**Summary**

The city of Ebott, 193X. The market's down, the crime rate's up, and Sans is just trying to make a buck and keep an eye on his brother by working for the Dreemurr crime family. But after the Dreemurrs rescue a human child from their rival gang, the Flower Boys, Sans soon finds himself in way over his head.

(Well. Not that that's hard.)

**Notes**

This fic is based on theslowesthnery's wonderful Undertale gangster AU art and writing! Please go check their stuff out, especially if you have a weakness for skeletons in suits! There are many other talented Undertale fan-creators who do gangster AU stuff, but this fic is influenced the most by theslowesthnery's interpretations.

This is a work in progress; I will try to make updates reasonably frequent but please bear with
me. I welcome any and all feedback, including constructive criticism. (I may not change anything, but I am happy to listen.)

The city of Ebott is based very loosely on Chicago, my hometown, in the late 1920s and early 1930s. (I know comparatively little about organized crime in the city nowadays and I am happy to keep it that way. So happy. This is certainly not how I experience the city! But I've used it as a framework and indulged in a lot of references to Chicago politics, geography, etc.)

The title is from a quote from Nelson Algren's 1951 essay *Chicago: City on the Make*:

"Yet once you’ve come to be part of this particular patch, you’ll never love another. Like loving a woman with a broken nose, you may well find lovelier lovelies, but never a lovely so real."

See the end of the work for more notes.
There's three places in this town where a monster can sit down for a good meal. Oh, sure, we've got bakeries galore, and there's a guy who drives an ice cream truck all over the Little Underground -- there's even a hot dog stand when I'm feeling up to it. And Ebott has plenty of restaurants outside of the Little Underground. But if you're a monster, and you want a place with waiters and tables and the whole nine yards, there's really only three options; the humans won't have us in their very refined establishments, after all.

The first place -- the only place you're likely to know of if you're human -- is Club MTT. It's famous -- this is where Shyren got her start, after all -- and it's booked solid for months, so good luck with reservations. But if you know a guy, you might find yourself at a nice table near the front. Don't worry about being the only human there; there's more humans than scary monsters at Club MTT.

The food's hit or miss, more spectacle than substance, but people go really wild for the entertainment and the glamour. Mettaton himself is up there on stage most nights, and whatever you think of the guy, he puts on a great show.

The second place is Grillby's. You gotta love Grillby's. Maybe you've heard of this one too, especially if you're from around here; it's where humans go when they want "the authentic Little Underground experience." It ain't glamorous, but the grub's fantastic. And hey, if you wanna know a guy who could get you into Club MTT, just look for me there. I'm the one with all the best jokes, and I've got a tab you could help me out with.

The third place is Lo Spaghettore. It's a great little restaurant in the heart of the Little Underground -- cozy atmosphere, friendly waitstaff, and so on. A nice, family-friendly kinda place. Humans never seem to find their way there, but if they did I know they'd be welcomed with open arms. The chef, a real swell guy named Papyrus, always comes out to ask how dinner was when you're done with your pasta.

What I think you should tell him is that dinner was great. I strongly advise against complaining about dinner. Dinner was fantastic. Excellent, even. Make no bones about it. Best spaghetti you ever had. Let them pack up the leftovers in a doggy bag. You're gonna have a lotta leftovers.

After you skip the spaghetti, though, you should order the pie. Trust me on this. Men have died for the recipe. Hell, men have killed for it. Which was a mistake, because no stone-cold killer's ever gonna get their grubby paws on Tori's famous pie. She'd never allow it. I mention this because I think people get the wrong impression about monsters -- about the Dreemurrs in particular. What you see in the papers is sensationalized. I'm not sayin' it's incorrect, but I just wanna point out that at no point have any of us ever been convicted. There ain't a gentler soul out there than Asgore Dreemurr, and Tori -- well, she's a classy lady, is all I can say.

Me? Come on, look at me, I'm what, four feet tall and all bones. You got nothing to fear from me. So what if there's been some... incidents in our community? We monsters have to do what we can to survive, and it ain't illegal to make bad spaghetti or good pie. Or to stick together.

Anyway, if you don't like the pie, I'll eat my hat. Course, I'd eat my hat anyway if it made for a good punchline. With ketchup, obviously. I may be a monster, but I'm not a barbarian.

Where is this all going? Well, you gotta know the lay of the land. Usually I'm at Grillby's in
between my various tasks and errands around town. I'm a very busy guy! I have to get in a lot of loitering, boondoggling, passing time, shilly-shallying, and general faffing around. But I always go to Papyrus' place for dinner. Always. Even if I'm performing at MTT later that night. I am part-owner, after all; I gotta look after the place. Also, he's my brother. We ain't got anyone but each other, not anymore. But I don't like to think about that.

So it shows how important Undyne is that I agreed to meet her at MTT for dinner in the first place. Papyrus wasn't real happy he wasn't invited, but I told him Undyne knows he's got his important chef duties to attend to, and I think he even believed it. We may not agree on much, me and Undyne, but she definitely wants to keep Papyrus out of trouble same as me.

Anyway, I walk in and there's Mettaton on stage in a slinky dress, singing about love and death and how great his legs are -- his usual schtick -- and Undyne's accompanying him on the piano, looking bored out of her skull and cranky as ever. I take my hat off, I order a Bloody Mary and a burger, I clap politely when the song's done, and I sit there and look around wondering why we're here. Not why we're here philosophically; I swore off worrying about the difficult questions ages ago, they're too much effort. I mean, why we're here in this glitter-trap full of slumming humans, because presumably Undyne has some important business. She usually does.

When they're done with their set she comes over to my table. "You're early. You said you wouldn't be able to get that delivery finished until six."

I shrug. "I know a shortcut. Anyway, what's going on?"

She looks around tensely, then sits down. There's a noise like an elephant blowing its nose, and she bares her teeth at me before removing the whoopee cushion from the seat and throwing it on the table. It lies there like roadkill.

I smirk. She sits down, scowling, and continues as if nothing happened. "Rumor is the Flower Boys are making a move soon."

"Yeah? Rumor is always that they're making a move," says I. "They're probably rooted to the spot, same as ever."

She rolls her remaining eye. Sometimes Undyne does not appreciate a good joke when I tell it. This is true of many people. I try not to hold it against her. "This is serious, Sans," she says. "People are saying they're prepping to reset the entire Little Underground."

"Reset" is a euphemism. It means they're gonna wipe it clean. They're gonna clear it out. In plain language, they want to kill us.

This is nothing new. They're crooks, after all. As a legitimate businessman, I despise their methods, obviously. Fortunately, I got friends in low places to deal with all of that messy work.

"So you're gonna shoot 'em up," I say, shrugging. "No cartilage off my nasal cavity."

"It's not that simple," she says. "They have this kid."

"What?" I am baffled. I've never met him, but the Flower does not strike me as the parental type. I don't even think the guy has friends. It's just him and his goons.

"They have this kid," she repeats. She lights up a cigarette, takes a long drag, and sighs, apparently exhausted from a long day of piano and beating people up. Smoke curls out of her nose, mouth, and gills. "The boss doesn't want to just kill 'em all. Collateral damage, you know?" After a thoughtful pause, she adds, "The boss never wants to just kill 'em all."
"Why do they have a kid?" I ask. "Who is this kid?" My burger comes. I pick the sequins out of it. Never liked the taste of sequins.

She shrugs. "Beats me. Must be a pretty special kid if the Flower's willing to play babysitter. Anyway, we're planning on doing a thing next week. We need you to distract the cops."

"What kind of thing?" I ask.

"It's not your kind of thing," she says, quickly. This is also a euphemism. It means "It's gonna be fucking brutal, Sans." Or "You're a useless lump, Sans. Stay out of it."

I can't really be insulted, because that is basically my job description right there. I work hard at being useless. Still, I'm curious. "How do I know what kind of thing it is or isn't if you won't tell me?" I ask. "When you put it like that --" and here I grin for real, because she walked into it "-- it sounds pretty fishy."

"You planning on helping out?" she asks, raising an eyebrow. "Because if not, it's not your kind of thing."

"You kidding? I'm already working my fingers to the bone here. Besides, you said you needed me to serve as a distraction."

"That's right," she says. "The boss wants to see you tomorrow for lunch. Specific instructions, I guess. Twelve-thirty sharp at Lo Spag."

"Gotcha."

"Oh, and..." Undyne makes a face. "She wants you two to take the kid, after. Just for a little while, until things settle down."

"What?" I gotta be straight here, I can barely keep a goldfish alive on a good day. Besides, I have my hands full with Papyrus. And the boss is... well, she used to have kids. I thought she missed 'em. "They're taking the kid? Who is this kid?"

Undyne shrugs. "That I don't know. What, you gonna turn her down?" She puffs on her cigarette thoughtfully.

"She's a hard lady to turn down," I say. "What about the big guy, though? Can't he watch the kid?"

"Yeah, he suggested that." Undyne's frown looks like a knife drawer in disarray. "But like you said. She's a hard lady to turn down."

"You got any idea what these specific instructions are?" Probably not, but it's worth asking.

She shakes her head. "Your guess is as good as mine. Better, maybe. How'd you say you knew Toriel, again?"

"I don't remember specifying," I say, maybe a little harsher than I meant it. She don't like my tone, clearly, but she's not gonna push it. "Sorry. I guess it's not that exciting. We were pen pals for a while, that's all."

"Pen pals," she repeats, clearly not believing me. I can't blame her. She's seen the state of my mailbox.

"Yeah," I say. "She likes getting mail."
Undyne doesn't know what to do with this, so she drops the subject. It's for the best. Things are awkward enough between Tori and Asgore and I don't wanna make things worse. Not that I think I -- well, anyway. Things are awkward. "Right," says Undyne. She puts out her cigarette, nearly breaking the ashtray in the process, and yawns. "We got another set in ten. You on the schedule for tonight?"

"Nah, they got a real comedian filling in," I say. I almost laugh, she looks so relieved. She straightens her tie and starts to leave. "Hey, you want me to say hi to Alphys for ya?"

She brightens. "Yeah! Yeah, how's she doing? Wait, when are you seeing her?"

"Probably after the cops rough me up next," I point out. "So I don't know. Soon, though. The boys in blue, they got a lot of anger issues. I'm thinking I should charge by the hour like a head-shrinker."

"Oh. Yeah." She looks a little dismayed. Undyne may not like me very much but she's a part of the family, and she hates to see an innocent person get hurt. Lucky for her I'm not innocent, right?

"So I'll tell her hi, then," I say, taking my hat. "Hey, thanks for the grub." I get up to make my escape.

"What?" she says. "Hey! Come back here! I'm not paying for --"

I vanish into the crowd, and I'm home before she knows it.

Chapter End Notes

I have been posting bits and pieces of this elsewhere, and an anonymous person was kind enough to correct my Italian grammar. I do not know your name, dear nonny, but thank you! (If you would like to be credited by name, please let me know.)
Next day, at Lo Spaghettore, I show up at exactly 12:29. It's a bad idea to keep Toriel Dreemurr waiting. She starts to worry where you got to, and I don't exactly deserve that kinda worrying about. And she definitely doesn't deserve to worry.

When I get there, she's already at her usual table, thoughtfully doing the word search I made for the children's menu. "Sans!" she says, to all evidence delighted to see me.

"Hey." I pull up a chair. Papyrus has conscientiously left a stack of phone books so I can actually see over the table. Things like that are one of the reasons he's my favorite brother.

"Sans, are you aware that 'giastctebrehber' is not a word?" she says. She's maybe trying not to laugh, and she's having trouble sounding out the non-word.

Before I knew her as the boss of the Dreemurr family, she was just a nice lady who worried too much, and she was my best audience. That hasn't changed, exactly, but the laughs are rarer now. Maybe I'm getting less funny. Maybe the world's getting darker. Either way, I don't wanna change the subject, so I lean into the joke. "Of course it is. Means 'someone who giastctebrehbs.' You think a smart guy like me would stoop to making up words?"

"Also," she adds, "I cannot help but notice that this word is nowhere in the word search."

"You think a smart guy like me would stoop to cheating?" I ask.

"Would you not?" she asks, amused.

"Heh. Guess I don't have to stoop that far to do it," I admit. She laughs, but then she opens her mouth to say something reassuring, and I gotta ask. "So, you got a special job for me, sounds like?"

Her face falls. "Yes. I. You know how I dislike asking you to --"

"Don't worry about it," I say. "A guy's gotta do what's best for his family." She doesn't have to know I mostly mean my family and not the family. But she probably does anyway. "Tell me who you need distracted, when, and where. I got a trombone, a hundred whoopee cushions, and ten gallons of rubber cement, and I'm not afraid to use 'em."

"Ten gallons of rubber cement?" she asks.

"Well, since the cops can never make the charges stick I figured I'd give 'em a little help," I say.

She snorts. "Where did you get ten gallons of rubber cement?"

"Eh. Around. What can I say, I've got sticky fingers."

She smiles again, but her heart's not in it. "Sans, I will need you to lead the police on a chase next Friday night. This might get very complex, as I think they must be working with the Flower Boys. Fortunately, I doubt if the police know about the child. The Flower Boys would never share the full details of their plans."

"Who is this kid?" I ask.

"I am not sure," she says. She looks sad. Tori always looks sad around kids, even when she looks happy, too. "But whoever they are, we must not let the Flower Boys keep them against their will."
...Sans, how much do you know about Determination?"

I pause. Tori knows more about my past than most people, so it's not like I can shrug the question off completely, but I never worked real closely with the stuff, even back in my egghead days, and there's a lot I don't tell anybody on account of not wanting to wake up in a padded cell one of these days. Or worse. "That's Alphys' area, isn't it?"

"She's looked into it," says Tori. "Asgore asked her to. While I was away."

That's a sore spot if ever there was one. "All I know about DT is that everyone wants it."

"You don't know why?"

"I have an inkling," I admit. "To be honest I'm a lot more comfortable with bathtub gin. Stuff's cleaner."

That earns me a little smile. "Very true. At any rate, we believe the Flower Boys plan to use this human child to produce immense amounts of Determination." Something of my true feelings must show in my expression, because she pats my hand reassuringly. "Do not worry, Sans! This is exactly why we are extracting the child. We have good information that the Flower Boys will not be able to cobble their extractor together for a month. They had to order the parts from a Swiss firm and thanks to your… adventure at the Customs office they are behind schedule."

"Oh, so that's what that was all about." I did wonder at the time. Not that I mind causing a little chaos every now and then.

"I am sorry for not explaining it earlier."

"Don't worry about it," I tell her.

