't move them you just sit down and lean back against them. He doesn't seem to mind, poking you in the side with his toes. Sans grumbles and puts an arm around your shoulders, pulling you closer to him. Neither of them say anything.

You're halfway through Two Towers by the time Toriel and Asgore show up with the kids. You'd
almost forgotten they were even coming, wrapped up as you are listening to Deacon and Sans snipe back and forth about the pros and cons of the books versus the movies. Frisk hurries over to where you and Sans are, climbing up into his lap and leaning forward to wrap their arms around your neck. Asriel follows soon after, greeting you with a hug before glancing over at Deacon. The kids haven't gotten quite used to seeing one of their teachers routinely hanging out over at your house. You imagine it would be weird for you too, in their position. Deacon, suddenly self-conscious, sits up on his side of the couch and casts an apprehensive look at the king and queen. He stands when Toriel greets him, walking over to meet her.

You and Sans talk with the kids for a little bit, asking about their weekend before the two of them disappear upstairs.

Toriel is still talking to Deacon while Asgore inspects the pictures in the stairwell. He looks a little out of place, unsure of what to do with himself. You're actually surprised he's here, you didn't expect him to show up with Tori. But you know that he tries to spend time with Asriel when he can.

"Oh, so Hope already spoke to you of our plans for Thanksgiving?" Toriel asks, giving Deacon a bright smile.

He's got his hands shoved in his pockets, nodding and smiling back. "Yeah, I let her talk me into it. I don't have any other plans, anyway," he says, shrugging.

"The more the merrier! It will be so nice to have everyone together for dinner." It's nice to see her so happy. If there's any holiday that seems right up her alley, it's Thanksgiving. Or Christmas. Oh gosh you haven't even thought about what Christmas will be like with everyone. You're... actually a little excited.

You walk past the two of them, towards the foyer and Asgore. He glances over his shoulder as he hears you approach, giving you a kind smile. "Ah, Hope. I was actually hoping to speak with you, if you have a moment."

Sans is at your side where he wasn't a moment before, touching your elbow. You glance at him, and even though he's smiling, you can tell it's forced. "what's going on?" he asks, his tone casual.

None of you ever told Asgore that he'd killed you. To you it still doesn't seem real, but the way that Sans watches him when he's around you, you can't doubt the truth of it. Where Frisk was able to look past it, to forgive him, Sans can't relinquish his hold. You hesitate to say that he hates, or even really dislikes Asgore, but there's a tension there that you don't think will ever go away.

"We're just going to talk about something. It'll just be a minute," you say, glancing over at Asgore to see what he'll say.

Asgore just nods, smiling. "Forgive me, I promise I will bring her back to you safely."

You notice the slight clench of his fist, but he doesn't protest. He looks at you, waiting for your reassuring nod, before heading back to the living room. Asgore's expression is solemn, and he lets out a little sigh.

"He does not trust me with you, I think," he says, turning towards the kitchen and meeting your eyes as you walk with him. "I cannot blame him, considering how our first meeting went."

You feel a shiver of apprehension before you realize he's talking about the encounter you both remember. When Sans put himself between you and Asgore, did his best to talk him down before
getting interrupted by Toriel. He hadn't needed to spell it out in so many words for you to realize
he'd meant to kill either your or Frisk to free his people. And he'd tried to convince Sans to let him.

"Well, I trust you," you say, and you mean it. How can you not, when he'd worked so hard to
protect you and Frisk when first coming to the surface? He'd supported you, encouraged you to
speak up for yourself and the monsters to the soldiers. You'd spent a lot of time with him and
Toriel, listening in on talks with the government. You know that he truly just wants what's
best. "It's just harder for Sans."

He bows his head, and gives you a weak smile as you lean back against the counter next to the
fridge. "I appreciate you saying so. Taking that into consideration, I hope you understand that what
I am about to say, I do not say lightly."

You curl your fingers around the lip of the granite counter, resting your weight back on your
palms. He's regarding you, waiting. You nod.

Asgore lets out a heavy sigh, folding his hands over his stomach. "I believe that it would be in
everyone's best interests if you take the time to correct the human media in regards to your
relationship with Mr. Stuart," he says, and whatever you were expecting to hear, that isn't it.

You blink, an uncomfortable twist of your stomach making you wince. "I... If I do that, then I'll
have to go public about my relationship with Sans," you say carefully, swallowing.

He nods. "Yes, that is right. I have been in talks with Captain Prasad again, and she leads me to
believe that the government is planning on finally opening the Line for monsters. With restrictions,
of course, but we might finally be let out past Ebott," he says, eyes shining with optimism.

"That's fantastic!" you say, his previous words momentarily forgotten. "Asgore, that's wonderful
news!"

"It is. And it is with that in mind that I think we should not approach this possibility with the very
real risk that the truth might be discovered about you and Sans. I fear what they might think if they
believe you were trying to cover this up using Mr. Stuart." His expression is apologetic, and you
get the impression he wishes he didn't have to speak to you about this at all.

But that doesn't make you feel any better. Frustrated and nervous, your brow furrows. "I'm not the
one that told them Deacon and I have been spending a lot of time together. I never asked them to
get the wrong idea!"

"I know, and I understand why you have been... discreet about your relationship—"

"To protect my family from what they might say about us!" you hiss, keeping your voice low as
anger bubbles up inside of you. You're not ready for this, it isn't fair! "Because people will jump to
conclusions and assume I'm using him, or worse that he's using me! And what about Frisk?"

"Opinions about monsters have been improving, according to the Captain. I am not saying that
there will not be talk, we both know there will be. I am only asking that you consider this. I cannot
force you to make this decision," he says, holding his hands out in a helpless gesture. "But do you
not wish to stop hiding? To not have to worry about keeping these secrets?"

"I'm never going to be free from all these lies, Asgore!" You grit your teeth, trying to be quiet. How
can he talk to you about honesty, when he has the lives of six children on his conscience? "You
know that better than anyone."

"Hope, this is your decision to make, I just wished to impress upon you my thoughts on the matter,"
Asgore says softly, an apology in his voice and regret on his face.

Forcing yourself to relax, easing the tension out of your arms and shoulders, you shake your head and look down at the tile floor beneath your feet. You sigh. "I'll think about it. That's all I can promise."

"That is all I can ask."
All of your guests are gone. Deacon left before dinner, and Toriel and her family left shortly after. You haven't been able to speak to Sans about what Asgore told you about, though you can tell he wants to ask you. But it has to wait until after Frisk goes to bed.

The three of you are curled up on the couch with your child sprawled across your laps, watching a movie (it's just been that kind of day). Well, you and Frisk are watching anyway; Sans is preoccupied with his phone. You steal a quick glance and see that he's looking at his most recent texts from Papyrus. The last one was from 5:34 PM, two hours ago. 'DOING DINNER NOW. HAVING A GOOD TIME, PLEASE DON'T WORRY!'

You lean over to press a kiss to his cheekbone to try and distract him but it doesn't work. He starts typing in a message, getting as far as 'will u b home s' before deleting it and turning off the screen. Setting down the phone on the armrest, he leaves it there for about two minutes before picking it back up again.

"Dad, you said you'd watch the movie with me," Frisk protests, reaching for his hands.

Sans lifts the phone out of their reach and sets it back down again. "you're right, i did. sorry kiddo."

As he puts his arm around your shoulder, trying to focus on the television under Frisk's watchful eye, the front door opens. The three of you look towards the foyer in time to see Papyrus walk in. He sees you, grins brightly, and turns to look behind him. His smile fades a little and he disappears from view again.

"YOU SHOULD COME IN AND SAY HELLO." You can hear his voice over the movie without any difficulty.

"Papy, I don't—" It's much harder to hear Mettaton, and you and Sans share a look as Frisk sits up between you. "—need to recharge soon."

"YOU CAN DO THAT HERE. PLEASE?"

It seems that he's just as weak to his pleas as the rest of you, because when Papyrus comes back into the living room he's followed by a hesitant-looking Mettaton. You give him a kind smile, feeling a little bad for him. You're not used to seeing him so uncomfortable.

"Pap, there's an outlet next to the love seat, if you want to help Mettaton get set up over there," you offer, pointing.

"Oh, thank you darling," Mettaton says, smiling at you and seeming to collect himself. "I'd hate to run out of power on the way home."

"yeah, we wouldn't want that," Sans says, and you elbow him gently in the ribs. He makes a small, agitated sound but falls quiet.
Frisk kicks their feet against the front of the couch, watching as Papyrus helps Mettaton with a cord hidden in a panel on his back. He plugs him in and a row of pink lights start to blink on and off on his chassis. You guess that's a sign that he's charging. As soon as Papyrus settles onto the love seat beside the robot, Frisk slides off of you and Sans and climbs up onto the two of them instead.

Papyrus leans down to nuzzle the side of Frisk's head, giving them a big hug that makes them laugh. By comparison, Mettaton seems a little taken aback, looking over at you and Sans. He meets your eyes and you give him a small shrug, smiling.

"Mom and Dad said you two were on a date!" Frisk says, looking up at them expectantly. "Did you have fun?"

"OF COURSE! WE WENT TO THE PARK DOWNTOWN AND LOOKED AT SOME SHOPS AND METTATON GAVE ME SOME SUGGESTIONS ON CLOTHES. WHICH WAS VERY NICE OF HIM, BUT I LIKE THE CLOTHES I HAVE NOW," Papyrus says, grinning. You'd tried to stop him from wearing his special 'Cool Dude' dating outfit, but to no avail. It didn't help that Sans was sabotaging you at every turn, reassuring Papyrus that Mettaton would love the fashion basketballs (MTT brand of course). Mettaton seems to be trying very hard not to cringe. "AND THEN I GAVE HIM THE GIFT I PREPARED ESPECIALLY FOR HIM. FRISK, YOU FOUND MY GIFT SO QUICKLY LAST TIME, SO INSTEAD OF HIDING IT UNDER MY HAT I HID IT IN MY RIBCAGE." He gives Frisk a wink, saying 'wink' in a high-pitched voice as he does it. "I REMEMBERED THAT METTATON DOESN'T EAT SO I COULDN'T GIVE HIM MY SPECIAL SPAGHETTI, SO INSTEAD IT WAS A PICTURE OF SPAGHETTI."

"that would definitely make it impastable to forget," Sans says, smirking at Mettaton.

Papyrus casts a frustrated look at his brother. "SANS I AM TRYING TO RECOUNT OUR FANTASTIC DATE TO FRISK. PLEASE DO NOT INTERRUPT WITH YOUR HORRIBLE PUNS."

"Mettaton, did you have fun?" Frisk asks, wide-eyed as they look up at him.

Mettaton looks over at Papyrus and, despite his earlier distaste over the mention of clothing, his expression softens a little into something you recognize as affection. "I did," he says, smiling at Frisk. "A marvelous time, and aren't you just adorable for asking?"

Frisk hides their mouth behind the sleeves of their pajamas, bashful all of a sudden. They turn to face the television again, leaning back against Mettaton and Papyrus to get comfortable. You know that a few months ago you never would have allowed this to happen. Everything in you would have rebelled against the idea of letting Frisk get that close, that comfortable with him. But now, with the way that Mettaton and Papyrus are leaning against each other, you just don't feel the same as you used to. It doesn't bother you.

Mettaton seems to feel more sensitive to what's going on than you do. You appreciate the anxious glance he casts your way, but you realize that maybe you ought to talk to him. Actually talk to him.

You get your chance as, when Frisk's bedtime rolls around, Papyrus insists on reading them a bedtime story. "YOU WERE GONE ALL WEEKEND AND THEN I DIDN'T GET TO SEE YOU THIS AFTERNOON! I, THE GREAT UNCLE PAPYRUS, WANT TO READ YOU MY FAVORITE STORY!"

Frisk leans over to Mettaton and wraps their arms around his neck, giving him a hug goodnight. His eyes widen just a fraction before he hugs them back, smiling as they slide off the couch to run
over to you and Sans and continue the process. Papyrus flashes the robot a big smile, and Mettaton actually blushes a little.

As Papyrus and Frisk disappear upstairs, Mettaton fidgets a little, glancing over at his power cord and then at the front door. Two of the lights on his chest are glowing, not blinking anymore like the others. "I hope that the two of you are doing well," he says, an awkward attempt at casual conversation if you ever saw one.

You pull away from Sans, rising to your feet. You feel his hand on the back of your thigh, a silent question that you don't turn to answer. "Mettaton, can I talk to you in the kitchen for a second?"

Mettaton blinks at you, then shifts his attention behind you where Sans is still sitting. "Of course," he says slowly, standing and following his cord to the outlet to unplug himself.

"babe," Sans says, a warning in his voice.

"Sans, one of us needs to talk to him and I know it's not going to be you. Let me handle this," you say, looking back at him and squeezing his hand.

He grits his teeth, looking distinctly unhappy, but lets you go. The exchange just has Mettaton looking more apprehensive as you lead him into the kitchen.

"If this is about Papyrus, I want to make it clear that he was the one who insisted on spending more time with me," he says quickly, before you even have a chance to turn around. You lean back against one of the barstools, pointing at another one in an offer for Mettaton to sit. He doesn't.

"Do you want to spend time with him?" you ask, raising a brow as you cross your arms over your chest.

"Yes. It... wasn't my intention to seem so distant before," he admits, resting his hands on his hips. "But I'm not using him, no matter what the rest of you might think. Especially Sans," he adds with no small amount of bitterness.

"He cares about Papyrus. We all do."

Mettaton's expression crumples, searching your face as he makes a sweeping gesture with his hand. "So do I!" he says, with more genuine passion than you think you've seen from him before. This isn't a performance. This is Mettaton, you think. "I care about him." His expression softens and he looks away, folding his arms over his chest and hugging himself.

"Good," you say. You're smiling as he gives you a surprised glance, arching a perfect brow.

"I suppose I can't fault you for doubting my intentions," he says grimly.

"This isn't what I want for us anymore," you say, sighing and pushing your hair out of your face. "I want you to be comfortable in our home, in Papyrus's home. I don't want to keep dancing around what happened months ago."

He's watching you, not quite understanding your intentions, you think.

Taking in a deep breath, you stop leaning against a barstool and take a step towards him. "Mettaton, I forgive you."

His head tilts just a fraction to the side, his arms going slack. "What?"
"Things were desperate in the Underground, I understand that a lot better now. And you've done enough to prove yourself to me." You look away, biting your lip. "You can be really selfish sometimes, but you've done a lot of good up here. I mean, you're bringing in a lot more humans, and... Look, I can't speak for Sans, but I want to put it behind us, for good. I forgive you."

You're studying some crayon drawings that Frisk and Asriel did a few weeks ago, feeling a little awkward and exposed. It's harder than you expected to finally say it. Mettaton closes the gap between you and as you look at him he takes your hand in both of his, squeezing gently. His expression is open, relief plain for you to see.

"Thank you, darling. That... that means more to me than I think you realize," he says softly. He lets out a startled sound when you slip your hand away from his and put your arms around his neck to pull him down for a hug.

"I'll try to see if I can make Sans come around," you tell him, not letting him go. "He's loved seeing Papyrus so happy these past few days leading up to your date. Just be good to him."

Mettaton hugs you back, a soft pressure that takes him a moment to ease into. You've never let him be this close before. "Of course I will."

When you wake up in the middle of the night, you roll over to reach for Sans and realize he's not there. That isn't too out of the ordinary, and while you're a little concerned you aren't worried. Picking your head up off the pillow, you look towards the other end of the room to see if he's reading over in the lounge chair but it's empty. Sitting up, you start to wonder if he's downstairs but then you see it. The balcony door is cracked open. Wrapping yourself up in a blanket from the foot of the bed, you peek outside.

Sans is sitting on a small footstool, looking through his telescope up at the stars. He's only wearing a pair of plaid boxers, unaffected by the chilly night air despite the small puff of white from his breath. The moonlight washes over pale bone, and to your groggy mind and blurry eyes he seems ethereal. You open the door enough to slip through and he turns to look at you, his eyes visibly brightening at the sight of you.

"hey, babe," he murmurs, reaching out for you.

"Hey," you echo back. You sidle up next to him and lean against his shoulder, tracing your fingers along his shoulderblades. He shivers. "Can't sleep?"

He makes a noncommittal sound, turning on his seat so that you're in front of him. With a certain tenderness that feels somehow romantic in the dark, he eases you down to sit on his leg, wrapping his arms tight around you to fold you more securely in your blanket. He nuzzles into your shoulder as you lean to rest your head against his.

"Looking at anything in particular?" you ask, and even though you don't need to keep your voice down you can't help it. It just feels right, to stay hushed as you listen to the sound of the wind rustling the trees gently.

"just the stars. i just... i needed to be outside." You know that tone, the one that tells you he must have had a nightmare about a Reset.

"I'm sorry, we shouldn't have talked about Mettaton before bed," you say, feeling responsible. "Bringing up all those things from before..."

"no, it's fine. we needed to talk about it," he says, hugging you tight. "i don't wanna just pretend our
time in the underground didn't happen. shit, we fell in love down there, i'm never gonna regret that."

You both fall silent, looking up at the clear sky dotted with stars. Your home is isolated enough that the lights from the denser areas of Ebott don't interfere too much with the view, but even you can tell that it's not the same as when you first reached the surface. Not that it isn't still beautiful and humbling, staring up at the brilliant wash of stars across black.

"Remember when you took me to Waterfall, and we used your telescope?" you ask him, freeing a hand from under your blanket to stroke his ribs. They're warm, like always.

"of course. you said you wanted to show me the real stars."

"And I did," you say, smiling. It fades after a moment as you sigh, letting out a puff of mist. "I also said I wanted to show you the city, and the ocean. The park my dad used to take me to as a kid, restaurants, museums, movie theaters... God, there's so much out there past the Line and we're finally almost there."

"that's what asgore says at least," he agrees, and you think he's trying not to get his hopes up. "what did the two of you talk about earlier?"

Sitting up straight so you can look at him, you hook your fingers around his clavicle as you try to find the right words to explain. Finally, as he searches your face in the moonlight, you let out a small, frustrated sigh. "He wants me to tell the reporters the truth, that I'm not with Deacon. That you and I are engaged."

Sans is quiet for a moment, and you wonder if you upset him. You're about to apologize when he speaks. "did he say why?"

"If the media finds out on their own that I let them get the wrong idea they'll probably blame me. Say that we were lying to hide our relationship. In the long run it'll look worse than just coming clean." You rub your thumb along the bone under your hand, searching his face. "I'm just worried about what people will say."

"i know," he says gently. "i'd be lying if i said i didn't want you to tell them the truth. to not have to hide this anymore. when we can finally leave ebott together i want to hold your hand and not worry who might be looking."

"I do too."

"but i also know that not everybody's gonna take well to the news."

"I hate this," you hiss under your breath, shaking your head. "I hate all of it. The lying, having to think through all the possible reactions whenever we have to deal with other humans, being stuck here cut off from the rest of the world. You all deserve so much better than this."

Sans cups your face, bringing you down so he can nip gently at your lips. "they're gonna find out eventually," he says, resting his forehead against yours. "why don't you make it on our terms instead of theirs?"

"I don't know if I'm ready. What if they—"

He silences you with another kiss, running his fingers through your hair. "whatever happens, we're with you hope. me, frisk, papyrus, all our friends. you won't be alone."
Squeezing your eyes shut, you let out a soft sigh. "I'll think about it. I just... can't decide right now."
Grillby doesn't seem surprised when Deacon knocks on the door to the bar, ignoring the 'closed' sign hanging in the window. In fact he doesn't seem much of anything, as far as he can tell. The fire elemental is a puzzle that he just can't seem to solve, and he's not sure he wants to try much longer. It's been a week, to the day, since the first time they hooked up and already the novelty is starting to wear off.

It's not like he went into this expecting a relationship. Deacon doesn't do relationships. But as Grillby lets him inside without a word, part of him wishes that he'd at least seem happy to see him. You're always happy to see him. It's obvious by how your face lights up and you don't even hesitate to engage him in conversation. You keep up with him, enjoy his jokes, make him laugh...

"Were you expecting me?" he says, turning so he's walking backwards towards the bar, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Grillby smiles, and Deacon is glad to get that much out of him. He's started to decipher some of the facial expressions and gestures, but it's just not enough. He's never been good with silence. The only thing keeping Deacon from leaving is the elemental's single-minded intensity, the way his attention hasn't strayed since he walked in the door. He can live with that.

"So how was your half day? Good lunch crowd?" Deacon asks, settling himself on a bar stool as Grillby follows after him. He doesn't respond, as expected. "Oh, my day was fine, thanks for asking."

Grillby undoes his tie and pulls it away from his neck in one fluid motion, slipping it into his pocket. Then his fingers go to the button at his collar while his other hand adjusts his glasses.

"I know this might sound crazy, but bear with me for a second," Deacon says, swallowing as he tries to ignore the stirrings of arousal making his pants feel snug. "We could talk or I don't know... watch TV or something."

Silence. Of course.

Instead there's warm, soft hands cupping his face, hot lips seeking his own, Grillby's legs between his knees. Deacon lets himself be quieted, giving up his futile efforts to make some kind of connection with the monster that isn't strictly carnal. Fingers rake down his chest then back up again, tugging at the knot in his tie. Soon his shirt is undone and the heat of Grillby's mouth is at his throat as a hand traces the muscles of his stomach.

Deacon slips one hand around the back of Grillby's neck, feeling the warm, harmless flames lick over his fingers. His other hand is tangled up with his in a gesture of intimacy he just doesn't feel. Instead he just feels hollow, disconnected from the moment, wishing he were somewhere else. His erection disagrees, but part of him wishes he'd just taken you up on your offer to spend time together after work. To just talk. God, when had his priorities shifted so wildly that he'd rather
hang out with a friend than have sex?

Probably around the time he'd found himself with an actual friend.

Here, with Grillby, there's just something missing. Something he wouldn't have noticed before. The funny thing is, if he'd been dating you he's certain he would have broken up with you by now. Before he got too comfortable. And, well... it's too late for that. He found that out on Halloween, that he wasn't ready to let that friendship go.

Deacon snaps back to himself as he feels his pants coming undone, a hand stroking him through his underwear. Gasping, he arches into the touch and turns his head, seeking Grillby's mouth. This is better. He just doesn't want to think anymore. He just wants to enjoy this moment, to surrender himself to whatever it is that Grillby wants from him.

There's just one problem.

"Wait," Deacon breathes, tilting his mouth away just enough that he can speak. "We should at least go upstairs."

Instead Grillby lets go of his hand and takes hold of his waist, lifting him off the barstool with an ease that might have startled him if he were in a more clear-minded state. He sets him up on the bar, sliding his hands around to his back as his mouth and tongue start to trace a trail down his chest. Deacon almost knocks over a set of condiments as he scrabbles blindly with one hand to support himself, the other hand fisting in the monster's sleeve. His protest is momentarily forgotten as he feels fingers curl around the waistband of his underwear and start to tug down—

"hey grillby, you— oh for god's sake!"

No. Oh god, why? Why did Sans have to show up? Of all the people on this mountain, why Sans?

Deacon tries to summon the will to play it off, to be sarcastic and unaffected. It's not like he's never been walked in on before. Instead he feels his infuriatingly obvious blush creep up the sides of his neck, heat up his ears and paint across his cheeks. This is the worst. The absolute worst. Why did he come here? What the hell is he doing?

He buries his face in his hand and tries to hunch forward and hide behind Grillby.

Grillby, to his credit, straightens and with a calm collectedness despite the pale blue color on his face, does up Deacon's pants and starts helping him button up his shirt in silence.

"on the bar? c'mon you guys, we bring the kids here," Sans says, grumbling to himself.

"I told you we should have gone upstairs!" Deacon blurts out, humiliated and suddenly angry. With Grillby, with himself, and most definitely with Sans. What the fuck was he even doing here?

Grillby doesn't answer him, instead turning to Sans once Deacon is mostly put back together. "We wouldn't have finished here," he says, voice soft, and Deacon just feels even angrier. Oh, so he doesn't have a problem talking to Sans, but even when he tries to fish for things to talk about, he won't say anything to him? Fine. That's fine.

God this isn't fine! Nothing about this situation is fine! Deacon slides off the bar and grits his teeth, scrubbing his face with his hands.

"you should put a sock on the door or something. shit, warn people," Sans says, shoving his hands in his pockets with a disgusted look.
"The door was locked," Grillby says.

Deacon takes a deep breath. They're both ignoring him. He counts to five. Focus. Control. He forces himself to relax, like he was taught. "It's fine, you won't have to worry about this again. Either of you. This was fun, but I think we both know this isn't going to work out," Deacon says, forcing a smile as both the monsters turn to look at him.

Grillby seems surprised, as much as someone with fire for a face can look surprised. But he doesn't say anything, doesn't protest as he walks past both of them towards the door. He unlocks it, waits for a second, but neither of them speak up.

Silence.

Deacon walks out.

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Sans lets out a small sigh as the door shuts behind Deacon. He can't say he's surprised. The human will be fine, he's sure that he's just going to go over and see you. At least this has all been laid to rest.

No, he's more concerned about Grillby. He's looking at the door, an especially unreadable expression on his face as he crosses his arms over his chest.

"it's for the best," Sans says, closing the distance between him and his friend. "sorry for showing up outta the blue like that."

Grillby lets out a small huff, losing sparks from his head.

"wasn't this whole thing just casual, anyway?"

The bartender nods, then leans back against a stool.

"sorry again, i know it's been a while," Sans says, rocking back on his heels as he studies his friend's face.

He shakes his head, not so much a denial as a dismissal. Grillby reaches up and fixes the top button of his shirt, then adjusts his glasses. "He was right. It wasn't going to work out."

Arching a brow, he hesitates for a second. "did you think it might?"

Grillby shakes his head again. "I'm not sure what I thought."

Sans sighs again, walking over and pulling himself up on the stool next to him. "at least i didn't show up any later. seemed like things were getting pretty heated."

The fire elemental gives him a narrow-eyed look. Sans just grins. He doesn't have it in him to lie, to say he wished things had turned out differently. So instead he can at least make an effort to cheer him up with horrible puns.

"you could say he had the hots for you."

Grillby lets off another shower of sparks, and he knows that it's working.

Deacon slows his car as he reaches your driveway, caught in an internal struggle. All he could think about earlier was how much he'd rather be hanging out with you, how much happier he'd be.
Now that he has the chance, why is it so hard to just take it?

He can't face you right now, and he's not sure why. As much as he knows you'd do everything you could to make him feel better, he's just too embarrassed and upset. This isn't the side of himself he wants you to see. He's not ready to share this vulnerability with anyone, not even you.

Driving past your house, he continues down the road until he reaches home. He parks, fishes his keys out of his pocket, and goes inside. The house is empty, just like it always is. It's silent.

Ugh. He can't stand it.

Deacon throws himself onto his couch and picks up the remote for the TV, just for the background noise. He doesn't even notice the channel.

There's another addition to his long string of breakups, if he can even call it that. There wasn't much of a 'relationship' to end. He's not even upset about that, about Grillby. No, just the thought of Sans catching him like that, almost literally with his pants down... it makes his stomach twist unpleasantly and he buries his face in a throw pillow.

He ought to tell you, before Sans does. What is Sans going to say? Who knows. He sure as hell doesn't know what might have been going on in the skeleton's head.

Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he stares at the last exchange he had with you. It's from last night. 'Just thought you should know. We're having meatloaf for dinner, I know you love it.'

Deacon can't help but smile a little bit. What did Sans do to deserve you?

'OMG is that an invitation? Are you offering me food?'

'Of course it's an invitation. Come over.'

He watches the little cursor blink on his phone, waiting for him to type in a message. Swiping his thumb across the screen, he can't help but copy the end of your last text. 'Come over. Please.'

Deacon stares at it. He deletes it.

'Too quiet in this house. Want to come over?'

He deletes that too.

'Hey, so Sans totally walked in on me and Grillby, thankfully he didn't get too much of a show. But I broke things off, no way I'm going to risk that again. Oh well.'

There. That's suitably casual. Makes it seem like everything is fine.

He's fine.

He sends the message and puts down his phone.
'Are you okay?'

'Yeah. I'm fine.' 'Just disappointed I won't be able to further offend your delicate sensibilities with my scandalous tales of debauchery.'

'I'm sure you'll get plenty more opportunities in the future.'

'Exactly. The world is my oyster.' 'When one door closes, another one opens. Etc.'

'Gonna get back in the saddle?'

'And other suitable metaphors, yes.' 'Unless... no, nevermind. That's just weird, even for me.'

'Oh my god.'

'That's the spirit.'

You scroll through the exchange that you and Deacon had an hour ago, and you can't help but feel like he's being too nonchalant about what happened. But this is Deacon. The guy who managed to move onto a mountain filled with monsters, and all that entails, without hardly batting an eye. He rolls with the punches, moves on. Doesn't let these things bother him. He's acting like this is all just normal for him.

Maybe it is. You don't know much of anything about his life before moving here. He made it seem like casual sex wasn't something new to him, and you'll just have to trust him. Why do you want him to be more upset? Shouldn't you be happy that he seems okay?

The oven starts beeping and you pocket your phone, getting up from the couch. Maybe you'll call him later, check on him again... Or, gosh that might seem a little overbearing wouldn't it? You'll see him at work tomorrow.

"No fair!" Asriel says, falling backwards onto the shaggy rug he and Frisk are sitting on, playing video games.

"C'mon, it's my turn now. You lost," Frisk says, trying to pry the controller from his fingers.

Asriel rolls over, hiding it under his stomach. "No, let me try—" He's cut off by a loud bleat as Frisk digs their fingers into his sides, climbing on top of him and tickling him. He dissolves into giggles as they ignore his protests and attempts to squirm away.

Smiling to yourself and shaking your head, you head into the kitchen.

As you pull the lasagna out of the oven you hear Sans's voice in the foyer. He must have teleported home; Papyrus has been spending more and more time out of the house and you remember Sans
insisting that he didn't need to pick him up from work today if he had other plans. Maybe you should stop making such big meals... Nah. You can just have leftovers for lunch.

Sans walks into the kitchen as you set the heavy glass dish on top of the stove, tugging off your oven mitts. He looks a little confused, glancing around the room like there's something missing. "just us?" he asks, rounding the island and slipping his arm around your waist.

You lean down to kiss him. "Were you expecting company? Frisk and Asriel are in the living room."

"yeah," he says, and as he pauses you can hear the kids both laughing and still roughhousing as far as you can tell. "saw them when i got in. but, uh, yeah i was kinda expecting deacon to be here."

"Oh, because of what happened earlier? Yeah he texted me, told me you walked in on him and Grillby," you say, frowning at him as you slip out of his grip so you can get some plates. "Good job with that. Not sure why you'd expect Deacon to be over here, though."

Sans lets out an annoyed sound, but doesn't say anything to defend himself. "i dunno. he seemed kinda upset when he left. figured he'd come see you."

"What?" you say, taken aback. You turn to look at Sans and he raises his brows, apparently just as surprised as you are but for a different reason. "He seemed fine earlier..." Oh, but you knew that couldn't have been the entire truth. You knew. Biting your lip, you walk back over to the stove and set down the stack of plates. You open a drawer to find a metal spatula to serve up dinner. "I'll go over there after we eat."

As you're about to start cutting into the lasagna, Sans takes hold of your waist and turns you towards him. Giving you a weak, lopsided smile, he traces your hips with his thumbs. "maybe you should go now. you can take dinner with you."

You blink. You want to. You hadn't even really considered it as a possibility with him and the kids home, but... "Oh, Sans are you sure?" you ask, hopeful.

"yeah, don't worry about us. you go. i know you want to," he says wrapping his arms around you and hugging you close. "you're just gonna worry about him if you don't."

He's right. He knows you so well, it makes your heart swell with a rush of affection. Leaning down to pepper his face with kisses, you feel so thankful for him. "I love you."

"love you too. go take care of your friend."

So, ten minutes later, with two plastic containers of lasagna hot in your hand, you're knocking on Deacon's front door. It takes a minute, but soon you hear the sound of the lock sliding open and the knob turning. He's standing there in comfortable clothes: a pair of sweatpants and a tank top. For a second you realize this is the first time you've seen most of his tattoo, the thundercloud covering his shoulder and more forks of lightning cutting through the dark blackwork on his bicep.

But it's hard to admire the detail when your friend looks so disheveled. His hair is ruffled, like he's been running his hand through it too much, and his clothes are all wrinkled. His expression is caught between being happy to see you and frustrated at the same time. You stare at him, taking this all in, and after a second he winces. "Dammit," he grumbles under his breath, doing his best to give you a smile. "Hope, I'm fine, really."

"Oh hell no, let me in," you say, clutching the lasagna tighter in your hands as you shoulder your
way past him. "We're having dinner. Go get some forks and drinks."

He hesitates for a second, giving you an odd look, then does as you tell him. Maybe you shouldn't have been so forceful. He doesn't really deserve being bossed around, you know that you don't like it when people do that to you. While he's in the kitchen and you set out the two plastic containers on the coffee table, you take a second to compose yourself. Yes, you're worried, but that's no reason to take it out on him.

The television is on, playing an infomercial. It's right in the middle of a 'demonstration', so it must have already been playing when you showed up. Was he watching this? Why?

He's back a moment later, popping open a soda can and setting it in front of you. You're handed a fork and he flops down beside you on the couch. It jostles you for a second before settling again. Then, sitting with his legs crossed beneath him, he reaches for the lasagna and glances up at the TV. Grimacing, he starts to go for the remote but you beat him to it. You turn it off.

"Were you just sitting here in sweatpants watching infomercials?" you ask him, setting your fork down on your still-closed dinner.

Deacon looks down at his food, using the edge of his fork to start cutting. "No, it was just on," he says, evasive. "This looks great by the way, much better than what I had planned."

You ignore the compliment. "Why didn't you tell me you were upset? I would have come over," you say gently.

He doesn't answer. Instead he stuffs his face with lasagna and takes his time to chew. While you wait you pick up your drink and take a sip. Realizing that you're expecting a reply, he looks over at you through his lashes, hunched forward over his food. "It's not a big deal. I'm fine."

"I mean, I know you said things with Grillby weren't going to work out, but—"

"I'm not upset about Grillby," Deacon snaps, making you flinch a little. His brow furrows and he looks frustrated with you. "This is why I didn't ask you to come over."

You can only stare, unsure of what to say. Then, feeling suddenly stupid for coming over, you cross your arms over your chest and glance at the front door. Maybe you should just leave. You should have left him alone, obviously he would have said something if he wanted to talk to you about this. "Sorry. I was just worried about you," you mumble. "I can go."

"No. Goddamn it, Hope," he says, hissing a breath beneath his teeth as he sets down his dinner and reaches for your hand. It's strange, to feel a hand that's distinctly human but not Frisk's. You look down at it as his fingers curl around yours, squeezing. "I didn't mean it like that. Shit. I'm sorry, this is just... Please stay, but can we just talk about something else? Anything. Anything that's not Grillby or what happened with Sans, please."

You swallow, looking up at his face. His blue eyes are searching yours, apologetic and worried. You can see the muscles in his jaw tense. Desperately, you wish he would just talk to you. To trust you with how he's doing. Didn't he say you were his best friend? He can trust you with more details about his sex life than you ever wanted to know, but when it comes to the real stuff, the stuff that matters, he's holding back. Does he have anyone he can talk to?

"Okay," you say, giving in. He relaxes and pulls his hand back, gripping his knee. "I just want you to know that you can talk to me. About anything."

His mouth twitches into a crooked smile, then he picks his dinner back up. "Yeah. You can talk to
me too. I mean, I know you've got Sans and all your friends, but... I'm here, if you ever need me." Huffing a weak laugh, Deacon jabs at his food with his fork. "In that unlikely event."


His smile brightens a little, and you think he looks a little embarrassed. "No way. I mean, you're my best friend, but you don't need to, like, say it back. It's not like I'm going to go out and get us matching bracelets or something."

"I guess I need to cancel that order I made the other day..." you say, trying not to smile.

Deacon lets out a surprised bark of laughter, taking a swig of his drink to help wash down his dinner. "Fine, whatever, if you insist. I think we've already proven I'm a terrible best friend. I'm clearly getting the better end of the deal."

"Yeah, you're right," you say, finally leaning forward to open your own container of lasagna. "I feed you, listen to you talk way too much about your personal life..."

"Hey, those stories are a gift. The gift of entertainment. Not to mention the pleasure of my company," he says, sounding more like himself. "I take it back. You're lucky to have me as a best friend." He seems happy enough just to have you here, talking to him. That's fine, right? You can't force him to talk about anything he doesn't want to, no matter how much you wish he would.

So you stay, and you eat dinner, and talk. Mostly about nothing. Television shows you both watched as kids, books you think the other should read, places you want to take Sans and your friends once the Line is open. You both agree that the beach should be a number-one priority, even if it's in the middle of winter. You can't wait to see their faces when they get the chance to look out at that broad expanse of water.

When you finish eating you both settle into the couch, and after a while Deacon turns the TV back on. He gets up to take the dishes to the sink, and when he gets back he sits closer to you, nudging you playfully with his shoulder. You nudge him back. He gives you another halfhearted nudge in retaliation, then stays there, just barely touching you.

You wonder, again, if he gets lonely here by himself. You want to ask him, but at the same time you're hesitant to try and pry again. Instead you just sit there with him, until it starts to get late.

You're still the one to move in first when you hug him goodbye, but he doesn't seem to mind so much. He hugs you back, resting his chin on your shoulder for a second. "Thank you for coming over. I feel a lot better."

"I'm glad. Even if you don't want to talk about it, you can always let me know if you just want to hang out, Deacon," you say, pulling back and giving him a reassuring smile.

He nods, looking a little sheepish. "Okay. I'll keep that in mind. And, uh, same. Because, best friends," he says, holding out his hand.

With a weak laugh, you take it and you both shake. "Best friends."
Frisk is sitting at the table they share with Asriel, Kid, and Bonnet (a little blue rabbit girl with long floppy ears she likes to tuck under her chin, like her namesake), waiting for class to start. Asriel is doodling something in the margin of his notebook, a flowing design of loops and whorls. As Frisk leans in closer they can see some little hearts tucked in there, too.

"Yo! What're ya drawing?" Kid says, leaning forward over the table to try and get a better look. They slip a little on the edge and end up banging their chin, but don't seem to mind.

Asriel glances up at Kid, his fingers tightening around his pencil. He pulls his paper closer to him, covering up the doodle with his other hand. "Nothing. Just shapes," he says.

"My brother Bell is really good at drawing, too," Bonnet says, leaning forward on her elbows across from Asriel. "He says he has lots of time at work to draw stuff. He says 'bus... business has been slow'."

"That's cuz people don't like cold stuff when it's already cold," Frisk chimes in.

Bonnet's nose twitches and she tugs the ends of her ears in opposite hands, pulling them snug under her chin. "Nice cream is different. It's good anytime," she sniffs.

"Frisk!" Kid says, turning their attention away from Asriel's paper now that they can't see it. "A bunch of us are gonna be playing kickball this Saturday here at school, you should totally come!"

Frisk glances over at Asriel, right as he looks over at them. They meet each other's eyes for a second, and Frisk sees his snout wrinkle just a little bit. "Uh," Frisk says, looking at Kid again. "I'm gonna be at Asriel's this weekend.

Kid bobs up and down in their seat. "You spend every weekend with Asriel," they protest, and even Bonnet is nodding slightly. "I mean, you can always bring him with you."

"We spend every weekend together because we're best friends," Asriel grumbles, and Frisk can feel his annoyance like an itch in the back of their head.

"I was friends with Frisk first," Kid says, cocking their head to the side. "Just cuz your Souls sound all funny together doesn't mean you can hog them all to yourself."

"Hey," Frisk says, loud enough to make both of them look at them. "I'm friends with both of you guys. Please don't fight. We... we can ask Asriel's mom if we can come on Saturday."

"Okay," Kid says, flashing a smile and apparently satisfied.

Asriel does his best to stop frowning, but he just hunches forward over his drawing again, pressing hard enough on the paper that his pencil squeaks. As Frisk leans over to say something, the classroom door opens right as the bell rings. Mr. Stuart walks in and gives the room a grin and a
little wave. They always have him first thing in the morning on Tuesdays and Thursdays. (You and Ms. Leveretta are in the back of the room, observing but mostly drinking coffee.)

"Morning everybody," he says, scanning over the class before picking up a green marker and starting to write on the whiteboard. He pulls a pair of black-framed glasses out of his pocket with his other hand, slipping them on.

"Good morning, Mr. Stuart," everyone echoes back obediently.

"Okay, so, I'm sure everyone is excited about the four day weekend next week, am I right?" he asks, smiling over his shoulder as the room agrees with enthusiasm. "Awesome, me too. So, last time I was here we talked about the normal stuff we do on Thanksgiving." He's written the words 'Thanksgiving' 'Pilgrims' and 'Native Americans' on the white board so far. He turns around to face the room, capping the marker and fiddling with it in his hands. "Eating turkey, taking time off from work and school, and spending time with family and friends."

Mr. Stuart's eyes flick up towards the back of the room, where Frisk knows you're standing. He smiles. The two of you are good friends, which is weird. Teachers shouldn't come hang out at their house, with their mom.

"So," he says, uncapping the marker again and stepping to the side while underlining 'Pilgrims' and 'Native Americans'. "Today, we're going to learn about what actually happened to the indigenous—uh, that is, the humans that lived here first."

As Mr. Stuart starts going into his lesson, Frisk realizes that what he's telling them is... a lot different than what they learned in school before. There's no nice dinner with the pilgrims. Instead he's talking about things like illnesses, and fighting. People dying, Native Americans having their land taken from them by force.

The other kids seem uncomfortable, and Asriel feels upset. Frisk glances over at him and he's rubbing his ear between his fingers.

"Dea— Mr. Stuart, can I speak to you for a second?" you say, interrupting him. His eyebrows raise and he turns away from the whiteboard as you walk up to the front of the room.

"Sure. Of course," he says, joining you near the door, off to the side of the room.

Frisk can't hear what you're saying. Curious, they tug on Asriel's sleeve. "Are you listening?"

He nods a little. "She's... your mom is mad that he's telling us all these bad things... that the humans did," he whispers, leaning closer. "She says... that he's scaring us."

Your brow furrows as you talk, fiddling with your ID badge. Mr. Stuart rubs the back of his neck, shaking his head.

"Um. He says that we need to know what humans have... done to each other. So that we can keep ourselves safe." Asriel shifts in his seat, fidgeting. "Your mom says that we're just kids, that we'll have our whole lives to... Um. To learn how horrible people can be... His heart is in the right place, but it's not the right time for this... That he should leave that stuff for the older kids."

You look over at the classroom as the students start to murmur to each other, just like Frisk and Asriel are. Mr. Stuart follows your gaze and they watch his expression shift. He turns back to you and nods.

"Okay," Mr. Stuart says, smiling at everyone and hushing the room. He adjusts his glasses. "So I
know that seemed a little scary, but, uh, things like that haven't happened here in a long time."

Bonnet raises her hand. He hesitates, then nods at her, gesturing for her to speak. "Mr. Stuart... Why did those humans hurt each other?"

He glances over at you, where you're still standing near the door. "Because they wanted this land for themselves."

"Are they going to do that to us too? Are they going to take Ebott away from us?" another kid chimes in, sounding scared.

"No no no," Mr. Stuart says, holding up his hands and shaking his head. "We don't..." He hesitates, swallowing. "We don't do that anymore, not here. Not for a long time."

"Is that why the humans locked us away?"

"We don't know," he says, raising his voice enough to quiet the room again. "We don't have any history telling us anything about monsters. How or why you were trapped in the Underground. I like to think that humanity has come a long way from how we used to be, and that things will only get better for everyone. But it's important to learn about the past, so we don't repeat the same mistakes. That's why history is important."

There's a beat of silence as he scans the room, twisting the marker in his hands. The cap makes a loud squeaking noise. After a moment, he uncaps it again. "So let's talk about something a bit more fun. There's this tradition that on Thanksgiving, the President 'pardons' a turkey..."

"Hey, you're late," Deacon says as you enter the break room, tipping the remnants of his cup of ramen into his mouth.

You ignore him as you get your lunch from the fridge —leftovers from the night before. Cracking the lid and pushing it into the microwave, you watch it spin on the turntable.

"Hope?" he asks, and you glance over at him. He pushes out your usual chair with his foot, but you stay where you are as you wait for your food to heat up.

"I'm late because I had two kids asking me if all humans were 'as mean as the ones from Mr. Stuart's story' and a third in tears. Oh, and Leveretta wanted to know if you were exaggerating, like it was supposed to be a fairy tale meant to scare children. I got to be the bearer of bad news," you say, sighing and shaking your head. "Please tell me you just told the turkey story to your other classes this morning."

He gives you an apologetic look, leaning back in his chair. His fingers card through his hair and he nods. "Yeah, the turkey story. And uh, a little bit about early Thanksgiving practices. Sorry, I guess the lesson plan seemed a lot better on paper," he says, wincing.

"I know you meant well, but can you try to hold back on the systematic slaughter of an indigenous people for like, at least the middle school aged kids? Seven is a little early to learn this stuff," you say, turning to the microwave as it beeps. Pulling out your lunch, you go sit down.

"I'll keep that in mind. I, uh, never really intended to teach elementary school," he says. Deacon rests his cheek in his hand, looking at you sideways. "Middle and up was sort of the plan. You know, the age you actually start having proper history classes."

"What? I'm sure you'd love to spend your days surrounded by a little horde of children," you say
dryly. Twirling spaghetti around your fork, you start eating.

"That's me. You discovered my secret." He rolls his eyes. "I don't know how you do it."

"It gives me more time to spend with Frisk. And I can keep an eye on Asriel for Tori," you say with a small shrug. "Besides, I'm just an aide. It's not as demanding as actually teaching."

"So are you going to swap classes when they go up a grade?"

"Nah." You shake your head. "Frisk doesn't need me following them through school. It was just nice while we were all adjusting to how things have been up here on the surface. Besides, I like Levey. I think I'll stick with her next year."

Deacon picks his head up from his hand, staring off into the distance. "You know, she's kinda cute, do you think—"

"No," you blurt out, shaking your head. "Not at all."

He blinks. "What, did she say something about me?"

You purse your lips, raising a brow. "Okay, three things. One: You just broke up with Grillby, like, a week ago—"

"We were just sleeping together. You know what, that isn't even accurate. I never actually slept over there. It was literally just sex. And food." He sighs. "Good food. But if I want food I can go over to your house."

"Two: For god's sake, please do not start sleeping with the faculty. You have to see these people on an almost daily basis," you say, ignoring him. "You can avoid Grillby's, and Muffet's, but you can't avoid work. And three: she's not... interested in getting involved with a human."

"Oh," he says, a little surprised. "Everyone's entitled to their preferences I guess. And talking about how humans are a bunch of horrible murderers probably didn't help any."

"She knows we're not all horrible murderers," you say, squinting at him. He flashes you a quick smile. "I just don't think she's prepared to deal with the... difficulties that might come up with a mixed-species relationship."

"Hmm." Deacon drums his fingers on the table, shrugging. "Well, speaking of, have you decided what you want to do about the news of your own mixed-species relationship?"

You admitted to Deacon a few days ago that Asgore had spoken to you about coming clean to the reporters. You also told him that you had no idea what you wanted to do about it. Shaking your head, you stare down at your lunch, pushing it around with your fork. "No. I'm just really nervous, Deacon. This is big, for more than just me. It doesn't help that, as far as I know, Sans and I are the only mixed couple right now."

"Sorry," he says.

You sigh. "It's not your fault. I just... I dunno, I just want to worry about Thanksgiving right now. I've got a twenty-two pound turkey taking up half my fridge and I'm not sure it's going to be enough for ten people."

"Well we're going to be eating more than just turkey. Which, uh, did Toriel want me to bring anything?" he asks, looking a little nervous.
"I'm sure she'll just be happy to see you. I wouldn't worry about it. Though if there's anything you want to bring, I'm sure that would be fine too."

He just shrugs, and you go back to eating. A few minutes pass in companionable silence before he speaks up again. "Hey, what are you doing this weekend?"

"Nothing that I know of. Why, did you want to do something?" you ask, smiling. He's been getting better about approaching you about spending time together. You're glad.

"Yeah, we should go get lunch. The MTT Resort restaurant, my treat. I've got a hankering for a steak shaped like a rectangle."
The lobby of the new MTT Resort is, in a word, exquisite.

Polished floors, manicured potted trees and floral arrangements, fine art on the walls, and a glistening fountain taking center stage, filling the space with the calming sound of falling water. It's exactly like a dream. A dream where humans and monsters alike can come and spend their money.

Mettaton surveys his pride and joy, well satisfied with the surge of business he'd been getting since Halloween. Yes, he'd have to wait to make his debut on the big screen, but this... For now he's content. Which is a little surprising, he has to admit. Before he'd been struggling here, behind the Line, but it's been different lately. Since he started seeing more of Papyrus.

A pair of humans walk through the front door and he watches, pleased, as their eyes widen and their mouths fall open while they take in the sights. Normally he'd rush forward to greet them, to put on the usual song and dance. Instead he watches as one of his new human employees—a young woman, all the the ones curious enough to apply were young—crosses the room with a smile and an outstretched hand. He gives a silent nod of approval to no one in particular.

He hears the click of heels on marble and he glances over his shoulder. His head waitress for the restaurant is there, adjusting her pink woolen hair. She's pinning it back on the sides with a pair of little golden clips shaped like flowers, and she doesn't seem to see him for a second until she gets closer. Bo jumps a little at the sight of him, letting out a short, embarrassed laugh as she comes up next to him.

"What are you doing down here? Aren't you supposed to be upstairs?" she asks, giving him a knowing smile.

"I'm waiting, darling. He's not here yet," he says, looking back at the front door again.

"Are you sure? Because I came in right after him, maybe ten minutes ago. I had to get ready for my shift, but did no one tell you?"

Mettaton presses a hand to his chest, whirling around to face Bo. Her expression turns apologetic as he bites back a frustrated sound, only to be betrayed by the grinding of metal from inside his torso. "No, no one told me! Of all the— Go. Go... waitress," he says with a dismissive flip of his hand. "Maybe figure out who failed to inform me that my guest was here and tell them they're fired."

Bo just laughs, resting her hand on her hip. "You know I'm not doing any such thing, boss."

He pouts. "I know. It just feels nice to say."

"Go on, I'm sure he's waiting for you," she urges, giving him a small shove to his back.
"He's going to be upset."

"Oh poo, no he's not! Get up there and apologize and I know for a fact he won't mind in the least." She gives him a big smile. "I have to go or I'm going to be late. My manager might get mad."

"I'm your boss," he says, walking towards the elevator. "I'm your manager's boss."

She just gives him a little wave as he presses the call button, hurrying off to work. He likes Bo. He's liked her since she was hired. She's sweet, a hard worker, and even better the humans love her. How could they not? She's nothing any of them would expect from a 'monster'. Mettaton appreciates her knack for being open and honest, and sometimes downright frank with himself and the other employees. But she's always nice about it. He's not sure she has a mean bone in her body.

The elevator dings and he steps inside. Right as he turns around he catches sight of two familiar faces across the lobby. Is that you and Deacon? He thinks so, but he doesn't have time to go say hi. The doors are closing and he's already feeling awful for making Papyrus wait. And not just today.

He'd made Papyrus wait for far too long, in his opinion.

Mettaton takes the elevator all the way up to the very top, to the penthouse apartment he'd reserved for himself. The lift opens up into a small room with a (mostly) decorative table with two chairs, and a single locked door. He enters a numerical code into a keypad set into the wall, and lets himself inside.

The space is sleek and modern, with crisp lines and perfect curves. White walls, blonde wooden floors, cream colored furniture, black stone accents, his apartment is like a spread in a style magazine. Actually, that's where it's from. He still has the magazine tucked away somewhere. (He'd also spent hours pouring over the search results online for 'modern home interior'.) It's an exact representation of the ideal 'modern' look. High contrast, and... impersonal. Sterile.

Well, that has been slowly changing. There's a vase filled with bright pink roses on a table near the door, a single shock of vibrant color that draws his eye immediately. They were a gift from Papyrus.

"Papy, sweetheart, I'm so sorry that I'm late," he calls out to the apartment, glancing around. Hmm, he's not in the living room, but the television is on.

"METTATON?" Papyrus pokes his head out of the kitchen, grinning brightly. "OH, YOU'RE NOT LATE, I WAS JUST EARLY. LUCKILY I HAVE THAT KEY YOU GAVE ME SO I COULD LET MYSELF IN."

He's so unbelievably sweet, Mettaton doesn't have the heart to correct him. Yes, maybe he was a little early, but that didn't negate the fact that he was late, too. Well, that doesn't matter. All that matters is he's up here, with Papyrus, and he's going to enjoy his hour break from managing the resort. Maybe two hours. This is why he has managers, right?

Papyrus vanishes back into the kitchen and Mettaton follows after him, curious about what he's up to. The skeleton is wearing a ruffled, pink apron with 'Kiss the Cook' written on it in slanted cursive, a leftover prop from his now defunct cooking show. In fact, most of the kitchen is unused. The only reason he even had it included in his apartment was because it would just look odd without one. And who knows, maybe he'll have a chance to bring that old show back sometime in the future.

At least Papyrus seems to be enjoying it. He has a pair of pots on the stove, one of which he's
"You know, they say that a watched pot never boils," Mettaton says, coming up beside him.

"THEY DO? OH, NO WONDER IT'S TAKING SO LONG," he says, turning his back to the stove with a guilty look on his face.

Smiling, the robot takes hold of his hand and pulls him so that he's standing with his back to one of the countertops. "It's just an expression, sweetheart," he murmurs, looking down at the apron and tracing the words with his finger.

Papyrus is blushing, and he lets out a nervous little laugh. "I-I HOPE YOU DON'T MIND THAT I BORROWED THIS. I FOUND IT IN ONE OF THE DRAWERS."

"Of course not. You can use anything in this apartment that you want," he purrs, leaning in close. "And it looks good on you."

"OH. WOWIE. DO YOU REALLY THINK SO?" He fidgets a little with the frill along the sides, over his chest.

Papyrus might have the worst sense of fashion that he's ever seen, but... "You always look good, Papy."

He looks at the front of the apron again. 'Kiss the Cook'. Maybe he should. He wants to. He wants to do this. For him. For Papyrus. For them. He's tired of dancing around this like they have for the last two weeks. The desire to touch him, to hug him without needing some kind of excuse, to lean in close when they're sitting together... He's still not sure what he's entirely comfortable with, but he knows one thing for certain.

Mettaton is not satisfied with just being friends.

A kiss should be soft. Or heated. Or passionate. He's seen Alphys and Undyne kiss more times than he'd have liked; he has a good idea of how they're supposed to go.

He's been paying attention to the wrong couple. Now he knows why he never sees you and Sans kiss on the mouth. This is... not soft. His pliable but still metal lips press against hard teeth and Papyrus goes still. Oh, what does he do now? How was he expecting the skeleton to kiss him back with no lips?

After a moment Mettaton pulls away, unable to meet Papyrus's eyes. He should say something. He really ought to—

Papyrus wraps his arms around him and pulls him close, nuzzling his cheek. He closes his eyes and leans into the touch, letting out a soft sigh of relief. He hugs him back.

"I'm sorry," Mettaton says, dropping his head to rest on the skeleton's shoulder.

A pause. "FOR KISSING ME?"

Mettaton picks his head back up again, pulling away so he can look up at Papyrus. "No! Sweetheart, not at all," he says, wincing. "No, I'm sorry for getting it wrong."

"WAS THAT WRONG?" Papyrus says, looking genuinely confused. He's still blushing, bright orange across his cheekbones. Mettaton resists the urge to kiss them.
"I..." the robot hesitates. "Actually, now that you mention it darling, I'm not sure. I've, uh, never kissed anyone before."

"WE COULD, UM..." Oh Papyrus is positively glowing now, his fingers fidgeting with a small, uneven spot on the back of Mettaton's chassis. "MAYBE... PRACTICE MORE TO FIGURE OUT WHAT WORKS BEST?"

Mettaton kisses Papyrus's cheekbone, giving in to the desire. "My, my, aren't you full of surprises," he murmurs, chuckling.

"NYEH HEH HEH." He laughs, tilting his head to the side. "I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AM ALWAYS FULL OF SURPRISES. SOMETIMES LITERALLY. LIKE WHEN I HIDE GIFTS FOR YOU IN MY RIBCAGE."

He can't help but break out into a wide smile, laughing too. "Yes, darling, exactly like that," he says affectionately. As he leans in close to try to kiss him again, a phone starts to ring. His phone.

Grumbling, Mettaton flicks open a small compartment in his chest and pulls out his cellphone. The caller ID reads: MTT Restaurant. Hmm. Well, whatever it is, they can figure it out on their own. This is why he has managers. He silences the call and puts it away again.

"DID YOU NOT NEED TO ANSWER THAT? IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN IMPORTANT," Papyrus says, looking uncertain.

"Not more important than taking time off to spend with you," he says, reaching towards Papyrus. For a second he hesitates, wondering if he's allowed to just do these things now. To touch him. He pushes through his reservations, cupping his cheek. "I want to make sure you don't feel neglected, like before."

Papyrus is beaming, glowing, and now a little scatter of sparkles are hovering around his head. How can he be so adorable? The skeleton hugs him close again, nuzzling where his jaw meets his neck. Oh, it's like that kiss unlocked an entirely new level of affection between them, and right now Mettaton can't get enough. He doesn't want to let him go. He doesn't want to be let go.

The hiss of water striking the heating element on the stove snaps them both to attention, Papyrus letting out a yelp of surprise. "MY PASTA!"

So much for that. The skeleton slips away from Mettaton to go attend to his noodles while he watches, a small smile curving his lips. He's content to lean there against the counter, though part of him wonders what that phone call was about. The restaurant hardly ever calls him. Usually it's the hotel's front desk that needs him the most.

Well, it doesn't matter. Whatever it is, he's certain his staff can handle it.
The MTT Resort is the only place where you can find an almost even ratio of humans to monsters. Between the growing numbers of human staff and guests from outside the Line, this is where you and Deacon can most easily blend in. It also means that you tend to get mistaken for non-residents.

You make it to the entrance of the restaurant before one of the employees comes to intercept you. A young human woman gives you a bright smile, and according to her bright fuchsia name badge she goes by Toni. "Hi and welcome to the MTT Resort! Is this your first visit?" she asks, clasping her hands over her chest.

Deacon chuckles and shoves his hands in the pockets of his jeans but doesn't say anything. He just glances at you through the edge of his bangs, smirking.

Normally you'd be polite and correct her, but Deacon is a bad influence on your sense of humor. "Actually I've been to the original," you say, trying not to grin.

Toni blinks, not sure what to say. You think Deacon is holding back a laugh next to you.

"This one's a lot nicer. I like all the attention to natural lighting this time around," you continue.

"Hope, oh my gosh!"

You look over Toni's shoulder and there's Bo, dressed up in her formal waitress uniform and hurrying to meet you. Grinning, she edges her way past her coworker so she can wrap you up in a huge, pillowy hug. The wool around her neck is soft and smells faintly of something sweet, like vanilla and strawberries. As you pull away from each other she snatches up your left hand, letting out a loud gasp and taking a moment to admire your engagement ring.

"I heard that he got you one of those fancy human rings, congratulations!" she says, grinning from ear to ear and bouncing a little in her enthusiasm. "It's beautiful!"

"Thank you. Bo, it's so nice to see you!" you say. Her joy is infectious, leaving you smiling just as wide.

"It's so good to see you. How's Sansy? And oh, what about Frisk? Are they doing okay after that nasty incident on Halloween?" her expression turns somber, big blue eyes scanning over you like you might be injured.

"They're both fine, I'll be sure to let Sans know you asked about him." You realize that Toni is still there, watching the whole exchange with a bewildered expression.

"Bring him down here with you next time! I swear, I see more of his brother than I do of him nowadays," she says, resting her hand on her hip. Then, Bo follows your eyes and also notices that Toni is still standing there. "Oh! Toni, sorry honey! You don't need to worry about these two, they live on Ebott. Don't you recognize Hope?"
Bo throws her arm around your shoulders and turns so Toni can get a better look at you. You give an awkward smile and watch as recognition dawns over her face and she covers her mouth with a hand. "Oh!" she exclaims, eyebrows shooting up to hide under her bangs. "Oh wow! So you really... you were in the Underground! You really did see the original resort!"

"Hope, were you teasing this poor girl?" Bo chides you, pretending to narrow her eyes at you. You flush a little, feeling guilty.

"It's fine, I should have known!" Toni says quickly. "I mean, you were all over the news for like two months!"

"Honestly, I'm glad people don't recognize me on sight much anymore," you say, grimacing.

"Well, I can take this from here, Toni," Bo says, letting you go. Toni nods and gives you a final smile before walking back out into the main lobby. The sheep monster turns to face you, tugging on the ends of her pinstripe vest. "Are you here for lunch?"

Deacon clears his throat, and you realize you forgot him this whole time. "Oh!" you blurt out, turning to look from him to Bo. "Deacon, I'm sorry. This is Bo. Bo, Deacon."

Deacon turns on that winning smile, which Bo returns with equal radiance. He reaches for her hand and she gives it to him, giggling. "We've met before," he says. "Here at the restaurant."

"Oh, so you do remember. And here I thought you only had eyes for Muffet," Bo teases, nudging his shoulder with the hand he's not still holding.

"It's impolite to stare at other people, no matter how beautiful, while dating someone else," he says, and it's all you can do not to roll your eyes.

"So I guess that means you're not dating anyone," she says, winking and sliding her hand free from his. Deacon just laughs.

"Can you two flirt after we get some food? I was promised lunch," you interject, elbowing Deacon in the ribs.

"Right, of course! Sorry," Bo says, grinning and not looking very sorry at all. Oh goodness, this is all the world needs. These two flirts getting together.

Actually. If Deacon's problem with Grillby was a lack of communication, you know for a fact that Bo is nearly the opposite. She's showing both of you that right now. As she turns around to lead you to the host's station at the front of the restaurant, you catch Deacon's eye. Which involves tugging on the sleeve of his flannel shirt because he's too busy watching Bo's hips. He looks at you and you raise your eyebrows, pointing at Bo. His smile widens and you give a silent laugh, followed by an affectionate look.

Well, as much as you think he and Bo would be cute together, you think they both deserve to be more than just a casual fling. You'll have to tell him that.

She talks to the host for a second, telling them where she's taking the two of you before leading you to a table. The new and improved restaurant is beautiful, you have to admit. You hadn't managed to come down here since it was finished, and for some reason you imagined it would look like the old one. Mettatons everywhere. But no. This place looks like a proper, elegant restaurant. In fact you feel a little under dressed in your jeans and sweater, but as you spot a few other casual diners your worries ebb.
You and Deacon sit down and Bo hands each of you a menu. Disappearing for a second, she returns with a pitcher of water, using it to fill the glasses already waiting at the table. She's definitely standing closer to Deacon than you, but you don't mind. Her flirting will be far more productive with him anyway. When she does that with you it's just habit.

Opening your menu, you glance over at your friend. He's still all smiles, looking up at Bo and resting his chin in his hand. His own menu is pinned under his elbow.

"So how've you been liking Ebott so far?" Bo asks him, resting her hand on her hip as she shifts her weight to one leg. You can see his gaze drop to her waist and flick back up to her eyes.

"It's been great. I, uh, I'd say something that might be an innuendo, but that would sound insincere. I actually really love it here," he says, and you're surprised to see him look over at you. "I've made a fantastic friend and this is honestly a great place to live."

Bo looks surprised too. After a second she gives him a sweet smile, resting her hand on his arm. "Oh honey, I'm glad you're friends with Hope. She's a real sweetheart, isn't she? I mean, anyone that can charm a bonehead like Sansy's got something going for her, I can tell you that much," she says, turning that smile on you. You blush. "Well, I should let you two look at the menu, unless you know what you want."

"I know what I want," Deacon says, arching a brow at her. "Oh, did you mean food? I know what I want for lunch, too."

You snort, rolling your eyes as Bo giggles and pulls out a small notepad from her pocket. She looks at you. "How about you, sweetie?"

"My favorite steak shaped like a rectangle," you say, snapping your menu shut and passing it over to Deacon.

He stacks it on top of his. "Same thing. This is the best place for steak on Ebott, from what I've found so far."

"Got it, I'll put those in for you," Bo says, taking the menus from him. "Oh, and you know not to worry about the bill, Hope. Mettaton's still got a standing order to comp your meals."

Once Bo walks off, Deacon squints across the table at you. "So that's why you didn't raise a fuss when I said I'd treat you to lunch. You knew there wouldn't even be a check," he accuses. When you give him an innocent smile he rolls his eyes. "Well, next time we're going somewhere else so I can treat you properly."

"You don't have to," you say, though you know he won't listen.

He makes a noncommittal noise, still squinting. "Whatever. Not important. What is vitally important, right at this moment, is the fact that there are people who call Sans 'Sansy'. What the hell?"

Caught off-guard, you cover your mouth as you let out a spluttering laugh, loud enough that a couple at a nearby table give you an odd look. "I don't know. I kind of hate it," you admit, shaking your head. "When Sans and I came here— I mean, the original resort. Anyway, Bo was our waitress and this was the first time we met. And she was fawning all over Sans, I was so jealous. For like five minutes until she started flirting with me too."

Laughing, fixes you with an amused look. "Sans doesn't strike me as the 'fancy restaurant' type. Did he just wear those gym shorts?"
"No, thank you very much," you retort, huffing. "He wore a suit actually."

"He owns a suit?"

You roll your eyes. "Mettaton had it made for him. He actually put together the whole weekend for us, totally free of charge," you say picking up your glass of water. Taking a sip and leaning forward over the table, you don't even think because you're just too comfortable with your best friend when you say, "It's the least he could do, after he tried to kill me."

You and Deacon stare at each other as you realize what you just said. His eyes widen and he reaches across the table for your hand as you try to lean back and away from him. "Hope, what do you mean he tried to kill you?" he asks in a quiet, dangerously calm voice.

"I wasn't supposed to tell you that," you hiss, glancing around to see if anyone heard you. The tables immediately surrounding you are empty and you weren't loud before. No one is even looking at you. "Deacon, no one is supposed to know that any of the monsters might be dangerous!"

"Might be? You just said— And I didn't even think about why you might not be thrilled to work with him for almost a whole month! I thought it was just because he's such a showboat. No wonder Sans kept giving him those dirty looks, and, oh my god, now Papyrus is dating him?" Deacon is starting to ramble, a bewildered look on his face. You squeeze his hand and he focuses on you again.

"It was months ago. Back in the Underground, things were harder. Mettaton isn't that person anymore," you say firmly. "Look, I just forgave him a couple weeks ago. Please, just forget I said anything."

"But why? Why would he try to hurt you?" he asks, a pained expression on his face.

You pull your hand away, folding them both on the table in front of you. Biting your lip, you study him. He looks so upset on your behalf, so worried, you just don't want to lie to him. He said you could always talk to him. "Deacon, I'm only telling you this because I trust you. You're my best friend, and I know that the last time you found out about Soul... stuff you kept your promise not to say anything."

He sits back in his chair, picking up his glass and taking a drink. Nodding, he lets out a small sigh, waiting for you to continue.

"He wanted a human Soul. So he could cross the Barrier by himself," you say quietly.

"But that would have been suicide. Coming up here alone? The government would have torn him apart," Deacon says, gritting his teeth. You nod. "Shit... That... I mean if he'd killed you to get up here I wouldn't feel the least bit sorry for him, but... God."

"I know. But Deacon he's so different now, believe me. He regrets what he did." You hope your words carry the right weight, enough to get him to listen.

He holds your gaze, brow furrowing a little but he nods all the same. "Okay. I mean, I wasn't there, and if you say you forgive him then what good is it for me to not believe you?"

You let out a small, relieved sigh, because the last thing you need is two people you care about holding a grudge on your behalf against your will. Sans has been getting better but he's still not ready to let go. But, his feelings about it are more complicated, too tangled up in his fear of Resets. God, Resets, that's something you never want to have to try and explain to Deacon.
"Thank you. If it makes you feel any better, we abused the room service and made Mettaton pay for it all," you say, earning yourself a weak laugh. Deacon relaxes, which makes you feel better. "It was Sans's idea."

"Of course it was."
know the first thing about cars, so you just sort of nod and make appropriate, sympathetic noises. Because even though you don't understand, you care that he cares.

"Well, well, look at Ebott's one and only human couple, out on a date," comes a sickeningly sweet, woman's voice.

You and Deacon both turn at the sound and there's a human easing her way to your table. She's dressed in a snug skirt suit, blonde hair set perfectly in place. In one manicured hand she's holding a large cell phone, a stylus poised in the other. As you look closer you spot the press badge clipped to her lapel.

Deacon gives you a worried look, then returns his attention to the woman. "Look, we're just trying to have lunch—"

"Oh, I was just hoping to get a quick word with you two, I couldn't believe my luck spotting you both here," she says, ignoring him. She flashes a bright smile at you. "I'm Ashley, with the Ebott County Times." Ashley taps her badge, then holds her hand out to you.

You stare at it, uncomfortable, but shake it anyway because it would feel worse not to. She turns to Deacon and he follows suit, begrudgingly. With that taken care of she pulls out an empty chair between the two of you and takes a seat without an invitation, tapping away on her phone.

"So you two met here in Ebott, right? You didn't know each other before?" she asks, glancing between you and the screen as she continues typing.

"Yes, we met here, but—" you say, about to protest but she cuts you off.

"Mettaton said you two work together. Did you start dating while you were organizing that Halloween event?" she continues.

Deacon looks at you, a question in his eyes. You feel cornered, forced to make a choice you'd been trying desperately to avoid. He doesn't want to do this for you. It seems like he'll go along with whatever you decide. You clear your throat. "Deacon and I aren't dating," you say, pressing your hands on top of the table to steady yourself.

Which is right when she of course spots your ring. "Oh my goodness, well that was fast! Talk about a whirlwind romance, how delightful!" she croons, and you feel a flash of irritation.

"No, we're not together," you insist, balling your hands into fists. "We're just friends. Mettaton never said we were anything more than friends, the reporters just assumed—"

"Oh, Hope, you don't need to try and hide anything. I was the one who had that first interview with Mettaton. I could read the subtext," she says, winking at you.

"Honey, is this lady bothering you?" Bo seems to appear from nowhere, sidling up next to Deacon's chair. She rests her hand on his shoulder and looks down at Ashley.

"We were just trying to explain that just because we're the only two humans living on Ebott doesn't mean that we're dating," he tells her. Ashley just laughs, clearly still not believing him.

You start to reach for your phone. "Look, Ashley, I can show you a picture of my fiancé, he's—"
"Well of course you're not dating Hope, you're dating me, aren't you sweet pea?" Bo says, and before you or Deacon can react she bends down to kiss him. Right on the lips.

You do your best not to react, to seem surprised, even though a small part of you wants to let out a loud gasp. Ashley certainly does. Bo's hand grabs at the front of his unbuttoned flannel shirt and after a moment Deacon reaches up to cup the side of her face. When she pulls away they're both blushing, and your best friend looks dazed and more than a little pleased with himself. Bo smiles and covers her mouth, a soft giggle escaping her.

Clearing your throat, you turn on your phone and pull up a picture of you and Sans. You tap Ashley's shoulder, prompting her to snap out of her daze as you hold it out to her. "This is Sans. We've been together since I was in the Underground," you say, and start to tell her the truth.

After Ashley leaves, maybe fifteen minutes later, you bury your face in your hands and let the mixture of anxiety and relief wash over you. There it is. Soon everyone will know the truth, just like Asgore wants. Once you made things clear, Ashley actually surprised you with how understanding and apologetic she was. You hope that means she'll put a positive spin on the story.

Bo comes around to your side of the table, stroking your hair with one hand as she hugs you against her hip. "It'll be okay, honey. Try not to worry too much."

"I know, there's nothing I can do about it now," you say, taking in a slow, steadying breath.

"I tried to call Mettaton once I saw her at your table, he's good at dealing with those reporters. Every week or so we get a new one trying to do some kind of exposé on the hotel or the staff," she says, sighing.

"Thank you for your help," you say, glancing over at Deacon. He's been quiet since Bo kissed him, eyes flicking between the two of you.

"Of course, anytime," she says, and you think you see her blushing under her soft, cream-colored fur. "I should get back to work, I asked one of the other girls to cover for me while I dealt with this..."

"Oh, Bo I'm sorry!" you blurt out but she shushes you, hugging your shoulders again before letting you go.

"Don't you worry about it, what're friends for?" she says, smiling.

Bo smooths out the front of her uniform, glancing behind her at the other tables, and as she's about to go Deacon stands up from his seat. He clears his throat, running his hand through his hair and giving her a small smile. "So, uh, do you want to go out sometime?"

Her grin brightens, blue eyes sparkling as you watch them. "Yeah, I'd like that," she says, nodding. "Let me give you my number."

As Deacon pulls out his phone and she reaches for hers, you have to resist the urge to let out a happy sound, hiding your smile behind your hands. No matter what ends up happening with Ashley's story, at least some good came out of it.
If you haven't read the April Fool's chapter, read it [HERE!]

You're elbow-deep in the abdominal cavity of a twenty-two pound turkey when you hear the shutter sound from Sans's camera. Pursing your lips, you look up to see him standing on the other side of Toriel's kitchen. He's looking through the pictures he's already taken and doesn't even notice you frowning at him.

You know that when today is over you'll be glad for the inevitable album, but you can't help but think about the set of photos he'll undoubtedly set aside to store in his machine. Just in case. If things somehow Reset, the thought of him sitting alone back in Snowdin sifting through months worth of photos just makes your heart ache. How would it make it better, seeing everything he's lost?

Then there's the other reason: so that he has this tangible, weighty record of his time since he met you. Proof of how far he's come since the last Reset. Evidence that time is moving forward undeniably. It's reassuring. On his bad days sometimes you can catch him looking through the albums or flipping through pictures on his phone.

As much as you love seeing your life through the lens of his camera, you can't help feeling a little melancholy. You think Thanksgiving is also partly to blame. This is your first major holiday with your new family, and you can't help the little nagging guilt in the back of your mind. No, you won't let thoughts of your mother tarnish your day. You won't.

"I'm sure that photo is really flattering," you say, fishing out the little packet of gizzards from inside the turkey and setting them aside.

Sans raises a brow, glancing up from his camera to look at you. "you've been picking up more sarcasm from deacon," he says flatly. "but you can see for yourself."

He comes over to stand next to you and turns so that you can see the photo on the screen. Resting your chin on his shoulder as you look, you're a little surprised that it, well, it's a good picture of you. Yes, your arm is shoved into the carcass of a dead bird, but the bright natural lighting from the kitchen skylight is catching the waves of your hair just right and your expression is tight and focused. He's good at capturing you in candid moments, you always feel weird in staged shots.

"I stand corrected," you say, kissing his cheekbone. He leans into the touch, giving you a brief, sideways hug.

Toriel comes into the kitchen as Sans pulls away from you and you turn back to the turkey. She's smiling and shaking her head, and you can hear Asgore's deep bass laugh in the other room where he's with the kids and Papyrus. It's still early in the day, and only your two families are here yet.
You had to get here with enough time to get the turkey started.
"What's going on in there?" you ask her, glancing towards the living room.

"Frisk is showing Asriel how to make 'hand turkeys'," she says, with a fond look on her face. "And I am afraid that we do not have paper big enough for Asgore to participate. The children are trying to tape sheets together for him."

"'hand turkeys'?" Sans gives you a confused look as you laugh.

"You'll see. It's a kid thing. Arts and crafts," you say, opening up the packet of gizzards and setting them up on a cutting board beside a bowl of stuffing. "That might be a cute picture of the kids; them working on their turkeys."

"Ah, before you go, Sans," Tori says as he's turning towards the other room. "I was hoping to speak with the two of you."

Oh, you were wondering when this was going to happen. That reporter's story about you and Sans (and Deacon and Bo, coincidentally) had gone live less than a week ago, the day after your impromptu interview. The article itself had been positive, much to your relief. Ashley had taken a romantic spin on it, including a cheesy line about love crossing the 'barrier' between the species. Reactions to the story, though, were... mixed at best. You had to remind yourself that the negative, rude, and downright racist comments tended to be the loudest, and that it's hard to get a good idea of the general opinion from just replies on a website. The article had also been reported on in the news, mostly with respectable neutrality. Though that didn't stop the conservative stations from making thinly veiled, bigoted comments to their co-anchors. But, for the most part, things had gone over without causing too much of a stir. At least from what you can tell.

The reactions that stung the worst tended to be online, in the comments section where the anonymity of the internet turns people into their worst selves. A handful of people questioned Frisk's safety and your poor judgment as their mother. You had to remind yourself that these are the same things they said before, when news got out that you and Frisk were living in Ebott instead of going 'home'. This isn't new. They're always going to question your choices.

You just wish you could go back to just being... nobody.

"did someone from the government talk to you or asgore about me and hope?" Sans says, and you know he was thinking the same thing as you.

Sans was upset that you were ambushed in the middle of lunch, and you know he wished he could have been there to help you. But he's glad. Glad that neither of you have to hide your relationship anymore. It doesn't stop him from worrying, though. About what this might mean for your future. What people with actual power might do or say.

Toriel looks between the two of you, a little taken aback. "Oh, that is not what I meant to say, but if you are concerned..." As she looks at you, you can tell she realizes that you are concerned, thank you. "We were... gently reminded that any kind of union or marriage that might be performed here on Ebott would not be upheld past the border of our territory. We are permitted a certain level of self-government, but until monsters are granted full citizenship, our rights are... limited at best past the Line."

Oh. You didn't expect any different, not until everything gets settled. But hearing it directly from Toriel feels so much more final. Sans rests his hand on the small of your back and you lean into his side. The queen does her best to give you a wide smile, taking a step forward and clasping her
"But, what I wanted to speak to you about has to do with your marriage," she says brightly. "Asgore and I were wondering, now that your engagement is official, when the two of you were going to complete your harmony. And if you knew who you wanted to perform the rite."

You and Sans look at each other, and his arm leaves your back to circle your waist. "I didn't know if we could," Sans says, eyes widening. "Are you saying it's possible?"

Toriel's smile grows, losing some of its forced tightness. Your worries about the government are quickly forgotten at this new information. "Of course! Hope, your soul has a song just as monster souls do. It has been generations since there has been an opportunity such as this, but this was not uncommon before."

You're grinning, looping your arm around Sans's shoulders (careful not to touch him with your hand because you were just touching raw turkey) to hug him. "That's great! Sans, I'm so glad we can do this for you. I just wish I could hear it too."

"Oh, you will," Toriel says, and you gape at her. She lets out a soft laugh. "The harmony will let you sense his soul as we do. It may take a little while for you to adjust to it, but..." She trails off as Sans turns to face you, cupping your face in his hands. His eyes are bright and he looks so happy, you lean down to kiss him. The queen lets out a pleased sound, and you're too caught up in Sans to feel embarrassed that she's standing right there. "I think that you will do just fine, my child."

"You'll be able to feel both of us," Sans says to you, tracing your hairline. You know he wants to run his hands through it but you have it pulled back while you're getting the turkey ready. "Babe, I had no idea or I would have talked to you about this sooner."

"I should have mentioned this before now," Toriel says, apologetic. "Sometimes I forget how much knowledge has faded from our people over the generations. But the two of you have had more than the customary waiting period of engagement before the rite. And I believe you have shared your souls before?"

You and Sans look at her, pulling away from each other enough to be polite. He nods and you can't help but notice the motherly way she's regarding you both. It makes you feel a little shy. "Yeah, a couple times," Sans says, and you realize he sounds apprehensive. "Tori, about that... her soul's a lot stronger than mine, is that gonna affect the harmony?"

"No, they will find their balance. In fact, you will find that the process will come easier to you afterwards," she says. You can feel some of the tension leave Sans's body. When Toriel speaks again, her voice is gentle. "Asgore and I were hoping that we might perform the rite for you."

"I don't know what that involves, but... I can't think of anyone else I'd want involved," you say, then look at Sans. He's gazing up at you, grinning. "If you're okay with that, hun."

"Yeah, absolutely. Who else would know what to expect with a human soul in the mix, and you mean a lot to us, tori," Sans says, and you realize he didn't say anything about Asgore.

"The rite is not complicated, and the choice to have a full wedding ceremony is entirely up to you. You do not even have to have guests, if you wish."

"We were going to wait until everything was legal to have a wedding," you say, hesitating. "But maybe we could do something small, just friends?"

"Babe, we can always wait and do this all at once," he says, though he sounds reluctant. "Just
because we know it's possible—"

"I want to. I want to do this for you. And for me. Who knows how long it's going to take for you to get your citizenship," you say, hugging his shoulders. "It may not be recognized outside of Ebott but... as far as everyone here where we live are concerned... I can be your wife."

"ok. yeah." He's grinning. "whenever you want to."

You're smiling, too. "Soon."

Everyone else shows up shortly after noon. Mettaton arrives with Undyne and Alphys and makes a quick beeline over to Papyrus to wrap him up in a hug and kiss him. Those two have been a lot more affectionate in the past week, and your soon to be brother-in-law was ecstatic to inform you and Sans that he and Mettaton are officially a couple. Sans has taken this all in stride, much to your relief. He's been making an effort to be a little kinder to him, you think.

Deacon is alone, and he's the only one that didn't bring any food. He admits to you that he couldn't think of anything that could possibly stand alongside your or Toriel's cooking, and he just sort of panicked and came over empty handed. You gently remind him that no one expected him to bring anything, but he doesn't seem comforted.

Frisk and Asriel rope the newcomers into making hand turkeys before they're allowed to do anything else. Soon you have a whole flock of colorful turkeys of varying size and shape spread out across the floor.

The living room is full of people, laughing and talking, waiting patiently for dinner. You and Sans decide to tell everyone that you're planning on having your small ceremony for your monster-style marriage (Sans calls it the rite of harmony when he announces it to the room) sometime soon. The whole room bursts into excited congratulations and your friends take turns hugging you both.

Well, except for Deacon. He waits until everything dies back down and asks you what that means. You explain, and once comprehension dawns on his face he gives you a big smile and a friendly pat on the shoulder. He's happy for you, you know he is, but maybe it's because he's still a little uncomfortable being caught in the middle of this huge family gathering that he seems less enthusiastic than the others. Or because he doesn't completely understand it. Honestly, sometimes you struggle to understand some of these monster-specific things too.

Later, after you check on the turkey and help Toriel put together some of the side dishes that still need to cook, you find Deacon sitting off to the side on the couch. He's looking at his phone while the others are talking, squinting a little to try and avoid using his reading glasses. You cross the room and flop down next to him, leaning in close to try and snoop. You catch sight of a string of text messages before he turns off his screen.

"Excuse me, ma'am, this is a private conversation," he says, pocketing his phone and nudging you away with his shoulder.

You nudge him back. "With whooo?" you say, smiling.

The tips of his ears turn pink and you know exactly who it must be. He rolls his eyes but can't stop himself from smiling. "Bo. We've, uh, been texting a lot since Saturday," he says.

"When are you guys going out on your first date? Sunday, right?"

"Yeah. She's been busy with work, and her free time tends to be in the mornings when I'm at
school..." He lets out a wistful sigh, running his fingers through his hair then rubs his mouth with the back of his hand. "I, uh... I'm actually really looking forward to seeing her again. She's... really something else."

You're grinning, and you give him another playful shove with your shoulder. "Look at you. I like Deacon with a crush. He's kind of adorable."

Deacon lets out an embarrassed laugh, giving you a sideways look. "Shut up."

"I hope everything goes well. I'm sure it will. I want you guys to start dating because you need more than just..." You trail off, lowering your voice because Frisk and Asriel aren't too far away. "Than just a fling. I want you to be happy."

"You're such a sap. If anyone's adorable it's you," he says, poking you in the cheek.

Grinning, you bat his hand away. "I'll accept that."

You catch the sound of Sans's camera and you and Deacon turn to see your fiancé facing the two of you. You wave and Sans smiles and waves back, then focuses his attention on Alphys, Undyne, Frisk, and Asriel where they're sitting in a circle on the floor. When you look at Deacon again he's giving you an odd look.

"What?" you ask, raising an eyebrow.

"He's really okay, with the two of us being this close? I mean, he's barely glowered at me all day, it's starting to weird me out," he says, and you can't help but laugh.

"Sans is having a good day. And yes he's fine," you say, smiling. "Really. I know you guys aren't friends, but he doesn't hate you."

Deacon makes a noncommittal noise, but lets it drop.

Dinner is wonderful. The turkey turned out perfectly golden-brown and the table is piled with dishes. From green bean casserole and stuffing, to slightly more non-traditional fare such as spaghetti and snail pie. Everyone is happy and smiling, and you're just so glad to be here with all of these people you care about. Even Deacon seems to be finally relaxing a bit, talking animatedly with Undyne and Alphys. It's good to see him like this.

Sans reaches under the table and squeezes your hand, an affectionate smile warming his face when you turn to meet his eyes. He's leaning back in his chair, content. "this is a good holiday. i like this one," he says. "it's good to see everyone together. we've all been getting pulled in different directions lately."

"Yeah," you say, threading your fingers through his. "I like it too."

"hey," he says gently, tracing the side of your thumb.

"Hey," you answer, smiling.

"i love you."

You lean over and kiss his cheekbone, ignoring the loud whooping sound from Undyne as she catches you in the act. "I love you too."

Once everyone is done eating, all of you work together to get the table cleared. In the loud hustle
and bustle of everyone getting in each other's way, your phone starts to vibrate in your pocket. Without thinking you excuse yourself out the back door, out into the fading light of evening. It's quiet on the porch, away from a kitchen full of people all trying to take care of dishes and leftovers with no coordination whatsoever. The shadows from the almost-bare trees and spindly evergreens are long, and the sky is washed with orange.

You answer the call. "Hello?"

"Where are you?" The familiar voice sends an icy feeling of dread into the pit of your stomach. For a single frantic moment you think about hanging up, but you can't bring yourself to do it. "What could you possibly be doing on Thanksgiving that's more important than seeing your only family?"

"Mother, I'm with my family," you protest, your voice weaker than you'd like. You weren't expecting this. You should have! But you aren't prepared to deal with her, not like the last time you spoke.

"I'm at home, alone, on Thanksgiving because my only child won't bring my grandchild to come see me," Kim says, and you cross your arm over your stomach, holding yourself. You can hear her breathing, the slight rasp in her voice. It sounds like she's been crying. Guilt stirs unbidden in your chest. "I thought you might come for the holidays. You should be here at home."

You resist the urge to be petulant, to say that you are home. "The Line isn't open yet. And there's no way I'd leave Sans behind," you say, shoulders hunched, curled in on yourself.

"Oh yes, your fiancé. I can't believe I had to find out from the news that my daughter is engaged. We can talk about that later, but it doesn't change the fact that you and Frisk are human. You could come home if you wanted to. What you're telling me is that you didn't want to see me for Thanksgiving. That you'd rather let me sit here—" Her voice cracks and you feel your eyes swim with tears. You hate this. You hate how guilty and awful she can make you feel. How easy it is for her to heap the blame onto your shoulders and you can't even deny it. "Alone. On Thanksgiving. I even made turkey. I guess I shouldn't have bothered."

"Mother, you never even—" The call disconnects. She hung up on you. She didn't even give you a chance to try and explain, or apologize. She just had to have the last word, to make you feel like utter shit and then leave you to wallow in it. This is just like her! "You never even asked me to come!" you snap at the phone, glaring at it through your tears.

Looking up at the trees, you try to will yourself not to cry but you can't. Instead, you cross the porch to sit on the steps, shoving your phone in your pocket before burying your face in your hands and just let yourself fall apart.

Even here, months since the last time you saw her, she has this awful power over you. This ability to make you feel guilty for whatever she decides. She is your family, and as much as you wish you could feel otherwise you still, in some distant part of you, care about her. It would be easier to hate her. To believe that she hates you too and only wants the worst. That she's cruel because she wants to be cruel. But you can't.

You're so stupid. You're just a stupid, worthless kid who hasn't done anything with her life but stumble upon these people who just gave you everything you have. You didn't earn any of this. You're just a fraud. You've never been worth any—

The back door opens and you jump, cringing as you try to dry your face with the sleeves of your cardigan. Sniffling, you glance over your shoulder, expecting Sans, or maybe Toriel.
Deacon is there, one hand in his pocket as he catches sight of you, his smile faltering. "Hope? I came to find you because I didn't know where you went, are you okay?" He takes a step closer, brow furrowing.

Your eyes well with fresh tears and you shake your head. Burying your fingers into your hair, you squeeze your eyes shut and hunch forward over your knees. Maybe he'll just go get Sans. You can't imagine he'd want to deal with you like this. You feel embarrassed and disgusting, a mess of tears and—

Deacon sits down beside you and wraps his arms around you, hugging you close and tucking your head under his chin. It just makes you cry harder. This is the first time he's ever done anything like this before, and you're just so glad that he's here. You circle your arms around his chest, burying your face in his shirt as he strokes your hair and your back, making soft shushing sounds to try and comfort you.

Fighting to catch your breath, your tears finally stop. It leaves you feeling wrung out and a little numb, and you pull away to wipe your face. Deacon keeps one hand on your back, pushing your hair gently to the side so he can rub soothing circles between your shoulders. You give him a watery smile, shaking your head and letting out a shuddering sigh.

"I'm sorry," you say.

He ignores your apology. He's watching you, searching your face. "Talk to me."

"I got your shirt all wet," you say, reaching out to touch the spot on his chest that's darkened with tears.

"Good thing I'm waterproof," he says, his mouth twitching with a weak smile. "What happened?"

"My mom called me," you say, biting your lip and looking away. You scan the trees, like they might show you what to say.

"You've never talked about your mom before. I'm guessing it wasn't a friendly chat," he says grimly.

You let out a sharp huff. "She was mad I didn't go home for Thanksgiving. With Frisk."

"How come?"

You look at him, wondering if he really understands just what he's asking. An innocent question, but with an answer you don't think he's expecting. But he's sitting out here, with you, because he cares. Deacon is your best friend and he cares about you.

So you tell him.

You tell him that she used to hit you. To tear you down and abuse you. That the reason you went to Mt. Ebott was because of her, to protect Frisk. That the rumors that apparently circulated while you were missing were all true. And you tell him that for the first six years of Frisk's life, Kim was their mother.

You keep it brief, and by the end of it your cheeks are dry and your chest aches. Deacon listens to it all with a solemn, attentive expression, and when you're finished he hugs you again. "I'm sorry. Is that why you always seem anxious when there's a loud noise? Like when you first rode in Sylvie and I slammed the door?"
"I didn't think you noticed," you say, surprised and a little touched.

"I didn't want to nag you about it. I figured if you wanted to tell me you would," he says, sighing. "I mean, I figured you had your reasons not to talk about your parents."

"That's why I never asked about yours," you say softly, reaching for his hand. He turns his over on his knee and lets you take it, clasping each other.

Deacon's expression shifts and he looks down at your hands. His fair skin and your warm brown, a contrast almost as stark as you and Sans. He lets out a soft sigh. "Do you want me to tell you why?" he asks, tilting his head to look at you through his bangs.

"Only if you want to. Deacon, you don't owe me anything," you say, tucking your own hair behind your ear as you lean against his side.

A small smile tugs at his mouth, but it's enough to reach his eyes. "You know, when we first met I wouldn't have believed you if you said that to me. I wondered why you were being so nice to me, what you must have wanted in return. But you've never expected anything. You're just... Hope, you're such a kind person."

You let out a tiny, embarrassed laugh, blushing for sure as you look away. "You give me too much credit."

"I don't. You don't give yourself enough," he says, squeezing your hand for emphasis. "I want to tell you. I haven't told anyone about this in... a long time, and I want you to know."

A small smile tugs at his mouth, but it's enough to reach his eyes. "You know, when we first met I wouldn't have believed you if you said that to me. I wondered why you were being so nice to me, what you must have wanted in return. But you've never expected anything. You're just... Hope, you're such a kind person."

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"I don't. You don't give yourself enough," he says, squeezing your hand for emphasis. "I want to tell you. I haven't told anyone about this in... a long time, and I want you to know."

Your smile fades and you nod, curious.

"I don't talk about my parents because I don't have any. No, Hope don't apologize, just let me tell you," he says, holding up his free hand as your brow furrows and you open your mouth. "I was told that my mom was sixteen when she had me. I was a month premature and she was discharged from the hospital without me. And never came back." He looks away from you, up at the trees. It's getting darker. "She never told anyone who my father was. The only thing she gave me was my name." Deacon shifts on the steps, his shoes scraping loudly against the wood.

"She just... she left you?" you ask, and you can't help but think of Frisk. How terrified you were in the hospital, and when you were sent home with them. With this baby you had no idea how to take care of. You can't imagine ever leaving your baby behind.

He nods. "Yeah. I mean, she was young and scared, I guess."

"So was I! But that's no excuse—"

"I know," he says, giving you a weak smile. "I appreciate your anger, but I don't know her. I never will. And maybe when I was younger I would have liked to go up to her and demand to know why she abandoned me..." His smile falters, and you wonder if he's actually as okay with what happened as he's letting on. "I spent... way too much time imagining what I might say, if I ever met her. But it doesn't matter. She made her choice and keeping me wasn't part of it."

You bite your lip, unsure of what to say.

"So I was raised in the system. Going from foster home to foster home. Some of them were okay. There was one family that wanted to adopt me, when I was five I think. But something fell through or they changed their minds, I'm not sure," he shakes his head, rubbing the back of his neck. You watch the muscles in his jaw tense. "But for the most part I was just a check from the state to these
people. They weren't my parents, I wasn't their kid. No family photos on the walls, no big family dinners. I learned early on that there wasn't any point in getting attached. Any time I tried to get close they'd push me away or I'd get moved to a new house. It was... um..." Deacon sighs and he turns his head to meet your eyes. "It was easier not to get emotionally invested. Because then they couldn't reject me."

"Deacon..."

He blinks hard, his eyes a little glassy in the fading light. "You broke my streak," he teases, forcing a laugh. "It's all your fault, that I realized what I've been missing out on this whole time. It's why I felt so shitty with Grillby..."

"I'm not sorry," you say, blinking back your own tears as he barks out a laugh.

"Don't be. I don't regret it. It's hard to realize you're lonely when you don't know what it's like to feel any other way," he says, and the casual way he just seems to brush it off makes your chest ache. He lets go of your hand and puts his arm around your shoulders. You slip yours around his waist and he gives you a gentle shake. "C'mon, I bet everyone is wondering where we ran off to. And I don't need Sans assuming the worst and coming after me."

You let him pull you to your feet, and as you step up onto the deck he gives a little sigh as your eyes meet. He wraps you up in another hug and you throw your arms around his neck, squeezing him tight just as he does the same to you. Deacon presses his face into your shoulder, taking in a deep breath and then sighing as you feel some of the tension leave his body.

"Sorry, I figured you needed another hug," he says, voice muffled.

"Are you sure you aren't the one that needed the hug?" you tease gently.

"No way. I'm making this sacrifice for you. Hugs are gross."

You pull away, grinning as you give him a weak shove. Your smile fades as you glance towards the back door, realizing that you're going to have to tell Sans about your mother's phone call. And how guilty you still feel. "Do you want me to not tell Sans anything about what you told me?"

Deacon shrugs. 'It's not exactly a secret, I just don't go around broadcasting, 'Oh, I'm an orphan, please feel sorry for me.' If you want to tell him that's fine. I trust you."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"About not throwing your tragic past in people's faces, or trusting me?"

You let out a small huff of laughter. "Both."
Sans wasn't quite sure what to expect from this human holiday. On the surface it sounded simple enough: food and family. What he gets is just that and something more.

You are positively glowing all day. He's not sure if it's Thanksgiving or because of the good news from Toriel, but once the turkey is in the oven it's like you can't stop smiling. Sans hasn't been without good days, especially once everything with Halloween blew over, but even he thinks this is easily one of his best in the past month. Learning that he'll be able to harmonize with you, and you'll be able to hear it, is a surprise he wasn't expecting. He needed this pick me up. He's happy.

Before noon and when everyone else is supposed to show up, you and Sans are pulled down to sit on the ground with the kids. That's when he gets his education on hand turkeys. Distracted by tracing his hand onto a piece of paper, Frisk ends up stealing his camera.

"hey, kiddo, be careful with that," Sans says, worried about all the pictures he's taken so far should something happen to it.

"I know," they answer, holding the camera up to their face, closer than strictly necessary.

He feels your hand on his side and he turns to look at you. Your smile is warm with affection and he feels that tiny knot of worry in his chest come undone. You lean in to kiss him, ignoring Frisk's groan even as they take a photo. "It'll be nice to have some pictures with you actually in them," you say gently. "You're always the one behind the lens."

That's true. He has to admit that except for some specific family photos he's absent from most of the pictures. He's just too busy taking them to be in them. He really ought to be better about that. The photo albums aren't just for him, after all.

He spends most of the day watching everyone else. When the rest of the group arrives he gets pictures of the others making their hand turkeys under the careful guidance of Frisk and Asriel. Then, once they're all done, he gets a shot of everyone's turkeys together. (Papyrus's has sparkles, Mettaton's is fuchsia and black, Undyne's has an eyepatch and a sword, and Alphys's is wearing a sailor uniform. The others are more 'normal'. He tried to get away with just writing 'sans' on his in red crayon, but Frisk wouldn't stop bugging him until he colored in in properly. His name is still visible under the layer of brown.)

Papyrus and Mettaton are inseparable the moment the robot walks in the door. Sans hasn't had much chance to see the two of them together. Even though you took the time to talk to him, to let him know that you forgave him and wanted him to feel welcome, Mettaton doesn't come to the house much. Though, he suspects that's more because of him than you. With a begrudging, inward sigh Sans thinks that maybe he ought to make an effort to be nicer. If he can be nice to Deacon for your sake, he can be nice to Mettaton for Papyrus's. Even Undyne's been nicer to him, now that Papyrus is happier.
And Papyrus is happier. As Sans lines up a shot with his camera, he watches his brother put his arm around Mettaton's shoulders and hug him close. Mettaton reaches for the hand dangling over his chest and laces their fingers together. He turns to Papyrus and says something that makes his face light up, and despite himself, Sans can't help but smile as his brother leans over to nuzzle the robot's cheek. He takes the picture.

Mettaton must notice the sound because his eyes flick over to where Sans is standing and they look at each other. After a moment of silent regard, Sans crosses the room.

"it's a good picture, wanna see it?" Sans asks as the two of them look up at him.

"OH, IS IT A PICTURE OF ME AND METTATON?" Papyrus asks, craning his neck.

Sans nods and turns the camera around so they can both see it. Papyrus lets out a loud exclamation of joy. "WOWIE, LOOK AT US! METTATON, YOU LOOK SO HAPPY. NYEH HEH HEH! IT MUST BE THANKS TO I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS!"

Mettaton is actually blushing a little bit, fighting a smile and losing. "Papy, sweetheart, please," he says, giving Sans an embarrassed look. As Sans pulls the camera back towards his chest and turns to move away, the robot clears his throat. "Sans, could you send me a copy of that picture? Please."

He looks at the two of them, and the honest, sincere look on Mettaton's face. He's changed a lot recently. For the better. Sans nods again. "yeah, sure mettaton. no problem."

His smile is genuine. "Thank you."

As he leaves his brother and his... There's a tiny moment of rebellion inside his mind but, yes, he tells himself, Mettaton is Papyrus's boyfriend. He'll have to accept that. But, as he leaves his brother and his boyfriend on the couch, he resists the urge to laugh as he listens to Mettaton try to field the barrage of questions Papyrus is now throwing his way about the picture.

He goes back to watching the rest of the room, leaving the two of them to their business.

Sans notices something when the two of you tell everyone that you'll be performing the rite of harmony soon, now that everyone is here to hear the news. In the midst of all the excitement, Alphys keeps glancing over at Undyne, like she's trying to catch her eye. Undyne doesn't seem to pick up on it, but he does. What's going on there?

When you disappear into the kitchen with Toriel to finish up some of the last preparations for dinner, he catches Alphys off to the side. She's watching Deacon try to to wriggle his way unsuccessfully out of a conversation with Undyne about more aikido lessons. He knows they've met up a few more times since that first day almost two months ago, but it seems like she's eager for more. He could help the human out... but it's more amusing to watch him try not to upset Undyne. Besides, if she's distracted, he can talk to Alphys alone.

"hey," Sans says, sidling up beside the doctor as she fiddles with the hem of her ruffled blouse.

"Oh!" she squeaks, jumping a little bit as she glances over at him. He wasn't exactly being sneaky, so she must have been pretty focused on Undyne. Or whatever she was thinking about. "H-hey Sans. Congrats again! I'm so excited for you g-guys!" She gives him a bright smile, adjusting her glasses.

"thanks," he says, smiling back at her. His camera is hanging around his neck, leaving his hands free. He twists his ring on his finger, the rubber grip on the inside giving it just enough resistance to make it oddly satisfying. After a second he looks at it to make sure the heart is centered and
stops fiddling with it. "so how are you and undyne doing?"

"Good! We're actually... we're really great," Alphys says, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. She looks down at the floor, her tail sweeping to the side with nervous energy before she looks up at where Undyne is still talking to Deacon. "I, um... I actually have a q-question for you. If you don't mind..."

"of course. what's up?" He raises a brow, curious but he thinks he knows what this is about.

Wringing her hands, her tail twitches again. "How did you k-know you wanted to m-marry Hope?"

Yep. Just as he thought. Grinning, Sans leans over and throws his arm over her shoulders. She makes an embarrassed but pleased sound, giving him a sideways look around the rim of her glasses. "alphys, you know that the first time i proposed to her was on accident," he says, chuckling.

"I-I know! But you still knew. You didn't change y-your mind," she presses, giving another nervous glance in Undyne's direction.

"well, i just knew that there was no way i could ever picture my future without her or frisk in it. so i told her that," he says, following her gaze to look at the fish monster. She's flexing, and making some kind of throwing motion. Deacon keeps stealing peeks at his phone and nodding as she talks. "is that how you feel about undyne?"

Alphys nods, then catches herself. She covers her mouth with both hands, blushing. "We knew when w-we moved in together that we wanted things t-to be s-serious. I can't imagine e-ever not being with her again."

"then you should tell her that."

"I know... Th-things have just been so uncertain with everything h-here on the surface," she says, wincing. Shaking her head, she gives Sans a worried look. "We don't know what m-might happen."

Sans knows that fear, better than she can ever know. How fleeting happiness can feel, how scary it is to try and catch it and cling to it, knowing something might snatch it away. He hugs her shoulders, leaning in close and making sure she's looking him in the eye. "then make sure to face it together. don't let worrying about the future stop you from enjoying the present. i did that for too damn long and i don't want you to make that same mistake. hope showed me that. let undyne do the same for you."

Alphys searches his face, and after a moment she gives him a wobbly smile. Nodding, she looks at Undyne again, right as Deacon finally manages to extricate himself with an excuse that he needs to use the bathroom. Before her girlfriend turns to spot them, she quickly blurts out, "Y-yeah! You're right!"

Letting her go, he watches as she goes over to rejoin Undyne, and he wonders if she's going to have the courage to follow through. He hopes so. When did he become such a sap? With a swell of affection, he blames you. He can appreciate and silently root for the two of them because he knows what it's like to be so in love. He wants the people he cares about to know what that's like.

He's torn from his thoughts as Asgore passes in front of him with the kids hanging off his horns, laughing. Wanting to make sure he gets a picture, he follows after them and turns his camera back on.

You come out of the kitchen at some point while he's busy doing that, going over to sit with
Deacon while he's got himself holed up with his phone. Sans gets that the guy doesn't seem comfortable with all your friends, but he could at least make more of an effort. But as he watches the two of you together he pushes that twinge of annoyance aside. Deacon's blushing and hiding his phone, you're clearly antagonizing him about something... Watching the two of you is like watching a pair of close siblings. There's a bond there the two of you have formed, and he's glad that he's finally letting himself see it. To be able to appreciate what it's done for you. You're happy, and that means everything to him.

Deacon pokes you in the cheek and you grin and push his hand away and as the two of you are smiling he takes the chance to snap a picture. You both look up at him and you smile and wave. Grinning, he gives a little wave back, amused by the bewildered expression on Deacon's face. That's fine, let him be confused. Sans turns away to leave the two of you to your conversation, satisfied with the fact that he doesn't even have to remind himself not to feel annoyed or frustrated.

Maybe it's because he's having a good day with his friends and family, but he hopes it's because he just doesn't mind Deacon so much anymore. That weird feeling is still there, but it's second nature now to just ignore it. How can he hold that inexplicable agitation against him when you trust and care about him so much? In the face of all the evidence, Sans is starting to trust him too.

When you go back inside after your talk with Deacon, almost everyone is still hanging out in the kitchen. Oh, you weren't expecting all these eyes on you. You think you look okay, that it's been long enough since you were crying, but the second you meet Sans's eyes you know he can tell. Deacon comes in after you and shuts the door.

"Found her hiding outside," Deacon says with a forced levity that seems casual enough. But no one seems very convinced.

"Sorry, I had a phone call. I hope I didn't worry anyone," you say, eyes flicking over to the rest of the room before returning to Sans.

He crosses the room to meet you, taking your hand as he searches your face. The kitchen is mostly quiet, save for the sound of the kids playing in the other room. You wish everyone would stop looking at you. "who was it? is everything ok?" Sans asks.

"I'm okay," you say, loud enough for everyone to hear. Biting your lip, part of you would like to talk to Sans in private, but these are your friends. Your family. They all know (well, you don't think Mettaton does) about Kim. You told them back when you first came to the surface and you needed to go see her. You'll never forget how badly Undyne wanted to go with you so she could threaten her, to make sure she knew you had friends who could kick her ass. "It was my mother."

Sans lets go of your hand so he can put his arm around your waist, hugging you against him. But before he can say anything to you Undyne comes up on your other side, throwing her arm around your shoulders and narrowing her eye. She bares her teeth. "What did she do? Do I need to take care of her for you?" she asks, drawing a finger across her neck.

You have the futile hope that she's mostly joking, but you let out a weak laugh anyway. The others are murmuring their concerns, and Toriel shoos Undyne away so she can wrap you up in a hug. Sans's hand still on your waist and you can feel his thumb rubbing your side.

"Oh my child, are you certain you are all right?" Toriel asks you, and the sweet concern in her voice makes your chest ache all over again. This is what a mother should be like. You nod into her shoulder.
"She was angry that I wasn't home for Thanksgiving. That she was there all alone," you say, trying to ignore the guilt still twisting in your chest.

"Did she ever call you? Ask you to see her, or if she could come see you?" Toriel asks, stroking your hair.

"No. I never heard from her."

"Then she has no one to blame but herself," Toriel says, with an iciness that surprises you.

When she pulls away you see that the others have gathered closer. Papyrus is at your side in an instant, snatching up your hand between his and squeezing. "ARE YOU STILL SAD? IS THERE ANYTHING WE CAN DO TO MAKE THINGS BETTER?" You catch sight of Mettaton behind him, looking just as concerned.

You give Papyrus a weak smile. All of these people care about you. It overwhelms the guilt, shoves it aside, at least for now. "I'm better. Deacon made sure I was okay, and I am. Really," you say, looking over at Sans. He gives you a small nod and hugs you closer.

As some of the attention goes to Deacon, much to his surprise, Sans gives you an apologetic look. "i'm sorry i wasn't there for you. but... i'm glad deacon was. you made a good friend."

You're more relieved to hear him say that than you probably should be. Some tiny part was worried that he'd be upset that Deacon was the one to comfort you. You feel a little bad for expecting the worst, but for the most part you're just happy. "I did. And I'm glad he was there with me too. I..." You lean in close to him, lowering your voice. "He opened up to me. I'm so relieved, Sans. If any good came out of my mother calling, it's that."

He gives you a small smile, leaning in to nuzzle your cheek. "at least it's not all bad."

"Today has definitely been more good than bad." You clench your jaw, a swell of defiance rising up in your chest as you look out over everyone. Sans squeezes your side and you cover his hand with your own. "I've got everyone I need right here."
"Hope, you need to help me," Deacon says, the second he hears you answer the phone. He's standing in the middle of his bedroom, staring at his open closet, dressed in just a pair of jeans. That's as far as he got before having this sudden crisis.

There's a pause on the line, and in the background he can hear some poorly played piano music. "You know, one of these days you're going to actually need help and I'm not going to realize it," you say, and he can just picture the slight narrowing of your eyes as you try not to smile. A small part of him wonders if he's starting to annoy you with his behavior, then promptly panics, but he squashes it back down. You're not that kind of person. You've already let him in and he can tell you're not the type to let go. Best friends. "And you could at least say hello first."

"Hi Hope, how're you? Also, you need to help me," he says, bringing the mic closer to his mouth for added effect. "What do people wear to go hiking? Bo wants to go hiking and I know that I've seen hikers before, but now I can't for the life of me remember. It's just a day trip, it's not like I need to bring supplies." A pause. "Do I need to bring supplies?"

"There is this thing that might be able to answer your question. It's called the internet," you say, and okay, really, what is going on in the background? There's bad piano and voices he can't quite make out. "Do you need me to come over?"

"I don't— Where are you?" he blurts out, overwhelmed with curiosity.

You let out a small laugh. "You can hear all that? I'm over at Undyne's with Frisk. Someone mentioned piano, and Frisk remembered that Undyne was supposed to be teaching them how to play."

"Ignoring the fact that it's a little shocking that she knows how to play piano. Frisk never seemed like the musical type," he says, momentarily distracted from his dilemma.

There's a pause. "Frisk's biological father was in a band back in high school. I don't know if he ever went anywhere with that, but... I imagine that's where they get it from," you say, quiet enough that he almost doesn't hear you. You clear your throat. "But do you need me to come help you? It's almost ten, aren't you supposed to meet her at ten-thirty?"

"No, no, you're in the middle of something," he says, glancing at the clock to check the time. Shit, you're right. "I don't want to interrupt. Uh, any more."

"HEY, who's that on the phone? Is it Sans?" He can hear Undyne's voice in the background.

"Oh, no it's Deacon," you tell her. "He's trying to get ready for his date with Bo."

"Oh! Darling, tell him to have a good time. That's so adorable that they're going out on a date after all that mess with the news," Mettaton's voice this time.
"TELL HIM NOT TO FORGET TO TAKE A GIFT! THAT'S VERY IMPORTANT!" And Papyrus. How many people are over there?

Deacon feels a sudden lump in his throat and a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Wait, do I need to take a gift? Is that like, a monster thing?" he says, running his fingers through his hair and giving a quick, cursory glance to his bedroom. Does he have anything in this house that might work as a gift?

"Hold on," you say, and he can hear the voices and piano in the background getting quieter. You must be moving to another room. "Okay. I didn't want Pap to hear me. No, you don't have to take a gift, don't worry about that. That's just Papyrus."

"Oh thank god," he breathes, letting some of the tension seep out of his shoulders. "Hope, I don't want to mess this up."

"Deacon," you say in that affectionate way that he's still not quite used to. If you were here you'd squeeze his hand, or his shoulder. He kind of wishes you were here to do that. "You're gonna be fine. Don't overthink it and just have a good time with her. You've been talking for like a week now, you're not going in blind."

"Yeah, okay, that's true," he says, pacing back and forth at the foot of his bed. There's a loud beep in his ear, a notification of a text message. "Hey, I just got a message. It might be Bo and I need to figure out what I'm wearing. Sneakers should be okay, right? I don't have boots."

"I guess so. I'm not exactly a hiker myself," you say, uncertain. "Just wear something comfortable for the weather. Don't worry, you look good in everything. It's awful."

He laughs, feeling a bit better. Okay, maybe you weren't much help on the clothing front, but he's glad he called you. "It's a burden I have to bear."

"Goodbye, Deacon," you say pointedly, laughing. "Have a good time."

"Yeah, yeah. Talk to you later."

He waits for a second until he hears you end the call. Sighing, he pulls his phone away from his ear to check the message he just got. Oh, no this isn't from Bo.

It's from Grant.

'We need to talk about what happened on the news last week.'

He frowns at the message, a swell of defiance in his chest. He exits out of his texts, choosing not to reply. "No, we don't," he says, to no one in particular.

Bo is already waiting at the small park the monsters built at the start of Mt Ebott's hiking trail. As he throws Sylvie into park and gives her steering wheel a small pat before getting out, he feels a small twist of nerves in his chest. This is all different than he's used to. Before, for years, the end goal had just been sex. A few weeks of fun and maybe some shallow companionship. Then a clean breakup and the cycle would repeat. No attachments. No feelings. No butterflies.

Oh, there's butterflies this time. He'd spent two hours on the phone with her yesterday before she went into work and that's just not something he ever did. Deacon just didn't do hours on the phone with girlfriends, or boyfriends. They were disposable. But he doesn't want to do that again. Not to her.
This is all your fault. You'd made him change. For the better, he thinks. He hopes.

Hiking had been Bo's idea. He admitted, yesterday, that he still doesn't know Ebott that well. While he had been the one to ask her out, he asked her if there was anything she'd like to do. And that thing had been hiking.

He'll do hiking. He'll do whatever she wants to do.

The parking lot for the park is empty, despite the handful of families he can see scattered in the nearby playground and field. Then, he realizes with growing dread, that most of the monsters don't own cars. They could get special permits from the military to drive (like Papyrus, Mettaton, and Asgore) but most of them haven't bothered. Which means... oh god did Bo walk here? He should have picked her up! She just said they could meet at the park and he didn't even think to suggest anything else.

Bo is sitting on a park bench, watching him with a covered basket next to her. As he catches her eye she stands up and gives him a big, bright smile. Oh, god she's even cuter out of that work uniform. She's wearing a pair of faded and worn, heeled hiking boots he's not sure are strictly practical. But, then again, they're not exactly shaped for a human foot. Does she have hooves? Would it be rude to ask? Never mind. His eyes trail up her shapely legs (she has that extra bend, like a really high ankle, but he doesn't know what it's called). She's wearing thick, gray wool leggings with a short black skirt over it. Her pale green, off-the-shoulder sweater looks like it's made of wool too.

That's a lot of wool on wool. Is that weird? Oh god, he can't ask her, that might come off racist or something. Is it her own wool? Would that make it weirder or less weird?

He crosses the distance between them and shoves the thoughts aside. At least his own jeans, sneakers, and long-sleeve henley don't seem too out of place for this hike, compared to her own clothes. That's reassuring.

For a moment he's not sure how he should greet her, but the decision is made for him. Bo comes right up to him and slides her arms under his, wrapping him up in a soft, warm hug. In her heels she's about the same height as him, but she's a little bigger. Hips and curves he wants to run his hands over. He hugs her back and feels a little strange with how his nose ends up buried in the fluffy, pink wool around her neck. She still smells like how he remembers, like strawberries and vanilla. It's a warm, summery smell that just suits her.

She pulls away, but keeps her hands on his sides, staying close against him. For a second he wonders what he should do with his own hands. Putting them on her shoulders would be weird, so he settles on her forearms. How is it possible to feel so happy to see her and so uncomfortable and awkward at the same time?

"I'm glad you found the park okay," Bo says, letting him go. She brushes her hands across his as she takes a step back, smiling and turning towards the basket she left on the bench.

"Yeah, it wasn't a problem. Um, did you walk all the way here?" Deacon asks, glancing over his shoulder. He can't see downtown through all the trees, but he knows it's a few miles down the mountain. "I could have picked you up."

"Oh, it's okay, I just got a ride from the Busperson. They stop by my apartment like every half hour," she says, tucking her basket into the crook of her arm and reaching back towards him. Is she just beckoning him closer or reaching for his hand?
He opts for the first choice and realizes he was wrong when she laces their fingers together. "The Busperson?" he asks, feeling confused as she tugs him along after her, heading towards a worn, dirt path.

"They used to be the Riverperson. Actually, it turns out there were a few Riverpeople. One of the others has a ferry across the lake. Another is still in the Underground." She laughs sweetly, giving him a sideways glance through her thick, dark eyelashes. "They're really committed to public transportation."

"Just wait until the Line is open. Maybe one of them will become the Planeperson. Or the Trainperson," he says, grinning. His nervousness is starting to fade. She's just easy to talk to. "A whole world of transporting options."

Bo laughs again, brushing up against him with her shoulder. He's not sure if it was on purpose or on accident, but either way he doesn't mind. "I'm sure they'd love that."

"I can give you a ride next time," he says, rubbing his thumb along her hand. "You don't need to take the bus."

"I'm sure there's going to be a next time," she says, bright blue eyes twinkling as she looks at him.

"It sounded that way, didn't it?" Deacon smirks and she looks away with a quiet giggle. Oh, he could get used to that.

He overestimated his ability to do this whole hiking thing. Walking at a steady incline has done a number on him, and about fifteen minutes in he starts lagging behind. This is fine, he tells himself, trailing after her. He has a great view of Bo's fantastic butt and the cute, pink wooly tail that matches her hair. It gives a little shake every few minutes as she walks.

"Honey are you okay back there?" she asks, slowing down a little. "We can take a break if you want to."

"No, no, no I'm fine," he assures her, pushing up his sleeves and waving her away with a grin. He hopes he doesn't sound out of breath. "Just admiring the view from back here."

Her mouth twitches and she lets out a small laugh. "Okay. But don't be afraid to tell me if you need a second. I come here a lot on my time off." As she keeps walking, Deacon swears she's swaying her hips just a little extra for his benefit. Oh, he could get used to that, too.

"Why hiking? If you don't mind my asking," he says, brushing his hair off his forehead. Oh he definitely sounds out of breath now, dammit.

She stops and waits for him to catch up, touching his elbow and slowing him to a more manageable pace. He watches her as she tilts her head back to look at the trees, the lacquered leaf-shaped clips in her hair catching the sunlight. "It's beautiful up here. There's this one spot, up the mountain, with the tunnel we came out of. There's a ledge right there with this perfect view of the ocean in the distance, and the city down in the foothills. It was the first thing we saw when we reached the surface. I'll never forget it."
She's still looking up, at the thread of blue between the spray of lingering fall leaves where the sky is peeking through. None of the other monsters told him what it was like for them to reach the surface. For you, he can't imagine it had quite the same impact. But Bo. Bo looks enraptured. He wants to kiss her but he doesn't want to pull her out of her memory. He wants to hear more.

Her mouth tugs into a smile. "It was the middle of the day, when me and some of the others from Hotland made it out. The sun was so bright it hurt my eyes, I couldn't even see properly for a minute or two," she says, laughing softly. "And then there was just... everything. The sky, the forest, this whole new world laid out before us. We were finally free, just like King Asgore wanted."

Bo looks at him again, with a bright, beautiful smile that makes her eyes shine. Deacon's mouth curves into a poor imitation, feeling guilty. "It's too bad that you didn't quite get the reception you deserved. That you can't even go to the ocean you can see from that ledge."

She gives him an indulgent look, unfazed by his pessimism. "It won't be like that forever. Things will get better."

He doesn't even think about it. Deacon reaches across her body to take her hand, turning her towards him and pulling her close. She's smiling, meeting his eyes for the second before he cups her cheek and kisses her. Her lips are warm and soft, just like he remembers, and she lets out a little pleased sound as she presses in close against him. But it's when her tongue starts to tease his bottom lip, leaving him wanting more, like their kiss back at the restaurant, that his phone starts to ring.

Bo pulls away, giving him a questioning look as he lets out a frustrated sound. Pulling it out of his pocket, he glares down at the caller ID that reads: Grant Bailey. He declines the call and turns his phone to silent before pocketing it again.

"Sorry," Deacon says, pulling her close again. "No more interruptions."
When you, Frisk, and Papyrus get home from Undyne's, you can't find Sans in the house. He doesn't answer when you call out for him, though you suspect you know where he might be. He stayed home because he wanted to go through all the pictures that he took at Thanksgiving, and he keeps the photo printer out in his workshop.

"Pap, I'm gonna go out back to look for Sans," you say, as he and Frisk start heading upstairs.

Papyrus stops, glancing over his shoulder at you. "HE PROBABLY FELL ASLEEP OUT THERE AGAIN," he says, with a long-suffering sigh. "WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO MAKE DINNER WHILE YOU TAKE CARE OF HIM?"

"Sure, I'm actually in the mood for some spaghetti. It's been a while." You give him a lopsided smile.

"WE JUST HAD SPAGHETTI ON THANKSGIVING," he corrects, coming back down the stairs. Taking hold of your shoulders, he starts steering you towards the living room where the big glass doors leading out to the back porch are. "BUT THERE IS NO REQUIRED 'MOOD' FOR SPAGHETTI. IT'S ALWAYS A WELCOME MEAL!"

You could beg to differ, but that would be a pointless endeavor. "Thanks for offering to make dinner."

"OF COURSE! BE SURE TO TELL SANS HOW WELL FRISK DID ON THE PIANO!" He releases you from his grip, and after a second his big grin falters and he gives you a sideways look. "AND PERHAPS YOU COULD... LEAVE OUT HOW POORLY I DID. I AM VERY GREAT! BUT, UH, APPARENTLY NOT AT MUSIC."

He had insisted, after watching Frisk, that he too could learn how to play. But where Frisk had been able to pick out notes and follow along with Undyne's lesson, Papyrus just... smashed keys until Undyne finally ordered him away. True to form, she'd been a little too honest in her criticism, but he'd taken it —mostly— in stride. At least Mettaton had been there to comfort him.

"Hey," you say, catching his attention as he's about to head to the kitchen. You slide your arm around his back, pulling him —well, more like pulling yourself towards him— into a one-armed hug. "If you were good at everything, then you'd just be too great. How could the rest of us ever compare?"

Brightening, Papyrus wraps his arms around you and lifts you up off your feet. You throw your arm over his shoulders to try and hold onto him, laughing as he nuzzles the side of your head. "OF COURSE YOU ARE GREAT! YOU'RE JUST... GREAT AT OTHER THINGS! WE'RE BOTH GREAT AT COOKING, AND MAYBE BOTH OF US CAN BE NOT SO GREAT AT MUSIC. YOU'RE A GREAT MOM, AND I'M A GREAT BROTHER! OH, AND I'M SURE YOU'LL BE A GREAT WIFE! SANS... WILL PROBABLY BE A GREAT HUSBAND," he says, trailing off
as he sets you back down. He taps his foot, resting a hand on his hip in a look you recognize as him thinking over something. "IF HE IS NOT, TELL ME SO I CAN SCOLD HIM FOR YOU!"

Doing your best not to laugh, you smooth out your hair as you smile up at him. "Sure. I'll let you know," you say, knowing full well that you'll be doing no such thing. But, it's amusing to think of.

Papyrus marches off towards the kitchen to start dinner and you head out the back door, crossing the backyard to where Sans's workshop is nestled near the treeline. It's about the size of a three car garage, insulated and fitted with a deadbolt more expensive than the one on your own front door. You and Sans are the only ones with a key. And even though you know he trusts you with it, you just don't feel comfortable going in there without him. It's his space, and the broken machine full of journals you haven't read and pictures you haven't seen just... intimidates you. Makes you feel like some kind of interloper. You don't like it. Part of you even resents it, and what it means to Sans, and in part, to Frisk.

You knock on the door as a courtesy and then reach for the handle, unsurprised when it turns. Pushing it open, you peek inside as Sans turns to look at you. He's standing in the middle of the room, talking on his cell phone. His eyes brighten at the sight of you and you give him a small smile as you quietly shut the door behind you. With a cursory glance, you see a small stack of pictures sitting on a table near the machine in the corner, and three frames sitting on another.

"you sure that's ok? if you have other plans, we can— i just don't wanna inconvenience you and asgore," Sans says, and you think he must be talking to Toriel. "we still need to talk about guests yeah, but we know it won't be more than just close friends. can't imagine it'll be much more than thanksgiving, y'know? hey, hope just got back so we'll talk and get back to you. but you're sure january first is ok for you? heh, sorry just want to make sure. ok. yeah, later tori."

Sans hangs up and slips his phone into his pocket, looking at you expectantly as you go to him and wrap your arms around his shoulders. He pulls you down for a kiss, sliding his fingers into your hair. His other hand slips around you to give your backside an appreciative squeeze, making you giggle as you smile against his cheekbone. "Talking to Tori about the date we picked out for the rite?" you ask, trailing your fingertips along the back of his skull.

"yeah. everything is fine for new year's day. they didn't have any plans," he says, stroking your temple with his thumb. His hand is nice and warm compared to the chill in his workshop. He didn't bother to turn on the small space heater, but you suppose he doesn't really need it. It's there more for you and Frisk, for when you're out here. "how was your day? did frisk have a good time?"

"Yeah, they're..." You hesitate, feeling that same sense of apprehension when Deacon asked you about Frisk's interest in music before. It's complicated, and you don't like it. Sans's brow furrows just a little as he catches your pause, and the slight change in your expression. His hand shifts from your butt to your lower back at the change in mood. "Frisk had a good time. Undyne was impressed at how quick they picked up on it."

"that's good," he says slowly, searching your face. "so why don't you seem too excited about it?"

Biting your lip, you let out a small sigh. "It's petty. I've told you about Chris before, did I tell you he was in a band, back when we were dating?"

"oh," he says, with sudden understanding. "no, you didn't."

"They get it from him. They have to. And it's just... frustrating," you admit, shaking your head. Wincing, you glance away. "Frisk... just seems to get a lot from Chris. His hair, his nose, his wider jaw... and now this? He isn't even here!"
Sans pulls you back down, pressing your forehead to his. "they have your eyes, and your smile. that stubborn determination," he says, squeezing you. "your kindness, the way you care about others. they sure as hell didn't get that from him."

You pull back, rubbing your forehead and pushing your hair out of your face. Sans lets you go as you step back to lean against one of his worktables. "He wasn't a bad person. I mean, I loved him, as much as you can love someone at fourteen," you say, shaking your head. "But as soon as the pressure was on him he cracked. He just couldn't handle it. Ugh, we've already talked about all this, I'm just... This sucks. Sans, I wish I could just be proud of Frisk."

"i know, babe," he says, sliding his hands into the pockets of his jacket as he watches you. "trust me, i don't particularly like it either. i mean, couldn't they at least pick up the trombone instead?"

Caught off guard, a snort escapes you as you dissolve into giggles. "Oh my god, is that why there's a trombone in the closet? So you can make jokes about it?"

"mostly," he says, grinning in a self-satisfied way that has you torn between shoving him and kissing him. Instead you just squint your eyes at him as he shrugs. "i mean, if they wanna take after their aunt undyne instead of their dad, i guess that's fine."

"Oh, don't let her hear you calling her that, we'll never hear the end of it," you say, laughing. "I'm sorry, I'm being upset about nothing, aren't I?"

His smile fades a little, and you think you sabotaged his attempts at distracting you away from what was bothering you. Sans closes the distance and pulls his left hand out of his pocket, his ring drawing your eye just like it always does. He laces his fingers with yours, rubbing your thumb. "it's not nothing. it's shitty and it's complicated, and you're allowed to be upset. but this one talent doesn't overshadow any of the good things that frisk got from you."

Squeezing his hand, you lean in to kiss his cheek. "Thanks, hun. I think I just really needed to hear that," you breathe, resting your weight on him. He holds you up as you bury your face into the fluffy hood of his jacket, taking in a deep breath of that familiar smell. It's comforting.

"hey, so i meant to tell you," Sans says, running his free hand through your hair. "they're gonna be announcing it on the news later, but tori told me. the line's gonna be open next monday. on the seventh. for humans and monsters."

With a gasp, you pull away so you can look at him, gaping. "Why didn't you tell me earlier! Sans, it's finally... it's finally going to happen?"

"yep," he says, grinning up at you. "we can finally leave ebott. with, uh, restrictions. we have to check in with the soldiers and have to be back by ten pm for curfew, and some crap about breaking curfew having consequences, but it's something. it's more than we had."

You can't even let the specifics bother you, not right now. Not in the face of this news! Even Sans doesn't even seem to care about the limitations. "I can't believe it, Sans we can... Oh I can't wait to tell Deacon! We're going to take everyone to the beach, I don't even care if it's too cold to go swimming. Did Tori say anything about school that day?"

"canceled. she figures half the kids will get pulled out by their parents to go past the line anyway." He chuckles. "i know it's what i'd do."

"Do you think Deacon might want to bring Bo? I mean, if their date goes well today," you say, halfway reaching for your phone and then stopping. There's so many places you want to take Sans,
so many things you want him to see. There's a museum not too far away, maybe a two hour drive. If you left early enough you could be back before curfew. Sans would love it, you're certain.

He eases back from you, still holding your hand. He's looking at you with so much affection it pulls you out of the whirlwind of your thoughts. "uh, speaking of deacon... i have something i want you to see."

Pulling you away from the table you're leaning on, he leads you to where those three picture frames are sitting. Oh, these must be new additions for the stairwell, but what does that have to do with—

In between a picture of everyone sitting at the table, and the one with all the hand turkeys, is a shot of you and Deacon sitting on Toriel's couch. For a second you think it's the picture you remember Sans taking, before dinner. But it's not. You're sitting in the same place but this is after dessert, after the two of you spoke outside. He's got his arm resting on top of your shoulder, leaning against you and grinning. You're looking over at him, giving him a lopsided smile. What were you even talking about when this was taken? You can't remember. All you know is that you both look so happy, so at ease with each other.

"Sans, you don't... you don't even like Deacon," you say, because you can't think of anything else. "he's ok," Sans says. He squeezes your hand. "besides, it's a good picture of you. you look happy."

"But..."

"that space isn't just for me. it's for everybody. i thought you might want to put this one up with all the other pictures of our friends and family." There's a pause, and you look over at him, a tightness in your throat that wasn't there a second ago. "i mean... he's kinda like your brother. at least, that's how it looks."

That means a lot, coming from him. His brother means the world to him. For a long time, his brother was his whole world. Looking at the picture again, and thinking about these past two months... "Maybe," you say, reaching out with your free hand and picking up the frame. "He means a lot to me. And adding this to the wall would mean a lot to me, too. Thank you, hun. Really. You've been so amazing about everything with Deacon, and... i love you."

"love you too, babe. c'mon, why don't we go put these up?"

"What you're telling me is that you two made out in the middle of a hiking trail," you say, leaning back in your chair in the break room.

Deacon looks more than a little pleased with himself, even as he tries to give you a disapproving look. "Yes, that's what I'm saying. Now quit interrupting or I won't tell you the rest."

"That is a bold-faced lie," you accuse, cupping your fingers over your mouth to try and hide your smile. "I couldn't get you to shut up about this date even if I wanted to."

"So, like I was saying," he says pointedly, raising a brow. "We went up to that spot she told me about. Where you all got out. It's... beautiful up there. To have that be your first view of the surface, I can't even imagine what that must have been like. Bo told me about it, but it's just not something I don't think I can ever really wrap my brain around, you know?"

You nod. "Me and the others, we were the first ones out. It was actually really early in the morning, so the stars were still shining." Dropping your hand to your chest, you toy with the lanyard around your neck, staring off into space as you remember that day. "I hadn't seen the sun in
three months, but when it rose, I watched Sans instead. Seeing him see the sun and the surface for the first time... I'll never forget that. But even so, I'll only understand a tiny fraction of what that must have been like for all of them."

Deacon rests his chin in his hand, and there's a moment where the two of you sit in solemn silence. "You two have been through a lot together, haven't you?" he asks, giving you a weak smile.

A humorless laugh escapes you, and you meet his eyes. "More than you know."

"More stuff like what happened with Mettaton?" he says quietly, in a measured tone.

You bite your lip and glance down at the table, then give a small nod. "Yeah, I'd... rather not go too much into it, though."

"Of course, yeah, no problem!" Deacon says in a rush, waving the words away and leaning back in his chair. He gives you a reassuring look. "I just meant that... it means Sans's attitude makes more sense. When it comes to you. Especially if... you know. Dangerous stuff."

You nod again, biting your lip. "So, your date with Bo..."

"Right, my date with Bo!" he echoes, enthusiastic about the change of topic. He sits up a little straighter. "So we had a picnic up on the mountain, and stayed there for a couple hours. There was talking, and more kissing. *Lots* more kissing," he says with a wink. You roll your eyes but are enjoying watching the absolutely smitten look on his face. "Then we hiked back down, which was much less embarrassing. And she invited me back to her apartment for dinner." "Ooh, dinner, huh?" you ask, grinning and studying his expression. You can already spot that pink color creeping along his ears, which is funny considering he's normally so shameless about this sort of thing. Oh, but you can already tell that Bo isn't just one of many to him. No, this is something different.

"Mhmm," he says, looking a little shy of all things as he rubs the back of his neck. "We had dinner, and watched some TV. She's really cuddly. It's... I feel kind of silly saying this out loud, that's so weird. Um... I never really let myself be cuddly before? It's just not what I'm used to, I'm sure you noticed. But it was... good." Deacon clears his throat, shifting a little in his chair. "Hope, I really like her."

You're smiling at him, a swell of happiness making your chest feel tight. "Deacon, I'm so glad!" you say, downright bouncing a little in your enthusiasm. "What happened after you cuddled on the couch? Did you stay over?"

He glances away, then back at you again. "I, uh, went home."

"Was something wrong?"

"No, we just..." He crosses his arms on top of the table and leans a little towards you. "We fooled around a little, but I didn't really push too far and neither did she, so... Nothing happened. I know this is weird for me. But I guess I don't want to rush things? I mean, if this is going to work out, we have time."

"Oh, Deacon, that's so great," you say, unable to stop the pitch of your voice from going all high as
you cover your mouth with your hands.

Deacon starts laughing, fixing you with an annoyed yet affectionate look. "Okay, okay, calm down. You're testing my resolve to try and stay manly and detached. You don't want me to start giggling like a schoolgirl with you, it's very unflattering."

"I'm just happy for you!" you squeak, reaching out and grabbing his hand. "Are you going to bring her with you when we take everybody to the beach next week?"

He nods, a pleased look on his face. "Yeah, I'm going to ask her."

"Good, I can't wait! Oh, this is going to be so much fun. We can—" The class bell starts to ring and you give a startled glance at the clock. "Oh, I had no idea it was already time!"

As the two of you hurry to gather up your things and head out the door, Deacon catches your arm as you turn to head to class. "Hey, Frisk is with Toriel after school today, right? You should come over after work. We can talk more about plans for the beach."

"Yeah! Absolutely."

As you pull up Deacon's driveway, with your friend following behind you, you're surprised to see that there's already a car waiting in front of the house. You pull off a little to the side, not wanting to park next to the strange silver sedan. Waiting until Deacon pulls up alongside you, you get out of the car and give him a curious look. But he's not looking at you.

Deacon's expression is hard, fixed on the front door where there's a man standing there, watching the two of you. He's older, maybe in his fifties, with dark, graying hair and a full beard. Heavy brows are drawn together into a frown, and he crosses his arms over his broad chest.

"I was wondering when you would turn up," the man says, dark eyes flicking over to you and back to Deacon as you trail after him, uncertain.

"I was at work," Deacon says, biting back on his words. "What are you doing here, Grant?"

Grant? That name sounds familiar, but you don't remember Deacon ever mentioning him in conversation. Then you remember that half-overheard phone call a month ago. One of the few times you'd ever heard Deacon sound angry.

The man, Grant, smiles in a way that doesn't reach his eyes. "I came here to check on you, son."
'Son'?

Deacon stops before the two steps leading up to his front door. As you come up alongside him, you steal a glance. His brows are knit together, the muscles in his jaw and neck are tense. He's toeing the line of downright glaring at Grant, but holding himself back. Grant just looks down at you from his spot on top of the steps, waiting.

This can't be... this man doesn't look a thing like Deacon. And he just told you that he doesn't have a family.

"I asked you not to call me that," Deacon says in a clipped tone. You reach to touch his side and his eyes flick over to you. He swallows.

"And this must be your friend, Hope," Grant says, nodding at you. He holds out a hand towards you.

You look at it, hesitating. Whoever this man is, Deacon is clearly upset that he showed up, and it's making you uncomfortable. You don't want to shake his hand, but you do anyway. Because to refuse would just add more tension to this already tense situation. His hand is bigger than yours, bigger than Deacon's, dry and rough. The handshake is brief and formal, and the second he lets you go you pull your hand away to touch Deacon's arm again. Your friend brushes your fingers with his, a gesture of reassurance or solidarity maybe, and Grant's eyes drop to the movement and back up again to your eyes. He hooks his thumb on the belt loop of his khakis, studying you for a moment.

"Nice to meet you. I've seen you on the news, of course. And Deacon's mentioned you," he says, turning his attention to the blonde again. "Well, are we going inside, or would you rather speak on the porch?"

"Should I go? If you have company..." You trail off, torn between wanting to remove yourself from all this and wanting to be here for your friend. If he needs you, you'll stay.

"No. He showed up uninvited, and we already had plans. You don't need to leave," he says firmly, as if daring Grant to object. He fishes into his pocket for his keys, jerking his head towards the door. "Come on."

He shoulders his way past Grant and you follow him inside, ignoring the anxious twist of your stomach as you do so. Oh, this is so uncomfortable. You're not even sure what you can do to help, but you know that he doesn't want you to go. So you won't. You'll stay here with Deacon.

Deacon shuts the door once Grant is inside, turning the lock and gesturing towards an overstuffed chair at an angle with the couch. You don't think you've ever seen your friend sit in it, the two of you always prefer the sofa. "Have a seat," he says to the older man. Then he looks over at you,
where you're standing rigidly off to the side, doing your best to stay out of the way. "Can you help me in the kitchen for a second?"

Nodding, you head into the other room with Deacon trailing behind you. He immediately walks over to the sink and turns on the faucet, turning to face the doorway to the living room and gesturing you close. Rubbing his face with one hand, he lets out a quiet snarl and balls the other into a fist, cutting it through the air before dropping to his side. "Son of a bitch," he hisses, dragging his hand through his hair, tugging the strands before letting go.

A little taken aback by his anger, you reach for his hand but he pulls away, shaking his head. Then, after a second, he takes in a slow, deep breath and as he exhaled some of the tension leaves his face. He takes the hand he rejected. You squeeze his fingers, rubbing your thumb over his knuckles. Your other questions about Grant can wait for a second. There's another that's more important. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," he says, meeting your eyes. He looks a little calmer, but he's holding your hand a little tighter than is comfortable. "I was going to tell you, I just didn't expect him to just... show up." He grimaces. "I'm sorry, this must be confusing."

You nod, biting your lip. "He called you 'son'. I thought you said you didn't have any parents."

"I know. I don't. He just... Ugh, calling Grant a dad is like calling a physicist a doctor. He's got the title but not the know-how, you know? ...He had no clue what to do with me. He still doesn't," he says, his voice laced with bitterness. With a sigh, he rubs the back of his neck with his free hand. "He adopted me when I was twelve. But that doesn't make him family. I was just a charity case. 'Someone with my potential shouldn't be left to rot in the system'. Deacon's frown deepens. "No, instead of swapping shitty homes every year or so I just got stuck in the same one. He never cared about me. Just who I might be."

You remember what he told you at Thanksgiving. How lonely his childhood was. How he'd never let himself get attached to anyone out of fear of rejection. And this Grant person adopted him, took him in, and... just kept that cycle going. It makes you angry, and you can't blame him for keeping this to himself. "Did he hurt you?" you ask gently.

Deacon balks a little, caught off-guard. After a second his expression shifts and he glances away. "No, nothing like what you went through. He just..." Shaking his head, he lets go of your hand and pushes away from the counter, still watching the doorway. He grits his teeth. "Grant didn't abuse me. He's not... he's not a bad person. He just wasn't a father."

"Neglect is a type of abuse, Deacon," you say, brow furrowing. You close the distance between the two of you again, catching his eye. "I saw your Soul. How scuffed it was. And you asked me why it looked like that." Resting your hand over your chest, you swallow. "What my mother did to me cracked mine. It's slowly healing, but it'll never be without scars. What those people did to you, what Grant did to you, it left marks on you, too."

He grabs at the front of his vest, over his heart, balling the fabric in his hand, eyes widening. Shaking his head, he turns away from you, back towards the sink. "No," he says, not looking at you for a moment before turning towards you again. He has this desperate, anguished look on his face. "Hope, I'm not a victim, I'm not—"

"I never said you were. Is that what you think I am?" you ask in a measured tone.

"No!" he hisses, wanting to raise his voice but needing to keep quiet. At this point Grant must know you're just talking about him, but he hasn't interrupted yet. "You're a survivor."
"So are you."

Taken aback, he blinks and then swallows hard. "He's already suspicious, I'm sure. We can't stay in here."

He's right. And the last thing you want to do is press the matter any further. He's reaching that point where he's close to pushing you away, like when you tried to press him about what happened with Grillby. But this is far more serious, too close to home. You need to drop it. "What do you want to do?"

"What can I do? I have to talk to him."

"You can ask him to leave," you suggest weakly.

He just lets out a humorless laugh. "Oh, I'm sure that would go over great."

Deacon shuts off the sink and leads you back into the living room. Grant is sitting in the chair by the couch like Deacon suggested, his ankle resting on his knee and his hands folded over his stomach. He arches a brow as the two of you come into view, and those cold, dark eyes follow you when you sit on the couch together.

"You could have at least brought me a drink to at least keep up this charade," Grant says, giving Deacon an amused smile. "And young lady, you can stop looking at me like that, I'm not going to bite."

Oh, you don't like him. More than you already did. But that frustration gets buried by feeling chastised and you fold your arms in your lap. You feel, inexplicably, like you've been sent to the principal's office. "How did you get here? Homes are off-limits to non-residents," you ask, sounding more timid than accusatory, like you wanted.

"You'll find that they make exceptions for family," he says, uncrossing and recrossing his legs, shifting in his seat.

Deacon bristles beside you. "Stop it. I told her you're not actually family," he says, his voice tight and restrained.

He holds up his hands in a helpless gesture, shrugging. "Very well, then. But it doesn't stop the fact that as far as the law and the government are concerned, I am allowed certain rights as a parent. That's how I was allowed here."

"You could have called me first. Let me know you were coming."

"I did call you. Yesterday," Grant says, setting his hands down on the armrests of the chair.

"Oh, when you were out with Bo?" you chime in, looking over at Deacon.

He flinches, grimacing, and you realize that you shouldn't have said anything. Damn it! Grant's eyes narrow a fraction and he sniffs. "So all that talk on the news is true. You are dating a monster."

Deacon doesn't say anything. He glowers at his knees. You wish you could go and take it back. "Deacon," Grant says in a warning tone, a step away from a reprimand.

"Yes," he blurts out, looking up at the older man with a defiant expression. "Yes I am. Not that it's
something you should be worrying about."

There's a pause, and something you don't understand seems to pass between them. You ball your hands into fists against your stomach, resisting the urge to hunch forward and hug yourself. This tension is nearly unbearable. You just wish Grant would leave. Seeing Deacon like this makes your stomach twist into knots.

"Are you certain that's wise?" Grant says carefully, and you get the feeling that you're missing something. Neither of them are looking at you. But, you suppose, you really are the outsider here.

"Why wouldn't it be wise?" Deacon retorts, arching a brow and leaning back against the couch. He glances at you and back at Grant.

Grant's jaw tenses and he hesitates, sitting up a little straighter and lacing his fingers together. "You may be setting yourself up for disappointment. This situation with the monsters is tenuous at best."

Frowning, you resist the urge to argue that point. Besides, it seems Deacon is on the same page. "No it's not," he says. "The Line is opening in a week. If anything, things are moving forward better than expected."

"So I heard on the news. Along with every other person who might feel less than enthusiastic about this change," he says, looking over at you. He catches your eye and you're afraid to look away. "I hope you aren't planning on leaving until you have a better idea of what it's going to be like out there."

"My family has been stuck on Ebott for five months. What do you think is going to happen? People aren't just going to attack us on the streets," you say, incredulous.

Grant just watches you with that cold, unreadable expression as you feel your confidence eke away. Cowed, you glance down at the coffee table. "I'm just expressing my concern. Deacon, surely you understand. I worry about you."

Deacon lets out a small, annoyed sound, but doesn't protest.

"Perhaps it would be for the best if you put your plans on hold—"

"No," Deacon says.

Grant blinks, heavy brow furrowing. "Excuse me?"

"I said no. Hope and I are taking her family and friends across the Line. They've been behind this second barrier for too long, and fear of the unknown isn't going to stop us." He holds Grant's eye, jaw tensing. Your chest tightens, caught between being glad and anxious.

"...I see," Grant says slowly, studying the two of you. His expression softens to something like regret. "Well, for everyone's sakes, I hope my concerns are unfounded."

Deacon relaxes a little next to you, and you let out a breath you didn't realize you were holding. "Yeah, me too," he says.

There's an awkward moment of silence where no one seems sure of what to say. Your friend rubs the back of his neck and you chew on the inside of your lip while Grant observes in silence. This is just so... uncomfortable. Finally, as the moment drags out, Deacon lets out a frustrated sound and turns to you. He looks annoyed, and like he regrets what he's about to say.
"I ought to talk to him alone, maybe... you should head home," Deacon murmurs, biting back a wince.

You search his face, wondering if he's going to be okay. Well, he's dealt with Grant longer than he's ever known you. Surely he has his way of handling this. After a second you nod and stand, looking over at the older man. He just watches you, a polite smile curving his mouth.

"It was a pleasure to meet you," he says, not getting up from his seat.

"You too," you say, doing your best to be polite. You think you see his mouth twitch.

Deacon rises to his feet and walks you to the door, stepping outside for a minute. The second you're alone you reach for him and you hug each other tightly, wishing you could lend him some strength. "Tell me if you need anything. Anything. I can... I dunno, get Sans to teleport him away or something," you blurt out, muffled by his shoulder.

He lets out a humorless laugh, resting his chin on you. "I'm sorry you had to deal with all that. He's an ass. And I'm sorry you had to have all that sprung on you, I meant to tell you, honestly."

"Deacon it's fine, don't worry about it," you say, giving him one last squeeze before pulling away to look at him. "But I'm serious, tell me if you need me."

"I can handle it... but thank you."

He gives you a weak smile, and it's all you can do to just watch him go back inside without you, to deal with that man.

A few hours later, when your family is home and you're wrapped up in Sans's arms, telling him everything that happened, you get a text. 'Grant is gone. Everything went fine. Really. I mean it.'

As you look at it, wondering if he's being honest, Deacon sends another.

'I promise. Best friends.'

He says it like a question, not a statement. A need for affirmation.

'Best friends.' You reply, ignoring the ache in your chest.
All of your family and friends have gathered together in a secluded spot in the forest, about a fifteen minute walk from your house. It's the day before the Line is going to open, and your trip to the beach, and Undyne is standing in the middle of the clearing, facing you all. She's in full guard captain mode, hands on her hips and dressed in her exercise clothes.

"OKAY EVERYONE! Tomorrow we're going into the middle of hostile territory, and we've got to be prepared for the worst!" she says, holding out her hand. A pale blue spear phases into reality as she grips it.

You glance over at Deacon where he's standing next to you. You're not surprised to see that he looks curious and focused instead of startled at the sudden use of magic. There hasn't been any need for offensive magic, certainly not around him, and this is going to be the first time he's seen any of this. You'd be curious too, if you didn't already have intimate experience with almost the full spectrum of what everyone gathered is capable of.

"Now, now, Undyne," Asgore says, holding up his hand in a placating gesture. "This is merely a demonstration for Hope, Deacon, and Frisk's sake. So that should the worst happen, they might know what to expect." He glances over at your friend, his expression going solemn. "I am certain this does not need repeating, but I must ask you once again to keep what you see here private. Obviously, if an incident were to occur this will no longer matter, but in the meantime, it is best that the public is not aware of the extent of our abilities."

Deacon is nodding before he can even finish. "Of course. I appreciate that you're even including me in all this."

"Of course we are!" Undyne says, flashing a smile. "We can't have you peeing your pants in fear when we're trying to protect everybody."

"I appreciate your confidence in me," he retorts flatly. "And my bladder control."

Bo is on his other side, here to participate since she'll be joining all of you on your trip tomorrow. She leans against him, meeting his eyes and smiling. "I believe in you," she teases. "I'm sure you won't wet yourself."

"Beset on all sides," Deacon laments, and Bo laughs and kisses him on the cheek as an apology. He tries hard to pretend to look upset, but his face cracks into a smile and he puts his arm around her shoulders. Whatever it was that Grant had to say to Deacon, he hasn't let it affect his relationship with her. You didn't pry, and he never offered, and so you let the matter of his adopted father drop.

"i still don't see why we need to do this," Sans says, his hands shoved into his pockets. "half the stuff we're able to do we can't use on anybody."

"Fuhuhu! You just don't want Hope to see you're not that strong," Undyne taunts. She bares her
teeth in a menacing smile.

Out of the corner of your eye you see Mettaton shift uncomfortably next to Papyrus, and Alphys fidgets a little. You've never thought that Sans was weak, but you find yourself curious of what he's capable of aside from what little you've seen. He catches your eye and must see your poorly-disguised interest.

"sure. fine. i could use a bit more practice anyway," he says with a forced casualness accompanied by an equally forced smile. "been a while."

You and Deacon take Frisk and Asriel to go sit on a jumble of boulders half-buried off to the side of the clearing, out of the way. Alphys speaks to Undyne for a moment and then joins you too, earning herself a curious look from Deacon. She gives him a tremulous smile in return, adjusting her glasses.

"I don't h-have any magical manifestations like the others do," she explains, folding her hands in her lap. "It's why I-I like to build things instead. Uh, Undyne just wanted me to come so I didn't feel l-left out."

"Then why is Mettaton over there? He has magic?" Deacon asks, looking over at the collection of monsters. They're talking amongst themselves, probably trying to figure out how they want to do this.

"I have magic, I just can't make it do anything," she says curtly. Adjusting her glasses, she clears her throat. "Most ghosts have strong magic. M-Mettaton is no exception."

"Wait, he's a ghost?" Deacon looks over at you, eyebrows shooting up.

You nod. "Yeah, possessing the body Alphys made for him."

Deacon's eyes seek out Mettaton in the crowd, and after a second his expression relaxes. "Huh. I guess that makes some kind of sense."

Speaking of Mettaton, he's the first one to take his place at the center of his clearing while the others shuffle off to the side. Except Undyne. She stays next to him, still holding her glowing spear in her hand and resting the butt of it on the ground. He turns to her, saying something in an undertone as his brow knits together.

Undyne rolls her eye. "Just show everyone what you can do!" she yells, making a sweeping gesture towards you and the others.

Pursing his lips, Mettaton holds out his arms. "This isn't my preferred type of performance, but I suppose I'll just have to make do," he says, looking at the group of you sitting on the rocks. Splaying his fingers, two sets of three small, black orbs appear between them. "Bombs are my specialty."

He has an air of nonchalance as he twists his hands and each group of three turns into one fist-sized bomb, the kind you'd see in cartoons, complete with a glowing fuse. Juggling them back and forth, he tosses them both up into the air where they explode. The sound is surprisingly quiet, a sharp beep followed by a low rumble that fades along with the brief burst of heat and smoke. Frisk and Asriel let out a loud cheer, surprising you more than the bombs did, clapping.

Mettaton smiles, taking a bow. "Oh, but there's one more thing. Thanks to Alphys, I also come equipped with a rather powerful zap." Dusting off his hands against his hips, he brings them up in front of his chassis and holds them with his palms facing each other. With a loud snap of
electricity, a jagged tangle of energy arcs in front of him, writhing between his fingers. He stays like the for a few moments before dropping his arms, the electricity vanishing.

You never actually saw either of those things before. A quiet, bitter voice in the back of your mind thinks that it would have ruined that 'horror movie' feel he was going for. Shoving the thought aside, you glance over at Deacon, who was watching the whole display with rapt attention. Noticing you out of the corner of his eye, he meets your gaze and gives you a concerned look. He must be thinking about what you accidentally told him, about Mettaton trying to kill you. You smile at him and he smiles back, reassured that you're okay.

Asgore lets out a soft, uncertain rumble. "I fear your explosives may be too dangerous, but electricity can stun and deter, I imagine," he says, stroking his beard.

As Toriel steps forward to take Mettaton's place, Asriel jumps up to his feet in his spot next to Frisk. "Mom, can I go after you? I want to show off my magic too."

"No you may not," Toriel says, pointing her finger towards the ground with a kind, but stern expression. "This is not for showing off. This is so that, should an emergency arise, we know what abilities we have at our disposal."

"But, Mom—"

"No buts, Asriel. Please sit down," she says, and her son obeys with a frown.

"It's okay. I've seen how awesome your fire magic is," Frisk says, putting their arm around his shoulders and hugging him close. "When we're bigger, you're gonna be super strong and cool!"

Asriel bumps their cheek with his snout, a pleased look on his face.

Toriel does a brief display of her fire magic, swirling egg-sized fireballs around her fingers. The kids clap and cheer, making her smile despite herself. Deacon shifts uncomfortably at your side and when you look at him you can see he's gone a little ashen. That's odd. Why would this bother him, but not Grillby? You touch his side and he jumps a little, startled as he turns to look at you.

You're about to say something to him, to ask him if he's okay, but then Toriel mentions her healing magic and draws Deacon's attention. By the time she's done talking about it the color has returned to his face and he's relaxed again. You decide to drop it.

Asgore goes next. He mentions his fire magic but opts not to put on an identical display as Toriel. Instead, he holds out his left hand and, as Undyne lets out a loud whoop, he summons a large red trident. You've never seen it before. You know you haven't. But as he grasps it in both hands and starts to speak, all you can hear is the sound of your heart pounding in your ears. There's a sharp pain in your chest and you grab the front of your shirt and for a second you think you feel something warm and wet.

Then it's gone. The sudden lurch of fear lingers on the fringes of your consciousness, but the pain and dampness is gone.

You're not even sure when Deacon put his hand on your shoulder but you feel it now, squeezing as he's looking at you. "Hope? Are you okay?" he asks quietly.

Your eyes flick over to where Frisk and Asriel are watching you with twin expressions of understanding and concern. They know. They both know, even better than you do, what just happened. That strong, sudden memory of something that never actually happened. But you can't say anything. Not in front of Deacon, or Alphys. She's glancing back at you, too.
"Yeah, I'm fine," you say, giving a nervous laugh. "Sorry, just some heartburn."

Sans is watching you with an unreadable expression on his face, his shoulders a tense line. You let go of your chest and give him a weak smile. The look on his face doesn't change.

"OKAY YOU PUNKS! My turn!" Undyne crows, squaring her stance and holding up her spear. As she does so, three more weapons appear in the air above her head, bobbing and turning their points towards the ground at her feet. "I make projectile spears to STAB THINGS! Matter or magic, whatever I want! I can make spears to stab right to Souls, or to skewer my enemies!"

Wait, is she saying that when she attacked you all those months ago she could have been attacking more than just your Soul? You're not sure how to feel about that, other than just glad she didn't actually run you through with spears... As you're mulling this over, Undyne's bright yellow eye fixes on you. The spears hovering above her plunge into the ground and stay there for a second before pulsing and disappearing.

"HOPE, come help me show off my green magic!" she calls, beckoning you over with a wave of the spear still in her hand.

"What?" Deacon says, just as—

"maybe you should keep your green magic to yourself this time," Sans cuts in, gritting his teeth. Oh, he wants to protect you, even though you know full well that Undyne wouldn't ever hurt you (again). But he must have seen that look on your face, and it could only have reminded him of one thing.

"I'm not going to HURT her, come on, Hope!" she calls out to you, grinning.

Sans is about to protest again but you push yourself to your feet, hopping down from you perch on the boulder. Your chest still feels a little tingly but you're fine. Everything is fine. You give him a reassuring look. "I'm okay. Besides, I know what to expect," you say with more casualness than you actually feel.

Undyne rushes forward to clap you on the shoulder, then gives a triumphant flex of her arm before backing away.

"Wait, hold on," you say, suddenly remembering something. "This is going to draw out my Soul. Sans, is this... are you okay with this?"

Sans is frowning, eyes flicking to Undyne then back to you. "s'not the same as pulling it out to show it off to other people. the intent is different. this is fighting. that was... more intimate."

"You ready, punk?" Undyne says impatiently, tossing her spear back and forth between her hands. The color of it shifts from blue to something paler, tinged with green.

"Yeah," you answer with a nod. Then, as she pulls her spear back, you balk. "Wait are you going to —!"

There's a flash of dark red as your Soul breaks loose when the spear comes flying towards you. You hear Deacon cry out in alarm, but no one else seems to react as the glowing heart turns green and your feet feel rooted to the ground. With your hands raised in front of you, there's that same green, transparent shield you remember. You glare through it at Undyne, who's still grinning.

"You could have warned me you were going to do that!" you snap.
"I thought you remembered!" she barks back, raising a brow.

With a sigh of resignation, you glance over at Deacon to make sure he's okay. He's wide-eyed and staring, halfway to his feet as he looks, not at you, but at the shield. And your Soul. Slowly remembering himself, he slides off the boulder.

"You can come over and look," you offer, turning in place to shift the shield a little.

"I... uh..." he fumbles, tugging at the front of his shirt. Clearing his throat, he collects his wits and crosses the distance.

His eyes scan over the curve of the shield, and you see him glance at your Soul again. It's a bit darker than Deacon's natural Soul color, not nearly as bright. You take a second to assess the cracks. Still no change in the last few months. Whatever healing had been happening has stopped. Maybe it would never completely mend. Deacon glances over at Undyne.

"Can I touch it?" he asks, pointing at the shield.

"SURE! I mean, technically it's not mine," she says, frowning. "My part was making sure she can't move. All she can do is turn. Which will be good in a pinch, right Asgore?" Asgore nods his approval. "Right. But the shield is all Hope. Well, my magic plus Hope's Soul, I guess."

Deacon reaches out and then hesitates. He looks at you through the green curve of magic. "Uh, well then, are you okay if I touch it?"

"Yeah, go ahead," you say, flexing your fingers.

He tries to prod it with the tips of his fingers but some kind of force keeps him from actually reaching the surface. He tries again, straining and gritting his teeth, but no luck. Whatever it is, it's resisting him. Like trying to press the same end of two magnets together. Finally, he gives up.

"And you said this is specific to green magic?" he asks, looking at Undyne again.

Undyne flicks her hand in your direction and the green color bleeds out of your Soul. With a sigh of relief you stretch your legs and reach up towards your chest as the rich, burgundy heart slips inside. You're familiar with that sensation of fullness that follows. "Yeah, I guess so. Green magic does a few different things, but that's what mine does," she says with a shrug.

"IS IT MY TURN NOW?" Papyrus blurts out, cutting off any more of Deacon's questions.

"YEAH, come show off your magic!" Undyne says, waving him over.

"I believe I said we were not 'showing off,'" Toriel mutters.

"It is good to see them so enthusiastic. It is not pleasant to have to hide part of who we are, out of fear of frightening others," Asgore says, his tone soothing.

You lead Deacon back towards the boulders, out of the way as Papyrus takes his place at the center of the clearing. With a flash of orange in his right eye, he conjures an array of bones of varying sizes, lined up in front of him on the ground. With a wicked grin, Undyne lashes out at him with a spear and he summons a large bone in his hand, deflecting her.

"NO FAIR! YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO INTERRUPT!" he blurts out, shoving her back with his weapon.
"I'm HELPING you!" she says, laughing as they trade blows. "Come on, it's been ages since we've had some good practice!"

"use your blue magic, bro," Sans calls out, grinning.

"NO WAY! That's cheating!" Undyne shoots him a glare.

Blue light circles her body and she lifts up off the ground, bobbing in the air. Frisk and Asriel start laughing as she yells at Sans, who is holding out his hand. He winks his right eye, the glowing left on fixed on her.

"Put me DOWN!" she yells, and you have to hide your smile behind your hand.

"BROTHER, NOW YOU'RE INTERRUPTING!" Papyrus says, stomping his foot.

As the three of them bicker, you glance over at Deacon. He's watching them and their magic with something like longing on his face.

"Makes you feel kinda weak, doesn't it?" you ask him, leaning back against the stone instead of sitting down again. "Must be fun, being able to do all that."

"Yeah," he answers, distracted. "It's... definitely something."

You hear the sound of someone clearing their throat and you're surprised to see Bo slide up beside the two of you. She casts an amused look at the brothers and Undyne and then over at Deacon. "I just thought I might just show you my magic while those three sort through their... issues," she says, giggling.

"SANS, YOU ARE BEING VERY RUDE!"

"what bro, you gotta bone to pick with me? i've got some you can borrow."

"Stop throwing bones at each other and PUT ME DOWN!"

"They might be a minute," you agree.

Deacon is smiling at her, with that warm, affectionate look on his face he gets whenever she's around or when he talks about her. Oh, he's in deep. He doesn't even seem to realize how deep. "I can't wait to see," he says.

"Oh, it's nothing to write home about, and not exactly fun," she says with a wink. Holding up her hands, a pair of white, faintly glowing blades appear between her fingers. At first glance they look like throwing knives, with a circular loop of metal at the end. Then, as she grasps them and then relaxes her hold, the blades separate into two. They're wool shears. "But I suppose they're useful. And, in a pinch..." You watch as she pivots to face away from you, spinning the shears on her fingers before throwing them at the nearest tree. Half the blades embed themselves in the wood before they flicker and fade away.

When she turns back to look at you she's smiling sweetly. Deacon swallows. "Remind me not to piss you off," he says with a nervous laugh.

"Oh, honey, I'd never hurt you," she says, pouting and threading her arm through his. "Besides, they're more useful for grooming than anything else."

"WELL, SANS, YOU MIGHT AS WELL FINISH YOUR DEMONSTRATION SINCE YOU
RUINED MINE," Papyrus says, pulling your attention away from the saccharine way that Deacon and Bo are looking at each other.

Undyne is picking herself up off the ground, dusting off the back of her pants as Alphys passes you to meet her. The orange glow fades from Papyrus's eye and he has his arms crossed over his chest as you catch sight of a mess of bones fading from view. Sans is grinning at his brother, a perfect circle of bones looped behind him. They spin as he swirls his finger and then, with a snap of his fingers, they vanish. His display is more refined, more controlled than Papyrus's. You get the feeling that he's a lot more dangerous than he's ever really let on.

"mine's done. besides, apart from the teleporting we have the same attacks," Sans says with a shrug.

"THAT'S NOT TRUE. YOU NEVER USED YOUR BLASTERS!" Papyrus says, and that catches your attention.

You knew about these other things. You'd seen Sans teleport, gone with him plenty of times by now. He'd tried to attack Flowey with bones before, and he uses his blue magic on mugs for crying out loud. But this is the first you'd ever heard of 'blasters'.

"that's cuz they're a last resort, not for showing off," Sans says, his smile weakening. "and i didn't see you use yours either."

"I DON'T LIKE MINE. LOOK!" Papyrus's eye bursts into life again and with a wave of his hand a bestial skull phases into existence, hovering over his shoulder. It's about the size of a bull's skull, with smooth horns and short fangs. Orange eyes scan its surroundings, jaw opening and closing as a crackle of magic snaps between its teeth. Magic swirls around Papyrus's right hand and he points towards a tree. The skull, the blaster, lets out a high pitched whine and the magic pulls into a central point in its mouth before firing off a searing burst of magic. It punches a hole clear through the trunk, and the tree topples over with a rush of pine needles. "EVEN AT THIS SIZE, IT'S JUST TOO DANGEROUS. BESIDES, COMPARED TO YOURS IT'S EMBARRASSING."

"WHAT? Since when could you do that?!" Undyne shouts, running over to Papyrus to examine his blaster.

"Holy shit," Deacon breathes, and you can't help but agree. You had no idea he was capable of anything like that. And Sans...

You lock eyes with Sans and he sees the question in your eyes. With a sigh, he beckons you over and you go, letting him put his arm around your waist. "i don't like using them. they drain too much magic and they're... really powerful," he says to you in an undertone. His jaw tenses, and he leans in close as Papyrus and Undyne talk about what he just did. The pinpricks of light in his eyes are sharp and narrow, scanning your face. "i have to... it takes a hell of a lot to get me to bother with them. the last time i did was when... when you died, babe."

You put your arm around his shoulders, hugging him close. "I want to know what you're capable of, hun. I had... no idea you could do anything like that," you say, looking at the toppled tree that Undyne is trying to lift, for what reason you're not sure. "I mean, that's... really impressive."

Sans chuckles, and looks a little relieved. "oh. you haven't seen impressive," he says, that confidence returning to his voice. "stand back."

Kissing his brow, you let him go and back away, calling out for Frisk, Asriel, Deacon, and Bo to come over to you and away from the set of boulders Sans is facing. Frisk runs up to you, circling
your hips with their arms as they watch.

"Dad, you're gonna use your blasters?" Frisk asks, squeezing you.

"that's the plan, kiddo," he says, his blue eye crackling as he looks over at the two of you. There's a thread of yellow swirling in his eye that you don't remember ever seeing before. "you ok with that?"

Frisk doesn't say anything, just nods and doesn't let go of you. You rest your hand on their head, stroking their hair as you get the feeling that whatever just passed between them has something to do with the Resets. But whatever thoughts you might have about that, whatever frustration you might feel is swept away as two skulls bigger —so much bigger— than Papyrus's coalesce at either arm. Hovering over the ground, they're taller than Sans. Where his brother's was soft and smooth, Sans's are sharp and jagged, long horns and wicked teeth with blue eyes shot through with yellow.

The hum of magic fills the air and as the blasters' mouths fill with energy, all you can do is stare with a mix of horror and awe as the old granite boulders you were using as a seat just minutes ago are turned to powder. The following silence is deafening as the blasters shut their mouths and turn their eyes to Sans. Their unfeeling gaze is chilling as they wait, obedient, for further command. Sans flicks his hand, sweat gathering at his temple as they phase out of existence and he looks at you.

"Remind me to never piss him off," Deacon breathes, and you'd laugh if you had a mind to. Everyone is just staring. "Jesus Christ he could have murdered me."

Instead all you can think of is the fact that the last time he used this power was when he saw you die. And you know with absolute certainty that if it came down to it, he would use this power to prevent that from ever happening again.
It's seven in the morning and the house is pure chaos.

You and Toriel are in the kitchen packing up a cooler with drinks and food for the day at the beach. Papyrus keeps walking from room to room, trying to decide on what he should bring. You've had to tell him three times now that going swimming in December isn't a good idea but he's having none of it. Yes, it's not like he feels temperature the same way that the others do, but if he goes in then the kids are going to want to go swimming too because for some reason they don't seem to understand the concept of cold. All you can think of is when Frisk got so sick back in Snowdin and you're not going to go through that again.

If push comes to shove you know that Sans will help you keep your child out of the water.

Sans is helping pack up blankets and towels, occasionally coming to ask your opinion on something before adding it to your growing pile of supplies. Asgore is doing his best to keep the kids distracted but they're too wound up. If there's anything more disruptive than two giddy children getting underfoot it's the nearly eight foot boss monster chasing after them through the kitchen. At some point Deacon and Bo must show up because the sheep monster appears at your side and joins you and Toriel in making sandwiches.

"I tried to get Blooky to join us, but they just aren't ready," Mettaton is saying to Alphys as they walk into the kitchen. "Maybe I can convince them once things are... a little more certain."

"We d-don't really know how things are going to go today. Good, I hope, but I u-understand why they'd rather stay home," Alphys says, frowning a little. "Lots of people are pretty n-nervous. Hope do you need any help?"

Honestly you just want everyone out of your kitchen that isn't helping put together food. But you know that's just your nerves talking. "No, we've got it. Did you bring the things I asked?"

"Of course, darling," Mettaton assures you in a soothing tone. He must be able to see the tension in your face. "Towels and blankets, extra water, and Alphys brought plenty of snacks. They're all out in the car."

As Mettaton and Alphys leave the kitchen Bo catches your eye while sliding a sandwich into a plastic bag. "It's a little strange, seeing him like this," she says to you, smiling.

Your eyebrows raise. "Who, Mettaton?"

She nods, sliding the bag closed and fitting it into the nearly-full cooler with the others. Rubbing her hands on the front of her sweater, she reaches for two more slices of bread. "He's more relaxed. Also, I don't really make it a habit of spending my days off with my boss."

"Oh, I didn't even think about that," you say, glancing towards the living room. You can't see everyone else from this angle but you know they're out there. "How is he, as a boss?"
"Depends on who you ask," she says, shrugging. "You have to assert yourself. See, I think he's just fine. Much more bark than bite." Bo gives you a wry smile. "Now Burgerpants... he lets Mettaton walk all over him and then whines about it after. Actually, he's been getting a bit better now that he's been dating the nice cream guy. Bell, I think his name was?"

"Speaking of dating," you say, giving her a sly look. Before you even have the chance to ask the question Bo's smile widens and her big blue eyes catch the light. "How are you and Deacon?"

Toriel lets out a soft laugh, but doesn't say anything, keeping her eyes on her work.

Bo glances over at the queen and then back at you, halfway through spreading peanut butter across a slice of bread. She nudges a tuft of pink wool away from her temple with the back of her hand. "We're doing good. I know it's just been two weeks since we really met, but we've just been talking so much. But, I think you know all this already," she says with an amused look. "You and Deacon are close."

She's right, you do know. He keeps telling you things whenever he gets the chance. Like something cute she said to him, or how he went to go see her at work after school last week. You also know that in the week since their first date they still haven't slept together, despite the two of them going out of their way to see each other as much as possible. You wonder how long that's going to last.

"I just wanted to know if you were feeling the same way as he is," you say in all sincerity. "Sorry, I hope I don't seem too nosy."

"You're his best friend, I don't blame you," she says, nudging you with her elbow. "He talks about you a lot, you know."

You're smiling, a swell of affection bubbling up in your chest. "Does he?" Bo nods, and you add, "He talks about you all the time. I'm glad you guys started dating. Are you two, like, official? God that sounds so high school..."

She giggles, cheeks darkening under her creamy fur. After a second she nods. "He actually asked me this morning, when he picked me up. He said, 'I only take girlfriends through government checkpoints. You okay with that?' And I said, 'Oh, I guess I should stay home then.'" You cover your mouth with the back of your hand, giggling as she tries not to laugh. "And Deacon's eyes got all wide and he was trying really hard not to lose his cool, so I told him yes."

"Oh my god, where is he? I need to go make fun of him," you say, finishing up the sandwich you're working on and wiping your hands on your jeans. "This is payback."

Bo and Toriel's laughter follows you into the foyer, where you're surprised to find Deacon by himself instead of in the living room with the others. He's dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, though his normal light hoodie has been replaced with a heavier jacket. With the weather getting colder and colder the closer you get to winter, you don't blame him. He's standing at the foot of the stairs, looking at the pictures hanging there with his thumbs hooked on his back pockets. He doesn't seem to notice you as you come up behind him.

"So, I heard your girlfriend beat you at your own game," you tease, poking him in the side.

He jumps a little, glancing over at you. "No way. I got her to say yes, didn't I?" he says evenly, giving you a half-hearted smile. His attention returns to the pictures, and you follow his gaze to see what he's so focused on. Oh, it's the ones from Thanksgiving. Specifically, the one of the two of you.
"It's a good picture of us," you say, studying his face. His expression is difficult to read.

Deacon's brow furrows a little, and his eyes scan over the entire collection of frames. "But, this is for you and your family," he says, his voice careful and measured. Uncertain.

"Deacon." You tug on his sleeve and when he glances your way you give him an exasperated smile. "You might as well be family."

His eyes widen and he seems at a loss for words. Then, as color creeps up the sides of his neck, he shakes his head and rubs his shoulder. "No, I'm not..."

Putting yourself on top of the first step, right in front of him and now at eye-level, you make sure the two of you are alone before fixing him with a serious look. "Get technical all you want, but you belong on that wall," you tell him. You reach out and put your hands on his shoulders, giving him a gentle shake. "Can't you see you're part of this ridiculous clan now? Because you are, whether you like it or not."

He arches a brow at you, doing his best to look stubborn. But you can see the flattered expression hiding underneath. "I can think of someone who might beg to differ," he mutters under his breath. Your mouth curls into a crooked smile. "This," you say, gesturing behind you, "was Sans's idea."

Deacon blinks, clearly taken aback. "...Huh?"

"He said you were like my brother."

He blinks again. Then, a small, sly smile creeps across his face. "Well, as your big brother, I'm not sure I approve of you getting married to a skeleton."

"Shut up," you say, shoving his shoulders and laughing as he staggers backwards. You drop down from the step and cross your arms over your chest.

"You can't just keep dumping all these surprises in my lap. I'm still trying to wrap my brain around the fact that your fiancé could disintegrate me with his laser skull," he says, shaking his head. "I mean. Literally. A laser skull."

"Actually, a pair of laser skulls," you correct.

"Hope. Why didn't you warn me that he could turn me into a greasy smear?" he says, dropping his voice an octave.

"I didn't know either of them could do that. Sans said it was serious emergencies only. And what was he going to do, just throw it casually into conversation?" You arch a brow and let out a small sigh. "He's not a killer, Deacon. He wouldn't disintegrate you. Uh, unless you tried to actually hurt one of us, I guess," you find yourself adding, as an afterthought.

"Well it's a good thing I don't ever plan on doing that," he says, running his hand through his hair. Then he gives you a curious look. "But you're serious? He actually said that about me?"

"Yes. Seriously. He's really starting to come around, but don't you dare say anything to him about it."

"My lips are sealed. I wouldn't want to jeopardize our blossoming friendship."

"Deacon."
"Do you think he'd want to swap friendship bracelets? I'm still torn up over the fact that you lied to me about getting us some."

"Deacon stop."

There are protesters at the Line.

There's been a few, you've heard, coming and going the last few days, but they're out in force now.

You're not a good judge of numbers, but you'd have to say at least fifty, maybe a hundred. They're lined up on either side of the road past the checkpoint, holding signs and yelling something you can't quite make out. The soldiers are keeping a watchful eye on them and they haven't caused any kind of incident, but just their presence is enough to put a damper on your mood. As your car sits there, waiting for your turn after Asgore and his family, Sans reaches over to pry your hand off the steering wheel. He threads your fingers together and squeezes.

"They're just signs. People protest things all the time. There's... jerks that protest at funerals, for god's sake," you say, for Sans and for Frisk and for yourself. "It's not going to stop us from having a good time at the beach today, right Frisk?"

You glance into the rear view mirror and they catch your eye, giving you a bright smile. "Right!" they say. You smile back.

The gate in front of Asgore's van lifts and they drive through. You catch sight of Asriel waving at you through the rear window and you wave back, a small rush of anxiety making your chest feel tight. You'll meet them down at the beach. You've all got maps, and you've shown them the route plenty of times. They're ready, everyone is prepared for this. Everything is going to be fine.

You shift the car into gear to take your place at the guard station, putting yourself back into park. Rolling down your window, you're pleasantly surprised to see Sergeant Wilkes, one of your acquaintances, manning the gate. But what little pleasure you find from a familiar face is squashed the second you start hearing what the protesters have been chanting.

"KEEP THEM IN! KEEP THEM IN!"

Wilkes seems to notice your change in expression, his dark brow furrowing in sympathy. "They've been at it all morning, since before sunrise," he says, jerking his head towards the crowd. "What they don't seem to realize is that their lot has caused more trouble than any of you ever have. We used to joke that we were working harder at keeping troublemakers out than in, but I'm afraid it's not much of a joke any more."

"Have they done anything?" you ask, swallowing back the lump in your throat.

He shakes his head. "Okay, I need your names to confirm with our database so we can put in the system that you'll be off the mountain," he says, giving you a weak smile. "But looks like it's just the three of you? Where's Papyrus?"

"behind us, with mettaton," Sans says, giving the soldier a strained smile. "he wouldn't miss this for the world."

Wilkes chuckles, glancing at the black car behind you. "That's what I figured," he says, typing something on the computer beside him. "So, all monster residents need to be back by 2200, that's 10 PM. And any repeated offenses may result in loss of privileges off of Ebott. Failure to return to the designated monster residential territory will result in arrest and further disciplinary action and
reevaluation of privileges for all residents." He clears his throat. "So just make sure you come back, okay? Not that I'm worried about you three. Where are you headed?"

"Are you asking cuz you're curious or because you have to put it in the file?" Sans asks, raising a brow. You squeeze his hand.

"Both, actually," he says, looking a little sheepish.

"The beach," you answer.

"Oh, with the king and queen? I hope you guys have a good time." He gives you a weak smile, then returns his attention to his monitor. "Are your cell phone numbers on file still correct?"

"Yes."

"We shouldn't need to reach you unless there's an issue with curfew," he says to your silent question. "And that's pretty much it. I'm sure everything will be fine, but you guys be safe, okay?"

"We will."
Everyone agreed to wait until the entire group arrives before leaving the parking lot at the beach. Obscured by huge sand dunes, you won't be able to see the ocean until you cross a wooden footbridge. The kids are impatient as you wait for the others arrive, but so are the adults, you think. Papyrus keeps trying to steal peeks through a small gap near the footbridge and even Sans is glancing at the dunes. The crash of waves seems to be taunting you.

"Sh-should we unpack the cars? While we're waiting for D-Deacon and Bo?" Alphys asks, wringing her hands and casting an anxious look at her girlfriend.

Undyne is pacing, the frills on the sides of her head twitching. You've never seen her this impatient before, not even when the Barrier was broken. Maybe it's the ocean air or the sound of the water calling out to her. Alphys must want to give her something to do to distract her.

You hear a familiar rumble and look across the empty parking lot as that old, beat up Civic pulls in. This early, it's just you and the others at this particular lot, and you hope things stay relatively quiet. It's one thing to have humans come willingly to Ebott to see monsters, but quite another to have the monsters come to them. But, with winter just around the corner, the beach isn't exactly a prime destination for most people. You're betting on this to work in your favor.

"No, let's not worry about all the stuff until after we take a look," you say, giving Alphys an excited grin. All that tension during the drive here, the anticipation, it's all getting shoved to the background as you watch Deacon pull up alongside your car.

Everyone is here. You look over your friends and family, gathered together in their warm clothes, looking more suited for a day in the mountains than a day at the beach. But they're finally here, past the Line, and they're all waiting for some kind of signal. Sans squeezes your hand, Frisk is watching you with their arm threaded through Asriel's, and you realize that they're all looking at you.

You let out a nervous laugh, waving your arm towards the footbridge. "Well, let's go!"

Frisk and Asriel take off at a run at the head of the group, trailed by Papyrus. Everyone, including you and Sans, hurry along after them, not wanting to get left behind. Besides, you want to see the looks on their faces when they finally see—

"Wow! It's so big!" Asriel cries out, and as your motley group filters out onto the sand, you can hear the others express similar sentiments to each other.

"Wowie, look at all that water!" Papyrus says, taking Mettaton's hand and tugging him down towards the shore. He's the only one not dressed in pants and a jacket, instead insisting on wearing bright, tropical swim trunks, a neon tank top, and a pair of sunglasses. "I can't wait to go swimming!" He also seems to have forgotten your request for no swimming. Again.
"Sweetheart be careful, I can't get too wet," Mettaton says, but doesn't seem to be fighting the forward momentum.

The kids run after them, and you can't find it in your heart to call them back. Though, to your relief, they stop at the waterline and opt to watch the waves roll in and out. Toriel and Asgore are content to watch the children, though you notice the king cast a glance towards the huge, rocky outcropping to your left that cuts through the beach and into the ocean, like a wall. You chose this spot because of the natural landmark. To make it easier to remember where you parked the cars in case you got separated, or chose to spend some time apart from each other. The rocky shore is also less popular with swimmers, so you figured it would help keep the day quieter than going elsewhere.

Undyne is suspiciously quiet you think. You glance over towards where her and Alphys are standing and you're surprised to see that the fish monster seems rooted to the ground. Her eye is wide, hands fisted in front of her stomach as she just stares at the ocean. Alphys strokes her arm, looking from her girlfriend to the water and then back again, and right as you're starting to get worried Undyne leaps into action. She's tugging off her boots and shrugging out of her jacket, and oh, you shouldn't be surprised she's wearing a sleek, black swimsuit underneath. You thought that was a tank top tucked into her jeans! Tripping over her pants before catching herself, she abandons her pile of clothes, runs halfway down the beach, doubles back to kiss Alphys, and then bolts headlong into the water with a whoop.

"S-sweetie it's cold!" Alphys cries out uselessly, reaching after her and then dropping her hand to her side with an amused shake of her head.

"I DON'T CARE!" Undyne yells, then yelps as her legs hit the water. "Ahhh, it's COLD! No, NO, I'm not going to let it stop me!" She grits her teeth and slogs through the waves until she's waist deep, gasping and then vanishing under the water.

You hear a soft chuckle and turn to look at Sans. He's watching everyone, just like you are, running his thumb over yours as he holds your hand. His eyes are big and bright and he doesn't seem to notice you looking. Happiness swells up in your chest and you lean in close to his side, freeing your hand so you can slide your arm around his back. He hugs you close as you lean over to cup his cheek and kiss him.

"We made it," you say and he nods, catching your hand and holding it to his chest.

"yep. we sure did," he says, glancing up at you and back out over the water. His smile weakens, replaced with something akin to awe. "this is... we can see the ocean from ebott but this is something else. there's so much sky, so much water, looks like it goes on forever."

Looking out at the ocean, you get that feeling too. Every time you come to the beach there's that moment as you look out at it all that you feel that enormity, the way it dwarfs you. It's like staring up at the stars. "Makes you feel small, doesn't it?" you say, not sure why you're speaking so quietly.

He nods. "there's so much out here. i can't believe how much we were missing."

There's a dull ache in your chest and you hug him closer, tucking your forehead into his shoulder. "I love you," you say, with as much tenderness as you can muster. Because you want to show him everything you can think of, and then some. Places you've been, and places you've never been or had the chance to go to. Even your own limited life before the Underground feels like so much more in comparison to what he and the rest of them had. A trip to the beach could be done on a whim and only now, after months of waiting and generations of entrapment have the monsters been
given anything close to that freedom. "I'm so glad we're finally here."

"I love you too, babe," he says, pressing your hand firmly to his chest. "A year ago if someone had told me where I'd be right now... I'd laugh in their face. Guess the joke's on me. Not that I'm complaining."

The sound of someone sniffling catches your attention as you and Sans fall silent. Lifting your head, you turn towards the noise and see Bo wiping her cheeks with the backs of her hands, letting out an embarrassed laugh as Deacon pulls her close to his side. He's looking at her with a tender smile, cupping her cheek and kissing between her eyes.

"Sorry, I feel so silly for crying," she's saying to him, nuzzling under his chin.

"It's okay, I know being around me can be pretty overwhelming," Deacon says, grinning as she laughs. "I'm sorry I'm preventing you from fully appreciating the ocean, though. Come on, maybe it'll be easier if we get closer."

With his arm still around her shoulders, he leads her to the water. For a second he catches your eye and the two of you smile at each other. This was a good plan. You give him a little wave and he nods, and as you look out over the beach and your friends and you listen to the crash of water, laughter and mingled voices, you feel content. The protesters are long forgotten.

By lunchtime the sun is beating down on all of you, and you're able to shed your outer layers. The mix of cold ocean air and the heat from the sun is relaxing, and as you sit on a blanket, leaning up against Sans, you're half tempted to drift off. Your fiancé already has, his jacket balled up like a pillow under his head.

Mettaton is sprawled out on a towel, laying as if he were sunbathing. You suppose he sort of is, hooked up to a small solar panel wedged into the sand next to him. Papyrus is busy at his boyfriend's side, talking to him as he works on sculpting a sand-skeleton. He's inexplicably good at it, and you're reminded of some of the snow sculptures you remember from Snowdin.

Covered in sand after refusing to lay on a towel or blanket, Undyne is probably the happiest and most content you've ever seen her. She's basking in the sun, laying next to Alphys and playing with the doctor's tail. Alphys is sitting on a blanket next to her, blushing and smiling down at her as she feeds her girlfriend torn off sections of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"There's so many fish down there! I'm going to go back, I'm sure I can catch a bunch," Undyne says, grinning.

"We brought plenty of food though," Alphys says, her tail twitching against Undyne's hands. "You don't have to do that."

Shifting a little in your spot, your hand brushes up against a pile of shells. Frisk has been adding to this new, growing collection all morning as they and Asriel have been exploring up and down the shoreline within sight. The kids, after having scarfed down a pair of sandwiches only after repeated requests from you and Toriel that they needed to eat, thank you, are now hard at work shaping a lump of wet sand you think is supposed to be a castle.

Looking at the shells, you pick up a big, mostly intact scallop shell, about the size of Sans's eye sockets. Turning it over in your hand, you glance over at your sleeping skeleton and, with a wry smile, set it on his face, right over his eye. His mouth twitches a little but he keeps sleeping. Sifting through the collection again, you try to find a second one, but before you can—
"huh...? hey!" Sans jerks upright and the shell falls into his skull with a clatter. You clap your hand over your mouth as he covers his socket with a hand and shakes his head. You can hear the shell rattle around inside.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" you blurt out, trying not to laugh as he opens his mouth and pulls the shell out from between his teeth.

"s'ok," he says, chuckling and reaching over you to put it back with the others. "if you wanted me to wake up you coulda just said so. waking up like that... it's kinda a beach."

You roll your eyes and sit up a little straighter, letting Sans claim your left hand and toy with your ring. On a blanket to your right Deacon is sitting with Bo's head in his lap, one arm behind him to hold himself up as his other hand is trapped under hers on her stomach. They've been like that for a while, after walking off alone earlier to follow the beach. Everyone but the kids is taking it easy, recovering from that early burst of excitement and relaxing after lunch. Bo is watching the ocean, and Deacon is watching her, and you can't help but smile at the soft, unguarded expression on his face.

Bo turns her head to look at you, and smiles as she catches your eye. "Sansy still asleep over there?" she asks you.

"yes," Sans says, making the two of you laugh.

She rolls out of Deacon's lap and pushes herself up to her knees, pushing her hair out of her face. "I was hoping I could steal you for a minute, if your fiancée doesn't mind."

"What if I mind?" Deacon says, and Bo gives him a sweet smile and leans in for a kiss.

"That depends on what you plan on doing with him," you tease, smirking.

"Oh, just talk," she says, brushing off her leggings and standing up. She gives you a playful smile and an arched brow and you free your hand from Sans's grip.

"i s'pose," Sans says, following her to his feet. He leaves his jacket behind.

As you watch the two of them walk off together, you realize that, months ago, this might have bothered you. But now you're just curious. Glancing over at Deacon, he sits up and crosses his legs, resting his chin in his hand. Oh, it looks like it is bothering him though. You get up and go to sit next to your friend, nudging him in the side with your elbow.

"What do you think they're talking about?" Deacon asks, watching the two monsters as they walk towards the wall of dark, jagged rock at the end of the beach.

"Dunno. I wouldn't worry about it," you say, giving him a reassuring look.

He frowns, then sighs and glances over at you. "They seem kind of... familiar. Did they ever...?"

"No, they just worked together. Back in the Underground." You bump against him with your shoulder, tucking hair behind your ear. "What are you worried about? She's been all over you all day, Deacon."

"It's nothing," he says, shaking his head. "I just thought maybe it was weird that the two monsters currently involved with humans just wandered off to go talk. But if you don't think that's weird..."

Maybe not weird, but now you're even more curious than you already were. From where you're
sitting, you can't quite make out their expressions, but Sans is talking animatedly and Bo is nodding her head.

"Mr. Stuart! Mr. Stuart can you come help us?" Frisk is yelling from down near the water, waving their arm. Their sleeves are pushed up to their elbows and their hands are covered in wet sand. "We found something weird and I dunno what it is."

You and Deacon look at each other and after a second he gives you a wry smile. "Five dollars on jellyfish. Though do I need to remind them that I'm a history teacher and not a science teacher?"

"You're a teacher, that's good enough for them," you say. "Just hope it's not a used condom. I used to find those on the beach under the pier all the time."

"If it's a condom I'm passing the buck to you. I'm definitely not a sex-ed teacher," he retorts, standing and brushing sand off his jeans.

"It's a sea urchin. Just don't step on it and it won't hurt you."

Frisk and Asriel are crouched over a small pool tucked into the rocks. In it are a few urchins, and even a crab and a handful of tiny fish. Mr. Stuart reaches into the water and plucks out the smallest ball of spikes, holding it out between them. Curious, Frisk leans in closer.

"Is it moving?" Frisk asks, squinting as they think they see the individual spines shift, but it's hard to tell.

"Yes, they use those spikes like hundreds of little legs to move across the ocean floor. I think. I'm pretty sure, at least," he says, frowning to himself. "I didn't take marine biology in college, kids, you'll have to cut me some slack."

"Can I hold it?" Asriel asks, holding out his hands, the pads on his palms facing upwards.

Carefully, Mr. Stuart picks the urchin up and sets it in Asriel's hands. "Now just don't squeeze it or you'll get poked."

Frisk leans in close to their best friend's side, putting an arm around his back and resting their chin on his shoulder. Asriel glances at them and back down at the urchin, a huge smile on his face. After a second he starts laughing, his hands twitching a little as he struggles not to drop it. "It tickles! I can feel it moving!"

"Okay, okay, be careful," Mr. Stuart says, cupping one hand under Asriel's and retrieving the urchin from him. "How about we put this little guy back in the water. You can just look at them."

"Frisk! Asriel!"

Frisk cranes their neck around Asriel at the sound of a familiar voice, and they're pleasantly surprised to see a familiar blue rabbit bounding towards them. Long ears draped down her back, Bonnet's furry feet are coated in sand as she reaches them, dressed in a pair of white, floral overalls. She's smiling at them, and comes a little short when she catches sight of who they're with.

"Oh, Mr. Stuart! Hi!" she says, surprised.

"Bonnet, mom told you not to run off!" A second blue rabbit makes his way up towards them, smoothing back a tuft of fur between his long ears as he fixes his sister with a stern look. "You can't just go running up to random humans. Hey, I'm sorry about—"
"Bell, he's my teacher!" Bonnet argues as he picks her up and sets her on his shoulders. She wraps her hands around his ears and tugs them to the sides, out of her way. "Frisk, this is my stupid big brother." She glances behind her and sighs. "And his boyfriend Tom is trying to catch up."

Frisk can only watch as Mr. Stuart and Bell look at each other, a hint of recognition spreading across the rabbit's face. The blonde just gives a polite smile and holds out his hand. "Hey, it's no problem. I think she was actually trying to say hi to these two," he says, nodding at Frisk and Asriel.

After a moment of hesitation Bell shakes Mr. Stuart's hand and quickly lets go. He opens his mouth to speak when a familiar orange cat-like monster comes up alongside him. "Tom, there you are, sorry I had to bolt after Bonnet," he says, jostling his shoulders and earning himself a squeak of protest from his sister. "I didn't want her getting too far."

"I thought your name was Burgerpants?" Frisk asks, looking up at him.

Burgerpants's —Tom's?— eye twitches, and Bell takes his hand. "That's just a nickname, little buddy," he says between his teeth. He looks over at Mr. Stuart and his eyes widen a little. "Oh, uh, hey there again."

As the three adults make awkward small talk, Asriel tugs on Frisk's hand. "Why are they acting so weird?" he asks in an undertone.

"I dunno. But Bonnet's brother looks kinda annoyed," Frisk says, watching the way the big rabbit's nose is twitching.

"Well, we should probably get going. We didn't mean to interrupt," Bell says, and he turns to head back the way they came.

Bonnet twists around on his shoulders and waves. "Bye Frisk! Bye Asriel! I'll see you tomorrow! And you too Mr. Stuart!"

"Bye!" Frisk and Asriel yell after her, then look at each other. "We didn't even—"

"—get to talk to her," Asriel finishes, and the two of them laugh.

Mr. Stuart gives the two of them an odd, confused look that quickly disappears into an amused smile. "If I didn't know any better I'd say you two were almost like twins. You're really close, aren't you?"

Asriel wraps his arms around Frisk, making them giggle as he presses his nose into their cheek.

It's mid afternoon, and the sun is starting its steady decline towards the ocean. There's talk of a bonfire, and Undyne already brought back at least ten fish she wants to cook. They're laid out on one of her towels, because there was no way in hell she was going to use anything you brought to hold a bunch of dead fish. This is why you packed sandwiches...

You've asked Sans twice now what he talked to Bo about but the only thing he'll say is that he'll 'tell you later' and he starts chuckling. You get the distinct impression it has something to do with you and Deacon.

The kids are napping on the centermost blanket, right in the middle of the group. Toriel is watching them sleep, but Asgore seems distracted by something. He keeps glancing over at the rocky outcropping, his brow furrowed.
"Asgore, is something wrong?" you finally ask him.

"Yeah, you've been looking at that cliff all day," Undyne chimes in, and you're not surprised that she noticed it too.

The king makes a soft grumble deep in his chest, tearing his eyes away from the rocks. He looks at you and then at Deacon, where he's sitting nearby, watching. "Do you know anything about it? Does it have a name?"

"Uh, when I was a kid I heard people call it Dead End Rock, but I don't know why. I mean, other than the fact that this end of the beach is sort of a dead end," you say, uncertain. "Deacon, do you know anything?"

The blonde shakes his head. "No, I'm not from here. I used to live three hours north."

Asgore looks unsatisfied with your answers. He pushes himself to his feet and crosses the beach, heading towards the rocks. You share a look with Sans and he shrugs at you. But you want to know what's bothering him. Toriel and Undyne seem worried as well, and so the three of you follow him.

"Asgore," Toriel says softly, hurrying up to his side. She touches his elbow and he glances at her. "What is it?"

"Do you not recognize this place?" He waits, and when Toriel just shakes her head, he continues. "I thought perhaps I was just imagining things, but the longer we are here... I do not think I am mistaken."

"What is he talking about?" you whisper to Undyne.

She gives you a baffled look. "I don't know. Something from before the war, maybe?"

Asgore stops right at the foot of the cliff, reaching out and resting a big hand upon the dark stones. He looks to his left, and then to his right, and runs his hand along the rock as he follows the edge towards the water. He doesn't stop until he reaches two worn hollows about and arm's length apart and as big as the king's fist, level with his head. Another low rumble echoes in his chest and he hangs his head, placing his hands inside each of the holes.

"Oh," Toriel gasps softly, covering her mouth with her hand. "Asgore, this is...?"

He nods, flames suddenly springing to life from his hands. Then, dropping his arms to his sides and leaving the fire blazing inside the stone, he backs away. As you watch, confused and worried about Asgore, the fire turns blue, and from them lines begin to etch their way across the worn, jagged surface of the cliff. As they curve and spiral, you realize that the two holes are eyes. Eyes for the massive face that the magic is painting over the rock. But it's when the lines come to an end at the tips of two huge horns that you realize that you're seeing the likeness of another boss monster. One that looks a lot like Asgore.

The king turns to look at you, sadness in those old, ancient eyes. "This is where my father died, and where we lost the war."
"I'm sorry," you blurt out, shaking your head and hugging yourself. "If I had any idea I wouldn't have suggested this place, Asgore I—"

Asgore gives you a kind, patient smile and reaches out to rest his hand on your shoulder. It's big enough to engulf most of your upper arm, but the weight is reassuring. "Please, do not apologize. It is... a very old pain, but not an unwelcome one. I had thought perhaps this place destroyed, or lost to time, but here it is." He lets you go and turns back to the glowing lines that make up the stylized image of his father's face. Whatever ancient magic that was used to create this memorial reminds you of the blue runes you saw briefly in Waterfall. Asgore rests a hand between the two flaming eyes, stroking the stone. "I suppose it is fitting, that this should be the first place we visited. The water was not so high before," he says with a gesture at the ocean.

"What happened here?" Undyne asks, and maybe it's just your imagination but you think she's avoiding your eyes as she follows Asgore to stand at his elbow. "What did the humans do to us?"

It stings a little, the bite in your friend's voice. You feel a hand on your back and you flinch away before realizing it's Toriel. Her expression is gentle, but guarded. "My child, perhaps you ought to give us a moment and go back to the others."

There's an uncomfortable lurch in your stomach at her dismissal. You feel all at once like an unwelcome intruder, an other in this group of monsters. But you are an outsider, how can you possibly grasp the enormity of what this place must mean for Toriel and Asgore, or even Undyne? And in the moment it takes you to recognize your frustration, now you feel shame for feeling it in the first place. You should respect their wishes.

As you give a curt nod, Asgore looks at Undyne, touching her back. "Go with her. We will join everyone shortly, and I will tell you more. I would prefer not to speak of it twice."

Undyne hesitates but does as her king tells her. She nods at him and then meets your eyes for a second before looking down at the sand and coming to you. It helps take some of the edge off your selfishly hurt feelings, to feel less excluded. The two of you head back towards the rest of your group in awkward silence.

It's four thirty in the afternoon. The sun is setting over the ocean, painting the sky with brilliant oranges over the water when Asgore and Toriel rejoin you and the others. The cliff face is dark once again, the magical fire snuffed out as all of you wait in solemn silence. Even the children, woken from their naps, are quiet and restrained, sorting through their collection of shells between them on the blanket.

At first the king and queen don't mention anything about what just happened. Instead it's decided that you need to get a bonfire started before it's dark. Everyone pitches in together to tidy up the space, to pull blankets and towels and coolers off to the side as Asgore digs a pit in the sand and
Papyrus and Mettaton go to fetch firewood from the car. Undyne starts cleaning her fish from earlier, but she keeps casting anxious glances over at Asgore.

Once the wood is all set up in the pit, Toriel pulls Asriel into her lap. "Now, Flufftail, you should start the fire for us," she says, and her son looks up at her with wide, excited eyes. "I think it would please your grandfather to know that after all this time, we managed to come back here to this place. He would be proud of you and your magic."

As Asriel holds out his hands and fire licks over his palms, Frisk crawls over to sit in your lap at your place beside the pit. Sans puts his arm around your waist and rubs your side with his thumb, distracting you. He's been watching you since you came back to the group, but there's nothing you can say to explain the guilt you're feeling. Your attention is caught again as the wood bursts into flames, and an appreciative murmur passes through the group. Asriel looks up at his mother and she nuzzles his cheek.

Asgore looks at his son, a proud smile easing away his melancholy as everyone waits, patiently, for him to speak. The only sounds are the crackling of the fire and the scrape of Undyne's spear as she uses it to scale her fish. Then, as he rubs the pad of his thumb over Asriel's head, the king settles into his spot beside Toriel and clears his throat.

"This place, with our backs to this cliff, is where my father's army made its final stand. All of our families were with us, because any monsters left unguarded were captured, or killed. The old and frail, and the young and weak, it did not matter. Any monster found by the enemy was at risk," Asgore says, his voice a low, calm rumble. Toriel rests her hand on his knee and he covers it with his own, something old and familiar passing between the two of them. A gesture of support. She must have been there too, seen all this firsthand. "There were humans with us too. Loved ones. Husbands, wives, partners, parents... Friends. Most of our allies without a personal stake had long since fled. It was clear that we were losing. And when my father was cut down, we... I... was given a choice. We could continue this war, and face certain death, or we could surrender, and take our chances with an uncertain future. They gave us a day to mourn our losses, and that is when I left my father's mark on that cliff. In the place I had to leave his dust when I chose to let my people be locked beneath a mountain."

"That wasn't a CHOICE," Undyne snaps, gritting her teeth. Alphys settles in closer to her and strokes her back and some of the tension leaves Undyne's body as she shakes her head. "You couldn't choose to let everyone die."

You glance around your ring of friends and family, hugging Frisk close to your chest. Mettaton is holding Papyrus's hand, both of their expressions solemn. Not even Papyrus has anything to say to lighten the mood, and he seems afraid to interrupt. Sans catches your eye squeezes you before focusing again on Asgore. You glance to your other side and see Deacon, his hands balled into fists in his lap and his shoulders rigid. Bo is rolling the hem of her sweater between her fingers.

"No," Asgore sighs, shaking his head. "I could not. Instead I watched as we were herded like beasts into a prison the mages fashioned for us. I could do nothing while families were torn apart, as children were taken from their parents. It was later that I realized why they did not let the humans stay underground with us, no matter how much they begged. Because it took humans to break the Barrier."

Sans's grip on you tightens. He hugs you close, reaching with his free hand to stroke Frisk's hair and leaning down to nuzzle the top of their head. They wrap their arms around Sans's neck and pull themselves into his lap, their legs still across you so they can touch you. Tucking their head beneath his chin, Frisk meets your eyes and you give them a tender smile. They press closer to
Sans's chest and he holds you both.

He would have lost you both, if the three of you were in that situation. Forced apart, locked away underground, with no way of ever seeing each other again. You can't imagine how horrible it must have been, to be so utterly helpless in the face of that fate. Tears sting your eyes but you blink them back.

"But we survived. That was all we could hope to achieve." A weak smile spreads across his face. "Now we are here again. On the surface, where we belong," he says, his eyes meeting yours. Your lips twitch in an attempt at a smile.

Deacon clears his throat and you look over at him. He opens his mouth to speak and then stops, giving you a helpless look and then meeting Asgore's inquisitive eyes. Running his hand through his hair, he clears his throat again. "I'm sorry," he says, unable to hold Asgore's gaze. "I was just curious. Do you know why they chose to lock you away?"

"No. Perhaps it was out of guilt that they let any of us live, but I was not in a position to ask," Asgore says, his tone neutral. "And there are no mages left that I might ask them. Which I suppose is some sort of justice in of itself, that our jailers and their kind are long gone, while we yet live."

Swallowing, Deacon seems uncomfortable under the king's gaze. You can't blame him. Even though the monsters had human allies, human families, you can't help but feel somehow guilty. "And these children taken from their parents, was it like Sans and Frisk? Or can humans and monsters...?"

Toriel lets out a soft laugh, stroking Asriel's ears. "Both. Monster children are made from a union of Souls and magic. So, a human mage and a monster could create a monster child, if they so chose. And back then, many did," she says, her smile turning wistful. She seems to notice the surprise on your face, as more than one pair of eyes turns to you and Sans. "We never said anything because once it became clear that the mages were gone, we did not want you to feel as though an opportunity had been snatched away from you. There are very few who even know that it used to be possible."

You shake your head with a quiet, nervous laugh. "Oh, no, I'm perfectly happy with just Frisk. Between them and Asriel... I don't think I could handle a baby."

Laughter ripples through the group and the tension in the air is starting to dissipate.

"Dad," Asriel says quietly, leaning forward to reach for his father's hand. Asgore gives it to him, smiling. "Can I go light the fires for my grandfather? I... I didn't get to see him before."

The king scoops up his son in his arms, nuzzling the top of his head. "Of course you can. I will help you," he says, pushing himself to his feet.

"U-um. A-Asgore...?" Alphys stutters, adjusting her glasses as nervous sweat dots her temple. He pauses to look at her. "Do you m-mind if I join you? I'm c-curious about the old m-magic you used..."

"I do not mind," Asgore answers, and the doctor hurries after him.

Toriel watches them go, and in the firelight her eyes seem shiny with tears. After a pause she clears her throat and catches your eye, forcing a smile. "Well, perhaps we should start cooking all these fish Undyne caught for us!" she says, clapping her hands together.

As if it were some kind of signal, the last of the tension fades away with the last of the sunlight.
Soon there are fish roasting on sticks over the fire, while the less adventurous members of your group eat the sandwiches you packed earlier. The night air is cold but the heat from the fire is comforting. With your feet near the flames, Sans sits behind you and wraps you up in the open flaps of his jacket, holding it shut around you. Leaning back against him, he nuzzles into the side of your neck and you smile.

Deacon has been quiet since Asgore's talk. He's holding a fish over the fire, twisting the stick in his hands. Bo leans against him and slips her arms around his waist which seems to pull him out of his thoughts. He smiles at her and puts one arm around her shoulders as she tilts her head up for a kiss. She digs her hooves into the sand near the fire.

After everyone has eaten dinner you extricate yourself from Sans's arms to go fishing through one of the bags for some very special supplies. Graham crackers, chocolate, marshmallows, and some long skewers. Right now, especially now that things are happier around the bonfire, everyone needs to experience the perfection that is a s'more. You make your way around the group with skewers and marshmallows, and watch them all as they start to roast.

"OH NO, MINE CAUGHT FIRE! HOPE WHAT DO I DO?" Papyrus yelps, yanking his arm back as the outside of his marshmallow starts to char.

"Some people like them burnt. Blow it out," you say, grinning as you start breaking apart chocolate bars and crackers to get them ready.

Undyne is purposefully setting hers on fire, not even bothering to wait before blowing hers out and popping it into her mouth. Asgore and Toriel are speaking softly to one another and the kids are trying to poke each other with their sticks. Sans is holding his marshmallow close to the fire but not too close, slowly turning it as it starts to brown. As you start to wonder how he knew to do that, you catch him watching Deacon as he shows Bo that exact same trick.

As you're about to say something Sans turns to you and holds out his marshmallow. Sandwiching it with the chocolate and graham crackers, you pull it off the stick and go to hand the s'more to him but he shakes his head. "that one's for you. i can break apart crackers and chocolate for people, you eat," he says, giving you an affectionate smile.

You lean in and kiss his cheek before taking a big bite of your s'more, letting out an appreciative groan as you lick the sticky marshmallow off your lips. Sans chuckles and waggles his eyebrows at you and you snort, giggling at the look on his face. "Stop it, that's rude," you say, shoving his shoulder.

"you're the one making funny noises," he counters, grinning.

"H-hey, Undyne? C-can I talk to you for a m-minute?" Alphys says from her spot across the fire, handing her completely untoasted marshmallow and stick to Asriel.

Undyne is licking marshmallow off her fingers, and gives her girlfriend a confused look. "Yeah. What's up?"

"U-um, come on," she urges, standing and reaching for Undyne's wrist. The fish monster looks even more confused but doesn't argue, following her away from the fire.

Curious, you glance over at Sans. He's grinning, the lights in his eyes bright. "What, do you know something?" you ask him, leaning against his shoulder as he helps Frisk make their s'more.

"i have an idea," he says evasively.
Frisk wanders back around to the other side of the fire to sit with Asriel, and for a moment you have a small bit of relative privacy. Sort of. "Well if you're not gonna tell me that," you whisper, poking him in the ribs. He grunts. "What were you and Bo talking about?"

He chuckles, low in his chest before turning to speak into your ear. "what do you think I might know about humans that nobody else here would?"

You blink, puzzling over his words for a second before letting out a loud gasp. Sans starts laughing, pulling away before you yank him back so you can hiss at the spot where his ear should be. "You didn't!"

"i did."

"She could have asked me."

"you're the human in this equation. she wanted a monster's perspective."

You pull back and give him an exasperated look as he shakes with laughter. "I hope you were nice."

"i was!" He says, and he gives you a reassuring smile, leaning back towards your ear again. "look, they're good together. even i can see that. i'm sure they'll be good together too."

You snort and push him away, shaking your head and refusing to dignify that with a response. It's good timing because now Asriel wants help with his s'more and you and Sans have all the supplies. As the two of you get Asriel taken care of, a loud whoop of triumph cuts through the soft chatter around the campfire.

"YES of course I will!" Undyne shouts, and as you turn to look she sweeps Alphys up into her arms and spins her around. "We're going to get MARRIED!"
Wanting More

Chapter Notes

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This is your warning for explicit content.

Everyone makes it back to Ebott with a full thirty minutes to spare. Deacon once again brings up the rear at the checkpoint, and by the time he's through all the other cars have already headed home. As the gate shuts behind Sylvie, he hears Bo let out a soft sigh. She's looking out the passenger window, at the mirror maybe. He reaches for her hand and places it on the stick shift, so he can thread their fingers together but still drive. Glancing over at him, she gives a weak smile.

"We'll go out again. As much as you want," Deacon says, because he can't stand that look on her face. Like a prisoner being returned to her cell. A taste of freedom snatched out of her hands. But it's true, isn't it? This is what it must be like for her, for all of them. Who's to say this will last forever? Who's to say it won't get worse before it gets better? If it ever gets better?

He can't think like that. It's not helping anyone.

"Okay," she says, squeezing his fingers. He squeezes back. "I'd like that. I want to see everything."

Everything within driving distance, maybe. Bo has this habit of watching the travel channel, or that home and garden channel where they remodel houses and stuff. He knows she's not going to be content with just the surrounding area for long. Her wanderlust, while endearing, feels dangerous. For now, at least. He's never been out of the state before, never really had a reason, but now he wants to. He wants to show her all the sights. The Grand Canyon, New York City, the memorials in DC... Yosemite, she'd love to go hiking there, right? And that's just thinking about the United States, who knows what else she might want to see all over the world. Everything, she said. He wants her to see everything.

...What is he doing? Thinking about what... the future? That's... he can't do that right now. Who knows what's going to happen in the next month let alone the next year. There's too many uncertainties, first and foremost being Bo. How does she fit into this mess that is his life?

How does he want her to fit in?

Downtown's street lights are dim, just bright enough to see but nothing like the city lights they passed through on their way back home. Most businesses closed for the day, and the streets are quiet. Before he realizes it he's at Bo's apartment building. Five stories tall, hers is on the second floor, in a corner with a view of Mt. Ebott. As they get out of the car and they head inside, she threads her arm through his and tangles their fingers together.

She's so physically affectionate, he thought it would make him uncomfortable but it doesn't. In fact it's more the opposite. He wants her to touch him, to crowd his space, to keep showing him these little signs that she just... wants to be close. He craves it. Every little touch and gesture is like a whisper of 'I want you'. 'I want you here'. He can't remember ever being wanted quite like this.
They take the stairs and he finds their pace slowing the closer they get to her door. When they get to her apartment the day is over. He doesn't want this to be over. Despite that somber moment, with Asgore and that talk of the war, today was a good day. Better than he had dared to hope.

He's not ready to go back to his empty house.

Bo fishes a key out of her pocket but doesn't let go of his hand. She looks at it, turning it over in her fingers, before looking up at him through thick lashes. God, she's beautiful. He wants to kiss her, but then wouldn't that be a kiss goodnight? Deacon would rather wait, to hold out as long as he can. Without thinking, he wets his lips with his tongue.

"I had an amazing time today," Bo says, her voice quiet. She smiles at him, and he feels this tightness in his chest that makes him smile back. "It's, well... It's not that late. Did you want to come in?"

Oh. Right it's not even ten yet. "Yeah, of course," he says quickly. Maybe too quickly. He feels heat creep up the sides of his neck and Bo's eyes are shining as her face brightens.

She unlocks her door and leads him inside, flipping on the light. He likes her apartment. It's soft and warm and just very... Bo. There's a fireplace in one corner and a soft, oversized couch he discovered is perfect for cuddling. There's knit blankets thrown over the back of the couch and a chair by the window, which he thinks she made herself. A basket of yarn sits next to the chair, and a variety of knitting needles. (Her grandmother taught her, she told him.)

"Did you want to watch TV or something?" he asks, thinking back to the other times she'd invited him into her apartment. He'd be content to just lay on the couch with her, her head on his chest—

"Or something," she says, still holding onto his hand and tugging him past the couch, past her small kitchen.

He blinks. Then swallows. She can't mean... Wait. Hold on. He glances over her shoulder and that is definitely her bedroom. Trying to ignore the eagerness in the back of his mind, Deacon clears his throat. "Oh," is all he manages to say.

Bo laughs, then lets him go and walks over to her bed. Leaning back against the edge of it, she starts tugging at the laces of her shoes. With a wry smile, she tosses them over by her dresser and stretches her ankles while she watches him. He's just standing there, caught between wanting very much to go over to her, to the bed, and... and do a lot of things he's trying very hard not to think about, and this plan he had to not do these things yet. To give himself time to take it slow with her, to not turn this relationship into every other poor excuse for a relationship he's had over the years.

"Usually you're a lot more talkative than this, honey," she teases, resting back on her hands. The only light is from the living room, filtering in through the door. It's enough to see her eyes shining, the way her fingers press into the blanket covering her bed.

Deacon lets out a nervous laugh, swallowing again. "I, um... I can't think of anything to say that won't make me sound like an idiot right now," he says, voice a bit higher than is strictly dignified.

Bo pushes herself away from the bed, crossing the distance of the small room to slide her arms over his shoulders, pressing herself close against his chest. His hands are at her waist without even thinking, pulling her hips against him. She gives him a heated smile as he thinks she can feel him hardening through his pants. "Then we don't have to talk," she murmurs, and her words make him ache.
She kisses him and his eyes snap shut, her fingers burying into the back of his hair and holding him. He circles her waist with one arm, his other hand raising to cup her jaw and throat, his thumb brushing the length of her ear. She makes a small, contented sound into his mouth and he does it again. Teeth find his lower lip and tugs gently before being replaced with a swipe of her tongue. He deepens their kiss and she tastes like roasted marshmallows. Like wood smoke and salt. Will the rest of her taste like the beach, too?

He angles his head away, drawing in a deep breath as his grip on her tightens, unwilling to let her go even as that little voice of reason tries to struggle in the back of his mind. Pressing his forehead against hers, he resists the way she's trying to kiss him again. "I'm... I'm trying to be different. For you," he says, his voice ragged with wanting her. "I want this to be different. More than just sex."

"It already is," she says, stroking the back of his head, grabbing his shoulder. "Isn't it?"

It is. It's unquestionably more. He's not sure what it is but it's more. He didn't realize there could be so much more. The words, he's not even sure which ones, get caught in his throat so he just nods.

"I don't want to do anything you don't want to do." Her voice is soft, and sweet, and patient, but underneath there's this heat. He doesn't want to disappoint her, and god he doesn't want to let her go.

He nods again, and she pulls back just enough so that they can look at each other. He blinks and in the dim light she's looking up at him with those big blue eyes, heavy and lidded.

"I want you, Deacon."

The way she says his name—his name, not 'honey' or 'sweet pea' or anything else—feels so intimate, so... tender. It makes his chest tight because it's just this same feeling of more he's not sure he understands. Right now he doesn't need to understand. She wants him, wants him, and he's never been so desperate to give himself to anyone as he is to her.

His kiss is hard and needy. Full of things that go unspoken, things he can't and doesn't know how to say. But all of that can wait. Right now, in this moment, he doesn't want to think. He just wants to be here with her.

Bo tugs him back towards the bed, pushing his arms away from her so she can peel off his jacket and tug on the hem of his shirt. He yanks it over his head, frustrated at the interruption of their kiss and leaning forward to chase her lips, eager now. She giggles and presses her hand to his bare chest, leaning back just enough to keep him away. Undeterred, Deacon slides his hands up the back of her sweater, fingers pressing up the curve of her waist, over the soft, short layer of wool there under her clothes. It's odd, for just a moment, but no odder than a body made of magical fire. She's just... soft. Everything about her is soft.

Raising her arms over her head, she ducks her chin as he pulls off her sweater and adds it to the pile of discarded clothing before taking a moment to just admire her. Her bra is black and lacy, and he thinks this must be one that she wanted him to see. He grins and she gives him a shy, knowing smile. Oh, she'd planned this, hadn't she? His pants feel uncomfortably snug at the realization but that can wait a little longer. Instead he slides one arm around her back, lowering himself to the soft swell of her breasts as his fingers pinch at the hooks of her bra. Soft, creamy fur gives way to smooth, delicate skin as he eases the lacy fabric away and over her arms, leaving her topless.

Bo braces herself on her arms, arching her back with a soft gasp as he takes one nipple into his mouth. Laving it with his tongue and sucking gently, she grabs at the arm he's using to hold himself up, wrapping her fingers around his wrist as her head tips back. "Deacon, please..."
breathes, tugging his forearm, pressing at the floor with her hooves as she scoots back just a little on the bed.

Grabbing her hips, he helps her the rest of the way onto the mattress. She lets out a little yelp and he freezes, jerking back to look at her face, her breast tumbling from his mouth. With an embarrassed laugh and a wince she rolls a little onto her side and reaches behind her. "Are you okay? What did I do?" he says, a little breathless.

Bo tugs down the back of her leggings, past the curve of her butt. He catches a glimpse of pink wool behind her. "Just laid on my tail funny, it's fine," she says with a quiet laugh.

"I'm sorry," he blurts out, brow furrowing, reaching behind her as she settles onto her back again. His hand is trapped under her.

They look at each other, and she starts to giggle, which soothes away the worry in his chest. Chuckling, he squeezes her ass and she lets out an appreciative noise, deep in her throat. He chases the sound, kissing her again before she breaks away to lay back on the mattress. Hooking his fingers on the waist of her leggings, he slowly peels them off of her, leaving just her lacy black underwear behind.

She runs the tip of one hoof up the side of his leg, a coy smile curving her mouth. Oh she is something, looking at him like that, nearly naked, laid out on her bed... His erection gives an aching throb and he bites his lip, letting out a soft groan as he looks at her. Her smile widens and, slowly, she raises her arms above her head, heavy breasts shifting with the movement, drawing his eyes. She's waiting.

Deacon kicks off his shoes and fumbles with the fly of his jeans, shoving them down and tugging off his socks. He almost falls over in his hurry but he catches himself on the mattress, blushing as he hears Bo's muffled laugh. Glancing up, he meets her eyes, standing there at the edge of the bed in just his boxer briefs. Then, pointedly, she cuts a path down his chest, towards his groin with her gaze. As she watches he pushes them down, his cock bobbing free as the tension from the taut fabric eases away. Stepping out of his underwear, Bo shifts a little on the bed, arching her back. It takes him a second (oh, thinking is getting a little more difficult now) to realize she's shimmying out of her own underwear, and he pulls them the rest of the way off. She crooks a finger to beckon him to her.

Climbing onto the bed beside her, he's careful to lay on his right side, to try and hide the burn scar. But she rolls over and hooks her arm over him, and her fingers press into the uneven skin. He takes gentle hold of her elbow and shifts her arm higher as she pulls away to search his face.

"It's just a scar," he says, trying to stop the questions before they start. Cupping her cheek, he trails kisses down the side of her face, under her jaw, towards the edge of the wool blocking his way to her throat. "It's ten years old, don't worry about it."

For a moment he thinks she might insist, but as he drops his hand to her breast and circles her nipple with his thumb she lets out a soft sigh, her eyes fluttering shut. There's plenty of time for that talk later. For now, he just wants this. She shifts against him, dragging her thigh along the length of him, making him shudder and rock his hips with a weak groan. Running her hand down his side, her fingers trace a path to his stomach, brushing over the dark blonde hair from his navel to his groin. His erection twitches as her hand loosely circles the base of him, and he nudges into her palm.

She gives an experimental stroke and he gasps, burying his face in her shoulder and her wool. Oh she smells sweet like she always does, but there's that smoke and salt from the beach and his heart
gives a not-unpleasant lurch in his chest. He wants her, and the second he feels her let him go and
hook her hand around his waist, pulling him, he rolls her over onto her back, shifting on top of her.

No, no, he can't yet, he wants to... to make sure she's satisfied. He can wait. He starts to shift,
kissing her before he begins a trail down her chest with his lips, over the soft fur on her stomach
and he grabs her waist and squeezes because he can't help himself. Then, settling himself between
her thighs, he listens to her shaky breath as he spreads her with his fingers and —silently relieved at
familiar territory— he licks a slow path from her entrance to her clit with his tongue. Her moan just
encourages him and he nudges her with his nose, closing his eyes as he feels her hand on his at her
waist. Deacon tangles their fingers together and holds her as her gasps and murmurs go straight to
his cock, almost painfully hard.

He could listen to her for hours. The soft, trembling intakes of breath. The moans as he reaches up
to stroke her nipple in time with his tongue. She's trembling as he alternates between long slow
swipes of his tongue and tight, focused circles, shifting forward, her knee over his shoulder.
Squeezing her hand, he lets out a pleased hum, enjoying the way her legs have started to quiver and
slowly, as he continues his rhythm, he feels her body begin to tense. She's close, he's sure she's
close. A few more minutes and he hears that sharp intake of breath and her back arches off the bed,
a ragged, warbling sound almost like a bleat coming from her throat. Oh, that was... god that was
cute. Does she do that every time? He suddenly wants to find out.

As he slows the rhythm of his tongue and gentles his movements, he waits to pull away until she
relaxes against the mattress. Pushing himself up on his hand, he nudges his hair from his forehead
and wipes his mouth with the back of his arm. But, as he looks at her, he realizes she's covering her
face with her hand, blushing dark beneath pale fur.

"Bo?" he asks, climbing over her, cupping her cheek.

She shakes her head. "Oh that was so embarrassing!" she blurts out, sounding distressed.

He swallows. "Did I do something wrong? Should I—"

"No, no, god that was..." Bo pulls her hand away from her face, letting out a satisfied noise and
closing her eyes. "Wonderful. I'm talking about that noise. I can't believe I—"

"What are you talking about? I loved that," he says, shushing her and rubbing her cheek with his
thumb. She opens her eyes to give him a funny look, like she doesn't believe him. He laughs,
smiling at her. "That was the cutest thing I've ever heard."

She sighs, giving him a weak smile and kissing him. "You're unbelievable," she says.

Deacon takes her hand and presses it into the mattress by her head. Shifting her hips, she lets out a
little groan as he presses against her entrance. "Is this okay?" he asks, wanting to make sure.
Because she still seems flustered, and even though he's aching to have her, he resists.

"Yes, Deacon," she says, reaching for his hip and urging him forward. "Please, I want you."

God, does she understand how much those words mean to him? How can she, he hasn't told her
yet, about his past. Not really. If she knew, maybe she wouldn't have pretended to reject him this
morning in the car, before the beach. She was just joking, just like he'd tried to turn it into a joke,
but even so it stung. But this, being here with her, hearing her say that she wants him, it makes
everything better. She makes things so much better.

He presses against her, wet and waiting, and she envelops him. With every part of her. Her legs
wrap around his waist and her free hand is at the back of his neck, fingers grabbing at his hair. Moaning, he lets her pull his forehead to hers, squeezing his eyes shut as he focuses on the feel of her, of that tight, hot clench of her around him.

"Oh, yes," Bo breathes, gasping. "Deacon..."

The sound of his name in her mouth is like a balm for the ache in his chest. No sweet pet names could compare to this. "Bo," he groans, ragged and rapidly coming undone as he thrusts. It's just all too much, she feels so good and she's holding onto him like he's a lifeline, and it's too much and not enough and right now this is nothing like he's ever felt before. How many times had he done this, with how many different people, without ever realizing it could be like this?

He doesn't know how many minutes pass before suddenly he crests that peak, snapping with one final buck of his hips, moaning with his release as he rocks forward and tenses. She's kissing him, cradling his cheek with her hand when he lets out a shaky breath. His eyes are burning and his throat feels tight and Deacon has to take a moment to collect himself. To force back that overwhelming feeling that threatens to swallow him whole. And Bo just waits, patiently stroking his face as he comes back down, the tension bleeding out of his muscles as he pulls himself out of her to collapse at her side.

He's not sure who reaches for who first but she tucks her head under his chin and he pulls her to his chest and they lay there together, listening to each other catch their breath.

"That was amazing," he whispers, burying his face in the wool at the top of her head.

"I want you to stay the night," she says, nuzzling his throat. "Please, don't go."

"I won't. I won't go," he says, and he hopes she can't hear the tremble of fear in his voice.
Frisk is asleep when you pull up the driveway. When Sans gets out of the car and opens the back
door they don't even stir. Their head is tipped to the side, their mouth slack, and as he reaches
across them to unbutt their seat belt and pull them into his arms, they nuzzle into his shoulder
and grab at his jacket. They're limp against him, still sound asleep, and as you circle the car to
check on him he meets your eyes and you share a tender smile.

He loves that way you look at him, that soft, gentle love that links the three of you together. It's
different from the passion you share in private, the heated glances, the strong pull of your bodies
towards each other. This is family. This is home.

Sometimes it just hits him, how he'd never ever thought he'd have this. A family of his own. He'd
never even had a chance to consider it, to think he might want it, before the accident had stripped
away huge swaths of his life. Left him trying to pull together the pieces into something
recognizable, something that was still him. He'd tried to fix it, or figure out what had gone wrong,
to decipher the clues he'd found. Then he gave up. Papyrus dragged him along to Snowdin, and
then by the time that he'd begun accepting this new life of his... The Resets started.

Then he just thought he'd never have the chance. Even if he did want it he'd never get the
opportunity. Stuck living the same handful of days over and over, for years, how could he even
entertain the idea of a future?

A future like this would have been too wonderful to even consider. And despite everything, this is
where he is. With you, a fantastic, amazing woman that in less than a month is going to be his
wife ——his wife!— and with Frisk, a great kid he only hopes thinks he's a good father.

He wishes he could remember his father. Anything about him. Was he a good man? Would he
have been the kind of dad he would strive to be himself? Did he carry him and Papyrus the way
he's carrying Frisk right now, asleep in his arms, a comforting weight on his chest and in his Soul?
There are times when he's not sure what he's doing, or if he's doing the right thing, that he wishes
he had a father to ask. Is he being too hard on Frisk? Too easy? Is he saying the wrong thing,
should he be handling a situation a different way? Is he screwing everything up?

You unlock the front door and lead him inside, and when you wrap your arms around him and rest
your chin on his shoulder, taking a quiet moment to brush hair from Frisk's face, that little voice in
his mind is silenced. He's not screwing up. At least, you don't think so and that's what matters.

"Do you want me to take them?" you ask him softly, looking from Frisk to him with a question in
those warm brown eyes.

He kisses you, because he can't resist. If he doesn't something inside him might burst. You let out a
quiet, surprised and pleased sound as he nips gently at your full bottom lip, then nuzzles into your
cheek. Pressing against him, lips against bone, you cup his face and trail slow kisses along his jaw.
He savors the feel of you, the presence of both of you draped over him, and he's content.
"I've got it," he murmurs, meeting your eyes as you ease away from him. "You go get ready for bed, I'll meet you there."

"Okay hun..." you say, your voice trailing off for a second as you can't seem to look away. Your eyes just take him in, and as Frisk gives a sleepy sigh and burrows further into his jacket your face crinkles into a sentimental smile. "I love you."

"I love you too."

You give him one last look and head up the stairs with him following after you. Frisk's room is right at the landing, next to Papyrus's, and he walks in without bothering with the light. He has the layout memorized, from hours spent helping them with homework or just talking. Reading stories, and helping them fall back asleep after a nightmare. He knows the toys and books, the drawings taped up on the walls from Asriel, the feel of the carpet under his feet and the way the moonlight paints across Frisk's bed at this time of night. Stopping next to the dresser, he shifts the kid's weight onto one arm so he can stroke their back with the other.

"C'mon kiddo, we gotta get you ready for bed," he murmurs giving them a gentle shake.

Frisk groans and their grip on him tightens as they rub their face in his jacket.

"I know. Me too. C'mon," he says, crouching and shifting his arm to let their legs hang loose, setting them on the ground.

They stand, grumbling and rubbing their face as they let him go, bleary-eyed. With practiced motions, he helps them get changed into a set of striped pajamas and picks them up to take them to bed. They're still so little, but he can't help but wonder when lifting them won't be quite so easy. You seem to think that Frisk's going to end up taller than you, which means they're definitely going to be taller than him, and he's not ready for that. But that's in the future. A future he's both looking forward to and thinks can wait just a little longer.

Tossing back the covers, Sans gets Frisk settled into bed, watching with a smile as they shift and get comfortable before blinking up at him, waiting. They reach up for him with both arms and he leans down to nuzzle their cheek, hugging each other. But when Frisk lets him go they don't roll over to go to sleep. Instead they grab his hand in both of theirs, trying to stifle a yawn.

"Wassup, kiddo? It's bed time," Sans says, but lets them pull him down to sit on the mattress.

"Was what Asgore said true?" they ask, voice barely above a whisper.

Sans blinks. "I s'pose so, but you'll have to be more specific."

"That there used to be monster and human families, like ours, but all the humans were taken away," they say, worry pinching their little face, making them look older than they ought to. "And people kept saying that the Line was like another Barrier, does that mean that somebody might come take us away too? That we won't see you again?"

His chest aches and he pushes Frisk's bangs out of their face and strokes their head with his hand. They shouldn't have to worry about this shit. About what's going to happen to their parents. They look even smaller in this big bed and it takes much of his restraint not to pick them up and carry them to bed with the two of you and wrap both of you up in his arms. To keep you safe because he's afraid of that just as much as Frisk is. That something will change and you'll be taken from him just like everything else...

"That might have been true before," he says, forcing himself to stay calm because right now he has
to make sure Frisk feels safe. They are safe. "but that's not gonna happen again. not ever. i won't let it."

"But how? If they—"

"not ever," he repeats, leaning down to press his cheek to Frisk's, holding them close. "i promise. ok? do you trust me?"

"...Yeah," they say, quiet and cowed. "Dad, I trust you."

"good, because between you and me? we'll make sure that this family stays together. no matter what." He sighs softly, pulling back and forcing a smile, ruffling their hair. "get back to sleep kiddo. you had a long day. you must be bone tired."

Frisk makes a face. "Dad."

Chuckling, Sans pinches Frisk's nose for a second before standing up. "g'night frisk. love you, for all time."

"For all time," they echo back to him, muffled by their pillow as they roll over onto their stomach.

Sans hesitates in the doorway, fighting the urge to go back to them and give them another hug before leaving the room.

You're thumbing through news sites on your phone while you wait for Sans, pleasantly surprised by the small number of negative articles you find from today about the Line opening for monsters. Most coverage was on the protesters themselves, who remained peaceful if not frustrating. As far as you can tell there weren't any incidents in the city, at least none that were reported on or communicated to Asgore. If anything bad had happened, you're sure someone would have called him.

When your bedroom door opens and Sans comes in, you're ready to tell him the good news but something in the somber look on his face silences you. Sitting up, you turn off your phone and set it aside, watching him as he shrugs out of his jacket and pulls his shirt over his head.

"Hun, what's wrong?" you ask him.

Sans leaves his clothes in the middle of the floor, which you would normally comment on but you don't, and he steps into a pair of boxers before climbing into bed beside you. You pull yourself close to his side as he holds out his arm for you, then sighs and buries his face in your hair. Fingers tracing the vertebrae in his neck, he hugs you close, leaning over you as you both sit there in silence.

"frisk asked me if the humans might come take you two away from me. told 'em no, that i'd never let that happen, but it still... i'm not nearly as worried as i used to be, but it's still there, y'know?" he says quietly, and you can't help that twist of guilt and dread in your stomach.

Because that almost happened. That very thing almost happened and you never told him. You still can't tell him. Besides, things are so much better now. "I know," you murmur, stroking his back. "Is Frisk okay?"

"yeah, i think so. i told 'em i'd never let it happen. and i won't. nothing is taking either of you away from me, i'll..." He grumbles into your hair, nuzzling down into the join in your shoulder. You feel teeth against bare skin as he tugs the strap of your tank top out of his way, nipping lightly. His
words hang in the air, an unspoken threat of action. The damage he could do with those blasters... you try not to think of Sans at his most desperate, the havoc he could cause. "I won't let it happen," he finishes.

"I'm glad you reassured Frisk. You need to listen to yourself too. Don't worry about what might happen, especially after today," you say, tipping your head to the side, closing your eyes as he grazes a path up your throat. Your breath hitches. "Today was good—oh, that feels good... Um, Sans, I'm trying to... Today was a good day, we got to see the ocean and, mmm... The protesters never did anything to hurt anyo—oh, god okay..."

Sans chuckles, a low rumble you can feel through your body. He gets like this when he's worried, especially about you. It's like he can't be close enough, can't get enough of you. It worries you sometimes and you just wish that maybe he'd talk to you instead but this is that same old fear. One that you know won't just go away. What could you even say to truly convince him that there's no way that anyone or anything could do anything to you and Frisk? You're not even sure you'd believe it, because all it takes is a change in opinion, or the wrong secret being spilled for this uncertain peace to come crashing down around you. How would the government react to the real truth of how the Barrier fell?

So instead of words, you show him that you're here, with him, and as long as you can help it you're not going anywhere.
It's almost midnight. Deacon knows he ought to get some sleep because he has to get up extra early to go home and get ready for work, but Bo is still wide awake, sitting back on her heels and tracing her fingers along his back. He lays there on his stomach, a pillow bunched between his arms, under his head, and he watches the curious look on her face. He could just watch her forever; the tiny little changes in her expression, the way her eyes follow her hands.

Affection stirs in his chest and there's that feeling again. That sense of more that scares the shit out of him. What the hell is he doing? Of all the times that he could decide to have a change of heart, to try and let himself have people stay in his life, why now? He's being so stupid. So stupid and foolish and every other nasty thing Grant said to try and convince him that this was a mistake.

Oh god, this is a mistake.

Not even because of all the things Grant said, but because she's going to hurt him. He's going to let her in, get attached, and right when he thinks he's safe she's going to push him away. Or she'll see him for who he really is, hurt and fragile and so fucking needy—when did he get so goddamn needy?—and decide that this isn't what she wants. And why should she have to deal with his mess, to pick up his pieces? If he keeps letting this go further, how can he handle that rejection?

He should leave. Everything inside of him is just yelling at him to run, just like he always does. It's safer that way.

Bo's fingers press into the tensed muscles in his back and he buries his face in the pillow, willing himself to relax. He's not going to run again. He won't, he won't. He told her that he'd stay and he's going to keep his word. To her, and to himself. This is going to be different, because as overwhelmed and confused and scared as he feels, he cares about her. He's happy when he's with her, when he's talking to her. A happiness that only his friendship with you can compare to. This is what he was missing before. He's starting to discover it, and how can he just let it go?

He can't. He won't.

He'll keep the ugly parts, the broken parts, the fragile parts tucked away like he always has and then she won't have a reason to reject him. He'll be happy, and charming, and funny, those things that drew her to him in the first place. He'll be that person, if it means that she'll keep wanting him.

Turning his head to look at her again, Deacon's sure that his expression is suitably contented as Bo meets his eyes, smiling at him before returning her attention to his back. Her fingers trail down to his side, to the uneven scar that reaches his bottom most ribs and goes all the way to his hip. It takes up maybe a fifth of his back, and as she touches it the smile fades a little from her face.

"Can I ask about this now? I know you didn't want to talk about it before..." she trails off, looking uncertain.
"I didn't think that it was the sexiest thing we could be talking about in the moment," he teases, shoving down the lingering fear coiled in his chest, latching onto that happiness he feels with her instead. He's not faking that, not lying, just... burying the rest deep down where it can't touch him. Or her.

Her smile is back, just a little. Good, he just wants her to smile, to not worry about him. "Yes, well, I guess that's true," she admits, spreading her fingers and pressing her hand over the scar. Her touch is gentle, but firm. "Does it bother you?"

Deacon rolls onto his left side, freeing an arm from around the pillow and reaching back to cover her hand with his. He presses them both over the raised, patchy skin, trying to show her she doesn't need to be careful. "No, it's fine. It's a little numb in places, but it doesn't hurt or anything," he says, squeezing her hand and smirking. "You don't have to worry about being too rough with me, you know, like in the throes of passion."

Giggling, she frees her hand and shoves his shoulder, pushing him over onto his back. She scoots closer, her thigh pressed against the length of his side, her knee in his armpit. He drapes his arm up her leg, fingers tracing over her cream-colored wool that gets thinner the higher he goes. He wonders, vaguely, if the pink on her head and tail is dyed that way, since the rest of her is so pale. As he teases up the inside of her leg, he's pleased to see her blush, squirming just a little as she runs her hand over his chest. Oh, that feels good. Just having her close, touching him; he just wants her to keep touching him.

"So, how did it happen?" she asks, though she sounds a little distracted. Probably because his fingers are stroking the fur beneath her belly.

He'd rather pull her on top of him, to grab her hips and press her down onto his— Bo asked him a question. He ought to answer that shouldn't he? He blinks and tries to ignore the fact that he's hard again, wondering if she notices. "Camping accident. Tripped and fell onto the fire while one of my foster parents was cooking some bacon, and let me tell you, they are not kidding about grease fires."

Bo's face crinkles with sympathy and she strokes his stomach, and it's all he can do not to rock his hips towards her hand. He doesn't care about the scar, or her concern. That was ages ago, who cares about that? "What's a foster parent?" she asks and that snaps him out of his lust-muddled head. Oh, she caught that didn't she?

Deacon swallows, looking up at her from where he's laying. He really ought to tell her. This was bound to come up eventually, and like he told you, it's not exactly a secret... Sitting up, he rests his hand on her knee, tracing the curve of it with his thumb and he tells her. He explains the details with more casualness than he managed with you, maintaining a certain level of detachment as if he were giving a history lesson. Well, he supposes, technically, he is. But he tells her what he told you, about his birth mother, and his foster families. About Grant adopting him and that he doesn't consider him a father.

She doesn't say anything, doesn't interrupt. She just watches him, taking it all in as he speaks, and when he finishes with a shrug and a smile Bo takes his face in her hands and she kisses him. It starts gentle and tender, but she doesn't let him go, not until she deepens their kiss and leaves him flushed and breathless, wanting more. What was that, he wonders as she pulls away and searches his face, holding him back as he tries to chase after her lips.

"You're spending Christmas with me and my family," she says, and her tone leaves no room for complaint. Right now, he's not sure he could argue with her even if he wanted to. "I have more than enough to compensate for you not having one."
He's never met a girlfriend's family before. And the way she's talking it sounds like this is going to be more than parents. Maybe he should be concerned, or intimidated, but right now he just... he just wants her to let him kiss her again. Smiling, he lets out a breathy laugh. "Sure, that's fine with me," he says, and he lets out a satisfied groan as she stops resisting and he claims her mouth with his.

Deacon will do whatever she wants, meet whoever she wants, be the person she wants, so long as it makes her stay.

You and Leveretta are standing at the back of her class, waiting for Deacon to show up and the bell to ring. There's still a few minutes left so you're just keeping an eye on the kids, half listening as they talk —very loudly— about their weekends and their trips past the Line. Leaning against the wall, you take a sip of your coffee and glance over at the hare monster, watching her nose twitch as she rolls her own drink between her hands.

"So you guys had a good time at the beach?" Leveretta asks, raising a brow and taking a drink.

"Yeah, it was nice and quiet. No one bothered us," you say, watching her. "How about you? Did you decide to go out?"

She nods, looking down at her mug for a second before meeting your eyes again. "My cousin has a van, so a bunch of us went out. Just parked downtown and walked around, got some food. Most people were nice, a few took pictures," she says, the corner of her mouth quirking into a smile. But it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "We had a good time, but we had to tell off some jerks who were messing with a vulkin." She shakes her head, sighing. "And we heard that a pair of moldsmals had a hard time getting service at a restaurant too. It's like the more human we look, the easier it is for humans to accept us. It's not exactly fair, is it?"

"No, it's not," you agree, but you're not surprised. It's just human nature, isn't it? To find it easier to handle things that seem familiar. "Maybe it'll get easier once they have more time to get used to everyone."

Leveretta shrugs, and sips at her coffee. "I don't see why it's so difficult in the first place. What's so hard about just being polite or kind?"

"I ask myself that all the time," you say, with no small amount of bitterness.

The bell rings and a few moments later the classroom door opens, revealing a harried-looking Deacon. His clothes and hair are in order but he's got dark circles under his eyes and he's got a paper cup of what you can only guess is coffee in one hand. He greets the class, a little more subdued than usual, and when you catch his eye he gives you a small smirk in response to your arched eyebrow. Oh, did he and Bo...?

Later, at lunch, you're giving him a scrutinizing look, glad that he at least looks a little more energetic by this point in the day, despite the yawn he stifles behind his hand. He just blinks innocently, though you're sure he knows full well what you must be thinking.

"Well?" you finally press, pulling your lunch out of your bag.

Deacon just smiles, stirring his noodles with a pair of chopsticks. "'Well' what?"


He snorts, chuckling as the corner of his mouth twitches. "Aren't you being nosy today?"
"Oh come on!" you blurt out, pointing at him with a spoon, holding an applesauce cup in your other hand. "You're always telling me everything whether I want to hear it or not."

"It sounds to me like you're finally admitting that you like my... how did you put it? My 'oversharing'?" Oh he's just being infuriating now, with that stupid grin on his stupid pretty face.

"Deacon," you say, and his shoulders start shaking with laughter.

"Okay, okay!" he says, doing a poor job of placating you as he rubs his eye with the back of his hand. "I was with Bo last night."

"And...?"

"And... We... um..." His expression falters, his smile fading, and color creeps up the sides of his neck. Giving you a suddenly shy look, he pokes at his lunch with his chopsticks, swirling the noodles in their cup. "And we slept together. Figuratively and literally."

You grin, holding back a happy sound as you try to contain your joy. It just makes him blush darker, shaking his head but looking pleased at your reaction. "How was it? The two of you, the whole evening, you wouldn't be acting so coy if it didn't go well, come on!"

He chuckles, slurping up a big bite of his lunch as he makes you wait. "I, um... You're friends with her, this feels weird!" he blurs out, shaking his head. "And this isn't just... this isn't like what happened with Grillby this is... She's not just some girl, she's my girlfriend."

"Oh god, this is so sweet, look at you," you tease, feeling giddy with how happy you are for him. "You're in so deep, aren't you?"

He blinks, hesitating, and his smile falters a little bit. Then he gives a weak laugh, shaking his head. "I just think that maybe it might be... inappropriate to share those intimate details considering the circumstances," he says pointedly. You snort, raising an eyebrow in disbelief, and he relents. "Okay fine. It was amazing, thank you very much. Both times." He smirks and you laugh. "I uh, ended up telling her about my personal history and she sort of decided I'd be spending Christmas with her and her family out of pity."

"I'm sure it wasn't pity," you say, nudging his shin under the table with your foot. "It sounds like she cares about you, you dork."

He rolls his eyes. "So I guess I won't be joining you and yours for Christmas. I'll be with a herd of sheep."

"So if the two of you were... intimate, then does that mean she saw that scar on your back?"

"Oh come on, Hope. Just say sex," he chides, rolling his eyes. "And yes. So I got to have that fun talk."

You finish off the last of your applesauce and reach for your sandwich, using it to point at him. "You never told me about that. I saw it but you never told me what happened."


"Well when you put it like that," you say, shaking your head and pursing your lips.

"What? It's not like it's a fun story. I tripped over some firewood and ended up almost ass-first in a frying pan," he says, shrugging. "It healed, now I've got this ugly scar, but somehow I managed to
"Fine, fine. I guess I was just expecting something more... exciting?" you admit, feeling a little chastised. "Forget it. I know it must not have been fun for you."

"It's just not a big deal," he says, slurping up more noodles. "Happened when I was fourteen."

"So Grant used to take you camping?" you ask, idly curious.

He blinks. "Yeah, sometimes. He tried to do what whole... 'dad' thing on occasion. It's like he read it in a magazine: 'Here's what you do to seem like a dad. Go camping, brave the wild outdoors, go fishing. Man stuff. Etcetera.'" Deacon rolls his eyes and waves his words away with his hand. "Clearly you can see how well that turned out."

"Clearly," you echo back to him with the same level of bitterness. You wish you could... do something to that jerk. To make up for Deacon's shitty childhood.

Your phone starts to buzz in your pocket, which is strange because no one ever calls you while you're at work. For a moment you wonder if something might be wrong, until you see the name on the caller ID: Mom. Your stomach gives an uncomfortable lurch and you set it on the table, glaring at it as you refuse to answer. Crossing your arms over your chest, you just watch as the vibration makes it shift slightly across the surface.

"Oh," Deacon says as he leans over to look at the screen, then glances up at your face. "Just reject the call."

You shake your head. "I don't want her to even think I saw it ring. I'll just... let it go to voicemail. If it's important she can leave a message or something..."

He reaches out and touches your shoulder, eliciting a small smile from you at the comforting gesture. His brow furrows and he rubs his thumb over the fabric of your blouse. The phone stops buzzing. "If she does you don't have to listen to it. You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

Sighing, you shrug, swallowing down the lump in your throat. Deacon doesn't understand, through no fault of his own. He can't understand that it's just not that easy. You watch, and feel a nauseating twist in your gut as a notification of a voicemail pops up on the screen.
It's just you and Sans tonight for dinner. Frisk is with Toriel and Asriel, and Papyrus is with Mettaton, so your fiancé said he'd stop by Grillby's on his way home from the lab to get food. So without even cooking to distract you, all you can do is wait.

Normally you'd be savoring this quiet time alone in the house, but right now, with only your thoughts for company, you can't stand it. You debate turning on the TV but you can't think of anything you'd want to watch. You look at the row of bookshelves and there's nothing you want to read. Instead, you just sit there on the couch, your eyes drawn to your phone as it sits silently on the coffee table.

Deacon offered to listen to the voicemail for you, to tell you if there was anything in it you needed to hear. But as much as you care about and trust Deacon, it didn't feel right that he be the one to do that for you. You promised that you would have Sans listen to it instead. The only problem with that plan is this horrible waiting.

Twice you come close to listening to the message yourself. You have your phone to your ear, the automated recording for your mailbox is playing, listing off your options before you catch yourself and hang up. Setting it back down on the table, you flip it over so your screen is face down, hiding the blinking notification light. What does she want? To demand you see her for Christmas? To yell at you for keeping her grandchild away from her? To make you feel even worse than you already do, because that guilt from Thanksgiving still hasn't left. She's your mother, and as much as you wish it wasn't true, that you could just tear yourself away from her, you feel this... obligation. A responsibility to be available, just in case.

Just in case of what? An emergency? If something happened, if you got a call because she was sick and needed you, or if she was in danger, would you go? Would you help her? You would, you know that you would. She doesn't have anyone else. She was an only child, and your grandparents died before you were born. After your dad died, she was alone. Alone with a five year old that people didn't believe was hers.

You remember the rude comments, asking if you were adopted. Or wondering if your father ran out on the two of you. It wasn't until you were older that you understood why people thought it was appropriate to ask this white woman about her brown daughter. That you'd been confronted with racism since before you ever knew what the word meant.

Kim had protected you, defended you as best she could. You'll never forget the times she had turned her barbed tongue on people who doubted your father's presence in your life just because of his race. You remember the times when she used to be strong for you. But then time went on and the world wore her down and her cruel words turned on you and she wasn't strong anymore. She started to drink and her words were joined by raised hands.

You just can't forget the woman she was because of the woman she became. It's why you can't bring yourself to change her name in your phone, why she's still listed under 'Mom'. Because the
person who used to love you is still in her somewhere, and you just miss her so much.

The front door opens and you jump, dropping your phone back on the coffee table. When had you picked it up again? And why do you feel like you almost got caught doing something wrong?

"babe?" Sans calls out to the house, and you hear him shuffling in the foyer.

"I'm in the living room," you answer. You force yourself to sit back and relax into the couch, crossing your legs and folding your hands in your lap.

He appears in the doorway, in his track shorts and black t-shirt, having left his jacket in the hall. He's got a plastic bag in one hand, inside which are a pair of familiar takeout boxes. Smiling, he crosses the room and leans down to nuzzle your cheek before flopping down onto the couch next to you.

"talked to grillby about coming to our rite on the first. told him that deacon'll be there but he doesn't mind. said he'd come. i was probably worried for nothing," Sans says, handing you your dinner. He seems preoccupied, which explains why he doesn't immediately sense there's something bothering you. Normally he catches these things a lot faster.

"I can't imagine Grillby would let Deacon get in the way of being there for you," you say. Your mother can wait. For now you just want to enjoy your dinner and some time with Sans. "He's your friend."

"yeah, that's what he said, too." He grins and takes a big bite of his burger. "have you talked to mettaton about clothes yet? as much as i hate to admit it, he did a damn good job dressing us up before."

You shake your head as you chew and hurry to swallow. "Not yet. I've been meaning to."

Talk of your upcoming wedding keeps you distracted as you eat. There isn't much to plan, considering that you're keeping it a small affair and Toriel insists on handling much of the preparations. At this point it seems like you're just expected to dress nice and show up. Which is fine by you, big events were never exactly your thing anyway.

As you finish up dinner, you know you can't put it off any longer. "So..." you begin, hesitating as you wait for Sans to meet your eyes. He leans back against the couch and drapes his arm around your shoulders. "My mom called me at lunch today."

His reaction is immediate and visceral. The lights in his eyes search your face and he reaches for your hand, his jaw and his whole body going tense beside you. "what did she want? are you ok?"

You swallow, but his concern makes you feel a little better. Because no matter what at least you have him here with you. "I don't know what she wants. I didn't answer. She left a voicemail but I haven't listened to it. I thought you might check it for me."

"why don't you just delete it?" he asks gently, rubbing your fingers with his thumb.

"What if it's something serious? I can't... I just want to know," you mumble, looking away.

There's a pause and then Sans squeezes your hand before letting you go to reach for your phone. He gives you a small, resigned sigh before keying in to your voicemail and standing up from the couch. You watch as he crosses his arm over his chest, frowning as he listens. He's far enough away that you can't hear the call, so all you have to go by is the changes in his expression. The way his frown deepens, and how his mouth shifts as if he were curling a lip into something like a sneer.
Your stomach twists into knots and you chew on the inside of your lip, waiting.

Finally, after about a minute, he lowers the phone and ends the call, shaking his head. "she tried to apologize for what she did to you on thanksgiving," he says, walking back over to you and handing you your phone. Sans sits down and scoffs. "and said she wanted to talk to you. she actually thinks that now that the line is open both ways you'd be willing to go see her. now that i can go with you.

You look down at the dark screen in your hands, unsure of what to think or how to feel. Sans seems certain that you don't care about what she has to say, but...

There's a warm, smooth hand on your cheek and with gentle pressure he tilts your head to look at him. "she doesn't deserve your forgiveness," he says, stroking his thumb beneath your eye.

You bite your lip, glancing away. "If she wants to apologize, shouldn't I hear her out?"

"hope," he says, a hint of exasperation in his voice. "she tried to apologize. we've done this already. we went to see her five months ago and she showed you she wasn't worth it."

"I know..."

His hand on your face tenses. "you need to cut her out of your life, block her number—"

"I can't," you say. There's an ache in your chest you just wish would go away. If only it was that easy, to just rip out the parts that hurt. "Sans, she's still my mother."

"what she did was bad enough to have you take frisk and run. you went up a mountain where people disappear. she's the reason you came to ebott, and the reason frisk ever fell into the underground in the first place!" He's gritting his teeth, frustration with you and anger at Kim rising beneath the surface. Dropping his hand from your face, he balls it into a fist as his pupils turn small and sharp.

"Which means that she's the reason I met you. The reason you even made it to the surface at all."

"don't. don't try to turn what she did into something good," he bites out, leaning back and giving you an anguished look.

"It's the only thing I can do, Sans," you mumble, sighing.

"babe, i don't want you to give her the chance to hurt you again, please."

It's tempting. So tempting to just listen to Sans, to let him protect you and keep you safe like he wants. But it's not that simple. It's never been that simple. Your eyes swim with tears and you watch his expression soften. "But what if that means giving up the chance to get my mother back? I can't spend the rest of my life wondering if I made the right choice. I need to take that risk, but—"

Your voice catches and you wipe at your face as you start to cry. "But I need you to help me. Sans, I need you on my side."

He searches your face and for a second you're scared he's going to refuse. To tell you that you're being an idiot and that you should just do as he says. But he sighs and gathers you up into his arms, holding you close. "i'm always gonna be on your side, babe. i've got you."

It takes you almost half an hour to gather your courage, to compose yourself to listen to your mother's voicemail. She sounds so sincere, so honestly remorseful you hope you're making the right choice. That maybe, if you just talk to her on your terms that maybe you can salvage some kind of
relationship with this woman. You can let her back into your life. Into Frisk's life.

Sans has his arm around your shoulders, holding you, supporting you as you stare at her number in your contacts list. You know he wants you to change your mind but isn't pushing one way or the other. Whatever you decide, he'll be there. It helps you when you finally hit the call button and raise your phone to your ear, looking at this wonderful man who loves you as he gives you a small squeeze. He might think you're making the wrong decision, but he's still letting you make it yourself. He won't take that away from you.

Your heart is pounding in your chest and you swallow through the tightness in your throat as the phone rings. For a moment you think you'll be spared this conversation for now, even as you dread the idea of having to try again later. But on the fourth ring the call connects.

"Hello?" Kim says, and you think you hear the television in the background.

"Hey, it's me," you say, your voice strained. Sans is rubbing between your shoulders. "I... got your message."

"Oh, sweetheart!" she says, and the actual, real happiness in her voice makes your heart ache. She must turn the TV off because all of a sudden it sounds quieter on her end. "I wasn't sure if you would call me back, but I thought I should try... Hope I just—"

"Mother," you cut in, scrambling for some kind of control of this conversation. You can't let her take it from you, not right now. "Before I agree to anything, to seeing you or... or forgiving you, I just need to know. Why did you even call me on Thanksgiving? Just to... make me feel guilty?"

"Hope—"

"No! You're going to let me finish!" you snap, and Sans tightens his hold on you. He gives you a little nod and a weak smile, encouraging you. "You never even asked me to come see you on Thanksgiving. Or gave me any sign you wanted to come see me. You don't get to just call me out of the blue to try and ruin my holiday with my family out of spite!"

There's a beat of silence where you think she's gathering the strength to yell at you. Or she's going to hang up. It goes on long enough that you start to feel worried, or that maybe she didn't hear you.

"...I know," Kim says quietly, and you think that's the last thing you were really expecting. "There's nothing I can say that'll make what I did right. I've got no excuse aside from being lonely, and having one too many drinks because of it. You know what that stuff does to me."

You rub your cheek, bowing your head and cradling it in your hand. "When's the last time you drank?"

"Thanksgiving. I've been trying to be better. Sweetheart I just want to see you and Frisk so bad, I miss you both so much. You're all I have." You're trembling, trying your hardest not to let her know how much she's affecting you. How hard you're hoping that she's actually wanting to change.

"Please. We can meet somewhere for lunch, anywhere you want. Out in public if that's easier for you. You can bring your fiancé, in fact I hope you do. I'd like to meet him properly, this time."

Looking up at Sans, he's just watching you. Waiting for your decision. You lean forward against him, resting your forehead on his clavicle. He wraps his arms around you and you feel his chin rest on top of you.

"Are you working on Saturday?" you ask, a twist of anticipation making you squirm.
"I can get the time off," Kim says, and you can hear the excitement in her voice. You almost smile. Almost.

"I want to go to Irene's for lunch," you say. Irene's is the restaurant you used to work at, a small family-owned place run by an acquaintance of Kim's. "I still haven't gone by to say hi since I got back."

"I'm sure they'll be excited to see you. I am too."

"Okay. I have to go, so we'll see you on Saturday."

"All right. I'll see you then. I love you."

You swallow, your eyes stinging. "I love you, too," you manage to say, then hang up the phone before drawing in a shuddering breath.

Sans pulls you closer to him, into his lap as you wrap your arms around his chest and fight back the tears threatening to spill over. You're still shaking, even as he tries to soothe you with one hand rubbing up and down your spine. "you did great, babe. you said what you needed to say and you're meeting on your terms. you did great."

"Why is this so hard?" you blurt out, hugging him tight.

He lets out a soft sigh, but doesn't answer.
"This is stupid."

"Undyne—"

Undyne smacks her hand on the table in the break room, fixing you with a narrowed, yellow eye. You flinch back at the gesture and Deacon leans forward, closer to you as he turns to the fish monster. She just bares her teeth. "Hope you're being STUPID."

"Hey," Deacon cuts in, voice laced with warning. "She's already made her decision—"

"And it's a STUPID one—"

"And being rude isn't helping anyone," he finishes, resting his arm on the table.

"Is this some kind of human thing? Just hurting each other all the time and letting them stick around anyway?" she says, lip curling as she shakes her head. "You have a new family, new friends, a new LIFE! You don't NEED any of that stuff from before!"

"Undyne, she's my mother. I have to try," you say softly, crossing your arms over your chest and hugging yourself. "Aside from Frisk, we're the only blood family we have left."

"Blood family isn't everything. Look at me and Deacon; we don't have any and we're just fine," she says, jerking a thumb at your friend.

You and Deacon share a look. Sure 'just fine' might be applicable, but he's not without his own troubles thanks to his lack of parents. But then again, the same could be said of you from having your mother in your life. The both of you have damaged Souls, after all.

"It's not that simple," is all you can say.

"Sure it is," Undyne presses, balling her hand into a fist. "Every time you talk to her you end up unhappy. So don't talk to her anymore. Simple."

"Look, I know you're just trying to help," you say, doing your best to keep your voice even. "But if Sans wasn't able to change my mind, what makes you think you can?"

"Sans goes soft on you, I don't," she says, hunching forward over the table and fixing you with a stern look. "This is tough love."

"There's a difference between being 'soft' on someone and respecting their decisions," you say curtly.

"And 'tough love' is just an excuse for being mean," Deacon says, his jaw tensing.

Undyne raises a brow. "Tch! I'm not being MEAN!"
You look down at the table, swallowing. "You just called me stupid, like, a minute ago," you mutter.

"No, I said you were BEING stupid," she says, but some of the edge has softened from her voice. "At least let me go with you. I'll make sure she doesn't do anything to you OR Frisk."

Shaking your head, you bite your lip. "This isn't a problem you can just...fight. I appreciate what you're trying to do, Undyne, but you can't help with this."

"Then why did you even bother telling me?" Letting out a ragged sigh, she pushes up from the table. "You know what, forget it. You do what you need to do, but don't say I didn't warn you."

"Fine, I won't." You rest your head in your hand as Undyne hesitates, then storms out of the room. The sound of the door being yanked shut (not slammed at least, but still too loud) makes you flinch. There's a hand on your shoulder and you look over at Deacon, meeting his eyes as he searches your face. "You agree with her, don't you?"

"She was being rude, and inconsiderate," Deacon says, brow furrowing.

"You agree with her," you repeat, folding your arms on the table and pressing your forehead against them, shoulders hunched.

"I—" He lets out a small, frustrated noise as his phone starts to buzz. You hear him shift to reach into his pocket, and answer the call. "Hello? Hey Bo," he says, his voice going tender. You steal a peek at him, turning your head just enough to uncover one of your eyes. He looks... god he looks so happy, at least until his smile starts to fade. "No, now really isn't a good time. Do you want me to come see you at work after I get off? Are you sure? I don't mind, it's not— No, I want to, if you want me to." He's smiling again. "Okay. Okay I'll see you later."

Deacon hangs up and he catches you looking, the tips of his ears going pink. Doing his best to wipe the remains of his smile off his face, he clears his throat. "Sorry."

Picking your head up, you rest your chin on your forearms with a sigh. "No, I'm sorry you didn't get a chance to talk to her," you say.

"You need me right now, it's okay," he says, shoving his phone back in his pocket. "And to answer your question: I don't agree with Undyne, but I also know that if I had to make that choice, I'd just cut ties. But what's right for me isn't what's necessarily right for you."

"But you understand, don't you? I mean, you obviously don't have the best relationship with Grant, but you still keep him in your life," you say. You just want someone to tell you you're not making a huge mistake. "There has to be a reason."

Deacon's face scrunches up and he looks away, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's... complicated."

"Exactly," you blurt out, picking yourself off the table and leaning back in your chair. "Why does everyone think it's so easy?"

"Because on one hand it is. Or at least, it should be." Your expression crumbles and he reaches for your hand, the concern on his face taking the sting out of his words. "Hope, I saw you on Thanksgiving. You told me what she did to you. To Frisk. Do you honestly think any of us would want you to put yourself back in a situation to be hurt like that again?"

You look down at your hands as he squeezes yours. "No," you admit with a sigh.
"Look, I don't get lots of chances to be the supportive friend, because usually you're the one taking care of me and my mess," he says, and you can't help but give a weak laugh. Meeting his eyes, he's smiling at you. "So here's me, being the supportive friend. There aren't many people in my life I worry about, but you're definitely one of them. I mean, you don't need my help because you've got Sans, but—"

"Do you not need me because you've got Bo?" you ask, fixing him with a serious look.

He blinks. "No, of course not."

"Then don't say I don't need you because I've got Sans. Best friends," you say, raising a brow.

Deacon chuckles, hanging his head and nodding. "Okay, okay. Best friends, right. Well then, let me make a correction: I know that Sans is your first line of defense, but I'm here if you need my help. With anything. Like, do you need me to go talk to Undyne? Because, uh, she might be really scary, but as long as she doesn't use her magic I'm still better at aikido than her. I can like... flip her onto the ground or something."

You snort, giggling at the thought. Shaking your head, you give Deacon's hand one last squeeze before pulling away, feeling better for having talked with him. "No, she's just... worried in her own way. Did I tell you what she did when Sans and I got into our first fight?"

"You mean the time that she started yelling at him and probably would have punched him if he hadn't confessed his love for you in the least tactful way imaginable?" Deacon grins, resting his chin in his hands and batting his eyes at you. "No you haven't, please tell me in exhaustive detail. I'm sure I'll love it and I swear I won't ever use this story against Sans ever in the future. Ever."

"Don't make me regret telling you things, Deacon," you say, squinting at him.

"Now, why would you ever think that?"

Frisk and Asriel's clubhouse is much nicer, now that they have Sans's old, spare tarp that they got from him before Halloween. It took a lot of work for the two of them to get it all set up, stretched over the top of the irregular ring of boulders, and then held down by more rocks they had to find and bring back themselves. Thankfully Asriel is so strong, he could carry twice as much as Frisk. The center of the tarp is starting to sag under the weight of a pile of fallen leaves, and Frisk is starting to wonder if their roof is going to hold up against the coming snow. Well, they guess they'll worry about that later. Right now, there's other, worse things they have to deal with.

Pressing their sleeve-covered hands over their mouth, Frisk stares at the little fire that Asriel is coaxing outside the entrance of their clubhouse. They made a little fire pit yesterday, inspired by the trip to the beach. After a couple prods with his clawed fingers, Asriel lets out a little grumble and lets the wood go out. It was giving off more smoke than heat, hissing angrily as he tried and tried to get it to catch fire.

"I think it's too wet or something," Asriel says, frowning at the little bundle of sticks now steaming and smoking. When Frisk doesn't answer he looks up, green eyes meeting theirs. He touches his chest absently, a little wrinkle forming between his brows. "Frisk, what's wrong? You've been worried all day, I can feel it."

Frisk wrinkles their nose, hiding their face behind their hands. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Come on, you can tell me anything," he says. He gets up from his spot beside the fire pit and walks over to Frisk, taking their wrists and pulling.
Frisk shakes their head, fighting his grip and leaning backwards. "Asriel, stop!" they protest, voice muffled.

But Asriel doesn't stop, and Frisk doesn't give in, and after a brief struggle they pull out of his grip and fall backwards off the rock they were sitting on. Sudden, sharp pain bursts between their shoulders. With a yelp, Frisk rolls onto their side, reaching behind them for the stick that jabbed them in the back. Hissing between their teeth as tears prick their eyes, they grab it and fling it away with a rush of anger as they push themselves to their feet.

"Are you okay?" Asriel asks, his worry plain enough for Frisk to feel through their connection.

But it's not enough to temper the awful swell of frustration in their chest. "I told you to stop!" they blurt out, scrubbing angrily at their eyes. Their back stings, and they try to reach back to rub it but they can't quite manage. It just makes it worse.

"I'm sorry," he says, reaching for Frisk but they pull away. His face crumples and he drops his hands. "I just want to help.

"Well you can't help! Just leave me alone!" They shoot Asriel a nasty look, doing their best to ignore the feel of his shock in their chest. Stomping into the shadows of the clubhouse, Frisk cuts a path to the very furthest spot, sitting down on the ground and leaning sideways against one of the big granite boulders. They tuck their knees up to their chin, wrapping their arms around their legs and doing their best not to cry.

They know Asriel can feel it. How angry and sad and confused they feel. They're not upset at him, not really (not ever). And now, feeling the prickling of Asriel's hurt on the back of their neck, they feel guilty too. Tears sting at their eyes and they sniff loudly, turning their head away as their best friend blocks the door to the clubhouse, and the light from outside. The padding of his soft feet on the dirt is almost silent as he walks to them and kneels down beside them.

It's silent for a long moment, as Frisk sniffles and tries to hide the evidence of their crying, even though they know Asriel can tell. They wish he would do something, and finally he does. He leans forward and wraps his arms around them, resting his chin on top of their head.

"I'm sorry," Frisk says. "I was being mean."

"It's okay. I should have listened," he says, and Frisk leans against him. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Mom is taking us past the Line to go see my grandmother," they finally admit, reaching to grab Asriel's arm as it's wrapped around them.

"Her mom? The one that you ran away from?"

Frisk nods.

"And you don't want to go?"

"I don't know. I.. kinda miss her. I mean, I thought... I thought she was my mom for the longest time. Sometimes she was mean, or would leave us alone at the house without telling us how long she'd be gone. But she was nice too, and I think that she loves us." Frisk shakes their head, burrowing their face into their knees. "But I'm scared, and I know Mom is scared too. And I don't think Dad wants to see her either, last time she was rude to him and everyone fought."

"Can't you tell your mom you don't want to go?" Asriel asks, and they can feel his confusion.
"But I don't know if I don't wanna go. That's the problem," they say with a sigh.

They both fall quiet, sitting there in their little clubhouse. After a moment, Asriel speaks up again. "You won't be alone. You've dealt with scarier stuff than her by yourself, like... like Flowey. And Dad. And Mettaton. And Undyne..."

Frisk picks their head up off their knees, giving Asriel a sideways smile as he pulls away. "When you say it like that, I guess it's silly to be scared of one normal human lady."

"And if things go bad, you can always Load. I'm sure Sans would understand." Asriel gives them a weak grin in return, resting his hands on his knees as Frisk starts to unwrap themselves from the ball they're in.

"But I'd still remember," they say quietly, their smile fading a little. "I'd still remember whatever bad thing she did."

"We remember lots of bad things that were undone," he says, running one long ear through his fingers. "And we're still okay now."
Irene's Bar and Grill is a little hole in the wall place, stuck on the end of a strip mall. It's nothing to write home about, but the food is decent and it's popular with the locals. Just about everyone in your old neighborhood at least knew of Irene's, even if they'd never been there.

Everything is just the way you remember it. The old, wooden furniture, the giant fish tank right as you come in. Even the neglected gumball machine, with the turn crank that takes quarters. As you walk in with Sans and Frisk, glancing around anxiously for sign of Kim even though you didn't see her car in the parking lot, you catch sight of a few familiar faces. Behind the bar, waiting tables, it looks like most of the staff is still the same as when you left. The host's station is empty, but as you stand there, waiting, a distracted young woman walks towards the front, straightening her ponytail.

"Hey, sorry about your wait, how— oh!" she yelps, jumping back as she finally looks at the three of you, her eyes wide and fixed on Sans. "Oh Jesus, you scared me. I haven't— oh that must be rude, I'm so sorry, I uh..." She's gone as white as a sheet, frozen in place.

Sans looks at you, arching a brow, and you decide to take pity on the girl. Besides, you know her, even if she's too busy freaking out to notice you. "Becca, it's fine. How are you doing?" you ask, shifting yourself to stand in front of Sans, catching her attention.

Her eyes widen even more, somehow. "Oh my god, Hope! Holy shit, I— oh, Frisk, sweetie I'm sorry I shouldn't be cussing, shoot, shoot. Um." Becca lets out a slightly manic laugh, running her hand over her pulled back hair, giving you a desperate look. Taking in a deep breath, she gives you a forced smile. "Hope. It is so good to see you."

You smile back, trying to be as reassuring as you can. "It's good to see you too. Is Irene here today?"

"Yeah, she's in the back. Do you want me to go get her for you, I'm sure she'd love to see you!" she blurts out, maybe a little too quickly. Like she's desperate to get away. But Becca was always a bit... high strung.

"No, you don't have to do that now, really. We're actually here for lunch, my mom is supposed to be meeting us," you say, gripping the strap of your purse a little too tight. You feel a hand on the small of your back and you glance at Sans as he moves a little closer to your side. "Becca, this is Sans, my fiancé." There's this uncomfortable tension in your chest as you say the words, not shame or embarrassment, but like you're bracing yourself for the worst. Waiting for the knee-jerk reaction of disgust or confusion. Instead the only thing you see on her face is recognition.

"Oh, I remember that on the news! We, well... There's been a bit of talk about you since you disappeared," she says, cheeks reddening a little. If it's from embarrassment or guilt, you're not sure. "But, it's, um, nice to meet you Sans!" Becca doesn't reach out to shake his hand, or make any kind of movement towards him. Instead she ducks behind the host's station and grabs three menus and a folded up kid's menu with two crayons tucked inside.
"you too," Sans says, flashing a friendly smile. "i take it you don't get many monsters out this way."

A bit of the tension leaves her body, and she looks a little relieved. "No, not at all. I mean, it's only been a week right? And this place is nice and all, but why bother coming here when you guys can go downtown?" The front door opens behind you and Becca startles a little, clutching the menus to her chest. "Let me get you guys seated!"

She takes the three of you over to a small table in the corner, out of the way. You think you catch people talking about you and Sans as you pass occupied tables, but there's music playing and over the general noise of the restaurant it's hard to make out individual voices. Not that you're surprised. Like Becca said, it's not like anyone would expect to see monsters here in the middle of the suburbs. Leaving you with your menus and the promise that your server will be with you shortly, Becca hurries away back towards the front.

"i guess that coulda gone worse," Sans mutters under his breath. You reach out to touch his arm, and he covers your hand with his. "does your mom normally run late to stuff? where is she?"

"I don't know, but this waiting is killing me," you answer, glancing over your shoulder towards the door. As you do so you realize that many of the other customers are watching you, openly staring. Meeting their gaze one by one, most of them look away.

"babe, just let them look. eventually they'll get tired of it," he says, squeezing your fingers.

You grip his jacket, and bite your lip, turning back around to look at him again. "Maybe we should have just gone to her house, then at least we wouldn't have to deal with all this staring."

"no, this is better. she'll be less likely to cause a scene in public."

Frisk unfolds their colorful menu and spreads it out on the table, hunching over it with their crayons and working on a word search. They've been quiet today, and you can't blame them. You know they're nervous too, and there's been this stifling tension over the three of you all day leading up until now. Now it's like a buzzing under your skin, a prickling on the back of your neck. Why did you agree to this? No one is happy to be here.

As you start to wonder who your server is going to be, none other than your old boss Irene herself comes up to your table. She's an older black woman, tall and lean with her natural, graying hair pulled back into a ponytail. Becca must have warned her because she only shows the slightest hint of surprise as she spots Sans at your side, but her face lights up into a smile as she catches your eye. "Oh, Hope, look at you girl!" she says, circling the table to wrap you up in a big hug. "I never thought I'd see you in this place again, we were all worried sick about you."

"I'm sorry, I should have come by sooner, but I... I haven't left Ebott much," you admit, giving Irene an apologetic look as she pulls away and straightens.

"Oh nonsense, don't you worry about us. At least we were able to see you were doing alright from the news," she says, waving away your apology. Fixing Sans with a scrutinizing look, she holds out her hand to him. "And you must be her fiancé."

Sans's eyes flick down to her outstretched hand, looking surprised. After a second he shakes it, and you're happy to notice that your old boss doesn't pull away the second it seems polite. If she's uncomfortable at all with touching a monster, she sure doesn't let it show. "that's me. the name's sans. s'nice to meet you," he says, and this time his smile seems a little more genuine.
"You treat this girl right, you hear me?" Irene says, letting go of his hand and pointing at him. For a second you're not sure if that half-glare is entirely joking or not, but soon enough her face breaks out into a smile again. "She doesn't deserve any less."

Chuckling, he nods, and you feel a little bit of the tension leave your chest. "Course. wouldn't have it any other way."

"Good," she says with a nod, then turns to look at Frisk. "And how are you doing, cutie pie? You and your momma doing good?"

You give Irene a startled look, though you know you really shouldn't be surprised. The news had already covered the fact that Frisk was your child, and all of your coworkers must have seen it. Did you honestly expect any people from your old life to still believe that lie?

"Yeah, really good!" Frisk says, probably the most cheerful you've seen them all day. Irene just has that effect on people.

"Don't give me that look, I saw you when you were pregnant," Irene says, catching your eye. "We went along with what you told us because who were we to argue, but most of us knew your momma didn't have any second child. Speaking of, Becca told me you were here to meet her for lunch?"

You nod.

"Have you seen her since..." She gives a vague gesture at the table. "All this?"

"Once, right after we got out," you admit, glancing at Sans. He meets your eye for a second and you both return your attention to Irene.

"Sugar, can I talk to you for a minute? D'you mind? Before your momma gets here," she says, and you feel a twist of apprehension in the pit of your stomach.

"Yeah, okay," you say, standing up from the table and giving Sans a worried look. "I... I don't want to go too far, I..."

"frisk and i will be fine, babe. you go," he says, doing his best to be reassuring.

"But what if she shows up while I'm gone?"

"How about we go right over there, by the kitchen, where you can see everybody," Irene says, putting a hand on your shoulder.

Hesitating, you look at the spot. After a moment, you nod. "Alright."

Steering you away, she gives your shoulder a squeeze as the two of you take your places near the kitchen entrance, out of the way of foot traffic. From here you can see your table and Sans can see you, though he's leaning over to help Frisk with their word search. Which means that when Irene speaks to you, he can't see the shock register on your face.

"Hope, I know you're desperate to stay out of your momma's house now that you're out, but you and Frisk can come live with me. You don't need to stay on that mountain with those monsters," she says, with all the sweetness and sincerity you'd come to love about her over the years. Your head whips around to look at her, too stunned to speak. "I'll keep you as long as you want."

You search her face, lips parting as you struggle to find the right words. You hadn't even
considered what your old boss might think about Sans, hadn't had time to worry about anything other than seeing your mother today. Brow furrowing, you swallow and bring one hand to your chest. "Irene, I know you mean well," you say carefully, doing your best not to sound ungrateful. "But I'm not using Sans to stay away from my mother. I love him."

Irene blinks, clearly taken aback. She glances over at the table, at Sans and Frisk, then back at you. "Hope, sugar, he's a skeleton," she says, not angry, or upset, or even scandalized. Just confused. You huff a weak laugh, caught between the sheer ridiculousness of this moment and your own lingering frustration. "He's a monster that looks like a skeleton. He and his brother took us in, without them I don't know what would have happened to us. I mean, look at them," you say, turning to watch your little family.

Frisk is looking up at Sans, frowning a little as they talk, a crayon poised in their hand. Sans grins and you can see his shoulders shake a little with laughter as he taps a finger on the word search and nudges their shoulder. They smile at him, ducking away as he tries to ruffle their hair. You can catch the faint sound of their laughter even from where you're standing.

"He does seem awful sweet on you and Frisk," she admits, giving you a serious look. After a second she gives a soft sigh and a small smile. "And I'm the last person that ought to be telling anybody how to live their life, so you do whatever keeps you smiling. Just remember that you've got people who care about you, people who knew you before you started headlining newspapers. You've got more than your momma off that mountain."

You're about to thank her, because you really do appreciate her concern, but the words catch in your throat as you watch her expression sour.

"Speak of the devil and she shall appear," Irene mutters, and as you follow her gaze you see your mother standing by the host's station. "Go get back to your man before she spots him. I'll be by in a second to get your drinks."

"Thank you," you blurt out, touching her arm before she ducks into the kitchen. She glances back at you, gives you a weak smile, and disappears into the back. You hurry over to your table.

Sliding into your seat, you grab Sans's sleeve to get his attention, heart beating frantically in your chest. You're on edge, all the anticipation from this morning finally about to spill over, and as he turns to look at you, meeting your eyes with the calm, steady reassurance you've come to rely on these past few months, you find yourself just a bit more at ease. Sans is here with you. No matter what happens, no matter what she might say, that won't change.

"She's here," you say in an undertone, swallowing as your fingers grip his jacket.

He pries your hand away, holding it in his own and stroking your knuckles with his thumb. "just remember we don't have to stay any longer than you want to. we can walk out at any time," he says, then looks over at Frisk. They're slumped a little in their seat, a hand pressed over their mouth. "you holding in there ok, kiddo?"

Frisk just nods.

"Oh, I'm so sorry I'm late," Kim says, coming up beside your table and standing behind the empty chair on the edge between you and Frisk. Sans, from his place across from her, gives her a forced smile. "I had to work a morning shift to make up for this afternoon, and it's just been so busy with Christmas around the corner. I couldn't even go home to change."
Well, that's true. She's still wearing black slacks and a white polo shirt, the only thing she's missing is her work apron and name badge. Shrugging off her jacket and sliding it over the back of her chair, she lowers herself down onto it and rubs her forehead. Kim looks tired, more tired than you remember her looking. Has she lost weight too? She's still bigger than you, but she looks smaller than before, somehow not in a good way. Like she's lost weight from stress. You think there's more gray in her hair.

She meets your eyes, giving you a tremulous smile as she lets out a small sigh. "Sweetheart it's so good to see you. I'm glad you agreed to meet for lunch," she says, and when your mouth gives the faintest twitch of acknowledgment she turns to Frisk. "Frisk, do you think your grandma could get a hug? I didn't get a chance last time."

Last time you were too busy fighting. Too busy defending yourself from the words she flung in your face. Is she trying to insinuate that it's your fault she didn't get any time with Frisk? You bristle but you aren't sure if you're just being oversensitive. Sans has your hand in his under the table, and he squeezes your fingers.

Frisk glances over at you, unsure.

"You don't have to if you don't want to, sweetie," you tell them, and you see your mother's shoulders stiffen. It makes your stomach give an uncomfortable lurch, but whatever she might be thinking, she doesn't say it.

Frisk looks from you, to Kim, and after a second they nod. "Okay," they say quietly, and it's all you can do to just watch as they share a hug. You notice the moment that Frisk tries to let go, and Kim holds on just a fraction too long for comfort, but before you can say anything she finally releases them.

Irene chooses that moment to come back, and as she and Kim share a few polite words (they know each other, after all) you glance over at Sans. He traces your fingers with his thumb and gives you a reassuring look. After a minute your old boss ends up taking your drink and food orders and disappears again, but not before giving you an odd look, like she's checking up on you.

"So, how are you doing?" Kim asks you, her tone coming off a little forced.

"We're fine. Work and school. The usual," you answer, unwilling to elaborate.

"The usual? Hope, I don't know what the usual is for you anymore," she says clipped but with a fake levity that tells you she's annoyed but trying not to show it. She manages a short laugh. "Who knows what life must be like for you now."

"Things in Ebott are just like things down here. People live their lives, go to work, go to school." You're getting defensive. You can hear it in your voice and feel it in your muscles. But you don't care. You suddenly don't want to be here anymore, it all feels so fake. Part of you wishes she would argue with you so you can just go home. You want her to make a mistake.

"Oh, well, that's good," she says evenly. Her attention shifts to Sans. "And what do you do for work?"

Leaning forward to rest his free arm on the table, Sans clears his nonexistent throat. "I help work on the core and in the lab back in the underground."

"So you're... a technician of some kind?"

You fight the urge to grit your teeth. "Mother, he's a scientist. He helps keep all the power flowing
to the surface and assists Doctor Alphys, a friend of ours."

"Oh, I didn't realize they had degrees back where you came from." 'Back where you came from', as if Sans was just from another country, not one of thousands of people trapped underground for centuries... "Sweetheart, you don't have to keep giving me that look," she says, the corners of her mouth going tight.

You look down at the table, knowing you're being unfair. Swallowing, you glance back up at her again. "Sorry," you say.

It looks like she wants to say something, judging from the way her face is all pinched, but whatever it is she keeps it to herself. "So when are the two of you planning on getting married? Now that you're engaged."

"We haven't decided," you lie quickly, and to your relief Frisk doesn't correct you. Sans squeezes your hand. "Right now it's not technically legal, so we'll just have to wait."

Conversation remains reserved and polite. Kim talks about work and Frisk starts telling her what they've been learning in school, which she eats up. In fact, Frisk and Kim seem to be doing most of the talking, now that your child seems more comfortable with her presence. And to your mother's credit, she's being just fine. You feel yourself relax, just a little, as your food arrives and the four of you start eating.

You catch Kim watching Sans with that confused expression you remember from Deacon, and you almost start to laugh before you catch yourself. You're not ready to joke with her, to act like everything is okay. Sans doesn't even tease her like he did with Deacon. He just eats and pretends she's not looking.

Finally, as lunch starts to come to a close and you find yourself glancing at your phone (one message from Deacon: 'Let me know how it goes. You can do it.') Kim clears her throat and looks at you. "I was hoping I could talk to you in private, just for a few minutes," she says.

All the tension is back in an instant. You feel Sans's eyes on you. "Whatever you have to say you can say here," you answer, voice tight.

Kim's jaw clenches, you can see the muscles bunch on the sides of her face. After a second she leans back in her chair, looking between you and Sans. "All right. I'm only saying this because I'm worried about you sweetheart, but are you sure being in a relationship with a monster is the best idea?"

You grit your teeth, fighting back the anger coiling in your chest because damn her she actually sounds concerned. "Yes it is, not that it's any of your business," you bite out, brow furrowing. "Hope, I'm your mother, of course it's my business," she says, frowning at you. Oh here it is, that tone like she knows what's best just because she gave birth to you. Sighing, she looks at Sans instead, which confuses you. "If something happened to you, what would happen to Hope and Frisk? You don't have any legal rights. Where would that leave her? Homeless? Penniless? When my husband died, the only thing that kept the two of us off the streets was his life insurance that paid off the house."

Sans looks taken aback, meeting your eyes for a second before returning his attention to Kim. "she'd have my brother, for starters. and all of our friends. not to mention we're both close with the king and queen. nothing bad would happen to her and frisk, i can guarantee that."
"Can you?" Kim presses, raising her brows. "Then what if, for whatever reason, something happens to monsters in general? What happens to her if your king and queen lost favor with the government?"

"Mother, you're being ridiculous!" you snap, shaking your head. "We're not going to let uncertainty stop us from living our lives. We've made our choice and there's nothing you can do to change our minds."

"Hope—"

"she said no, kim," Sans says, and though his voice is low and quiet it still silences her. "keep arguing and we're gonna leave."

Kim fixes him with a cold look, and for a moment you think she's going to argue. But the seconds tick by until finally she lets out a resigned sigh and glances over the three of you. "I just wanted to make sure you considered the risk you're taking, committing yourself to that life. I'm sorry you took it the wrong way."

You don't answer. Her apology is flimsy at best, insincere at worst, and you can't think of an answer that doesn't feel like a lie. The four of you sit in uncomfortable silence, until finally Irene swings by with the bill. Kim snatches it up before you can even look at it, sliding a credit card into the check presenter and handing it back before you can object.

"I want to see you for Christmas," Kim says bluntly, folding her hands on the table and meeting your gaze. "I don't want to spend another holiday alone."

You and Sans share a look, and both of you are quiet for a moment. His expression is closed, but you can tell he's leaving this up to you. Swallowing, ignoring the twist of discomfort in your chest, you offer her a compromise. "How about you come up to Ebott next weekend, to our house. We can do dinner and if that goes well we can talk about Christmas."

Kim's face erupts into a warm, relieved smile, and you feel a little bit of your guilt ebb. Just a fraction. "I'd like that, very much."
The first thing Deacon realizes as he wakes up on Bo's couch is that—hey, when did he fall asleep? Last he remembers the two of them were watching television, something boring about fancy restaurants around the world (she just can't get enough of those travel shows). So, the first thing he realizes is that he's alone, wrapped up in a knit blanket that smells like Bo, but is a poor substitute for the real thing. Did she get up and cover him in a blanket? God, how is she so adorable?

The second thing is that the TV is off and there's music playing. Something bright and cheerful, with an easy beat and snappy guitar. Bo can't stand the quiet. Every time he's over here either the TV or music is going, even if it's just in the background. He can appreciate that about her, even if her taste in music is different than his. That isn't to say he doesn't like it, it's very her.

The third thing is that something smells delicious.

Rubbing his eyes and pushing his hair off his forehead, Deacon sits up to look over the back of the couch, towards the kitchen. Bo is there, stirring a steaming pot and swaying her hips in time with the music. Her back is to him so he takes a moment to just appreciate the view. She's wearing casual, around the house clothes; a black camisole and some loose, soft pants that cut off just at the knee (he thinks she hemmed them herself) and cling to her in all the right places. A strong, basic urge rises to the forefront of his mind, to go up behind her and wrap his hands around her waist and pull her back against him. He entertains the thought for a second, then saves it for later. There's plenty of time for that, he's not going home until tomorrow morning, before work. Spending Sundays (the one day off they both share) with her is becoming a bit of a habit.

Bo has folded him gently into her routine, into her life. It hasn't even been a full week since she agreed to be his girlfriend and already he's just so wrapped up in this new normal. There's still that underlying fear, that tiny voice telling him to get out while he still can, to tear himself free while he won't lose too much of himself in the process. But he won't. Things right now are good, and he could be happy just keeping things exactly like this.

The song changes and so does the rhythm of Bo's movements. She taps her bare hoof on the kitchen tile and does this little back and forth step in time with the music. Softly, barely loud enough for him to hear, he catches her singing along. Deacon is smiling, a surge of affection welling up in his chest, and instead of balking in the face of it he just lets it sweep him up. Basks in it. It's that moment that Bo covers the pot she was stirring and does a little turn as she dances across her tiny kitchen, and sees him.

He gives her an embarrassed smile, feeling a bit like he was caught doing something wrong as heat creeps up his neck. She blushes a little under her fur but instead of being upset like he expects, she takes swaying steps in time to the music to come stand behind the couch.

"Enjoying the view?" she asks him, smirking. Oh, he likes it when she's playful (which is often, to be honest).
"Absolutely. I didn't realize I was being treated to dinner and a show," he says, shifting onto his knees so he can lean over the back of the couch and reach for her hands. She lets him take them, pulling her closer.

"Hmm," she purrs, freeing her hands so she can cup his face, running her fingers through his hair. Deacon tips his head back, making a contented sound as she strokes his head, eyes closing most of the way. "If you ask nicely I might give you a private performance later."

He lets out a low, suggestive chuckle that is quickly lost in a groan as Bo leans down to kiss him. His hands reach for her waist, the flare of her hips, holding her as she leaves him flushed and breathless. When, a few moments later she pulls away, looking very satisfied with the flustered state she's left him in, he has to take a second to collect himself. Oh she is good at that. Leaving him a desperate mess.

She smooths his hair before letting him go, straightening and covering his hands on her hips with her own. "Baby, you've got to let me go or I can't finish up dinner," she says with a smile.

Deacon holds her tighter. Her smile widens. "I'm sorry I fell asleep while we were watching TV," he says. "How long was I out?"

"About an hour," she says, reaching up to cup his jaw. She rubs her thumb across the stubble there, giving him an affectionate look. "I don't blame you, we were up late last night and you get up so early. Why didn't you sleep in?"

"Bo, nine is sleeping in for me," he says with a chuckle. "If it was a weekday I'd already have been at school for almost an hour."

She wrinkles her nose. "I don't know how you do it."

"Our schedules are sort of opposite, aren't they?"

She makes a noncommittal noise, her bright eyes dropping to his chin. Her thumb is still stroking his face, which feels good. He wasn't able to shave this morning. "Have you ever grown this out? I think you'd look handsome with a beard."

Deacon makes a face. "No, I'd look old," he says, unable to stop himself from thinking of Grant. "And I thought I was already handsome?"

"Of course you are," she says, placating him with a kiss on his forehead. "It was just a thought."

Bo pulls away to go back to the kitchen, and Deacon gets up to follow her. He feels a little guilty for sleeping while she was working hard on food, which is weird because he's never really felt bad for not helping you before. Should he? No, wouldn't he just get in the way? Well, whatever. He trails after Bo like a lost puppy, unwilling to let her get too far now that she's got his attention. That delicious smell is stronger now that he's closer and he leans in to get a better look as she lifts the lid.

Dodging the cloud of steam, he takes in a deep breath of the spicy scent wafting up from the pot. Inside is cubed, brown meat in a thick, dark orangeish sauce. It looks familiar, but... "What are you making?" he finally asks, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"Lamb curry. It's Indian," she says nonchalantly.

It takes a second for her words to register, and when they do he gives her a wide-eyed, stunned look. Lamb? Okay, he doesn't care if she is just a monster that looks like a sheep, that
is definitely weird! No getting around it. No second opinion needed. Brow furrowing and gaping like a fish, Deacon is about to tell her as much when she bursts into a fit of giggles, covering her snout with her hand.

"Ohmygod your face!" she says between gasping breaths, leaning back into the corner where two sections of countertop meet. She's laughing in earnest now, and he can see tears shining in her eyes. "Baby, I'm sorry I couldn't help it! It's beef..."

He lets out a relieved sigh, shaking his head and grinning despite himself. "You scared me for a second. I know you don't have a problem eating meat, but that was just a little much even for me," he says, moving in closer to her and resting his hands on either side of her, effectively pinning her into the corner.

Bo drapes her arms over his shoulders, nuzzling under his chin in a small gesture of apology before kissing his throat. Oh, if she keeps doing that... He refuses to even think about the obvious 'lamb meat' joke that's hiding in there somewhere. That's just too close to pun territory and the last thing he wants to think about right now is Sans.

"Deacon," she whispers against his skin and his eyes close as he bites back a groan. "This isn't helping me finish dinner."

"Keep saying my name like that and I'm not going to care very much," he says, shifting his weight onto one hand and wrapping his free arm around her waist.

She nips at his Adam's apple before pulling away, ignoring his disappointed whine as he looks down at her. Dropping her hands to his hips, she arches a brow as he pulls her closer. "You have to let me go," she says.

"No," he says with a playful pout, leaning down to bury his face in the wool around her neck.

But he doesn't get any time to enjoy it because she's pinching his sides, poking him and thrusting her hands up his shirt. With an undignified yelp of surprise, he tries to jump back but she follows him. "What's this? Are you ticklish?" she says, grinning.

"I— hey! No!" he barks out between laughs, squirming to try and get away.

Bo ends up chasing him back into the living room, pinning him to the couch and tickling his ribs until he's out of breath, pink-faced and cheeks aching. Then she's kissing him, pushing up his shirt and leaving him breathless in an entirely different way.

Dinner is a little burnt, but neither of them seem to mind.

Sans doesn't want to be here. What makes matters worse is that he even left work early to be here. He could have gone home, spent some extra time with you after a busy Monday, but no. Instead he's standing on Deacon's doorstep, because what's coming isn't something he thinks he can handle on his own.

After a moment of frustrated hesitation, he knocks on the door. A minute later there's the scrape of the deadbolt being undone and then it opens. Deacon is standing there, dressed in his slacks and sweater vest, reading glasses perched on his nose. He gives Sans a confused look.

"Hope isn't here," he says, rolling a red pen between his fingers.

"i didn't come here looking for hope," Sans says, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket.
Deacon blinks, then taps himself on the chest with the capped end of the pen. "Oh, you mean you actually want to talk to me? There's a surprise."

"yes, i'm here to talk to you," he says, gritting his teeth. Of course he wasn't going to make this easy, was he? It's bad enough that he's here at all. "i need to... ask for your help with something."

The human's face curves into an amused smile, stepping back to let him inside. "Oh, please, this I need to hear," he says, shutting the door behind Sans.

There's music playing, something he thinks you've described as 'classic rock' before. It's not very loud, more like background noise, which must be because there's papers spread out on Deacon's coffee table. Oh, that explains the red pen. Deacon gestures at the large chair next to the couch, and unlike the last time he was here, Sans decides to sit. The human takes his place in the center of the couch and pulls off his glasses, setting them and the pen down on top of some papers before running his hand through his hair and looking at Sans. That amused expression is still annoyingly obvious.

"What can I, a simple, ordinary human of humble origin, possibly do for Sans?" Deacon asks, threading his fingers together and draping his arms over his knees. "Is this about Bo's awful nickname for you? Do you want me to talk to her? Because believe me, I hate it."

Sometimes Sans wishes he could just wipe that stupid smirk off Deacon's face. But he thinks he knows a way how to do it in this case, without resorting to violence. "it's about hope."

And in an instant that insufferable look is gone. Deacon's smile fades, he sits up a little straighter and his brow furrows. His arms tense. "Is it about her mom coming this weekend?"

Sans nods. Deacon is quicker than he sometimes gives him credit for. More observant. And if there's one thing he can count on it's that Deacon cares about you. "yeah. i still don't get why she thought it'd be a good idea to invite her here but—"

"Home field advantage," he says, arching an eyebrow.

"huh?" Sans frowns at him.

Deacon sighs, shaking his head. "It's a... sports reference. Basically since this is familiar territory, and Kim will be out of her comfort zone, Hope thinks she might have the upper hand, you know?"

"oh. yeah, sure, pal. whatever you say," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "the point is that i want to know if you're gonna be home this saturday. just in case."

"Just in case of what, exactly?" he asks. Unlacing his fingers, he rests his hands on his knees.

"in case this goes south and we need some backup." Sans lets out a ragged breath through his teeth, freeing one hand from his pocket and cradling the side of his head in his hand. He looks down at the coffee table, away from Deacon. "i don't wanna give this woman any ammunition to use against me or papyrus, like if she decides to talk to the press or something. which means no magic. i mean, i will if i have to, but if push comes to shove... i'd feel better knowing we had a human to do the pushing and shoving."

Deacon is quiet for a minute, studying Sans's face. He leans back against the couch. "Have you talked to Hope about this?"

Sans shakes his head. "no. she's... optimistic about this dinner and i don't wanna take that away from her," he says, looking at the human again. He gives Sans a sympathetic look. "but i don't buy
it. I don't trust her, and Hope's too conflicted to see straight when it comes to her mom. So I'll feel better knowing you've got her back, if we need you."

"Yeah, of course," Deacon says, subdued. His expression crumples into something guilty and resigned, cringing as he glances down at the table and rubs the back of his neck. "Look, Sans, about all the shit I gave you when you got here... No matter what, I'm always willing to help you guys if you need it. I just want you to know that."

"Thanks, pal," Sans says, and well shit he really means it. "I appreciate it."

"So what do you need me to do?"

Good, down to business instead of dealing with this weird... camaraderie they have going now. "I just want to know you'll be home so that if we need you, I can give you a call. Which, uh, means I'll need your number."

Deacon's mouth curves into a mischievous smile. "Are you sure this isn't just some clever ruse to get my number?"

"Don't make me regret this."

"Can I pick out a little emoticon to go next to my name in your contacts?"

"How does she put up with you?"

"Does this mean we're friends now?"

"You know what, I'm sure I can just get it from Hope's phone."

"Wait, wait," Deacon says, doing his best to try and stop laughing as Sans grits his teeth and stands up. "Okay, I'll stop. Here, just give me your number and I'll text you so you can save mine however you want."

Begrudgingly, Sans lists off his number and fishes his phone out of his pocket. After a moment, a message pops up on the screen. 'You can stop glowering. I know you don't hate me.'

He's lucky that you care about him so much.
You spend the entire day cleaning the house. You're tense and nervous and it's the only thing keeping your mind from straying into dangerous territory about dinner, but your anxiety is still getting the better of you. When Frisk whines about not wanting to clean up their closet (because why would their grandmother look in their closet?) you snap at them a bit harsher than you intend. Sans takes them upstairs, and you end up crying in the downstairs bathroom while scrubbing the toilet.

Kim isn't even here yet and look what she's turning you into. Why did you ever think inviting her here was a good idea?

Papyrus finds you an hour before your mother is supposed to arrive, sweaty and smelling like bleach, sitting in the middle of the bathroom floor, halfway through scrubbing it when you just needed to take a break. He stands there in the doorway, regarding you like he's not sure what to do with you (you're not sure what to do with you at this point). Then, with surprising gentleness, he helps you to your feet and pries the brush from your hand.

"YOU HAVE DONE ENOUGH, I THINK. GO UPSTAIRS AND CLEAN YOURSELF, I'LL FINISH THIS FOR YOU," he says, and for a moment you think he's about to dismiss you from the room. But then his brow furrows and he stoops down to wrap you up in a tight hug. "HOPE... NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS, WE'RE HERE TO HELP."

You're crying again. Maybe if you get it all out of your system now it won't happen when your mother is actually here.

An hour later you're feeling better, showered and dressed in some nice (not too nice) clothes, looking over your new family. Sans even changed, to placate you a bit. He's wearing a pair of old slacks he dug up from somewhere and a nice sweater he borrowed from Papyrus. It's a little big on him, lengthwise, but he pushed up the sleeves to his elbows and he looks pretty handsome, actually. You tell him so and he gives you a tense smile, squeezing your hand.

Papyrus is dressed in nice jeans and a flannel shirt, fiddling with the end of his scarf and bouncing one leg as he sits on the loveseat. He's feeling the nervous energy filling the room just as much as you are. Sitting on your lap, Frisk is wearing an oversized blue sweater with a short, faux fur collar and black leggings. You bought them that sweater because it reminded you of Sans, and you think that's why they chose that one to wear. You can't blame them; part of you wants to just curl up in Sans's jacket and hide, too.

Though you were hoping things would go smoothly, you're not surprised when things get off to a rocky start.

Your mother shows up fifteen minutes late. "Sweetheart, I'm sorry, they gave me a bit of a hard time down at the checkpoint when I said I needed permission to get into your neighborhood," she says, putting on her best apologetic look.
Kim glances around your foyer as you let her inside, and you can't miss the widening of her eyes as she gets a good look at your big kitchen and comfortable living room. You think, perhaps, you spot a hint of envy in the tightening of her mouth. A small, dark part of you takes some satisfaction in rubbing your success in her face.

"that's hard to believe, considering we called down to the checkpoint ourselves to let them know you were coming," Sans counters, arching a brow as he watches her study your home.

Her face takes on this pinched look, like she wants to say something rude. But she doesn't get the opportunity before the sight of Papyrus coming to join you silences her. You have to admit, you understand the feeling of being intimidated by the over six-foot skeleton.

"HELLO HOPE'S MOTHER!" he says, resting his hands on his hips and giving her a big smile. "I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AM..." He stumbles for a second, probably over the word 'pleased'. "MEETING YOU FOR THE FIRST TIME."

Kim just looks at him, clutching a small, faded purse to her stomach. She doesn't even say anything to him, just looks at you with a bewildered expression. "Is he always so loud?"

You don't even have to look at Sans to feel his agitation. You feel it too, prickling on the back of your neck. Papyrus isn't even that loud! He just projects his voice, and has a presence. "Were you always so rude?" you mutter, low enough you're not sure she can hear you. Clearing your throat, you force a small smile. "Mother, he was speaking to you."

Papyrus waves his hand dismissively, his attention focused on Kim. He looks friendly enough but there's something... familiar about the way he's looking at her. Like he's sizing her up. "I'M CERTAIN THAT SHE MEANT NO OFFENSE. IT WOULD BE UNSEEMLY TO COME INTO SOMEONE ELSE'S HOME JUST TO BE RUDE," he says, and there's this unspoken warning in the air that he just lets hang for a moment. "HOPE WORKED VERY HARD TO MAKE SURE YOU FELT WELCOME. IT WOULD BE DISAPPOINTING IF ALL OF THAT WENT TO WASTE."

There's a beat of tense silence where you're torn between grinning and cringing, unsure how your mother is going to react. Her eyes narrow just a fraction and, before she can reply, Frisk takes her hand and gives her a big smile, leading her to the living room. You don't want to leave the two of them alone for too long, but you and the brothers share a look now that you have a second.

"good job, pap," Sans says, grinning and chuckling silently.

Papyrus frowns, crossing his arms over his chest. "I don't like her," he whispers, looking at you. "I'm sorry if that seems mean."

"It's not mean, I understand." You sigh and shake your head, giving Sans a desperate look. "This was a mistake wasn't it?"

For a second he doesn't say anything, just rests his hand on the small of your back. "...maybe," he finally admits.

After a bit of small talk in the living room you and Papyrus retreat to the kitchen to take care of dinner, leaving Sans and Frisk alone with Kim. So far things... could be worse, in his opinion. Sans can tell she's still trying to put her best foot forward, biting back snide comments or just keeping her mouth shut when he's sure she'd rather speak. She really is used to getting her way and bossing people around, isn't she? It must be frustrating her, how much power you have over her ability to
see Frisk.

As amusing as it is to watch her squirm, he wants her gone. He wants her out of his home, out of your life, and away from his child. A fierce, protective love twists in his ribcage as he watches Frisk show her one of the many photo albums he has lined up on a bookshelf. Her expression of interest is fake, which is frustrating enough, but the way Frisk is sitting in her lap, like they do with you, makes him want to snatch them away from her. Everything in him rebels against the inclusion of her in his family.

Frisk turns the page, talking about Undyne and Alphys when Kim looks over at him and catches him watching her. He doesn't flinch, doesn't look away, holding her eye and sitting back on the couch. After a second she looks back at Frisk, hugging them to her for a moment before taking the album out of their hands and closing it.

"Sweetie why don't you go help your... mother in the kitchen," she says, and Sans grits his teeth over the hesitation. "I want to talk to Sans for a minute."

Oh, this should be good. What could this woman possibly have to say to him? Frisk slides off Kim's lap and gives him a curious look, which Sans answers with a reassuring smile. After a second they run off to do as they were asked, leaving him and your mother alone. She meets his eyes again, standing up from the loveseat and smoothing out the front of her pants before crossing the room to sit on the other end of the couch. He turns a little to face her, raising a brow.

"and what do you wanna talk about, exactly?" he asks, undeniably curious.

"My family," she says, which makes Sans's eyes narrow. Oh her family, is it? "I appreciate everything that you've done for my daughter, but she doesn't belong up here with you."

"me personally, or monsters in general?" he answers, keeping his voice even.

"Both, I suppose," she says, pursing her lips. "You're not doing them any kindness by keeping them here."

"you say that like hope doesn't have a choice. well she does and she chose me. they both did," Sans says, gritting his teeth. "after you smacked them around enough to send them running up to mt. ebott just to get away from you."

She glares at him, openly now. Her hands ball into fists in her lap and he can see the muscles in her neck tense. "I am trying to do right by her to make up for that. I've done a lot of thinking this past week, and I just can't understand what you think you're doing, being with her. Do you have any idea how much harder her life is going to be just by having you in it? What people are going to call her, what they're already calling her? And how that's going to affect Frisk. If you really care about Hope, maybe you ought to consider just what damage you're inflicting upon her future, as a human trying to marry a monster."

"you think any of that is news to us?" he snaps, resisting the crackle of magic itching his eye and his fingers. His voice is low, a threatening gravel that he feels in his bones. "news flash, pal, we know what we're getting into. we've been through a hell of a lot worse than some strangers being assholes. whatever happens, we do it together. nothing, not some vague threats or a meddling bitch like you is ever gonna change that."

Kim rushes to her feet, her face red and blotchy with anger. "How dare you!"

Sans stands too, though much slower. Oh, he's angry too but it's like a slow, steady boil. This is
what he was waiting for. Maybe, *maybe*, he can use this to his advantage. "What? see right through your little game? You just want to get them away from me so you can hook your claws back into her. To get her back under your thumb. Well guess what, I won't *fucking* let you."

"And just how do you plan on doing that?"

You're tearing apart lettuce leaves while Papyrus stands beside you, chopping tomatoes. A chicken is roasting in the oven, nearly done, and you're counting down the minutes until it's time to eat. That'll be one step closer to Kim leaving, though you suppose you still need to consider your plans for Christmas...

Toriel already invited all of you over to her house, and you hated having to tell her you weren't sure. Do you really owe your mother your first Christmas on the surface with the monsters? It's not like you haven't spent every other Christmas of your life with her.

Frisk scampers into the kitchen and you're pulled out of your thoughts as they latch themselves around your waist and open their mouth. Laughing, you reach over and grab a slice of tomato, stuffing it between their teeth. As they chew, realization dawns on you and you glance over at Papyrus. "Wait, if you're in here sweetie... Did you leave your dad and grandmother alone?"

Frisk nods, bangs bobbing on their forehead as they lick tomato juice off their lips. "She asked to talk to dad in private," they say.

Papyrus's head jerks up from his work and he looks at you, meeting your eyes. "Maybe we should..." you start, but he's already shaking his head.

"**MAYBE THEY SHOULD TALK. IF SHE IS... GOING TO BE PART OF OUR FAMILY, THEY NEED TO GET ALONG,**" he says, but seems unhappy with the idea.

Frankly, you're not thrilled with it either. Things were happier, *simpler*, when you just weren't speaking to her. You didn't have this wound up tension squeezing your heart, a fraction away from feeling like you aren't getting enough air.

"They're never going to get along," you say, sighing. "And I don't blame Sans for that. He doesn't need to forgive her."

"**THEN WHY DO YOU?**"

You halt your movements, halfway through tearing a leaf of lettuce. Biting your lip, you glance up at Papyrus and then back down at what you were doing. "I'm not sure I know anymore."

Before Papyrus can say anything, you catch the sound of raised voices from the living room. Wrapping one arm around Frisk's shoulders, you look up at the skeleton at your side, anxiousness sending a shiver up your spine. "Take Frisk upstairs."

"**HOPE—**" "**Mom—!**"

"Please," you beg, prying Frisk's arms off of you and pushing them towards their uncle. "Papyrus just take them upstairs and stay there until this is all sorted out. They don't need to see this, whatever it is."

Papyrus scans your face for just a second then nods, taking hold of Frisk's hand. The three of you leave the kitchen, the two of them going upstairs while you go past to the living room.
Sans and Kim are standing in front of the couch, glaring at each other. Your mother has lost a good chunk of her composure, red-faced in a way that makes you want to turn tail and go upstairs. To just get out of her way before she sees you. Sans's expression is hard and sharp, his grin nearly predatory as he watches her.

"And just how do you plan on doing that?" Kim demands, and once the angry words leave her mouth she catches sight of you over Sans's shoulder.

Her eyes widen and she tries to collect herself, rearranging her expression into something more pleasant. Sans glances back at you, taking a few steps back to meet you as you approach him. Some of the anger leaves his face but there's still that guarded tension in his jaw. He reaches for your hand, holds it tight.

"What's going on in here?" you ask, swallowing past the tightness in your throat.

"your mother was just telling me about how the two of us should break up so i don't ruin your life. if she wasn't being so manipulative i'd almost believe she was actually worried about you," he says, with a certain confidence bordering on smugness. Kim must hear it too, because you see her lip curl.

"Sweetheart, I am worried about you," she says, taking a step forward. You flinch back. "I thought maybe he'd understand where I'm coming from. Be reasonable."

"So you tried to convince my fiancé to do what exactly?" you ask, anger rising up in your chest, making your heart pound and your arms shake. "Leave me? Kick me and Frisk out of the house? Behind my back?"

"Don't you remember what it was like for you, growing up being different from me? What those people said about us?" Kim says, fighting to keep her voice steady but she has that tone. If Sans wasn't beside you, you'd already be backing down. "Because that is what you're going to do to Frisk if you let a monster be their father."

"So that's what this is about? Sans. You... you heard about Sans and I being engaged and then tried to guilt me into talking to you on Thanksgiving, and then apologized so I'd let you in... just so you could try to sabotage my marriage to Sans?" You stare at her, feeling like you were just slapped across the face.

"I'm trying to protect both of you from making a mistake!" she yells, and there's that moment you've been waiting for since you got up this morning. That horrible feeling of dread as she raises her voice and for a second you feel your eyes swim with tears as you flinch away, but Sans is there. He has your hand and he's supporting you, just like he always does. Out of the corner of your eye you see him moving, reaching for his pocket.

"No, you're trying to control me, just like you always do," you say, your voice breaking as tears spill down your cheeks. "If you think me being with Sans is a mistake, then what does that say about you and Dad? Was he a mistake too, just because he didn't look like you?"

Sans brings his phone up to his ear. What is he doing? "yeah, exactly," he says, but neither you or your mother pay him much attention.

"Don't you try to turn this around on me, young lady—!"

"Get out of my house," you say, low and angry.

"You can't just throw me out!" she shouts, seething. She takes another step forward. "I am
"You may have given birth to me but you don't own me! You can't tell me what to do anymore!" You shout back. It's been so long since you've felt this angry. "Now get out of my house!"

She moves quickly, and too late you realize she's raising her hand to hit you. But Sans is faster than her. One moment you're right in front of Kim and the next you're five feet away, magic humming over your skin. She stares at you, dumbfounded, as you let what she tried to do sink in.

"You tried to slap me?" you demand, hating how pathetic your own words sound to your ears. You're shaking worse than before, and you're having trouble breathing. Raising your free hand to your cheek, as if she actually did hit you, you do your best to try and clear your eyes but you're still crying. You're not sure you can stop.

Before Kim can answer you hear the front door open.

"that was quicker than i thought," Sans says, and Deacon is there, putting himself bodily between you and your mother. Part of you wonders how he's here but you don't care. You're just so relieved to see him, to have him here helping you and Sans. You just feel so grateful for him.

"I may have been sitting on your back porch, reading this whole time," Deacon admits, looking over at you with sympathy. "You don't have to worry, we've got this handled, Hope."

"And who the hell are you?" Kim asks, finding her temper again.

With the pressure, the responsibility off your shoulders, you feel yourself start to crumble. Sans has both arms around you now, pulling you to him. He's rubbing your back and telling you to breathe.

"Oh, me? No one important. I'll just be the guy making sure you get the hell away from my best friend." Deacon's voice has an edge to it you've only heard him use with Grant. God you should have listened to everyone when they told you that you were making a mistake.

"H-how?" you manage to stutter through your tears.

Thankfully Sans seems to understand. "i talked with deacon, made sure he was around if we needed some help. i called him."

"Now, unless you want me calling the soldiers to escort you off the mountain personally, I'd suggest you fuck off Kim," Deacon snaps.

You hold yourself together long enough to watch her pass you in the foyer, cast an angry look at Sans. "I hope you're happy, tearing apart our family like this."

"you're the one that did this," Sans growls. "you have no one to blame but yourself."

"Don't... don't you ever try to contact me again," you say, your voice thick with tears even as it cracks. Because even though this has to be done —because if you don't do it now, when will you? — god it hurts. "I'm done."

Kim storms out of the house with Deacon on her tail, making sure she leaves you guess. You don't care so long as she's gone. You're too busy sobbing into Sans's shoulder to care.
"babe, just breathe, ok?"

Your chest hurts. It feels like you can't get enough air but you do your best to listen to Sans's voice. You're having a panic attack. You know it but it doesn't help because your body won't listen. Squeezing your eyes shut, you press your forehead into Sans's shoulder and try to focus on the feeling of his hand rubbing circles between your shoulders. You can't stop shaking.

"i've got you. i've got you and you're ok, she's gone," he says, cradling the back of your head. "can you nod for me, lemme know you hear me?"

You nod against him and he hugs you closer, tucking his head next to yours.

"that's my girl, you're doing great. just keep breathing."

The door opens and you jump, clinging tighter to Sans's sweater as you let out a small sob. You feel him look up, and he drags his fingers through your hair, against your scalp like he knows you like.

"it's just deacon coming back inside," he tells you, nuzzling your temple. "is she gone?"

"Yeah. Watched her go. I called ahead to the checkpoint to let them know what happened, they'll keep an eye out for her," Deacon says, sighing. You peek over Sans's shoulder to try and look at him but your eyes are all blurry from crying. But you think you can see the apologetic look on his face. "Is there anything I can do?"

"babe, what—"

"Stay." You free one hand from between the two of you, reaching over Sans's shoulder for Deacon. He hesitates for only a second before taking your hand and letting you pull him closer. Sniffling, drawing in a deep, shuddering breath and wiping your eyes with your sleeve, you do your best to give him a watery smile. "Please stay, Deacon... I'm just so glad you're here."

"I'm not going anywhere," he says firmly, sandwiching your hand between both of his and squeezing. "Though I can't really take the credit, it was Sans's idea."

You're starting to feel better. Exhausted and wrung out, but better. Sans is still holding you, Deacon has your hand, and with the two of them here you're feeling safe again. Resting your chin on your fiancé's shoulder, you let out a slow exhale and force some of your muscles to relax.

"you were here at just the right moment, thank you," Sans says, and you watch Deacon's expression brighten just a little. "if things had escalated any further..."

If things had escalated he would have had to use his magic, more than he already did. And who knows how Kim would have reacted to something like Sans forcibly removing her from the house.
with his gravity magic? That would have involved her Soul and just... there are too many variables there. Things that you were able to avoid just by having Deacon step in. You're glad that Sans had this contingency in place, even though you're frustrated for not thinking of it yourself. But you'd been hoping, hoping so much, for things to go well.

"I feel like such an idiot for even talking to her in the first place," you mumble, fresh tears swimming in your eyes.

"You're not. It's not your fault that she tricked you, that she wasn't the person you hoped she'd be," Sans says, doing his best to be soothing but you can hear the edge in his voice.

"Exactly," Deacon agrees, squeezing your hand.

You want to argue, to wallow in your own regret and poor choices, but the oven beeping in the kitchen yanks you back to reality, hard enough to make you tense up again. "Oh, shit, I almost forgot about dinner, I need to—"

"We'll handle it, babe don't worry," Sans says, easing away from you so he can look you in the eye. His pupils are two sharp points.

"But I—"

"Don't worry about it. I can..." He hesitates, looking towards the kitchen. "I can get Papyrus. Where are him and Frisk?"

"Upstairs," you mumble, wiping your face with your free hand. Deacon is still holding the other. "I didn't want Frisk to see all that."

"No, you did the right thing. I'll be right back, you stay with Deacon," he says and you nod before he disappears.

"Hope—" Deacon doesn't get the chance to say anything else before you throw your arms around him. You hear him let out a soft sigh as he wraps you up and hugs you back, holding you tight. For someone that used to be so hesitant about physical contact, he gives great hugs. (In all fairness, you think you and Bo might be the only exceptions.) "I'm sorry. That things didn't turn out how you wanted."

"Me too," you mumble, muffled a little by his chest. You turn your head and rest your cheek against him, tucked under his chin. "I just... wanted her to be something she's not anymore. But I... I tried. I tried to..." Trailing off, you shake your head and you try to swallow back more tears as they gather in your eyes.

"You did what you could to try and let her back into your life, and she ruined it. Not you, her. You did more than she deserved, but at least you know you tried. That's what you wanted, right?" He's rubbing your back, a little harder than Sans was but it's a good distraction. You try to focus on that feeling, nodding.

Yeah. That's what you wanted.

The oven stops beeping and you can hear Papyrus in the kitchen. Sans must have teleported him down. Deacon lets you go and you wipe your eyes, giving him a small smile that he returns as you pull away from him. Frisk appears and runs towards you from the kitchen, flinging their arms around your waist before giving Deacon a confused look.

"Did she leave? And why is Mr. Stuart here?" they ask, peering up at you through their bangs.
"Mom... were you crying?"

You smooth their hair away from their forehead, kneeling down to plant a kiss there and pull them into a proper hug. Swallowing past the lump in your throat, you nod. "Yeah, sweetie, I was. Your grandmother upset me very much, but she's gone now. Deacon came over to help make sure she left and didn't cause any trouble."

Frisk's arms are around your neck, their face burrowed into the crook of your shoulder. "Did she hurt you? Are you okay?"

The fact that Frisk even knows to ask that, that they know what she's capable of is proof enough that you did the right thing by kicking her out. You just should have done it sooner. If it wasn't for your own guilt you never should have given her this chance at all. Blinking back tears, you look up at Deacon and you can see the pain in his face as he watches Frisk. He shakes his head and hooks his thumbs on his jeans, turning away.

"My heart hurts, and I'm sad and upset, but I'll be okay," you tell Frisk, your voice tight. "What about you? I'm sorry to get your hopes up."

"I don't want to see her if she's going to make you cry!" Frisk blurts out, squeezing you. You smile, even though they can't see it. "I'm glad she's gone, if she's still gonna be mean..."

"That's right. Besides, we've already got plenty of family right here." You told yourself that before, on Thanksgiving. Now this time you're actually going to listen.

"you were really on the back porch the whole time?" Sans looks at Deacon across the table, arching a brow and giving him a wry smile as all five of you eat dinner.

"Yes, really. Uh, speaking of which I have to remember to go get my book, I just sort of left it on the steps," Deacon says with a sheepish grin.

This is much better. Dinner with Kim would have been a tense, anxiety-ridden affair but this. This is real family. You're smiling and Sans has his hand on your leg and everyone is just... happy. You're happy.

"what are you reading?" Sans asks, rubbing his thumb along the curve of your knee as he pokes his fork at his salad.

Deacon goes on to describe a historical fantasy novel you haven't heard of before, but Sans looks interested at least. The two of them start talking books and you're content to just watch them. Is this what it took to get the two of them to start getting along? Both of them teaming up to protect you? Well, if that's the case at least today wasn't a total waste.

Well, and despite the dull ache in your chest and a tender feeling of loss, you at least have a bit of closure. You knew where you stood with your mother and though you feel the lesser for losing her for good... now at least you can move forward. You don't need her or her abuse in your or Frisk's life. Though sometimes you have to remind yourself, you deserve better. You don't deserve what you were given.

Covering Sans's hand with your own, you thread your fingers between his. He doesn't even consciously react; he continues his conversation with Deacon. But he spreads his fingers so you can get a better hold on him and then he squeezes. Just a silent little reminder that he knows you're there. It's enough to make your heart give a flutter and for your eyes to mist up just a bit, because you're already feeling delicate and such an awful day has turned into something wonderful.
What did you ever do to deserve these people in your life?

"I'll lend you the first book, I think you'd like it!" Deacon says, grinning at Sans, looking pleased with himself. He glances over at you and that smile falters a little, his brow furrowing in concern. "Hope, you okay?"

With an embarrassed laugh, you blink back the tears in your eyes and rub your face. "I'm just glad to have everyone here. I never could have done that on my own," you say, looking over at Sans. He just smiles at you with this tender look on his face, and if it wasn't for present company you'd probably be kissing him right now. You love him so much.

"OF COURSE WE'RE HERE!" Papyrus says, pointing his fork at you. "WE'RE FAMILY!"

"I told you I'd help you, and I meant it," Deacon says with a smile. "I'm more than happy to kick your mom out of your house as many times as you want."

"Hopefully just the once, thanks," you say.

"I'm just saying. The offer stands." He winks and you laugh, nodding.

"SHE WAS VERY RUDE, WASTING NO TIME TO MAKE HER VISIT UNPLEASANT FOR EVERYONE!" Papyrus says, shaking his head. "SHE COULD HAVE AT LEAST WAITED FOR DINNER!"

You're not sure why —maybe it's that leftover giddy feeling after having adrenaline wear off from earlier— but all of a sudden you can't stop laughing. Everyone is laughing.

"No way, then I wouldn't be able to have her portion," Deacon interjects once he catches his breath, resting his elbow on the table and cradling his head in his hand.

"yeah, i'd rather have deacon here than kim," Sans says, squeezing your knee and your hand at the same time.

He rolls his eyes. "Well, I'm so glad you hold me in such high regard."

"buddy, c'mon, i didn't mean it like that." Sans arches a brow and the look he's giving Deacon is genuine. You also realize the slight shift in how he addressed him. Back before you started dating, he'd called you 'buddy' after all. Not 'pal'.

"Oh," Deacon says, then gives him a lopsided smile. "Habit, I guess."

"yeah, well, things are changing, right?" he says with a shrug, and you look between the two of them with a new feeling of optimism. You could get used to this.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. You still owe me an apology for the disaster that was watching Monty Python with you," he says, narrowing his eyes and pointing at him with his fork.

"nope. not gonna happen," Sans says, but he's smiling a real smile even as he leans forward and squints. "you have awful taste."

"Monty Python is brilliant and I'm offended you think otherwise!"

"it's not funny."

"It is!"
Well. Maybe some things won't change.
The next couple days are... okay.

Kim tries to call you the next day and you reject it, and she leaves two voicemails you ask Sans to delete for you. He's more than happy to, and you can see the grim satisfaction on his face as he does it. Then on Monday you receive a call in the middle of work from a soldier manning the checkpoint. Kim is trying to get through and while they had a note from when Deacon called them, they need to double check with you on if she was permitted entry. You tell them that no, under no circumstances is she to come into Ebott so long as you have any say in the matter. That was all the soldier needed, and you apologize to her for having to deal with your mother. After you hang up you have to excuse yourself to the bathroom so you can catch your breath and stop shaking.

When you tell Undyne what happened with Kim she tells you she knew as much, but thankfully refrains from rubbing it in your face. Maybe it's the look on your face that subdues her, but she hugs you, gives you a 'that's rough, buddy' and asks you if you want her to go beat her up. While the thought is tempting you have to politely decline.

Toriel is upset on your behalf that things happened the way that they did, but you can tell that she's happy Kim is gone for good. "That horrible woman does not deserve you or Frisk, my child. Do not give her a second thought. You have a family that loves you," she says, and you end up crying in her office at school. When you're done you feel better, like the more you let yourself feel what happened, the more you're finally letting go.

You were worried about what affect this might have on Frisk, but honestly they seem happier now that this is all over. Ever since you agreed to do lunch with her they'd been a little... withdrawn. Apprehensive of this small change in their life after adjusting to a world without her. So it's good for them, and for you, to have things back to normal.

Well, as normal as you can expect.

When you wake up Tuesday morning, three days before Christmas, it's snowing. You don't even notice until you're in the kitchen. Sipping coffee and and sitting in peaceful silence with Sans at the bar, that silence is abruptly shattered as Papyrus marches into the room with a half-asleep Frisk perched on his shoulders.

"IT'S SNOWING!" he exclaims, and you barely manage not to splash hot coffee down the front of your robe. You've been a little jumpy since Saturday, and you catch the concerned look Sans gives you as he puts a hand on the small of your back.

"Mom, does this mean we get a snow day from school?" Frisk asks, grinning down at you.

You glance out the window and see that, yes, in fact, it is definitely snowing. Not hard, but enough for you to notice. It never snowed down in the foothills where you grew up, just here in the mountains. "That's not how it works, sweetie. You've still got today and tomorrow and then you're
off for winter break.

Frisk lets out a loud, disappointed noise as Papyrus sets them down and rushes over to the big picture window to open the blinds. It must have started snowing overnight because the trees and ground already have a light dusting of white.

"IF IT KEEPS SNOWING LIKE THIS IT'LL BE JUST LIKE BACK IN SNOWDIN IN TIME FOR MY BIRTHDAY! WE CAN MAKE SNOW SKELETONS LIKE WE DID LAST YEAR," Papyrus says, turning to look at his brother. His bright grin turns into a perturbed frown. "AND YOU HAVE TO ACTUALLY TRY SANS. NO MAKING SNOW LUMPS AND WRITING YOUR NAME ON IT."

"snow problem, bro," Sans says, earning himself a frustrated groan from Papyrus. "i'm sure you'll have an ice birthday."

"SANS! IF YOU ARE GOING TO ANTAGONIZE ME WITH YOUR RIDICULOUS PUNS, THE LEAST YOU COULD DO IS COME UP WITH SOMETHING MORE ORIGINAL." Papyrus taps his foot on the tile floor, arching a brow. "OR I'LL HAVE TO GIVE YOU THE... COLD SHOULDER! NYEH HEH HEH!"

Papyrus rushes back out of the room, probably to change out of his pajamas. Sans is chuckling, a fond look on his face as he watches his brother go, but as he trails off you watch his attention return to the window and the snow outside. His smile fades, and after a second he shakes his head and looks back down at his coffee.

"Hun, everything okay?" you ask quietly, glancing at Frisk as they get themselves some cereal and go to the living room to watch cartoons.

"s'nothing," he mumbles, tapping the tips of his phalanges on the handle of his mug.

"Sans." You take hold of his knee and use it to turn the seat of the barstool so he's facing you. He sighs and after a moment of hesitation he meets your eyes. His pupils are dim. "it's not nothing."

"it's stupid," he says, and as you're about to argue with him he takes your hand from his leg and holds it. "it's just the snow, and pap saying it'll be like snowdin... i don't..." Sans grimaces, turning your hand in a way so he can see your ring. He nudges it with his thumb, centering it on your finger. "i don't have a lot of good memories from there. if we never got out, and we'd stayed in snowdin together that woulda been ok. but now that we're up here, it just feels a little like going back, and i don't like it."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" you ask gently.

He shakes his head. "nah, i'll be ok. besides, papyrus is happy about it. and a white christmas is supposed to be a good thing, right?"

"Think of all the nice seasonal photographs you'll be able to take," you say, and that manages to get him to smile, at least a little.

"He's an early Christmas gift."

Sans isn't sure who said that to him, maybe his mother, but that's what he remembers when he got to hold Papyrus for the first time after he was born.

It's Christmas Eve and it's Papyrus's birthday, and it's been fucking years since he's been able to
celebrate it. His own birthday came and went without him even noticing (granted, things had been a little hectic with adjusting to the surface) but he's been anticipating this day for months. He finally gets to see his little brother turn twenty-two.