She turns over the menu and starts to draw a map on it. "We think the child is being held here, at their warehouse on the corner of Wilder and Camponella." Surprisingly, it's not very deep in Flower territory; they gave up on using the warehouse for other goods recently. I figured it was because Aaron and Wosh cleaned 'em out a couple times (literally) so we could resell the booze that was good enough to drink and trash the stuff that was making people go blind. But apparently they're keeping a kid there now. Great. "We will need you to distract as many of the police as you can; the nearest station is here --" she marks it in red crayon "-- and these three stations are likely to send assistance if something important was to happen. I believe you are familiar with most of the officers likely to be on patrol Friday nights?"

"Oh yeah, I know 'em," I say, gritting my teeth. It's a smile. I gotta keep smiling.

She pauses. "Sans, please. If you cannot do this, we can always --"

"I'm happy to do it," I say, firmly. "You gotta get that kid outta there, Tori. A warehouse full of cheap gin is no place to raise a kid." A beat. "At least we can get 'em some cheap champagne."

She smiles, the kind of dangerous smile that makes the newshawks clam up and the cops step out for donuts. "I assume you mean grape juice."

"Yeah, yeah," I say, waving it off. Shit. Do we have any kid-edible stuff in the apartment? What do kids even eat? I pick up the map and squint at the kids' menu side. "Boiled chicken? Spinach? Ain't kids got tastebuds these days?"

Toriel looks confused. "Sorry?"
"I just realized I don't know what kids eat anymore. Or humans, for that matter. They have that weird human food, don't they? I've heard about it. Sounds kinda gross."

She laughs. "They eat normal food! And, hm, Undyne must have mentioned that I would like you to look after the child once we have liberated them from the Flower Boys."

"Yeah," I say, trying to look more confident than I feel. I'm good at that, though; I don't think she's noticed. "Yeah, she might've said something about that."

"It is only that... I do not think I can -- it is very -- it is very difficult, just now." Oh no, she's got that look now, the one I hate seeing and I can't do anything about and I can't look away from. "I did not tell you, Sans, what happened between Asgore and I. Did I?"

And I don't wanna know, because then I'll feel... obligated, or something. They're still together, nominally, and I don't wanna jinx that, the political situation being what it is, but sometimes she wants to talk about it and I dunno why she thinks I can help. "I figured I'd keep my nose clean, and since I don't have a nose it's clean by default."

"Yes," she says, a glimmer of humor coming back into her eyes. "Well. After I left... as you know, things got out of hand. I do not entirely trust him to take good care, considering how he has reacted in the past, and..." She rolls her eyes. "Well. I suppose he thought he was doing what was best."

At this point I decide to change the subject, employing my trademark care and subtlety. "Right, so, the kid, I'll take the kid for however long you need me to, it'll be great, I'll teach 'em how to cheat at poker and Papyrus will make spaghetti, it'll be a grand old time." I manage to get it all out in one breath. (So to speak.) It's clearly not making Toriel happy, but I also don't have to watch her get all sad, either. I am a very smooth guy, for a skeleton, although this is maybe not saying much. "Anything else I need to know?"

"No. I suppose not," she says. She looks disappointed.

The silence that ensues is about as awkward as a snake on stilts, and twice as long. I'm on the verge of saying something (what it is I don't know, but something, at least, even if it's not funny) for an entire thirty seconds, before the Spaghettore himself waltzes in and saves us both.

I love that guy.

"Good evening, Mrs. Dreemurr! Good evening, Mr. My Brother!" Toriel starts to tell Papyrus to just call her Toriel, but as usual, she gives up halfway through the first word. She's learned from experience that Papyrus' enthusiasm makes him resistant to all attempts to correct him. And neither of us bother to remind him that it's early afternoon. "What fine culinary concoction may I, the proprietor of this world-class spaghetteria, present to you tonight?"

The menu, such as it is, is four pages of spaghetti. Spaghetti with meat sauce. Spaghetti with tomato sauce. Spaghetti with chocolate sauce. Spaghetti with a cherry on top. But Tori always makes a show of paging through the menu before ordering her usual. "I would like the spaghetti aux escargot, please," she says. It's marked TORIEL'S FAVORITE on the menu; I was never really clear whether that was an advertisement or a warning, but at least she seems to genuinely like the stuff.

"And I'd like the spaghetti on rye," I say. I haven't looked at the menu in years, but I know that's not on it.

"Sans, you know we don't have spaghetti sandwiches," Papyrus says, exasperated.

"Really?" I ask. "That's a shame! Rye-ever not? Wheat better consider adding them."
"Sans, stop grilling your poor brother," says Toriel, who has not quite managed to keep a straight face. Like I said, she's my best audience, and sometimes I wonder if I might be hers. "At the very least, you should not be Reuben it in. Papyrus is a real hero for putting up with it!"

"It's true, I should wrap it up," I admit. "Otherwise someday he's gonna banh mi from this club."

Papyrus makes a sort of despairing wail. "Can you please order something without puns?"

I pretend to consider it for a moment. "Nah, that's completely impastable."

"You used that one last time!" In my defense, it is a classic of food-based wordplay for a reason.

"Ah, but those who cannot remember the pasta are doomed to reheat it," Toriel points out wisely.

At this point the two of us start cracking up. "Fine!" says Papyrus, throwing his hands up dramatically. "If I had a penne for every terrible pun you two tormented me with, I'd be the world's wealthiest spaghettore in addition to its greatest! ...Or at least I'd have a lot of penne and nowhere to store my other ingredients! You are both getting the spaghetti aux escargot! Nyeh!" He swipes his menus back like we're unworthy.

"Oh dear," says Toriel.

I shrug. "That's okay. I've taken a couple slugs in my time."

"You might as well bite the bullet," she agrees. And after that we have a pretty good time. Papyrus' spaghetti is almost okay today, although I can't say the same for the snails, as they're an acquired taste I have yet to get my hands on. We hash out the timeline and details of Friday's extraction while Papyrus is busy wearing his chef hat (no, really, I got him one) and drive him off with puns whenever he puts his waiter hat (more metaphorical) back on.

I try not to worry too much about the care and feeding of mysterious human kids.
Chapter 3

I start laying in supplies for the kid. At first I'm trying to do it without letting on to Papyrus that I know, but then Undyne briefs him about the upcoming expedition and suddenly he's telling me all about it -- all the fun he's gonna have and how excited he is to meet this human kid we gotta watch for a few days.

Papyrus… well, he could be good in a fight, hypothetically. But that's a very distant hypothetical. The real reason he's coming along is he's the best driver out of all of us. That's partly my fault; before we came to Ebott we kinda had to keep moving, and sometimes we, uh, acquired various automobiles, you know, to aid us in that end. By the time he was twelveish he was taller than me, and pretty soon after that he could reach the pedals easy and was getting us out of all kinds of scrapes. I'm still not entirely sure how we'd have survived that one thing in Kansas without him. (Just to set the record straight: it was a pigeon, not a chicken, and there was only one of 'em, and I wasn't there, and I don't know anything about it, and I have it on good authority that Papyrus was fifteen states away at the time. But he sure saved our sorry asses there.)

Anyway, Papyrus is a great driver. He even had a chauffeuring gig once, and boy did he love it, but apparently he was too loud or some bullshit and they fired him. He was pretty broken up about it for a while there. I guess it's a good thing he can put his skills to use for a good cause these days, although I think the restaurant keeps him pretty happy. I hope so, anyway. He's a good kid.

So the Dreemurrs want him along to drive. He'll wait in the car -- Undyne makes sure of that. It always makes me a little tense, but so far he's never been caught. And he's got the city maps memorized, including all the little shortcuts and alleyways no one else remembers. One time he even got us onto Lowest Kaluszka, which is the road that runs under Lower Kaluszka and Lower Lower Kaluszka, and which I had assumed, until then, was a myth.

He is… very excited about the human kid's extraction -- or "rescue," as he keeps saying. I think Toriel would agree with that assessment, but I ain't calling it that, on account of the kid is probably gonna like being held captive by a bunch of monsters even less than being held captive by a bunch of mobsters. And reading between the lines, here? I don't think we have the option to let the kid go free, neither.

Anyway, I don't really have the heart to tell him that the human kid is not likely to be his "cool friend" and that we'll be lucky if the kid don't try and escape at least once. Sure, I want them to have a nice time while they're here, but I don't know if that's really possible, and no one's telling me anything about who this kid is or why they're such a windfall for wannabe DT distributors. And I'm not sure I wanna know, because to be honest, anything involving DT always sends a chill down my spine. Booze'll eat your liver if you got one, and dope fries your brains, but I only ever saw one thing melt a guy.

Once Papyrus is on board, supplies become easier to smuggle in. He draws up a long list of stuff we gotta do to make the apartment more hospitable, and a strict schedule of cleaning, organizing, and decorating to which I will almost certainly not adhere.

On Wednesday evening, Papyrus is sweeping for about the tenth time, and I am dozing on the sofa listening to the Friendliness™ Soap Flakes Spooktunes Hour on the radio. I have decided it's my day off, which is a conclusion I habitually reach at around 10:30 every morning, once I've
established that nothing's gonna get done. I might pop out for spider donuts later, when Papyrus isn't looking. But then again, I might not. Mostly, I am planning a very funny routine for Friday night, which involves a stepladder, a squeegee, two buckets full of rubber cement, and every plate-glass window I can find on Summerwine Street. The cops are a tough crowd but I'm sure they'll find something to appreciate about my act if I can get them to stick around long enough.

There is a knock at the door, although to call it a knock is kind of like calling the Great Fire a weenie roast. "Papyrus!" It's Undyne. "Papyrus, come on, we gotta go get going."

I rush to open the door before it shakes off its hinges. "It's happening!" she shouts, shoving me aside.

"What's happening?" I ask.

"The thing! The thing with the kid!" she says. "If we don't get going now we'll be way too late. Come on!" And with that, she grabs Papyrus, broom, frilly apron, and all, and tucks him under her arm.

"Wowie! I'm so excited!" I hear Papyrus say as she runs down the stairs.

"Hey, wait a minute!" I call after her, but it's no good. So I take a shortcut and meet her in front of the building. "Hey! Undyne!"

She's only mildly startled; she's used to this by now even if she don't know how I do it. "What?" she snaps.

"What about my part of the plan? They still need me?"

"I don't know, probably," Undyne says, waving her free hand. She dumps Papyrus into the driver's seat of the car, a shiny Cadillac that goes through plates like it was a professional dishwasher. "Just go do… whatever it is you do." I see Woshua and Aaron in the back seat; I assume they got more monsterpower than that lined up for this little expedition. I hope so, anyway. "Let Alphys know we might need her," she adds, before getting in herself. Then Papyrus floors it and they're gone.

Welp. Time to get my squeegee, I guess.

After I drop in on Alphys and tell her not to put away her little black bag just yet, I start heading northwest, towards the river. The idea, as Tori and I had discussed, is just to cause a ruckus and keep attention elsewhere. Unfortunately I was kinda hoping for more of a head start than they gave me. Lucky for me, I get around pretty fast when I gotta.

The first step to being a general nuisance is noise. You gotta be LOUD or else no one's gonna hear you over the sound of their own private lives, especially in this city. I put my hat on the ground, throw a nickel in it for luck, and take out my trombone.

Now, I learned to play trombone as a kid, it being the most obnoxious instrument I could think of. I was never a great talent, but after my promising career in physics was snuffed out for, uh, reasons beyond my control, I tried being a musician. I figured the musician's life would agree with me; sleep late, stay up later, travel if you get real good at drawing a crowd or if you get real bad at paying off debts, and so on. But as it turns out you need talent and luck to make it in music, two things I do not have in abundance.

My point is, I am not exactly a maestro here. Still, I know some great tricks. I start by sliiiiiiding up the scale slowly and agonizingly, then staccatoing back down, hitting all the sourest notes I can find. An old music teacher once told me that should be impossible for a skeleton to have a good
embouchure, and despite having proven her wrong many times, I take this statement to heart, and not
incidentally to the eardrums of everyone in the vicinity. I play When The Saints Go Marching In,
only backwards. It don't sound half bad, actually! When The Saints Come Running Out, maybe? I
couldn't blame them.

Eventually, after dodging some items thrown at my head by the good people of Summerwine Street -
- I keep telling them, I want cash in my hat but they're a very enthusiastic audience -- I hear the
sweet sound of sirens. Now it's time for phase two, which is the really fun part.

I stash my trombone away and get out my stepladder and my rubber cement.

I'll be plain with you. I'm bending one of my rules here; not breaking it, but just giving it a little
twist. This is not ordinary rubber cement. Technically it's not rubber cement at all; it's a low-
viscosity epoxy adhesive in two parts, which, if it acts like it did in the lab, should cure in thirty
seconds to a minute once I've applied the hardener. (No blue humor, please; this is a family criminal
nuisance I'm prepping.)

I asked Alphys to try mixing up something like this, more in case of broken bones than anything,
since she's the one who has to patch us all up, but then she came out with about ten different varieties
of the stuff, all useful for different things. I've been telling her to patent some of 'em but she's too
terrified. She ain't got a real doctorate -- it's pretty hard for monsters to get into college, even Tems --
so she thinks they'll think she stole the formula or something.

"Sans," you may well ask, "where exactly is all this chemical mumbo-jumbo going? Get to the
goddamn point!"

The point is that between these two buckets and squeegees, I have something that's perfect for gluing
cops to plate-glass windows.

I climb my stepladder and lay down a layer of resin across the window of a candy store, right as the
first cop car pulls up.

Officer Ogden's the first on the scene, always. "Evening, officer," I say, spreading the resin. I
whistle a little to myself.

"Aah. It's the comedian. I should have known," he says. He is soon joined by his partner, Officer
Morris.

"What do you think we should do with him?" Morris asks.

"The usual," Ogden says. He looks between me and my buckets. "Hey. What the fuck are you
doing, funny bones?"

They really need to leave the bone puns to me. "What's it look like I'm doing? I'm washing these
windows!" Swipe, swipe. I put my squeegee back in the bucket. The windows don't look very
washed, and hopefully the cops will want to take a closer look.

Good old Officer Ogden. He gets up real close to the window. You gotta love a guy who walks
right into the joke. "What are you doing?" he demands once more.

Quick as I can, I grab the other squeegee, the one with the hardening agent, and squeegee it on. It
looks even less washed now. I spray the squeegee with solvent and wipe it off on a rag, then pat
Officer Ogden on the back, hard. "I'm doing a service to the community and washing these
windows! But enough about me; it's good to see you, pal! How ya been?"
Ogden does the first thing I thought he'd do -- puts his hands out to keep from falling into the glass. Then he does the second thing I thought he'd do, which is that he figures out he's stuck. "Is this some kind of monster magic?"

"Nah," I say. I get down from my stepladder while he struggles uselessly. "Just an arresting development in science." I almost feel bad for Morris then, 'cause his first reaction isn't to slug me, it's to help his partner. But I don't feel that bad. Somehow, while they're not looking, some of the sticky stuff gets on Ogden's coat, and as soon as Morris tries to pull him off, he's caught too.