It makes all this feel a little more real somehow. This passage of time, the evidence that things are still moving steadily onward from that day that Frisk fell into the Underground. That day — those days — that just wouldn't stop repeating. And through it all Papyrus had been his constant.

"He's an early Christmas gift."

He hadn't realized just how much he needed that gift until after the accident, and he was going to make damn sure that his brother knew how much he appreciated him.

Sans spends the entire morning building snow skeletons with Papyrus while you're inside baking with Frisk. He's not sure if he's more excited about the snow or the fact that Sans is actually putting some effort into his own sculpting, but it's enough to just see Papyrus happy. Even if part of what makes his brother happy is nagging him over the fact that he's spending more time just watching Papyrus than working. But he can't help it. It's not every day that he gets to see him this excited.

Some people would hate having their birthday on Christmas Eve. But not Papyrus. He's practically the living embodiment of Christmas cheer and has more than enough to share between the two days. Papyrus is many things but selfish is not one of them.

Everyone comes over to the house (even Deacon, since Papyrus didn't want to leave anyone out, not that Sans minds) and Asgore grills up hamburgers and hot dogs in the backyard. As though there wasn't a few inches of snow on the ground. There's music and party games that involve a lot of spear-throwing courtesy of Undyne. It takes a few minutes for Sans to get you to let Frisk play.

With everyone else here Sans can take more of a back seat for the festivities, especially with Mettaton fawning all over Papyrus. On one hand it appeals to his laziness, but on the other... this is the first time he's ever had to share his brother with so many people on his birthday before. It's... well a small, selfish part of him feels frustrated, but mostly he's happy. Happy that Papyrus finally has so many friends and people that care about him. It sets it apart from so many birthdays with just the two of them (at least that he can remember).

The cake you made turned out beautifully. When you bring it out, topped with twenty-two red candles (Papyrus is sure to count them all to make sure) Toriel lights the wicks with a snap of her fingers. But as everyone starts singing 'Happy Birthday' Sans catches sight of tears glistening in his brother's eye sockets. After he blows out his candles he swipes the back of his hand over his face as all his friends start clapping.

"Papy, what's wrong sweetheart?" Mettaton asks, and Sans has to catch himself before interjecting where it isn't his place. Those two are together now. Just like you're the person he goes to when he's upset, he has to expect Papyrus to go to his boyfriend. That's how these relationships work. It still doesn't stop him from feeling a little bitter about it, though he knows that isn't fair.

Papyrus is smiling, though, looking a little embarrassed. "NOTHING. I JUST CAUGHT SOMETHING IN MY EYE."

There's a soft chorus of laughter that echoes around the room, and Mettaton wraps an arm around Papyrus's shoulders. "Are you sure?"

"I'M JUST SO HAPPY TO SEE EVERYONE HERE, EVEN THOUGH WE'LL BE SEEING EVERYONE AGAIN TOMORROW FOR CHRISTMAS... BUT THIS IS PROBABLY MY
FAVORITE BIRTHDAY SO FAR. BECAUSE..." He hesitates, seeking out Sans in the crowd around the table. "BECAUSE NOT ONLY DO I HAVE ALL THESE WONDERFUL FRIENDS, BUT I ALSO HAVE MORE FAMILY THAN I HAD BEFORE! AND I'M SO HAPPY TO SEE SANS SO HAPPY."

There's a beat of silence where everyone is smiling, and Sans feels you there next to him, slipping an arm around his shoulders as, before he realizes it, he feels his own eye sockets grow a little damp. Chuckling, he swipes his sleeve over his face and beams at his brother. "I'm glad to see you happy too, bro."

"Well, on that note maybe it is time for the presents?" Toriel says, a welcome interruption as Sans takes a second to gather himself again.

You lean in closer to him, and for a second you meet his eyes and yours are a little shiny and wet too. He nuzzles your cheek and you kiss his brow, and as he pulls away he catches sight of Papyrus and Mettaton talking quietly next to the cake. They're smiling at each other, holding hands, and after a moment they lean in for a kiss and Sans looks away. Not because of any particular dislike, but to give them their privacy.

His little brother is finally, finally, getting the chance to get a year older, and see what life has in store for him.
"Mom! Dad! Santa came!"

You're woken by Frisk's excited shout, followed shortly after by a small body jumping into your bed. Hands are shoving your shoulder, trying to push you out of bed, and you give a bleary look in the direction of your bedside clock. Five thirty-six AM. Not that you expect any less from a six year old on Christmas morning.

"SANS! GET UP YOU LAZYBONES! OR FRISK AND I ARE GOING TO OPEN PRESENTS WITHOUT YOU!"

Papyrus flips on the overhead light and you and Sans let out a chorus of disgruntled groans, shielding your eyes. You feel Frisk's hands leave your back and hear the soft rattle of bones as they turn to shake Sans instead. Rubbing your face and pushing your hair out of the way, you sit up and glance over at your fiancé as he tries to pull the covers over his head. You can hear him chuckling.

"Dad!" Frisk whines, and you still love the sound of that. That this year, on Christmas, Frisk has a father who loves them. They pull on the comforter and try to yank it down. "Dad c'mon!"

Wrapping your arms around Frisk's middle, you pull them away from Sans and try to yank it down. "We'll be right down," you tell him, glancing over at the lump that is Sans next to you. "Why don't you get some Christmas music playing for when we open presents?"

"I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, CAN ACCOMPLISH THIS TASK!" he says, beaming as he hurries out of the room with Frisk in tow.

Rubbing your eyes, you adjust the collar of your nightgown before shoving what you guess is Sans's shoulder. He grunts at you. "Hey," you say.

After a second you see a set of bony fingers curl over the edge of the blanket and pull it down, just enough for you to see a single eye socket looking at you. His pupil is big and bright, but a little fuzzy around the edges. "hm?"

Leaning down, you plant a kiss on his exposed brow. "It's our first Christmas together."

He makes a contented sound. "yep."

"And in a week, we'll be getting married," you say, easing back the comforter away from his face. He doesn't resist.
A warm, bony hand brushes along your jaw, cupping the back of your head. He pulls you down so he can kiss you, nuzzle against your cheek. "yep."

The faint sound of Christmas music drifts up to your bedroom, and you can hear Papyrus's muffled voice. "I love you."

Arms circle your chest and pull you down to him as he hugs you tightly. He buries his face in your neck, in your hair, and for a moment he's silent, tensed beneath you. "i love you too, babe," he says at last, and if his voice is rough from sleep or something else, you're not sure. Though, if you had to guess you'd bet on the latter. "i love you so damn much."

You'd put up the Christmas tree the day after Kim's visit. It was like banishing a haunting presence; willing the foulness out of your house with an abundance of holiday cheer. Set up in a corner of the living room in front of some of the bookshelves, you and Sans stayed up extra late to put out presents after Frisk and Papyrus went to bed, though there's quite a few under the tree you don't remember wrapping. When you catch Sans's eye after looking them over, all he does is grin and shrug.

They're all labeled for you.

You never had many gifts at Christmas. Any extra money you had around the holidays went towards buying gifts for Frisk, and, well, your mother had made it clear who she favored. And surprise, it wasn't you. Not that you minded. It was more important for you to see Frisk have a good Christmas.

Sans had apparently decided that he was going to change that, starting this year. As Frisk takes turns passing out gifts one at a time, instead of you having to sit and watch while the others open presents, you have just as many as the rest of them. By the fourth gift you have tears in your eyes and Sans wraps his arm around your shoulders.

"merry christmas," he murmurs to you, and you can't stop smiling as you wipe your eyes. "and this is just the stuff from me and pap."

"You didn't have to do all this," you whisper, resting your head against his.

"sure i did."

Frisk is too busy looking through all their new toys and games to notice you sniffling, but Papyrus catches your eye. Grinning, he lets out a small, pleased 'nyeh!' before returning his attention to his own pile of presents. Some new robot action figures, a few cookbooks from you, and a variety of clothing in garish colors (from Sans, probably to offend Mettaton's sense of fashion, you can only assume).

You think that gifts are over, as Papyrus gets up to go to the kitchen and start breakfast and Frisk starts carting their spoils upstairs. But Sans goes over to the tree and fishes something out from between the branches, something that no one else noticed was there. It's a small box wrapped in blue paper with a matching blue bow stuck to the top. He hands it to you.

Arching a brow, you hold it in your hands as you watch the affectionate look on his face. "So why couldn't I open this one in front of Papyrus and Frisk?" you ask quietly as he sits on the couch next to you.

"thought you might want a minute," he says, which doesn't tell you much of anything.
Curious, you tear off the paper to reveal the flat, square box beneath. You glance at Sans and then back at the gift before pulling off the lid. Inside is an oval locket, white gold and about the size of an old half-dollar coin. Designed like a sunburst, in the center is a raised infinity symbol. You set the box aside, pulling the locket out and letting the thick, sturdy chain slip through your fingers.

"It's beautiful," you say, running your thumb over the smooth ridges of the sunburst.

"I know you don't wear a lot of jewelry, but I thought you might make an exception for this," Sans says, watching your expression. "Technically I'm giving it to you a little early, but I didn't wanna wait. Open it."

Using your thumbnail, you hear a soft popping sound as you do as Sans tells you. Inside, on the right side, is a picture of you, Sans, and Frisk. Instead of a formal portrait like one of the ones you have hanging up in the stairwell, this one is full of energy and huge smiles. You and Sans are sitting together with Frisk on your laps, tucked right in the middle. You remember this. This was from your birthday party out at the lake. You can see the water and the trees behind you, and the loose, plunging shirt you wore over your bathing suit. Sans took this selfie on his phone.

Smiling, you touch the glass keeping the picture protected, then turn your attention to the left side of the locket. Engraved there is a date: the date of your wedding next week. Beneath it reads, 'Love for all time.'

"Sans, you keep making me cry," you blurt out, laughing weakly as you rub your eyes.

He takes the locket from you and slips the chain over your head, carefully pulling your hair out from under it and letting the weight of the pendant settle right over your heart. Nuzzling your temple, he covers the necklace with his hand, pressing gently over your sternum. "Now you've got us right here whenever you need us."

Later, after breakfast has been eaten and you get dressed for your big family Christmas with Toriel and the others, there's a knock on the door. For a brief but nerve-wracking moment you think maybe somehow Kim is there to ruin yet another holiday, but instead you find Deacon. He's standing there on the porch in a festive, green sweater vest and coordinating button-up shirt, a stack of presents in his arms. Grinning, he hands them to you and steps inside.

"Merry Christmas! How long have you been up?" he asks, throwing his arm around your shoulders and giving you a sideways hug.

"Five thirty, how did you know?" you answer, elbowing him in the ribs and leading him into the living room.

"You have a six-year-old, is there any other alternatives for Christmas morning?" Deacon spots Frisk playing a game on the TV and grabs one of the gifts from the middle of the stack in your arms. The wrapping is... serviceable you guess. Not terribly done but not all that pretty either. "Hey Frisk, think fast," he says, tossing the present towards them.

They drop their controller to catch it. "Oh, thanks Mr. Stuart!"

"Don't mention it," he says with a wave of his hand. "Merry Christmas."

"You didn't have to do this," you say to him softly, smiling as you catch his eye.

Deacon shrugs. "I've never exactly had people to buy presents for before," he says with a crooked smile. "They're not much, but I wanted to do something."
Setting down the remaining gifts on the coffee table, you shift around some presents still under the tree; the ones for your friends. Finding the two small packages you're looking for, you hand them to Deacon as Sans comes into the room.

"thought i heard the door. merry christmas," Sans says. He comes up alongside you and glances down at the table. "stuff for us?"

"Merry Christmas, and yeah. Frisk already got theirs," Deacon says, starting to open what you just handed him. "Oh sweet! Hope, this lanyard is great. I'll be the coolest teacher at school." He pulls the on the black lanyard, patterned with gold elven script from Lord of the Rings.

"Aren't you already the coolest teacher at school?" you tease, nudging his arm.

"Well yeah but even more so now." He winks at you.

Sans is opening his gift from Deacon: a short stack of three books. "oh, i thought you were just gonna let me borrow these from you?" he says, sounding pleased.

Deacon shrugs. "Yeah, but now you have your own copies."

You nudge your friend's shoulder as you reach to grab your own present off the table. It feels like more books. "Open the other one. I mean, I'm not sure if it's really your thing, but—"

The sound of tearing paper interrupts you, and Deacon looks down at the picture frame in his hands. It's his own copy of the photo of the two of you from Thanksgiving, matted and framed and ready to go wherever he decides to put it. For a second you're not sure he likes it. He doesn't exactly have pictures around the house, so you don't know what to expect from his reaction. A moment passes and he looks up at you and smiles.

"This is great, this is..." He trails off and wraps you up in a big hug. Clearing his throat and sniffing, Deacon takes a second before letting you go. You think his eyes might be a little shiny. "I mean, it's no friendship bracelet, but I guess it'll have to do."

"Shut up," you tell him, laughing. "I'm glad you like it."

"Um, would it be weird if I copied you guys and hung it up in my stairwell?" he asks quietly, bowing his head and glancing over at Sans as he carries Papyrus's gift into the kitchen.

"If that's what you want to do, I think it would be perfect." You give him an affectionate smile. "Hey, when are you supposed to go over to Bo's? You're still doing Christmas with her family, right?"

"Yeah, and uh," he gives a cursory glance around the room, looking for a clock you think. "Soon. Like, I should probably head out in the next couple minutes. Do you know anything about her family? Has she ever mentioned them to you?"

You blink. "No, not really. Did she not tell you anything?"

"I mean, she said there's a lot of them. And that they're friendly, but isn't that what people say about their families? Uh, present company excluded. But seriously, it's always, 'Oh they'll love you!' and then it all falls apart and there's holiday hijinks and hilarious-but-well-intentioned misunderstandings."

"Deacon, you're rambling," you say, taking hold of his shoulders and making him look you in the eye. "And it sounds like you've watched way too many movies. You'll be fine. Bo adores you and
I'm sure her family will too."

"Okay but, imagine this, what if they don't?" he presses, swallowing. "She's got to be close with them, so what does it mean if they don't like me? What if they don't want a human dating their daughter?"

"you're worrying too much," Sans says, chuckling and arching a brow as he returns to the living room. "i'm sure they'll eat you right up."

"Are you sure? Have you met them?" Deacon asks, turning towards your fiancé with more than a little desperation.

"yeah, they swung by the hotel a few times when we worked together. they're nice folks." He shrugs his shoulders and rocks forward onto his toes. "and i think you're expecting them to act like humans. we're a bit more accepting of this kinda stuff."

"Sans is right," you add, giving Deacon a warm smile. "You'll be fine."

"Baby, are you okay?"

Deacon glances over at Bo where she's sitting in the passenger seat, looking at him with concern in those big blue eyes. She's wearing an adorably tacky Christmas sweater that just so happens to coordinate with his vest, and there's a sprig of holly tucked into her woolen hair, right above her ear. He forces himself to relax his grip on the steering wheel, reaching over for her hand.

"I'm fine," he tells her (and himself). "Totally fine."

"I promise, you've got no reason to worry," she says for the third time so far (he's counted). Honestly the fact that she keeps repeating herself just makes him worry more. "If I like you, they'll like you— oh, it's that house right there. Yes, the white one with the red door."

There's only one other car parked in front of the house, a big van. He's seen a lot of vans recently, now that more monsters have been getting permits to drive with the Line opening. Pulling Sylvie up behind it, he throws her into park and gets out, circling the car to open Bo's door. She waits, letting him help her out, which he thinks is adorable. She's just... everything about her is adorable. He takes hold of her waist and gives her a soft, tender kiss before letting her go, savoring the pleased sound low in her throat.

"Keep that up and I might let you take me home after," she teases, letting out a silky laugh. She follows him around to the trunk as he opens it, and inside there's a big bag of presents.

"Are you sure I didn't need to get your parents anything?" Deacon asks for the fourth time (he's counted that, too). He fishes out the one, single present he brought with him; the one for Bo. She refused to open it at her apartment, insisting that she wanted to bring it with her. It's nothing he wouldn't want her family to see, but... he hopes she likes it.

"Yes," she says as he takes the bag from her, then closes the trunk. She grabs his arm, stopping him as he starts to head for the path leading up to the front door. Looking him in the eye, Bo gives him a reassuring smile. "Deacon. I promise."

After a second he lets out a long sigh, nodding his head as he forces some of the tension out of his chest. "Okay, okay. Right. Sorry, this is just... I've never done this before," he says with an apologetic look.
"I know," she says, kissing him on the cheek.

She leads him up to the house, still holding his arm. Snow crunches underfoot, though most of the path is cleared by sets of unidentifiable footprints. As they get closer he can hear the sounds of music and voices inside, and on the door there's a beautiful, fresh wreath of pine and holly. Bo glances at him, gives him a smile, and presses the doorbell.

There's a sudden shift in the voices inside and after a second he sees a shadow pass over the frosted glass set into a semicircle at the top of the door. Deacon swallows, doing his best to ignore the way his stomach is doing somersaults. Then, the knob turns, and it opens.

Standing there, wearing a bright red sweater and a pair of slacks, is not a sheep. No, no, not a sheep at all. There is a white wolf standing in the doorway, with a pair of glasses perched on his muzzle.

"Daddy!" Bo exclaims, throwing her arms around his neck. "Merry Christmas!"

Oh god her father is a wolf.

"Merry Christmas sweetheart!" the wolf says, chuckling and grinning, baring an impressive (and terrifying) set of fangs. "Ylva, our daughter is here!"

Past Bo's father, a little way down the hall, another wolf with brown fur pokes her head out of a doorway. "Well don't leave them standing there in the cold, Rollo!"

Oh god her parents are wolves.

"I'm sure they'll eat you right up."

Oh, Sans, that son of a bitch.
"And this must be Deacon," Rollo says, which snaps him back to reality, and he realizes that, shit shit shit he must have been staring.

As quick as he can, Deacon plasters on a friendly smile. "Hi! Merry Christmas!" he manages to say, giving Bo a quick look that he hopes doesn't seem too desperate. "I'm sorry, I'd, uh, shake your hand but I don't have any to spare."

The white wolf chuckles, putting his arm around his daughter's (his sheep daughter, what the hell is going on?) shoulders as she glances at him, her smile turning confused. Oh she's confused? If anyone is allowed to be confused right now it's him thank you very much. This has to be some kind of joke. Sans sure as hell thinks it's one, that much he's sure of.

That damn skeleton.

"Well come on in, your mother will have my hide if I keep the two of you out here much longer," Rollo says, still grinning and showing those glistening fangs. He turns to Bo, hunching over and giving her a cautious look. "Is she still looking?"

"Don't you start that now, I may not be able to hear you but I'm not blind," Ylva calls down the hall, shaking her head and pulling back into whatever room she poked out of. Rollo and Bo start laughing and Deacon takes the time to gather his wits.

Okay, he can do this. This is fine. Everything is fine. Who cares if Bo was... what? Adopted by wolves? Honestly it explains a lot. Her taste for meat maybe, and her spunky, in your face personality. Or perhaps it was just wrong of him to assume that she'd act like, well, a sheep when she's, in fact, a monster.

Deacon trails after his girlfriend and her father, going, uh, quite literally into the wolves' den. Okay, no, he can't think of it like that. Look, he went on a date with Muffet. He went back to her house. This can't be scarier than that, right? Well, no that doesn't help. He might have managed to go inside but that had ended with him screaming (just a little, dammit) and excusing himself for the evening. He can't do that here. This is Bo's family. His girlfriend's family. He has to make a good impression, he can't just run away!

Would she hold it against him if he just turned around and walked out and maybe hyperventilated a little on the front porch?

The living room is full of people and they're all talking at once, so when Bo says his name he doesn't hear her the first time. He's too busy trying to sort out the voices and just trying to take it all in. There's wolves on the couch and a monster covered in scales leaning against one wall. Something (no, Deacon, that's rude; someone) with four arms and bright orange skin is carrying a wolf pup in one set and a child with spikes and wings in the other. Okay so they're mostly wolves, but not all of them. That makes him feel slightly less like a slab of meat being brought to the table.
And it's a little hard to feel threatened when almost all of them are wearing tacky Christmas sweaters.

"Deacon?" Bo says and he jumps a little as he feels her hand on his arm. A little crease forms between her eyebrows and she leans in close. "Daddy asked you a question."

He blinks and looks over at Rollo where he's polishing his glasses with the sleeve of his sweater. Feeling heat creep up the sides of his neck, Deacon clears his throat to try and stop making it feel so tight. "I'm sorry, I was just... I got distracted by all the noise and I didn't hear you. Could you please repeat the question?"

Rollo rests his glasses back on his muzzle, tugging on the chain fixed to the sides to make sure they're settled properly. He gives Deacon a wolfish grin. "It's fine. The Wolf clan tends to be a little... boisterous," he says with a chuckle. "I was just asking if you'd like me to take those presents off your hands."

"Oh! I, uh..." He's normally better at this! Why does it feel like he's constantly losing his footing and about to careen down the side of the mountain? "I can..." Deacon glances towards the big Christmas tree in the corner, where a mountain of presents dominates the space around it. That alone is intimidating in of itself. "Yeah. I mean. Yes. Please, if you don't mind. I don't want to... mess anything up."

Perhaps taking pity on him, Rollo doesn't say anything and takes the big bag of presents from Deacon's arms and turns to pick his way across the living room. Oh god he's sweating and is it hot in here? He thinks that maybe, just maybe he can ask Bo why she never told him her parents are wolves but then, right as he opens his mouth—

"Lamb chop!" A huge gray wolf appears from the kitchen behind him and Deacon has to fight back a startled squeak.

"Ice! It's so good to see you!" Bo exclaims, jumping up to wrap her arms around the wolf's neck and pull him down. After a second she pulls away, holding onto his shoulders to keep him at eye level. "Or do you go by Jimmy now? Mama said that Auntie Frost told her you were still thinking about changing your name."

He snorts. "Nah. It's still Ice."

"Deacon," she says, and for a second he wonders if he's giving them a weird look. Oh god he probably is, isn't he? But if she notices she doesn't say anything, still all smiles as she lets go of the wolf to touch Deacon's hand for a second. "This is my cousin."

Ice holds out one enormous hand and when Deacon goes to shake it the gray-furred fingers nearly swallow up to his wrist. He fights the urge to yank it back. "So you're the human everybody's been talking about." What? They were talking about him? Ice gives him a scrutinizing look, tightening his grip on his hand as Deacon feels his forced smile start to falter. "Watch yourself. If you hurt Bo... let's just say that Ebott's an awfully big place for someone to go missing."

There's a moment where Deacon reconsiders that idea of hyperventilating on the front porch again.

"Ice!" Bo exclaims, smacking his chest and giving him a playful glare. "Stop trying to scare him!"

Try? Oh no, he was succeeding. With flying colors.

Ice starts laughing and finally lets go of Deacon's hand. As the big wolf turns to head into the living room, he looks back at him and makes a V with his fingers, pointing to his eyes and then at
Deacon. A universal sign for 'I'm watching you'.

"Where's the bathroom?" Deacon says, his voice a little higher than strictly dignified.

Bo gives him an odd look. "Baby we just got here."

"I'll just be a second," he says, and after a moment Bo points him towards an open door down the hall.

The second he has the door shut and locked behind him Deacon yanks his phone out of his pocket. Maybe he ought to say something to Bo, to tell her that he's more than a little freaked out so she can... he doesn't know, just try to make this a little easier on him. But she shouldn't be spending her Christmas worrying about him. She should be enjoying time with her family. (A family that just threatened to murder him, joking or not.)

Letting out a frustrated sound, something to just force the tension out of his body, he pulls up Sans's number. For a second he thinks he's just going to text him, but no. No, that won't do. He starts a call.

After two rings he picks up. "hel—"

"You son of a bitch," Deacon hisses, walking to the far side of the bathroom and sitting down on the edge of the tub. He holds his head in his hands. "You asshole you knew this would happen!"

There's a chuckle on the other end of the line. In the background he can hear voices. He must be at that big family Christmas at Toriel's house. God, at least if he was there he wouldn't feel quite so lost. "calm down, buddy. it can't be that bad."

"Her cousin Ice just threatened to kill me! They're wolves, Sans! You could have said something!"

"ice wolf? nah, he's harmless. if there's anybody you should watch out for it's ylva. that's her baby girl you're boning."

"For fuck's sake, Sans."

"Hun, who's that on the phone?" He hears your voice and for a brief, insane moment he has this gut-wrenching desire for you to just come save him from this disaster he's found himself in the middle of.

"deacon. you wanna talk to him?"

"Yes," Deacon snaps. "Please put Hope on the phone."

There's a pause where he can hear the phone exchanging hands. "Deacon, what's wrong?"

"Hope, help," he whispers, shoving the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Everything is awful."

"Why are you whispering? Where are you?" you ask him. "Sans why are you laughing? He sounds upset."

"I'm hiding in Bo's parents' bathroom. We just got here and it's already awful. You're about to ask him why, so he just blurts it out all over again. "They're wolves. She was raised by wolves and Sans didn't tell me and he knew. What do I do?"

"Deacon, you're..." A pause. "Sans go away, I can't believe you right now," you grumble, but if
Deacon knows you (and he thinks he does) he can tell you're not really angry with him. Ugh, the world just isn't fair. "Why are you hiding in the bathroom? Go spend time with your girlfriend on Christmas!"

"They're wolves."

"They're monsters. Just like Sans, and Papyrus, and Undyne, and everyone else you know," you tell him, calm and placating and oh god you're right, he's being so stupid. "Take a breath, and get out of that bathroom."

"Okay, this is me, taking a breath. I'm breathing," he says, and sucks in a steadying lungful before exhaling loudly into the phone for your benefit. "I'm a mess."

"You'll be fine. Deacon?"

"...Hope?"

"You're nervous because you care. It's a good thing, don't let it scare you," you say gently, and he can hear the smile in your voice.

He barks out a laugh, shaking his head. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"Hang up the phone. Sister's orders."

Sister. That sobers him a little, gets him to take another deep breath and ground himself. It still feels too strange to think of seriously. Sure, he could joke about being your brother, do the protective shtick for laughs, but... He doesn't know the first thing about having a family.

"Okay, okay," he says, letting out a weak laugh. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Call us if you need us."

He waits in silence for a second until you hang up the phone.

As it turns out, Bo isn't adopted. Her grandmother on her father's side is a sweet old sheep named Mary, who he finds tucked away in a corner with a litter of grandchildren. He shouldn't be surprised that she's the one who taught her how to knit (and also to spin her own wool into yarn, which answers a whole handful of other questions he has).

Now that's he's calmed himself down, everyone seems a lot less frightening. Yes, Ice Wolf keeps pointing at him and making threatening gestures while laughing, and maybe Bo's mother makes him a little jumpy (though he thinks part of that is Sans's fault), but they're nice people. That's what he forgot: to regard them as people. He thought he'd been getting better at that, but he was already on the defensive when they got there and he'd just... it had been a bit much all at once. He'll do better.

Opening gifts takes over an hour with the number of people in attendance, most of which he spends just watching Bo. She's so loved by her family, he can see it in the gifts they got her, in the way that they talk to her and how they've welcomed him. Her happiness is precious to them. What can he possibly bring to the table? What does he have to offer her that she doesn't already have? Here, surrounded by the entirety of the Wolf family, he feels like all he's doing is taking. Her companionship, their hospitality... Bo's parents even got him a gift and like an ass he didn't have anything in return. Not even a crappy gift; they got him a set of nice ties for work.
Sitting next to Bo, clutching his ties in his hand, he feels more like a fraud than he usually does with her. Here she is, with her loving family, happy and well adjusted and just... good. She's so good and how can he compare?

Well, he'll just keep doing what he's been doing: pretending he's just as happy and well adjusted as she is.

"Oh, this one's from you!" Bo says, looking over at him and nudging him with her shoulder. She has his gift in her lap. He smiles at her, a little ball of worry rolling around in the pit of his stomach.

Tearing at the paper, and thankfully keeping her opinion of his terrible wrapping job to herself, Bo flips over the hardcover book to find the title. Her expression is curious; she doesn't have a whole lot of books in her apartment because she's not a habitual reader, but he hopes she'll like this one anyway. In big bold letters, the title is '100 Places in the 50 States: Sights to See in the USA!'.

She stares at it, runs her fingers over the cover, and then looks at him, a question in her eyes.

"Uh, open it. Inside cover," he says, pointing at the book.

There, in his tidy print, it reads: 'I hope someday soon you can see every single one. -Deacon'. He'd spent almost an hour deciding on what to write. Twice he'd nearly given up on writing anything at all. He didn't want to say anything about them seeing the sights together, even though, secretly, that's what he's hoping. But it hasn't even been a month since they started dating, and that kind of commitment... no, he's not ready to assume anything right now. But he knows that, even if he's not the one with her, he sincerely wishes that she gets to see the world one day. But for now, maybe just the US will suffice.

Deacon clears his throat. "One of those places is actually just an hour or two South of here, if you wanted, we could—"

"Yes," Bo says, giving him the biggest, brightest smile. "Yes, I'd love to. Deacon, this is perfect, thank you so much. I love... I love it."

Something in his chest squeezes as though grabbed by a giant fist, even as he lets out a relieved laugh. "Yeah? Good! I'm glad."

She leans over and kisses him, and he forgets that there are other people in the room, watching the two of them, until the (literal) wolf whistles start. Blushing and embarrassed, he tries to pull away. But Bo holds him in place, kissing him thoroughly until she's satisfied, and when they finally part she casts a smug look at her family. They just laugh and the opening of presents continues unabated.

"You're shameless," Deacon murmurs, rubbing the back of his neck and giving her an affectionate smile.

"I've got nothing to be ashamed of," she says primly, then grins. "Okay, now you've got to open mine."

He watches, doing his best not to openly stare, as she goes to all fours to reach for a present tucked away under the tree with what's still remaining. Settling back beside him again, she pushes the gift into his lap. It's big and flat and rectangular, and for a second he thinks maybe it's a book. Bo wraps her arms around his waist, resting her chin on his shoulder as he opens it.

Sitting on top of a box is a glossy leather wallet. "You kept complaining about needing a new one,"
Bo says as he picks it up. Tooled into the corner is an ornate letter 'D' in a flowing script. Flipping it open, and inspecting the pockets, he finds a dollar bill in the billfold. "Apparently it's bad luck to give an empty wallet. And this way you'll always have something from me wherever you go."

"I can't believe you listened to my whining, thank you," he says, smiling at her. She kisses his cheek and settles her chin back on his shoulder.

That just leaves the box. Pushing the wrapping paper further off the corners, he pries off the white lid. Inside is a collage style picture frame. It's empty.

"I talked with Hope, and we both thought you could use some pictures in your house. But you and I haven't taken any, so I thought maybe this might give us some incentive," she says, hugging him close. "Maybe we can use this book as our guide, start ticking off the list—"

Deacon doesn't let her finish. Doesn't need to let her finish to know what she wants and he's too busy kissing her to listen. Because he wants the same thing, even though he doesn't say it. When the wolf whistles start this time he doesn't care, because he's got nothing to be ashamed of.
Before the Big Day

In hindsight, deciding on New Year's Day for your wedding is actually a really good idea. The significance of the date aside, you have the entire week leading up to it off from work for Winter break. This gives you and Toriel plenty of time to spend on going through what's expected of you during the rite.

As far as you can tell it doesn't seem too complicated, at least on your end. Being human, there's not much you can do aside from say your vows. Sans, Toriel, and Asgore will be handling the magical side of things while you just... trust them with your Soul. Which you do, undoubtedly! But you just know that if you were a monster you'd be a more active participant in your own wedding.

That doesn't matter. Because what does matter is that once this is over, once you complete your harmony with Sans, you'll be married. Maybe not in the eyes of the government, but every single monster on Ebott will know it.

It's Wednesday the 30th, two days before your wedding, and you just spent the last four hours trapped in a room with Mettaton and two other monsters you've never met before, getting the finishing touches done on your wedding dress. You might feel more grateful for all his help if you hadn't just spent the entire afternoon feeling like a glorified mannequin. He's fantastic at it, you'll give him that, but after all this fuss part of you is just looking forward to it being over. You don't need a fancy dress, you don't need the party (even if it's going to be a small one). You just want to marry Sans. Maybe once everything is legal you won't bother with a second ceremony. You'll just go down to the courthouse and sign some papers. The idea of doing any of this again is just exhausting.

As you step off the elevator into the MTT Resort lobby, you don't even notice Deacon and Bo until they appear on either side of you, threading their arms through yours.

"Well well well, if it isn't the bride-to-be," Deacon says, grinning at your confusion. "Sure would be a shame if something were to happen to you so close to the big day."

"We've come to kidnap you," Bo adds, squeezing your arm and beaming at you.

Laughing, you look from one of them to the other as they steer you toward the door. "Oh, is that so? And where are you taking me?"

"You'll see. But first we have to meet our accomplices outside." He tries to temper his smile, dropping his voice in an attempt to sound sinister.

"Don't try to call for help, no one is going to come for you," she says, trying not to giggle.

"Oh no. Whatever will I do?" you say dryly. "What could you possibly have in store for me? What horrors will you inflict?"

Deacon pushes his way through the heavy front doors and leads the two of you after him, out into
the brisk Winter air. It's four in the afternoon, already starting to get dark, and you spot two familiar faces down the road where you parked your car. Alphys and Undyne are standing there, wrapped up in their coats and waving as they catch sight of the three of you.

"I see, so these are your accomplices you villain!" you gasp, nudging Deacon in the side and trying not to laugh. "The mad scientist and the former captain of the royal guard! How dastardly."

"Don't bother trying to fight back. We've got you right where we want you," Deacon says, giving you a companionable pat on your shoulder with his free hand. He clears his throat, dropping the charade and grinning again. "So I found out that apparently monsters don't do bachelorette parties, so I decided to take it upon myself to make sure you had a good time."

Your eyes widen, gaping at him. "Deacon, you didn't need to do this," you blurt out, glancing over at Bo. She just gives you an affectionate look before returning her attention to her boyfriend. You follow her gaze, and Deacon looks pleased with himself.

"I did too," he says, arching a brow. "You're my best friend. And since you don't exactly have a wedding party or a maid of honor to do this stuff for you, I figured I'd handle it. It's not like you're going to get another chance."

"Honey, just let yourself have some fun tonight!" Bo says, hugging your arm. "We've got everything under control."

"I even asked Sans if it was okay for us to take you out." Deacon's smile turns wry. "Since we're going past the Line I wanted to make sure he knew, not that you need his permission. Also he informed me that my original bar-hopping plan would be an absolute disaster since you don't like to drink, so I'm glad I talked to him."

"So then what was your backup plan?"

"It's a secret. You'll see."

"I swear to god, it better not be strippers," you warn him, eyes narrowing.

"I'm offended that you think I don't know you well enough. Uh, excluding the drinking thing. Though, FYI, if I ever end up getting married, I one hundred percent expect strippers. Gender doesn't matter. Just a room full of strippers."

"Isn't your best man supposed to handle that sort of thing?" you ask, arching a brow.

"No one says I can't have a best woman. Who would even be my best man? Sans? Also, please, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Deacon says, clearing his throat. "Today is about you. And you are not a stripper kind of lady."

"That is one of the weirdest things I've ever heard you say."

"So," he continues, as if you never spoke, "we are going to do something that you've told me you haven't been able to do in a long time. Something I think everyone will enjoy."

That thing is bowling, which you have to give him credit, you haven't had a chance to do since you were a kid. You don't even remember why you talked to Deacon about bowling. Maybe it had something to do with things you could do with the monsters that they've never done before? Well, it doesn't matter, because all you know is that you're having a great time showing Alphys and Undyne how to do it.
Deacon called ahead beforehand to make sure that they'd accept monsters, which was smart of him. More and more places have been turning away monster business, though you're not sure why. You can't think of anything in particular that could be causing this shift in anti-monster sentiment aside from the Line opening. But you try not to dwell on that. You're supposed to be having fun, and you can't let those kinds of thoughts put a damper on your high spirits.

"NGAAH! This game is STUPID!" Undyne yells as she gets her fourth gutter ball in a row, stomping away from the lanes. She has her hands balled into fists, gritting her teeth.

"S-sweetie it's just for fun. Besides, we're still l-learning!" Alphys says, reaching out for her fiancée's hand and squeezing. She's actually had a bit of success with the two-handed 'granny roll' technique. It might not be strictly appropriate, but hey, you're just here to have a good time.

Bo gets up from her seat as her turn comes around, picking her ball up from the return. She gives the lane an apprehensive look as she waits for the pins to be set up again.

"I'm going to go get some beers, does anybody want anything?" Undyne grumbles, glancing over at the bar. "Uh, unless that bothers you, Hope."

"Just a coke," you tell her. "And no, I mean... you guys can drink, it's fine."

"Just get a pitcher of beer and a pitcher of coke," Deacon says, looking over his shoulder at the fish monster, momentarily distracted from eyeing his girlfriend. "That should cover everybody."

"I'll go w-with you," Alphys says, hurrying off after Undyne.

Which leaves you alone with Deacon and Bo. She's giving him doe eyes and he gets up from his seat to go help her with her turn, showing her for probably the third time how to swing the bowling ball. You think that at this point they're just using it as an excuse to be close. It's adorable, but spending the evening with two couples is starting to make you feel like a fifth wheel. You know they're not doing it on purpose, that they're enjoying their time with you, but you kind of wish Sans was here too.

"Ugh, that's disgusting."

You're pulled out of your thoughts by an unfamiliar voice. A group of four humans is stepping down into the sitting area next to you, carrying bowling bags and eyeing Deacon and Bo with clear annoyance. Oh, wonderful. God what is wrong with people? Why can't they just keep their shitty opinions to themselves and let other people just be happy? Maybe you can just finish your game before—

"Maybe he's Scottish," a tall, thin man says to the shorter man next to him in something like a stage-whisper. He chuckles.

"What's being Scottish got to do with it? My grandmother's from Scotland," an older woman in the group protests, rolling her eyes.

The short man throws his arm around her shoulders as he sets his bag down on one of the seats across from you. "Sheep fuckers," he says, and the woman makes an annoyed sound, her face scrunching up with distaste.

The fourth person, a teenage girl, looks up from her cell phone. "Dad, gross. And do you have to be rude?"

The humans start to change into their bowling shoes and their conversation lowers to the point
where you can't hear them anymore. You look over at Deacon and Bo where they're talking next to the ball return, and you can see the irritation in her face. He's got his hands on her shoulders, leaning in close as his thumbs rub back and forth in a way that's meant to be soothing. But Bo doesn't look very soothed. She's baring her teeth and shaking her head.

You get up to go talk to them, to make sure everything is okay, but then the short man stands up and lugs his bowling ball to the shared return between your lanes. "Hey, can't you keep that crap in private? Nobody here wants to see that, I'm trying to have a nice time with my family," he says, lip curling.

Bo's expression hardens and Deacon gives her a steady look before turning to place himself between her and the human. He holds up his hands in a placating gesture. "Look, we're just here trying to bowl like the rest of you. There's no need for anyone to say anything unnecessary," Deacon says, keeping his voice steady but you can see the tension in his jaw.

Oh god, maybe you should go catch Undyne before she gets back but you don't want to leave Deacon and Bo alone either.

"Then keep your perversion where none of us have to deal with it."

It stings, hearing those words thrown in Deacon's face, right in front of Bo. You feel it just like he does. It's one thing to have anonymous comments ridiculing, insulting, threatening you online, but to have this man, this flesh and blood human stand there and insult your friend — and you even though he doesn't know it — feels like a punch to the gut.

"Listen here you little man," Bo snaps, taking hold of Deacon's forearm and pulling him out of her way as she pushes past him. She's glaring at the human, nearly unrecognizable. You can see now what she gets from her parents. "The only thing perverse going on right now is the fact that you think you're allowed to just insult people!"

The man snorts. "It's hilarious that you think you count as people."

"Deacon, don't!" you cry out, rushing forward to grab his hand as it balls into a fist. You wrap both hands around him, knowing that he's stronger than you but needing to at least try. He looks at you, blue eyes flashing as he glares at the man who's just standing there, looking smug. "He's not worth it. It's just like all the assholes online. We should just go."

"We have just as much a right to be here as anyone else," Bo snaps, looking at you from across Deacon's back.

"Dad, come on," the teenage girl says, hugging herself and looking uncomfortable. "You're being embarrassing."

"How do you deal with this?" Deacon asks, and it takes you a moment to realize he's talking to you. "How do you put up with all the ignorant bullshit?"

"I ignore it. Deacon," you say, calmer than you feel. Part of you just wants him to punch this asshole in the face. "His words can't do anything to us."

"I can't just sit here and listen while he insults us! Every time someone chooses not to act against this kind of ignorance, it's like giving silent permission." Deacon grits his teeth, and the man actually starts to look a little nervous. "I won't condone it."

The man just laughs. "And who the fuck do you think you are? What's some nobody monster-loving pervert going to—"
Deacon wrenches his arm from your grip, pulling back to go for a punch. But his sudden movement throws you off balance as he shakes you off, and you trip over your own feet as you try to catch yourself. Falling sideways, you reach out on instinct but your leg hits the step up to the lanes first, hard, right in the middle of your calf. It hurts, god it hurts as pain shoots through your leg, gasping as stars burst behind your eyes. Sprawled out on your side, pushing yourself up with one hand, you hiss a breath as tears blur your vision, anger and humiliation and above all pain overwhelming your senses.

"Oh no, Hope are you okay?" Bo says, and you feel hands on your shoulders, helping you sit up as you let out a gasp when you try to move your leg.

There's voices, angry voices but you can't tell them apart. It's all just noise as a soft hand squeezes yours. You hiss through your teeth. "My leg," you say, squeezing your eyes shut then reopening them as you try to blink through your tears. Bo reaches for your shin and you flinch away, crying out from your own movement instead of what she did.

"I'm sorry, Hope I'm so sorry," Deacon is saying at your other side, and when you look at him he's wide-eyed and pale. "This is all my fault."

"Deacon you'll have time to feel guilty later, we need to take her to a healer," Bo says, her grip on your hand tightening. "Where are Undyne and Alphys?"

"It was an accident," you tell Deacon, doing your best to try and ignore the waves of pain throbbing in your leg. You look up and the group of humans is talking to themselves, low enough that you can't hear. They've backed away from you and your friends, distancing themselves from your injury. A few other people are staring. You try to force a smile as you turn back to Deacon, catching his eye as you wince. "Sans might not be ready to give his permission for you to take me out again anytime soon, though."

Deacon lets out a weak laugh, hanging his head. "He's going to kick my ass and you're joking about it."

"He's not gonna kick your ass, it was an accident," you tease, letting out a whimper as you try to shift into a more comfortable position. "I... I'm not gonna be able to stand by myself."

"I'll find Undyne and Alphys, we need to go," Bo says, stroking your hair before standing up. "I'll be right back."

You watch her go, taking the stairs in two big strides up and out of the bowling area. Deacon grabs your hand, squeezing it a little tighter than is strictly comfortable. When you meet his eyes he's glaring down at your leg, eyes shadowed and shoulders hunched. His jaw clenches. "I wish that I could make the pain stop. I wish I could make you feel better."

"There's nothing you can do yourself." You take in a slow, steadying breath, trying to focus on that instead of the pain. Like they taught you years ago at the hospital when you were in labor. Turning just a little, you lean to the side to press your forehead into Deacon's shoulder. He tips his head to rest against you, cupping the back of your neck with his free hand and rubbing. "That helps. Do that."

You sit there, waiting, wishing that Deacon wasn't so angry with himself. You think it's only a couple minutes before Bo comes back with Undyne and Alphys. When you open your eyes the human family that started this whole mess is gone.

"O-oh no!" Alphys gasps, and she hurries to your side, kneeling down by your leg. Trembling for a
second, she shuts her eyes, takes a breath, and steadies herself before reaching for your pant leg. "I need to take a look to see if it's broken."

"I'm pretty sure it's at least fractured, or it wouldn't hurt so damn much," you say, gritting your teeth as the doctor starts to roll up your jeans.

"WHERE ARE THEY?" Undyne yells, making you jump as you stare up at her. She's got her hands balled into fists, bright yellow eye glaring all around her. All of the people nearby have suddenly stopped staring, going back to whatever they were doing minutes ago. "I'm going to KICK their ASSES!"

"Undyne please," you snap, in too much pain to be polite. "You're not helping."

Snarling at you, but not at you at the same time, Undyne stands there at your feet, all impotent rage with no direction. No outlet. Bo touches her arm but she jerks away, shaking her head.

"Can't you use your green magic to heal her?" Deacon asks, looking up at Undyne.

"What?" She's so confused for a second it distracts her away from being angry. "It doesn't work like that. I don't just have every type of green magic."

"We can take her to Toriel, she's adept at healing magic. It'll be quicker than human medicine," Alphys says, and as she studies your leg you can already see where it's starting to turn colors. Ugh, looking at it just makes it hurt worse. Her dry, scaly hands run over your shin and you bite your lip, whimpering as Deacon squeezes your hand again. "I think you're right about it being fractured, but whatever break happened it isn't out of alignment. We should keep it that way. Sweetie can you carry her to the car?"

Undyne nods, circling around Alphys to crouch down at your side. "You're going to be fine, punk."

Letting out a weak laugh, you throw your arm around her shoulders. "I just want to be able to stand for my own wedding."

"Toriel will make sure of it, we know she will," she says, sliding her other hand under your thighs. "Okay, this might hurt. Deacon, you need to get go of her hand, she's not going anywhere."

He jumps a little, drawn back to reality from wherever his mind was a moment ago as he stared off into space. Letting you go, Deacon stands as Undyne lifts you up. You brace yourself and bite back a groan as you jostle a little, and when your vision snaps back into focus once the pain ebbs you can see the guilt on Deacon's face.

"It was an accident," you repeat.

"I should have listened to you," he says. "I should have ignored him."

"No, you're right. The more people don't speak up the more we let the worst people be the loudest."

"Yeah, well, I'm sure that punching him in the face wouldn't have helped us any," he mutters, dragging his hand through his hair as he follows after Undyne. People are staring at your group again, but if anyone has anything to say about you being carried out in the arms of a six-foot-tall fish monster none of them are speaking up.

"I'd rather you not get charged with assault," you admit, trying to smile but you're afraid it comes off as more of a grimace. "Though it would have been nice to see."
"Sans is going to kill you," Undyne cuts in, looking at Deacon.

"Sans is going to kill me," he agrees, swallowing.

You frown. "Sans isn't going to kill anyone."

When you get back home Toriel is already waiting, having received your call once you were situated in the car. Sans doesn't kill anyone, like you said, and even he has to admit that it wasn't Deacon's fault. That seems to put your friend a bit more at ease, but the tension hanging over you and your friends is palpable. There you were, just trying to celebrate your upcoming wedding, and someone just... had to ruin it.

Sans doesn't let you out of his sight for the rest of the evening, even after Toriel takes care of you and you feel perfectly fine again. Even all the bruising is gone. Deacon stays late, would probably stay later if he didn't have to get Bo home.

You're fine, physically, but what that man said keeps ringing in your ears. That people honestly and truly think such terrible things about people like Deacon. About people like you.

You shove the thoughts aside. This isn't how you're going to go into your wedding day. Tomorrow, you're going to relax, feel better, and then on Friday...

You're going to marry your monster no matter what anyone might think about it.
This feels a bit like deja vu. Only instead of Alphys's bedroom you're in Toriel's, and instead of getting ready for a date you're getting ready for your wedding.

Hair, nails, and makeup, the routine is the same but the butterflies in your stomach are beating twice as hard, almost to the point of nausea. You keep running over the vows in your head, hoping you don't forget any of them, knowing that even if you do you'll just be repeating after Toriel anyway so you'll be fine.

Everything will be fine.

"Hope?"

You're rubbing the sash of your bathrobe between your fingers, staring into the middle distance as Undyne tames your hair. She's braiding the sides like a band around your head, meeting at the back where the rest of your hair falls in thick, dark waves. Your bangs frame your face. There's sprigs of silk forget-me-nots sitting on the vanity in front of you, your attention drawn to them as Undyne reaches around you to grab them. She starts threading the plastic stems through the braids circling your head.

All this anticipation is killing you. All the attention and fussing and waiting... you want this to be over. You want to marry Sans, complete your harmony with him, and make what you've known for months now finally official. Months; now that you think about it that doesn't seem very long. You haven't even been together a year, though it feels like so much longer. Maybe that's because of everything you've been through. Between the Underground and the surface, you know that if there's anyone that you want by your side for whatever the future holds for you and Frisk, it's Sans. You didn't need more time to figure that out.

"Hope? Are you o-okay?" Alphys asks, and you think she's already said your name once before and you just didn't hear her.

Blinking, you look in the vanity mirror to catch sight of Alphys standing next to you, giving you a tremulous smile. She's already in her dress; cute and pink with a pleated skirt and a sweetheart neckline, she's wearing a soft white cardigan over it.

You smile back, trying to ignore the twist of anxiousness in your stomach. "Yeah, sorry I was just zoning out," you say, smoothing the soft terrycloth fabric of the bathrobe over your legs.

"Nervous? I wouldn't blame you if you were," Undyne says, speaking around the silk flowers she has pinned between her teeth as she continues to futz with your hair. In contrast to Alphys she's dressed in a rich, dusky copper dress in a mermaid style. You think Mettaton must have outfitted all the guests too at this rate. "No going back after this."

"Undyne," Alphys says, a little crease forming between her eyes. She adjusts her glasses. "Y-you
don't have to say it like that. And Hope it's o-okay to be nervous."

Nervous? Oh, of course you're nervous. You're nervous about the ceremony. Of screwing up the vows or tripping over your dress or any other number of stupid mistakes. You're so nervous you barely had anything to eat for lunch because you'd completely lost your appetite. But marrying Sans? No, you're not nervous about that.

You've never been more sure of anything in your entire life.

Shit, he really should have figured out how to tie a tie since the last time he'd been stuffed into a suit. Standing there in front of a full-length mirror in the corner of Toriel's guest room, Sans has a moment where he can't help but wonder what the hell is wrong with him. He's in his black slacks and white shirt, burgundy vest unbuttoned, black tie hanging around his neck, and feeling like a mess.

Then Grillby is there, gently turning him around and tying his tie, arching a semblance of a brow over the black frame of his glasses in silent question.

"where did pap go?" Sans says, glancing around the elemental for sign of his brother.

"Speaking with Mettaton. Do you want me to fetch him?" he asks quietly, adjusting the tie around Sans's neck and tightening the knot.

"no, no, it's fine," he mutters, rubbing his forehead with the scrape of bone against bone. "have you seen deacon yet? i'm sorry if it's uncomfortable."

"It's fine. That was a month and a half ago." Smoothing out the fabric, Grillby starts buttoning Sans's vest for him. "And I don't think that's why you're worried."

"who said anything about being worried?" he says, brushing his friend's hands away and straightening the vest himself.

Grillby straightens and fixes him with an unreadable expression, folding his hands in front of his stomach. Sans does his best not to look at him, but he can feel the weight of the elemental's stare.

"it's nothing. just wedding jitters," he insists, lying through his smile. Fetching his tuxedo jacket from the back of a chair, he shrugs into it, holding out his arms. "how do i look?"

Grillby watches him for a moment, huffing sparks before nodding his head. Whatever he might want to say, or might want Sans to say is left to silence. Which is for the best, because he just... doesn't want to talk about it. Ever since you came home Wednesday with a broken leg and a heavy heart, the reality of what the two of you are doing has been weighing on him.

Yes, physically, Toriel was able to heal you. Your leg is fine, with no evidence anything had ever even happened to it. She said that because it was just a minor fracture that her magic could handle it, but if it had been worse it would have needed more time. There's only so much that healing magic can do to aid the natural processes of the human body.

But her magic couldn't do anything to touch the sting of injustice, of cruel intolerance. And Sans can't help but think that something like that, even if the injury was an accident, is just the beginning. That if humans recognized you out on the street as the woman married to the monster, they might sling more than just insults. And if that's the case, isn't he partially to blame?

Was Kim right? Is you marrying him a mistake?
"BROTHER ARE YOU READY YET? YOU CAN'T BE LATE FOR YOUR OWN WEDDING," Papyrus says, startling Sans back to attention.

Grillby and Papyrus are standing there, looking at him in their own dress slacks and shirts, ready and waiting. His brother's expression shifts from affectionate frustration to just plain affection as he fiddles with his tie.

"yeah, bro. i think i'm ready now," Sans says, with more confidence than he feels.

"GOOD, METTATON SAYS THAT HOPE IS ALMOST READY AND YOU SHOULD BE WAITING FOR HER," he says, hurrying forward and steering Sans for the door. "GRILLBY AND I NEED TO TAKE OUR SEATS, EVERYONE ELSE IS HERE."

Grillby follows the two of them out into the hall, giving Sans a reassuring smile before he passes them to head out into the living room. With so few guests, the rite is being held in Toriel's house. Papyrus hangs back, standing in front of his brother and fixing him with a serious look. For a moment he wonders if he can see what's bothering him; Papyrus can be more aware than he often gives him credit for. But instead he leans over to hug him.

"I'M SO HAPPY FOR YOU, SANS," he says, as they embrace one another. "YOU AND HOPE LOVE EACH OTHER SO MUCH. AND EVERYONE IS HERE TO CELEBRATE THE TWO OF YOU, SO PLEASE DON'T WORRY."

Sans lets out a soft chuckle. Of course Papyrus could tell. Of course. "i know, bro. and thanks."

He gives him one final squeeze before letting go, looking down at Sans with tears in his eye sockets. Grinning, he claps his brother on the shoulder with one hand and rests the other on his hip. "I BELIEVE THAT NO MATTER WHAT COMES, THE TWO OF YOU WILL ALWAYS BE STRONG ENOUGH TO FACE IT."

Papyrus leaves him there in the hallway, disappearing around the corner. All Sans can do now is wait.

Not that he has to wait long. After a few minutes the door down the hall opens and Undyne and Alphys slip out and close the door behind them. Undyne gives him a double thumbs-up and a toothy grin and Alphys smiles and walks over to him. Reaching out, she takes one of his hands in both of hers.

"I'm so h-happy for you guys," she whispers. Then, after a moment's hesitation, she lets go of his hand to throw her arms around him in a sudden hug. "And I'm happy for you. You deserve this a-after everything."

Then, before he can answer, she lets him go and hurries off with Undyne to go join the others. He's alone again.

Does he really deserve this? Does he really deserve you? He hopes so. God he hopes so.

Maybe it's a mercy that the door opens again before he has time to dwell over things any longer, to second-guess himself and this decision. But the second you step out into the hallway all that doubt, all that worry just melts away. Because you're the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

The dress is ivory lace, with capped sleeves and draping fabric. There's a sash of soft, antique blue around your waist, tied at your hip, that matches the little blue flowers threaded into your hair. You're wearing the sunburst locket, and that makes him happier than it ought to, since you wear it every day now. But it's that shy smile on your face, the way your dark, stunning eyes look at him.
through thick lashes that fills him with such an overflowing feeling of love and makes him wonder just how stupid he could have been to doubt this wedding even for a moment. That look is timid, holding a silent question he needs to answer, before he does anything else.

Because you need to know.

"you look beautiful," he says, and you can see the tears welling up in his eye sockets. It's enough to make you have to blink back your own, laughing quietly as you take an apprehensive glance at the hallway between you. The hall that leads towards the living room where you can hear voices talking softly amongst themselves.

They're waiting for you, but they can wait a moment longer.

"You clean up pretty good yourself, handsome," you say, grinning as you're reminded once again of that date back in the Underground. Which, you suppose, is only proper since that's when you first got engaged.

At least the wedding isn't on accident like the proposal was.

Sans chuckles, and you think he remembers the same thing you do. "looks like we still go together," he says, gesturing at the blue at your waist and in your hair.

"Of course we do," you say, smiling and taking in a deep breath to keep yourself from letting your tears spill over as so much love makes your throat feel tight. "Always."

"c'mon, babe." He takes a step forward, into the light from the living room where he knows your friends will be able to see him. He holds his arm out for you. "it's the first day of the new year — my first new year in a long time— and i can't think of a better way to start it off than by marrying you."

"Neither can I," you say, closing the distance between the two of you and slipping your arm through his.

Then, together, you walk down the short hall to where your friends and family have gathered. At the far end of the living room are Toriel and Asgore, standing in front of her huge stone fireplace. They're dressed formally, in matching shades of purple, Delta Runes picked out in gold embroidery. Before them are rows of chairs, with all the occupants turned around to watch the two of you as you make your way down the center.

Everyone you care about is here. Deacon gives you a wink and Bo smiles at you, Grillby nods and you think Papyrus is already trying not to cry. Mettaton is at his side, rubbing his shoulder. Undyne gives you a huge, toothy grin and Alphys wipes her eyes, and at the very front Frisk and Asriel are kneeling in their seats, getting a good look at the two of you from over everyone's heads. They look so silly you can't help but laugh, and they glance at each other, smiling.

It's not a long walk, so soon the two of you are standing there, arm in arm, in front of the king and queen of monsters. Toriel smiles kindly at you which you do your best to return, your nervousness returning in full force now that you're standing in front of everyone. Sans must feel you tense up because he gives you a comforting squeeze.

"And so we have two Souls who approach us as equals, wishing to join their songs and form a single harmony, to leave this place not two but one. Is that your wish?" Asgore says, his deep bass voice filling the room.
You and Sans answer together, like you practiced. "It is." "it is."

"And who here might vouch for these Souls? That they have made clear their intentions and have entrusted themselves with each other, and know the truth of the bond they wish to form." The king glances over at Toriel.

Her smile widens. "I, Toriel Dreemurr, will vouch for them. I present them to you that we might aid them in their union."

"Please, join hands and you will make your vows," he says, gesturing for the two of you to face each other.

You take your arm from his, sliding your hand towards his wrist but instead he reaches for his pocket. Confused, you can only watch as he pulls out a thin, white gold band. He gives you a wry smile, reaching for your left hand. "before we do the vows i wanted to give you this. since this is what humans do, and i wanna make sure to do this right."

Pulling off your engagement ring, you let him take your hand. "Technically, the rings are given after the vows," you murmur, and blue paints across his cheekbones.

"shit, i knew that," he grumbles, and Toriel bites back a soft laugh.

You wiggle your finger, the adrenaline from your nerves making you a little giddy. "It's fine."

Gritting his teeth, he slides the band onto your finger, giving you an apologetic look. You put your engagement ring back on, taking a second to look at the two rings together, a proper wedding set, before grabbing his hands and giving him a bright smile. It takes him a second to return it, but he does. He squeezes your fingers, and you're not sure if he's trembling or if it's just you.

"You shall repeat after us," Asgore says, and as he starts to speak you barely hear him or Toriel anymore. You know the vows, you've rehearsed them so many times. But this is the first time you've heard Sans say them.

"i, sans, make these vows to you," he says. The lights in his eyes are bright with joy.

"And I, Hope, make these vows to you," you answer, swallowing past the lump in your throat.

"that i will share your burdens when you are weak."

"That I will share your sorrow and your joy."

"i will shelter you from the cold."

"I will shade you from the heat."

"i will cherish you from this day until my last."

"I will be the first face you see in the morning, and the last before you sleep."

Sans is crying now, holding onto your hands so tightly, and you know you're crying too. Because there's so much love that you can't contain it all, and it overflows through your tears. He's looking at you with such fierceness, you couldn't doubt for one second how much he loves you even if you tried.

"i will raise you up if you should fall."
"I will be your hope," your voice cracks, even as soft laughter fills the room. Because even though you are quite literally his Hope, you're so much more than that. "I will be your hope when you are hopeless."

"and this, my final vow i make to you. that my soul is yours, and yours is mine."

"My Soul is yours, and yours is mine," you echo, and you want so badly to kiss him now, but no, not yet. It's not time. You have to make due with squeezing his hands, blinking at him through your tears as he smiles at you.

"We will now guide you through your harmony, now that your vows are made," Toriel says softly, and when you finally break your eyes away from Sans you can see that she's crying too. She takes each of your hands closest to her, separating them. Then, she presses your hand to Sans's chest and his to yours, right over your heart. She keeps her hand over his, her other hand resting on your back, holding you as Asgore mimics her with Sans. His huge hand swallows yours on your fiancé's ribcage.

There's no words for this. All of them have been spoken. All you can do is watch as Sans closes his eyes, focusing, as Toriel and Asgore's hands start to glow faintly with white light. For a second you wonder if maybe this process would be easier if you could help, if you had magic of your own. If you could guide your Soul to his instead of having to be led there like a child. But you barely have the time to feel sorry for yourself before you feel... humming. A vibration that echoes in your chest and flutters under your skin. You can feel it and almost hear it at the same time, a low resonating sound that seems so new and so familiar all at once.

Toriel's hands pull away and so do Asgore's, but you can't think about them. You press harder against Sans's chest and your brow furrows, not caring for anyone else in the room because you have to focus on this feeling, this brand new sensation that you realize is him.

"can you feel it?" Sans asks you, moving his hand from your chest to the back of your neck, pulling you close and down so that your forehead is pressed to his. It makes the humming louder, stronger than before.

That low tone, that soothing hum like... distant thunder. Like his voice when he does that deep chuckle he knows you like. It's accompanied by something higher, softer. Like a chime, or a wet finger around the rim of a wineglass. You see now why they call it a song, because each vibration, each tone, changes in pitch or intensity. And those two different sensations, his and yours, they shift in... well. In perfect harmony. Like they were meant to be together.

"babe, talk to me," he murmurs, and carefully you focus on him, on the bright lights searching your face.

"I can hear you," you say, and all at once you're so overwhelmed by it all that you're crying all over again. "I can hear us."

"are you ok? is it too much?" He sounds worried, and that's the last thing you want him to be right now. He doesn't need to worry about you.

"No, it's perfect," you say, and you kiss him.

You kiss your husband and you realize you forgot everyone else is here until you're deafened by the sound of applause.
There's music playing but you don't really hear it. All you can hear, all you can feel, is Sans's Soul. Every time you look at him or touch him (and you can't stop doing either) it consumes your attention. It's... wonderful, but honestly getting a little distracting.

"Beautiful, absolutely beautiful, darling! If I might boast a little, I was certain that..."

"I've never been to a rite b-before, it's nice to have a chance to see w-what we're gonna be getting into..."

"So, how does it feel to be a married woman?"

"Baby, I don't think she can hear you..."

"babe." His eyes meet yours and you realize you've been staring at Sans this whole time, fixated on the humming of his Soul harmonizing with the thread of yours inside of it. He takes your hand, squeezes it, and oh, that just makes it louder, stronger... How are you supposed to pay attention to your friends and family when his Soul is just so beautiful? You just want to be alone with him now, to see how much more you can feel him now when your bodies are pressed close, skin to bone, with his magic— "hope?"

Okay, maybe more than a little distracting.

Blinking, you will yourself to focus, to listen with your ears instead of... with your Soul, you guess. You tear your gaze away from him, letting the song of his Soul fall to the background of your senses, taking in the people all around you. Toriel is looking at you with a knowing smile. She must have some small idea of what this must be like for you, but not really. How can she possibly understand what it's like for you to have this wholly new sense opened up for you, even if it only works with Sans? It's strange and new and how will you ever get used to this? It's so much just being around him.

"I'm sorry," you blurt out, blushing a little as you pointedly look at each person standing near you. With some regret you let go of Sans's hand, which helps. It helps a lot, actually. He's much quieter now that you're not touching, but now you're mourning the loss. You just want to—

Toriel steps forward and guides your hands back together, folding them between hers and giving you both a tender look. "Today is about you and your union. Revel in it, take joy in your harmony, do not worry about us," she says, squeezing you both before letting go.

You look over at Sans and he's smiling so bright, eyes shining as he just takes you in. His fingers thread between yours. "It'll get easier once you get used to it," he says, and his voice grabs your attention right before you lose your focus. "it's... pretty distracting for me too. can't stop feeling our souls together, wish you coulda known what they felt like separate, so you'd understand how amazing we are together."
"I already know how amazing we are together," you say, leaning over and kissing his cheekbone, doing your best to not get wrapped up in how much stronger that extra contact makes his Soul feel because someone (Bo, you think) wolf whistles and the room fills with laughter.

"Get a room!" Deacon teases, taking a sip of a drink in his hand that you think is alcoholic.

"oh, buddy, if it wouldn't be rude to leave yet we'd already be there," Sans says, arching a brow. Deacon almost chokes on his drink.

Somehow you manage to keep up a conversation, though once or twice they have to repeat your name a few times to keep your attention. It keeps straying to Sans. Because how are you supposed to focus when all you want to do is test this new sensation in every possible way? Well, soon enough you're figuring out what it's like to be away from him because Grillby comes up to your side of the room to talk to your husband (and isn't that something, that he's your husband now) and Deacon pulls you aside.

"How are you feeling?" he asks you, smoothing his tie down the front of his chest and casting an uncomfortable glance over your shoulder.

Now that's a question. "Uh," you start, then laugh and shake your head. Pressing a hand over your heart, you realize that you can feel something deep in your chest, a humming sound you recognize from Sans's Soul. It's yours; your Soul buzzing somewhere in your ribcage, singing like struck glass. But it's like hearing yourself breathe; you sense it now that you're thinking about it, but it just as quickly fades into the background. "A lot. I'm feeling a lot."

He laughs, a short huff of breath as his eyes flick back to yours. Why does he look so— oh. You glance over your shoulder, and you catch sight of Grillby talking to Sans and Bo.

"I warned you he was gonna be here," you say, giving him a wry smile. "Is it weird?"

"Oh I don't know. Would it be weird for you if your ex just showed up, and you realized that two people you've had sex with are in the same room together? It's bad enough that I can't even think of anything to say to Grillby, let alone the fact that I fully expect him not to speak to me at all just because when did he ever speak to me before? What would we even talk about? I'm just going to... not talk to him." Deacon blinks, his expression crumpling. "Shit, I'm sorry, this isn't what you want to listen to. Hey, so how's that whole... Soul thing going?" he says, waving at your chest.

You look down at yourself, as if there was anything different to see. "It's... Deacon, it's so distracting," you confess, taking in a deep breath and letting it out slowly. "But... in the best way possible? I'm not sure how to explain it, it's just like... There's an entire other part of Sans I've never been able to sense before and now I can and it's just..." Closing your eyes, you focus on the feel of your Soul, of that low hum that's him inside of it. "I love it. I love him and now I can know him like he knows me."

When you open your eyes he's looking at you with a tender expression and you can't help but blush. "Look at you," he says, reaching out and taking your hand. You smile. "Practically glowing like a light bulb."

"Oh, you mean like how you look when you're with Bo?" you tease, and there's that blush creeping up his neck and he ducks his head a little to hide his face.

"Nope. This is your day. We're talking about you and your mushy feelings about Sans," he says pointedly, narrowing his eyes at you. "Your hubby. Scratch that, I'm never using the word 'hubby' again, that's awful."
Laughing, you move in for a hug, holding him close. "You should tell her," you say quietly, and you feel him tense a little.

A pause. "Tell her what?"

"How you feel," you press.

"I think you are projecting your wedding sappiness onto people it has no business being on," he protests, grabbing your shoulders and pushing you gently away. You give him an amused look. He looks... well, not nearly as amused as you are. Maybe even frustrated.

"Maybe," you admit, rolling your eyes. "I just want you guys to be happy."

Deacon huffs, mouth quirking to the side. "We're happy. I'm happy, she's happy. Everybody's happy. Now how about you go be happy with your husband."

"You're the one that pulled me over here," you point out, poking him in the chest.

"Yes, well, I'm sending you back," he says, shooing you away as he flaps his hands in your direction.

"Fine, fine," you say, turning away from him to head back to Sans.

And the second you look at him, the second his eyes meet yours and he smiles, consuming every bit of your attention, you can feel his Soul call out for yours. It's quiet at first, singing under your skin, and as you close the distance it gets louder, stronger, echoed in your chest as your own Soul answers. Then, as you thread your fingers through his, it peaks for just a moment before mellowing to a steady drone. It's a feeling that, given time, you can imagine might be just as familiar and unobtrusive as the feel of his bones under your skin, the sound of his breathing, the dry, musky smell of his jacket. Normal. One day this will be normal, and while you'll be glad for that, right now you just want to savor the newness of it. Because you will never feel like this —like knowing him for the first time— ever again.

"Hey wife," he says, pulling you close, and you feel like you might burst just from the sound of those two words coming from his mouth.

Grinning like a fool, you know you're blushing. "Hey husband," you say, and he's blushing too, grinning just as wide.

If it were any other day you might care about how obnoxiously in love you must seem to everyone else, but it's your wedding day! This is why they're all here in the first place. To celebrate your love for one another.

You tear your eyes away from Sans to glance at Grillby and Bo, then over where Deacon is poking his way through a buffet table. Alone. "Bo," you say, catching her eye. "I think Deacon needs you. He's being kind of awkward about Grillby."

Bo and Grillby look at each other, then back at you. Sans is snickering at your side, sounding far too pleased with this turn of events. "What, because he's slept with both of us?" Bo asks, and you have to stop yourself from laughing at the exasperated look on her face.

Grillby crosses his arms over his chest and glances over at Deacon, huffing sparks as he lets out a breathy laugh. He doesn't speak.

"In a nutshell, basically," you say, and Bo rests her hand on her hip.
"I'll go unruffle his feathers," she says, and walks off to go tend to her boyfriend.

"have you had anything to eat?" Sans asks you, rubbing his thumb across the inside of your wrist.

You hesitate, which is sign enough for your husband.

"imma go get you a plate. alphys said you barely ate anything for lunch either." He arches a brow, like he's daring you to object.

"I didn't have an appetite," you say defensively, resting your free hand on your stomach. "And since when was Alphys tattling on me?"

"since she wanted to make sure that someone got you to eat once the rite was over," he teases. With an affectionate look, he tugs you down to nuzzle your cheek, then lets you go. "be right back. grillbz, you keep my wife company while i'm gone."

"You just keep looking for excuses to call me your wife," you say, smiling despite yourself.

"course i do." Sans winks, then heads over to the buffet table.

You watch him go, then, remembering that Grillby is standing beside you, turn your attention to the fire elemental. He's looking at you, smiling, and after a second he holds out a hand. You place yours in his, the heat from his fingers pressing against your skin as he squeezes and his face visibly brightens.

"I'm very happy for you," he says softly, and coming from Grillby... it means a lot. He's known Sans since he and Papyrus moved to Snowdin, and you suspect saw him at some of his worst. Hell, he'd seen Sans through your first fight. "Congratulations. You're both fortunate to have each other."

"Thank you." You have to resist the urge to hug him, because you're not sure that he's much of one for physical contact, but then he surprises you. He holds out his arm, offering, and you take the opportunity. He's incredibly warm, you can feel it right through his shirt as you embrace him, just long enough to be polite before letting go.

"And, if you could," he says, and you think this is the most he's said to you in one sitting. "Can you please tell Deacon there are no hard feelings?"

Hiding your smile behind a hand, you nod. "Yeah, I'll be sure to talk to him."

Grillby nods back.

Frisk and Asriel are staring at the wedding cake. It's not at all like what they've seen in movies before. No delicate white frosting, no ornate tiers. Instead it's a rich, chocolate cake studded with slices of strawberry and blueberries. Frisk just wants to pick them off and eat them.

"Do you think they'd notice if some of the berries were gone?" Asriel asks, echoing their own thoughts.

"Probably. When are we gonna have cake?" Frisk answers, pouting.

"If we keep staring at it I'm going to eat some and then Mom will get mad at me." He takes hold of Frisk's hand and tugs them away from the table.

They go over to the couch, climbing up onto it to sit by themselves. None of the adults are sitting, which is weird because there's so many chairs everywhere. They're just standing around, talking
and eating. You and Sans keep staring at each other, being all mushy. Which is nice, but kind of
gross. Frisk is happy that you're happy, that now the three of you are really a family now, but they
don't want to see you two kiss so much.

And they think that your mushiness is rubbing off on everyone else. Papyrus and Mettaton keep
giving each other these affectionate looks and when he thinks nobody is looking Mettaton pulls
him off into the kitchen. Frisk doesn't want to know what that's all about. Mr. Stuart and his
girlfriend are standing near the stereo, drinks in their hands. She's swaying a little to the music,
trying to get him to dance with her maybe, and he's grinning and laughing. Once again, Frisk thinks
that it's just too weird seeing him away from school. It just isn't right.

Alphys and Undyne are talking to you and Sans, arms around each other. Whatever you're saying
has Alphys blushing and Undyne grinning. They're engaged now too, so does that mean there's
gonna be another wedding? Everyone seems to be having fun but... to be honest, Frisk and Asriel
are kind of bored.

"We could probably go play games in your room. It's not like anybody is paying attention to us,"
Frisk says, glancing over at Asriel.

And that's when they notice the weird, scrunched up look on his face. He's thinking about
something, not even paying attention. Whatever it is, Frisk can't feel anything bad through their
connection, so he's not upset... Stroking his ear and cocking his head to the side, he jumps a little
when Frisk pokes him in the side.

"Hey, I was talking to you," Frisk says, pinching him and making Asriel laugh.

"Quit it!" he protests, giggling until he lets out a loud bleat and shoves them away.

Grinning, Frisk waits for Asriel to catch his breath, holding his side. "What are you thinking
about?"

His green eyes flick over to Frisk's, then down at his lap, pressing his hands against his knees.
Hesitating, Asriel wrinkles his snout for a second before meeting their gaze again and holding it.
"Were you paying attention to your parents' vows?"

"Sort of," Frisk says, tilting their head curiously. "Which part?"

"The last part. 'My Soul is yours, and yours is mine.' Isn't that... Frisk, isn't that kind of what we
did? I mean..." He trails off, blushing and looking down at his knees again. His hand is at his ear,
squeezing. "Maybe not exactly. But it's... I don't know. Maybe I shouldn't have brought it up."

Frisk reaches for Asriel's hands, turning on the couch so that they're facing one another. Smiling,
they make sure he's looking them in the eye. "Does it matter? We're gonna be together forever
anyway. Besides, what we have is totally different. Special, just for us."

"Yeah, you're right," he says quietly, nodding to himself as his brow furrows. "It's not like..." Asriel
lets out a nervous laugh. "It's not like we're married."

Frisk laughs too, nudging Asriel's forehead with theirs. "Maybe someday. When we're grownups."

He's blushing darker now. "...Maybe."

They're about to say something else, to tease him, but then Asgore's booming voice fills the room,
calling everyone over to the cake. And, well, right now cake seems a lot more important than
seeing how red they can turn Asriel's face.
There weren't exactly many options for where to go after the wedding. Papyrus and Frisk could have gone out for the weekend to give you a few days alone at home, but that isn't what Sans wanted for your first days as husband and wife. No, he wanted to do something special. Or, at least, more special than normal. So when Mettaton offered a room at his hotel, Sans had little choice than to accept. In a perfect world the two of you would have gone past the Line, gone somewhere new, but this isn't a perfect world. Far from it.

Though, right now, as he's looking at you standing there in your wedding dress, it feels pretty damn close.

"I guess it's only fitting that we're here," you say, giving him a wry smile as you glance around the room. "At least the room isn't covered in Mettatons this time."

You've been getting better at focusing around him, at least when you're not touching. Soon he suspects that it'll be second nature, another part of your senses like it is for him. But right now he feels selfish of your attention. He doesn't want you looking at anything but him. Crossing the short distance between you, he wraps his arms around your waist, pulling you close against him as he holds your gaze. You blush a little, and somehow, even after all these months together, you still manage to look shy.

"and this time i'm not letting you outta my sight," he says, almost growls, his protective streak getting the better of him. "nobody is gonna lay a finger, or a vine, or anything on you except for me."

You flush darker, cupping the side of his skull and dipping your head so that you're pressed cheekbone to cheek. "You have to let me out of your sight at least a little," you murmur, and you let out a soft, pleased sound that's close to a hum. It blends with the resonation of your Soul, envelops him as he focuses on the feel of the two of you together. He never thought he'd be able to hear himself echoed back to him inside of you, never thought he'd be able to carry a bit of you with him no matter where he goes. It's more comforting than he could ever imagine, knowing that all he has to do is focus inward to know that you're there.

"and why should i have to do that?" he asks, nuzzling right under your jaw, teeth grazing your throat.

He can feel you swallow. "Because I have to go to the bathroom," you admit, and Sans can't help but laugh. Pulling away to look you in the eye, you cover your mouth to try and hide your smile. "Also, uh, I need to slip into something a little less comfortable." He thinks you're trying to recover some element of seduction, but when you bite your lip you just look a little embarrassed. "Wow, that didn't sound very sexy, did it?"
"you're always sexy to me," he says, chuckling. "go on."

You seem reluctant to let him go, a feeling he shares, but after a moment you do. Your suitcase is sitting in the corner, and you stop to fish a small bundle and a hanger out of it before heading to the bathroom. Before you head inside, you turn to fix him with a look as he starts to shrug out of his tuxedo jacket. "You can take that off but don't you dare get undressed," you say, arching a brow.

"and what about you?" He smirks.

You smirk back. "You'll see."

Sans watches you close the door, and the moment he's alone he's not quite sure what to do with himself. He discards the jacket over the back of a chair, then takes a quick glance around the room. Bed, television, small sofa, desk and chair... It's beautifully furnished and much more tasteful than the original resort, which is a bit of a relief. He rocks forward onto his toes, fidgeting a little. Unbuttoning the cuffs, he rolls up his sleeves to get a little more comfortable. He can take off his shoes, right? That should be fine. Going to sit in the middle of the couch, he unlaces the stiff dress shoes and sets them aside.

With a long sigh of relief, he feels some of the tension of the day ease off his shoulders now that he's alone. You're married now. Nothing can ever change that. Looking down at the ring on his finger, he twists it to center the inlaid heart, then presses his left hand to his sternum. Closing his eyes, he just takes a moment to listen, to feel the change in his Soul.

He'd never really paid much attention to his own Soul before. It had always been there, like a heartbeat if he had one. Now that it's different though, he can't help but listen. His attention keeps coming back to it, studying it, mapping out the changes in his mind.

Minutes pass, he's not sure how many, but he doesn't realize that you've come out of the bathroom until he hears you clear your throat. Eyes flying open, the second he sees you, that he's aware of you there in front of him he can feel your Soul brush against his consciousness. It's as beautiful and gentle as it always is, even with the addition of himself harmonizing within it. Or maybe that just makes it all the more wonderful to him.

And then he sees you. He lets the feel of your Soul fall to the wayside because you're standing there in more white lace, but this time... This time there is so much less of it. He can see your panties through the sheer fabric of something that looks like an incredibly short dress. He's not sure what it's called but whatever it is he likes it. White, see-through lace covers your breasts in an enticing and failed attempt at decency. You've freed your hair from those tight braids, plucked out the flowers and let it fall in dark waves over your shoulders. Watching him and teasing your bottom lip with your teeth, you bury one hand into your hair while the other rests on the curve of a hip.

"oh, damn," is all he can manage, and as his jaw goes a little slack you're smiling and biting back a laugh. You look so pleased with yourself.

You take the last few steps between yourself and him, and without him even making a conscious thought he reaches for you with both hands. Tangling your fingers with his, you let him keep you steady as you straddle his legs, settling onto his lap. He tries to let you go, wants to take hold of your hips but you don't let him. Instead you pin his hands to the back of the couch on either side of him, leaning in close and tracing the line of his jaw with the tip of your nose before following after with your lips.

Closing his eyes, he tips his head back with a soft groan, relinquishing any thoughts of control he has. For the moment. He relaxes beneath you, savoring the feel of you on top of him, the way your
lips feel against his bones, your soft fingers holding on tight. Listening for your Soul, he's not surprised to hear it singing.

"How do you get anything done when I'm around? If my Soul is anywhere near as distracting as yours," you breathe against his neck, making him shiver. "All I want to do is see how strong it feels."

"you're just distracting in general," he teases, and as you let go of his hands to reach for his vest, he slips his fingers beneath the hem of this gossamer nightgown you're wearing. You arch your back as he follows the curve of your waist, smiling up at you as he cracks his eyes open. "and speaking of souls... if you'll let me—"

"Yes," you say, leaving his vest unbuttoned but still on as you reach for his left hand, shifting it up to cover your heart. You're smiling at him, searching his face, and he doesn't need to wonder how you know what he wants. You just know him so well. "I want to know what it feels like now."

"ok." He takes a breath, steadying himself as he pulls his hand back and reaches out with his magic, tugging your Soul with him. It floats free, bathing you both in rich red light as it hovers there between the two of you, just waiting.

"Oh," you say softly, resting your hands on his chest as you lean in to get a better look. Some more of the cracks have healed up, just a little. The scars are still there, they always will be, but they've mended most of the gaps. Not all, but most. "It's... I thought it wasn't going to heal any more."

"one day all those cracks are gonna be gone," he says, tearing his eyes away from your Soul (if there is anything more singularly distracting right in this moment, it's that) so he can hold your gaze. "and i can't wait to see it with you."

And before you can argue, to try and tell him that you don't think you'll ever fully heal, he takes your Soul in his hand.

It's... god it's like night and day. Before it was like being swallowed up. Like being thrown into the ocean and trusting you not to let him drown. And he did trust you, but that feeling of being so wholly overwhelmed was frightening. Exhausting. But this. This is balance. Harmony. He can feel you, every bit of you; it hums over his bones, blends the edges where you're touching each other.

Your joy, your love, the swell of pride at being his wife, of him being your husband. He feels them, mirrors them back at you because he feels them just as strongly. Never before does he think you've ever been so completely in sync. There's no fear, no worries here in this moment together. There's just the two of you and your Souls.

"it's so easy," he blurts out, and he can feel your amusement before he hears your laughter. His words and your sounds are echoed, duplicated as he listens through two minds at once. "it's like—"

"—we're already linked. Like we just—"

"—need to tap into it. follow the path. how did you—?"

"—know what you were going to say? I don't know. Maybe it's—"

"—part of the connection. that makes sense. babe, this is—"

"—amazing. Sans I can feel so much."

Then it hits him, this sudden, strong need for you (and you for him) as he's keenly aware of you
sitting in his lap, half-naked. He tugs your Soul down in front of your stomach, cupping his other hand behind your neck. (You let him pull you down, leaning forward over your Soul, pressing open-mouthed kisses along his jaw. His bones are smooth and warm against the sensitive flesh of your lips.) Sans is both distantly and acutely aware of you tugging on the knot of his tie, feeling the pull against the back of his neck even as he can feel the fabric beneath your hands. (He should wear ties more often. He should dress up more often, he looks so good. You know he knows what you're thinking, what you're feeling, and you just want him to know how much you want him right now.)

He buries his fingers in your hair (you want him to pull, just a little) and pulls you to the side, grazing his teeth down your neck (you love it when he does this, have you told him enough how much?) and then bites down into the meat of your shoulder. You gasp, he groans, low in his chest, and under it all, under every sound is the harmony of your two Souls.

He's not sure when or how you both get undressed. You can't get his shirt off, not without him having to let go of your Soul, so you just push it open, tangling your fingers in his ribs and holding on. There's so much going on, too many thoughts that aren't his, hands that he can feel but not control. All he knows is that you're both desperate for one another, for your bodies to join like your Souls. Then he's inside of you, thrusting up with his hips as you grind down against him, your pleasure magnified as, fuck, you share the feeling of each stroke of his cock.

Later he might lament the fact that he didn't get to really enjoy taking you out of your lingerie, but right now he doesn't care. He's too caught up, too wrapped up in the feel of your bodies and Souls tangled together so inextricably that he's not sure where he ends and you begin. There are hands, and mouths, and teeth, and soon enough before he can even fathom and end to this, even think he's anywhere close, the two of you crest that peak together, so suddenly and so strongly that Sans loses his grip on your Soul. As your connection severs and the burgundy heart slips back into your chest, you collapse boneless against him, pressing your forehead against his jaw.

"Fuck," you breathe as, trembling, he wraps his arms around you and holds you close. "That... Do you...? Holy shit."

"do i what?" he says weakly, his eyes sliding closed as he tips his head back against the couch, settling you more comfortably in his lap. "love you? i dunno if that was your question, but i love you."

You give a tiny, exhausted laugh. "Do you remember how I got naked? Do you remember anything?"

"uh. not really." He yawns. "s'all just a big... sexy blur."

"Maybe not how I'd describe it, but yeah," you mumble, feeling a little heavier on him as you nestle against him. "Oh, we're still on the couch."

"mmm. plenty of time to get the rest of the furniture after a nap," he says. "got all weekend."

He's starting to drift off, and he thinks you are too, at least until he hears your voice again. "I love you, husband."

Sans smiles, tilting his head to rest against yours. "love you too, wife."
The first week after the wedding is the most difficult for you. When you're apart from Sans you find yourself trying to listen for a sound that isn't there, reaching out for a Soul that can't answer. It's almost more distracting than being around him, and by the end of the week Leveretta pulls you aside to... well, to put it impolitely, to 'get your shit together'. Embarrassed and chastised, you spend the following weekend working with Sans on better adapting.

It takes until the end of January for you to feel fully adjusted, but you get there.

In the meantime, you have plenty of other things going on to consume your attention. Inspired by seeing your rite with Sans, Undyne and Alphys pick out a date for early summer. Undyne wants to have it at the beach, which will require a certain amount of planning in advance to get all the guests she wants out there. And there will be no shortage of guests, if she gets her way. There's the entirety of the old royal guard, your group of friends of course, people she knew from her duties back and forth throughout the Underground... You can already see the nervousness building in Alphys's head, but when you talk to her about it she insists that can't let her own anxiety ruin the day for Undyne. What's one day compared to the rest of their lives together?

Frisk's birthday is on the 20th of January, and you throw a huge party after school, taking advantage of the classroom and all their classmates. Sans and Alphys even leave work at the lab early to come celebrate. Among all their presents, the highlight is a brand new bicycle (their first one ever), which Sans promises to teach them how to ride once it gets warmer.

Papyrus and Mettaton are still doing well. In fact, bolstered by Papyrus's support, the robot manages to land a role in a small independent film. It... honestly it sounds terrible, but he hopes that it might be the jump start he needs for his big film career. He's excited, your brother-in-law is excited and, well, how can you not be happy for him? But that means a lot of trips back and forth across the Line, and Sans isn't happy with this new routine.

Not that he says anything to his brother about it, but between the lingering snow and Papyrus accompanying Mettaton on a weekly basis, he could be doing better. It's during a quiet weekend alone —with Frisk at Toriel's and Papyrus with Mettaton— that you discover another benefit of your harmonized Souls. You'll never be able to fix your husband's depression, but at the very least you can ease it for a little while. Sharing your Soul, taking some of his bad days upon yourself, helps pull him out of the worst of it. It's... exhausting for you, to be honest, but if you can help then shouldn't you?

But soon enough he realizes what he's doing to you, and starts to outright refuse, which just makes the cycle that much worse. Finally, when you catch him sitting in his workshop alone in the middle of the night, staring at the machine for god knows how long, you force him into a compromise. That when he is at his worst, when he feels hopeless, he'll let you be what you vowed to be: his hope.

It helps him get through the rest of winter. Once the snow melts, at the end of February, you notice
the gradual shift in his moods. Fewer sleepless nights, bigger gaps between his nightmare-driven panic attacks that still haven't stopped (might never stop). You're glad for the signs that spring is getting closer.

Things across the Line are getting more strained for monsters, not that it's stopping them from leaving. You hear word that more businesses are starting to refuse to serve them, going so far as to post signs on their front doors. Deacon tells you about an instance where he and Bo had to bring a whimsun back with them after a date. It had been inconsolable and in a near-panic after bumping into some anti-monster protesters outside a movie theater and running away.

Monsters have also taken to traveling in bigger groups when leaving Ebott after an influx of monster-targeted muggings. It was getting bad enough that it was being reported on in the news. They tried to spin it that it was because monsters tend to carry cash on them instead of cards (the banking situation for monsters right now is limited at best) but you suspect that anti-monster sentiment is also to blame.

Despite all this, Toriel decides on a series of field trips for the students at Mountainside School. So, after the first few for the older children go well, you, Sans, Deacon, and Leveretta find yourself chaperoning your class on a trip to the zoo the first week of March.

The Busperson is in charge of transportation. Turns out that the old bus used to be a school bus before they got a hold of it months ago. Deacon is sitting in the seat in front of you and Sans, turned around with his arm draped over the backrest. Like everyone else, he's dressed in a garish, safety orange t-shirt to identify your group. He rests his chin on his forearm, right on top of the raven tattooed there, and yawns.

"Late night?" you ask him, arching a brow. You hear Sans huff under his breath beside you.

"Yeah, was up with Bo. And no not for the reason you think," he says, squinting. "We had an... argument."

"What? Why?" Alarmed, you sit up straighter in your seat, taking your hand out of your husband's to cover Deacon's. "Is everything okay?"

"she finally get tired of you?" Sans adds, which makes your friend grit his teeth.

"No, she didn't get tired of me," Deacon bites out, a little more defensive than you think he intends. Swallowing, he turns his attention back to you. "No, she..." He rolls his eyes. "She got mad at me because I... 'need to tell her when I don't want to do something she wants to do'. I don't get it. If she wants to go hiking almost every weekend, we can go hiking. If she wants to watch boring travel shows, we can watch boring travel shows. Why would she be upset that I do what she wants?"

You pause, waiting to see if he's going to pick up on it. You raise your eyebrows. He gives you a confused look back. Finally, with an exasperated sigh, you spell it out for him. "Deacon, she wants..."
you to be more honest with her. You can't just cater to her whims all the time, she wants you to be happy too. It goes both ways."

"if i spent all my time only worrying about hope's interests, i'd just end up resenting her," Sans chimes in, resting his hand on your leg. "i have time for my stuff, and she has time for hers."

"Okay, but you guys are together all the time. Bo and I work opposite schedules."

"Then find a compromise. Alternate weekends or something. Do stuff you both enjoy," you press, fixing him with a serious look.

"I guess?" Deacon says, glancing away, out the window.

"So how did you resolve this argument? What did you tell her?" you ask.

"What she wanted to hear," he admits, and you let out a frustrated sound. He frowns at you. "Come on, I didn't want her to be mad at me."

"Deacon, you need to talk to her!" you say, shoving his arm. "Seriously, you're not doing her any favors by just making sure she's happy all the time. What about you?"

"What about me? I'm fine," he says defensively.

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"he'll figure it out eventually," Sans says with a sigh. "one way or the other."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Deacon grumbles, but he doesn't have time to get the answer.

You've arrived at the zoo.

The kids are excited, filing off the bus after you four adults and gathering around you as Leveretta and Deacon talk them through what's expected of their behavior. To stay with the group, no yelling or running. Leveretta handles most of that, since this is her class after all, but Deacon helps lend a sense of 'human authority'. Anything past the Line still feels like foreign territory, so when in doubt they tend to gravitate to him or you.

"Okay, does everyone have a buddy?" Leveretta asks, scanning over the group.

As the kids all raise their joined hands, Sans reaches over and takes yours. "how 'bout it, buddy," he murmurs, making you laugh.

"Shh," you hiss, lacing your fingers through his.

"Miss Leveretta?" A small, familiar blue hand bounces up and down, alone in the middle of the group. "Miss Leveretta I don't have a buddy!"

"That's okay Bonnet, just make sure to stay together. Why don't you tag along with Kid and their buddy?" she says, looking down at a clipboard. "All right, unless there are any other questions?"

There aren't. You and Sans take up the rear as the teachers lead the kids towards the entrance. Frisk and Asriel are just a little ahead of you, their voices lost in the crowd as all of them start talking at the same time. For a second you see Frisk lag behind, slowing their steps, but right before you have time to wonder why they hurry again to keep up.
"This'll be fun. Thanks for taking time away from the lab to come with us," you say, smiling over at Sans.

"no problem, babe. we oughta do more family outings anyway," he says, squeezing your hand.

And you're right, it is fun. At least, until you start catching some of the looks the humans are giving all of you. Thankfully the kids don't seem to notice, but you do. People are giving you all a wide berth, shifting away from the monsters on the footpaths and walkways. At one point you think you catch someone making a snide comment about the kids being the ones that belong on exhibit. When you spin to look for the speaker there's too many people nearby, pointedly not looking in your direction.

Angry and offended, Sans grits his teeth and soothes you, though beneath his strained smile he looks just as angry. You don't want to cause a scene. The last thing anyone needs is to draw more attention.

But then you also draw the curious. A tiny, gray-haired woman actually comes up to you and Sans while the kids are lined up in front of the elephant enclosure, just to say hello. You're so on the defensive, so ready for her to say something rude, that it takes until Sans laughs and smiles at the old woman before you realize she's being perfectly pleasant. You just can't help it; the bad experiences stand out so much starker in your mind than the good ones.

A little bit later, about two hours into your trip, you stop at the bathroom so that the kids can rotate in and out to prevent extra potty breaks. While you're waiting outside a young family, maybe a little older than you and Deacon, approaches with their young son. He's probably four or five, and questioning his parents while barely pausing for breath. The father, with the harried look of anyone with a small child, comes up to Sans.

"Hey, I'm sorry to bother you," he says, glancing from your husband to you with an embarrassed look on his face. "Uh, would it be okay if my son talked to you for a second? He just wants to say hi, he hasn't been able to stop talking about 'the skeleton' since we passed you guys like half an hour ago."

You and Sans look at each other, and you can't help but smile. Sans chuckles, nodding. "yeah, sure pal. no problem. what's his name?"

The man looks a little surprised, and after a second he composes himself and returns the smile. "Oh, it's Trevor. And thanks, really, I'm sorry if this is sort of odd..."

"it's better than what we normally deal with," he says, shrugging.

"Right, I'm sure," the man says, turning to look at his wife and son. "Okay, come on over honey. Trev, you want to say hi to— oh, shoot, I didn't even get your name."

As Sans talks to this family, a little flattered you think by the attention, you realize that Leveretta is taking inventory of the kids on her clipboard. She's also frowning. But before you can ask her, Deacon is at your side, looking tense.

"What's wrong?" you ask him quietly, glancing between him and the hare monster.

"Have you seen Bonnet?" he says, and that sends an icy sting of dread right into the pit of your stomach.

Your mouth falls open as you try to wrack your brain. You saw her earlier right? You don't remember anyone getting away from the group, and you should have seen her with that bright
orange shirt! Or... oh no was she wearing a jacket? It's still chilly out, she might have been wearing a jacket.

"Who's Bonnet's buddy?" Leveretta calls out to the assembled children, trying not to sound as worried as she must be.

Frisk's hand shoots up and as soon as they have her attention they drop it again. "She didn't have one! You told her to stick with Kid and their buddy."

"Kid, when did you last see Bonnet?" she asks, pushing her way through the group to crouch beside the armless, yellow monster.

The last time anyone can remember seeing her is at the tiger enclosure, which is enough to make your heart start pounding. That was at least twenty minutes ago. When you tell Sans what's going on, he tells you to stay with the kids, and disappears.

Bonnet isn't back near the tigers, like Sans hoped she might be. He's not surprised, but he'd hoped...

Now that he's not with the group the strange looks he's getting are more clear, more directed, but he doesn't have time for that right now. He needs to find that little girl before something happens to her. For about fifteen minutes he's retracing the group's steps, trying to ask people for help, but most of the humans ignore him or hurry past.

Don't these people care? Who cares if she's a monster, she's just a child!

"hey," Sans says to a pair of young women, who thankfully stop instead of just brushing him off. "have you seen a little monster girl, looks like a blue rabbit?"

The women exchange a look. "I don't think they have a rabbit cage here," one of them blurts out, laughing. The other gives her friend an odd look, not joining in on her joke.

He grits his teeth. "please, that's somebody's kid you're talking about. we're with a school group and we wanna make sure she gets home to her parents."

The friend, the one that didn't laugh, tucks her hair behind her ear and crosses one arm over her stomach, looking uncomfortable. "I don't think they have a rabbit cage here," one of them blurts out, laughing. The other gives her friend an odd look, not joining in on her joke.

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"thanks, that's more than i had before," Sans says in all sincerity, shooting the first woman a frustrated look. She has the gall to look offended as he hurries off towards the gardens.

He pulls his phone out as he teleports the short distance down the main path through the zoo, closer to where he hopes Bonnet might be. Calling you, you pick up on the first ring. "babe, someone said they think they saw her by the flamingos, i'm headed there now."

"Okay. We still haven't seen her either. I'll stay on the call, tell me as soon as you see her," you say, and he can hear the fear in your voice. He wonders if you've been imagining what this would feel like if it was Frisk that went missing. He knows that's what he keeps doing, whether he wants to or not.

But Bonnet isn't in the gardens. If she ever was in the first place. He has no way of knowing.

"shit," he breathes, and he hears your sharp intake of breath.
"Did he find her?" Deacon asks, his voice coming through in the background.

"No. No, not yet," you say. "Hun, just keep looking. Hey, Frisk, what are you—?"

His phone is back in his pocket. He's not in the garden anymore.

"This'll be fun. Thanks for taking time away from the lab to come with us," you say, smiling over at Sans.

He looks at you, brow furrowing as it dawns on him what just happened. A goddamn Load. This wasn't an emergency, if he'd had more time—

"SANS! HELP!"

Asriel is shouting, and all at once the kids break away from their orderly rows, crying out in surprise. Frisk is limp in Asriel's arms as he holds them up, looking through the scattered group back at Sans, and fear smacks him full in the chest.

"Frisk!" you cry out, tearing your hand free from his as you run forward to take them from Asriel.

But he doesn't let go, still staring at Sans as he rushes after you. "I tried to stop them," he blurts out, eyes swimming with tears. "I tried, I promise!"

"What happened?" you demand, looking from Asriel to Sans, finally taking hold of Frisk's body and cradling them in your lap as you sink to your knees. You're pale with fear.

"a load," he whispers to you, pushing Asriel out of the way as he circles to kneel in front of you.

Asriel is crying now, a hand on Frisk's leg and the other over his chest. "It doesn't feel right. Their Soul is too quiet."

He's right. Frisk is unconscious, pale, and Sans can barely feel their Soul. How could a Load have done this to them?
Frisk is standing, though they can't feel any ground beneath their feet. It's strange, isn't it? That's supposed to be strange. The space around them is filled with a strange, pale iridescent mist, shifting as if there were air in this place. But there's no air. There's no... anything. Just white, shimmering vapor.

Looking down at their chest, Frisk cups their hands beneath the pale —too pale— heart hovering there. It's nearly colorless, with only the scar of gray slashed across the center marring the surface. A reminder, a remnant of Chara. They haven't seen their Soul since Chara was finally put to rest, and now they take a moment to regard it. Maybe they should be worrying about why it's so drained of color, but they feel numb. Listless.

Where are they?

There's movement in front of them and fear flares sharp and sudden, snapping Frisk out of their daze. Cupping their Soul in a protective and possibly futile gesture, their eyes dart up to meet two glowing red points burning through the mist. The eyes —they must be eyes, right?— are fixed on them, growing steadily bigger as whatever they belong to grows larger, approaching.

The shape is familiar. It's... Frisk takes a step backwards as a thin, elongated skull —it's a blaster, like Sans's but not at all— shows itself, lifeless red eyes fixed on them. But something isn't right, it's... it should be more solid. Eye sockets droop slightly under a sagging weight, and its jaw looks like it's dripping. Its mouth opens, baring long fangs as the movement disturbs the iridescent mist, causing it to swirl between its teeth. Then, with a high-pitched whine, the vapor starts to glow, the colors coalescing into brilliant white and—

A white hand appears on the blaster's snout, pushing down gently as its eyes turn to regard the hand's owner, mouth closing. The hand is bone, or as much like bone as the unstable blaster, with a hole in the palm, soft and oozing in a way that reminds Frisk of the amalgamates. And there, standing clad in a black, dripping coat and a high, white turtleneck, is a man that they've never seen before.

His face might have once been a skull, and from within two mismatched eye sockets, circles of red light stare down at them. A thin slash of a mouth curves into a smile, tugging on the end of a black, oozing crack that trails from his left eye to meet and split his upper lip. A chill runs down Frisk's spine.

"Ah, Plato, here they are. As expected." The voice is smooth, deliberate, but it echoes. Frisk can hear it for a moment before he opens his mouth and again after it closes, like it’s... stretched over too much time. "Oh. No, this isn't..." He folds his hands in front of his chest, smile faltering as he sighs. "I keep getting these two mixed up. This isn't the right visit."

Frisk blinks up at him, eyes darting between the man and the blaster —Plato? "Who...? Who are you? Where am I?" they blurt out, hands clenching into fists in front of their pale Soul.
"I'm afraid that telling you would be an exercise in futility, but seeing as for the moment we have nothing but—moments, that is—I suppose I can humor your curiosity." He glances to either side of him, patting the blaster before it turns away to watch behind him. Didn't Sans say that the blasters took a lot of magic to use? And why does this strange man have them too? "Though you won't remember. We'll have this conversation again."

"Why wouldn't I remember?" Frisk asks, frowning up at him.

His hand darts out—too fast, how did he do that?—and before Frisk can even react his hand goes right through their shoulder and back out again. They gape at him as he laces his fingers together and gives them an indulgent look. "Because, child, you aren't actually here. You're close though, too close in fact. What you did was incredibly dangerous. In truth, you oughtn't meddle with your stolen magic, you lack the finesse, the intuitive control necessary to harness it properly." He chuckles, shrugging his shoulders. "Ah, but if you did that then our second meeting won't happen, and we can't have that. Again, not that you'll remember my words of caution anyway."

He pauses, going silent as he stares down at Frisk. Frisk just stares back.

"I'm afraid I lost my train of thought. Where was I?" He pauses again, frowning a little before his eyes widen. "Ah, yes. Well. I am Doctor W.D. Gaster, though I suppose you might call me Gaster. Or..." Gaster falters, unthreading his slender index fingers and tapping the tips together. "Grandfather might be appropriate, considering that my son has married your mother."

Startled, they gape up at him. "You're Sans's dad?"

"That would be the implication, yes," Gaster says, smiling. He tilts his head to the side, then frowns a little. "Perhaps we don't have as many moments as I previously expected... so to answer your other question: this place where we are standing is everything, yet nothing. Outside of reality where no living thing is meant to reside. This is part of why you won't remember any of this, I'm afraid."

Plato shifts a little behind Gaster's back, and Frisk hears that telltale whine of magic gathering between its teeth before cutting off abruptly, teeth snapping shut.

"When I discovered it I considered many names. The Void, or perhaps the Source. This mist, everything around us? It is magic in its purest form." He separates his hands, swirling the pale vapor around his fingers. "You're too young to have learned this yet in school, I believe, but white is the presence of all color. And so it is with magic. Ah, but I'm getting distracted. But this place is where all magic comes from. A wellspring to which we are all connected. The Font."

Gaster looks pleased with himself, but Frisk just feels confused. "Oh."

The doctor's smile fades. "Ah, yes you are still a bit young this time, aren't you? Well, this is why I didn't much see the point in explaining, but I'm afraid I got a little carried away at the excitement of having a captive audience." He smiles again, laughing softly to himself. He turns to look over his shoulder at the blaster. "Plato, I do think that Sans would have liked that one. You see, because at least for the moment, they're trapped here. Captive."

The blaster doesn't react. It's not alive, Sans told them once that they're just tools. So Frisk isn't sure what to do when Gaster keeps talking to it like it's going to respond. Maybe they just shouldn't do anything. Dropping their hands back to their sides, the doctor's attention snaps back to them, in particular their Soul.

"Ah, shouldn't be much longer now," he says, stooping down to squint at the pale heart. He's taller
than Sans, but shorter than Papyrus. "The Font is rejuvenating your Soul, you see?"

He points, and as Frisk looks they do see. It's starting to regain some color. "And then I'll wake up? And I won't remember?"

"Precisely. And... oh, yes hopefully that will be soon. Plato, on your guard," Gaster says, straightening and going rigid, his red eyes flaring brighter as the blaster lets out another whine. "The Anathema has decided to investigate this intrusion on its territory."

"What?" Frisk asks, turning to look around them. They don't see anything, just mist. "What's the Ana... Anathuh..."

"The Anathema," Gaster says again, spreading his fingers as his hands glow bright, brilliant red. Bones surround them in a tight circle, like the bars of a cage. "Do you like the name? I chose it for the creature myself, it means—"

"Interloper." The single word surrounds Frisk, spoken, shouted, screamed, whispered all at once by too many voices. "You think you can hide this Soul from us? THIEF!"

"Grandchild, you would do best to wake up," Gaster says, keeping his voice even as Plato is joined by two more blasters, pulled together from the mist. Magic thrums all around Frisk as they pull it into their mouths, screaming before they fire blindly into the fog. "It would pain me to see you harmed."

"I thought you said I wasn't really here!" Frisk says, looking at their Soul (it's getting pinker, redder). They grasp for the tail of his coat, stepping closer to him. It feels strange, like fabric and putty at the same time. "How can it hurt me if I'm not here?"

"That is—"

"Interloper! Answer us!" the voices bellow, and Frisk covers their ears, crying out in pain.

"Stop interrupting me while I am speaking!" Gaster snaps, his voice distorting, straining, whirling on his heel as the three blasters follow his movement, lining up in front of him.

Frisk peers around him, and there, past the towering bones, is... There's a face, tilted to the side, staring at them. Dripping and iridescent like the mist surrounding it, seven eyes (one for each Soul color, for each magic color) blinking out of sync, set in a row where there should only be two, each tilted to stand vertical. It doesn't have a mouth. Long, spindly fingers wrap around the bones in front of it, drawing itself up and exposing a black underbelly of emaciated ribs and oozing flesh. It raises up on two legs, hunched forward, dripping trails hanging from its body as if lashed to the ground.

"You speak too much for a man to whom no one listens," it says, and it reaches through the bones, its body shifting, squeezing through the gaps. It laughs with too many voices.

"Frisk, you need to get out of here," Gaster says, and the trio of blasters fires off their bursts of magic, hitting the Anathema and making it recoil with a chorus of screams.

"I don't know how!" they cry out, cringing and ducking back behind his coattails.

"All of the Souls that come to this place are ours for the taking! Like ripe fruit from the vine, we pluck them as we see fit." A thick whipcord of the Anathema's stretched arm lashes out and flings the blasters aside, shoving itself forward again.
Gaster makes a slashing motion with his arm, his red magic flaring as more bones litter the air, ends narrowed to sharp points that spin to face the creature. "You need to wake up!"

The bones surge forward, the Anathema howls with rage, and Frisk's vision goes dark.
"It doesn't feel right. Their Soul is too quiet," Asriel says, crying as he clings to Frisk's leg.

You can't feel their Soul, can't judge for yourself if what he's saying is true, but you can feel their pulse. Cradling your child in your lap, you refuse to let yourself fall apart as you fumble at their throat for their heartbeat. And it's there, perfectly strong, so you know that whatever happened has nothing to do with their body.

No. This is because of their strange magic, that awful power that's caused so much damage to their life, Sans's life. You hate it. With every ounce of yourself you hate it, because if it wasn't for that, Frisk would be fine right now. You'd be enjoying a trip to the zoo. (You don't think —can't think— about where the two of you would be without the Resets, without the cycle repeating over and over until you came along and changed it. It doesn't matter right now because Frisk is... You don't know what Frisk is, other than unconscious.)

"Did something bad happen to us?" you ask, wide-eyed and trembling as you hug Frisk closer to your chest and look up at Sans where he's kneeling in front of you. "Why did they do this?"

"babe, we can't talk about this here," he says softly, glancing up at the loose circle of kids surrounding you. He covers your hand with his, where you're holding Frisk.

"I need to know if it was worth this!" you blurt out, too loud, tears stinging the corners of your eyes.

Sans squeezes your hand tightly, cupping your cheek with his other hand and holding your gaze. His jaw is tense, clenched as the small, sharp lights in his eyes search your face. "maybe," he says, infuriatingly calm. How can he be so calm? "but right now that doesn't matter."

"What happened?" Deacon says, pushing his way to your side, staring down at Frisk. He looks as frightened and confused as you feel, crouching next to Sans. For a second he reaches out towards Frisk's chest and then stops, meeting your gaze.

"passed out, we're not sure why," Sans supplies. "make sure none of the kids wander off, keep them together while we sort this out." As Deacon hesitates, then pushes himself to his feet, Sans touches his knee to get his attention. "hey, keep an eye on bonnet."

A flicker of confusion crosses Deacon's face at the odd request but he nods.

You're dimly aware of Leveretta's voice, ushering the kids away. Deacon is talking to some members of the zoo staff, and you think you hear them mention calling an ambulance. Something inside you rebels at the idea of going to the hospital, knowing that there's nothing they can do to help. This is magic, not medicine. But now you're alert to the humans gathered nearby, watching you, and how can you refuse medical attention for your child without giving the wrong impression? Even now, with Frisk unconscious in your arms, you know that anything you do will
be treated with scrutiny. Hadn't you already been judged enough online for your choices? What would they say (again) about your capacity as a mother?

"Was it a seizure?"

There's an unfamiliar voice and you look to your side to find the owner. There's a young man, maybe a little older than Deacon, standing there with his wife and young son. He can't be older than five, hiding behind his mother's leg.

"My son, Trevor, he has seizures. Is that what happened?" he asks again, firmly.

You shake your head. "No, no it wasn't a seizure," you mumble.

"I'm sorry, it's so scary to not know how to help your child," the wife says, resting her hand on her son's head. You can hear her talking to you but you can't focus. Frisk's weight is heavy in your lap. "They're calling an ambulance, is there anything we can do to help until they get here?"

What could they possibly do to help you? What can anyone do? No one, not even the monsters, can understand what's happening to your baby.

"no, i don't think so," Sans says with a surprising amount of kindness. He looks at the young family, giving them a tense smile. "but thanks for offering."

They wait for a moment, and you wonder if they're going to say anything more, but then the wife takes her husband's hand and leads him away. With the kids pulled aside by Leveretta and Deacon and the other humans gathered around keeping a safe distance, the four of you feel trapped in the eye of a storm. Waiting.

"they're gonna be okay," your husband murmurs, but when you look at him that smile is gone. "How can you know that?" You want to believe him, want to trust his... god, is it optimism or just a lie to comfort you?

"cuz i think their soul feels a little stronger than a few minutes ago," he says and you dare to let yourself feel a small trickle of hope. He looks at Asriel, where he's still kneeling at Frisk's feet. "what do you think, kid? you can sense it better than me."

But you don't think Asriel is listening. He's just staring at Frisk, one hand on their leg and the other fisted into the front of his shirt, tears spilling silently down his white fur. At last taking a little pity on him, now that the initial shock has worn off and all you can do now is wait, you reach out and stroke his head. Flinching at the contact, he gives you a wide-eyed look before his face crumples and he curls in on himself.

"This is m-my fault," he sobs, voice cracking. "If F-Frisk still had Chara's—"

"hey." Sans cuts him off, firmly but gently, putting an arm around Asriel's shoulders and hugging him. You think this is the first time you've ever seen him comfort Asriel like this. When he speaks his voice is low and quiet, making sure no one can overhear. "without chara's soul you'd be a flower again, and i dunno about you, but i like this asriel better. yeah?"

He buries his face in Sans's shoulder, his words muffled as he flings his arms around your husband's neck. "Yeah, b-but—"

Sans meets your eyes, pained as he rubs Asriel's back. "this isn't your fault. we don't know if it has anything to do with frisk not having two souls anymore. it's not like this happened last time."
"B-but it did," Asriel says, sniffling. "They got dizzy, but they said they were fine."

"And neither of you told us?" you ask, doing your best to keep the frustration out of your voice.

"and last time was only half an hour. this was five times that." He's starting to analyze, to turn the pieces over in his head to see how they fit together. But right now you don't care about why. You just want Frisk to wake up.

Wherever Sans's mind is taking him, you don't get to find out because you can hear the sound of an ambulance's siren cutting through the air.

Minutes later you're standing off to the side, Sans's hand holding yours tightly as one of the EMTs runs through a series of questions. Two others, a man and a woman, are checking Frisk's vitals, talking to each other in clipped, staccato bursts that keep drawing your attention. They wouldn't let you stay next to your child, and you feel useless. Worthless. A nuisance. Unable to help or even answer these simple questions because you can't possibly tell them the truth. But you're starting to second-guess yourself, wonder if maybe it wasn't the Load that did this. Could something else be wrong with Frisk?

So when the EMTs tell you that they're going to take Frisk to the hospital, because it's been twenty minutes and they're still unresponsive, all you can do is agree. But as they load your child into the back of the ambulance, and you and Sans go to follow, you run into another problem.

"Family only," the EMT says, holding out a hand to bar your husband. He at least has the decency to look apologetic. "It's policy."

"What. No," you protest, looking at Sans, holding his hand tighter. "He is family."

"babe, you need to go," Sans says gently, and you feel his fingers relax in your grip. "go with frisk."

"Not without you," you say, and for the first time since this day began its tailspin dive, your eyes swim with tears. You could do this with Sans there keeping you steady. But now? You look at the EMT, desperate. "Please."

"I'm sorry. I can't," he says, shaking his head.

"I'll call a cab, we'll be right behind you," Deacon says, coming up alongside Sans.

"You need to stay with the kids, they have a field trip." You're not sure why you're arguing. You want Sans with you not in a cab with Deacon.

"Leveretta's already got them back on the bus, all accounted for," he says, glancing over at Sans. "And she's taking care of Asriel. But now you have to take care of Frisk."

The EMT is getting impatient as you hear the front doors of the ambulance slam shut. "We need to go."

You could scream. Sans frees his hand from yours and you want to fight and yell and force them to let him come with you. But you can't. You can't do any of it. "Okay," you say, gutted. Defeated. "I'm coming."

"we'll be there soon. we'll find you," Sans says, trying to give you a reassuring smile that you can see right through. You know him better than that.
As you climb into the back of the ambulance you catch sight of an old woman walking up to Sans and Deacon, offering to give them a ride to the hospital before the doors slam shut.

"I'm sorry, family only."

Sans stares at the nurse manning the desk, ignoring Deacon shifting on his feet next to him. She looks uncomfortable, unwilling to meet his gaze for long before her eyes dart to her computer screen.

"Sans, come on," Deacon says quietly, and he's frustrated by how nervous your friend sounds. Then again, in comparison to the agitation he's feeling towards the nurse on duty, this frustration seems insignificant.

"she's expecting me. she must have told somebody—"

"And I'm sure that she was told the same thing," the nurse interrupts, pursing her lips. "I can't let anyone back there that isn't family. It's not, ah, personal. It's just policy."

"can you at least tell me if they're here?" He goes to shove his hands in the pockets of his jacket out of reflex but he's not wearing it. Just this stupid orange shirt. Balling his hands into fists he drops them to his sides.

"That would be a breach of privacy— Sir, I know you're upset," she says, interrupting him as he goes to object. "If they're admitted for any reason, then you can go back as visitors. But for now, I'm afraid you'll just have to wait."

She gestures at the rows of seats where a scattering of people, waiting to be seen or just waiting, are sitting. A handful of them are watching him; they don't even bother to look away as he turns. A TV is playing the news with the closed captioning on, too quiet for anyone to really hear.

"fine," Sans says through gritted teeth, wanting very much to keep arguing but knowing that it won't make anything better. In fact, it would just make things worse, considering that right now, he's probably the only monster in the whole damn hospital. "fine."

Sans stalks over to a corner of the room where no one else is sitting, knowing that Deacon is on his heels but not caring, taking a seat and slouching as he fishes his phone out of his pocket. That's when he sees the text from you.

'Won't let anyone back. Let you know what's going on once I know.' You sent it five minutes ago, right as they were dropped off at the hospital.

'here. in waiting room.' Sans stares at the message, not sending it yet. He's been making a conscious effort to spell out his texts properly after fielding a lot of complaints from you over the past few months. Typing a short addition, he hits send after finishing. 'love you both.'

Deacon flops into the seat next to him, pulling out his phone. "Oh, Hope said—"

"i know," he snaps, grip tightening on his phone. "she texted me too."

"Did she text you to tell me to tell you not to do anything stupid?" He arches a brow, crossing an arm over his chest as he brandishes his phone. "Well she didn't tell me that, but I'm telling you that. Don't do anything stupid, Sans."

"i'm not gonna do anything stupid," he says, giving Deacon a disgusted look. Oh, he wants to do
something stupid, like teleport past that damn locked door and go find you. "who do you take me for?"

"I take you for a man who just got told he's not allowed to go to his wife and child." He sighs, giving Sans a sympathetic look as he rests his phone in his lap. "You have every reason to do something stupid."

There's an ache in his chest and Sans looks away, doing his best to ignore that creeping feeling of fear. Why hadn't Frisk asked him first before Loading? Why hadn't they just waited to see if they could find Bonnet? But, if his growing theory is correct, that the length of the Load had been what caused them to pass out, who knows what would have happened if they'd tried it after any longer.

And now this. He knew, you both knew, that no one would recognize your marriage past the Line. Toriel had told you as much. But having it thrown in his face, just how illegitimate the world considers his family... It's infuriating. He's powerless out here, unable to even so much as stand beside you when you need him the most.

"fuck," he hisses under his breath, covering his eyes with his hand, squeezing the sockets shut.

"I know," Deacon says with a sigh.

Something inside Sans snaps. "no you don't," he says, dropping his arm so he can glare at the blonde beside him. "how can you have any idea?"

"Hey, I can't go back there either," he protests, brows shooting up to hide beneath his hairline. "I'm just as much an outsider as you are, as far as they're concerned."

"but i shouldn't be! i should be back there with her where she needs me!" Sans growls, voice lowering as he grits his teeth.

"Yes. I know," he repeats, running his hand through his hair. "Sans, if there's anything I want it's for somebody to be back there helping her. I mean, I'm sure she's handling it just fine by herself, she's tough like that, but she shouldn't have to. I'm on your side. I'm on Hope's side."

Sans searches his face, sees the sympathy still there, beneath the frown, and deflates. Resting his head back against the wall with a soft 'thunk' of drywall, he closes his eyes again. "i hate this."

"I know. Being stuck out here with me sucks," Deacon says and Sans can't help the soft huff of laughter that escapes him.

"i shouldn't'a taken it out on you."

"It's fine, I'm used to it by now. You have my permission to blame me."

"s'not your fault, not anybody's fault." Sans sighs.

"Do you know what could have caused it? Why Frisk would just pass out like that?" he asks, and Sans turns his head and cracks open his eyes to look at him. He's settled into a similar position, with his hands resting on his stomach and slouched in the chair. They look at each other. "Did they do anything?"

Sure they did. They Loaded the world back to a point two and a half hours in the past, all by themselves. He can't imagine that not taking a toll on a kid's Soul. "dunno," he lies.

"Is Asriel going to be okay? He seemed pretty shaken up."
"shit," Sans blurts out, squeezing the phone still in his hand and sitting bolt upright. "shit, i don't think anybody's called tori, i gotta—"

He's interrupted by the familiar chime of a text. It's from you. 'Frisk is awake.'
Frisk doesn't wake slowly. It's all at once, a sudden gasp that makes you jump as they sit bolt upright on the hospital bed, wide-eyed with fear. They're clutching at their chest, and it takes them a moment to calm down as you hug them close and stroke their hair. When you try to ask them what had them so scared, they say they're not sure.

You're so relieved that they're okay that you can't bring yourself to be mad about the Load. Though you suspect that they won't be so lucky with Sans.

The doctor offers to keep Frisk for observation, because despite the tests they run they can't figure out what could have caused them to pass out. Not that you expect them to. They're even more put off by the fact that as soon as Frisk wakes up, it's like they're back to normal. No dizziness, no trouble walking, or speaking, or focusing. Just a little tired. But right now you just want to get them home, so you decline having them admitted. Instead you take their suggestion to follow up with their primary care physician with a polite smile, knowing full well you'll do no such thing. There's nothing these people can do to help Frisk.

Sans is nearly beside himself by the time you meet him in the waiting room, two hours after you texted him about Frisk waking up. He hugs you both so tightly, letting out a deep sigh of relief that you echo as you let the sound of his Soul wash over you, comfort you.

"Dad, I'm sorry," Frisk says, muffled between the two of you.

"s'ok kiddo, right now i'm just glad you're ok," he says, hugging them close and nuzzling the top of their head.

"Frisk!" Asriel's cry of joy alerts you to his presence, and as you look up in time to see him darting for the three of you, you see Toriel is here too.

You and Sans let Frisk go so Asriel can have his turn, tucking his snout under Frisk's chin and apologizing over and over as they hug one another. Toriel comes to you and rests her hand on your shoulder, searching your face as concern paints across her features.

"Are you all right, my child?" she asks you softly, then glances over at the children. "And did the humans say what might have happened to Frisk?"

"I'm better, now that Frisk's okay," you admit, giving her a weak smile. "And they're not sure. They think maybe they were dehydrated; we did a lot of walking today." It's not a complete lie, that is what the doctor said, but you still hate having to keep these secrets. Though you know why it's necessary.

You talk with her for a moment, with Sans at your side as the kids speak to one another. She and Asriel have been here for the last hour; Sans called her to tell her what was going on, and as soon as all the kids got safely back to school she came so she could bring you all home. You're certain that
Asriel's fear might have had something to do with it as well. It's hard to imagine that, if the situation were reversed, Frisk would accept staying away.

Deacon is standing off to the side, quiet and patient, but he gives you a smile when you catch his eye. Why does he still do this? Keep himself separate as if he's not included? Breaking away to the group to go to him, he holds his arms out to you the moment he realizes you're going for a hug.

"Thank you for being here with Sans," you tell him quietly, squeezing him tight before pulling away to look up at him. He lets you take his hand. "I can't imagine him sitting out here by himself... It was bad enough getting separated in the first place."

"Don't mention it. I'm glad I could help, even if it was just to help you worry a little less," he says, shrugging his shoulders.

"Really, I..." You hesitate, biting your lip before dropping your voice. "I'm sure Sans appreciates it too. Not being alone."

It takes him a second, but he drops his chin in a small nod, quirking the corner of his mouth with a wry smile. "I'm just glad I didn't have to stop him from doing anything stupid."

You open your mouth to say that you're sure Sans wouldn't have done anything, but the words catch in your throat. Deacon sees you falter, looking away as you realize that you're not so certain of how much your husband could take before he felt forced to act. "Yeah," you finally say. "Me too."

You have to tell Deacon he can leave four times before he finally does. You know he's got a stack of tests needing to be graded at home, and that he has to have them done by tomorrow. It's only Tuesday, and if he gets behind the whole rest of his week will be thrown off schedule. Toriel insists on staying and making dinner so that you can relax, and while you know that Sans is anxious for her to go so he can talk to Frisk, you're grateful for the help. She's being especially doting this evening, going so far as agreeing to let Asriel stay the night on a school night.

But with one look at how Asriel has been following Frisk around the house, refusing to let them out of his sight since you all got home, you can't blame her. You'd have done the same thing.

Frisk has completely bounced back, and if you didn't know any better you wouldn't even suspect they'd been in the hospital. The only evidence of that is the bandage on their forearm from where they'd put the IV port (standard procedure, they said). But then Toriel has to leave, showering both the children in kisses before embracing you and Sans. She tells you to call her if anything happens, no matter the hour. You don't think anything will, but you promise anyway.

The moment that Toriel is gone, the mood in the house shifts.

Sans lets out a breath, as if he's been holding it all day, sagging back into the couch. You look at him, taking his hand as he rubs his brow with the back of the other, then looks at where the kids are sitting in front of the television. Frisk glances back at him, sees him watching, and immediately looks down at the floor. He doesn't even have to say anything. The two of them turn off the TV and shift so that they're sitting facing you.

"I'm sorry," Frisk blurs out, wincing. "Dad, I know I should have asked you first."

"I already said it was ok," Sans says. He looks tired. As you notice it you realize just how tired you are too. It's been a hell of a day.
"So what happened? You still haven't told me," you say, looking at the three of them. It's frustrating, being the only one in on this secret that can't remember the Loads.

"bonnet went missing, 'bout two hours into the trip. and we couldn't find her," Sans answers, turning his attention to Frisk. "kiddo... why did you load when you did? why didn't you talk to me?"

Frisk ducks their head, hiding their mouth behind their hands. Asriel fidgets beside them, rubbing his ear between his fingers. They both look like they're being scolded, which in a way, they are. Looking up through their bangs, Frisk shoves their hands in their lap. "Everybody was so worried," they say quietly. "And Bonnet's such a good hider; she's always the last one to get found in hide and seek! And... and if she got lost and scared, she probably hid..."

You glance over at Sans. You were expecting something worse, something more proportionate to the fear you felt, the anger and frustration of having your husband kept from you. An ugly, selfish thought creeps into your head. No one else's child is more important to you than your own, and you have to choke back the words before you admit to it out loud. You know that if it were up to you, you'd never have Frisk risk their safety for anyone. But, that isn't fair, is it? They've already shown that they'd risk themselves for Asriel —split their Soul with him like sharing a cookie. (They can't keep doing that. They can't keep hurting themselves to make other people safe.)

"but why didn't you talk to me or your mom first?" Sans asks, firm but gentle.

"Because I could make it better. I knew I could just go back to when I Saved, right when we got there and Bonnet was still with us. Then no one would have to worry." They bite their lip, hunching their shoulders and dropping their eyes. "But I made you worry instead," they mumble.

"Yes, you did," you say, leaning forward to rest your arms on your knees. Hair spills over your shoulder, tickling your skin. "You should have waited for one of us to tell you if it was okay."

"actually..." Sans looks apologetic as your eyes dart to his, surprised. "i think if they'd waited, and something had gone wrong with bonnet... it would have been too late. i think it woulda been too much for frisk to handle."

The thought makes your stomach twist. "We don't know if it was the length of the Load. It would have been any Loading, we don't know anything about this ability."

"Last time I was fine," Frisk insists, looking up at you again. "I was just a little dizzy."

"well, there's one way to find out. if you do a short load, like five minutes—"

"What?" you blurt out, staring at your husband. "Absolutely not!"

"babe, i don't like it either—"

"Then why suggest it?"

"—but we gotta know."

"No," you say, clenching your jaw, balling your hands into fists in your lap. "Frisk can just stop."

"and what if there's an emergency, what if something happens and frisk can fix it?" Sans says, holding your gaze. You wish you could look away, but you can't.

"We can live our lives without screwing around with time!" You're glaring at him, desperate for
him to understand. "Isn't that what you want? For all of this to just stop?"

"not if it means the difference between watching you die and seeing you live!" he snaps, fingers closing tight around your wrist.

There's a short, tense moment of silence as the two of you stare at each other, his words hanging heavy in the air. Asriel and Frisk look at each other, shifting uncomfortably on the floor.

"That's not fair," you say quietly, swallowing past a lump in your throat. "Sans, you can't keep holding that over my head. And you can't keep letting that hold you back."

"if we have a way of protecting each other, of keeping our family safe, don't you want to know?" He turns to Frisk. "make a save, in a few minutes, we can..."

"It's not Frisk's responsibility to keep us safe," you say, but as you're about to say more, you notice Frisk and Asriel's eyes lose focus for just a moment, then blink a few times before they glance at each other. You look at Sans. "It's our responsibility as the adults to protect Frisk, not the other way around, and... Oh my god, you just told them to Load, didn't you?"

Sans grits his teeth, looking over at Frisk as they give him a sheepish look. "you couldn't've made a new save? not gone back to when your mom was still upset?"

"You didn't tell me to make a new Save!" they blurt out, looking away.

"you agreed," he says to you, fixing you with an apologetic look. "we talked about—"

"Forget it, I believe you," you say, with no small amount of bitterness. Downright petulant, if you're being wholly honest with yourself. "I'd hate for you to have to repeat yourself."

"babe..."

You kneel on the ground and reach out for Frisk, shoving your frustration to the back of your mind. They let you pull them close as you run your hand over their forehead, as if checking for a fever, and feel for their pulse. They don't argue, are pliant under your hands as you check them over. "How do you feel? How long was the Load?"

"I'm fine, I promise," Frisk says, giving you a reassuring smile. "And, uh... ten minutes?"

"eight." When you look at Sans he's looking over at the clock. "eight and a half. and you're not dizzy?"

"No, Dad, I'm fine," they insist.

Asriel leans in close, focused on their chest. "Your Soul still feels fine. Maybe, um, just a little bit quieter."

"Mom, I'm fine," Frisk says again, and you realize you're absently stroking their hair. "You said it would be okay for me to try, because I said I wanted to help. That it would be safer to do it here than letting me get into trouble on my own later."

You can't help the small smile that curves your lips, because yes, that sounds like you. Kissing them between the eyes, you wrap them up in your arms, and then glance over at Sans. He's hunched forward with his arms on his knees, one hand behind his head. He's not looking at you.

"we can assume that it's not the act of loading itself that's the problem, it's gotta be the length of
time. We know that thirty minutes causes dizziness, and two and a half hours causes loss of consciousness, but where is the line drawn?" He's talking to himself, thinking out loud. You don't like where this train of thought is taking him. "It's not very good science to claim results are accurate with just one test, but—"

"Stop," you say, and Sans's eyes dart up to yours from the ground. "Fine, we know that just loading a short time won't hurt Frisk, as far as we know, but just drop it for now. Though it's not like I can stop you. If you really wanted to keep testing it it's not like I would know."

"Hope, I promised you that I'd always tell you if something happened," Sans says, holding out his hand to you.

He did promise. But a small voice reminds you that he's lied to you before, in the name of keeping you safe. Would he lie about this? You like to think that he wouldn't. You look at his hand, the proverbial olive branch, and know that no matter how you might feel right now, you can't keep arguing in front of the kids. It's not right. They shouldn't have to see this. So you shove down your frustration and your fear, the resentment over the Loads, how left out you feel because you can't remember like they can. Because you're being petty and selfish and you know it. You know it and you have to make the active choice to push past it.

You take his hand.
There's a pool of water in the center of the tarp stretched over Frisk and Asriel's clubhouse. It's been there since the snow melted, bowing the roof low over their heads. Browned and blackened leaves are rotting away beneath the surface, trapped beneath what used to be ice. The water has turned an unpleasant, cloudy shade of beige and it's starting to smell.

"Can't you, like, turn it all to steam with your magic?" Frisk asks, glancing over at Asriel. They're sitting together on top of the granite boulders, where it's warmer. The spring air is still a bit chilly, and the rocks are heated by the sun.

"It only works like that in video games, not in real life," Asriel says, hunching forward and resting his chin in his hand. "Even if it did, I'd probably melt the tarp."

"Well, until a year ago, I didn't even know magic was real." They lay back, folding their arms behind their head as they look up at the trees. The evergreens are still, well, the same as always, but the others are starting to grow fresh new leaves. Through the spindly branches they can see the pale blue sky, cloudless and clear. "And you don't do much magic, so how am I supposed to know?"

"I don't do much magic because I'm not supposed to mess around with it unsupervised until I'm older," he says, his voice going all quiet and thoughtful.

Frisk nudges him with their knee, making him look back at them. "You're starting to sound like your dad."

"There's worse people to sound like." A little crease forms between Asriel's eyes. "And maybe we both should be better about listening. Our parents know better than we do."

They let out a frustrated noise. "Maybe for you, but nobody knows what to expect from my magic. If it wasn't for Dad, I could mess with it all I wanted and Mom wouldn't even know."

Asriel turns around to look at them, kneeling on the rock beside them. His expression is serious, and Frisk glances away so they don't have to meet his eyes. His frustration is clear enough, echoed inside their Soul, they don't need to look at him to know it. "Frisk, when I had that power, it never did anything like that to me. I mean, I was just a Soulless flower, but when you passed out..." He trails off, that frustration replaced with fear. Frisk bites their lip, guilt twisting in their stomach. "Your Soul felt empty. Like you didn't have any magic left inside of you. The only time I've ever seen anything like that before was when... When Chara's Soul went gray. Right before they died for good."

"I don't wanna just pretend like I don't have this power," they say quietly, worrying their lip between their teeth. "It's mine and I should be able to use it to help people."

"Is it? Yours, I mean," he says, resting his hands on the rock in front of him and leaning over Frisk
to try and catch their eye. "You didn't have it before Chara. And they were the one that knew how to use it."

They look at him, pushing up on their elbows and frowning. "You think this magic is Chara's? Then what about you? How did you get it?"

"I don't know," he admits, taking hold of Frisk's hand. He meets their gaze, holds it as his worry washes over them. Asriel is so emotional, sometimes it feels like being buffeted by the ocean. "I had Chara's Soul inside of me when we died. Maybe... whatever Alphys did with all that Determination did something. Maybe it isn't just Determination, but Chara."

"But you have Chara's Soul again."

"Not all of it."

They both fall silent, staring at each other. Frisk feels like they should know something more about this, like someone told them something about their magic. The thought that it isn't really theirs, that they... borrowed it or stole it, it rings true but that doesn't mean they have to like it. It shouldn't make it any less theirs to use.

"I'm just scared you're going to get hurt again," Asriel whispers, leaning down to hug them.

"I'll be more careful. I'm trying to make Saves every hour, just in case, so I don't go back too far," Frisk says. They shift their weight onto one arm, using the other to hug Asriel back.

The sound of a stick breaking under someone's foot snaps them both to attention, letting each other go as they bolt upright to look for the source. After a few tense seconds where they're both watching the trees, crouched and ready to bolt at the first sign of trouble, they instantly relax at the familiar sight of blonde hair.

"Mr. Stuart?" Frisk calls out, giving Asriel a quick look. He looks just as confused, but his anxiousness is gone.

"Oh, good! You're here!" Mr. Stuart calls back, winding his way through the trees to reach their clubhouse. He raises a hand in greeting, peering up over the boulders. Dressed in jeans and a faded t-shirt, Frisk is still a little taken aback by the sight of their teacher's dark tattoo. They've seen it plenty of times by now, stolen glances at the ravens and lightning. But it's hard to mesh this version of your best friend, the one they see at home, with the teacher at school.

"Were you looking for us?" they ask, crossing their legs and sitting back down, watching him as he comes to a stop at the entrance of their clubhouse.

"How did you know where to find us?" Asriel adds.

"I stumbled across this little hideaway before winter when I was exploring the woods behind the house," he says, running his fingers through his hair and hooking his other hand on the pocket of his jeans as he looks up at them. The boulders are as high as his shoulders. "Mind if I come up?"

The kids share a look. "Uh, sure," Frisk says. "Is everything okay?"

"Just the question I was meaning to ask you," Mr. Stuart says, glancing around for a way up the rocks and circling around behind them. He finds the right stepping stones and hoists himself up to settle down on the boulder next to theirs. "That's better. I didn't see you at school today, since it's Wednesday and all, and I wanted to make sure you were doing all right."
"I'm fine," they say, fidgeting with the ends of their sleeves. This is just weird. Yeah, he doesn't come to their class on Wednesdays, but why did that mean he had to come check on them? Couldn't he just ask you?

"Good, that's good. We'll have to try the zoo some other time," he says, giving them a smile. "Now, uh, did anything happen before you passed out, that you can remember?"

"...No?" Frisk glances over at Asriel again, who looks just as confused as they feel. "Everything just went dark."

"For no reason? You didn't push yourself too hard? Or maybe you weren't feeling good?" Mr. Stuart rests his hands on his knees, giving them a scrutinizing look.

"I, uh, felt a little dizzy after getting off the bus," Frisk lies, latching onto his last question. "You said you were a little queasy too," Asriel chimes in, and Frisk nods.

Their teacher looks between the two of them, hesitating a little. They wonder if he's caught them in their lie, but if he did he doesn't say so. Instead he gives them a kind smile, shrugging his shoulders. "Well, I just wanted to check on you myself. We were all really worried about you, Frisk. And, uh, if you ever need to talk, I want you to know you can come to me. I'm here."

"Um, okay Mr. Stuart," they say. He's always been nice to them, even got them presents for Christmas and their birthday. Other teachers never did that, and well, he's not exactly just their teacher. Kids don't have their teacher over for dinner on a regular basis. He's more like Undyne now; family friend first, teacher second.

"You can call me Deacon, when we're not at school," he says, giving them an awkward grin. It falters a little. "Uh, if you want. Mr. Stuart is fine too, I don't want it to be weird or anything."

Frisk has the distinct impression that this is already weird. "Okay... um... Deacon," they say, his first name sounding weird in their own voice.

Deacon beams at them. "There you go! Besides, soon enough we're going to be on summer break. I'm sure it'll be a lot of fun. Has your mom—" He cuts himself off, eyes narrowing as he looks down beneath the kids. "Are those my chair cushions?"

It was so long ago Frisk had forgotten! The cushions they'd taken from Deacon's house when it was still vacant, and had tried to take back but then they got caught and had to load. Guilt and dread drop into the pit of their stomach, and Frisk and Asriel look at one another, slack-jawed.

"We didn't—"

"It was before you—"

"—mean to take them from you!"

"—moved in, they weren't yours yet."

"Whoa, whoa, okay hold on!" Deacon says, holding up his hands and giving them an uneasy smile. Both the kids fall silent, waiting for the inevitable. "Keep them, it's fine! I don't really like them much anyway... Besides, I got rid of the rest of them months ago."

"...You're not mad?" Asriel mumbles, wide-eyed. "Are you going to tell our parents?"
"No, just... don't make a habit of taking stuff from vacant houses." He gives them an uneasy smile. "It'll be our secret."

It's Thursday, one day closer to the weekend, and unfortunately Deacon has to get through a pile of worksheets. He's sitting on Bo's couch, doing his best to focus as she cleans up the kitchen in preparation for cooking later. She had the day off so he came over directly from work, not even going home to change. Hunched over the coffee table with a pen in his hand, he pushes his glasses back up his nose as he struggles to decipher some particularly bad handwriting squeezed into too small of a space.

This is awful. He'd rather be keeping his girlfriend company, hell, helping even. Being here with her, but not actually spending time with her, is distracting and frustrating. But he's done it before. He can do it again, and once these are done he'll be able to give her his undivided attention for the rest of the evening. She's like the carrot dangling in front of his nose, keeping him motivated.

...But how is he supposed to care about the California gold rush when he can hear her humming to herself as she does dishes?


Deacon pushes his sleeves back up his arms, past his elbows where they were slipping. Frowning down at the papers under his hand, he goes down a list of multiple choice questions, leaving checks and slashes. At least that part of the worksheet doesn't take too much focus. He doesn't notice the sound of the faucet turning off, or the tapping of hooves against tile and then hardwood until he hears her speak.

"Have I ever told you how sexy you look with your glasses on?" she says, and when he looks up at her she gives him a coy smile. Bo wipes her hands off on the front of her flowing, ruffled skirt, then comes up next to him and brushes his cheek. Her fingers are still damp and warm.

"Maybe once or twice," he answers, grinning as he leans into her touch. Oh, this isn't helping him focus. "Finish cleaning up?"

"Mhm." Leaning over, Deacon catches a glance right down the front of her v-neck shirt before she kisses him. "Everything is ready whenever you are."

"It's a little early for dinner," he mumbles as one of her hands finds the collar of his shirt, loosening his tie.

"It is," she agrees. She tugs, pulling him closer. He cups her cheek and lets out a soft groan. "I might have meant that I'm ready, whenever you are."

"I..." Deacon swallows. "I have papers to grade," he protests weakly.

"Oh, Mr. Stuart," she says, pulling away enough so she can catch his eye, pouting. "Is there anything I can do to get some... extra credit?"

"Oh my god," he says, deadpan. "Bo, please."

Grinning, she pushes him back against the couch, plucking the pen out of his hand and setting it down before crawling into his lap. Shit, he ought to stop her, to tell her to give him a little more time, but—
"I'm willing to do whatever you want to get a good grade," she teases, her skirt hiking up as she straddles him. She tugs his tie the rest of the way off, tossing it aside as she works on the top few buttons of his shirt.

"I feel like having a thing for teachers is something you should have been a little more forthcoming a-ah! about," he stutters as she grazes his ear with her teeth.

"Oh, are you going to put me in detention?"

"D-did you find 'naughty schoolgirl' porn online or something? Because, ah, this whole scenario is like, my worst nightmare," he admits, swallowing. She pulls back to look at him, that amused look on her face gone. "I'm sorry, it's just... I can't even joke around about getting with a student, it's—"

"Shh, baby it's fine," she says, pressing a finger to his mouth. Bo gives him a weak smile, blushing and looking embarrassed. "One of the girls at work was just teasing me about you being a teacher... You do look really sexy sitting here all dressed for work, grading papers..."

"Is that what does it for you?" he asks, relieved that she's not upset. He relaxes a little back against the couch. "Red pens and sweater vests?"

"And glasses—"

"Oh, of course. Can't forget those," he murmurs, cupping the back of her head and pulling her back down to kiss him. She melts against him, one hand on his now-exposed throat.

"I... Deacon." The seriousness in her tone makes him let her go, resting his hands on her thighs as she straightens back up again. Glancing away, it takes a moment before she meets his eyes. "Is this okay?"

He blinks. "Is what okay?"

"Me interrupting you. You were busy, and I just climbed onto your lap anyway," she says, looking apologetic.

"What? Of course it's okay," he blurts out with a weak laugh. "Bo, I was spending the whole time thinking about how much I'd rather be doing this right here."

"I just worry now that you're not telling me when something's bothering you." Deacon has to resist the impulse to let out a frustrated sigh, or frown. Instead he just blinks. This again? "How could this bother me?"

"How am I supposed to know?" she asks, covering his hands with her own. "When you won't even tell me when you're bored with a show?"

He tries to remind himself of what you and Sans told him. That she's acting this way because she cares about him and his happiness. But seriously, what does his happiness matter compared to hers? He's used to not being put first (who was ever there to put him first, anyway?) so he doesn't mind prioritizing her wants. Her needs. Her everything.

Why can't she be happy with him wanting her to be happy?

"Sorry, I'm sure you don't want to have this conversation again," she says, sighing and looking down between them. Bo tries to ease away, to get back onto her feet but he catches her, holds her close.
"I don't want to fight," he says, and there's a moment of silence between them that he's not sure how to take.

"Okay, then no fighting," she agrees, giving him a weak, lopsided smile. After a second her smile brightens. "I swapped shifts tomorrow with Tabby, so I'll be working breakfast and lunch. I'll be home before dinner, so you won't have to wait around for me to get off."

He returns her smile, relieved at the change in conversation. This is better. Things are better like this. "Sounds like a great way to start the weekend."
By Friday everything feels just about back to normal as far as Frisk is concerned. There's no sign that there's anything wrong with them after what happened at the zoo, so when Toriel comes to check with you to make sure it's still okay for her to take them for the weekend, you don't have any reason to disagree. Besides, you and Sans have plans: Sunday marks one year since he asked you out on your first date.

It almost seems a little silly, to celebrate your dating anniversary now that you're married, but Sans insists. Well, considering how much your lives have changed (especially his; what must it be like for him to pass a year since the last Reset?) since the two of you first met, you can't blame him. And who are you to pass up a chance for your husband to plan something nice for the two of you?

So Frisk is off to spend the weekend with Toriel and Asriel, and you head home.

Walking through the front door, keys still clutched in your hand, you check your phone out of habit and notice that you missed a text message. It's from Deacon. Shouldn't he be headed to Bo's for the weekend? The two of you spent your whole lunch talking about your separate plans with your significant others.

'Grant's car is in my driveway. Help.' The text is from ten minutes ago.

You turn right back around and head back out the front door, shoving your keys and your phone into your pockets. Passing your car and opting to walk, you're not sure how much help you'll be — maybe just a deterring presence — but you know that whatever you can do for Deacon you'll do it. Just the thought of Grant at his house, antagonizing him or... you're not sure what he might be doing. Being an asshole. The thought of anyone distressing your best friend the way that Grant does, it brings out a fierce protectiveness.

After a couple minutes at a brisk walk down the road you're turning up Deacon's driveway. There, parked next to Sylvie, is the silver sedan you recognize from before. Does he just make a habit of showing up out of the blue, or was Deacon ignoring his calls again? Either way, you don't care. You just want this man gone.

"...making a foolish mistake! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

You freeze on your way up the path, hearing Grant's raised voice through a window you realize is open. The sound of yelling elicits a sudden and unwanted reaction, the urge to turn back around and flee. But you can't, you're here for a reason!

"This is none of your business," Deacon says, loud and firm.

"None of my business? Oh, now you being here in Ebott is none of my business?" Grant demands, and through the cracked blinds you can see the two of them standing in the living room, facing one another. "This isn't just about me, Deacon. You've disappointed a lot of people by getting serious
with one of them."

Should you be interrupting this? Should you even be listening? But doesn't he need this chance to stand up to Grant?

"It isn't—!" There's a pause, where Deacon falters. "It isn't serious. You know me."

"Yes, I do know you," Grant says, then walks over towards the stairwell. The spot where you know Deacon has pictures of him and Bo, of him and you. "Don't try to play coy with me, son. I know you better than that, and you care about her. I told you this wasn't wise."

"I'm not playing coy."

"You're making too many connections, letting your emotions get the better of you—"

"I'm not a heartless son of a bitch like you!" Deacon shouts, and you can't help but flinch at the vehemence in his voice. "I have been happier here in Ebott in just five months than I ever was with you!"

"And you're letting it blind you. Making you biased," he says, infuriatingly calm in the face of Deacon's anger. "And then you're going to screw this up. Do you need to come back home and clear your head?"

You can't make out Deacon's response, but you can hear the low, restrained growl of his voice. Okay, enough is enough. Rushing the last few steps up to the front door, you knock loudly.

"Expecting company?" Grant says, agitation plain in his voice.

"I told you I had plans this afternoon," Deacon grates out, his voice getting louder as he crosses the room.

When the door opens you can see the relief on his face. You're torn between hugging him and pulling him outside and just leaving until Grant goes away. But you don't do either. "Hey," you say, giving him a tense smile. "I got your text," you add in an undertone.

He gives a sharp nod. "Hey. Good timing."

"That's one way to put it," Grant says, and when you glance over by the stairs where he's standing, he's got his arms crossed over his wide chest. His beard a little shorter than the last time you saw him, and his heavy brow is set into a frown. "No, don't bother shutting the door. I might as well see myself out. I can tell you aren't going to listen to me right now."

Deacon doesn't say anything, just watches the older man as he passes you on his way out the door. You and Grant look at one another and you resist the urge to wither under his cold, scrutinizing gaze. Why is he looking at you like that? Why does it seem like Grant can't stand the people in Deacon's life?

Shutting the door behind his adopted father, Deacon lets out a heavy sigh, scrubbing his face with his hands. "Drives two goddamn hours just to give me a lecture face to face. Fucking asshole."

"Can't you just... I don't know, tell the checkpoint not to let him in? Cut him out of your life?" you ask, resting a hand on his shoulder and squeezing.

He shakes his head, still covering his face. "No, it's... complicated."
"What, more complicated that the situation with Kim?" you ask, huffing a humorless laugh.

"Yeah," he says, dropping his hands back to his sides. He hangs his head, weary-looking and drained.

"Deacon, I heard what he was saying—"

"What?" he blurs out, head jerking back up to meet your eyes. For a second he looks scared, but you can't imagine why.

"Your window is open," you say meekly, gesturing towards it. "And Grant is just a racist jerk. Don't let him talk you out of your relationship with Bo."

Deacon relaxes, turning away from you and walking over towards the stairs. Hanging there, on the wall, are two frames. The one with the picture of the two of you from Thanksgiving, and then the collage that Bo gave him. Only two of the spots in that big frame have pictures so far. "I... understand where he's coming from, but he's wrong and worried for all the wrong reasons. And I'm not going to let him make me leave Ebott."

"How could he make you do anything?" you ask, following him across the room.

He doesn't answer. After a moment he glances over at you, giving you a weak smile. "Thanks for bailing me out."

"Of course. What're friends for?" You lean against him and he gives you a one-armed hug.

"Apparently they're for getting shitty parents to leave," he says with a humorless laugh.

"Are you okay?" you ask, putting your arm around his back to return his hug. Looking up, you try to search his face but his expression is unreadable.

"I'll be fine."

"But you're not fine now. Is there anything I can do?"

"Nah, you did exactly what I needed you to," he says, smiling weakly. "I ought to get ready for the weekend. Need to take care of some things and pack up."

"Do you want me to stay and keep you company?"

"No, I've got to take a shower and stuff. But thanks for offering." He lets you go and you give him one last, concerned look before pulling away.

Deacon walks you back to the door and, after he closes it behind you, you hear the scrape of him shutting the window.

With an old backpack slung over his shoulder with clothes and essentials for the weekend inside, Deacon gives a polite knock on Bo's door before turning the knob and letting himself in. She always unlocks it when she knows he's coming over. It's almost six, right when she wanted him to arrive. He's been wondering why she wanted him to wait until then, though it gave him plenty of time to finish some stuff before leaving the house.

It also gave him the opportunity to muddle his way through the shitty, pessimistic thoughts that had refused to leave him alone since Grant left.
Is his relationship with Bo 'serious'? He knows that it's a hell of a lot more serious than anything else he's been involved in, but what does that mean exactly? What does it mean that Grant was able to pick him apart so easily to get right to the truth of it before he'd even realized it himself? Sure, he and Bo aren't exactly planning on breaking up any time soon, or dating other people, or... anything that hints at them being together ending at all. He doesn't want it to end! But calling it 'serious'... Well, that puts a whole new spin on whatever this is that he's gotten himself involved in.

'Serious' sounds like a step towards 'committed' and 'long-term' and... and a whole bunch of labels that make his chest feel tight and unpleasant. What's wrong with things how they are right now? Just being happy in the moment. Why does 'serious' have to hold so many implications for the future?

The apartment is dim, with the curtains and windows open to let in the lingering light and the pleasant spring air. As he shuts the door behind him he realizes there's soft, classical music playing and candles lit on the kitchen bar. Bo's tiny dining room table has a single candle placed in the center, and dinner is ready and waiting.

And Bo—

Bo is standing beside the table in a black, silky dress that falls just above the knee. The cross strap neckline draws his attention right to her cleavage, pale cream framed in inky fabric and it takes him a second to realize that the collar of pink wool around her neck is gone. Gold clips shaped like flowers hold her hair out of her face, and she gives him a pleased smile as she watches him stare.

Deacon is suddenly aware that he's standing there in jeans and a raglan t-shirt, with a ratty old backpack over one shoulder.

"I'm sorry, did I get the wrong apartment?" he asks, jerking his thumb back towards the door. Heat creeps up his neck. "Because I don't remember seeing anything about a dress code."

She comes to him, easing his bag out of his hand and setting it on the floor. He lets her kiss him, but he's still feeling a bit disoriented.

"I might have at least stayed in my work clothes, since you like them so much," he mumbles, and the dress draped over her hips feels just as silky as it looks beneath his hands.

"You're fine," she says, giggling.

"No, you're fine," he blurts out, pushing her gently away so he can look her over again. "Look at you."

Bo laughs harder, cupping his cheek. "Always so articulate. A regular poet."

"You know it," he says, and he breathes out a weak chuckle, pulling her back to him as he lets the tension, surprise, and embarrassment out of his muscles. He kisses her properly this time, fumbling a little when he goes to put a hand on the back of her neck and finding short fur instead of wool. That will take some getting used to. "What's all this for? Not that I'm complaining, I'm just confused."

"This," she says, leading him over to the table, "is me doing something nice for you. Because we'll have been dating for three months on Monday, and I'm not going to see you since we both have work, so I thought we could celebrate tonight."

Deacon sits after he pushes in her chair for her, feeling a fleeting moment of panic as he looks at her across the table. It must be plain on his face because she just gives him a placating smile.
"Don't worry, I wasn't expecting you to do anything," she says, picking up her fork and looking down at her plate.

"But should I? I, uh, kind of need you to help me with these dating milestones," he says, trying to ignore the unpleasant twisting feeling in his stomach. "You know I don't exactly have the best track record."

"I know," she says, nodding. "Don't worry about it, baby. I'll be sure to tell you."

"Okay, thanks," he says, rubbing the back of his neck. "Oh, this looks delicious!"

They share small talk over dinner, discussing work and reminiscing over the last three months. That seems appropriate, he thinks, considering the occasion. Does it count as an occasion? Maybe. But, what he doesn't tell her, is about Grant showing up today. He doesn't want to put a damper on her good mood, or remind himself about what he had to say about their relationship (their nearly three-month relationship). Grant doesn't understand, can't understand, what this has been like for him. Any of it.

Near the tail end of dinner, Bo gets this contemplative look on her face that Deacon might have ignored if it wasn't for the way she's watching him. Like she's trying to figure out how to word something. It makes him a little anxious. "About milestones," she says, hesitating. Then she glances away, letting out a nervous laugh. That's not normal, she's almost never nervous. "One of my cousins has been nagging me. It's silly, but she keeps asking when you and I are going to... share our Souls with one another."

"That's kind of serious, isn't it?" he blurts out, his voice a little high. "I mean, that's like... serious."

"Yeah," she says slowly, looking over at him again. "I mean, I told her that it's different with humans, that you can't even share Souls with each other at all! She was just wondering why we hadn't done it yet, since it's already been three months."

Already? Not only? Because that sounds like something that should be prefaced with an 'only'!

"How long do monsters normally wait to do that?" he asks, trying his best to sound casual instead of panicked.

"A month or two, usually," she says, shrugging her shoulders. Pushing the last bits of her dinner around her plate, Deacon is grateful that she isn't watching him as he rearranges his expression into something neutral. "I mean, if you can't trust your Soul with someone, then what's the point in staying with them?"
You were expecting a quiet Saturday, just you and Sans, but it seems that Papyrus has other plans. Which at first you think is going to annoy your husband, but you realize that you've been seeing so much less of his brother. You're sure he's more than happy to sacrifice some of your alone time for him. Besides, the two of you have been having a lot more alone time since Papyrus and Mettaton started dating.

Instead, you're 'treated' to a sneak peek of the movie that Mettaton has been working on. 'Treated' being the robot's word to describe the activity, not exactly your own. Because it's awful. Really awful. Not even so awful that it circles around to good again. Cringe-worthy awfulness. And, actually, it's not even Mettaton's fault. The writing is atrocious, the other actors are flat, and if you're being honest, Mettaton's performance is the only redeeming quality. Which is saying a lot, because the Underground's greatest star is, well, not that great.

"Well?" Mettaton asks expectantly, looking across the room at you and Sans with a rigid smile on his face. "What do you think?"

"It was..." you begin, scrambling to find something diplomatic to say.

"you're definitely the best actor on the cast," Sans says and you nod, agreeing enthusiastically as though clinging to a piece of driftwood in a turbulent sea.

"Absolutely. Your acting put the others to shame," you add, glancing over at Sans. Your eyes meet, and you get the distinct impression that you both feel as though you just dodged a bullet.

Mettaton's smile fades and he lets out a heavy sigh, wilting back against the couch. "It's horrid, I know," he says, pressing the back of one hand to his forehead. "Weeks of filming for an utterly abysmal finished product."

"WELL I LIKED IT!" Papyrus says, doing his best to comfort his boyfriend despite the anxious sweat dotting the side of his skull and the rigidity of his smile. "I LOVE ALL OF YOUR PERFORMANCES!"

"Sweetheart, you're precious but you and your family don't need to try and coddle me," Mettaton laments, taking his hand from his brow to cup Papyrus's cheek.

"well then why did you bother showing us if you know it's shit?" Sans says, grimacing. "that's an hour and a half i could have spent doing literally anything else."

"SANS!" Papyrus frowns at his brother, and your husband just shrugs his shoulders.

"I don't know, I thought that maybe it wouldn't seem quite so awful this time around," Mettaton says with another dramatic sigh.

As the guys continue to bicker, your phone starts to ring. Excusing yourself to the kitchen, you're
surprised to see Deacon's name on your caller ID before answering.

"Hey Deacon, everything okay?" you ask, resting your elbows on the bar as you hold the phone to your ear.

"I need to ask you some questions. About something that's probably private but I need your take on it," he says, and there's that familiar anxiousness in his voice that you associate with him desperately needing your help. "Please."

"Aren't you at Bo's? Oh, is she at work for the day?" you ask, deciding to sate your curiosity before Deacon gets himself fully wrapped up in whatever's got him worried this time.

"Yes, to both questions. Which is why I need to talk to you now before she gets home later," he says. There's a pause. "It's, uh... About Soul sharing. And Bo."

"Oh!" you blurt out, smiling despite yourself. "Did you guys decide to do it?"

"No, no, I..." There's a small, strangled sound and you can almost picture him running his hand through his hair. "She hinted at it. Very strongly. Like, it wasn't even really hinting, if you understand. We started talking about something else before she just outright asked. How long did you and Sans wait to do it?"

"Um," you begin, feeling a little embarrassed all of a sudden. You're sure you're blushing. "About six weeks? I mean, I didn't know much about it in advance or anything. We... we did it right after Sans told me he loved me. Part of me didn't believe him at first so he... showed me."

"Oh." His tone is flat, making it difficult to gauge his reaction. You wish he were there in front of you, where you could read his expression.

"Deacon, what's wrong? What has you worried?" you ask, gently.

"And what's it like? Can you... I dunno, read each other's minds? How does it work exactly?" he asks, brushing away your questions with his own.

"No, nothing like that. It's emotions. How the other person feels, emotionally and physically. It's like... linking everything you are together."

"And that's just something that they do in relationships? They just... put it all out there like that?" His voice is getting tight, and you can hear him take a deep breath. "That's normal?"

You hesitate, in part because you're not completely sure, and also because you're trying to figure out what Deacon wants to hear. He keeps avoiding your questions about if he's all right or not. He sounds a little overwhelmed, and you're afraid that pushing him to talk to you might just make it worse. ".Do you want me to ask Sans? I've got three monsters at my disposal that could probably answer that question better than me."

There's silence on the other end of the line, followed by a frustrated noise. "Shit, I'm sitting here nodding to myself like you can see me. Yes, yes, I could use a little more detail."

"Okay," you tell him, pushing away from the kitchen bar and heading back to the living room.

"Even bad publicity is still publicity," Mettaton is saying, on his feet now with his hand pressed to his chest.

"the whole worlds knows we exist at this point, you think that's not enough publicity?" Sans
counters from his seat on the couch, arms folded behind his head.

"That's not the right angle, they need to know— Oh! Hope, darling, maybe you can help with this little dispute," he says smoothly, striding across the room towards you with a charming smile. He makes a frustrated sound when you walk right past him to go sit next to Sans.

"wassup babe? who's that on the phone?" Sans asks.

"Deacon, do you want me to put you on speaker?" you ask, watching as understanding and subsequent confusion dawns on your husband's face.

"Uh, yeah. Sure," Deacon says.

Pulling the phone away from your ear, you hit the speaker button and get settled into a cross-legged position on the couch. "Okay, I've got Sans, Papyrus, and Mettaton here with me," you say, glancing up as Papyrus and Mettaton come over to stand beside the couch, curious. "Deacon wants to know a little bit more about how Soul sharing works for monsters. Like, how normal it is in relationships. Bo brought it up to him."

There's a pause. Mettaton takes Papyrus's hand, and Sans looks contemplative, sitting up straighter and freeing his arms from behind his head so he can rest a hand on your knee.

"Guys?" Deacon says sounding anxious.

"Darling, are you saying that the two of you haven't done it yet?" Mettaton says slowly, meeting your eyes. He looks... concerned.

"No, I... Humans can't do this stuff!"

"ok, buddy, calm down," Sans says, leaning a little towards the phone. "this is a good thing, right? means that she cares about you a lot, to suggest it. we don't just offer to share our souls with anybody."

Deacon hesitates. "It's only been three months," he says weakly.

"METTATON AND I SHARED OUR SOULS TWO MONTHS AGO," Papyrus says, which you didn't realize. You glance over at Sans and he doesn't look surprised at all. Maybe a little resigned. "HOW ELSE DO YOU SHOW SOMEONE HOW YOU REALLY FEEL?"

"I'm actually surprised she waited this long to bring it up," Mettaton says, tapping a finger against his leg.

"Okay, but what does it mean? What does it mean for the two of us?" Deacon asks, his voice tense.

"it means she thinks your relationship might have what it takes to be the real deal," Sans says, giving you a small smile as you meet his eyes. "i didn't share my soul with anybody until i met hope."

Deacon is silent for a moment. "...Hope can I speak to you in private again please?"

You share a look with the three monsters, taking the phone off speaker and bringing it back up to your ear. They look confused as you get back up and walk to the kitchen again.

"I'm here," you say. "It's just me. Talk to me."

"The Soul sharing," he says, taking in a deep breath. "You said it's emotions. Feelings. Is it just
"Kind of. But, it's easy to go deeper. It's... a very personal experience," you say, remembering what it felt like the first time Sans shared his Soul with you. That swell of love right there on the surface, but beneath it all that fear and sadness he kept hidden from you. When you'd brushed up against it he'd pulled away. "Deacon, if you're worried about it, just talk to her. I'm sure she'll understand. You saw how easy it is for them to forget that we don't have the same expectations as they do."

"This is a lot to try and wrap my head around," he admits, and you let out a weak laugh.

"Yeah, welcome to the club."

"Are there t-shirts? What's our slogan?" he says, and you can feel him forcibly changing the direction of the conversation as if grabbing it by the shoulders and shoving. Should you try to steer it back?

Maybe not. Maybe what he needs right now is a good laugh instead. "I'm sure we can get some made, now that I'm not the only member. And I'm leaning towards: 'What the hell have I gotten myself into?' It's still a work in progress."

Deacon chuckles, which makes you smile. "It's a start. Well, I'm going to let you get back to your family. Uh... tell them thanks, I guess."

"Do you want me to say the 'I guess' part?"

"Hope."

You snicker. "I'll tell them. And Deacon, just talk to her. I'm sure she'll listen."

Talk to her.

Right.

That's easy for you to say, when you have no idea what he hasn't said. Just how much of his fear and desperation he's kept tucked away, hidden from both of you. You've seen some of it, more than Bo, but nowhere near the reality. Just how close he's come to leaving her to protect himself, how scared he is to risk what they have right now.

He's already experienced so much more being with her. He's happy, so happy that's it's almost overwhelming, just how much he cares about her. Part of him wants to just give in, to share his Soul with her like she wants, but that loud, terrified voice that's been hurt too many times cries out in protest. He can't. It would leave him too vulnerable. Exposed. He's kept those walls up too long just to tear them down in one fell swoop.

And Sans's words keep ringing in his ears. The idea that Bo wants to see if the two of them are... something more maybe? More than just casually dating.

Were they ever just casually dating? Was this always leading up to this point? She took him to meet her entire family. He brought her with him to your wedding. He knows that he doesn't want to imagine the next few months without her, but...

But he doesn't make a habit of thinking about the future at all. With or without her.

Why can't things just stay like this?
When Bo gets home from work that night, he doesn't give her time to talk. He doesn't want to talk, about Souls or feelings, or any of the things that keep making his stomach wind into knots and his chest feel tight. Instead he kisses her the second she walks in the door, pins her against the wall and enjoys the satisfied noise that she makes into his mouth. Once she's suitably flustered, and he's worked up enough that he can't even bother to think much any more, he carries her off to the bedroom.

He needs her. He just needs to be here with her to be happy. To hear her moans and gasps, the way she grabs at his arms and wraps her legs around his waist, holding him like a lifeline, clinging to him like she can't bear to let go. He doesn't want her to let go, even as this feeling in his chest, this sense of more than just affection, something like... He can't even think it. Shies away from it. It threatens to swallow him up, and in this moment right here with her he lets himself get dangerously close, skirting the line between safety and the unfamiliar.

It would be so easy to lose himself, here with her. Would that really be so bad? The way she whispers his name into his ear as he crests his peak, holding him close; for that moment, scattered and witless, he wonders why he's so scared.

She looks up at him, cupping his cheek and smiling with so much warmth in her eyes. He could just watch her forever, if she keeps looking at him like that. "I want to share my Soul with you," she murmurs, still catching her breath. There's something desperate in her voice. "Please, Deacon. I love you."

And then it feels like the carefully crafted bubble, the safety net of trying to just enjoy the here and now, comes crashing down all around him.

He can't do this.

He can't do this. Why did he think he could? How could he think this would be different?

How can she say that she loves him?

It's too much. She's giving him too much and he has nothing to give her in return except wide-eyed terror and grief and insecurity. He knows, with absolute certainty, that if she touches his Soul, she'll finally see all that ugliness inside of him and she'll leave him. She'll reject him, just like everyone else.

He can't let that happen.

"No," he blurts out, pulling away, sitting back on his heels and pressing a hand to his face. He shakes his head, trembling as his heart hammers in his throat. "Bo..."

She's staring at him, hurt in those big blue eyes as she pushes herself up to sit. Tucking her legs beneath her, she crosses her arms over her chest, holding her shoulders. Protecting herself. "What...?"

"I can't," he says, shaking his head again.

"You can't, what?" she asks, frowning. No, he doesn't want this. Why did it have to happen like this?

"I can't share my Soul with you," he says, unable to watch as her expression crumbles, as her eyes fill with tears. "Please, you don't understand—"

"Don't you trust me?" she says, her voice thick. "Deacon, I love you. I thought... I thought we were
happy. I thought you were happy."

Because that's all he ever showed her. All he ever let her know. *Fuck.*

All he can do is look at her, any words to defend himself, to comfort her, to do *anything* catch in
his throat. Choking him. He watches as tears spill down her cheeks.

"Talk to me," she begs, her voice harsh and thick with emotion. "For once, just fucking talk to me."

He can't. God, he *can't.* If he says anything now the dam will break and she'll reject him anyway.
He's not the person she deserves. He's not the person she thinks he is. He's too broken, and fragile,
and *weak* to be that person.

This is him. Sitting here, letting the woman he... The woman he cares about cry over him, because
he's held up this false image of himself over all the ugliness. And he's too scared to let it go.

He swallows, and she lets out a soft sob as she shakes her head.

"If you won't talk to me," she says, pleading with him with her eyes. "Then just go." He thinks, for
a second, she can't be serious. But no, no she is. She *means* it. "And don't bother coming back
unless you're willing to tell me what's going on."

For a moment he's frozen, scrambling for some way to fix this that's within his power. Some way
to placate her without pulling down his armor. But there is none. There's no way to salvage this.
What she wants he just can't bear to give.

So, with a hollow feeling in his chest, he goes.
"Did you know about Papyrus and Mettaton?"

Sans pauses in the middle of taking off his shirt, eyeing you with his arms up in the air. You're getting ready for bed, stripping and balling up your clothes before carrying them to your hamper. "you mean about them sharing their souls?" he asks, and you're not surprised that he knows exactly what you're talking about.

It's been in the back of your mind all afternoon. "Yeah. That was the first I'd heard about it. Did you not tell me?"

Yanking off his shirt, he doesn't look at you as he changes into a pair of blue plaid boxers. "can't tell you what i don't know," he says in a clipped tone.

"Oh," you say, biting your lip. You're not sure what else to say to that.

"s'fine. i didn't go outta my way to tell him about when you and i..." He trails off, looking over at you and letting out a sigh. You're watching him, certain that your concern is plain on your face. "he's a big skeleton. doesn't need me taking care of him. hell, for a while he was the one keeping me from going off the deep end."

Crossing the bedroom, he hesitates as you reach for him but after a moment wraps his arms around your waist. His fingers slip under the hem of your underwear, copping a feel as you give him a wry smile. Whatever makes him feel better, you suppose. Sans tilts his head up for a kiss and you do your best to oblige.

"You're his brother, you'll always need each other," you say, running your thumb along the vertebrae in his neck.

"it's just... always been us, y'know? for years, it was just us," he says, something sad ghosting over his features. Then he gives you a weak smile. "then there was you and frisk. four of us together. family. but now, with this thing with mettaton..."

"You're afraid he's going to take Papyrus away," you say, and Sans shakes his head.

"he's already taking pap away. it's how this whole thing works. if he... loves mettaton, then he should be with him."

He pulls away from you and you let him go, sensing his need for space. His need to move. Sans walks over to the big glass doors leading out to the balcony, pushing aside the curtain and staring out into the darkness. You go to flick off the light, and instead of darkness outside now you both can see the shadows of the trees and the spray of stars.

"he's home less and less. i already told him to stop picking me up from work cuz it's just outta his way." He sighs, glances back at you and holds out his hand. You go to him and take it, holding him
"i know my bro. i know he's not gonna just disappear. heh, he'd never let me go a day without talking to him, just so he can nag me."

"Because he loves you," you say, giving Sans a warm smile.

His expression softens, and he leans against you. "yeah. i know he does. what i guess i'm trying to say is that this soul sharing stuff... it's just more evidence that this thing with mettaton... it's serious. and sooner or later, it's just gonna get more serious. i don't expect pap to stay here with us forever, but it doesn't mean i have to like the thought of him leaving."

"You should talk to him."

He scoffs. "if i told him i didn't want him to leave, he'd probably stay. and then i'd feel like an ass for being a selfish jerk."

"Then just tell him that you want him to do whatever will make him happiest," you say, turning your head so you can kiss the side of his face. "Tell him that we'll always be here for him, and that you love him."

Sans sighs, nodding his head. The two of you are silent for a moment, staring out at the stars. You've never had a sibling, never been in this situation. But you're here for your husband, to support him as he struggles with this. You love Papyrus, you adore him and you've spent the last year living with him. But just like you expect Sans to put you and Frisk first, you expect Papyrus to put Mettaton first. You think your husband understands that too, but he's conflicted.

"you realize what this means though, right?" Sans says, looking over at you with an amused glint in his eye.

You blink.

"if pap and mettaton stay together. get married, the whole deal," he continues, his smile widening. "he's gonna be your brother-in-law."

"Oh god," you groan, pressing your free hand to your face. "My brother-in-law that tried to murder me. He'll be your brother-in-law too, you know."

"uncle mettaton."

"I'm not sure how I feel about this anymore," you say, mostly joking. Mostly.

Sans chuckles, shrugging his shoulders. "you're the one that forgave him. made a big deal about making him feel welcome."

"Is this how far we've come? That we can joke about Mettaton coming after me and Frisk with a chainsaw?" you say, huffing a weak laugh. "This is ridiculous. We're ridiculous."

"sometimes it's better to find the humor in things, instead of letting them haunt us."

"Yeah. I guess that's true."

You're woken at seven in the morning by the need to pee. Groggy and bleary-eyed, you extricate yourself from Sans's grip with only a little bit of a struggle and stumble off to the bathroom. It's when you get back, eager to crawl back into bed and get a few more hours of sleep, that you notice a light on your phone blinking.
For a second you debate checking it, assuming that whatever it is can wait until later. But you go ahead and turn the screen on, and you're glad you do. There's a text from Deacon.

He sent it an hour ago. What was he doing up so early on a Sunday? 'Please call me when you get this.'

Simple enough, but it fills you with apprehension. Picking up the phone, you unplug it and carry it with you across the room, over to the squishy lounge chair in the corner. Sitting down with your knees tucked up to your chin, you hit the call button. Early morning sunlight slants through the gap in your curtains, and it looks like it'll be a beautiful day outside. You can even hear the first hints of birdsong.

Deacon picks up after the second ring. "Hey," he says, his voice subdued and scratchy.

"Hey, did I wake you?" you say quietly, glancing over where Sans is still sleeping.

"No. Haven't slept," he says. He sounds exhausted.

Worry gnaws at your stomach. "Deacon, what's wrong?"

There's a beat of silence, and he clears his throat. "Can I come over? I don't... I'd rather talk to you in person, if that's okay."

"Of course you can. I'll get dressed, make some coffee," you say, as reassuring as you can. "Just come in, I'll unlock the door."

"Okay. I'll be there in a minute," he says, breathy with relief.

You hang up the phone, perfectly alert now that adrenaline is thrumming through your veins. What could have happened? What does he need to talk to you about? Oh, no, is it about Bo? All that talk about Soul sharing yesterday... did something go wrong?

Standing, you go over to your dresser to put on a bra and comfortable, around-the-house clothes. Before you head downstairs you grab the pen and notepad you leave on your bedside table, scribbling down a quick note for Sans and leaving it on your pillow. He still has trouble waking up alone, but this way at least he'll know where you are.

Coffee is percolating and you're staring at the inside of the fridge, not really looking for anything in particular, when you hear the front door open and shut. You hurry to meet him in the foyer.

Deacon is—

God, he looks terrible. There's dark circles under his eyes and his hair is in disarray. He's wearing a pair of sweatpants and a thin, wrinkly t-shirt, his shoulders slumped, everything about the way he's standing just weighed down with defeat. Whatever is going on, you've never seen him this miserable before.

"Deacon what happened?" you ask instantly, going to him and reaching for his arm.

He flinches, looking away from you as you freeze mid-motion. Then he cringes, giving you an apologetic glance as he moves close again, brushing up against your hand. "I fucked up," he says, gritting his teeth and covering one eye as he grabs at his hair. "Hope, I fucked it all up."

"What... what happened?" you ask again, gentler this time. You hold your other arm out to try and hug him but you feel him go tense and you stop.
Deacon stares down at the ground, glaring and trembling. A small, choked sound escapes his throat and you rub your thumb over his shoulder with the hand he let you touch him with. He shakes his head, drawing in a sharp breath. He's so tense and withdrawn, caged in his head where you can barely reach him but desperate for someone to talk to. He's at war with himself, an internal struggle over his ability to just get the words out.

"Go sit down," you say, giving him a gentle push towards the living room. "I'll get you some coffee."

He nods, looking grateful for the respite, and shambles away from you. You watch him go, aching to just wrap him up in a hug until he feels better. But he needs to talk to you, you know he does.

When you return with two mugs of coffee he's sitting on the couch, sideways facing the other end where he knows you'll be sitting. He's got his arms wrapped around one leg, chin resting on his knee, while his other foot is planted on the ground. His blue eyes flick up to yours as you come into the room and he lets go of his leg, shifting it so that it's folded against the back of the couch.

"Thanks," he murmurs as you hand him his drink and he takes a sip. He flinches at the heat and sets it down on the coffee table. "Hot."

"Yeah, sorry," you say, holding your mug between your hands as you settle across from him. "You said you didn't sleep?"

Deacon shakes his head, leaning to the side to rest his cheek against the sofa. "No."

He's being so uncharacteristically quiet, it's starting to scare you. "Whatever it is, whenever anything has you this upset, Deacon you can call me no matter what time it is. Why didn't you call me?" you ask, putting your drink down so you can reach out to touch his knee.

He doesn't react to that. Instead he squeezes his eyes shut, brow furrowing. "It was late. I didn't want to wake you. And I couldn't... I wasn't ready." Opening his eyes again, the look he gives you is heartbreaking. "I wasn't desperate enough."

"You weren't desperate enough for what?" you ask, gently.

His lip quivers as he stares down at your hand on his leg and he covers it with his own. There's a moment where you're not sure where he's going to speak. But he does. "To ask for your help," he choked out, his voice cracking as he shudders.

"What happened?" you press, knowing that he needs to get it out. You sandwich his hand between yours, leaning in close and trying to get him to look at you. "Deacon..."

He meets your eyes, and his are glassy. He's blinking too much, trying to fight back tears. So far he's succeeding. "Bo, she... she said she wanted to share her Soul with me. That she... Hope, she said that she loved me and I told her no."

"But I couldn't do it. I can't, I can't."

"Why can't you? What are you so afraid of?" Your own eyes are stinging with tears, watching him struggle so hard. Watching him hurt. You want to fix this.

"That she won't want me anymore. Like everyone else." His grip on your hand is almost painful. "Why would she want to keep me around if I'm not happy like she thinks I am? I'm not strong, Hope. Look at me, I'm fucking f-falling to pieces. Why would she ever want to be the one to pick them up?"
"Because she loves you," you say, reaching out with your free hand to cup the back of his neck. "People who love each other take all the bad with the good. She doesn't expect you to be strong, to be smiling all the time. And one day you can be the one to pick up her pieces."

His tears are clinging to his eyelashes, still refusing to fall. He blinks hard to try and clear his eyes. "I just showed her that I can't," he snaps, clenching his jaw. "I just... I rejected her, before she could do it to me." Realization dawns on his face and he pulls back, eyes widening for a moment before his expression crumples. "She's the only person who's ever loved me and I pushed her away."

"Deacon," you say firmly, tightening your grip on him, pulling him back towards you as you dig in your heels, determined to make him understand. You'd let so many hints slide, so many instances to try and shove past these walls he's hidden himself behind. You owe it to him to get through his thick skull. "That's not true. You have people who love you."

He scoffs, rolling his eyes. "Like who?" The bitterness in his voice is tempered by the sound of unshed tears that he's still blinking back, caught in his throat.

God, how can he not know? Your expression softens, and your vision blurs as you give him a watery smile. "Like me, you dork. I love you."

He stares, searching your face, and you can see the moment that it hits him. His tears finally spill down his cheeks and he leans forward, shoulders rounded and trembling as a loud, gut-wrenching sob breaks loose from his throat. Pulling him forward, he goes to you and wraps his arms around you, holding on so tight as he buries his face into your shoulder and cries. Silently you cry with him, rubbing his back and doing your best to soothe him as you wonder just how long he's been holding onto this pain. You think, with a heavy heart, that the answer isn't so simple.

"H-how?" he blurs out, muffled in the space between you. "How can you? I'm not... I don't deserve any of it."

"Of course you do!" You hold him tighter, hugging him closer. "Deacon, don't you ever think that!"

Another sob escapes him, sending a shudder through his back. "How am I ever g-going to fix this?"

"What did she say? When you told her no, what did she say?" you ask, hoping, praying that she gave him some kind of sign—

"To not come back unless I was willing to talk to her," he mumbles, groaning.

"Then you need to talk to her," you say, sniffing but somehow stern.

"I can't," he says, pulling back to look at you, wiping his face. His eyes are red. You hold onto his shoulders, not letting him go too far.

"If you don't talk to her, you will lose her," you say, shaking him gently. "You have to try."

"And then, after I've let her in, what if she doesn't want me?" he demands, desperate. He takes hold of your wrists, but doesn't take your hands from his shoulders. Shaking his head, he tries to clear his eyes but tears are still cutting paths down his cheeks. "I don't know if I can deal with that. This... fuck I don't know if I can deal with this either."

"Your choices are knowing that you'll lose her, or taking a chance at getting her back
and *finally* letting her in." You give him a pleading look, brow furrowing. "Deacon, if I know monsters at all, it's that they're some of the most compassionate people you'll ever have the chance to know. She'll embrace you, *all* of you, and when the dust settles the two of you will be the stronger for it."

He doesn't say anything. You hope he's mulling over your words.

"You clearly wanted to talk to someone. Why didn't you go to her?" you ask softly.

"Because you know what it's like to be messed up. You and Sans... you support each other. You hold each other up," he says, gritting his teeth. "You've always been patient with me. I'm not... I wasn't afraid of losing you. At least not over this. Not like I am with her."

"I'm your best friend. You're like a *brother*. You'd have to do a hell of a lot to lose me," you say, giving him a weak smile.

He tries to return it, but something behind it gutters out and he doesn't speak.

"If you're not comfortable with sharing your Soul yet just *tell* her. You're not a monster. This kind of thing has never been expected of you before. Tell her that you're scared, how much you *care* about her," you continue, and you feel his grip on your wrists tighten. "Do you love her?"

His gaze falls to the space between you. After a second he finds his voice. "How am I supposed to know what love feels like?" he whispers, and he's trembling again, leaning his cheek against your hand. It's wet.

"do you feel like losing her might kill you?" Sans says, and you feel Deacon jump beneath your hands, cursing and scrubbing at his face with his knuckles. "because, buddy, that's love."
Taking a Chance

Chapter Notes

Deacon looks embarrassed, turning his head away and ducking to hide behind you while he wipes at his eyes. Not that Sans can blame him; Deacon isn't exactly high on his list of people he'd be willing to break down in front of, and he's sure the human feels the same about him. And shit, the guy is a textbook example of broken. It says something about how their... okay, yes, friendship has come that he feels so bad for him.

Because if anyone knows what it's like to be terrified of falling in love with someone, to put his happiness in someone else's hands, it's Sans.

He heard everything, sitting on the stairs just out of sight. He'd woken shortly after you'd gone, when he reached for you in his sleep and you weren't there. Then he found your note and wanted to check on you.

You give him a quick, conflicted glance over your shoulder before leaning close to Deacon, smoothing back his hair as he shakes his head and mumbles something to you. Maybe he should have let you handle this, kept out of it, but you're just not pushing your friend hard enough. And you don't understand just how bad he really fucked up.

"let me talk to him for a minute," Sans says, walking further into the room. He fidgets with the front of his t-shirt.

"No," Deacon blurts out thickly, sniffling behind you.

You turn to look at Sans again, wiping at your eyes with the back of your hand. "Sans, are you sure?"

"yeah. do you wanna make some breakfast?" he asks, giving you a weak smile as he pushes some hair out of your face.

Hesitating, you turn to meet Deacon's eyes as he gives you a desperate look. "He wants to help," you tell him, and he looks down at the couch. As you let him go he pulls back and crosses one arm over his chest, continuing to scrub at his face. Sans helps you to your feet and you hold his gaze, giving him a serious look. "Be kind to him."

"don't worry about us," he tells you, and after a silent pause where you squeeze his hand tight you head to the kitchen.

Deacon crosses his legs under him, looking everywhere but at Sans as he takes the spot you just vacated. The human doesn't say anything, and he can practically see him trying to pull his walls back up. To lock himself down again. He can't let him do that.

"did hope ever tell you how fucked up i was when we first met?" he says, and that seems to surprise him. It's enough to stop Deacon from withdrawing back into that shell for now.
"No. I... I can't really imagine you not being insufferably confident all the time," he says, and that makes Sans huff out a laugh.

"yeah, neither could she. you're not the only one who hides behind humor. well, if you can call what you do humor," he says and Deacon rolls his eyes. His grip on himself relaxes a little. "it's fucking scary, realizing how much power someone has over you when you fall in love. isn't it?"

He doesn't answer, but he finally meets his gaze.

"would you honestly be here, like this, if you weren't helplessly in love with bo? would you have let your guard down enough to come to hope if you didn't love her too?" Deacon looks away again, blinking hard as his eyes start to water. Sans can see the muscles in his jaw tense. "the first thing you need to realize is that, yeah, it makes you vulnerable. i get the feeling you know that well enough. but it's worth it. i...

Sans trails off, catching himself for a second as he debates, quickly, just how much he's willing to say. It's enough of a hesitation to draw Deacon's attention back to his face.

"i lost a lot of things, before i found hope," he says carefully. "and i was afraid of losing her too. i still am. but if she hadn't convinced me to let me give happiness with her a chance, i would have regretted it. more than anything. you can't let the fear of an uncertain future prevent you from seizing what's right in front of you. be honest with her."

"But what if she doesn't want me, after she realizes the truth?" Deacon murmurs, rubbing the back of his neck.

"and what if she still does?" Sans says, harsh now. "you're gonna let her go on a chance you might get hurt? what about what you did to her? when she brought up sharing your souls, what did she say?"

He has the common sense to look ashamed. Chastised. "She said she wanted to share her Soul with me."

"and you told her no."

Deacon nods.

"she offered you everything. her love, her soul... buddy, in case you didn't realize; a monster's soul is our whole being. it's our magic, our bodies, everything we're made of." He fixes the human with a hard look, holding his gaze with an intensity that makes him flinch. "she offered all of that to you and you told her no."

Swallowing, Deacon opens his mouth to say something, but then shuts it again.

"you did to her exactly what you were afraid of her doing to you."

"I know," he says, wincing and looking away.

"well i'm just making sure you remember," Sans snaps. "do you love bo?"

Deacon closes his eyes, covering his face with his hand.

"deacon. answer the goddamn question."

He draws in a shaky breath, but doesn't speak.
"deacon."

"Yes! Fuck you, Sans," he blurts out, tearing his hand away from his eyes and fixing him with a glare. "I love her."

"then what the fuck are you still doing here?" Sans says, arching a brow. "get your ass over there."

He stares at him, his face going slack for a second before he rushes to his feet. Feeling satisfied with himself, Sans follows at a distance as Deacon walks past the couch, through the foyer, and into the kitchen. You're there, babysitting a pan of bacon with a distracted look on your face until you catch sight of the two of them coming to meet you.

"Deacon, what—?" you say, before your friend silences you with a hug. You give Sans a confused but relieved look over his shoulder, cupping the back of his head.

"Thank you. Hope, I..." Deacon trails off, his voice catching. "I'm going to go talk to Bo. To tell her... that I love her. And I wanted you to know that I..."

Taking gentle hold of the sides of his head, you ease him away and give him an affectionate smile. "I know. You don't—"

"I do." He insists, still holding you. Sans stays back, lets the two of you have this much-needed moment. He suspects this was a long time coming, for Deacon at least. "You're like a part of a family I never got to have. You've done more for me than anyone. And I need you to know that I love you too."

You're smiling so wide, your eyes brimming with tears as you pull him back into another fierce hug. "Go. Go make things right with Bo."

"Okay," he breathes, drawing in a shaky breath against your shoulder. "Okay, I can do this."

"You can do this," you agree, letting him go and patting his cheek.

Deacon gives you a shaky smile before turning to head towards the door, then falters as he looks at Sans. All at once he looks a bit embarrassed.

"don't mind me," Sans says, giving him a lopsided smile. "go get her."

"Sans..." he starts, trailing off and grimacing.

"really. the sooner you go—"

"Thank you."

Sans gives a soft laugh, pleasantly surprised. "yeah, don't mention it. next time you need a kick in the pants you know where to find me."

Deacon rolls his eyes, and with one final look between the two of you, he heads for the door. You both watch him go, and when it shuts behind him, he turns to look at you. You're smiling at him, a fond look in your eyes.

"Whatever you did," you say, going to him and draping your arms over his shoulders. You kiss his forehead. "You did good."

"if he and bo broke up for good, you woulda been upset. i couldn't let that happen," he says, making a contented sound as he holds you close.
"I'm sure that's the only reason," you say, chuckling. "Not because you're a good person and you like Deacon."

"keeping him happy keeps you happy."

"Mhm. Well, whatever makes you feel better about yourself."

Deacon's adrenaline, his single-minded determination to make things right, gets him to Bo's doorstep. Then the fear threatens to overwhelm him, to drown him and send him running again. Talking to you had been hard. Talking to Sans had been hard. But this? This is terrifying. He just hopes that Sans is right and it's worth it.

Swallowing past a lump in his throat, he ignores the exhaustion, the way that even as he stands there looking at her door his eyes are already blurry with tears. Because he's been shattered to pieces and cobbled back together with a fragile hope that he can make this all right somehow. That he can salvage his relationship with Bo with enough desperation and honesty.

Because what else does he have to offer than that?

Knock on her door asshole. Knock on her door and do whatever it takes to get her back.

He raises his hand. Balls it into a fist. Stares at her door.

He feels nauseous. Jittery from adrenaline and lack of sleep. It doesn't matter. None of this shit matters except for getting her back.

He knocks.

A few long, torturous moments pass in silence as he waits, wondering if she's even awake. She sleeps in on Sundays. It's not even noon yet, maybe he should have waited, come back later— He jumps as he hears the turn of the lock, the scrape of metal as she twists the knob.

She's dressed in shorts and a tank top that he recognizes as pajamas. Her eyes are rimmed in red from crying —recent crying, she's rubbing at her face and her fur on her cheeks is damp. Clutching the door, Bo's face cycles through recognition, then hope, and then apprehension as studies the state of him. He must look terrible. But she... She still looks beautiful, even as guilt twists at his heart, because he did this to her. In trying to protect himself he hurt her.

"I want to talk," he says quickly, before she can say anything. "Please."

Relief floods her expression and she nods, once, before her snout scrunches up and her eyes swim with more tears. Bo backs away from the door to let him in. After she closes it she reaches for him, a soft sob escaping her throat as he hugs her close and she kisses him desperately.

"I didn't think you'd come back," she says, her voice breaking.

"I wasn't sure you'd want me to come back," he chokes out, trembling as he buries his face against her bare neck. "I'm so sorry. Bo, how can you forgive me for what I did?"

"Just tell me why," she breathes, tensing in his arms. "Tell me why and I will."

"I'm not okay. I'm nowhere near as confident as you think I am," he says, and now that the walls are down, now that he's started he can't stop. He needs to get it out. "I... I'm charming and funny because it's the only way I could get people to l-like me. I never told you when I was annoyed or
bored because I thought that if you were unhappy with me you'd get tired of me. Everyone always got tired of me!"

He's crying again. He's cried more today than he ever remembers crying before. Because it never did him any good to give in to feeling sad, because who was there to ever care about him?

"I love you," Bo murmurs, and she tries to stop him as he goes to pull back, staring at him through her tears. Searching his face.

"You're the first person who's ever said that to me," he admits, and the shock on her face is plain enough to see. "Bo, this is why... I panicked. You were giving me too much and I feel like I don't have anything to give you in return. There were so many times where I almost r-ran because that's what I always did. I ran to keep myself safe. Because every time I tried to reach out to someone they wouldn't want me. So I stopped trying. But this time I hurt you instead and I'm... I'm so sorry."

"I want you," she says and he breaks just a little more, bowing his head as he forces himself to listen. To believe her.

"After I hurt you?" he asks, drawing in a shaky breath. "After I rejected you?"

"If you want me. If you want to be with me as badly as I want to be with you—"

"I love you," he says, kissing her. Cradling her head in his hands, he's nearly giddy with relief, shaking. "Bo, I just... I need more time. To share my Soul with you, I... I trust you, I swear, I just..."

She silences him with another kiss, then presses her forehead to his jaw and nods. "I was just so desperate to show you how I feel about you. But I'll be here when you're ready. I promise. I'm not going to get tired of you. I can wait for you. I can do this for you."

"I love you," he says again, turning his head to kiss her temple. "This is fucking terrifying but I love you."

She gives a soft laugh and he pulls away enough so that he can kiss her properly again. God, to think that a few hours ago he wasn't sure if he'd ever kiss her again. He could be gentler, less needy, but he needs her so much right now. He's not afraid to show her just how scared and desperate he is.

Bo pulls away too soon, leaving him chasing her lips as she catches him with her hand, blinking back lingering tears and searching his face. She's a little breathless and flushed, but there's something serious in her eyes.

"Is there anything else you need to tell me? I don't want you to have to hide anything. I want you to at least have one person in your life that you can turn to," she says, cupping his cheek, stroking his skin with her thumb. She's smearing tears across his face but he doesn't care. He's too exhausted to care. "Whatever it might be, you can tell me."

He should tell her. If she can't accept this, then at least he'll know that he was honest, truly honest with her. And if it ruins everything, like Grant said it would, then so be it. Because this, with her. With his life. This is more important. It's worth the risk.

"Yeah," he says, clearing his throat as his heart hammers in his ears. "There's something else. Something important you need to know about me."

Later, after she listens, and doesn't throw him out, or yell at him, or hate him... (There was a
moment where he thought she'd do all three.) When she's still there, loving him, *all* of him now that she knows the truth, Deacon falls asleep with his head in her lap and she runs her fingers through his hair. And he feels content.
'Where are you?' 'Also, did you know that Sans has some hilarious nicknames for Mettaton when he's angry?' 'My favorite is overgrown calculator but I don't get it.'

"Tell Sans to stop worrying," Mettaton says, running his fingers through his hair as he glances back at you.

He's sitting in the passenger seat of Papyrus's car, you and Frisk in the back as your brother-in-law drives the four of you home. You'd just spent the day with Papyrus and Mettaton at the robot's film shoot, at Frisk's insistence. You get the feeling that the crew appreciated your presence; much of the day was spent keeping Papyrus from getting himself into trouble. They even asked Frisk to be an extra. They couldn't stop talking about it from the moment you left until they finally fell asleep about ten minutes into the drive.

"It's not Sans, it's Deacon. Wanting to know where we are," you say, glancing at the time on your phone. You balk. "It's almost ten, are we gonna make it to the checkpoint in time?"

"Darling, I've got everything under control. Trust me, a few minutes is nothing," he says soothingly, giving you a reassuring smile.

"THE SOLDIERS ARE VERY NICE. WE WERE ALMOST A HALF AN HOUR LATE ONCE AND THEY DIDN'T MIND," Papyrus adds.

"Don't let Sans hear that," you mutter, typing out a reply to Deacon, letting him know you'll be home soon. "And a half hour? Don't you think you're pushing your luck?"

"Oh it's not luck. It's amazing what a good rapport with the officials can do." Mettaton's smile turns charming as he gives you a wink.

"THEY'RE ALWAYS SO HAPPY TO SEE ME!"

The robot's expression sours just a little and you have to fight the urge to laugh. With a sigh, Mettaton turns back around to face forward, reaching over to pat Papyrus's knee. "Yes, Pappy. Everyone loves you," he says, affection plain in his voice. "Me most of all."

You're smiling, cradling your head in your hand as you lean against the car door. Do you and Sans seem so sappy to everyone else? Probably. Before you can dwell on it too long your phone chimes.

'Your husband is momentarily placated by the fact that he thinks it's hilarious that I still can't talk to Grillby.' 'Also, since when did Grillby start babysitting Frisk?' 'Also also: please hurry this is getting uncomfortable.'

Smothering a laugh behind your hand, you shake your head. 'We'll be there soon.'

'Hell of a way to kick off Spring Break. Yeah there's bathing suits but I thought the discomfort and
"look, yeah the curfew is stupid, but you aren't gonna win any points with the soldiers by just ignoring it," Sans says, fixing Mettaton with a stern look.

"Honestly, Sans, it was just a few minutes." The robot scowls, resting his hands on his hips. "Besides, there hasn't been a single monster that's been charged with a curfew violation. The soldiers know it's just as stupid as we do."

The two of them are standing in the foyer, Sans in a pair of swim trunks and a t-shirt. Deacon catches your eye, shrugging his shoulders as he puts one arm around Bo. They're both dressed for the hot spring as well, though Deacon's green swimsuit is accompanied by a light jacket over his bare chest. It might be the start of Spring Break, and almost the end of March, but the nights are still chilly. Bo has on a pink, floral bikini with a sarong tied around her waist.
You ought to go change, but you don't want to leave Mettaton and Sans here arguing while Papyrus is putting Frisk to bed.

"and you wanna be the first one?" Sans presses, arching a brow. "or papyrus?"

"You're being paranoid."

"i just want my family safe. especially out there."

"You think that I don't?"

"Guys," you interject, and they both look at you. Sans huffs through his teeth and Mettaton rolls his eyes, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "Can I trust the two of you to be civil while I go put on my bathing suit?"

"i'm always civil," Sans says, and Mettaton scoffs. Your husband shoots him a look, but neither of them have anything else to say.

"Okay, then I'm going to go change," you say, heading past them for the stairs.

"Hope, mind if I join you for a minute?" You turn at the sound of Bo's voice as she pulls away from Deacon to follow you.

Deacon gives her a pitiful look, glancing over to the living room where you can see Grillby sitting quietly on the couch, one leg crossed over the other as he reads a book. You'd almost forgotten he was even here. Normally Toriel would be babysitting but she, Asgore, and Asriel are spending some time together as a family. Grillby doesn't seem to notice that anyone's paying any attention to him at all.

Bo gives a soft laugh. "Baby, you'll live. You could always go say something."

He arches a brow, his nose scrunching up. "I'll go get a drink," he says pointedly, going into the kitchen. The opposite direction of the living room.

You and Bo share a look and start laughing as you gesture for her to come upstairs. She's silent as you make your way down the hall towards your bedroom, and gives you a polite smile as you close the door behind her. There's an awkward pause as you regard one another, then you head over to your dresser to find your swimsuit.

"I don't think anyone at work would believe me if I told them how Mettaton acts with you guys," Bo says, shaking her head. You nod in agreement, wondering if it's really her boss that she wants to talk about. You don't have to wonder for long. "I wanted to thank you. For helping Deacon, I never got a chance to talk to you in the last couple of weeks since our... fight."

"Of course. God, you don't have to thank me, I'm just glad it all worked out. You guys are still doing good, right?" you ask, shutting a drawer as you hold your black one-piece in your hand. Heading towards the bathroom, you hesitate at the door as you wait for her to answer.

She waves you inside, following you to stand outside the door so you can hear her. "We're great. Actually we're... He told me a lot of things, about himself. It's just so good to feel like he really trusts me. So we're actually doing better than we were before."

"That's awesome! Bo, really, I'm so happy for you guys. When he came over..." you trail off, stripping down before working on shimmying into your bathing suit. "He was beside himself. I've never seen him that upset before."
"I'm glad that he had you to talk to, since he was so unwilling to talk to me." You freeze in the middle of adjusting a shoulder strap as the bitterness in her voice hits you. Scrambling to situate yourself, you open the door the moment you're decent.

Bo has her arms crossed over her chest, hugging herself, as she rests back against the edge of your mattress. Her big eyes flick up to meet yours as you return to the room. Her somber expression is swept away as she gives you a friendly smile. "That suit looks great on you. I love the way the top crosses and that little keyhole gap in the bust," she says, gesturing at you.

But you don't care about your swimsuit. "Bo, Deacon loves you," you say, holding her gaze.

"I know, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say it like that. I just wanted to thank you," she says, shrugging her shoulders. Her voice is flat.

"He fought through so much fear to make things right with you," you continue, watching her. "Because you mean so much to him."

"I know I do." Bo gives you a weak smile. She shakes her head. "I'm sure I'll feel better once he lets me touch his Soul. It's... I believe him, I do! But the difference between hearing that someone loves you, and feeling it..."

"It's worlds apart," you agree, nodding as she sighs. "So he still hasn't..."

"No. Not yet."

You turn away to find your cover-up, hanging in your closet. She follows you, standing by the door as you shift hangers around.

"That's the other thing I wanted to ask you about," she admits. "He's been asking more questions without me bringing it up, which makes me hope that he'll offer soon, but it's just..."

"Not what you're used to. What you expected."

"Right."

"Humans aren't used to this stuff," you say, giving her an apologetic look as you shrug into an oversized, crochet cover-up. "He'll come around. He just needs more time. You've been so good for him."

Bo gives you a weak laugh, smiling as she looks down at the floor. She almost looks shy, which is a feat in of itself. You didn't think it was possible. "We had dinner with my parents last week. They really like him, and after we left he looked at me and said, 'I came to Ebott without a family, and now I've got two.' We've both been good for him."

You open your mouth to argue, to reassure her that she deserves most of the credit because part of you is afraid that she's jealous, but Bo wraps you up in a hug. She lets out a long, slow breath.

"So I really, really want to thank you for everything you've done for him. I don't know if we'd be together if it wasn't for you," she says, and you have to blink back the tears that prick the corners of your eyes.

"Sans helped a bit," you admit, which makes her laugh.

"Yeah, he said that Sansy gave him a pretty good kick in the ass before he left here. Those two are something else, they bicker worse than an old married couple." She lets you go and gives you a
Snorting, you hide your smile behind a hand. "Don't tell them that."

Undyne and Alphys are already waiting in the hot spring by the time the six of you get there. The fish monster is neck deep in the dark water, eyes closed with her head tipped back against Alphys's shoulder. Alphys is propped up against a rock, reading something on her phone (which you're sure is waterproof). A trio of gas lanterns are lit around the edges of the spring, lighting the space with a soft glow as moths beat their wings against the glass.

Papyrus and Undyne had found the spring a few weeks ago, in the forest outside of Ebott's lake. The lake itself is naturally warm thanks to the mountain's volcanic activity, so you weren't surprised to hear there was a spring about a fifteen minute walk away from Undyne and Alphys's house.

Undyne's eye pops open as you push through the underbrush, sitting up and fixing you all with a toothy grin. "There you are! Took you guys long enough!"

"WE'RE SORRY THAT WE'RE LATE!" Papyrus calls out from the rear of the group. There's a measure of diplomacy in his voice, after another brief argument between Sans and Mettaton in the car.

"Y-you're not that late," Alphys says, giving her phone a quick glance before setting it aside.

Rubbing your arms and fighting back the urge to shiver, you pull away from Sans in your hurry to get to the hot, steaming water. Tugging off your cover-up and kicking off your sandals, you put them on an obliging rock and dip your toes in. Hissing from the blissful heat, you grope around for a place to step down, easing yourself into the water as quick as you can. You're already dreading the walk back to the car.

"how is it?" Sans asks, grinning as he and the others get themselves settled before joining you.

"Oh my god it's amazing," you groan, tipping your head back to soak your scalp.

"We should get a hot tub," Undyne says, throwing her arm around Alphys's shoulders. "Almost as nice and right there in the house." There's a pause, and her grin turns wolfish. "More private."

The doctor flushes, pressing her hands to her cheeks. Whatever she says is lost in the sound of Papyrus splashing his way into the spring. As the others wade in, Mettaton is the only one standing off to the side, one hand resting on his hip as he gives the water a dubious look.

"COME ON IN METTATON!" Papyrus grins. "THE WATER'S FINE!"

"Sweetheart, I think you'll just have to enjoy it without me," he says, apprehensive. "I'd rather not risk my circuits."

"You're waterproof now," Alphys chides him, adjusting her glasses.

"I still haven't quite tested that feature yet, darling," he says, threading his fingers together nervously.

"Y-you don't need to. I tested it," she says. She gives him a weary sigh.

"I THINK YOU'D LIKE IT. YOU SHOULD JOIN US!" Papyrus says, wading back over to the
edge closest to Mettaton and holding out his hand. The robot reaches for him, then hesitates.

"bro, maybe he's worried it'll be too... shocking." Sans chuckles and pulls you into his lap. You being light and buoyant in the water, he doesn't have any trouble with it from his seat on a submerged rock.

Mettaton frowns and Papyrus lets out a frustrated sound. Setting his shoulders, Mettaton looks right at Sans as he takes your brother-in-law's hand and carefully takes a step into the spring. He freezes, and for a second you wonder if maybe something went wrong, but no. He's perfectly fine. After a moment a smile erupts across Mettaton's face and he eases himself the rest of the way in, letting out a relieved laugh.

"Oh, this is... This is nice, isn't it?" Mettaton asks, his gaze locked on Papyrus. Papyrus just nods, leaning in to nuzzle his boyfriend's cheek.

Smiling, you look away to glance over at Deacon and Bo. Right as you do you catch a sly look on Bo's face and the startled look on Deacon's as his hand darts into the water. She just giggles as his ears go beet red.

"pair of incorrigible perverts," Sans mutters into your ear, making you giggle as the vibration of his words matches the humming of his Soul as you're pressed skin to bone. He grips you tighter, a hand straying to your thigh beneath the water.

"Look who's talking," you say to him, arching a brow and smiling. Leaning close to press a kiss to his cheekbone, your hand drifts to the wing of his pelvis, and you feel him twitch beneath you at your touch, the bright points in his eyes sharpening as he looks at you. You just keep smiling.

"keep that up and you're gonna be in for a late night," he warns you, his voice a soft growl.

"I don't mind," you murmur. "I've got nowhere to be tomorrow. Spring Break, remember?"

"well, in that case..." he says, nipping your shoulder.

Giggling, you're sure you're blushing as you try to pull away from his teeth. Feeling suddenly self-conscious of the six other people here in the spring with you, you give Sans a pointed look as his expression softens. You kiss him again. "This is nice," you say.

"yeah. this is real nice."
You expect your week off from work to be relaxing, save for keeping Frisk out of trouble. But, seemingly overnight, the entire attitude of the public towards you and the monsters shifts. News sites that used to be neutral, or even positive take a sudden swing towards the negative or downright nasty. They bring up the incident with Asriel at Halloween as evidence of the danger of monsters, newscasters use your relationship with Sans as the butt of inappropriate jokes. Though you're the more popular topic of conversation, Deacon isn't spared from the public eye either.

He's labeled as a pervert in the same breath as you're accused of being brainwashed. More than one 'expert' is brought in to suggest Stockholm syndrome from your time in the Underground. You feel sick as you try to explain to Sans what it means.

Your interview with Gloria, that horrible woman from the conference, is finally aired. It's picked apart as evidence of your skewed outlook, your unwavering and misguided alliance with the monsters. One news station even brings Gloria herself onto their show and she's positively glowing from the attention. It turns your stomach to see her feeding so shamelessly off of your ridicule. She questions why you didn't allow Frisk to speak towards the end of your interview, as if you were afraid Frisk might reveal something. Finally, at the end of the segment, she fixes the camera with a sympathetic look, beseeching you personally to leave Ebott and seek some kind of help. Sans has to take the TV remote away from you before you throw it across the room.

More than one outraged show host (most of them women; why is it always the women?) demands to know where Frisk's father is. Why he hasn't stepped in to 'protect' his child, or take them away. You can't imagine Chris ever coming back into your life, but the thought of it worries you. If he and his parents suddenly decided that they wanted Frisk... You try not to think about it. Chris's parents wouldn't ever tarnish their reputation with a connection to you or their son's illegitimate child. Would they?

You do your best to keep the news from Frisk, but you know that as soon as school starts back up again that rumors will spread. The kids, even little ones, talk. Because they listen to their parents and regurgitate it to each other.

If you had work, at least you could distract yourself. You and Deacon spend most of the afternoons throughout the week together, keeping each other occupied while Sans and Bo are at work. You watch movies, or go for walks, anything to stop you from thinking about it all. There's one day, in the middle of the week, where you go over to his house and he's not home. When you text him he doesn't answer until almost an hour later. You ask him where he is and he tells you he was meeting Grant for lunch past the Line. Pressing him for more details, worrying that the stress of what's happening is making him more vulnerable to Grant's influence, yields little results. 'It's complicated,' he tells you again, and you trust him enough to drop it.

Asgore counsels patience, says that he's trying to get to the bottom of this sudden shift in behavior. But Captain Prasad is just as baffled as he is, and his connections to humans of influence are minimal. Toriel offers you comfort as best she can. Undyne calls you when she finds out and rants
and raves with you until you feel a little better, and you wish you could take her up on her offer of 'beating up all those stupid fucks'. Mettaton tries to rally together some support for you and Deacon from his human employees, but their voices are too quiet to be heard over the din of hate. There's just too much of it.

The worst part, the part that cuts the deepest, are the petitions. Hundreds of people banding together to make their voices heard to have Frisk taken away from you. Claiming you're an unfit mother, that Child Protective Services should be investigating your home. You're not sure which is worse: people accusing you of being mentally ill or just a terrible person.

You tell yourself they're just voices. People screaming into the darkness wanting to be heard but unable to act. They don't have any power over you or your life and it makes them angry. But they do have power. You can't stop thinking about them, their barbed insults and cutting words. The thinly veiled disgust on television or the outright revulsion online. Threats of action against you to 'protect' Frisk. Threats of a baser... more violent nature to 'teach you a lesson' for choosing to be with a monster.

You can't sleep.

Your mind keeps trying to make sense of all this, wanting to know why. Why you? Why the sudden surge of outrage against you and the monsters? If you knew why then maybe there is something you could do, something you could say to try and make things right again.

It's two in the morning and you're sitting at the dining room table with the laptop in front of you. Your knees are pulled up to your chest, tucked under your nightgown as you ball yourself tight and scroll through the comments on yet another news article. All the hate and disgust directed at you and anyone who tries to defend you gathers like bile in the back of your throat. But you can't stop reading. Can't stop trying to pick it apart to find some semblance of a cause. You cling to the few comments trying to stand against the overwhelming majority, calling the others out on their hatred. You silently thank these people for speaking out in your favor.

You resist the urge to get embroiled in this mess yourself. To listen to what everyone has been telling you: to stay out of it and just wait.

It just hurts. How do these people think it's okay to be so hateful towards you? What have you ever done to any of them? All you've wanted to do is just be happy with your family. But without you the monsters never would have reached the surface. You defended that choice to Gloria. And now the people rallying against the monsters are trying to take their anger out on you; the person who in their eyes is the source of all this.

This is all your fault.

"babe," Sans says, startling you from the doorway. You hug yourself tighter, guilt knotting in your stomach. The moment you look over at him, pale in the darkness of the house, you feel the resonation of his Soul under your skin. It's a small comfort, but not enough to soothe you. "i didn't realize we were swapping roles. isn't this usually the other way around?"

You rest your chin on your knees, watching him as he closes the distance between you. The lights in his eyes are dim as he searches your face, illuminated by the glow of the computer screen. He looks worried about you. "I couldn't sleep," you say, your voice a tired mumble.

He runs his fingers through your hair, cupping the back of your head as he leans down to nuzzle your temple when you don't tip your face back to let him kiss you. It's comforting, but part of you doesn't want to be comforted. You want to be angry, to cry and rage against the injustice of it. But
most of you feels guilty. And tired.

Reaching across you, he closes out the internet browser, leaving the desktop showing. It's a collage of photos you edited together of your family and friends. Everyone you care about, all there on display. Happy. For a moment you just stare at it in silence.

"you're just hurting yourself, reading that stuff," Sans says, grabbing the back of your chair and pushing so that you're mostly turned to face him. "why are you doing it?"

You bury your face in your knees, shaking your head.

Sans takes gentle hold of you, making you look up at him. Your eyes are blurry from a mix of sleepiness and unshed tears. "I want to know what they're saying about me."

"but why? it's not gonna help you," he says, and you think he's trying to keep the frustration out of his voice. "hope, just... don't. leave it alone, there's nothing you can do."

"They want to take Frisk away from me," you say, blinking back tears as he strokes your cheek with his thumb.

"and you already know they can't do that."

"They think I'm crazy." Your voice cracks and you look towards the computer, throat feeling tight.

"and you know they're wrong."

"How can you be so calm about this?" you demand, scowling up at him, digging your fingers into your arms as you keep them wrapped tight around your legs.

"because getting worked up over it isn't gonna help you. i know you want me to be angry, and babe —" He fixes you with a hard look, tense and restrained. "i am. you know i am. but that's not what you need from me."

"And what do I need?" you snap, eyes narrowing. You can taste the bitterness on your tongue.

Sans's expression softens as he smooths his hand down your hair. "that's fine, you can take it out on me," he says gently, and you feel something in your chest fracture.

What are you doing? A weak sob escapes your throat and your expression crumples, tipping your head into Sans's touch. "I hate this," you blurt out, squeezing your eyes shut as tears spill over down your cheeks. "I want to go back to Snowdin. Where there's no reporters, or people who hate us. We were happy before."

"you don't mean that," he says, and there's an odd tremor in his voice as his grip on you tightens.

"It was easier. Things weren't so complicated," you say, shaking your head. "No one tried to tell us our relationship was wrong. We didn't have to worry all the time about what the government might do to us! Sometimes I wonder if we made the right choice, leaving the Underground. If we could go back—"

"no," he says sharply, startling you. Your eyes snap open and his pupils are almost completely gone, his mouth a tight grimace. "nothing is worth going back. and don't you ever let frisk hear you say that."

You blanch, taken aback. "I didn't mean... Sans, even if I wanted to do it all over again —which I
don't!— with what we think we know, a Reset would kill Frisk."

"maybe," Sans says, shaking his head and letting out a ragged sigh. He looks shaken, and guilt gnaws at your insides. "just don't... don't give frisk any ideas. the kid means well but their sense of self-preservation needs some work."

There's a pause where you're not sure what to say. You feel raw and hurt, Sans is withdrawn. He strokes your cheek again, clenching his jaw.

"come to bed with me. just... don't think about that stuff and be with me. that's the only way you can fight back," he says, an edge of desperation to his voice. "come on."

You reach up for him and he relaxes, helping you to your feet. He's right. What a better way to show the people that would tear you apart that they can't hurt you than by being happy in spite of them?

As the week progresses the number of reports and articles starts to slow. But the responses to them are still full of he same vitriol. The petitions are discussed on the news but are otherwise ignored. Things, while still hostile, are still sort of 'normal'. When you go back to work on Monday the 28th you're able to fall back into the same old routine.

Leveretta pulls you aside to check on you, asks you about Deacon. When you tell her that other than some hurt feelings you're both fine, she seems relieved. She wastes no time in reminding you that she's your friend, and she's on your side. That all of Ebott is on your side. It's nice to hear.

Besides, you're all in this together. While some of the more pointed outrage is directed towards you in particular, it's monsters and those associated with them who the people truly hate.

"How's Bo?" you ask Deacon, looking at him as the two of you share lunch in the break room. You're both picking out of a large container of leftover meatloaf from the night before, set between you. "Is she still mad?"

"I think she's angrier than I am," he says, shaking his head. "The whole Wolf family is. You should have seen them last night; they're furious. Which is just what they want."

"Just what who wants?" you ask, confused.

Deacon's eyebrows shoot up beneath his hair as he looks at you, chewing. After a moment he responds. "These people. What would look better for their cause than a bunch of angry monsters? Prove them right, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, you're right," you say with a sigh of resignation. "I guess we just have to hope that they wear themselves out. Get tired of shitting all over us."

"Now that's a mental image," he teases and you can't help but laugh.

"Gross."

"Hey, you said it not me," he says, smirking.

"No way, you made it literal."

"Yes, well... it just figures that this stuff is happening right before my birthday," he says with an offhanded air as if he hadn't just dropped a surprise right in your lap.
"Your birthday?" you ask, setting down your fork.

He blinks. "Yes?"

"When's your birthday?"

"Saturday. The second," he says, still looking confused.

"And you never told me... why?" you press, reaching over and shoving his arm.

"Oh!" he says looking embarrassed. "This is... this is one of those things I forget people actually want to know."

"We're doing something for your birthday. Just so you know," you say, nodding to yourself. "I'll talk to Bo. I know she normally works Saturdays but maybe she can swap shifts..."

"You don't need to do anything," he protests weakly, color creeping up the sides of his neck. Despite his words, he looks pleased.

"Oh hush. As if I wasn't going to do something for my best friend's birthday. As if Bo wouldn't want to celebrate with her boyfriend!" You pick up your fork again, pointing at him before returning to your meal. "What's your favorite kind of cake?"

"I... uh..." He hesitates.

"Deacon, oh my god, if you say you've never had cake before—"

"I've had cake before!" he blurts out, laughing. "Jesus, we had cake at Papyrus's birthday. And Frisk's. You've seen me eat cake."

"Please tell me those aren't the only times you've had cake," you press, and to your relief he shakes his head. "Okay, good."

"But would this be a bad time to mention I've never had a birthday party?" he asks, looking amused by the shock on your face.

"Oh that's just sad," you say.

He chuckles. "Okay, that's kind of a lie," he admits. "Grant may be an asshole, but he wasn't that much of an asshole. I mean, nothing fancy, no big party or anything, but I got a nice store bought cake and a few gifts. It's not like he just pretended I didn't have a birthday."

"Well thank god for that," you say sarcastically, arching a brow. "We're doing something for your birthday. No ifs, ands, or buts."

Deacon raises his hands in surrender.

Deacon comes to meet you in your classroom at the end of the day, after Frisk heads off with Asriel to go home with him. The two of you made plans to hang out after work.

As you're debating the possibility of either going to the hotel to bother Bo, or head down to Lakeside to take a walk and enjoy the spring weather, you almost don't notice the man standing outside the school, in the parking lot. He's not looking at the doors, where you're coming from, instead glancing down at his phone.
He's tall, taller than you and Deacon, and broad-shouldered. His pants are black and baggy, almost big enough to completely cover his shoes, and a faded skull is silk screened on the front of his t-shirt, which he's wearing over a long-sleeved shirt. His face is concealed by long, straight brown hair. Something familiar stirs in your chest as you start to slow your steps, brow furrowing as you struggle with this feeling of recognition. Who—

He looks up, pushing his hair out of his face and at first the piercings in his ears and in his eyebrow throw you off. You don't recognize this broad face with the familiar nose and the unfamiliar dark scruff below his lip and along his jaw.

But he knows you.

"Hope?" he says, in a voice that's a little deeper than you remember. And you do remember now. That hesitant smile is hard to forget.

You freeze, torn between sudden fear (what is he doing here?) and an old, old affection for someone you never thought you'd speak to again. ".Chris?"
Why Are You Here?

Chapter Notes

Chris's smile brightens as he crosses the parking lot to meet you. "I thought maybe I missed you," he says, shoving his hands in his front pockets. He hunches forward a little as he walks, like he's trying to make himself smaller.

Deacon is at your side, looking at you to try and read the situation. But you're not sure how to react. Chris is just how you remember him, just older, bigger, and a tiny, quiet part of you that had waited and hoped for him to come back into your life is stirring in the back of your mind. This boy is the first person you ever loved. The first person you had sex with. When you were fourteen he knew you better than anyone else in the world. He was your refuge. You would have done anything for him.

So where does that leave the two of you now?

Without any sign from you to tell him what to do, Deacon wedges himself between you and Chris. "Hey," he says, holding out a hand. As Chris slows to a halt in front of the two of you, he has to look up at him. When did he get so tall? Deacon isn't exactly short, but next to Chris he sure looks it. "What's this all about?"

He looks at Deacon, shifting uncomfortably on his feet, then over his shoulder to meet your gaze. You had forgotten that his eyes were gray. "It's good to see you," he says, and that hesitant smile is back. "Like, really fucking good to see you."

"Good to see me," you say flatly, eyes narrowing. "Chris, what are you doing here? How did you even know where to find me?"

He looks a little taken aback, though you can't imagine he's surprised that your reunion isn't as friendly as it could be. You put your hand on Deacon's arm and he looks at you, searching your face before stepping back to stand beside you. He's barely restraining a grimace. Chris watches the two of you for a moment, fumbling as he tries to find his words.

"Eric? I mean, you remember Eric," he says, clearing his throat and glancing down at the ground before meeting your eyes again. "Look, I don't really keep up on the news much, at least not recently. But he told me about that stuff that's been airing. In that interview you did you mentioned where you worked and I figured I could catch you here."

"And what, you think they're right?" you say, bristling. "That you can just swoop in here and—"

"No no no!" Chris blurts out, holding his hands up and shaking his head. His jagged bangs fall into his eyes and he pushes them aside, tucking his hair behind his ear. God, even all his mannerisms are the same. "I just... I wanted to see if there was anything I could do to help."

"You want to..." Your grip tightens on Deacon's sleeve and he tenses, looking between you and Chris. As the bubble of fear inside you bursts at the realization that, no he doesn't want to make
things worse, something else swells up in your chest. Something angry and bitter that comes out as a sharp, humorless laugh. "You want to help? Now?"

He swallows, having the decency to at least look ashamed. Fidgeting with the barbell pierced through his eyebrow, he bows his head. He opens his mouth to say something but you don't let him speak.

"Where were you eight years ago Chris?" you blurt out, balling your hand into a fist and holding it in front of your chest. "When I needed your help!"

"Hope, I'm sorry," he says, and that pitiful look on his face just makes you want to hit him. Which in turn has you recoiling inwardly, surprised at yourself.

"I don't—" You cut yourself short, shaking your head and biting the inside of your lip. Letting go of Deacon's arm, you push your hair out of your face and fix Chris with a hard look. "I don't need your apologies. Or your help. I've done this without you since before Frisk was born, and I don't need you now."

"I just want to talk," Chris says, hooking his thumbs in his pockets. "Maybe explain myself, if you'll let me."

And isn't that something you've always wanted? Answers? Because while he abandoned you, pregnant and only fourteen, you weren't sure how much of that was really his choice. How many of the words he'd managed to say to you were fed to him by his parents. They'd always hated you, you were certain of it though they'd never said so to your face.

"And how do your parents feel about you being here?" you ask, crossing your arms over your chest. "I'm sure they're thrilled."

He straightens, pushing his shoulders back. Frowning, he glances off to the side and back at you. "They don't know. I..." he clears his throat again, a nervous tic of his. "I moved out. I haven't talked to them since then."

You blink, relaxing just a fraction. "You what?"

Grimacing, Chris shrugs his shoulders and looks down at the ground. "After you... after you and Frisk disappeared, we got into a huge fucking fight. And I left. Can I... This is probably a lot to ask, but I was wondering if I could meet her. You don't have to tell her who—"

"'Them'," you interject, keeping your voice even. His gray eyes dart up to yours, looking confused. "Frisk is nonbinary. They go by 'they' or 'them'."

"Oh. Oh, shit, sorry. Fuck, I'm glad that I didn't screw that up in front of them. It's just... the long hair threw me off," he says, wincing.

"Chris, you out of anyone should know not to assume based on hair," you say, relaxing a bit more and arching a brow. His sheepish expression draws a tiny smile out of you.

He grabs a handful of his own long hair and gives an embarrassed laugh. "Shit, yeah I guess you're right."

Sensing the shift in mood, Deacon rests his hands on his hips, easing back a little. He looks at you, raising a brow, and he doesn't need to speak for you to see the 'Now what?' in his expression. That's a good question. Chris watches your silent exchange, rubbing his chin as you return your attention to him.
You bite your lip, regarding him with uncertainty. "What exactly do you want from us, Chris? Do you want to be part of Frisk's life? Because they have a father now, and if you think you can get in the way of that... I won't let you."

The way he looks at you, it's like he's looking at you for the first time. Like he's been seeing someone else and realizing that you're not that scared girl anymore. You're a woman, a mother, and Chris is... you're not sure what Chris is. Is he really any different from the boy you knew in high school? "I just want to make things up to you, if I can. I know I fucked up. I should have been there for you."

"Yeah," you agree, hugging yourself. A fleeting, mournful smile curves your mouth for a second before disappearing. "You should have. I'm not sure what you think you can do to help us, but if you want to talk, I'll listen."

"Oh, Sans is going to love this," Deacon mutters, and you can't help but laugh.

"Oh, is that... Sans is your boyfriend, right?" Chris asks, the momentary look of relief gone as quick as it came.

"No," you say, unable to help the self-satisfied smile you give him. "Sans is my husband."

"Her skeleton husband, great choice of shirt by the way," Deacon says, thoroughly unimpressed. Chris's eyes widen as he looks from you, to Deacon, then down at his shirt. His cheeks redden just enough to be noticeable, and he gives you an apologetic look. "Fuck, that's right. Uh, shit I forgot, should I...?"

"It's fine," you say, shooting Deacon a look. He just smiles at you. "We can... Chris are you doing anything this afternoon?"

His eyebrows shoot up, one hand splayed over the front of his shirt, as if to hide the skull design. "Uh, just coming here. Looking for you."

"I don't want to stand here in the parking lot. If you want to talk, you can come to the house," you sigh, earning yourself a surprised look from both Deacon and Chris. "Frisk won't be home until late, I can tell Toriel to keep them until you leave. I want to talk to them first before I just... I'm not going to surprise them with this. If they want to meet you, and I don't have a problem with whatever it is you have to say to me... and if Sans agrees. Then we can figure something out."

"Yeah, yeah of course," Chris says, bobbing his head in agreement. "Whatever you want. Tell me what to do and I'll do it."

You tell him to follow you back to the house, and as he walks back to his car (a BMW, which you can only assume his parents bought for him) Deacon hangs back by your side. He fixes you with a questioning stare, one brow raised as you fidget with the locket hanging around your neck. Your thumb trails over the infinity symbol on Sans's Christmas gift.

"You think I'm making a mistake," you say, and Deacon shrugs his shoulders.

"I think Sans is going to disintegrate him. With his laser skull," he says, so deadpan that you snort and bite back a laugh.

"He said it's a blaster, and no he won't," you insist. "He's not here to cause trouble."

"That you know of."
"He's harmless. A huge softie the whole time we were dating."

"Perhaps," Deacon says, running a hand through his hair. He gives you a sly look as the two of you walk towards your cars. "But I'll give it to past Hope; Chris is cute. I see what you liked about him." He winks at you.

"Deacon I swear to god."

"I mean he'd have to be. Between the two of you, no wonder Frisk came out so adorable," he says innocently.

"Don't try to distract me with flattery. I'm too disgusted by the thought of you finding my ex attractive," you say, trying not to smile. You're not succeeding.

"Do you want me to come with you? Call me paranoid, but I don't like the idea of leaving you alone with him, softie or not," Deacon says, sobering as he pulls out his keys.

For a moment you're about to tell him no, but when you really stop to consider it... "Yeah. I appreciate it. And I'm sorry this is messing our plans," you say, wincing.

He rolls his eyes. "Yes, how dare your ex-boyfriend just show up with no warning on the day you're supposed to spend with me. How could you be so inconsiderate!"

You huff a laugh. "Okay, okay. I'll meet you at the house."

You don't even have time to think about what you're doing, what good could possibly come out of talking with Chris, because you have to call Sans while in the car. You have to let him know that there's a possibility he might still be at the house when he gets home. That's the last thing you want to surprise your husband with right now.

Sans picks up on the second ring. "hey babe, everything ok?"

"Yeah, everything's—"

"S-Sans!" Alphys yelps on the other line, and you hear your husband let out a startled sound.

"sorry alphys! i got it," he says, and you hear the scrape of metal and a loud thunk of something sliding into place. "ok gimme two seconds. i'll be right back. hope, you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Are you okay?" you ask, getting the distinct impression that you're interrupting something.

"yeah, don't worry about it. just caught me in the middle of something. what's up?" He sounds a little out of breath.

"Um. It's... Everything is okay!" you insist, letting out a nervous cough.

"ok..." he says slowly.

"It's... Chris. Chris came to see me after work today," you say, and you jerk the phone away from your ear as the crackle of magic comes through the call as high-pitched feedback.

"what the fuck does he want?" Sans growls. You wish you could say you were surprised by his response.
"He's not here to try to take Frisk. He wants to talk, and I wanted to let you know he might be at the house when you get home."

"what about frisk?"

"Frisk is with Tori this afternoon. I don't want them meeting him unless all three of us decide it's okay," you say, doing your best to try and placate him over the phone.

"babe, are you sure this is a good idea?" he asks, letting out a frustrated sigh. You can just picture him gritting his teeth.

You sigh too. "No," you admit. "He says that he saw the news recently, about us. And he wanted to try and help. I... don't know how much he can do, but I... Hun, I dunno."

"the last time you tried to give someone a chance to apologize to you, it bit you in the ass," he says carefully.

Your hands tighten their grip on the steering wheel as you turn down the long road towards your house. "I want to know why. This is my chance to know how he justified abandoning me," you say, bitterness creeping into your voice.

"do you want me to come home? i don't like—"

"No, you stay. Deacon's coming to the house too so I won't be alone."

"are you sure?"

Biting your lip, you hesitate for a second. "Yeah. I want to get a chance to hear what he has to say before you judge him too harshly."

"who says i'd judge him too harshly?"

"I don't want a repeat of what happened with Deacon."

"fine," he grumbles, unhappy. "but you call me if anything changes. it only takes me a couple minutes to teleport home."

"I will," you agree. "And, Sans. I love you."

"love you too," he answers begrudgingly, his tone softening just a little. "be careful."
"Man, this is totally a step up from your mom's house," Chris says, standing in the foyer as he takes in what he can see of the living room and kitchen. It's strange, seeing him here in your home. Stranger than when Kim was here, even. You'd never thought that Chris would ever try to contact you.

"I'm sure it doesn't seem like much compared to your parents'," you say, glancing back at Deacon as he follows you inside. He shuts and locks the door. "Chris, I forgot to introduce you. This is Deacon, my best friend. He lives next door."

Chris's attention shifts to Deacon, and something silent passes between them. Your friend stays at your side, one hand resting on his hip as his jaw tenses. "I've already escorted Kim out of this house, I don't have a problem adding you to the list," he says with a smile.

"Wait, your mom came here?" Chris asks, oblivious to Deacon's threat. His surprised expression quickly folds as he clears his throat and rubs the hair on his jaw. "Is she... were the rumors right? Is she why you came here to Mt. Ebott in the first place?"

Deacon's phone pings and you glance over at him as he pulls it out of his pocket. His forced smile fades a little, but you return your attention to Chris where he's standing there, watching you. Sighing, you nod. "Yeah. She was the reason," you say.

Chris's whole body tenses, his eyes searching your face as a furrow forms between his thick brows. "Was she still hurting you? Did she... hurt Frisk?" he asks, though he seems to dread your answer.

"I thought you came here so that you could explain yourself, not the other way around," Deacon mutters as he types in a message on his phone.

"Deacon—"

"No, he's right, I shouldn't have—"

"Yes she hurt us!" you blurt out, because you need him to know. You need him to know the situation he left you in when he made his choice. "She never stopped hurting me. Sure, maybe while I was pregnant, but that was nine months out of the last eight years! I'm sure you remember the bruises."

He's silent, staring at you, as the two of you look at one another. You know he remembers them. You can't help but think of the times he'd brush his hands over them, over your sides and chest, your legs. Places you could hide when you went to school the next day. Places only he could see whenever you stole time alone together by skipping school, or lying about where you were going on the weekend. He was intimately familiar with how your mother used to hurt you, and he did what he could to try and make you feel better. To tell you that the marks she left on your skin didn't make you any less beautiful to him.
He'd been such a good boyfriend. You'd been so happy.

"And until the night we left she hadn't hurt Frisk," you say, hand closing around the locket hanging against your chest. "I don't know why I thought she wouldn't hurt them, she hadn't had a problem hitting me as a child. But she finally did and we came here. Because I couldn't think of anyone that could help us."

"Fuck," Chris breathes, squeezing his eyes shut and covering his face with a hand. He makes a pained sound, gritting his teeth and tearing his hand away as he fights back his gut reaction. He's blinking too fast, shaking his head and shoving the heel of his palm against one eye. You're not surprised to see his eyes are a little glassy; he'd always been sensitive. Especially when it came to you. "Goddamn it, I should have been there. I... I would have come to get you guys, I would have figured something out. I just... fuck."

You feel somehow satisfied by his pain and anger on your behalf. It's an odd feeling, and you're not sure how to take it, but it's there. You're quiet as you watch him try to come to terms with what you've told him. A quick glance at Deacon shows that his expression has softened, and he even looks a little uncertain. The two of you share a look before you return your attention to Chris.

"As soon as I heard you guys went missing, I fucking knew it. You'd never do something like that unless she'd been..." He trails off, dropping his hands and taking a step closer to you. He's searching your face, remorseful. "Hope, I'm sorry. That I wasn't there for you, for our baby—"

You wince, crossing your arms over your chest and glancing away.

"—I was selfish and scared—"

"You were scared?" you snap, shaking your head and catching his eye again. "I was scared. I was fourteen, pregnant, stuck in a house with a woman who hit me and you left me there!"

"I'm sorry," he blurs out again, and there's that pitiful look on his face. "I can't apologize enough. I know I can't. All I can do is try to not be a complete fuck-up anymore."

"I loved you!" You storm up to him and stop a foot away, jabbing him in the chest because you need to... you want to shove him but you restrain yourself. "And I want to hate you for what you did but you can't even let me do that!"

He fumbles with something to say, apologetic and confused. "I'm sorry," he says weakly.

"Was it just because you were scared?" you ask him, staring up into his eyes as the anger leeches out of you. He's cowed, standing there and taking whatever you have to give him, even though he's nearly a foot taller than you. It's so much harder to be angry with him when he's just so... weak. "Or did your parents tell you to do it?"

"Both," he admits, and a part of you feels vindicated. You knew they had to be to blame. "I didn't know what else to do. I told them what happened and they said they'd... take care of it. They didn't even give me the choice of trying to help, just said that they'd make an arrangement with your mom and told me to break it off with you. You remember what they did; they put me in fucking private school just to keep me away from you."

"I thought... I thought you wanted to switch schools. That's what Eric told me," you say, brow furrowing. "Why would he lie?"

Chris grimaces, hanging his head and pushing his hair out of his face. "Because that's what I told him. He assumed I'd be more than happy to get away from you and the whole... pregnant thing, and
I just went with it."

"Are you saying..." You have to swallow past a lump in your throat, suddenly afraid of the question you need to have answered. Afraid of what it might mean. "That you never wanted to leave me?"

He hesitates, and part of you feels... relieved. "I didn't know what I wanted. I never got the fucking chance to find out," he says, and you think that speaks more of his relationship with his parents than what happened between the two of you.

Deacon's phone pings again and it yanks your attention away from Chris. Which is probably for the best because you're not sure what to think right now. Turning to look back at your friend, he's typing another message, brow furrowed.

You glance over at Chris. "C'mon, we can go sit down," you say, then walk over to Deacon. "Who's texting you?"

As the two guys follow you into the living room, Deacon pockets his phone. "Nobody."

"Is it Sans?" you press. You and Deacon take a seat on the couch, while Chris opts for the loveseat across the room. Probably for the best.

"No, it's absolutely not your husband, texting me to make sure everything is okay," he says dryly, arching a brow at you.

"I'm not sure if it's annoying or adorable that it takes some kind of crisis for the two of you to start banding together." You wrap you arms around a pillow and hug it in your lap, against your chest. Deacon huffs a weak laugh, then settles back against the couch.

Chris, in contrast, is sitting on the edge of his seat, hands fisted in his lap as he looks at the two of you. "Um," he says, pulling your attention back to him. "Do I count as a 'crisis'?"

"How did you think Hope and Sans would react to the only person that might have any chance of taking their kid away?" Deacon snaps, harsher than you'd expect. "You said you saw the news; that's all these assholes are hoping for! You to step in, and then here you come."

"Deacon—"

"You abandoned your kid!" he blurts out, openly glaring at Chris and shit why hadn't you realized just how close to home this would be for him? "You fucked off so you could keep doing whatever the hell you wanted while Frisk was left without a father!"

"Deacon he knows," you say softly, touching his arm. He flinches, but doesn't jerk away, his expression hardened.

His gaze is cold as he glances at you. "Well maybe he needs to hear it again. You're forgiving him too easily."

"I never said I forgave him," you say, but your own words feel weak to your ears.

He must sense it too. "But you're going to."

"Sorry, but I'm not sure how it's any of your business," Chris says, picking at the fabric of his pants as he watches the two of you.

Deacon's lip curls and you see him get ready to hurl something back at him, but you catch him
before he can. "Hey," you say, hand tightening around his arm. He makes a low, frustrated noise but looks at you. "Chris, can you give us a minute?"

Your ex hesitates, then pushes up to his feet. "Yeah... I'll just be by the stairs I guess."

"Thanks," you say, flashing him a weak smile as he goes. When you look back at Deacon he seems sobered, but the line of his jaw is still tensed. "I love you, but you're being an ass right now."

Caught between your annoyance and affection, Deacon looks down at his knees, gritting his teeth. "He doesn't deserve your forgiveness. Or any part of yours or Frisk's lives. He doesn't get to bail for the hard parts and then come reap the benefits after."

"I'm just talking to him. No one is making any decisions yet, and when that happens, Sans will be here." You sigh as he rubs the back of his neck. "I believe him, when he says that he's sorry. He's not a bad guy."

"It doesn't take a bad guy to make shitty choices that hurt the people around them," he says, eyes flicking over to yours. "He's already done it to you once."

"It's impossible to get through life without hurting people. Sans has hurt me, Frisk has hurt me, you've hurt Bo... Should I condemn the three of you?" You lean in close and he drops his gaze, sighing. "I trust him, and his intentions, more than Kim's. So please don't make this harder than it already is. I'm already worried about when Sans gets home."

Deacon scrubs his hand over his face, cradling his forehead in his hand. "Fine. Fine, I'll play nice. I'm sorry, I should have kept out of it."

You give him a quick rub across his back, pressing your cheek against his shoulder. "Thank you. I'll be right back," you say, then stand to go find Chris.

You're not surprised to find him looking at the pictures in the stairwell, studying the faces of your family and friends, of the child that has his hair and his nose and his jaw. In particular he's looking at a picture of Frisk and Asriel, arms around each other and smiling at the camera.

"That's Asriel," you say, coming up beside him. He pushes his hair behind his ear on the side closest to you so he can glance over to meet your eyes. "They've been best friends since we left the Underground."

"Your best friend doesn't seem to like me," Chris says, sighing. "Not that I can really blame him, can I? Can't imagine you had many good things to say about me. For good reason."

"You fucked up, Chris," you say, giving him a weak smile.

He returns it, then looks back at the picture. "I fucked up," he agrees. "But you didn't. You and Frisk have this amazing life now. And you've changed."

"I grew up," you say, reaching up to grab your locket. "And yeah. We're really happy here. Things were... pretty unexpected, but we've found a good place."

His attention shifts to a family portrait, of you, Sans, and Frisk. A tiny ghost of... something crosses Chris's face before you can pin it down. "He, uh, seems nice. Your husband, I mean. You guys look happy."

"Are you sure you want to do this? You could just leave, avoid the meeting with Sans that... I'm
not sure will go very well. I don't even have to mention anything to Frisk," you say, because wouldn't that be so much easier? To just pretend that this never happened. You could be content with the knowledge that Chris hadn't completely turned on you overnight by himself, shift most of the blame onto his parents. And you and Sans and Frisk could just go on with your lives.

But would you be happier? Would Chris? Would Frisk?

"Is that what you want me to do? I mean, if you want me to go, I'll go. I just thought, with all the shit going on on TV that maybe there was something I could do. Like, maybe talk to somebody?" He fidgets with his eyebrow piercing, shrugging his shoulders. "And I just... when I saw you guys on TV... I wanted to know that you were doing okay. I wanted to come see you, and apologize. And... I don't know. I'm here now. Eight years too late, but I'm here."

"You butthead," you say, without the least bit of animosity. You used to call him that, and judging by the small smile on his face you think he remembers. "Stop being so damn sweet. I'm supposed to stay mad at you."

Chris laughs, and his smile brightens. "Sorry, I can't help it. Right now I'm just glad that you didn't kick me off the mountain."

"Don't push your luck, you've got two guys that would be more than happy to do that right now," you say, which wipes the smile back off his face. Then, as if on cue—

"Uh, Hope?" Deacon calls from the living room. "Sans just texted me to say that he's headed home."
You're waiting in the foyer when Sans comes through the front door. He looks harried, the lights in his eyes are narrow points as he takes quick stock of the state of you, then closes the distance to reach out and take your hand. The way that your Souls hum together in your chest at his touch is a reassurance that you think you both needed, because a little bit of the tension smooths out of his face. His thumb brushes over your wedding rings.

"are you ok?" he asks, his voice low.

You tangle your fingers in the front of his jacket, holding onto him and nodding. "Yeah. It's... weird, but I'm fine. What happened, I thought you weren't going to leave early?"

A frown flits across Sans's face. "alphys kicked me out, said i was being more of a nuisance."

You give a weak laugh and he rolls his eyes, but for a moment the two of you look at each other and you know that everything will be fine. Whatever happens, you have each other.

But now that he's reassured of your well-being, you can see his focus shift. His brow furrows and he glances towards the living room. "where is he?" he asks in a tone that's almost a growl.

"In the living room," you say, and you think he's going to ask you how things have been, maybe try to understand what's been happening in the last hour, but he lets you go and brushes past you. All you can do is follow him.

Deacon is still sitting on the couch, a look of amused anticipation on his face. Oh, you're certain he's just glad to see Sans focus his frustration on someone else for a change. He'd gotten a taste of it with Kim, but this time he can just sit back and observe. You're a little torn on how you should feel about that.

Chris is back on the loveseat, hunched forward with his arms on his knees, picking at his fingers. The second that Sans comes into the room he looks up and his eyes widen, startled and you think more than a little intimidated. He swallows hard enough that you can see his Adam's apple bob up and down.

"i've had months to think of what i'd like to say to you if you ever decided to show up," Sans says, shoving his hands into his pockets as he glares down at Chris. You're at your husband's side, silent. Chris's eyes flick over to you. "don't look at her, you look at me. you don't deserve her in your life. she's a better person, a better parent, than you'll ever be and you had your chance."

Chris is silent as he listens, which you're thankful for. The best thing he can do right now is to just let Sans talk. And you'd be lying if you said you weren't enjoying this at least a little bit. Years of bitterness aren't just going to disappear with an apology and one feeble gesture of goodwill.

"when i told her i loved her, she didn't believe me. didn't think i meant it enough because of
what you did," he says, his tone darkening. You never realized just how much Sans resented him for that. When Chris flinches and looks down at the ground, Sans doesn't say anything to correct him. "the first time we had an argument she panicked because she thought i was gonna leave her, like you did. she thought i wouldn't want to spend my future with her and frisk because you didn't think they were worth yours. i love her, and i don't regret a single moment of repairing the damage you did, but she shouldn't have been damaged in the first place!" He takes a step forward, and you can feel the crackle of magic raise goosebumps up your arms. Chris must feel it too because his eyes dart back up to Sans, startled. "if you had really loved her, and stayed by her side, you could have spared her so much pain, you piece of shit. spared frisk from—"

From sharing their body with Chara. From gaining the ability to Reset in the first place. From falling into the Underground and inadvertently adding to the cycle of Sans's misery. From bringing you with them, and meeting Sans and helping free the monsters. Just like Kim, Chris had had a part to play in your lives. A key role in bringing the two of you together.

You think Sans knows it too, because he cuts himself off. He grits his teeth and looks at you, seeking out some small kind of reassurance. You give it to him, a brief, tender look before he returns his attention to Chris.

tell me why i shouldn't kick your ass outta my house and make fucking sure you never come near my wife and child ever again," Sans demands, glaring down at the man that's nearly cowering on your couch.

How did he ever work up the nerve to stand up to his parents?

"I don't know," Chris says weakly, shaking his head and looking down at the ground, pushing his hair out of his face. "Maybe you should. Hope, I never... I never thought I'd hurt you that badly."

"What did you think would happen?" you say, touching Sans's arm as he goes to interject. But he quiets as he looks at you again.

He shakes his head again, burying his face in his hands. Whatever enjoyment you'd been getting out of watching Sans rake him over the coals is rapidly fading. "I don't know."

Sans frowns, looking annoyed as his body relaxes just a fraction. "then what the hell do you know?"

"That I'm sorry," he blurts out, and oh goddamn it his shoulders are shaking and his voice cracks. Now you just feel... sorry for him. "That I just wanted to apologize and see if there was anything I could do to help because I was worried about you guys. When you and Frisk went missing I thought that I'd lost my chance to ever find out how you were doing. Whenever your due date came around I'd... think about going over to your house but I could never work up the nerve." He rubs his face, sniffling, before looking up at you. Taking a second to collect himself, blinking hard, he meets your eyes. "I blamed myself for what happened. I knew that if I had done something you guys wouldn't have disappeared. And when they found your car at the foot of the mountain, I thought... I thought you were dead and it was my fault."

Chris takes a long, shuddering breath and you're not sure what to say. What can you say? His guilt isn't your fault. The only one he has to blame is himself and maybe his parents, and you suspect he's been doing that already for a long time.

"And my fucking parents," he continues, pushing his hair out of his face as he looks to the side, his expression twisted with disgust. "The only thing they could say when they heard what happened is that they were relieved that they could stop worrying about the chance of you coming after them
for child support. That's all they ever cared about was their goddamn money. They said you got pregnant on purpose to try and get money from them!"

"What the hell?" says Deacon from behind you, listening in silence this whole time. It sums up your own thoughts quite nicely.

"What, because I was poor and brown that's all I'm good for? Getting pregnant for handouts?" you snap, because that would be just like them, those racist assholes. "Is that all they thought of me?"

Chris meets your eyes again, everything about him just screams regret, and it makes you that much angrier. How many awful things had they said about you behind your back? "I never believed them," he says, but part of you wonders if that's completely true. "When I thought you were gone and all they could talk about was how convenient it was for them... I left. I told them off like I always wanted to, packed what shit I could, and slept on Eric's couch for like a month. I haven't talked to them since."

You know how hard that is. Standing up to your mother had taken more courage than you thought you had in you, but you'd done it. "I didn't realize you could be that brave," you say, and Chris lets out a humorless laugh.

"It's fucking stupid. I could be brave enough after it didn't matter, but when it could have counted, I caved under the pressure," he says, pushing his hair over his shoulder and tilting his head to the side. "So now I work at a music store, pissing away my degree that I only got because they thought that I'd want to go into fucking 'business management'... I hope Dad gets a damn ulcer if he ever finds out. Serve the bastard right."

Silence fills the room as the three of you regard each other, uncertain of what to say. Sans's anger diminished the moment Chris started to cry, and he doesn't seem to know what to do with him. You're honestly not so sure yourself.

It stretches on to the point of awkwardness, and finally Chris pushes up to his feet. Sans lets out a soft sound of annoyance as the human towers over him. "I think maybe this was a bad idea," he says, glancing towards the front door. "All I've done is upset you guys, and I don't... who the fuck am I, right? I should just go."

As Chris goes to walk past you, and you wonder if you should call him back, Sans shocks you by doing it first. "wait," he says, in a commanding tone that makes Chris freeze mid-step and give Sans a startled look. "shit, i feel like i just kicked a damn puppy, stop looking at me like that."

"Sorry," Chris blurts out shoving his hands into the front pockets of his pants.

Sans just rolls his eyes, then looks at you. "babe, what do you think?"

You blink. "About what?"

He jerks his shoulder at Chris, not looking at him. "you know him better than me. and i trust your opinion. i'm not convinced he's got any sort of ulterior motives for being here—"

"I don't! I didn't even think you guys might think I'd try to take Frisk," Chris says, eyes wide. "I don't know the first thing about kids."

"that i believe," Sans says, and you hear Deacon muffle a laugh behind you. Sans glances over his shoulder. "deacon, you're still here?"

"Uh, yeah. It would have been kind of awkward to just get up and leave in the middle of all that. I
didn't want to interrupt," he says blithely.

"All I know is that Chris wants to help, but he doesn't know how, and he wants to meet Frisk, if we'll let him," you say, drawing your husband's attention back to you. You give Chris a questioning look. "Unless I'm forgetting something?"

He shakes his head. "Um, no, that's it," he says, then looks at Sans. "I'm not here to like, try and take your place. I know I can't! I just... if Frisk wants to talk I'm around. I can come back whenever I have time off. Whenever is good for you guys. Or never. It's cool."

"do you want him to meet frisk?" Sans says, glancing over at you.

"I think that, as long as we're both okay with it, it should be up to Frisk," you say carefully, and Chris is giving you a hesitant smile. "He's still... part of where Frisk came from."

Sans's jaw tenses at that but he doesn't say anything. He just nods.

"So are you okay with asking Frisk?" you ask. He nods again.

"we can talk more about how you can help after we see if they even wanna meet you," Sans says, pulling his hand out of his pocket so he can lace his fingers with yours. You're not sure if he's doing it for you, for himself, or for Chris. Maybe all three. "for now, pal, maybe you oughta head home."

Chris nods, and he gives you his cell phone number so you can let him know whatever you decide. He doesn't ask for yours, and you don't offer. If you end up inviting him back, he can get your number that way.

"I'll walk him out, I need to get going too," Deacon says, pushing up from the couch. As he gestures for Chris to follow him, he gives him an amused and distinctly unimpressed smile. "Let me tell you one thing, Chris. You haven't even met a fraction of the people that care about this family, and if you do anything to hurt Hope or Frisk, you'll have a lot more than just me and Sans to worry about. But as long as we're being honest... the two of us are the ones you need to worry about."
You're fidgeting with your phone the next evening, after Frisk goes to bed. Normally you'd set it on the table, ignored for the rest of the night as you spent time with your husband. Papyrus isn't due home for another hour or so, and for now the house is quiet. But you can't relax. Can't stop wondering what you should do. You and Sans talked to Frisk after Chris left, and the answer they gave you, while not surprising, left you in a difficult spot. You honestly thought they'd decide differently, but then again, when it came to the issue of their father, they'd had strong opinions from the beginning.

You just thought that, like you, they'd be willing to give him a chance. But why would they? He's no one to them except a guy who was never there. A guy that their mom never bothered to mention until they asked. Whatever lingering friendliness you might have for him doesn't matter to Frisk. And really, it shouldn't matter to you either. Chris shouldn't matter.

"keep frowning and your face is gonna stick like that," Sans says, snapping you out of your focus. "brooding's not gonna help anybody."

"It might," you say, pressing your phone face-down on your leg and looking over at your husband. He's searching your face, a mildly exasperated look forming a crease between his brows as he regards you. You sigh. "I was wondering if I should tell Chris about what Frisk said."

Sliding his arm around your shoulders, he pulls you up against him, nuzzling your temple. He makes a noncommittal noise and the low, steady sound of his Soul is comforting. You focus on it for a moment, like taking in a deep breath, and let it wash over you just long enough to gather your thoughts.

"Deacon thinks that I shouldn't call him. That I should leave him waiting like he did to me," you say, resting your head on his shoulder.

He runs his fingers through your hair. "and what do you think?"

"I think Deacon is projecting his own issues onto Chris."

"yeah, but i mean, what do you think about what you should do?"

"Oh." You hesitate, trying to think of the best way to put into words how you feel. "I... I know that if our places were reversed, I'd want to know for sure one way or the other. And, I know that he didn't exactly extend that courtesy to me, but things were a lot different then. We're grown-ups now. Shouldn't we act like it?"

"maybe," he says, drawing the word out. He's coaxing you to say more, like he can tell that you're not telling him everything.

Closing your eyes, you turn to tuck your head against his neck. "It would be petty of me to not call him out of spite. I just... he was such an important part of my life and I can't not care about him at
least a little." Sans makes a soft noise and you're not sure if it's annoyance or understanding. You can't see his face to help you decipher it. "Is that wrong?" you ask softly.

"you're a caring person. it's part of what i love about you," he says, but there's a measured tone to his voice. "but sometimes you worry too much about the feelings of people who don't matter. or shouldn't matter."

"But does it bother you that I don't hate Chris?" Your hand is on Sans's leg, your thumb rubbing against the smooth fabric of his shorts. He covers it with his own, threading your fingers together and squeezing.

"you couldn't even hate kim after she abused you for most of your life, why would i expect you to hate chris?"

"I don't know. I just thought maybe you'd want me to."

"i'm not sure what you're wanting me to say here, babe."

Letting out an agitated sigh, you pick up your head and look at Sans, trying to get a read on his neutral expression. His pupils aren't bright but they aren't dim either, frustratingly in-between. "You're not worried, or jealous?"

"why, do you want me to be?" he asks, and now he's got an amused gleam in his eye that makes you let out an annoyed huff.

"No! I just... you were jealous about Deacon even though nothing was happening, and now Chris shows up, a guy I was actually sleeping with at one point, the biological father of our child, and you're... fine?"

"the thing with deacon was... a lot more than just thinking you might be attracted to him. but we're married now, in a way that chris could never even comprehend. i know you and you know me down to our souls, and he couldn't come between that even if he wanted to." Sans gives you a warm smile, and you feel a little foolish for ever expecting any different. "and to be honest, he's kind of... pathetic."

You let out a soft, embarrassed laugh. "I swear he seemed a lot cooler when I was younger," you admit.

He chuckles, leaning over to nuzzle your cheek. "guess i should be glad your tastes have improved." After a pause, he pulls back so he can look you in the eye again. "if it'll make you feel better, call the guy. i don't mind. if you were worried about upsetting me, don't. he's not gonna get under my skin."

Snorting, you make a face, doing your best to stifle your laughter. "I'm not going to dignify that with a response."

"your adorable snort was response enough, babe," he says with a self-satisfied grin.

Setting back into the couch and looking at your phone, you pull up your contacts and scroll down to the C's. He's not hard to find; it's not like you have a big list. Your eyes flick over to Sans's and he squeezes your hand again, giving you a small nod of encouragement.

Taking in a deep breath, you tap Chris's number and hold the phone to your ear. At first you think he's not going to answer. Maybe you'll be able to get away with a voicemail, but no, after four rings he picks up.
"Hel— shit! Fuck!" There's the sound of the phone clattering to the ground and muffled voices. You hold it away from your ear for a second, confused, as you hear a scrape on the other line and the sounds of jostling before Chris returns to the line, sounding a little out of breath. "Sorry, uh, hello?"

"Um, hey. It's Hope," you say, biting your lip. "Is this a bad time?"

"Oh! Just a— Eric knock it off! Hey—" He's cut off by the sound of a loud guitar riff. "Hey douchebag! Can't you knock it off for two goddamn seconds while I answer a call?"

"Maybe I should call back later," you say slowly, giving Sans a bemused look.

"No, Hope, hold on," Chris blurts out. "Let me just go outside— fuck off dude I'll be right back."

"Tell your baby momma that you're busy," says a faint voice in the background, one you think you recognize as Eric's. He'd always been a bit of an asshole, and after Chris left your school you'd stopped talking to him. To him, as far as you knew, you were just an accessory. You weren't Eric's friend, just someone he had to interact with when trying to hang out with Chris.

"Don't call her that," he says weakly, and the laughter in the background fades and there's the slam of a door shutting. "Sorry. I'm here now. What's up?"

"I... are you sure this is a good time?" you ask.

"It's fine," he says, with an enthusiasm you're afraid you're going to end up squashing. "I was just jamming with the guys. Uh, I do that a lot in my time off. Most of the band is still together, though we had to swap drummers a couple years ago. What is it with drummers?"

You hunch forward, trying not to smile. It feels strange, hearing him talk about band drama while sitting next to Sans. It's... awkward. Like you're straddling the line between these two very different stages of your life. "Is this your third one?"

Chris laughs, a forced sound that's a little strained. By nerves, you think. "Fourth. You weren't around when..." he trails off, and after a second he clears his throat. "I'm sorry, you probably don't give a shit about all this. Um, what's up? Did you...?"

"Yeah," you say, nodding though he can't see you. You wince. "I... Chris, I talked to them and..."

"Oh," he says, and he must be able to hear the apology in your voice. "I-I mean I wasn't expecting much. It's fine, I just thought—"

"I'm sorry."

"No! Please, it's fine," he says, almost yelling before he drops his voice. "Don't apologize. I can't blame them. Like, they've got you and your husband, it's fine. It's... Fuck, at least Eric will be thrilled. You wouldn't believe the shit he was... okay maybe you would."

"Yeah... Look, I can... I'll keep your number, and if Frisk changes their mind, I promise I'll let you know. They're only seven, and right now they're being really stubborn, especially about who their dad is," you say, because you feel like you owe him an explanation. You know you don't, but you can't help it. "All this stuff with the news..."

"I don't want to do anything to upset them. Or you. I... I understand. You didn't even need to bother to let me know so, thanks. For keeping me in the loop. It's probably more than I fucking deserve, let's be real," he says, letting out a heavy sigh. "You've been a lot cooler about all of this than I
"What are you talking about?" you blurt out with an uneasy laugh. "I yelled at you, Sans made you cry, and I'm pretty sure my best friend threatened you more than once."

"You didn't have to give me a chance at all. And... I'm glad you've got people watching out for you. I wish you'd had people like that sooner."

"...Thanks Chris," you say gently. "You're... You're still a good guy. And I'm glad you got away from your parents."

He clears his throat. "Yeah. Thanks. Ah, look, I should get back inside before Eric comes looking for me—"

"Yeah! Go, go ahead. I just wanted to let you know what happened."

"Yeah. Thanks again for that. I'll uh..." For a second you think he's going to say 'talk to you later' but he doesn't. "Goodbye, Hope."

"Bye, Chris," you say, and there's only a second between you speaking and him hanging up. You can't help but feel a sense of finality, and wonder, briefly, if you'll ever talk to him again.

You suppose that's up to Frisk.

Asgore spends most of his evenings during the week alone. He expects Wednesday to be much of the same: dinner and tea by himself as he keeps an eye on the news and whatever these humans have in store for his people this time. Because is that not how it has been since the Barrier fell? Just more and more of how the humans have decided to restrict, control, and limit him and his people?

It has been this way since the war. Since before he was king. Why should he have expected this time to be any different? He wonders, sometimes, if that is part of why he never tried to find a way to free them for so long. Because even if they returned to the surface, who was to say that things would be better or safer? Maybe the only way for his people to survive was beneath the earth, hidden away and forgotten by the world. He thought that, with how much time had passed, that things would be different.

And oh, they are certainly different, but the hearts of humans are still at their core fundamentally the same as before. With exceptions —there are always exceptions—to be sure, but the human race is, without a doubt, a fearful one.

He supposes it was always a matter of time before the general opinion of them turned sour. But he cannot let himself lose hope. Would that not counteract what he has been trying to show his people for so long?

It is starting to get dark outside when there is a knock at his front door.

Who might that be? He has not received any calls, or requests to meet in private that he can recall. Did he forget something? Ah, probably not. He had always had an open door policy with his people, that they might come to him with whatever problems that might arise. It could be anyone, here for his counsel.

The human soldiers at his door are not here for counsel.

He recognizes Captain Prasad. She is a short yet commanding woman, black hair pulled into a
tight bun beneath her hat. Asgore has spoken with her on many occasions, regarding matters with the Line and as a liaison between himself and higher government officials. He has a great degree of respect for her and her morals, despite what she and the men and women under her command have been assigned to do. Dressed in fatigues, she looks a little out of place beside the man with her.

He is a head taller than her, clad in what Asgore thinks he has heard referred to as a dress uniform. Perhaps if he was a smaller monster he might feel threatened by this man, but standing there in his doorway, looking down at the two of them, he is only cautious. Whatever the matter is, Captain Prasad looks upset, which bodes ill.

"Captain," Asgore says, inclining his head to the woman. His grip on the doorknob tenses out of sight. "How might I help you this evening? It is not often that you pay a visit to my home."

"King Asgore," she says, and the tightness of her smile only worries him further. What is this all about? "I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm afraid this couldn't wait. Can we come inside?"

"May I ask who 'we' is?" he asks, glancing over at the man at her side and back again.

The man appears to dislike the question, his lip curling even as he remains silent. Prasad clears her throat. "This is Captain Jacobs. He and his men will be replacing my company."

"What?" Asgore blurts out, eyes widening. "When was this decided?"

She opens her mouth to speak but Jacobs raises his hand, giving her a look of disdain. "That information is not yours to have. We are not at liberty to say."

Prasad's expression sours. "We're here so that I can introduce the two of you," she says, pursing her lips. But there is something... worrying in her eyes. A warning? "So that the... transition is a smooth one." It sounds as though she is echoing someone else's voice, her sincerity ringing false.

"Then by all means, please come inside," Asgore says, taking a step back to allow them inside.

As they step over the threshold they remove their hats. Prasad folds hers up like he has seen her do numerous times, slipping it into her pocket. Jacobs, by comparison, is stiff and formal. He rolls the brim of his between his fingers, taking sharp, calculating looks around the house.

Asgore gestures towards the living room. "If you would like to take a seat—"

"This won't take long," Jacobs says dismissively.

Prasad bristles. "Captain Jacobs, you are speaking with what amounts to a foreign dignitary—"

"With all due respect, Captain Prasad, that hasn't been officially recognized or sanctioned," he cuts in, arching a brow. "I believe that right now they're still considered... refugees for all intents and purposes."

"With all due respect," Prasad echoes back with venom, "that shouldn't stop you from behaving with a little decorum."

A thin smile toys around Jacobs's mouth, but he does not answer, though Asgore has the impression that there is much he would like to say. The cold sting of dread in the pit of his stomach is familiar and unwelcome.

"Well then, King Asgore," Jacobs says, folding his hands behind his back and looking up at him with a cool confidence that he finds disquieting. Prasad's hands twitch at the man's tone. "Effective
tomorrow you will come to *me* with any concerns you or your people may have. The changing of
the guard should be hardly noticeable, no rules or regulations are changing." His smile is one of a
cat playing with a mouse, and all Asgore can do is counter with kindness and civility. "So long as
everyone has been following the rules, I'm sure there won't be any problems. Captain Prasad and
her men are needed elsewhere, so I trust you'll forgive their removal."

"Of course. I am certain that things will continue as peacefully as they have thus far," Asgore says
carefully, offering Jacobs a polite smile. His attention shifts to Prasad. "Though I am sorry to see
you go, Captain."

The corners of her mouth twitch, and she gives a curt nod. "We're all sorry to leave, I can tell you
that much," she says, turning to face Jacobs. "Now unless there's something else you'd like to say,
I'd like a moment alone to speak with the king."

Jacobs's eyes narrow for just a moment, regarding her. "How irregular."

"That's not your place to decide," she says firmly, clenching her hands behind her back. "Until
midnight tonight I am in command of this post, and you would do well to remember that, Captain."

He raises his hands in a gesture of concession. "Of course. Though I'm sure that our superiors will
be interested to hear that you make a habit of speaking with 'the king' in private."

"Tell them what you like," she snaps, and her show of anger just makes Jacobs smile. "There's only
so much else they can do to me at this point."

Prasad and Jacobs share a tense moment of silence before the man gives a nod and tugs his cap
back into place. "I'll just be outside then. Try not to take too long, there's still lots of work left for
tonight."

She does not say anything, just waits and watches as he lets himself outside. The moment the door
closes she turns to Asgore, her frustration and distress plain upon her face. "I only found out a few
hours ago," she says, low and fast. "I would have called but I couldn't get away from him."

"Do you know why your government saw fit to do this? To you and your men?" he asks, doing his
best to try and squash down his fear. He suspects this has less to do with *them* and more with *him*.
"Has there been more talk of them trying to pressure me into allowing monsters to enlist?"

"I haven't heard a damn thing," she says, gritting her teeth and running her fingernails over her
scalp. "The only strange thing I heard was that... Now this is just a rumor, but Governor Williams
has been acting strange. One person, I don't know them that well so I'm not sure how much I trust
their opinion, said he seemed almost paranoid. But it doesn't make any sense."

"People behave foolishly when they are afraid," he says solemnly, and she nods.

"Yeah, but it's just... it's sudden. I don't like it." Shaking her head, she lets out a ragged sigh and
cranes her head to look up at him. "I don't know what else to say but... do whatever you can to keep
the peace. Make sure people are following the rules. I know we've been a little lax on you guys, but
I don't think that Jacobs and his company are going to give you that courtesy."

"I suspect you are right," he says with a weary smile. "Though, if I remember correctly, you and
your men were of a mind as Captain Jacobs at first."

"Yeah, but..." Her expression is apologetic. Pained, even. "I don't think you can count on them
warming up to you like we did. At least not any time soon. Just... please be careful."
"The last thing I or my people want is to upset this peace that we have found. You have my word."
"Frisk is still mad at me."

You see Sans's head turn sharply out of the corner of your eye but you don't look at him, instead focusing on the road. He's in the passenger seat of your car, balancing a plastic cake carrier in his lap as the two of you head to Undyne and Alphys's house. They offered to host Deacon's birthday party, and out of your few options they really had the best place for it. Built right along the lake's shore, it was the favorite hangout spot last year before the weather started turning cold.

"Frisk isn't mad at you," Sans says, drumming his fingers on the cake carrier.

"They've been ignoring me all week. Sans, you had to remind them to kiss me goodbye before taking them to Toriel's," you say, wincing and hunching your shoulders.

"Well... I, uh..."

"See!"

"Babe, c'mon," he says with a sigh. "It's not like they're gonna stay mad at you forever. Remember that two weeks last year when they pretended I didn't exist? All cuz I snapped at Asriel?"

"And I remember spending most of that two weeks trying to convince them not to be mad at you," you say with no small amount of bitterness. "I'm not exactly seeing you trying anything similar."

"Let the kid be upset. They're allowed."

"I'm not saying Frisk isn't allowed to be upset!" you snap, letting out a frustrated sound. "Not that you seem too worried about it, now that you're the favorite."

"The favorite? Hope..." He trails off, an agitated sigh hissing through his teeth. "They're just upset about the whole Chris thing. Y'know, dad stuff?"

You don't say anything. Yes, sure, maybe the reason they'd been preferring Sans all week was to reassure themselves of his place as their dad. But it didn't make their neglect of you any less painful. You know, deep down, that getting frustrated at Sans—or even with Frisk—is unfair, but you can't help it. This whole situation just feels unfair.

"It'll blow over. They're seven, you think they have the attention span to hold a grudge?" he says carefully, reaching over and touching your arm.

You ignore it, resisting his efforts to placate you. "Forget it. I shouldn't have brought it up."

"Babe—"

"Forget it. You're right, I'm just overreacting."
"i never said you were overreacting," he says, and you can hear the frustration buried in his tone. "You didn't need to," you mutter under your breath.

Sans starts to say something but he falls silent as you both catch sight of a military jeep headed your direction up ahead. You watch, apprehension twisting in your already tight chest, as it approaches and then passes you without incident. What used to be a familiar, almost comforting sight now fills you with anxiety, and suddenly this squabble over Frisk feels petty and insignificant. So far there hadn't been any incidents with the new soldiers, but from what you'd heard the past couple days, things are much more tense.

"been seeing these new guys around a lot more, especially in the residential areas," Sans says quietly, as if someone might overhear him.

"Did you hear from Papyrus last night? Did he and Mettaton get back okay?" you ask, pushing aside your frustration to focus on this instead.

He senses it too, reaching for your hand. You give it to him, a silent apology as you squeeze one another. "yeah. checked in with him around curfew, let me know the two of them got back safe."

"They keep cutting it close."

"i know. believe me, i talked to him about it."

"Good. I just... the fact that Asgore's worried..." you trail off, biting your lip.

"yeah. me too," he says, rubbing his thumb over your skin. "but, hey, we're gonna have fun today, right? nothing the soldiers can do about that."

"Yeah... Yeah, you're right," you say, giving Sans a hesitant smile.

Sans was wrong.

Well, sort of.

"Absolutely outrageous!" Mettaton exclaims, resting a hand on his chest with his nose in the air as he talks to Alphys. The moment he and Papyrus arrived he was ready to complain, and unfortunately for the doctor, her fiancé was too busy with the grill to protect her. Which left Alphys defenseless, clutching her drink in both hands as she just looks up at him and gives a feeble nod. "We were back with a full fifteen minutes to spare, and those horrid excuses for soldiers harassed us! Tried to insinuate that we were imposing on them! As if we were the ones that decided on this idiotic curfew!"

Papyrus is sweating nervously, avoiding Sans's gaze as his brother watches him. This is... not the story that he'd been given, you're sure. You look at your husband and you can see the tightness in the corners of his smile.

"My director is already frustrated that I can't stay any later, and now I have to tell her that I have to leave earlier?" Mettaton scoffs, tossing his hair out of his face and pursing his lips. "Outrageous," he says again with an elegant frown.

"A-Asgore already spoke with Undyne too," Alphys says quietly, her expression faltering. She takes a quick glance over at the fish monster and back up at Mettaton. "About our w-wedding. He's worried that they won't let us get m-married at the beach like we wanted."
"What?" you blurt out, brow furrowing. "That's bullshit! We have every right to go past the Line within curfew! They can't just stop you."

"Darling I'm so sorry," Mettaton says, clapping her hands between his as he bends over to look her in the eye, claiming her attention. You grumble and look down at your drink, but Sans touches your back. At least your anger on her behalf wasn't completely unnoticed. "That's awful. As I said before, if you need a venue, I'm more than happy to host everyone at the hotel."

"We're already th-thinking about just having it here at the lake instead. So we can still do an outdoor ceremony, and still by the water. J-just... different water," she says weakly, looking away.

"Whatever you want," he insists. "I'll do everything I can to make sure your special day is just that! Special."

"Thanks M-Mettaton," she says, giving him a wobbly smile.

The sliding glass door leading from the house to the back deck scrapes open, drawing everyone's attention. Deacon and Bo step out to join the rest of you, the former with a pleased but embarrassed smile on his face as he takes everyone in. His eyes meet yours and you greet him with a big grin.

"Uh, hey everybody," Deacon says, glancing over at Bo with something like uncertainty. Like he's not sure what to do with all this attention. She gives him an encouraging look, filled with affection as she nudges him further outside.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" Papyrus exclaims, beaming and probably glad for the shift in focus away from talk of the soldiers. "NOW THAT YOU'RE HERE WE CAN STOP TALKING ABOUT UPSETTING THINGS AND CELEBRATE YOU TURNING ONE YEAR OLDER INSTEAD!"

Everyone gathers around to welcome and wish him a happy birthday. Mettaton is warm and friendly, Alphys stutters but gives him a big smile as she points out the table covered in food and presents. Bo has to step in as Undyne puts him into a headlock to give him a 'birthday noogie', and Papyrus commiserates with Deacon after the fact about all of the 'just because' noogies that he's had to endure. Undyne tackles him and gives him a 'for whining about noogies' noogie in retaliation.

After everyone else has their turn, Deacon gives you a slightly desperate look and you can't help but laugh, wrapping him up in a hug and then pulling him aside to the food table. There, front and center, is his cake. You'd never been especially skilled at cake decorating, but with the right frosting tips you'd managed a nice swirled trim in green over pink, strawberry icing. The words 'Happy 25th Birthday Deacon!' are a little wobbly, but legible.

"Oh man, that looks delicious," he says, grinning from ear to ear. "Hope, you're the best."

"There's sliced strawberry filling inside between the layers," you say, a little smug.

"I could kiss you," he says, then puts his arm around your shoulders. "Screw it, I will kiss you."

As you let out an embarrassed laugh, he holds you as you try weakly to squirm away and plants a kiss on your temple. Giggling, you push him away. "Being around Bo is rubbing off on you. You never would have done that when we first met," you say.

"There's a lot of things I wouldn't have done when we first met," he says, his smile sobering just a little. "And it's not just Bo. It's you, and everybody... even Sans." He rolls his eyes but it's just for show. "Thank you. For the cake, and everything."
“You’re welcome. You deserve a nice birthday,” you say, nudging him with your shoulder.

He doesn’t answer, just smiles.

Talk stays away from the soldiers and the Line, and with the shift in mood everyone has a good time. Undyne handles the grill, which results in some... seriously charred hot dogs that you have to scrape off with a knife before they’re edible. After that Mettaton takes over to make sure that the burgers don’t meet the same fate. Once everyone has eaten you gather around to sing ‘Happy Birthday’, which leaves Deacon pink-faced and embarrassed as he blows out the big candles shaped like a 2 and a 5. (Papyrus is not pleased with the candle situation, but lets it go quickly enough.)

As Mettaton is cutting the cake (after having to wrestle the knife away from Undyne) Deacon opens his presents. Most of it is simple things that everyone knows he likes, like books and movies. The little box from you seems almost out of place as he picks it up and looks over at you with a question in his eyes.

“It's something you've wanted for a while,” you tell him, grinning.

He rips the paper and opens the little box, eyes darting back up to yours. "Oh my god, I can't believe you."

“What? What is it?” Undyne asks, craning her neck.

Deacon pulls out the thick, braided friendship bracelet woven in greens and burgundys to match your Soul colors. As he looks back at you again, you fish a thinner, matching one out of your pocket and slip it on.

“There, now you can stop bitching about it,” you tease, and he starts laughing.

“Next thing you know we'll be having slumber parties and talking about boys,” he says but you can tell he's pleased. He takes a moment to tie it around his left wrist and give you a smile before moving to the rest of his gifts.

Later, after cake, everyone is gathered around talking. You suspect the party is going to be over soon; you can already see Mettaton getting a little fidgety and Bo has sneak took a peek at her phone twice already when she thinks no one is looking. You can't blame her for wanting to have Deacon to herself for the rest of the day.

“Hey, so are you ready for the camping trip next weekend?” Deacon asks Sans, taking advantage of a break in conversation to change the subject.

“oh, yeah, that’s coming up isn't it? almost forgot,” Sans says with a shrug.

Sans had agreed to help Deacon and Leveretta chaperone a camping trip for Frisk's class to make up for the botched zoo trip last month. Normally you’d be going in Sans's place, but Frisk insisted on wanting their dad to go instead so he could bring his telescope. The decision had been made before the incident with Chris, but you still can't help but feel a little annoyed and left out. Again. But you keep it to yourself.

Besides, you have a weekend with Undyne, Alphys, and Bo planned. Bo had even managed to get the days off (thanks to some finagling from Alphys with Mettaton, you suspect). You’ve been meaning to spend more time with them, and this is your opportunity. As strange as it'll be to be separated from your husband, you're looking forward to it.

“No need to sound so excited,” Deacon says with a laugh.
"I KNOW THAT SOMETIMES IT'S HARD TO TELL, BUT I'M FAIRLY CERTAIN THAT WAS NOT SANS'S EXCITED VOICE," Papyrus says, and you cover your mouth to hide your smile.

"i'm sure i'll have a good time with frisk and the kids," Sans says evenly, his expression passive.

"Well YOU may be acting like a wet blanket," Undyne cuts in, rolling her eye. "But that doesn't mean you get to change your mind. Hope is OURS for the weekend! GIRL'S NIGHT! For two nights!"

"You're not fooling anyone Sans. We're friends now, just accept it." Deacon gives Sans his biggest, brightest grin and your husband rolls his eyes.

"only by association," he says, but you can tell he's trying not to smile.

"I finally wore you down. This is the best birthday present ever."
Camping, as it turns out, is surprisingly like the first few weeks out from the Underground. It involves a lot of tents, sleeping bags, and chaos as three adults try to keep fifteen kids in check. Fifteen kids that don't seem to be running out of energy any time soon, even though the sun is starting to set.

They're set up in a clearing dotted with granite boulders, near the cliff where everyone emerged from the Underground. The craggy stone face of the mountain isn't too far off, mostly hidden behind a stand of trees. They're far enough away from downtown that the light pollution shouldn't be much of an issue for stargazing.

Sans is a few paces away from camp, fiddling with his telescope in preparation for later. Also, it's a good excuse to get a moment to himself while Deacon and Leveretta get the kids fed. It's not exactly peaceful, considering the consistent background noise of kids yelling and occasionally shrieking for no goddamn reason, but at least he has a second where no one is demanding—

"Dad?"

So much for that.

Sans looks down as he feels a tug on the side of his jacket, and Frisk is standing there, grinning and holding a plate of hot dogs smothered in ketchup. They hold it up to him and he feels guilty for his initial annoyance.

"hey kiddo," he says, giving them a smile.

"I brought you dinner. Thought we could share," they say, gazing up at him with hopeful eyes.

And, well, how can he be mad at that? "that was real thoughtful of you, thanks," he says, giving them an affectionate hair ruffle before taking one of the hot dogs.

Frisk picks up one too and, careful to try and avoid getting ketchup all over themselves, takes a bite. Sans does the same.

"well, s'no hot cat, but it'll have to do," he says, giving Frisk a wink.

They laugh. "You make the best hot dogs. And hot cats."

"i'm surprised you're not over there with asriel," Sans says, taking another bite and jerking his chin over towards the campfire where everyone is gathered. "everything ok?"

They nod a little too quickly. "Yeah! I just wanted to spend some time with you!"

"and i appreciate that, frisk. you're my favorite kid," he says, grinning and nudging them with his elbow.
Frisk pushes him back. "I'm your only kid!"

"yeah, but i'm not your only parent," Sans says, and their smile falters. Frowning, they look down at their hot dog and take a big bite to stop themselves from talking. That's fine, he's prepared to do enough talking for the both of them. "you can't keep ignoring your mom. she loves you and was just trying to do what's best for you."

Frisk lets out a muffled sound of protest and hurries to swallow. "I don't wanna meet him!"

"she never said you had to. she just told you that he was willing to meet you if you wanted to. you said no and she told you that was ok." He arches a brow, watching them as they purse their lips and tap the toe of their shoe into the grass.

"But why would Mom want him around at all? You're my dad and she loves you," they say, glaring down at the ground.

Sans blinks. "nobody, not even chris, is gonna change that," he says gently, wrapping an arm around Frisk's shoulders and pulling them against his side. "we're a family. c'mon, has your mom ever given you any reason to doubt that?"

"No..." they mumble.

"exactly. so when we get back on sunday i want you to be nicer to your mom. if not for her, then for me, ok?" He gives them a little shake, eliciting a small, annoyed sound.

"I guess..."

"good enough. now why don't you go play with your friends. i gotta get this ready for later," he says, taking another hot dog and giving Frisk a nudge back towards camp.

"Okay..."

"hey," Sans says, catching their attention as they turn to shuffle back to the others. "i love you kiddo."

Frisk smiles. "I love you too, Dad."

You're all sprawled out on a pile of pillows, cushions, and blankets in the middle of Alphys and Undyne's living room, a half-eaten bowl of popcorn nestled in the center and bags of chocolates open and scattered. Dressed in pajamas, the setup feels like something right out of a movie, and you can't help but grin. It's like they wanted 'Girl's Weekend' to be picture perfect. The only thing you were divided on was what to watch. Somehow you've managed to convince them to watch something that isn't anime, with Bo's support.

Unfortunately that doesn't mean that they like it.

"Why didn't she just PULL HIM up on the door?" Undyne blurts out, flopping back against a stack of pillows and throwing her arms over her head.

Alphys looks equally unimpressed. "I-I mean, I guess the special effects were good, b-but..."

Bo lets out a loud snuffle as you cast a watery glare at the other monsters, tugging your attention away. You wipe your eyes as Bo does the same. "That was so sad!" she blurts out. "Why couldn't they just be happy?"
"They knew each other for like, two days," Undyne grumbles. You choose to ignore her.

"But did you like it?" you ask, hoping that your choice wasn't a total loss.

"I loved it!" Bo says, which makes you smile. "I'm just... oh, honey, I'm just being sensitive I think. All this romantic stuff has me weepy right now."

Alphys gets up to change out the DVD, and out of the corner of your eye you see her looking over her extensive anime collection. That's only fair, you guess.

"Is everything okay with you and Deacon?" you ask, grabbing a handful of chocolates and holding them out to Bo. She takes a couple, picking at the foil wrappers.

"Oh, better than okay! I mean, ever since he finally shared his Soul with me—"

You almost choke on your candy, covering your mouth as your eyes widen. Undyne reaches over and thumps you on the back a little harder than necessary as you wave her away and collect yourself. Swallowing and clearing your throat, you fix Bo with a surprised look. "He did? When?"

"He didn't tell you?" Bo asks, maybe as surprised as you are. "Oh, gosh that's right I told him that I wanted to talk to you about it this weekend! I can't believe I forgot."

"That's why he's been acting funny all week!" you say, feeling relieved as you start to laugh. "Geez, I thought he was nervous about the camping trip or something. So it went well? When did you guys do it?"

Bo blushes and Undyne clears her throat and all at once you wonder if you just asked something very inappropriate. Oh god, you probably did, didn't you? "Well..." she says, fidgeting with her chocolates looking down at her hands.

"Sorry, that was rude, wasn't it? I'm just happy for you guys, I know it was something that was bothering you," you say, feeling heat creep across your cheeks.

Bo laughs, shaking her head. "No, no, honey you're fine! I don't have a problem telling you at all. It was after his birthday, actually. I mean, I kind of guessed that it was coming, since he'd been asking me all those questions, and he was in such a good mood from the party..." A reminiscent smile toys with her mouth, and she looks so happy. A swell of joy makes your chest feel full. "It was wonderful. Being able to show him just how much he's loved... The look on his face..." She trails off, her expression sobering just a little. "Well, if he didn't believe me before, he certainly does now."

"I'm glad that he has you," you tell her, and her smile warms again.

Later, after the others have fallen asleep, tangled up in the nest of pillows, you find yourself still awake. You're only half paying attention to the anime that's still playing on the television, your thoughts elsewhere.

It's strange, being away from Sans, and you're having trouble relaxing. You don't want to call him because you're sure he's busy stargazing with the kids, or maybe getting some sleep. You're not sure what their schedule is, but you know he's not going to have much time alone. And what if his cell phone ringing woke him or the others up? No, you'll survive not talking to him for one night.

Not that you're happy about it. You push yourself up to your feet and pick your way out of the pile, holding your breath as you try not to wake anyone. Letting out a relieved sigh when you find bare floor, you make your way to the kitchen to get yourself some water. As you stand in the dark room,
tiles cold under your toes and the edge of the counter pressing into your back, you close your eyes and try to push the lonely feeling away. You're here with friends, having a good time. You shouldn't be moping about being away from your husband. It's just one weekend!

The soft shuffle of scales and claws tapping on the hard floor alerts you to Alphys's presence as you look up from the glass in your hand. She wrings her hands, giving you a questioning look as she comes closer. "Are you o-okay, Hope?" she whispers.

You nod, giving her a weary smile. "Just having trouble sleeping. Sorry, did I wake you?"

"I'm kinda s-sensitive to weird noises at night," she admits, looking a little embarrassed. "B-but that's not your fault! Don't feel bad..."

"Sorry," you say anyway, wincing.

Alphys shakes her head. "Did you want some company?"

Hesitating, you nod after a second. "Yeah. Thanks, Alphys."

"Don't worry about it," she says with a smile. "H-have you not slept apart from Sans since back in Snowdin?"

You give a weak laugh. "That obvious?"

She smiles wider. "I just imagined h-how weird it would be for me if Undyne and I slept apart after moving in together. I-I'd probably have a hard time sleeping too."

"It's just the weekend. I'll survive," you say with a sigh. "Sorry in advance if I'm tired and cranky tomorrow."

"Have you c-called him, or—"

As if on cue, your phone chimes from it's place in your pocket. With a flutter of anticipation in your chest, you pull it out and turn on the screen. It's a text from Sans.

'miss u. HOPE ur sleeping good and i didn't wake u.'

You roll your eyes at his lame attempt at a joke, but you can't help the rush of affection at his message. There he was, thinking about you just like you were thinking about him. Alphys lets out a quiet, pleased sound as you smile down at your phone and type in a reply.

'Haven't fallen asleep yet. Miss you too. I love you.'

Sans looks down at his phone from his seat on the boulder beside his tent, smiling at your message. It makes being away from you that much more bearable, knowing that you miss him. Not that he had any doubt, but it's reassuring to know that he's not the only one.

The kids are all in their tents after a long night of ghost stories, arguing over the telescope, and roasting marshmallows. The campfire is burned down to glowing embers, which he can still make out from his perch overlooking camp. It doesn't sound like anyone's asleep yet, judging from all the hushed whispers he can't quite make out, but maybe that just means they'll sleep in later come morning. Though, knowing kids, that probably won't happen.

He returns his attention to his phone. 'try to sleep. i love u too.'
There's movement out of the corner of his eye and he looks over in time to see Deacon wander back
towards camp from the treeline. Pocketing his phone, he sees the moment that the human spots
him and alters his course to head his way. For a second he's a little agitated, but he's not sure if
that's just habit at this point. By the time that Deacon makes it to the boulder he's scooted over to
make room as he climbs up to join him.

That odd, nagging itch in the back of his mind that he can't quite get rid of around Deacon is still
there but it fades easily into the background. It's familiar by now, as familiar as the steady, mid-
range hum of the human's Soul as he looks at him. If Sans was to compare your Soul to clear, glass
chimes, Deacon is like brass. He seems pleased by the silent welcome, grinning as he settles cross-
legged on the rock next to him.

"where'd you wander off to?" Sans asks casually, arching a brow.

"Had to pee, what else?" Deacon answers, looking up at the spray of stars in the cloudless sky. The
half-moon is bright, illuminating the two of them in faint, white light.

"hm."

"Figured you'd be asleep by now," he says, running the bracelet you made him between his thumb
and forefinger. The movement is distracting, drawing Sans's eye.

You hadn't even known how to make the knotted bracelets when you'd decided you were going to
do it for his birthday. You picked up the string from the store, watched a handful of videos online,
and got to work. It was endearing, seeing you sit there on the couch with the laptop and a handful
of colored threads, face screwed up in concentration. It was a better use of your time than worrying
about the steady drone of negative news stories still trickling in.

"s'weird, being here without hope," he admits, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets.

Deacon glances over at him, and for a second Sans isn't sure what to expect. Teasing maybe,
sarcasm likely. But ultimately his kindness seems to win out. "Have you ever been apart since you
got together?" he asks.

"...just once," Sans says. The worst night of his life. The night Frisk ran away, and you died. He
shakes his head. "but since then, no. not since we reached the surface."

"I don't really know what that's like... but I'm starting to get the idea. Being away from Bo is
getting harder and harder," he says with a sigh. He tips his head, leaning back on his hands and
searching the sky again.

"how're things going on that front?" he asks, genuinely curious. Ever since that fight they had, Sans
has felt... a lot more comfortable around Deacon. Seeing him with his defenses down reminded him
of himself, and he couldn't help but empathize.

Deacon's mouth twitches, curving into a wry smile. "Good. I mean, uh... Bo didn't want me to tell
Hope cuz she wanted to tell her and this was agonizing to keep to myself," he says, tipping his head
to the side. "But I finally... Uh... y'know..." He clears his throat. "We shared our Souls after the
party last week."

"good for you guys," Sans says, grinning. "i'm glad you did it buddy, sounds like it went well?"

He looks a little sheepish (heh, sheepish) as he nods. "Yeah. I mean..." Sans glances over at Deacon
as the human keeps his eyes on the stars, but he swears that it's more than the light making his eyes
shiny like that. Man, he really is in deep, isn't he? Deacon clears his throat, blinking. "Yeah," he
"gotcha. no need to elaborate," he says and Deacon gives a little nod. "i've been rootin' for you guys."

"Seriously?" he asks, eyes widening as he glances over at Sans.

Sans rolls his eyes. "yeah, seriously. and i know hope'll be happy to hear it, too."

"Well, thanks Sans." He grins, then narrows his eyes. "That almost makes up for that prank you did with the telescope."

Chuckling, Sans shrugs his shoulders. "kids love a good laugh. 'specially at a teacher's expense."

"Yes, ha ha," he says flatly, making Sans laugh harder. "You're hilarious."

"heh. i know."
Frisk is laying with their legs across Asriel's lap, a notebook resting on their shins as their best friend draws under the midday sun. It's warm, warm enough that their sweater is balled up beneath their head for a pillow. Closing their eyes, they think they might fall asleep to the distant sound of the other kids playing and the soft scratch of pencil on paper. They can't move or they'll mess up Asriel's drawing, which sounds like a good excuse to doze off.

The rustling of grass catches Frisk's attention and they open their eyes in time to see Bonnet leaning over them, smiling as her ears fall on either side of her face. "Aren't you too old for naps, Frisk?" she asks, and Frisk sticks their tongue out at her.

"Dad says nobody's too old for naps," they answer.

Bonnet wrinkles her nose. "I guess," she says, unconvinced. "Well you should come play tag with us! You're always so good at it!"

Well, what ended up being years of dodging attacks and running away from Undyne and... Frisk pushes the thoughts aside, because it's not like they really feel like any of that was them. Remembering it all at once, when Chara unlocked their memories, it left it feeling disjointed. Like parts of their life that stood separate from the rest. This timeline, with you coming with them to the Underground. This feels real. Those other hundreds of short, hurried timelines feel like they belong to someone else. But they still remember, they still learned from all of that.

And in a very mundane way, it meant that they're really good at tag.

"I'm comfy here," Frisk says, and when they glance over at Asriel he gives them a weak smile.

The rabbit lets out an annoyed sigh, resting her hands on her hips. "You know, just because Mr. Sans is lazy and stuff doesn't mean you have to pretend to be. It's not like he's your real dad, so you didn't 'get it' from him."

Sitting bolt upright, Asriel makes a startled noise as Frisk yanks their legs off of him and twists around to face Bonnet. She gives them a petulant look, scrunching up her face. Frisk glares at her. "He is my dad," they say, pushing up on their knees.

"Then why are all the human news channels wanting to know where your dad is, and talking about how your mom shouldn't be with Mr. Sans?"

Anger and embarrassment burns in Frisk's chest, and Asriel's fingers close around their hand. He's trying to calm them down but it just makes them more frustrated as they shake him off and stand up. "Who cares what they say? They're just stupid and mean," Frisk snaps, their cheeks burning. "Just like you're being stupid and mean."

"I was just telling you the truth, don't call me stupid!" Bonnet exclaims, taking a step forward and jabbing her hand into Frisk's chest.
"STUPID!" Frisk yells at her, and her eyes go wide and suddenly swim with tears.

Maybe they ought to feel bad but they don't.

"If you're going to be mean then just leave us alone!" Asriel chimes in, baring his small, pointed teeth as he takes his place at Frisk's side.

"What's going on over here?" A familiar, stern voice rings out over the clearing as Ms. Leveretta crosses the grass in long strides, her ears twitching as she fixes the three kids with a firm look.

"Frisk called me stupid and m-mean!" Bonnet blurts out, sniffing.

"Only cuz you are!" Frisk snaps, balling their hands into fists at their sides. "My dad—"

"Hey!" Ms. Leveretta says, cutting them off. "We do not allow name-calling in my class, you know the rules."

The sheer unfairness of it feels like a slap to the face. Glowering, they stomp one foot in the grass. "She started it!"

"Ms. Leveretta, Frisk is telling the truth!" Asriel says, wrapping his hand around Frisk's fist.

Angry tears sting Frisk's eyes and all at once they don't want to be here, letting Bonnet get the better of them and tricking Ms. Leveretta onto her side. It's not fair, and they don't want to listen.

They don't have to listen.

And in a hurried fit of emotion, before they can tell themselves they know better, Frisk reaches back to that bright point locked in their memory, an hour ago, and pulls.

"We should play hide and seek!" Kid blurts out, spiked tail thumping against the ground in their enthusiasm. Bonnet lets out a loud squeal of agreement before they're both hushed by Leveretta.

"No, you are not going to go wandering off into the forest to play hide and seek. Why don't you go play tag instead?" she suggests with a weary smile.

Sans was just cleaning up after lunch a second ago, packing away leftovers with Deacon. And now he's back here, gathered around with the group right before the kids scattered to go play in the clearing next to camp. His eyes dart over to Frisk and Asriel, where he sees them with their arms around each other with the former looking a little dizzy and the latter looking... angry and worried all at once. Shit, what the hell just caused them to Load? Whatever it was, it must not have been an actual emergency because Frisk is clearly avoiding his gaze as Leveretta continues talking.

Well, if they think—

Deacon is staring at Frisk. Sans almost doesn't notice, because he's too caught up in his own frustration with the kid's cavalier attitude about fucking with time, but he's definitely staring. He watches as the human's eyes narrow just a little, his body tense in concentration. Then, after a moment, he relaxes and looks away as Leveretta dismisses the kids to go play.

Did he... notice the Load? No, that can't be right, can it? When they were at the zoo and Frisk Loaded, he didn't give any hint that he'd—

Deacon had asked him at the hospital if he knew what might have caused Frisk to pass out. He specifically asked if Frisk had done anything. But that's... no he's just being paranoid. There's no
way that a human like Deacon could know that anything happened. He probably just noticed the kids acting strange. Right?

Sans watches him for a moment as Deacon rubs the back of his neck and looks down at the ground, seemingly lost in thought. Should he talk to Deacon? How would that even go? No, he can't think of any way off the top of his head to bring it up without making him suspicious. He'll just have to wait and see if something else happens. Besides, there's a kid in a heap of trouble that needs his attention.

Frisk knows what's coming. He can see it in the kid's face when he catches their eye and then they quickly look down at the ground. As the rest of the group scatters, Frisk and Asriel stay rooted to their spot. Sans walks over to them, hands shoved in the pockets of his jacket.

"You shouldn't have done that," Asriel says, before Sans can even get a word in. He's angrier at Frisk than Sans could have anticipated, angrier than he is. He's more frustrated than anything, but Asriel... Asriel's snout is wrinkled and his teeth are bared. "You could have hurt yourself again!"

"I'm fine," Frisk says, wide-eyed as the prince pulls away from them and leaves them a bit wobbly on their feet for a second. They catch themselves, startled. "Asriel—"

"You're the stupid one!" he blurts out, eyes shining with tears, as he turns on his heel and storms off towards the tents.

"I didn't— This isn't fair!" Frisk exclaims, angry tears of their own springing to their eyes.

"hey. hey!" Sans says, catching Frisk's arm as they try to turn and walk away. "what the hell happened?"

"I don't wanna talk about it!" they say, voice raised and their hands balled into fists. They try to pull away from him.

"tough," he says firmly, his grip on their wrist tightening. He lowers his voice. "because we're talking about this. if you don't wanna talk about asriel that's fine, but you're gonna tell me why you loaded."

They glare down at the ground, body tense but unresisting as they stand there. Sans lets go of their arm and they hug themselves. "Bonnet."

"what, again? did she—"

"No," Frisk snaps, and Sans resists the urge to tell them to watch their tone. "She was mean to me, told me that you aren't my real dad and talked about all those dumb things on the news. And I yelled at her."

He isn't quite sure what to say to that. He understands why they're upset, but that doesn't mean they can just abuse their power for, arguably, trivial things! Sighing, he reaches out and rests a hand on Frisk's head, which makes them jerk their face up to look at him. Their expression softens, then crumples as tears spill down their cheeks.

"c'mere, kiddo," he says gently. They fling their arms around his middle and bury their face into his jacket as Sans wraps them up in a hug. "you gotta do your best to let that stuff go. and i know it's hard, believe me. i don't like hearing that crap on the news, people wanting to separate me from you and your mom. but there's nothing anybody can do. it's just talk."

"It's not fair..." they say, muffled by his jacket.
"i know. things would be a lot easier if they were fair." He drags his fingers through their hair, holding them close.

"I scared Asriel, and now he's angry with me."

"yeah, he is. you just gotta give him some time to cool off. we both know he can't stay mad at you for long."

As it turns out, that isn't entirely true.

Asriel avoids Frisk for the rest of the day and, seemingly out of spite, Frisk spends the afternoon playing tag with the other kids. Sans wonders if he ought to talk to Asriel, but he thinks he just needs some time to himself. Sometimes he worries about how close the two of them are, because of situations just like this one. It's so easy for them to hurt each other, with or without that strange connection between their Souls.

Later, during dinner, Sans catches Deacon watching Frisk again. He tries to shake the suspicion, wants to believe that he's just falling into old habits. He probably just saw that Frisk got dizzy again and was worried that they might pass out. That's what logic tells him. But Sans is starting to wonder if there's more to it.

To what though? Deacon worrying about Frisk? He's being ridiculous. He's spent too much time choosing to put his trust in this guy to let this spoil that. It's nothing.

...It's not nothing.

Late that night, after all the kids are in their tents, Sans still can't sleep. He's keeping watch from the shadows of one of the granite boulders as Asriel pushes the flap of his tent open, takes a quick glance to see if anyone is looking, and slips off towards the trees. Debating for a moment if he should follow him, Sans isn't surprised to see Frisk follow after a moment later. Well, he knows that the kids need some time to hash out their differences, but he really ought to—

Deacon pokes his head out from his tent, looks around, and climbs out to follow Frisk and Asriel.

No amount of convincing is going to get him to think that's not suspicious. If he was really worried about Frisk, then why didn't he say anything to Sans? Why would he take it upon himself to follow two kids into the woods in the middle of the night?

Sans follows him.

Anger starts to bubble up deep in his chest as a million questions keep bouncing around inside his skull, and beneath it all is a tiny voice that sounds like yours, asking him to give Deacon the benefit of the doubt. He's been doing it for months, can't he do it just a little longer? Don't jump to conclusions...

He's not even sure what conclusions to jump to. What could Deacon possibly know about Frisk?

"Asriel, just talk to me!"

Frisk's voice is clear in the night air, and as Sans comes to a halt, hidden in the shadows of the trees a short distance away from Deacon, he realizes that the kids are standing at the foot of Mt. Ebott's cliff face. It echoes their words, bounces them back into the forest. Deacon crouches behind one of the tree trunks, peeking around to watch Frisk and Asriel. What is he doing? Why is he spying on them?
"I came here to be *alone!*" Asriel snaps, and Sans is distracted from Deacon as the telltale flicker of fire glows around the prince's fingers. "Just leave me alone."

"I won't! You say you want to be alone but I know you don't," Frisk says, closing the distance between them and reaching for Asriel's hands. He jerks away, his magic flaring brighter. "I know you're mad at me, but—"

"You could have hurt yourself! You could have—"

"But I didn't! Asriel, I'm *fine*!" They press a hand to their chest, shaking their head. "Please, I'm sorry!"

"I can't lose you too!" he yells, and the fire in his hands swell even larger. With a sudden, sorrowful shout, he swings around and flings his magic high at the cliff face, where it smashes against the rocks and sputters out. The kids are plunged back into darkness. "Please, Frisk, I can't—"

The low, grating sound of stone grinding against stone cuts off whatever Asriel was about to say. It takes Sans a moment to realize what's going on, a moment longer than Deacon because the human is already bolting out from behind the tree, running headlong for the kids. Sans follows after, looking up in horror as rocks, broken free, start tumbling down. He reaches out with his magic, eye flaring bright blue as he snatches up the biggest of them, flinging it to the side, but he can only grab so much, can only—

The kids cry out in alarm and as the rocks come tumbling down and Deacon throws himself right in their midst. Then, as he raises his hands in a futile gesture to somehow protect them, a soft green glow envelops his hands, and from them a translucent, arc of light forms over their heads, down to their feet like a dome. The stones pelt against it but bounce off harmlessly, falling to the sides.

Deacon lets out a soft grunt of effort as he shifts the dome with his hands. It's a shield. No... not a shield. Sans grits his teeth, his left hand tensing as he watches the magic dissipate, watching the... the goddamn *mage* stand there with the kids. It's not a shield. It's a *barrier*. 
I couldn't help myself. Have the next scene early.

It only takes Deacon a moment to realize that Sans is standing there at the treeline, eye still crackling, magic poised on the tips of his fingers. The mage flinches, holds up his hands in a warding gesture as he opens his mouth to speak, but Sans won't let him. He's done listening.

Sans reaches out with his magic, wrenches Deacon's Soul —green for just a moment before washing over with blue— from his chest, and yanks him down to the ground. His lungs empty with a whoosh of air and a pained grunt, and the kids can only stare as Sans takes a step forward, keeping the pressure on.

"you lied to us!" Sans shouts, picking him up off the ground and slamming him back down.

Deacon groans, tilting his head so he can look up at him. He reaches out towards him, grimacing in what Sans hopes is pain. "Sans, wait. Let me explain."

"both of you get over here." He gestures with his free hand for the kids, beckoning them over. They do as he says, but Frisk looks conflicted, glancing between Deacon and Sans. "is this what you're planning? another barrier? you son of a bitch, if you think—"

Deacon's hands flash green and before he can try to react, a barrier springs to life around Sans, trapping him and cutting off his magic on the mage's Soul. Slamming his fist against the inside of the perfect sphere, his arm bounces off of it harmlessly, leaving him seething within a bubble of green. He tries to teleport outside of it, but that doesn't work either. He's stuck. **Powerless.** Deacon pushes himself up off the ground, keeping one hand raised and focused on Sans as he wipes his face with the back of the other.

"I'm not here to trap anybody," he says, rising to his feet. He cringes, tossing his hair out of his eyes. "I mean, I know how this looks, but I—"

"you tricked me into trusting you! all of us! i was right this whole goddamn time!" Sans bellows, his voice distorted inside the ball. Clenching his hands into fists at his sides, overwhelmed with impotent rage, his left eye flares bright, yellow threaded in the blue. If he had enough space he could summon a blaster, see if it could punch a hole through it, but he can't. Deacon must have remembered. **Fuck** why had he shown him the blasters? Why had they all shown him what they were capable of?

"Sans, I'm your friend! Hope's friend! This doesn't change that, please just listen!" Deacon says, but his pleading falls on deaf ears.

"this changes everything," he snarls.

Deacon flinches back, lips parting in surprise as his free hand cups protectively over his Soul. The color is starting to dim, just a little, and for a brief moment he looks panicked. Unsure. "Just...
Sans, give up and calm down."

*Give up.* "i will never give up again!" Sans smacks his fist against the side of the barrier. "i won't ever stop fighting to protect my family from people like you!"

"I haven't done anything to hurt anyone!" he exclaims, brow furrowing. "I was just sent to keep an eye on things. To learn."

"i hope you've learned a lot about how many different ways i'm going to kick your ass when i get out of here. you can't keep this up forever."

"Let him go!" Asriel steps forward, fire gathering in his hands, fangs bared.

Deacon pales, raising his unoccupied hand towards him. "Come on, Asriel, don't do this," he says, his fingers flickering wisps of green.

"asriel, you stay back!" Sans yells, but the prince isn't listening.

White furred fingers gather in more fire, and as he flings a spray of flames at Deacon he ducks his head and summons a small shield in front of his outstretched hand. The fire splatters across the curve of magic and dies in a puff of sparks. "Shit, kid, stop!" Deacon blurts out, taking a step back. The hand pointed at Sans twitches, shaking a little. The ball shudders and gets a little smaller.

"Let him go!" Asriel shouts again, pelting the shield with more fire.

"Asriel wait!" Frisk blurts out, rushing up beside him and wrapping their arms around one of his. He hesitates, looking at Frisk and lowering his hands.

"both of you get back!" Sans snaps, pounding on the bubble again.

"Asriel he just saved us! We should listen!" Frisk says, then turns to look at Sans. "Dad please!"

But Sans gives a sharp shake of his head, gritting his teeth and hunching his shoulders. The space inside the ball is electric with his magic, making the air tingle over his bones and crackle against the green energy keeping him in. "he's lied to us this entire time. the whole goddamn time!"

"You lied to Mom! But she listened and she understood!"

"And I was just trying to protect myself!" Deacon exclaims, and his hands are shaking worse now. "I used my magic to protect two kids and this is how you r-acted!" He's breathing hard, eyes darting between Asriel and Sans, refusing to drop either the bubble or the shield. "Did... did you ever trust me, or was it all just an act... to get Hope off your back?"

Sans glares, hard, as he feels the magic close in tighter around him. Deacon's Soul is turning ashy, graying as sweat drips down the side of his face. "i trusted you. we all fucking trusted you. and you've thrown it all in our goddamn faces!"

"What was I supposed to do, Sans? Introduce myself as a mage?" Deacon asks, his expression desperate. "No one knows we still exist... and I'm not one of the mages you need to worry about. If you'd let me explain..."

The ball shudders, losing color and then brightening again as the shield on himself melts away. His arm falls limp at his side. It's just a matter of time. He's exhausted, Sans can see it in his face.
"Please. I'm not your enemy," Deacon begs, shoving sweat-damp hair out of his eyes with the side of his arm. He looks afraid. He should be. "I'm a friend. Please."

"you're not my friend," Sans says, glaring up at the roof of the ball as it shrinks more. The mage can't keep this up. He can't. "and once everyone knows the truth, none of them are going to be your friends either. i should have trusted my instincts from the moment i met you."

He shakes his head, gasping as a leg buckles. He drops to one knee. "Fuck!" Deacon hisses, and Sans thinks he can see tears in his eyes. "I just wanted to help. Why isn't... it ever good enough?"

With one last shudder of magic, the bubble shatters and dissolves into nothing, and Sans flings the blunted end of a conjured bone right into the center of Deacon's chest. It strikes him right beneath his near-colorless Soul, knocking the wind out of him and sending him sprawling back into the dirt at the base of Mt. Ebott's cliff.

Sans summons a spray of bones over his head, poised to strike again, but Deacon doesn't move.

"Dad! Why did you do that?" Frisk cries out, staring at him wide-eyed.

"go back to camp," Sans says, low and careful, gritting his teeth as he takes a cautious step towards the sprawled-out mage. When the kids hesitate, he snaps his head towards them. "i said go back to camp."

Flinching, they shy from him and Asriel starts tugging Frisk away. After a moment they let themselves be led away, and he can hear them running back through the trees. Sans returns his attention to Deacon.

His Soul is still hovering there above his chest, flickering weakly with only the barest hint of green. After a moment, as Sans grits his teeth and waits, it sinks back inside of Deacon where it belongs. He's unconscious.

"shit," Sans breathes, and buries his face in his hands.
His chest hurts like hell.

Consciousness comes to Deacon swiftly and sharply as he draws in a deep breath and it feels like someone stabbed him right in the solar plexus. Gasping and hissing through his teeth, he rolls onto his side, curling into a ball as he groipes his chest with one hand. He groans as he presses against tender flesh. Pain dulling his senses, it takes him longer than it should to realize he's on a bed.

This isn't right. He was in the forest, he was—

Oh god. No. No no no

It all comes back in a rush and his eyes fly open, finding himself in a dimly lit bedroom he doesn't recognize. A small bedside lamp is lit, the floral shade casting an odd, splotchy pattern on the wall behind it. There's a desk set against one wall and in the chair...

Undyne is sitting there across the room, watching him with one, narrowed yellow eye. As their eyes meet her lips pull away from her teeth in an unconscious snarl. "Finally awake?" she asks, uncrossing her arms and resting her hands on her knees, leaning forward just a little.

Grunting, Deacon eases himself into a sitting position, muffling a cry of pain as he aggravates what he's certain is a nasty bruise. Sucking in a sharp breath, he keeps one hand over his chest and does his best to fold his legs. He's light-headed, and his limbs feel leaden in stark contrast. He was too close, too damn close to burning himself out. He tries to draw on his magic, testing how much he has left, but his hand only flickers faintly with green before sputtering out. Healing this bruise will have to wait.

"What the FUCK did you just try to do?" Undyne snaps, fingers digging into her legs as she watches him, tendons standing out in her neck. Is that fear or anger? Her visceral reaction reminds him of Sans, that wild, panicked look on his face the second he'd seen Deacon's magic. Either way, he's exhausted and powerless, no threat to anyone like this.

Grant was right. He'd let his personal attachments blow his cover. "You care too much. And one day it's going to bite you in the ass."

And, well, damn him if that hadn't come true. Not that he'd undo what he did. He wasn't about to let Frisk and Asriel get hurt just for a secret. He'd stood by the sidelines one too many times when he could have done something to help, and he wasn't going to let that happen again. Not to your child. He'd never forgive himself.

If Sans hadn't been there, watching, he might have been able to salvage this. Talked to the kids, had a civil conversation. Come at this whole thing from a different perspective. Instead he'd...fuck, he'd panicked too. The first thing he thought of when he saw Sans bristling with magic was those blasters. Magic strong enough to turn a granite boulder to powder. He'd needed time to try and
explain, thought that maybe if he contained him long enough to do so...

He hadn't expected Asriel to attack him. Trying to maintain a full bubble and a shield at once was foolhardy and nearly got himself killed.

What was going to happen to him now?

"you're not my friend, and once everyone knows the truth, none of them are going to be your friends either."

Fear and dread twists in his gut, a pain more bone-deep than anything physical. He can't lose this. He'd finally had something. He had you, and friends, and Bo. Bo—

"I asked you a question, MAGE."

It feels like a slap in the face. Deacon looks at Undyne, shock and hurt plain on his face. He doesn't have the energy to fake indifference, to shrug it aside. He's tired, and raw, and he just... he's scared. "I was trying to heal myself," he says, voice tight.

"So you can heal AND create barriers?" she demands.

"It's green magic. I'm a green mage," he says, sighing. "I thought that was obvious. And what do you mean barriers? Are you talking about the shields?"

Undyne clenches her jaw. "You put Sans in a barrier. You sealed him AND his magic in a BARRIER. Just like how we were sealed Underground!"

"Oh, goddamn it," he hisses, squeezing his eyes shut and hanging his head. "No, it's... We never... They're just shields. Like what you did with Hope. They're temporary. We don't even know how the Barrier was made."

"Bullshit," she snaps, but her tone is tempered by doubt. "You... MAGES did it in the first place."

"Hundreds of years ago. And the mages who created it died, so it's not like they could pass down the knowledge," he says, looking up at her again. "Undyne, I'm still me. Come on, we..." Deacon lets out a weak, desperate laugh as he buries his fingers in his hair and clutches it tight. "We both use green magic. And all those times we sparred, I never... I'd never hurt you guys."

She looks away, towards the door, but something in her expression wavers a little.

He swallows, trying to press whatever moment of weakness she might be feeling. "Undyne, you helped host my birthday party last week. We're... we're friends..." His voice cracks as a waver of apprehension and fear takes hold of his throat. Tries to turn his statement into a question against his will.

Undyne clenches her jaw, shoulders stiffening. She doesn't say anything. He can feel her pulling away, shrugging his friendship off of her like an unwanted burden. Not again, no not again...

His gaze falls to his lap and there on his left wrist is the bracelet that you made for him. Anyone else might think it was silly, or childish. But not Deacon. No, you made this for him, with your Soul colors no less, and it...

Sans is going to take you away from him. He’d thought it was going to happen once before but this time… He doesn’t doubt that your husband wants nothing to do with him. Hell, he doesn’t even know if you will want anything to do with him after this.
Deacon squeezes his eyes shut as tears threaten to gather. It seems silly, that out of all the things he has to worry about it’s you that his mind jumps to, but you were the first person who really, truly took him in. Cared about him, unabashedly and wholeheartedly accepted him and trusted him. Defended him when Sans refused to do the same. Do you regret that decision now? Is Sans reveling in some sort of grim satisfaction that he was right this whole time?

He doesn’t want to lose you. But he’s terrified that he already has.

As he sits there in chilly silence with Undyne, he can hear voices past the door. Muffled, but he thinks he recognizes Asgore’s distinct bass and Sans’s slightly higher timbre. There’s a third voice, one that cuts through the other two, loud and stern. He knows that’s you.

“Where am I?” Deacon asks, unsure if she’s even going to answer.

“Asgore’s,” Undyne says, still not looking at him. There’s a pause, and she pushes up onto her feet without warning, making Deacon flinch. Balling her hands into fists, she heads for the door. “They’ll want to know you’re awake. I know Asgore’s got questions.”

“I want to talk to Hope,” he blurts out. His voice sounds pathetic and desperate to his own ears but he doesn’t care. He is pathetic and desperate. He needs to know if he’s ruined everything, if you hate him. He needs the chance to try and explain why. “Undyne, please.”

“It’s not my decision,” she mutters, and steps out into the hall.

She’s only gone for a moment before she returns with Asgore in the lead, looking grave even in his pajamas. Something about him, his face, fills him with dread. This isn’t the same man he’s known since October, the one who was a kind and doting father, who carried Frisk and Asriel on his shoulders at Thanksgiving, who cooked burgers on the grill in the snow for Papyrus’s birthday. No, this was King Asgore. The stern-faced monarch he’d seen once before at the beach.

Sans follows closely behind him, hands shoved into the pockets of that same, worn out blue jacket, shoulders set into a stiff line. Everything about him is tense, radiating annoyance and frustration. However long he’d been unconscious, it wasn’t long enough to improve Sans’s mood much.

And then, there’s you. He catches a glimpse of your hair from around Asgore’s arm, the side of your face above Sans’s shoulder. For a moment he wonders if you’re going to stay behind them, if you’re too disgusted with him to even look him in the eye, but then your hands thrust into the space between the monsters so you can shove your way through.

“Deacon, oh—” you start, but Sans catches your arm.

“babe, don’t,” he says, and to Deacon’s surprise you jerk yourself out of his grasp.

“Hope, stay back!” Undyne snaps.

“Like hell I will!” you say, casting them both an angry look before turning to look at him.

Deacon braces himself for your anger. For your rage and hurt. For you to fling his betrayal at his feet before storming back out again. It’s what he deserves. He deserves it all, doesn’t he? For lying to everyone. For taking your friendship when his intentions were nowhere near as selfless as yours. He wouldn’t blame you, as much as it would break his heart, if you hated him.

Please. Please don’t hate me. I don’t think I can take it.

And then your brown eyes meet his, and all he can see is… Worry. Concern. That same look you
had on your face when he came to you more desperate for help than he’d ever been before in his life. The day that you’d told him you loved him. Because you were always there for him, ever since he met you. You’d never turned him away. Why did he think you’d do that now?

Deacon’s eyes swim with tears and he feels something inside him break. “I’m sorry,” he blurts out, because he needs you to know. That most of all he’s just sorry. “I wanted to tell you. I didn’t want you to find out like this.”

“Deacon…” you say softly, and he buries his face in his hands.

“Oh god, I thought you were going to hate me,” he breathes, weak, manic laughter spilling out of his throat.

“I don’t hate you,” you say, and he feels your hands on his shoulders. “You’re my best friend.”

He bites back a sob of relief, uncaring of the awful pain in his chest as he leans forward into your touch. At least he still has you. You and Bo. Maybe that’ll be enough.

“you’re getting ahead of yourself. we still don’t know a damn thing about what the hell he’s doing here,” Sans mutters, grim and bitter at your back.

Part of him wants to argue, to defend himself, but that won’t get him anywhere. It’ll just bring back that animosity, and that’s not what he needs.

He needs everyone to just listen.

“Deacon.” Asgore’s voice is firm yet gentle, kinder than he’s expecting. He wonders if he has you to thank for that. “I think that you ought to tell us why you came to Ebott.”

He drags his hands down his face, wiping his eyes as he tips his head up to look over at the king. As he leans back, he hisses a breath between his teeth, raising a hand to his chest and wincing. Your brow furrows, grip tightening on his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” you ask, leaning in closer.

“I’d be better if I hadn’t taken a bone to the chest,” he mutters.

You cast a dark look over your shoulder, but Sans’s expression doesn’t change. “I still can’t believe you attacked him,” you say.

“He’s a mage,” Sans says, as if that explained everything.

Deacon is relieved to see that you remain unconvinced. Whatever ingrained fear of mages Sans and Undyne seem to have, you’re clearly lacking.

“You’re treating him the same way that humans have been treating monsters; with blind prejudice!” you exclaim, turning on your heel to face your husband. You’re standing between him and Sans, defending him again. He’s torn between gratitude and guilt. That again you’re fighting with the man you love all because of him. “The only difference is that you know that Deacon is a good person, and you’re still flinging accusations at him!”

“He lied to us this whole time!” Sans grits his teeth, shaking his head.

“And we’ve been lying to everyone this whole time! How does that make it any different? We all know what happened in the Underground, let’s not pretend that monsters are innocent of any
“cruelty,” you mutter, and the room goes still for a moment for a reason that Deacon isn’t sure he understands.

“Hope,” Undyne says, a warning in her voice.

You whirl on her, raising a hand in a sharp, jabbing motion. “Don’t even start with me! You were just the first one to try and kill me and Frisk!”

Undyne balks, and Deacon can only stare over your shoulder as she looks away, grimacing. What the hell, her too? He knew about Mettaton, but you never gave any hint about this.

“Do I need to go into detail how many times I was afraid for my life, living in the Underground?” you ask, looking at Undyne, then Asgore, and finally settling back on Sans. “How many times you had to protect me? How many secrets we have to keep to make sure that everyone in Ebott stays safe, because if anyone knew what I’d really been through, they’d use it against you? We’re lying to protect ourselves. And if Deacon lied about being a mage, it wasn’t without good reason! Obviously his fears of telling us the truth weren’t unfounded since you attacked him for it!”

“you don’t understand—”

“What, blaming an entire group of people because of the actions of a few? Monsters tried to kill me, and you don’t see me going out there and joining the picket lines. For god’s sake, Sans, two of the people who tried to kill me are in this damn room. And I forgave them both.” Your voice trails off, weak and exasperated. You turn to Asgore, hands clenched at your sides. “You said yourself that not all mages were against you in the war. You said that there were mages that had children with monsters. Why are you keeping Deacon here like a prisoner when he’s done nothing to deserve it? Asgore, he protected our children.”

“I know,” Asgore says, holding out his hand to you. You hesitate, staring up at him and searching his face, then place your hand in his. He wraps his fingers around you, engulfing you up to the wrist, and gently pulls you back to stand between Sans and himself. “Which is why I would like him to explain what he said to Sans. I believe he said something about being sent here? And other mages.”

Sans shakes his head, grimacing. “he’s already lied to us. how can we trust what he has to say?”

Deacon had thought that maybe he and Sans had finally put their differences aside. Buried the hatchet. Now he sees that the skeleton was just waiting for his chance to dig it back up again, to hold it over his head and take the moment to swing. He’d flung his greatest fear right in Deacon’s face, tried to turn you against him, was still fighting against even giving him a chance… Why, why was Sans so adamant in his loathing of him? Why was it so easy to undo months of work?

It’s enough to make him find his voice, to chime in for his own meager defense. “Because I’ve got everything to lose,” he says, pleading with Asgore with his eyes. “I’ll tell you everything, answer all your questions, if it means that you won’t make me leave the first place I’ve ever felt at home.”

Sans looks away, gritting his teeth. Undyne shifts uncomfortably on her feet and Asgore’s expression softens just a little. He opens his mouth to speak, maybe to tell Deacon to go ahead, but he’s interrupted by the sudden loud crash of the front door banging open. Everyone jumps, but while the monsters look at each other, bewildered and startled, you bite your lip and meet Deacon’s eyes for just a second.

“Deacon?! King Asgore?!!”
Deacon’s heart gives a lurch in his chest at the sound of a familiar voice, everything inside of him telling him to go to her. But he’s stuck here on this bed, blocked in.

“We’re back here!” you call out, and Sans turns to you with a look of surprise.

“What is she doing here?” Sans demands, an accusation in his stare.

You press your mouth into a hard line. “I texted her to tell her where we were.”

“I told you not to tell her anything.”

“She has every right to be here,” you snap. “If I were in Deacon’s place, you would want to be here.”

He doesn’t have time to argue any further. Bo is there in the doorway, pale and livid as she takes in the sight of him and the others in the room. You catch her eye, usher her forward, and step aside to let her through to him.

As she hurries forward to go to him, as they reach out for each other, Sans’s sharp tone makes her stop short. “he’s not who you think he is,” he says, eyes narrowing. “Deacon’s a mage.”

Deacon watches carefully as her face twists into a snarl, turning on her heel towards Sans. He looks taken aback, more taken aback than he was when you’d faced him with similar vehemence. “I know he’s a mage! He told me.”

“...what?” Sans says, and Deacon feels vaguely satisfied as he watches some of the fire burn out of the skeleton’s anger.

What he doesn’t like is the small shift in your expression. The questioning look you give him and the hurt there in your eyes.

“And he shared his Soul with me,” she says, taking a step back towards the bed and reaching behind her. Deacon takes her hand, squeezes, and he’s not sure he’s ever loved her more than at this moment. “I’m not going to let you do anything to him. He’s not our enemy.”

Silence fills the room as Bo glares at the other monsters, daring them to challenge her. After a moment, Asgore clears his throat.

“I see,” he says slowly, threading his hands together and resting them over his stomach. “Well, then I suppose that does change matters. You can vouch for his honesty?”

“Yes,” she says, her grip on him tightening. “I know his Soul.”

“Sans, even you cannot deny this,” Asgore says, arching a brow.

Sans clenches his jaw, but doesn’t answer.

“Then, I think we ought to put our arguments to the side for now,” he says, looking over at you and the others, “and let Deacon tell us what is going on.”
You're standing in Asgore's guest bedroom, the king to your left, Sans to your right, and Undyne behind you, all facing the bed where Deacon and Bo are sitting. He looks exhausted and in pain, leaning against his girlfriend as she supports him, one hand combing through the back of his hair. She alternates between watching Deacon's face, concern shaping a furrow in her brow, and looking up at Asgore with something like defiance in her eyes. The looks she casts at Sans are nothing short of angry. You can't blame her. A large part of you feels the same way.

When Sans told you what happened, he was expecting you to share his outrage. His sense of betrayal. You were shocked, yes, but Sans was reducing him to a single aspect —mage— and disregarding everything else he knew about Deacon. Everything you knew about Deacon. You couldn't, wouldn't, throw it all away over this. Not without an explanation. And that look on his face —the fear, the absolute desperation— when he saw you, and the breaking point when he realized you hadn't given up on him; that was proof enough for you. That whatever he had to say for himself, you could accept it.

The thing that stings is that he told Bo the truth and not you.

Oh, you know you're being petty, and selfish, and maybe a little bit jealous. You'd been there for him, through so much! Why couldn't he trust you with this too?

Your thoughts must be plain on your face because Deacon is watching you. "I wanted to tell you," he says, regret in his voice. "But I... I couldn't. I was still worried about Sans. I wanted to tell you both together. I thought..." He lets out a weak, humorless laugh. "I thought we could use this camping trip to get to know each other better. I guess that was true."

Sans makes a low sound deep in his chest, something between a scoff and a grunt of acknowledgment. You love him, you do, but part of you just wants to shake him right now. For being so stubborn, for scaring the kids...

Toriel called you, after Sans took her to the campsite to take his place. They didn't want to disturb all the kids in the middle of the night, or let them know that anything was wrong. But he'd left Frisk and Asriel, scared and worried that he'd done something to Deacon. While waiting for Deacon to regain consciousness, you talked to Frisk, reassured them that he was okay. They told you, over and over again, that he'd protected them. That he didn't do anything wrong.

It's still the middle of the night. You hope that with Toriel there they're getting some sleep.

"I was going to tell you," Deacon says, firmer this time.

"So tell me now," you say, crossing your arms over your chest, hugging yourself.

He nods, glances at each of your faces, and looks at you as he starts to speak. "I'm... I'm from a group of mages, called the Literatum. I was sent here to observe and learn, to help us try and
reclaim a lot of the knowledge that was lost over the generations. Things about Souls and magic. It was... easiest for me because I have a degree in teaching. And I was curious, so I asked to do it."

"You came to SPY on us?" Undyne interjects, making you jump.

"...Sort of, yes," he admits, swallowing. "Not to do anything bad, they just... There's so much we don't know, about our history, or monsters. I didn't even believe the stories when I was told as a kid, that you guys were real. I thought it was just... I don't know, more old mages trying to make us into more than we are." He frowns, shaking his head and looking down at his hands in his lap. "I've only met like ten other mages. Most of them all talk. They spend so much damn time just keeping ourselves secret and trying to find others so they can pass down the knowledge they do have even though they won't use it for anything..."

There's a moment of bitter silence where Deacon grits his teeth.

"The Literatum aren't a threat," he says, looking up at Asgore. "They just wanted to know more about magic. And they didn't want anyone —human or monster— to find out about us. The whole secrecy thing is really important to them, but I just... I don't fucking care any more. This double life bullshit is crap, and it's gotten to the point where it feels like dealing with Grant and the others is the fake."

"Grant's a mage?" you ask, and suddenly it feels like an important piece of the puzzle has slipped into place. "That's why he adopted you. When you said he saw your potential, it was your magic. And why... Oh my god, that's why you said the situation was complicated, and what he said about Bo..."

Deacon is nodding, glancing over at his girlfriend. He takes her hand in his. "He didn't want any of you clouding my judgment," he says, sighing. "Questioning my... loyalty. Hm, guess he was right about that after all."

"Why would your loyalty be put into question?" Asgore asks, the soft rumble of his voice filling the room. "If your people are not a threat to mine, why would you have to choose a side?"

"Because they're cowards and don't want to get caught in the middle if—" he cuts himself off, grimacing in pain as he gingerly touches his chest. "There's another sect of mages that call themselves the Vigilum. They're like... old families, Illuminati, cult, 'power is everything', paranoid assholes. All the stuff that's been going on in the news?" Deacon looks at you again, his expression hard and serious. "We're almost certain that's them. Most of them aren't even mages, but they can trace their ancestry back to one and they abuse their connections. They're probably pissed that you guys basically outed to the world that there's magic, and they're worried that one day they're going to get found out."

"What, and your people AREN'T?" Undyne cuts in, and you can hear the skepticism in her voice.

"I mean, the Literatum are worried about that too, but they wouldn't..." Deacon's eyes flick up to Undyne's, then back down to yours. "During Spring Break, when you couldn't get a hold of me? I said I was at lunch with Grant. Well, that was only partially true. I was meeting with Grant and the others. I was trying to convince them that we need to do something about what's been going on. But they don't want to get involved."

Asgore clears his throat. "Would your people be willing to speak with me?"

"I... probably."
"you can't be serious," Sans blurts out with a look of disbelief. "dealing with more mages?"

"Asgore we all know the stories, it's too dangerous," Undyne says.

"Deacon, how would you say your magical ability compares to other mages? Are you considered average by your peers?" Asgore asks, ignoring the others.

Deacon blinks. "My healing isn't very good, but I've been told my shields are on the strong side. Um, so I guess above average?"

"And you exhausted yourself with just a sphere and a basic shield? Over the course of about ten minutes?"

He's frowning now. "I also stopped a rock slide. What are you getting at?"

"You are significantly weaker than your forebears. A green mage during the war could create a shield wide enough to protect a hundred men," he says, and you watch as Deacon's jaw drops in shock.

"That would... I can do maybe five, for like ten seconds," he breathes.

"And you are dying out. Nearly a quarter of the human population were mages then, and now..." Asgore sighs, and he looks... relieved. "You are a fading echo of what you once were. You must understand, hearing the news that mages still exist, it made us think that your people might be capable of another Barrier. We had taken relief in thinking that magic had left humanity. But it seems that our fear was mostly misplaced."

"and we're just supposed to believe these two mage groups exist? just based on your word," Sans says, stepping forward so that he can look around you to face Asgore. "and you want to, what, meet with them? asgore, you're playing right into what could just be a trap."

Frustration twists in your chest, but Bo is faster than you. She's glaring at him, baring her teeth. "He's not lying! Deacon wouldn't hurt anyone."

Sans frowns. "fine. then how do you know that they're not tricking you? using you to get to us. you don't seem to like your dad very much but you're asking us to trust him and his people."

"He's not my dad," Deacon snaps, jaw tensing. "And I've known Grant since I was twelve. Long before any of us ever thought monsters would ever reach the surface. How would they know to lie to me about their intentions this whole time? Look, I might have my problems with the Literatum, but they're not bad people. The Vigilum are who you need to worry about."