Now I'm not gonna pretend the cops only hate me because they're jealous of my dazzling wit and personal charm; it's definitely at least partly 'cause I'm an asshole. And I'm very proud of that. However, I think it's mostly 'cause they never manage to pin anything on me. At first they were just picking on me on account of I'm four feet tall and don't fight back, but now, at least for the cops I've made fools of, it's personal. This incident here is probably the worst thing I've ever done to them, but Tori did say it was important, and if she's right about the DT, they gotta get that kid out of there.

"Hey, are you guys okay?" I ask. They swear at me; I'd offer to wash their mouths out if I actually had soap. "You look like you're in kind of a sticky situation."

"We'll get you! There's backup coming!" says Morris.

"Oh good," I say. "We'll have a ball. A regular policeman's ball."

I set up my stepladder a little further down the street and start squeegeeing more windows with resin. When the windows are be-resined to my satisfaction, I get out my trombone again, and play a few more tunes, just to pass the time. Officer Morris is mostly silent. Officer Ogden doesn't sing along either, or at least, if that's what he means to do, his idea of lyrics is mostly along the lines of "You fucker, you fucker, I'll kill you for this." He's no Ira Gershwin.

A couple more cop cars pull up. This time it's Thompson and Bilandic, and Cermak and Medill. I am surprised to see Officer Cermak on duty, because last I heard he had a close call with a bullet; he hates me too, but he ain't in the pay of the Flower Boys, at least, or they wouldn't have shot him. For a second I think, hey, maybe I should let that guy go. Then he calls me a little shit and says my jokes ain't funny, and I decide, nah, let him suffer.

Everyone has their own way of dealing with heckling. This is mine.

"Don't touch the windows!" Ogden shouts.

"Yeah, don't touch the windows," I say. "I worked hard to get 'em this clean. You'll get all your nasty human fingerprints on 'em." And then I lean one hand onto the nearest resin-coated window. It's not dangerous just like this, after all. But then I work my squeegee sleight-of-hand, and the cops try to dogpile me, but I step out of the way juuuuust in time. Just like that I got four more of Ebott's Finest caught in my web. I'm sure Muffet would be proud.

I figure that's enough for this particular part of town, so I pick up my stuff and go make a nuisance of myself elsewhere.

Eventually, by about 10:30 or so, I got as much of the local police force as I can stuck to various windows or sidewalks or mailboxes or whatever. I decide to look in on my compatriots before I reach the third phase of my own task, just in case they need a little luck. I know I shouldn't be doing this -- one day it'll probably come back to bite me in the coccyx -- but I'm too curious to stop.

I take a shortcut over to the warehouse, and stay in the shade where I can't be seen. Things are going
pretty good, looks like. Five of the Flower's six lieutenants are there along with the regular grunts; I can pick 'em out from the rank and file by their colorful boutonnieres. Asgore and Toriel seem to have Zielinski pinned down with fire magic, and as I watch Undyne grabs Tachibana bodily, and uses him to club Corcoran over the head, which is pretty impressive seeing as how Tachibana's got a pretty mean uppercut himself.

I blip out of the main warehouse space to check out the rest of the place. The old boss' office is empty, looks like; so's the kitchen and the break room. Where's the kid?

I retrace my steps back into the office. There's a closet. Careful not to make too much noise, I go listen at the door.

There is definitely someone in there. Maybe two someones. I hear 'em breathing.

I rap my knuckles on the door. "Knock knock!" I say, brightly.


They do not take my advice.

"Hey!" I say. "It's rude to pretend you ain't home." I open the door. For a split second the tableau in front of me is still; the Flower's sixth lieutenant, Patience Gorman, with a ribbon in her hair, a baby blue flower in her buttonhole, and a gun to some poor kid's head.

Then she turns to shoot me in the face.

I remove the bullets from the gun. I am not entirely sure where they've gone, but it ain't here and that's the important part. She pulls the trigger, frowns, then throws the empty gun away and lunges for me, so I shut the door in her face. There's a loud Thunk!, like a skull bouncing off solid wood, and then a softer Ka-thump!, like a human hitting the floor.

I open the door again. Gorman's out cold and the kid's staring at me like they never saw a skeleton before. "Hey, pal," I say. "It's kinda dangerous out there and I gotta get going." I nod at the door out into the warehouse; the rat-tat-tat of guns and fwoosh of magic comes through loud and clear. Undyne is shouting orders, too. Once I think they get the point, I go on. "My friends are gonna come get you, hopefully, but you have to wait out this fight, okay?"

The kid nods. They don't seem spooked, at least, just quiet and confused. I was expecting crying, maybe, or screaming, but sometimes kids are more resilient than you'd think.

"And, uh, don't mention I was here, all right? It's between us. If you want, tell 'em you knocked Gorman out yourself." I wink, and I step out, and I am gone, back on the streets of Ebott.

It's nice out, one of those rare autumn days when the rain's let up and the wind off the lake's not so cold yet. The night's mostly pretty quiet, except for the sound of cars speeding along a busy road to the north. I pick up my trombone case and my buckets and I make my way back to my captured cops to see how they're doing. Now comes phase three of my plan -- the incredibly not fun part.
It's hard to remember much after that, and when I come to again, I'm at the station.

Chapter End Notes

References:
All street names in this fic are Undertale Kickstarter backer names, taken from the end credits!

All police officers are named for mayors of Chicago. I'm not doing this to impugn the real life mayors' characters; simply being mayor of Chicago seems to require you to be kind of a jerk. But mostly I wanted a list of names to grab from and didn't want to name corrupt cops after Kickstarter backers. If I run out of mayors I'll probably start on governors of Illinois.

One time he even got us onto Lowest Kaluszka, which is the road that runs under Lower Kaluszka and Lower Lower Kaluszka: A reference to Wacker Drive, which has three levels, one of which is sometimes used for illegal racing.

When The Saints Go Marching In, only backwards: I expected it to be awful, but it sounds like this.

Officer Ogden's the first on the scene, always: William B. Ogden was the first mayor of Chicago.

He is soon joined by his partner, Officer Morris: Buckner Stith Morris was the second mayor of Chicago. Apparently the phrase "to hell in a handbasket" originated with him! Despite this, he sounds like an asshole.

I am surprised to see Officer Cermak on duty, because last I heard he had a close call with a bullet: Anton Cermak was shot and killed in office while he was shaking hands with FDR. The assassin was aiming for Roosevelt, although apparently some people have speculated that the intended target was Cermak and the assassin was sent by Al Capone.

Medill's writing something on a notepad: Joseph Medill was the co-owner and managing editor of the Chicago Tribune before he was elected mayor.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter has some unpleasant stuff; in particular there is brief eye
torture and mention of injury to hands/fingers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

This part's not real funny. Sure you don't want me to tell you stories about Papyrus instead?

Well, all right. You asked for it.

* * *

Loathe as I am to admit it, I'm kind of fragile, even for a monster. Even I'm surprised I haven't
turned to dust yet.

My first secret is... naps. It's also why I'm such an easygoing kind of guy. Naps are very healthful, I
think. There's never a bad time for a nap. Think about it: when little kids get cranky, you put 'em
down for a nap and then when they wake up they're little rays of sunshine, right?

(At least, Papyrus was, although to be fair he's like that so much anyway. You're sure you don't
wanna hear ...okay, yeah, no. You just wanna see me suffer, huh? Well, I guess it's not like I have
much more control over this narrative than you do. I won't judge.)

My second secret, and this is a real secret, is Temmie. I first encountered Temmie because the rumor
was she'd buy anything. Anything. See, in my line of work sometimes you just kinda... end up
owning a thing or two you didn't own before, maybe even a valuable thing. You gotta get rid of it
somehow, especially if the original owners are looking for it and the only reward they're listing is one
(1) knuckle sandwich payable on delivery. As the saying goes, good fences make good neighbors,
and Temmie's the best fence this side of the Onion River. And, don't ask me how she does it, 'cause
it ain't my area, but she also makes the best goddamn bulletproof, magic-proof, steel-toed-boot-proof
vest I ever had. Comfy, too. Of course, it's made of cardboard, so if the cops throw me in the river
again it'll dissolve and I'll be out five hundred bucks. (I know, I know; for that kind of money I
could buy a decent car! But trust me, it's worth it. Besides, what do I need with a car? I can't reach
the pedals and it'd just slow me down.)

My third secret is that the cops are dicks. Trust me, I'm not real happy about that fact, but it's actually
saved my ass repeatedly. See, monsters are made almost entirely of magic, and magic reacts to
things based on thoughts -- intent, emotion, that kinda thing. Unlike physical matter, which cares
only for cold hard facts, magical matter can pick and choose what rules it wants to behave. (That's
why a monster can break almost any physical law if it's funny enough. Or dramatic enough, I guess,
but I never tried that myself. Never had to resort to high drama when the lowest form of humor's
within easy reach.) So, the cops are dicks. How does this help me? Well, the cops ain't hitting me
because I did anything bad and they want me to stop. They're trying to get revenge 'cause I keep
making 'em look like morons. They want me to hurt. Ergo, no matter how hard they hit, how shitty
their intentions are, and even if I forget my cardboard undershirt and I been up all night on account of
Papyrus and Undyne set the place on fire again? I'm still probably gonna be okay. Because if I die?
I won't hurt, and they won't get what they want.
Magic's kind of a bitch, huh?

Anyway, don't you worry about old Sans. You'd have to be pretty determined to kill me.

* * *

So when I come to, I'm at the station. The cops are *really* pissed off, more so than I ever seen 'em. It feels like they've been knocking on my skull with a sledgehammer, maybe, or possibly a piano fell on me. They got Detective Boone on the case, and he's always ready to do whatever it takes to protect the city of Ebott from the monsters who are ruining America. Or whatever. In this particular case, soon as I come to, he slams my head on the table, and then, like an asshole, he grabs my skull like it's a fucking bowling ball and lifts me up by the eyesockets.

This *hurts*. It's all I can do not to, uh. To react.

Anyway. Last time they did this shit to me, they were tryin' to get me to confess to a murder. I do not murder people. That is not what I do. Trust me, in the event that anyone ever ends up dead because of me? They got a *very* good reason to be dead, and my alibi is airtight.

This time? This time I figure they're just pissed off because that epoxy's probably not so great for human skin. Hell, if it's *really* that bad, they should be thanking me! I just ensured that none of those cops are ever gonna leave their prints next time they plant evidence.

"Jeez, officer," I say. "Eye think this is taking blind justice a little too far, don't you?" I consider making a pun on 'orbit' but I don't think these guys have much knowledge of anatomy beyond where to point the gun. Also, the pain is making it real hard to come up with new material.

But then Boone says "Where's the kid, skeleton man? Where'd you fuckers take the kid?"

*What kid?*, I wonder.

*That kid*, I realize.

Oh no.

"What kid?" I blurt. I am not prepared for this. I don't have a shaggy dog story to tell 'em. I don't, in point of fact, know where the kid is. Or how they know about the kid. Maybe it's a different kid. Last year there was this horrible thing where a kid went missing -- a human kid from *such* a nice family, a good kid, a smart kid, the kind of kid who should never go missing, a tragic loss. Well, of course the cops went looking at all the usual neighborhoods; Franklin Heights, Chinatown, the Little Underground, Italian Village, Odessa on the Lake... you get the picture. It would not surprise me if this was a similar situation.

(In case you're wondering, it was the kid's uncle that did it. *Such* a nice family.)

Boone is no use, of course. "You know what kid, boneface."

"Boneface?" At this point it's kind of automatic. "Boneface, is that the best you can do? Why not bonehead? It's a perfectly good insult. Or! You could work in a short joke and call me Bone-aparte. Hey, or how about --"

"Shut the fuck up and tell me where the kid is," says Boone.

"How'm I supposed to tell you something if I gotta shut up about it?"
"JUST TELL ME." He is not a model of patient policing.

"I don't know about a kid," I tell him, as serious as I can be without creeping the humans out.

"Really? Your brother sure did. Told us all about it. Told us what you sick fucks were planning."

He's just lying to get a rise out of me. Unless Boone thinks of spaghetti and puzzles as abject cruelty, Papyrus hasn't told him a thing, and I'm skeptical of Papyrus' ability not to talk about spaghetti and puzzles, so probably Papyrus is okay. "I don't know about a kid," I repeat. "Don't I get a phone call? Jesus, at least get your fingers outta my eyesockets, I might blink on accident and I warn you, that's really gonna hurt."

There's a moment where Boone, I'm pretty sure, is trying to remember if he's ever seen me blink. Then he lets me go. I'm glad I didn't specify who it would hurt. I rub my eyes sockets a couple of times, and then get a real look at the room.

Boone's partner, Dever, is standing in the corner. He ain't all that impressed. "Jesus Christ, Boone, give it up," he says, irritably. "You'll kill him if you're not careful, and then there'd be riots. You know how these monsters are. I don't think he knows anything."

"Hey!" I say, indignantly. "I'll have you know I'm a very educated guy. I know all kinds of things! Go ahead, ask me to explain Heisenberg's uncertainty principle!"

"What the fuck is he talking about?" Boone asks Dever.

Dever shrugs.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Boone asks me.

"I'm not sure," I say, shrugging broadly. That should be punchline enough, but hey, sometimes you get inspired. "Guess I gotta be in a more coherent state. ...eh? No? Oh well, I guess I'm playing to the wrong crowd."

At this point Boone slugs me. It hurts like hell, but it was exactly what I was going for, since he got me right in the nasal bone, which is kinda sharp, and hurt his widdle knuckles. "Shit," he mutters, and I see he's leaking red stuff. He ain't too comfortable with the sight of his own blood, looks like. Maybe that's why he likes beating up monsters. "I gotta -- I gotta go."

He rushes out and I'm left with Dever. Now, Dever's a decent cop. He's still a cop; he don't like the Dreemurr gang, but he don't like any gang, and he's a stickler for the rules.

Dever sits himself down at the interrogation table. "Mr. Sans. Really. Be honest."

"When am I anything less?" I ask.

"Most of the time," he points out. This is true enough. "Do you know anything about the kid?"

"I don't even know what kid you're talking about," I say.

"It looks pretty bad," he says. "What with the Little Underground half-empty today, and you gluing cops together all last night."

"What do you mean, half-empty?" I ask.

He pauses and tries to look thoughtful, but it's all a little too theatrical for me. "Well," he says. "I'm just saying, it looks pretty bad."
"You and Boone should take your good-cop-bad-cop routine on the road," I grumble.