Sans is shaking his head. "i don't like this. look, every time i'm around deacon i just feel... like there's something wrong. i ignored it and now... was it his magic?" He looks up at Asgore, wide-eyed and anxious, a note of desperation in his voice. "if it's just his magic then fine but it's — why do i feel this way?"

He sounds so distraught. It smooths away some of your frustration, just enough for you to catch his eye and brush his arm with your hand. He searches your face, then frees his hand from his pocket so he can take yours, and the relief there in his expression is enough to make you feel guilty.

"Hmm," Asgore begins, looking from Sans to Deacon. Deacon is just sitting there, confused as he watches Sans. "It sounds as though your Souls are dissonant."

"are you—?" Sans cuts himself off, gritting his teeth. "are you kidding me? he's a human."
"What are you talking about?" Deacon says, echoing your own thoughts.

"He is a mage and as such his Soul is more like that of a monster. Magic flows through him, and even though he cannot sense them as we do, it is possible for a mage Soul and monster Soul to become dissonant," Asgore says, which isn't helping you very much if you're being honest. But Sans seems to understand. "Unfortunately, since human Souls are stronger than ours, the dissonance is... much sharper."

"so you're telling me... that not only are we dissonant, but he can't even tell?" Sans asks, his voice almost a growl.

"What can't I tell?" Deacon asks, looking between Asgore and Sans.

"Your Souls are too similar to be complementary. They... clash. A dissonance between monsters might surface as a rivalry, or just a general dislike, likely without a logical reason," Asgore says, sighing. "This is a step more than that, but since you cannot feel Souls as we can, Sans is the only one that it affects."

"But... you two were getting along! Everything was fine, until..." you trail off, looking at the ground, and then at Sans. He looks resigned. "You overcame this..."

"Well this is fucking perfect," Deacon breathes, bitterness in every syllable. "No wonder you hate me, our damn Souls won't even play nice."

"i don't hate you," Sans blurts out, looking up at Deacon. Your friend is taken aback, his lips parting like he wants to say something, but he doesn't. "shit, i... fuck, i don't know anymore..."

There's a moment of silence, where no one seems sure of what to say. All the anger from earlier seems to have dissipated into uncertainty.

"So what do we do now?" Undyne asks, quiet.

You look to Asgore, same as everyone else. He watches all of you, mulling this over as he strokes his beard. Then, after a moment, he sighs. "For now, I think it is best if you all go home. Bo, perhaps you should take Deacon with you."

"I was already planning on it," she says sharply.

"And Deacon, I expect you to get in touch with your superiors and let them know that I wish to speak with them regarding this... situation," he says, and Deacon nods. "For the moment, you will have to oblige me in not going to work until I am more familiar with this turn of events."

"But I—" he starts to protest, then withers. "Yeah. Okay... Are you... Are you going to tell everyone about me?"

"No. I think that for now it is best if we keep this between those of us who already know. I do not want to worry my people unnecessarily," he says, and you can see the relief on Deacon's face.

If Sans has any protests about Asgore's plan, he keeps them to himself. You look at your husband, and his expression is enigmatic. Frustrated perhaps, and a little sullen, but you think that he's focused inward, on this 'dissonance' thing that Asgore just dumped in his lap.

"So you're going to try and talk to Deacon's mages about the... bad mages?" Undyne asks, stifling a yawn.
Asgor nods. "Yes. See if there is anything that can be done about what is happening in the news. See if there is any link between that and the recent change in our soldiers..."

As Bo throws her legs off the side of the bed, scooting off and turning to help Deacon, Undyne and Asgor turn to leave the room. This is your chance, you think, to ask some questions you didn't want to raise in front of the others.

"Bo, can I... I want to talk to Deacon alone for a second, if that's okay," you ask gently, and that seems to get Sans's attention.

"what, why?" he asks, gripping your hand tighter.

Bo gives you a questioning look, then glances at Deacon.

"It's about Frisk," you say, and realization dawns on his face.

"Oh. Yeah, I... Bo can you give me a few minutes?" he says, leaning back to sit on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry."

She looks between you and Deacon, then glances at Sans. "All right," she says, cupping his cheek and leaning in to kiss him. "Not for long, okay? This... this whole thing really scared me. This could have gone so much worse, baby."

Deacon lets out a weak, exhausted laugh. "Tell me about it. Hey," he says, catching her hand as she starts to pull away. "I love you. You have no idea how much it means to me that you're here."

"I love you too. And get used to it, I'm not letting you go without a hell of a fight," she says, and for a second you think they might kiss again, with that fierce look in her eye. But they don't. She brushes his cheek with her thumb, then lets him go to tug on Sans's sleeve. "Come on."

"what?" Sans says, not budging.

"She said alone. And I have a few words for you," she says, fixing him with a stern look.

Sans looks at you, and when you don't say anything, he lets himself be led out of the room. Bo shuts the door behind her.

"I thought maybe Frisk was a mage," Deacon says, before you can even ask. He gives you a lopsided smile in response to the surprise on your face. "You wanted to know why I followed them into the forest, right? Or at least, now you can tell Sans. I'm sure he was wondering."

That wasn't exactly what you were going to ask, but that's the sort of answer you were looking for. Could Frisk's ability to Load and Reset be linked to them being a mage? "What made you think they might be?" you ask. Sans thought he might be able to sense Loads, and you wonder if that's true.

"There was this weird moment in the middle of the day. We were all just standing around, and all of a sudden I felt Frisk's magic just plummet. For no reason. I, uh, can't sense Souls the same way monsters can, but I can feel a person's magic. At the zoo? It was the same thing. I think they passed out because of their magic getting drained but I don't know how."

Deacon sighs, reaching up to rub his neck as he searches your face. "But, I get the feeling you know something about this already?"

You search his face, then give a short nod.

"There's something odd between Frisk and Asriel, isn't there? I don't get it, but I can feel
something's off."

You nod again. "It's..."

"Complicated? Yeah, I think that's the word of the day," Deacon says, and the two of you share a long, quiet look. His wry smile fades, replaced with something sad. "Hope, I'm sorry."

You shake your head, doing your best to ignore the tears stinging in the corners of your eyes. "Sans shouldn't have attacked you," you say.

"It would have been nice. But he was scared and angry. I'm sure putting him in a bubble didn't help," he says and that smile tries to make a reappearance, but it's gone after a moment. "I don't think he's going to forgive me."

"I don't want to talk about that," you mutter, closing the distance between the two of you and reaching for him. Carefully, you wrap him up in a hug, doing your best not to hurt him. "I just want everything to be okay."

"Yeah," he says softly, burying his face in your shoulder. "Me too..."

"So that burn scar, I get the feeling it wasn't a grease fire."

"No."

"What was it?"

"Grant. We were training, and he caught me in the back. Then I got to practice healing myself," he says, holding you tighter as you tense.

"That bastard," you snap.

"Hey," he says, the gentleness of his voice distracting you from your redirected anger. "Thank you, for believing in me. And for telling Bo where I was. Without the two of you... I don't know what might have happened."

"I dunno either. But we don't have to worry about it. And maybe, with Asgore and your, uh... Literatum?" He nods against you and you continue. "Maybe with them working together they can do something about the other mages."

"Maybe," he says, but he doesn't sound very convinced.
"hope—"

"I don't want to talk about it," you mutter, yanking your clothes off over your head. "It's late, I'm tired and angry and... I just want to get some sleep."

You can feel Sans watching you as you dump your shirt and bra on the floor and shove your pants down past your waist. He's at your back, silent as you pull open a dresser drawer. There's some of Sans's old shirts that you sleep in, along with a few colorful sets of proper pajamas. Feeling spiteful, you slip into a green nightgown. Pulling your hair out of the collar and combing your fingers through it, when you turn around Sans is still standing there in the center of the room, watching you.

"What?" you ask petulantly. When he doesn't immediately answer you walk over towards the overhead light switch. "Fine. Well you can get changed in the dark if—"

A pair of strong arms slide around your waist and pull you back against a broad ribcage, ignoring your small sound of protest. You feel Sans press his forehead between your shoulder blades, burying his face in your hair. He holds you tightly, and there's something desperate in his grip. He's shaking.

"don't," he whispers, and all you can do is stare at the wall, arms at your sides as you bite your lip. You're mad at him. You want to be mad. "i know you're angry, but don't keep me out right now, babe. please."

"You attacked my best friend, after he saved Frisk's life. You scared them. They thought you had... Why would Frisk think you were capable of killing Deacon?"

Sans tenses, rubbing his head against your back as he shakes it. "i didn't mean to scare them. i just... they almost got hurt, or worse, and then seeing that barrier magic... i panicked. i trusted him and and he'd been lying this whole time."

"Yeah, I know how that feels," you mutter darkly, ignoring your instinct to cover Sans's hands with your own, to try and comfort him. You're hurt, and that bitter part of you isn't ready to let that go. "To find out that the whole time you've known someone, they've been keeping a secret from you. I have experience."

He flinches, and you feel satisfied that you've struck a nerve. But a moment later guilt twists in your stomach. Sans is your husband, the man that you love more than anything. Yes you're angry with him, but lashing out isn't doing either of you any good.

"That was cruel of me," you say.

"it's true, though."
Sighing, you drape your arms over his, gripping his hands. You let yourself relax just a little into his hold. "I'm tired. I'm too tired to fight with you. This isn't done, I just... I love you, but I can't do this right now."

"do what?" he asks, and the fear in his voice makes your heart ache.

"This talk. About you and Deacon. Let's just go to bed."

"You need to eat something."

Deacon gives a pointed look at the clock on the stove as Bo opens the fridge and starts to scan the contents. "It's almost three thirty in the morning. It's a bit late for a midnight snack," he says, but waits obediently beside the sink as she pushes things around.

She reemerges with some mayonnaise and lunchmeat, as well as a packet of cheese. "It'll help you recover your magic quicker. Food is good for the Soul," she says, and there's something off about her tone. It's brisk and casual, her words sound practiced.

"Bo, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Look, just let me make you this sandwich and you'll feel better and you can heal yourself," she says. Her voice sounds tight.

She's not fine. Ignoring the ache in his chest, he goes to her side, touching her arm to try and get her attention. "Hey," he says gently. She's laying out two slices of bread, ignoring him. "Hey, come on. Usually I'm the one clamming up."

"Just let me help you!" she blurts out, tears in her eyes as she turns to look at him. Deacon is taken aback by her fear, the slight wobble of her chin as her face scrunches up. She grabs a butter knife and starts spreading mayonnaise across the bread. "I know that this will help, so just... let me do this."

"I'll be fine," he says gently, stroking her cheek with his thumb, wiping away a stray tear that slips down her fur.

"Ever since you told me what you are, I've been scared about what would happen if anyone else found out," she says, not looking at him. Bo swallows. "Sans could have killed you."

"Oh, he's not Sansy anymore?" he teases, giving her a weak smile.

Bo shoots him a halfhearted glare. "Asgore could have sent you off the mountain. Banned you from coming through the Line."

"Then you'd finally have to learn how to drive, like I keep nagging you about," Deacon says, stroking her arm. He pushes the fabric of her short sleeve out of his way as he leans over to kiss the curve of her shoulder. Some of the tension is easing out of her body, slowly but surely. "You'd come and see me."

"Or any other number of things. Deacon, this could have gone so terribly," she says, finishing up the sandwich with a diagonal cut.

"But it didn't. Thank god," he mutters, sighing. He takes the plate as she hands it to him but he sets it back down, pulling Bo into his arms and holding her tight. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost this. I... I can't go back to how things used to be. I won't."
"I'll fight anyone who tries to take you from me. Sans, or Asgore, or Grant, or any of those other mages..." Bo tucks her head under his chin. "Hope will help me."

He's not sure what to say to that. Having people willing to stand up for him, to protect him, it still feels strange. To be loved and defended. Deacon dips his head so he can kiss her, cupping the back of her neck as she melts against him. But she pulls away too soon, fixing him with a chastising look.

"Eat your sandwich," she says, and he knows he ought to just do as she says. He lets her take care of him, like she wants.

Things are tense after you and Sans get up for the day. You both slept poorly, and you just feel too cranky and irritable to have a decent conversation with him. To make matters worse he keeps watching you like he's waiting for you to bring it up, but refusing to do so himself. You don't speak much. You get ready to take a shower and don't invite him to join you. He doesn't ask, instead heading downstairs alone.

Normally showers help you feel better, but by the time the water runs cold you still feel agitated. As you enter the kitchen Sans catches your eye but you ignore him, instead focused on the stove where Papyrus is making breakfast. He must have been told some excuse for why you and Sans are home already from your weekends, because he doesn't ask you. He just greets you brightly and flashes you a big smile. You can't help but smile back, feeling your sour mood lighten just a little.

But your brother-in-law senses the tension between you. He keeps glancing between the two of you as you eat, notices that you aren't talking or glancing or touching each other like you normally do. Instead of reaching for Sans's hand you fiddle with your friendship bracelet, looking at the stripes of green and dark red. Sighing, you finish your food and slide off the barstool.

"HOPE," Papyrus says, catching you before you go. "UM. DID YOU HAVE ANY PLANS FOR TODAY?"

You feel Sans's eyes on you. "No. I just need to go pick up Frisk from the campground in a little bit. What's up?"

"I THOUGHT YOU AND FRISK MIGHT LIKE TO JOIN METTATON AND I AT THE MOVIE SET," he says, wringing his hands anxiously. "I KNOW YOU BOTH HAD FUN LAST TIME."

The thought of getting out of the house, being around people who don't know about this mess with Deacon is tempting. Staying home with Sans, dodging around what you should but don't want to talk about sounds... awful. Besides, you think Frisk could use some fun right now just as much as you can.

"Yeah, I'd like that," you say, smiling at him. "Let me go get changed. And I'm driving."

Upstairs, as you're pulling a blouse off a hanger, you're not surprised to find Sans waiting for you where he wasn't a second ago. You shut the closet door, arching a brow at him as you slip the shirt on over your head.

"fine, you win. let's talk," he says, looking at the floor.

You frown. "'You win'? That's how you want to start this conversation?"

"look, just don't go, ok? stay and talk to me," he says, glancing up to meet your eyes. His expression is tense, his arms rigid at his sides. The pupils searching your face are small and faint.
"I don't want to talk right now," you mutter, turning towards your dresser. There, where it always is, is your locket from Sans. You push it around with the tip of your finger, but don't pick it up.

"I just want to make things better."

"Do you?" you demand, twisting so you can look at him, scowling. "Because I haven't heard you apologize. And not just to me. Don't you feel sorry at all for what you did?"

"I screwed up, overreacted—"

"Are you sorry or not!" you exclaim, balling your hands into fists. "Because you did more than just screw up. I don't care about the dissonance or whatever the hell is going on, you were friends two days ago! And the first thing you did was try and turn the others against him. You just couldn't let go of the fact that you thought you were right about him this whole time."

"I was right," he says, frowning. "but—"

"Oh you asshole."

"but," he continues, fixing you with a hard look. He grits his teeth. "I am sorry."

You shake your head, hissing out a sigh. "I don't believe you," you mutter, turning away from him and snatching up the locket. You yank it on over your head, begrudgingly. "I'm going out with your brother. We can talk more later. Maybe you can take the time alone to think."

As you head for the door he catches your wrist. "wait, just... don't leave like this," he says, and the pleading tone in his voice makes you relent just a little.

You turn, kiss his cheek, and when he tries to pull you closer you slip away again. "I love you, Sans. I'll see you tonight."

He stares at you for a moment before giving a weak, resigned sigh. "I love you too."

The day on the set with Mettaton and Papyrus is what you and Frisk needed. It's a good distraction for both of you, and Frisk spends most of the afternoon at your side. It's a nice change of pace from the last two weeks where they were mostly ignoring you, but after Sans's stunt in the forest... you suppose you're not the least favorite anymore.

Frisk doesn't seem to want to talk much about what happened either, aside from making sure that Deacon is okay. They ask if he's in trouble, and when you reassure them that he isn't they seem relieved. You wonder if you and Frisk should sit down with Deacon and thank him properly for what he did, and maybe talk about all of this... mage stuff. And what this might mean for Frisk. You're convinced that he might have some kind of understanding of what's going on with their powers. But that's something else you'll have to talk about with Sans first.

Filming ends early for the day, around dinnertime. As you all pile into your car, with Papyrus in the passenger seat and Mettaton in the back with Frisk, you're grateful for the time to help clear your head. You're in a much better mood, and you think that after you've eaten you'll pull Sans aside so you can actually talk.

As you roll up to the checkpoint at the Line and put the car in park, you're a little surprised when two soldiers come to stand at the driver's and passenger's side windows. Is this a new procedure? You haven't been through the checkpoint since this new group of soldiers arrived. Glancing over at Papyrus, you're not comforted by the nervous look on his face.
"We're just coming back in," you say, looking up at the man standing beside you. He's older, with gray hair peeking from beneath his cap. The patch on his uniform reads 'Jacobs'. The name sounds familiar. "Do you need—"

"If the two monsters would step out of the car, please," he says, cutting you off and making some sort of gesture to the other soldier.

"What?" you ask, bewildered as you look at Papyrus again. "What's going on?"

"Ma'am, you and your child stay where you are, but the monsters need to exit the vehicle," Jacobs says, sterner this time.

"Darling, I don't like this," Mettaton says, and when you glance over your shoulder he looks worried.

"I... There's nothing we can do but do as he says," you say, anxiousness forming a lump in the pit of your stomach.

"DID SOMETHING HAPPEN?" Papyrus asks, twisting his seatbelt between his hands.

"Are they refusing to comply?" Jacobs asks, looking down at you again.

"No, no!" you say in a rush, turning back to Mettaton and Papyrus. "Please, just do what they want. We don't want any trouble."

Mettaton purses his lips and sweat dots the side of Papyrus's skull, but the two of them get out of the car. You're watching them, hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel as the other soldier shuts the car doors and escorts them towards the checkpoint booth.

"You're free to go," Jacobs says, giving you a smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

You look at the gate. It's still closed. "You need to open the gate," you say carefully, an icy finger of dread running down your spine.

"Oh, I'm sorry for the confusion," he says, his smile disappearing. "But no outside entry by humans is permitted at this time. Once all monsters have returned to Ebott, the Line is closed until further notice."
"But we..." Your heart is hammering in your ears, you're shaking with anger and fear in equal measure. "We live here. My husband—"

Jacobs's bushy eyebrows raise in an approximation of surprise. "I didn't realize you had married. Last I checked, your record with us had you listed as unwed Miss Garcia."

Your grip on the steering wheel tightens, white-knuckled as you shove the sudden urge to yell back down into your stomach. "Please, just let us back through," you beg, desperate. "We won't leave Ebott again, just let us go home."

He shakes his head. "I'm sorry, no exceptions."

"WHY AREN'T THEY LETTING HOPE AND FRISK THROUGH?" Papyrus's worried voice cuts through the air, and as you look away from Jacobs you spot him and Mettaton with a soldier on the other side of the gate, still being ushered away. Your brother-in-law stops in his tracks, ignoring the human at his elbow.

You hear the sound of a seatbelt unbuckling, and twist in your seat in time to catch Frisk's wrist before they can crawl to the passenger side of the car. "Don't," you say sternly. "Stay in the car and put your seatbelt back on."

"Mom, they can't do this!" they blurt out, looking at you with wide, tearful eyes.

"Sweetie, please," you murmur, because you can't handle this right now. You can't try and deal with Frisk and this disaster at the same time.

"What is the meaning of this!" Mettaton cries out, jerking his arm out of the soldier's grasp. Another human is approaching him and Papyrus, reaching for something at his waist. "You can't keep them out, they've been here since before this damn checkpoint was even built! How dare you!"

"HOPE, I DON'T LIKE THIS!" Papyrus says, and he looks afraid. You plead with Jacobs with your eyes but he seems uninterested. "WHY ARE THEY SEPARATING US?"

"Get moving!" one of the men barks at the monsters, but neither of them budge. His hand settles on a holster on his waist.

Jacobs lets out an aggravated sigh. "If they don't listen, then—"

"Wait!" you blurt out, reaching for your door handle. "Let me talk to them. Don't hurt them."

He gives you an appraising look, mulling this over for a moment before giving you a sharp nod. The second he takes a step back from your car you rush out and hurry over to the metal arm gate blocking your path.
"Sir?" one of the soldiers on the other side asks, looking to Jacobs.

"Give them a moment," Jacobs says.

No longer held back, Papyrus and Mettaton close the distance to you with long strides. You and Papyrus grab each other's arms, and Mettaton reaches for your shoulder. This feels like a goodbye, and you try your hardest to fight back the tears stinging your eyes.

"Don't fight them. Just go home okay?" you say, looking from one set of eyes to the other.
"Papyrus, you—"

"THIS ISN'T RIGHT!"

"Darling, they can't do this!"

"Papyrus," you say again, tightening your grip on his arm and giving him a serious look. You can't fall apart right now. You can't. You can't. "Don't let Sans do anything stupid. Tell him to call me when you get home, I can't—" You swallow past the lump in your throat, blinking back tears and fighting them down. Not now. "Sans can't be alone when he finds out."

"BUT WHAT ABOUT YOU?" Papyrus blurts out, shaking his head.

"We'll make sure," Mettaton says gently, and you give him an appreciative nod. His lips twitch in a poor attempt at a reassuring smile.

"Okay, that's long enough. If the two of you don't comply, we'll have no choice but to use force," Jacobs says, coming up alongside you.

You give Papyrus and Mettaton one last desperate look, grabbing the robot's hand and squeezing them both. "This isn't— I—" Any reassurances you might make die on your lips. You have no idea what's going to happen. To you, or to them. "Take care of Sans."

You have to shake them both off of you because they won't let you go, and it's enough to tear at your heart, to nearly send you into a fit of crying. But you can't. Not yet. You still have to figure out what to do. You still have Frisk back in the car, relying on you to keep them safe.

You turn away because you can't bear to watch Papyrus and Mettaton be led away from you, flanked by soldiers whose hands are resting on their weapons. Jacobs gives you another smile that doesn't touch his eyes.

"Thank you for your help. It would have been... unfortunate if there had been an incident," he says smoothly. You grit your teeth at the unbidden urge to punch him. "Let me escort you off the mountain, make sure you get to where you need to go safely."

"I don't need an escort," you say, balling your hands into fists at your side.

"I insist," he says, and there's something in his expression that lets you know he won't hear any argument.

You're also sure, suddenly, that he's not doing this out of the kindness of his heart.

"I need to... I need to call someone first. Make sure I have a place we can go," you say.

"That's fine," he says, leading you back to your car. There's something unsettling about his smile. He gestures to a military jeep parked off to the side of the road. "I'll be right behind you whenever
you're ready."

You sit back down behind the steering wheel, shutting your door and rolling the window back up. Checking the rear view mirror, Frisk is watching you, scared and quiet as they press their fingers to their mouth.

"When was the last time you Saved?" you ask them quietly. Maybe, if you can go back even just an hour, you can call Sans. Figure out something you can do.

They look away, their eyes swimming with tears. "I don't remember," they mumble, shaking their head. "I can... I can just Load anyway, Mom we can't—"

"No!" you blurt out, and their eyes dart back up to the mirror. "No, not unless you know it's been less than two hours. I can't... Frisk, I can't. We'll just have to figure something out."

They go quiet as you pull out your phone, wracking your brain for someone outside the Line that you could go to. The first person you think of is Kim, but no. You'd rather live in your damn car than speak to her ever again. That's not an option. There's Irene, your old boss, but... You can't get her mixed up in this. You don't even have her number, you'd have to drive up to the restaurant and hope that she's working. And Jacobs would be following you the whole way.

As you pull up your contacts, which isn't exactly a very extensive list, you bite your lip. "Sweetie, I know you don't want to meet Chris, but I need to see if we can stay with him while we figure things out."

"What? Mom, no—"

"Frisk," you say, silencing them. "We don't have a lot of options."

When they don't say anything else, falling into sullen silence, you hit the call button. It rings three times, and for a moment you're worried he's not going to pick up. Is he working? Please, please just answer the phone...

"Hello?" His voice is hesitant, uncertain.

"Chris," you say, thankful that at least this is going right. You cast an anxious glance towards the jeep where Jacobs is sitting, watching you. "Are you home right now?"

"Uh, yeah?"

"I need..." Your voice breaks, and you draw in a shaky breath. Squeezing your eyes shut, you tell yourself, over and over, not to cry.

"What's going on? Are you okay?" he asks, worried and urgent.

"Chris, I need your help," you manage to say, rubbing your face and forcing your eyes back open.

"Sure. I said I'd help. What do you need?"

"I need a place for Frisk and I to stay. I don't know for how long, but they've... They closed the Line and they're not letting us go home." You're trembling, clutching the steering wheel with one hand to try and steady yourself.

"I, uh, shit, I mean..." Chris says, and there's a moment of hesitation on the other line. "Hope, my place isn't exactly... Fuck it, yeah, of course. Let me give you my address, you can put it into your
phone? I'm still shit with directions."

You let out a weak laugh, pulling your phone away from your ear and putting him on speaker. "Okay, yeah, give it to me. And thank you."

Chris gives you his address and you set it in your map application, pulling up a way to get there. He's about twenty minutes away, down in the foothills. You don't recognize the neighborhood where his apartment complex is, but you think it's in a poorer part of town. Before you set down your phone in the cupholder next to you, you call Deacon, putting it on speaker.

Frisk is still quiet in the backseat, staring out the window as the phone rings. You're feeling a little steadier, the adrenaline is keeping you alert and numb, at least for now. As you shift the car into reverse so you can turn around, you hear Jacobs's jeep start up.

The line picks up. "Hey," Deacon says, sounding a little subdued.

"Are you still in Ebott?" you ask, glancing back at the jeep following you down the mountain road.

"Yeah. To be honest, I haven't even called Grant yet, I'm really not looking forward to that—"

"You can't leave," you blurt out. "I don't know if they'll even let you, but you can't leave Ebott."

"What? What's going on?"

"The soldiers closed the Line. They let Papyrus and Mettaton back in but they're keeping Frisk and I out. Do you think that the Vi—"

"Stop," Deacon snaps, sharp and urgent, startling you. "Don't... don't say anything that you don't want to be overheard." There's a muffled curse, and you can hear him draw in a slow, hissing breath. "If they're shutting the Line down, then I can only guess... They might be tapping phones. Especially ours. There's got to be a reason that they'd do this now."

"Jacobs, he's the new captain, isn't he?"

"Yeah."

"He's following me. I think... Deacon, I need you to help Papyrus and Mettaton keep Sans from doing something stupid. He can't try to come get me. He can't give them a reason to do anything to him," you say, fear twisting in the pit of your stomach.

"I think they're past needing a reason," he sighs. "But, I... Hope, I'm the last person he's going to want to be around right now. Especially... Sans is going to lose his goddamn mind."

"I know. Which is why I need you there just in case," you say gently.

There's a moment of silence, where you think he understands what you're trying to say. That if anyone can stop Sans from lashing out, at least for a little while, it's Deacon. "It's not like he can be any madder at me right now, I guess," he mutters, resigned. "Yeah, okay. So I'm guessing you haven't told Sans yet?"

"No, I... I told Papyrus to have him call me when he got back to the house. You should call him, see if the soldiers are making them walk back home. They just..." you trail off, clenching your jaw. "They just ordered them out of the car and forced them to leave us on the other side of the Line."

"Hope, I'm so sorry," he says, and the regret in his voice is enough to make your throat tight.
"Not right now," you say, choking on the words. "I'm driving, I need to focus."

"Right, okay," he says, hissing out a breath. "Look, we're going to... We're going to get through this. All of us. What are you doing now? Where are you going?"

"We're going to stay with Chris. I know you don't like him, but..."

"Who gives a shit about that, as long as the two of you are safe, that's fine," Deacon mutters, letting out an aggravated sigh. "I'm just... if you didn't have anywhere else to go, I'd say that I could convince Grant, but this is better. Trust me, staying away from him and... If they're watching you, this is better. Just sit tight with Chris until this gets sorted out."

"Okay, I'm... I should go. You need to call Papyrus," you say, swallowing hard. "Deacon... thank you."

"You don't need to thank me," he says firmly. "You're my best friend, and I'll do whatever I can to help you. Okay? It's the very least I can do after everything you've done for me."

"Okay," you breathe. You feel just a little better, knowing that Deacon is there. A weak smile curves your mouth. "Just... I love you."

"I love you too, but don't you start getting all sentimental on me," he says, and you let out a weak laugh. "This isn't... Don't give up, okay?"

"Okay."

"We'll take care of Sans, and everyone will be back together before you know it."

"...Okay."

There's a pause. "Goddamn it," he whispers, and you think you hear his voice break. Your vision blurs for a second before you blink back the tears, hard. "All right. I'm hanging up now. We'll talk again soon."

"We will," you say, and there's a moment where the call continues, the faint background noise filling the quiet car. Then, after a few seconds, you hear Deacon hang up the call.

The only sound left aside from the low drone of road noise is the soft sniffling of Frisk crying in the back seat.
Sans still hasn't called you by the time you pull up in front of Chris's apartment. He's in the middle of a squat, dingy building, right in the center of the complex. His shiny BMW looks incredibly out of place. The asphalt of the parking lot is pitted and the painted lines marking spaces is worn off in spots and faded in others. As you get out of the car you can hear the traffic from the freeway, despite the cement wall meant to minimize the noise. The huge, beige wall looms over the apartments.

Jacobs doesn't get out of his jeep, which is a small mercy. He pulls up behind your car, catches your eye as you help Frisk out of the backseat, and gives you a nod while he waits. You grit your teeth and do your best to ignore him.

Frisk clutches your hand, keeping close to your side as you walk up the cracked sidewalk to Chris's door. They don't say anything; don't argue, don't ask you any questions, don't make any sound. It worries you more than if they were angry. When you glance down to check on them their eyes are hidden behind their bangs, but they sniffle and scrub their face with the sleeve of their jacket.

"This is just for right now," you murmur, squeezing their hand. You might not have been able to lie to Papyrus and Mettaton, to say that everything was going to be okay when you had no way of knowing if that was true. But for Frisk, you can manage it. "This isn't going to be forever, and we'll be back with your dad soon."

"He promised that he wouldn't let them take us away," Frisk says. Their voice is hollow, emotionless, and it tears you up inside. Hasn't Frisk been through enough? Haven't you all been through enough?

"I know, baby. Give him and the others time. I'm sure they'll think of something," you say, willing yourself to believe it too. But your platitudes ring false, and you're not sure that Frisk is comforted. You're not sure that you are either. "Asgore won't let this go on for long, I'm sure of it."

They don't answer.

As you knock on the door you glance over your shoulder in time to see Jacobs pulling away. Well, now he knows where you'll be staying. He must have a reason for wanting to follow you, and you suspect this is part of it. A chill runs down your spine.

You already feel jittery from the adrenaline, anxious and hyper aware of your surroundings. So when the door opens with the loud crack of a too-snug fitting being forced apart, you can't help but jump a little. Chris is standing there, gray eyes darting from you down to Frisk, and for a second his mouth twitches into a half-smile and he goes to say something. But then he looks at you again and his smile disappears. Frisk's grip on you tightens and they duck behind your leg.

"I'm sorry," you mumble, and you're not even sure what you're sorry for. For showing up with barely any notice, for Frisk not wanting to be here at all, for being so miserably unhappy that even
Chris can feel it. Because whatever Chris had planned for his Sunday evening, you can't imagine it included dealing with... this.

He tucks his hair behind his ear, some strands getting caught on the silver rings of his piercings. "It's fine. Come on in," he says, taking a step back and jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "It's, uh... It's small, but you're more than welcome for as long as you need."

Chris's apartment is... he wasn't kidding. It's a tiny studio, with a cramped kitchenette and only one door which you imagine leads to the bathroom. There's a tiny loft with a crawl space that's literally just big enough for a mattress without a frame, with a steep ladder that leads up to it. A small TV is set against one wall with a ratty old couch across from it, and there's a basket of folded laundry sitting on the floor. You don't see a dresser anywhere, is that where he keeps his clothes? Two guitars rest off to the side, next to an amp. At least it looks clean.

"Sorry," Chris mumbles, and you hear the sound of him forcing the door closed and the scrape of the deadbolt. "It's not much, but it beats sleeping on Eric's couch. That place was a fu— uh, a pigsty."

Frisk skirts around you, keeping your body between them and Chris as he shifts past you and into the center of the room. He looks at the two of you uncertainly, fiddling with the barbell through his eyebrow as uncomfortable silence fills the apartment. You're not sure what to say or do. You feel caught in limbo, waiting for Sans to call you so that the other shoe can finally drop. How is he going to react? You're certain that he shouldn't be alone for the news, but will he really try and lash out?

With their face buried in your side, you rest your hand on Frisk's head. At the very least you know that this needs to be dealt with. Right now, it's all you can do. "Sweetie, c'mon now," you murmur, carding your fingers through their hair (Chris's straight brown hair).

"No," they mumble, muffled by you.

"Frisk—"

"I want my dad!" Frisk yells, jerking away from you and glaring up at you with tears slipping down their cheeks. "I don't want to be here! You said he didn't want us."

You raise a hand to your chest, clutching at your locket. "I don't want to be here! You said he didn't want us."

You stroke their back, smoothing their hair, letting them know you're there. After a moment you glance up at Chris.

He's standing there, watching the two of you, his lips parted and his expression twisted into something helpless and desperate. Like he wants to do something to help, but he knows it's not his place. You catch his eye and shake your head. He closes his mouth and turns away, a pained look on his face.
It takes a couple minutes, but soon Frisk relents. They crawl, sniffing, into your lap, resting their head on your shoulder and draping their arms around your neck. Still running your fingers through their hair, you rock gently back and forth, holding them close. It reminds you of when they were smaller. When the worst problem could be solved by a hug and some soothing words. That feels so damn long ago now.

"I wanna go home," they whimper.

"Me too, sweetie," you say, and as you close your eyes, swallowing back the lump rising in your throat, your phone starts to ring.

Sans is sitting at the kitchen bar, doing his best to ignore his phone as he keeps Toriel company. She and Asriel came over about an hour ago, hoping to talk to you about Deacon, and she was never very good at sitting idle. So to keep herself occupied she's doing what she does best: making pies. His phone is sitting on the granite counter in front of him, the screen dark. You haven't texted him once since leaving the house, and he hasn't texted you.

You don't want to talk to him. You're angry, and beneath the layers of frustration he knows you have every reason to be. He'd reacted out of fear, kept reacting out of fear, and then when he'd slowly realized that Deacon wasn't a threat he'd soldiered on through sheer stubbornness. It's the dissonance, fucking with his head and setting him on edge. Now that he's been away from Deacon, away from that nagging feeling, it's easier to see that he should have listened. Normally he was so much more patient and clear-headed. He doesn't like how this thing between their Souls is affecting him.

But at least he has a name for that uneasiness. A clear explanation that's, to be perfectly honest, not Deacon's fault. You were right; they had been becoming friends, despite it. But that just made this whole thing worse, this deception. To put so much effort into trusting him, only to find out that he was a mage. A mage of all damn things. The one thing that monster kind had hoped they'd never have to deal with again. Now he has to reconcile these two Deacons in his mind. Your best friend, the man that was thrust unwillingly into his life six months ago, and this... mage spy. He admitted to spying. Maybe not for malicious reasons, but... The Deacon he thought he knew never existed.

...Besides, would Deacon ever be able to look at him the same again?

"Sans?"

He snaps to attention at the sound of Toriel's voice, and the frustrated look on her face tells him that he'd missed something. "sorry tori," he says, giving her a lazy grin. He raps on the side of his skull, making a hollow sound. "being a bit of an air head."

"You do not have to pretend for my sake, my friend," she says gently, giving him a sympathetic look. "I understand if you do not wish to speak of what is bothering you, though I can only assume that it is the obvious... But you do not have to smile if you are unhappy."

Sans looks back down at his phone, his smile slipping a little. "s'ok. just habit, i guess," he says. He hadn't wanted to talk about his fight with you, still doesn't want to. "i'm sure it'll be fine."

"It will be," she agrees with a reassuring smile. "She will forgive you."

He arches a brow. "how'd you know i was worried about hope?"

Toriel gives him an indulgent look, which just makes him feel... young. Young and naive. He
supposes, compared to her, he is. "Because she is not here with you. I cannot imagine that you would be separate from her right now, with this revelation, unless she was still cross with you."

"hey, hope and i aren't always together," he says, a little too defensively.

She lets out a soft laugh. "I apologize, am I getting under your skin?"

That earns her a weak chuckle, which seems to please her. But as he's about to answer he hears the sound of the front door opening. Turning in his seat, he looks towards the foyer as Asriel appears from the living room. He looks expectant, then confused, which is odd.

"OH. UH. YOUR HIGHNESS!" Papyrus blurts out from out of sight, sounding nervous. That's odd too. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? NOT THAT YOU'RE UNWELCOME! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AM ALWAYS HAPPY TO SEE YOU!"

Sans slides off his seat, making his way towards the front door. He's greeted by the sight of Papyrus and Mettaton crowded in front of the door, Asriel frowning at them as he cranes his head to try and look around them. And towards the back, still halfway on the front porch, is—

"what's deacon doing here?" he asks sharply, casting his brother an annoyed look. Then, after a pause, he looks back at Deacon, at the miserable look on his face, and all at once he feels dread start to prickle at the base of his neck. "where's... where's hope?"

There's a moment of silence as Papyrus looks down at the floor, wringing his hands. Even Mettaton looks upset, distraught over something.

Sans lets out a clipped, tense laugh, though it's the last thing he feels like doing. "look, i know she's mad at me. but did she really need to send you to come get me to apologize?" he says, staring at Deacon as he latches on to the first reasonable explanation that he can find. He scrabbles for it, clings to it tightly. His voice sounds too high. "is she... is she really that mad?"

Papyrus's eye sockets start brimming with tears, and that makes Sans more scared than anything. He can only watch as his brother crosses the room, resting a hand on his shoulder. From the corner of his eye he sees Deacon slip out from behind Mettaton, tensing. Tensing for what? And why is his brother about to cry?

Where are you?

"THEY WOULDN'T LET THEM IN," Papyrus blurts out. "WHEN WE GOT TO THE CHECKPOINT THEY LET ME AND METTATON THROUGH BUT THEY TOLD HOPE THEY HAD TO LEAVE. SHE'S STUCK ON THE OTHER SIDE!"

Papyrus's grip on him tightens. He's aware of Mettaton and Deacon watching him, waiting for something. What are they waiting for?

"W-what do you mean they're stuck on the other side?" Asriel asks, his voice trembling. "Mom, what does that mean?"

He hears Toriel say something to her son, and then he starts to cry. He's crying, and he's angry, repeating something about a promise. "Frisk promised we'd always be together!" he wails, and Tori starts making soft shushing sounds and leads him back into the living room.

The others are still staring at him.

He realizes that the thing that they were waiting for, what they were watching for, is him. Sans
looks up at Papyrus, and he feels...

Numb.

"i'll go get them," he says quietly, and Deacon takes a jerky step forward, raising his hands.

"You can't," Deacon says, and Sans gives him an odd look.

"of course i can. they can't stop me." His voice is flat. "it's a gate, not a barrier."

"If you teleport past the Line and bring them back, they'll know. They followed her and Frisk off the mountain, they're probably watching her. Anything any of you do right now can be used against you," he says, pleading with him. "You can't."

"...no," Sans says, shaking his head.

"There was nothing we could do," Mettaton says.

The three of them are talking to him, explaining what happened. He hears it, understands it, and the weight of realization bears down on his back, crushing the air from nonexistent lungs. They're trapped behind the Line, his wife and child separated from him. Just like last time. They don't need magic to cage us anymore.

"Sans," Deacon says, and it doesn't sound like it was the first time. Somewhere during their talk he'd stopped listening. What was the point? "Hope wanted you to call her after we told you."

"you... you already talked to her?" he asks. His hands are shaking. Why are his hands shaking?

The look Deacon's giving him is strange. He doesn't like it, like there's something on his face. Reaching up to rub his cheekbone, he's startled to realize he's crying. He wonders when that started.

"Yeah," Deacon says carefully, fidgeting with his bracelet. His muscles are tense, like he's still waiting for something. "She wanted to make sure you didn't do anything stupid. Don't make me have to stop you."

"why would i do anything?" he asks, and it hits him. All of it. It's crippling, the crushing weight of realizing that you're on the other side of this new Barrier. That he's lost both of you. He shudders, a soft, manic laugh escaping him. "i can't do anything. i might as well just give up, right?"

"SANS!" Papyrus exclaims, gripping both of his shoulders and forcing him to look at him. "NOW IS NOT THE TIME TO GIVE UP! YOUR FAMILY NEEDS YOU!"

"you heard him. i can't do anything."

"YOU—! YOU LAZYBONES! I'M NOT SURE YET WHAT WE CAN DO, BUT STANDING THERE AND NOT EVEN TRYING ISN'T HELPING!"

"what am i supposed to do?" He feels exhausted. Defeated. It feels as though he's spent a year fighting back against a universe determined to take the two of you away from him. And it had succeeded.

"You can help me," Deacon blurts out, catching Sans's eye. He clenches his jaw, realization on his face.

"why the hell would i want to do that?" Sans snaps, frowning.
"Oh, are you finally back to your senses?" he presses, arching a brow. "Good, because you were pretty damn useless there a second ago."

Sans bristles. "pal, if you think you can come in here and start talking to me like that—"

"Like what? Telling the truth instead of coddling you?" Deacon takes a step forward, and anger stirs in Sans's ribcage.

"my wife is trapped outside the line."

"My best friend is trapped outside the Line," he echoes.

"WHY ARE YOU TWO—" Papyrus starts, but Mettaton shushes him, pulling him aside. Good, get him out of the way so Sans can show this fucking mage just who he's dealing with.

"i just lost my family. i understand that you don't get what that's like—"

Deacon flinches, but he shakes it off. "Yes! You lost them both."

"you son of a bitch, what the hell—"

Your best friend is smiling. It's strange enough to give Sans pause, staring at him and trying to figure out why he's giving him that weird, satisfied smile.

"Do you still feel like giving up?" Deacon asks quietly.

Sans blinks. After a second he rubs his face with his sleeve, gritting his teeth. "son of a bitch," he says again, weaker this time.

"Right back at you. Sunk pretty low there with that jab about family," he counters, pressing his lips into a thin line. "Call your wife. Then we can talk about how we're going to fix this."
Sans is calling you.

For a moment you feel a twist of apprehension, of dread. It's not a feeling you want to associate with your husband, but it's there. Frisk leans back as you fish your phone out of your pocket, sitting in your lap and watching you with an unreadable expression. They've pulled back a little into their shell, waiting to see what you're going to do.

You wish you knew.

Your hands are trembling as you answer the call, holding it up to your ear. Frisk shifts a bit closer so they can listen too. "Sans," you breathe, your heart squeezing painfully tight in your chest.

"hey babe," he says. He sounds... drained. His voice is a little raspy. "you and frisk get to chris's ok?"

"Yeah," you say. You brush Frisk's bangs out of their face, tucking hair behind their ear. "Did Deacon tell you?"

"yeah. he, uh..." Sans trails off, and for a moment you can hear some muffled voices in the background. You can't make out what anyone is saying but you're glad he's not alone. "he also said he thinks somebody, the military or whatever, might be listening to our calls."

"Did he tell you that they followed me? They know where we're staying," you say, and you hear Chris let out a soft, alarmed noise. Glancing up at him, he walks over to the single window in his apartment, next to the front door, and he peeks through the blinds. "Chris, he already left."

"he told me," Sans says. "you... you guys need to be careful. i can't..." He hesitates, letting out a harsh sigh. You squeeze your eyes shut as your throattightens. "i can't be there to protect you and it's fucking killing me, hope."

You can't hold it back any more. Your steadfast resolve, the stubborn determination keeping your tears at bay finally succumbs and you bury your face in your hand and let out a choked sob. "This is my fault," you blurt out, distantly aware of Frisk hugging themselves against your chest as you're shaking. "If we hadn't left this wouldn't have happened!"

"babe—"

"I was so stupid." Tears pour unchecked down your cheeks. You ruined everything. If you hadn't been so selfish, so bitter, you'd be home right now. You took Frisk away from their father, forced them to meet Chris against their will... You're worthless, and you should have known you'd screw this up. "I'm s-sorry, Sans if I had just—"

"don't you dare blame yourself," Sans says, cutting you off harshly. "none of that shit is true and you had no way of knowing they'd do this. asgore's trying to get a hold of somebody but tori says
no one is giving him any answers. mettaton's keeping an eye on the news but nobody's even reported that the line is closed yet. we... babe, it seems like they did this *just* to keep you and frisk out."

"B-but why?"

"dunno." He lets out a slow breath, and something about it helps steady you.

"You're being so calm," you mumble, and you're met with a humorless laugh.

"no, i'm not. you..." He hesitates. "i'm sorry that you couldn't trust me to handle the news properly, but you made the right call."

"I'm sorry. After what happened with Deacon..." Sniffling, you rub your face with the back of your hand. Frisk is still clinging to you tightly. "I couldn't let anything else bad happen. Did he... did you...?"

"we're ok. right now everybody's just trying to figure out a way to help."

"I love you," you blurt out, another sob breaking loose.

"i love you too, babe," he says, and everything inside of you aches for him. You want to be home, you want him to hold you in his arms and tell you that everything is going to be okay. You don't want to be here in this tiny apartment without anyone to lean on. "i'd rather have you two home, angry at me for being a huge jerk, than stuck out there."

Your lips twitch with the tiniest smile, huffing out a weak laugh. "If you want, I can still be angry at you for being a huge jerk."

That gets you a soft chuckle, which eases away a little bit of the pain. If you can still make him laugh, you hope that means he's going to be okay. You're worried about him. "whatever you want, babe," he says gently. "just... don't give up. don't let the bad shit swallow you whole."

There's something about the way he says it that makes you want to ask him why he said that. It sobers you, helps you dry your tears. But before you can say anything, Frisk sits up and gestures for the phone, giving you a questioning look. "Hun, I think Frisk wants to talk to you."

"ok."

You pass the phone to Frisk and they slide off your lap as they hold it close to their head with both hands. "Dad?"

"hey kiddo," you can hear faintly, before you push yourself to your feet. "how you holding up?"

They make a noncommittal noise and stand in the corner with their back to the rest of the room. Rubbing your eyes with the heels of your hands, you scrub at your face as you try to pull yourself back together. Chris is standing off to the side, looking uncomfortable and out of place. You feel guilty for that too.

"Sorry," you say, walking over towards him.

His eyebrows shoot up as he looks at you, then gives a too-vigorous shake of his head. "No way, don't worry about it!" he says quickly, somehow looking even *more* uncomfortable. He shoves his hands in his front pockets, hunching forward a little and wincing. "I just... wish there was more I could do. I don't like seeing you guys unhappy."
"You're doing more than enough, just letting us stay here." You glance around the apartment again, at the ratty couch and the single bed up in the tiny loft space. You try to feel grateful, but instead you're just disheartened. How are you going to make this work?

"I was, uh, thinking you and Frisk could take my bed, and I'll sleep on the couch," he says, shrugging his broad shoulders. When you open your mouth to protest he shakes his head. "Really, it's the best way to stop anyone from ending up on the floor. It's not like there's a whole bunch of options."

"Okay," you agree, weakly.

"Have you eaten yet?"

You shake your head. You were going to have dinner with your family, and now, despite the hollow feeling in your stomach, you don't have much of an appetite.

"I don't really have much in here," he admits, turning towards his tiny kitchenette. There's a sink, a microwave, and an ancient oven with coil burners. A dingy refrigerator is stuffed into the corner. Chris opens a cabinet. "I can't really cook and... I can make you guys some ramen?"

Your heart gives a painful lurch, though you know it's silly. Lots of people eat ramen, but it's so strongly linked to your memories of Deacon you can't help but hurt. Not only are you cut off from Sans, but you're cut off from your best friend too. All of your friends are trapped in Ebott with no way in or out, and the realization settles like an iron ball in your gut. Blinking back a fresh wave of tears, you sniffle and hug yourself.

"What do you normally eat?" you ask, your voice threatening to betray you.

Chris glances over his shoulder, then closes the cabinet and goes back to you. The look on his face is equal parts apology and concern. "I'm sorry," he says, pushing his hair out of his face. "It's bad enough that you're stuck here, but I can't even offer you anything better than fucking ramen."

Cringing, catching himself too late, he glances over your shoulder to where Frisk is standing. "Shit — shoot, I mean... I'm sorry!"

You give him a weak, wry smile. "It's fine," you say. You think they've been hearing a lot of that kind of language the last few days. "I mean, try to cut back, but..." You sigh. "It's fine."

"Okay, okay sure," he mumbles, clearing his throat. "Uh, to answer your question; I normally just pick up something. I tried doing the groceries thing for a while but with just me half the sh — stuff just ended up going bad."

"I need to go to the store anyway. If we're going to be here for a few days at least" —you're not sure if that's optimistic or pessimistic at this point— "Frisk and I need clothes, toiletries... I can run by the grocery store tomorrow, too."

"Do you need money?" he asks, and there's a bit of hesitation there. Judging from his apartment, you can't imagine he has much to spare. But he's still offering it to you.

"I've got some cash," you say, shaking your head. Not much, but enough for this. You carried cash with you at all times, since you and Sans were hesitant to trust a bank with your money. Not a human bank, anyway. But now that means you're stuck with literally what you've got on your person, and in your car.

"Mom?"
You turn at the sound of Frisk's voice and they hold up your phone for you, holding theirs in their other hand. "They wanna talk to you more. I'm gonna call Asriel," they say, and their mood seems to have improved. Their cheeks are red and their eyes are puffy —you imagine you look much the same— but they give you a tentative smile.

"Okay sweetie," you say, taking your phone and holding it up to your ear. "Hello?"

Deacon glances over at Toriel as she talks to you on Sans's phone, giving you heartfelt reassurances and comfort. He runs his hand through his hair, shaking his head and walking back into the foyer, away from everyone as they stick together in the living room.

He's lost without you here. This space, this house, he only ever came here because you were here. But now you aren't, and he's not sure what to do with himself. He just knows that he needs to do something to get you back. And in order to do that, he needs help. As much as he hates to admit it, he can't do this alone.

"so," Sans says, coming up alongside him. He keeps a healthy distance between the two of them, giving him a wary look. "you said something about helping you. back when..."

Back when he'd shut down. When he'd scared Deacon more than if he'd just responded in outrage, because he'd been prepared for outrage. For an instant call to action. Not... resignation. Not for giving up. He'd said he'd never give up, even while trapped inside of Deacon's magic, but this had broken something inside of Sans. He watched as it happened. He never thought he'd see Sans so weak, but for a moment he had. When he told him that he'd been 'fucked up' when he first met you, he hadn't believed it.

Deacon thinks he caught a glimpse of what Sans was like before you came into his life.

"Yeah. I need your help," Deacon says, sighing. "I have to talk to the Literatum, but I can't exactly do that over the phone."

"oh, so now you wanna let me in on the big secrets?" he asks, but even the venom in his voice feels weak.

"Yeah. All the big secrets," he drawls, rolling his eyes. "The moon landing was faked, margarine doesn't taste as good as real butter, soylent green is people."

Sans just squints at him, gritting his teeth.

He sighs again. "It's stupid, probably dangerous, but with your help I think we can meet up with the Literatum."

"and how are we gonna do that?"

"You and I are going to teleport past the Line."
Deacon's plan isn't as immediate as Sans was hoping. Instead of being able to do anything now, he's stuck waiting. Deacon said he'd have to call Grant and get the message across to him for a meeting using some kind of secret code. Figures that some stuck up mage organization would have goddamn codewords (he stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that right now those codewords might just save their asses a lot of trouble).

For the time being they agree not to tell anyone what they're planning. Not until they have a better idea of what to expect from the Literatum.

So Deacon heads back to Bo's for the evening, Toriel takes Asriel home after making sure that Sans will be all right without her (she gives him a lingering hug, telling him to call her if he needs anything whatsoever), and Mettaton chooses to stay. Not that he's much company, he spends the majority of the evening making calls with his staff and his director. With the Line closed, he's lost access not only to his movie shoot, but also to about a quarter of his employees. To his credit, Mettaton manages to keep his selfish whining to a minimum when Sans is in earshot, but he's definitely feeling the pinch.

And Papyrus... Papyrus is hovering. He's making a good show of trying not to seem like he's hovering, but it's exactly what he's doing. Offering to make him spaghetti, suggesting movies, doing his best to make jokes, his brother is pulling out all the stops to try and keep him distracted. Like he's afraid of what might happen if he lets Sans stay still for too long.

Finally, after the third suggestion of food, he catches Papyrus by the arm as he starts flitting anxiously towards the fridge. "bro, stop. all this nervous energy is just making my bones buzz," he says, giving him a weak grin.

"I'M JUST WORRIED." He claps his hand over Sans's, an unsettled look on his face. Nervous sweat dots the side of his skull and his brow creases.

"hope and frisk have somewhere to stay, they'll be ok—"

"I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT THEM! I MEAN, I AM, BUT..." Papyrus trails off, holding Sans's gaze with an intensity that's not unfamiliar, but strange at the same time. "SANS, I'M WORRIED ABOUT YOU."

Sans gives a strained laugh. "you don't need to worry about me. i'm not the one stuck out there."

"I KNOW THAT YOU'RE UPSET, BUT YOU CAN'T LOCK YOURSELF IN YOUR ROOM THIS TIME. YOU CAN'T..." Papyrus looks down at the ground, his teeth snapping shut as he tries to find the words. Sans's smile slips by just a fraction, and the hand holding his brother's arm falls back to his side. For a moment they just stand in silence. "YOU CAN'T LEAVE AGAIN."

"i didn't go anywhere, pap. i've always been here with you."
Papyrus shakes his head. "YOU WERE HERE A LITTLE WHEN WE MOVED TO SNOWDIN, BUT YOU DIDN'T COME BACK UNTIL HOPE AND FRISK STARTED LIVING WITH US."
He meets Sans's eyes again, and he's just not used to seeing his younger brother look so sad. "WHEREVER YOU WENT WHEN WE WERE STILL IN THE CAPITAL... YOU ALMOST WENT BACK THERE. I SAW IT."

"bro—"

He's cut off by a sudden hug, pulled tight with his face crushed into Papyrus's ribcage. After a second he wraps his arms around his brother, hugging him back and letting out a heavy sigh. "PROMISE ME YOU WON'T GO BACK TO THAT PLACE. STAY HERE!"

"ok, ok... i promise," he says, smiling weakly though Papyrus can't see it. "i'll be right here, with the coolest guy i know."

"Y—YOUR FLATTERY IS UNNECESSARY BUT APPRECIATED." Papyrus pulls away, taking quick swipes at his eye sockets with the backs of his hands. "JUST BE SURE TO KEEP YOUR PROMISE OR I'LL... I'LL... BE FORCED TO ASK DEACON FOR HELP! METTATON INFORMED ME THAT HE PLAYED A CLEVER TRICK TO GET YOU TO SNAP OUT OF IT, AND WHILE I AM FOND OF JAPES, I'M AFRAID I CAN'T BE MEAN TO YOU, EVEN IN JEST."

"i guess that's jest as well. you don't have a mean bone in your body."

"I SUPPOSE I SHOULD BE GLAD THAT YOU'RE FEELING WELL ENOUGH TO RESORT TO YOUR AWFUL PUNS," he says, a disgusted look on his face. Sans just grins at him.

"mettaton's the one with the resort. i just visit sometimes."

"UGH."

Sans feels guilty enough about worrying Papyrus that he finally accepts the offers of food and distraction. It seems to make his brother feel better, which is good enough for him. As the hour gets later, he tries not to think about how right now he'd be talking Frisk into going to bed. How they'd try to wheedle him into reading a bedtime story and how, depending on the night, he'd try to get out of it so he could spend just a little bit longer with you.

He sees Papyrus start to nod off on the couch, the glances that Mettaton makes towards the clock. Normally his brother would be in bed by now, but... he suspects he's staying up to keep him company. Sans is tired, though he knows he won't be able to sleep, but he feigns a yawn and forces himself to his feet.

"i should get to bed," Sans says, making a show of it as he shuffles off towards the stairs. "s'getting late."

"MMM— HUH? OH, WHAT?" Papyrus blurts out, jerking upright after he started to slump to the side. "OH! YES, OF COURSE! IT IS LATE, ISN'T IT? I BARELY NOTICED!"

"see you two in the morning."

"Oh," Mettaton says softly, and when Sans glances back at the two of them the robot is giving Papyrus a surprised look. His voice is quiet as he asks, "Do you... want me to stay? I understand if you'd rather I go."

"YOU SHOULD STAY. I... HAVE AN OUTLET IN MY ROOM YOU CAN USE WHILE YOU
Sans doesn't hear the rest of the conversation as he heads upstairs. Mettaton hasn't ever stayed the night at their house before, both of them preferring the robot's apartment at the hotel instead. Which is fine, he understands the appeal of privacy. It's not something that he'd been afforded much with you, at least at first.

At least both of them won't be alone tonight.

It's dark. It's especially dark in the cramped loft where Chris's bed is, with just enough room to sit up. Frisk dragged you to bed early, equal parts tired and wanting to get away from Chris, you think. They made a point to ignore him all evening, refusing to look at or speak to him. Any other day you would have scolded them for their behavior, but you just didn't have the energy. Besides, you can't blame them for being upset.

They fell asleep with their head pillowed on your shoulder, but after about thirty minutes they rolled away to sprawl out better. You wish you could fall asleep so easily. You're exhausted but sleep refuses to take you. Rolling onto your side to try and hide the glow of your phone, you check it. Not quite midnight, no new messages. Not since you told Sans you and Frisk were going to bed. You wonder if he's able to sleep.

Probably not.

The bed smells like Chris. You remember hearing something about smell being especially good at triggering memories, and you suppose it must be true, because you can't help the wave of nostalgia that hits you. Cuddled up to him at lunch during school, his arm around your shoulder, sharing your food. Your friends (his friends, really) would tease the two of you but he'd just ignore them. You can almost feel the heat of the sun against your hair, the metal lunch table bench pressing against your legs.

Then there's the more intimate memories. Mornings spent skipping school, ducking back to your mom's house when you knew she'd be at work all day or catching a ride with Eric to go down to the beach or the park. Hours spent roaming the city... or roaming each other. You skipped school a lot your freshman year.

The gentle sound of an unplugged electric guitar being played —quiet strumming, the soft scrape of fingers over strings— reaches your ears, and for a moment you wonder if it's just part of your memories. But no, it's real. Chris must still be up. Suddenly frustrated with your inability to sleep, you sit up and crawl towards the ladder.

When you're halfway down, the music stops. "Sorry, was I bothering you?"

Bare feet hit hard, short carpet —the kind that they put in stores and schools; durable with hardly any padding— and you cross your arms self-consciously over your chest. You shake your head, feeling hyper aware of the fact that you're wearing one of Chris's t-shirts and a pair of flannel pajama pants. Fourteen-year-old Hope would be beside herself to be in your position right now. But you just feel uncomfortable and uncertain.

"Can't sleep?" you ask him.

He's sitting on the floor by the window with the blinds cracked open, just enough to let the orange light from the parking lot lights to filter in. Shifting the guitar in his lap, he's only wearing one of his other pairs of flannel pants, not bothering with a shirt. There's a patch of dark hair in the center
of his chest, and a thin trail down his stomach.

He barely looks like the boy you remember, like this. His piercings catch the light as he tucks his hair behind his ear. "Nah, it's just... early for me? Normally I'm up for a few more hours."

You hug yourself tighter, walking over to him so you don't have to whisper across the room. "Sorry, I guess we're really throwing you off, aren't we?"

He flashes you a reassuring smile, setting his guitar to the side and hoisting himself to his feet. "It's fine, really. You don't have to keep apologizing." Hunching his shoulders and fidgeting with his eyebrow piercing, he glances over at the front door. "Do you, uh, wanna go outside? So we don't have to whisper."

You hesitate for a second, then nod. His mouth twitches into another smile and he nods back, skirting around you to carefully pry the door open. With a little more time spent navigating the pressure against the frame, he's able to get it open without making too much noise. Chris leaves it cracked as you both step outside.

The steady drone of the freeway is quieter, but accompanied by the buzz of insects and the parking lot lights. Glancing up at one, there's a trio of moths fluttering around the foggy glass. The night air is brisk, but not as cold as it is up on the mountain. Here in the foothills, it's warmer. It smells like asphalt and car exhaust. You miss the scent of pine and wood.

A sudden, muffled yell from somewhere nearby makes you jump, and Chris casts an anxious look your way. "You okay?"

"You didn't...?" Gritting your teeth, you shake your head. "Sorry, I'm just... It's been over a year since I've been away from Ebott overnight. It's not... it's loud down here."

"Oh, yeah," he says, casting an embarrassed look around the apartment complex. "Never would have expected you to end up in a dump like this," you murmur, and he lets out a humorless laugh.

"Shit. Yeah, me neither," he agrees. He rubs his arms, glancing up at the sky. There's barely any stars that you can see, thanks to all the lights.

"Are you safe here? I mean, this place... Sorry, I'm being rude."

"Do you not feel safe?" he asks you, looking at you again.

You feel your cheeks flush with embarrassment, but you shake your head. "Not really. I'm just... I'm used to being around monsters. They don't hurt each other like humans do."

"I have to go to work tomorrow. Are you two going to be okay here, or do you want to come with me?"

You give him a surprised look. "Oh, I mean, we have to go shopping. So it's not like we're going to be here all day. But, um, where do you work?"

"Zane's. You know, that music store down the road?" Chris jerks his thumb over his shoulder. "Oh, yeah! We used to go there, for—"

"Strings and sheet music," Chris finishes, chuckling. "I remember you used to spend hours looking
through books for the cheesiest fucking love songs to try and get me to play them for you."

"And you would," you press, feeling yourself start to smile, "so long as Eric wasn't with us."

"Well yeah. I couldn't, like, look like a wuss in front of Eric. I'd never hear the damn end of it. He was more than happy to help us ditch school so we could—" He cuts himself off, cringing a little and shaking his head. "Uh, nevermind."

The reminiscent, amiable air that had settled between the two of you turns awkward, thanks to Chris's near slip into things best left unsaid. You both feel it, the weird tension lingering there. You can't deny that you used to be a couple, that you'd loved him what feels like ages ago.

But that doesn't mean you need to talk about it. Not the intimate parts, anyway.

"I should probably try to get to sleep," you mumble, tucking your hair behind your ear.

Chris nods too quickly, pushing the door open for you and yanking his arm back to give you space. "Yeah. You've had a long day and stuff. You should sleep."

You don't look back at him as he follows you inside, and shuts and locks the door. Frisk is still sound asleep where you left them when you climb back into bed, the smell of the night air clinging to your borrowed clothes. As you lay down and close your eyes, you focus your attention inward. To the soft, high note of your Soul and the deep, steady rumble accompanying it. It's like listening to air filling your lungs; unnoticeable until you think about it. It helps you ignore the constant drone of the city outside, of the quiet sound of Chris plucking at his guitar again, the too-familiar smell of the pillow under your head.

You focus on that bit of Sans that's always with you, and as you're lost in the comforting feel of it, you somehow drift off to sleep.
Getting out of the house to go to Deacon's is trickier than he thought it would be. Papyrus is still hovering, plying him with a hot breakfast and rambling on about plans for the day. Sans has to bite back a sigh of relief when you call him around midmorning and he can escape to the other room just to talk.

The conversation is brief, and he wishes he could talk to you about what he and Deacon have planned, but at the same time he's worried you wouldn't approve. As angry and frustrated as you sound on the phone with the whole situation, he thinks you'd tell him he was being too risky. Well, he is, but that doesn't mean he shouldn't do it. Someone has to do something, and right now... he doesn't have much else to lose.

Glancing at the clock, Sans grimaces. "babe, i gotta let you go here in a sec," he says, and he feels guilty for the disappointed sound that elicits from you. "i know. but you said you had some shopping to do, and i, uh, told deacon i'd see him today."

"Oh," you say, sounding surprised and a little wary. "I... that's good, right? Are you two getting along?"

"you could say that," he says, rubbing the back of his skull. "s'better than ignoring each other, right?"

"Did you apologize to him yet?"

He hesitates. "no... not yet."

You make a disapproving noise and he lets out a harried sigh. "Well I guess I'll let you do that, then," you say. "I love you, hun. I'll talk to you later."

"i love you too, babe. be safe, ok?"

"You too."

After he gets off the phone he goes to tell Papyrus that he's going out for a while, and instead of the worried fretting he expects, his brother surprises him by responding with enthusiasm. (In retrospect this shouldn't have been that surprising.) So long as he's not moping around the house, Papyrus seems pleased. He catches fragments of a conversation between him and Mettaton, and gets the impression that while he's gone they'll be going to the hotel to help out. Hopefully that means that they won't notice however long he's gone.

He teleports over to Deacon's front porch and raps on the door. Sans can only assume he was waiting, because it only takes a second for it to open and your friend lets him inside. There's a paper map spread out on the coffee table, but he barely gets a look at it before Deacon holds out his hand.
He curls his fingers in a beckoning gesture. "Give me your phone," he says.

Sans arches a brow. "why?" he asks, even as he reaches into his pocket.

Deacon takes the phone from his hand and sets it on the table by the door, then leads him over to the map. "GPS. We can't take our phones with us, in case they're able to use them to track us. So as far as the military is concerned, we're just... hanging out."

"hm," Sans grunts, shoving his hands in his jacket pockets and walking over towards the table. "so what's the plan?"

He takes another look at Sans, scanning him quickly from head to toe. "At least you listened and wore pants. And shoes," he says, frowning a little. "But couldn't you wear something nicer than sweatpants?"

"no."

"You're going to meet a group of mages, who have no idea you're coming because I couldn't exactly tell them... and you're fine with their first impression being sweatpants," Deacon says flatly.

"yep," he says, his grin widening almost imperceptibly.

Deacon lets out a frustrated groan, shaking his head and sitting down on the couch. He hunches over the map, ready to get on to business. "Fine. Whatever. We're meeting at a house here," he says, pointing to a small neighborhood. He meets Sans's eyes again. "It belongs to Morwenna, our leader. So just... try to be respectful."

"so long as she does the same."

"Can you teleport to a place you've never been before?"

"yeah. i can manage. it'll take a couple hops though, can't exactly go in one jump. s'too far," he says, crouching down to get a better look at the map.

"Then we'll need to figure out pit stops within your range," Deacon grumbles, running a hand through his hair. "Just... keep your hood up while we're traveling. If anybody sees us they'll just think you're some weird, fat kid."

"'scuse me?" he says, resisting the urge to grit his teeth.

The look on Deacon's face is borderline smug as he looks up at him. "In case you hadn't noticed, you're a little short for a stormtrooper."

Sans snorts despite himself. "jackass. didn't know you liked star wars," he mutters.

"Everyone likes Star Wars," he says, and that smug look has softened into something almost friendly. "Now come on, we have to figure this crap out in the next half-hour. We've got a small window of opportunity where most of the Literatum in the area will be available. I don't want to miss it."

It takes the entire half-hour to decide on the route to take, because Sans isn't familiar with the area and Deacon has trouble remembering which places have alleys with good cover. And he doesn't want to just use the internet to check interactive maps online just in case anyone is monitoring that too. Once they've finally agreed on where they're going, Deacon stands up and
circles the coffee table to go stand next to Sans.

There's an awkward moment where they just look at each other.

"So... for this whole teleporting thing," Deacon says, drawing out the words as he fishes for some kind of answer.

Sans rolls his eyes, then reaches out and grabs his wrist. "this'll probably feel weird. but deal with it. you don't have much of a choice."

His brow furrows, he opens his mouth to protest or maybe ask a question, but Sans doesn't give him the chance. He tightens his grip on Deacon's arm and pulls them both into the space between.

When they reemerge a moment later in the forest near the Line, Deacon stumbles a little and lets out a sharp gasp. "What the fuck!" he hisses, rounding on Sans, wide-eyed. "Give a guy some goddamn warning!"

"you done whining? we got like, four more trips," Sans says, grinning a little wider than strictly necessary.

Deacon glares at him, taking a steadying breath and shifting on his feet. He rubs his stomach with his free hand, swallowing.

"you better not throw up. hope and frisk never threw up."

"I'm not going to throw up," he snaps, grimacing.

"ok. then lets keep moving."

Deacon is silent for the next three jumps, clenching his jaw and going a little rigid, but he doesn't complain. Sans had started out small with you, short teleports within line of sight at first. Hell, he doesn't even think you'd even really noticed the first few times. But these long trips are a lot more jarring, even to him. As they appear in the middle of a dark alleyway behind a big warehouse store Sans takes a second to take stock of Deacon.

He looks a little pale against the dark fabric of his shirt, eyes darting to take in their surroundings. So far they'd been lucky; the only person they'd seen so far was a homeless man who was asleep in the shadow of a dumpster. But he can't blame Deacon for being jumpy. Between the fear of getting caught, the nerves of bringing Sans to meet his fellow mages, and the disorientation of teleporting, he'd be surprised if Deacon wasn't on edge.

"you ok?" Sans asks.

Deacon twitches a little at the question, looking at him. "Peachy," he mutters. "One more?"

"yeah. right into the house."

"Not my ideal choice for first impressions, but what the hell. It's not like this can be much worse," he says with a sigh. "Once more unto the breach."

"huh?"

Deacon blinks, giving him an incredulous look. "Shakespeare? I mean, I know you literally lived under a rock, but come on."

"ok, i know who shakespeare is, no need to get all shaken up," he says, chuckling at the annoyed
look on Deacon's face.

"Let's do this, we shouldn't just sit here," he says, rolling his eyes.

"ok. last one."

Sans pulls them through again, and when they reappear they're in the middle of a living room. For a split second he's aware of a handful of humans crying out in surprise, then there's a yell and a faint orange glow as someone lunges forward.

"Shit!" Deacon hisses, jerking his arm free of Sans's grip and holding up his hands. A green shield springs to life in front of them, and that orange streak crashes into it and rebounds off. "Maria, what the hell?"

"Deacon?" There's a woman there, dressed in a button-up blouse and a pencil skirt with heels. Wide, dark eyes peer through the translucent green, and as Deacon's magic fades she shakes the wisps of orange off her hands and relaxes her fists. She eases out of her fighter's crouch.

"Yes, Deacon," he retorts. "Jesus, you scared the shit out of me."

"We've talked about this, Jesús is my brother," she says, and now that she's talking more Sans can hear the slight accent to her words. He pushes his hood back down and the movement seems to catch her attention. Her eyes go wide again, shock plain on her face as she brings her hands in front of her. "Mierda. You brought—"

"What have you done?"

A loud, stern voice cuts through the room, and everyone's attention goes to the speaker. He's the biggest person there, arms crossed over a barrel chest as a heavy frown settles over his brow. He's older, with deep lines that disappear into his beard, which is graying almost as much as his dark hair.

"Grant, he already knows," Deacon says, wincing as he shifts himself to stand almost defensively in front of Sans.

"I knew you weren't cut out for this," the man says, his frown twisting with disgust. Oh, so this is the asshole that adopted Deacon. The one you both seem to hate so much. He can see why. "I should have forced you back home the second we found out about all your frivolous attachments. This is—"

"Bailey." Next to Grant is a severe-looking woman with short orange hair, and to Sans's amusement she's wearing a pair of loose exercise pants and a tank top. Maybe his sweatpants aren't so unusual after all. She casts a grim look at the man twice her size, resting her hands on her hips. "Now is not the time."

Grant presses his mouth into a stern line, but doesn't protest. At least not verbally. His gaze is hard as he watches the woman approach Sans and Deacon.

She gives them an appraising look, catching Sans's eye and holding it with a steady resolve that he can't help but respect. It's almost a little familiar, which is strange.

"'sup?" Sans says, and he sees a glint of amusement in her eye.

Deacon groans. "Sans, this is Morwenna. Morwenna, this is Sans."
Morwenna nods, holding out her hand. Oh, that's a pleasant surprise. Sans pulls a hand out of his pocket to shake hers, giving her a friendly smile. "so this is the big, fancy mage clubhouse?" he asks, casting a glance around the room. Maria has settled into a chair at a table, legs crossed at the knee, foot bouncing with nervous energy. There's one other man, a police officer, quietly observing from his spot leaning against a bare patch of wall near the door. The name badge on his chest says 'Min'. "neat."

"Sans, I swear to god..." Deacon mutters.

Morwenna's mouth twitches, and she takes her hand back before turning to face Deacon. "We weren't sure how you were going to get here. I suppose I shouldn't have discredited the idea of other magical means. This situation with the Line closing is... troubling, to say the least."

"Whoever is behind it —the Vigilum or the military, or both— I think they did it specifically to keep Hope and Frisk out." Deacon balls his hand into a fist at his side. "There was no warning, no explanation—"

"Supposedly there's a quarantine." Min, the police officer, is soft-spoken but everyone turns when he speaks. He looks at Sans, then at Deacon, his hand going to the walkie talkie on his shoulder as he pushes away from the wall to join the others. "That's what we were told down at the station, anyway. We were just talking about it before you got here."

"a quarantine for what?" Sans asks, eyes narrowing.

"You may have helped sneak Deacon here, but I don't see why we need to involve any outsiders in this matter," Grant cuts in. He casts a sideways look at Morwenna, who meets his eyes for a second in silence.

"He's not an outsider." Deacon's voice is clipped. Tense. Everything about his stance is defensive.

"And like it or not, he is involved. All of the monsters are involved!"

Grant rolls his eyes. "This again."

"Yes, this again!" he snaps. "We suspected that the Vigilum were behind the shift with the news and we did nothing. You ignored the fact that it was just making the harassment of monsters worse, because it 'wasn't our problem'."

"You're too much of a bleeding heart."

"Now the monsters are trapped in Ebott like prisoners, again. They're having their freedom stripped away, and you're just... sitting here! I mean, this isn't even everyone. This is just whoever wasn't at work." Deacon's lip curls with disgust and frustration. He points at Maria, who's stealing a glance at her cell phone. "She's probably on her lunch break, Howard is working... Morwenna's dressed for classes later. We're the only ones outside of the Vigilum that have any idea what might be going on, and we're not doing anything to help."

"Our duty isn't to help. You knew that when we sent you to Ebott in the first place," Grant says. No one else is speaking. This struggle feels strictly between the two of them.

"You sent me there to observe. To gather intel to decide if we needed to act," he says, squaring his shoulders. "Well I'm telling you we need to act and all you want to do is just do what you've always done! Sit on your asses and just hope for the best! They need our help! Not later. Now!"

"Is that how you fumbled our biggest secret? By acting?" Grant snaps, and Deacon flinches, just barely. But it's enough that the other man can see. His smile is grim. "How many of them
know? Did you just tell them, or did you do something foolish?"

"I couldn't just stand there and watch two kids die when I could help," he snarls.

Grant arches a brow. "That's strange, you didn't have a problem doing that before."

The room was already silent, save for the two of them, but it feels deathly still now. Sans bites back the obvious question, eyes narrowing as he watches Deacon pale and swallow, the tendons in his neck tensing in sharp relief from his throat.

"You never gave me a choice," Deacon says, his voice canted low.

"You always had a choice. But if you had acted against my orders you would have placed all our lives at risk," Grant says, still insufferably calm. His eyes narrow as he regards Deacon. "Just like you're doing now."

"You bastard!" Deacon pulls back his fist, takes a step forward—

There's a red blur and Morwenna is standing between them, muted crimson magic ghosting off her skin for just a moment before it fades. A red mage? Sans's curiosity is piqued by the apparent self-applied time magic, making herself speed up from what he can guess. It was so localized that he didn't even feel any difference in time.

"Stuart, stand down," she says calmly. When he tries to duck around her she snatches up his arm and twists it behind his back in a move reminiscent of the training he did with Undyne. Deacon lets out a soft grunt of pain, refusing to take his eyes off of Grant. "Deacon Isaac Stuart, you will stand down and let me handle this."

"Just do as she says, man," Howard says. When Sans glances over at him he's got his thumbs hooked into the laden belt around his waist.

"What's gotten into you, Deacon?" Maria asks, surprised.

"Min, Mendez, no commentary necessary from the peanut gallery," Morwenna says, fixing them both with a stern look. Maria shrugs her shoulders and slumps back in her chair, picking up her cell phone again. Howard shakes his head and shifts uncomfortably on his feet.

"I told you he was too young for this," Grant says, looking at Morwenna. "He let himself get attached, his entire outlook on the situation is compromised—"

"Grant, shut up," she snaps, letting go of Deacon's arm. The blonde gives her an appreciative look, rubbing his shoulder as she turns to face Grant. "Deacon's right, we do need to do something. Because the Vigilum are behind the situation with the Line. This Captain Jacobs you told us about last week?"

Morwenna looks at Deacon again, who nods in acknowledgment.

"He's part of the Vigilum."
"if you'd already decided you needed to finally do something about all this shit, then why did you even let this argument happen?" Sans fixes Morwenna with a hard look, his grin rigid.

But she isn't paying attention to him. Her focus is on Grant. His frown deepens before he speaks. "The Vigilum are always going to be meddling in something. It's not our responsibility—"

"Coward," Deacon snaps, ignoring the sharp exhale from Morwenna as she glances at him.

"You're being too emotional, son," he counters. "And call me whatever you like, I'm being practical."

"'Practical'? To let the monsters be antagonized, pushed to the breaking point and caged just so that you don't have to dirty your damn hands?" He balls his hand into a fist, and Sans wonders if he's going to try and punch him again. "You'll be just as guilty of whatever the Vigilum decide to do. We can make the difference, but you'd rather sit back and just let it happen. Choosing not to act is just as bad as if you were doing this yourself."

"I know you feel guilty about what happened to that little boy—"

"Don't—"

"But trying to champion this fool's cause won't change what's been done." Grant lets out an impatient sigh as Morwenna places a restraining hand on Deacon's shoulder.

"Don't fucking talk to me about that kid." Deacon is shaking, from rage or grief he's not sure. Maybe both. "This has nothing to do with him. This is about helping the monsters."

Grant clenches his jaw, jabbing a finger in Deacon's direction. "The last time the Literatum got directly involved with the Vigilum we lost good people. Right now our priority needs to be finding new mages and preserving what we have, not risking our lives."

"Coward!" Deacon snaps again. "What's the point in preserving anything if we won't fucking use it to make things better?"

"There are no heroes like in those books of yours. This isn't fantasy. This is real life, and good and evil doesn't exist."

Sans has seen enough. "shit, you were right deacon. you guys aren't the mages we needed to be worried about. this is just sad."

"Quién es este pedazo de mierda arrogante?" Maria mutters, drumming her nails on the table beside her. He isn't sure what she said, but he gets the feeling it wasn't very polite.

That's fine. He's not feeling particularly polite either.
"Excuse me?" Morwenna asks, arching a brow and crossing her arms over her chest.

"you're the leader, right?" Sans asks, holding her gaze. "do you normally let your people duke it out during your super secret mage meetings? or is this just for my benefit?"

Deacon winces, tearing his attention away from Grant. "Sans, you're not helping."

"i think we established that nobody really feels like helping," he continues, looking at Grant. The big human gives him an unimpressed look, which seems to just be his resting expression. What is this guy's problem, anyway? "my wife and kid are stuck out here because of all this mage bullshit. you may not think it's your problem, that it's not personal enough for you to get involved, but it's personal to me. and it's personal to deacon. the only reason i even bothered to come here —to risk getting caught— is because of my family. so if none of you feel like helping? just come out and say it so we can stop wasting everyone's time. you can tell us what you know and we'll figure something out ourselves."

"I already said that we should do something to help," Morwenna says, pressing her lips into a thin line. As Sans gets a good look at her, at the serious look on her face, he can see the fine lines at the corners of her eyes and around her mouth. She's older than he first thought, maybe close to Grant's age.

Grant makes a noise of disapproval. "Mors, maybe you don't remember the last time we went toe to toe with the Vigilum, but—"

"Don't you call me that," Morwenna snaps, eyes flashing as she whirls on him. "And I remember. You'd do well to stop bringing up the past to try and fight your battles for you. This behavior is beneath you, Bailey."

"They almost killed you," Grant says, gentler this time.

"Well they didn't," she says icily. "And you've made your opinion clear, I'd like to hear from Min and Mendez."

Maria Mendez glances from Morwenna to Deacon, putting her cell phone down and granting them her full attention. "I say we help. I don't know what's gotten into you since you went to Ebott," she says, eyes fixed on Deacon. "But you're right, enough sitting on our hands. What's the point in having magic if we never use it?"

Morwenna nods, then glances over at Howard. "Min? What about you?"

"You said that this Jacobs guy is in with the Vigilum. What do we know? What information do we actually have?" he asks, shifting to lean back against the wall again.

"Edward Jacobs is a non-magical member of the Vigilum, from a prominent family within their ranks," she says. As she starts to speak, Grant turns and goes to sit down on the couch. With a healthy distance between them, Deacon shifts into a more comfortable stance at Sans's side. He feels a little bit of that old camaraderie, standing here with him in a sort of unified front. "Ingram couldn't be here, but she's working hard on gathering more information. Unfortunately, all we know right now is that we're certain that Jacobs is part of the Vigilum, and we have to assume that he's following their orders."

"But the National Guard answers to the governor. He wouldn't be able to do anything without Governor Williams's express permission," Howard says, rubbing his chin.

"Right. Which means that he might be getting bribed. Ingram is trying to figure out the exact
situation, because that's going to determine what we can do."

"So for now we wait," he says.

"For now we wait," Morwenna echoes back.

"fuck waiting," Sans blurts out, grinding his teeth. "i can't just leave hope and frisk out here. deacon, we came here to get them some help."

"What exactly did you think we'd be able to do?" Morwenna asks, giving him a curious look.

"something. with your fancy latin name i thought you'd be more... shit, more anything." He makes a vague gesture around the room, at the gathered mages. "this isn't a... a cabal of mages. this is just a handful of humans. you've got the schoolteacher, the cop, the coach, the... businesswoman?"

"Secretary," Maria supplies, looking at her phone again. "Secretary that's going to be late getting back from lunch if I don't leave soon."

"I'll save you the trouble of guessing what Grant is. He's a social worker," Deacon mutters.

"you're kidding? that sounds like the punchline to a shitty joke."

Deacon shakes his head, and Grant rolls his eyes from his spot on the couch. "Are you finished?"

Grant asks.

Sans lets out a sigh, disappointment sitting heavy on his shoulders. "the word 'mage' used to mean something to us. i guess we should be glad that this pathetic show is all you could muster. how something like the barrier was ever within your power is beyond me."

"Hey," Deacon warns, frowning. But before he can continue Morwenna clears her throat.

"That's a fair assessment," she says evenly, ignoring the perturbed looks on the other mages' faces. "The Literatum used to be a respectable organization. But there's been fewer and fewer mages, and right now, this is all we've got. We want to help you get your family back, to stop what the Vigilum are planning. But we can't charge in blindly. We don't even know where to charge. We have our suspicions, but we can't reveal ourselves too soon or we don't stand a chance."

It makes sense. Sans hates it, but it makes damn good sense. He just thought... he hoped that this trip to meet these people would give him a sense of direction. Something to hold onto and plan for. Not more 'wait and see'. Frowning, he shoves his hands back into his pockets.

"As soon as we know more, we'll get in touch with Deacon. Arrange another meeting," she says, stern but... kind. He can tell she's sorry she can't offer more.

Sans grunts in acknowledgment, but doesn't say anything.

"Thanks, Morwenna," Deacon says, running his hand through his hair.

She smiles at him, the first real smile he's seen on her face this whole time. "For what it's worth, I appreciate this new passion you've found. It's good to see you standing up for yourself and what you believe in."

Deacon flushes a little, ducking his head. "Uh, thanks," he says again. "I didn't think you would. Grant said that you guys were... disappointed in me. Because of my, ah, relationships."

"We had our concerns, which you must admit weren't unfounded," she says, raising an eyebrow.
He cringes a little, glancing down at the floor. "Do all the monsters know, now?"

As Deacon explains to Morwenna what happened, Sans hears movement behind him. He turns to look back at Howard, who raises a hand to beckon him over. For a second he hesitates, but walks over to stand beside him.

"Need something, pal?" he asks.

Howard Min is just a little shorter than Deacon, but roughly the same sort of build. He assumes, at least, under all that bulk of the police uniform. He's been pretty quiet this whole time, mostly just interjecting to ask questions, and never once did he raise his voice or put much emotion into his words. They regard each other for a moment, and Howard gives a small nod.

"You said your wife and kid are out here in the city?" he asks.

Sans nods. "Yeah, they're staying with someone. Why?"

"With all this radio silence, must be hard not to be able to tell her what's really going on," he says, straightening his uniform. "If you want, I can take a message to her for you."

A small flutter of hope beats in his ribcage, only to get squashed back down. "I dunno the address."

His mouth twists into a half-hearted grin. "I'm a cop. Who's she staying with? I'm sure I can find them."

"Oh, right. Uh, his name is Chris. Christopher Osborne, I think she said." He feels that dangerous optimism again.

"Hmm. Got anything else to help me narrow it down? Chris is a pretty common name."

"He's... twenty-two? White."

"He drives a black beemer," Deacon interjects, glancing over his shoulder. "And looks like a tool."

Howard chuckles, pointing at Deacon. "Thanks, man." He returns his attention to Sans. "That should be good enough. Anything in particular you want me to tell her?"

There's so much he wants to tell you. To tell Frisk. And he doesn't want Howard to ask him any questions. He mulls this over for a second. "Can you give her a letter? Is that okay?"

"Sure. I think I can manage that."

Chris gives you the spare key to his apartment before he leaves around nine to go to work. There's an awkward moment where he mentions never having anyone to give the other key to, and then he hurries out the door before it can sink in just how pathetic that is.

Frisk should be in school today. You should be in school today. You're sure that Toriel let Leveretta know where you and Frisk are, but you can't imagine that the kids won't be worried. And Asriel... Poor Asriel must be just as miserable as Frisk is. They whine about not being able to go home, not being able to go to school, not having any clean clothes, not wanting to take a shower in Chris's cramped bathroom... It's enough to drive you crazy.

You call Sans around midmorning, to check in with him.

Finally, as you're getting dressed to head out and do some shopping, you've had enough. They're
sitting on the floor, pretending like they don't know how to tie their shoes, when you kneel on the floor in front of them, grab their laces, and fix them with a hard look.

"You need to stop this right now," you say, in that 'mom voice' you've perfected over the last year. "We have been through worse than this, and all this whining you're doing? You never did anything like this in the Underground. You're too tough, smart, and clever to be acting like a spoiled brat. Do you understand me?"

Frisk just stares at you, wide-eyed, as you yank their shoelaces just shy of too-tight. Then, as you hold their gaze, they bite their lip and give you a small nod. "Yes, Mom."

"Yes, what?"

"I'm sorry. I'm not helping, am I?" they ask in a small voice.

You let out a soft sigh, forcing yourself to give them a smile. "No, you're not. I know you're upset, we both are, and I need you on my side. Sweetie, we're all we've got right now."

"I know..." They lean forward and get to work tying their other shoe without the feigned ignorance they were doing before. You push yourself to your feet as they finish.

"Okay. Then lets go shopping."

It's a little jarring, shopping on a budget again. You realize just how spoiled you were, having access to all that money after the monster gold was converted into cash. The trip itself is unremarkable, and no one even seems to recognize you. It takes you a couple hours to pick up clothes for three days, as well as groceries for what you hope will last about a week. It takes you longer than normal because you have to check all the prices, and try to think of meals you can make with the cash on hand.

When all is said and done you only have about twenty dollars left. If you stay much longer than a week, Chris is going to have to pay for food.

Frisk is in a better mood the rest of the day. You find an old video game system tucked away in a box beside the television, back from when you and Chris were in high school, you think, and get it set up for them. They make a face when they see the jagged, low resolution graphics, but after a few minutes they start to enjoy themselves. You're cooking dinner when Chris gets home at six-thirty.

Glancing over your shoulder while you sauté some chicken and potatoes, Chris's eyes seem to light up at the sight of you. You feel a little embarrassed as he grins. "Oh man," he blurs out, shoving the door closed with his foot. "Oh man, that smells amazing."

You laugh, turning back to the stove and shrugging your shoulders. "It's nothing."

"It's not. Thanks for cooking!" he says. As you're about to answer, he starts talking again. "Oh nice, you found my old games. Are you... uh, you having fun?"

You expect silence as his only response. But, it seems, you can still be surprised. "Yeah. I mean, it's not as cool as my games back home, but this is okay."

When you turn to look at the two of them, Chris looks beside himself with happiness. He crouches down beside Frisk where they're sitting on the floor, tucking his hair behind his ear so he can glance over at them. "Oh for sure. Like, these games are older than you are. But I used to spend hours playing this, so if you get stuck or anything, just lemme know, okay?"
Frisk seems to consider this for a moment, then looks over at him. Seeing them right next to each other, it makes all those features that they share stand out even more. They really take after him, and it makes something in your chest feel uncomfortably tight. Sans is their father, there's no denying that. But Chris... Chris is still part of them.

Frisk bites their lip, then unfolds their legs and shifts onto their knees. They bring up a map screen in the game, and point at something. "I can't figure out how to get there. I don't have any keys and the door is locked."

With an eagerness that's bordering on overzealousness, Chris lets himself fall back into a sitting position and starts to unlace his shoes. "Okay, let me see where you've already gone..."

They spend the time while you're finishing up dinner focused on the game, and when you're done you bring them plates and join them on the floor. They pause it, but don't shut it off. You guess they'll be playing more of it after you eat. You're just glad that they're finally getting along.

Mid-bite, Chris makes a muffled noise of exclamation, shoving his hand into his pocket and pulling something out as he tries to swallow. "Almost forgot! Here," he says, holding it out to you.

It's a small, black cylinder decorated with pink skulls and crossbones, attached by the base to a carabiner clip. You recognize some kind of nozzle at the top. He waves it at you when you don't immediately take it.

"I mentioned that you were staying with me to this girl at work, Ruth. She told me to give you this. It's mace spray," he says, looking pleased with himself. "The, uh, decorations were already there. I swear that wasn't me."

You finally reach out and take it from him, turning it over in your hand. In tiny print, on the side, is instructions. "What's this for?"

"You said you didn't feel safe. I figured it might help," he says, his expression dimming a little.

"Oh," you say, gripping the spray a little tighter. You give him a small smile. "I... thanks, Chris. That was... really thoughtful of you."

His smile widens a little and he nods. After a second, as he glances down at his food with a thoughtful look on his face. "Oh, so, I was checking the news at work. They briefly mentioned Ebott, about the Line closing. It's weird, because they didn't spend much time on it. Just said that there was some kind of quarantine? Which, from what you told me, sounds like a lie. And they didn't even mention you at all. You'd think after all the time they spent ragging on you that they'd want to report on you being 'free' or whatever."

Chris starts eating again, and doesn't notice the way you're staring at your plate, frowning. It is strange. Why would they go out of their way to just ignore you? Were they waiting? Well, as far as you know, no one outside of the military and the citizens of Ebott know what happened to you, so you suppose the normal reporters wouldn't know. But if the Vigilum were behind the surge of negative press, and probably behind the situation at the Line —not that Chris knows anything about the Vigilum or mages...

But if they'd been so adamant about smearing your name in the news before, then why are they being so quiet now?
Deacon is quiet when they get back to his house. Sans lets go of his arm the second they appear in the living room, shoving his hands back in his pockets and lowering his hood. He was hoping to come back to Ebott with answers, with a plan. Instead he's empty-handed, the only revelations being Jacobs's ties to the Vigilium and the fact that the Literatum are one huge disappointment.

He's not content to just sit and wait. Not anymore. But it seems he's stuck doing just that, for now at least.

What was the Literatum like before? They must have been at least a little more proactive if they'd had some kind of conflict with the Vigilum. At least one bad enough to lose people... Sans can tell that Grant and Morwenna have some kind of history, and he wonders what happened there.

Sans and Deacon look at each other, something uncertain hanging in the air between them on the other side of this little adventure. He wonders if this would be a good time to apologize. He was wrong. It's obvious that he was wrong. Deacon had stood up for him to people he'd known a hell of a lot longer than him, had every reason to like more than him. He'd almost punched Grant for refusing to back down to get the help they needed to bring you and Frisk home. He'd alienated himself from these other mages because he'd made a place for himself on Ebott, with you and Bo. Maybe they couldn't see it yet, but Sans could; Deacon didn't see himself as one of them anymore.

(He'd tried to ruin that for him. He'd been so quick to cast judgment, and he was wrong.)

But the words catch between his ribs. Some stubborn part of him still clings to the fact that he lied to him, to everyone. That part doesn't care that he had a good reason, that it wasn't personal. All the bitterness and annoyance and frustration, his lack of patience... How much of it is really him, and how much is the dissonance fucking with his head? He'd been able to ignore it before. He should be able to do it again. Having a name for it should make it easier.

Is it defeatist of him to just accept that they're not meant to be friends? That their Souls just aren't content to share the same space?

...Hadn't he stopped letting the universe try to boss him around?

“hey, i—”

“About that kid—”

They both stop, letting silence reclaim the room.

Sans watches Deacon’s jaw work, and whatever sudden resolve he might have had to just blurt out the apology has left him. “go ahead,” he says. “what were you gonna say?”

Deacon’s pale eyes fall to the floor as he rubs the back of his neck, shrugging his shoulders and looking ashamed all of a sudden. He lets out a haggard sigh. “That kid, the little boy Grant…” His
hand clenches into a fist at his side. “The one he brought up. I assumed you were going to ask about what happened.”

He’d actually forgotten, in the mess of everything else. Sans had been more concerned with his letter to you and wondering about the Literatum. But he can see that it’s weighing heavy on Deacon. So instead of denying it, he just nods.

“It was… Look, I was young, I was scared, and I didn’t…” He shakes his head. “I did as I was told. And that son of a bitch has the gall to tell me I had a choice? I never had a choice with him. I was—”

Deacon cuts himself off, forcing himself to relax and take in a slow breath. Sans counts five seconds.

“You don’t have to—”

“This would be easier if Hope was here,” he says, and the rawness of his words silences Sans. Because, yes, a lot of things would be easier of you were here. “I keep expecting you to jump down my throat.”

“Just say what you gotta say.”

Deacon nods and crosses his arms over his chest. “Yeah. Okay. Sure. Long story short, this kid in our neighborhood got run over by a car. This lady was backing out of her garage and couldn’t see him on his bike. You hear stories like that every once in awhile, big tragedy, stuff like that. The two of us —me and Grant— we heard a commotion outside, some lady yelling to call an ambulance.” He hesitates. “I should have stayed inside like Grant suggested, but he didn’t stop me so I went.”

Sans can only watch Deacon as he talks, sees the moment his attention isn’t quite here in the room anymore. His eyes are off in the middle distance, and the muscles in his shoulders tense.

“There’s a few people standing in this lady’s driveway, and on the ground is this kid. This little boy I recognized from down the road. It’s… it’s fucking awful, what a car can do to a body that small, it’s…” He blinks, shakes his head, rubs his eyes but still doesn’t look at Sans. “He was still breathing when Grant and I got there. I could have healed him. At least enough to buy him some time, for the ambulance to get there. But he told me I couldn’t. I’d always been told that I couldn’t use my magic in front of anyone because it was too dangerous. And I was young and scared and didn’t think I could disobey him. So I just sat and watched as this kid died right in front of me, knowing I could have done something to help.”

Sans isn’t sure what to say. What can he say?

Deacon shrugs his shoulders, like he’s trying to shake off the memories. He gives Sans a weary smile. “So yeah. Now you know my other deep dark secret I guess. I watched a little kid die when I could have stopped it.” How many times had Sans watched Frisk die? How many times had he just not cared enough to help them? He’d been too far gone, too lost to muster up the effort. Because nothing he did ever changed the outcome. He’d carry that guilt for the rest of his life, but Frisk is still here. Deacon’s pain is permanent. “Maybe. I mean, I might have just made it worse, but—”

“How old were you?”

His expression falters, like he wasn’t expecting the question. “What’s it matter? Old enough to know better.”
“just tell me,” he says, gritting his teeth.

“...Sixteen,” he admits.

Sans bristles. “grant’s a fucking asshole, putting all that responsibility on your shoulders like that. you were a kid. s’not your fault.”

“It’s complicated. The whole thing with Grant is... it’s complicated,” he sighs.

“once this is over, once we deal with this mage bullshit, i wouldn’t blame you if you just cut ties with them,” he says, indignant on Deacon’s behalf despite himself.

“The others aren’t so bad,” Deacon says, which is a weak defense. “They’re just... People. With their own lives. Morwenna and Grant take it a lot more seriously. And Vanessa. Vanessa Ingram, Morwenna mentioned her. She’s our ‘spy’. They actually wanted to send her here to Ebott, but she didn’t have the best way in. And she’s better at the really covert stuff. But Howard and Maria are just people. They had lives before Morwenna and Grant found them, unlike me.”

Deacon shakes his head, laughing weakly. “God, you don’t care about this shit,” he says, fixing Sans with an amused look. “You don’t care that I’m just as disappointed with the Literatum as you are. That when Grant came to me, when I was twelve and had read way too many books, and told me that I was special ... That shit, maybe the stories I’d been reading were right. That I could be something .” His expression sours. “But he never let me be anything. He wasn’t even going to let me get a degree in teaching, I had to convince him to let me do that. Had to reason with him that it would make it easier for me to find magic in the kids so we could keep an eye on them until they were older.”

“deacon.”

“You should probably just go,” he says, running his hand through his hair. “Sorry, I just dumped all this shit on you. I’m not... I’m not your friend. Hope’s my friend and she’s not here.”

“does bo know about all this?” he asks gently.

Deacon gives him an odd look, taken aback. “I... no. It never came up.”

“you should talk to her. tell her everything you told me.”

“Look, I get that you didn’t really want to hear all of that, but just brushing me off is a little rude, don’t you think?” he grumbles, frowning.

Sans rolls his eyes, frustration bubbling beneath the surface. “i’m not brushing you off, you ass. i’m saying that you should go talk to your goddamn girlfriend, because she wants to be there for you. and we both know that you don’t want me doing the listening. you want hope, and you’re stuck with me, and you should be going to bo. you need someone to help you feel better, and no matter what i say it’s not gonna help. so go to someone who can.”

Deacon’s ears go a little pink and he swallows. “Oh. Yeah.” After a second he walks past Sans, over to the side table where they left their phones. Picking them both up, he passes one to Sans. “Well, then I guess I should do that. I’ll, uh, keep you updated if and when Morwenna or Grant gets in touch.”

“oh ,” Sans blurts out, catching himself right before he checks his phone. “uh, so i’m curious. what’s the story there?”
He arches a brow. “Morwenna and Grant? They, uh, were a thing I guess. A few years before I got adopted. Look, I mean, this is all just gossip that one of the old Literatum told me, before he stopped showing up at the…” He lets out a weak laugh. “‘Super secret mage meetings’ I think is what you said?”

Sans rolls his eyes.

“But that fight with the Vigilum they kept talking about? I guess Morwenna had a brother who was a mage, too. He and another guy died, and Morwenna blamed Grant for not saving him. Something about him putting his feelings for her ahead of the good of the group. She broke up with him.”

“this is the same grant that was giving you shit about ‘frivolous attachments’?”

“Yeah.”

“shit.”

“Uh huh.”

“well morwenna deserves someone better than that jackass anyway,” Sans says with a shrug.

“Oh, you would be a huge sucker for her, wouldn’t you?” Deacon says, resting his hands on his hips.

“what makes you say that?”

“Red Soul. Maybe you’ve got a type.” He winks at him.

“i’m leaving,” he grumbles, narrowing his eyes. He glances down at the phone in his hand.

“Yeah, you say that because I’m right—”

“fuck !” Sans grits his teeth as he’s greeted by the sight of about ten missed calls, one of which is from Asgore, and two from Undyne. The rest are from Papyrus. There’s four voicemails and fifteen texts.

“What, what’s wrong?” Deacon asks, alarmed.

Sans doesn’t immediately answer, checking the text messages first. ‘SANS WHY AREN’T YOU ANSWERING YOUR PHONE??? I’M STARTING TO WORRY!!!’ ‘BROTHER, I HOPE YOU AREN’T DOING SOMETHING DANGEROUS OR FOOLISH. OR BOTH!!!’ They’re all pretty similar, with varying abuses of punctuation.

“Did something happen? Is Hope okay?” Deacon asks, pressing closer to try and look at his phone. He checks his own, but his frown just lingers. “I didn’t get any calls.”

“What? yeah, no, she’s fine, i… i gotta get home. pap is freaking out about me being gone and not answering my phone.”

“Oh, oh, okay. Yeah, just—”

He doesn’t let Deacon finish. He teleports home.

Papyrus, Asgore, and Undyne are all waiting for him when he arrives.
He’s wrapped up in a pair of long, bony arms before he can even get a word out, crushed to his
brother’s ribcage as he starts to chastise him loudly and thoroughly. “BROTHER WHERE WERE
YOU? I WAS WORRIED SICK AND WHEN YOU DIDN’T ANSWER YOUR PHONE I
THOUGHT YOU WERE OFF DOING SOMETHING FOOLISH AND DANGEROUS.
UNDYNE SAID YOU WERE TOO LAZY FOR THAT, BUT I TOLD HER I THOUGHT IT
WAS STRANGE THAT YOU DIDN’T JUST STAY HOME, AND THEN SHE SAID WE
SHOULD CALL ASGORE, AND—”

“bro, s’ok. everything’s fine,” he says, patting his brother’s back.

“Well, then I suppose this whole arrangement seems rather silly, in hindsight,” Asgore says
soothingly, giving them all a placating smile.

“You got us all worked up over NOTHING,” Undyne blurts out, letting out a frustrated sigh.
“LAME.”

“Undyne, it is just as well that everything is fine,” Asgore says. “It is preferable to the alternative.”

“Yeah, but you were busy talking to that Jacobs asshole, and we interrupted you for no damn
reason.”

Sans bristles at the sound of Jacobs’s name, pulling away from Papyrus so he can see Asgore. “you
met with jacobs?”

Asgore nods, a solemn look on his face. “Yes, though I fear it did us little good. He is still refusing
to give me an explanation for this change in procedure. The human news is reporting something
about a ‘quarantine’ and when I asked him for clarification he gave me none. So you can be
reassured that this interruption hurt no one.”

Sans wants to tell Asgore what he learned, but if he does that then he’ll have to explain how
he knows. And he’s not ready to let any of the others in on what he and Deacon are up to. They’ll
want to be involved and… he can’t put them at risk. Not to mention that he’s not sure he can trust
their subtlety.

“If anyone is going to get HURT, it’s Jacobs!” Undyne growls, immediately proving his point.

Yeah, there’s no way that he could involve Undyne.

Asgore makes a noncommittal rumble deep in his chest. “I do not think antagonizing the Captain
will do us any favors. Unfortunately, for the moment, there is nothing that we can do but wait and
see if anything changes.”

Sans knows that feeling all too well.
Chris invites you and Frisk to go to work with him, to get out of the tiny apartment, but you decline. Which is just as well because you spend most of the morning on the phone. Papyrus calls to talk to both of you, so does Alphys. Undyne texts you between classes and Sans talks to you for about an hour before lunch. He asks you about how things are going between Frisk and Chris, and you hesitate. Because you’re not sure what he wants to hear.

So you tell him the truth, that they’re talking now and getting along fairly well. Sans seems satisfied with that answer, to your relief. The last thing you want him worrying about on top of everything else is how Chris fits into this mess that is your life right now. The conversation shifts onto easier topics, and as you run out of things to say he seems like he’s waiting for something. You’re just not sure what. After a few moments of awkward silence he says he’ll let you go, that he misses you both and that he hopes this separation won’t last long. After you exchange ‘I love you’s he hangs up the phone.

You text Deacon while you’re eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, watching Frisk play that video game from yesterday. You don’t really have much choice in that regard; there’s one television, one room, and one kid you want to keep entertained. They can have free rein of the TV for now.

Your best friend is quick to reply and bring a smile to your face. You complain about the tiny apartment, the lack of privacy, the fact that you and Frisk are sleeping in Chris’s bed and he’s sleeping on the couch. Things that you’re not comfortable complaining to Sans about because you don’t want him to worry. Also, it’s not lost on you how weird and awkward it is that you’re using your ex-boyfriend’s bed. It’s not lost on Deacon either.

‘I’d say something, but I don’t want to make it gross.’

You cringe. ‘Okay, but now I can’t stop thinking about all the gross possibilities and now I think I need to see if there’s a change of sheets anywhere in this tiny shoebox of an apartment.’

‘It’s too late. You already slept on those sheets. Twice.’

‘That doesn’t mean I need to keep sleeping on them. Ugh.’

‘Sorry.’

‘At least I know he’s single right now. So, that makes it a little better, right?’

‘Who knows what he’s done in that apartment. Or where.’

‘STOP.’ You bury your face in the crook of your arm, leaning against the side of the couch. You bite back the urge to make a distressed sound, not wanting to get Frisk’s attention.

‘He’s a young man.’
'Deacon no.'

'Young men have needs.'

You grimace, hiding one eye behind your hand. 'I hate you so much.'

'You don’t. You love me.'

'I do love you. Jerk.' You’re grinning, laughing softly to yourself as something bittersweet stirs in your chest. It feels so normal, having this back and forth with him, and for a moment you’re able to forget that you’re stuck here away from your friends and your family. Away from two of the people you love the most in your life. ‘I miss you. We should be eating lunch together right now at school.’

There’s a longer pause between messages, a few minutes instead of just a few seconds. As you glance around the room, looking to see if there’s any storage space you might have overlooked that might have some spare sheets (and considering you might just have to do some laundry instead) you hear your phone chime at last.

'I miss you too. I wish there was something we could do to help.’

You get the feeling that there’s more to this than he can say. That someone is doing something to try and fix this. At least, you hope so. You have no way of knowing.

'I know.'

The sudden, loud knock on the door is enough to make you jump. Frisk looks back at you with wide eyes, pausing the game and standing. You leave your phone on the armrest of the couch, rising to your feet and debating if you should ignore it. The can of mace Chris gave you is sitting on top of the television. You bite your lip. After a second you hear another knock.

“This is the police,” comes a stern voice through the door.

Considering that you can’t even trust the military, you’re not sure you have much faith in the police either. But you can’t just stand there and pretend this isn’t happening. You leave the mace where it is, because the last thing you need is to be accused of threatening a police officer, and go to the door.

“Mom?” Frisk asks.

You wave them back. “Stay there.”

Taking a quick look through the peephole, you’re relieved to see that it’s just one man at least. You open the door just a crack, enough to get a better look at him. His uniform is crisp, the badge on his breast is shining in the midday sun, and his name tag reads ‘Min’. You’re pretty sure that’s Chinese.

“Hello?” you ask tentatively, gripping the side of the door tight in your hand.

“We received a report of a disturbance here last night,” he says, loud and firm. “Do you mind if I come inside and speak to you about that?”

A disturbance? There wasn’t any kind of disturbance. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” you say, biting your lip.
“Please, this will only take a few minutes and then I can get out of your hair,” he says, giving you a small smile. It crinkles the corners of his eyes, and something about it is reassuring. This isn’t like that cold smile Jacobs gave you.

You think that technically you can deny him entry to the apartment. That he can’t come inside without a warrant. But something tells you not to worry. Drawing in a deep breath, wondering if that little voice in the back of your mind is telling you the truth or not, you take a step back to let him inside. Officer Min gives you a curt nod and you shut the door behind him.

“Is this Christopher Osborne’s apartment?” he asks, taking a quick look around the place. Frisk is still standing by the couch, watching the two of you with apprehension.

You cross the room to stand beside your child, resting a hand on their back. “Yes it is. What was this ‘disturbance’ you were told about?”

“And can I get your first and last name, please.”

“…Hope Garcia,” you say. Is he going to recognize you from the news? And if he does, what does that mean for you?

His face breaks out into a warm smile, holding out his hand for you. You just stare at it. “Sorry about all that, there wasn’t any disturbance. I just wanted to make sure I had the right person. And the apartment is being watched.”

You feel dazed, like you’re missing something important. “I… what? Watched?”

“Yes. There’s a car parked a few buildings down. I couldn’t let them know why I’m really here.” Officer Min drops his hand when you refuse to shake it, reaching inside his vest to pull out a folded square of paper sealed with strips of tape. “I’m Howard, by the way. I brought you a message from your husband.”

“My…” You can only stare, struggling to put the pieces together. “How do you know my husband?”

Howard is holding out the note. He makes a weak gesture, pushing his hand closer to you to get your attention. Finally, looking from his face down to the paper, you take it and turn it over. There’s nothing on the outside other than a few pieces of tape keeping it closed. “Through Deacon Stuart. I believe he’s a friend of yours.”

Your attention snaps back up to his face, and your free hand goes to the bracelet around your wrist. “Are you…? One of the—”

“Yes. I’m sure Sans explained in his letter,” he says, pointing at it. “I can’t exactly linger, I’m not supposed to be here. But as a husband and a father…” Howard looks down at Frisk and gives them a weak smile. “I figured I could at least do something to help get word to you guys.”

“I… Thank you,” you say. Realizing how rude you must have seemed, you hold out your hand. His smile brightens and he shakes it. “Really, it’s been hard not being able to know what’s going on.”

“You’re welcome. Just be sure to destroy that note, just in case. I know it sounds really… spy movie, but it’s better to be safe than sorry. If the wrong people got wind of what we’re up to, it could put all of us at risk.”

Holding it close to your chest, you nod. “Sure. Of course. Did you see them? Sans and Deacon, I mean.”
“Yeah. We met with them yesterday. Your husband’s teleportation is really impressive. I don’t think that’s even possible for any human mages,” he says, casting a look towards the front door.

“They what?” you blurt out, eyebrows shooting up. “No, they’re not allowed out of Ebott, if they got caught—”

“They clearly think it’s worth the risk,” he says, making a patient, placating gesture with his hands. “Just know that we’re doing what we can to help fix this situation.”

You bite back further protests, knowing full well that Howard Min isn’t responsible for your husband and your best friend. He’s just another… well, a mage probably. An ally. Sighing, you nod. “Okay. Fine.”

“Are you really a police officer?” Frisk asks, just barely louder than a whisper.

Howard blinks, then starts to laugh. He crouches down to put himself at eye-level with Frisk. “Yeah. I am. I know it’s a little sneaky, coming here to see you and your mom, but I’m really a cop.”

“Is it like, your secret identity?” Their face scrunches up in confusion.

You feel your cheeks heat up, a little embarrassed by Frisk’s questioning. But Howard just gives them a good-natured grin. He did say he was a father, after all. “Nah, it’s just part of what I do. Just like being a mage,” he says conspiratorially, winking. Then he stands back up, looking at you with something like pity in his dark eyes. “I’m sorry there isn’t more I can do to help. With you being watched, it makes things much more difficult for us.”

Swallowing past a lump in your throat, you nod. “I understand. But thank you for bringing me this. And letting us know that something’s being done.”

“We’re trying,” he says. “And now I really should get going.”

When he leaves me makes a show of apologizing for the misunderstanding and telling you to have a good day before getting back into his squad car and driving away. For a moment you hesitate, wondering if you should try to figure out which car is the one he mentioned with the person watching you, but that would just look suspicious. You go back inside.

Then you remember the note squeezed tight in your hand. Going to sit on the couch, you break the tape and unfold the paper. You recognize the messy handwriting.

hopefully howard got you this letter ok. i can’t even ask you over the phone, so next time we talk, after you get this, tell me about the first time we met. then i’ll know.

Oh. Maybe that’s why he seemed like he was waiting for you to say something specific earlier.

howard’s an ok guy i guess. he’s one of deacon’s people. he and a few of the others (you were right, grant is a huge asshole) are supposed to be helping us help you and frisk. and everybody, i know it’s not just you. we need to get the line back open for everybody.

but babe, you know i’m doing this for you.

the literatum have some kind of inside woman trying to figure out the source of this mess so we can… i dunno, do something i guess. this whole thing isn’t what i expected. they’re just a handful of people, hope. people with power they don’t know what to do with, which is worse. i’m trying to stay optimistic, but they don’t exactly inspire a lot of confidence. but it’s something. it’s better than
sitting around and giving up and doing nothing.

if something happens, if you feel like this whole thing is hopeless… you call me and you tell me to
come get you and damn the consequences. we’ll run as far as we have to as long as we’re together.
i won’t let them keep you from me. i’m not gonna lose you.

but right now i’m trying to be patient.

tell frisk that i plan on keeping my promise. that one way or another, these people aren’t going to
keep us apart. deacon and i are working together with the literatum to make sure. don’t tell them
how worried i am that these mages don’t know what they’re doing.

i love you both, until the end of time.

sans

There are tears in your eyes as you reread the letter two more times, then start to tear it into tiny
pieces.

The next day when Chris asks you again to come with him to work, you accept. Because you can’t
forget Howard’s comment about someone watching the apartment, and you’re starting to feel some
cabin fever from spending so much time in that one little room. Even Frisk, who was content to
play video games, perks up at the idea of going to the music store.

Zane’s is just how you remember it. It’s a small, privately owned music store, specializing in
instrument repair as well as sales and rentals. Right at the entrance is a small, glass display case
and counter, behind which is a row of hanging guitars in various states of damage. Looks like their
repair guy has some backlog. The room to the right is crowded rows of boxes, some with sheet
music, others with records and CDs. Straight ahead, past the counter to your left, is the room with
the instruments, including a soundproof booth for playing and testing. The light that filters through
crowded windows catches on the dust motes hanging in the air, and you’re enveloped by the smell
of wood, dust, paper, and polish.

It’s small and cramped and a little run-down, but it’s all so familiar you can’t help but smile. You
spent hours here with Chris. You were with him when he picked out that Gibson SG he loves so
much. And now you’re here with Chris again, and the child you’d made together.

That thought hits you so strongly that you have to take a moment to backpedal, to remind yourself
that Chris was hardly more than a sperm donor. But you know that music is in Frisk’s blood,
because they certainly didn’t get that talent from you.

And Frisk is looking around them with a look akin to awe, taking in all the sights as Chris flicks on
the lights and starts fiddling with the cash register.

“Don’t touch anything without permission,” you tell them, combing your fingers through their hair.

Chris looks up at that, catching your eye then looking at Frisk. “You can check out a bunch of
instruments back there,” he says, grinning and pointing. “Do you like music?”

Frisk nods enthusiastically. “Undyne was showing me how to play piano!”

“That’s so metal! Piano was my first instrument too,” Chris blurts out.

There’s a moment of silence where Frisk looks back at you. “What’s ‘so metal’ mean?”
Chris’s mouth falls open, gaping at you. “You know, like… Hope, how does Frisk not know what that means? You used to say that all the time.”

You scrunch your nose. “I haven’t said that in years.”

He gives you that look that you’ve come to realize is the one where he notices that you’re not the same Hope from high school. At the same time, you’re seeing more and more that Chris is still that same boy you remember. Just older, bigger, with piercings he got to spite his parents after moving out and a scraggily attempt at growing out the hair on his chin. You grew up out of necessity. He’d been stunted, and now he’s trying to play catch-up.

“Well, uh, you want to check out the most expensive keyboard in the shop?” Chris asks, doing his best, you think, to sweep aside his mistake.

“Yeah!”

“No,” you interject, catching Chris’s eye. “Please remember that Frisk is seven.”

“Oh. Uh. Right,” he says, letting out an embarrassed laugh. “Then, how about the cheapest keyboard in the shop?”

The two of them disappear into the next room, with Chris talking animatedly about different types of keyboards. You’re sure that Frisk hasn’t the faintest clue of what he’s talking about, but they seem excited nonetheless. With both of them occupied, you take the time to wander the cramped rows of sheet music.

It’s a good way to pass a bit of time, but after about half an hour you head back to the instrument room. They’re sitting together on the floor, a keyboard (a cheap one, you guess) in front of Frisk and an acoustic guitar in Chris’s lap. As you peek around a stack of boxes, it looks like Frisk is showing him what they’ve learned from Undyne, while he mimics it on his guitar. Trying to show them how the notes compare, you think.

Frisk is looking at him with unguarded interest, watching his hands as they slide up and down the strings. They lean in closer, paying attention, and Chris has this focused look on his face that you recognize. He’s not playing around, not sitting there in awe of Frisk’s attention. He’s honestly trying to show them what he’s doing, concentrating on the task of teaching them. It’s the same expression he’d have when memorizing a new song, or figuring out some tricky chords.

You’re about to come out from behind the boxes to go join them when you hear the tinkling of the bell above the front door. Turning at the sound, you’re surprised to see a familiar face. Eric looks just as surprised as you are. But he recovers quickly, shutting the door behind him and hooking his fingers on one of the two belts hanging around his waist (not even in his belt loops, just hanging from his waist). He’s dressed in the same sort of stuff you remember seeing him in back in high school, when he’d help the two of you skip classes and encourage most of your delinquent behavior. A ripped band shirt, ratty faded jeans, boots, an old leather jacket (actually, that might be the same leather jacket), and chipped black nail polish. It’s the band look, you think. By comparison, Chris looks positively cleaned up.

Thin and lanky, Eric has that sort of pinched look to his face like he just tasted something sour. Dark circles like bruises shadow his blue eyes, and his thin, black hair hangs limply on either side of his face. He must be twenty-five now, but whatever he’d been up to in the last eight years hadn’t been kind. He looks closer to his mid-thirties than his mid-twenties.
“Look what the cat dragged in,” Eric drawls, his mouth curving into an amused smile. “Long time no see.”

“Yeah. It has been a while,” you agree, crossing your arms over your chest. Your hand finds the locket hanging around your neck, rubbing your thumb over the design on the front.

“I guess this explains why Chris keeps fuckin’ bailing on me.” He rolls his eyes, walking over to you. “You got him pussy whipped already?”

Your eyes narrow, clenching your jaw. “We’re not together.”

“I didn’t say ‘together’,” he says, laughing. He makes a crude gesture with his hands. “I meant together.”

“You’re disgusting as always,” you say, lip curling involuntarily. “And do you mind toning it down? My kid is here.”

“Oh this I gotta see. Where’s Chris’s crotch fruit?” His grin is downright giddy, which just pisses you off even more.

As Eric tries to brush past you, you put yourself bodily in his way. He halts, his smile faltering as you fix him with a hard look. “Back off, Eric. This situation is hard enough as it is without you trying to turn this into a fucking joke,” you growl, anger making your skin prickle as your hands clench into fists.

He laughs in your face. “Are you kidding me? This is hilarious. I need to know what made you come crawling back to this big dumb idiot.”

“Why are you here, Eric?”

Chris is behind you, and you feel the faintest pressure of his hand on your shoulder. You twist to the side, away from his touch and out of his way so he can shift to stand in front of you. Looking for Frisk, you see them watching you from their spot on the ground on the other side of the instrument room, poking absently at the keyboard.

“I came to see why you kept cancelling on me, dude,” Eric says, smacking Chris in the stomach with the back of his hand. “That’s two days in a row you’ve been ‘busy’.” He grins and waggles his brows. “I didn’t realize you meant you were getting busy.”

Chris cringes, pushing his hair out of his face. “Dude, fuck off, it’s none of your business. They just needed a place to stay while the shit on Mt. Ebott gets sorted.”

“Well if you two aren’t fucking then why aren’t you coming to practice with us?” he asks, shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders.

“Not everything is about sex you goddamn creep,” Chris mutters.

“Sure it is!” Eric gives Chris a healthy shove in the shoulder, laughing. “And since when did you think otherwise? You don’t have to put on the big ‘good guy’ act just because your baby momma is here. Especially if you guys aren’t even screwing. Who do you have to impress?”

Chris’s shoulders tense, and after a second he shoves Eric back, towards the front door. Eric’s eyes go wide, then narrow as he looks up at the much bigger man in front of him. “Unless you’re buying something, get out. Or quit being such a fucking prick.”
He stares up at him, like he’s trying to gauge his seriousness, before letting out a weak laugh and throwing his hands up in surrender. “Fine, fine. Whatever dude. You keep doing what you’re doing,” he says, turning and heading towards the door. “Call me when you get your balls back from your ex.”

After the door closes and the bell tinkles once again in the now thankfully-quiet store, you look up at Chris. He lets out a haggard sigh, rubbing his face with both hands before giving you an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry,” he says, wincing as he searches your face. “He’s still such an asshole, but he…”

“You don’t need to apologize for him,” you say, biting your lip. “But why the hell are you still friends with him? Shit, he’s worse than I remember.”

Chris bobs his head. “Tell me about it. But he’s the frontman and the rest of the band thinks he’s hilarious… And I mean, he’s my best friend.”

You arch a brow.

“Ehh,” he says weakly, shrugging. “Okay, oldest friend.”

“Do you always let him talk to you like that?”

“...Yeah?”

“Chris,” you say, sighing as he wilts under your stare.

He looks away, rubbing his arm. “Look, he’s gone, and I’m sure he won’t come back for today. So why don’t we just forget about him, okay?”

That pleading look in his grey eyes is hard to resist, so after a moment you ease the tension out of your body and give a nod. “Fine. Yeah. Sorry, I know he’s your friend,” you say, giving him a weak smile. “But you did real good, standing up to him like that.”

Chris perks up a little at that, returning your smile. “Yeah?”

You give him a pat on the arm, then a comforting squeeze. “Yeah.”
Asgore has spent much of the last few days with Toriel and Asriel. Where once his presence would be... not *unwelcome* but certainly not encouraged, now it seems to him as though his wife is glad for his company. He is hesitant to place that merit upon himself, however. He is certain that it is largely due to the steadily growing pressure of having the Line once again closed to them. It is the gradual squeeze of their cage bringing them closer together. He resents it even as he is glad for the time with his family.

The days are filled with attempts at negotiations with Captain Jacobs or his subordinates, which are as fruitless as they are frustrating. He misses Captain Prasad and her curt, often harsh honesty. At least he always knew where he stood with her. But this Jacobs… he cannot fathom the depths of his duplicity.

The evenings, however, are a source of small joys. Dinner with his wife and son. Careful, cautious words with Toriel as he gingerly tests where he stands with her. Some nights are easier than others; she does not have the walls quite so high around her heart. His hopes of winning her back, of regaining her trust, are small and fragile. Shattered and rebuilt many times over the last year. But he cannot bring himself to give up. Not completely. She will always have a place in his Soul.

This Friday night, almost a week since the Line was closed once more, Asgore feels somber and withdrawn. He does his best to keep a positive face in front of Asriel, to make sure that his son does not slip into hopelessness. Being separated from Frisk is especially hard on him, which is worrying. Losing Chara had made him do the unspeakable. Taking their Soul, crossing the Barrier… that choice had been made out of heartbreak. What would Asriel be capable of if he lost Frisk too?

He and Toriel have spoken on that topic only once, and as with other things where Asriel is concerned, she refuses to dwell on it. She could barely even speak of their adopted child.

But, this night, Asgore’s fears do not lie with his son or his wife. They rest firmly in the iron grip of the military, clenched in Captain Jacobs’s fist. Toriel can tell that something is bothering him. It always surprises him, how attentive Jacobs is to his moods despite their separation, but he supposes that after hundreds of years spent together, their time apart could not diminish her knowledge of him. She watches him over dinner, plies him with tea whenever his cup empties, encourages Asriel to sit with him after they finish eating.

Asriel splits his attention between his father and his cell phone, sending messages to Frisk no doubt. He does not mind; if that is what it takes to keep his son from doing something rash, he will tolerate it. He understands the importance of keeping that line of communication open to them.

Toriel acquiesces to his silent request to take his son to his room at bedtime, does not intrude when he sits down to read to him and tucks him in. He realizes, all at once, how much bigger Asriel is than he was just a year ago. His birthday is coming up soon (he hopes, silently, that you and Frisk will have returned to them in time for it) and he will be eight. Or... he is not certain how all of this
works exactly. He knows that Asriel spent some time as a Soulless flower, and he had been —no, he must not skirt around it— dead for so long…

No, in this regard he will agree with his wife: that does not matter. Asriel is here now, hale and hearty, and it is simpler to think of his age in terms of his time properly alive.

He will be eight soon.

“Dad?” Asriel asks, and he realizes that he was staring, lost in his thoughts as he strokes his son’s head.

Asgore forces a smile, leaning down to press a kiss to his brow and nuzzle his cheek. “Forgive me,” he says. “I was just thinking of how much you have grown. Soon you will be a fine young man.”

Asriel’s snout scrunches, looking embarrassed. “Daaad…”

Chuckling, he pushes back up to his feet. “Get some sleep, little one. Who knows what tomorrow may bring for us.”

“Do you think it’ll be something good?” he asks, his voice soft and hesitant. It pains him to hear his son so afraid to hope.

“We will just have to see,” he says. “Goodnight Asriel.”

He mumbles his goodnights and rolls over onto his side as Asgore shuts off the light and closes the door behind him. He wishes he could promise his son a better tomorrow.

Toriel is waiting for him when he returns to the living room, sitting on the oversized couch instead of her normal spot in the rocking chair. She gestures to the place next to her, following him with her eyes as he obeys her silent command. Concern furrows her brow, her fingers twist in her lap, and worry radiates from her very core. The hum of her Soul strengthens at his presence, and the normally muted tone of their harmony seems to swell just a little as he reaches for her and she takes his hand.

“You are worried,” she says, searching his face. “More worried than you have been these last few days. What has changed, Asgore?”

“I spoke with Captain Jacobs.”

“You have spoken with Jacobs every day for almost a week,” she reminds him, her fingers curling around his palm.

“I do not think they intend to reopen the Line soon,” he says, hanging his head. His hair falls in front of his face, shielding his eyes. “Not unless I submit to certain requests.”

“...Like what?” Her voice is just above a whisper, traced with fear. She has her suspicions, and he thinks that she is most likely correct.

“You do realize that asking is merely a courtesy? All it takes is enough shift in opinion for them to give the order to lock this entire place down and start doing things by force. It would make things easier on everyone if you just accepted the inevitable.”

Asgore closes his eyes, letting out a weary sigh as he tries to banish Jacobs’s predatory smile from his mind. “What they have wanted from the start: monsters as weapons in their military. Captain
Prasad was kind enough to help me delay the interest, to speak to her superiors on our behalf. I had hoped that the entire matter had been settled. But this Jacobs, he is coming at this with his teeth bared.”

“Is that why they have us trapped here? To try and force your hand?” Toriel asks, leaning in closer, keeping her voice canted low. It would not do well to have Asriel overhear them.

Nodding, he raises his head and meets her eyes again. “His thinly veiled ultimatum was clear enough, Tori. Either I convince some of us to submit to their authority, or they will be conscripted against their will. And I fear that if it comes to that, there will be violence.”

“Can they do this? Can things go so wrong so quickly?” She shakes her head, her question clearly rhetorical. He allows her the time to gather her thoughts, to collect herself. He had always valued her guidance and counsel, leaned on her for generations (until she was gone). The look on her face is a familiar one, the clear sign of her mind turning this new puzzle over and over. “What did you tell him?”

“That I needed time to consider, to speak with those I thought might be more willing…” He bares his teeth in a weak, futile show of defiance. “A blatant lie, but necessary for the time being.”

“Of course,” she says, and her agreement is reassuring.

“They have us pinned,;” he snaps, low and angry. “Trapped against this wall just like before. They give us a choice as if we have one, knowing full well that as long as they have us stuck right here that they can take whatever they wish. He is laying the freedom of my people at my feet and asking me to crush it beneath my heel in the name of peace and protection! Instead of a cage they offer a leash and collar.”

“We cannot fight back.”

“I know,” he says, and the look he gives her is pleading. “But I cannot stall them forever.”

Toriel catches his cheek, her gaze firm and stubborn. “Now you listen to me, Asgore Dreemurr. Do not give in. Do not falter. You are the king of all monsters, and you need to remember that your people look to you for their strength.”

“I am so weary of this fight, Tori,” he says, leaning a little into her touch. “I am alone in the midst of enemies that were once allies.”

“You are not alone,” she says, firm yet tender in the same breath. Then she leans in close, still cupping his face in her hand as she kisses his cheek. It is enough to send a wild thrill of hope through his chest, but he quickly restrains it. Now is not the time to wish for her back, to try and turn his head to kiss her properly and risk sending her running away again. If this is ever to happen, if she is ever to return to him, it will be on her terms. He knows this. He accepts it. He does not deserve her after what he has done, but he will always be waiting. She lets out a soft sigh and pulls back, dropping her hand away and folding it in her lap. The look she gives him is conflicted. “I… I am not…”

“I know,” he says quickly, hiding his disappointment behind a careful smile. “But I am glad to know that you are by my side. As an ally.”

Toriel nods, looking down at her hand in his. “We have not always been in agreement. Which is an understatement of the highest degree,” she says, giving him a small squeeze. “But I know that everything you have done has always been what you thought was best for our people. I trust your
intentions, if not always your methods. I will not…” She hesitates, clenching her jaw before meeting his eyes again. “I will not abandon you again. I will tell you when you are wrong, I will stand up to you. But I will not run.”

He wants to kiss her. He wants to kiss her so badly that it makes him ache, but he cannot. It would ruin this hard-won peace between them and that would hurt worse than not kissing her. So instead Asgore just nods, looking anywhere but at her face in case she can see his thoughts plain in his eyes. He would not be surprised if she could. “That means more than I think you know,” he says, his voice rough with suppressed emotion.

“Stay determined, for your people,” she says. “Stall them as long as you can. Because I believe that our friends are up to more than they are letting on. I cannot imagine that Sans is staying idle while Hope and Frisk are kept from us.”

“He should not be taking it upon himself to act,” he says, grumbling. “But I am certain you are right, as unwise as his course of action may be.”

“He is young and in love. It is not his place to be wise. That is for old people like us,” she says, and they both let out weak laughs.

Feeling reassured, Asgore lets out a weary sigh and glances up at the clock. “Well, perhaps it would be wise to go home. It is getting late, and I am afraid I am merely intruding on your hospitality at this point.”

As he goes to stand, to free his hand from hers, she holds him tighter, keeping him on the couch. When he looks at her, surprised, she looks once again conflicted. Frowning, he thinks, at herself. “It is Friday. Asriel and I do not have school in the morning, so you should stay. Could stay,” she corrects, glancing away and letting him go. “Asriel would be happy to see you here when he wakes up. The guest room is yours to use.”

He swallows, watching her as her expression falters. “Are you certain?” he asks.

Toriel makes a face, giving him an almost annoyed look. “No. But I do not think that our family should be parted with our future so uncertain, do you?”

His smile is tender as he studies her face, and after a moment her features soften and he could swear that a tinge of pink spreads under her pristine fur.

“Do not give me that look, Dreemurr, or I will offer you little more than the couch,” she says, sniffing and raising her snout in the air.

Asgore laughs, and he catches the hint of a smile on her face. “Forgive me. I would like very much to be with the two of you as long as I am welcome.”

“You can make breakfast in the morning, by means of an apology.”

The future is uncertain, just how long he can delay what might be the inevitable he does not know… But for now he will take comfort in sharing this space with his family. Because who knows what the days to come will hold for them.
Sans wakes up in bed alone.

He knows he’s still in the present, still on the surface, that you’re still *out there*, but there’s that moment where he reaches for you in half-sleep and his hand gropes empty space and his chest gives a sudden, panicked lurch. Then it all crashes over him all over again, the knowledge that you’re in a place where he can’t go. That he’s trapped; *everyone* is trapped even though he’s reached the surface and there’s nothing he can—

*Stop.*

Grabbing your pillow, he hugs it to his chest and buries his face in it, forcing himself to take a slow, steadying breath. He *is* doing something. Yes, for the past few days he’s been waiting, but there’s still *something* in the works. And he knows you got his letter from Howard because you gave him that sign. So if things get worse, if it comes to it…

He’ll see you again. One way or the other, he’ll have you back.

He needs to get up, to get out of this bedroom that should have two people in it but only has one. Your absence is painful. You’re not lost, or truly gone, but these moments where he catches himself alone and it’s not so simple as just finding you somewhere in the house, he feels a little bit more of his resolve and patience slip away. It leaves him raw, like an open wound.

His phone starts to ring. He’s never felt this much relief to see Deacon’s name on the screen.

The members of the Literatum still let out a collective yelp of surprise when Sans and Deacon appear in Morwenna’s living room, but this time their reception isn’t quite so violent. He spots familiar faces. Howard is out of uniform, sitting in a chair closest to the front door. Maria is in casual clothes too, jeans and a loose blouse, and it takes Sans a little too long to realize that it’s Saturday. With you and Frisk gone, it’s harder to keep track of the weekdays. Grant barely gives them a glance from where he’s sitting, and finally Sans spots Morwenna in the kitchen with a woman he hasn’t met before.

She’s tall and thin, with rich brown skin darker and cooler in tone than yours. Her short hair is a collection of tight twists that bounce as she catches sight of him and walks out into the living room.

“Vanessa,” Deacon says, in lieu of a hello.

“She looks surprised,” Sans says, wondering if he should offer to shake her hand. Her arms are crossed over her chest and she feels closed off, so he thinks better of it. He shoves his hands in his pockets. “Wasn’t exactly a social call.”
“Hm. Well, neither is this. But that doesn’t mean we should skimp on pleasantries,” she says, arching a manicured brow.

“You’re Vanessa, I’m Sans, seems pleasant enough,” he says, shrugging his shoulders. “I thought we were here because you had something to tell us, not to make polite conversation.”

Deacon makes a noise in the back of his throat and Vanessa’s hand darts up, pointer finger raised in the universal sign for silence. She still isn’t looking at him, her focus never straying from Sans’s face. It’s a little unnerving. Deacon huffs an annoyed breath but doesn’t speak, and her mouth curves into a smile. “A fair point. I see you’re not here to make friends, which is just as well. We have business to discuss.”

And on that note she turns and walks back to where Morwenna is waiting, placing a hand on her shoulder and leaning in close to say something to her. Whispering.

“What was that about?” Sans mutters, glancing up at Deacon.

Deacon hooks his thumbs on the pockets of his jeans, giving Sans an impatient look. “She was testing you.”

“Huh. Did I pass?”

“Probably. If the test was ‘how not to make a good first impression’.”

“She’s right. I’m not here to make friends,” Sans says, gritting his teeth.

“Yeah, you’re real good at that.” The bitterness in Deacon’s voice is enough to stir up the still-glowing embers of guilt deep in Sans’s ribcage.

He doesn’t answer.

There’s a few minutes of greetings where Deacon leaves him to his own devices to talk to Maria. Instead of just standing there, Sans goes over to Howard to thank him for delivering his letter to you. He just nods and tells him it wasn’t a problem, that he was happy to help. But Howard isn’t the most talkative person, so they slip into an awkward silence before it’s finally broken.

“So, now that everyone is here,” Morwenna says, walking into the center of the living room with Vanessa trailing behind her, “we can get started. Tell us what you’ve found out.”

Vanessa’s eyes sweep the room and she fidgets with a gold bangle around her wrist for a moment before she speaks. “Governor Williams isn’t being bribed, like we suspected. Which, in a way, works in our favor. He didn’t change out the soldiers on Ebott or close the Line because he wanted to. The Vigilum are holding him and his family hostage inside his home.” Surprised murmurs fill the room, and even Grant leans forward in his seat, looking grim. “He has a new ‘secretary’ that’s with him at all times at work. That break-in that was reported in the news? That was when the Vigilum installed themselves.”

“So then we need to get rid of them. Then the governor will be able to issue new orders to the National Guard,” Howard says.

“That’s the idea, yes,” Vanessa says, nodding. “Things weren’t ideal, but they were tolerable before the governor was compromised. And if we can pull this off and get the governor on our side, then he can take the pressure off the monsters. Because that’s their goal; putting enough pressure on you to try and get you to crack.” She’s looking at Sans now, her eyes meeting his. “The bad press? Stirring the pot to encourage ordinary people who might not have acted on their
own? That was the Vigilum trying to get you and your people to react. To lash out.”

“they underestimated our capacity for tolerance and our desire for peace,” Sans says, shaking his head. “they expected us to react like humans.”

“Right. So they took it a step further. They’re pushing in different places to see where you’re weakest. They knew that your wife and kid are important to a lot of people on Ebott, including the king and queen. They were hoping that by taking them away, they’d push your people into action.”

“well, they weren’t wrong,” he mutters. “just not in the way they were expecting. but why do they want to do this? what’s their goal? and how do you know all this?”

Her smile is smug and predatory. “Purple magic may not be the flashiest, but it’s useful for finding out secrets. It just takes knowing which people to listen closely to, and some perseverance. The people I work for have been thinking about the situation with the governor a lot lately, so it was just a matter of fitting all the pieces together.”

Sans’s eyes narrow as he studies Vanessa’s face. “you’re saying you can read thoughts?”

“I’m saying that I can sense intent, and yes, when I choose to, I can hear surface thoughts. It’s very draining on my magic, so I have to select my targets wisely.” Her expression sober, that smile slipping away. “As to your other questions, they feel threatened. You and your magic returning places all mages in a rather precarious position. They’re also paranoid that all those old stories of monsters using human Souls being true. Speaking of which, perhaps you could enlighten us.”

All at once attention shifts to Sans. His eyes narrow as he watches Vanessa, resentful of being put on the spot. Of course it’s true, he knows for a fact that it’s true. But he doesn’t want to tell them that, it’s not his secret to—

Shit. He glares at Vanessa as he catches sight of the very faint, barely noticeable purple glow that catches in her eyes.

“yes, it’s true. at least, it's possible,” he mutters. “we’re told that’s what started the war in the first place. humans being afraid of us having the potential to take in your souls.”

To his surprise, none of the mages seem at all shocked. Grant and Morwenna share a knowing look, and Vanessa just nods. “We suspected as much,” Vanessa says. “But fearing someone for their potential to harm does no one any good, does it?”

Sans can’t help it. He glances over at Deacon at the same time that Deacon looks over at him and there’s that twist of guilt again.

“So are we honestly talking about… what, rescuing the governor?” Maria blurts out, drawing everyone’s attention.

“If we’re going to do anything about this, then yes,” Morwenna says. The stubbornness in her tone is enough to make Sans feel a little more confident that they’re finally going to do something.

“Eso es una loca,” Maria says under her breath, resting her forehead in her hand. “You’re going to get my ass thrown in jail, Morwenna. Or deported.”

“Or killed,” Grant mutters, and once again the focus in the room shifts. “You can’t expect them to do this.”

“Grant, we've talked about this,” Morwenna sighs, and Sans can't help but notice the slip of not
“Wait, before you two argue,” Vanessa cuts in, looking between the two of them. “There's something you both need to know.” Her expression is hesitant, which is the first time he's seen her at less than completely confident. That piques his curiosity. “The man in charge of all this at the governor's house… It's Avery Fletcher.”

The name doesn't mean anything to Sans, but it clearly does to everyone else. Grant and Morwenna both stare at Vanessa and the others go quiet, like they're afraid to say anything. He gives Deacon a questioning look but his only answer is a quick shake of his head.

“Wait that certainly changes things,” Grant mutters, and Morwenna's expression turns alarmed.

“Oh, so now you'll stop fighting with me for the sake of revenge?” she says, eyebrows shooting up.

“Killing Avery fucking Fletcher isn't revenge. It's justice. For your brother and for—”

“Don't you dare bring Willem into your goddamn crusade,” she snaps, glaring now.

“Stop pretending you wouldn’t be glad to see that murderer six feet under. Ten years ago you would’ve leapt at the chance.”

“It’s not just Avery,” Vanessa interjects, and Morwenna and Grant look at her again. Grant crosses his arms over his chest and Morwenna rubs her shoulder, a somber look on her face. “It’s the… it’s his initiates too.”

There’s another silence laden with grim understanding. It’s enough to be downright irritating.

“Ok. who wants to fill me in?” Sans says, arching a brow and looking around the room as their attention shifts to him. They all seem to have forgotten he was there. “all these meaningful silences aren’t so meaningful when you don’t know what the hell’s going on.”

He looks at Deacon, thinking that he might be the one to speak up, but he’s looking at Morwenna. And Morwenna is looking at Vanessa. Vanessa’s mouth is set in a hard line.

“How much you want him to know is up to you, Ingram,” Morwenna says, taking a step closer to the young woman. “It's your story to tell. You know the initiate program better than anyone.”

“Does he know anything about what happened with Willem?” she asks her, and she sighs when Morwenna shakes her head. “Do you want me to tell that part too?”

“That’s fine.”

Vanessa looks at Sans, a deep furrow forming between her brows. “When I was nine, I was kidnapped by the Vigilum. There was a whole group of us, all kids under twelve. They wanted to turn us into some kind of special task force and didn’t want to use their own people to do it. So they figured they’d snatch a bunch of mage kids from across the country and train us up.” She shrugs her shoulders. Anger swells in Sans’s ribcage, and he balls his hands into fists in his pockets. It’s hard not to imagine Frisk as one of those abducted, magical kids. “The Literatum caught wind of what they were doing, and a bunch of them came to try and rescue us. I was the only one they managed to get out, and that was after two casualties; Morwenna’s brother Willem, and a man named Thomas. All the other kids got left behind. They’re the initiates helping Avery keep the governor and his family hostage, because if they get found out, they don’t have any family ties to the big names in the Vigilum. And in case you couldn’t figure it out, Avery is the one that was in charge of the initiate program back when I got rescued, and he’s the one that killed
Willem.”

There’s another beat of silence, but this time Sans understands why the air feels so heavy.

“Did I forget anything?” Vanessa asks, looking at Morwenna.

“No. That was fine,” Morwenna says gently, and Vanessa nods. The older woman looks at Sans, jaw tense. “So you can see why we might have a vested interest in disrupting the Vigilum’s plans, and why there’s some… division about getting involved. We haven’t openly stood against them in seventeen years.”

“So what’s the plan? when are we going to do this?” Sans asks, which seems to catch Morwenna off-guard.

“You’re… coming with us?” she asks.

“Damn right i am.”

“I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“He should be there,” Deacon says, before Sans can argue the point further. “He’s just as committed, if not more, than anyone else here. Not to mention his magic is… incredibly powerful. We want him there.”

Morwenna glances between the two of them, then fixes Sans with a calculating look. After a moment she nods. “Okay then. Let’s talk planning.”

Planning is long and tedious, with a lot of bickering back and forth. Vanessa insists that she wants to be involved in the attack but Howard is quick to point out that her magic is non-combative and she shouldn’t be going. Vanessa counters with the fact that apparently Howard’s cyan magic isn’t exactly equipped for combat either. That phasing through objects and turning invisible won’t help them fight.

There’s a short debate on if they should bring guns, which is quickly squashed by Howard. They don’t want to leave any clear evidence of a fight (which means that Sans’s blasters are right out, unless there’s an emergency). This decision is supported by Vanessa, who is confident that Avery and his team aren’t armed either.

It’s decided that everyone will meet back at Morwenna’s house tomorrow after midnight, with the hopes that doing this at night will reduce the chance of any extra, uninvolved people getting caught in the middle. And maybe they can catch the Vigilum off-guard.

But all this talk makes Sans feel like he’s going around in circles. That they’re repeating the same arguments over again. He just wants to go and do something about all this! His patience is frayed and his attention keeps drifting…

Which is why it takes him so long to realize that the Literatum are repeating themselves. Sans’s attention snaps back into harsh focus as he listens to Howard give the same argument against guns that he made twenty minutes ago. When he looks at the clock, he realizes that it is twenty minutes ago!

There was a Load and he barely even noticed.
Any number of things could have happened to you and Frisk to make them Load, and his mind immediately jumps to the worst ones. Did the Vigilum catch wind of what they were doing and decided to take it out on you? Had they attacked you, or harassed you, or… Or was it something mundane, like an accident? Were you hurt somewhere?

Sans reminds himself that if Frisk Loaded, whatever happened was undone. Maybe it was enough to keep the two of you safe. But these weak reassurances aren’t enough to calm him down. The Loads aren’t perfect. What if it hadn’t prevented anything at all, but just doomed you to repeat it?

He can’t just stand here and listen to the Literatum repeat themselves. He can’t stand here and do nothing! Of all the times to be away from his phone…

“do you have a phone i can use?” Sans asks abruptly, cutting Morwenna off in the middle of talking to Vanessa.

Morwenna’s brow furrows and she gives him a distracted look. Her hand flicks towards the kitchen, a quick dismissal. “In there.”

“thanks,” he mutters, and breaks away from the others.

“Sans?” Deacon calls after him but he ignores him, uninterested in explaining himself. He can’t explain himself.

The landline is fixed to the wall next to a picture window, overlooking an overgrown backyard. His steps are quick as he crosses the room to reach it.

“Sans, what are you doing?” Deacon says from behind him.

Gritting his teeth, Sans turns just enough to look at him. “i need to make sure hope and frisk are ok.”

He frowns, looking confused. “I’m sure they’re fine, what’s this all about?”

“don’t worry about it,” he says, turning away to reach for the phone.

His fingers are stopped by a green shield that pops up in his way. “You can’t call her from here,” Deacon says.

Balling his hand into a fist, Sans drops it to his side and casts a dark look at Deacon as his fear bubbles over into anger. Deacon flinches, swallowing hard, but he doesn’t lower his arm and his magic is still coiling around his fingers.

“get out of my way,” Sans growls.
“If they’re tracing Hope’s calls, it’ll lead them right back here to Morwenna,” he says, taking a few cautious steps forward, as if he were approaching something dangerous.

He supposes that he is. Deacon never used to look at him like that, like he’s afraid. When they’d argue, even at his most nervous he never gave the impression that he was scared of Sans. It gives him pause, and that nagging feeling of guilt eats away at his anger.

“i don’t care.”

Deacon’s eyes narrow and he shakes his head in disbelief, letting out a harsh breath. He drops his hand and his magic dissipates, closing the gap between them as frustration wins out over his fear. “Well you need to start,” he hisses, dropping his voice and jabbing a finger towards the living room. “Because they’re willing to risk their lives to help, so the least you could do is not make it fucking easier for the Vigilum to find them.”

Sans clenches his jaw, knowing that Deacon is right. He’s being selfish and stupid. If he were to call you and the Vigilum were to listen, not only would they know there was someone out here trying to keep in touch with you, but that he had managed to get out of Ebott. It would risk their entire plan—the entire plan that he and Deacon are currently missing out on.

Worrying about you is fucking with his head. Normally he wouldn’t be so impulsive and foolish. It shouldn’t take Deacon to tell him he’s being an idiot.

“fine,” Sans says. “you’re right.”

Deacon blinks, taken aback for a moment as he straightens his back and drops his arm to his side. “Yeah,” he says slowly. “I am.”

Sans rubs his forehead, bone scraping softly over bone as he hunches his shoulders. “we can’t stay here too long. i need to call hope.”

“What’s got you so worried? You were fine a few minutes ago.”

“just… trust me.”

“Oh, so who’s keeping secrets now?” he asks, bitter as he arches a brow.

“deacon—”

“Whatever. I’ll let them know that we need to get back before people start wondering where we are,” he mutters, then turns on his heel to head back to the living room.

Sans takes another look at the phone before following him.

“Wait, no, you’ve got your fingers all wrong. Loosen up, you’re all tense.”

Frisk scrunches their face and gives Chris an impatient look, adjusting the unwieldy acoustic guitar in their lap. Tossing his hair back over his shoulder, Chris demonstrates how to hold the neck better with the glossy, red electric guitar he’s holding.

“Their hands are still a little small for that, Chris,” you call from the kitchen where you’re making sandwiches.

“No way, Frisk can do this, can’t you bud?” he asks, giving them a bright grin.
Frisk can’t help but smile back. “Yeah! Giving up is for losers.”

“You got all that stubbornness from your mom. Definitely not from me.” He chuckles, shaking his head.

“Dad says it’s ‘determination’ not stubbornness,” they say, pursing their lips. “It sounds cooler.”

Chris’s smile slips a little, but he recovers quickly, bobbing his head up and down in agreement. “Totally. So let’s put that determination to use and show your mom that you can play.”

They take a quick glance at the clock and realize that it’s been a little over an hour since their last Save. They’ve been trying to keep on top of them ever since they forgot the day the Line closed, so they take a second to focus inward, to set this moment as a touchstone in the back of their mind. When they feel it lock into place, they realize that Chris is talking to them.

“You ready to do this?” he asks, rocking the guitar in his lap and giving them a look of anticipation.

Nodding, they press their fingers to the strings in a mimicry of how Chris’s are positioned.

But then you’re taking a seat on the floor next to them, setting down two plates in front of them. “How about you rock legends eat some lunch first?” you say with a fond smile, reaching out to ruffle Frisk’s hair.

They try to duck away but with the guitar in the way all they can do is fall backwards to try and escape.

“Whoa, whoa, hey be careful!” Chris yelps, reaching out and snatching the instrument out of their hands.

“It’s fine,” you tell him, leaning over to grab Frisk’s hand and hoist them back into a sitting position. “C’mom sweetie, eat your lunch. Then you two can go back to playing.”

“Thanks for making lunch,” Chris says as he sets the two guitars aside, then picks up his sandwich. Blindly he takes a bite, and as he chews he makes a delighted sound. He tries to talk but his mouth is full, so he hurries to swallow. “Holy sh- shoot,” he fumbles, looking over at Frisk. Frisk just blinks. Don’t they know that they’ve said a lot worse things than ‘shit’ in front of them before?

“When did you buy honey? You remembered I love peanut butter and honey. You’re amazing.”

“I think that’s taking it a little far,” you say, and Frisk isn’t sure how they feel about that happy look on your face. “And how could I forget your impassioned protests against peanut butter and jelly?”

“I think that’s taking it a little far,” you say, and Frisk isn’t sure how they feel about that happy look on your face. “And how could I forget your impassioned protests against peanut butter and jelly?”

“Overrated,” he says, and the two of you start to laugh.

Frisk tears into their sandwich —peanut butter and strawberry jelly, like they prefer— in mildly annoyed silence.

“So what are you going to teach Frisk to play?” you ask.

Chris’s smile turns mischievous, nudging Frisk with his elbow. Frisk makes a noise of protest and nudges him back, mouth too full of bread to say anything. “You’ll see,” Chris says.

“Something simple, I hope.”
“You Hope, me Chris,” he says in a funny voice, and Frisk can’t help but splutter into laughter, spraying crumbs.

“Oh my god, you butthead,” you groan, rolling your eyes. “I haven’t heard that one in ages.”

Chris reaches over to pat Frisk on the back while they struggle to swallow. After a second they manage, and look over at him to see concerned grey eyes watching them as they wipe their mouth with the back of their hand. “You okay, bud?”

Frisk just nods, looking away quickly. It’s just… too weird. He’s so nice to them, and you, and they don’t understand how he can just… be so nice. If he was nice, then why didn’t he stay? But then things would be different. They don’t want things to be different.

“You’re not supposed to breathe in your food,” you tell them, giggling.

“I wasn’t trying to,” they answer petulantly, stuffing their mouth with more of their lunch.

As they watch, you and Chris look at each other, smiling over your sandwiches while sitting there on the floor. Something passes between the two of you, something familiar. You look away first, reaching into your pocket for your phone, and when you aren’t looking his smile falters and he looks a little… sad.

After they’re done eating Chris hands them back the guitar and they get to work on learning chords. You’re right, their hands are kinda small, and it’s tricky to reach all the strings, but they manage okay. After about fifteen minutes they’ve got the very start of the song down pretty well, but they don’t recognize the tune.

But you do.

You look up from your phone where you’re sitting on the couch (you moved after you finished eating), mouth open for a second as your brow furrows in concentration. Then you give Chris an odd look, something happy and sad at the same time. “Is that…?”

Chris gives you a hopeful look in exchange, the corner of his mouth quirking to the side in a hesitant smile. He keeps playing, past the point that Frisk knows, and his smile grows as your expression softens. They’re not sure what’s going on, they don’t like how you’re looking at each other. It’s too similar to how you and Sans look at each other sometimes, just… sadder.

“You’re teaching Frisk that song you wrote for me,” you say softly. But something in your tone is off.

His smile grows just a little. “Just the tune.”

“Chris… can I…” You sigh, crossing your arms over your chest. “Can I talk to you outside?”

“Yeah. Sure. Whatever you want,” he agrees, setting his guitar up against the wall.

As the two of you get up to leave the apartment, Frisk can’t help the twist of anxiety in the pit of their stomach. What are you going to talk about? Why do you keep looking at each other funny? Why does Chris keep looking at you like that and why does it feel… wrong?

They don’t like it. Something about it scares them and they don’t want the two of you to spend any time alone together. They’re afraid of what might happen.

Loading comes so much easier to them when they’re scared.
“no, no, i just wanted to check on you, see how you guys are doing,” Sans says, forcing casualness into his voice. But he’s sure that his voice is strained and you can tell, you’re just not drawing any attention to it. Because you can’t with the risk of people listening.

“We’re fine. I mean… Frisk’s been a little clingy since lunch, but we’ve just been here at the apartment. They wouldn’t even leave my side when they were on the phone with Asriel. Chris was going to teach them some guitar, keep them busy, but they changed their mind,” you say. There’s a hint of concern in your voice, just enough for him to pick up on but not enough to be obvious to the casual listener.

Deacon is watching him, perched on the arm of the couch as Sans paces a path back and forth in front of the television. He could have gone home first, called you in private, but he’s not sure that Papyrus wouldn’t have ambushed him as soon as he stepped foot inside and he just… this couldn’t wait. It had already been almost two hours since the Load and he just needed to know you were okay. Whatever had happened would have come and gone by now, so whatever it was, Frisk must have taken care of it. He just wishes he could ask what it was.

Besides, he doesn’t think that Deacon is going to let what happened earlier go so easily. And as much as Sans could just teleport home and ignore him, he knows that he’s worried about you too. He deserves to know that you and Frisk are fine, at least.

What you’ve told him doesn’t really let him know what might have happened to cause the Load. The only bit that stands out is Frisk not spending time with Chris. “how’s the whole situation with chris?” he asks, doing his best to keep his tone even.

You let out a soft sigh, which Sans isn’t sure how to take. It’s not sad, or frustrated, or happy… He’s overthinking things. He doesn’t have a choice but to overthink things, because there’s only so much you can tell him. Between the Load and the two of you being kept away from him, it’s driving him nuts. When you start speaking, your voice is quieter than it was a moment ago. “It’s fine. I mean, it’s awkward sometimes. He’s trying to get to know Frisk, which is sweet of him. And it’s…” You sigh again. “I’m in the bathroom, I feel like I’m hiding. I wish this place had rooms. Um. You met Chris, he’s like a giant puppy. I just feel like I’m taking advantage of him, like I owe him something. And I don’t… Sans, I don’t want to hurt his feelings, but I think he’s getting a little too comfortable with us being here. You’d think he’d want us gone.”

“Well, for one, you don’t owe him anything. this is just a fraction of what he owes you for bailing on you and frisk,” Sans grumbles, and he catches sight of Deacon frowning a little as he rests his chin in his hand. At least when it comes to Chris, he and Deacon are in agreement. “two… what do you mean too comfortable?”

Another sigh. Oh, you don’t want to talk about this, but you feel like you have to. “He’s, um… It’s been almost a week and we’re sort of falling into a routine. It’s… It kind of reminds me of when Frisk and I first came to Snowdin,” you admit.
He doesn’t like that comparison. A lot had happened in that first week with you, and he can’t help the twinge of annoyance and, well, possessiveness that stirs in his ribcage. “not too much like it,” he mutters.

You let out a soft laugh, which is reassuring. “Sorry, that’s not really a good way to put it, is it hun? No, it’s just… you took us in and we didn’t know how long we were going to stay until we just… never left.”

“you’re not gonna be there forever,” he says, closing his eyes and covering his face with his hand.

“I know. I’m just worried that he’s going to be disappointed when we leave,” you say, and there’s a certain softness in your voice that makes him frown. You care about people too much. You let too many people in and it makes you too vulnerable. He doesn’t know how you manage.

“you’re not his anymore. you belong here at home,” he says, gritting his teeth. “he gave up his chance.”

“I know,” you say gently. Placatingly. If you were here you’d be comforting him properly, wrapping your arms around his neck and giving him that indulgent look like you think he’s being silly. He is being silly. “I think he knows too.”

“he better.”

“Sans.”

“babe.”

“I love you. Things are fine. He’s not doing anything wrong, I promise.”

It’s Sans’s turn to sigh. “i love you too. and i trust you. i don’t trust him, but i trust you.”

“Are you okay?”

No. He’s not okay. You’re not here with him, and tomorrow he’s supposed to help a group of mages free the governor from a goddamn hostage situation and he can’t even tell you. He can’t fucking tell you that he and Deacon might be putting themselves in danger, and that if things go badly… He doesn’t want to think about it, or the choices he might have to make. Choices that he’s sure you wouldn’t agree with.

“i’m ok,” he lies, and he thinks he does a pretty good job of it. “don’t worry about me, you just take care of yourself and frisk.”

“I’m going to worry about you,” you say, and he can hear the smile in your voice. “Because you’re a big numbskull and that’s what wives do. They worry about their husbands.”

He doesn’t even have to force the laugh. “i should let you go. i’m sure you wanna get out of the bathroom.”

“It’s literally just a tiny shower stall and a toilet. The only sink in this whole place is in the kitchenette,” you say, grumbling. “So yeah. I’ll talk to you again later, right?”

“yeah. of course you will. love you, babe.”

“Love you too, hun. Talk to you tonight.”

Sans listens to you hesitate, then end the call. He takes a second to gather himself before he slips
his phone in his pocket, to look over at Deacon where he knows he’s waiting. He arches a brow as their eyes meet, an expectant look on his face.

“Well?” Deacon asks, picking his chin up out of his hand and sitting up a little straighter. “Are you satisfied? Sounds like they’re fine.”

“yeah, they’re fine,” he admits, frowning. “false alarm, i guess.”

“What alarm?” he demands, pushing up onto his feet and crossing the small living room. “There was no alarm. There was you standing there, perfectly content, and then the next second you looked like you’d seen a ghost and you were about to do the stupidest damn thing. What the hell happened?”

“nothing,” he says.

“That wasn’t nothing. That was a big something and you know what? I want to know what it was,” Deacon says, squaring his shoulders and crossing his arms over his chest. “For someone who’s so big on honesty, you sure are a damn hypocrite.”

“it’s none of your business,” he mutters, shaking his head and gritting his teeth. He could teleport away, or walk out the door. But he doesn’t. Sans feels rooted to the spot, because he… He needs to talk to Deacon. He needs to do something about this hostility before tomorrow.

They’re going to be facing down the enemy and he doesn’t want to do that at the side of someone who thinks he hates him.

“You know what was none of your business?” Deacon snaps, uncrossing his arms so he can drag his fingers through his hair. It leaves him looking disheveled and flustered. “All of this shit. The Literatum, the fact that I’m a mage. It wasn’t your secret to know. But you do. You know just about everything about me, and what do I have to show for it? Not a goddamn thing. I don’t even have your trust, do I?”

“i’m sorry.”

Deacon blinks, staring at him for a second. “What?”

“i’m sorry,” he says again, letting out a haggard breath and pulling his hands out of his pockets. “for assuming the worst and attacking you. for… for trying to convince the others not to trust you. i was an ass and you didn’t deserve it.”

There’s a pause where the two of them just look at one another. Waiting.

Then Deacon’s frowning again. “That’s all you have to say? You tried to keep Bo from me! Hope had to sneak around behind your back to bring her to my impromptu fucking trial in the middle of the night! If it wasn’t for those two, who knows what would have happened, no thanks to you. What did you want Asgore to do to me, exactly? Throw me out of Ebott? Keep me prisoner? Execute me? I want to know how you thought this situation was going to end, Sans.”

Sans shakes his head, guilt weighing heavy on his shoulders. He can’t quite meet Deacon’s eyes. “i don’t know.”

“You don’t know. You just…” He lets out a weak laugh, turning away from him. “You almost ruined everything I had here, and you…” Whirling back around, Deacon jabs a finger in Sans’s direction. “You’re a fucking asshole, Sans. And this dissonance thing sounds like a bullshit excuse. I thought we were friends. I thought we moved past all that shit from Halloween and we were
"I'm sorry," he says again, weaker this time.

"If you're really sorry, then trust me like I've trusted you, and tell me what the fuck happened back there." His glare fades into something desperate and exhausted. Like he's tired of fighting.

Sans is tired of fighting too. He’s tired of the defensive barbs that he knows he deserves, the stinging comments that let him know that Deacon is still hurting from what he did. What he’s still doing. And right now, he really does think he can trust Deacon with this secret. He knows that you would, and that helps. If there’s anybody he should be able to count on to protect Frisk’s secret, it should be the guy who saved their life. The guy who outed himself and his allies to save his kid’s life and to help bring the two of you home.

Asgore said the dissonance was in part because their Souls are too similar. Maybe that should tell him what he needs to know.

"If I tell you this, it’s between us. No talking to your mage pals," Sans says slowly, catching Deacon’s eye and holding it. "Me, Hope, Frisk, and Asriel are the only ones that know any of this. Got it?"

"Frisk and Asriel?" he asks, confusion furrowing his brow.

"Frisk and Asriel are the key part of all this," he says. "Now, do you understand?"

Deacon doesn’t hesitate. He nods. "Yeah, okay. No telling Bo?"

"Not even Bo. I’m serious, I haven’t told Papyrus, or Asgore and Toriel, or anyone else. I’m trusting you with this if you promise me that you’ll keep this secret," he says, searching his face for any sign of doubt.

He doesn’t see any.

"I promise," he says, curious and concerned. "So why did you think that something might have happened to Hope and Frisk?"

"Because Frisk can… manipulate time, and something happened to make them do it while we were talking to your mage pals." He knows it’s not enough information, but this initial concept is what he needs Deacon to grasp first.

Deacon is, understandably, staring at him like he’s grown a second head. "Like… a few seconds? Morwenna can mess with time a little bit; speed herself up, and she says she can go back about five seconds. I wasn’t sure if Frisk was a mage, after the stuff that happened at the zoo and when we were camping, it was like their magic just plummeted for no reason. But if you’re saying they can — How could you tell? Frisk wasn’t anywhere near us, how do you know they did anything?"

"No, not a few seconds," he says, bracing himself. "It was more like half an hour. And I—"

"No. Now you’re just making shit up," Deacon blurts out, his mouth pressing into a hard line. "If you didn’t want to tell me the truth, you could have just said so. You don’t need to come up with this lie, which is just… What you’re saying is impossible."

"I’m not making it up, I’m telling you the truth," Sans says, frustrated. "Those moments you remember with their magic were times that they loaded a save point. A, uh, fixed point in time that they can go back to."
"Stop, Sans. No one, let alone a seven-year-old, is capable of what you’re saying,” he snaps. He shakes his head, looking away. “There’s no magic, anywhere, that can accomplish that. No mage is that powerful.”

“frisk’s been able to do it since they fell into the underground. i don’t think it has anything to do with being a mage or not.”

Deacon looks angry now. He’s glaring, hand balled into a fist at his side. “Why are you trying to keep up with this lie?”

“i lived through three years of resets. three years of the same handful of days over and over again without knowing why, until i finally got to the point where i just stopped hoping that i’d ever see the end of the fucking week,” he growls, making Deacon flinch. “so instead of calling me a liar, how about you let me explain? you wanted to know, and i’m trying to tell you. so how about you give me some of that trust you insisted you have?”

“Fine. Whatever, go ahead,” he says, turning away from him to go take a seat on the couch. He fixes Sans with a dubious look as he crosses his arms over his chest.

Sitting down isn’t a bad idea, he thinks. Because this is going to take a bit of time. He pulls out his phone as he takes the other end of the couch, texting Papyrus to let him know that he’ll be a bit longer getting home. At least now if anything happens he has a way to get in touch with everyone.

Sans tells Deacon everything that he told you. That he and Frisk and Asriel are the only ones that remember the manipulations in time, about the accident that he still can’t remember but knows is the cause of his own persistent memory. In order to explain about the new limitations on Frisk’s power, his and Asriel’s theory that splitting their Soul from Chara’s is the root of the problem, he has to tell Deacon everything. Well, not everything. Not the truth about the bad timelines. He won’t tell him anything that you don’t know yourself. But he has to try and explain that there was a second Soul within Frisk’s body, and that they gave it to Asriel to bring him back from being Flowey.

To Deacon’s credit, he doesn’t interrupt. He just sits there and listens, his look of suspicion slipping into stunned disbelief and then finally to something like awe. To finally know the full extent of what you and Sans and Frisk have been through, to understand the bond between Frisk and Asriel…

By the time he’s done, Deacon doesn’t look like he thinks he’s lying anymore.

“Holy shit,” Deacon breathes, once Sans falls silent.

“yeah. that’s one way to put it,” he agrees.

“You didn’t need to ask me to keep it a secret, there’s no way that anyone would believe me,” he says, resting his forehead in his hand as he leans forward over his knees. “That’s… I’m not sure i believe it. I mean, I do, but then I try to sit here and wrap my brain around it…”

“i get it.”

“Frisk can turn back time,” he says flatly, staring at the floor.

“yep.”

“And Hope doesn’t remember any of it either?”
“nope.”

“What must that be like as a parent?”

Sans can’t help it. He starts to laugh, because what else can he do? “that’s the thing that stands out to you?”

“Well that and a whole number of other things. Like, can we talk about Asriel being an evil flower for like, five seconds? Because that is some of the weirdest shit I’ve heard since coming to this damn mountain.”

“knock yourself out,” Sans says, and despite the fact that he just told Deacon about some of the worst things he’s been through in his life, he’s smiling. Because he’s also told him some of the best, and the end of that long story of what happened in the Underground is intrinsically linked to you. “but do you have anything to drink? my throat’s a little dry.”

Deacon opens his mouth to speak, halfway through a gesture towards the kitchen before he rolls his eyes. “You don’t have a throat,” he counters.

“doesn’t mean i can’t get thirsty,” he says, pushing off the couch and to his feet. “you can ask me your questions in the kitchen, can’t you buddy?”

“Oh, so I’m ‘buddy’ again, now?” he asks. Sans isn’t sure if the hint of bitterness he hears in Deacon’s voice is in his head, or maybe just out of reflex, but he refuses to rise to it either way. At least for now, he still feels like he deserves it.

“sure, if you wanna be,” Sans says, sufficiently casual.

They regard each other for a moment, and as silence settles over them Sans realizes he’s not sure how Deacon is going to respond. He’s also not sure how he feels about that. But the seconds pass and something in the human’s expression softens before he finally gives a curt nod.

“Yeah,” Deacon says, running his hand through his hair and looking off to the side. But despite the forced casualness that echoes his own, there’s a smile he’s trying to hide as he refuses to meet Sans’s eyes. “I want things to go back to how they were before the whole mage thing. I want us to be friends again.”

“i don’t think it’s ever gonna go back to how things were before then. but i don’t think that’s a bad thing,” he says, and now Deacon is looking at him, confusion plain on his face. “it’s a hell of a lot more complicated, but with all these secrets out of the way… i think it’ll be better. we’ll be better friends.”

“Maybe we can talk Hope into making us our own friendship bracelets,” Deacon teases, and that’s when Sans knows that things are going to be okay.

“you keep that up and you can keep your questions to yourself,” he retorts.

Deacon just laughs.

Once Frisk is asleep in the loft bed you manage to slip away and back down the ladder to the rest of the apartment. When you told Sans that they were being clingy, that was a bit of an understatement. They insisted that you go to bed with them, and there wasn’t much you could do to argue without starting a fight. So you decided to pick your battles and just do as they asked.
At least until they were unconscious.

Chris is sitting on the floor with his back against the couch, plucking at his guitar in the dim glow of the television. He glances up at you as your feet hit the floor, giving you a weak smile as you stretch your legs across the sofa, facing him. “They finally asleep?” he asks quietly, arching a brow. The light from the TV catches on his piercing, making it shine.

“Yeah,” you sigh. “I dunno what got into them today.”

He lays the guitar across his lap, leaning back to rest his arms on the seat of the couch. His forearm brushes up against your calf, but neither of you move away. “Do you think…” He clears his throat. “Did I do something wrong? Like, one second they were all pumped to learn some guitar, and then the next they wouldn’t even talk to me.”

“They’re still…” You want to say ‘adjusting’ but they shouldn’t have to adjust. This isn’t your new life, this isn’t your new home. This is just temporary. “This is all still really weird for them, Chris. And kids Frisk’s age, they can be kind of moody.”

“Oh,” he says softly, picking at the couch cushion under his hand. He looks away from you, his expression distant for a moment. “I guess I really don’t know jack shit about kids their age. Or just… kids in general.”

“You haven’t really had much reason to learn.”

You’re not sure that was the right thing to say, because he frowns and pushes his hair out of his eyes. Most of it just falls back where it was a second ago. You watch the tiny, minute shifts in his face, a clear sign of some internal debate. Seconds pass in heavy silence before he finds his voice again. “I should have,” he mutters, then looks at you. He looks apprehensive, uncertain. You feel a little anxious about what he has to say. “Can I ask you something? About us?”

You swallow. “I… Chris, I don’t—”

“Please,” he says, and that pleading look is one you have a hard time refusing.

“Okay,” you sigh, resting your cheek in your hand as you cross your arm over your chest.

“If I…” He trails off, hesitates, then frowns and pushes forward. “If I had come back, before you and Frisk disappeared, could we have had this? I know that this is all just temporary, I’m not that much of an idiot, but I feel like…” Chris winces, looking down at where his arm is still resting next to your leg. Then he meets your eyes again. “I feel like this is something we could have had. For real.”

“Please,” he says, and that pleading look is one you have a hard time refusing.

“You can’t sit there and play the what-if game with our past, because no matter what it’s already done.”

“I know,” he groans, shifting on the floor to turn and face you. “But you’re just so… you’re so cool and grown up and watching you with Frisk… I can’t help but feel like I missed out on having this awesome family.”

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“This person that I am right now?” you say, clutching the locket around your neck. The locket with the picture of your real family inside. “I’m only her because I fell into the Underground. Because I finally took it upon myself to get out of that house, on my own strength, and become a better person. When we were together, I always hoped that you’d rescue me from my mother. It wasn’t until I had no one left that I realized I could rescue myself. So maybe, if you had come back, we
might have had something. I can’t deny that. But I wouldn’t be me.”

“Oh,” he says, and while he looks a little disappointed, you think there’s some understanding there too.

Hesitating for a moment, you relax your grip on yourself, holding out a hand to him. Chris looks at it, then up at your face, then takes it in his own. His fingers are calloused, his hand is wider and bigger than yours and still a little familiar. You squeeze him and give him a weak smile. “I’m sorry that I can’t be who you want me to be, Chris. I’m sorry that your parents took so many of your choices away from you. But I’m not sorry about the life I have now, and my husband that I love and our family. I wouldn’t go back to change anything, and you need to let those what-ifs go or they’re going to just hold you back.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, looking down at his knees. “I didn’t want to make things uncomfortable. I wouldn’t ever do anything to pressure you, or try to make things more than they are—”

“I know you wouldn’t.”

“I guess I just… needed to know,” he finishes with a sigh.

“Do you feel any better?” you ask gently, tilting your head to the side.

Chris rests his head on his arm, against the couch. He gives you a pathetic look and a weak smile. “Not really.”

“You’ll be okay, butthead,” you tell him, squeezing his hand again. “Things won’t ever be like how they used to be, but that doesn’t mean we can’t figure out something new.”
Deacon isn’t sure what he was expecting when he demanded to know why Sans thought you were in danger. Maybe some kind of monster sixth (seventh? does sensing Souls count as the sixth?) sense since the two of you had gotten Soul-married. But no, he sure as hell wasn’t expecting ‘my seven-year-old can alter time on a massive, unbelievable scale’ to be the answer. Stacked on top of that is the fact that their current power is less than what it used to be, now they’re no longer possessed by Toriel and Asgore’s old adopted kid that died. (And Asriel died and then got turned into a vicious flower that almost killed you.)

And Asgore …

Now Deacon understands the full scope of what you meant that night when you stood up for him, when you said that the monsters were keeping secrets. Six dead kids… he’s not sure how to absorb that information. He’s not really sure how to absorb any of this, but he has to try. But now he gets the strained relationship between the king and queen, why Sans acts standoffish around Asgore. Between those six kids and the fact that he’d…

Shit, Asgore had killed you. How could you be friends with these people that had tried to kill you, and one that actually did? Even if you didn’t remember that last one, Sans and Frisk did.

The look on Sans’s face when he told him about that part; what happened the night that the Barrier fell. He can tell that it still haunts him. Having to see you die, Deacon can’t even imagine what that must have been like. He doesn’t want to imagine it. Shaking his head, he pushes the thought away.

Deacon wishes he could talk to you. You have that true outsider’s perspective on all of this stuff, and you’d lived it. For now he just has to trust in your judgement, in the fact that these people are your friends. That you send Frisk to spend weekends with Toriel and Asriel, and that he knows Frisk has a good relationship with Asgore.

Despite six dead kids on his conscience.

One thing is for certain though, about all of this. The Vigilum would kill to get their hands on a kid with Frisk’s raw power, and the thought scares the crap out of him. Now it’s his duty to help you and Sans keep Frisk safe from anyone that might try to abuse that magic. Now that he knows, how could he not? He cares about them, about your whole family, and as long as he can help, he will.

Because if you’re like a sister to him, then that makes Frisk his… uh. His nonbinary equivalent of a niece or nephew. Shit, he should look that up. Maybe Papyrus knows, he’s their actual uncle. Whatever. It makes Frisk family.

First thing’s first, though. He and Sans (and the Literatum) need to bring you and Frisk home, where you belong. And to do that, they get to do some serious covert-ops bullshit that he’s pretty sure he’s not trained for. None of them are. And the last time the Literatum tried to do anything
like this against the Vigilum they ended up with two dead people and, well, almost complete failure. He’s sure Vanessa appreciates what they did, but it had gone badly enough to swear Morwenna and Grant off of doing pretty much anything ever again.

And now they’re suddenly responsible for rescuing the governor and his family, so that he can undo all the changes he did in regards to Ebott. It’s intimidating, and frankly more than a little scary. But they’re doing something. Finally doing something with all this power and knowledge that they have instead of just sitting around twiddling their thumbs. Grant may insist that heroes don’t exist, that good and evil are just words in books (books that are just a waste of time, that don’t matter), but you know what? Now he has the chance to do some damn good for the people that matter to him. To the community that had taken him in and accepted him and given him more than the Literatum ever did.

Maybe, for them (for you), he can be a hero.

He just better not be a tragic one, because he’s got a beautiful girlfriend who needs him to come back safely.

Said beautiful girlfriend is currently running her fingers through his hair, letting him use her lap as a pillow as they watch (or in his case, don’t watch) TV. If he wasn’t so distracted by everything right now he’d probably be nodding off. He’s comfortable, the feel of her nails against his scalp is soothing, and there’s a certain security in just being here with her in her apartment.

Deacon has been spending the majority of his time here instead of at home, and she doesn’t seem to mind. Right now he still can’t work, the hotel is just a couple blocks away from her apartment, and it’s just… less lonely, even when she’s gone. This place is full of her things, her personality, her life. It doesn’t feel quite so empty.

It’s strange, how easy it is for him to feel lonely now. It never used to bother him before. Well, it’s hard to know what you’re missing when you’ve never had it before.

“You’ve been awfully quiet,” Bo says, tilting her head so she can look down at him.

Of course he has. Everything that’s on his mind is something he can’t talk to her about. You and Frisk and time travel, the fact that tomorrow night he’s going to be putting his life on the line for her freedom… He can’t tell her any of it. The first part because he promised Sans that he wouldn’t, and he can’t break that. The second because he won’t let her get involved. If things go badly, if he’s caught, or killed, and the plan fails, he can’t let it get back to her. If he can spare her any sort of punishment for his behavior, he’ll do it. Even if it means lying to her; if it means sneaking off somehow in the middle of the night to do it.

“I’m just basking in the pre-coital glow,” he says, rolling onto his back, shifting to get himself comfortable. Catching her eye, he smiles.

Bo arches a brow, a grin pulling at her lips. “Isn’t the phrase ‘post-coital glow’?”

“I’m just being preemptive,” he says.

“I think the word you’re looking for is ‘premature’,,” she counters, eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Hopefully not. That would be disappointing,” he says, which earns him a soft laugh. “No, I’m just lying here, thinking about what I’d like to do with you. It’s very satisfying.”

She pushes his bangs back off his forehead, then traces the side of his face with her fingertips. When she catches the side of his neck he can’t help but shiver. “Oh? And what are you thinking
about exactly?”

Well, he should have seen that coming. Uh, shit. Instead of grasping for ideas he just gives her a wolfish (will he ever be able to take that word seriously again?) smirk. “I think I’d rather show you,” he murmurs, and even though he hadn’t been thinking about it a moment ago, the way her mouth curves into a rather pleased smile gets his mind turning in the right direction. It doesn’t take his body long to follow. “If you’ll let me.”

“Oh, are there going to be diagrams? Should I take notes?” she teases, and he can’t help but laugh.

“We talked about this, Bo,” he says, sitting up and turning to face her. They never break eye contact, watching each other as he leans in close. “About the teacher thing.”

“Baby, I didn’t mean it like that,” she says, giggling as he bypasses her mouth to start pressing kisses against her throat. She tips her head back, letting out a soft, pleased sound and she reaches up to bury her fingers in his hair. Oh, that feels good. “Though now that you mention it…”

Deacon doesn’t give her the chance to continue that thought, instead moving in for a proper kiss. Her grip on his hair tightens, and he lets out a quiet groan into her mouth. The satisfied hum she makes in response is encouragement enough to slip a hand under her shirt, hooking around her side and pulling her up against his chest. “Maybe I’ve always had a secret waitress fantasy,” he says, tracing his thumb along the curve of her waist. “If we’re talking about roleplaying.”

“I think you just like it when people feed you,” she retorts, and he barks out a laugh against his will.

“You’ve got me all figured out,” he murmurs, pressing lingering kisses slowly along the line of her jaw. “I’m just here for the good food. And right now, I could really go for some mutton.”

Bo dissolves into a fit of giggles so overwhelming that he can’t help but laugh too. He has to admit, it’s hard to take that line seriously. Once he manages to stifle his laughter, he tugs the loose collar of her shirt to the side and nips at her shoulder for emphasis. It just makes her laugh harder, trying to squirm away. “No, oh my god, you’re so awful!” she manages to exclaim as she tries to catch her breath.

“This is payback for pretending you were cooking lamb that one time,” he grumbles against her skin. He slips his hand higher up her back, groping for her bra while she’s distracted.

If she catches onto him she doesn’t say anything, instead thrusting her own hand beneath his shirt in exchange. He arches his back at her touch, shivering as she traces the muscles in his back. It makes him fumble with the hooks of her bra for a second before he manages to pinch them open. This is better than worrying about things outside of his control, beyond his realm of understanding. Being here with her, laughing, being happy while he still has the chance— No don’t think like that... There’s still plenty of chances. There’s still a future with her, here in Ebott, especially now that his secret is out. He doesn’t have to leave, he’s not going to be sent away, and he sure as hell isn’t going to let anything happen to him tomorrow night.

Not if he can help it. At least, he hopes that he can help it. Because it would be some kind of cruel irony to have gone through so much to keep what he’s found, only to be snatched away from it when he’s trying to protect it. It would be poetic in the shittiest way possible. But that would be just his luck, wouldn’t it?

“If you’re going to unhook my bra, the least you could do is take my shirt off,” Bo says, reminding
him that he’s in the middle of something important. “This is just awkward.”

He pulls back, looking down at the the lump of her freed bra underneath her shirt. Yeah, that’s a little weird. “Sorry, let me fix that,” he says, giving her a mischievous smile as he takes hold of the hem of her shirt and pulls it up over her head with her help. She slides her bra off her arms on her own, tossing it over the arm of the sofa.

For a moment he just looks at her. The curve of her mouth as she gives him that coy smile, the way she shifts her arms in just the right way to press her breasts together as she knows he’s watching. But that tiny voice in the back of his mind tells him this might be the last time he gets to see her like this. That it might be the last time they’re together. He tries to squash it down, to ignore it, but that surge of fear rises up in the back of his throat and threatens to choke him.

“How’s Deacon?” Bo says, and that concerned tone in her voice tells him he wasn’t able to keep those feelings off his face. He betrayed his own thoughts before he could catch them and lock them away. He’s getting worse about that, especially with Bo. It’s so easy to let his guard down now, to let her in. But he can’t let her see this. He can’t tell her that he’s afraid he’s going to leave Ebott and might never come back.

But he forces a smile, shaking his head. “You’re still just as stunning as ever,” he says.

There’s a moment where she hesitates, like she’s not sure if she should believe him. But whether she decides to or makes the conscious decision to let it go, she cups his cheek and leans in to kiss him.

He’s lying to her, keeping the plan a secret to protect her.

It’s not because he’s afraid to admit out loud that this might get him killed.

Chapter End Notes

This WAS supposed to be a smut chapter, but it wouldn't have ended on the right note, so... Apologies guys. We had four smut chapters in ACT One and we're going to just have the four in ACT Two. <3
‘We’re best friends no matter what, right?’

Deacon stares at the message, typed up and ready to send. He still has a couple hours until Sans is going to come over so they can head to Morwenna’s house, and with Bo at work he finds himself sitting alone in his house. He’s in his makeshift office, sitting on the small twin bed, rubbing the seams of the quilt between his fingers. Why is he in this room, out of all the rooms in his house? Why isn’t he in his bedroom, or the living room? He could be watching TV or eating a snack or any number of things.

Instead he’s in the one room of the house that has most of his sentimental belongings from before coming to Ebott. His college diploma, framed on the wall. Shelves full of books. One of the few good things about being adopted by Grant is that he’d been able to have an actual collection of books. He wasn’t being shuffled from home to home, limited in what he could take with him. Very few things traveled with him as a child, but the quilt under his hand had.

When he was six, the nurse who took care of him in the NICU after he was born made a point to find him. His foster parents at the time were kind enough to agree to let her visit. She made him the quilt and brought pictures of when he was a baby. He remembers feeling uncomfortable, looking at that tiny infant inside a plastic box, a tube taped to his face, another fixed to his red, too-small chest. It wasn’t until he was older that he wondered if she was allowed to take pictures of her patients (probably not) but he still has them tucked away somewhere. Someplace safe. She told him how sorry she was that his mother never came back for him, that she would hold him when it was safe to take him out of his incubator because the other preemies had their parents to touch them and babies needed to be touched. He didn’t have anyone.

He wishes he had asked her why she chose green, if maybe she knew somehow. But he knows that was the day he decided green was his favorite color.

‘We’re best friends no matter what, right?’

The message is still sitting there, waiting for him to either erase it or send it. He keeps letting his mind wander, because it’s easier than coming to terms with the fact that soon enough he’ll be leaving Ebott and he can’t be certain he’ll be coming back. And even if he does, he’s not sure it’ll be in the same state that he left.

The question he has posed for you seems simple enough. You won’t understand it how he means it, he knows that. But he feels like he needs to ask it anyway. The real questions he can’t ask. ‘Will you still think I’m your best friend when I’m taking your husband with me into someplace dangerous? If he gets hurt because of me?’ ‘Are we still best friends if I come back with someone’s blood on my hands? If Sans has blood on his?’ ‘Can you accept that I’m doing what’s necessary to help you?’

Deacon sends the message, then sets down his phone and runs his hand through his hair. You
might be asleep already, he’s not sure. You might not even see the text until you wake up the next
morning, and by then the entire situation may have changed. You might be getting the good news,
or… or they might be—

His phone chimes. He picks it back up.

‘Oh god, what did you do this time?’ Deacon can’t help it, he smiles and shakes his head. He can
feel the exasperation in your tone, can practically hear your voice as if you were sitting next to him.
Another chime. ‘Is it Sans? Are you and Sans playing nice?’

He doesn’t immediately answer. Whatever he might say will ring false, and in this moment he just
doesn’t have it in him to lie. His hand goes to the green and burgundy bracelet around his wrist,
fingers tracing over the knotted threads. As he stares at his phone, after a minute or two, he gets
another text.

‘Of course we’re best friends. Is something wrong?’

Now you’re worrying. He doesn’t want you to worry, that won’t do anyone any good. Whatever he
was lacking that was keeping him from lying he now has in spades. ‘Everything’s fine. Just being a
mushy loser.’ ‘Look at what you’ve done to me.’

‘I have that effect on people.’

Yeah. You really do.

It if had just been Deacon you wouldn’t have suspected anything. You would have thought that he
was just feeling lonely, or a little down, or even anxious. After a week of this you couldn’t blame
him. It’s starting to wear you down, too.

But it’s not just Deacon.

“i know i called earlier, before frisk went to bed—”

“Hun, it’s fine,” you murmur, keeping your voice down because yes Frisk is asleep in the bed
above you. Chris glances over at you and excuses himself to the bathroom, to give you some
privacy, you think. He’s been surprisingly understanding since your conversation last night. “I was
just reading on my phone, what’s up?”

“i just… wanted to hear your voice again. tell you that i miss you and i love you,” he says, and you
can tell right away that the ease of his tone is forced. It worries you.

“I miss you and love you too,” you tell him, pulling your knees up to your chest and tucking your
hair behind your ear.

“i don’t want to talk to him myself, but could you, uh, thank chris for me? for helping you out. he
didn’t have to do that, and—”

“I will,” you say gently, and this is worrying you more than Deacon’s texts ever could. You want
to ask Sans what’s going on, why he’s talking like he has to take this opportunity now, like it’s…
like he’s not sure he’ll have another chance.

Dread is heavy in your chest and you squeeze your eyes shut, fighting to keep your voice even.
Whatever you might suspect is going on, you can’t accidentally give them away to whoever might
be listening. You can’t let on that you think something is about to happen. His letter said that they
were trying to make things right, that they were working with Deacon’s mages. You just wish you knew what that meant.

“thanks, babe,” he says. “maybe, once all this is over, we can all sit down and talk. figure some things out.”

“I’m sure he’d like that.”

There’s a pause where neither of you are quite sure what to say. But you don’t want to get off the phone, and neither it seems does he. “what were you reading?”

“A book,” you say, letting yourself sound playful. Because it’s preferable to sounding worried.

“yeah?” he replies, picking up on your tone. “is it one with sex stuff?”

You snort, hiding your hand behind your face and smiling. Your reaction earns a chuckle from your husband. “No ,” you say. “Oh my god, I don’t want to have this conversation again.”

“heh. then what’s it about?”

“... Happy stuff,” you mumble, your smile slipping a little as you let out a soft sigh. “Cuz I could really use some happy stuff right now.”

“yeah,” he says. “tell me about the book. i’m curious, and i just… wanna talk to you.”

You tell him. Chris comes back from the bathroom but doesn’t interrupt, just leaving you be as you spend the next hour on the phone with Sans, explaining the book to him. Because neither of you are ready to say goodbye.

Sans didn’t get the chance to say goodbye to Papyrus. He didn’t trust himself not to give it all away, to be too obvious that something was bothering him. Knowing what was coming just made him anxious, which was throwing him off. Instead he spent most of the day with his brother, pestering him and annoying him with stupid jokes. He even managed to get him with the whoopie cushion, which he hadn’t been able to do in months. Papyrus’s frustrated scream was more than worth the effort.

So when his brother said that he’d be going to see Mettaton tonight, he wasn’t in any place to protest. What would he say? And he didn’t want Papyrus doting on him all night, it would make slipping away too difficult. Sans told him to have fun and watched him go.

At least if anything happens to him, he won’t be alone. He’ll have Mettaton. And the others too; he can’t imagine Undyne not trying her hardest to help him, and Toriel would be there in a heartbeat. And… Sans knows you’d do whatever you could, too. From wherever you were.

“What’s got you looking so grim?”

Sans glances to his right where Deacon is sitting, watching him. They’re in the backseat of Grant’s car, the orange light painted across the human’s face coming and going as they pass the street lamps on the freeway. He’s rubbing a thumb over his tattoo, arms crossed over his chest and slouched in his seat.

The radio is playing, just low enough that he can’t make out the words, but the energetic country music seems an odd juxtaposition to what they’re preparing to do. “other than the obvious?” Sans grumbles, arching a brow.
Deacon’s mouth twitches and he tilts his head to the side. “Yeah, okay. Stupid question,” he says.

Sans sighs, tipping his skull back against the headrest. “Just thinking about papyrus. and hope, and frisk. and… everybody.”

“Yeah. Makes sense,” he says, glancing past Sans out the window. His eyes flick back to his. “I can relate. I don’t know how Bo couldn’t tell something was up. Maybe she did and she just didn’t say anything.”

“I think Hope could tell when I talked to her. She just couldn’t say anything,” Sans says.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

“Both, I guess.”

Silence falls back over the car, settling thick in the space between them. There’s a sort of camaraderie there now, again, won through this mutual experience and shared secrets, but everything isn’t perfect. Some wounds are still fresh and Sans isn’t sure that Deacon completely trusts him again. But they’re in a better place than they were before, and that’s enough. It’s got to be.

“We’ll be there soon,” Grant says, reaching for the radio and muting it. As though it was loud enough to warrant it in the first place. “Deacon, there’s something we need to talk about—”

“Grant, we talked about this,” Morwenna cuts in, shifting in the passenger seat to face him. “And the answer was no.”

“Deacon, we need to take this opportunity to eliminate Avery Fletcher. This isn’t just about getting justice, this is about—”

“That’s all it is. You wanting to get revenge, and don’t you try to rope Deacon into your personal vendetta,” she snaps.

“He’s a murderer, Morwenna. And a key member of the Vigilum. If we remove him from the equation—”

“Just fucking say what you mean. Just say kill.”

“Fine,” he snaps back. “If we kill Avery, we’ll be putting part of the Vigilum into chaos. It opens up a chance to shift the balance of power in their infrastructure, according to Vanessa. Who is also on board with the plan to kill Avery, considering that he and his men kidnapped her as a child.”

“Kill him if that’s what you want, but that’s not Deacon’s business. Haven’t you pushed your own agenda on him long enough?”

Sans glances over at Deacon, who’s staring down at his arms. His thumb is still rubbing at his tattoo, tracing the forks of lightning as his jaw tenses.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Grant demands.

“What exactly do you want me to do?” Deacon says, loud and firm as Morwenna opens her mouth to retort. She turns in her seat, looking back at him with concern as Grant focuses on the road.

“I want you to be ready to do what’s necessary if it comes down to you, son. I need you to be prepared to help us kill Avery Fletcher.”
The car goes quiet again, and Sans watches Deacon swallow hard. He glances over at him, their eyes meeting, and the human looks… uncertain. Scared. He opens his mouth and then closes it again, looking down at his knees.

“Deacon isn’t a killer,” Morwenna says quietly, her tone serious. “You can’t ask him to do that.”

“He isn’t my first choice to do the deed, but we don’t know how things are going to go in there. We need as many people prepared to handle it as we can,” Grant says. “This needs to be a priority.”

“Our priority is rescuing the governor and his family,” she cuts in.

“What about the other Vigilum? The… the ‘initiates’? What are we doing about them? If you hadn’t rescued Vanessa she’d be one of them,” Deacon says, and Sans thinks he looks a little paler than normal. It’s hard to tell in the orange light from the street lights.

“If we can disable them, fine. Maybe, with Avery out of the picture, they can be reasoned with. But we have to keep in mind that they’ve been raised to do their dirty work. It’s probably too late for them,” Grant says, his voice grave. Not cruel, or pleased, just stern and resigned. Ready to do what must be done. “They’re victims in this, but that can’t excuse that they are our enemies. Now, Deacon, I never heard an answer. Can I count on you to do what must be done?”

Deacon’s grip on himself tightens, his fingers pressing into his skin. Sans can’t picture Deacon killing someone, not even someone who sounds as twisted as Avery Fletcher. He doesn’t even have any offensive magic! His magic is strictly limited to protection, to healing for fuck’s sake. Morwenna has the right of it, Deacon isn’t a killer.

But Sans… Sans is.

“i can take care of it,” Sans says, and Deacon’s head jerks up as he gives him a wide-eyed stare. “if it comes to it, i’ll kill him.”

“No, Sans, you don’t have to—”

“buddy,” he says with a reassuring look. “i’ll do whatever it takes to get my family back.”
The governor’s mansion is smaller than Sans thought it would be. With a fancy title like ‘governor’, some part in the back of his head pictured something grandiose with pristine white walls and maybe even some pillars. Something historic. Instead, it’s just like any other big, expensive house in the area with a big wrought-iron fence and a manicured lawn.

It only takes Howard a few minutes to phase through the fence and disable the security system to let everyone inside. When asked if there was any trouble, he states nonchalantly that he had to knock out two guards at the front door.

Without cameras to worry about, the group makes their way inside the house. It’s dark and quiet, and in the corner are the two aforementioned guards. Their hands are bound behind their backs with zip-ties. Howard and Vanessa disappear for a few moments to check the first floor, and come back with twin expressions of confusion.

“There’s no one down here,” Howard whispers, looking at Morwenna.

“I think I felt people upstairs,” Vanessa adds, her attention on Grant. “But it was quiet, I think they might be sleeping. Or the vaulted ceilings are fucking with my range.”

“Let’s head up then,” Grant says, heavy brows set into a frown as he eyes the staircase.

“Do you think Avery is even here?” Vanessa says, falling into step beside Grant as they head further into the foyer. “It’s the middle of the night, if he’s in charge he might have just left a lieutenant.”

“He better be here.”

“Stay focused,” Morwenna hisses, following them. “Our priority is making sure the governor and his family is safe. If he isn’t here that doesn’t affect our job.”

Maria pushes her way towards the front, flexing her fingers as they climb the stairs. Deacon stays at Sans’s side, casting nervous looks around them. He’s been quiet since they arrived, and he thinks he sees little flickers of green ghosting around his fingers. His magic is lurking just under the surface, waiting to be called.

Sans knows the feeling. He can feel the crackle of his own humming in his bones as the tension builds and builds in his body. There’s going to be a fight, there has to be, and he just wishes it would happen so he can get it over with. All this waiting for the last day has been drawing him tight and much more of this is just going to make him snap.

“This has been too easy,” Deacon mutters under his breath.

“The guards in the house are here to keep the family in, not intruders out,” Howard whispers, glancing over his shoulder. “I expected more on the first floor, but if they’re keeping a light crew,
it makes sense.”

“I guess…”

When they make it to the second floor there’s no guards in the hall. Two rooms, an office and a home theater, are open and empty. They look at each other, uncertain of what to do.

“Something’s wrong.” Deacon insists, catching Vanessa’s eye. “Is there any way they could have known we were coming?”

“No,” she says. “They couldn’t have had any idea!”

“Can you sense anyone?” Morwenna asks her, glancing at the closed doors around them. “You said you thought you might have.”

She grits her teeth, eyes darting from room to room. After a moment she gestures down the hall. “There’s something down there. It’s faint.”

“I’ll go check it out,” Howard says, rubbing his chin. “You guys stay here.”

“Be careful, Min,” Morwenna says. “I’m with Stuart, I think something is wrong.”

As he looks at her his body starts to melt into a very faint, barely visible cyan blur. If Sans hadn’t seen him disappear he wouldn’t even know he was there. “They’re not going to see me coming,” he says.

They wait in silence as he goes, and Sans watches Howard’s transparent body slip through the door at the end of the hall. “that’s a hell of a thing,” Sans says to no one in particular.

“He can’t keep doing that, he’s burning himself out,” Deacon says, catching Morwenna’s eye.

“Min knows his limits,” she says. She doesn’t look at him, instead focusing intently on the door. “And we don’t have much of a choice. We can’t go in there blind.”

“Rushing in would give us the element of surprise, though,” Maria says off to the side.

“uh, shouldn’t Howard be back by now?” Sans asks, and everyone looks at him. “he was just going to take a peek, wasn’t he?”

Silence falls over the group.

Grant clears his throat. “Give him a minute to come back, he might be—”

“A minute could mean the difference between life and death, if something happened to him behind that door,” Deacon cuts in, glaring. “We can’t just sit here and wait.”

“Hold on, we need to think,” Morwenna says. “Sans can—”

“Bickering isn’t going to get us anywhere,” Maria says, pushing her way past Grant and Morwenna. Her hands are starting to glow bright orange, leaving a faint light trail for a second as she draws her fists up in front of her. “We’re not leaving Howard in there alone.”

Sans could stop her, if he wanted to. He could teleport in front of her, or grab her with his magic and pull her back. But he isn’t going to. He’s ready for this to finally happen, for whatever trap might be laid for them to finally spring. Because once he knows what it is he can finally deal with it. They hurry to follow her, because if she’s going to barrel through that door they can’t let her do
it alone.

Maria smashes her fist into the side of the door, breaking the hinges and sending it crashing to the floor in front of her. And as they all come up behind her, trying to see what’s in store for them, the dark room is suddenly flooded with bright, florescent light.

“How nice of you to finally join us,” says a smooth, masculine voice. “Please, why don’t you all come in. I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to your friend here.”

As Sans and the others squint to try and regain their bearings, Maria lets out a string of curses in Spanish. The room is some kind of den, with a pool table shoved into the corner and a sitting area with a TV. A woman is standing off to the side with a knife to Howard’s throat, her hand fistled in the hair at the top of his head, yanking it back to expose his neck. For a second his edges blur, and he starts to slip out of her grip, but she lets out a flash of yellow and he jerks his head back as flames dance over her hand holding the knife, just enough for a warning.

She clicks her tongue as the fire vanishes. “Nuh uh. You’re not getting away,” she says, grabbing his hair tighter and yanking him backwards. He cries out in pain, almost losing his balance but she keeps him upright.

In the center of the room is a middle-aged man, standing there with a self-satisfied grin on his face. Dark blonde hair is swept to the side, and even in the middle of the night he’s dressed smartly in slacks and a shirt and tie. At his sides are a handful of men and women which Sans can only guess are the initiates. And off in the far corner of the room, bound and gagged, are a man, a woman, and a teenage boy. The governor and his family.

Slowly they all do as the man says, filtering into the room as his smile widens. Sans watches him, pulling his hands out of his pockets as his eyes flick over to Howard and back again.

“Ah, the… You know, I can never remember the name of your little gang,” the man says, giving a flippant gesture with his fingers. “Honestly I thought we’d gotten rid of you ages ago. What was it, seventeen years? Did it take that long for you to lick your wounds?”

“Fuck you, Avery,” Grant snaps, glaring as yellow magic swirls around his hands.

Avery’s smile widens, then he points at Grant’s hands. “None of that, unless you’d like to see your friend here die. Now, in all seriousness can you please remind me of the name of this… merry band of yours. What was it? It’s on the tip of my tongue.”

“The Literatum,” Morwenna says.

“Yes, that’s it! And you, oh you do look familiar, don’t you? Were you there at that little spat we had? I think—Oh, Vanessa, you wait your turn dear,” he says, eyes flicking over to where Vanessa has slipped to the front, grabbing Grant’s arm. “There’s nothing that old man can do for you right now.”

“How do you know my name?” she demands.

“Did you think that we didn’t know all about you? God, that’s adorable. You may have changed your last name, but we never forgot you. And your purple magic is so crude and unrefined, it didn’t take much to feed you the information we wanted you to have. If you had stayed with us, I could have taught you so much more,” he says, giving her a pitying look and heaving a dramatic sigh. “I could have made you into something great.”

“You would have turned me into your lap dog!” she snaps.
“You’ve already interrupted once, dear. Mind your manners, I was speaking,” Avery says, dismissing her and returning his attention to Morwenna. “Now as I was saying. Maybe it’s the hair, but you look awfully familiar.”

“You killed my brother,” Morwenna growls, clenching her jaw. The muscles in her arms stand out in sharp relief under her skin, and Sans can see her eyes dart over to Howard and back to Avery. Like she’s gauging something in her head. “Did you forget that too?”

His eyes widen with recognition, and he plops his fist into his other hand. “Oh, that’s right! So you were there, bravo. Ah, and I see you’ve brought a monster this time, how quaint! Do you really think it’s going to help you? We defeated them hundreds of years ago, what makes you think this will be different? Mages are stronger than monsters.”

Avery’s eyes are on Sans now, but he doesn’t say anything. He feels his magic welling up beneath the surface, ready and waiting and itching to be freed.

“Now, how about we talk about how this is going to go?” Avery says with a smile.

You’re woken up by a loud knock on the door.

You jerk upright, disoriented, and nearly knock your head against the low ceiling of the loft bed as Frisk makes a soft, confused sound at your side. Reaching for them, they pull up beside you and latch onto your arm, rubbing the sleep from their eyes. Below you, you can hear Chris mumbling something to himself and the creak of the sofa.

Who could that possibly be at this hour?

A twist of dread coils in the pit of your stomach as you look at Frisk. “When’s the last time you Saved, sweetie?” you whisper.

They look up at you, eyes widening and brows shooting up in alarm. They bite their lip, nose scrunching as they think. “Um. Not since before I fell asleep.”

“You need to Save right now,” you tell them, smoothing their hair from their face. “I’ve got a bad feeling.”

Nodding, they shut their eyes. After a second they look at you and nod. Okay, that’s taken care of.

“Stay up here,” you tell them, and head for the ladder.

Chris is already on his feet, looking at you as you reach the ground. “Expecting anybody?” he says quietly, arching a brow.

You shake your head, then jump as there’s another loud knock. You and Chris stare at each other for a second, then he heads towards the door. Glancing around the room, you spot your can of mace on top of the television and snatch it up. Just in case.

You barely hear the sound of the door unlatching before it bursts open, knocking Chris back. He tries to catch his balance but he stumbles into you, sending you both crashing to the floor. You let out a cry of surprise that sharpens into a gasp of pain as you jam your elbow and Chris’s weight twists your arm.

“Don’t move,” says a familiar, harsh voice. “Or I shoot your friend here.”
Looking up through the hair that’s fallen into your face, you see, looming above you, Jacobs with a gun pointed at Chris’s head. His mouth is set into a hard line, eyes narrowed.

“You and the kid are coming with me, and I don’t much care what happens to this one. So you can do this the easy way or the hard way, it’s your choice.”
Mages might have been stronger than monsters hundreds of years ago, but they aren’t anymore. However Avery thinks this is going to go, he’s wrong.

“It’s actually rather convenient that you’re here, skeleton,” Avery says, still smiling, still thinking that he has everything under his control. “It will be so easy to pin all this ugliness on you. It’s what everyone wants to believe, anyway. The world has been waiting for one of you to make the wrong move, to prove them all right. And we will give that to them.”

“And then what? you kill all of us?” Sans asks, gritting his teeth.

“Oh no, nothing quite so barbaric. That would be such a waste,” he says with a flip of his wrist. “No, I know for a fact that there are veritable hordes of scientists frothing at the mouth to experiment on you. Even members of the military who aren’t any of ours would love to get their hands on a few of you for their arsenal. Yes, I’m certain there will be casualties in the transition, not everyone will go quietly. You, for example, will have to go once you’ve served your purpose. We can’t have you running your mouth. But there will be uses for so many of the others. Anyone can be broken and reshaped to fit our mold.”

Sans tries not to think of Papyrus, of his friends, being broken. His brother would go easily, he thinks. It would be easy to play to his weaknesses, all it would take is a threat to one of his friends to get him to surrender. Undyne would either go down and take as many people as she could with her, or she’d restrain herself for Alphys’s sake. He’s not sure which. They’d put Alphys to work if they were smart, abuse her knowledge for their own gain.

“And the rest of you… Well, if last time is any indicator, I could just let you go and you’d go back to your sad little lives and maybe this time you could realize, once and for all, that none of you are a threat to the Vigilum,” Avery says, and his attention drifts to Morwenna and Grant. “We are greater in every conceivable way, and you and your pathetic little—”

That’s the chance Sans is looking for. His magic practically sings through his bones, flaring to life in his eye as he snaps his left hand up into the air. Seizing the knife at Howard’s throat in a blue haze, he wrenches it out of the woman’s grasp and flings it away, where it lodges itself into the wall. The second Howard realizes he’s free he reaches over his head to grab the woman’s arm and flips her forward over his body, crying out in pain as she refuses to let go of his hair. His edges blur and he slips out of her grip.

Everything else dissolves into chaos.

“Get this situation under control!” Avery snaps, his face twisting into a sneer as he backs away and his team closes rank in front of him.

A man rushes over to go help the woman that Howard currently has wrestled to the ground, dark orange flaring from his hands. Sans lashes out with his magic, wrenching the man’s Soul from his
chest (it’s cracked, not down the center but from the sides, multiple tiny fractures instead of one big one like yours) and yanking him down to the ground hard. But before he can do anything else a cramped, dark green bubble encases him in, cutting him off.

“not again!” Sans yells, slamming his glowing fist against the inside of the barrier as he turns to look at the others.

He spots the enemy green mage, holding her hands out in front of her and gritting her teeth. Sans could wait her out, he knows well enough that she can’t maintain this forever, but by the time she exhausts herself things could very well be in their favor. There’s also the more pressing issue of the bubble growing smaller…

“deacon!” He calls out the first name that springs to mind, eyes darting to try and find him.

Deacon is with Vanessa off to the right near a huge wooden cabinet, keeping her protected behind a shield as a second yellow mage pelts them with a spray of tiny fireballs. For a moment he jerks his head at the sound of his name, eyes widening as he catches sight of Sans. “We need to take out the green mage!” he shouts, then has to turn away to focus on his enemy.

Grant glances his way but doesn’t move from his spot in front of the door, bright yellow light radiating from his hands as his palms fill with flame. His focus is on Avery, tucked back behind two other mages. “Get out of my way,” he growls. “Does he have you both on such a short leash?”

The orange mage Sans attacked a second ago is back on his feet, blood trickling from his mouth as he faces down Morwenna. She’s light on her feet, just a hair faster than a human ought to be as red magic leaves a faint trail in her wake. They skirt past to his left, towards the pool table and around behind him. The first yellow mage, the woman that attacked Howard, is unconscious on the ground nearby. But Howard is nowhere to be seen.

Then there’s a flare of cyan behind the green mage keeping him captive. Howard puts her in a headlock, wrenching her backwards and breaking her focus. The bubble melts away, leaving Sans free again.

“You okay?” Howard asks him as he wrestles with the woman, jerking her to the side as she tries to writhe free.

“yeah, you?”

“Fine. Go do some damage.”

Sans takes another quick inventory of the situation. Deacon is rushing into the yellow mage’s face, knocking them off balance with a sudden shield summoned right in their face and shoved into their chest. His martial arts training is serving him well in place of any proper offensive magic. Maria is at Grant’s side, trying to push through the combination of a second green and a red mage trying to keep the two of them away from Avery. Morwenna is still occupied with the orange, circling the room.

And Avery… Avery is just standing in the back, watching it all happen.

Well, Sans can’t let him miss out, can he?

In the blink of an eye he’s standing in front of him, holding out his left hand as a handful of bones coalesce in the air above it. “i wonder what color you are,” he says, eye sockets narrowing.

Avery glares at him, masking the look of surprise he was wearing a moment ago. “I reckon you’re
familiar with it,” he says, and that’s when Sans feels the bottom drop out of his stomach (if he had one) as he’s flung up into the air.

Oh that son of a bitch. He tries to get his bearings, flings the conjured bones down at him but they miss and fizzle away into nothing. Teleporting won’t work as long as Avery is holding him with his magic, so he tries to hit him with bones again, but the second he’s got them ready he’s flung to the side, crashing into the wall. As he chokes back a grunt of pain Sans feels the foreign blue magic melt away and let him go and he falls down to the floor in a jumbled heap next to the pool table.

Vanessa has Maria’s limp (unconscious?) body pulled off near the door, cradling her head in her lap and pushing her hair out of her face. She’s bloodied, and will have a good black eye when (if?) she wakes up. Morwenna and the other red mage are a pair of crimson blurs, lunging and darting at each other as Grant faces down the green mage still holding him at bay in the center of the room.

He’s burning too bright, Sans thinks, judging from the sweat drenching his face and the leaping flames in his hands. But he can’t do anything about that.

Deacon has Avery’s hand twisted behind his back, the other clutching at the arm around his neck. Blue magic flares into life around the two of them and they raise up in the air and come crashing back down to the ground with Avery on top, but Deacon refuses to let go.

“Get out of my way!” Grant bellows, one last push of fire overwhelming the green shield as the mage falls to their knees. As Grant lets out a grunt of triumph, Sans sees the flash of cyan a moment too late.

There’s a young man behind Grant, plunging a knife (the knife Sans flung into the wall, it’s got to be) deep into his back. He lets out a howl of pain and rage, reaching blindly behind him. Sans snatches up the mage with his magic and sends him flinging across the room, striking the pool table with the center of his back. A sickening crunch fills the air before he crumples, limp, to the ground.

“Grant!” Deacon shouts, horrified and desperate, echoed by Morwenna a half second later with a shrill cry as her red blur comes to a halt.

Sans teleports to Grant’s side, catching him over one shoulder as his knees buckle. But when he starts to ease the big man onto the floor, the wet sound of his breathing all-too familiar from what he can only guess is a punctured lung, the sound of a gunshot rings through the air.

All movement in the room grinds to a halt, and in the sudden stillness a scream of agony fills Sans with dread.

Avery pushes up to his feet, a gun in his hand as he wipes his face with the back of his hand and smears blood across his cheek. On the ground is Deacon, clutching at his side as he curls in on himself, green flaring bright from his hands for half a second before sputtering out.

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Morwenna makes a strangled sound and Sans jerks his head in her direction in time to see the other red mage yanking her arms behind her back as she stares, pale and horrified at the pool of blood slowly spreading out beneath Deacon’s body.

“Oh, and it looks like you’re in no place to heal yourself either, what a pity,” Avery sneers, shoving at Deacon with his foot. His mouth curls in satisfaction at the ragged cry of pain he gets in return.

Sans has to do something, anything, to try and salvage this. Morwenna’s out, Grant is out, Maria is unconscious, Vanessa can’t do anything, and Howard… He can’t see Howard. Maybe he’s about to do something foolish, or brave, or both. But Sans can’t just stand here while Avery threatens to finish the job he started on Deacon.

Deacon is going pale, his face pulled into a tight, pained grimace as his hands press over the wound over his hip. They’re slick with blood, and he tries to call forth his magic again but it just flickers and dies. He presses his forehead against the floor, twisting his head to look towards Sans, their eyes meeting. The way he’s looking at him… it’s a silent, desperate plea for help.

But what can he do?

So much for being a hero.

Deacon can barely think through the pain. It’s nothing like being burned; it’s so much worse and the blood —his blood— is soaking through his clothes, seeping between his fingers. The coppery smell of it is overwhelming and he’s feeling dizzy and nauseous and most of all terrified.

Some small, still-sane part of him wants Sans to run. To teleport away and go find you and Frisk and just… be safe. Somewhere, anywhere else. But the rest of his mind can’t stop screaming: ‘Help me, help me, please I can’t die here!’

Sans is standing there, watching him, and he thinks something passes between them though he’s not sure what. He can’t think, he can’t focus. He’s losing blood and it hurts and any second now Avery is going to kill him. He’s going to die, oh god he’s going to die and there’s nothing he can do.

No.

No he can do something. He’s still got magic left, he just has to focus. Shields are what he’s good at, better than healing by a long shot. He can do this. He’s got to.

Count to five. Focus. Just like Grant taught him. Oh god, Grant…

Stop. Don’t think about him now.

One. Two…

Sans’s expression hardens, that glowing left eye of his sparking as he raises his hand just a fraction. His attention shifts to Avery, or somewhere just past him, Deacon isn’t sure.

Don’t think about it.

Three…

“pal, you’ve got no idea who you’re dealing with,” Sans says, his voice dripping with more
subdued rage than Deacon has ever heard from him before. When they’d had their confrontation in the forest, that had been Sans reacting out of fear and anger. This… this is just fury.

Four—

Everything happens at once.

The mage pinning Morwenna’s arms shouts, “Avery, behind you!”

Deacon glances up just for a fraction of a second to see the spray of bones, and behind them, the beginnings of a massive shadow that can only be one of Sans’s blasters. In a blind panic, Deacon reaches for his magic, feels the small, weak shield spring to life above him but he’s certain it’s not strong enough to stop a bullet. He wasn’t ready, this was too—

There’s a flash of cyan, the glint of a knife, and Sans’s eye sockets go wide as his magic sparks and then gutters out, leaving his skull dark and hollow. Even without his pupils, Deacon knows he’s looking at him. Standing behind Sans is another mage they overlooked, one that must have been hiding and waiting for the chance to strike. She’s crying.

“Sans!” he screams, scrabbling at the floor, his hand slipping on blood as he tries to push himself up but he can’t. He can’t do fucking anything. “SANS, NO!”

Something’s happening to Sans’s body. It’s starting to crumble away into… into something like dust.

“We wanted him alive!” Avery bellows, but Deacon doesn’t care about him right now.

All he can think about is the fact that he’s watching Sans die.

He thinks he’s crying, it’s the only thing that can explain why his vision is so blurry. “Sans, you son of a bitch, don’t you dare fucking die!”

Sans grimaces, his attention shifting to Avery as he lets out a hollow laugh. “guess you can’t use me as your goddamn scapegoat now,” he says.

Deacon tries to push up again, but his legs are too weak, his whole body is to weak and it hurts and this… This must be what going mad feels like. “Sans!” he yells again, but that’s weak too.

Black is creeping in on the edges of his vision and he feels his grip on consciousness slowly slipping away.
There had been a time when Sans expected to die. Every time he faced down Frisk in that hallway back in the Underground, he wondered, ‘is this gonna be the time i finally fail?’ But he never did. He never failed, until now.

He’s falling apart, crumbling into nothing, and the last thing he’s going to see is Deacon losing his goddamn mind.

No... No, it’s not. Even as he feels his body start to drift away (he thought it might hurt, but no it just feels like he’s going numb) he sees... He sees you. He sees you and Frisk and Papyrus. His family. The family he never thought he’d get to have but did, even if it was just for a year, it was the best damn year he could have asked for. He got to see so much by your side.

He sees the ocean, can practically feel the salty air on his face (that’s what it has to be, right? not the fact that he’s turning to dust) and your hand in his. He sees your home. He hears you and Papyrus in the kitchen but he can’t make out the words, just knows your voices.

He sees the sun for the first time. He sees you in the sun for the first time.

He smells greasy burgers and fresh snow and the smell of your hair.

He sees you standing in the orange neon lights from Grillby’s, painting you in warm colors against the stark backdrop of black and white, waiting for him. He sees you smile as you turn your head just enough to look at him.

Then he sees nothing at all.

Jacobs bends over Chris, keeping the gun pointed at the back of his head as he reaches down to grab a fistful of his hair. Chris lets out a hiss of pain but doesn’t struggle, cringing and going still as he looks down at you. He’s got one of your arms pinned under his body, the one with the mace in its hand, and he’s half laying on you from your messy fall.

“Where’s the kid? Tell them to get over here or they’ll only have themselves to blame for this,” Jacobs says, jabbing Chris with the muzzle of the gun. Squeezing his eyes shut, he sucks in a shaky breath and bites back a whimper of fear.

You feel a rush of guilt. He’s only in this mess because of you. This isn’t his fight, and he was never one for bravery...

And Frisk. Why hasn’t Frisk Loaded? Why are they waiting? You open your mouth to tell them to do it, to give yourselves another chance to get this right. They’ll tell you what happened, help you do things better—

Wait.
Maybe it’s knowing that this isn’t permanent, knowing that whatever happens can be undone, but you can use this to your advantage. You can get answers, maybe, and you just pray that Frisk is paying attention.

“Frisk, come down the ladder,” you say carefully, trying not to feel outraged as Jacobs’s mouth curves into a smug smile. He can look like that all he wants, because soon enough you’ll be doing this again and with luck he won’t have the upper hand.

“Mom?” Frisk asks, sounding doubtful.

“Sweetie, just trust me,” you say.

You hear the shift of blankets, the scrape of bare feet against old wood, and you know that they’re doing as you ask. Jacobs tightens his grip on Chris’s hair and his eyes fly back open, pain and frustration and fear there clear for you to see. You try to give him a reassuring look, to tell him through your silence that everything will be okay. You’re scared too, but you’re pushing through it with bullheaded determination.

There’s no time to be afraid.

“Why are you doing this?” you demand, looking past Chris to Jacobs.

Jacobs regards you for a second. “For collateral,” he says simply.

Your stomach gives a lurch and you bite your lip. “Collateral for what?”

“For your stupid friends that decided they could screw with us,” he snaps, looking up as Frisk makes it to the ground. “Now no more questions. You, kid, come over here.”

So you were right. Whatever was going on with Sans and Deacon, they must be doing something. Something threatening enough that the Vigilum felt it was necessary to try and use you and Frisk against them. You can’t let that happen. “You’re not going to beat them by using me as a distraction! I won’t—”

Jacobs laughs, cutting you off abruptly. “Oh, we don’t need any help to beat them. Just to keep the survivors under control.”

“What…” you breathe, before you can stop yourself.

“There's no way they can win. Not against us,” he says with a confidence you think is supposed to make you lose yours. But instead you read between the lines, pick up on the fact that he doesn’t know if they've lost or not. It's not much, but it's something. Enough to hold onto hope.

At least for a moment before it feels like the world comes crashing down around you.

It’s not a physical feeling. It’s not a punch to the gut, or a shiver down your spine. It’s this sudden and overwhelming sense that something is missing and wrong and it’s… No. No no no.

You couldn’t hear your Soul before you married Sans, before his song was added to yours. Now, for a reason you can’t accept, refuse to even think, his song is gone and all you can hear is his absence. It’s all you can feel. You’re irrevocably changed down to your Soul and it’s as though huge chunks have been torn out of you and you’re left with the tattered remains. The places where he’s meant to fit are empty and you can’t fill them yourself.

“Hope, it’s gonna be okay,” Chris murmurs, and it snaps you back to your senses. You’re crying
and he’s looking down at you, wincing in pain as Jacobs jerks his head back.

You ignore him, because he has no idea. He has no idea how much this hurts. “Frisk,” you say, twisting your head to look for them. They’re standing on the other side of Jacobs, watching and waiting. “You need to Load. Something happened to Sans, you need to—”

Frisk is sitting next to you on Chris’s bed. There was just a knock on the door and you woke up and told them to Save. They closed their eyes and—

“Mom!” Frisk blurts out, eyes flying open as they latch onto your arm and give you a wild, desperate look. “We can’t let him in!”

Sans hits the wall and tumbles to the floor, and the sudden, jarring pain is enough to let him know that he’s alive. Alive and… oh fuck. He’s back in the middle of the fight. Deacon is wrestling Avery into a headlock (he realizes now that it was Deacon that freed him from the blue magic) and Grant is unharmed and still fighting that green mage.

He was dead and Deacon was dying and they’d lost and now he’s got the chance to do things right. To fix all the glaring mistakes they’d made the first time. But there had been a Load somehow, and while he should be marvelling at the sheer dumb luck of it, he can’t help the swell of panic that chases his moment of realization.

There had been a Load in the middle of the night when you and Frisk should be asleep, which could only mean that something had happened. And it can’t be a coincidence that it was while he and the Literatum where here fighting. They’d done something to the two of you.

But he can’t do anything about that if he dies here, so he buries his fear and knows what he needs to do.

Avery is yanking him and Deacon into the air and sending them both crashing to the ground, which is fine. That wasn’t the problem. He needs to help Grant. As the older man blasts his way through the green mage’s shield, Sans catches up the boy as soon as he appears in a flash of cyan, wrenching his Soul from his chest and holding him up in the air. This one’s Soul is cracked too, the color dark and muted like the other initiates he’s seen so far. He kicks his legs, gripping the knife tight in his hand before flinging it in Sans’s direction with a cry of rage. Blinking to the side, he crouches down to wrench the blade out of the floor, turning to look at Grant as he looks, startled, at the knife.

“help deacon, avery’s got a gun,” Sans says, tensing his fingers as he gives the boy in the air a little shake for good measure.

“How do you—”

“help deacon,” he snaps. “and watch for another sneaky one. there’s two.”

Grant only hesitates for a second before he nods and turns away.

“where’s your friend?” Sans demands, looking up at the young man again.

“I’m not telling you anything!” he spits, but that furious look on his face slips away the second Sans hangs him upside-down and lets out an undignified yelp.

“how ‘bout now?” he says. “i suggest you hurry, i’m not in the mood to play games with you.”
“Fuck you!”

Sans sighs and rights the boy in the air again, indignant and red-faced as he glares down at him. “fine,” he says, his eye flaring bright in his socket. He feels for one of his blasters, finds it in the space between and urges it forward. It starts to coalesce barely a foot away from the cyan mage, and he watches with a degree of satisfaction as he pales and tries to squirm away as it becomes more and more solid. “we can do this the hard way.”

“Wait!”

There’s another flash of cyan right below the boy’s feet, and now there’s a girl standing there with her hands up and a wide-eyed, terrified expression on her face. “Please, don’t hurt him!” she pleads.

“What are you doing, Fatima?” the young man yells, his voice cracking as he’s caught between fear and frustration. “Hide!”

“Shut up, Rashid!” she snaps, keeping her eyes fixed on Sans. He glances between the two of them, notices how similar they look, how close in age they must be. Twins? “Please, don’t hurt my brother. I’m right here.”

Sans shoves away the harsh sting of guilt that lashes out at him from the horrified look on Fatima’s face. He’d killed her brother. That’s why she… Fuck, that’s why she’d killed him. “are there any more of you sneaking around?”

“Yeah, a whole bunch—”

“No,” Fatima interjects, shooting her brother a sharp look.

“She’s telling the truth.” Vanessa comes up beside him, her expression tense and focused. Her eyes are glassy but that’s the only thing that could be considered a crack in her composure, barely noticeable behind the faint purple glow.

“you sure? your magic wasn’t much help to us earlier,” he says.

She flinches a little, but nods. “I’m sure. They’re weakened now, the training they got from the Vigilum to block their minds from me isn’t enough to keep me out anymore.”

“…are you ok?”

She swallows. “Just perfect. Maria’s just unconscious, so it could be worse. What the hell is that skull?”

Sans looks back up at the blaster hovering in the air, waiting for him. He takes another look at the siblings, the defeat in their eyes, and lets it slip back out of reality. The moment he lets it go it’s like a tension has been lifted from his shoulders, freeing a huge portion of his magic. “s’nothing,” he mutters.

“That’s one hell of a ‘nothing’, ” she says, giving him a look with that purple glow still in her eyes that tells him that if she really wanted to pry she very well could. Whatever. “You can let him down. He doesn’t have enough magic to disappear again. He and his sister are both willing to cooperate.”

“i’m just supposed to believe that?” he demands, glaring up at the boy again as he refuses to release his magic. “what are you gonna do if they just try to run?”
“I can handle two kids,” Morwenna says, coming up from behind Fatima. She’s got a cut over one eye and what looks like is gonna be a hell of a bruise along her jaw, but a quick look verifies that the other red mage is in much worse shape. He’s unconscious (or worse) over behind the couch. “Leave these two to us. Go to Deacon.”

Morwenna’s confidence is enough for him to relinquish the siblings. He cuts off his magic from the boy and lets him fall to the floor with an undignified cry of alarm and turns to quickly scan the rest of the room. The Vigilum are defeated, all out of commission save for the cyan kids and Avery. And Avery… Well, Avery currently has two guns trained on him. One in Grant’s hand and the other in Howard’s. The two of them are speaking to each other while the blue mage watches them with disdain, blood trickling from a split lip and a purpling bruise.

Deacon is away from them, kneeling next to Maria. His expression is tight and closed-off, grim as he cups her cheek in one glowing green hand and sweat trickles down the side of his face. Whatever is going on with Avery, he doesn’t want any part of it. That much is clear. And, well, Sans is certain that whatever happens to Avery Fletcher, Grant will be sure to handle it.

Sans is relieved to see Deacon unharmed, more relieved than he realizes at first. For a second he thinks it’s just him coming down from the rush of dismantling the Vigilum’s plan, or hell, coming back from the dead. But no, it’s just plain, honest relief for the man’s well-being. For his friend. Because after seeing the horror and grief on Deacon’s face when he was dying, how could he ever doubt that Deacon is his friend?

“hey,” Sans says, his voice a bit thicker than he’d like. “deacon, you ok?”

His blue eyes flick up at his approach, arching a brow as he shoves sweat-damp hair from his forehead with the back of his hand. “Wonderful. You know, saved the day and all that. Nobody died, so that’s always nice.”

“not this time,” he mutters, gritting his teeth.

Deacon hesitates, studying his face. “So something did happen,” he breathes, paling more than he already was. “Did I…” His hand goes to his side, where the gunshot wound was. You told him once that you had a strange, phantom pain after Frisk brought you back with a Load. That you hadn’t known it at the time, but you’d felt some kind of remnant of being stabbed in the chest. Deacon must have experienced it too. “Did something happen to me?”

“avery shot you,” he says quietly.

“That’s how Grant knew about the gun. You told him.”

“yeah.”

Deacon’s expression softens, nodding his head and giving him a weak, lopsided smile. “Thanks, Sans. I mean, I’m sure you just did what you had to, but—”

“what’re friends for if not to stop each other from getting shot?” Sans says, cutting off that train of thought. Yeah, he wanted to make sure they won, but he didn’t want Deacon to get hurt either. He reaches out and rests his hand on his shoulder, giving him an amiable pat. He looks a little confused, but pleased all the same. “honestly that, uh… that load couldn’t have come at a better time.”

“Wait, if there was a… a Load or whatever, that means…” Deacon’s eyes widen, his smile slipping. “Did someone tell them, or…”
Sans shakes his head. “no. something must've happened. we need to get in touch with them as soon __”

A gunshot rings out and both of them jump, whirling towards the sound as Sans puts himself in front of Deacon, grip on his shoulder tightening as though he could teleport them faster than a bullet could travel. But he needn’t worry, that shot wasn’t meant for either of them.

Avery Fletcher is lying on the floor with a rapidly growing pool of blood spreading out from his head, close to where Deacon had been less than ten minutes before. (God, had it really been less than ten minutes?)

Grant is standing over his body with a thin wisp of smoke trailing from the barrel of the gun in his hand and a grimly satisfied look on his face. It looks like this part, at least, is over.
“What happened?” you ask Frisk, a feeling of dread settling in the pit of your stomach. With it is the undeniable sense that something very bad happened. It’s like an off-tempo beat in your Soul, and echo of something horrible that you can’t let happen again. For a moment it feels like something is wrong with the harmony of yours and Sans’s songs, but when you take just a moment to listen, to focus inward, it feels the same as it always does.

You press a hand to your chest and wrap your fingers around your locket.

“It’s that army man, the one who followed us here,” Frisk says.

“Jacobs?”

There’s another knock on the door, louder this time. It makes you jump and your heart is pounding in your ears. You hear Chris moving down below, making a frustrated, grumbling sound.

“It’s too late for this shit, I’m coming,” he mutters.

“No!” Frisk hisses, scrambling to the edge of the loft. “Chris, don’t!”

You follow them as they slide down the ladder, casting the front door a nervous look as Chris turns towards the two of you, a groggy, bewildered expression on his face. He takes in the frightened look on your face and his attention sharpens, glancing at the door. “What’s going on?”

“It’s that evil soldier from the Line,” Frisk repeats, grabbing his hand and pulling him away from the door. “He came to kidnap us to…” Their face screws up as they try to find the right words. “To… use us against Dad, I think. They’re doing something, something the bad people don’t like and you told me to Load because something bad happened. You said something happened to Dad.”

Sans has to be okay now. And whatever happened, he could change it, right? Frisk Loaded. He’d remember. You have to hope that’s true, because right now you have to deal with what’s happening right here, at this moment.

“Kid, how do you know that?” Chris asks, his brow furrowing as he looks down at them. You’d expect him to doubt, to not take Frisk seriously. Instead he looks worried, scared even. His eyes flick over to yours. “Hope?”

“I don’t have time to explain,” you tell him, shaking your head before turning your attention to Frisk. “What happened? What happened when we opened the door?”

Instead of another knock you start to hear the sound of metal scraping against metal. Oh shit, does he have a key? Or is he picking the lock? Frisk snatches up the can of mace from on top of the TV and presses it into your hand.
“He shoved Chris down and had a gun. He was going to shoot him if we didn’t cooperate,” they say, and you realize that their voice is trembling. Their whole body is trembling but they’re staying determined. This isn’t fair, for a seven-year-old to have to shoulder this much fear and responsibility. To take your safety onto themselves. “Mom, I don’t know what to do.”

“Can you load again if things go badly?” you ask. “Do you feel strong enough?”

They nod.

“Go back up. I want you to be safe.”

Frisk only hesitates for a moment before scrambling back up the ladder. You watch them go, your heart in your throat as adrenaline makes you feel as though your whole body is humming in anticipation. When you look back at Chris he’s picking up his electric guitar (the Gibson, his pride and joy) by the neck and hefting it in his hands. The set of his mouth is grim, and he raises it like one might hold an axe over his shoulder.

The scrape of metal is still going as he flattens himself beside the door, and gives you a worried but surprisingly steady look. “Spray him as soon as he comes in the door,” he whispers, gesturing at the mace in your hand. “If he’s not—”

The click of the lock turning sends you fumbling to flip open the cap covering the spray’s trigger, and if it wasn’t for the fact that the door sticks for a second as Jacobs tries to open it you wouldn’t be ready in time. But, thank god, you are. The door bangs open and there’s a moment where he’s raising the gun in his hand before you clench your fist and jam the button down as hard as you can. His arm flies up to try and cover his face as he lets out a cry of pain and surprise.

That’s when Chris takes the opportunity to smash the guitar into the back of Jacobs’s head. There’s a loud crack and for a moment you think that maybe he killed him, but then you see that it’s the Gibson’s neck that snapped and not Jacobs’s. There’s a brief, cruel moment where you regret that it wasn’t the other way around. The man crumples to the ground.

For a second you and Chris stare at his limp body, then your eyes meet across the small room. The body of the guitar is hanging by the strings, and he’s just standing there holding it with a dazed look on his face. Then, after a few more seconds pass, he looks down at it and the corners of his mouth turn down into a mournful frown.

“Goddamnit, I loved this fucking guitar,” he blurts out.

Laughter bubbles up through all the fear, past the lump in your throat as all at once a swell of relief floods your senses. “Oh my god,” you say. “Oh my god, we… shit. Shit, we… Oh, god he’s bleeding, is he dead?”

Chris drops the broken remains of his guitar and closes the apartment door, flicking on the overhead light before nudging Jacobs’s side with his foot. You look at each other again and he shoves him harder to roll him onto his back. Raising the mace again, you inch closer as Chris inspects his face, then pries the gun from his hand and carefully sets it aside as though it might bite him.

“He’s breathing,” Chris says, sounding relieved as he takes a step back. You’re glad, for his sake, that he didn’t kill Jacobs. It only takes a second for him to start grinning, letting out a weak laugh. “Holy shit, did you see what I did? And you, Hope that was fucking metal! Oh, fuck— I mean— Sorry kid.” He cringes and you can’t help but laugh again.
“You were great,” you say, and that sudden rush of satisfaction is starting to wear off, leaving you jittery and worried. “We need to… to tie him up. Make sure he can’t do anything if he wakes up. Check his pockets, if he was planning on kidnapping us he might have… something. I don’t know.”

“Should we call the police? I mean, he broke in with a gun.” He starts rummaging through his pockets, gritting his teeth. “Oh, here we go.”

Chris pulls out some plastic zip-ties, and rolls the unconscious Jacobs over onto his face none too gently. Yanking his arms behind his back, he binds his hands together.

“I don’t know. I don’t even know who to trust with this, I wish I could talk to Sans…”

Sans has played his part. He got the Literatum through this alive, helped save the governor and his family, and now all he wants is to make sure you’re okay. Howard is talking to Governor Williams and Grant is dealing with Avery’s body. Rashid and Fatima are sitting on the floor out of the way with Vanessa, speaking quietly.

“So do you want to tell me what the hell happened back there?” Morwenna asks, crossing her arms as she comes to stand in front of Sans, arching a brow.

Deacon makes a low noise in the back of his throat, but doesn’t speak.

Sans feigns confusion. “back where?”

“You did something. I felt the strongest sense of deja vu, like we’d done part of that fight before. And there you were, countering Rashid like you knew he was there. And how did you know that Avery had a gun?” she presses, her expression growing more and more stern as she speaks.

“i’ve got good instincts,” he says carefully.

“Monster magic isn’t like ours,” Deacon says, cutting in. “They’re not limited by color, and they’ve got stuff we could only dream of. He just knew.”

Morwenna’s eyes shift from Sans, to Deacon, and then back again. He’s not sure she’s satisfied with that answer, but at the moment she doesn’t try to force it.

“What are you gonna do with the kids?” he asks, pointing over at the twins.

Her expression shifts into something sad as she glances behind her. “Take them with us. They’re only seventeen, they’ve still got their whole lives ahead of them, now that Avery’s gone.”

“You need to take them in, not grant,” Sans says, and her attention snaps back to him, surprised.

He doesn’t look at Deacon, but he can feel his eyes on him.

Morwenna hesitates, pursing her lips and nodding. “No, I won’t make that mistake again,” she says quietly.

“good. now, i need to borrow your phone.” Sans hold out his hand.

“Excuse me?”

“I need to make sure my family is safe after this little stunt, now please let me borrow your phone,” he says, barely keeping the pleading tone out of his voice. None of this other shit matters right
now. He just needs to hear your voice.

She studies him for a moment before reaching into her pocket and handing her phone to him. “You’ll have them back soon. From the looks of it, the governor is very grateful for our assistance. We’ll make sure he remembers that a monster helped save his family.”

“i only did it to save mine,” he mutters, but Morwenna smiles at him anyway as he keys in your number.

It takes four rings for you to pick up, and by that point Deacon is crowding him, an anxious look on his face. “Who the hell is this?” you snarl into the phone, startling him. But the moment after his surprise fades he starts to laugh. “babe, it’s me. are you ok?”

“Oh my god, Sans,” you breathe, and your voice cracks when you say his name. He doesn’t say anything, just listens as you draw in a shuddering breath and the relief he feels makes his knees weak. You’re okay. You’re okay. “I’m fine, I— Hun are you okay? Jesus, I… I can’t… Are you okay?”

“i’m ok,” he says gently, rubbing his face with his free hand and then glancing over at Deacon. He’s smiling, running his hand through his hair and letting out a relieved sigh. “everybody’s ok. i’ll… i’ll tell you more as soon as i can, but things are fine. shit, you have no idea how happy i am to hear you, babe.”

“Jacobs is here,” you say, and that wipes the grin right off his face. “He’s tied up and he’s still unconscious, but he came here to kidnap us.”

“Chris broke his guitar hitting him in the head!” Frisk chimes in from the background, and Sans and Deacon look at each other again.

Well, at least he knows what got them to Load. In a weird way he supposes he owes Jacobs his life. “we’ll buy him a new one,” Sans says weakly.

“Was Jacobs alone?” Deacon asks, leaning in and speaking loud enough for the phone to pick him up.

“What about Jacobs?” Morwenna interjects, eyebrows shooting up.

“he tried to kidnap them. they stopped him,” Sans says.

“And he’s still there?”

He nods.

“I’ll go get Howard,” she says, and walks off.

“Yeah, he was alone,” you say. “Who was that in the background?”

He almost says her name, but catches himself just in case. “a friend. i’m sure you’ll get to meet her and the others soon. what have you done with jacobs?”

“We’re just… we’re just sitting here like we don’t have him tied up and locked up in the bathroom,” you admit, and your weak, near-hysterical laughter lets him know that you’re just as overwhelmed by all of this as he is. He really just wants to go home. “You gagged him, right?”

“Yeah.” That’s Chris’s voice, faint but Sans recognizes it. “The apartment on that side is empty,
but yeah.”

“hope.”

“Sans?”

“i love you. this is almost over,” he says, closing his eyes and tipping his chin to his sternum.

“I love you, too. What should we do? I didn’t call the police, but maybe we should—”

“no, just hang tight.” There’s footsteps approaching, and when he reopens his eyes Howard is there.

“Morwenna just told me what’s going on. The governor isn’t going to be involving the police at all, they just need to, er, dispose of the body and clean the place up. They don’t need me here,” he says, and the corner of his mouth twitches up into a half-smile. “Want to go see your wife?”

Sans can’t help but laugh, grinning as Deacon claps a hand onto his shoulder. They exchange another look as Deacon chimes in, “I’m going too.”

“looks like i’m bringing the police to you, babe. i’ll see you soon.”

It’s the longest thirty minutes you’ve ever had to wait in your entire life. Knowing that Sans and Deacon are on their way, that this week (it feels like it’s been so much longer than just a week) is almost over, that hopefully by the end of the day you’ll be home… It gives you a surge of energy that leaves you pacing the tiny apartment despite Frisk’s teasing.

Frisk actually nods off on the couch with Chris after about fifteen minutes, worn out from what you can only imagine was a much worse night for them. What had happened before the Load you can’t remember, but to them they’d gone through it twice. Their cheek is smooshed up against Chris’s arm and he’s doing his best not to look too pleased with himself. He casts hesitant looks your way, like he’s worried he’s doing something wrong, but you just smile at him. He can have this, after everything he’s done for both of you.

After all, he might not be their dad, but he’s still something like family.

The knock on the door is soft but it’s still enough to make you jump, your nerves drawn tight and ready to snap. Still holding the mace in your hand, just in case, you go over to the door and glance through the peep-hole where you catch sight of familiar blonde hair. You can’t open the door fast enough.

“Sans,” you breathe, barely able to finish his name before his arms are around you, half-carrying you back into the apartment as he holds you almost painfully tight. You kiss him; on his mouth, his cheekbones, the side of his skull, tears springing to your eyes as you let out a sob of overwhelming relief. “You’re okay. Thank god you’re okay. I felt… I felt something wrong, like something happened to our Souls, and—”

“i’m okay, i’m right here,” he murmurs to you, nuzzling your cheek and nipping at your skin with his teeth. Kissing you back in the only way he can. He holds you close, breathing deep. “i’ve got you.”

“Dad!” Frisk cries out, happy and indignant in the same breath as you feel them jerk on the side of your shirt, trying to edge their way in.
You can’t help but laugh as you smile through your tears, keeping one arm around Sans’s shoulders as you pull away enough to let Frisk between you. He’s stroking their hair, hugging them close, and as they speak to each other you catch sight of Deacon. He’s standing by the door, patiently waiting his turn, and he gives you a lopsided grin as you meet his eyes.

“Come over here,” you demand, reaching out for him, splaying your fingers.

He ducks his head a little, somehow embarrassed even as he does as you ask. You grab his arm as soon as he’s close enough, pulling him to you embracing him as best you can while still holding onto Sans. Tucking your head under his chin, you shut your eyes.

“You said you’d do whatever you could to help me,” you say to him, clutching tightly to the back of his shirt. “And you did. Deacon, thank you so much.”

“It wasn’t...” He trails off, his protest fading as it passes his lips. He hugs you back, resting his cheek against the top of your head. “You’re welcome. This week was hell without you.”

You’re faintly aware of Howard talking to Chris, of the two of them heading back towards where you know the bathroom is, but right now you don’t care. You’ve got Sans and Deacon and they’re both here and safe, and you get the feeling they have a hell of a lot to tell you about what happened this past week.

But at least for the moment, it can all wait.

Chapter End Notes

I came back to add this note, so if you missed it the first time that's why.

Next chapter is the end of ACT Two! We're almost done you guys, and then we'll be on to ACT Three, which as many of you might be able to guess, will have more to do with Gaster and the Anathema. ;) So stay tuned for that, and I'll see you all next chapter!
It’s morning by the time Deacon gets home.

Howard dealt with Jacobs, calling in some fellow officers that he trusts to arrest him and take him away. Deacon and Sans can’t be there for that, but your husband refused to leave without you, so they spent the hour’s worth of questioning hiding in the empty apartment next door.

During that time, stuck together, Deacon convinced Sans to tell him what happened before Frisk Loaded. How Grant was stabbed, and Deacon was shot and bleeding out, and finally that he had seen Sans die. That the girl, Fatima of all people, had killed him. He’s surprised that the skeleton didn’t seem more upset about it, that he’d actually spoken up and asked Morwenna what was going to happen to the twins.

“They’re just scared, broken kids. And I killed her brother,” he said, giving Deacon a tired look that made him seem so much older. They both had a long night, but Deacon can’t even imagine what it must have been like for Sans.

“After he stabbed Grant,” he protested weakly.

“Avery took two kids and turned them into weapons. And if I never told you, you wouldn’t even know it happened. Morwenna can handle them, don’t you think?”

Deacon rubbed his face, letting out a heavy sigh. “Fuck if I know. They need a proper parent, and I don’t know if she knows how to be that person.”

“She’s gotta be better than Grant,” Sans said, fixing him with a somber look.

“Sure,” he said. He studied his face, a furrow forming between his brows. He wondered if he should ask Sans about why he said what he did to Morwenna about taking the twins. Why he told her that Grant shouldn’t be the one to do it. He felt vindicated, to hear Morwenna admit that what happened to him was a mistake, and he wondered if he should talk to her about it. Ask her why. But he didn’t say any of those things. He just let the topic fall flat. “So how’d you let yourself get killed by a seventeen-year-old?”

Sans huffed a humorless laugh, letting his head fall back against the wall behind him. They were both sitting on the floor, because it was their only option. “Same way you let yourself get shot by a huge asshole: got distracted by seeing someone I begrudgingly care about get hurt pretty damn bad.”

“Begrudgingly? Ouch,” Deacon teased, making Sans roll his eyes. He chose to ignore the implication about Grant, the fact that he’d let his guard down because the man had been hurt. That it had shaken him enough to let himself almost get killed (might have ended up killing him, from the way Sans told it). A moment of silence passed between them, as whatever levity Deacon was
feeling faded away. “Are you… okay? I mean, you died, which has got to be… Something that sticks with you.”

He had to think about it, which made him wonder if he just shouldn’t have asked. But finally Sans met his eyes again, his pupils small and dim. It took him a long time to realize that his eyes were the best way to judge his mood, and Deacon knew that dim wasn’t usually good. “dying didn’t bother me, it was thinking about everybody else having to cope with me being gone. i know what it felt like, seeing hope die, and thinking about her having to go through that…” He stared at Deacon for a moment, like he was debating over something. “i saw what it did to you. remind me when i’m in a better mood to make fun of you for it.”

Deacon’s mouth twitched, but he couldn’t bring himself to smile at the attempt at humor. “What did I do? You know, so I can appreciate the joke later.”

“i think it was something along the lines of, ‘sans, you son of a bitch, don’t you dare fucking die’.”

“Oh,” he said, which is retrospect wasn’t the most eloquent reaction. But how was he supposed to respond to something like that?

“you also called me an asshole when i asked you if you were ok after you got shot,” he said with a shrug. “so at least you’re consistent.”

“Well, to be fair, that’s a stupid question to ask someone who just got shot.”

Deacon pressed a hand over the spot where he’d felt that weird, sharp pain after what must have been the Load. What he knew was some kind of strange remnant of what had happened. Sans noticed it, his eyes flicked down to the movement and then back to Deacon’s face. “do you remember it at all? morwenna seemed to have an idea…”

Deacon shook his head. “No. And I think that’s because she’s a red mage. She sort of operates within that wavelength. Sort of.”

Sans just nodded.

It wasn’t long after that when the police finally left and he and Sans were able to rejoin you in Chris’s apartment. Morwenna called Howard a short while after that to let everyone know that Governor Williams had been in touch with the National Guard, and Captain Prasad was being ordered to immediately take control of the Line and to once again allow entry. A weary sigh of relief passed through the room, and everyone was ready to get home.

(Chris, understandably, was nervous about staying by himself with what had just happened, and you and Sans agreed he could go with you. At least until things settled down.)

And here Deacon is, at his house, only lingering long enough to grab his car keys and his phone. His phone has a handful of missed calls, all from Bo. It’s early, just before six in the morning, and god knows he hasn’t slept. But he can’t sleep. Not before he sees her.

He calls her after he pulls out of his driveway. She picks up on the second ring. “Deacon?” she says, and he hates that tremble in her voice. He scared her, he knew he did, and hearing the evidence in the way she says his name only makes him feel worse.

“I’m coming over right now,” he tells her with as much reassurance as he can.

“Where were you?” she demands, and he’s not overly fond of the anger in her tone either. But he’ll take whatever she has to give him, because he knows he’s earned it.
“I’ll tell you, I promise. I don’t want to do it over the phone. I just wanted you to know that I’m okay and I’m coming over.”

“...Okay.”

“I’m headed from the house, so I won’t be long,” he says, steadying the steering wheel with his elbow as he swaps the phone to his other hand so he can shift gears. Oh this is a dumb thing to do while running off of no sleep. “I’ll see you soon. I love you.”

“I love you too, Deacon. Stop talking while driving, you know it makes me nervous.”

“Sorry. I’ll hang up now.”

He knows he’s going to be in for it when he gets there, but he doesn’t care. Well, that’s not entirely true, but he doesn’t care enough for it to deter him. Seeing her, letting her know that he made it out unscathed and that they managed to get this whole mess righted again, that’s what’s important. Because he didn’t just do this for you and Sans, he did it for her. So that she could still see the world outside Ebott, and hopefully, one day, have all the freedom that he does. He wants to give her everything, because she deserves it all.

Finding out that he almost died, that everything he has could have ended tonight… it has him thinking about the future. His future, which he sincerely hopes has Bo in it. He wants that, he wants that life with her he never thought he’d have (or want) with anyone. He’s given her more than he’s ever given another person, because she’s the only one who’s ever wanted him for themselves. Though that skittish, still-damaged part of him shies away from the idea of committing fully to that future, he feels as though, with a bit more time, he’ll be ready to. And if nothing else, Bo has proven that she’s willing to be patient for him.

He wonders if Sans will make fun of him for asking how monsters propose. With him, it could honestly go either way.

But marriage is the last thing he needs to be worrying about right now. First things first, he has an angry girlfriend he needs to apologize to.

The door is unlocked when he gets to her apartment, so he lets himself in. She’s standing beside the kitchen counter, her arms crossed and dark circles under her eyes. But the frown eases off her face as she looks at him, her whole body relaxes and she goes to him as he closes the door, wrapping him up in her arms. She kisses him, hard, one hand cupping the back of his neck and holding him in place. As though he’d ever want to get away.

Deacon feels bruised when she finally pulls back, and yelps when she punches him in the chest a little harder than strictly necessary. “Hey,” he protests, rubbing the spot with his hand.

“Don’t you ‘hey’ me, Deacon Stuart!” she says, her snout scrunching up in frustration. “I came home after work and you weren’t here! No note, no call, nothing. And you wouldn’t answer your phone. I thought something happened to you at first, but no. No, then I realized that you’d gone to do something reckless and dangerous and I had no way of knowing if or when you’d be back! I thought you were going to tell me when the Literatum came up with a plan! You hid this from me!”

“I’m sorry,” he says softly. He reaches out to take hold of her arm and for a second he thinks she’s going to pull away, but she doesn’t. She goes to him in a weak embrace. “I just wanted to make sure this couldn’t come back to you if something bad happened. I wanted to protect you.”
“I don’t need your protection,” she says, and there’s hurt there in her wide blue eyes. “I need your trust. We’re in this together, and you have to remember that. You’re not alone anymore. So promise me that you won’t do this again.”

“Which part is ‘this’? The doing dangerous things, or doing dangerous things and lying about it?” he asks, and he does his best to give her a playful smile.

Bo rolls her eyes. “Ideally both, but I meant the second part. I know I can’t get you to promise not to do dangerous things to help people.”

“Well, it’s not exactly my favorite pastime,” he admits, and while he’d love to keep joking around, that glint in her eye tells him he needs to hurry up and do as she says. “Okay, okay. I promise. If I’m going to go run off to fight the bad guys, I’ll be sure to mention it first.”

“Deacon,” she says, exasperated, but whatever else she wants to say is lost as he pulls her closer, cupping her cheek so he can kiss her again.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. “I did it all wrong.”

“I forgive you,” she says, sealing her words with a kiss. “Now tell me what happened.”

He does. At least the parts he can tell without revealing Frisk’s secret. Because, as much as it frustrates him to not be honest with her, that one isn’t his to tell.

After you’re home and Frisk is in bed and Chris is set up in the guest room, Sans tells you everything. Knowing that you felt the echo of him dying, having him explain to you just what losing a spouse does to a Soul, you feel numb by the time he’s finished. It was sheer dumb luck that Frisk was able to save him, and you’d been so close to losing him forever.

You try not to dwell on that, but it’s difficult. You should sleep, you’re both exhausted, but instead you share your Souls, losing yourselves in each other for just a little while before letting the real world back in. Because you’ve each had enough of the real world and its problems, and you need each other so badly after being kept apart.

After you’re both left even more tired than before, but satisfied and comforted, you sleep.

The coming months bring rapid-fire changes, for the better.

Chris stays with you for a few days while the news of Captain Jacobs’s actions spread and the National Guard speaks out against him. The media latches onto Jacobs and the majority of broadcasts focus on bashing him and his behavior in a head-spinning turnaround of public opinion. (Not that it’s a perfect change, the conservative stations barely touch the subject at all, and continue to raise questions about his possibly justifiable motivations while following orders as head of Ebott’s military installment.) Captain Prasad and her troops make a swift return much to everyone’s relief, and things quickly go back to how they used to be. At least while you’re waiting for new legislation to come down the pipeline.

And it is coming, albeit slower than you’d like, but with Governor Williams spearheading pro-monster legislation in light of Sans’s help in saving his family, you know he’s doing everything he can.

While you’re waiting, gradual changes happen with your family and friends.

Alphys and Undyne are able to have their big wedding on the beach, just like they wanted. Asgore
and Toriel officiate the ceremony, just like they did for you and Sans, and the king has to fight back tears as he leads Undyne through her vows. Afterwards she teases him about it, but you catch her suspiciously rubbing her good eye and you think she’s just as touched as he is.

Mettaton bursts into tears halfway through the rite, flapping his hands uselessly as he fights to keep himself in check. Later you hear him gushing over how beautiful Alphys looked in her dress, and you think you hear him tell Undyne to take good care of her (as if she hadn’t been doing that already).

Frisk and Chris have semi-regular visits, though most of the time they spend together is on online multiplayer games with Asriel. It’s not very often, but often enough that Chris feels like he’s keeping in touch with everyone, and it doesn’t take long for you to start to see him become all the better for it. There’s little hints, each time you see him, that he’s starting to grow up. Not too much, he’ll always be the soft-hearted metalhead you remember (and you wouldn’t want that to change) but it’s enough to see him start to come into his own.

And Sans keeps his word, and buys him a brand new Gibson SG to replace the one broken over Jacobs’s head. Chris might have cried a little, though he’d hesitate to admit it.

There’s talk of Papyrus moving out of the house to be with Mettaton, but nothing concrete. He drops not-so-subtle hints around Sans, and when his older brother doesn’t say anything against it he seems encouraged, but you don’t think that Papyrus is quite ready to go yet. Not while things are still tenuous with the government. You both know that everyone is more comfortable having the whole family under one roof, at least for now. But one day, probably sooner rather than later, he’s going to move on.

Deacon is able to go back to work immediately following Captain Prasad’s return, once Toriel and Asgore learn what he and Sans did to help everyone. Asgore is less than pleased at being left out of the loop in regards to their plans, especially considering the fallout if it had gone poorly, but he thanks them for their effort. It isn’t long afterwards that the king meets the other Literatum, and a friendly understanding is formed between them.

Vanessa, who can’t go back to her job after discovering the Vigilum knew the entire time she was a spy, ends up moving to Ebott and getting a job working for Asgore. Her magic is particularly useful in handling political matters. Maria joins her a few months later.

Morwenna takes in Rashid and Fatima like she said she would, and though you’re not sure how to feel about the twins, Sans seems surprisingly concerned with their well-being. You and Deacon can’t quite decide if it’s suspicion or just his own good intentions motivating him, or some bizarre mix of both. After all, while Fatima had the capacity to kill him, she hadn’t in this timeline. And with Avery gone, the siblings seem to flourish.

The first few months are nerve-wracking, waiting to see if anything ever comes of Avery’s death, but so far nothing has. There’s a brief report in the news about him going missing, but no follow up. Whatever was done with his body, no one has found him (if there’s anything left to find). With a key antagonistic figure gone, the Vigilum seem uninterested in further provoking the monsters, at least as far as any of you can tell. If that was mostly Avery’s doing, or they’ve decided to bide their time, you’re not sure. You just know that you all can’t live your lives expecting the next shoe to drop.

So you don’t. You live your lives.

It’s six months, almost to the day, after Avery’s death that the monsters are finally granted full rights and citizenship. The Line remains in place, but no longer as a cage to keep monsters in.
Instead it’s there to protect them, to maintain Ebott as a safe haven. But the curfew is lifted, and travel throughout the country is permitted to them all. You and Deacon immediately start planning a road trip for the following summer, when school is out and hopefully the attitudes towards monsters throughout the nation are improved.

But the first thing that you do, the day that the laws are passed, is go down to the courthouse to marry your husband. Legally, as far as the government is concerned.

You and Sans talked a lot about the fact that he’d need a last name once all of this finally passed, and when the time comes he ends up taking yours. You thought that maybe the two of you would come up with something new, like most of the other monsters. But instead he says that you should keep the name that you got from your father, and that he’d be happy to use it too. You hadn’t even considered that as a possibility, asking him to take your name, but the moment he suggests it you know that’s what you want to do. You’re sure that if your dad was still alive, that he’d be more than happy with it.

So you forego the ceremony, because as far as you’re concerned you married your husband almost a year ago, and a slip of paper isn’t going to change that. But now no one can deny that he’s your family.

And, with Chris’s full support and assistance, the paperwork is started for Sans to officially adopt Frisk. It takes some pressure, from all of you, but they can’t stop you. When all is finally said and done, Sans keeps copies of your marriage license and the adoption papers on him at all times, just in case. You wish you could say he was being paranoid, but you know he’s just being practical.

Things aren’t perfect. You don’t think they ever will be, because it isn’t in the nature of people to be perfect. But it’s getting better, your lives are happier, and you think that just might be good enough for you.

Chapter End Notes

And here's the end of ACT Two you guys. Holy crap, who knew that this beast would be almost twice as long as ACT One.

I just want to give my heartfelt thanks to each and every one of you, new readers and old, commenters and silent fans, there's no way this would have gotten done without you guys. You all mean the world to me, and I still can't believe how much love and support you all show me every single day. This story has been an immense labor of love, and I'm continuously honored and humbled with how invested you are in it and these characters.

I'll be taking some time off to outline and iron out some details for ACT Three, and just generally take a BREAK for the first time in forever, so come say hi on my Tumblr to check in on how I'm doing! I can't imagine I'll be off for much longer than a week, but we'll see what happens.

I love you guys, and I'll see you back here for ACT Three! <3
He was distracted that day.

Sans didn’t agree with the plan, didn’t like it, didn’t trust it, but how could he tell the man he respected and admired the most, his father, to reconsider? He didn’t have the right arguments, the facts, to dissuade him. He knew that the brilliant Dr. Gaster wouldn’t back down from this — what he hoped to be his defining moment— just because of Sans’s feelings. No matter how much his instincts were telling him that none of this was right. That they weren’t meant to meddle with this… this place that they’d found on accident.

Let alone the thing that he’d discovered inside of it.

But his father knew what he was doing. (He didn’t.) If anyone could do this, it was him. (He couldn’t.) Everything would be fine. (It wasn’t.)

Dr. Gaster was standing there in front of him, a syringe in his hand as he watched his son patiently. Or at least he seemed patient. Sans couldn’t help but feel his nervous energy, knowing that he was eager to leave his small office in basement level of the lab. The space was small, with a television shoved in one corner and stacks of files piled up in another, the cabinets already full to bursting. He never knew how his dad kept it all straight, that ‘organized chaos’ he called it. Harsh fluorescent lights cast a sickly glow over the both of them, and as Sans looked at him he felt that ever-present sense of wrongness swell in his ribcage.

“dad… what’s wrong with your eyes?” he asked, his attention flicking from his father’s face down again to that syringe in his hand. It was filled with a glowing, red substance, something he’d said was ‘determination’. He’d taken it in small quantities from the human Souls Asgore had safely locked away.

Dr. Gaster let out a soft sigh, setting down the needle on his desk and taking Sans’s hand in his. The holes in his palms were familiar, even as the red lights in his eyes were foreign and haunting. They weren’t supposed to be that color. (What color did they used to be? He can’t remember.) The malleable, smooth bone of his face curves into a reassuring smile. “Nothing is wrong,” he said, patting the back of Sans’s hand. “Just a side effect of the injection, that’s all. It will fade in due time, as it runs its course.”

Sans grit his teeth, feeling sweat gathering on the side of his skull. When he spoke his voice sounded strained. “are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Is what a good idea, Sans?” he asked, arching a brow. “If you’re worried about the use of determination, I’m certain that it’s stable when used in a healthy subject. Breakdown of stability was only shown in weakened, or damaged—”

“no, i mean all of this,” he protested, gesturing with his free hand toward the direction of the test chamber, where he knew the machine was waiting. “it’s dangerous, isn’t it?”
“Of course it is,” Dr. Gaster said, squeezing his son’s hand before letting go and reaching for the syringe again. “But that’s why we’re using this as a precaution. Should anything happen—which I doubt—this will strengthen our magic. But, if you’re having second thoughts, you don’t have to participate. I have an entire team of assistants waiting for me, you don’t need to force yourself—”

“no, i don’t—” Sans cut himself off, his pride refusing to make himself look like a coward in front of his father. And if something did go wrong, maybe he could do something to help. And, even more so, if it all went right he wanted part of the credit. He wanted the entire Underground to know that Dr. Gaster and his son had done the impossible. “i want to be there with you, dad.”

His father’s face brightened, and the pride in his eyes was enough to make him squash down his doubts. He was always so proud of him, so encouraging, pushing him and willing him to be more, to do more, to follow in his footsteps as Royal Scientist. How could he let him down now, when he was about to do the unimaginable? (He should have argued with him. He should have done so much more to stop all of this from happening.)

Sans shoved the sleeve of his labcoat up to his elbow and held out his arm for his father. Dr. Gaster fixed him with a serious look. “Are you certain, Sans? I want you to be sure. After this the only way is forward, and there can be no turning back.”

With a wry grin to hide the fear he’s certain his father could see, Sans forced a laugh. “geez, dad. no need to be so dramatic. yeah, i’m sure. but you could stand to inject a little humor into the situation.”

Some of the tension eased out of his face, and Sans was glad to see him chuckle softly. “You’re always so humerus, Sans.”

Normally he’d call him out on the obvious joke, but right then it was more important to relieve some of the tension in the air. “you could say i tickle your funny bone.”

(That was the last time he ever heard his father laugh, and he can’t even remember it. He can’t remember any of it…)

Sans wakes up trembling, though he’s not sure why.

He feels unsettled, like he should be remembering something but can’t. This isn’t like waking up from a nightmare (which have been fewer and farther between). No, instead it’s like… for the briefest moment he feels like he’s in the wrong place, the wrong time, and he jerks upright to look around the room.

Your shared bedroom hasn’t changed much in the past five years. It’s a little messier, the bedding clutched tight between his fingers was replaced a few months ago, and the squishy lounge chair tucked away in the corner is broken in and lumpy-looking. Sunlight filters in through the blinds in front of the balcony door, and it’s enough to ground him. To soothe away that anxious feeling needling through his bones.

He’s at home, where he should be, and everything is just fine.

“Hun, you okay?”

Glancing towards the sound of your voice, he sees you standing there in the doorway to the bathroom in your underwear, combing your fingers through damp hair. You must have just gotten out of the shower.
“yeah,” he says, after a second. Concern forms a crease between your brows and he shakes his head. “s’nothing, just a dream.”

“What was it about?” you ask, moving closer to the edge of the bed. Your fingers are wet from your hair when you cup his cheek, and he’s surrounded by the scent of your shampoo.

“dunno,” he admits. “can’t remember. what’s got you up so early?”

You tilt your head to the side as your thumb traces just below his eye socket. “We’re watching the twins today, remember?”

Sans groans, falling back against the pillows as you let out an exasperated noise. “oh. yeah.”

“Don’t be like that,” you say, leaning down to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth. He catches you before you can pull away, humming contentedly as he earns himself a startled giggle when he nips your throat. “Don’t be like this either! We need to head out soon, they’ll be waiting for us.”

“changed my mind. i think we should just stay home. dealing with the twins is exhausting,” he says, letting you pull away but taking hold of your hand before you can get too far. He threads your fingers together, enjoying that contented look on your face as you squeeze his hand.

“Come on, you old bag of bones,” you tease, tugging him gently. “We promised.”

“i told you i don’t like to make promises. cuz then you gotta keep ‘em.”

You tug again, harder this time. “Exactly. Now come on.”

Sans knows he’s pushing a little close to the limit of your tolerance for his teasing, so he lets you pull him out of bed so you can both get dressed. He steals glances at you as you shimmy into a pair of snug, denim shorts, but he’s not sneaky enough—he isn’t trying to be—to not get caught. But you just roll your eyes and turn back to your dresser with a smile tugging at your lips. He knows you appreciate the way he still looks at you, just like he appreciates when you sneak up behind him and slip your hands under his clothes. It’s those little reminders that you’re both still very much enamored with one another, that you still have those moments where you’re in awe of this person you’ve found yourself with for the rest of your lives.

As you tug the hem of your tank top into place, Sans can’t help himself. He goes up behind you, wrapping his arms around your stomach and nudging damp hair out of his way as he grazes the bare part of your shoulder with his teeth. A surprised squeak escapes you, which melts into a contented hum as he pulls you back against his ribcage. You cover his hands with your own, soft fingers threading between bony ones, your wedding rings scraping against one another. He nuzzles into the crook of your neck as you turn your head, and the soft laugh that passes your lips sends a swell of love bubbling up between his ribs.

He needs this. He needs to just hold you for a moment, to chase away whatever lingering ghosts are haunting him from the dream he can’t remember. And he doesn’t want to remember it, not if it’s going to upset the joyful balance of his life. Things are good, they have been for a while, and he doesn’t need to dwell on the past. His life here with you and his kid are all he needs to be happy.

“hey,” he says, closing his eyes and resting his chin on your shoulder.

“Hey,” you answer, like you always do. You know what he’s going to say, but you let him say it anyway.

“i love you.”
A soft, happy hum escapes you. “I love you too, Sans. Do you feel better?”

“yeah. guess we should go eat, huh?”

“Mhm.” You tilt your head just enough to plant a quick kiss to his temple, then squeeze his hands and let go. He doesn’t stop you as you pull away to reach for your necklace on top of the dresser, that locket that he gave you for Christmas right before your wedding. It’s a little scuffed —you’ve worn it almost every day since he gave it to you— but it catches the light as you turn to face him, freeing your hair from beneath the chain. You tug it into place, right over your heart, and your thumb brushes experimentally over the raised infinity symbol, like you need to make sure it’s still there.

You wear your family and friends in the pieces of your jewelry. When he met you, you didn’t have anything you liked to wear, but now… Now you have your wedding rings, the locket with the picture of the three of you, a ring on your right hand with Frisk’s birthstone they gave you for Mother’s Day, and that red and green bracelet that matches one on Deacon’s wrist. (It’s probably the sixth or seventh one you’ve made, over the years.)

Sans has his own friendship bracelet, at Deacon’s insistence and your encouragement. Finally, between the two of you, he’d just given in to shut him up. The blue and green stripes are a familiar sight now on his wrist, sometimes he doesn’t even notice that it’s there. Sort of like how he barely noticed how easy their friendship has become. It’s strange, thinking back on how rocky their start was, and how close all of you are now. Not even that ever-present, nagging sensation of the dissonance between their Souls really bothers him anymore. It’s just… normal.

A few things he never thought he’d adjust to are normal now, not least of which is the fact that Papyrus moved out almost four years ago. As he follows you out of the bedroom, his eyes are drawn to the open door of what used to be his brother’s room. It’s just another guest room now, decorated with impersonal furnishings. No more race car bed, no more flame-patterned rug, no more collection of robot figures. In reality, that room has been vacant longer now than it had ever been filled.

Now Papyrus is living with Mettaton in his luxury apartment at the hotel (whose business has been booming, much to the robot’s pleasure). At least, that’s where they live when they’re not off on location for a film shoot. After some coaxing from Mettaton’s directors, Papyrus found his big break in movies alongside his now-husband, and in all honesty, Sans couldn’t be prouder. He’d always wanted to be a member of the Royal Guard, and now he’s being cast as action-movie heroes (which is arguably safer) and is making quite a name for himself. (More of a name than Mettaton, in certain circles, which Sans can’t help feel a bit smug about.) The two of them are doing well, and he’s happy for them. Even though it means they’re away from Ebott for weeks at a time, like right now.

Not that it spares him from his brother’s affectionate nagging. He calls nightly whenever he’s away to make sure he’s not being too lazy, and is he helping Frisk with their homework, and has he given you enough hugs for today. In a way, Papyrus is still a constant facet of his life, just like he always was, and for that he’s grateful.

“Mom?” comes Frisk’s voice from downstairs, and you hurry down the last few steps ahead of Sans.

“Yeah, sweetie?” you answer, rounding the corner into the kitchen and ducking out of sight.

“I thought you got more frozen waffles, I can’t find them,” Frisk says, and when Sans walks into the kitchen he spots them digging through the freezer, bent at the waist as they dig through
colorful boxes and sealed bags of frozen meat.

“Did you check behind the veggies?” you supply, coming up alongside them. They straighten and move out of the way so that you can take a look, and it still catches Sans a little off-guard that they’re the same height as you now. It didn’t take long for them to get taller than him, but soon enough Frisk will be surpassing you too. He shouldn’t be surprised, considering Chris is over six feet tall, but they didn’t need to take after him that much.

Even worse, though, is Asriel. He’s standing over by the counter, the tallest one in the room by a few inches, but he’s got that pubescent look of getting stretched too quickly—he’s all arms and legs, gangly and awkward looking in his own body. He’s watching the two of you (no, that’s not true, he’s got his eyes on Frisk like he always does) quietly, scratching the top of his head, and he doesn’t even notice when Sans comes up beside him and clears his throat.

Asriel jumps, letting out a startled bleat that cracks halfway through, and the miserable expression on his face is almost enough to make him feel bad. Almost. “What?” he blurts out guiltily as he jerks his hand down to his side.

“Your mom said to leave them alone,” he says, arching a brow.

“They itch .” he complains, and he really does sound miserable.

“You’re going to scratch yourself,” Frisk says, walking over to them and putting themselves between him and Sans while you’re still busy digging around in the freezer, muttering to yourself. They push their bangs out of their eyes and reach up with both hands to cover the top of Asriel’s head, massaging the spots close to his ears where his horns are starting to bud.

He closes his eyes and leans forward, resting his chin on top of Frisk’s head. Frisk lets out an affectionately annoyed sound that sounds almost exactly like you, but just stands there and rubs the prince’s head while they cast Sans a bemused look.

“you coming with us to go see the twins, az?” Sans asks, undeterred by the lack of boundaries between the two of them. After the past six years of this, he doesn’t even really notice it anymore. They don’t have ‘personal space’, just each other.

“Um, no, I can’t,” he says, cracking an eye open and looking at him. His snout wrinkles as he lets out an annoyed huff through his nose, exposing the tips of his fangs. “Mom wants me to help her go through her office at work.”

“She still has weeks until school starts,” you say, and with a triumphant flourish set down the box of frozen waffles on the counter. You don’t even bat an eye as the two pre-teens (well, twelve and thirteen-year-old) split apart and make a grab for the box. Frisk ends up winning; they always were faster than Asriel. “Why does she want to do it now?”

“No idea,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest as he watches Frisk load the toaster up with breakfast. “You know Mom, she’s just like this.”

“Mom, can you braid my hair for me?” Frisk blurts out as you’re reaching to get started on some coffee.

Your eyes dart over to him where he’s standing there, doing a whole lot of nothing, and he waves you off and steps in to take care of it. You give him a thankful smile and go to tend to Frisk’s hair. As he’s getting the coffee pot set up and Asriel steps in to take care of the waffles that just popped up out of the toaster, the familiar sound of your cell phone catches his attention.
“Hun, can you check that?” you ask, your hands still twisting diligently through the braiding motions. You jerk your chin towards the kitchen island where your phone is sitting.

It’s a text. It’s… oh. Well, you’re not going to be happy about this. “uh, it’s from deacon,” he tells you, and you brighten visibly at the sound of your best friend’s name. Sans winces. “they’re gonna be a few days late getting home. taking them longer to make the drive back than they thought.”

Your smile fades. “Oh,” is all you manage.

“sorry, babe. i know you were looking forward to them getting back,” he says, giving you an apologetic look.

“It’s fine,” you insist, shaking your head and returning your attention to Frisk’s hair. You’re almost done. “I’m sure they’re having a great time, and I think they were planning on taking Route 66 back, so Deacon probably got distracted with all the old sights. It’s not like taking the freeway, it’s not a straight shot.”

“i know you wanted us to go with them, especially after he invited us.”

“Yes, well, we needed to stay here with Frisk,” you say, and your tone is growing clipped.

“i said you could go without me. alphys needed me to stay to help with the core anyway,” he says, which he realizes he shouldn’t have. He just should have dropped it, judging by the tightness in your jaw.

“I wasn’t going to go clear across the country right when they started to train with Morwenna. We had no idea how it was going to go, and—”

“Well so far it’s not going anywhere ,” Frisk blurts out, pulling away from you the second you fasten their braid. “My stupid magic is useless unless I’m Saving or Loading. She’s got all these cool tricks, and I can’t do anything.”

There’s a beat where you and Sans look at each other, unsure of what to say. Right on the cusp of hormonal upheaval, Frisk’s moods have been at worst explosive, and regularly unpredictable. Asriel, honestly, isn’t much better, and with the two of them in the same room it’s only worse. The link between their Souls is a double-edged sword with which you’re both all too familiar.

But the moment passes and Frisk lets out a heavy sigh, their shoulders going slack. Sans can see his own relief mirrored on your face. “I just need to keep trying,” Frisk says.

“Exactly, sweetie,” you say, smoothing their braid down their back and smiling when they glance over their shoulder to look at you. “I’m sure that you’ll figure it out soon, with Morwenna helping you.”

They look so much older for just a moment as they smile back at you, their eyes crinkling just the same way that yours do. Sure, on the surface they might take a lot after Chris, but there’s so many subtle ways that it’s plain for anyone who’s paying attention to see that Frisk is yours. “Thanks, Mom,” they say, and then Asriel steals their attention as he puts a plateful of prepared waffles under their nose.

And just like that, you and Sans are seemingly forgotten, left behind as the two of them dart off into the living room with their food. And that’s normal, too.
“Oh thank god,” are the first words out of Undyne’s mouth when she sees you (the door was unlocked, as usual, so you just let yourselves in). She’s sitting on the floor, still in her pajamas, her vibrant red hair pulled back into a bun to keep it away from the grasping fingers of the two babies both grabbing at the front of her shirt. “Babe, they’re here!”

Alphys is nowhere to be seen, but you hear her call back from the general direction of their bedroom. “Okay!”

“Hey squirt,” Undyne says, giving Frisk a toothy grin as they take a seat on the floor next to her, holding out their hands for one of the babies. She passes them her son, Varan. To you he looks like Alphys, more lizard-like, with blue and black scales. A small crest of ridges crowns his head, and behind it he has about an inch of dark, glossy black hair. He gives Frisk a big smile as his mom sets him in their lap, blinking up at them with big yellow eyes. Frisk smiles back, and Varan lets out a squeal of delight. “Careful of his mouth, he’s teething.”

“How are you holding up? Ready for school to start back up again?” you ask, laughing at the sudden look of desperation that spreads across her face.

“You have no idea. Classes full of kids are EASY compared to two babies,” she says in an undertone, glancing towards her bedroom. “Two weeks into summer vacation and she asked me if I wanted to put them back into daycare, but…”

“didn’t want to admit defeat?” Sans chimes in, an amused grin on his face.

Undyne scowls at him, but doesn’t say anything. Knowing her, you’re sure Sans hit the nail right on the head.

“It’s hard work,” you say, crossing the room and kneeling down on her other side. “Want me to take Lea so you can go get dressed?”

For just a second, a confused expression flits across her face as she glances down at herself. There’s a yellowish stain that could be baby poop or food, you’re not sure which, and there’s a dirty burp cloth poking out of her pocket. Dragging her hand down her face, she nods in weary defeat as you reach out to take her daughter from her lap. “Thank you, again, for coming over,” she says.

“You deserve a break,” you reassure her, hooking your hands under Lea’s arms and pulling her into your lap. Their daughter is more fish-like, like Undyne. She reminds you of a lionfish, her scales a soft yellow color with shockingly red stripes that frame her eyes and streak through the long and delicate frills on either side of her face and the top of her head. Chubby, webbed fingers clutch at the straps of your tank top and bra as she peers up at you with piercingly blue eyes. As you smile at her, her face scrunches up into what looks more like a grimace than a smile and she lets out a sudden, loud, growl that makes you jump. “What was that?”
“NGAHhh!” Undyne roars, leaning in close to her daughter and baring her teeth. You can only sit and stare as Lea’s face breaks out into a huge smile and she lets out a shriek of delight that dissolves into giggles as she leans forward to pat her mother’s cheeks and kick her feet. After a second she latches onto the frills on either side of Undyne’s face and lets out another loud growl, which you realize is a mimicry of her mom’s outburst.

“Mamamamama, Varan babbles, latching onto Frisk’s fingers and shaking them back and forth as he watches all of you curiously.

“Oh, OW, okay let go of mama’s fins,” Undyne says, wincing as Lea starts to pull. “Lea NO. Let go.”

You watch Lea’s little hands just grip tighter, and you help Undyne pry her fingers open. She leans away once she’s free and fixes her daughter with a frustrated look.

“She knows what ‘no’ means, but she just doesn’t listen,” she grumbles, pushing herself up to her feet.

“I can’t imagine where she gets that stubbornness from,” you say, arching a brow.

Barking out a laugh, that annoyance that was just on her face melts into a look of pride. “She takes after ME!”

“Aunt Undyne, can I get a drink?” Frisk asks, bouncing Varan on their knee as he clings to their hands.

“Sure, squirt! Knock yourself out,” she says, yanking the burp cloth out of her pocket and throwing it at the general direction of the couch. It falls short and lands in a pile on the floor as she heads off towards her room to get changed.

Sans walks over to take Varan from Frisk, then sits down next to you as they disappear into the kitchen. The babies catch sight of one another and start babbling. He’s surprisingly good with the kids, though maybe you should have expected it. He’d been a father to Frisk for half their life now, why wouldn’t he? But the ages of six to twelve aren’t anything like handling a baby.

“Well if she’s taking after Undyne,” he says, chuckling and reaching out with his free hand to smooth back the frill on the top of Lea’s head. She just blinks at him. “Think this little guy’s gonna be like Alphys? Maybe one day he’ll be helping us at the core?”

You look at Varan, the way he’s quietly watching the both of you as you talk to one another. By contrast, Lea is trying to wiggle her way down to the floor. You let her go, and she crawls over to a set of stacking rings and starts pulling them all off. Her brother just observes, his hands circled around Sans’s knuckles. “Probably,” you agree with a smile.

“Hopefully the twins can’t both be like Undyne.”

“They’re not twins,” Alphys says with the exasperated tone of someone who’s had to explain this distinction a hundred times (and she has). “They’re clutch mates, there’s a difference.”

“Well, in humans, fraternal twins are two separate eggs fertilized at the same time—”

“We can argue technicalities all you want, Sans,” she says, shuffling into the room. She’s slipping her cell phone into the beach bag on her shoulder, straightening her pink sundress with her free hand. Under it you can see the straps of her bathing suit. Varan lets out a loud ‘ah!’ at the sight of her and she smiles. “Hey there sweetheart. But if you want to start comparing biology, then just
look at the terminology used for fish and reptiles. For them to be considered twins, they would have to have been hatched from a single egg.”

“we’ve all been calling ‘em twins. s’easier,” he says with a lazy grin that elicits a frustrated sigh from Alphys.

“What about the twins?” Undyne says, reemerging from the bedroom. She’s changed into her swimsuit with a sarong tied around her waist.

Sans’s grin just gets that much bigger, and you can see the defeat in Alphys’s face. “Nothing, sweetie,” she says.

“Well we’ve got it from here,” you say, glancing towards the kitchen as Frisk returns with a can of citrus soda in their hand. You think it’s a little early for soda, but you don’t say anything. “If you two want to get going.”

Alphys and Undyne share a look, and there’s a short hesitation you don’t quite understand. “Well we’d hate to just run off right after you got here,” Alphys says, and once you hear that stutter in her voice you know something’s up. She hardly ever stutters anymore, not unless she’s nervous or upset. “Have you talked to Papyrus lately? The last time I talked to Mettaton was a couple weeks ago…”

If Sans notices her unusual behavior he doesn’t say so. He wiggles his fingers back and forth to keep Varan entertained as the little lizard leans forward to start gnawing on his phalanges. Sans winces, but doesn’t stop him. “Last night. they’re doing good, think they’re wrapping up filming this week. he said their agent was trying to talk mettaton into some horror movie, but he told ‘em no. was pretty adamant about not doing any horror movies from the way pap told it.” He glances over at you, and you pick up on what he leaves unsaid.

Not that Undyne was ever very subtle. “Well good. After what happened down with the lab it would be pretty tasteless. And RUDE.”

Alphys clears her throat. “And impressions are still really important. Something like that wouldn’t go over very well…”

There’s a sharp knock on the door and Alphys lets out a soft ‘oh!’ as she and Undyne look at each other again.

“expecting somebody?” Sans asks, watching Alphys as she hurries over to pluck Varan from his lap. You hear the front door open.

But she just smiles at the two of you as you both start to stand, feeling more and more lost. “What’s going on?” you ask, attention darting between Undyne and her wife as they both look down the hall towards the front door.

Then, from around the corner, there’s that familiar smile and blonde hair and that dark tattoo covering his whole right arm and— “Deacon!” you blurt out, and you’re glad that you’re not sitting because you rush towards him and he braces himself to sweep you up in a huge hug. “Oh my god, when did you get home!”

He holds you tight, tight enough that you can feel his laugh rumble through his chest. “Late last night,” he says, grinning when you make an indignant noise. You try to pull away to glare at him but he won’t let you go. “I wanted to surprise you.”

“I spent a good half hour sulking this morning after I got that text from you. And you were just next
door, you liar!” Since he won’t let you go you just hug him tighter. “I hate you, you’re the worst.”

“You love me,” he says, brushing a kiss against your temple.


“I missed you too, I’m sorry you couldn’t come with us,” he says, and finally relaxes his hold on you.

Easing away, you rest your hands on his shoulders, studying his face. A whole month he’d been gone, and while the long summer trips are normal for him and his wife, it doesn’t make them any easier. Deacon has laugh lines framing his mouth that deepen as he smiles at you, and the faintest hint of crow’s feet crinkle in the corners of his eyes. He’s aged handsomely, like a goddamned actor, and he barely looks thirty. Oh, he’s going to be unbearable to grow old with.

“You always hog her to yourself,” Bo interjects, and you feel a new pair of hands pull you into a warm embrace. “I’m sorry, honey, this whole thing was his idea. You should have heard him plotting with Alphys over the phone.”

“Alphys!” you exclaim, and you hear her laugh behind you. “I can’t believe you guys!”

“i can,” Sans says, and when you and Bo let each other go, you turn in time to see your husbands clapping each other on the back as they pull away from their brief hug. Sans grabs Deacon’s arm and jostles him a little as your friend laughs. “you jackass,” he says affectionately.

“At least I have an ass,” he answers, giving Sans a playful shove. “Unlike someone.”

Frisk has edged their way to the edge of your group, waiting patiently for a break in your little reunion. “Uncle Deacon,” they say warmly, catching his attention. He turns and pulls them into a hug, rubbing their back.

“Holy crap, kid, look at you! Hope, did they get taller while I was gone?” he demands, keeping one arm around their shoulders as he turns them both to face you.

You barely have time to nod before he gives Frisk a mock-annoyed shake.

“Come on, I told you you’re not allowed to grow when I’m not here,” he says, doing his best to scowl. “I need to see each and every inch you get taller than Sans.”

Frisk laughs and Sans rolls his eyes. “s’not that exciting. besides, at this rate they’re gonna get taller than you too.”

“No way, we made a deal,” Deacon says with a lopsided grin. He lets Frisk go. “Yes they can get taller than mom and dad, no they can’t get taller than Uncle Deacon. There was a handshake and everything.”

“Oh, well, if there was a handshake,” you say, rolling your eyes and chuckling.

“Ohay, well you NERDS have fun,” Undyne says, loud enough to get everyone’s attention. “I’m sure the five of you can handle two babies. That’s like, two and a half people per baby.”

Bo is at Alphys’s side, resting Varan on her hip and stroking the hair on the back of his head. As Alphys and Undyne say goodbye to their children and pass along some basic instructions (time for their next nap, suggestions for lunch) Bo can’t take her eyes off the little boy in her arms. He tries to reach up for the pink wool of her hair, pulled back into a ponytail (she’s grown it long, lately),
but she catches his hand gently and rubs her thumb over his tiny knuckles. She barely notices when
the couple finally heads out the door, leaving all of you with the babies.

“They got so big, look at them,” Bo murmurs, swaying side to side in what you think is an
unconscious movement. It’s a habit you picked up after Frisk was born, it wasn’t even something
you tried to do. It just happened. “Oh, you cutie pie, you’re so precious. I can’t believe how
different they look after just a month. They’re what, ten months now?”

She looks up at you, catching your eye until you nod in agreement. “Yep. Ten months next week,”
you say, but her focus is right back on Varan where he’s starting to babble at her. Bo’s face lights
up and you know it’s pointless to try and talk to her now.

Deacon, in comparison, looks uncomfortable. That reunion-high has worn off, and as he watches
Bo sit down on the ground next to where Lea is playing, you can see his Adam’s apple bob up and
down as he swallows. After a moment of this he clears his throat, pulling his attention away from
her and turning to Sans. “We took a lot of great pictures, maybe later we could sit down and I can
get you to print some for me?” Deacon asks.

Sans was distracted by watching the twins, and there’s a short pause before he turns to look at
Deacon and his words process through his head. “huh? oh, yeah, sure! got some new additions for
that stairwell?”

You catch Deacon wince just a little at the phrase ‘new additions’ but he presses on as if he hadn’t.
“Yeah, exactly. You wouldn’t believe some of the weird stuff they’ve got along Route 66…”

Deacon glances over at you as he starts telling Sans about some of the strange roadside attractions
he and Bo stopped at. You give him a crooked smile and he seems to relax a little, but you notice
that though he tries to involve Bo in the conversation she keeps missing his cues. She’s just too
wrapped up in the twins. Eventually he just stops trying.

Later, when you’re in the kitchen getting some bottles ready, Deacon slides up next to you and
rests his forehead on your shoulder with a heavy sigh. You put your arm around him and pet the
back of his hair.

“What’s wrong?” you ask him quietly. “You’ve seemed upset.”

“I’m fine,” he insists. “Just hoping that Bo gets her baby fix and goes back to normal after we
leave.”

“Have you talked to her about not wanting kids?”

Deacon pulls away, and the look on his face is conflicted. He runs his fingers through his hair and
glances at the bottle sitting on the counter. “It’s not… It’s not that simple.”

You blink. “You do want kids?”

He scowls and shakes his head. “Hell if I know. Hope, it’s… It’s a thing. It’s a huge thing, and I
don’t… I don’t know if I want kids, but she does. She doesn’t bring it up, but I mean… You saw
her in there with the twins.” Deacon lets out a ragged sigh. “It’ll be fine. We’re fine. We go on long
trips and don’t have to worry about dealing with a kid, and we’re happy and get to sleep at night.”

“You need to talk to her,” you tell him, and in that regard you’re starting to feel like a broken
record. He knows your advice when it comes to Bo will almost always be the same, but he comes
to you anyway. “You guys need to be on the same page. You said she hasn’t brought it up?”
“Not lately.”

“What does ‘lately’ mean?”

“...Not since the last time we saw the babies,” he mumbles, hanging his head.

“Deacon…”

“I know, just let me…” Deacon sighs, and rests his forehead on your shoulder again. “Let me pout for a bit.”

You give a weak laugh, putting an arm around his waist. “Okay, you big dork.”
Fatima’s world had been flipped on its head twice in her life.

The first time was when she was ten, and she and her twin brother Rashid had lost their parents. That was when Avery Fletcher had managed to get his hands on them, manipulated the system to have them relinquished into his care. Seven years of their lives were spent being shaped into tools, molded to fit into the well-oiled machine of Avery’s initiates.

The second time was when Morwenna, Deacon, Sans, and the other Literatum had freed them. Morwenna had taken them into her home, helped them remember that they were people, just kids, and got them back on their feet as best she could. They had a whole world of possibilities at their fingertips, and they hardly knew where to start trying to understand who they were.

But the ever-constant, unchanging variable that even Avery couldn’t touch, is the fact that her brother is the absolute worst (and best).

“Tell me you’re not naked,” Rashid says from behind her, and she isn’t even startled.

Fatima swivels her computer chair towards the sound of his voice, stopping when she catches sight of him. There’s a faint tinge of cyan where his shoulders are poking through the wall separating their bedrooms, and his eyes are squeezed shut as the top half of him hovers there.

“I’m not naked,” she mutters, rolling her eyes and resting her elbows on the armrests. “One day, Rashid, you’ll remember there’s a door to this room.”

His eyes snap open and he slips the rest of the way through the wall, magic ghosting off his skin for a second before fading away. She takes quick stock of him; the patchy stubble on his chin, the erratic tufts of dark brown hair, wrinkled flannel pants. This is probably the first time he’s left his bedroom today, and it’s to come bother her. Of course it is. “Doors are for the weak,” he says, leaning against the side of her dresser. She swivels back to face her laptop, making a disgruntled noise and hunching forward over the keyboard.

“What do you want?” she asks, returning her attention to her game. Fatima’s eyes flick down to the bottom left corner of her screen towards the chatbox, and realizes that she’s been getting messages while Rashid was distracting her. “Shit.”

Octacrit: hey, where did you need to go again?

Octacrit: you said you wanted to run one of the old raids for gear

Fatima quickly types in a reply.

Teema: Sorry, bro was distracting me. Karazhan. I think the quickest way to get there is to port to Blasted Lands.
Octacrit: are you busy? we can do this later

Teema: No, it’s fine! Just give me a second, I need to hop on a flight path.

“Who are you talking to?” Rashid asks, and she feels the back of her chair tip as he rests his weight on it.

Fatima’s face scrunches up in annoyance but guides her character towards the nearest flight master. “It’s none of your business. What do you want?” she demands, a twist of embarrassment coiling in her stomach, though she’s not sure why.

“Oh, Fatima are you really dragging him along on one of your stupid loot runs?” Rashid asks, leaning over her shoulder and squinting as he makes out the name of the one other person in her party. “Christ, you’ve got that big idiot wrapped around your finger.”

“He’s not an idiot,” she bristles, turning to shove him off the back of her chair. “And he’s not wrapped around my finger. He asked me what I was up to, I said I was going to run Kara, and he asked if I wanted any help. It was his idea.”

“You don’t need any help. It’s like, forty levels below you.”

Fatima is done rising to his bait. She knows that her brother won’t let this go unless she changes the subject. “You came in here for a reason?” she asks pointedly, her eyes on her laptop screen.

“Obviously to nag you about why you’re spending time with Chris,” he says, his face twisting with exaggerated disgust.

“You don’t need to be mean about him,” she says, suddenly defensive. “He’s a nice guy, you’ve said so yourself. He’s our friend. Besides, he’s only coming with me because Frisk and Asriel aren’t online for him to play with.”

“He’s nice, in that sad and pathetic sort of way.”

“What do you want, Rashid?”

There’s a pause where she knows he’s considering pushing her further. He’s weighing the irritation in her voice, the angle of her hunched shoulders, the too-hard clicks of her mouse and presses on the keyboard. However it all adds up, it’s enough to tip the scale in her favor.

“Got an email from school, enrollment for the fall semester is open. Are you gonna register?” Rashid leans against the back of her chair again, poking her between her shoulderblades, which she ignores.

They’ve been taking online courses slowly over the past couple years, after they completed their GEDs. They’d missed all of middle school and high school locked away in Avery’s mansion-slash-compound, and while they were taught most of the basic concepts—even tools needed to have a certain intelligence to perform their tasks fully—there were areas they were sorely lacking in. Things like literature and history were deemed ‘non-essential’ past the rudimentary basics.

Deacon had spent a lot of time the first year tutoring the two of them in history himself, rather than leave them to their own devices with the online coursework Morwenna set up for them. Rashid resented it at first, but grew more comfortable with Deacon as time went on. Fatima was enraptured with his passion for the subject from the start.

“I’m thinking about taking a semester off,” she says, shrugging. She taps her spacebar with a
metronome-like series of clicks as she makes her character in the game jump while running.

There’s a moment where she thinks she almost has him fooled, but he lets out a soft ‘tch!’ of annoyance. “No you’re not. Deacon would be pissed.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, which he can’t see from behind her. He’d caught her lie, but not for a reason she’d intended. “What does Deacon have to do with it?” she asks, doing her best to sound casual.

“Because you have the biggest crush in the universe on him, which is still gross by the way,” he says, poking her between her shoulderblades again. It’s a faint, annoying almost-pain as he jabs her spine. “He’s eight years older than us.”

“Seven and a half,” she says too-quickly. She’s thought about this before, and seven and a half sounds a lot less than eight. Fatima presses forward before Rashid can tease her about her very specific answer. “And that’s less than a ten year gap, therefore acceptable. We agreed.”

The weight on the back of her chair lifts as he stops leaning on it. “No, you decided that on your own. Also, he’s married.”

“If you’re going to call me out on anything, it should be that, dipshit,” she points out, trying to ignore the heat on her face. Fatima has known for a long time that her crush was silly and wholly misguided, but she can’t help it. He’s just so damn cute. And nice, and patient, and of course kind. Who wouldn’t have a bit of a crush on someone like that? “And you’re right, I’m not taking a semester off, I already registered.” Fatima picks up the open spiral-bound notebook sitting on the desk beside her, shoving it into her brother’s chest without looking. “Wrote it all down there.”

Rashid takes hold of the notebook and shoves her hand away from him. “Bitch.”

Her mouth twitches. “Asshole.”

There’s the rustle of paper as Fatima runs circles around the entrance of Karazhan, waiting for Chris to meet her. She could start clearing, but it doesn’t feel polite. Quickly checking her map to see where he is, she’s a little taken aback when she doesn’t immediately find him.

**Teema:** Crit, are you lost?

**Octacrit:** ...maybe

**Octacrit:** sorry Teemz, I’m headed your way now

“How is a children’s lit course in the three hundreds?” Rashid asks, and when she glances back at him he’s sitting cross-legged on her bed. He stretches his arms over his head and flops backwards to sprawl out, arching his back with a groan.

“You could sign up and find out,” she retorts, huffing out her nose. “You might learn something about what childhood was supposed to be like.”

“Pass.”

“It’s not just reading YA books, it’s studying the underlying themes and—”

“Pass.”

“Fine. Don’t take it.”
They’re settling in to bicker, getting into the rhythm of it right when there’s a soft knock on the door. Fatima looks up from her computer.

“Come in!” she calls out, knowing that it can only be one person. They still live with her, after all.

A familiar orange-haired head pokes into the room, a scattering of brown freckles painted across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose. “Fatima, have you seen—” Morwenna’s eyes flick towards the direction of the bed. “Oh, of course. Well, I wanted to remind you two that I’ve got training with Frisk tomorrow, so I need you to keep an eye out for Asriel.”

“Are you sure they’re a mage?” Rashid drawls, his tone a little too high-andmighty for Fatima’s taste. “It’s been a month and still nothing from the kid.”

“Don’t be such an ass,” Fatima snaps. After shooting her twin a glare, she looks up at Morwenna. “Frisk is working hard, aren’t they?”

Something strange flits across Morwenna’s face, nearly imperceptible, but Fatima sees it. She’d always been the observant one, the one to pick up on the subtle shifts in Avery’s behavior that warned them of some kind of new ‘lesson’. It taught her when to be on her toes, when to tell Rashid to watch his mouth to avoid being punished. Those habits hadn’t gone away, no matter how long they’d been with Morwenna. In the beginning it helped her realize that she really did have their best intentions at heart, that they didn’t have to live in fear anymore. Now she just can’t turn that heightened awareness off.

She wishes she knew what that look meant. If she could borrow some purple magic, just for a few minutes… Well, whatever it is going on with Morwenna and Frisk, she’d tell them if it was any of their business. Not that it stops her from being curious.

“Of course they’re working hard. It’s just more tricky for some people than others, that’s all,” Morwenna says carefully. “And they’re still young.”

“We had to start learning at ten,” Rashid grumbles.

“Well, that’s not how we do things,” she says.

“Isn’t twelve still really young for you guys? Us guys? Whatever,” he says, sighing. “Deacon said he got taught early and he was fourteen when he started.”

Oh, she hadn’t thought of that before. Why start Frisk so soon?

“Frisk is a special case,” Morwenna says in a clipped tone. “And I’m reminding you again that I need you to keep an eye out for Asriel. I don’t want him interfering.”

“I’ll see if he wants to do something in-game during that time. Keep him busy,” Fatima says, glancing over at her brother. “You can run some dungeons with us?”

He sighs. “Yeah, I guess. Though I don’t see the big deal. Why can’t he be there?”

“He’s a distraction,” Morwenna says, and Fatima isn’t sure she’s being entirely truthful. But what other explanation could there be? “And Frisk needs to focus. So thank you for helping, you two.”

“Yeah, sure,” Rashid says.

“Of course,” Fatima answers, because how could she ever say no to the woman who’d taken them in? How ungrateful would they have to be to not help her?
Bo is quiet when they get home. Contemplative.

Deacon doesn’t like it.

They’d spent the middle of the day with you and your family watching Alphys and Undyne’s kids, and everyone but him was just head over heels for those babies. Yeah, they’re cute —and he’s happy for Alphys and Undyne!— but he just… didn’t know what to do with them. Sometimes Bo would pass him one of the kids if she needed a free hand to take care of something, even though there were three other more willing people in the room, and he’d just sit there and go all stiff and have baby advice he’d heard in movies start repeating over and over in his head. *Mind his head, make sure to support her neck, don’t drop him.* He’s pretty sure that neck stuff stopped applying once they could hold their heads up on their own, but it’s one of those things that just gets hammered into your brain whenever you see people passing newborns. And while he was sure to do his best not to drop them, they sure put forth a valiant effort to squirm out of his arms, like they knew he wanted nothing to do with them.

Well, that’s… that’s not strictly true. It’s not that he didn’t want anything to do with them, it’s just that he was afraid of doing something wrong. He had three grown adults watching him, all of which have more baby experience than he does (you a mother yourself, Bo having been around countless baby cousins, and Sans… well, Sans was just a natural somehow) and he could just feel the —undoubtedly well-intended— scrutiny from all of you. Even Frisk was better at it than he was.

He’d just screw something up. And it’s not that he’s worried about the kids, right? Or what Bo would think of him for doing something wrong. That’s… that’s *not* it. It’s that he doesn’t want to piss off the fish-monster that could easily break him in half.

That’s a normal thing to be scared of. (Well, his idea of ‘normal’ is relative.)

After Alphys and Undyne got back you insisted that he and Bo go back to your house for dinner, and it was easier to have a conversation without the babies around distracting everyone. Which, admittedly, was getting really annoying. Every time one of the twins would do something cute, someone would have to point it out no matter who was in the middle of talking. Yes, he just spent the last month with his wife twenty-four seven, and he was having fun spending time with his friends, but it still bothered him when he’d have to sit there and repeat Bo’s name to get her attention.

Is this what their lives would be like if they had a kid? Would he immediately slip to second-best in her eyes?

He feels selfish for thinking it, but he’s not… He’s not sure he’s ready to share her.

She’s standing at the foot of the stairs, looking up at the last five years told in pictures, and Deacon’s afraid to ask her what she’s thinking about. Instead of seeing the two of them, happy and together, and a *family* of two, is she just seeing what’s missing?

There’s nothing *missing*, damn it!

“I think we’re going to be running out of space soon,” Bo says, glancing over her shoulder. She pushes soft, pink hair out of her eyes, and one of her long ears gives a small twitch as she brushes it.

His stomach lurches. Space? No, the house is perfect for the two of them, they don’t need anything
bigger. Is she trying to suggest they move? Why? For more bedrooms? He’s had the house next door to you for almost six years, he’s not going to move! “W-what?”

She blinks, then jerks a thumb at the stairwell. “The pictures. They’re getting a little cramped.”

“Oh!” he blurts out, suddenly relieved. “Uh, yeah I guess so. We’ll have to make more room for pictures from next year’s trip.”

Bo laughs, tipping her head to the side. “We just got home and you’re already thinking of the next one?”

“Sure, why not? Have to start planning early,” he says, finding his feet and crossing the room to stand beside her. Slipping his arms around her waist, he pulls her up against him.

She slips her arms around his neck and gives him a brief, chaste kiss, more comfortable than anything. “We’re still not allowed to go where I really want to,” she says, sighing.

“Maybe in the next year—”

“You said that last year,” she mutters, hugging herself close and resting her head on his shoulder. “I’m getting tired of putting things off on the hope that it finally changes.”

“What are you putting off?” he says, and realizes too late what she means.

“Leaving the country will be a lot trickier if we have kids.”

If. At least she didn’t say when.

“Doing any kind of trip will be trickier if we have kids,” he says, rubbing his hand up and down her back. He’s glad she can’t see his face. ‘If’ is easy to dance around. They’ve talked about kids before, in passing, before they got married. She knows it’s not a priority to him, that he’s not sure he even wants any. She married him knowing that.

She goes quiet, and he takes her silence as an opportunity to change the subject. “We’ve got lots of time to decide on trips and stuff” —god he can’t even say ‘or kids’, just stuff — “so why don’t we finish unpacking, get some laundry started? Having half our wardrobes stuffed in suitcases is getting old.”

“Laundry?” she whines, nuzzling under his chin. “Baby it’s late, we can do laundry tomorrow. I’ve still got two days before they’re expecting me back at the restaurant.”

“Well, then what would you rather do?” he asks, cupping the side of her face with his hand and brushing his fingers along the length of her ear the way he knows she likes.

She shivers, letting out a pleased hum. It falls into the same pitch of the smooth, warm sound of her Soul (that’s one thing that still amazes him each time he stops to think about it, that being married to her means he can feel her Soul) like a low note played on a violin. Something inside of him answers, his own clear pitch in harmony with her. It’s a reassurance, a reminder that they belong together. That they are together.

“You,” she says, and her breath is hot on his neck as she presses slow kisses against his throat.

“I dunno, I really had my heart set on laundry—”

“Mr. Stuart, you cut that out,” she growls, and her lips are replaced with teeth.
His chuckle is low and warm, affection bubbling up and smoothing away his worries. He doesn’t need to think of all that right now. They have all the time in the world to think about their future. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Stuart, is something bothering you?”

“Yes, my horrible husband,” she says, pulling away to fix him with a frustrated look.

Deacon knows he’s smiling, can feel the way his expression softens when he looks at her. Her frown smooths away, and he strokes her cheek and kisses her between her eyes. “I love you,” he says, because he just needs to say it. He needs her to hear it, and he needs to hear her say it back. “I love you too.”
The determination was buzzing in his bones, setting his teeth on edge, taking the low drone of his Soul and cranking the dial all the way to eleven. He’d never felt anything like this before, like his magic was waiting to spill over from inside of him. It’s just shy of too much, a hair away from overwhelming, bordering on taking over all his senses. It distracted him and honed him to hyper-awareness at the same time, his attention flitting from person to person as he and Dr. Gaster entered the test chamber where everyone was waiting for them.

And there, up against the wall where all focus would be drawn to it, was the machine.

The steady hum of it filled the air, just enough to be noticeable but not loud enough to drown out other sound, an inescapable undercurrent of noise. Large and rectangular, the machine was a metal booth with a singular panel fixed on the outside, flanked with buttons and switches to manipulate the controls. Sleek steel, polished and painted knobs and dials, this was the only time that it would ever look like this. (It’s broken now, singed and scraped, damaged and taken apart over and over through the years but never completely. Because it’s the only thing that can withstand the Resets and Sans can’t let that go. It’s still in his workshop and it will **always** be there, gathering dust and holding memories.)

Inside the machine, through the open door (it doesn’t have a door anymore, just twisted, pitted metal where the hinges look like they were ripped off) was darkness. A darkness too perfect, too dense and thick, too **everything**. It filled the space, and something about it made Sans think that it was trying to get out somehow.

*Get a grip,* he told himself, gritting his teeth and looking to his father. He’s talking to one of the four assistants gathered for what might well be their crowning achievement. Over the buzz of the machine, the atmosphere in the room was something bordering on triumphant. They believed they were doing what was best for the people of the Underground.

*We’re here to break the Barrier. This is it.*

“Everything is prepared whenever you’re ready to begin, Dr. Gaster,” one of the assistants said, clearly anxious to get started. Their fingers fidgeted in front of their chest, elbows sticking out on either side of them attached to arms that were too long to seem comfortable. “The machine is primed, the gate is locked. You just need to initiate the breach.”

His father beamed, his skeletal grin pulled wide as he took in the room, red pupils (the wrong color) falling on each and every person before resting on Sans. And he was too much of a coward, too mindful of his damn pride, to do anything but return that smile despite the voice in the back of his skull telling him that it was wrong. Telling him to stop all this before it was too late.

It was already too late.
“I know that all of you are well aware of what we’re doing here today,” Dr. Gaster said, his gaze leaving his son and once again sweeping over his gathered staff. “But for the sake of decorum”—laughter, high spirits, smiles all around—“and to remind ourselves of just what has brought us here today, and what we hope to achieve… This day may be our last day in the Underground. This time tomorrow we may very well be standing beneath the sun, all monsters may be freed because of our efforts here today.” He paused for effect. He’d always been such a good speaker with a captive audience, knew just what to say to make people believe in him. Trust him. Because he believed in himself and his capacity to make the Underground a better place for all of monsterkind. He wanted to give them the world, and it showed.

“But first we need to make history in another way. Those of you gathered here are the only ones who know that we’ve discovered the font from which all magic springs, and with this—” He gestured at the machine, splayed his long, delicate fingers with a flourish. “We will open a gateway between our world and that place. Our experiments may have started because of the study of fractured timelines some time in the future, but they led us somewhere far greater, to what may very well be the hope our people need. The one thing we need to tear down the Barrier.”

Murmurs of approval filled the room, companionable glances at one another, a friendly nudge between a short, scaly monster with a row of spikes trailing down its back and another with a huge, hanging head.

“And through this gateway we will bring the creature we found in that place. If my speculations and analysis is correct, it feeds on magic, and the Barrier should be quite a meal for it,” Dr. Gaster said, and the others laughed. But not Sans. It was all he could do to keep that grin on his face. He couldn’t let go of that feeling of dread, he couldn’t stop thinking about all the magic coursing through his body, making him feel too full. Like he was about to burst.

If the thing inside that place fed on magic, wouldn’t he be a tantalizing treat?

Wouldn’t they all be?

“Now, I suppose all that’s left for us is to begin.” His father rested a hand on his shoulder. It felt like the weight of the world. “Sans, would you like to do the honors?”

No. “all on me, huh?” he said, and his skull felt like it might crack from the strain of his smile. NO. “welp, guess i’ll get this show on the road.”

(He’s not sure he could bear the guilt, if he could remember it.)

Frisk remembers this feeling, waking up and not remembering why they feel so unsettled. It makes them think of Chara, and a young, small, frightened part of them half-expects to hear that voice in their head, telling them they just want to help.

How many hundreds of times had Chara ‘helped’ until the one time they finally meant it? The one time out of years’ worth of Resets where their help meant saving lives instead of ending them.

They lay in bed and listen to the sound of their own too-fast breathing, the thud of their heart as it finally starts to slow. Over a minute passes before they finally accept that the voice isn’t coming. Of course it isn’t; Chara is dead, no matter if their memory still haunts them six years later.

Besides, whatever it was they just dreamed about, they get the feeling it didn’t have anything to do with Chara. It didn’t even have anything to do with them.

Anxious and jittery, Frisk shoves their hair out of their face and turns towards the clock. It’s just
after two in the morning, and though they wish they could, they know they can’t get back to sleep any time soon. The adrenaline is still too fresh, the nightmare hovers at the edges of their consciousness, enough to make them afraid but not near enough to let them know why. To make matters worse, this is the second night in a row.

It’s infuriating.

Throwing off the covers, Frisk swings their legs off the bed and to the floor. They groan and rub their face, scrubbing eyes that feel sore from too little sleep. They want to talk to someone, anyone, but they don’t want to wake you or Sans. Or Asriel, even though they’re sure he wouldn’t mind. But they don’t want to scare him in the middle of the night into thinking it’s an emergency.

So they do the next best thing; they sit down at their computer and turn on the monitor, wiggling the mouse to wake it up. The whir of the fans joins the whine of summer insects outside and the quiet drone of the air conditioning. Flickering to life, the monitor is blinding for a moment as Frisk adjusts to the light, wincing and narrowing their eyes.

The easiest place to check for people to talk to is in the game they all play together. Some of them are night owls, and might still be on. They load up the game and log in.

The familiar music is comforting and the ache in their eyes is starting to fade. They know they should be in bed, not messing around in World of Warcraft, but at the very least maybe they could do something productive while they can’t sleep. As they wait for it to load they run their fingers through their hair. It’s getting long, maybe too long. Not for the first time they wonder if they should cut it short to stop people from getting confused.

But they shouldn’t have to cut their hair just to stop people from asking stupid questions, from being nosy about things that aren’t any of their business. What does it matter if some people think it makes them look girly… Chris has long hair, and no one tells him he looks like a girl.

They toss it all back over their shoulder as the loading screen goes away, ignoring all that for now. They’re barely on for five seconds before a message pops up in the guild chat.

Octacrit: kid, shouldn’t you be asleep?

Octacrit: I mean, not that it’s my place to tell you to go to bed or anything

Octacrit: it’s just super late

Frisk taps their mouth with their knuckles, rubbing back and forth across their lips as they think of what to say. They understand why Chris is saying that stuff, but it’s still sort of… annoying.

Frisket: I was asleep. Had a bad dream.

Octacrit: oh

Octacrit: did you want to talk about it or something?

Frisk sighs, rubs their eyes.

Frisket: I can’t remember it, just feel sorta creeped out… =/

Frisket: Just need to distract myself for a bit until I get sleepy again.

Octacrit: no problem, I got you. well if you need to talk, I’ll be up for a while, ok?
Frisket: Ok. Thanks.

They got out of bed because they wanted to talk to someone, right? And Chris is right there, offering. Maybe they should—

The game makes a soft notification sound. There, in the chatlog, is a message telling them that Asriel logged on.

Octacrit: jesus, both of you? you guys really are weirdly in-sync sometimes, did you have a bad dream too?

‘Weirdly in-sync’ is one way to put it. They never did explain much to Chris, about their Souls or anything else. He’d found out about the mages (he was just too close to it all for that to stay secret) and he’d made the assumption on his own that what had happened that night with Jacobs, Frisk knowing about the future, was just mage stuff. It wasn’t so much a lie, and they never corrected him...

Ashhoof: Oh, Frisk, you’re up too?

Frisket: Yeah.

Asriel plays a tauren druid, and had insisted on going with an ‘appropriate’ name for his character. Unlike Frisk, Chris, and Rashid. (Rashid had named his rogue something rude enough to get flagged for a rename, and ended up with ‘Shidhead’ instead.) Fatima’s, while a play on her nickname, was still ‘in-character’ enough for Asriel’s taste.

Frisk gets a private message from Asriel, whispered outside of guild chat so Chris can’t see it.

/Ashhoof: What does he mean, bad dream? Did you have a nightmare too?

They swallow, a feeling of apprehension tightening in their chest.

/Frisket: ...Yeah, but I can’t remember it. What about you?

/Ashhoof: Same thing.

/Frisket: That’s… really creepy. It’s not like we dream the same stuff, like, ever.

God, at least they hope not. Their dreams have been sort of… uh… embarrassing. Where Asriel is concerned.

/Ashhoof: Right.

Octacrit: well, uh, don’t stay up too long ok?

Octacrit: this is me, trying to be the responsible adult

Frisket: lol

Frisket: Ok, I’ll try.

Ashhoof: We won’t be on long.

/Frisket: He just doesn’t want to get in trouble with mom and dad.
/Ashhoof: He’s trying a little too hard.

/Frisket: So you had a weird dream too? That you can’t remember?

/Ashhoof: Yeah. It felt like… something bad happened.

/Frisket: Yeah… It happened to me last night too.

/Ashhoof: Ok, now it’s just getting even weirder. I had the same thing.

/Frisket: Why didn’t you tell me? You stayed the night and everything, we could have talked about it.

/Ashhoof: You didn’t talk to ME about it either. It didn’t seem like that big of a deal at the time.

/Frisket: …Yeah, true…

There’s a soft knock on the door and Frisk jumps.

“kiddo, you up?” Sans’s voice is quiet, just loud enough to be heard through the door.

/Frisket: Dad is up, gtg.

They type the message in quickly and exit the game, but don’t bother turning off the monitor. It’s too late now anyway, they’ve already been caught. “Yeah,” they say. “You can come in.”

Sans pokes his head in first, the lights in his eyes small and focused as he finds them there sitting at the computer. He’s just wearing a pair of boxers, the light of the screen catching on the paleness of his ribs. Somehow, in a way that just doesn’t make sense yet is familiar at the same time, there are shadowed circles under his eye sockets. He looks tired.

“you oughta be in bed,” he says, but his reprimand is weak. He closes the door behind him and comes to stand next to the desk.

“Shouldn’t you?” Frisk asks, and Sans gives them a wry grin and a shrug in return. “Had a nightmare, couldn’t go back to sleep.”

He studies them for a second, that smile fading as he rubs his fingers over the vertebrae in his neck. “what about?” he asks carefully.

He knows something. Or thinks he does. Frisk isn’t sure if it’s reassuring or just worries them even more. “I can’t remember.”

A furrow forms between Sans’s brows, but he doesn’t say anything.

“…Asriel was woken up by the same thing. A nightmare he can’t remember,” they say, pressing their hand to their mouth again, cupping their chin. “We both had the same thing happen last night too.”

“that doesn’t make any sense,” Sans says, shaking his head and frowning.

“Maybe it’s just something to do with our bond,” Frisk says, trying to rationalize it because they don’t want Sans to worry. He worries too much as it is, even though he shouldn’t have to. “It’s never happened before, but maybe it’s something new.”
He’s shaking his head still, even before they finished speaking. “can’t be that. doesn’t explain why it’s happening to me too.”

Frisk stares at him for a second, unsure if they heard him correctly. “But…”

“dunno.” Sans sighs, and all of a sudden he looks even more tired, more weary. He walks over to the edge of Frisk’s bed and sits down. “there’s only one thing the three of us have in common.”

They have to think about it before it clicks in their head. “Remembering the Resets and Loads?”

“bingo.”

Frisk’s mouth gapes open, fear making goosebumps stand up on their forearms. “But I’m not… I’m not doing anything, I promise!”

“c’mere, kiddo,” Sans says, beckoning them over. They hesitate for a moment before doing as he says, going to sit beside him. He wraps his arm around their shoulders, which is a lot different now than it used to be. He has to reach up now. Sans used to seem so big before, so powerful. And he still is, but… they miss the days when it was so much easier for Sans to make them feel like everything would be okay. “i don’t think you’re doing anything. i dunno what’s going on, but i don’t blame you.”

“What should we do?”

He mulls this over for a second, rubbing Frisk’s arm with his thumb as he stares at the window. Then he lets out a haggard sigh, ruffling Frisk’s hair and earning himself a sound of protest as they reach up to try and fix it. “go back to bed. they’re just dreams, and unless something changes there’s not much we can do,” he says, pushing back up to his feet. “just lemme know if anything does, and if it happens again. asriel too.”

Frisk wants to argue, to try and come up with a plan. But Sans is right, what could they possibly do about weird dreams? “Okay…”

“ok,” he echoes back, and points Frisk towards the head of their bed. “now get some sleep, and i’ll try to do the same.”

“Fine,” they grumble, crawling back under the covers.

“g’night frisk. i’m sure everything will be fine,” he says, but his tone rings a little false. Like he’s trying to placate them.

“Night Dad.”

Sans shuts off the computer monitor on his way out the door, plunging the room back into darkness. Something about the moment where everything is pitch, when their eyes aren’t adjusted to the absence of light, feels eerily familiar. They wish they knew why.

Chapter End Notes

If the first scene left you a little confused, maybe go back and reread Chapter 141. :)
A lot has changed in regards to the mages since the monsters learned of their continued existence. The Literatum now live in the newest of Ebott’s neighborhoods, Woodside (named, of course, by Asgore after the wooded valley it’s nestled into). Woodside was built specifically to house the gradual influx of humans (mostly mages) that had begun to trickle into the monster society.

The monsters, after taking a little time to adjust, were as friendly and welcoming as always after they’d heard about what Morwenna and the others had done to help secure their legal rights. And once Asgore had assured his people that they meant no harm, their incorporation went smoothly.

And so the Literatum set up a base of operations on Ebott, headed by Morwenna and Grant, which gradually began to grow as word spread among the unaffiliated mages and other groups that the mountain was something of a safe haven for magic. It’s Ebott’s worst-kept secret; so far as the world is concerned, humans don’t have magic. There are rumors of course —there are *always* rumors— but any odd incidents are easy enough to explain away as coincidence, or a trick performed by a nearby monster.

Having a home where the mages can be themselves, unafraid of using their magic and being caught, Frisk knows how comforting that is.

Though, lately they’ve been second-guessing this whole ‘embracing their magic’ thing.

“Frisk, you need to *focus* ,” Morwenna says, resting her hands on her hips as she bites back an aggravated sigh. She’s annoyed with them, that’s plain enough to see, and it doesn’t help that they’re annoyed with themselves, too.

“I *am* focusing,” Frisk snaps before they can catch themselves, pushing sweat-damp hair out of their face as they scowl.

Her head tips a little to the side, arching a brow as she gives them a bemused look. Frisk is standing there in a fighter’s crouch, breathing hard, and Morwenna hasn’t even broken a sweat. Her tank top is still pristine, short orange hair (graying just at the temples) not even mussed. It’s embarrassing, being put through their paces and outstripped by a woman just shy of sixty.

The training room at the Literatum headquarters (officially known in Woodside as the ‘Community Center’) is empty save for the two of them. At least no one is there to see this.

“This is pointless!” Frisk blurts out, dropping their arms back to their sides and letting out an exasperated noise.

“Put your hands back up,” she says. She settles into a combat stance, raising her arms.

“I can’t do this without Asriel here,” they insist, shaking their head.

“I will only say this one more time. Put your hands back up.”
“It’s not going to work,” they mutter. They don’t move.

Morwenna doesn’t answer. Instead she lunges forward, lashing out with the heel of her palm. With a yelp of surprise, Frisk tries to twist out of the way but she’s too fast, hitting them square in the shoulder with enough force to knock them off-balance.

“Stop!” Frisk yelps, trying to bat her hand away but missing as she snaps her arm back. But she’s moving forward again, her mouth set into a hard line, her brow furrowed. “Wait!”

“Stop me yourself,” she says, shifting her weight with a fluid motion as she moves, striking again. Frisk manages to deflect this one, just barely, but they’re backpedaling. “You have the magic necessary, you can be faster than this. Use it.”

“I can’t!”

“You can!” she snaps. There’s a fire in her eyes as she forces Frisk back, just shy of overwhelming them. The worst part is that she’s obviously holding herself back; she’s not using any magic! “Use your magic, Frisk.”

They try to reach for it, to tap into that huge well of power that’s hidden deep inside of them, but they can’t do it. They just can’t glean enough magic for something simple, something ordinary like Morwenna can. The only thing they can touch is that bright point in their mind, the thing they know is their Save, but they aren’t trying to Load. All they can do is Load and that’s not what they want! “It’s not mine!” they cry out, frustrated tears blurring their vision. “The magic isn’t mine!”

Frisk raises their hands to defend themselves against an attack that doesn’t come. After a second, sniffling, they blink to try and clear their eyes and look at Morwenna. She’s watching them with a somber look on her face, arms hanging limply.

“It is yours,” she says softly. “It’s inside of you, it’s connected to your Soul. Maybe it didn’t start out as yours, but it is now.”

“You don’t understand.” Frisk swipes angrily at their eyes, frustrated and embarrassed.

“I understand enough. I understand that you can’t stop thinking of that power as Chara’s, that it isn’t yours to use,” she says. You and Sans and Deacon had agreed to tell her the truth, years ago. That as the only other person who might understand Frisk’s magic, she needed to know. (Also, Deacon insisted on telling Bo. Which brought the number of people who knew about their powers up to six, not including Frisk themselves.) Frisk drops their gaze to the floor. “I understand that you’re afraid of it.”

“I’m not afraid,” they mutter, digging their toes into the ground. “I just can’t do this by myself.”

“You can’t keep relying on Asriel. Yes, he has most of Chara’s Soul, but you have their magic. You’ve used it before,” she says, her tone careful. Cautious.

“Yeah, when Asriel was with me,” they say petulantly.

“He can’t always be with you, Frisk.”

“Yes he can! The only reason he’s not here right now is because you’re keeping him away.” Gritting their teeth, Frisk turns on their heel to head towards the door. “You want me to do all this stuff, but you’re crippling me!”

“Frisk, where are you going?”
“Away,” they snap. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“Fine,” she answers, her voice even from behind them. “Then I’ll see you tomorrow for more training.”

They want to argue, but they know it’s pointless. They remain silent as they storm off.

“You yelled at Morwenna.”

Frisk buries their face in their knees, letting out an anguished groan. Asriel clears his throat, rubbing their back with one hand.

“What did your mom say?” he asks.

“I didn’t tell her,” Frisk says, voice muffled. “It was the end of practice when I stormed off anyway, so she was just waiting out in the car. Just lied and said it was fine. Same stupid thing.”

“Aren’t you worried Morwenna’s going to tell her?”

“...Well I am now!” they whine, unfolding themselves and lifting their head to look at him. They’re sitting on Asriel’s bed, in his room, and he winces at the look on their face.

“Sorry,” he says, dropping his hand away from their back and glancing down at the bedspread.

Frisk can feel his apprehension, his desire to make them feel better somehow. It’s tangled up in this confusing uncertainty, and Frisk wishes they could make him feel better too. So they try to do what they can. They push him over so that he’s laying on his back, then sprawl out on their stomach and rest their head on his chest. Asriel makes a soft, confused sound as he twists his head to look down at them, and as their eyes meet they feel him relax beneath them.

That nervousness is still there though as Asriel shifts his arms, like he’s not sure what to do with them. Finally he settles on playing with Frisk’s hair, though from what they can feel through their bond, it doesn’t help his nerves. He’s been like this a lot lately; too anxious.

Maybe it’s what Morwenna said, or being worried about Asriel, but something ugly twists in the pit of Frisk’s stomach. Something that makes their throat tight and their chest ache. “Are we together too much?” Frisk whispers.

Asriel tenses beneath them, the fingers twirling through their hair halting in their fluid, circular gestures. “We promised to always be together,” Asriel says, his voice cracking.

“When we were little kids,” they say weakly.

“What do you mean? Do you… want to take it back?” He still hasn’t moved. He’s just laying there, looking at them. Frozen.

This was the wrong thing. All of this, it’s wrong and they don’t mean any of it the way it sounds. “No, Asriel, I don’t,” they insist, draping an arm over his stomach in an awkward attempt to hug him. “We just said a lot of… silly stuff when we were little. I— I don’t know, that’s not right either!”

He pulls his hand free from Frisk’s hair, propping himself up on his elbows. It shifts Frisk off of him, and they’re left having to push themselves onto their hands and knees. His expression is closed off, a little hurt, and though he might seem cold and stony on the outside, they can feel his
emotions tossing him about. They’re not faring much better.

Asriel must feel it too, able to tell that they feel just as badly as he does, and instead of them feeding off of each other’s negative feedback they take a moment to just look at each other. As they hold each other’s gaze, not needing to speak to understand, Frisk feels Asriel start to mellow. It calms them, too.

“I’m sorry,” Frisk says, sighing. “Morwenna just… doesn’t understand. But she knows so much other stuff, so sometimes I wonder… If there’s something wrong with us.”

Asriel shifts his weight onto his side, freeing one arm so he can scratch above his ears. His snout scrunches. “Of course there’s something wrong with us. None of this is normal,” he says.

Frisk bats his hand away, kneeling beside him as they reach with both hands to rub the top of Asriel’s head. He lets out a contented noise as his eyelids droop. “Normal is overrated,” they declare, echoing a sentiment they’re fairly certain they’ve heard Deacon express. “She keeps trying to make me do magic the ‘normal’ way and I don’t think I can.”

“Maybe we can practice together tomorrow,” Asriel says, sounding sleepy as they massage the raised bumps where his horns are still waiting to come in. “If you figure out how to do it when I’m around, maybe it’ll be easier when I’m not.”

“They don’t want me doing anything unsupervised,” Frisk grumbles, ‘they’ being you, Sans, and Morwenna. Probably more, if they knew. “Cuz ‘magic can be dangerous’ blah blah blah… Like I haven’t been doing this stuff for years by now…”

Asriel huffs a snort through his nostrils. “And getting in trouble for it almost every time,” he mumbles, drifting towards Frisk as he follows their fingers. Before he realizes it, he’s lying with his head in their lap, on his side with one arm draped over them.

“Don’t fall asleep,” Frisk complains. “Or I’m gonna stop. And it was only a little bit of trouble.”

“M’not falling asleep. Just feels good.”

Frisk grabs his long ear and gives it a firm tug, making Asriel let out a startled bleat that cracks halfway through. His eyes fly open and he turns his head enough to look up at them.

“What was that for?” he demands.

“You were about to fall asleep in my lap,” Frisk answers, arching a brow. “I mean, you can if you want, but—”

Asriel rolls away, unable to stop himself from going a little pink under his fur as he grabs the ear they tugged on and worries it with his thumb. “I wasn’t going to fall asleep,” he says stubbornly, staring up at the ceiling.

Frisk tries not to smile. “Okay.”

“I really wasn’t.”

“I said okay.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”
“Fine.”

“Fine.”

They fix each other with their best attempts at serious expressions, which crack in a matter of seconds. Frisk laughs and Asriel grins, and neither of them remember that they each meant to talk about their strange dreams.
It’s been a month since you’ve had the chance to just sit and spend time with Deacon, and you realize now how much you missed him. Each time he and Bo go on a trip, either during summer vacation or other school holidays, you’re reminded of just how deeply ingrained he is in your life. His absence is noticed, each and every time.

You get the feeling he enjoys being missed.

But of course he would. Needing to be reminded that he’s wanted is something he’s never quite managed to shake, and you’re more than happy to oblige in that regard. You don’t ever want him to doubt that he belongs here in your eclectic little family. Not that it’s easy to tell that he’d ever feel out of place just by looking at him—he’s got his shoes off and his socked feet kicked up on the coffee table, slouched on the sofa next to you with his arms crossed behind his head. Your house is the only place you’ve ever seen him this relaxed, other than his own home. You can’t imagine him being quite so cavalier with Bo’s parents, no matter how much they adore him.

(And they do. You’ve met them on more than one occasion, including at Deacon and Bo’s wedding, and you’d never seen a pair of parents more happy to see their child marry anyone before.)

“It’s so good to be home,” Deacon says, and you’re not sure if he’s talking about Ebott in general or here with you. Either way, you can’t help but smile. His eyelids are heavy with contentment as he lets out a long, slow breath. “Don’t get me wrong, I love taking trips with Bo, but there’s nothing like coming back here after we’re done.”

“I’m glad you’re back. I wish I could have gone with you,” you say, your smile slipping a bit.

“From the sound of it, seems like all those worries over Frisk’s training were kind of pointless.” He gives you an apologetic look, one corner of his mouth quirking up. “In hindsight, it wouldn’t have changed much on this end if you’d come with us.”

“Yeah, well, hindsight is twenty twenty,” you say, sighing and settling back against the arm of the couch as you sit sideways, facing Deacon. Hesitating, your lips curve into a mischievous smile as you burrow yourself into the cushions. “And, well, this might have been your last trip just the two of you. Maybe it’s for the best.”