He considers it for a moment. "It'd never play in Peoria," he says finally. I laugh, because I have played in Peoria, and the crowd was a bunch of dummies. (No, I mean, literally dummies. Stuffed with cotton, button eyes, and not much for conversation.) In other circumstances, I wonder if maybe we coulda had a nice conversation about my days working the old Chimera Circuit. "You sure you don't know anything about the kid?" he asks again.

"What kid is this?" I demand, not really expecting an answer.

He considers it for much, much longer than a moment, and I can tell this ain't a performance. Finally, slowly, he says, "There's a kid missing. Like last year, you know the drill. Good family, kid missing, mayor riding our asses, et cetera. It's an election year, so he wants us to find the kid by yesterday."

"Did you check the uncle's wine cellar?" I know it won't make him laugh -- I sure as hell don't find it funny -- but I can see he gets the gist of it.

"I didn't think that little detail made it to the press," he says.

"It didn't. I looked into it. Found the court records. Repeatedly raiding a guy's neighborhood can make him real curious."

He nods. "Fair enough. The thing is... I wanted to check the uncles, believe me. Evil uncles were the first thing I thought of."

"And?"

"No uncles." I am not sure where this is going at first. "No aunts. No cousins. Nothing. Grandparents conveniently dead, both sets. They moved here from New York last year, but their old neighbors never heard of them. Also, they blamed the monsters straight away. Said you people were hanging around their house, watching, stuff like that. It strikes me very funny, is all. Very easy."

"Well, I don't know anything about this kid," I tell him.

"It's very hard to trust a guy who smiles all the time, you know that?" says Dever, giving me his own very cynical smile. "But I know when I'm getting taken for a ride, and I don't think you're the driver this time around."

"Detective, I swear to god," I tell him, "I an innocent pedestrian on the road of life, at least in matters concerning kids who are missing from families that don't exist."

He nods. "Well, you hear about the kid, you tell me. Missing kids are serious shit. We'll make sure the family's not crooked before we hand the kid back, don't worry."

He sounds like he actually believes that, too. "What's the kid's name?" I ask. "I could ask around." I mean, I probably won't, but I could.

"Frisk," he says. "Frisk Addison."

I nod. "I can't make any promises. But, well, if I hear about the kid..." ...if I do, and it's this Frisk, hey, I still didn't make any promises. I don't gotta tell him anything.

Detective Dever seems to fill in the blank with what he wanted to hear. "Well. All right." He looks
worriedly at the door to the interrogation room. "You know you're gonna pay for that glue stunt, though."

I sigh. "Yeah."

"And you know I can't do anything about Boone. He's got friends. You know how it is. Politics."
In this city -- heck, in this whole county -- "politics" is almost a synonym for magic, except with magic you at least gotta have a sensible explanation. With politics, on the other hand, the law of gravity could be reversed within the city limits for an entire fortnight if it'd help the mayor's buddy pick up some roofing jobs.

"Yeah," I say tiredly. "I know about politics. Good thing I don't bruise, huh?"

I must not be looking as chipper as I want, because Dever shakes his head. "You bring this on yourself, you know," he says. "I'll try and get you your phone call later."

So yeah. Boone comes back with a bandage, all out of proportion to the damage. He smacks me around a little more, this time being more careful with his own personal skin. I got a few fractures and my jaw ain't feeling too good, which Boone sees as a personal triumph because I ain't smiling anymore. A few teeth go skittering to the floor. They'll reattach as long as I can grab 'em before I leave and get 'em back in within a day, but the worst is they're still part of me, so I can feel 'em on the cold floor. It is a long morning, basically.

I don't get my phone call. I sure as hell don't get breakfast. Or lunch. Dever slips me some disgusting coffee at one point, and I doze a little (caffeine always makes me sleepy) but they're sure hoping to get more out of me, or at least trying to charge me with something more than Reckless Gluing Cops Together.

At some point, when the questions start getting boring and I've cycled through all my best material, I start worrying about what they mean about the Little Underground being half-empty. Did something go wrong last night? Should I have stayed and seen it out to its conclusion?

Now, you may be looking at me and thinking, this guy can't be very useful in a fight. And you're right. I can't be good in a fight. If I was, people'd ask a lot of inconvenient questions. Plus, I've found that generally the reward for good work is just... more work. Who wants that? I sure don't.

Eventually, long after I've given up pretty much any hope, two officers seize me by the shoulderblades, uncuff me, and shove me out into the lobby of the station. They stuff my hat onto my head roughly and tell me I'm free to go. I blink, partly because it's a lot brighter out here, and partly because there is absolutely no reason they shouldn't press charges.

However, when my eyes adjust to the light, all is explained. Toriel's there, holding my trombone case. While she's certainly a sight for sore eyesockets, she looks pretty anxious, and that's never good. I wonder what she needs me for, and what strings she had to pull to get me out.

To my surprise, when she sees me, she sweeps me up into one of those kinda terrifying hugs where you didn't see it coming and don't know where to put your hands because it's way too late to shove 'em in your pockets.

"Sans!" she says. "Sans, I'm so glad you are all right!"

"Uhh. Little optimistic there, Tori." I am painfully aware people are staring. Cops are staring. This is not going to look good. I don't want you to get the wrong idea here; we're old friends, is all. But if you had a suspicious mind, and cops pretty much always do, you could be reading way too much
Well, uh. Anyway. When she sees all they done to me she sobers up pretty quick. In fact, I can see her getting kinda steamed. Now is not the time. Not in public, and definitely not with all these humans around. I say, "Hey, don't worry, I made sure to grab all my teeth on the way out," and I give her a winning smile, but sadly this only seems to make her more upset.

"Sans! This is completely unacceptable!" she says. She seems to remember that I am not usually at eye level and she finally puts me down. This I have mixed feelings about, but I have to admit that one of the primary ones is relief.

"I'm, uh. Sorry I got arrested?" And now I'm wondering if I missed something during our planning session. She didn't like it, but I thought she knew I'd probably get a little beat up. "Thanks for bailing me out." I resolve to ask her how she bailed me out once we get somewhere that ain't crawling with cops.

"No, no, no. I do not mean you." She glances venomously at the desk sergeant, who is either a braver or a stupider man than I am -- probably both; I'm a very intelligent coward -- because he don't react at all.

"Tori. We should get going," I say, because, like I said before, people are staring and I hope to hell it's just that we're monsters.

She's called a car, which tells me she's got important stuff to talk about. Once we get in, she tells the driver, a twitchy kid who I recognize from Club MTT, to take us to her place. "Whoa, whoa, wait a minute, I thought you wanted me and Papyrus to watch the kid? He'll be needing help," I say.

"Sans," she says, in that particular quiet and gentle voice that is never, ever delivering good news. "I am sorry. The Flower Boys have Papyrus."

"What?" There is not much else I can say. There is not much else I can think, frankly. "I mean, you're usually funnier than this when you want to be, but please tell me you're joking."

"We got the child away from them, but they must have -- they must have expected us. They managed to capture many of us. Including... Papyrus. We think they are all still alive."

"How did they get Papyrus?" I demand. "Didn't he stay in the car? He was supposed to stay in the car!"

"I believe they may have captured our lookouts and drivers first," she says. She's speaking quietly and calmly, but she looks like she's barely all right, like she's blaming herself for this entire mess.

I hate to say it, but I'm kinda blaming her too. I want to reassure her. She couldn't have known. But goddamnit, she's supposed to be the brains of this operation and when it don't operate like it should, it's probably her fault.

"They also have Asgore," she says. This is apparently hitting her the hardest, if you go by the quaver in her voice. "If only he had not..." She grits her teeth. "He threw himself in front of them to save me." She's taking this very personally, apparently. "The nerve of that man...."

I replay that moment when Undyne grabbed Papyrus and carried him out of our apartment over and over. If only I'd done something -- made up a reason Papyrus couldn't go, or stopped Undyne... heh. Like I could ever stop Undyne. Even when she's caught off balance, I never saw anything stop her except a heat wave. And she was in a hell of a hurry. And that bugs me, 'cause usually we're a lot better prepared. "Why did you push it forward?" I ask. "Why did you move it up two days?"
"Our informant said they managed to expedite their last shipments and were going to receive what they needed today," says Toriel, "and then they would proceed with -- with taking what they needed from the child." Her voice is shaking now.

"I don't think I believe our informant anymore," I say. Oh hell. Now I see the whole thing, this all fits together so easy Papyrus wouldn't even call it a puzzle. "I think they got wind of our plans. They still ain't got the DT extractor finished; they're way off schedule with that. So instead they figured they'd have a little fun with us."

She's lost now. "What do you mean?"

"This kid? This very important kid? Is not by any chance named Frisk, are they? Frisk Addison?"

Toriel makes a face. It ain't a good face. "How did you --"

"The cops are lookin' for the kid," I explain. "There's some rich folks claim Frisk's their kid who's been kidnapped --"

"Well then we must get them back to their... family...." She slows down as she realizes what's happening. "They framed us."

"Yup. Looks like."

"They framed us!" she repeats. "They knew we would move to save the child despite being unprepared. Those... those pathetic, horrible...." She trails off into a growl. I can tell the driver is gettin' a little anxious at how upset the boss lady's sounding, from how the car's slowed down and he keeps glancing back.

"We gotta get Papyrus back," I remind her.

"We have to get everyone back," she says. "And then we have to teach those -- those weeds -- that we cannot be bested so easily." She's got an expression on her face that really reminds you this lady has fangs.

I, uh. I'm a pretty selfish guy. I want 'em all back too, but worst comes to worst I'm happy to stop at Papyrus. She don't need to know that, though. She'd probably think a lot less of me. "Yeah," I lie. "Look, uh, not to change the subject from who's missing, but who do we have?"

She sighs. "Undyne, although she is very badly wounded. Alphys is seeing to her wounds and -- and then there is... oh! Sans, forgive me, I have not healed you at all."

I realize that one of the reasons I feel so lousy is in fact, that I got beat up pretty badly and then starved and harangued all day. "Oh. Uh." She takes my hand without my say-so and begins to work her magic on my metacarpals where they stomped 'em. It hurts a little but it also feels good; warm and soothing, like sitting by a fire inside during a blizzard. I fight off a sudden wave of exhaustion. I guess being knocked out with a nightstick ain't exactly the same as bein' put under a rest.

"Sans? Are you all right?" she asks. I realize that if I keep up this drowsy dope schtick she'll tuck me into a bed somewhere and leave strict instructions about how I gotta eat soup, and then I won't know what the hell's going on and if it ends badly I'll never see her or Papyrus again.

That would be a very bad outcome. So I force my eyesockets open. "Yeah! Yeah, I'm great. Ow. Damn. Sorry." I apparently forgot that it hurts to talk too fast. They really fucked up my jaw in there.
She works on that next. She is very gentle, and she smells nice, like cinnamon and baking, and there is nowhere to look that isn't awkward. God, she looks so sad. I can't waste time thinking about that now, though. Once I can move my jaw again, I repeat my earlier question. "Toriel. Who else do we have?"

"Well, some people could not make it there initially. Pyrope had other plans and Tsunderplane was very emphatic that she had no desire to participate. Muffet's pet was very ill, or the two of them might have come along. Gerson, of course, is quite elderly but he could be a valuable consultant. Grillby might be persuaded if we could ensure his daughter's safety. That obnoxious bear with the political column expressed some interest, but I decided not to bring him along, as he was very good at explaining how firearms work but did not seem to know how to aim them, but if we are really in dire need... Oh! I believe that nice young lady with the shop wanted to participate, but I did not see how she could be of any use. Several of her friends were captured, though."

"Uh... Temmie?" I ask.

"Yes, I think that must be her name," says Toriel. "She, ah, is quite an admirer of humans, it seems, and wishes to see them up close. But I cannot see her being very effective in battle."

"Sometimes the toughest fighter is the last person you'd expect," I say. "See if she has any armor to spare, at least. Who else?"

"Well, Undyne and Dogaressa and I made it out of the battle, and I think those two lovely young men who are such good friends -- the rabbit and the dragon? Doggo, Lesser Dog, Astigmatism, and Madjick also escaped as well. Oh! And Woshua... fled." She grimaces.

"Well, it sounds like the Flower Boys were fighting dirty," I point out.

She laughs, but it's not a very good laugh. I remind myself of the circumstances and try not to take it so hard. She hesitates before she asks her next question. "Sans, would your, ah, 'shortcuts' be a good solution here?"

I grimace. Like Undyne, she don't know how exactly I suddenly turn up where I need to be, but unlike Undyne, she's well aware it goes beyond a stupid party trick. (I guess I should know better than to show off when she's around, huh? But she never pressed me for details.) "Not if I don't know where they're being held. Even then, I uh. I don't wanna be found out, not by the Flower Boys. I mean, consider they're working with the cops. The cops find out I can do it, there goes almost every alibi I ever had. Ever. Hell, they might decide Papyrus can do the same thing."

"No, that is true. I was thinking that myself." I can tell she's trying very hard to figure out how to get us out of this mess without actually risking any of our lives.

That kind of attitude is one of the things I love about Toriel, but I'll be honest, she ain't always a very good criminal. I used to think that killing people would make you detached; make it too easy to hurt more people. And I do think that's true of lots of people. I uh, think it might be true of me, for example. Toriel, though -- you can tell, if you see her after a fight someone didn't survive, that she's really, truly broken up about it, even if that someone was a rat bastard who was trying their damnedest to kill her. In a better world, she wouldn't be doing this. We wouldn't need her to do it.

I gave up on trying to reach that world a long time ago, but times like this I wish I could be back there, and take the people I care about with me.

Thinking like that is useless, though. It won't get my brother back, for one.
The both of us are lost in thought when the car pulls up to Toriel's place. Technically it's Asgore's place too, but he lives on the second floor, and he sure ain't there now. Toriel thanks the driver quietly and insists on carrying my trombone case for me even though I'm mostly pretty healed up now; I let her, because I know she likes to help. Once we're inside, mostly to break the awkward silence, I say, "So how did you get 'em to drop the charges? There musta been some. Property damage? Injuries?"

"Sans, do you imagine the Flower Boys are the only people to whom the police owe favors in this city?" she asks.

That gives me pause, because... I kinda did. Or at least, I sure didn't think Toriel could necessarily call favors in. "Wait, really?"

"I have lived here for... quite a long time," she says. "Monster-human relations have not always been quite so fraught. Of course, I can remember when they were much worse, too."

Jesus. Worse than this. I guess technically we ain't been at war with humanity for a few centuries, but that's only 'cause the last one proved we couldn't fight back. "What kind of favors?" I have to ask. I'm a curious guy. It's one of my many faults.

"Well. Asgore and I halted the progress of a fire that burned down nearly half the city," she says. "And we contributed a great deal to the rebuilding efforts. It was... all we could really do."