Deacon’s eyes widen for just a second before he lets out a pitiful groan and tips his head back. Looking at you sideways, he shoves your knee. “Hope, please,” he whines. “Don’t start.”

“What, been hearing a lot of that at home?” you tease gently, nudging him with your foot. “How was she after seeing the twins yesterday?”
He lets you do it, a low grumble of protest his only defense, “We didn’t really talk about it too much. I managed to avoid it for the time being.”

“Deacon…” you say, in a tone that sounds suspiciously like your ‘mom voice’.

He winces, looking away. “I know, I just… I still don’t know. Look, this isn’t really the pressing issue. What’s the deal with Frisk’s training? I would have expected a lot more by the time we got back, all things considered.”

As far as changing the subject goes, he’s almost as good as Sans at avoiding things. You notice, of course, but you let it slide. This time. “I’m not exactly a mage, Deacon, I don’t know what the problem is. Though that’s not really helping Morwenna either…” You sigh, what little amusement gained by teasing Deacon suddenly lost. “She called me, after I dropped Frisk off at Asriel’s. They lost their temper with her.”

Deacon’s eyebrows shoot up and he turns a little to face you. He rests his arm on your leg. “What happened?”

“She’s not angry,” you say, cupping your cheek with your hand and tipping your head to the side. “From what she said, Frisk is getting frustrated about their magic not working right. And about her keeping Asriel away. The only time Frisk was able to use their magic to do anything smaller than a Load was when he was with them on their first day of practice, so maybe they have a point.”

His brow furrows as he reaches up to rub his neck. “But the magic is all Frisk’s. Whenever they use it, their Soul is the only one affected. It doesn’t make any sense that Asriel would need to be there.”

“Nothing about their situation makes any sense,” you say with a sigh.

“Heh, well, that’s certainly true.” Deacon hesitates, momentarily lost in thought. His expression turns somber. “Maybe this wasn’t a good idea, getting them to do this. I thought maybe it might help them understand their whole situation better, maybe make things safer…”

“I understand why you suggested it to us,” you tell him, reaching out to take his hand. He lets you, and you give his fingers a squeeze. “It’s just… complicated, I guess. I don’t…” You cringe, closing your eyes and letting out a frustrated sound. All of this magic, everything about it, it keeps affecting your family in ways that you never imagined possible. You wish you could understand it better. In a group of mages and monsters, sometimes you feel like the singular mundane human in the mix. Though none of them would ever claim you were the odd man out, you can’t help but feel it just the same. It’s a part of their lives you’ll never be able to truly understand. “I don’t know. How could I? I don’t know magic.”

“I thought you were on rather intimate terms with magic,” Deacon says, and he says it in such a casual way that it takes you a moment to register what he just said.

Spluttering, you erupt into embarrassed laughter, doing your best to hide your face.

“I think magic would be rather offended if you said you didn’t even know it,” he continues, and you’re not sure how he’s doing this with a straight face. “It must be under the impression that you’re in a committed relationship.”

“Oh my god. Stop,” you blurt out, shoulders shaking. It only gets worse as you fail to muffle an undignified snort. “You know what I mean!”

He’s laughing now too, unable to maintain his composure. “Okay, okay, but really.” Deacon
forces himself to speak, swallowing his laughter as he sucks in a slow, deep breath to try to steady himself. “I know you and Sans had some mixed feelings about this in the first place. Maybe I should talk to Morwenna, I’d hate for Frisk to just get more frustrated. I didn’t want to make things harder on them…”

“We know,” you say, squeezing his hand again. He squeezes back. “And Frisk wants to learn. It’s not your fault that nobody seems to know how their magic works…”

“If it even does, honestly,” he says, sighing. “They’re ridiculously powerful for a red mage, impossibly so… It’s like… a blunt, brute force for them. Like swinging a cudgel. They might not be capable of fine, detailed magic. At least not easily.”

“Maybe… I guess all I can do is wait and see,” you say. You give him a weak smile. “I’m sure you and Morwenna will come up with something.”

Sans’s phone is ringing.

You arch a brow as he looks down at you, teeth parted, blue swirling in his left eye socket, tongue slipping back into his mouth. Sprawled out beneath him, naked, you feel that fuzzy haze of desire quickly dissipate, swept away by the peppy ringtone you know is assigned to a singular person. Papyrus.

“Sans,” you warn, hooking your hand on the back of his neck, doing your best to keep him focused with a teasing swipe of your fingertips along his vertebrae.

No such luck. The magic in his eye dims a little, and he turns his head to look towards the nightstand. “he’s gonna worry if i don’t answer,” he says weakly.

“It’s late, he probably forgot about the time difference again,” you say. This isn’t the first time he’s called at nearly midnight, then didn’t understand why he couldn’t talk to Frisk (who was already in bed, asleep by this time). He’s three hours behind you, in Hawaii. “And we’re sort of in the middle of something here.”

“i know, babe, but…” He gives you a pleading look, and you know you can’t say no to that.

Sighing, you let him go and purse your lips, your hands flopping against the bed on either side of your head.

The swirl of blue disappears from his eye socket and is quickly replaced by those white lights. He bends down to nip at your neck, but doesn’t linger. “i’ll make it quick, i promise,” he says, then scoots over so he can reach for his phone.

As he reaches for it and answers the call, you push up into a sitting position. He’s sitting cross-legged on the edge of the bed, elbows resting on his knees, naked and giving you a full view of his bones. You feel anxious and a little frustrated, all wound up with no release. Shifting closer to Sans, he gives you a quick glance as he feels the bed move under your weight.

“yeah, it’s a little late, bro,” he says, covering the back of his neck with his free hand.

“OH, SANS, I’M SORRY! WERE YOU SLEEPING?” Papyrus asks, his loud voice easy enough to hear with you sitting right behind Sans.

“uh, no. not sleeping.” For a moment you hope that will get the point across, until Sans keeps speaking. “but it’s ok, bro. what’s up?”
You frown. You love Papyrus, you really do, but that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t annoy you sometimes. Well, you can’t get back at your brother-in-law for interrupting your alone time with your husband, but there is something you can do...

Give Sans a reason to stick to his word and make this a brief call.

As Papyrus recounts some conversation with Mettaton about another talk with their manager (something about another movie, not a horror one this time) you trace your fingers down the bumps and ridges of Sans’s spine. He jerks under your touch, biting back a sharp gasp as his head snaps to look at you. His eyes are wide, a sudden flush spreading across his cheekbones, and you just give him a coy smile in return.

“What was that? Is everything okay?”

Sans stares at you, studying your face as he tries to find his voice. “Yeah, everything’s fine. go on,” he says, a little clipped as he stares.

Biting your bottom lip, you’re satisfied with the way his eyes dip down to watch. Good. Trailing your fingers down even lower along his spine, you brush deliberately over the spot where it meets his pelvis, one of the most sensitive places on him and you know it. He shudders and squeezes his eyes shut, and you hear the barest, faintest hint of a strangled groan. It’s quiet enough that Papyrus doesn’t even notice.

His pupils are bright as he opens his eyes again, and the look he gives you is full of hunger. Also, you’re pleased to note, a distinct frustration as his hand tightens on his phone. Slowly, purposefully, you trace along the wing of his pelvis and he jerks away, catching your hand and twisting to shove you back against the bed. You let out a self-satisfied laugh as he throws his leg over your hips, straddling you and pinning you with his weight. That blue glow is in his eye again, quickly enveloping his phone. He uses his magic to hold it in place while he leans forward to pin your hands to the mattress over your head.

“Hey, bro?” Sans says, his mouth curving into a wicked grin. “I gotta get going, ok? we’ll talk more soon.”

“Oh but I didn’t get the chance to ask about hope yet. How is she doing? Are you being a good husband? Are you taking good care of her?” he asks, and you bite your bottom lip again, this time to try and stop yourself from giggling.

You can feel Sans’s deep, satisfied chuckle rumble through your body as he presses in close. “Yeah, don’t worry about that. I’m taking real good care of her.”

There’s a moment of silence over the phone. “I get the feeling that we aren’t talking about the same thing, sans.”

“G’night papyrus. say hi to mettaton for us,” he says, and the note of finality sends a flutter of anticipation low in your stomach.

“Good night, brother. Be sure to get your rest, but not too much! I don’t want to hear that you’ve been getting lazier!” he says, unaffected by Sans’s dismissal. “Goodbye!”

“Bye,” he says, and lets go of one of your hands so he can reach up to end the call. Once that’s done he tosses the phone aside. You don’t even have time to appreciate your free arm before he has it pinned again, letting out a low growl. “What the hell, hope.”
“What?” you ask innocently, testing his grip on you. His fingers tighten, and he leans more weight on them to hold you in place.

“were you trying to drive me nuts?” he demands, heated as his face inches closer to yours.

“Maybe,” you murmur, taking what little movement you can to lean up and kiss his mouth. As you fall back against the bed you give him a mischievous smile. “Did it work?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead he presses in closer, nipping at your lips just shy of too hard, ribcage dragging against your breasts in a way that leaves you wanting more, unsure if his teasing is purposeful or just an accident. Either way it makes you squirm, gasping, and when your mouth opens you feel his warm, soft tongue seek out yours.

He spreads your legs with his knees, shifting himself between them instead of straddling them, and you hook your legs behind his back with enthusiasm. This is what you wanted, after all. You wanted him, his attention, his desire focused entirely on you. The humming song of your Souls as you touch is a backdrop to your passion as you feel the faint tingle of magic rub against you, making you moan as he drags a slow stroke over your folds, just enough to tease.

Oh, you know that you asked for this, but you let out a frustrated whine just the same.

“i can’t even be mad at you, i just want you,” he says, his voice pitched in a low rumble. He rocks forward again, grinding against you, and you bite your lip as another whining moan builds up in your throat.

You arch your back, trying to rise to meet him. “Yes, please Sans…”

And that’s all he needs to press inside of you, slowly and carefully, holding your gaze as you grasp at his fingers still pinning your hands. He’s careful, letting your body adjust to taking him in, watching your face as you let out a soft, satisfied gasp. Sans bends over you to graze his teeth along your shoulder, making you shudder.

“i’m gonna make you come for me,” he says against your skin, then takes hold of you with his teeth. He bites down, for emphasis, and you gasp. “and then i’ll have my way with you.”

You can’t help but laugh, a soft, breathy sound as you turn your head to catch his eye. “That doesn’t sound like a punishment for teasing you,” you murmur, pressing slow, open-mouthed kisses down his jaw.

“who said i was punishing you?” he counters, and he grinds forward to press himself further into you, eliciting a quiet moan. Then he pulls away to start a slow, steady rhythm.

It’s tender, almost gentle, sweetened as you feel a small, familiar tendril of magic stroking at your clit, doing what his hands are too occupied to do themselves. And then there’s another, circling your waist, enveloping you as it reaches for your breast. He knows just how to please you, years of learning every inch of you, all your preferences, just the right way to tease and fondle and rub. How much magic is too much, too strange unless you’re feeling adventurous.

Sans knows you, and it doesn’t take him long to have that tension coiled tight in your belly, right on the brink of release, arching beneath him as he urges you over that point and you come undone with his gentle, practiced coaxing. Crying out, you squeeze your eyes shut, tipping your head to the side to press against his forearm because it’s the only thing you can do. You can’t reach for him, can’t hold him as you ride out the rush of pleasure that leaves you trembling and gasping.

He slows his pace just a little as the pressure against your clit is removed, the too-sensitive feeling
making you whine and squirm until he finally stops. As your body starts to relax you peek up at him, and you’re greeted with a very smug looking skeleton. You roll your eyes and let out a soft laugh, and he leans down to nip at your lower lip in lieu of a kiss.

You let out a soft, satisfied groan.

“yeah?” he breathes, picking up the pace again, his strokes sending warm, heady pleasure through you.

“Yes,” you agree.

It doesn’t take much for him to ‘have his way with you’, all things considered. He’s already close by the time he leaves you flushed and satisfied, and after a few more minutes of more purposeful thrusts he tenses, lets out a ragged cry, and buries his face into your shoulder. Your fingers stroke over the side of his skull as you free your hands from his grip, making him shudder as you brush along the vertebrae in his neck.

The room is plunged into darkness as he uses the last of his focus and magic to flip off the light before collapsing next to you, wrapping you up in his arms and curling around you. Like he can’t hold you tight enough. Fumbling for the covers with your free hand, you manage to pull them up around your waists.

Sans nuzzles against your throat, his fingers pressed against your back. “I love you,” he says, groggy and muffled.

“I love you too,” you answer, kissing him. “Get some sleep.”

You hope that this time it’s peaceful.
The problem with twins (clutchmates, an annoyed voice in the back of Undyne’s mind corrects her, sounding distinctly like her wife) is that when one of them wakes up, so does the other. Varan starts to cry, which wakes up Lea, and then she starts to cry too. Undyne wonders, not for the first time, if they should just split the babies up. She’s certain that Lea would sleep through the night every night if it wasn’t for Varan, but Alphys and Toriel agreed that it would be better for them to stay together.

Not that they’re the ones that have to get up with them every night.

Teething hadn’t made Varan’s already patchy sleep any better. Undyne slips out of the bedroom as quietly as she can, closing the door behind her as she rubs blearily at her good eye with her knuckles. She’s not even sure what time it is — she hadn’t bothered to look. The nursery is at the end of the hall, and the second she opens the door Lea and Varan are on their feet in their cribs, reaching out for her and whining. They haven’t started walking independently (yet) but they can pull up on things so it’s only a matter of time. Then they’ll be even more of a handful than they already are…

She goes to Varan first, picking him up so that he can lay his head against her chest. He always does that, nuzzles right under her chin and plops his head down, and there’s that warm fuzzy feeling in her chest that — at least for a moment— lets her forget how frustrated and annoyed she is with his inability to just sleep for once.

Lea knows this routine. She’s been through it so many times, but she still clutches to the side of her crib and reaches out for her, asking wordlessly to be picked up too. But she doesn’t need it, not like her brother does. Undyne goes to her and strokes her head, letting her grasp at her nightshirt as she makes soft, soothing sounds for both of them. Her daughter fusses, pulls, shifts back and forth on her feet and all the while Undyne just runs her hand over the frill on the top of her head.

She could pick her up. She could pick up two kids ten times their weight, that isn’t the issue. It’s that she knows Lea better than that and so instead of giving in to her sleepy, grumpy whining (she can sympathize, she’s sleepy and grumpy too) Undyne turns and leaves the room with Varan cradled against her chest.

Her daughter cries for just a moment before she goes quiet, undoubtedly soothing herself the way that Varan just hasn’t figured out yet. She’ll be asleep by the time she sneaks back into the nursery with her son asleep in her arms to slip him back into his crib, praying that he doesn’t wake up
during the transition.

For now she beats a familiar path through their dark house, swaying in her steps, patting Varan’s bottom to comfort him as she goes through their nightly ritual. She’d fall asleep on her feet if she could, it doesn’t take much effort to pick her way along the same route she takes every time. Down the hall, out into the living room, she slows her pace as she passes the huge floor to ceiling windows that look out over the lake. The moon is more than half-full, the sky cloudless, and silver light dances along the ripples on the water’s surface. For a moment she contemplates going out on the back deck, enjoying the night air and the sound of the crickets, but that would be a break in routine.

And a break in routine would just make this take longer.

...These aren’t the battles she was meant to fight. She wasn’t supposed to be fighting against whatever kept waking her son, or her own frustration, or whether or not it was okay to let the twins sleep in separate rooms. She shouldn’t be struggling with naptimes (almost as difficult as bedtime), or getting Lea to listen to the word ‘no’, or making sure they don’t hurt each other (Lea likes to pull, and Varan keeps putting everything, including his sister, into his mouth to chew on).

She was the captain of the royal guard! Asgore’s right hand, meant to hunt down any human intruders to the Underground and to kill if necessary. She’d trained to fight for as long as she can remember, had challenged the king himself when she was just a scabby-kneed brat of a kid. Asgore and Gerson had been her mentors, her idols. Monsters had been under her command, she was a leader!

She was a warrior! ...Is a warrior.

Isn’t she?

Undyne grimaces and turns away from the window, continuing her path around the couch as she listens to Varan’s breathing. It’s quieter, heavier… He’s drifting off, she can tell by the soft snuffling he does as he sucks on his thumb.

And that’s another thing… Toriel keeps ‘gently’ reminding her that she ought to break him of that habit sooner rather than later, but right now… right now Undyne just wants him to sleep. He only does it when he’s stressed or tired, that’s not that bad, right?

She keeps telling herself she’ll try to work on it, keeps telling Toriel that too. Those sympathetic, almost pitying looks from the queen are nearly more than she can stand, and she just feels like… like she’s going to screw this up. She’s not sure what, but something. Every good parent wants what’s best for their kids, and Undyne is no exception. She’s got to do better to listen to Toriel’s advice…

Even if it means second-guessing her own instincts.

Lost in thought with a now-sleeping Varan on her chest (she loves that feeling, that soft, heavy weight of her son asleep in her arms, and not just because he’s finally asleep), Undyne almost misses the light on under the door to Alphys’s office. Had she woken up when she did and she hadn’t seen? Maybe, but now that she thinks about it she’s not certain her wife ever came to bed. Lately she’s been passing out early in anticipation of these nightly wakeups, leaving Alphys alone to watch anime or spend time on the computer. Maybe she’d… lost track of time?

What time is it?
She walks over to the kitchen, where the clock on the stove reads just past two in the morning. That wouldn’t be unusual, if this were a year ago, but with two babies to take care of and work in the morning, Alphys doesn’t have any business being up this late.

First things first, however. Undyne takes the very unconscious Varan back to the nursery and puts him to bed, curiosity and a little frustration sharpening her senses. Both of the kids are safely in their cribs as she slips back out of the room and closes the door.

Alphys doesn’t even hear her when she opens the door to her office, sifting through boxes of papers and blueprints, huge sheets spread out over her desk, the filing cabinet, on the chair and even on the floor. Undyne catches herself on the threshold, afraid that she’d disturb this… chaos just by entering. Standing there, blinking in the bright light as she struggles to adjust, her wife is completely oblivious to her presence.

“Are these…? This looks familiar, I just can’t…” Alphys mutters to herself, leaning forward over a tattered sheet of dark blue paper, crisp white lines showing some sort of rectangular object from what Undyne can see. She’s still dressed in the same clothes she was wearing earlier.

“Babe, did you never come to bed?” Undyne asks, trying to keep her voice down so as not to startle her.

Not that it helps. Alphys jumps, crinkling the blueprint under her claws as she whirls around to face Undyne. Recognition dawns quickly on her face, replaced by a mix of guilt and confusion. Opening and closing her mouth, she glances around for the clock on the wall. “I d-didn’t even… Oh, oh no I had no idea it was so late!” she blurts out, her jaw dropping. “Did the babies wake you up?”

Undyne nods, frowning down at the papers spread on the floor in her way. She’d just walk over them, getting to Alphys to bring her to bed to get some sleep feels more important, but… But she’s been better about being considerate of what Alphys considers important. And she can’t imagine all this crap is set aside for no reason.

But whatever the reason is, it can wait until morning.

“I just put Varan back to bed, so why don’t you come with me and we can get some sleep,” Undyne says, arching a brow and beckoning her with one hand.

Alphys casts an apprehensive look around her. “I r-really shouldn’t leave all this everywhere—”

“Leave it,” Undyne cuts in, satisfied when her wife finally nods and starts to pick her way across the room. As she’s doing that, she takes another look at the papers and diagrams. The handwriting is small and cramped, in a hand that Undyne doesn’t recognize. It’s not Alphys’s, and not Sans’s; maybe it’s from someone who worked at the lab before them? That must have been a long time ago though, before she’d joined the royal guard. She doesn’t remember a royal scientist before Alphys.

“…What is it about this stuff that got you so distracted?”

She looks surprised by the question, and maybe a little taken aback. As Undyne backs up to let her out of the room, Alphys hesitates in the doorway, hand going still as she reaches for the lightswitch. Her eyes sweep over the room, stopping to pause on that blueprint that had her attention when Undyne came in. “I just… wasn’t tired, and I had this weird impulse to look through some of this old paperwork I took out of the lab a couple years ago. I meant to throw it away, but I never did,” she says, her brow furrowing. “I think I should show some of this to Sans, but I don’t… I-I can’t really make heads or tails of this stuff.”
Undyne reaches around her, flipping off the light and shutting the door. Letting out a soft sigh, Alphys shakes her head, barely visible in the dark. “You can worry about it later,” Undyne mutters, yawning. “You should have been in bed hours ago.”

“I know,” she says, chastised. As Undyne starts to turn away to head towards their bedroom, a hand on her hip stops her. Alphys wraps her arms around her waist, pulling her into a hug, stretching up on her toes to nuzzle under Undyne’s chin. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to stay up so late. Thank you, for coming to get me.”

She’s still tired, and still frustrated with her family for not sleeping, but she drapes her arms around Alphys’s shoulders and leans down to kiss her. That makes this all a little better, at least. “I’ll always come get you, you big NERD,” she teases, her hug turning into a quick and rather weak headlock as she gives her wife a gentle noogie before letting her go. “You’d be working yourself to death if I wasn’t here to watch out for you.”

Alphys’s laugh is a little too tight, ducking her head in what might be embarrassment or guilt. “Yeah, probably…”

Then she’s looking at the door to her office again, frowning ever so slightly, mulling over something before following Undyne to bed.

Sans pressed a button next to the machine’s monitor. It was such a tiny thing, just a small, circular red button, narrower than the thumb he used to press it, and it gave a small, satisfying click. Something so insignificant shouldn’t have been the trigger for hell itself to rip open and tear his family apart.

As the machine began to whir, that humming that filled the room growing louder and louder, Sans stepped back to stand beside his father. All eyes were on the darkness through the open door, which somehow, inexplicably, only seemed to grow darker. It didn’t make any sense, but it’s the only way Sans’s mind could make sense of what he was seeing, the way that it seemed to stretch and fill the space within the machine more than should have been possible. Then, as if from far away, deep inside that eerie blackness, a point of white began to grow. Bigger and bigger, and Sans couldn’t tear his eyes away, not even to look at Dr. Gaster as he let out a soft gasp of what sounded like delight.

“There,” Dr. Gaster breathed, and Sans could swear that he’d felt his father literally buzzing with excitement. “Our first glimpse of the wellspring. Soon we’ll be—”

He cut himself off as the soft white light filled the space in the machine, edging out all traces of the darkness. Curls of iridescent mist, delicate tendrils of something like fog, began to waft out of the machine. Despite his fear, the dread in the pit of his stomach, Sans found himself intrigued. It glowed, faintly, and pearlescent and every color even as it was white. Dr. Gaster was right; pure, raw magic was just like the light spectrum. He just never thought he’d ever get to see it for himself.

The other assistants were having the same revelation, inching closer to the open door to get a better look. Dr. Gaster himself was doing the same, and so Sans followed him.

“Oh my, you can feel it, look!” one of the assistants said, reaching their hand towards the mist. It pulled towards their fingers, glowing brighter for just a moment before being drawn inside them. They’re the first one to die.
A hand unlike anything he’d ever seen before, long and spindly fingers covered with dripping, oozing flesh darted out of the machine from inside the thick mist, engulfing the assistant’s arm up to the elbow and pulling him inside. They didn’t even have time to make a sound, just a soft gasp as they prepared to scream but couldn’t quite manage. They’re gone, and there’s a moment where the only sound was the loud rumble of the machine before everything dissolved into chaos.

“Get back, get back!” Dr. Gaster yelled, his magic —brilliant red— swirled in his eye sockets, flaring bright from his hands.

The other assistants aren’t fast enough. Two arms lashed out this time, and as Sans charged after his father to try and help, his magic screaming inside of him as he urged it forward, two more monsters were pulled inside. They managed to scream before abruptly silenced. How, Sans wasn’t sure. He’s certain he didn’t want to know.

“dad, we have to turn it off!” Sans yelled, teleporting the short distance between himself and the controls, putting himself closer to the door. It was dangerous, he knew that, but he had to get there. He had to stop it!

“No!” Dr. Gaster said, and as Sans whirled to look at him he was shocked to see his father look angry. “We need that creature to destroy the Barrier! If we stop now this will all have been in vain!”

“it’s destroying us!”

“We don’t know that the others are dead, we might be able to—”

Long, emaciated, dripping and iridescent like the mist, those arms thrusted their way back out of the machine, scrabbling at the edges as it started to force its way through. A face —it must be a face, what else could it be— finally appeared, mouthless, noseless, studded with a row of seven vertical eyes in each of the colors of magic. The eyes blinked out of sync, taking in the room as the head swept from side to side, hunched shoulders pushing out of the machine.

Sans could only stare and watch in horror as the creature fixed its attention on the last remaining assistant who had backed himself against the wall. Its biggest, central eye shifted from orange to blue, and it reached out and wrenched the cowering monster to it with a bright flare of magic. Held tight in the creature’s hand, they did their best to struggle, screaming as it pulled them close to its blackened underbelly of ribs and oozing flesh.

Remembering himself, Sans tried to reach out with his own blue magic, tried to brute force the creature into letting go, but it was stronger than him. Of course it was, it was standing in the goddamn source of magic! Bones pelted the creature in the face and arm, and he could hear his father yell something, but their attempts to help were futile. The assistant clutched tight in its grip let out a faint glow of white light, of magic, which was quickly absorbed by the creature before the monster’s body crumbled away into dust.

There wasn’t any doubt anymore. The others were dead.

All he could do now was try to shut the machine down before this thing came all the way through. Sans’s fingers darted over the switches and knobs, wishing that it was as simple as just pressing that damn button again.

“Free, free!” the creature cried out, a cacophony of voices all speaking at once, yelling and whispering and sobbing. “Too long, too long in that pit, that cage! You will not stop us, monster!”
Sans was barely able to finish the shutoff sequence before he felt himself wrenched off his feet, fingers twisted in his lab coat, grabbing at his arm. The only satisfaction he could glean was in knowing that the loud clattering sound coming from the machine was sign enough that it was starting to sever the connection to that damn place it came from.

“Sans!” His father’s scream shook something loose inside of Sans’s skull, let his fear break free. That thing had him, he was being pulled towards its body, he could feel the magic being siphoned out of him. He was being pulled over the threshold of the machine, and for a moment, even as he was being drained, he could feel himself being filled with power. Something inside of him, the place where the determination had changed his magic, felt... different. Altered. “You won’t take my son!”

Then everything turned red. He was ripped from the creature’s grip, flung across the room. Before Sans struck the wall, for a moment it was as if time slowed. He could see his father turn to look at him, red magic flaring so bright from his eye sockets that the strain had cracked his skull. One socket had split up towards the crown of his head, the other down to his mouth. Then, with his back turned, the creature lashed out and grabbed for him, wrapping both hands around his middle and yanking him back off his feet. Sans could see the deep, horrible darkness creeping in on the edges of the doorway, and together the creature and Dr. Gaster were being sucked backwards.

The creature howled, letting go of Dr. Gaster with one hand as it clawed at the door, holding on as tight as it could. As Sans finally hit the far wall, there was the loud, awful sound of twisting metal and the scream of hinges snapping. The door had given way, and as he tried to look, dazed and drained of magic and overwhelmed with pain, he saw the darkness fill the void within the machine, taking the creature and his father with it.

“dad!” he tried to scream, but it came out as a ragged gasp, his arms buckling as he tried to push himself up.

Blackness began to creep into the edges of his vision, and he was vaguely aware of his mind going fuzzy, something awful happening to his memories. He tried to hold onto them, then felt his panic and fear and grief for his father start to blur and bleed away, even as his eye sockets swam with tears.

“no,” he breathed, but as he collapsed to the floor, head swimming as the darkness came to claim him, he wasn’t sure what he was saying ‘no’ to.

When Sans wakes up in the morning he doesn’t even realize he’d even dreamed.
‘Are you doing anything this afternoon?’

The text is a simple one, with a myriad of implications. At least, it would if it was from anyone but Chris. Fatima looks at the message, tapping her finger against the side of her phone, and is certain he’s not asking for any reason outside of their typical jaunts in-game. Maybe he wanted to run some dungeons, or go through some old raids for cosmetic gear. It is Tuesday, which means everything got reset…

Sitting on a padded bench in the Woodside ‘community center’ where she and her brother are waiting for Morwenna and Frisk to finish their training, Fatima pulls her legs up beneath her to sit cross-legged as she types in a reply. ‘No plans. Did you want to run something? I’m not home right now, but I shouldn’t be out too long.’

Rashid makes a muffled sound that’s suspiciously close to a snort, and when she glances over at him he’s busying himself with his own phone held close to his face. Leaning back against the wall, his sneakers are propped up on the edge of his seat, his knees jutting up as he slouches.

She frowns. “What?” she asks petulantly, arching a brow. Dropping her arms to rest in her lap, she turns the screen off with a quick press of her fingers.

“Look, I may not be interested in all that” —he waves his hand in the general direction of her phone, and then at her— “relationship stuff but even I can tell that Chris doesn’t want to just play WoW with you.”

Fatima scoffs. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“He’s been talking to you a lot lately.”

“We’re all playing the same game together, of course we talk, Rashid,” she says, shaking her head and looking away from him.

The community center (Super Secret Mage Headquarters according to Sans, which had also been picked up by Deacon) is a newer building, and still has that sort of clean smell to it. The walls, which are curved to fit some sort of artistic style, are painted in a nondescript neutral greenish color. There are potted trees, glossy tile floors, and huge floor to ceiling windows. In order to keep up appearances, there’s a pool inside the facility, along with a basketball court and a few rec rooms in addition to the training room strictly used by the Literatum. A receptionist (a mage; a young man named Oliver) sits at desk not too far away, watching YouTube videos on his computer.

Rashid just makes an impatient noise but doesn’t bother to say anything. He doesn’t need to, his message is plain enough. He’s wrong, but obvious. She’s about to tell him so when her phone vibrates in her hands.

Chris replied. ‘Well, we’re all doing dungeons later tonight right? I don’t have work today, so I was
just wondering what you were up to before then.’ There’s a pause where she just sort of stares at her phone, feeling a little confused. What’s he getting at? Then her phone buzzes again. ‘Sorry, if you’re out doing something we can talk later. I don’t want to bother you.’

Well now she just sort of feels vaguely guilty. What is he apologizing for?

As Fatima gets ready to reply to him, to tell him he’s not bothering her, the automatic door near the receptionist’s desk opens with a quiet rush of air and a robotic tone. Distantly curious, she looks up right as a familiar face strides in. Deacon looks preoccupied with something, pushing his hair back off his forehead as his eyes seek out the training room without even noticing the twins sitting across the hall from it. Fatima feels a bit voyeuristic, watching him like this. But she can’t help it!

“Oh,” she says, unable to stop herself. Rashid looks up at that, glancing from her to the door. He rolls his eyes and looks back at whatever he was doing a second ago. Fatima frowns at him. “Shut up.”

His eyebrows shoot up, looking over the top of his phone to meet her eyes. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t need to. I could hear you thinking it.”

As Deacon heads towards the door to the training room, still not seeing them, Fatima feels a little anxious twist in her stomach before calling out to get his attention. “Hey Deacon!” she says, swallowing after her voice gives a nervous crack.

He jerks to a halt, looking around for a second as he tries to figure out who said his name. She’s pleased at the way his expression brightens in recognition when he spots her. Raising a hand in greeting, his eyes flick from her to Rashid, then back to her as he takes a couple steps towards them. “Hey, how’re you two doing?” he asks, smiling.

“We’re good,” Fatima says, smiling back. Her phone buzzes and she ignores it, setting it down on the bench as she stands up. She can’t help it; she tucks her hair behind her ear and stands up a little straighter than normal, suddenly hyper-aware of her own body and the space she occupies. Fidgeting, she hooks a hand on the pocket of her shorts, rubbing the fabric absently. “Did you need Morwenna? Her and Frisk are still training.”

A crease forms between his brows as he glances behind him at the door. “Yeah, I wanted to talk to her about that,” he says, dismayed. Sighing, he shrugs his shoulders. “Ah well, I guess I’ll just talk to her after.”

“Um,” she begins. Not the strongest start. Berating herself silently, she tries again. “If it’s something important, I’m sure she wouldn’t mind you interrupting.”

Deacon gives her a lopsided smile, laughing in a quiet, breathy way that makes her have to glance anywhere else. Her cheeks are warming, certain she’s said the wrong thing. “Oh she definitely would mind,” he says, proving her own suspicions correct. She winces internally. “Unless she’s gotten soft in her old age.”

Rashid lets out a snort behind her.

That just makes Deacon laugh again. “Morwenna’s going to be a hardass until the day she dies, mark my words,” he says, shaking his head and grinning. “It’ll be safer for me to just wait out here with you guys.”

“How was your trip?” Fatima asks, changing the subject. As Deacon moves to take a seat on the end of the bench, she sits back down and picks up her phone, but doesn’t look at it. The little
notification light is blinking, and she dimly remembers it vibrating a little bit ago, but she can just
check that later.

“Yeah, how was that trip with your wife?” Rashid asks pointedly, and Fatima can almost feel him
smirking on her other side. She could punch him, it would be worth it!

She knows he’s married. She doesn’t expect anything from Deacon, she knows better! But her eyes
dart down to the gold band on his left hand and her mood dampens. If he’d ever suspected about
her feelings for him he’d never said anything. Never given any hint. She’s been doing her best to
keep her own behavior restricted appropriately, not that it stopped her brother from pestering her
about it. Maybe Deacon never said anything to her because he didn’t want to embarrass her. That
would mean that he at least cared about her feelings…

Of course he cares about her. He’s a kind person.

That doesn’t make it any easier. With her initial excitement at seeing him again wearing off, she
finds herself less than interested in his stories about his trip (especially since most of them tend to
center around Bo). So while she smiles and nods at all the right places, she feels a twinge of relief
when the door to the training room opens.

The first thing she notices is the downcast, frustrated look on Frisk’s face. Oh, things must not have
gone well. They shove their hands in the pockets of their gym shorts, glancing up at Fatima as she
catches their eye. She offers them a sympathetic smile. It softens them a little bit, their mouth
twitching in response.

They seem surprised to see Deacon sitting beside her. “Oh, hey Uncle Deacon,” they say, sounding
hesitant.

“Hey Frisk,” he says. “Don’t give me that look, I’m here for Morwenna.”

Morwenna has her hands on her hips, watching Frisk with something like concern before Deacon
catches her attention. Is she worried that it’s taking Frisk so long to pick up on their magic? What
could have her looking like that? “Deacon, I heard you made it back in one piece,” she says, giving
him a weary smile. “Enjoy yourself?”

“Always,” he says, pushing up to his feet and grinning. “Bumped into a few mages while we were
gone, too. Told them to spread the word about Ebott, you know… just in case anybody was
interested.”

Mages from all over the country have been slowly (very slowly, it’s not like there’s many of them)
trickling to the mountain, in part thanks to people like Deacon making sure others knew about what
was happening with the Literatum. Fatima never would have thought to see so many mages in one
place, the way they are now. It’s been… well, maybe complicated is the best word for it. She liked
the small, compact way the Literatum had been organized before. She had been comfortable with
knowing every name and every face of the ones responsible for saving her and her brother. Now
there were so many new people, and not enough time to learn whether or not they were
trustworthy.

“Did you need me for something?” Morwenna asks, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand.

“Yeah, I wanted to talk to you, if you’ve got a few minutes,” he says, and Fatima sees the moment
his eyes flick towards Frisk, just for a split second. She gets the feeling, not for the first time, that a
lot more is going on with Frisk than they’re being told.
Fatima wonders if Chris knows.

Nodding, Morwenna gestures back towards the room she just exited. “Yeah, we can talk in here,” she says. “Frisk, I’ll see you on Thursday, alright?”

Frisk doesn’t say anything, just mumbles their assent. Fatima and Rashid couldn’t get away with treating her like that, but she just purses her lips and follows Deacon back into the training room. Instead of feeling annoyed on her behalf, Fatima just feels badly for them.

“Still no luck?” she asks, leaning forward in her seat and giving them an apologetic look.

“Nope,” Frisk grumbles, fidgeting with their hair. Their bangs are clipped back out of their face, their hair pulled back into a thick braid. Flushed and sweaty, it looks more like Morwenna was teaching them aikido than magic.

“Maybe you should just give up,” Rashid says. Startled and more than a little annoyed, Fatima turns to look at him, bristling at the nonchalant shrug of his shoulders as he deigns to look up from his phone. “You’ve been at it for a month now with nothing to show for it. Maybe Morwenna’s wrong about you being a mage.”

“Rashid, stop,” she warns, her voice dropping low.

Frisk crosses their arms over their chest, scuffing the toe of their shoe against the glossy tile floor. It makes a muffled squeak, and their face scrunches up as they look at Rashid. “I have magic,” they say quietly.

“Well it must not be very much,” he says. Dropping his feet from the edge of the bench down to the ground, he rocks forward to sit up, tilting his head to the side as he studies Frisk. “If you are a mage, you must be pretty weak. When Fatima and I were your age, we were already reaching our full potential, magic-wise.”

“Well, I’m not being raised by some sick psychopath,” Frisk snaps, gritting their teeth and glaring at him. It stings a little, hearing them put it so bluntly, but Fatima understands why they’re angry. She’s angry too. “What the hell are you doing?” she demands. Rashid glances over at her, arcing a brow and looking confused. “Frisk is just a kid—”

“I’m not just a kid!” Frisk says, balling their hands into fists and dropping them to their sides. Letting out a growl of frustration, they storm off, leaving Fatima feeling dazed.

The twins watch them go, and after they disappear through the automatic door, Rashid lets out a sigh and slumps back against the wall. “Nice going, Fatima.”

Sometimes she wonders how her brother survived living under Avery’s thumb with his big fat mouth. With a frustrated noise, she casts a dark look at her brother. “Shut the fuck up you asshole.”

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The clubhouse has undergone some renovations over the past few years. Where once there was just an old tarp keeping the elements out of their rocky den, now they have a wooden roof supported by posts. There’s just enough of a gap between the tops of the boulders and the roof to let light filter through. Undyne and Papyrus had built it for them (they’d had plenty of practice with construction back when her house had burned down) back before the twins were born, even before Papyrus’s film career had really taken off…

Asriel had burned looping, swirling designs into the posts with his magic, and every once in awhile
he adds more to what has been gradually overtaking the inside of the roof. Frisk loves it. It makes their clubhouse feel more personal, etched with Asriel’s work. Their eyes follow the dark lines through the wood, up towards the top where it transitions from post to roof. It’s a good distraction as their best friend stares at them.

They can feel his anger bubbling beneath the surface.

“What did they say after that?” Asriel asks, his snout wrinkling in a barely-withheld snarl.

Frisk shakes their head, twisting the end of their braid in their fingers. “That’s when I left,” they say.

“Good!” he blurts out. “Rashid is a jerk. If he had any idea how strong you are he wouldn’t be saying stupid crap like that!”

They appreciate his anger on their behalf—they really do!—but theirs had died out on their way home, leaving them wondering if Rashid was right… If maybe they should just give up. Whatever is going on with the magic inside of them, it’s not working the way it should. It refuses to let Frisk tap into it, except for Loads.

“Maybe Morwenna’s wrong about you being a mage,” he said. Well, whatever they are, they’re not sure that ‘mage’ is the right word for it.

*Chara* was the mage, not them.

*Stay determined.*

...They can’t give up! That’s not like them! They have to keep trying until they get it right.

If nothing else, just to prove Rashid wrong.

“—should make sure that if any leather gear drops in the dungeons tonight that he doesn’t get any of it. I’m going to roll on *all* of it even if I don’t need it,” Asriel is saying, sounding particularly vindictive. He always was so protective of Frisk. As he shakes his head, his ears brushing against his shoulders, he opens his mouth to say more but Frisk cuts him off.

“I want to practice with you here,” they say, meeting his eyes and holding them. “If I can figure out how to do it with your help, then maybe it’ll be easier during practice. Like you said.”

For a moment Asriel seems taken aback by Frisk’s abrupt change of mind. Just yesterday they’d told him they intended to follow the rules you and Sans had set for them, to not mess around with their magic unsupervised. But it doesn’t take long to recover, grinning and nodding enthusiastically. “Yeah! I want to see the look on Rashid’s face when you finally show that jerk you’re not weak.”

The two of them leave the shelter of their clubhouse, walking out into the sun-dappled forest. It’s the middle of the afternoon, bright and sunny, but with just enough shade to keep the heat from being unbearable. Asriel scoops up a palm-sized rock as they leave the circle of boulders behind, just far enough away to give them some space to work.

Morwenna practices with aikido, trying to get Frisk to tap into the ability she specializes in: distorting time on herself to make herself move faster. She said that other red mages are better at directing their magic outward, using it to slow objects or people. Some can even reverse time for a few seconds, which sounds at least a little similar to their own ability. They opt to start with the latter two methods.

Asriel stands next to them, not touching but close. When they let him know they’re ready, he lobs
the rock up into the air. Frisk holds out both hands (Deacon channels his magic through his hands, and so does Sans, so maybe this will help) and tries to reach for their magic and push it towards the rock. Nothing happens. It just falls back into Asriel’s palm.

He watches them as they try a few more times, his enthusiasm starting to fade as Frisk feels more and more frustrated. They’ve been trying all day, they’re hot and sweaty and tired and they just want this to work damn it! They have all this magic, more than anybody should, and it just sits there inside of them and won’t do anything! They try to slow the rock, they try to reverse the path of the rock by turning it backwards in time, but the only thing they feel inside of them is a stirring in that place where their Save is.

That’s not what they want! There’s so much more that they should be able to do, but it won’t let them.

Why is everything about them so difficult? Their magic, even their body, why can’t any of it just feel right for them? Why can’t they just be normal? Normal would be easier than this—

Asriel takes their hand in his, the pads on his fingers are smooth against their skin. Surprised out of their rapidly spiraling thoughts, Frisk looks at him. His expression is kind and reassuring, and once he sees he has their attention he leans over to press his forehead against Frisk’s. Their eyes, green and brown, lock as he nudges them gently.

“You can do it. We’ll figure out a way, don’t worry,” Asriel says. It’s Frisk’s turn to blush at their closeness, the sincere, heartfelt affection and care in his voice.

“Okay,” Frisk says softly, reaching up to take hold of their friend’s ear with their free hand. Asriel nudges them again with his head and they give him a gentle tug before they pull away from one another.

But they don’t stop holding hands. Frisk laces their fingers together and holds on tight.

They try again, and now, with Asriel’s contact and support, they feel… closer. Like it’s within reach for the first time. The magic in their Soul stirs from what they can only guess is a response to his presence (and the shell of Chara’s Soul inside of him).

But it’s not close enough. Feeling the magic respond but still refuse to do like they want, it just frustrates them even faster as the rock refuses to alter its course no matter how hard they try. Asriel squeezes their hand, trying his best to silently reassure them, but they’re annoyed to the point of embarrassment. Of shame. Even with him here, they can’t manage what they’d done on accident, once, the first day of training. That tiny leap backwards in time that hadn’t been linked to a Load had felt like a turning point!

Now it just feels like a fluke.

“I can’t do it!” Frisk finally blurts out, tearing their hand away from Asriel and turning their back to him. “This isn’t working. Maybe we’re wrong, maybe you aren’t the key to this stupid magic.”

Asriel is quiet for a long moment, long enough that Frisk starts to worry that they’ve upset him. It’s not his fault that this isn’t working. They should turn around, look at him so they can make sure he’s okay, but it feels too late for that. If he’s hurt, he’s hurt and it’s their fault—

Arms circle their waist and Asriel hugs them close, resting his chin on top of their head. Frisk feels a funny lurch in their chest, something that makes their heart beat fast. Asriel makes a soft, uncertain sound. “Well, uh, there’s one thing we haven’t tried,” he says.
“What’s that?” they ask, too self-conscious to refuse any more ideas.

“We… uh…” Asriel clears his throat, and as suddenly as he’d reached for them he’s pulling away now, leaving Frisk to turn around to face him. He’s looking down at the ground, head tipped to the side as he fidgets with his ear. “There’s another way for our magic to be closer. I mean, I could… Our Souls I mean.”

Frisk blinks. “You mean share our Souls?”

Asriel bobs his head, going pinker under white fur. “Yeah. It makes sense, right? I mean, if the problem is that Chara’s Soul is split between us, then wouldn’t linking it back up make your magic work?”

“Yeah, okay.”

His head jerks back up, eyes widening. “Oh! A-are you sure?”

They smile weakly, feeling a bit embarrassed. “We’re already connected,” they say, glancing away as their cheeks warm. “And I don’t… If I’m gonna share my Soul with anybody, it’s gonna be you.”

Asriel smiles at that, grinning from ear to ear and looking pleased with himself. It just makes Frisk feel more self-conscious. Of course they’d share their Soul with him! He doesn’t need to look at them like that! “Okay! Then, um, I’ll just…” His confidence diminishes a little, that uncertainty creeping back in. “Are you ready?”

“I guess,” Frisk says, patting their chest with their hand and looking down. It’s been a long time since they’ve seen their Soul. There was never any reason to.

So when Asriel raises his hands and brings them towards their chest, then pulls back slowly, they take a moment to stare at the bright, brilliant red heart that emerges. A single grey slash across the center of it is the only blemish. That tugging sensation is very faint, the weakest they ever remember feeling, and they wonder if that has to do with Asriel. That their Soul is just that willing to respond to him. They wouldn’t be surprised if that was the case.

“Um. Okay,” Asriel breathes, hesitating as he holds one hand towards their Soul. He reaches into his pocket with the other and pulls out the rock they were practicing with earlier. “Let’s try this?”

Frisk can’t help but laugh at the emotions playing across Asriel’s face. The apprehension and excitement and curiosity. “Come on, you’re making me nervous,” they say, fidgeting with their hands.

“Oh! Sorry,” he says. He gives them an anxious smile. “Okay.”

And then Asriel reaches for their Soul and the instant they come into contact it’s like everything they’ve ever felt through their connection but more than they thought possible. Instead of a faint echo of Asriel’s emotions they feel them as strongly as their own. His nervousness, his fear, his exhilaration at sharing their Souls like he’s wanted to do for so long now. How long has he been meaning to ask? Didn’t he know that all he needed to do was ask?

That makes Asriel blush, which makes Frisk embarrassed too, and the two of them stare at each other, both afraid to speak or think or move, worried that the other might find out more than they’re ready to admit. There’s so much beneath the surface of their minds, and they’re both so curious, but afraid to delve too deep.
But as they both struggle with this, Frisk realizes that—*oh,* there’s the magic where it’s been all along! But now they can reach it. It’s in their grasp. Asriel must be able to feel it too (of course he can) because he grins and raises the hand with the rock.

*Ready?* he seems to say, but doesn’t need to because Frisk can tell exactly what he’s thinking.

They nod, even though they don’t need to, because Asriel knows the answer to his unspoken question before they can even start to move. So Asriel pulls his hand back and tosses the rock into the air.

It’s so simple now, to reach out with their magic and *push.*

What they don’t expect is for the rock to vanish and leave behind a hole. That’s all they can imagine it as, a *hole* there in the air, a black spot where the rock should have been. It’s dark, darker than any shadow, almost a solid thing itself. Frisk and Asriel barely have time to wonder what it is, to stare at it before it rips open, a ragged diagonal tear. And as it widens the darkness clings to the edges, and in the center of it, there’s a soft, misty white.

They barely have enough time to feel afraid before, by some unseen force, they’re pulled bodily into the rift by Frisk’s Soul.
Their Soul feels wrong.

That’s the first sensation that Frisk registers as they regain consciousness, the strange pulling that reminds them of fighting a monster. But it’s not the same, it feels like it’s inside their Soul, not like it’s trying to come out of their chest. Disoriented and a little weak, they roll onto their side where they’re sprawled out on the ground.

Or at least, they think it’s the ground. As they open their eyes they realize they’re surrounded by odd, shimmering mist that obscures most of the space around them. It’s all they can see, just white iridescence. Sucking in a deep breath, the air smells like ozone, charged and sharp, clean and almost sterile.

What is this place?

A soft, anguished whimper nearly scares Frisk out of their skin, and as their heart leaps to their throat they whirl towards the sound. Asriel, half-hidden in the fog, is curled forward on his knees, his head parallel to the ground as he presses both his hands to his chest. Mouth hanging open, he’s panting and squeezing his eyes shut. It looks like he’s in pain.

“Asriel!” Frisk exclaims, rolling onto their hands and knees and scurrying over to him as quick as they can. They put one hand on his back, the other over his own hands on his chest, leaning in close and searching his face.

He cracks his eyes open, turning his head to look at them. But he’s unfocused, his fingers digging into the front of his shirt.

“What’s wrong?” they ask, confused and afraid. They focus inward, trying to feel for any hint of what he’s feeling, but they— Why can’t they feel him? Their connection is still there, they know that much, but it’s as though something is interfering. All they can feel is… fuzzy static. It’s like having a mouth full of cotton.

“It… Frisk, it hurts,” he sobs, screwing his eyes shut and closing his mouth. He clenches his jaw, then leans his head against theirs. Every muscle in his body is tense.

“What does?” they ask, voice tight as a sharp lance of dread wends its way down their spine.

“My Soul! It feels like it’s trying to…” He whimpers again, leaning forward even further, pressing his brow hard to their chest. Frisk wraps their arms around him, unsure of what else they can do. “It feels like it’s going to break apart,” he whispers.

“I’m not gonna let that happen,” Frisk tells him, knowing full well they have no idea how to make good on that promise. They’ll figure something out, they’ve got to! This is all their fault, them and their broken magic! Asriel isn’t going to… Nothing is going to happen to him. Not so long as they’re here. Hugging him close, they lift their head to look around them. “We’ve got to get out of
here. It’s… it’s got to be this place, doing something to us. I feel weird too.”

But all they can see is mist. There’s no sign of the dark tear that brought them here, there’s nothing except for this damn fog!

Wait.

No, that’s not true.

There are two red lights, barely visible, slowly getting bigger and brighter. Like a pair of giant eyes coming closer. Frisk lets out a sharp gasp and Asriel jerks his head up, brushing against their face and gripping their side as he follows their gaze.

“What is that?” Asriel blurts out.

“I…” Frisk can only stare, a strange feeling of deja vu nagging them in the back of their mind. “I can’t remember— I mean, I don’t know.”

“Should we run?” he asks, his voice going reedy as his throat tightens.

“Can you stand?” They clutch at his back pushing up on their knees as Asriel does the same. He wobbles and one knee buckles, dragging Frisk back down.

“Shit,” Asriel breathes, gritting his teeth and baring his fangs. A low, frustrated growl rumbles in the back of his throat. “No…”

Fisting their hand in his shirt, Frisk clenches their jaw, returning their gaze to the ever-growing pair of eyes approaching them. “Then I guess we’ll find out if it’s friendly,” they say stubbornly.

“You… Frisk, you should—”

“Shut up,” they snap, casting him a sharp look. “Don’t even think it. I won’t ever leave you behind.”

He doesn’t say anything after that. Which is good, because now they’re pissed that he’d even try to suggest something like that! They know that’s what he must have been about to say because he doesn’t even try to deny it. It’s too late now anyway, those eyes are now the size of dinner plates, and the shadow of whatever they belong to is coming into view.

It’s a long, thin skull— a blaster! It’s a blaster like Sans and Papyrus’s, what can that possibly mean? But something about it isn’t right; the eye sockets are drooping and it looks… wet. It seems to sag, dripping as its jaw opens and closes, exposing long fangs. Asriel sucks in a quick, scared breath, tensing as it moves closer. But instead of seeming threatening, or even dangerous, it just hovers there, a few feet away, regarding them.

The eyes are lifeless, there’s no sign of intelligence or personality… but why does it seem like it recognizes them? It just keeps staring at Frisk, unblinking. It’s a little unsettling.

They’re so focused on those bright red eyes, the huge floating skull, that they don’t even notice the other figure until a thin, white hand reaches out to rest on the blaster’s brow. It strokes it fondly. There, standing beside it, is a man. He looks like he might have been a skeleton once, but instead he’s soft and malleable. Oozing around the edges, even his clothes. The black coat and pants, the high, white turtleneck, they look like they’re part of his body.

Two circles of red light look down at them from within two mismatched eye sockets. They crinkle
a little as he smiles, his thin mouth pulling on the crack that runs from the bottom of one eye to his upper lip. Another crack intersects his other eye, up through his brow to the crown of his skull. A shiver runs down Frisk’s spine, even as that feeling of deja vu refuses to go away.

"Ah, Plato, here they are. As expected." The voice is smooth, deliberate, but it echoes. Frisk can hear it for a moment before he opens his mouth and again after it closes, like it’s… stretched over too much time. “Oh. No, this isn’t… Wait! Yes it is! Marvelous!” He plucks his hand away from the blaster —Plato? Why do they feel like they’ve heard that before?— and takes two long strides towards where Frisk and Asriel are huddled on the ground, folding his hands over his middle. There are holes straight through his palms. “Frisk. You are a miraculous accident, the product of so many implausible things, and I have never been happier to see you. You and Asriel have done what should be impossible.”

Frisk can only stare, wide-eyed as this strange man smiles down at them. It takes them a moment to find their voice. “W-who are you? Where are we?”

His mouth twitches, head tilting just a fraction to the side. “As I suspected, you don’t remember the last time we met. I told you before that explaining this to you was an exercise in futility, but now…” The man reaches down towards them with both hands, beckoning them. Frisk and Asriel share a look and a silent question before they each free one arm so they can take his hands. With only a little difficulty, they both manage to get to their feet. But he doesn’t let go, instead holding them tighter. Not painfully so, just firmly. “This time is different. This time I’m not sure what’s going to happen!”

“Who are you?” Asriel asks, repeating Frisk’s unanswered question. He tugs his arm sharply away from the strange man, clutching it to his chest and wincing. Plato inches closer, a faint whine building in its mouth as its jaw part slightly.

The man’s smile fades and he holds up a hand towards the blaster without taking his eyes off them. His attention shifts to Frisk, flicking down at their hands for a moment as he seems to come to some realization. He lets their hand go, threading his fingers together over his chest. “My apologies, I seem to have gotten ahead of myself,” he says, apologetic. “A side-effect of my… condition, I’m afraid.” Unfolding his hands again, he gestures to himself. “I am Doctor W.D. Gaster. For ease’s sake, please feel free to just call me Gaster. Though…”

He trails off, studying Frisk. His eyes sweep over them quickly, from head to toe, and something fond softens the, well, already soft lines of his face. Frisk isn’t sure what to do with this, they aren’t uncomfortable, but it’s just… strange.

“You have grown so much since our last visit,” Gaster says, meeting Frisk’s eyes again. They kind of wish that he’d stop talking about things they can’t remember. “It feels like eons ago.”

They have so many questions. About this ‘last visit’, and what this place is, and who he is to them. But none of that is important right now. “We need to get out of here,” they say, pressing in close to Asriel’s side as he sags against them. He’s still breathing hard, but trying not to look like he’s in pain. “This place is doing something to Asriel. It’s hurting him.”

Gaster’s attention shifts to Asriel, his brow furrowing. “Yes, I suppose it would… That child’s Soul, Chara, it’s drawn to this place because it belongs here.” He shifts closer and Frisk pushes between them, making Gaster come to a halt, eyes widening slightly.

“It belongs right where it is!” they snap, glaring. “I gave him that Soul, and it’s what Chara would have wanted. How do you even know about them?”
Taken aback, Gaster looks down at them with an unreadable expression. After a moment he spreads his long, delicate fingers in a helpless gesture. “I only meant that it’s only natural for their Soul to be drawn here. It’s what brought you here in the first place,” he says, eyes flicking back and forth between the two of them. “When a mage dies due to an over expenditure of magic, they come here, back to the Font. Right to the source to be replenished. At least… when things go as they should.”

Frisk isn’t sure that they understand, but this isn’t important! They can’t stay here, not if this place is trying to take back Chara’s Soul.

“You didn’t answer Frisk’s other question,” Asriel says, nudging them out of the way so he can look at Gaster properly. Frisk shifts back to his side, helping support him better. “How do you know about Chara?”

“Asriel, we can talk about that later, we need to find a way out of here,” Frisk says. They watch him, the way he’s still clutching at his chest, the sweat dampening his fur, the pain tightening his face. He can’t stay in the Font, no questions can possibly be more important than keeping him safe.

“The short answer, to perhaps sate your curiosity, is that I have been able to observe the outside world from this place. Everything since my… displacement, up until this moment, has been made available to me.” He looks at Frisk, solemn. “Including all of the fragmented timelines from your time in the Underground.” Then his eyes move to Asriel. “And your experiments as Flowey.”

Frisk’s thoughts go to the worst timelines, the ones where they relinquished control to Chara. They can only imagine that Asriel is doing something similar. They had both, while arguably not themselves, done horrible things. But Gaster just regards them placidly before tilting his head and letting out a soft sigh.

“Now that you understand, I believe it is time for us to go. My grandchild is correct, we should not stay here longer than necessary. For your sake, Asriel,” he says, his expression turning kind.

Frisk blinks. “Grandchild?”

Gaster’s brows raise, eyes widening, and for a moment he looks a little sheepish. “Ah, yes, I told you before, but… Well, no matter. You see, your mother is married to my son, Sans.” He glances over at Plato, where the blaster is still hovering at his side, turned away and watching behind him. Sobering, he straightens a bit before looking at the two of them again. “But, Frisk, with any good fortune we will have all the time in the world to speak of that. Right now, our priority is to leave before we attract any unwanted attention. The Anathema has been suspiciously quiet, and I don’t know how long it will remain as such.”

Frisk’s head is spinning. Grandchild? Sans’s dad? Sans said he couldn’t remember his father, that his memories had been in shambles since some kind of accident almost ten years ago now. Did that have something to do with him? And what is the Anathema? Just the name sends a shiver down their spine, and they feel like they should know something.

Asriel lets out a frustrated noise. “Everything you say just makes me more and more confused,” he mutters. “What the hell is an Anathema?”

“Something incredibly dangerous, especially for the two of you,” Gaster says, taking a step back and flicking his wrist, gesturing for Plato. The blaster immediately swivels around, floating in close towards the three of them. “Asriel, take hold of Plato’s horn, if you will. He’ll help you walk. For now we need to get moving. It won’t take us long to get to the breach, but every moment we spend here is another that the Anathema might become alerted to your presence.”
Asriel gives the blaster a wary look, but Frisk helps support him as he reaches out to hook his elbow around the curve of its horn. It looks solid, but it gives slightly as he leans his weight against the side of Plato’s skull. His face twists into a look of restrained disgust.

“It feels like play-doh,” Asriel says, his snout wrinkling.

Gaster bursts into sudden, sharp laughter, startling Frisk and making them jump. When they turn to look at him, he holds up his hands in apology. “Oh, I’m sorry, that was funny,” he says, smiling. “Play-doh, Plato, you see the words…” He trails off as the two of them just stare, and after an awkward pause he clears his throat, gesturing off to his right. “This way.”

Gaster takes the lead, followed by Plato and Asriel. Frisk falls into step alongside their friend, and when he reaches for their hand they rush to take it. He gives them a small, tense smile, squeezing their fingers.

“Thanks… I feel a little better when we’re touching,” he says quietly.

Frisk nods. “Me too.”

“That’s because the separated pieces of your shared Souls are more stable when you’re in contact,” Gaster says, glancing back at them over his shoulder. “The more stable, the less likely that the attraction of the Font will cause your Soul to fracture apart… Or, oh, were you speaking of perhaps emotional reassurance?”

Asriel casts a bemused look over at Frisk, who mirrors it back at him.

But they don’t want to be rude, not when Gaster is helping them. He’s… weird, but they feel like they can trust him. And if he is Sans’s dad, that makes him family. “How do you know where the tear is?” they ask him.

“After so long spent in this unchanging place, any disturbance is like a beacon,” Gaster says, twirling his fingers through the iridescent mist, sending it curling over his hand and drifting away. “I can feel it like a ripple through the magic.”

“Oh,” Frisk says. “I guess that makes sense.”

Gaster chuckles. “With only a Soul-devouring creature for company —apart from Plato of course — one does become sensitive to any changes. Vigilance is key to survival.”

“This thing eats Souls?” Asriel asks, clutching tighter to Frisk’s hand.

“In a way, yes.”

“And it’s been trying to take yours?” Frisk asks.

“Since I came to this place,” Gaster says, sounding weary.

Frisk balks. “How did you sleep?”

“I didn’t,” he says. “I never needed to. The Font is the source of magic, it has kept me alive.”

“That sounds horrible,” they say, casting an anxious look to either side of them.

“My time here has been… not without its challenges,” he admits, his voice somber. “I am very ready to go home.”
Frisk falls quiet, and Asriel shifts his arm around Plato’s horn. Trying to get a better hold. After a moment he opens his mouth, closes it, then finally speaks. “If the Font has been keeping you alive, are you going to be okay if you leave it with us?”

Gaster is silent for a long moment, and Frisk starts to worry that Asriel upset him. Finally, with a soft sigh, he heaves his shoulders in an enormous shrug. “I don’t know,” he admits. “My awareness ends here. It could be because I leave the Font and so my sight is once again limited by a normal existence. Or… it means that I die. I have no way of knowing which is the truth, but knowing that my time here in the Font reaches an end, either way… It’s the only thing that has kept me going. Forgive my grimness, but either outcome is preferable to what has been a miserable existence. Seeing the world, my sons, move forward without me, as if I was never even there…”

“I’m sorry,” Asriel says, looking down at the ground. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“That’s quite alright,” Gaster says kindly, though he doesn’t look back at them. His fingers drum against his leg, patting at the tail of his coat. “Do not feel guilty on my behalf, young prince. You have not said anything that I was not previously aware of.”

He falls quiet, and neither Frisk or Asriel know what else to say. They have plenty of questions, but now doesn’t feel like the right time to ask them. Knowing that Gaster is willingly moving towards either his freedom or his death —and would accept either gladly— hangs heavy over Frisk’s head.

As they continue in silence, it doesn’t take long for Frisk to start to feel the change in the air. It feels thinner somehow, less oppressive. They hadn’t even noticed how heavy this place feels until it starts to lift. Asriel’s breathing eases a little, and the pained look on his face isn’t quite so harsh anymore. It hadn’t been very strong to begin with, but that pulling feeling in Frisk’s Soul is hardly noticeable now. It must be a huge relief for Asriel.

“How are you feeling?” Frisk asks him quietly.

“Better,” he says, giving Frisk a weak smile. “A lot better.”

“We’re almost there. Soon we should be able to see the breach.” Gaster sounds distracted, looking to either side of him and Frisk thinks he might be frowning. Plato lets out a soft whine, and for a moment the mist gathered inside its mouth glows before it snaps its teeth shut again. The charged mist rushes out of its mouth, then dissipates.

“Is something wrong?” Frisk asks, squeezing Asriel’s hand and looking from the blaster to Gaster. He seems on edge, and it’s making them nervous.

“No, quite the opposite,” Gaster says, reaching out to touch Plato’s snout. “I was expecting some sort of opposition. But this is… Perhaps my paranoia is getting the better of me. Who am I to doubt such good fortune? Besides, there it is.”

And he’s right; the tear is right in front of them, hanging there in space. The mist seems drawn to it, leaking out through the rift. On the edges is that dark, impossible blackness, and in the center is the place they left. They can see the trees, and in the distance is a glimpse of their clubhouse. It’s a ragged hole, big enough for them to walk through. They only have to step over the bottom edge and they’ll be home.

Gaster halts a few feet away, turning towards them. “You two go first. I’ll follow behind. If I… If I start to destabilize, I’ll have to be quick to close the breach. I cannot leave it open. I should have energy enough to do that before… Well, let’s hope for the best, shall we?”
Frisk hesitates as Asriel lets go of Plato, strong enough now to stand on his own. But their attention is fixed on Gaster, the strange man who says he’s their grandfather. They only just met him and now there’s a chance he might die? “G-Gaster,” they say, stumbling over ‘grandfather’ for a moment before it feels too strange in their mouth. “Are you sure—?”

Gaster circles around them, pushing them gently with his hands. “Go, go! Do not waste this opportunity. No matter what happens to me, I want to see you both safely through. I will follow right behind you.”

Frisk looks back at him, torn between worrying for Gaster and being anxious to get Asriel out of this place. Gaster’s urging grows more insistent, and finally Asriel too tugs on their hand.

“Come on. We should do as he says,” Asriel says.

And so, hand in hand, Frisk and Asriel step through the tear.
It’s a simple thing to step back to their world. Shouldn’t this be harder? Shouldn’t crossing dimensions be something earth-shattering and catastrophic and terrifying? They should be glad that it isn’t, they suppose.

Frisk turns to check on Asriel the moment their feet hit solid, visible ground. He’s rubbing his chest, casting a relieved glance up at the trees and the sky, an anxious smile tugging at his mouth. A soft sigh passes his lips before he turns to look at Frisk, and the silent look that they give one another says ‘we’re okay’.

But what about Gaster?

They both come to the same realization as their own palpable relief starts to fade, and they turn around to face the tear. The doctor is standing there on the other side, looking at the edges of the breach. One hand rests on Plato’s nose, drumming a nervous tattoo against bone.

“Our turn,” he mutters to himself, glancing down at the blaster. “Or, perhaps I should say, my turn my friend. I’ll need all my magic to hope to sever myself from the Font unscathed. Or, at the very least, intact. Time to rest.”

Frisk reminds themselves that blasters aren’t alive. They don’t have emotions or memories or recognition. They’re just weapons, magical constructs. Sans told them as much. But it doesn’t stop Gaster from looking at Plato with sadness plain on his face as the red circles fade from his eye sockets. When they vanish completely, so does the blaster. He stares, dark-eyed, at the now-empty space for a brief moment before blinking slowly and turning back towards the tear. He has two white pupils, small and bright and just like Sans’s.

“Well,” he says, meeting Frisk’s gaze and giving them a weak smile. “I suppose this is the moment of truth. Step back, if you will. I’m… not certain what will happen to me when I cross the threshold.”

Asriel tugs Frisk back as they hesitate, watching with apprehension building in their chest as Gaster regards the tear. He doesn’t look worried or scared. Curious maybe, and resigned. Determined to follow through. Then, with a slow exhale and a clench of his jaw, he takes that step.

A twig snaps beneath Gaster’s foot, a sharp, crisp sound that makes Frisk jump. The doctor looks down at it, tilting his head to the side. He seems curious, and for a brief moment delighted at the sight of it. The stick, the leaves, he nudges them with the toe of his shoe. Then, as a few seconds pass, he seems to remember himself and turns to face the tear. The tails of his coat sway behind him, heavier than the fabric it must have been once a long time ago.

“So far so good,” he breathes.

Raising his hands, they both begin to glow a bright, brilliant red as he reaches out and somehow
seizes hold of the two sides of the breach. A grunt of pain escapes him and his arms tremble as he tries to force the two edges back together.

Frisk feels rooted to the spot, stunned and awed. They hadn’t thought he’d literally close it with just his hands! Well, his hands and whatever strange red magic he has. They’ve never seen a monster with red magic before, from what they’d heard it was impossible. But everything about Gaster just seems impossible, so why would this be any different?

Once the sides of the tear start to pull together, to finally budge from where they’re stuck hanging in midair, it’s as though it wants to be closed. The edges seal up, closing as the widest parts start to narrow, like a pair of zippers pulling in towards the center. Gaster lets it go as it gets too small to hold, yanking his hands back as it closes with a soft whumph of air and a thin tendril of iridescent mist that drifts towards the doctor’s hands. It touches him, glows and turns a faint red before being absorbed.

There’s a moment of silence as they all just stare at the spot where the tear once was. Then Frisk’s eyes dart back to Gaster, their fear for him no less than before. He’s cut off now, wholly and truly from all that magic that he said was keeping him alive. What now? Gaster must be wondering the same thing because as the magic dissipates from his fingers he looks down at them, turning them over.

“No change,” he says, then takes an experimental swipe at the air in front of him. “The breach is sealed, no sign of any lingering distortion… Any excess magic that must have been expelled into our world must have— Oh, that’s not—”

Gaster is cut off as his body shudders, a ripple traveling from his shoulders to his knees. He’s able to half-turn, enough that Frisk can see the shock in his face as he starts to… Oh no, he’s starting to melt. His eye sockets droop even further, the white once-bone of his skull running down one side. His arms are losing definition, his clothes sagging into an amorphous lump. His hands and face stand out in stark relief against the blackness of his body as it begins to collapse in on itself.

“Gaster!” Frisk cries out, taking a step forward, horrified and desperate for some way to help.

But Asriel holds them back, wrapping his other hand around their wrist and digging in his heels.

“Don’t! Don’t touch him!”

“Let me go—!”

“Stop.” Gaster’s voice is warped and distorted, audible for almost a full second before he even opens his mouth (his lips are stuck together, dripping tendrils stretching and breaking) and continues after he closes it. “Wait, I can… Wait. Wait, wait, wait.”

The word repeats over and over, like a needle catching on a chipped record, looping as his body starts to shiver. Frisk stops fighting Asriel’s grip as he shudders and the surface of him ripples, once, twice, and then a third time, slower. It starts from the ground, pushing the bulk of him upwards like clay being drawn on a wheel. His body is reforming, his limbs stretching and separating, his clothes redefined and lighter-looking than before. He’s more solid than he was even in the Font. Not quite bone and not quite the oozing flesh-like substance from before, his head and face lack the definition of Sans and Papyrus, but still look vaguely skeletal.

Eyes screwed shut and his brow furrowed with deep creases, Gaster lets out a trembling breath as his knees buckle and he falls back onto the forest floor. Asriel is too stunned to stop them this time as Frisk yanks themselves free and rushes to their grandfather’s side. As they drop down to their knees next to him, ignoring the brown, brittle pine needles poking into exposed skin, they’re
relieved to see his mismatched eye sockets slowly blink open.

Two white pinpricks of light waver, flicking back and forth as he takes in the scenery above him. His face goes slack, one hand drifting lightly over the leaves and needles and he closes his fingers around one half of the broken stick from his first step out of the Font. He traces the sharp, jagged end with his thumb, then raises his other hand towards Frisk. Without thinking, they take it and he clutches them tightly. Their eyes dart down and back to his face again, and they’re surprised to see his pupils start to blur, bright and shining as they start to brim with tears.

“I made it,” he says softly, and that faint stretch of his voice is nearly gone. There’s still a faint echo, a hint of distortion, but it’s almost normal. (Almost normal is probably as good as Gaster is ever going to get.) “I’m back, I— I’m on the surface. Frisk.”

Gaster tears his eyes away from the flecks of sky visible through the trees, blinking hard as he composes himself. Grunting with effort, he pushes himself up into a sitting position with Frisk’s help. He turns the piece of stick over in his hand before setting it carefully back down on the ground, meeting Frisk’s gaze. “Frisk, thank you,” he says, covering their hands with his own. His thin mouth curves into a smile, head tipping just a little to the side. “For freeing me.”

His intensity makes Frisk blush, glancing away. “It was an accident. It wasn’t like we knew you were there…” they mumble, suddenly self-conscious. The only reason any of this had happened was because of their foolish attempt at messing with their Souls and their magic.

“And not just for freeing me,” he continues, as if they hadn’t said anything. “For everything you’ve done for monsterkind, for breaking the Barrier. For making this moment—” he looks up at the sky again, something like awe on his face— “possible. You’ve given everyone so much. You’ve given my sons—”

Gaster catches himself, dropping his gaze back down to Frisk. They’re biting their lip, unsure of what to say in the face of all his praise. That all felt so long ago now. Six years had passed since they helped shatter the Barrier, and it wasn’t often that monsters stopped to just thank them anymore. They’re glad for it; all the attention was starting to make them uncomfortable. But Gaster doesn’t notice any of that.

“I need to see them,” he says, his eyes snapping back into sharp focus. Then he winces, shaking his head. “They won’t remember, it’s not that simple. And Papyrus isn’t even here…”

“He’s in Hawaii,” Asriel says from behind Frisk. They glance over their shoulder to look at him, but he’s still a few paces away. Watching them uncertainly. When Frisk takes the time to really focus on him, they feel a hazy sensation of doubt and confusion rise to the surface.

“I’m sure he’ll come home as soon as he hears,” Frisk says, refusing to dwell on Asriel’s feelings. They don’t like how they conflict with their own.

“I’ll speak with Sans… If he believes me. Well, I suppose that is a bridge we shall have to cross when we get there,” Gaster says, sighing.

“I have a question,” Asriel says, taking a step closer. “Something that doesn’t make sense. How come we woke up so far from the tear that we opened? Shouldn’t we have been closer to it?”

Gaster looks at him, blinking as he considers the question. Giving the back of Frisk’s hand a gentle pat, he releases them and begins the process of picking himself up to his feet. He’s a little wobbly and unstable, but he manages. Just barely. “I don’t know,” he says, making a helpless gesture with his hands.
“You mean you didn’t see it?” he demands, a little harsher than Frisk likes. They stand, turning to face him. “You could see Chara and all the timelines and all our mistakes but you couldn’t see what happened to us when we came into the Font?”

“No. My vision is —was— limited when it came to the Anathema. Perhaps it kept me from seeing in the hopes of delaying my getting to you somehow,” he says. He brushes off the back of his coat, twisting this way and that to get a better look at his surroundings. “Whatever happened, the important thing is that the three of us made it safely here. Isn’t it?”

He doesn’t wait for Asriel to answer, instead looking down at Frisk again and threading his fingers together. “I believe that Sans is at work in the lab, so in the meantime… I’d very much like to meet your mother.”

Oh no. Frisk winces and presses the back of their hand to their mouth, glancing away. This is one conversation that they realize they’re dreading. You and Sans aren’t going to be happy to hear about what they did...
“I should get dinner started,” you say out loud, to no one in particular.

“Huh?” Deacon looks away from the television, pausing the game he’s playing. Frisk had shown him some new fantasy game they’d gotten while he was gone, something involving dragons, and he’s been playing it since he came over a couple hours ago. After he’d gone to talk to Morwenna. You’ve been half-watching, half reading a book, curled up on the couch with your feet tucked behind Deacon’s back. “What time is it?”

You arch a brow, giving him an indulgent smile before glancing at the clock. “Dinner-making time,” you say, sighing. “At least if I want it done when Sans gets home. Are you staying? Bo has to work tonight, right?”

“Yes, she won’t be home until late,” he says, following your gaze towards the time. “What are you making?”

“I’ve got a few options, do you have any—”

Meatloaf,” he says immediately, a twinkle in his eye.

“Why do I even bother asking,” you laugh, giving him a wry look. “You only ever suggest the one thing.”

“Because it’s my favorite thing.” His face cracks into his most winning smile, and you already know you can’t deny your horrible best friend anything. You can’t resist making the dork happy. “It’s been over a month,” he says, as if it’s the worst thing he’s ever endured.

“What if I don’t have the ingredients to make meatloaf?” You slip your bookmark between the pages you’re reading, setting the book aside. He just scoffs in disbelief. “Fine, fine,” you mutter, fighting against a grin but losing. You nudge him with your toes. “Come keep me company. Tell me more about your trip while you peel the potatoes.”

Deacon follows you as you get up to walk towards the kitchen, leaving the game paused in the living room. He knows his way around your house almost as well as his own, so he doesn’t need your help to step into the pantry and pull out things you need. You pass him the peeler as he sets a handful of potatoes down on the cutting board beside you. Side by side, you start preparing dinner.

“I’ve already told you most of the interesting stuff,” Deacon admits as he drags the peeler over the first potato. The soft metallic sound of the blade fills the air between you. His brow furrows as he thinks, emphasising just for a moment the lines in the corners of his eyes. They’re not noticeable enough for you to consider them wrinkles—he’s only thirty after all—but they’re a small hint that you’re both getting older. You wonder, vaguely, if Sans will ever show any obvious signs of aging as you grow old together. His eyebrows jump up as he says, “Oh! Did I tell you about the little girl
we met in Albuquerque?"

“No?” you say, curious.

He grins brightly, glancing over at you before returning his attention to the task at hand. “So this little girl, we were getting some food, right? She’s watching the two of us as we get up to the counter to order, and I’m pretty sure her mom was really embarrassed that she was staring. Probably waiting for her to say something inappropriate, on accident. So we put in our order and Bo sees that this girl has been watching us, so she goes right over to her and her mom so we can wait for our food. And I follow her, because what else can I do?” Deacon shrugs, making a helpless gesture even as he’s smiling. He sets the first potato aside and starts working on the second as you finish crushing a sleeve of saltines. “The girl keeps glancing over at her, this sort of worried look on her face, and looks like she’s about to explode. She obviously has something to say. And finally she just blurts out: ‘Why didn’t they finish shearing you, aren’t you hot?’”

Deacon tries to smother his laughter as you start to giggle, covering your mouth with the back of your hand. “Oh my god,” you manage to say.

“And her mom just looks scandalized, right? And Bo and I just start laughing our asses off and she isn’t sure if she should be mad at her daughter or what…” He shakes his head, chuckling. “So Bo just gives her a pretty smile and says, ‘Don’t worry sweetie, I grew up in a volcano, this is nothing.’ You should have seen the look on her face, she was so impressed. We ended up eating with the two of them. She had so many questions.”

“I’m sure you made that little girl’s whole year,” you tell him. “That’s something she won’t ever forget.”

He blinks at you. “Oh, do you… think so? I mean, we were just being nice. Her mom thanked us for being patient with her and answering her questions, but I mean… it wasn’t anything special.”

“Not to you, maybe,” you say, giving him a knowing look as you start kneading together the ingredients for the meatloaf. The squelch of raw meat between your fingers is disgusting and oddly satisfying at the same time. “But it was for her. You have to know that was probably the first time she’d ever met a monster before.”

“True…”

“That’s going to be something that changes how she sees the world, Deacon. You guys did a good job.”

When you glance over at him, his expression is uncertain. Conflicted. You thought you were being reassuring, but you must have hit some sort of nerve. It has to be the kid thing again. You want to talk to him about it, to figure out what’s got him so spooked at the idea. It would be simple if he’d just flat out said he didn’t want kids, but he hadn’t. But this is something the he needs to bring up on his own. That’s between him and Bo, and if he wants to get your insight, you’ll give it to him. But their choices on how they want to handle their family is private.

Sometimes staying silently supportive is harder than getting involved.

“So how many of those weird novelty spoons did Bo end up getting this time?” you ask, changing the subject.

That snaps him out of his head, giving you a lopsided smile. “Well she has most of the states already, but she got about five new ones I think? You know, for a collection that started out as a
joke, this sure has gotten serious,” he says with a fond laugh. “We made sure to stop somewhere in Wisconsin that had that touristy junk, and she got one at the House on the Rock. Oh, speaking of which, that place is an absolute disaster.” Deacon’s expression turns bewildered, shaking his head as he gets started on the last potato. “It’s like a bad acid trip, covered in wall-to-wall red carpet. Each section of the place was like descending into a new circle of macabre hell. I couldn’t tell if Bo loved it or hated it. You know what, I’m not sure if I loved it or hated it. It was just… We scared like ten people because they thought Bo was an attraction at first. That’s how messed up that place is.”

He goes into exhaustive detail over just how bizarre that particular leg of the trip was, keeping you both entertained as you finish up dinner and get it into the oven. You think you read about that place in a book before, the description of the room with the gigantic, monstrous whale and the merry-go-round surrounded by mannequin angels sounds familiar but you’re not sure why.

You’re washing your hands, wondering if you should ask Deacon if he knows, when you hear the front door open.

“Mom?” comes Frisk’s voice, hesitant and a little worried. Oh, what’s going on now?

“In the kitchen, sweetie,” you call back, shutting off the faucet and drying your hands on a dishtowel.

“Can you come here?” they ask, and that has you glancing over at Deacon just as he looks at you. A silent understanding passes between the two of you, knowing that whatever this is can’t be good. He’s been part of this family long enough to know that Frisk never sounds like that unless something happened. Bracing yourself, you circle the kitchen island with Deacon at your heels.

Frisk and Asriel are standing in the foyer, and with them is a monster you’ve never seen before. He’s vaguely skeletal in a way that seems sort of familiar, dressed in a long black coat. The lights in his eye sockets, ones that look just like your husband’s, brighten at the sight of you, his mouth curving into a smile. You look from him to the children, at their guilty, timid expressions. Biting back an exasperated sigh, you give the man an apologetic look. “I’m sorry, what did they do this time?” you ask, tucking your hair behind your ear. Your mind immediately goes to the handful of incidents that have happened over the past few years. That time that Asriel accidentally set some shrubs on fire, when they’d come home soaking wet and fully clothed because they’d found a new hot spring about a mile from their clubhouse, or that ordeal with the bees… “Whatever it is, I’m sorry. They’re good kids, I—”

He holds up his hands in a placating gesture. You’re surprised to see he has holes through his palms, and you catch yourself staring. “I’m sorry, what did they do this time?” you ask, tucking your hair behind your ear. Your mind immediately goes to the handful of incidents that have happened over the past few years. That time that Asriel accidentally set some shrubs on fire, when they’d come home soaking wet and fully clothed because they’d found a new hot spring about a mile from their clubhouse, or that ordeal with the bees… “Whatever it is, I’m sorry. They’re good kids, I—”

“It’s not often that you encounter a monster you’re not at least passingly familiar with on Mountainside. Most of them had set down roots the second everyone moved to the surface, and not many had moved after taking residence in their new homes. Had he moved from downtown, maybe? Or even Lakeside?
“I’m Doctor W.D. Gaster, though just Gaster is perfectly fine. In fact I prefer it,” he says, fidgeting with his hands as he watches you. It’s a little strange, the intensity of his gaze as he speaks to you. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I wish we could have met sooner, this is… Ah, I apologize that this is so sudden and unexpected, but perhaps it is for the best to just make this plain. I’m Sans and Papyrus’s father.”

You can only stare at the man —Gaster— with what must be a ridiculous look on your face, silent.

“I’m sorry, what?” Deacon blurts out, having no trouble finding his voice.

Frisk winces, walking over to you and resting their hand on your arm. “Mom—”

“Sans’s father is de—” You catch yourself as you’re about to say ‘dead’. You’d assumed, you both had, that whatever had happened to his father, he was gone. That was something you’d had in common; you’d both lost your fathers. And now, this man is standing here in front of you saying that it isn’t true. “How? How is it possible? Where have you been? And why can’t they remember you? Assuming you’re telling the truth.”

It’s then that you notice the look on Asriel’s face, the frown wrinkling his snout. He’s watching Gaster, shifting closer to you and Deacon as he does so. Frisk, by comparison, is giving you that familiar look. That look that says ‘give him a chance, listen to what he has to say’. You recognize it from your time in the Underground, when they’d convinced you to let them ‘fight’ Papyrus, and befriend Undyne. It’s that ability to see the best in people that you hope they never lose.

Gaster doesn’t notice. His attention is on you, his expression solemn as he nods in understanding. “I cannot blame you for your skepticism, I know my claim is… unbelievable in the current circumstances. But my son told you about the lab accident, the one that fragmented his memories and involved that machine he keeps in his workshop?”

How can he know that? How can he know about the accident, or that Sans told you, or about that damn machine? He must be able to see the recognition on your face, but he tips his head to the side, waiting for your answer. You nod stiffly.

“That incident resulted in me being pulled out of reality, into a place called the Font. Well, I call it the Font, we hadn’t previously known about it until we discovered it by accident. It’s the source of all magic, an incredible place of power,” he says, gesturing with his hands as he speaks. He hesitates, catching himself as he realizes he’s going off on a tangent. “My removal from the natural order caused my existence to be erased from everyone’s memories. The only things left behind were some of my inventions, blueprints… But I’ve been trapped there.”

“And what, you just walked back out?” Deacon interjects, and as you give him a surprised glance you see that he’s frowning. “That doesn’t explain how you got free.”

“Oh!” Gaster says, eyes widening and looking towards Frisk. Their grip tightens on you and they wince. “Frisk and Asriel saved me, however inadvertently. You see, they breached the gap between this world and the Font—”

“They what?” you interject, looking from Asriel to Frisk, each of them wearing matching expressions of guilt and apprehension. Oh, so that’s why they looked so worried.

“It was an accident,” Frisk says immediately, letting you go and taking a step back.

“We didn’t mean to,” Asriel adds.

“Yes, that’s generally the definition of an accident,” you say in a clipped tone. “How did you…
What did you *do*?"

The kids look at each other. For solidarity, maybe. There’s a moment of hesitation where you feel yourself growing frustrated until finally Frisk starts to explain.

“I wanted to try to use my magic with Asriel nearby,” they admit, eyes shifting towards Deacon and back to you.

“Frisk, you promised,” you say, disappointed, and their gaze falls to the ground.

“That was incredibly dangerous,” Deacon says. Unlike you, he sounds a little angry. “Your magic is unpredictable, to mess around with it unsupervised… Frisk you could have seriously hurt yourself. *I told you* about what happened to me. I almost killed myself because I didn’t know any better when I was a kid.”

“I know,” they mumble, digging the toe of their shoe into the floor.

“It’s my fault,” Asriel says. Frisk’s head jerks up in surprise. “It was my suggestion first, and it was my idea to share our Souls to try and get Frisk’s magic to work right.”

“You…” You and Deacon glance at each other. You both know what it’s like to share your Souls with your monster spouses, how intimate and personal a thing like that is. Frisk and Asriel had always been different, but this… Is this inappropriate? Neither of you seem to know. “And that’s what somehow… what, opened a door to this ‘Font’ place?”

“I can explain the details of the process to you if you’d like,” Gaster says, drawing your attention. “But if it’s any reassurance, it wasn’t just the act of sharing Souls that caused it. Though certainly they will need to be cautious of it in the future. And I mended the tear, it won’t cause any more problems.”

“Well, at least *someone* knows how to fix holes in the fabric of reality,” Deacon mutters, dragging his fingers through his hair and looking… distinctly overwhelmed. You’re feeling much the same at the moment. “That’s awesome. Wonderful. Hope, this is…” He gives you a desperate look, fisting his hand in his hair. “This is weird. This is the weirdest damn thing and this is taking into consideration all the other weird shit that keeps happening to our family. Frisk especially.”

It goes without saying that he means their ability to manipulate time, he just doesn’t want to say it plainly in front of Gaster.

“Well, one cannot exist without the other,” Gaster says calmly. “This wouldn’t have happened without Frisk’s other abilities. Their red magic, the alterations in time—”

“How do you know about that?” you ask him, reaching out a protective hand for Frisk’s wrist. They slide their palm into yours, holding your hand.

“I’ve been able to watch this world from the Font since I became trapped there. That ability is no longer available to me, but while it was… I was able to watch over my sons.” He pauses, regarding you with a look bordering on fondness. Threading his fingers together, he taps his thumbs against one another. “I’ve been wanting to thank you, Hope, for everything that you’ve done for them. For Sans especially.”

You open your mouth to respond, though you’re not sure of what to say, but Deacon beats you to it.

“*Nope. It got weirder,*” he says, making a sweeping gesture towards Gaster. “*You’re saying that you’ve been watching them* this whole time?”
“Deacon,” Gaster says quietly, and you don’t remember ever telling him your friend’s name. “Your skepticism, your concern, your unerring defense of my daughter-in-law are some of my favorite things about you. But please, I’ve been waiting to speak to her for many years now. Allow me this.”

“I’m not leaving them,” he says, stubborn as he rests a hand on your shoulder. You give him a weak smile.

“I didn’t ask you to leave, but I would appreciate it if you didn’t interrupt.”

Deacon is looking at you, a silent question in his eyes. ‘What do you want me to do?’ You quirk your mouth up to the side, just as bewildered as he is, but you give him a small nod. His jaw tenses, but he gives you a nod back.

“I don’t need you to thank me for what I’ve done,” you say to Gaster, biting your lip. “Sans helped me just as much as I helped him. And he…” You hesitate, looking at Gaster. The similarities are obvious now. Their eyes, his skeletal appearance—though not the same as the brothers, it’s not hard to make the comparison. You’re about to continue, but—

“I don’t know,” Gaster says, but you’re not sure what he’s responding to.

“What?” you ask, brow furrowing. He doesn’t seem to hear you. “Well, I was going to ask you if Sans will remember you now that you’re back.”

There’s another pause.

“Gaster, I just—”

“Didn’t I just answer your question?” he asks, sounding confused. He blinks, his eyes focusing on you as he seems to snap back to himself. “I’m sorry, I… That was odd. Let me repeat myself, for clarity’s sake. I don’t know if Sans will remember me.”

“Are you okay?” Frisk asks him, concerned. “You answered mom’s question before she even asked it.”

Is that what that was?

Gaster frowns, hunching forward and tracing the fingers of one hand along the side of his skull. “A side effect,” he says. He gives Frisk a weak smile. “Inconvenient, perhaps, but no cause for concern.”

This is… more, a lot more, than you’re prepared to deal with. “I should call Sans,” you say, squeezing Frisk’s hand. “He should be here to talk to you.”

Gaster fidgets with his hands, glancing towards the stairwell. Towards all the pictures of you and your family. If—as you’re starting to believe—he’s telling the truth, his family, too. That’s something you’re not ready to wrap your mind around yet. But he looks… nervous. “There’s no need to interrupt him,” he says weakly.

“He should be here,” you repeat, firmer this time. He’ll know the right questions to ask to make some sense of all this. And if this is his father… If anyone should be talking to him, it’s Sans.

“. . .Yes, you’re right of course,” he says, nodding.

You feel your back pocket for your phone, fishing it out. As you stand there, holding it in your
hand, you realize you’re all just loitering there in the foyer, stiff and uncomfortable. Gaster is nearly backed up against the front door, standing there like he’s not sure what to do with himself. He keeps stealing little glances around the room, like he shouldn’t but can’t help himself. Asriel is fidgeting with his ear, and Deacon and Frisk are standing on either side of you.

This won’t do.

“Come on, come inside,” you say, moving from where you’ve been rooted to the same spot, nudging Deacon with your shoulder to try and ease away some of the tension. He gives you a bemused look. “Gaster, would you… Do you want something to drink while I call Sans?”

Gaster looks at you like you just asked him the question in another language. One he doesn’t understand. He blinks, glances towards the kitchen, opening his mouth and closing it again. “Yes,” he finally says, giving you a warm smile. “Just water would be wonderful, if you please.”

Chapter End Notes

For the curious, the book featuring the House on the Rock that Hope couldn't remember is 'American Gods' by Neil Gaiman. Also, google the House on the Rock because that place is ridiculous, I went there like two years ago and it is... an experience.
You don’t tell Sans everything over the phone. You can’t. This is something he needs to hear in person, once he’s safely teleported home. He needs to see Gaster for himself. So instead you ask him if he can come home a little early, that it’s not an emergency, but there’s someone here who needs to speak with him. When he asks who, you tell him it’s better for him to find out when he gets here. You tell him to trust you.

Of course he trusts you. He says he’ll be home in a few minutes.

As you hang up the phone, a twist of apprehension and nerves in the pit of your stomach, you come to a sudden realization about the man standing next to the sink, staring down at his glass of water like he’s not sure what to do with it. If his last name is Gaster, does that mean that Sans’s last name should be Gaster? Should your last name be Gaster?

No. You had agreed that Sans would take your last name, that you’d keep that link you still had to Benjamin Garcia. To your father. But you can’t help that quiet, nagging worry in the back of your mind. Wondering what the sudden appearance of Sans’s father might mean for your husband, for you, for your family. You watch Gaster, suddenly defensive, as he taps the sides of the glass with his index fingers before gingerly raising it to his mouth and tipping it back.

The look of surprise and delight on his face throws you off-balance. He lowers the glass, holding it up towards the light as he starts to talk to himself. “Thirteen years I believe. At least. At the very least thirteen, when you take into account the Resets from both the children. Good god it has been that long, hasn’t it, Plato?” He looks to his left, then his right, and a slow realization spreads across his features. Then, with a flick of bright white pupils, Gaster sees you watching him.

“Who’s Plato?” you ask him carefully, embarrassed to be caught staring. “I’m assuming you’re not talking about the Greek philosopher.”

Gaster gives you an awkward smile. “Ah, no. Though that would be something, now wouldn’t it? No, I’m afraid I found myself in the habit of talking to one of my blasters and took to calling him—it—Plato. The Font was a rather lonely place.”

“Like Wilson,” Deacon chimes in from where he’s leaning against the pantry door. He left the kids in the other room, opting instead to keep an eye on you and Gaster. To make sure that nothing happened to you, you’re sure. After all, you’re the only one in this family who doesn’t have some kind of magic to defend themselves.

Gaster turns to him, a puzzled look on his expressive face. “I’m sorry?”

“He’s the one who found me trapped for over a decade with the ability to see into our world and you didn’t bother watching any Tom Hanks movies?”

He blinks, tipping his head to the side and seemingly oblivious to Deacon’s sarcastic tone. You
shoot your best friend a subdued glare which he pointedly ignores. Gaster fidgets with the glass. “My vision had restrictions. I could only view my sons and those they’d interacted with. And not for too long at any given time, or else I’d run the risk of becoming too distracted.”

Deacon doesn’t miss a beat. “So you never tuned in on movie night?”

“Oh!” Gaster exclaims, turning towards you so quickly that water sloshes out of his cup. He doesn’t seem to notice. “That movie, the one with the giant ship. I’ve seen you watch it at least three times but I’ve never managed to catch the end. Perhaps, once things are less… complicated, I might be able to watch it?”

Is he… asking what you think he’s asking? You open your mouth to answer, but true to form, Deacon beats you to it.

“You get out of an alternate dimension and your first request is to watch Titanic? This is wrong on so many levels I can’t even count them all,” Deacon says, caught somewhere between amusement and disgust.

“Okay, this is the last thing we need to be worried about right now. Sans is going to be home soon,” you say, bringing an abrupt end to the conversation.

When you leave the kitchen you find Frisk sitting alone on the staircase. You notice the dejected, frustrated look on their face before realizing what must be the cause. Asriel left while you were preoccupied, headed home according to your child. When you ask them why, their eyes flick over to Gaster but they don’t say anything. Whatever it is, they don’t want to say it out loud. You suspect the two of them have differing opinions on your houseguest. Given the current circumstances you know that the inevitable lecture you and Sans owe Frisk and Asriel can wait, but you can’t help the annoyance you feel at him sneaking off. He knows full well he won’t get in trouble at home; trying to explain to Toriel and Asgore what had happened would be impossible without also telling them about Frisk’s abilities, and that’s not something you’re willing to do.

But no matter how dangerous what Frisk and Asriel did was, the two of them are fine. Right now you’re more worried about Sans and what this is going to do to him. Part of you wants to believe that this will be good for him. That having his father back might help him start to piece together the fragments of his forgotten past. But he’s been happy, he’s been doing so well. You can’t imagine that this won’t upset the delicate balance of his life.

For better or worse this isn’t your situation to control. You can only stand beside him and support him, keep him grounded like you have for the last six years. No matter what happens, he’s got you.

Sans is your first priority. You send the others into the living room so that you can talk to him in private first once he arrives. Which is only a few moments after you’re left alone in the foyer. He pops in without bothering to use the door, making you jump even though you were expecting it. Sans immediately notices your reaction, his brow furrowing as he pulls his hands out of his jacket pockets. (It’s a new jacket, the old one is tucked away in the back of the closet, frayed and worn. And instead of a ratty old t-shirt like he used to wear, he’s got on a button-up shirt beneath it. He started dressing nice for work a couple years ago, and you think it really suits him.)

“What’s wrong?” he asks you, reaching for your hands. You let him take them, squeezing them for half a second before you pull them back so you can slip your arms around his shoulders and hug him. That doesn’t reassure him. When he speaks he only sounds more concerned. “babe, what’s going on? who’s here?”

You want him to be happy. You just want him to be happy to have what should be an unexpectant
and pleasant surprise. But you don’t think it’s going to be that simple. Not for Sans. You know him better than that.

“This is going to sound crazy,” you murmur, holding him tight. “It is crazy, but... There’s a man here, he looks enough like a skeleton to make me think he might be telling the truth. Sans, he says that his name is Gaster, and that he’s your dad.”

He goes rigid in your arms. “I... what?”

“I know,” you say quickly, pulling back so you can get a look at his face. His expression is blank. “He came here with Frisk and Asriel, there was—”

“where is he?” he asks, staring up at you.

You bite your lip, feeling somehow at a loss. Is he angry? Is he upset? Is he cautiously hopeful? You can’t tell. His eyes, his tone, it’s all unreadable. “He’s in the living room with Frisk and Deacon.”

Sans lets you go, circles around you to walk to the living room. You can only follow helplessly after him.

Deacon and Frisk are sitting on the couch, and as Sans enters the room Frisk tries to get up to go to him but Deacon catches their arm. He says something in a quiet undertone, shaking his head as they look at him. You’re grateful for his help; this shouldn’t be interrupted.

You’re there to witness the moment that they see each other.

Sans grinds to a halt, his arms hanging limply at his sides. Eye sockets wide, pupils tight and focused, he freezes and just stares as Gaster struggles with what to do. Gaster’s expression is easy to read compared to your husband’s. There’s something bittersweet, a pain you’re familiar with but on a much lesser scale. His brow furrows, he takes a step forward and makes an abortive reach with his hands before he catches himself. His arms hang there, reaching for Sans for just a moment before he lowers them, rearranging his face carefully into something less open, more dignified. But his voice cracks when he says, “Sans.”

Sans flinches, his jaw tensing, and something in his expression wavers. He doesn’t speak. Seeing them both here, only a few paces apart, you can see the resemblance now. The structures of their faces, even with the way Gaster’s is distorted, you can see the similarities.

But then Gaster’s eye sockets swim with tears, his face screwing up as he tries to keep his expression under control. But he’s failing quickly, overwhelmed by what you can only imagine has been a very complicated day. Not even a day, just an hour or so. There’s very little warning before Gaster lurches forward to embrace Sans.

To Sans’s credit he doesn’t teleport away, or hold him back, or really do much of anything. He just stands there, his arms halfway up out of a reflexive motion, rigid as the man who claims to be his father hugs him tightly. Gaster says —maybe a little too literally— against Sans, and your husband looks at you with wide, desperate eyes. The silent question of ‘what do I do?’ hangs between you, and all you can do is bite your lip and make a small, helpless gesture with your hands.

After a moment of hesitation, Sans gives Gaster a sort of awkward pat on the back. That seems to jolt him back to his senses. “You don’t remember me,” Gaster says thickly, pulling back enough to look at him. To search Sans’s face for any sign of recognition. Tears slip down his face, tracing down the crack below his eye socket. “I knew, but I dared to hope... No, of course you don’t.” His
hands ball into fists on Sans’s shoulders, gripping his jacket. A weight seems to settle on Gaster’s back, bearing down on him.

“sorry, pal,” Sans says, looking uncomfortable. “but i… i’m not saying i… dammit, i feel like i should remember! it’s there, there’s something familiar but it’s not…” He grits his teeth, shaking his head and pulling Gaster’s hands away. “if you’re my dad, then where the hell were you?”

Gaster presses his hands to his chest, then realizes he’s been crying and rubs at his face with his fingers. “I was trapped, in another plane of existence. I was erased from this world.”

“How?” Sans demands.

If Gaster is hurt by Sans’s harsh tone he doesn’t show it. He’s eager to answer his questions, to make him understand. You’re finding it very difficult to doubt Gaster’s word as you watch the two of them. “An accident at the lab. You know which one I’m speaking of, how can you not? It was all my fault. My own hubris—”

“Your fault,” Sans says, his tone icy. When he told you about the accident, whenever he spoke of it, it was always with this sense of guilt. Like it had been his fault. As if there were some way he could have prevented whatever it was he couldn’t remember. “this whole time i… i spent years trying to figure out what happened, what i could have done different.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Gaster says, and a fleeting expression of relief passes over Sans’s face. “It was my plan, my experiment. You were one of a handful of assistants with me that day.” He gives him a weak smile. “My best and brightest, but the fault is mine. I wished for so long that I could tell you that, and now I hope you believe me.”

But that look of relief is already gone as Sans shakes his head with a tight grimace. “why now? why show up now, when i finally have all my shit together? i needed you back in new home. i needed you in snowdin. papyrus needed more than just the— the broken shell you’d left behind after whatever the hell happened back there! what was the experiment for? i want you to explain to me what was so damn important that it destroyed my life when it failed.”

Gaster holds out his hands, a silent offering. He’s trembling, just slightly. “My son, I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”
The dining room is quiet. You and Deacon share a glance as you both eat, and Sans gets the impression neither of you are sure what to say. To be honest, he’s not sure what to say either. Gaster dropped a lot of information on him before excusing himself to the back porch to give them some privacy.

What Gaster told him about the accident, the injection of determination and being grabbed by the Anathema and pulled partially into the Font… It makes a crazy kind of sense as to why he can remember the timelines. He’d been drained of his magic, which triggered a reaction in the determination in his body, and then he’d been immediately replenished by direct contact with the source of magic. It had been enough to keep him from losing his stability, like what had happened with the amalgamates. When Sans mentioned the comparison to Alphys’s unfortunate experiments, Gaster’s eyes lit up with interest, and had almost derailed the entire conversation. Not that Sans let him.

The last thing he remembered for himself about the experiments at the lab was research on timelines. The anomalies they’d seen in the readings with time stopping and starting and ending. He hadn’t remembered that in looking further into those endings they’d discovered the Font. He’d suspected for the longest time that the broken device in his workshop was a time machine, but no. Instead it was a gateway, a door into another dimension. Somehow that seems even more unbelievable.

But he’s not sure how to feel about any of this. Shouldn’t he be happy to have this mystery solved? To have his... father back? Why instead does he just feel more burdened? More confused and very much like he’s had a rug pulled out from beneath him.

“Is anyone else going to say anything about the creepy Soul-absorbing monster your dad was trapped with?” Deacon says suddenly, breaking the silence. He gestures with his fork before stabbing at a potato. “Because while the rest of what he told us is certainly enlightening, I’m a little more worried about the creature that seems to enjoy eating mage Souls and magic.”

“Gaster didn’t seem to think it was much of a threat anymore, stuck in the Font,” you say, meeting Deacon’s eyes for a moment before looking over at Sans. “He said that the tear the kids made was too small for it to pass through. And speaking of that tear”—the look you cast Frisk is a stern one, making them wince and drop their eyes down to their empty plate—“don’t think you’re not in trouble for what you did. But… we’ll talk about that later.”

Frisk doesn’t say anything, opting to keep quiet. Probably for the best, Sans thinks. He can’t even dwell on how incredibly foolish what the kids did was, his focus firmly elsewhere.

“Oh, but that means that we still get to live with the knowledge that there’s a huge goopy monster just chilling in the source of all magic, preying on the Souls of mages who have the misfortune of burning themselves out with their power and dying. And, speaking as a mage, that’s a little concerning.” Deacon continues, glancing between you and Sans. “I don’t exactly want to get
“well, then don’t overdo it and kill yourself,” Sans says flatly.

“Thanks Sans, I never would have thought of that on my own,” Deacon retorts, and Sans sees the moment you decide to intervene.

“Enough, both of you,” you say, resting a hand on Sans’s forearm and casting Deacon a weary look. Then you turn to him, your eyes searching his face. Your expression turns concerned, and he knows you’re worried about him. “Sans… do you believe Gaster?”

“you don’t?” he asks you, surprised.

“I didn’t say that. I think I believe him, but… I trust you more when it comes to these sorts of things than I trust myself,” you murmur, brow furrowing as your gaze drops for just a moment before flicking back up to his face. “I want to know what you think.”

“i believe him,” he says, covering your hand with his. He hesitates, thinks back to that strange feeling he had when he first saw Gaster. His Soul had lurched, a sudden swell of something close to joy bubbling up inside him for a fraction of a second before vanishing. It was like getting a frustratingly fleeting glimpse of something he could recognize but not quite place, as if just another look might help him remember. But he wasn’t allowed that second look. The feeling was gone as quickly as it came, and it was frustrating to the point of anger. An anger he had turned on Gaster. An anger that turned into blame. Sans lets out a heavy sigh. “i don’t have a good reason why, but i do. it’s just… a feeling.”

Deacon lets out a quiet, indignant sound. It doesn’t take much for Sans to understand why. He hadn’t exactly received the warmest reception thanks to one of Sans’s ‘feelings’.

You glance over at Deacon, maybe anticipating some snarky comment that doesn’t come. As the moment passes your attention shifts over his shoulder, past him towards the window. It’s getting dark outside now, the visible sky an inky blue. “You should go check on him,” you say, your voice soft with concern. “He’s been out there for over an hour, and the only thing he’s had since he got here is half a glass of water. He should eat.”

“You can help me in the kitchen. Sans, I’ll fix him a plate, okay? Just go talk to him.”

You’re right, of course. And once you’ve got that stubborn look on your face there’s really no arguing with you so he pushes away from the table and gets up. As he heads out of the room, towards the living room and the door to the backyard, you enlist Frisk to join you and Deacon in cleaning up. Frisk and Asriel… that’s an entirely separate issue the two of you will need to address. That uniting the two parts of Chara’s Soul and tapping into their magic had punched a hole through dimensions and caused this whole mess to begin with… Shit. How is he even supposed to deal with that?

Later. He’ll worry about it later.
Gaster is a shadow on the porch, standing with his back to the glass door and his head tipped back to look up at the sky. Sans hesitates, watching him for a moment, his hand halfway to the doorknob. This man had dropped literally out of nowhere, bringing with him everything Sans had wanted to know for the longest time. Things he’d finally given up trying to figure out. Things he’d accepted he’d never know. He’s not even sure if he wants this. He’s happy with his life; with you and Frisk and with the family he has now. He feels selfish for thinking it, in light of what this man — Gaster, his father — had been through to give him this opportunity, but part of him wishes he didn’t have to deal with this. This upheaval of his life is the last thing he expected, and now there’s no going back.

His dad is on his back porch and he needs to talk to him.

Sans finishes his reach for the door and turns the knob, barely even noticing the familiar creak of the hinges as he pushes it open. But Gaster does. He jumps at the sound, and before Sans even has a second to think, to wonder why he’s doing it, a flare of bright red surrounds Gaster’s hands as he whirls around blurringly fast and a long, thin, red-eyed blaster appears in the space at his side.

“fucking hell!” Sans yelps, teleporting about five feet to Gaster’s other side, magic crackling in his bones as his left eye flashes and he waits, ready to defend himself but waiting to see if he really needs to.

“Oh! Plato, no!” Gaster’s eyes go wide, the bright red glow in his sockets making Sans uneasy. It isn’t right, seeing a monster with red magic. It would make his skin crawl, if only he had skin. Distressed and a little panicked, Gaster turns to the blaster with a look of dismay before he waves his hands and dismisses it. The red magic in his eyes and around his fingers vanish. “Sans, I’m sorry. You startled me, I—”

“s’ok,” Sans says, gritting his teeth and forcing his left hand down to his side. He blinks, hard, and shoves his magic back down. “guess that makes us even.”

“It’s just…” He trails off, his brow furrowing, tugging on the jagged crack over his right, drooping eye socket. “It’s a bit much, out here. In this world, I mean,” he admits. “It’s so loud, and there’s just… I find it impossible to relax.”

It seems quiet out here to Sans, but as he takes a second to listen he hears what Gaster must be hearing. The soft drone of insects, the rustle of leaves as a gentle night breeze sweeps through the trees surrounding the backyard. The whir of the air conditioner on the other side of the house. If he wasn’t focusing on it, it would all just blend into the background. “so it was pretty quiet then, in that place.”

“Yes,” Gaster says, some of the tension easing off of his face. But he still looks anxious, his eyes darting towards the trees. “The only disturbances I had were from the Anathema, which I hope explains my… violent reaction just now.”

“i’d say it does,” he says. He forces himself to relax a bit more, adopting a more casual stance. Hooking his thumbs on the waist of his pants, Sans takes a couple lazy steps closer to bridge the gap he’d put between them. But he’s not sure what to say.

Silence settles between them, thick with tension. Sans can feel it, he’s sure that Gaster feels it, and for a little while they just stare out at the backyard. After a moment Gaster looks back up at the sky again, and when Sans follows his gaze he sees that the stars are starting to come out. It’s a clear summer night and though there’s still a hint of orange off towards the ocean it’s dark enough now to see them. The bright ones, at least.
After a few minutes pass, Gaster lets out a slow exhale. Sans looks over at him, what’s meant to be a quick glance but turns into a stare. Gaster’s eyes are wide and bright, even the one that’s sort of damaged is open as much as he thinks it can, taking in the night sky. That’s when he realizes it.
“this is the first time you’ve seen the stars, huh?”

Flinching at the sudden interruption, Gaster glances over at him. His mouth curves into a hesitant smile. “With my own eyes, yes. I’ve seen them when I would watch over you and your brother, but… I never had the chance to see the surface before I was trapped in the Font. I suppose I’m a bit late to the party, so to speak.”

“better late than never,” Sans says, without thinking. As Gaster’s smile widens at Sans’s words, he reaches for a way to change the subject. He’s not ready to have some sort of moment out here in the dark. He’s not glad Gaster’s here, he doesn’t even know him. (And deep down he feels like an asshole for feeling this way.) “hope wanted me to get you to come inside. she thinks you should eat something.”

Gaster hesitates, studying Sans’s face as his expression sobered. His eyes flick towards the back door and then up at the stars again. “That will take some getting used to. Eating, that is. But I’d like to stay out here a bit longer. It’s very… overwhelming, inside.” He gives him an apologetic look. “Forgive me, I was starved for company for so long, now I find myself drowning in it and it’s taking some adjustment.”

“i think starving is what hope’s worried about,” he says with a shrug. “hey, can i ask you a question?”

“Of course, Sans,” he says, turning to him with a sudden eagerness. “Anything you’d like.”

“What’s the ‘w.d.’ in your name stand for? gaster’s gotta be your… uh, our? last name.” He stumbles a bit over his words, still trying to adjust to the idea of this man as family.

“Ah,” Gaster says, looking a bit uncomfortable. “Yes, that’s right. It stands for Wing Dings.”

He pauses. “oh. do you go by ‘wing’ or ‘dings’ or…?”

He cringes, shaking his head as a faint red flush paints across his cheekbones. “No. And I’d rather you not call me by my first name. Only one person ever called me Dings, and that was your mother. Everyone else just called me Gaster, or Doctor Gaster. I don’t expect any different from you.” Something sad passes over his face, his mouth twitching with an attempt at a smile. He quickly looks away, his once-wide eyes now heavy as his shoulders sag. “It is lovely out here. You always were fascinated by the stars. I’m glad you still have that old telescope.”

Sans can’t help the creep of guilt up his spine at the abrupt change of topic, and the way that Gaster had not-so-subtly implied that he didn’t expect him to call him ‘dad’. He ought to, shouldn’t he? He owed the guy that much, didn’t he? But it just doesn’t feel right. Not yet. “did you buy it for me?” he asks, his eyes flicking up towards the balcony overhead where he knows the telescope is set up.

“I found it, in the garbage back in Waterfall. I fixed it up for you for your birthday,” he says, fidgeting with the lapel of his coat. “You get that from your mother. While I was busy with thermal energy and designing the Core, trying to make the Underground a better place for us to live, she was dreaming of the surface. Of the sky and the stars and…” Gaster trails off, and Sans is very much aware in that moment of the missing notes in the sound of his father’s Soul. The places where his mother used to be. It makes something in his own Soul ache, and he feels uncomfortable. “I’m just sorry that she isn’t here to see this for herself.”
"yeah," is all Sans can think to say. A meaningless word of agreement, of sympathy. What else is he supposed to say to a father he doesn’t remember about a mother he hardly does? "welp. i guess i’ll leave you to it then. hope’s got some food set aside for you whenever you’re ready."

Gaster doesn’t look at him, twisting his fingers together in front of his chest. “Thank you, Sans. I’ll try not to be too much longer.”

“no problem. take your time,” he says, and goes back inside.

Right after Sans heads outside, you take Deacon and Frisk with you into the kitchen to clean up. As you’re putting together a plate for Gaster and Deacon carries the heavy baking dish over to the sink, Frisk’s cell phone goes off. The sudden sound of electric guitar makes you jump, and they hurry to answer the call. You know that ringtone is only assigned to one person.

Why is Chris calling?

“Hey,” Frisk says, sounding harried. “What’s up?”

Deacon doesn’t say anything, doesn’t even look at you, but you glance over at him reflexively. Even after five years he hasn’t relented much in his dislike of Chris, even when Sans had. You can see the crease between his brows as he works on the dishes but whatever he might be thinking he keeps to himself.

“Oh,” Frisk says, pushing their bangs out of their face as they wince. “Sorry, something came up. I know we said we’d do dungeons tonight. I… Is Asriel on? He isn’t either? No, I wasn’t sure. Look, I don’t think I can—”

“Just go on,” you tell them, circling around them to pick up the stack of dirty plates they set on the counter. Then, in an undertone, you add, “But don’t tell him anything about what happened yet.”

Frisk’s eyes light up and they nod quickly, giving you a fleeting smile as they hurry off towards the stairs. Before you can change your mind. “Nevermind, I’m going to use the computer now! I’ll be on in a second.”

Deacon is looking at you now, taking the plates from you and setting them into the sink. “You’re just going to let them play games after what happened?”

You try not to feel annoyed at that, like he’s questioning your choices as Frisk’s mother. You know that’s not what he’s doing, even though it’s what it sounds like. Pushing the irritation away, you lean your hip against the counter, crossing your arms over your chest. “It’s better that Chris doesn’t think anything’s wrong. And right now I’m more concerned about Sans and Gaster than what Frisk did…” You sigh, shaking your head and tipping your chin down to your chest. “I get the feeling that they’re not going to try that again anytime soon.”

“This is one hell of a shitshow right now,” he says, pushing his hair away from his forehead with the back of his wrist. “Sans’s dad just popping out of another dimension… That’s not exactly something you plan for. I mean, if one of my parents decided to make a sudden appearance, that would be surprising but not exactly implausible, you know? But Gaster might as well have not even existed. How do you think Papyrus is going to take the news?”

“Oh god,” you breathe, turning to sag against the countertop, resting your weight on your elbows as you bury your face in your hands. “I hadn’t even thought about Papyrus. I mean, I’m sure he’ll take it well, right? He takes everything well.”
“Yeah, I guess that’s true. What about you?” Deacon looks at you, shifting to the side so he can give you a gentle nudge with his shoulder. “You hanging in there?”

With a weak smile, you give a feeble shrug of your shoulders. “I guess. I think I’m still in, like… damage control mode. This is just… weird, Deacon. Just one more freaking weird thing to happen to us.”

“Speaking of weird,” he says, starting the process of loading up the dishwasher. “Gaster watching you guys.”

You wince. “Yeah, that’s a little weird. But I mean, he must have been worried about Sans and Papyrus. I can’t really blame him for keeping an eye on them.”

“Okay, but you can’t tell me that there’s no chance he hasn’t seen you guys doing it,” he insists, arching a brow as he fights to keep an amused smile off his face. “Even on accident.”

“Oh my god,” you say, groaning in dismay. “Why, Deacon, why did you have to say that?”

“Because it was the first thing that popped into my head when he said he’d watched you guys, and I needed to share that horror with you.”

“He’s… he’s my father-in-law, Deacon no. God, now I’m going to keep thinking about that.” Your face twists with disgust and subdued horror, and Deacon at least has the decency to look apologetic.

“Sorry,” he says. “But, uh, I guess I should probably head out soon. I mean, you didn’t really need me here at all, Gaster seems pretty harmless.”

Despite the embarrassed flush on your cheeks and the desire to shove Deacon for causing it, you can’t help but put your arm around him and give him a one-armed hug. “I needed you here,” you tell him, which is true. “I would have felt a lot more uncomfortable if you hadn’t been here when he showed up with the kids. I know that you would have kept us safe.”

He lets out a quiet, pleased sound. “Yeah, well, what kind of brother would I be if I didn’t watch out for you? But seriously, this is probably something you want to take care of with just, you know, real family. I’m sure you and Sans have a lot to deal with right now.”

“You are real family,” you insist, frowning.

“I know,” he says, giving you a warm smile as he dries his hands off on a dishtowel. When he’s done he puts an arm around your shoulders, pulling you closer. “But let’s be honest, this has a lot more to do with you guys than it does with me. Besides, I got my meatloaf. That’s the real reason I stuck around.”

Laughing, you give in to the urge to shove him. He grins at you as you free yourself from his hold. “Well, I’m not saying you have to stay, but don’t feel like you need to leave.”

“Ohay,” he says, giving in. “But I do think I should head home.”

“You leaving?” comes Sans’s voice from behind you.

When you both turn to look at your husband, you’re surprised to see that he’s alone. You look behind him, wondering if Gaster is trailing behind, but no. It’s just Sans.

“Yeah, thought I’d give you guys some space,” Deacon says.
“Where’s Gaster?” you ask, crossing the kitchen to meet Sans halfway. You reach for his hand and he gives it to you, squeezing your fingers as you look again towards the living room.

“said he wanted to stay outside a bit longer,” Sans says, indifferent. You’re not sure you like that tone in his voice. You know that it’s been a lot to take in, but shouldn’t he care a little more?

“I’m going to go talk to him,” you decide. “Deacon, I guess I’ll talk to you tomorrow?”

“Of course,” he says. “Call me if you need anything.”

“I will.”

“babe, i think gaster just wants some time alone,” Sans says, frowning.

“He’s been alone for too long. I’m just going to check on him myself.” If Sans has any other words of protest you don’t hear them, walking past him towards the back door. He doesn’t follow you to try and stop you.

You can see Gaster out on the patio, and you don’t hesitate. You open the door and step outside.

“Sans, you don’t need to trouble yourself over me, I just—” Gaster glances behind him as you shut the door, his eyes widening in surprise. “Oh. Hope, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it was you. Is there anything I can do for you?”

He looks exhausted. His eyes are heavy, his shoulders are sagging, and something in his expression makes him look lost. Uncertain. How could Sans not see it? Any words of reprimand you had for him to try and get him inside die before they can pass your lips. Your brow furrows in concern.

“Gaster, are you okay?”

He blinks, taken aback, like he’s surprised by your question. His mouth opens, he hesitates, and whatever reassurances he might have given you never come. Instead he tilts his head just a fraction to the side and glances away. “I don’t know,” he admits, and after a pause he looks back up at the stars. “I haven’t quite stopped to think about it.”

You feel a pang of sympathy. “This is a lot, for everyone. Especially you.”

“I will adapt,” he says, and you’re not sure if he’s trying to reassure you or himself more. “Anything is better than that place.”

“Well,” you say, gently, “if anyone knows what it’s like to have to adapt to an unfamiliar place, it’s me.”

He turns to you again, that surprised look back on his face. Then, after a moment, he smiles at you and inclines his head. “Of course. I hadn’t considered… well, I will keep that in mind.”

“It’s overwhelming, and it’s confusing, but you’re not alone,” you say. You look at him, study the way he’s watching you, and after a moment of indecision you reach out to rest your hand on his arm. “Not anymore.”

He looks down at your hand, that smile fading into something sad and lonely. “That will… also take some getting used to,” he says, and you can’t help it. You just feel so sorry for him.

You hug Gaster, because damn it, someone needs to, and you don’t think it’s going to be Sans anytime soon. He freezes for a moment, startled, before he relents, reciprocating hesitantly. It takes a few more seconds, but he relaxes, hugging you back with a fierceness that surprises you.
“Hope,” he says, and his voice sounds thick. “You are so incredibly kind. It pains me to think about what would have happened to Sans without you. You have done, and continue to do so much for this family.”

“Come inside,” you say, unsure what to do with his praise. “You have to be exhausted, and you should eat something.”

“I do feel a bit weak,” he admits. “I suppose you’re right.”
Rashid has never been good at apologies. Too bull-headed, too full of pride. He hates admitting defeat, and refuses to be wrong. (Avery knew it, too. He’d tried to break Rashid so many times, Fatima was sure one day it would get him killed once he lost his patience with her brother. Thankfully he’d gotten killed first.)

So Fatima knows that when she catches the familiar sounds and smells of bacon frying in the kitchen that he’s trying to apologize. Not that she’s the one he should be apologizing to.

He usually makes dinner, so that in of itself isn’t unusual. After they’d moved in with Morwenna and they’d started acclimating to the ‘real world’, they’d both been taught the basics of cooking. They hadn’t exactly had a choice in the matter. Rashid had taken to it a lot better than she had, once he’d stopped bitching. But he bitched about everything, especially back then. He’d kept up that angry, mad-at-the-world wall for months before he’d let himself relax. At least a little. Just at the house.

When she keeps people at arm’s length at least she isn’t rude about it.

But the fact of the matter is that bacon, pancakes, and eggs is her favorite meal, and Rashid is using it to try to win her back over. It might just work, depending on if he remembered to put powdered sugar on her pancakes.

Both laptops are set up at the dinner table. With Morwenna out for the evening, it’s easier for them to game together in the same room than separated by their bedroom wall. They have an evening of dungeons planned for their perfect group of five.

The only problem is that two of their group is missing.

“Maybe they’re still eating dinner,” Chris says, his voice coming through her headphones. They’re on a group voice chat, the only two currently in while Rashid is away from his computer.

“Wouldn’t be the first time Hope’s kept them a bit late.”

“Probably,” she agrees, half-watching the little fishing bobber on her screen as she works on catching fish to make in-game food. “They’re pretty good about telling us if they can’t come.”

“If they don’t show up in a little while I’ll give Frisk a call,” he says.

“No rush, we haven’t eaten dinner yet.”

“What’s Rashid making?”

“My favorite,” Fatima says with a self-satisfied grin, even though Chris can’t see it.

“Oh man, how bad did he screw up? He must be in trouble, right?” he asks, chuckling. “Or is he just being nice for a change?”
She laughs weakly, until she remembers why she’s mad at her brother. Chris might not be Frisk’s dad in practice, or title, or in any legal sense at all, but that didn’t stop him from caring a hell of a lot about that kid. He’s like what she imagines a really awesome uncle would be like, if she’d ever met any of her distant relatives. But she doesn’t want to upset him, or make things weirder than they’re probably going to be whenever Frisk shows up in-game, so Fatima makes the quick decision not to elaborate. “Just him being an asshole. You know, like usual,” she says, which isn’t exactly a lie.

“To you?” he asks, and there’s an odd tone in his voice, like he’s agitated. It catches her off-guard.

“No,” she says quickly, letting out an awkward laugh. “And even if he was, you don’t need to worry about it.”

There’s a weird pause, and for some reason Fatima thinks she said the wrong thing. She’s not sure how, but she gets the feeling that Chris wasn’t quite prepared for that. Whatever that was. Why did this get like this?

“Well, uh, I hope your day wasn’t too bad. I mean, I’m sure it’s going to be better now that you’ve got breakfast-for-dinner on the way,” he says, doing his best she thinks to inject some levity back into the conversation.

“Absolutely,” she agrees. “Who doesn’t love bacon? And pancakes. Breakfast food is the best food. But the rest of the day was fine, I mean we were just at the community center and— Oh my god I totally forgot about your texts! Chris I’m sorry!”

“Oh.” He makes a soft noise, then clears his throat. “I mean, I wasn’t going to bug you about it. I just figured you were busy or something.”

“Sort of,” she admits, wincing. But she can’t help but feel guilty. She doesn’t like knowing that she’d never bothered to answer his messages. “What did you end up doing this afternoon?”

“Nothing really. I wasn’t sure if you were going to get back to me, and it’s not like I had anything planned…” He trails off, and she can practically hear the shrug in his voice.

“Chris, I’m really sorry,” she says again.

“Teemz, it’s okay,” he insists, sounding a bit uncomfortable. “Shit happens.”

“Yeah, but you seem to get shit on a lot,” she says, honestly feeling bad, but he just laughs.

“Well, it’s not the first time a girl hasn’t returned my texts,” he says. “I mean, usually I at least get a date first, but I’m not surprised.”

Fatima can’t help it, she laughs, which just makes Chris laugh more. “I’m sorry,” she says, trying to stifle herself. “That’s not that funny.”

“Yeah it is. But seriously, don’t worry about it. I feel better knowing you weren’t ignoring me on purpose. I thought I might have been bugging you or something.”

“No, of course not. I like talking to you, you weren’t bugging me,” she insists.

“Yeah?” he asks, and she finds herself wondering what his expression must look like right now. He sounds like he doesn’t quite believe her.

“Yeah,” she says firmly. “You just caught me right as Frisk was finishing up with training. I just
got distracted.”

“Oh, that training with Morwenna?”

“Yeah.” She hesitates, thinking back to earlier. That look that Deacon had given Frisk, her suspicions about whatever he and Morwenna must have talked about. Something strange was going on and she wasn’t being told what. “Hey, has Frisk mentioned anything to you about what’s going on with all that?”

Chris lets out a humorless laugh. “No way. We don’t really, uh, talk? I mean… they’ve got Hope and Sans, and probably Deacon I guess. Unless it’s got to do with games or music, they don’t really come to me with their problems.” There’s a short pause before he starts to speak again all in a rush. “Not that that’s bad! I mean, who am I? Seriously, I don’t know jack shit about fixing problems for pre-teens. Besides, the magic stuff is a little, uh, beyond me. Goes right over my head.”

“I’m sure you could get it if you sat down and really talked about it with someone,” Fatima says, feeling herself frown. She can practically hear Rashid’s snide comments about Chris being stupid, big and dumb and too nice for his own good. He’s not dumb.

“…Are you volunteering?” he asks, hesitating for a second before clearing his throat again.

“Sure.” She reaches up to adjust her headset, fidgeting with it so it sits more comfortably across her head. Shifting in her chair, she’s having a hard time finding a good position for some reason. “I don’t mind.”

“Awesome! We can, uh, maybe get together sometime. It’s been awhile since I’ve seen you, you know, for real. I can come up there.”

“Yeah, it’s been a couple months hasn’t it? That’d be nice. We should do lunch or something,” she says, smiling to herself. There’s not many she can honestly say would seem as enthusiastic as Chris about meeting up with her just to hang out. “Oh, hey should you check on Frisk?”

“Oh! Right. Uh, lemme give them a call. I guess I’ll be right back,” he says, and there’s the sound of movement on his end before he mutes his microphone.

She leans forward, resting her chin on her hand as her smile widens and she shakes her head. Chris is a sweet guy, probably one of the nicest she knows. He’d even offered to come up to Ebott to meet her; did he remember when she’d mentioned she wasn’t comfortable driving off the mountain yet? It’s silly, she knows, being so nervous, but Ebott’s roads are a lot less busy and the thought of dealing with traffic and freeways just makes her anxious. Any time that she and Rashid go down into the foothills he has to drive. He still teases her about it, which doesn’t make it any easier.

She’s sure that Chris would never tease her.

“Frisk still not—”

Fatima yelps, jerking upright as Rashid comes up behind her. He lets out an equally startled noise and gives her a wide-eyed look as she whirls around in her chair to look at him.

“What the fuck, don’t sneak up on me!” she blurs out, pressing a hand to her chest.

“I didn’t fucking sneak up on you!” he snaps back, thick brows pulling together into a frown. He’s holding two plates, one in each hand, with squat stacks of pancakes, strips of bacon, and scrambled eggs. One stack is dusted with powdered sugar; he remembered!
“I have my headphones on, I can’t hear you,” she grumbles, but then reaches with both hands for her plate with enthusiastic grabby motions. “Oh man, that smells so good, gimme!”

Rashid rolls his eyes, pushing it towards her and setting down his own plate next to his laptop. Folding himself into his chair, he crosses his legs beneath him as he gives his sister an exasperated look. “So like I was trying to say before you almost made me ruin dinner,” he says pointedly, ruffling his already messy dark hair with one hand, “Frisk still isn’t on? We haven’t heard from them or Az.”

“Probably because you pissed them off by being an asshole,” she says, but her words don’t carry much of a bite. She’s been nagging him about it all afternoon and most of her anger has died down. Not to mention being mollified by this beautiful stack of pancakes. Glancing over at her twin, he’s wearing an expression that clearly states ‘do we have to do this again? I made you your apology dinner, this is the deal’ so she gives a small dismissive gesture with her fork and shrugs her shoulders. “Chris went to go give Frisk a call to see what’s up. He’ll figure it out.”

“Good, because it’s hard to do dungeons without our tank,” he says, snapping a crispy strip of bacon between his teeth. His eyes flick over towards the front door as he chews, and a sly smile quirks the corner of his mouth. “So. What was Morwenna’s excuse this time?”

Fatima rolls her eyes, licking syrup off her lips as she works on her pancakes. “Nothing new. She said that they needed to ‘discuss work’. You know, very boring, no need for us to get involved, etcetera.”

“I can’t believe she thinks we don’t know her and Grant are screwing,” Rashid says, leaning back in his chair and looking at her. “Does she think we’re stupid?”

“Maybe she’s embarrassed.” Fatima shrugs.

“She should be,” he says with a grimace. “He’s a fucking prick.”

Fatima can’t deny that. It’s been five years and she still gets the feeling that Grant thinks they’re somehow Vigilum spies, no matter what they do or say to the contrary. Whenever he looks at them it’s with thinly veiled distrust, or at the very best simple tolerance. Deacon had told him off once when he’d tried to drill some stupid ideals about not letting personal connections get in the way of what ‘needed to be done’ or some crap, and ever since then Grant only interacted with them when necessary. Which was perfectly fine with both of them.

“They’ve got history,” she says with a sigh of resignation. “Like thirty years of it. I guess it sort of makes sense. It might even be romantic if it wasn’t Grant.”

Rashid just shakes his head, lip curling as he stabs his eggs. “I don’t get it.”

“We don’t need to get it.” Tossing back the long bits of the front of her hair as best she can, she shrugs her shoulders. “I’m just kind of curious if it’s just sex or if they’re going to get back together.”

“Oh god I hope not,” he grumbles. “He can’t live here. I’ll move out. Fuck that guy. Only don’t fuck that guy, because eugh.”

“I think Morwenna is fucking that guy enough anyway.”

“Good for her I guess.”

“Good for him too. He’s been a lot more bearable the past few months,” she says, huffing a laugh.
“This isn’t the first time this has happened though.” He arches a brow, drumming his fingers on the table. “They’re gonna have another falling out and he’s going to shove that stick right back up his ass.”

“Yeah, but this is the longest it’s lasted,” she reminds him. He’s right, though. Over the past five years (and who knows how often before that) Grant and Morwenna had done this song and dance over and over again. Like they couldn’t manage to just split up for good. “Maybe this time it’ll stick.”

“Maybe what’ll stick?” Chris’s voice makes her jump, forgetting that she was still in voice chat.

“This thing with Grant and Morwenna,” Fatima says, doing her best not to sound like he’d just scared her. “You know, we talked about it the other night.”

“Oh, right, how’s that—”

Rashid cuts him off. “Did you get in touch with our tank?”

Fatima throws an annoyed glare his way but he’s unfazed.

“Yeah, I guess something happened but Frisk’s on their way now. But, looks like Asriel is MIA,” Chris says, sounding concerned.

“Well, we can fill his spot. He’s just damage,” Rashid says.

“That’s strange though,” she says, ignoring the uninterested tone in her brother’s voice. “Those two are always together.”

Rashid scoffs. “Guess not.”
When you go downstairs in the morning, Gaster is watching TV in the living room. From the sound of it the local news is on, some fluff piece about the influx of friendly intermingling between the citizens of Ebott and the cities in the foothills. You see him before he sees you, his attention fixed and a vacant look on his face. Is he… asleep? With his eyes open? Tucking still-damp hair behind your ear, you step further into the room to see if he notices you. He doesn’t.

“Gaster?” you say, giving a small wave of your hand. When he doesn’t respond you wave your whole arm in a wide sweep. “Gaster?”

A few seconds pass where you wonder if there’s something wrong with him, and you debate going to go get Sans from your room, but then Gaster’s head turns towards you and his eyes flick up to yours. “Oh, Hope, is it…” He glances around, towards the glass door leading out to the back patio. It’s a bright, clear summer day. “It’s morning already.”

“Yeah, it is,” you say, unable to keep the worry out of your voice. “Did you sleep at all? You know you’re welcome to the guest room upstairs.”

For a moment it seems like he doesn’t hear you, but then he looks at you again and gives you an apologetic look. “It’s a lovely room. I must have lost track of time.”

Time seems to be his problem. You shift a little to the side, watching as he continues to look at the space you just occupied for a few seconds too long. “You didn’t sleep at all?”

The delay in his response seems a little shorter this time. Maybe he’s catching back up. “Not exactly,” he admits, twiddling his thumbs.

You bite back a reprimand, reminding yourself that this man is, you assume, at least twenty years your elder. He doesn’t need you speaking to him like you do to Frisk. Even if he does seem to be horrible at taking care of himself. But, you suppose you should give him some allowances in that regard; he hadn’t needed to sleep in over a decade. Hoping he can’t see the exasperation in your expression, you glance behind you towards the kitchen and at him again. “Can I make you some breakfast?”

There’s a pause, but you’re fairly sure it’s because he’s thinking this time. He cocks his head to the side, looking contemplative. “I… Yes, that would be lovely. I think… I think I am hungry, now that you mention it.”

“I’ll make oatmeal,” you decide, doing your best to sound reassuring. “Do you think you’d prefer cinnamon and brown sugar or something with fruit?”

“Whichever you and Sans prefer,” he says, smiling weakly. He looks downright haggard, with dark shadows under his eyes and drooping sockets. He needs some sleep!

“You don’t want what Sans prefers.” You make a face in an attempt to inject some humor and
you’re rewarded with a small chuckle. “Unless he gets his bad taste from you.”

“Oh, certainly his taste isn’t all bad,” Gaster says, his smile widening fondly.

It takes you a moment to catch his meaning and you blush, looking away as you hide your smile behind your hand. “Well it looks like I can see where he gets his way with words,” you say with a wry grin.

“Undeserved praise, I assure you.”

“Sans and Frisk should be downstairs soon, if you need me I’ll be in the kitchen,” you tell him, then turn to leave the room.

The weird way he was out of sync with time notwithstanding, that conversation was pleasantly normal you have to admit. For the most part. It’s strange, having anyone stay at your house, but as long as you don’t think too hard on it, this could almost seem ordinary. But what’s going to happen to Gaster now?

It’s not like he has anywhere else to go, and you’d never even consider telling him to leave, but where does he… fit in? He’d been the Royal Scientist, a job that had been essentially dissolved despite Alphys’s continued work at the lab and on the Core (the Core that Gaster himself had apparently designed). Would he want to go back to what he’d been doing before? Now that he was free to live his life again, what would he want to do with it? He might not even know, and it would be unfair to expect him to.

“whatcha makin’?”

You jump at the sound of Sans’s voice, turning as he comes up alongside you to glance down into the pot on the stove. He’s dressed and ready for work, in slacks and a nice collared shirt.

“Oatmeal,” you tell him, biting your lip as he rests a hand on your side, looking up at you and searching your face.

“sorry, didn’t mean to scare you, babe,” he says, edging in closer and leaning up to nuzzle your cheek. You turn into his touch, closing your eyes for just a second to savor the brief moment of affection.

“I know, I was just lost in thought,” you tell him, kissing his cheekbone before he gets too far.

“what about?”

“What do you think?” you mutter, arching a brow.

“oh, i dunno, maybe how much you love your husband?” he says, winking at you.

You can’t help but smile at that, giving him a playful shove. He chuckles and you roll your eyes. “I guess. Did you talk to Frisk already?”

His expression falters a bit, his grin tensing as he makes a soft, agitated sound. “yeah, we got to have our conversation about what they did.

“And?”

“They’re not gonna be doing any messing around with their magic any time soon,” he says, sounding grim and certain. “between gaster’s talk of the anathema, what happened to them
firsthand, and whatever the hell is going on with asriel bailing on them yesterday, they’re not in any place to want to make a repeat performance.”

Your eyebrows shoot up in alarm. “Haven’t they talked to Asriel since then?”

Sans runs his hand over the top of his skull, shaking his head. “nope.”

“Oh boy…” you sigh, gaze dropping to the now-bubbling pot of oatmeal. “Do you think this is going to be a repeat of the thing with Kid?”

“god i hope not,” he groans. “the moment those two stop talking it’s like the whole mountain suffers. nobody’s safe.”

“Nobody’s safe from what?”

You and Sans both look guiltily at each other before your attention darts to where Frisk’s standing in the doorway, arms crossed over their chest in what can only be described as pre-teen gloom.

“from your mom’s oatmeal,” Sans says quickly, earning himself a frown from Frisk.

“Just because you don’t like it doesn’t mean it’s not good,” Frisk retorts, walking past him so they can sidle up next to you. They lean over to rest their head on your shoulder for just a second as they look down into the pot. It’s enough to cause a swell of affection in your chest. They’re older, and with the steady (and sometimes not-so-steady) shifts in their attitude they’ve been less and less casually affectionate. It’s expected, it’s normal, but it’s times like these that you’re reminded of what you’ve started to miss.

It seems like you get to be the favorite of the hour because you weren’t the one who had to carry out the lecture this time. “Thank you, sweetie,” you say, kissing the top of their head while you can. Frisk grunts in acknowledgement but doesn’t say anything else. They walk over to the cabinet to grab a stack of bowls.

“Four,” you remind them. “Your, er… Well, Gaster is going to have breakfast too.”

“Are you sure? He’s asleep on the couch.”

And asleep he is. As you peek into the living room to confirm what Frisk said, you see Gaster with his head tipped back and his eyes closed, slouched to the side against an oversized decorative pillow. Making sure not to disturb him, you slip back to the kitchen where Sans and Frisk are sitting at the bar with their breakfast.

“I think he was up all night,” you tell Sans, sitting down next to him. He pushes your own bowl towards you, already fixed the way he knows you like it. You give him a fleeting smile. “I’m glad he’s finally getting some sleep.”

“…nights are usually harder. especially when you’re alone,” he says, pushing his oatmeal around with his spoon. “you gonna be okay here with him, babe?”

“I…” You trail off, those stirrings of sympathy for what Gaster must be going through throwing you off kilter. You do your best to push them aside for now. “I’m sure we’ll be fine. You have work to do. I know you and Alphys have been working hard on those upgrades to the Core.”

Sans doesn’t answer. He just makes a quiet sound and taps his finger against the countertop. “maybe… i mean, he built the core. maybe he’d have some better insight on how to improve it.”
“Are you going to talk to Alphys about him?”

He sighs. “i dunno. i’ll think about it.”

“Hun, it’s not like he’s a secret, you know? People are going to find out he’s here. They’ll want to know. I mean, getting your father back… Sans, that’s a good thing,” you say, putting down your spoon and looking at him. His eyes flick over to yours and something guilty passes over his face.

“…i know,” he says.

“Hope, this whole thing… It’s not so good.”

Deacon leans forward in his chair, the old wood creaking as he does so. You’re both out on the back porch, doing your best not to disturb Gaster. He’s still asleep in the living room and had been for the last four hours. At this rate he’s going to set up an entirely backwards sleep schedule, but at the moment that’s the least of your concerns.

You’d called Deacon after Frisk left about an hour ago, riding their bike down to Toriel’s to try and talk to Asriel. You hope that they can get everything sorted out peacefully.

“I don’t think it’s bad, Deacon,” you say, glancing over at him. He’s in shorts and a tank top, and you hope that he doesn’t get burned sitting out here like that. He probably will, and then he’ll whine about it later.

“Maybe not the Gaster part, but this whole Anathema thing? Not good,” he says. He runs his hand through his hair.

“As far as we know it’s always been there. Nothing has really changed, has it?” you say timidly. That doesn’t really help much, you’re sure, but you just wish he wouldn’t worry about it.

“I want to ask him if he knows more about it, and I think Morwenna should talk to him. This stuff is important for mages to know,” he says, letting out a frustrated sound and pushing up to his feet.

There had been a time when Deacon had all but rejected his place among the Literatum. Back when he’d been forced to live as a mage in secret, sent to spy on you and the others in the name of information. He’d been pulled in two different directions, caught between you and the people he’d come to care about, and his sense of obligation to the other mages who had taught him. If it wasn’t for the fact that he’d needed them to help you and Frisk, you’re sure he would have burned that bridge and never looked back. Now those two groups are connected, no longer at odds and both striving towards a common goal. All of Ebott was united under this ideal of monsters and magic. And of all the Literatum, Deacon was practically the poster child for mage and monster unity. He was married to Bo, arguably a part of your already mixed family, and had deeply ingrained himself into Ebott’s society. He belongs here.

Here just also includes a hell of a lot of mages now, compared to how the Literatum started, and how can you blame him for having their best interests at heart?

“She probably should,” you agree after a moment. “I’m sorry, I haven’t really been thinking about what this all must mean for you…”

Deacon’s expression instantly softens. “Oh, no, I mean… Shit, you’ve had enough to deal with trying to get this whole situation to work here. I don’t blame you at all for focusing on, you know, the guy that just showed up at your house.”
You give him a weak smile, grateful for his understanding. “Did you want to call Morwenna and see if she can come over later?”

He arches a brow. “Are you sure? I mean, if you guys want more time to settle in…”

Shaking your head, you fidget with the locket hanging around your neck. “This is important to you. If Gaster decides he’s not ready then we can do it another day, but it wouldn’t hurt to check with her.”

Deacon hesitates, then glances away, then finally nods. He pulls out his phone, does a few presses, and raises it to his ear. You watch him, idly curious of what he’s going to say to her, when his expression sours.

“Why are you answering her phone?” he demands, and the iciness in his voice has you taken aback. Who could that— Oh. Oh, no. “No, I don’t care. Just give Morwenna the phone.”

He claps his hand to the back of his neck, turning his back towards you. Uncomfortable and worried, you push up out of your chair and circle around him, trying to catch his eye. He’s staring at the porch beneath his feet.

“Are you serious?” Deacon blurts out, gritting his teeth. “Morwenna, what the hell? Yes I’m upset, why— No, he did that on purpose! My goddamn name shows up when I call, he knew what he was doing!”

There’s a pause where he lets out a ragged sigh, his shoulders sagging.

“I know. Yes, I’m sorry. Yes, it’s your business, but— Okay. Okay, fine. I just don’t— Okay. I was calling to see if you’d come over to Hope and Sans’s place later.” He hesitates, his eyes finally rising to meet yours. He squints, then looks out at the backyard. “It’s… not exactly about Frisk. It’ll be easier if you just come over. I hate to interrupt your quality time, but— I’m allowed to be spiteful. I’m not going to be happy for you. I’m not the one that made it my business, he’s the one —! Fine. We’ll see you in a few hours.”

Deacon hangs up the phone and shoves it into his pocket, clenching his hands into fists.

“Deacon…?” you say, reaching out to touch his arm.

He flinches away, which you try not to take personally. He always gets so worked up over Grant, and when he’s like this he just seems to pull away from everyone. But you still make that small gesture of comfort anyway, to let him know that you’re here. “I can’t believe they’re doing this again. What the fuck does she see in Grant?” he demands, looking at you.

“Familiarity? History?” you offer, cringing.

He shakes his head, letting out a frustrated sound.

“The point of history is to learn from your mistakes,” he says, glaring at the trees and hunching his shoulders. “Not to repeat them.”
Asriel had insisted on going to Frisk’s first day of training with Morwenna. Not that it took much to convince them, they were already nervous about it and the weird, tense looks that you and Sans kept sharing only made it worse. They knew you had been worried about what might happen, and Sans had been torn between scientific curiosity and that protective, paternal streak that didn’t want to mess around with time more than necessary (which was to say almost never). But Deacon had convinced the two of you and Frisk wanted to try, but once the day had finally arrived they found themselves with cold feet.

Asriel was nervous too. That didn’t help.

When the four of you (you, Sans, Asriel, and Frisk) walked into the Woodside Community Center’s training room, Morwenna was waiting. She arched a brow and rested her hands on her hips, giving the group an appraising look. “I was only expecting one student today,” she said, her attention settling on Asriel.

Asriel didn’t say anything. Instead he stood a little straighter, raising his chin and meeting Morwenna’s eyes. Frisk had dubbed that look his ‘prince face’, and for a moment he looked a lot less like a gangly teenager fighting the urge to scratch his budding horns. Instead he looked like someone that should be respected.

Morwenna didn’t seem impressed. “I can’t imagine this will be much fun, but maybe I’ll find some use for you,” she said, then turned her attention to you and Sans. “We won’t be doing much today, just some basics. If you want to come back in an hour we should—”

“Come back?” you interrupted, sounding concerned. Frisk cringed, silently begging you not to embarrass them. “I thought we were going to stay?”

“I find that students perform better when they’re not worried about their parents watching them.”

“But—”

“babe, she’s trained mages before,” Sans said quietly. “she knows what she’s doing.”

“But they’re not—”

_Not a mage. Not normal. Not the same._

Frisk wasn’t sure what you were going to say, but it made them clench their jaw, shoving their hands into their pockets. “Mom, I’ll be fine. You don’t need to stay. This is just like school, I don’t need you watching over me.”

They didn’t see the hurt on your face, or the way that Sans rubbed your back and said something soft and reassuring to you. They just heard the two of you agree to leave and wish them good luck before turning and heading out the door. Frisk was just relieved that you weren’t there to make a
Once the three of them were alone, Morwenna returned her attention to Frisk, dropping her hands to her sides and adopting a more relaxed stance. She closed the distance between them with long, easy strides. “Our goal for today is just to get a feel for your magic. I want to see what you’re capable of and your level of control. Don’t worry if it doesn’t go well right away. Like I told your parents, normally we don’t start training this young. You’re a special case.”

Frisk frowned at that, scuffing the floor with their shoe. They knew they weren’t normal, that doing things the normal way just wasn’t going to work for them. They’d made a point to make that clear to anyone who would listen for the longest time. But sometimes, most times now, they wished things were more ‘normal’. A ‘normal’ mage, a ‘normal’ kid… It felt like they had more setting them apart from everyone than in common.

They glanced over at Asriel and he looked back at them, turning his head at the same time they did. No doubt he could feel the tangled mess of emotions scrabbling inside their chest and in their head. At least they’ve always got Asriel. He, out of everyone understands them the best.

“Anyone who’s used their magic early is trained once that’s happened,” Morwenna continued, glancing between the two of them. “It’s what happened with Deacon. We try to encourage young mages to wait, but…” She sighed, shaking her head and pursing her lips. “He didn’t. So whatever you’re thinking, this isn’t that out of the ordinary.”

Oh. Well that wasn’t too bad.

Morwenna glanced down at Frisk’s chest, squinting a little as if she were looking at something. She couldn’t see their Soul, not really, but they got the impression she was studying it somehow. After a moment her attention returned to Frisk’s face, right as they were starting to feel a little uncomfortable. “I did some research. On Chara,” she said slowly. Frisk and Asriel exchanged a look, attention piqued. “The Literatum may have been a small group, but it’s old and we’ve carried records for generations. I assumed that if there was a mage child in this area, near Mt. Ebott, we might have had record of them. There wasn’t much, but I did find them.”

“What did you find?” Asriel blurted out, clenching his hand into a fist and raising it to his chest.

“Chara was the sibling of one of my ancestors. About four or five generations back.” She paused. “There wasn’t much else written about them, other than that they went missing. The records are very… dry, so there wasn’t any information about what might have caused—”

“They were being hurt,” Asriel snapped, and Frisk could feel his anger bubbling beneath the surface. Held in check, but building. “They hated humans when they fell. They didn’t… They couldn’t stand it, up here.”

Frisk stared at Morwenna. They hadn’t thought anything of her similarities to Chara; the red hair (more orange than Chara’s auburn), fair freckled skin, red Souls, red magic. Her eyes were nothing like theirs though. Hers were hazel; bluish and gold. She wasn’t like Chara, she wasn’t.

“What did you have a lot of mages in your family?” Frisk asked, speaking through the tightness in their throat.

“Yes,” she said, her eyes darting between the two of them. “Nearly every generation had at least one. Mine was lucky enough to have two. Not that it did us much good, in the end.”

“Your family drove Chara away,” Asriel accused, that anger only growing.

“That’s not Morwenna’s fault,” Frisk said, touching his arm. Asriel turned to them, a deep frown
etched into his face before he forced himself to calm down. Frisk could feel it, the way he shoved that anger deep enough that they could barely tell (but it was still there).

“Whatever,” he muttered under his breath, dropping his gaze to the floor.

As they trained with Morwenna, they could sense that anger. It wouldn’t leave, it just lurked beneath the surface, buzzing around Frisk’s head like a fly. It was distracting, worrying, and when Morwenna tried to explain things to them they kept missing bits and pieces. But they didn’t want Asriel to go. Even though he was just standing there, brooding and watching as he got angrier and angrier.

It was starting to tick Frisk off. Why was Asriel dwelling on that Chara thing? Why was he just sitting there letting it get him more and more worked up? His anger was seeping into Frisk’s consciousness, messing with their focus. Morwenna was starting to come at them with some basic aikido moves and they were expected to use their magic, but they could barely pay attention because all they could hear and feel and sense was just that buzzing, nagging, prickling anger in their gut. They just wish he would—

“Asriel is in his room,” she says, wiping her hands on her apron. “Did you want anything? Are you hungry? Thirsty? If you are fine waiting I have a pie in the oven.”

“Stop!” Frisk snapped, whirling on Asriel, and for just a moment that’s what everything did. It all stopped.

Then things crept backwards, just for a few seconds, and then it all started again. Morwenna made a confused noise, then as realization dawned on her face she clapped Frisk on the shoulder. “Good work! We’ll try to replicate that! Do you know what you did to do it?”

Asriel looked startled, and later when they talked to him about it he couldn’t remember Frisk doing anything strange. He didn’t even know that they’d yelled at him. He’d noticed a flare of their red magic, and a weird, out-of-sync feeling for just a moment, but that was all. But for the rest of training they didn’t have any luck getting it to happen again. They were guilty over getting angry with Asriel, but at least he was snapped out of his brooding by Frisk’s display of magic.

That one moment had felt promising. But that promise had been empty.
change it. After all, was five years really that long for her? She’s hundreds of years old, what was five? No, the couch is still up against the same wall, the chair in just the right place near the fire, and the same rug is spread on the floor. The only thing that has grown and changed is the assortment of pictures on the mantelpiece.

Most of them are of Asriel, over half of them with Frisk included, and all at varying ages. They cringe a little at a picture of the two of them when they were nine, making stupid faces at the camera. Sans took that one, they think. At their birthday party; they can see a corner of the cake behind them. Off to the side, at the end of the mantel, is the only picture that includes Asgore. It’s more recent, from after Asriel’s big growth spurt. They’re all smiling, both of Asriel’s parents resting a hand on one of his shoulders.

When they were little they had tried to get Toriel and Asgore back together. For a while it seemed like it might work, just like in the movies. But it didn’t. Toriel had picked up on their scheme and put an end to it calmly and firmly. But they hadn’t wanted to give up! They tried spending more time with Asgore, doing their best to work things from his side of the equation. But then even he figured out what they were doing and sat them down for another awkward conversation. They’d stopped trying two years ago.

...They didn’t come here to stare at pictures.

Frisk turns away to head down the hall towards the bedrooms before they can lose their nerve, pushing down the uncomfortable twist in their stomach. They aren’t even sure what they’d done to upset Asriel, and when they texted him that morning he’d never answered. It was enough to set them on edge, to have them cycling through all of the things that they could have messed up. And the more they think about it the more frustrated they feel because as far as they know they didn’t actually do anything! He’s been acting strange ever since they got out of the Font and they freed Gaster.

Frisk is tired of guessing what might be wrong. They just need to ask him.

Asriel’s bedroom door is closed. They stare at it for just a moment before making themselves knock.

“Come in,” he says, loud enough to be heard.

So Frisk does.

It’s bright and sunny in Asriel’s room in direct juxtaposition to the way that the room’s owner is currently hunched over his desk, head in one hand, pencil in the other as he works on a drawing. It’s messy, like normal. His bed is unmade, there’s a few articles of discarded clothing around his hamper instead of inside it (they recognize some of their own clothes; they’d never quite gotten out of the habit of swapping things, especially when staying at each other’s houses), and his cell phone is sitting on the nightstand. The little notification light is blinking on and off. Even his laptop is shut and shoved over to the side of his desk. He’d isolated himself from the easiest ways to get in touch with him.

Well, he couldn’t stop them from just coming over, which is precisely why they did it.

Asriel leans further over his drawing, hunching his shoulders. “Mom, I told you I’m fine,” he grumbles, his words punctuated by the harsh scratch of his pencil.

“Well, as far as I can tell she believes you,” Frisk says.
He jumps, whirling around in his chair and catching the side of his desk with his hand before he accidentally topples himself over. Green eyes widening in disbelief, Asriel stares at them for half a second, too surprised to remember he’s unhappy with them. Then that realization hits him and a frown settles over his features. And then he must remember that he’s trying to be aloof instead and just sort of gives them this weird, airy look. Like he’s trying to do his ‘prince face’ but failing.

“I didn’t know you were coming over,” he says, fidgeting with his pencil as he looks at them.

Frisk points at his cell phone where it’s still sitting across the room from him. “Probably because you haven’t bothered to check your phone. Or get online. Or, I don’t know, give me any way to try to tell you?”

“I was drawing,” he mutters, glancing over at his sketchbook. When Frisk takes a step closer to try and get a look he shuts it quickly. Oh, that’s irritating. They know it’s not technically any of their business, but to them it feels like he’s just being petty.

Their eyes narrow. “Why won’t you let me see it?”

“It’s not done yet.”

“You know I like seeing your work in progress stuff, it just feels like you’re hiding something from me,” Frisk says, closing more of the gap between them.

Asriel presses his hand over the top of the sketchbook, keeping it pinned like he’s worried Frisk might snatch it up without his permission. “I don’t have to show you everything. Just like all your stuff doesn’t always have to do with me, all my stuff doesn’t have to do with you either.”

“What are you talking about!” they exclaim, thrusting their arms out to their sides, leaving themselves exposed.

“Just forget about it,” he says, his snout wrinkling as he lets out a frustrated snort. “You won’t really listen anyway.”

It feels like a punch to the gut. His hurt and frustration compounds with their own, making their heart hammer in their ears. “Do you think I came over here to not listen to you? Are you that big of an—” They catch themselves before they say ‘idiot’, knowing, knowing, that would be too far. But Asriel senses it anyway, they can see it in his face, in that wounded look that burns out the worst of their anger.

“Asriel, I don’t mean it. You know what’s happening, we need to stop. We’re making this worse.”

“Because you always know what’s right for both of us.” Asriel shakes his head, pushing up to his feet. He suddenly feels tall compared to them. “It’s always how you want things to go, how you feel. My opinions get ignored.”

“No,” Frisk says, trying not to sound petulant but they don’t think they manage. It’s this damn feedback loop, this endless cycle of anger and pain feeding on itself inside their Souls. “Asriel, I don’t mean it. You know what’s happening, we need to stop. We’re making this worse.”

“Because you always know what’s right for both of us.” Asriel shakes his head, pushing up to his feet. He suddenly feels tall compared to them. “It’s always how you want things to go, how you feel. My opinions get ignored.”

“I’m not trying to ignore you,” they insist, trying not to make it sound like they’re being defensive, doing their best to try and diffuse the situation. It had all gone so wrong. “I came over because I want to talk. I want to know why you’re upset.”

His anger is fizzling out. Frisk can feel the sudden shift, when it gives way to hurt and to… He’s afraid. Underneath all of that anger and pain is so much fear. Asriel balls his hands into fists to try
and stop them from shaking and he’s blinking hard, trying not to let Frisk see the tears gathering in his eyes. “I don’t…”

“Asriel,” Frisk says, taking a chance, moving in closer and taking hold of his hands. He doesn’t pull away, and his eyes get wider. “Whatever it is, I’m sorry. I just want us to be okay again. I don’t like this.”

“I…” He screws his eyes shut, grabbing at Frisk’s hands and bowing his head. “We shared our Souls. For the first time, and we tore a hole in reality. I just wanted to… to help you, and to…” Stumbling over his words, his brow furrows. “It was supposed to be something good and it almost ripped my Soul apart, Frisk. Because of Chara, because of that place. And now I don’t know if we can ever do it again.”

Frisk presses their forehead to his, unsure of what to say. He bites back a choked sound, his voice thick.

“And then all you cared about was Gaster,” he blurs out, turning his head away, trying to pull back. “I almost died… again, and I… I couldn’t say anything about it because—”

They’re the idiot. They’re the biggest idiot in the world. Frisk grabs him before he can get away, throwing their arms around his neck and hugging him tight. Asriel lets out an ugly, muffled sound, something caught between a whimper and a sob as he starts to cry. “I’m sorry, Asriel I’m so sorry. I care, I promise I care, I promise,” they say, feeling their own eyes swim with tears. If it’s because of their own sadness or Asriel’s it doesn’t matter. They’re here for him, when they should have been here sooner.

“I couldn’t even tell my mom.” His voice is faint as he buries his face in Frisk’s shoulder, hugging them back just as tightly. “I had to pretend everything was okay and nothing was okay.”

“I should have known. I should have known something was wrong. Tell me how I can help.”

“Just…” Asriel hesitates, taking in a shaky breath. He’s heavy against them. “I just want you to stay here and listen. I want to talk about it.”

“Okay,” they say, squeezing him tight. “I’m not going anywhere.”
“You should have worn sunscreen,” you say, doing your best not to sound smug. Deacon just shoots you a weak, disgruntled look, tenderly rubbing aloe onto his arms as you stand with him in your bathroom upstairs.

“Well I didn’t think we were going to be outside for three hours,” he grumbles, stretching to try and reach his shoulders. He winces and you take pity on him, scooping the aloe gel out of his hand and doing it for him. His skin is too hot and you’re sure he’s uncomfortable. Relaxing under your touch, he catches your eye in the mirror and gives you a small, burnt-faced smile. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” you say. “But honestly, this happens every time. You need to be more careful.”

“It’s just a sunburn, it’ll heal. In the meantime I just feel like you could fry an egg on my shoulders.”

That makes you snort, shaking your head with a wry grin. “At the risk of sounding like an old lady —”

“Never,” he interjects, giving you a charming smile. Faintly embarrassed and a bit flattered, you roll your eyes and bite your lip.

“—you need to take better care of yourself!” You jab him in the ribs with your knuckles, careful not to jostle anything that’s sunburnt. He lets out a muffled yelp. “You’re thirty years old—”

“Don’t remind me.” He pulls a face.

“—and you should be more responsible,” you finish, reaching for the aloe again so you can get his other shoulder.

“Hope, it’s just a sunburn,” he says, protesting weakly.

“Two words.” You hold up two fingers.

He groans. “Hope.”

“Skin—”

“You don’t have to—”

“—cancer. I’m just saying. Don’t make me talk to Bo about it, because I will,” you threaten, and
he groans again, louder this time. “Don’t give me that, you have people who love you and want you to stay healthy for as long as possible.”

“I give up, I give up!” he says, throwing his hands up in surrender. “Turn off the mom guilt, message received.”

“Someone has to mother you sometimes,” you sigh, meeting his eyes and cocking your head to the side for just a moment before carefully rubbing the aloe into his skin. Then, sensing what might be an opportunity, you attempt to change the subject. “Speaking of parenting… Have you—”

“Whoa, whoa, okay, is this really the most important thing we could be talking about?” he blurts out, his eyebrows shooting up as he gives you the look of a deer caught in the headlights. “Also, give a guy a break, I can only take so much guilt in one sitting.”

Taken aback, you give him a bewildered look. “What? No, I was just going to say something… You were going to say something snide about Grant, but you don’t think that’s going to improve his mood any. “What did you think I was saying?”

He blinks, swallowing and breaking eye contact. “Nothing. Forget it.”

“Deacon,” you say gently, and you realize what he must have thought. He’s been so jumpy over the subject of parenthood and children… You didn’t realize it was this bad, though.

His expression crumples, giving you a desperate, anxious look. “…Can we not do this now? Please?”

The pitiful tone in his voice is enough to make you relent instantly, softening. “Sorry,” you say. Deacon’s jaw tenses. His eyes drop down to the sink. “It’s fine.”

For a moment you’re not sure if you should say anything else or just drop it entirely, but you feel as though you’ve held back too much. You know from experience that more often than not, when it comes to things like this, Deacon needs that extra push. But you also know that he’s right, that this isn’t the time. “Okay,” you say carefully. “But you know you can talk to me. About anything. I know I usually tell you that you should talk to Bo, but that doesn’t mean I’m not here.”

He nods, turning around to face you. His expression is a bit guarded for your liking and his smile seems forced. You know him better than that and you’re sure he knows it, but he’s putting up that front anyway. “I know,” he says. “But uh, I think we should probably go wake Gaster and let him know we’re going to have company?”

He’s right. That’s the reason you came inside in the first place.

It turns out that Gaster is already awake. You find him in the kitchen, looking lost as he eyes the fridge dubiously and wrings his hands. He catches you out of the corner of his eye when you and Deacon enter the room, jumping as a panicked look ripples across his face before abruptly vanishing as he recognizes you. You could have sworn there was a brief flash of red, a flare of magic, but if there was it was only for a fraction of a moment.

“Oh, Hope,” he says, hiding his fleeting fear behind a bright smile. “I was just looking for something to eat, I didn’t want to disturb you so I—” His attention shifts and his eyes widen. “Oh! Deacon, you’re here rather, ah, early, isn’t it? And you’re a bit… redder than I remember.”

Deacon’s brow furrows. “It’s a sunburn. It happens.”
“Gaster, it’s not early,” you say, concern slipping into your voice. That seems to be a common thing now, you feeling concerned about him. “It’s the middle of the afternoon. You were asleep for about six hours.”

“I see…” Gaster’s head tips to the side, his attention shifting inward as he ponders over something. Then, after a moment, he spreads his hands in a helpless gesture and chuckles softly. “I suppose that would explain why I feel so famished! My dear if you could be so kind—”

“Of course,” you say quickly, giving him a reassuring smile as you break away from Deacon’s side to help Gaster find something to eat.

“Hey, Gaster,” Deacon says as you start looking for leftovers in the fridge. His tone is much more polite than he was with him yesterday; you’d talked to him enough about your worries about Sans’s father to smooth away most of Deacon’s suspicions. “If you’re, you know, feeling up to it… I’ve got someone I want you to talk to. About the Anathema. There’s some questions I want to ask too, and I thought she should be here.”