That was sixty years back, when their involvement in city politics didn't involve bootlegging or bullets. In the end, the fire killed hundreds, including Tori and Asgore's two kids. (Then some asshole made up a funny song about how they started the fire themselves, rumors spread that they'd planned it from the start, and Asgore lost his temper at some of 'em in a very public way. It was downhill between humans and monsters for the next few decades.)

Reminded of this, I feel really selfish. This lady's already gone through the absolute worst-case scenario, twice in one day, and she can still care about people. She never lost that. I don't know what I'd do if I lost Papyrus. I don't know that I could get myself to do anything.

"Tell me you didn't use all of that to get me out," I say.

She snorts. "No, no. I merely reminded the officers of my past services to the city! I reminded them that should such a time come again... well, they were very civic-minded."

"And maybe you offered 'em some little portraits of Ben Franklin, engraved in tasteful green?" I suggest. Even if you're sayin', sweet as pie, What a pleasant city you have here. It would be very upsetting if anything bad were to happen to it, and even if you sound like you mean it, a little cash can't hurt.

"They seemed fairly content with Ulysses S. Grant," she says, laughing.

I pretend to be outraged. "Really? Only fifty bucks? Next time I'll remind 'em to hold out for the highest bidder."

She laughs at that, but it's not the kind of laugh I'd like to hear. "You should sit down," she tells me, once we're in the parlor. "I need to call Alphys and see how Undyne is doing." I take my hat off and try not to collapse too obviously on the couch; she turns the radio on and goes to make her call.

Chapter End Notes
Guess I gotta be in a more coherent state: I, um, don't remember a lot of my physics (Don't sign up for the 7 AM lab. Don't take three semesters of physics in one summer. DO NOT.) but coherent states are a ...thing. It's too early in the morning for me to explain it well (okay it's 1 pm on a Sunday, that's still morning to me) but basically in this context "coherent" means less mathematically uncertain/more able to be described by classical Newtonian mechanics... I think? IDK, I'm a paralegal, what do you want from me?

They got Detective Boone on the case, and he's always ready to do whatever it takes to protect the city of Ebott from the monsters who are ruining America: Levi Boone was from the "American Party," more commonly (and accurately) known as the Know-Nothing party. He did a lot to reorganize and streamline the Chicago Police, but his other big thing was firing all immigrant employees of the city.

Dever's a decent cop. He's still a cop; he don't like the Dreemurr gang, but he don't like any gang, and he's a stickler for the rules: William Emmett Dever, also known as "Decent Dever," thought Prohibition was a bad idea, but did all he could to enforce it because it was the law. Apparently it worked for a little while, but his term ended in a huge gang war breaking out across the city.

It'd never play in Peoria: In the context of vaudeville, Peoria, Illinois was supposedly both a tough place to play and an indicator of common American tastes. If your show succeeded in Peoria, it could do well anywhere, but you also didn't really want to be playing there very often.

working the old Chimera Circuit: In real life, the best-known vaudeville circuit is probably the Orpheum Circuit. I figure that in this AU, monsters would have their own circuits, though, as black, Italian-language, and Yiddish-language performers did.

Then some asshole made up a funny song about how they started the fire: Presumably this universe's version of the song about Mrs. O'Leary's cow starting the Chicago Fire, a story which was totally made up by a reporter.

some little portraits of Ben Franklin, engraved in tasteful green: If you're not familiar with US money, Ben Franklin's on the $100 bill and Ulysses S. Grant is on the $50.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I overhear bits of Toriel's half of the conversation as I doze on the couch, but they all get kinda muddled up together, and before I know it I'm slowly opening my eyes and there are a lot more people in this room, goddamn.

Also, someone put a blanket over me. That was nice of her.

"H-hey, Sans," says Alphys. She's sitting next to me on the couch.

"Glad you finally decided to join us," says Undyne, who's sitting on the other side of Alphys. Her shoulder's all bandaged up and her arm's in a sling; the bandage is stained with blue-grey ichor and dusty at the edges where it's dried out. It looks like she had a worse night than I did.

Dogcessa's sharpening her axe in the corner. Boy does she look pissed. It probably don't help that Doggo's sitting next to her, startling every time she jerks her file along the blade. Pyrope and Muffet are having an animated discussion while Lesser Dog chases her weird spider muffin pet around.

"Uh," I say, still groggy.

"T-toriel said you should have some p-pie," says Alphys, shoving a plate toward me apologetically. "I mean. When you wake up." She looks around the room uneasily. "I, uh, I should probably g-go, I d-don't think I'll be t-too helpful here --"

"Oh c'mon, you can't leave me all alone with these wimps!" said Undyne, more than making up for Alphys' lack of enthusiasm. "I'll introduce you around!"

"T-to be honest, I'm n-not sure you should be here, either!" says Alphys. "I mean, your sh-shoulder is all, uh." She looks at me imploringly, like anything I say would carry much weight with Undyne.

I got bigger fish to fry with her, though. "Undyne, did you see them take Papyrus when they took him?"

She grimaces. "I spotted the Caddy driving away with one of the Flower Boys riding shotgun as we fought our way out of the warehouse."

"But did you see Papyrus?" I demand.

"Not his face, nah. But it had to be him," she says. "It had to be, the way he peeled out of there and made that real sharp left turn into the alley off of Wilder."

I take a moment to think about this. "Doesn't that alley end in a dead end?"

"Not anymore!" says Undyne brightly. "That's also how I knew it had to be Papyrus."

I nod. I buy it.

"Sans, I'm really sorry," she says, sobering. "We'll get him back for you. Or. Damn it, I guess I won't be going." She scowls. "They'll get him back for you or else they'll have me to answer to," she says, waving her one good hand at the crowd. "Right, guys?"
There is a general chorus of mildly terrified "yeah!"s and "yes ma'am"s. I feel a little better. Still, I wish I could just go in there and nab him myself. And I would, if I only knew where he was.

"I'm sure they won't hurt him," Undyne says, giving voice to the stuff I was frankly trying not to think about. "I don't know anyone who could hurt that goober."

"Yeah," I say. Well. If they do....

If he ain't all right when we find him, those shitheads are dead. I'll -- I'll get Tori or Undyne to take him home and then when he's out of earshot....

But if he's dust... god. I don't know what I'll do. Not much to do for that, is there?

He's a good kid and he don't deserve this shit, and I wish I'd put my foot down more about him running with the goddamn Dreemurrs. I figured he was gonna do it whether I said it was okay or not, but maybe -- I dunno, maybe I should've just grabbed him and moved across the country again. Maybe we shouldn't have moved around so much when he was a kid? He always wanted friends so bad, but I had to keep him in food and clothes and that meant bein' on the road and sometimes on the run.

Goddamnit. I've fucked it all up again.

"H-hey, Asgore's with h-him, isn't he, Undyne?" Alphys is trying to cheer me up. She's sweet but it ain't gonna work. "I'm sure Asgore would n-never let anyone hurt any of the h-hostage-- I, I mean, any of our f-friends."

Undyne is about to answer when my mind seizes onto one of those words like a beartrap.

"Hostages? Have they sent terms?"

Alphys and Undyne exchange a look of dismay. "Um. They have?" says Alphys, warily.

"Are you askin' me or tellin' me?" I snap, and she cringes away.

"Hey, lay off her," Undyne snarls. "This ain't her fault."

"Um, um, I was t-telling you," says Alphys, quickly.

"You don't have to answer people when they're being jackasses," Undyne reminds her.

"Sorry," I tell Alphys. Shit. That's not how I'm supposed to be. "I'm. It's. God, I gotta get him back. I should never have let him...." I trail off. A good brother wouldn't have let him do half the things I did, but they made him so happy.

"Y-you should have some pie," says Alphys, shoving the plate at me again. "R-really, Toriel was, uh, p-pretty clear on that p-point."

Sighing, I take the damn pie. But I make a special effort to eat it grumpily.

You'd be surprised at how hard it is to stay annoyed when you're eating pie. Eventually the pie convinces me that we have a chance of getting Papyrus back.

Suddenly, everyone's attention turns to somewhere in back of me. I turn and see... the kid. They're staring at the parlor full of monsters with an expression that goes well past terror and circles around again to total confusion. A rabbit lady who I recognize from the local motel -- uh, her name's Tabitha or something? She's always real nice to Papyrus, so I figure she's a good egg. Anyway, she
hurries over to the kid and urges them back out of the room.

I put the pie plate down and stand. "'Scuze me," I say, pushing between Astigmatism and Temmie.

"Hey, watch it!" Astigmatism snaps. "Don't pick on me!" I am not in the mood. I maybe apply my humerus a little more forcefully to the back of Astigmatism's head.

The kid meets my eyes, and they look a little less worried. That's different, but okay, I guess technically I did them a good turn.

Tabitha smiles weakly. "I'm sorry, Toriel wanted me to watch them but they wanted to see what was going on and I --"

"Nah, it's fine. Want me to take over for a while?" It would probably make me feel better. Besides, I'm curious what this kid's like. It's not like we got a chance to talk. "Technically me and Papyrus were supposed to be taking care of 'em, but...."

"Oh, yes, Toriel mentioned... I'm very sorry," she says quickly.

I'm not gonna mope, because people being reassuring wears me out. I realize I haven't been smiling since I talked to Undyne, and attempt a grin, although I can tell it's not coming out right. "Eh, we'll get him back. At this point he's probably tryin' to cook the Flower Boys spaghetti or something. Soon they'll be pasta the point of all reason and asking parmesan to let him go." There. Look. It's me, Sans. I'm hilarious.

She does not laugh. Well, they can't all be winners. At least she's smiling politely. She turns to the kid. "Frisk, this is Sans. Is it all right if he watches you for a bit?"

The kid nods.

"I'll let Toriel know you're up and about. She might want you in here, though." She nods at the parlor. "But if not, I'd appreciate a chance to go grab some supper."

"Sure thing. Go eat! I'm sure no one will carrot all if I'm not here for a little while."

That one does get a small snort, at least. Thank god I haven't lost my touch completely. Tabitha says, "The playroom is the first door on the left." She leaves me and the kid in the doorway.

I look at the kid. The kid looks at me. "So," I say. "You want me to introduce you to all these fine upstanding citizens or you wanna go somewhere where it's nice and quiet?"

The kid looks at the room and back at me again, and then they just scowl -- not in anger, just confusion. They take one more long look at the room, then turn around and head back towards where, I guess, the playroom is.

My folks weren't rich enough to get a fancy schmancy playroom, so I don't really know what to expect; this one is full of all the toys a kid could ever want... if it was sixty years ago. The room feels like a hotel room, because it's obviously been cleaned recently, but no one lives there. It feels separate from the rest of time and space, and it's eerily quiet. Even the wallpaper's different from the rest of the house. There's an open doorway in the back that leads to a small bedroom.

"So. I don't think we were really introduced. I'm Sans." I hold out my hand. "And you're, uh... Frisk?"

The kid opens their mouth to speak, but when they take my hand, the whoopie cushion takes 'em by
surprise and they start giggling. My smile's genuine now; after this whole goddamn day, it's so refreshing to hear a real laugh.

"Yeah," they say, speaking for the first time. They got a real quiet voice. "Um. Can -- can I ask a question?"

"Shoot," I tell them.

They hesitate. "It -- it might be a stupid question,"

"Hey. There is no such thing as a stupid question," I say, because that is something I firmly believed for many years. Then I consider this principle in the light of what my life is like now. "Except when the cops ask if you did it. Cops always ask stupid questions. But you aren't a cop, so I'll try and be honest, all right?"

Frisk nods. "Uh. So. Why is everything like a gangster movie?"

This... was not the question I was expecting. I was expecting something along the lines of 'When are you going to steal my soul, Mr. Scary Monster?' or maybe 'But how are you alive if you're a skeleton?' which is a thing humans ask me for some reason, and I won't say it's a stupid question but it's kinda nonspecific. "A gangster movie," I repeat. It is a weird thing to ask.

"Never mind," they say, sounding like they wish they never asked. "I knew it was a dumb question."

"Um. Well. No," I admit. It isn't a stupid question, it's just kinda... inconvenient. But it is a weird question. Something about it makes the processes on the back of my spine itch. The phrasing's off. It don't rest easy. "I guess it might have something to do with how we are technically conducting illicit business here, in a semi-organized way, and that could, I guess if you were bein' a stickler for definitions, make us gangsters."

Frisk does not look happy, or any less confused. "No, no, I mean. Um." They make a frustrated sort of gesture with their hands, an all-encompassing one that suggests extreme bafflement. "Never mind. Um. Um okay maybe this is a stupid question but are you going to kill me?" They blurt out this last sentence so fast the words squish into each other, almost too fast to understand. Then they look like they regret asking.

"Absolutely not. Tori would never let anyone hurt you," I assure them. When their brow furrows even more, I clarify. "Toriel, I mean. The tall lady with the horns. Did she give you pie?"

Frisk nods, but then they cross their arms and look pensive. Finally, they say, "The other people killed me three times," in that real quiet, worried voice they used first.

That is a difficult thing to believe, since they're standing right there, looking remarkably lifelike. Still, it ain't the craziest thing I ever heard from a lost kid on their own. It does suggest I'm not gonna get a useful answer to my questions, though.

"Like I said, we don't do that here," I assure the kid. "Look, how'd they get a hold of you? Where's your family?"

Frisk gnaws on their lower lip for a while, not saying anything. Finally, they look up from whatever was so fascinating about their shoes. "I don't have a family," they say. Not sad -- it's more of a challenge.

So probably they do have a family somewhere, but maybe not one they're real fond of. That's okay.
Family's complicated sometimes. I nod. "Fair enough. You got any more questions, Frisk?"

They get pensive again. Then, after a while, they finally say, "What do you want with me if you're not gonna kill me?"

"Well." I decide there’s no such thing as a non-alarming way to explain we mostly don't want the Flower Boys to make DT out of them, and that we're not in the practice of doing that ourselves; this kid comes pre-alarmed and suspicious as hell, and I don’t blame ‘em. So I elide an actual answer. "I think Toriel'd like to get you back to your folks, if you have 'em, but since you don't.... You were supposed to be staying with my brother and me ‘til we figured it all out, but everything just got a lot more complicated."

They look interested, and not annoyed that I haven't actually answered the question. Mission accomplished. "Why?"

"Well, for one thing," I say, "the Flower Boys took a bunch of our people."

"They're the -- the bad guys?" Frisk asks.

I like this kid. Already they're rooting for the right team. "You could say that. Anyway the other thing, kid, is you got people looking for you."

"What people?" Frisk asks. They are instantly suspicious.

"I dunno, they went to the cops and said you was their missing kid," I say.

This, to my surprise, gets a laugh. It ain't a happy laugh. I don't know what happened to this kid before we got 'em, but whoever's responsible has an awful lot to answer for, and if I happen to come across 'em, I'll suggest they change their ways.