There’s a moment’s hesitation before Gaster replies, though from desynchronization with time or just anxiety you’re not sure. He doesn’t sound unsettled when he speaks. “I can’t blame you for wanting to know more, we didn’t get to discuss the Anathema in any great detail last night. Other matters were certainly more pressing,” Gaster says. “I will do my best to tell you what I know. Who is coming over?”

You find some leftover soup but decide against that. He’d had enough trouble with a fork and knife last night, and you think you’ll leave the spoons for later. It turns out that not eating for over a decade required some time to recover from, in terms of hand-eye coordination. Maybe a sandwich would be best. Grabbing what you need, you turn back towards the kitchen island in time to see Gaster’s curious expression and the wary but well-meaning look on Deacon’s face. He’s doing his best to be sincere, not turning on the typical ‘Deacon charm’ or treating him like a threat to himself or to you. You can tell he’s still not quite sure how to handle your father-in-law.

“Her name is Morwenna. She’s—”

“Oh, the leader of your order of mages!” Gaster says, sounding delighted. “That’s an excellent idea, I’ll be happy to speak with her.”

“How did you— No, nevermind,” Deacon says, grimacing and shaking his head. “I figured it out. But you should probably, like, not act like you know things you shouldn’t? At least around other people. Hope—” He turns to you, dragging his fingers through his hair. “We’re going to need to come up with some kind of story. We can’t tell everyone what Frisk and Asriel did, but people are going to have questions. People’s dads just don’t normally pop up out of nowhere. Especially ones that nobody knows even exist.”

“Yeah,” you mutter, frowning down at the sandwich you’re making. “We’ll figure something out. But we can tell Morwenna the truth, she knows about all of… everything anyway.”

“Right.”

“I wonder what she’s going to think of all this.”

“They did what?”

Morwenna gapes at you as you and Deacon explain as best you can what happened when Frisk and Asriel tore the hole in reality that freed Gaster. You haven’t even been able to get to the part with
the Anathema yet, arguably the part most concerning to her and the Literatum. Gaster is standing at the far end of the couch, off by himself. Morwenna is sitting on the loveseat, and you and Deacon are on the couch. All of you are leaning forward, intent on the conversation, and no one in the room seems comfortable.

She’d accepted Gaster’s presence in the room well enough; she’d shaken his hand, given him a quick once-over with only the slightest hint of confusion before stowing away her questions to allow you to explain. At least until you’d reached the matter with the kids.

“No, that’s just *not* possible,” she says, softly and mostly to herself. Leaning forward and resting her elbows on her legs, Morwenna cradles her head in her hands as she stares at the floor. “Red magic just *isn’t* capable of that kind of…” Her brow furrows as she trails off and she looks up to meet your gaze. “I understand that Frisk’s abilities are unusual, but this is insanity.”

“‘Unusual’?” you echo back, arching a brow and snorting a laugh. “Morwenna, they Reset multiple days, over and over again for what amounted to *years*. There was another child living inside of them, they split that doubled Soul with Asriel, if you think that’s just ‘unusual’ then I think we need to compare our units of measurement. Because considering the fact that Sans and I both owe our lives to Frisk’s abilities, I’m not surprised that Gaster does as well. And this thing, here, this bit you’re refusing to accept? This isn’t even half of it. *This* isn’t what we wanted you to know about.”

“How could it not be?” she blurts out, spreading her hands helplessly. “You allowed me to teach your child—to *try* at least—and this is… Hope, *this* is just even more reason to keep Frisk and Asriel separated for their training, if this—”

“They were sharing their Souls, they’re not going to do it again,” you protest, taken aback by her vehemence.

“It can’t be worth the risk. Who knows what kinds of long-term ramifications it could have on—on *time* and *space* or…” Morwenna trails off, rubbing roughly at her eyes. “Red magic, *normal* red magic, doesn’t *tear* or damage the… whatever it is that keeps our world separate from that place.”

Deacon is suspiciously quiet, his arms crossed over his chest as his eyes flick between the two of you. You look at him for support, to back you up and try to reassure her that the kids aren’t a danger. But he remains silent. He isn’t speaking on Morwenna’s behalf either but… you get the feeling he might share some of her concern.

You’re not sure how to feel about that.

“Frisk doesn’t have ‘normal’ red magic,” Gaster says, spreading his hands as he speaks gently. “Trying to apply your concept of ‘normal’ to that child is inherently flawed from the start. To be quite honest, your very perspective of ‘normal’ red magic is anecdotal at best and compared to your ancestors woefully… hm, forgive the harshness of the word, but frankly *pathetic*. Surely the king has told you as much.”

Deacon sucks in a sharp breath as silence settles over the room. He raises a hand to the back of his neck and ducks his head, and you find yourself at a loss for words and, to be honest, incredibly uncomfortable with the sudden tension in the air. Gaster must be somehow oblivious to it because he’s still looking at Morwenna with that same kind, patient expression, and Morwenna…

Shit. Morwenna looks livid.

“I have been teaching mages for *decades*, this is your second goddamn day on the surface with even the *chance* to observe human magic first hand,” she says, just shy of a growl. Pushing up to
her feet, she squares her shoulders as she takes a step closer to Gaster, fixing him with an unimpressed glare. “Don’t think you can lecture me. Monsters don’t even have red magic.”

Oh no. Gaster doesn’t immediately respond, but his eyes narrow as the lights in his sockets shrink and sharpen. You’ve been married to Sans long enough to know that’s not typically a good sign. “Normally you would be right,” he says slowly, splaying his fingers with a fluid motion. “However, once again your scope is too narrow, as far as ‘normal’ is concerned. You see, an excess of determination is what kept me alive when I was pulled into the Font by a creature called the Anathema. One notable side effect is that my Soul and my magic were permanently altered, so I’m afraid you are very, very wrong.”

Gaster’s eyes flick from white to red, vaporous trails of his magic rising from his fingers. But it only lasts long enough for him to make his —arguably dramatic— point.

“So you could say that if anyone is familiar with what shouldn’t be possible with red magic, it’s myself,” he finishes, snapping his hands closed as his magic dissipates all at once. “And I would appreciate it if… if… if… if…”

The frustration is gone from his expression, replaced at once with confusion as he raises a hand to the side of his head and steadies himself with the other, groping for the arm of the couch beside him. As you watch, braced to rush up from your seat at the first sign of trouble, his face —no, his whole body— starts to… to sag. Like he’s starting to run at the edges, like paint that hasn’t quite dried.

“Gaster—” you start, pushing yourself to your feet as fear starts to prickle up your spine, but Morwenna beats you to him.

There’s a blur of red and she’s bracing his arms, holding him steady as her magic flares bright where she’s touching him. When she comes back into focus she’s grimacing, baring her teeth as she lets out a soft grunt of effort. “Okay, okay, for crying out loud you made your damn point,” she snaps. “You don’t have to fucking de-sync with the flow of time to show off that you’ve got red stones.”

“Do you think he even has—”

“Deacon! Now isn’t the time!” you hiss as you pass him on your way to Gaster and Morwenna.

Gaster has a tight hold on her arms, bowed forward, steadying himself on her as she keeps him upright. But from what you can tell he looks more solid again. “How… how could you tell?” Gaster asks, drawing in a shaky breath while somehow managing to sound surprised. “How could you tell that’s what was happening?”

The look on her face is bordering on smug as she helps him over towards the free space on the couch. “My red magic isn’t borrowed,” she says, easing Gaster down then pulling away so she can fix him with a stern look. “I can tell when it’s being used and yours…” Her expression softens into something close to pity. “Gaster, your red magic is a damn trainwreck.”

“That is… unfortunately a rather apt comparison,” he admits, turning his head away from her and pressing a hand to his forehead. The white lights in his eyes are dim but they’re there, and he looks like he’s fine at least… “But I manage. Things could be much, much worse.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Deacon asks, glancing from Gaster to Morwenna and back again. “That wasn’t just a small hitch like before, that was…”
“I’m fine,” Gaster insists, reminding you strongly of your husband. The brave face, the resistance to concern, the need to collect himself in front of the three of you. It’s frustrating and understandable all at the same time.

Morwenna doesn’t say anything, but you see the frown tugging on her mouth, the creases on her forehead that bunch her freckles together. You wonder what she’s seeing that you’re not. “You said there was more that you wanted to tell me. Deacon, you said you had questions. Why don’t we focus on that instead?”

Deacon looks at you, arching a brow in silent question. You take in the room, the sound of Gaster’s gradually steadying breaths, the way he’s sitting a little straighter and regaining that air of quiet dignity. Maybe it would be best to not dwell on his episode, you get the feeling it would just embarrass him. You give a little nod to Deacon.

“The Anathema,” Deacon starts, looking up at Morwenna as he leans forward to rest his arms on his knees. “It’s this creature that lives in the Font. It sounds like it’s always been there and we just never—”

“Oh, it hasn’t always been there,” Gaster interrupts, catching you off-guard. He says it matter-of-factly, like he expects you to know already. “The Font is timeless, but the Anathema formed later. Around the same time that the Barrier went up, to be more exact.”

You and Deacon are staring at him, waiting for him to elaborate while Morwenna is trying to mask her confusion. Gaster looks between the three of you, blinking owlishly, when finally he realizes that you’re all focused on him.

“I’m sorry, perhaps I should have been more plain. The Anathema is constructed from the Souls of the seven mages who created the Barrier.”
“What?” Deacon blurts out, twisting in his seat so he can face Gaster better. He feels like someone just knocked all the sense out of his head, the air out of his lungs. His eyes dart over to Morwenna and the look of shock on her face, stunned into silence. Deacon’s mouth fumbles with his words as he tries to speak. “How did—? How do you—? Just… how.”

“The mages that created the Barrier were killed in the process,” Morwenna says, her words slow and careful, her hands clenched into fists. “There are records, dating back hundreds of years. They were drained of magic and they died, when that happens there’s nothing left of the Souls. How could their Souls be part of some… creature?”

Gaster looks between the two of them, folding his hands in his lap as his brow creases with concern. “I apologize, that was a rather abrupt way of going about this. Please, let me explain what I know of the Anathema and I will do my best to answer your questions.” His eyes flick over to where you’re hovering near the end of the couch, a look of something like weary resignation on your face. Deacon can’t help but wonder if you’ve finally reached the point of just accepting all these developments in stride. He wouldn’t blame you, for someone without any magic of your own to speak of, you sure have had to deal with a lot of it. Gaster catches Deacon’s eye, pulling his attention away from you. “I believe one of your questions was going to be ‘how do you know’. The simple answer is that the Anathema had the occasional moments of lucidity and on rare occasions we… spoke. I would ask it questions and sometimes it would answer. The Anathema is… to be quite honest, as much as I despise it for what it did to me, for killing my lab assistants, I pity it.”

“Why?” you spit, and Deacon is surprised by the sharp, cold look on your face. “Those people were the ones who created the Barrier. They trapped your people in the Underground, don’t they deserve this?”

Gaster looks at you, studying your face with remorse. “I believe the situation is more complicated than that, as things so often are. Morwenna, as you said, the seven mages died when they created the Barrier, but there is a facet to that event that no one could have known about. Drained mage Souls don’t just disappear, they are sent to the Font. I’m not sure why, I think the magic calls them home, but the fact remains that is what happens.

“From what I was able to gather from multiple conversations with the different… personalities so to speak, the mages did not expect the creation of the Barrier to kill them. They were pouring their magic into our cage, together, when they died. And they arrived in the Font together, scared and angry and afraid of what had, and what was going to happen to them. So, instead of their Souls peacefully returning to their source and rejoining the cycle of magic, they resisted. They clung together and rejected the Font and became the Anathema.”

Deacon tries not to think about that too hard. He can’t. He can’t think anymore about ‘why’ or ‘how’, just that it is and he still has more questions. “And they’ve been… forcing other Souls to join them. That’s what they’ve— it has been doing? You said it consumed the Souls it could catch.”
Gaster nods. “I’m not sure what the purpose is, what’s left of the seven different Souls each seem to have a differing opinion on how it should behave. It fights with itself quite often. Sometimes it thinks it’s saving the Souls by taking them out of the cycle, others that it is owed the Souls and that it is the master of that place. The second tended to be more vocal about my being an intruder in its domain.”

“What about all those people?” you ask, your voice weak. “All those Souls it absorbed, those were… those were people, weren’t they?”

Deacon feels a twist of dread in the pit of his stomach at the thought of how close he’d come to being one of those Souls. How stupid he’d been as a kid, fucking around with power he wasn’t ready for and shouldn’t have tried to use. You could be talking about him.

“I’m afraid that question is more… theological,” Gaster says, gesturing helplessly and tipping his head to the side. “I’m not sure what happens to the Souls it takes within itself. I’m not even certain if they had any type of consciousness to begin with. As far as I am aware from my time in the Font, the seven Souls at the Anathema’s core are strictly unique.”

Morwenna is shaking her head, reaching up to rub her shoulder as she paces, but if she has any vehement denial of his explanation like she did earlier she keeps it to herself. The past five years have done a number on her perspective of magic, and maybe he’s an ass for thinking it, but maybe she’s getting a bit old to have her worldview so radically shifted. Sometimes he feels too old sometimes. Or just too sick of all these damn surprises.

“But I suspect that the Anathema is the reason for your declining magic,” Gaster continues. Part of Deacon wishes he would just stop. Hasn’t he given them enough to try and take in? Why does he need to add more to the broken pile of what they thought they understood? “Human magic, that is. There are fewer of you, and your magic is significantly weaker than your predecessors. The idea that the Anathema has disrupted the natural order enough to affect mages on such a scale… it doesn’t seem too far outside what could be considered possible.”

“I don’t even know where that line even falls anymore,” Morwenna mutters, turning away and walking over to the loveseat. She drops down onto it heavily. “Fine, so there’s this ancient mage-Soul creature and it’s basically cursed the rest of us to get weaker and weaker. You might as well say it’s punishment for the Barrier. Maybe we deserve it…” She cradles her head in her hands, letting out a long, slow sigh before setting her jaw in a hard line. “But at least this thing is still stuck in the Font.”

The weekend it happened he was fourteen.

Grant was twenty minutes late getting home —he was always on time so this was odd. His stomach was growling and he was about to start rummaging through the kitchen when he heard the garage door open. Heading to ask him what made him so late, Deacon was glad to see him. He was happier when the house wasn’t empty.

Grant swung himself out of his mid-size sedan —an impersonal silver car with no real character—and Deacon spotted the bag of fast food clenched in one hand and the drink carrier in the other. Tucked under his arm was a small stack of books. He smiled as he caught sight of Deacon, jerking his head to beckon him over.

“Come here, help me out, will you?” Grant asked, hip-checking the car door closed.

Deacon did as he was asked, rushing over to his side and reaching for the bag of food. But Grant
pulled his hand away.

“No, take the books,” he said, twisting a little. “They’re yours anyway.”

“For me?” Deacon asked, eyes widening in surprise as he reached for the trio of paperbacks. With a quick glance at the spines, he recognized the titles from a fantasy series he’d been meaning to check out from the library. But these weren’t library books, these were brand new.

“Yeah, for you,” Grant said, gesturing him back inside. “Those are the ones you wanted, right? All the titles sound the damn same.”

Grinning, he nodded and smacked the button for the garage door on his way in the house, looking over his shoulder to make sure that Grant didn’t need any more help. “What’s the special occasion?”

“We’ve got a two hour drive first thing in the morning down to headquarters,” he said, ‘headquarters’ meaning Morwenna’s house in the foothills of Mt. Ebott. “We’ve got a new recruit, we’re going down to meet him. But, I figured you could use something to read in the car. I still don’t get how you can read those, you know better by now how magic works.” Grant’s teasing was gentle, his exasperated smile was familiar and sort of comforting. He’d been with Grant for just over two years now, and while it had taken some time for them to get used to one another, things lately had been... good.

“They’re fun,” Deacon said, clutching the books to his chest. “They don’t need to be like real life to be good. But, uh, thanks. Dad. You didn’t have to buy them for me.”

There was a brief moment of silence as Grant set dinner down on their small kitchen table, looking up and catching Deacon’s eye. Not for the first time he wondered if he’d done something wrong by calling him Dad, even though he knew he was allowed to.

”You know you don’t have to call me that when it’s just the two of us, if you don’t want to,” Grant said, breaking eye contact and pulling the drinks out of the cardboard holder. The loud squeak of him forcing the cup free felt unnaturally loud in the bare kitchen.

“I know,” he said, eyes downcast, still worried that he’d upset him.

But Grant just handed him a burger and pointed at his usual chair at the table. “Just making sure. How was school?”

The small talk was easy, sitting with him for dinner was normal, and when they were finished Deacon went to go read in his room. It was how he imagined the other kids at school spending their evenings with their families. Wasn’t this what normal was like? (Aside from the mage stuff, of course.)

But he was excited to go to Morwenna’s, to see the other members of the Literatum. It wasn’t very often that they all got together, and even though Morwenna kind of scared him, he liked knowing that at least in some way, he was a part of something. Even if, if he was being honest with himself, he really wasn’t.

Grant brought him along, let him get to know the other mages, but when they got down to business he was never allowed to participate. He hoped that maybe this time would be different. That maybe now he could at least listen in and learn more. Someone new would be joining their group, so that meant he wouldn’t be the newest anymore. Didn’t that mean something?
The drive down was uneventful, though Deacon had to listen to that awful country music that Grant liked. He thought about asking him if they could listen to something else but he didn’t want to start an argument. He never won them anyway.

They got to Morwenna’s house before noon.

The new guy was in his early twenties, and seemed surprised when he was introduced to Deacon. Like he wasn’t expecting to see a kid there. (He wasn’t a kid, he was a teenager!) He said his name was Howard and he twisted nervously on his shiny wedding ring, casting anxious glances around the room. The adults were doing their best to make him feel welcome. To Deacon it seemed like they were trying to make sure Howard didn’t think they were some kind of creepy cult. As he listened to them talk he overheard Howard mention that his wife was pregnant.

But once the introductions were over Grant told him to go read in Morwenna’s guest room, making it clear that he wasn’t going to be allowed to join them yet again. *That* was the real reason for the new books, to keep him distracted. For a moment he almost told him no, tried to insist that he should be allowed to stay. After all, Vanessa was allowed to stay and she was only sixteen. She’d been involved with Literatum business, *and* using her magic since before Grant took him in two years ago, when she was the age he was now. And he wasn’t allowed to do either. It just didn’t seem fair!

They just hadn’t bothered to tell him the reason *why*. Why Vanessa had already been able to use her magic even before he’d been adopted, about Avery and the life she’d been forced to live before she’d been rescued. That her magic had been forced out of her before she was ready. All he knew was that he was jealous and that he wanted to be the mage they all insisted he was.

So maybe he needed to take that next step on his own. Maybe they were waiting on him to *show* them he was ready. He was so desperate to be included, to show these people —show Grant— that he was worth their time and attention. He wanted, *needed*, to be more than just the orphan they picked out of the system. And he just couldn’t wait anymore.

Angry and frustrated and with a fierce need to prove himself, Deacon sat on the guest bed in Morwenna’s spare room and focused inward on that hard ball of energy that was supposed to be his magic. The thing that made him different and special, like so many heroes out of so many stories. He reached for it, grasping at it, and he felt the moment that it shattered. It was like a dam breaking, power flowing through him and so easy to reach now. He didn’t even need to think, to *guess* how to tap into it. It was just *there*, waiting for him to use it.

So he did.

Brilliant, bright green light filled the space around him, covered his hands so densely he could barely see them, and he was so in awe of all of this green (they’d said he was green, but this was the first time he’d ever known they were right) magic that he barely noticed the light-headedness creeping behind his eyes. He grinned, ecstatic in his discovery and giddy with the rush of power deep in the place he suspected was his Soul. There wasn’t any form to the magic, it was just *there*, free and open and flowing out of him. This was *his*, and none of the other Literatum had that same color. He was the only one, he was *special*.

Shields and healing. That’s what they said he’d be able to do. Blinking hard, unsure if the burring of his vision was just some trick of the light from all that magic or had something to do with that woozy feeling he was choosing to ignore, Deacon held up his hands and thought of something solid. A disc, like a medieval buckler, coalesced in the space in front of him, drawn together from his magic.
He had just enough time to see that he’d managed to do it before his head swam and something in his chest gave a nasty lurch and darkness swallowed him up.

When he woke up Morwenna was sitting beside his bed. Her face was drawn with worry, her hands clasped under her chin as she idly tugged at the ends of her jaw-length orange hair. Deacon winced, letting out a low groan, and she sat up straighter as relief flooded her expression.

“Deacon, oh thank god,” she breathed, resting a hand on his chest as he tried to sit up. “No, no don’t move. You’re too weak, you… Deacon why did you do that?”

He didn’t answer. Whatever satisfaction he had felt at using his magic for the first time was swept away by his intense feeling of shame. He’d never seen Morwenna look so haunted, and he knew that he’d screwed up. They’d told him to wait and he hadn’t listened.

“Am I…?” Deacon swallowed past the lump in his throat, blinking as his eyes started to burn with embarrassed tears. “Am I okay? What happened?”

“You almost got yourself killed is what happened,” she said sharply, her jaw clenched tight. “You can’t just— What you did was dangerous! There’s a reason you were told not to try anything like this on your own, if you had…” Morwenna trailed off, shaking her head and pinching the bridge of her nose. “Things are going to have to change.”

That scared him. What things? Why would they have to change? The way she said it, it couldn’t be anything good, could it? He bit the inside of his lip to keep himself from letting out a soft, pathetic sound.

Deacon looked away from her, searching for someone who wasn’t there. “Where’s Grant?” he asked timidly.

Morwenna’s face fell, and he had no idea what that could mean. Sighing, she stood and pushed the chair away from the side of the bed, tucking it into the corner before heading for the door. “I’ll go get him,” she said, tucking her hair behind her ear before vanishing out of sight.

He was alone long enough for the dread to creep into every inch of him, for his hands to start shaking as panic made his heart hammer in his ears. Would they get rid of him? Was he just not good enough for them to keep around? Was his magic too weak to be worth their time?

By the time that Grant appeared in the doorway, he was convinced that the last two years had been some kind of fluke, that the Literatum would realize their mistake and send him away. Just like everyone else.

There was a brief, fleeting moment where Grant just stared at him, his brow knit together with concern and he opened his mouth to say something. But then he grit his teeth, his expression hardened, and he took three long strides across the room to stand looming over where Deacon lay. “What you did was incredibly foolish,” Grant said, his voice cold. “Do you have any idea how close you were to killing yourself with that reckless stunt?”

Morwenna’s worried anger was easier to handle than this. He’d rather have her back, yelling at him instead of Grant’s distant disapproval. Deacon cringed, staring down at the bedspread, twisting shaking fingers into the hem of his shirt.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, the words wavering as he forced them out of his throat.

“Young sorcerers are always showy, but you did just fall in with a group of them. I’ve been keeping an eye on you, and… well, you might want to spend a little time with someone who can help you get a handle on your magic.”

“Being sorry doesn’t change what just happened. You were told not to do exactly this. You—” Grant cut himself off, shaking his head and looking to the ceiling as if for guidance. “I thought you were ready, Deacon. But you’re not.”
were smarter than this, Deacon.”

Deacon’s whole body tensed, his vision blurred, fear twisting his stomach so roughly he thought he might throw up. “I’m sorry, I won’t do it again,” he blurted out, not even sure that he really understood what he was saying. That it even made any sense. He’d already opened those floodgates, he’d already done it. “Please, Dad—”

Grant’s expression went steely, fixing him with a hard look. “Don’t call me that,” he said, clenching his hands into fists. “I’m not your father.”

He should have known this would happen eventually. The rejection cut deep, the immediate dismissal felt like a slap across the face and Grant didn’t even look like he cared. But Deacon felt like he’d been tricked. Like he’d spent the past two years with someone he thought cared about him, at least a little, and now...

Morwenna was right; things did change.
You get a call from Frisk shortly after your conversation about the Anathema, asking you if it’s okay that they stay over at Asriel’s tonight. You tell them yes, of course, as long as it’s fine with Toriel, and you’re silently thankful that whatever had been going on between those two is resolved. After you hang up the phone you notice the disapproval written all over Morwenna’s face. She must not think it’s a good idea to leave the two of them alone. But keeping them apart is out of the question! Not only would it drive a wedge between you and the kids, it would be impossible to enforce. Not to mention more dangerous than just letting them go back to normal. Kids that were told not to see each other just came up with ways to do what they wanted anyway, behind their parents’ backs. You know that well enough firsthand.

Morwenna doesn’t say anything, but she doesn’t look happy. Frankly, she looks a bit overwhelmed. Not that you can blame her, it’s a lot to take in.

Later, after Deacon and Morwenna each head home, you and Gaster explain the situation to Sans over dinner. He listens, his attention shifting between the two of you as you supplement each other’s recount of the conversation, until finally, when you’re done, he says simply, “huh. wouldn’t’ve expected that.”

“It was rather surprising,” Gaster says, prodding experimentally at his food. His fork skills are improving, at least. “The Anathema is not an easy creature to try and carry a conversation with, it took quite a long time to get it to speak with me. Many attempts were nearly met with disaster.”

“then why did you do it? if it was so dangerous,” Sans asks, arching a brow.

Gaster’s face pulls into a small frown, looking down at his plate. “Desperation. And an overabundance of time.”

There’s a short pause where you and Sans aren’t sure what to say. He glances over at you, you look at him, and you both share a helpless look.

“Did you talk to Alphys? About Gaster,” you say, trying to change the subject.

Sans gives a small shake of his head, looking uncomfortable. “not yet. i mean, there’s no rush. and it’s kinda a lot. for everyone.” His eyes flick over to where Gaster is sitting across from the two of you. “and it sounds like you had a pretty full day with morwenna giving you the third degree, anyway.”

That crease between Gaster’s brows deepens. “It has been some time since I last had to argue with someone. It’s as frustrating as I remember,” he says, sighing and shaking his head. “You never gave me so much trouble. As stubborn as you are you always listened. To me, at least.”

You hide your amused smile behind your hand, glancing between the two of them as you reach for
your drink. Sans’s eyes widen just a little, a hint of curiosity brightening his expression.

“did i?” Sans asks.

A smile curves Gaster’s mouth as he sets down his fork and threads his fingers together. “Yes. You were my best assistant at the lab. You and I would have made quite the team, had things gone differently.” There’s a pause where he grows flustered. “Not that Alphys hasn’t been doing an excellent job, and the two of you have done very well in maintaining the Core—”

“it’s fine,” Sans says, holding up a hand and wincing. “i got ya. but, uh, speaking of the core… we’ve got a bunch of blueprints and stuff we haven’t quite pieced together, i think they’re yours? maybe you could, well…”

“Of course,” he says, as Sans trails off. His smile is infectious as he beams at his son. “I would be happy to help. It’s been quite a while since I last worked on the Core, but I’m certain I can be of at least some assistance.”

Nodding, Sans gives him an unsteady smile in return. “good. that’s, uh, encoreaging.”

You roll your eyes, letting out a soft groan. But Gaster is delighted. He covers his mouth as he starts to laugh, and you can’t help it, you laugh too. You think this is the first time you’ve seen Gaster so happy, without any regret or sadness lurking just under the surface. He’s just here, with the two of you… enjoying time with his family. With his son.

Sans lets out an awkward chuckle, shrugging his shoulders. “s’not the greatest joke i could have done. i don’t really lava it.”

Gaster is laughing so hard that he’s hunched forward over his food, shoulders shaking and eyes shining. Or, are they shining or are those… You can swear that for a second you see tiny, reddish sparkles near the corners of his eyes, reminiscent of what you’ve seen Papyrus do when he’s happy or excited, and you glance over at Sans to see if he noticed them too. His eyes are fixed on Gaster, the corners of his smile are pulled a little too tight, and there’s something skittish about his expression. Like he’d just been spooked.

You rest your hand on his forearm and he glances over at you, his face relaxing as he meets your eyes. This can’t be easy on him. You know it’s not. You just wish there was something you could do to help him. To help both of them.

“welp, i’ll bring some of that stuff home then,” Sans says, doing a very good job of sounding casual. He was always good at that, even if you can usually see right through him now. “we can take a look sometime.”

“Of course,” Gaster says, still smiling.

Dinner continues peacefully, and Gaster helps you carry the dishes to the kitchen once you’re done. There’s a moment where Sans looks a little put-out, like he’s wondering if he should be helping too, even though he usually doesn’t (most nights it’s Frisk’s job). He ends up following the two of you and you catch yourself before telling him he doesn’t need to worry. You’re sure he doesn’t want to hear that.

When he starts emptying the dishwasher you wonder if you need to start digging up missing family members more often to get him to help around the house.

As you get started on washing dishes, Gaster clears his throat and goes to try and help Sans put the dishes away. “oh, y’don’t gotta worry about this,” Sans says, trying to wave him away.
But Gaster is unperturbed by Sans’s refusal. “Please, it’s the least I can do. And it will help me learn where everything goes.”

You glance over at Sans at that, right as he looks towards you. You know, logically, that it makes sense. That Gaster has nowhere else to go and wants to help out and know more about the household. But you’re not surprised by that tenseness in your husband’s jaw or even your own knee-jerk, territorial response. This is your home, and he is just a guest.

A guest with no departure date.

You give Sans a look that says, ‘just let him help, it’ll be easier’ and he seems to pick up on your message. He passes Gaster a short stack of bowls and directs him over to a cabinet. Thankfully he seems oblivious to what passed between you and Sans and just seems glad to help. Was his social awareness was always this bad or is it just a byproduct of his time completely split off from any real interaction with people?

Maybe it’s why he chooses now to bring up something —well, someone — that you know Sans has been trying to avoid.

“Sans, you mentioned that you speak with Papyrus on an almost daily basis,” he says, sounding a little nervous. Your muscles tense as you scrub too-hard at a plate locked in your grip. “I was hoping that I could talk to him as well.”

“no,” Sans says immediately, making you wince. When you glance over at Gaster out of the corner of your eye he’s caught mid-step on his way back to the dishwasher, frozen with a startled look on his face. “look, it’s one thing to just drop into my life outta nowhere, it’s not the first time something crazy has happened to me. but i’m not gonna let you do that to papyrus, not right now.”

“Hun…” you say, trailing off because you’re not sure what to actually say to him. Because there’s no right answer. There’s no right thing to do. But you know that Sans is being harsh, because that’s what he does when he feels threatened, when his family is threatened. He throws up those walls and digs in his heels and waits.

Gaster folds his hands over his stomach, tapping his fingers against his wrist and glancing down at the floor. His brow furrows, smooths, and he works his mouth for a few seconds before looking back up again. “...May I ask why?”

Whatever Sans was expecting you don’t think that was it. He studies Gaster, then bends over to start stacking plates on the counter. “he’s off in hawaii with mettaton filming a movie. he’s doing what makes him happy, but what do you think he’d do if he suddenly found out that you’re here? that he’s got a dad he never knew existed?” He shoots Gaster a frustrated look, not giving him time to answer. “he’d drop everything to come home to see you. but doing that would piss off the wrong people, probably hurt his career. so you don’t get to mess with that. you can wait a little longer to drop that bomb.”

Gaster seems to mull this over before finally giving a small nod. “I understand. I hadn’t considered the implications—Sans, you always looked out for your brother, even when you were little.” His smile is sad and bittersweet and somehow proud all at once. “I’m just sorry that I’m making it more difficult for you to do so.”

Cringing, Sans has to look away, rising up on his toes to slide the stack of plates where they’re supposed to go. “look, we can… i’ll call pap. i can put it on speaker so you can listen in, but just promise me you won’t say anything.”
You’re surprised by this quick concession, and so it seems is Gaster. He fumbles for a moment before managing to say, “Of course.”

Later, when Sans tries to call Papyrus, it goes to voicemail. Sans reassures him it’s probably because they’re still shooting, but you can tell that Gaster is disappointed. He fidgets with the lapel of his coat and shifts uneasily on his feet, and as you’re watching him you come to a realization.

“Hey, while we’re waiting for them to finish why don’t I find you a change of clothes? You’ve been wearing that labcoat for over a decade,” you say, doing your best to sound light-hearted. “If you want I can wash what you have on.”

Gaster blinks at you, glancing down at his clothes. “Oh, I… I hadn’t even considered… I suppose that’s a good idea.”

You take him upstairs, and with a quick glance to gauge Gaster’s size, lead him to Papyrus’s old room. When you open the door you’re greeted by a slightly stale smell. It’s been awhile since the last time you came in here. Flipping on the light, the room has been converted mostly to storage over the past few years. The racecar bed is still here, but the mattress is bare and there’s a stack of boxes pushed against the wall and headboard. Things you’ve been meaning to donate or just haven’t had the heart to get rid of are tucked away under a thin veneer of dust.

“Sorry,” you mutter, pushing a bag out of your way so you can get to the closet. “We don’t really use this room anymore. But Papyrus left some of his stuff when he moved out and I know there’s some clothes that should fit you.”

Gaster doesn’t answer. When you glance back at him he’s looking at the old bed, the ratty table where Papyrus used to keep his robot figures, his ancient computer you’re not even sure would still turn on. Guilt twists in your stomach, as if it were your fault this was so hard.

“Last I heard they were wrapping up this movie soon,” you offer gently. “He and Mettaton should be back home before the end of the month.”

His attention shifts to you and he gives you a weak, reassuring smile. “It’s just harder to wait, now that I’m here. But that’s what I’ve been doing all along, so at least it’s something I’m familiar with.”

Biting the inside of your lip, you shake your head. “I’m sorry about Sans, I wish—”

“Hope,” he says, holding up a hand. “Please, you don’t need to apologize for him. There’s nothing you could have done to change this.”

“Was he like this before?”

“Was he suspicious and distrustful? Or withdrawn?” Gaster watches you as you give a helpless nod. He sighs. “No. No he wasn’t.”

Silence fills the space between you and you turn away to pick through the closet again. This isn’t why you’re up here. You already suspected that Sans hadn’t been the same person before the accident, and there’s no sense in the questions plaguing you now that you know for sure. Wondering if the old Sans would even like you, let alone love you. “Well, um, I don’t really have anything here I’d consider nice. Papyrus’s fashion sense was always… different. But this is just while I clean your clothes.”

At least, that’s what you originally thought. A few minutes later, when Gaster emerges from the guest room —his room for the time being— dressed in a mint green, appliqué cat sweater and
turquoise harem pants that pool over his feet, you notice a severe lack of his black lab coat and trousers.

Years of living with Papyrus has rendered you mostly immune to outfits such as this, but on Gaster it looks even more ridiculous than it ever would have on your brother-in-law. You do your best not to laugh out loud as you glance behind him to check for his old clothes.

“Um, where are your clothes?” you ask, your voice going all squeaky as you fight to contain yourself.

Gaster looks uncomfortable and more than a little embarrassed as he says, “Ah, you see, it turns out that their hold on reality was as tenuous as my own after our stay in the Font.”

You blink. “...Um?”

“They disintegrated.”

“Oh,” you say, biting down on your lip, hard. “We’ll go shopping tomorrow. Because to be honest, the rest of the clothes aren’t any better than… this…”

“Thank you,” he breathes, looking down at himself and wincing.

All of your careful restraint goes right out the window the moment you lead Gaster downstairs. Sans takes one look at him and explodes into laughter. You shoot him a weak glare as you try your best to not dissolve into a fit of giggles yourself.

“babe,” he says, after a few failed attempts to find his voice. “the cat sweater? you couldn’t find anything better?”

“There isn’t anything better!” you blurt out defensively, crossing your arms over your chest. “Mettaton helped him pack, so of course all the worst stuff got left behind. It was this or a crop top with the words ‘Greatest Man’ in rhinestones across the chest. The one from Undyne’s bachelorette party.”

“that woulda been hilarious.”

“Sans—”

You forget what you were about to say when Sans’s phone starts to ring. It’s that familiar, peppy ringtone he has set for Papyrus. The wide grin is wiped off of Sans’s face as he looks over at Gaster.

“don’t forget to stay quiet,” Sans says.

Gaster wrings his hands. “I know.”

As Sans answers his phone you rest a hand on Gaster’s arm, giving him a reassuring smile. He twitches at your touch, looking at you with a bewildered expression before his eyes flick down to your hand and he covers it with his own. He does his best to return your smile.

“hey pap,” Sans says, pressing the speaker button on the phone and holding it out in front of him. He’s watching Gaster. “how’s it going?”

“HELLO SANS!” Papyrus says brightly. Gaster pulls away from you, sinking down to sit on the loveseat. He covers his mouth with one hand, eyes fixed on the phone. “I SAW THAT YOU
“CALLED ME, BUT I WAS BUSY AND NOW I’M NOT!”

“heh, that’s good. how was your day? do any cool scenes?”

“YES! THOUGH THE DIRECTOR DID NOT APPRECIATE MY SUGGESTION THAT WE SHOULD ADD SOME SORT OF MAZE TO THE FINAL FIGHT BETWEEN MYSELF AND THE EVIL VILLAIN. METTATON SAYS HE MUST HAVE BEENINTIMIDATED BY MY KNOWLEDGE OF PUZZLES,” he says. You see the small hint of a smile twitch across Sans’s face. Mettaton has done a good job of keeping Papyrus’s spirits up in his brother’s stead, you think. “IT ALSO COULD HAVE BEEN BECAUSE WE FINISHED FILMING TODAY AND HE DIDN’T WANT TO GO BACK AND RE-SHOOT…”

“Oh, you’re wrapping up already?” you blurt out, leaning closer to the phone.

“HOPE! I DIDN’T KNOW YOU WERE HERE ALSO, IT’S GOOD TO SPEAK TO YOU! I THINK YOU WOULD LIKE HAWAII. IT’S VERY PRETTY HERE,” he says, and you can’t help the big grin on your face. “AND YES, I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, HAVE FINISHED WITH ALL OF MY SCENES! SO HAS METTATON.” There’s a pause, and his voice lowers by a fraction. “ACTUALLY HE FINISHED HIS SCENES A WEEK AGO, HE DIDN’T HAVE VERY MANY. BUT THEY WERE GOOD SCENES! GREAT EVEN!”

You feel a twinge of sympathy for Mettaton. It can’t be easy, being overshadowed by his husband in a career that had been his dream. But last you saw the two of them they were still ridiculously happy, so it couldn’t be bothering him that much. “If you’re done, then when are you coming home?” you ask.

“THREE DAYS,” he says. When you look at Gaster he has his eyes squeezed shut, cradling his chin in his hand. Is he happy? “OUR MANAGER ALREADY HAS THE PLANE TICKETS! I’M EXCITED TO COME HOME.”

“can’t wait to see you, bro. i’m sure you got a sick tan,” Sans says, smirking.

“I TRIED, BUT I DON’T LOOK ANY TANNER,” he laments, and you try not to laugh. “IF ANYTHING I JUST LOOK PALER THAN BEFORE!”

“maybe you did it wrong.”

“MAYBE THE SUN WORKS DIFFERENT IN HAWAII. THAT SHOULD GET CHECKED.”

“i’ll keep that in mind,” he says with a chuckle. The sound trails off as he looks up and over at Gaster. His expression soberes. “hey, bro, so when you get home… i got a surprise for you.”

“OH, HOW EXCITING! NOW, YOU CAN’T TELL ME WHAT IT IS OR THAT WILL RUIN THE SURPRISE! YOU HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL I GET HOME.”

“oh, shoot, you’re right. well, i guess i’ll keep it to myself for now. thanks for warning me.”

“YOU’RE WELCOME, SANS. NOW I THINK I SHOULD GO TO HELP YOU RESIST THE TEMPTATION OF WANTING TO SPOIL THE SURPRISE. TELL FRISK THAT THEIR UNCLESLOVE THEM AND TO BE GOOD AND ALSO TELL ASRIEL TO BE GOOD TOO. AND WE LOVE HIM TOO. AND YOU AND HOPE. GOODBYE SANS! GOODBYE HOPE!”

“love you too, bro,” Sans says.

“Give Mettaton our love, too,” you add. “Enjoy Hawaii before you come home.”
“I WILL!” Papyrus says, and then hangs up the phone.

You and Sans look at one another before you both turn to Gaster. Slowly he pulls his hand away from his mouth, and you can see that it’s stretched into a wide smile.

“Three days,” Gaster says.

“three days,” Sans echoes back with a sigh of resignation. “welp, time to figure out how we’re gonna explain this to papyrus.”

Chapter End Notes

Holy cow, next chapter is number 200! I'll see you guys here on Monday for something a little different. ;)}
Ty starts his third day working as a waiter at the MTT Resort hotel by being introduced to his manager. She’d come back from vacation with her husband, so his hiring process had been handled by her assistant manager. He’d only heard good things about Bo, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t nervous. After all, first impressions are everything and he wants to make a good one.

He’s certain he doesn’t.

She goes to shake his hand and he doesn’t even think about it, he just does it and he can’t help but see the involuntary flinch and the way she tries to wipe her hand off on her apron without him noticing. He notices. He always notices. The worst thing (well, one of the worst things) about being a water elemental is that most people just don’t like feeling damp all the time. Ty tries not to take offense and doesn’t acknowledge her reaction. She tells him it was nice to meet him and sends him off to work.

Fire elementals have it easy. People can snuggle up with a nice, warm fire elemental. The only time people wanted to snuggle up with him was in the middle of summer. And only if they didn’t mind having to dry off later. He even had to get a special uniform for work, fabric treated with that stuff that made it waterproof so he didn’t perpetually look like he’d been caught in a downpour.

It’s a hell of a way to start his first day waiting tables solo. He spends the first hour worrying about what Bo must think of him, feeling self-conscious of every damp spot he leaves on a tablecloth or the droplets of water on the rim of a plate. Thinking solid thoughts, he does everything he can to try and keep himself from dripping on the place settings. It works, for the most part.

Unfortunately, all that focus on himself means that he’s neglecting attention elsewhere. He realizes that he’s accidentally skipped one of his new tables, so he hurries over to them, cursing himself under his breath.

“I’m sorry for the wait,” he says, looking at the blended party of humans and monsters. His voice is slick and slippery, with an odd, bubbling undulation. “What can I get you to drink?”

One of the humans, a young woman, squints in the vicinity of the garish, pink name tag pinned to his crisp dress shirt. “Tide?” she asks, looking up at him with a sly smile. “Like the detergent?”

The rest of her party laughs and he grips his small notepad a little tighter in his hand, grateful for his lack of a persistent mouth so he doesn’t have to force a smile. Of course not like the detergent! Like the ocean! The ocean his parents had hoped he’d one day get the chance to see, even though they never got to.

He makes a mental note to ask Bo if there’s any way he can get a new nametag. “Please, just ‘Ty’ is fine,” he says smoothly. “Now what can I get for you today?”

The woman pouts a little when she realizes he didn’t appreciate her attempt at a joke, but doesn’t
say anything else. That’s a relief. Once he’s done getting their drink orders he hurries off to make sure one of his other tables is enjoying their food and then heads towards the bar.

When is his break? He hopes it’s soon. But those hopes are dashed when he sees he’s still got another hour until he can hide in the back for fifteen minutes and try to get his shit together.

Ty rattles off a drink order to one of the bartenders, mixing up two of them before correcting himself, then pivots on the heel of his stiff, shiny black shoes. There’s the familiar pressure of his wings brushing against something, and the soft gasp right behind him tells him that he screwed up.

Of course it’s Bo. How could his day get any worse? She’s doing her best not to look upset, he thinks, smoothing her hand over the now-damp splotch across half her pinstripe vest.

Opening his mouth to apologize, Bo cuts him off. “It’s fine,” she insists, giving him a reassuring smile. “Honey, don’t worry about it. I was about to leave anyway, I just wanted to make sure you were doing okay.”

“I’m so sorry!” he blurs out anyway.

She fixes him with a steady look with her big blue eyes, clasping his hands in hers. She doesn’t flinch or make a face this time, just gives him a comforting squeeze. “Sweetheart, you didn’t do anything wrong, I should have been more careful. Do you need to take a minute? Which section is yours, if you want to go to the back and calm down I can make sure everybody’s doing okay.”

He’s tempted. He’s so tempted. “No, you don’t need to do that!” he says, shaking his head. “I’m okay. I just…” He just can’t let himself look like even more of a mess in front of his new boss!

“You’re still new, and I remember what it was like when I first got hired,” Bo says, a wry smile curving her mouth. She gives his hands one last squeeze and lets him go. “Don’t be afraid to ask for help, Ty. People are here for you if you need it.”

Oh. He hadn’t expected that. It must show on his face because her smile turns sympathetic. “I will,” he says, tucking his wet, watery wings extra close against his back. He reaches back absently to check they’re not sticking out where they can hit anyone else.

Bo sure is nice, and pretty, and… Oh. And married. He notices it the second he gives in to his curiosity and listens to her Soul, the two songs mingled together into a full harmony. But why is it getting louder?

“Bo, you ready to go?”

A blonde human walks up beside her, and there’s a sharp spike in the intensity of her Soul as she turns to look at him, eyes lighting up. Oh, is this…? She’s married to a human. Ty tries not to stare, turning his attention away from her Soul abruptly, very much disinterested in hearing or feeling any more. The human seems to finally realize that he’s there, glancing up at him as he rests a hand on Bo’s shoulder. It’s an odd, sort of defensive gesture that leaves Ty feeling confused. What could he have to feel defensive about? They’re married. Harmonized. There’s nothing that can threaten that.

“Oh, sorry, were you two talking?” he asks, eyes flicking towards Bo again as she reaches up to cover his hand with her own.

“You’re fine, baby,” Bo says affectionately. Then she looks at Ty again. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yes ma’am,” he blurs out, maybe too fast.
Bo gives him one last, long look before taking her husband’s hand and threading their fingers together. “Okay, honey. Just remember what I said and I’ll see you tomorrow. If you have any problems let me know.”

Ty just bobs in head in agreement.

As Bo and her husband turn to go, he hears the human say, “So who was that? And why are you wet?” He doesn’t get to hear her response.

The rest of his shift isn’t much better. He’s never been good at asking for help, and that isn’t about to change any time soon. Working until close is great for tips, but by the time he’s able to leave Ty feels like he’s been chewed up and spat back out. And it’s the middle of the week! Not even a peak restaurant day! He hopes that with a few more days under his belt that the weekend won’t be quite so scary.

Loosening the top button of his shirt and rubbing the side of his neck, the night air is cool as he stands at the bus stop in front of the MTT Resort to wait for his ride. With September around the corner, more than just the nights will be cool. Some of the other waiters were talking about business settling down in the fall, too, with less people traveling. Just his luck that he’d start in the middle of tourist season.

But he’d needed the job. When things didn’t work out at the grocery store, or the clothing shop, or the healer’s clinic, or… anyplace else, he’d applied at the resort. There’d been a time where he swore he’d never work for Mettaton, not after seeing how obnoxious he’d been back in the Underground (why did so many people love the guy?). But he was more owner than manager now, off of Mt. Ebott more often than he was on it, and the people he’d put in charge seem nice enough. He definitely likes Bo.

The bus rolls up after a few minutes. Ty never has to wait long; whatever natural inclination the Busperson (and all their family) has for public transportation it seems to gift them with a sixth sense for a person in need. He’s had the displeasure of experiencing the human transit system and there’s just no comparison. The door opens and the hooded figure inside gives him a polite nod as he takes his usual seat.

The rest of the bus is empty this late, nearly midnight. He wonders if he should talk with the Busperson but he just doesn’t have it in him. Too many hours of too many forced friendly conversations have left him mentally drained and very ready to just crawl in bed and get some sleep. He leans his head against the window and stares out at the woods on the side of the road, watching the trees whip past and fade back into the dark. The vibration of the bus and the soft sound of the Busperson humming to themselves is oddly soothing.

Ty thinks he must have drifted off for a few minutes because before he realizes it the bus is pulling to a stop on the outskirts of Lakeside. He lurches to his feet and makes his way to the front. But the doors aren’t open.

“Mind your feet,” the Busperson says, turning to look at him. He wonders, not for the first time, what they look like under that hood. An odd shiver runs up his back. “You wouldn’t want to trip and fall.”

“Okay,” Ty says, fidgeting with the collar of his shirt. “Uh, thanks.”

For a moment the Busperson just stares, not moving, until they give him a nod and reach over to push the lever that opens the door. Ty doesn’t waste any time hurrying down the steps and off the bus.
As the bus rolls away he’s left alone on the sidewalk on the wooded road. His house is a short walk away, past a stand of trees and a small playground. He starts heading that way. It would be nice if, as the only passenger, the Busperson could have dropped him off just a bit further down the road, but they had rules about that sort of thing. They have set stops and don’t diverge from them.

A breeze ruffles the leaves overhead and Ty shoves his hands in his pockets, fanning out the watery span of his wings for the first time in hours. The quiet and the solitude is a welcome respite after everything. If he doesn’t think about it too hard, the sound of the wind through the trees sounds almost like rushing water. He should go to the beach again sometime, it’s been a while…

Ty tips his head back to look up at the moon, thinking fondly of his bed, when something strikes hard against his ankles and sends him sprawling forward face-first to the pavement. Pain shoots up his arms as he catches himself with his hands and he bites back a sharp yelp. There’s a moment—a brief, naive moment he desperately wants back—where he thinks he just tripped over something. But when he rolls to his side and cranes himself to look for what he hit, there’s a blur of eerie, ghostly-pale flesh and a huge hand closes around his legs and hoists him, upside-down, into the air.

He has a second of clarity as he stares into seven different colored eyes set into a featureless face, and opens his mouth to try and scream for help.

A second hand engulfs his head and shoulders. Ty claws at the thick fingers, trying to pry them off even as he knows there’s no way he can be stronger than it. He needs to escape, he needs to—

Ty wills his body to lose its form, to run like the water he’s supposed to be, but the thing cups its hands and catches him as he’s about to slip away. It’s carrying him off into the woods.

“Magic,” it mutters to itself with too many voices than one creature should ever have, all speaking at once. “Need more. No! We need answers. We need magic.”

Ty starts to reform himself again, lashing out against the fingers all around him, keeping him caged in.

“Too empty. Too quiet. Too loud. Too much,” it says, and Ty is starting to feel strange. A faint white glow of magic—his magic—illuminates the cramped, dark space and he realizes that he’s losing it. It’s being siphoned out of him. “Magic is gone, need more.”

Panic and fear sends him driving against the hands still, trying to press into the gaps, desperately doing everything he can to try and escape. But it’s not enough. He’s getting weaker and weaker and he thinks…

“This is better,” the creature says, closing the space between its hands. “This is enough, for now.”

Ty thinks he’s dying.

Then he sifts away into dust.
“Are you naked?”

Fatima doesn’t even look up from her phone, leaning against the side of her bed as she tries not to check her text messages for the fifth time in as many minutes. “Totally,” she says, voice flat and emotionless. “All the bits exposed, just sitting around, in my room, naked—”

Rashid lets out an annoyed sound. She glances up to see her brother open his eyes just so he can roll them as he slips through the wall separating their bedrooms. The faint cyan glow ghosting off his skin dissipates as he rests one hand on his hip and ruffles his already-messy hair with the other. He looks like he just rolled out of bed.

“You’re not as funny as you think you are,” Rashid says, but his words don’t carry any bite. “One day you really are gonna be naked and then where will we be?”

“You will be thrown out of the room on your ass if that’s the case,” she retorts, arching a brow. “What do you want?”

“To bug you. Looks like it’s working.” His smirk is nearly insufferable. She gives him an impatient look and he shrugs his shoulders. Then he gives her a once-over, and his smirk is replaced with a confused expression. “What’s with the outfit? Going somewhere?”

‘The outfit’ is just a pair of nice jeans and a decent, sleeveless orange top. She’d also changed out her sneakers for some nice flats instead. Okay, maybe it isn’t her day-to-day wardrobe, but what’s with the weird look? “Yeah? I told you, I’m meeting Chris for lunch.”

“Oh,” Rashid says, wrinkling his nose. “Right. I must have blocked it out.”

Fatima scowls at him, pushing away from her bed and pocketing her phone. “Don’t be an asshole.”

“Where are you guys going?”

“Grillby’s.”

“Sort of a weird place for a date, isn’t it?”

Taken aback, Fatima’s eyes widen and she fidgets with her bangs. “It’s not a date,” she insists. “We’re just getting lunch. He wants to understand magic better, and not a lot of magic-less humans go to Grillby’s so it’s safe to talk there.”

“Well it’s nice of you to take pity on him and his tiny, pea-sized brain,” Rashid says, leaning back against her dresser. “And it’s about time he tried to learn a bit more, he’s only been surrounded by magic for five years.”

“He’s not—” she catches herself, refusing to continue to rise to his bait. “Forget it. I’m going to
“Okay. Then why are you sitting around in your room?” He makes a flippant gesture, arching a brow.

“I’m waiting for him to let me know when he leaves.”

There’s a pause where Rashid must not be able to think of anything shitty enough to say. Or maybe he’s listening to her for once and keeping his comments to himself. They regard each other for a second, and Fatima debates if she should just tell him to leave.

“Well since you’re going to Grillby’s, did you know that apparently him and Deacon had a fling before he met Bo?” Rashid says, shrugging his shoulders.

“Um, no? Who told you that?” she blurts out, curious and a little guilty for being so interested.

“Frisk,” he says, smirking. “They mentioned it a few weeks ago. It’s why Deacon never wants to go to Grillby’s.”

“Oh my god, that makes so much more sense now,” she mutters under her breath. “I thought he just didn’t like the food.”

“He probably just finds the service a little lacking.” Rashid gives a lewd chuckle and Fatima shakes her head, doing her best to look scandalized.

She’s not though. She’s more worried she’s not going to be able to look Grillby in the eye anymore with this new tidbit of information. What must that have been like? Not that she can ever mention it to either of them. Ever.

Thankfully her phone goes off in her pocket, saving her from descending even further into that dangerous spiral of curiosity. Especially since it involves Deacon. And Deacon in rather… compromising positions. Oh geez, she needs to check her phone.

“Guess I should let you get to your date,” Rashid says, earning himself a weak glare. She knows he isn’t going to listen so Fatima doesn’t bother protesting again.

‘Headed your way. Be there soon.’

Fatima smiles. ‘OK. I’ll see you there. Don’t text and drive.’

Her brother makes an annoyed sound and when she looks up she catches sight of him right as he phases back through the wall to his own room. Morwenna used to get on their case about ‘wasting’ magic, but that was just asinine. Rashid even told her so. Eventually she backed off, but Fatima thinks it still sort of bothers her. Years —no, decades — of restricting herself and the other members of the Literatum has beaten that habit into her brain. She and Grant both share that mentality. Deacon, Vanessa, and Maria have slowly grown more accustomed to embracing their magic. Deacon especially. She caught him catching a bug inside of a bubble a couple months ago just because it was bothering him. She’s not so sure about Howard. He’s the only one that still lives off-mountain because of his job and his daughters’ school, and has to be more careful.

‘Red light. I can pick you up?’

‘I can take the bus.’

Fatima grabs her small, crossbody purse and shrugs into it, opening her bedroom door like a
normal human being. Morwenna is sitting at the dining room table, plugging away at something on her laptop. She looks up as Fatima enters the room, giving her a half-smile as she takes in her outfit.

“Going out?” Morwenna asks, her attention flicking between her and the computer. She seems distracted.

“Yeah, meeting up with Chris for lunch,” she says, curling one hand around the strap of her purse. It feels strange still, checking in with someone. Someone who seems to care.

“Do you need a ride?” She’s still typing as she talks, whatever she’s doing is probably important.

“No, it’s okay,” Fatima says, forcing a polite smile. She glances towards the door. “You’re busy, I was just going to take the bus.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind.”

“Really, I’m fine.” And she is. She doesn’t need any help, she can manage getting there on her own. There’s no need to bother Morwenna, or impose. She tries not to let her discomfort show on her face.

“Okay,” she says, her attention falling back down to the laptop. “Well, call me if you need a ride back home. You don’t have to take the bus, Fatima.”

“Okay, Mom. I’ll let you know,” Fatima says, trying to feign annoyance to deflect. But instead she feels an uncomfortable twist in the pit of her stomach, realizing what she just said.

Morwenna notices it too, because there’s a moment where her head jerks up and they look at each other. She’s startled, definitely taken aback, and it takes her just a bit too long to rearrange her expression into something neutral. Like she hadn’t noticed the awkwardness that word had caused between them.

“I’ve got to get going or I’ll miss the bus—”

“Fatima—”

“Bye.”

Turning on her heel and hurrying for the door, she slips through with her magic instead of letting it slow her down. She just needs to get away. (She can do that now, she’s not trapped anymore. She can go anywhere she wants.) That was just weird and awful and… Fatima shakes her head and focuses instead on following the sidewalk to the end of their road.

Woodside is built more like a typical city suburb, the houses set closer together and more uniform. With the majority of the residents being human (mages, especially), they constructed something familiar. Just from looking at it, no one would ever suspect that there was anything extraordinary about the people here. Just a neighborhood with people and families…

Her parents would never have been able to afford someplace nice like this.

She only has to wait a few minutes at the bus stop. The Busperson gives her a friendly nod as she climbs up the steps and takes an empty seat between a group of human and monsters kids and a coiled, serpentine monster staring out the window. The ride itself is noisy with chatter, which she prefers to silence. It’s easier to feel like she has some privacy with her thoughts when there’s a crowd to get lost in.
There’s a handful of stops between Woodside and Mountainside, so it takes about fifteen minutes to get there. The pack of kids piles out of their seats first, taking the lead off the bus with her trailing after them, but as she reaches the front she hears the deliberate sound of a throat clearing.

Hesitating, Fatima glances over at the Busperson. They’re looking at her, she thinks.

“He will be beneath you,” they say, humming to themselves. The words are spoken in a sing-songy voice, unsettling enough to make her freeze in her tracks.

“What?” she asks, gripping the handrail.

“Staying or going, dear, I’ve got a schedule to keep,” the Busperson says in that same musical cadence. She wonders if she just misheard before.

Either way the Busperson is watching her and she can’t just stand here. She hurries down the steps and the door snaps shut behind her. What was that all about?

“Hey, Teemz!”

She jumps at the sound of her nickname, chastising herself for being so anxious as she turns towards the voice. Chris is walking over to her from the parking lot beside Grillby’s, raising his whole arm in an enthusiastic wave. It’s enough to make her smile and forget that business with the Busperson.

He’s just how she remembers him. Tall and about twice her size (she and Rashid were always sort of short and thin), he pushes his long brown hair out of his face and over his shoulder, letting the piercings in his eyebrow and his ears catch the light. His gray jeans look new but his Pink Floyd shirt definitely isn’t. That scruffy almost-beard still covers his jawline and chin, and he gives her a big, beaming grin.

Her wave in return is nowhere near as showy, more of a raise of her hand and wiggle of her fingers. But Chris doesn’t seem to mind. He just comes right up to her and reaches out to touch her shoulder. She glances towards the gesture, not sure of what to do, then realizes too late that maybe he was trying to see if he could hug her. Maybe. God, she’s not really sure.

But before it gets awkward Chris hooks his hands on his jeans and does this casual sort of flap with his elbows. “You look great! Was the ride over okay?”

“Uh, yeah,” she quickly lies, shrugging. “You know, just a bus ride.”

“Cool, cool…”

There’s a pause where she glances up at him and he looks down at her and—

“You look great too!” Fatima blurts out, realizing she hadn’t reciprocated his compliment. Why does this feel so awkward all of a sudden? It’s just Chris!

His smile turns a little shy, tucking his hair behind his ear and glancing away. He chuckles. “Thanks. Did you, um, want to go inside? I’m starving.”

She takes a step towards the restaurant and he follows suit at her side. “Did you skip breakfast again?” she teases. This is easier. This is a conversation they’ve had before.

“Uh…”
“Me too,” she says, smiling.

He laughs. “So this is more like brunch, then.”

“Nothing says brunch like burgers and fries. Though, now I’m thinking brunch, and pancakes …”

Chris slows his steps, jerking his thumb back towards his car. “Do you want pancakes instead? We can—”

“No, no, come on,” she says, pinching the side of his shirt between her fingers and giving a weak tug. “We’re already here.”

He smiles and nods and the corner of Fatima’s mouth quirks up in response. She appreciates the offer, she really does, but he’s just being silly. Reaching for the door, she pulls it open and Chris holds it until she’s inside, following after her.

It’s not very busy, which isn’t surprising for a weekday. Catching Grillby’s eye from where he’s standing behind the counter, Fatima gives him a little wave and leads Chris over to an empty booth. She tries not to think about Grillby and Deacon, even as the thoughts surge to the surface of her mind, taunting her. Maybe she would have been better off not knowing.

“You okay?” Chris asks, looking at her from across the table, settling into his seat.

Fatima blinks. “Huh? Oh, yeah,” she says, her cheeks feeling warm. She wonders if he can tell. “Why?”

“You just had this funny look on your face,” he says. Chris rubs at the scruff on his chin, glancing away.

“Sorry, it’s just been a weird morning,” she admits, feeling guilty all of a sudden. She’s not sure why. Ticking off the events of the day so far in her mind, she settles on the one she’s willing to talk about. “Morwenna was doing this, like, hovering thing? She was asking me if I needed a ride here, and just…”

“Acting worried about you?” he offers.

“Yeah, and it’s just, like, I don’t need her to do that. I’m twenty-two, it’s not like I’m fresh out of child-soldier camp anymore,” she says, rolling her eyes and frowning down at her hands where she has them pressed flat to the table. “So I did what whole ‘okay Mom’ thing, as a joke, and it got weird.” Gritting her teeth, Fatima shakes her head. “Then I bailed.”

“Yikes,” Chris says.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I mean, she’s sorta like your mom? Kinda?” Fatima looks up at him sharply and he winces, shrugging his broad shoulders high enough to brush his ears. “I mean, not really, just… I’m sure she cares about you. You’ve been with her for five years.”

She catches herself before she points out that she’d been with Avery Fletcher for seven years, and that didn’t mean he cared a single fucking bit about any of them. But that’s not a fair comparison, Morwenna is a thousand times better than Avery could have ever hoped to be, and she knows that’s not what Chris was getting at. So instead Fatima makes a noncommittal noise, thankful when Grillby chooses that moment to step up to their table.
The fire elemental’s face crinkles into a smile, nodding to both of them. Neither of them are strangers to this place, but he seems surprised to see them together. Then he gives them a questioning look, gesturing towards the door.

Chris doesn’t seem to understand what he’s asking, casting Fatima a confused glance.

“It’s just us,” Fatima says, smiling as Grillby gives a quick nod in understanding. “How’s Cindy? Is she off today?”

His niece has been working here the entire time she’d known him. As far as Fatima can tell, she’s going to end up taking over the business whenever Grillby decides to hand it over. She hopes that’s not for a long time.

Grillby nods. “She’s been working too much,” he says quietly.

“Sounds like she takes after you,” Chris chimes in, smiling.

That makes him laugh.

They place their orders and Grillby heads off to the kitchen, leaving them alone again. Chris and Fatima look at each other, both hesitating. He tucks his hair behind his ear and she taps lightly at the table with her fingers, fidgeting.

“So I guess you were gonna tell me—”

“So how’s work been—?”

“No sorry, you—”

“What were you—?”

Chris’s face breaks out into a huge, embarrassed smile, gesturing to her with one hand and rubbing his cheek with the other. He looks a little pink. “You first,” he says.

“I was just asking how work’s been,” Fatima says, fighting against that anxious twist in her gut at that disastrous start of conversation.

“Oh!” His expression brightens. “I mean, just the same shit. Getting more caught up on the instrument repairs though, so that’s something. Ruth’s been getting on my case about the backlog, and that’s… not fun.”

“She still not having any luck getting that job she wants?”

Chris shakes his head. “There’s not a lot of hiring going on for firefighters. She says there’s just not enough positions for the people certified, at least not in the area.” He makes a pathetic sound, his face falling. “And I think she’s taking her frustration out on me. Zane’s just isn’t enough for her. I had hoped that once she finished her training and shit that she’d be able to go…”

“I’m sorry,” she says, unsure of what else to say. She’s never been good at this stuff. The comforting stuff.

“Oh, fuck, I mean, it’s not your fault,” he says quickly, holding up his hands. “I’m just bitching. It’s fine, really. It’s just hard to feel like the assistant manager when someone who’s supposed to be beneath you is bossing you around… And I can’t really tell her she’s wrong because technically there’s stuff I could be doing. She acts more like the manager than me.”
“But Zane promoted you,” she says, frowning.

Chris lets out a humorless laugh. “Yeah, because we all thought that Ruth would be leaving to go save people. Fight fires. Do the shit she was trained to do. Not do inventory on twenty-year-old records and rent out instruments to middle-schoolers. If she had any intentions of staying on long-term she would have gotten the position, not me.”

“I’m sure that’s not true…” She gives him a sympathetic look, wishing she knew something better to say.

He looks at her, something sad passing over his face for a second before he shakes his head and smiles. “Sorry, we didn’t come here for me to whine to you. This isn’t fun for either of us. You were going to tell me more about magic.”

That’s true, she was. That’s why they’re here after all.

So she goes over the basics. The differences between monster and human magic, the limitations by color, how it feels to her when she taps into that well of energy within her Soul. He’s a good audience, listening carefully and asking her questions, genuinely interested in what she has to say. It feels nice to have his undivided attention.

The talk goes through lunch, and she barely notices as another hour passes by after Grillby comes back around to refill their drinks and clear their plates. The topics of conversation shift from magic towards other things. TV shows, movies, things they’ve watched online. Video games, whatever they’ve been up to recently. Chris keeps asking her questions and she’s more than happy to answer, to tell him about what she’s been doing and seeing when she’s not on the computer playing WoW with him and the others.

By the time they realize it’s been almost two hours she’s got a list of games to play and more things to watch jotted down on her phone, things Chris thinks she’d like. (And they actually do sound like things she’d like, not just stuff that he likes that he’s trying to push onto her. She’s had that happen before.) Sometimes it feels like she’s still trying to catch up on almost a decade of pop culture that she missed. In a way, she is.

Fatima had refused his offer of a ride earlier, but when he asks her if he can take her home this time she doesn’t tell him no. He still has that BMW his parents bought him before he struck out on his own, though it’s starting to show its age. She doesn’t think it suits him very much, but knows that he really can’t afford a car payment right now. Maybe she should have argued with him more when he insisted on paying for her lunch.

Chris plays some Led Zeppelin and when Fatima reaches across the dash to turn up the volume his huge smile makes her laugh. He looks ridiculous, but she’s glad that he’s happy. Nodding his head in time with the music, he rests his arm on the back of her seat.

When they get back to her house she doesn’t expect it when he cuts the engine and unbuckles his seatbelt. A weird, fluttery feeling makes her stomach swim as she gets out of the car and he walks with her up to the door.

“You didn’t have to walk me,” she says weakly, fidgeting with the strap of her purse. “I promise I wouldn’t get lost.”

Chris shrugs his shoulders, rubbing the side of his neck. “Yeah, well, it didn’t feel right just pulling up the driveway and being all like, ‘okay, get out’ so…”
She laughs, shrugging back. “Fair enough. This was fun, though.”

“Yeah! We should do this again. I really liked getting to do something just us for a change,” he says. His smile seems a little uncertain, almost nervous. Which is making her nervous.

“Me too,” she says, partially because she feels like it’s what she’s supposed to say, and also because she means it.

“Sweet.”

There’s a pause, a heavy, awkward pause where she’s standing next to her front door, he’s looking down at her, and neither of them seem sure of what’s supposed to happen next. She’s supposed to go inside, right? That’s why they’re here. Then he reaches and touches her elbow and it’s a simple gesture but it’s easy enough for her to read.

Fatima leans in and hugs him, and he leans down to hug her back, wrapping her up gently in his big arms. He’s always been big, but hugging him makes her feel small. Not in a bad way, not in a weak way. Just small. Her cheek brushes against his and she feels the scrape of his beard against her skin and smells something like sandalwood now that she’s closer.

She’s not sure if it lasted too long or not long enough, but then Chris is pulling away, definitely a little redder than he was a moment ago. He also can’t seem to stop smiling.

“Maybe next time I can pick you up? That way you don’t have to take the bus,” he says a little clumsily, pushing his hair out of his face and catching a bit of it on the piercing in his eyebrow. He fixes it and Fatima tries not to let the nervous energy inside of her turn into a laugh.

“Yeah, okay,” she says.

“Okay. Uh, then this is you,” he says, pointing at the door. Then he jerks a thumb back at his car. “And that’s me, so I’ll let you go. I’ll see you online tonight?”

“Yeah,” she says again, feeling at a loss for anything else to say. She can’t stop smiling either.

“Cool. Sweet. Then, uh, later Teemz,” he says, taking a couple slow steps backwards, glancing over his shoulder to make sure he doesn’t bump into anything.

“Bye Chris,” she says, covering her mouth as she laughs when he finally turns around to look at where he’s going.

When she unlocks the front door to let herself inside, she takes one last look towards his car to see him standing by his car, watching her. Making sure she gets in before he leaves. She smiles and he smiles back and gives her a little wave. She ducks through the door, feeling giddy and anxious and a little confused.

The second she turns the lock she hears the sound of footsteps behind her. Deliberate footsteps, because if he wanted to be sneaky, she wouldn’t be able to hear that Rashid was there. “So, how was lunch?” he asks. When she turns around to look at him he’s standing there with his arms crossed over his chest, eyebrow raised in question and a stubborn look on his face.

Fatima fidgets with her hair. “...I think it was a date?”

He rolls his eyes, pointing at her with both hands. “I fucking told you so,” he says, then turns around and walks away.
Gaster is doing a very good job of looking like he’s busy, pouring over the small stack of blueprints that Sans brought home for him yesterday, but you can tell his heart’s not in it. His eyes keep flicking over towards the clock, counting down the minutes until Papyrus is due to arrive.

He’s still got another hour, which means you have another hour of feeling just as antsy over this whole reunion. Between Sans and Gaster and even Papyrus, you’re doing your best to prepare yourself for the worst and you’re just not really sure what the worst might entail. You’re not the biggest fan of springing this on Papyrus as soon as he gets home, even under the guise of a ‘surprise’, but you understand Sans’s reasoning. Even Gaster accepted it.

You just want everything to go well. For everyone’s sake.

“Do you think he knows he’s looking at that page upside-down?” Deacon mutters under his breath, stealing a glance at Gaster from his seat next to you on the couch. Your father-in-law is hunched over the coffee table, having insisted that he’d rather do his work with the rest of you rather than somewhere private.

“Is it?” you ask, squinting across the room as you try to get a look for yourself. “Honestly I tried looking at some of them and they might as well be in hieroglyphics…”

“No idea. Just seems like something he’d do,” he says. You roll your eyes at him. “It could be upside-down. How would anyone know?”

“*He* would. He wrote them.”

Deacon makes a noncommittal noise. “And they’re supposed to be for that busted up machine in the shed? The one that opened the door to the Font in the first place?”

You nod, glancing away from Gaster and over at Deacon. He’s picking at his now-peeling sunburn, but abruptly stops the second your eyes narrow and he sees the look on your face. “The machine and the Core. And I think Sans said something about some kind of… extractor? I’m not sure.”

“Hmm.” Deacon looks down at his phone, frowning as you catch sight of him flicking through some messages.

“You okay?” you ask, resting a hand on his arm.

He glances over at you, hesitating for a second before nodding. “Yeah, just… frustrated. This whole thing with Bo’s work threw off her entire schedule for the week. This new hire just stopped showing up after three days and now she’s having to cover all his shifts.”

“You mentioned that yesterday… He still never showed up?”
Deacon shakes his head. “Nope. And it’s been two days, so she’s not expecting him to come back. It’s not unusual, Bo says they end up losing like a quarter of the servers in their first week. It’s just annoying as hell. He could at least have bothered to say something!” With a frustrated sound in the back of his throat, he makes a dismissive gesture. “Well, whatever. She’s getting the schedule sorted out, but for now she’s stuck there.”

“Is Bo upset?”

“About the extra work? Not really. I think she missed it all, being on vacation,” he says, with an exasperated but affectionate look on his face. “She’s more upset about the guy —I don’t remember his name— not showing. The last time she saw him he was pretty stressed out, and you know her. She’s just wondering if she could have helped him more. But he’s not answering any calls from the restaurant so there’s nothing she can do.”

“He’s not answering the phone?” you ask, arching a brow.

Deacon arches his own right back at you. “If you walked out on a job, would you want to the boss you quit on? He probably feels like an ass. Or he should. Well, whatever. They’ve never had a problem getting new people.”

You’re about to say something but you’re cut off by the sound of two sets of footsteps on the stairs, descending into the foyer. Glancing in their direction, you catch a glimpse of Frisk and Asriel right as they slip into the kitchen.

“Hey, what are you two doing?” you call out, sitting up a little straighter and craning your neck.

There’s a guilty pause. “Just getting a snack?” Frisk replies hesitantly.

You push up from the couch with a frustrated sound, heading towards them. “I don’t think so. We’ve got less than two hours until dinner.”

The kids are standing half in the pantry when you find them, a bag of chips in Asriel’s hands when they turn to look at you. Asriel won’t quite meet your eyes and Frisk has a stubborn look on their face.

“Mooooom,” Frisk whines as you pluck the bag away and shoo them away from the food. “We’re hungry.”

“You’ll eat plenty of dinner later,” you reply, shutting the pantry and giving them both a stern look. They start to shuffle off towards the stairs. “And don’t bother going back up to your room, your father will be home soon and then your uncles won’t be long after that.”

Frisk lets out a harsh sigh that has you gritting your teeth, wondering to yourself why they feel the need to make this harder than it has to be. Asriel follows after them as they head to the living room, hunching his shoulders in an attempt to make himself seem smaller. You bite your lip once they can’t see you, rubbing your forehead. As you resist the urge to copy Frisk’s annoyed sigh, you wonder if you’re being too bossy.

Following the two of them after a moment to gather yourself, you can’t help but notice the way that Asriel skirts around Gaster, going to flop in one of the bean bag chairs the kids use to play video games in. Frisk, on the other hand, seems curious about the blueprints. They hesitate beside the coffee table, stealing a not-so-subtle glance down at the papers. As you go to retake your seat next to Deacon, Gaster looks up to catch Frisk’s annoyed sigh, you wonder if you’re being too bossy.

“Would you like me to explain anything?” Gaster asks, giving them a patient smile.
There’s a pause where Frisk’s eyes dart over to where Asriel’s waiting, looking a bit sour, you think. They shake their head. “Maybe later,” they say, then go over to flop into the tiny space left in Asriel’s chair.

Asriel, startled, lets out a strangled bleat of protest, throwing out a leg to catch himself as Frisk elbows him to the side to make more room. “There’s another chair!” he says, but his complaint sounds weak. After a moment he willingly scoots over and lets Frisk settle in next to him.

Gaster is watching the two of them, just like you are. He sits up straight, pushing away from the coffee table and the paperwork, folding his hands in his lap. “Asriel, I hope that you are doing well?”

The kids, who were just about to look at something on Asriel’s phone, look up in unison with twin expressions of surprise and confusion. They glance at each other (the perfect timing of this motion would be eerie if you hadn’t been around them for the last six years) and then back at Gaster.

“He’s fine,” Frisk says.

“Yeah,” Asriel agrees, dropping his gaze back to his phone.

You just do your best to ignore the annoyed feeling in the back of your mind, resisting the urge to tell them they ought to be more polite.

“What happened in the Font left you with no ill effects?” he presses, either unaware or uninterested in the cold-shoulder he’s being given.

Asriel’s hand goes to his chest, a furrow forming between his brows as he leans a little closer to Frisk. “I’m fine,” he insists, hunching his shoulders.

Frisk says something to him, too quiet for you to hear, pressing in close to his side. But Gaster doesn’t seem to be getting the hint, looking like he’s ready to say something else. You open your mouth to say something, but—

“So, Az,” Deacon says, maybe a little louder than necessary. The kids look at him, bringing back that startled and confused look again. Like they’re surprised that anyone is actually talking to them. There’s a moment where Deacon seems at a loss, more interested in interrupting than having anything to say. Leaning forward he rests his arms on his knees. “You, uh, looking forward to school starting up soon?”

“...I guess?” Asriel answers. “Are you?”

Deacon shrugs. “Sure. I mean, I didn’t become a teacher because I hate it. And I’m pretty sure that I get to have two of my favorite students again this year.”

Asriel’s mouth twitches just a little, and he seems to relax just a bit. “Wait, you mean we get to be in your class?”

“Oh, you thought I was talking about you two? I meant Bonnet and Kid, but I guess you guys are okay.”

“Hey!” Frisk protests, which just makes Deacon laugh.

“Yes, I get to teach you two again this year,” he says, smiling. “You’re seventh-graders now, officially in my age range. No more little kid history. Now you get to learn all the horrible stuff your mom used to yell at me for telling you.”
You roll your eyes, giving him a firm shove. “I’m just glad they got you away from the elementary school kids.”

“You and me both!” he agrees. You snort.

The tension is gone from the room, and for that you’re grateful. He keeps the kids entertained with a quick runthrough of some of the things he has planned for them this year but soon enough he’s taking looks at the clock as it creeps closer and closer to when Sans should be getting home. Their conversation trails off and Frisk and Asriel go back into their own little world, huddled together in their bean bag chair. You watch them for a moment, smiling as Frisk rests their head on Asriel’s shoulder while they watch something on his phone.

“Well, I should get going,” Deacon finally says, sighing and pushing up to his feet. “I told Bo I’d do some stuff around the house at some point today, and you guys have got an, uh… interesting night ahead of you.”

You give him a weak smile, following after him as he heads for the door. “That’s one way to put it.”

“Tell me how it goes?” He drapes his arm over your shoulders leaning against you as you step into the foyer.

“You know I will,” you say with a one-armed hug, tipping your head against his shoulder for just a second before he releases you.

It’s at that moment that Sans appears in the entryway, hands in his pockets and a startled look on his face as his arrival is announced with the quiet rush of displaced air and a faint blue glow. You and Deacon both jump, grabbing at each other for just a second before you both realize what just happened.

“Shit,” you breathe, anxious laughter bubbling out of you as the sudden jolt of adrenaline starts to fizzle away. “Sorry hun, you scared me.”

“didn’t think anybody’d be standing right here,” he says, glancing between the two of you. His eyes settle on Deacon. “what’re you doing here?”

“Well fuck you too, buddy,” Deacon mutters, resting his hands on his hips and fixing Sans with a flat look.

Sans, grinning, ignores him and slides up to you, wrapping his arms around your waist and pulling you to him. “hey, babe,” he says, tipping his head up to nuzzle your cheek. You kiss him in return, hugging him back. “how’s everything?”

“Well,” you say quietly. “Gaster’s getting nervous, I think.”

“hm,” is his only response. He looks at Deacon. “bud, you staying?”

“As much as I enjoy a good show, I think I’ll leave this one to direct relatives,” Deacon says, shifting around the two of you to head for the door. “Say hi to Pap and Mettaton for me.”

“We will,” you tell him, and with that Deacon heads home.

Sans’s smile is a little more rigid than it was a second ago as you stand alone in the foyer. You’re close enough to the door that you’re out of sight of the living room, so taking advantage of the relative privacy, you rest your forehead against his and cradle his skull in your hands. He closes his
eyes, drawing in a long, slow breath. You can feel the anxiousness in him, in his body and the way that he’s gripped your sides and isn’t letting you go.

“I love you,” you tell him, stroking his cheekbones with your thumbs.

“love you too,” he murmurs, squeezing you.

“I know you’re nervous.” He huffs, but doesn’t disagree. “But I’m sure everything will be fine.”

“this is gonna be just like deacon all over again.”

Whatever you were expecting him to say, that wasn’t it. You pull away far enough so you can see him, brow furrowing in confusion. “What?”

Sans grimaces, glancing away. “i’m gonna be the asshole here. papyrus is gonna waltz in, be totally fine with our dad just appearing out of thin air, and i’m gonna be the only one who isn’t okay with this. i’m the bad guy. again.”

“Sans, you’re not the bad guy,” you say, dropping your hands to his shoulders and gripping them. “You’re allowed to work through this in your own time…”

“i’m not treating him like family.” He shakes his head, reaching up and covering your hand with his. “you’ve been nicer to him than i have.”

“I’m not sure that comparison is fair to you,” you say, a playful smile tugging at your lips. “I’m nicer to everyone than you are.”

A soft laugh escapes him against his will, giving you a mildly annoyed look. “yeah, ok. but i’m just….” He sighs, leaning forward to rest his forehead against your sternum. You cup the back of his head, pressing your cheek against him. “i’m overthinking it. i’m circling back around over and over about things i can’t remember and have no way of knowing if they’re true and it’s just… i wish i knew. and he wants to take the blame for that and god knows i’m too willing to give it to him.”

“But you’ve been trying,” you say, hoping you sound soothing. “Sans, that’s worth a lot and I think Gaster sees that. I know I do. And I don’t think anyone thinks you’re being the bad guy.”

Sans grumbles into your chest, sounding more like Frisk in the middle of a good pout than a grown adult. But you know that sometimes he needs to just let himself sulk. You do the same thing. “will you yell at me if i do end up making an ass out of myself?”

“You know I will,” you say. You kiss the top of his head. “Just don’t beat yourself up over this. You don’t need to be like Papyrus. You don’t need to be happy and enthusiastic and accepting like we’re sure he’s gonna be. You just need to be Sans.”

“thanks, babe.”

“You’re welcome. Now come on, if anyone has been less happy with Gaster than you it’s Asriel, and I’ve left him and Frisk alone with your dad long enough to make me worry,” you mutter, giving him a wry smile as he pulls back to look at you.

“wait, asriel is—?”

He’s cut off mid-thought by the sound of a car door slamming shut, followed by the muffled but still distinct sound of Papyrus’s voice outside.
“IT’S SO NICE TO BE BACK IN EBOTT! I WONDER WHAT SANS’ S SURPRISE IS!”

You and Sans stare at each other, and the look of resignation on his face is enough to make you kiss him between his eyes in an attempt to comfort him. You take in a deep breath. “Well, here we go.”
It’s more than just Sans worrying about being the bad guy. Sure, he doesn’t want a repeat performance of what happened with Deacon, like he said. But what he’s afraid of is that once Papyrus is here, once he meets Gaster, is that he’s not going to be allowed to be angry at him anymore.

He’s kept it to himself, that anger. He’s kept it close and quiet, buried under the mess of everything else he’s been feeling the past few days (less than a week!) since Gaster tumbled into his life. But it’s been there for him to fall back to. He can hold him accountable for the accident instead of himself, the person responsible for so much pain and confusion and doubt…

It’s unfair, and it’s beneath him, and that’s why he never told you. Because you’d tell him as much and he just wanted to enjoy it while he could.

As you head to the door to usher in the inevitable, Sans catches movement out of the corner of his eye. He glances in the direction of the living room, half-expecting to see Gaster lurking there, anxious to see Papyrus. Instead it’s the kids, Frisk holding onto the edge of the entryway with Asriel hovering over their shoulder.

He hesitates for a second before beckoning them over. “c’mon, come say hi before this all goes… however it goes,” he finishes lamely, shrugging.

That’s all he gets the chance to say before Papyrus makes his grand entrance.

“HOPE! I’M SO HAPPY TO SEE YOU AGAIN! IT’S BEEN WEEKS AND WEEKS AND I HOPE THAT SANS DIDN’T SLACK OFF WHILE I WAS GONE. SANS! THERE YOU ARE, DID YOU STAY BUSY?” He doesn’t waste any time the moment he’s through the door, wrapping you up in a hug and lifting you off your feet, leaving you clinging to his shoulders and laughing despite everything.

When he sets you down Sans gets a good look at his brother’s outfit. He’s wearing bright pink flip-flops and orange, floral shorts that are probably swim trunks. His Hawaiian shirt is in a perfectly clashing shade of dark green, and the hibiscuses don’t match the design on his shorts. Last but not least is the wilted and slightly crumpled lei around his neck, and the giant aviator sunglasses that are held on by an elastic strap behind his skull.

Honestly, he’s worn more eccentric things.

Mettaton follows silently after him, an affectionate and indulgent look on his face as he watches the reunion. He’s been with Papyrus long enough now to know when it’s best to just stand back and let him go, and this is one of those times.

“yeah, you know me. always working hard,” Sans says, giving Papyrus a lazy grin.

“THAT IS EXACTLY THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT I KNOW ABOUT YOU,” Papyrus says,
stooping down and ignoring Sans’s sound of protest as he hoists him off his feet just like he did to you. “I HOPE YOU WEREN’T TOO LONELY WITHOUT ME HERE. HAWAII WAS VERY NICE, BUT IT’S VERY FAR AWAY FROM HOME!”

As Sans is lowered back down to the ground after a fierce, bony hug, he doesn’t let his brother go. Instead he hugs him just a little bit longer and says, “I missed you, bro. I’m glad you’re back.”

“I… I MISSED YOU TOO, BROTHER,” he says, voice wavering for just a second. “WE’LL GET SOMETHING CLOSER NEXT TIME! TRAVELING SO FAR IS NICE SOMETIMES, BUT—OH, FRISK YOU MUST HAVE GROWN AN ENTIRE FOOT WHILE I WAS GONE!”

Distracted by the kids, Papyrus lets him go and hurries to wrap his arms around Frisk and Asriel, asking them how their summer was and continuing to comment on their heights. Sans takes a quick glance towards the living room, checking to see if Gaster has made an appearance yet (he hasn’t) before looking to you for reassurance. But your attention isn’t on him.

“Hope, darling, you look wonderful as always,” Mettaton purrs softly, beaming at you and wrapping you up in a much gentler hug than the one Papyrus gave you. “I trust everyone is doing well?”

You glance at Sans for just a moment before giving the robot a smile. “Yeah, you know, everyone’s fine… And I see you’re still a good liar.”

Laughing, Mettaton releases you and pats your arm. “Never. Though I’m a little shocked that Papyrus hasn’t instantly hounded you about that surprise, he’s been on and on about it for the last three days. I’m sure he’ll remember soon enough.”

Your expression falters just a little. “Mettaton, listen, about that—”

“SANS, I KNOW YOU MUST BE DYING TO SHOW ME WHAT YOUR SURPRISE IS! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, HAVE DECIDED THAT YOU SHOULD GO AHEAD AND GET IT OVER WITH, THAT WAY YOU DON’T HAVE TO CONTAIN YOURSELF ANY LONGER,” Papyrus blurts out, one arm around Frisk’s shoulders as he rests the other on his hip. Bright orange sparkles dance around his eyes, and it looks like he’s having trouble keeping still.

It hits him, not for the first time, that Gaster really must be their father. He’s seen that look of eager anticipation on his face, those silly glittering sparkles that neither of them seem to consciously control. Not to mention the blasters… But all this time he’s been looking for traces of himself in Gaster, when really it’s been Papyrus all along.

Somehow that makes this next part a little easier.

“Yeah, ok,” Sans says, gesturing towards the living room. “C’mon, lemme introduce you.”

“INTRODUCE ME TO WHO?”

He doesn’t say. Instead he leads the way into the other room, hands shoved into his pockets, his shoulders set with stubborn resignation. He feels your hand on his arm, and having you beside him is a small comfort. But there’s not much that you can do to help. The situation is out of his control now. He’s set the gears in motion and how he has to hope that everything turns out as best as it possibly can.

Gaster is waiting in the center of the room, fidgeting with the sleeves of his dark red turtleneck, his eyes narrowed to tight, anxious points of light. He looks up as everyone enters the room, his focus immediately seeking Papyrus out. A wobbly smile curves his mouth, taking in every bit of him in a
hungry way that Sans isn’t sure how to feel about.

Everyone is quiet. Papyrus looks at Gaster, confused, before glancing at Sans and them back to their father again. He clears his throat loudly and unnecessarily before adopting a bright smile. “HELLO! I’M NOT SURE WHO YOU ARE OR WHY YOU’RE MY SURPRISE, BUT IT’S NICE TO MEET YOU!” he says, crossing the room with long strides and holding out his hand.

Sans is sure that Gaster is going to crack and hug Papyrus just like he did to him when they first met. He’s braced for it, waiting for it to happen. But it doesn’t. Instead Gaster looks down at Papyrus’s hand, takes it in his own, and clasps it tightly. “It is so good to see you,” Gaster says, his voice thick with emotion kept tenuously in check.

Surprising himself, Sans walks over to them, leaving you behind with Mettaton and the kids. Papyrus looks at him, clearly confused but doing his best not to let it show. “bro, this is… uh…” He hesitates, fishing a hand out of his jacket to gesture at Gaster and run his fingers across the back of his skull. “this is our dad.”

Papyrus stares at him, that confused look not going anywhere. Then he turns to Gaster, tipping his head down to look at his hand still held in his grip. “...ARE YOU SURE? I THOUGHT WE DIDN’T HAVE A DAD.” His voice is too flat, too emotionless.

“We just can’t remember, it’s… it’s complicated,” Sans says, grimacing, glancing between the two of them and suddenly unsure of how to make this better. But he knows that he wants it to be better. “i can try to explain later.”

Papyrus’s eye sockets narrow just a fraction, brow furrowing in concentration as he studies Gaster a little closer.

“I’m sorry, Papyrus, I know this is difficult,” Gaster says, patting the back of his hand. “It’s quite a lot to believe—"

“I BELIEVE SANS,” he says, with an intensity that startles them both. Sans drops his hand back to his side, feeling a little in awe of his brother’s devotion. “IF HE SAYS THAT YOU’RE OUR DAD, THEN IT MUST BE TRUE. HE MAY LIKE TO PLAY A LOT OF JOKES, BUT HE WOULDN’T JOKE ABOUT THIS! SANS, DO YOU KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS?”

Sans can only stare blankly up at the sudden swing in Papyrus’s mood and the huge grin that brightens his expression. “uh, no? what’s it mean?”

“IT MEANS WE GET TO MAKE UP FOR ALL THAT LOST TIME! WE CAN DO ALL THOSE DAD THINGS LIKE… UH… CATCH AND…” He hesitates. “SANS, YOU’RE A DAD! WHAT DAD THINGS CAN WE DO?”

A strange blend of relief and reservation wash over him, catching him by surprise and leaving him with his go-to grin and an awkward laugh. “i’m sure we’ll figure something out,” he says, shrugging and glancing at Gaster.

He’s got tears shining in his eyes and he looks so happy. Sans might not have been able to do this for him, to make him feel welcome or wanted, but Papyrus has. Guilt and self-centered bitterness is added to the already confusing jumble of emotions he’s refusing to acknowledge, a pile to sort through later. There’s too much to feel and no time to spend on it. Not right now.

“I’m not sure how well I’d do with catch,” Gaster admits, apologetic through his smile as he tries not to cry. “But I’m here for you now. For both of you.”
“THIS IS SO EXCITING!” Papyrus blurs out, freeing his hand and wrapping Gaster up in a tight hug. “PLEASE DON’T CRY!”

But it’s too late because Gaster already is. Sans takes a hasty swipe at his own face and glances back at you in time to see the dark look on Mettaton’s face as he pulls you out of the room.

Mettaton catches your eye the moment Papyrus breaks away from him to go greet Gaster. You’re not sure what he’s thinking, though you have a good idea from your own first impressions of this whole situation. But what you think at first is just confusion and a desire not to interrupt turns into clear displeasure as his face twists into a frown and he crosses his arms over his chest. He keeps looking from his husband and his family over towards you, and a creeping sense of guilt twists in your stomach.

Finally, once it’s clear he’s had enough, he jerks his chin towards the kitchen, waiting for your little nod of understanding before reaching for your wrist and leading you away.

“I’m just supposed to believe that their father just appeared out of thin air?” Mettaton demands the moment he has you alone, whirling around to face you as you duck into the dining room. He rests his hands on his hips, arching a perfect brow. “Have you suspected that perhaps he’s lying to try and manipulate his way into this family?”

“He’s not lying,” you say, wincing up at him and folding your arms over your stomach. “Do you honestly think Sans would let him get anywhere near Papyrus if we didn’t believe him?”

“Oh, I’m not ready to even talk about Sans yet,” he snaps, expression pulling into a deep frown.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” you ask defensively.

“How can you be so sure that this person is who he says he is?” he retorts, ignoring your question.

“I’ve spent a lot of time with him. And talked with him, and just…” You fish around for some kind of concrete evidence, giving a helpless gesture as you turn away from him. “He’s got those blaster skulls. The ones Sans and Papyrus can make. And I know he looks sort of off but he’s definitely skeletal.”

Mettaton taps at his waist, his expression relaxing just a bit. Tossing his hair out of his face, he lets out a heavy sigh. “How much time? How long has he been here? Obviously the past three days.”

“…Almost a week,” you admit, feeling that stab of guilt again as Mettaton’s eyes widen.

“And Sans thought calling this… this ambush a surprise was the right idea?” He leans forward, jabbing a finger towards the living room. “For someone who is supposed to be so damn smart, your husband sure is an idiot sometimes.”

“Hey,” you snap, holding up a hand and doing your best not to shoot him a nasty look. “He just thought he was doing what was best.”

“Oh, yes of course! That’s what Sans always does. What he thinks is best without consulting anyone else!”

“Mettaton…” As frustrated as you are, you know that Mettaton has every right to be just as upset. It’s why you’ve felt so guilty, realizing too late that you should have at least said something to him if not Papyrus himself.
“Don’t,” he says, balling his hand into a fist. “I know that Sans doesn’t respect my place in this family—”

“He does!”

“—but he should have said something to us. It’s not up to him to decide on things that affect everyone. Did you have any input on this?”

You open your mouth to reply but find yourself caught. He stares at you, waiting, until you force yourself to speak. “No…” you admit begrudgingly. “I left it up to Sans.”

“Because that’s how it always is,” he hisses. “And I’m not satisfied with letting him do what he thinks is best for Papyrus and I. I understand that they’re close, and that Sans is doing this because he honest to god cares about him. But he isn’t responsible for Papyrus’s well-being anymore. He hasn’t been for four years.”

“I know… Mettaton I should have told you. I didn’t even think about it,” you say, spreading your hands helplessly.

The anger melts off of Mettaton’s face, sighing and shaking his head as he folds up one of your hands between his. “I’m sorry, Hope. I’m not angry with you. This is… this is the final moment in a string of many that just… Sans needs to trust me to know how to help Papyrus. We need to work together instead of him making all these choices on his own. Choices that aren’t even ours to make, they should be going to Papyrus! I understand why he wouldn’t want to tell him while we were in the middle of the ocean, but... I would have liked to know about this ahead of time instead of getting caught entirely unaware.”

“I know…”

Mettaton gives you a tight smile, releasing your hand and crossing his arms over his chest. “Though I suppose worrying about Sans trying to be parental to Papyrus should be the least of my worries now that we have a father-in-law to worry about. How is he? How are you?”

“He’s fine, he’s…” You give him a weak smile in return, shrugging. “Gaster is very nice. It’s… Mettaton, it’s so complicated right now, but he’s just trying so hard to fit in. I’m sure you’ll get along just fine.”

“Yes, well, I do know how difficult it can be to find a place in this family,” he muses, arching a brow. You let out a clipped, awkward laugh.

“Well, then maybe you shouldn’t have tried to kill me.”

“Touché.”
Morwenna knows how people think of her and Grant. As she looks at him, sitting there in bed with the blankets pooled around his waist, staring off into space and lost in thought, she's reminded, as she always is, that she isn't in love with him. She *loves* him, but there's a difference. Between being *in* love and loving someone. How couldn't she after over thirty years of knowing him and trusting him and... She's not sure if some part of him is still in love with her, and she's not sure she wants to know.

She’s been spending too much time here. She’s certain the twins know by this point, even though she’s been lying to them. But they have a knack at picking up on things —at least Fatima does, Rashid sometimes when he’s paying attention— so Morwenna keeps getting the feeling that they’re all just dancing around the issue any time she gives them one of her excuses. Not to mention all the nights she’s been spending away from home.

He can’t come to her house. She can’t let him into her space, then this would feel too… real. That’s rule number one; this thing they’re doing has to stay here, in Grant’s house, nowhere else. It can’t leave this place.

But for now, for a little while, she can indulge herself in what they’ve built together here. Morwenna drapes herself across his shoulders, sliding her hands down his chest and resting her head alongside his. Grant’s head turns a little towards her as he reaches up to run his hands up and down her arms. His beard is bristly against her skin.

“What’s going on in that head of yours, Grant?” she asks him, tilting her head as his lips find her neck.

He makes a disinterested grunt, twisting to reach for her shoulder, trying to pull her around him. But she doesn’t go, keeping her place pressed against his back. “Nothing,” he finally says. “It’s nothing, come here.”

“It doesn’t sound like nothing,” she says, curiosity piqued. Morwenna crosses her arms around his neck, leaning away so she can try to get a look at his face. He’s giving her a frustrated frown. “What is it?”

Grant lets out a haggard sigh. “You want to know?”

“I asked you, didn’t I?”

“I’ve been thinking about what you told me earlier. About this Gaster and the Anathema.”

“Oh,” she says, brow furrowing. “Grant, we agreed, no *outside* talk—”
“You’re the one that asked,” he retorts, words sharp.

Morwenna tenses, and she’s certain he can feel it. He drops his hands away from her arms, letting her free herself from him and pull back. She settles next to him, wrapping her half of the blanket around herself. “Fine,” she says, studying his face. He looks agitated, and she wonders if whatever he has to say has been gnawing at him ever since they spoke about this in the first place. “Then tell me.”

“I don’t believe his story,” he says, jaw tensing as he glares at a spot on the wall, not looking at her. “It sounds like a load of bullshit. Yeah, we’re living in a world with monsters and magic, but another dimension? That’s taking it a step too far, Mors. All we’ve got is his word.”

She has to stop herself before she mentions Frisk and Asriel, that they’ve got three accounts to go off of that the Font is real. But Grant can’t know about them, she’d promised that she’d keep Frisk’s secret. But it’s times like these that her word feels constricting, backing her into a corner she has to struggle to get out of. If she could just tell him it would make this argument that much easier.

“I know it sounds like bullshit, but we need to consider that he might be telling the truth. If it would make you feel better, he can talk to Ingram—”

“That won’t work if he thinks he’s telling the truth.”

“Don’t interrupt me,” she snaps, eyes narrowing as he looks at her again. “I know how Vanessa’s magic works. So you think he’s crazy then?”

“All of this sounds crazy!” Grant spreads his hands, exasperated and confused. “Don’t you see it? The mages who put up the Barrier, locked away in another dimension and feeding on magic? That sounds just like some kind of bogeyman story monsters would come up with.”

“Well it’s not eating their magic. It’s eating ours. It’s making us weaker—”

“So he says.”

“Do you have a better explanation?” she demands, balling her hands into fists in the comforter around her, wishing that she was dressed, that she didn’t feel quite so vulnerable here in his room. This is why they had agreed not to talk about things here. This was supposed to be a safe place! “As we are now, seventy mages couldn’t piece together the Barrier let alone seven. We’ve been losing our magic by inches and barely even noticed until we had monsters to tell us what we’d lost. So if a monster has an explanation for that then I’m going to be pretty damn inclined to listen. Your stubbornness isn’t doing you any favors.”

“I don’t understand how you can buy into this so easily,” he mutters, scratching his beard with the rasp of fingers against coarse hair.

“I never said it was easy,” she grumbles back, seeing some of the heat die out of him. “But I trust Sans. And he thinks Gaster is telling the truth. I don’t have a reason to disagree.”

“You have too much faith in them.”

“You don’t have enough.”

“I lost my faith a long time ago,” he says, holding her gaze, his expression unreadable. She can see him pull back into that shell, the one she thinks he only lets down sometimes for her. When she gives him a chance. “You know that well enough.”
He might as well have added ‘because you took it from me’ because she can hear it unspoken, lying between them like a corpse. The remains of what they had been too long ago that lingered and festered and refused to leave. There’s a moment where anger flares up in her chest, where she wants to spit his words back at him and deny it and lay the blame at his own feet. But then that old, familiar guilt rises up like bile in her throat and she knows that she’s partially to blame for the way he is now. That this bitter, angry man wasn’t always like this. That she could have done things differently.

But she’d felt gutted at the loss of her brother and it had been so easy to blame Grant. To tell him he could have done more, that he should have saved Willem instead of making sure she was safe. She’d lashed out at anyone who had tried to comfort her and no one had come out more wounded by her rage than Grant.

And somewhere in the wreckage of what had been the two of them, underneath all the guilt and blame and hurt heaped in equal measure by both of them over the years, they still found themselves here in this damn room. Because despite it all he’d stuck by her and helped her keep the Literatum in one piece. He hadn’t given up on her. But all that hardness and grit had left him worn down into a person she could never love the way she used to, even after she’d forgiven him for something that by all rights wasn’t his fault.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter if you believe him or not,” Morwenna says, her voice flat as she rubs one eye with the heel of her hand, resting her elbow on her leg. “Even if he’s right, it’s not like there’s anything we can do about it. Everything will just stay the same.”

“They’re no reason to frighten everyone with this. You asked me if I thought we should tell the others, and I’m telling you now that my answer is no.”

She looks at him, hesitating before she lets out a slow breath and closes her eyes. She just doesn’t have the energy to fight with him, because in a way she agrees. “Fine. We won’t tell them.”
Deacon is running late. He was supposed to be at the Woodside community center a half hour ago, but he's only now pulling into the mostly-empty parking lot. A handful of familiar cars are huddled together near the front door. There's Grant's silver sedan, Morwenna's bright red Jeep, Vanessa's little black electric compact, and Howard's big white SUV. They all try to meet about once a month, just to catch up and share any important news, and here he is running late like an asshole. He'd even missed the one last month! But getting his classroom ready for school to start had taken a lot more time than he'd thought.

He ought to know this stuff by now. It's his fourth year in that room and he's long-since settled in. But he'd just lost track of time. Oh well, nothing he can do about that now.

Sylvie rumbles her way into the spot next to Howard's car. It's been two weeks now since they got back from their road trip and she'd handled it like a dream. Granted, she'd just been to the shop in preparation and has been fixed up quite a bit over the past few years, so that was only to be expected. Her engine is all but replaced at this point, and though she still hasn't gotten those rust spots fixed or a new coat of paint, Sylvie is in better running condition than she'd been since before he owned her.

He can't imagine ever giving her up for something like the hulking box of an SUV staring him right in the face, the vehicle of choice of the only parent of the original Literatum. That thing has seen countless days of sports practices, family trips, food spills, rides to school... It just screams, 'I have kids and all I do is drive them places!' Sylvie doesn't even have seatbelts in the back seat. How could he ever get a child in there? She's the car of a broke college kid in desperate need of anything that could get him to and from class, to give him that first little taste of independence from Grant. She's not the car for a family.

Shaking his head, Deacon shoves the unwanted thoughts away, refusing to dwell on that nonsense right now. His family is him and Bo, and Sylvie is perfect for just the two of them. With that thought in mind, he slams the door shut behind him and heads for the front of the community center at a hurried pace.

A soft chime announces his entrance through the automatic door, and as he passes the front desk he sees Oliver, the receptionist, talking with a blonde young woman. Deacon recognizes her. Valerie Bowman moved to Woodside about a year ago, one of the many transplants from other parts of the country (he can't remember where, exactly). She’s pretty and she carries herself like someone who knows it. Oliver seems to know it too, judging by the way he’s looking up at her from his desk. It takes him a second to even notice Deacon enter and when he does his elbow slips off the edge where he was resting it and he has to catch himself before he falls out of his chair.

“Mr. Stuart! Uh, the others are—”

“Waiting for me, yeah,” Deacon answers, giving Oliver a rigid smile without stopping. “Thanks.”
Valerie turns to look at him, brushing hair out of her face as she catches his eye. It’s not subtle, the way she’s looking at him. Years ago he might even have been interested in seeing just where that rabbit hole might lead, though if he’s being honest Oliver is more his type. But even if he weren’t married, they’re both just… too young.

When did people in their early twenties start seeming young to him? God, he’s getting old.

“Deacon, did you have some time to talk after your little meeting?” Valerie asks him, batting her eyes.

He does his best not to sound annoyed when he shakes his head as he passes her. “Sorry Valerie. My wife and I have some plans for dinner and I can’t be late for that too,” he says, not quite lying, but hoping she’ll take the hint.

“Maybe some other time then,” she says, unperturbed.

Not bothering to answer, Deacon slips down a side hallway leading to where he knows the others are. His phone vibrates in his pocket and he ignores what must be a text message, certain that it’s one of them checking on where he is. There’s no point in replying because he’s just a few feet from the door, reaching out for the handle and rushing inside.

“Sorry, sorry, I know I’m late. I hope you guys didn’t do anything fun without me,” he says while he’s moving inside, before he even takes a moment to look at the room.

There’s no immediate answer as they all turn to look at him, scattered throughout the small lounge, holding brightly colored paper plates and eating cake. Something like guilt crosses over most of their faces. Fatima and Rashid (who must have come with Morwenna) share a glance and look away, Grant rolls his eyes and keeps eating, Howard cringes and takes a few steps towards him as Deacon freezes in the doorway. That’s when he notices the streamers and balloons, the cheesy party-store banner taped to the wall with ‘Happy Birthday!’ written in big, puffy, rainbow letters.

“Hey man, we weren’t sure if you were coming or not,” Howard says to him, looking uncomfortable. “I tried to text you.”

“I think I just got it,” Deacon mutters, covering his eyes with one hand and groaning. “Goddamn it, I completely forgot—”

“It’s fine, you were out of town—”

“—it’s your birthday. I didn’t even—”

“Deacon,” Howard says firmly, clapping a hand on his shoulder and shaking him gently. “Chill. It’s no big deal.”

Still feeling very much like a jackass, Deacon lets out a ragged breath and lowers his hand, giving Howard an apologetic smile. He grips his shoulder, mirroring Howard’s hold on him, and gives him a squeeze. “Happy birthday, Howard. You’re forty now, how does it feel to be over the hill?”

“That’s not what’s making me feel old, it’s the fact that both the girls are going to be in high school this year,” he breathes, sagging a little and looking suddenly overwhelmed at the prospect.

“Shit, I remember when Theresa was still pregnant with Sophie,” Deacon says, feeling a bit daunted himself. “And now Evelyn is going to be a freshman…”

Howard gives him a stiff, commiserating pat. “You realize that you were Evie’s age when I first
met you.”

“Shut the hell up,” he blurts out, grimacing. “Oh, and what a way to meet. You show up and I almost kill myself. Great times.”

Howard’s expression sober, letting him go. “You know I’ve been thinking about that. I’ve been keeping an eye on the girls…”

“But they’re not… are they?”

He shakes his head. “No. No magic,” he says, shrugging. In an undertone he adds, “I’m not sure if I should be glad or not.”

Deacon just blinks. He’d never give his magic up, no matter how much trouble it had caused him over the years. It was a part of him, it made him special, and the idea that Howard wouldn’t want his daughters to be a part of that… Well, at least if he had a child with Bo he knows they’d be magical. They’d be a monster, after all.

Howard must see his confusion because he lets out an awkward laugh. “That’s probably the parental protectiveness talking,” he admits. “I’m sure you’ll understand someday.”

That makes Deacon bristle, though he keeps it to himself. What is it about parents that just makes them assume everyone else wants to join that club?

“C’mon, let’s get you some cake,” Howard says, taking his arm and steering him towards the table.

Deacon pointedly ignores Grant as he passes him, and gives Morwenna a small smile of acknowledgement. The twins are on her other side, huddled around the chips and dip on the far corner of the table, but Fatima gives him a quick wave before returning her attention to her phone. That’s strange, normally she’s more friendly with him than that…

He doesn’t have time to dwell on that as Maria steps into his view, giving him a chastising look. “About time you showed up,” she says to him, crossing her arms over his chest. She has to look up at him, but she might as well be looking down.

“What she means to say,” Vanessa says smoothly, sliding up alongside her girlfriend and circling her shoulders with both arms. Maria’s eyes dart towards her and the momentary distraction seems to gutter out most of her heat. “Is that we were worried about you. It’s not like you to be late. We thought maybe something happened to Sylvie.”

“No way, this was just me losing track of time,” he says, glancing between the two of them as he holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Entirely my fault, Sylvie is doing great. The road trip was wonderful.”

“I’m still shocked you take that rust bucket out like that,” Maria says, rolling her eyes. “You can afford to get a decent car you know.”

He claps a hand to his chest, shoving down his building irritation and covering it with mock offense. “Who needs a decent car when I’ve got a great car. How’s that glorified go-kart holding up? The battery lasts what, two hours?”

They bicker about cars for a little while as Howard shoves a plate into his hands and he idly eats his slice of birthday cake. Eventually, after defending her vehicle of choice (“We hardly leave Ebott and from end-to-end is only a forty minute drive! And the battery lasts, four hours, thank
Vanessa steers the conversation towards more friendly conversation. Namely work.

Vanessa and Maria have both been working for Asgore, with Vanessa’s purple magic and both of their office experience coming in handy. They mostly work downtown, though on occasion they’ve had to travel with the king to meet with government officials. Vanessa’s ability to read thoughts and intentions is particularly handy in dealing with politicians. But even with her help, she is annoyed to report that she and Asgore still haven’t had any headway with getting the travel restrictions lifted for monsters. She can’t even say with any optimism that they might make any progress in the near future.

It’s frustrating and disheartening, but not at all surprising. That doesn’t mean he’s looking forward to telling Bo the news, either.

As that conversation starts to sour Deacon excuses himself to go pick at the vegetable plate that’s been left mostly untouched (except for the cherry tomatoes, why did those always end up disappearing?). It’s as everyone is milling around him, enjoying their small talk, that he thinks to check his phone.

Taking a moment to pull it out of his pocket, he sees the text from Howard, but there’s also one more, from Bo. He pulls it open, curious.

‘I’ll be home for dinner, finally got some help picking up those extra shifts. Things getting back to normal. See you when you get home. <3’

Deacon smiles and pockets his phone. ‘Normal’. Normal is good. He could use a good dose of normal after all the strangeness of the past two weeks with Gaster and learning about the Anathema and…

The sobering thought makes him take another glance around the room, at everyone just at ease and celebrating Howard’s birthday. These aren’t the faces of people who knew about any of that. He’d thought that maybe Morwenna would use this meeting to fill everyone in, but he supposes he was wrong.

He’s not sure how he feels about having yet another secret from the rest of the Literatum.

Bo is waiting for him when he gets home. She’s sitting on the couch in front of the TV, slurping lo mein noodles out of a takeout container with a pair of chopsticks. The plastic and paper bag combo is sitting on the coffee table, with another set of chopsticks waiting for him. Bo’s face crinkles into a smile at the sight of him, and that tension that had been building in his chest all day finally seems to relax.

She’s perfect, and the swell of love that fills him as he hears and feels her Soul call out for his leaves him momentarily speechless as he just takes her in. Something about the ratty sweatpants that used to be his (until she commandeered them), the soft glow of the television in the mostly-dark room, the smell of cheap Chinese food… it just makes her all the more beautiful, and feels like home.

Dumping the contents of his pockets on the table by the door and kicking off his shoes, he goes to the couch. Instead of sitting next to her, he kneels on the ground in front of her and wraps his arms around her middle. He listens to her soft sigh, setting down her food and hugging his shoulders. One hand drifts up and down his back as he closes his eyes and relaxes into her hold.

“Baby, is everything okay?” she asks him, fingers combing through the back of his hair.
I just wanted you to hold me, he thinks but is too embarrassed to say. “Yeah. You just looked so comfy, I wanted to hug you.”

Bo laughs, kissing the top of his head. “Well, whenever you’re done there’s some beef and broccoli waiting for you. And I saved you some dumplings.”

“You’re the best wife.”

“I ordered crab rangoons but I ate them all.”

“I still love you.”

“Well I’m glad our marriage is stronger than rangoons.”

“I mean, not by much, but—”

With an indignant sound, Bo gives a half-hearted yank on a bit of hair, then quickly dissolves into laughter.

“I love you more than Chinese food,” Deacon says, leaning back enough so he can meet her eyes but not letting her go.

She cups his cheek, a warm, affectionate smile spreading across her face. Leaning down, she kisses him, pulling away at the last moment before he can pull her closer and deepen it. When Bo looks at him again there’s something hesitant in her expression, something nervous. But most of all there’s so much love there, right on the surface. He can see it and he can feel it, through the warm, rich tone of her Soul.

“Deacon…” she says, searching his face. “I want us to have a baby.”

All that warmth and contentment seems to fall out of the bottom of his stomach, too quick and too sudden for him to try and disguise it. Bo can tell, of course she can, and her body tenses when he leans back to sit on his heels. She grabs his hands as he tries to pull them away, holding them against her thighs.

“Bo,” he says weakly, but trails off as he’s not sure of what to say. It’s hard to look at the disappointment on her face, the way she’s trying to hide it from him but can’t quite manage.

“Okay,” she whispers, looking down at their hands. “That’s not… that’s not how I wanted to bring this up. But we’ve been dancing around this for months, and I don’t know if you’ve been humoring me with ‘maybe’s or what, but—”

Deacon winces. “No, Bo, I—”

“I just want to know if it’s going to happen,” she blurts out, pleading with him with those big blue eyes, looking up through her lashes. “I didn’t marry you because I wanted to have children with you. I didn’t even know it was possible for us when I fell in love with you. But I did know, when we got married, that there was every chance you wouldn’t want children. This isn’t an ultimatum, I’m not going anywhere. I will never leave you.” She lets go of one of his hands to hold the side of his face, to make sure that he’s looking at her. Her touch is gentle but firm. “I just want to know. I want to know what to count on our lives being like. Because right now, I just… I just feel like I’m stuck waiting on a maybe.”

Deacon is still scared out of his mind, caught like a deer in the headlights and wanting very much to not be talking about this, but. But. Hearing that no matter his choice, she’ll still be here, she’ll
still love him… That gives him more comfort than it probably should. Shouldn’t he have known that already? Had he really expected that she would do that to him? A small part of him is ashamed to admit that, yes, he had expected that. He thought that if he didn’t give in to what she wanted that she would leave. But that’s the old Deacon’s way of thinking, and he’s been trying hard for years to move on from that compulsive need to appease the people in his life. That he was allowed to put himself first.

But this isn’t about putting himself first. He needs to think about what is best for both of them. This is something that would affect the rest of their lives, and Bo… Bo had always wanted to be a mother. Could he bear taking that opportunity away from her? An opportunity that by all rights they were fucking lucky to have in the first place?

“Deacon,” she says quietly, her expression turning sad. “Baby, talk to me.”

He shakes his head, looking down at her legs, opening and closing his mouth as he fights for the words to say. “I just… Bo, I…” With a pained sound, he presses his forehead to her knees, turning the hand still in her grasp so he can squeeze her fingers. Anxious, overwhelmed and frightened tears sting the corners of his eyes. “I don’t know. I don’t have an answer.”

There’s a long moment of silence that sits like an iron weight in his gut, where he wishes she would say something. After a little while he feels her free hand in his hair, and he tips his head towards her touch. “Can you think about it, please?” she says, voice soft enough to almost be a whisper. “Or talk to me? Or anyone, just… I can’t know what you’re worried about if you don’t tell me.”

He lets out a humorless laugh, muffled by her legs as he refuses to move. “I’m scared that I’m going to agree to this, and that I’m going to end up regretting it. That I won’t be able to cope with how much it’s going to change our lives, how it’s going to change us. And I’m a selfish asshole who doesn’t want to share you, not even with our own kid. I don’t think I’m ready, Bo.”

“No one is ever really ready,” she says gently. “Ask Undyne and Alphys, or Hope, or—”

“I don’t think Hope counts,” he mutters, and Bo huffs a tiny chuckle. He hesitates, and in a tiny voice he says, “What if I fuck it up? What if… What if that part of my parents that made them run makes me want to run too? What if—”

Bo cuts him off with a shushing sound, her hold on him tightening, and he realizes that he’s shaking. “You’d never do that. Deacon, you’re a good man, and if you choose to you’ll be an amazing father. I know you will.”

“I wish I had your confidence,” he says bitterly. “I just don’t want you to resent me if I say no.”

Bo hesitates, letting out a long, slow breath. “I won’t say that I won’t be disappointed. But Deacon, I don’t want you to agree just for me. I want you to want this too. You are more important to me than any child we might have. Because if we do have a baby, they’re not going to be with us forever. One day they’re going to move out and all we’ll have left is each other. I chose you, and I’ll keep choosing you.”

Deacon pushes back up to his knees, wrapping her in a tight embrace and pulling her close. He takes in a deep breath to steady himself, to get his bearings and try to stop shaking. Even after a long day, she still smells faintly of vanilla and strawberries, and it’s enough to make his heart give a lurch in his chest. “I love you,” he manages to say. “I’m sorry I keep making you wait for me.”

“I love you too. And you should know by now that I’ll always wait. Just think about it, and let me know what you decide.”
Things with Gaster are going well. He’s adjusting, mostly, to being back in the real world, though not without some difficulty. Whenever lost in thought or focused on a task he falls back into the habit of talking to that blaster, Plato, that isn’t there; asking it questions to sort through his own mind. His sleep cycle (and sense of time in general) is still disjointed to the point of nonexistence. More than once Sans has woken up in the middle of the night only to find his father poking around on the household laptop, or trying to cook breakfast for a family that wouldn’t be up for another four hours. Then there was the day that he had forgotten to sleep entirely, and it wasn’t until he’d nearly fallen asleep on the stairs that anyone realized what had happened. You’ve been trying to keep better tabs on his day-to-day since then.

Gaster’s little hiccups in time, those five-second delays in his responses or speaking too soon, haven’t improved. They still happen with concerning regularity. At least he hasn’t had another one of those melting episodes that you’d told Sans about. That side effect of whatever’s been going on with him worries Sans more than he’d like to admit. He’s still trying to adjust to having Gaster around, to even begin to think of him as his father, and the thought that he might get snatched away is too much for him to dwell on. Besides, Gaster doesn’t seem overly concerned about it, so maybe he shouldn’t be either.

Easier said than done, but he does his best.

Papyrus comes to visit almost daily, with and without Mettaton. He says that Mettaton is busy catching up with the goings-on at the hotel, but Sans thinks it’s a bit more than that. It wasn’t noticeable at first with how Gaster was, and still is, so attentive to Papyrus whenever he comes over. But their father barely acknowledges Mettaton’s presence. He’s not outwardly rude or dismissive but… Sans gets the feeling that Gaster doesn’t like Mettaton. And, well, maybe a few years ago Sans would have been more than happy to push him in that direction, but Papyrus and Mettaton have been married for a while now.

Sans sort of feels bad for Mettaton, and can’t really blame him for not wanting to come over. You don’t like it, though. You’d made a point, years ago, to make sure that the robot felt welcome in your home. You, who had every reason to hold a grudge for the rest of your life if you so chose. And Gaster is disrupting that.

You haven’t said anything to him about it, yet, but Sans knows you. You won’t let this continue forever.

With summer vacation rapidly coming to a close, you have to make time to get to school to help Leveretta set up her classroom for the new year. It’s for that reason that Sans takes Gaster with him to the lab today.

It’s not that you and Sans don’t trust him at home by himself, it’s just… you’re both worried about him. You know he doesn’t like being left alone.
He’s brought him before, introducing him to Alphys and explaining the situation (as best he could without bringing Frisk or Asriel into it). She’d been surprisingly receptive to the whole ordeal, and spoke with Gaster at length about the blueprints they’d been passing around trying to decipher.

Later, after they’d gone home for the day, she’d called Sans so that they could talk. About the accident. She tried to apologize for not trying harder, for not being there for him like she could have. (“Y-you’d lost your father! Maybe you didn’t remember, b-but… No wonder you were in so much pain.”) But he knew that no matter how hard she tried it wouldn’t have helped. (“you tried getting through that thick skull of mine for weeks, alphys. you did more than you needed to.”) He never would have let her in, and he told her that. She didn’t believe him, but she let it go anyway.

Alphys is already there when Sans and Gaster arrive, teleporting in after a series of quick jumps. Gaster presses a hand to the side of his head when they stop, catching himself on Sans’s shoulder as he lets out a soft, distressed noise. For a moment he’s worried that the teleportation did something to mess with his already questionable stability, and Sans turns towards him, reaching out to brace him. But then Gaster shakes his head, giving a weak, reassuring smile before collecting himself and pulling away.

“I’m fine,” Gaster says, resting a hand on his midsection. “It’s just been a while. It always did turn my stomach, even when you were a child.”

“you don’t have a stomach,” Sans says, studying his face for a moment to try and see if he’s hiding something. But if he is, he can’t tell. Gaster just looks… calm. Composed. That same, withdrawn and guarded way that he is when talking to Sans. Like he’s worried about acting overly familiar. At first he was grateful for that distance, but after watching him with Papyrus he’s not sure how he feels about it anymore. He forces a smile. “which means i guess you never had the stomach for it in the first place.”

Gaster’s expression brightens immediately, laughing. It’s not a great joke. Hell, it’s barely even a good one, but his dad seems to like it and that was the point. So, mission accomplished.

There’s a brief point, where Sans’s smile isn’t quite so forced, where something almost like fondness creeps inside his ribcage and Gaster rests his hand on his shoulder. Not for balance or anything else, but just because he wants to. And Sans feels a little… proud of making his father laugh. It’s a familiar sort of feeling, like he’s done this before, hundreds of times, and—

“Oh, you b-brought Doctor Gaster with you!” Alphys shuffles up towards them, already dressed in her lab coat with a folder clutched in one hand and tucked under her arm. She adjusts her glasses with the other, looking between the two of them with a shaky smile.

Gaster’s hand falls away from his shoulder and Sans steps away from him, closing the distance between himself and Alphys. He takes a quick glance at the folder, but he can’t see anything written on it just yet. “yeah, hope’s busy today, so…” He trails off with a shrug.

“I’m sorry,” Gaster says, folding his hands over his middle. “If that’s a problem I can—”

“No, not at all!” Alphys blurts out, stepping around Sans to peer excitedly up at Gaster. Her tail swishes across the ground, then goes still. “I was actually hoping to go over some things with you the next time you were here. I’ve been having some unexpected complications with…”

As she goes off into detail, Gaster leaning in a little closer, giving her his undivided attention, Sans can’t help but feel a little annoyed. Trying not to dwell on being so abruptly swept aside, he goes to fetch his lab coat from a nearby peg. He hesitates for a second, then grabs a second one, the one that Gaster used the last time he was here. It’s old, a little dingy, clearly left behind years ago and
never thrown away. There’s a place that looks like it once held a nametag but wherever it is it’s long gone. It’s the only one that fits him, but it fits him perfectly. Like it was made for him. It probably was.

“Are you going to be coming more often?” Alphys asks Gaster, glancing over at Sans as he approaches with the coats.

“Ah.” Gaster’s eyes dart over to Sans, looking uncertain. Sans holds out his coat and he takes it, fumbling a little as he shoves his long arms through the sleeves. He clears his throat. “I’m not certain. I wouldn’t be adverse to the idea, though I’m still… adjusting. Perhaps, er, that is to say…”

Sans decides to rescue him from his floundering, knowing full well that he’s only avoiding an answer so as to not step on his son’s toes. “we should get him a badge, just in case. gaster and i can talk about it later.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea!” Alphys says, bobbing her head up and down in agreement as she heads towards one of the computers. “And there’s no p-pressure, Doctor Gaster, it’s just nice having another person here who sort of knows how all this works… I’ve been doing what I can to improve on your designs —Sans and I both have!— but it’s, uh… I mean…”

“It’s a very intricate system, and very convoluted,” Gaster says reassuringly, giving her a kind smile. “You’ve done exceptionally well, considering that without a means to decipher the schematics left behind, you essentially had to reverse-engineer much of the system to find a way to include your additions.”

Alphys is blushing, pleased and embarrassed at the attention. She distracts herself with the computer. “Really, it wasn’t… I-I mean, I was just building off of the amazing work you’d left behind, I’m sure it’s sloppy compared to what you c-could have done.”

“Nonsense,” he says, smoothing down the front of his lab coat, standing a little straighter, holding his head a little higher. He’s more confident here, talking to Alphys, and Sans can only imagine this is a glimpse at the man he was before. The Royal Scientist, the man who’d created the Core. “Don’t discredit yourself, Alphys. You’ve done amazing things. I always suspected that you’d do well, and you proved me right.”

Alphys is starting to sweat a little, growing more uncomfortable and less flattered as Gaster speaks. “I-I’m not sure I’d call what I’ve done amazing…”

“You created a new body for your friend.”

She fidgets with her claws. “Yeah, to t-trick Asgore…”

“You became the Royal Scientist after me.”

“B-because of a lie!”

Sans gives Gaster a confused look. How can he not see how uncomfortable she is? “gaster…” he says, trying to gently get his attention.

But Gaster is too focused, too caught up in his train of thought to notice either of them. “And then there was your work with determination. I have a huge amount of respect for what you tried to accomplish to free our people from the Underground, even if—”

“L-look, Doctor Gaster,” she says, turning around now to face him, pale beneath her yellow scales.
“I made a m-mistake. I made *so many* mistakes when I was d-down in that place. The Amalgamates are h-happy, sort of, but I shouldn’t have… I guess it turned out okay, in the end? But I was toying with p-people’s *lives* and that’s not… Don’t respect me for what I’m m-most ashamed of.”

“My dear, you were only doing what you thought was best,” he says, spreading his hands. “And we’d run tests with determination before—”

“I didn’t know that, then! I thought I w-was doing something totally new and d-dangerous and…” She shakes her head, pushing up her glasses and pinching the bridge of her nose as she stares at the floor. When she speaks again her words come in an angry rush. “And your tests were on healthy subjects. You were smart and did things the right way, with control groups and disclosure; you *told* them what you were doing! We were all behind you, you had the support of *everyone* and I was skulking down there by myself with no one to hold me accountable except my— Why are you looking at me like that?”

Gaster is staring at her, wide-eyed (well, as wide as he can get them, the one socket still droops no matter what he does) and mouth parted. Sans takes a step forward, just as confused in his sudden change of mood, squinting and studying his father’s face when it hits him. She—

“You remembered,” Gaster says, clutching at the front of his turtleneck, fingers trembling and voice thin. “You remembered the experiments, you remembered something from *before* — Sans.” He turns to Sans, a wild, desperate look in his eyes that catches him off-guard. Grasping, clinging to his shoulders, Gaster holds him tightly, bending down so that they’re eye-to-eye. “Sans, do you remember? Do you remember anything? Anything at all.”

He tries. He really does, and after a moment of silence, of Gaster leaning uncomfortably close and his fingers digging into his bones even through his lab coat and his shirt so hard that it hurts, he sees the moment that he’s been quiet too long. The moment that the spark of hope dies in his father’s eyes. Despite the thrill of discomfort, the worry and even the bit of fear, Sans feels like the world’s biggest asshole. That he can’t even remember his own dad. That he can’t even bring himself to lie just so that Gaster didn’t have to feel this moment snatched away from him.

“I’m sorry,” Sans says, and he means it.

Gaster stares at him a moment longer, like it might make some difference, and then, trembling, he lets Sans go and pulls away. He rubs his temple with one hand, looking off to the side, anywhere but at the two people watching him, lost for words. “It’s quite all right, it’s not your fault. Perhaps it’s mine, for involving you with the machine in the first place, for how the accident affected you,” he says, his voice flat. He has his emotions under lock and key now, buried deep, deep beneath the surface. Gaster still doesn’t look at anyone. “Alphys. How much do you remember?”

Alphys jumps at the sound of her name, her eyes darting to meet Sans’s. She wrings her hands. “W-well, I… I’m not sure it just s-sort of… Came out? I mean… I sort of r-remember those experiments, a little? But I don’t… That’s it.”

He nods, once, dragging his fingers across his forehead. “Perhaps there are triggers, ways to… *unlock* your memories of me. I’ll have to think about this, take matters into consideration…” Gaster mutters to himself, his voice lowering to the point of inaudibility.

“gaster…” Sans says, unsure of what to say but knowing, deep down, that he can’t just stay quiet.

Gaster looks up at the sound of his voice, meeting his eyes, and a tight, rigid smile pulls at his mouth. “We’ll figure this out. Both of us. Together. Just like before. You were my best assistant
and I know with the two of us, we’ll… We’ll fix your memories. And your brother’s. You’ll 
*remember* me.”

“yeah,” Sans says, because what else can he say? He’s afraid of what disagreeing might do. “yeah, 
we’ll figure it out.”

Chapter End Notes

Can you guys believe that tomorrow is the one year anniversary of WTMYH?

Me neither.
“maybe i can just pretend to be sick.”

Sans has his forehead cradled in his hand, not even bothering to look at you as you strip out of your pajamas to get ready to shower. That’s a clear enough sign that he’s at least halfway serious about this. He’s nothing if not enthusiastic in his appreciation for your body.

Balling up your clothes and tossing them into the hamper, you cross the cool tile floor to where he’s standing, leaning up against the counter. That gets his attention. You reach for his arms, catching your fingers on the space between his radius and ulna and rubbing up and down. He grimaces, the tight, sharp points of his pupils meeting your eyes before falling away with a ragged sigh.

“Alphys needs you at the lab,” you say gently, pressing in close against him, his bones warm against bare skin.

His arms slide around your waist, pulling you closer. One hand strays to the curve of your backside, which makes you wonder if he’s actually as frustrated as he looks. No, he probably is. The way he’s touching you is less out of passion and more out of comfort, of familiarity. He’s called you his touchstone before, and that’s what you are in this moment. He hugs you to him, fitting against him the way you always do, and some of the tension leaves his face.

“if anything it’ll be better for her if i’m not there,” he grumbles, meeting your eyes again. You lean down to kiss between his eyes and he nuzzles against you, making a noise that’s somehow a blend of annoyance and affection at the same time. “half the day is spent on trying to avoid gaster’s half-baked attempts at getting some kind of reaction out of me, and the other half is cleaning up whatever messes those attempts leave behind. if i’m not there then maybe those two can get some actual fucking work done.”

“It’s not really that bad,” you say, though part of you isn’t so sure. Maybe it is.

But Sans is breathing a sigh of concession, tipping his head to the side. “ok, fine. maybe like a quarter of the day is me actually doing something productive.”

“If you want, I can try to ask him to stay home with me,” you offer, a little half-hearted. “Maybe he can take a look at the machine, he’s been asking—”

Sans stiffens, just slightly. Barely enough for you to notice. “no. i still don’t want him in there, not without me,” he says, and there’s enough seriousness in his voice to leave you nodding in agreement. He relaxes. “as much as i’d like to avoid the problem… i know that shoving him off on you for the day isn’t gonna help. but i appreciate the offer, babe.”

“Well, if you change your mind, let me know,” you say, kissing him again, closer to his mouth this time. “I can come up with some excuse to keep him here. Between Frisk and I, I’m sure we can
keep him busy.”

With a noncommittal sound deep in his chest, Sans shrugs his shoulders. “speaking of frisk. don’t they have magic class with morwenna today?”

“Oh, yeah, they do.” You pull away, ignoring Sans’s soft noise of protest as you glance at the shower. The big glass stall is starting to steam up, letting you know it’s hot. Your husband follows you as you climb inside. “Though I’m starting to wonder if it’s a waste of time. And Frisk’s just seemed more and more frustrated since they started. I don’t like seeing them like that.”

Sans keeps away from the spray, letting you hog the water as you soak your hair and rinse off. He doesn’t really need to shower, he just likes keeping you company. The feel of his hand on your hip while your back is turned catches you off-guard, but you stop yourself from jumping as he gives you a small squeeze. “i know, babe. i don’t like seeing them like that either. but morwenna seems confident she can get their magic working properly. they did it once already.”

“And they’ve spent the last month trying to replicate that one time,” you sigh, squeezing your eyes shut and rubbing your face. “They’re not happy. And soon they’re going to have school on top of it.”

“...do you want me to talk to them? see if they wanna stop going?”

You groan. “Do you honestly think they’re going to give up? When has Frisk given up on anything? Ever?”

Sans chuckles, and as you swipe the water away from your eyes you turn enough so you can give him a wry look. He’s just smiling at you. “you gotta point there,” he admits, and you roll your eyes.

“I guess we should just be glad that after the insanity of your father just popping in from another dimension, all we have to worry about is him trying to startle you into remembering him and Frisk still having trouble with their magic.”

“he’s getting really annoying, though,” Sans says, with an absurd enough level of gravitas that you can’t help but laugh.

“Well, after what happened with Morwenna before, I can’t imagine I’d be able to tempt him away from the lab by having to take Frisk to her.”

An hour later, when Gaster insists on joining you and bringing along Asriel as well, you realize just how wrong you were.

Morwenna isn’t thrilled with these new additions to their routine, Frisk can tell. She’s not very good at concealing the immediate look of frustration as her eyes dart from Gaster to Asriel, then finally to Frisk, not that Gaster seems to notice. But he doesn’t seem to notice a lot of things about the way people react to him, so they’re not surprised.

It doesn’t stop Frisk from wanting to crawl into a hole and just forget that this is even happening.

“Good morning,” she says in a clipped tone. “This is certainly… different.”

Gaster smiles, folding his hands in front of him. “Good morning! I was thinking that perhaps something ‘different’ might just be what Frisk needs. If you don’t mind the intrusion.”

Morwenna looks very much like she does mind. “Well, I suppose that’s for Frisk to decide,” she
Feeling rather put on the spot, Frisk’s eyebrows shoot up beneath their bangs as they look from Morwenna, over to Gaster’s self-satisfied expression, and finally to Asriel. He’s standing next to them, away from Gaster, fidgeting with his ear and giving Frisk a look that says, ‘Don’t ask me, I just got dragged along for this.’ But they know that they want him here, and in order to make that happen…

“I want them to stay,” Frisk says, their eyes still on Asriel. He smiles and glances away, but they can feel that flutter of happiness that hums through their linked Souls, just strong enough for them to sense. They turn to Morwenna. Her expression is unchanged, but they can’t help but feel like they’re disappointing her when they say, “I don’t know if what we’ve been doing is doing any good… And, uh, it wouldn’t hurt to try something else?”

“Trying something else is what put you and Asriel both in an extremely dangerous situation,” she says, fixing them with a stern look. Guilt and frustration rise up in equal measure but they tamp the feelings down, keeping their mouth shut. But she relents, resting her hands on her hips with a sigh. “But. I’d rather you feel like you’re allowed to explore other avenues to see what works with experienced, adult supervision rather than on your own. Again.”

Frisk and Asriel glance at each other, heads hanging but also glad. Glad that she’s willing to work with them. Gaster claps his hands together, looking pleased.

“Excellent! Well, shall we get started?”

“Go ahead,” Morwenna says, gesturing with one hand. “I’m curious to see what you have in mind that’s so different from what I’ve already been doing.”

That sweeps away whatever relief Frisk had been feeling, cringing at the discomfort now filling the room. But, of course, Gaster doesn’t notice. He turns to Asriel, stepping forward a beckoning him to follow. Asriel, uncertain, looks from Gaster, to Frisk, and back to him again. Then, with a nudge from Frisk, he walks up to him, a wary look on his face. Morwenna crosses her arms over her chest and just watches, unimpressed and impatient.

“Now, Asriel, I think that you are the key to this mystery of Frisk’s magic,” he says, gesturing to the two of them. “Your Souls are connected, and for humans, that is the source of their magic. We monsters”—he does a sweeping motion over his body with one hand—“are magic given form. It is us. And they”—he gives a flick of his wrist towards Morwenna before tapping the center of his chest—“draw it from here. But the two of you are different. Unique. Asriel, is using your magic any different than how it was before you came back?”

Asriel’s brow furrows, not in frustration but in thought. A hand raises unconsciously to his chest. “I didn’t get to use it much, before, but… No? No, it’s still the same.”

“So your magic doesn’t come from your human Soul. It still comes from every bit of you.”

He nods.

“Excellent,” Gaster says, looking satisfied. He turns to Frisk, waving them over. Curious, they go to stand beside Asriel. “Now, Frisk, you’ve been trying to use magic like a human. Like an ordinary mage. Instead, I want you to use it like a monster. Focus on your connection to Asriel’s Soul, and Asriel, if you could oblige me in using your magic for a moment?”

Hesitating, Asriel raises his hands. But nothing happens. “…What do you want me to do?”
“Anything. A few fireballs should suffice.”

As Asriel does as he’s asked, Frisk tries to focus. They close their eyes. He’s close enough that they can feel the heat of the fire across their skin, light and shadow dancing beneath their eyelids as the flames move beside them. But they don’t feel… anything like magic. They feel his curiosity and his uncertainty and that little bit of hope that this will help. But they don’t feel the thrill of magic, that power, his control of it. All they can feel is Asriel.

Then the heat is gone, and when Frisk opens their eyes Gaster is watching them expectantly. “Well? What did you feel?”

Frisk thinks about lying. Of telling Gaster what they think he wants to hear. “Nothing,” they admit, looking at the ground. “Just the normal stuff.”

“Exactly!” Gaster says, loudly and suddenly enough to make them jump. “For us it’s an instinct, a part of who we are—”

“Frisk isn’t a monster,” Morwenna interrupts, circling around him to stand at their side. “Frisk is a mage. And for mages, it requires practice and discipline, not instinct.”

“Frisk is neither,” he says, brow furrowing. “Or both. And insisting on only treating them as a mage is doing you both a disservice.”

“So instead of offering them any guidance, you’re just telling them to just do it, because it should be instinct? How is that helping them?” she demands, giving him an incredulous look.

“Morwenna,” Gaster says carefully. He looks annoyed, but his voice is even. “Perhaps you can let us try this method before your pessimism rubs off on the children?”

“I—”

“Let me just try it,” Frisk blurts out, silencing the room as Morwenna opens her mouth to argue. She catches herself, cheeks ruddy with irritation as she casts Gaster a nasty look.

He ignores her, focusing on Frisk with eager anticipation. “Good. Now, try not to force it. Instead of trying to grasp your magic, embrace it. Let it become just another part of you.”

Frisk has no idea what that’s supposed to mean, but they try anyway. They take a deep breath, and try to, well, not do anything. That bright, hard point of magic deep in their chest sits there, inert, and Frisk just… tries not to think about it. Which doesn’t work.

They can feel Asriel’s nerves buzzing under their skin, against their ribs. They try to silently reassure him, but they can barely reassure themselves. It’s distracting, and nothing is happening, and as the frustration wells up deep in the pit of their stomach—

“Try to remember how Asriel felt. How natural and normal it was for him,” Gaster says, shattering their concentration on trying not to concentrate. What are they even doing? “Try to replicate that.”

“I am,” they grumble, closing their eyes.

But they’re not Asriel. Magic for him is like breathing. Magic for them is like… drowning. Like fighting for the surface and trying to tread water. But all they can manage is huge, desperate gulps; Loading with huge expenditures of magic instead of normal, even breaths.

“It’s not working,” Frisk blurts out, pushing their hair out of their face as they shake their head,
opening their eyes to stare at the floor. They feel Asriel’s hand on their shoulder, but for the moment it feels like a burden. His success feels like their failure.

“This was only your first try,” Gaster says, unperturbed. “Take a moment, and we can try again.”

“This is a waste of time,” Morwenna says, turning towards Frisk. The look she gives them isn’t angry, but apologetic. “We can try some other things now that Asriel is here, maybe I was wrong to exclude him, but—”

“Before you dismiss my theory so casually,” Gaster says, spreading his hands, “I would like to have a bit more time to disprove my idea. As a man of science, repetition is crucial to a good experiment—”

“Frisk isn’t an experiment,” she blurts out, whirling around to face him. “This whole ordeal is an experiment. We have no idea what will work. Morwenna, you’re a brilliant woman, but—”

“You—!” She catches herself, balling one hand into a fist. “Come here. I need to talk to you.”

“We’re already talking,” Gaster says, confused as he watches her storm past him. After a moment he follows after her, over to the other side of the room.

This is unbearable. Frisk turns their back to them, facing the door, letting out a ragged sigh and squeezing their eyes shut. Why is this so hard? Why is everything so hard?! Training was already going to be bad, but Gaster being here just made it worse, and… Why did he even need to be here anyway? If he wanted to try something different so bad, why did it have to be in front of Morwenna?

They don’t even realize their fingers are clenched into a tight ball until they feel Asriel try to ease them apart. When they open their eyes to look at him, startled, he’s there at their side, hovering close, searching their face with two big green eyes and doing his damndest to hold their hand. After a second they let him, threading their fingers together.

“I’m sorry,” Asriel says quietly, and now that they’re looking at him, loosening the tight hold they had on their Soul, they can feel his regret.

“For what?” they mutter, rubbing their face with the back of their free hand.

He shrugs. “Everything. This sucks.”

Their mouth twitches, almost into a smile. “Tell me about it.”

There’s a pause where Frisk can almost make out what Gaster and Morwenna are saying to each other, but whatever it is it doesn’t sound very good. They catch ‘insufferable’ and ‘arrogant’ from Morwenna and ‘stubborn’ and ‘close-minded’ from Gaster. Cringing, they look at each other.

“We should get out of here,” Asriel says, tugging on their hand.

There’s a moment where Frisk brightens at the thought of just leaving, which is quickly squashed under the weight of the repercussions. “We can’t just leave.”

Asriel tugs harder, taking a step towards the door. “Sure we can. The door’s right there.”

Frisk lets out a weak laugh, glancing over their shoulder. The two adults aren’t even looking their
way, too caught up in their argument. “What’s gotten into you?” they ask, arching a brow at him. He shrugs. “You. You must be rubbing off on me.” That tug on their hand is getting more insistent.

“Where are we going?” Frisk asks, relenting, letting themselves be pulled along behind him.

Beaming, Asriel cracks open the door and they slip out silently. “Wherever is going to make you happier than here.”

“How are we going to get home?”

“We can just take the bus.”

Later, long after the Busperson stops in Mountainside and two familiar children depart to head for home, they glance up at the long mirror over their head, at the passengers in their care. They know things about each and every one of them, they know each face.

They know that, just like one time before, one of these people isn’t going to make it home. That something terrible is going to happen.

They try to warn them as best they can, but they know it won’t be enough.

After all, their family has a very strict policy. On schedules, on magic…

And telling the future is against the rules.
After dropping the kids and Gaster off at the community center in Woodside, you head to school to meet Deacon. He’s still busy getting his classroom ready for next week, and with your work done helping Leveretta with hers, you don’t mind giving your best friend a hand.

He’s poised precariously on a student desk, one foot in the seat and the other on the desktop itself, smoothing a huge map up on the wall. Faint green light trails from his fingers as a tiny green disc floats beside him, upon which is resting a roll of tape. Resting his elbow against a corner of the map, the disc hovers closer and he picks up the tape, tearing off a bit.

You knock softly on the doorframe, smiling at him as he glances over his shoulder. You see his frown for a split second before it disappears, replaced with a bright, beaming grin as he spots you.

“That’s dangerous,” you say, pointing at the desk under his feet.

“Does this look level to you?” he asks, ignoring your warning. “I think it is.”

You scoot further into the room, centering yourself. Squinting for a second, you nod. “Looks fine. When did you get this one? It’s neat.”

“It’s more than neat.” Deacon dismisses the magic disc with a flick of his hand and tears off more tape to stick the map more securely, then shoves the roll in his jeans pocket. Smoothing his hand over the wide, glossy surface, he admires it for a second. From what you can tell, it’s a stylized map of Europe, but the borders are a lot different than normal and the countries— Well, it’s been a long time since the Ottoman Empire existed, you know that much. And with all the browns and the look of old parchment— “It’s Europe in 1800, but in Tolkien style. Just got it yesterday, and it’s awesome.”

“You’re such a nerd,” you say affectionately, laughing.

“Yep,” he says, lowering himself back down to the ground. “It’s part of my charm.”

“Is that how you won Bo over? Your unquenchable thirst for history and fantasy novels?” You cross the room, picking your way through rows of desks to follow him to a neat stack of posters waiting to be put up.

“You laugh now, but just you wait until I’m able to give her a grand tour of Italy,” he says, making a sweeping gesture towards the map. He sniffs, feigning offense. “And I don’t know if you’re invited anymore.”

Shoving his arm, his composure breaks and he laughs as you shoot him a dirty look. “Rude,” you say.

Deacon puts his arm around you, hugging you against his side. You relent and hug him back,
trying to maintain your frown but failing. “Well, I don’t know when we’d be able to manage a trip to Europe anyway. So maybe by then you’ll be back in my good graces.”

You jab him in the ribs and he lets out an undignified noise as you extricate yourself from his grip. “So we’re putting up posters?”

“Ow. And yes.” He rubs his side, gesturing to the stack you’re both standing in front of. “It’s very exciting work.”

“Totally.”

There’s a pause, and when you glance over at Deacon there’s a small crease between his brows. He sighs and runs his hand through his hair, catching you looking at him.

“What’s got you so serious all of a sudden?” you ask, giving him a weak smile.

He grimaces, shaking his head and picking up a poster. You follow him as he crosses the room. Not looking at you, doing his best to busy himself with finding the right spot for it, you wait, quietly, until he finally heaves another sigh and glances at you, pressing against the wall with both hands. “I kinda wanted to talk to you. It’s, um…” Deacon looks away, grits his teeth, and looks back at you again. “Can I ask you something? Personal, probably not an easy question. You don’t have to answer if—”

“Of course you can,” you say, resting a hand on his arm. You search his face until he glances away again, fumbling for the tape in his pocket. With an easy familiarity you reach for it and pull it out, tearing off strips for him silently.

He takes them, then focuses on getting the poster in place as he speaks. “Did you… Um. Shit, did you ever… regret having Frisk? I mean, obviously you don’t now, but…” He trails off.

You know this isn’t about Frisk. It’s obvious. But it takes you a moment to think of how you want to answer the question, how best to frame it. Deacon shifts uncomfortably, and as he’s about to speak again, to backpedal, you clear your throat and he goes quiet. “There were moments where I thought things would be a lot easier if I hadn’t had them,” you say slowly, fidgeting with the roll in your hands. “Having a kid… not every moment is going to be great, Deacon. There were times that I… God, times I was furious with them. And times when they were just a baby where I sat there and looked at this helpless little person and thought… ‘I can’t do this. It’s too much.’ And I guess… I guess that’s part of why I let my mother take that from me, but it’s… Sorry, I guess I’m rambling, but the moments where I did wish that I could go back and do things differently… Those moments were short. I was unhappy and things were hard, and I knew better.

“Because one moment I’d be desperate and overwhelmed and angry, and I’d just wish I could be by myself again and have what little freedom I had before. And then… maybe after they fell asleep, or when they laughed, or when they did this smile, like they hadn’t just pushed me up against my limit. I’d look at them and none of that bad stuff mattered anymore. All I knew was that I’d do anything for them, and I loved them.”

You rub at your eyes, clearing your throat as you realize you’re on the brink of tears. Deacon is quiet, watching you, his expression unreadable.

“Sorry,” you mumble, shrugging your shoulders. “I guess that was a bit more than what you were asking.”

“No, it’s… okay,” he says quietly, staring at the poster. It’s absurd, really, to have a print of a
painting of the founding fathers staring down at the two of you as you’re talking. “Frisk is really lucky. You’re a really great mom, Hope.”

“I learned what not to do,” you say simply, tearing off more bits of tape. He looks at you when he hears the ripping sound, taking the strips as you offer them. “I had a great example of what not to do… So, do you want to tell me what brought this up?”

He gives you a half-hearted smile. “Bo and I had a talk. It’s, um… I’m taking some time to think about how I feel about having a kid. Bo has made herself pretty clear about what she wants, and she’s doing her best not to put too much pressure on me about it… But I need to make up my mind. I mean, I’m thirty now, I don’t… I don’t want to have a kid when I’m pushing forty, you know? And we need… Bo needs to know what’s going to happen with our family. And I don’t blame her. So I just need to… figure it out. What I want.”

“And you’re afraid you’re going to regret it, if you have a baby,” you say, meeting his eyes. Deacon nods. “It’s a big decision. I mean… I’m not trying to… don’t take this the wrong way, but it would almost be easier if she got pregnant on accident. She’d be happy and I’d… do what I needed to do. But making the conscious choice to… to do something that could ruin my life—! This would be all on me. I could have this kid that I resented and I’d have only myself to blame. And I just don’t want to be this bitter person because of it.”

“I understand where you’re coming from.” You lean against his arm, tipping your head to the side to rest on his shoulder. “It’s not easy. And there’s no right answer.”

“I don’t want my kid to go through what I went through. I never want them to feel like someone doesn’t want them,” he whispers, covering his eyes with his hand.

“Deacon. If I know you as well as I think I do, I know that you’d never do that,” you say, wrapping your arms around his middle. He lays his arm on top of yours, squeezing your hand. “And you have to remember that you’re not going to be doing this alone. Bo will be there right beside you, and you’ll support each other like you always have. And you’ve got me and Sans, and everyone. The fact that you’re worried about being a good parent? That’s the sign of one. You already care.”

Deacon turns in your hold, folding you up in a tight hug. He takes in a deep breath, holds it, and you feel it tickle your neck as he slowly exhales. His back is tense. “Okay,” he says.

“Okay?”

“Okay,” he says again, firmer this time. “Sorry, I don’t really have much else. I… I believe you? But there’s still a lot. To think about, and… I’ll keep all that in mind. I promise.”

“You can always talk to me,” you say, giving him a reassuring squeeze.

“I know. And as always I’ll abuse that privilege.”

“I love you. And I just want you to be happy, Deacon.”

“I love you too,” he says, kissing your temple before pulling back. His cheeks and ears are a little pink as he glances away, clearing his throat and looking pointedly at the poster. George Washington looks back at him with something close to a moody scowl. “I think it’s crooked.”

“It’s fine,” you say, and you humor him as he takes a step back and then pulls the poster down to try again.
Deacon fills the silence with talk about the lessons he has planned, which things he’s most looking forward to teaching this year’s batch of students (Frisk and Asriel included). You don’t try to steer things back to talk of kids, knowing that the conversation has run its course. You’re glad that this is finally happening, that Bo decided to talk to him about what’s been bothering her for months at this point. It’s hard for Deacon, and you hope you made it a little easier, but they couldn’t keep avoiding this forever.

You can only trust that you said the right things. That you were honest and it was what Deacon needed to hear.

Two posters and a history lesson later, your phone starts to ring. Wondering if maybe you lost track of time and that you need to pick up Frisk, you’re surprised to see not Frisk’s name on the caller ID, but Morwenna.

You answer the call. “Hello?”

“Hope, has Frisk called you at all?” she asks, skipping the pleasantries. She sounds worried, which is enough to immediately put you on the defensive.

“No, what’s going on? They’re supposed to be with you,” you say, looking at Deacon as he circles around to catch your eye. He’s frowning, setting down the poster in his hands as he leans in a little closer to try and overhear your conversation.

“Frisk and Asriel left while Gaster and I were… discussing how to handle their training,” she says, and you can hear the frustration in her voice. But it’s nothing compared to what you’re feeling right now. “I tried to call them but they’re not answering me.”

“Discussing or fighting?” you demand. Deacon touches your arm and you cover his hand with yours.

“We tried to look for them but we didn’t have any luck. I was hoping that maybe they’d called you to pick them up.”

“No, they didn’t— I’ll head back to the house. I’m going to call them and I’ll let you know. Just —” You squeeze your eyes shut, restraining the anger and worry forming a leaden ball in your chest. “Just bring Gaster home. Can you do that at least?”

Your tone is harsher than you’d like, despite your best effort, but if Morwenna takes any offense she’s smart enough not to show it. “Of course. Hope, I’m sorry—”

“I’m sure they’re fine,” you say, cutting her off. “They wander off all the time, and Ebott’s a safe place. I’ll call you back.”

“Alright,” she says, and you hang up.

“They left? Just walked out?” Deacon asks, giving you a bewildered look.

You nod, pulling up Frisk’s number and starting a call. It’s ringing. “I shouldn’t have taken Gaster with us. I knew those two don’t get along. It’s— Frisk! Sweetie, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, Mom, we’re fine,” Frisk says, and you sag with relief. They’re fine. You knew they would be, but… Hearing your child just up and vanished always reminds you of the worst times. Of the hundreds of timelines they ran away. Of the night the Barrier fell. “…Did Morwenna call you?”

“Yes, she did,” you say, forcing sternness into your tone. It doesn’t last long. “Were they fighting
“Yeah,” they mumble. Then after a breath they speak in a rush. “Mom, it was just super uncomfortable, and Asriel and I wanted to leave, and they weren’t paying attention to us anyway—”

“It’s fine,” you say. “What are you doing now?”

“We’re, um, just headed to the park.”

“Do you need me to come get you?”

“Do you want us to come home?”

You hesitate. “No, I think I need to have a talk with Morwenna and Gaster… Do you still have some money for lunch?”

“Asriel, do you— Yeah, we’re fine.”

“Okay. Just stick together, let me know if you need me. Just be back home before dinner, alright?”

“Okay.”

“I love you, you’re not in trouble.”

Frisk laughs, sounding relieved. You honestly can’t blame them. “Love you too, Mom.”

They hang up and you pocket your phone, letting out a haggard sigh as you and Deacon look at one another.

“It’s always fun when the elderly act like children,” Deacon says.

You cover your mouth as a loud snort escapes you, breaking the tension. “They’re not elderly.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No… I think I need to handle this myself.”

Chapter End Notes

As of 11/15/16 WTMYH is currently on Hiatus. Please check the link HERE for some more information.
Something of a Resolution

Chapter Notes

Hey kids, so this isn't really a new chapter, sorry if that disappoints you. But what it IS is a summary of what was going to happen. This is also posted over on my tumblr, but thought I'd put it here just to make sure all of you who may still be subscribed to the fic will see it.

Thank you, all of you, for reading this fic. <3 I'm sorry I couldn't give it the ending you deserved.

So I said I’d do this ages ago, but never quite got around to it, so here we go.

Disclaimer: This was just how I mapped it out in my notes. The big strokes probably wouldn’t have changed, but some of the in-between stuff always ends up tweaked in the process. It also wasn’t 100% figured out how we got from certain points A to B so forgive any missing bits.

Chapter 209

Supposed to be Morwenna POV, big talk between her and Gaster about their argument that drove Frisk away, them reaching a mutual agreement about their admittedly-childish behavior. This was meant to be build up for their dynamic moving forward. @mod2amaryllis You had totally convinced me to do more with Gaster/Morwenna thanks to your wonderful art of the two of them. <3

The two of them were going to preemptively apologize to Hope for what happened, and then she was going to ask Frisk exactly what happened, and there was a possible subplot planned where she was going to get Gaster a pet or something to distract him and keep him occupied aside from pestering people.

Chapter 210

Fatima POV! A nightmare about her time with the Vigilum, focusing on emotional manipulation/deception by Avery Fletcher (the big bad from ACT Two, if you forgot) to highlight the source of her trust issues.

After she wakes up, she decides to text Chris to see if he’s awake so she can talk, he asks if he can call her, she realizes he actually WAS asleep but they’re all cute and this was more setup for their relationship.

After Chapter 210

Those were the only two specific chapters I had planned out. So after that…

There were certain setup things I needed to do:
• More monsters being killed by the Anathema, possibly even secondary/tertiary characters with recognizable names such as the Nice Cream Guy, Leveretta, or Bonnet.
• Deacon was going to spend more time with Howard (you know, the mage cop) talking about his concerns about having kids.
• We were going to see more of a mage girl named Valerie Bowman, who had been introduced once before in an earlier chapter. She was going to befriend Fatima after a few failed attempts at flirting with Rashid.
• Sans was going to start having flashbacks of his forgotten memories, mostly the ones with Gaster as he spends more time with his dad.
• More moments with Morwenna/Grant/Gaster.
• Bonding between Morwenna and the twins.

The kids were then going to get back to school as the summer ended, and after a few more people went ‘missing’. Enough that the monsters were starting to notice.

Frisk and Deacon were going to have some bonding over Frisk talking to him about using their magic, nudging Deacon a bit in the direction of giving having kids a chance (he eventually does decide to say yes to Bo, they eventually have a little sandy-colored wolf girl that @mod2amaryllis guessed correctly ages ago).

The timing of things are a little wobbly here but bear with me.

Fatima was going to start realizing her feelings for Chris, things there were going to develop.

Deacon, forever a grudge-holder, tries to warn her away from him, citing his flakiness with being there for Hope a million years ago as signs of his un-trustworthiness (and knowing playing into her own trust issues). He was also specifically supposed to drop the line, “He’s beneath you.” in reference to Chris as a callback to what the Busperson told Fatima before.

Hope would find out by accident from Gaster about the Geno runs. There would of course be some drama and fallout, and mostly tie in with some Themes of closure for Sans that we’ll get to in a little bit.

As more of the monsters started to go missing, the monsters start to cast suspicion on the mages. They’d spent years trying to get over their deeply-ingrained divide, but this new, subversive threat is starting to wear down that peace.

In response to that, the Literatum decides to take it upon themselves to look into what’s happening to prove that it isn’t them. However, Fatima and Rashid are excluded from these ‘team meetings’ because Grant still doesn’t trust the twins, thinking that they’re still brainwashed by Avery and the Vigilum. They, of course, resent this.

Frisk and Asriel, who are also worried about what’s going on, also want to look into the disappearances. The two of them, the twins, and a hesitant and worried Chris form a ‘scooby gang’ to work on their own. (Chris is very worried, but wants to spend time with Fatima and Frisk, but also thinks that Hope is going to kill him if she finds out. He also feels kind of like the ‘idiot without magic’ in the party.)

Morwenna breaks things off with Grant again, frustrated with his stubborn refusal to believe Gaster and the hostility forming between Grant and Gaster. Morwenna has been spending more time with Gaster by this point. The very beginnings of a maybe-relationship start to form.

Then shit starts to get real.
Frisk and the scooby gang witness the Anathema killing someone, and specifically see it using Cyan Magic. Chris drags them away and they rush over to the Literatum who are currently having a meeting.

But when they get there, they discover that Howard is missing.

A little bit of time passes here, and it is believed that Howard is dead.

However, Howard had just been kidnapped by the Anathema and was feeding off of him because unlike monsters, it could drain some of the magic out of a mage without taking all of it, kind of like a vampire reusing a victim over and over again. Howard eventually found a way to reach out to the others while the Anathema was gone before getting re-captured. He is being kept in the Underground.

The Literatum stage a rescue mission. This culminates with Morwenna and Deacon getting separated from the party, but finding Howard and then getting cornered by the Anathema. Morwenna tells Deacon to take Howard and run, that she’ll keep it distracted so that they can escape. (The Anathema constantly fights with itself, between the multiple personalities of the primary Souls that comprise it, so she had a plan to manipulate that to her advantage.)

Morwenna ultimately sacrifices herself to save Deacon and Howard, citing the fact that they both have families who need them. (Bo, at this point, is pregnant. Howard has his wife and daughters.)

The aftermath of Morwenna’s death is explosive.

Grant, in particular, is devastated, and takes his grief out on the people around him. Primarily Deacon, who he blames for her death, and goes so far as to try and punch him when the news breaks. Grant and Gaster also get into a heated argument because Grant wants to start an all-out offensive against the Anathema, against better judgement.

Speaking of Gaster, he becomes very withdrawn and throws himself into his research into how to combat the Anathema. He and Morwenna had never began a relationship, but he’d been holding out hope of it.

Deacon, Fatima, and Rashid are all very much in mourning. They all saw her, in different ways, as a surrogate maternal figure.

The rescue of Howard and the discovery of the Anathema fully puts everyone into crunch time.

This is where my notes start to get a little foggy.

Sans and Gaster come up with a plan to use The Machine to get the Anathema back into the Font. They do their best to keep Frisk and Asriel in particular uninvolved in this plan, since they’re children. Hope agrees.

They get The Machine up and running again. This is particularly troubling for Sans, who has been using The Machine as a safety net in case of another Reset. This goes back to those themes of closure for Sans in having to relinquish this last piece of ‘safety’ from his past.

However, before they can execute the plan. Valerie Bowman (you know that girl from before) reveals herself as Avery Fletcher’s niece, there to exact some kind of revenge for her family (who are sort of on the outs with the rest of the Vigilum). She and her family don’t want the Anathema gotten rid of, instead wanting to use it for themselves (or something). So Valerie sabotages the machine.
This results in Frisk and Asriel ultimately having to open up another tear into the Font like before. However, this time Hope refuses to let the kids do this alone, and her presence and the way her Soul resonates with Frisk’s helps ground them and prevents the kids from getting sucked inside like last time (because of Chara’s Soul and its connection to the Font). This was meant to be a sort of echo back to the end of ACT One.

The end. Sort of.

So obviously there’s some holes in there. There was also a lot of debate on my end over how exactly the Anathema was going to be dealt with. I had a lot of stuff in my notes about the different Souls of the mages who comprised the core of the Anathema, in particular the Red Soul, who was a mage who was actually on the side of the monsters, who had married and had children with a monster and whose family was among those trapped behind the Barrier.

She, along with a couple other mages on the monster side, were forced to help create the Barrier in exchange for the surviving monsters being spared instead of massacred. This was a big cause for the huge conflict among the parts of the Anathema, because they were enemies. The Red Soul in particular had held onto scraps of her sanity after becoming the Anathema, which is why we would never see the Anathema use Red magic against anyone. The Anathema’s central eye color would change based on which Soul was most in control, and she was basically never in control.

We were going to find out that the Red Soul’s family was actually Undyne’s family line. That one of her ancestors was a mage. Asgore was meant to later reveal this to her when, during an encounter with the Anathema, it refused to attack Undyne after the Red Soul took over and called Undyne by a different name before retreating.

There was also some uncertainty over what exactly was going to become of the Anathema itself. The groups within the story were going to argue over this as well because there were a few different ways to go:

- They could try to destroy the Anathema. It would release, theoretically, every single mage Soul that they had absorbed, releasing all the contained magic. This would mean that mages would go back to their pre-war power, which has it’s own risks.
- They could simply send the Anathema back. Let it continue to weaken mages as it removed mage Souls from returning properly to the Font and the cycle of human magic.
- Or, what I think I was ultimately going to go with, they were (somehow) going to be able to alter the Anathema somewhat. Put the Red Soul in primary control of the Anathema through some method I was going to worry about later so that the Anathema still existed, but didn’t continue to capture Souls going forward.

The ending was still giving me some trouble, as you can see, and there was lots of character-development planned between lots of different groups of people. (I have a LOT of notes!)

But, well, this was basically how WTMYH was supposed to go!

If you have any questions about it, feel free to send me any asks or even a direct message, I’m more than happy to fill in whatever blanks I can. <3

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