"I don't mean to be rude, but you mind filling me in on the joke?" I ask. "It don't sound like it's actually all that funny."

I catch sight of the kid's face again, and shit, it really ain't a happy laugh. I pull out my handkerchief just as the kid starts sobbing, and offer it to 'em.

They seem a little surprised at the gesture, although possibly they are more surprised that I keep all my handkerchiefs tied together in a long chain. "Sorry, did you only want the one?"

There is a small smile through the tears. "Are you a magician?"

"Maybe," I say, brightly.

"Why do you need handkerchiefs?" they ask, sniffling a little. "Do skeletons sneeze?"

"Snot likely that I'll ever need 'em for that. Achoo-se to carry 'em because my brother says we got an image to maintain and apparently that image includes pocket squares." I shrug.

"Your jokes are awful," Frisk says, admiringly. I decide I like this kid a lot. Then they add, real quickly, "I'm sorry I was crying." Their use of past tense is not really very accurate, but I'm not gonna point that out.

"Hey, it's okay," I tell them. "You've obviously been through some stuff here. But could you tell me what's so crazy about people looking for you? We're not gonna turn you over to 'em without your okay if that's what you're worried about."
"Um." Frisk blinks back a few more tears, and then takes a deep breath. "N-nobody knows where I am." They sniffle. "Nobody likes me," they add, apropos of nothing.

"Aw, come on, you got a great sense of humor," I say. "I bet lots of people like you. Actually, no, scratch that, you think I'm funny. What's wrong with you, kid?" They laugh at that. "Anyway, I like you. You seem like an okay kid."

I decide that probably finding more out about what's going on with this kid is not gonna work right now; they're too worked up and they sure as hell don't trust us. I can see why not. So I try to let myself relax and not worry about what the rest of the gang is up to in the other room, or what the hell the Flower Boys want from us, or how Papyrus is doing now.

I bet they're feeding him human food. I hope they have a mop.

I can't do anything about it now, I remind myself. I don't know where he is. Even if I did, I can't get everyone out with one shortcut, and Papyrus is unlikely to let me just grab him and escape.

The kid is staring at me.

"Heh, sorry. I'm a little preoccupied. Hey, uh. Look at all these cool toys!"

The kid is not remotely impressed.

"Okay, yeah, maybe not. You know any card games, kid?" I take out my deck, which I carry around so I can play solitaire when I'm supposed to be doing something else. Then I spread the cards out on the floor and start to shuffle.

"That's not how you shuffle cards," says Frisk.

I look down at the mess of cards on the floor. "It's how I shuffle cards. I dunno how you do it."

"Not like that," they insist. "You do it like this." They gather the cards together and cut the deck, but their hands aren't quite big enough to riffle them like a real cardsharp would.

"Okay, okay, I guess I'll try it your way." They hand me the cards, and I show off a little with some flourishes I learned off a stage magician in Galesburg. Then I start to teach 'em blackjack, which they seem to already know some. So I decide to teach 'em to count cards, which I figure is a useful skill to have.

"Isn't that, um, cheating?" they ask.

"Sometimes the deck's stacked against you and you gotta cheat to make it out of the game okay," I tell them. "Anyway, counting cards ain't cheating, it's just knowing more than the other guy. Being smarter." They seem amenable to this interpretation.

This all makes me wonder again what this kid's story is. Why'd they run away from home? (If they did; the weeping earlier makes me suspect they'd like to go back but for whatever reason that's not an option, although maybe that's just the stress of the past few days catching up with 'em.) Where'd they learn blackjack, of all things? They don't seem to have absorbed any moralizing bullshit about gambling, but they're pretty hesitant about cheating. By this point in the day I've worked pretty hard here to show I'm about as intimidating as an ice-cream cone in July, and I wonder if maybe I can ask about it again, but they seem pretty happy and I'd like someone to be happy today, even if it ain't me.

But there's a knock at the door, and I hear a muffled "Knock knock!" Oh, Toriel.
"Who's there?" I am helpless in the face of knock-knock jokes, it's true.

"To," she says, brightly.

I don't actually think I've heard this one. "To who?"

"To whom," she says triumphantly, opening the door. We laugh at this, and Frisk groans, covering their face with their hands. "Really, Sans, have you no respect for grammar?"

"I got lots of respect for grammar! ...Wait, you mean the one on my mother's side or my father's?" Frisk ain't up to looking at us yet, but they giggle. "Sorry we're too hilarious for you, kid," I say.

Toriel is grinning. "You must admit that last one was a bit punderhanded, Sans."

"Well, I'm a glutton for punishment but I think Frisk was kinda punderwhelmed," I say.

Frisk groans again, but they're grinning, and Toriel snorts in a decidedly undignified way. Then she sighs. "While I would love to continue in this vein, we have business to attend to. Thank you for taking care of Frisk, Sans, but I would like you to be present for our discussion of strategy. Also, dinner." She smiles at Frisk. "Dinner is waiting for you in the kitchen, and after that, Tabitha will take you to stay with her and her sister."

Frisk nods. "'Kay," they say, in that little shy voice.

"You can keep the cards if you want," I tell them. "You know any solitaire games?"

Frisk brightens. "Oh! Yeah, I'm really good at that," they say, enthusiastically. "The one with the pyramid especially. I've never played on my own though."

Good. Wait. What? But Toriel is beckoning me out and I leave the kid.

"I believe that is the most I've ever heard them speak," says Toriel. Then she frowns. "You were not teaching them to cheat at cards, Sans, were you? I had assumed you were joking when you mentioned it earlier."

See, this is what happens when you're hilarious like me; nobody actually believes you. "I was showing 'em that math is fun," I say, "and also teaching a valuable and lucrative skill."

"Sans," she sighs, "there is a reason I no longer permit you at any gambling establishment under my purview. Nor, in fact, does anyone else with any sense, given your tendency to misuse your admittedly prodigious mathematical skills."

I shrug. "You're mathtaken. I'm just a really lucky guy, you know?"

"There is a limit," Toriel says, "to how lucky one person usually is in a given span of time." When I look up at her she's grinning, though.

We get to the dining room, which is full nearly to bursting; most people are sitting at the table in mismatched chairs. I climb onto the seat next to Alphys. She's looking like she'd rather be anywhere else, and her eyes keep darting over to Undyne, who's talking in low and serious tones with Dogaressa.

"Hey, Doc," I say.

She startles. "Oh! S-sorry, I --"
"No, no. I should be the one sayin' I'm sorry," I say, dismissing her apology. "I wasn't myself, and I --"

"It's fine," she says. She takes a dinner roll and starts pulling it apart into tinier and tinier pieces.

"You, uh, don't by any chance know what the terms are, though, do ya?" I ask.

"No," she says.

"Hey, what's eating ya?" I ask. "We'll be having dinner soon, it oughta be the other way around."

"T-toriel wanted me to stay," she says miserably.

"So? She's a nice lady, she wants everyone to stay for dinner," I point out.

"N-no, she -- she, uh, wouldn't let me leave," says Alphys. "There were all these st-strangers around and that d-dog lady kept snarling at me and I think I upset Astigmatism b-but I don't know how and, and, T-toriel had to give me a p-paper bag to b-breathe into but she wouldn't let me g-go home." She frowns. "And I'm missing my f-favorite radio show for this."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes at this last thing. I like Alphys, but Papyrus being in peril is kinda making it hard to sympathize with her plight. "Well if Toriel thinks you oughta be here, you better stay," I say.

"Yeah." She sighs. "Yeah, probably. D-don't think I'll be much help, though."

"I gotta say, your epoxy worked like a dream out there last night," I tell her.

"Really?"

"Heh. Well, for the cops it was more of a nightmare."

"Oh my god, Sans, you used it on the police?!?" she asks. She clearly can't figure out whether to be horrified or impressed.

"You shoulda seen it," I tell her. "Well, maybe not -- they paid me back pretty good and I wouldn't wish that on you. But I'm tellin' ya, patent that stuff, you'll make a mint. Nobody at the patent office has to know you're a monster."

"I d-don't know," she says, returning her attention to the bread she's been atomizing. "I just --"

"HEY!" Undyne startles the both of us. "This guy giving you a hard time?" she asks Alphys, eyeing me with distaste.

"N-no, he's --"

"Actually I was telling her she oughta patent this great glue she came up with," I say. "Although maybe she shouldn't advertise how great it works on cops specifically."

"What's he talking about?" Undyne says, scowling at me.

"Oh, n-nothing, it's just, uh, I, uh, I came up with, uh, well, it makes a copolymer if you apply a c-curate, it's silly, really --"

"Sounds neat! Tell me all about it!" says Undyne.
I am reasonably sure Undyne would understand this explanation better if it was in Pig Latin, but she is fascinated nonetheless.

Soon Toriel, Grillby, and Muffet come out with dinner -- chicken pot pie, some kinda vegetable stew, baked potatoes, lasagna, and plenty of other stuff besides. I try not to think about how much of this meal will be made of spiders. Once all the food's out, Toriel goes to her seat at the head of the table. It's an overcrowded table in a house that's seen better times, in one of the worst neighborhoods of a city run by bullies and goons, but somehow the dignified way she carries herself is more regal than ridiculous.

We all wait for her to sit down before we start eating. If you're gonna eat at Tori's place, you learn table manners quickly.

Toriel clears her throat. "Greetings. As you know, our latest action, while it succeeded, resulted in many members of this organization being taken hostage. This was planned by the Flower Boys. They have forwarded a full list of their hostages, which I will read aloud. If you know of anyone who is not on this list, please let me know."

She reads off the names. It starts with Aaron and ends with Vulkin, but all I care about is that Papyrus is on it, which means he's alive and relatively valuable to them.

"Does anyone know of a missing loved one who was with us yesterday and is not on that list?" Toriel asks.

No one says a thing.

"Very well," says Toriel. "Their conditions for the release of the hostages are as follows. They are willing to release one half of the hostages if we return the human child to them."

I hate myself a little that my first thought is, Which half? I could trade that kid in for my brother. It'd be doable. But then in my head I see his face fall when he realizes what I did, the cost someone paid for him, and I think about that poor kid saying the Flower Boys killed them three times. Even if it makes no sense the way they put it, whatever happened is awful and I don't wanna subject 'em to it again if I don't have to.

"They will release a further one-quarter of the hostages should we also give them Alphys," says Toriel.

I hear Alphys choke on her food and start coughing next to me, and I thump her on the back. "What? No!" says Undyne, standing up so fast she almost knocks the table over.

"I did not say we were going to agree to these terms, Undyne," says Toriel. "Please sit down."

Undyne sits, but her fists are still clenched. Alphys is chugging water. I feel pretty bad for her; everyone's staring.

I'm about to suggest that someone go get Alphys something a little stronger from the cellar when Toriel clears her throat and gives everyone a sort of look, so instead I help myself to some spare ribs. (Never know when you're gonna need extras.) "Moving on. They will release the remaining quarter of the hostages if we turn Sans over to them."

And that's everyone's cue to stare at me. "Uhh. You sure you're reading that right?" I ask.

"What do they want with Sans?" Undyne asks. She sounds a little insulted and I can't exactly blame her. It's obvious, though, they aren't trying to cripple us in combat; they want Alphys to make
something for 'em. Hell if I know what they want me for, though, unless... nah, they don't know about that, do they? But they want Alphys, and they already got Asgore, and... I am really hoping it's a coincidence, because wow does Tori not wanna find out about this.

"Maybe they need someone to eat all their donuts," suggests Muffet wryly. Shit, do I still owe her? What am I saying, I'm gonna be on that payment plan 'til my grandkids have fallen down.

"Maybe they have a bone to pick with him," says Dogaressa, with complete earnestness. "Bones are delicious!"

"Sans? That guy is so overrated," says Jerry. ...why is Jerry here? Who invited Jerry?

I grin, though, when Undyne snaps "Who asked you, Jerry? Shut the fuck up."

"Needless to say," Toriel says, trying to regain control of the room. When everyone quiets down, she repeats herself. "Needless to say, we will not be agreeing to these terms."

Pretty much everyone agrees with this, except for Jerry. "Wait a sec," I say. "If I go --"

I am instantly drowned out by people telling me to shut up. I guess I should be flattered?

"Boy, this is a really tough crowd," I say. It doesn't get a laugh. "If I go, will they let a quarter of our hostages go? I mean, without getting the kid and Alphys mixed up in it?"

"That may be the case," says Toriel, frowning, "but I don't --"

"Do we get a say in who they let out?" I ask.

"Sans, you are not going to turn yourself over to the Flower Boys," says Toriel.

"Yeah, but --"

"No," says Toriel.

"Sans, are you crazy?" Undyne asks. "We don't even know what they want with you."

"P-probably information," says Alphys. "I m-mean, I assume that's what they want with m-me," she says, shakily.

"I'm not gonna tell them anything, trust me," I say. "I can take care of myself."

"Do you even know how to fight?" Undyne asks. "You've never done anything like this before. They'll break you in seconds."

"Oh, you mean like the cops never managed to do?" I ask. "Like I said, I can take care of myself."

It is clear no one believes me.

"This is not up for discussion, Sans," says Toriel, in a voice so stern I wonder if maybe I got a detention coming up or something.

Well, she didn't rule it out. Besides, she asked me earlier if we could use my shortcuts to our advantage in this situation... and hey, now we got a way to get me in there without arousing suspicion, so if I can just get everyone out.... I have to talk to her afterwards about this.

I don't know that I'd even be considering doing this if it wasn't for Papyrus in there, and I hate myself a little for that. But who knows, maybe I'd do it. Maybe if Papyrus was safe at the restaurant
making marinara sauce I'd be relishing the opportunity to screw with the Flower Boys' heads.

Yeah, no, that's ridiculous, of course I wouldn't. This is gonna be an absurd amount of work. At least I have half a chance of making things better here, which is more than I can say for most shitty situations I find myself in. (I mean, it's gotta turn out better than that thing in Munich, although that ain't saying much.)

I listen silently to everyone else suggesting dumb ideas that ain't gonna work in any universe I'm familiar with, and try to pretend I still got an appetite. I try to catch Tori's eye but she's not looking at me, and for some stupid reason I have to try not to take it personally. Like anything the boss does is personal. Sure we're friends, but at the end of the day I'm still just the guy who gets beat up by cops for her. It's not even like she has me doing what I did when Asgore ran things. And hopefully, I never have to tell her about that.

Dinner takes too damn long and I'm starting to have trouble keeping a smile on my face by the end of it. At one point I catch Undyne glowering at me, but when I raise a supraorbital ridge at her she turns back to her dinner hurriedly and asks Alphys a question about glue.

In my head, I draw up a list of who I oughta trade myself for ASAP and who I can jailbreak afterwards. This list starts with Papyrus and Asgore. Tori seemed so broken up about Asgore, even though she tried to pass it off as anger -- are they reconciling? If so, it's the first I heard of it. Anyway, he's kind of a figurehead, but to the outside world he's still supposed to be the boss, so he's gotta get out. Plus, he's still got information from when he did run the show.

After that I have to talk myself out of being a sap. Dogamy can wait; sure, he's got a wife anxious for his return, but truth is, Dogaressa's much better in a fight when she's pissed like she is now. Greater Dog, great as he is, ain't that intimidating either once you pat him behind the ear. And I know Temmie's worried about her friends Temmie and Temmie, but we gotta prioritize here. People like Knight Knight and Aaron and Glyde make the list instead -- maybe they ain't got families who need 'em, but they're useful to us.

After dinner's finally over I stay and help clean up -- and while usually I do this out of pure sloth, 'cause it's easier to stick around then get going, this time I actually do end up helping. Papyrus isn't here to clear the table, so I do it. I gotta say, I am pretty good at stacking plates, even if Undyne don't trust me to keep 'em all up in the air after number twenty-nine.

Alphys is still visibly shaken, but she sticks around for a while giving me funny looks, which is probably not good. Undyne's still glowering at me by the time she leaves, but I don't pay her any mind.

Anyway, once Tori and I finally figure out how to get Jerry to go away, we're the last people in the house, and we end up in the kitchen, listening to the radio and working away at a mountain of dishes. She's washing 'em, and laughing her head off while I make dumb jokes about dishes; I'm drying 'em, and trying to enjoy the moment, and not quite succeeding.

She's adorable in ways I should probably not be noticing. It's partly the song on the radio, a cheerful, jazzy tune with coy lyrics about the mystery of love. It's partly that she's not quite tapping her foot along to it, but I can tell she kinda wants to, and the tip of her tail's twitching with the beat. And it's partly that I'm just a sucker for the kind of woman who can go through what she has and still come out that sweet.

"What did you think of Muffet's plan?" she asks me. I try to remember what Muffet suggested.

Oh, right, it involves spiders, like always. "I think the Flower Boys could foil it pretty easy by
deploying a couple of guys with bug spray," I say.

"That is true. Although I suppose it was not as dire as Doggo's idea." She sighs. "I do not know what else to do. We will think of something. We may need to raise some funds quickly."

"You think they'll take cash?" I ask.

"I think everyone like that has a price," she says. "We may need to make some concessions to them in terms of ...territory, clientele, that sort of thing."

"Like what?" I ask. The Flower Boys don't exactly take care of the people in their territory, and, well, they wouldn't; they're here to turn a profit. But the areas they managed to take over from us are especially dire; there's even a couple of blocks on the border of our territory that the locals call the Ruins, if that gives you an idea.

"I think if I were to suggest they take over supplying Club MTT with alcohol," she starts, hesitantly, "they would have to--"

"No! Tori, that's easily half our profits right there," I say.

"We will find something else," she says. "Perhaps even something ...legitimate?"

"And if not, I guess that'll teach us to rely on overgrown adding machines," I say. "Besides, you know he'd blow his vacuum tubes if they raised the price, and you know they'd try raising the price, and the minute the Flower Boys got threatening Mettaton'd make like a nut and bolt."

She snickers. "Is he really so terrible? I do not think I have ever seen his show."

I shrug. "He's not the best guy in the world but he's not terrible; it ain't a binary. Long as you don't push his buttons he's an okay guy."

"Do you think he has a screw loose, or is that simply how he is wired?" she asks.

This lady. I swear. I can't think of any more robot puns for the moment, although I'm sure after I leave I'll come up with something amazing about steel, so I decide to actually answer the question. "In all fairness," I say, "I get to tell the dumb jokes I like, and he don't criticize too much. He's not a bad boss at all. But I've had better." I shoot her a grin.

It apparently takes her a second to realize I meant her. "Oh! ! Thank you!" she says quickly, and gets very focused on getting something off a pan for a few minutes. Shit, was that a creepy thing to say? I didn't mean to be a creep. But she's smiling, so I guess she just has nothing to say?

The silence that ensues would be companionable if we both didn't have way too much on our minds, I guess. Tori hums along to the radio, and I take advantage of when she ain't looking to float the dry dishes up into the cabinets. (I'm sure she knows how I do it, but it's kind of our joke now.)

But eventually, I gotta say something. "Tori. I think you should turn me over to 'em."

"Sans." The way she says it you'd think I told her a dead baby joke or something.

"Hey, you asked if we could use my shortcuts." I float a couple more saucers up into the cabinet while she's scrubbing at a particularly stubborn pot. "Now there's a way. I walk in, a fourth of our people walk out, and then the rest of us just sorta… vanish. See? Easy."

"It would not be that simple and you know it," she says curtly, wiping off her hands and handing me
the last of the dishes.

Okay. That's true. But it gives me the opportunity to find Papyrus. Papyrus, who should be here right now, putting all of Tori's plates in the wrong cupboards while he cringes -- I mean, smiles -- at our bad jokes. He should be changing the radio station to make sure he ain't missing a live broadcast from Club MTT. Instead I'm staring into space at the place where he would be standing.

"Sans?" I turn and see Toriel looking worriedly at me. "Oh, Sans, I apologize," she says. She pats my hand. "I know this must be awful and I know you want to do something, but you will not have to give yourself up to them to retrieve your brother. There is another way," she says. I look up at her, and I can tell she means it, every word.

"Look, Tori," I say, "I, uh, I realize I'm just some washed-up comedian who used to write you letters full of dumb jokes in exchange for advice on raising a kid, but I swear, I can get out alive and get those hostages out too. I'm not as dumb as I look."

"It is not your intelligence that I doubt, Sans," she says. She pauses. "Do you know why they asked for you in particular?"

I have been wondering this for the entire evening, and I can't say I came up with much. Patience Gorman saw me before I knocked her out, obviously, but as far as she knows I came along with the rest of the gang and her gun happened to jam up when she tried to shoot me. Everything I've ever done during strikes on the Flower Boys (or on any of the other syndicates who give us trouble) has been similarly unimpressive and plausibly deniable.

Then there's the stuff Asgore had me doing. It's the most worrying, and on one level it'd make the most sense -- but wouldn't they rather have a human mage doing that? Besides, if they really did know what I was capable of, I don't think they'd be real anxious to invite me over for brunch and hostage negotiations now. I was pretty good at that job.

I think back further. I can't think of anything incriminating I did while I was on the road with Papyrus, unless all the Flower Boys want is someone to tell 'em what time it is when an elephant sits on your fence. (Usually a little after five o'clock, incidentally. That's when elephants get off of work.)

Before that, I was a cocky asshole and got some physics papers published, but I wasn't so dumb I did it under my own name. What name did I use again? It was something snotty, something borrowed from the side of my family that had cash and serifs, I think. Ehrhardt? Bookman? I forget. I do remember the ones I sent out under Futura got rejected out of hand, which I can't say I blame 'em for. They were way ahead of their time.

And before that? They got absolutely nothing on me.

I shake my head. "No idea, Tori. Sorry."

She does not look convinced. "Sans, please. I know you must have some idea."

I shake my head. "I wish I could tell you what they want, but I really can't." I realize I am twisting and untwisting the dishrag in my hands, and I stick it on the counter in a hurry.

"Sans, I know there are... many things you have not been entirely honest with me about," she says. Oh jeez, she has no idea. "I had hoped you might trust me enough to share them with me, someday. I had hoped... I had hoped that my personal regard for you would not interfere with my job, which is to keep the monsters of Ebbott safe and cared-for and to get us out of this idiotic mess Asgore got us
all into." She sighs. "Unfortunately, it is well past time I knew these things. And you want me to trust you? To send you into this situation? How can I possibly do that, when I have no idea what sort of information and power I am turning over to our enemies?"

It takes a lot to leave me speechless, but Tori manages that sometimes. I try to think of something to say that's not either the mountains of stuff I don't wanna talk about or off-topic inquiries into the road-crossing habits of poultry. It's surprisingly difficult. "I, uh."

"And if you try to turn this into a knock-knock joke," she says, warningly, "or, or, distract me with dish puns, I will not laugh. Please, just tell me something. Explain to me what is going on and why I should let you do this."

"Heh. Well. I. Uh." There's nothing for it. "Sorry, Tori. I hate to disappoint, but you gotta admit, I'm very good at it despite my best efforts. I'll, uh. I'll see you around, I guess." I sigh. "And you know perfectly well that whether you approve or not, you ain't letting me do anything."

"Sans, please, just --"

I decide it is time to vamoose. The lights cut out for a second, and then I'm back home. For some reason it takes a lot out of me to pull my vanishing act when someone's watching, and between that and the incredibly lousy day I just had, once I'm home, the exhaustion hits me like a truck with the breaks cut.

The dustpan's still where Papyrus left it yesterday. The list of stuff he wanted me to do to make our apartment "human-friendly" is still on the floor by the couch, right where I dropped it on Tuesday. The whole place feels hollow. I don't wanna think about it, though. I'd prefer not thinking about anything, really.

The phone starts to ring, so I unplug it. Then I crawl into bed. Who knows, maybe I'll decide it's worth getting out of bed in a few years. But that's a pretty long shot.

Chapter End Notes

References:
Because I'm a dork, I did research on shuffling cards for this. It's actually really interesting, if you like math.

...why is Jerry here? Who invited Jerry?: I saw this headcanon post while I was writing this and it CRACKED ME UP so I incorporated it.

a cheerful, jazzy tune with coy lyrics about the mystery of love: I made myself a little era-appropriate playlist, and happened to be listening to "What Is This Thing Called Love?"

(I love how YouTube basically now only recommends me jazz, big band, Let's Plays, and Megalovania remixes. I HAVE OTHER INTERESTS, YOUTUBE. DON'T PIGEONHOLE ME.)
YOU GUYS YOU GUYS OMG LOOK at this amazing art of the interrogation scene in chapter 4. It's by Zhamka and I have been ridiculously excited all dayyyyy about seeing this, omg.

If you've never woken up hanging from a hatrack by your suspenders, I wouldn't suggest it. It's kinda uncomfortable.

On the other hand, waking up being yelled at by Undyne ain't all that unusual for me. At this point I can usually sleep through the first few minutes of her spiel.

"...CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE STILL ASLEEP! What do I have to do to wake you up?!!? And you missed today's deliveries, not that anyone was surprised about that, but jeez, you could have answered the phone. Oh wait, no you couldn't have, you took it out of the wall!"

I crack my eyesockets open. "Hey, Undyne," I say. "Guess all I'm up to today is just hanging around."

She's sitting at the kitchen table, glaring up at me, but now that she sees I'm awake she stands. "This is not! Acceptable!" she shouts.

"You know, I appreciate you trying to fill in for Papyrus by doing his berating duties, but it really ain't the same," I tell her. I consider asking her to get me down from here. Then I think, nah, then I'd have to use my own two legs and stand up for myself or something.

"That's not why I'm here!" says Undyne. "I'm here to RAISE YOUR FIGHTING SPIRIT!"

That seems like a bad idea. "I think my fighting spirit is pretty much as high as it can get, Undyne. Unless you wanna hang me from a skyhook instead. I don't really see the point."

"I'm also here," Undyne says, completely ignoring me, "because Toriel asked me to give you back your hat and your jacket and your trombone case."

Oh. Uh. Whoops.

She don't wait for me to respond before adding. "Also, wow is Toriel pissed off at you. I don't know what you did but boy would I not be leaving any more clothes at her place anytime soon if I was you. Or my instruments."

I picture Undyne lugging her baby grand around town like it was nothing: I see her tying it to the top of her and Papyrus' car and then instantly having four flat tires; I imagine her trying to fit it on the seat next to her on the train when the car's in the shop, and the lady with groceries next to her mutters about pianists these days, how nobody ever taught 'em proper manners or key signatures or dynamics, and so on; I consider what would happen if she accidentally left the thing on a bus and had to describe it to the lady at the Lost and Found, who probably has to deal with a thousand lost pianos a day and don't have time for one angry fish. For all I know she actually does this. "I'll try not to," I assure her.
"Also, jeez, Sans, you couldn't wait a couple of weeks to make your move?" she asks, disgustedly.

"What?" I ask. I am admittedly feeling a little indignant now. "Wait, what? How long do you think I should let the Flower keep Papyrus before we spring him, Undyne? How does waiting around make any sense?"

She looks really confused now. "Uh. That's, uh. Not what I was talking about," she says. "Wow. Uh. I'm sorry, Sans, I shouldn't have assumed you'd be quite that much of an asshole."

"Gee, thanks," I say. I can't really take Undyne's jabs personally. She kinda says everything that comes into her head, so at least you always know where you stand with her. "What exactly are you talking about, if not Papyrus?"

"The court date?" she asks.

"What court date?" I ask. I try to remember who all's been arrested recently, aside from me. "Is there an arraignment I don't know about?"

"Wow, and here I thought Toriel told you everything," says Undyne. She sounds almost envious; she's Tori's second-in-command, but she was always Asgore's favorite. "Well, I guess not. I don't mean criminal court! I mean her and Asgore. They're finally getting divorced!"

"Oh," I say. Well, shit. So she thought… because Asgore was gone, I was… uh. Wow. No.

"Yeah, she was really mad at him for getting taken hostage because apparently it means he won't be there to say how she was a lousy wife or something, and if he doesn't do that she can't ditch him." Undyne shakes her head. "Man, the justice system is nuts. And getting divorced is awful! But, whatever! Let's not waste time on this feelings bullshit!"

I sigh, and cross my arms. She's never gonna get me down from this thing, is she? Oh well.

"Sans, I think you're really weird!" she declares. "Like, for example, you barely care about anything at all!" I don't think this is technically true; I care about a lot of things, I just know there's no way I can change 'em. "But! I know one thing you really, really care about! I know your secret weakness, Sans! And I will help you save Papyrus!"

"Uh. You will?" I ask.

"Yeah!!! I'm gonna TRAIN YOU TO FIGHT."

She waits for my response. "Undyne, this is not gonna help anyone. Trust me on this."

She puts up her one good fist; her other arm's still in a sling. "Come on!! Send some bullets at me!" she demands.

I sigh. "Undyne, get me offa this stupid thing, could ya?" I gesture back at the hatrack. "This is getting old hat."

"No! You can't fight with puns and jokes!" she insists. "Come on, show me some magic!" I roll my eye-lights, and send a couple of little bones at her, which she brushes off harmlessly. "Sans, come on! How do you expect to be able to help Papyrus at all if you're --"

There is a knock at the… doorframe. (The door is flat on the floor; I dunno if Undyne got sick of knocking or just knocked too hard.) "H-hi, uh, Sans-and-for-some-reason-Undyne," says Alphys, looking a little panicky. "I, uh, I can c-come back later if you're, b-busy. I tried c-calling, but, uh...."
She looks around the apartment. "Your phone is unplugged, did you know that?"

"Yup," I say.

"And, uh, Undyne, I d-didn't know you would be... here," says Alphys, looking terrified. She kind of always looks terrified, although usually around Undyne it is a particular, happy kind of terrified, and this time it's more your bog standard panic and dread.

"I'm going to teach Sans how to fight!" Undyne says, as if I haven't objected to that several times already.

"Oh," says Alphys. "Really?" She meets my eyes. I shrug. She looks back to Undyne. "Uh. Are you sure that's a g-good idea?"

"Nah," I say.

"You don't get a choice," snaps Undyne.

"I mean, uh. You should be r-resting?" says Alphys. "And not t-trying to fight Sans."

Undyne considers this for a split second. Then she bursts out into uproarious laughter. "You think Sans could hurt me?" Then she keeps laughing -- apparently so hard that something in her shoulder twinges. "Ow! Okay, maybe I shouldn't be laughing so hard."

"See? I can be really dangerous just by being hilarious!" I say. "Now could ya get me down?"

Undyne frowns at me, and then looks back to Alphys, who is doing what I guess she thinks is a stern face, but really it's more like... directed anxiety. She sighs. "You really don't want my extra special lessons in fighting for wimpy skeletons?"

"I really do not," I confirm. She sighs, gets me down from the hatrack with her one good arm, and dumps me in the chair she was sitting at.

"Fine, fine, I guess I'll go see what else Toriel needs," sighs Undyne.

"You should rest," insists Alphys.

"You sound like her, you know that?" says Undyne, shooting her a jagged grin. "Sans, I made breakfast. Or, I guess, lunch. Remember, the burnt parts are the most nutritious part of every meal!!!"

"Yeah, that makes sense," I lie.

"Anyway," says Undyne, "I guess I gotta find someone to take over for me at Club MTT tonight. I can't play with a janky arm. Oh, hey, I guess that means I have the evening free. Alphys, you have any plans for tonight?"

"Uhh," says Alphys, visibly panicking. "Yes! I! Uh. Am doing things with my f-friends! That I have! We have, uh, a lot of activities p-planned!"

"Oh," says Undyne, disappointed. "Well. Uh. Have fun, then!" She waves at us, and, in a final gesture of helpfulness, leans the door against the doorframe when she goes, so that the apartment at least has the illusion of privacy.

I get up and wander over to the kitchen area, where Undyne has thoughtfully set out a small and terrible buffet for me. "So," I say, "you want some burnt toast? Or maybe some burnt oatmeal?"
Hey, looks like there's burnt orange juice too! That takes real dedication."

"I'm g-going with you," she says.

"How's that?" I ask, helping myself to some of the charred remains of the oatmeal. Hey, I'm not picky, and I don't feel like dragging myself all the way to Grillby's for once.

"To the Flower B-boys," says Alphys.

I laugh good and long at that one. "No you're not. Undyne'll murder me if anything happens to you."

Alphys blushes at that. "I d-don't think that's --"

"No, really, I'm not kidding." It doesn't seem to have convinced her, so after some consideration, I ask, "Alphys, why do you want to come along?"

She looks down at her feet. "B-because I want to help out and this is the only w-way I can?"

"Alphys. Come on," I say. "Whatever they want you for, it ain't gonna be --"

"Sans, you know what they want us for," she snaps. Well, at least she ain't stuttering. "You know. And I -- I --" Her breath hitches.


"B-but what else could it be?" Yeah, card tricks ain't gonna help Alphys. Seeing as how my vast handkerchief collection is in my jacket, which is currently hanging out of reach on the coatrack, I hand Alphys a dishrag instead. She dabs at her eyes and blows her nose noisily. "I mean -- I mean - -"

"Hey, if you think they're gonna make you mill DT again," I say, "why would you wanna come with?"

"Well they'll just g-get someone else to d-do it otherwise," she says shakily. "A-and -- and I don't know, m-maybe I could... h-help you stop them?" Not to be a hypocrite here, but, you know what, fuck it, I'm a hypocrite: she definitely ain't telling me everything, and that bugs the hell outta me.

"So you just wanna help me out, fight the good fight, that sorta thing?" I ask.

"Yeah!" She gives me a shaky smile.

"Alphys, that is the fakest smile I ever saw," I tell her, flatly.

The smile evaporates. "So I guess you d-don't own a mirror or anything," she says, even flatter.

"The second-fakest," I amend.

"W-why are you so worried about me coming along if you d-don't think they're asking us to m-make DT?" she asks.

"Eh. I mean, it's the most reasonable possibility," I say, "but. I doubt Asgore talked. He would never have told 'em those details. Hell, he never told me a lot of it. You never told me, neither, unless ya had to. I think he wanted to keep it all nice and compartmentalized. Most of what I know about your part of it is guesswork."
"D-do you want to kn--"

The lights in my eyes go out at the very idea. "No," I say, very firmly. She looks a little freaked out, and I dial it back a little. "Heh. Sorry. Just, you know. Bad memories. Weird memories."

"Your mentor?" she asks.

"Yeah. I... I already thought too much about how it coulda gone down different, you know? If I did something wrong, or it was all him, or --"

"Honestly, he sounds like a jerk," she says, almost angrily. Then she looks abashed. "S-sorry, but."

I sigh. "He was not always a jerk. I don't work with jerks. Anyway, enough about that guy. So you think you're coming with me?"

She nods. She does look very determined, actually, although not, thank god, Determined.

"Okay. You wanna come with me to see Gorman, then?"

"P-patience Gorman?" she asks. "The Flower's --"

"Yup," I say. Her horrified look doesn't change. "What? We gotta talk to the Flower somehow. You'd rather see Corcoran? Or Xanthopoulos?" These are two more of the Flower's lieutenants; they are also, respectively, a professor and a judge. Most of the Flower's lieutenants are known to be fine upstanding citizens; that's how he operates. He's got his tendrils all over this damn city.

"D-definitely not," says Alphys. "But... but isn't she the one with the b-butterfly knife?"

"Eh, I think it's just a fancy toy. I never seen her do much with it but flip it around a little," I say.

"She got Undyne pretty badly once," says Alphys, and for a moment she looks absolutely furious, and I think, holy shit, there's still some fight in the good doctor yet. (I also think, when are those two gonna just smooch? Jeez louise, it's been obvious for years.) "Okay. Yeah. I can handle her. Yeah!"

"Yeah?" I ask, just to be sure.

"Y-yeah!!" She gives a hesitant, almost-enthusiastic little shake of her fists. "We'll show her!"

Undyne she is not, but at least she don't look so depressed anymore. Still... something ain't right about this. I'm gonna have to watch Alphys real carefully. "Okay. Well. If you wanna back out I understand."

"No, I'm w-with you," she insists.

"Great," I say. "Plug the phone back in and hand it to me, would ya?"

She does, and I ask the operator to get me the Ebott Temperance League. This is where Patience Gorman does her fine upstanding citizen act, to wild applause. Then I put on a nice, classy voice, which I think startles Alphys. I make an appointment soon as I can, for Monday morning -- she may be Patience itself but I sure as hell ain't -- and leave a couple of fake names.

"Shouldn't we use our real names? So she takes us, uh, seriously?" Alphys asks.

"Oh, trust me, she'll know who it is," I say.
"I didn't say she wouldn't know, I said she wouldn't take us seriously," Alphys says, rolling her eyes.

"Eh. Being taken seriously is wildly overrated. You and I both know that from experience. Now, why don't you go find Undyne and tell her all your plans got cancelled. Take her out dancing or some shit," I say.

Alphys' scales go a very bright red. "Oh, n-no, she wouldn't -- I d-don't know how --"

"She'll teach you," I point out. "Go. We might not survive this stunt. You should make the most of the weekend."

She puts her face in her hands. "Is it r-really that obvious?" she asks, miserably.

"That she'd do anything for you? Yeah, it is. Now get out of here."

"Uh. I'll... I'll try. And. I'll see you Monday?" she asks.

"Yup. Now go!" She squeezes out between the door and the doorframe.

I have some of Undyne's burnt toast, leave the rest on a plate on the floor, and spend the rest of the day on the couch. All this planning and plotting really wears a guy out.

It's getting dark when the phone rings. This better be good. I'm too lazy to get up and go to the phone, so I float the receiver over with magic; the stand jangles as it clatters to the floor. "Hey," I say into the receiver.

"Sans! Where are you?" It's Mettaton. Goddamnit.

"I'm, uh, I'm at home, obviously, or you wouldn't be talking to me. I'm taking the weekend off. Can't a guy take a weekend off? You ain't supposed to work on weekends, it's unnatural."

"Sans, we are a nightclub," says Mettaton. If he had breath, he'd be talking under it. In a friendlier tone, he says, "The weekend is our time to shine! There is a huge crowd and you know Snowy's been having family problems --"

"Is he the only guy who gets to have family problems?" I ask. "Look. My little brother is, uh, really sick, and --"

"Sans, please. I implore you. I beg you. I am down on my knees -- well, I don't have knees right now but if I did, I'd -- look, Undyne can't play so I've had to cut out half of our musical numbers, Snowy's nowhere to be found, I have an hour and a half of time to fill tonight during our peak hours, and there's a live broadcast scheduled so that's an hour and a half of dead air on my poor, dear, sweet cousin's show. You wouldn't do that to my poor, dear, sweet cousin, would you?"

I always thought 'cousin' was some kinda euphemism, personally, but I never met the cousin in question, so who even knows. How do robots have cousins? Maybe they came outta neighboring factories or something? "Sorry, pal. Just, uh, really not feelin' up to it right now."

Mettaton gives a short bark of a laugh. "Ha! You really must meet Blooky, you know. But look -- I can't have this happen tonight, it'll be a disaster, we have a very important guest coming and I need you. As terrible as your jokes are. Please?"

I sigh. It is hard to resist such a blatant and shameless overuse of italics; I worry that Mettaton might break something, wheedling like that, or maybe the letters will all fall down like drunks in a conga line. "Fine," I grumble. "Fine. I'll be there in a minute."
"You're a star, darling."

I can accept my resemblance to a giant ball of gas that's perpetually on fire, but I don't have to like it. "Yeah, yeah, whatever." I throw the receiver vaguely in the direction of the phone instead of hanging up.

I throw on my jacket, get my hat, and reluctantly tie my shoes. The nice thing about being a comedian is that if you look like you slept in your clothes twice and got kicked around by the cops a couple times too, it's all just part of the act. Although, technically I'm not listed as a comedian. I'm just listed as "Sans." I guess that's just how great the jokes are -- so good they're not even funny anymore.

Something Alphys said is still bugging me, so I go check the mirror in the bathroom. I'm smiling. It's as good as being happy most of the time. Tonight, though... tonight it's not.

Why'd I have to go on tonight? I don't know how hard I can pretend everything's okay. Yeah, yeah, Mettaton's cousin's show and the VIP in the audience, whoever it is. I bet it's the mayor. I fucking hate that guy.

You know what? Mettaton doesn't deserve any old Sans tonight. Nah. Mettaton's getting a comedian. I'm gonna be hilarious. That crowd's gonna have a real good time. My smile gets a little less fake.
First off, **THERE IS LOTS MORE FANART FROM ZHAMKA.** Undyne nearly knocking over the table at Toriel's dinner party, Sans hanging from the hatrack, and Sans waking up after Toriel bailed him out, plus a gorgeous little shady Sans portrait.

Also, thank you, everyone on Tumblr and elsewhere who reassured me that the comedy I wrote here was actually funny! (You know who you are.) I don't usually sit down to specifically write comedy, with the exception of occasionally looking for puns; mostly I trust funny to happen on its own. So this was new and different and I wasn't sure the jokes would work.

Finally, I wrote most of this to **insaneintherainmusic's awesome Live at Grillby's Undertale jazz cover album.** It's so goooood.

I pop over to Club MTT. "*There you are!"* Mettaton's got his humanoid body on now, but he's still plugged in -- that gossip you heard that sometimes he looks like a box on a wheel? Yeah, it's true. Alphys has been trying to iron out power source issues with his true form for ages, so sometimes he's stuck like that. That's part of why you only ever seen him in one movie; the other reason is that after that, he only ever got asked to read villain parts.

"Yup. I'm here," I say half-heartedly.

"Oh, I'm so glad you could make it!" he gushes.


"Really?" He frowns. "Do you think that's wise? We do have such a wide audience tonight --"

"Don't worry about it," I say. "It'll be killer." As we speak, I am dredging up all the punchlines I never used in conversations with Mettaton because he won't think they're funny at all.

"Well, I guess you're the expert," he says, laying it on way too thick. "You have an hour."

"That long?" I ask. I was kinda hoping for less time. Give me an hour and all I see is fifty-five minutes of procrastination. Only having ten minutes would be better.

"Yes, so you'd better not waste time! Now, you run along, I have to go yell at that idiot busboy," he says, waving me off.

Well, that hour is the most productive five minutes of my life, despite my misgivings, and when I go out on stage, I know how I gotta start, just so Mettaton knows what's up here.

Nights at Club MTT are basically the only time I could ever be mistaken for **energetic.** If you ain't having fun, the crowd don't wanna be there. And what I usually do is, well… the same old same old -- you know, elephant jokes, bone puns, stuff like that. I get a surprising amount of mileage out of physical comedy, especially since there's loads of little ways to use magic to take feigning clumsiness
to the next level -- and since the audience is human, most of ‘em ain't ever seen magic up close before, and they never will, so to them it's new and different. If you see the show on the regular, though, you know the humor's as tired as I am.

Tonight is gonna be different, though. So after I do the standard waving, mugging for the crowd, thanking the audience for showing up, that kinda stuff, I say, "You know, I got a younger brother -- I don't know if I ever talk about him, so you might not know this." The monsters in the audience, though there ain't a whole lot, crack up. "He wasn't up to coming in, but I hear we're on the radio tonight, and I hope he's listening." This gets a delighted Awww! from the audience. "See, he hates my jokes --" I pause briefly while the Awww! turns to laughter "-- so I figure if I tell enough of ’em tonight he might bring himself to come in here and drag me off stage. Anyway, you'll recognize him. The family resemblance is unmistakable. He's real tall and good-looking." This gets a little laugh from everyone.

"No, but seriously, you'll recognize him. He's about yay high" -- I put my hand up as far as it will go, then give up -- "well, maybe a little yayer -- and he'll be smiling, but he sure won't like it. So this show's for him. I won't stop telling 'em until you come in here and carry me out, brother!"

He probably ain't listening, but you never know; even humans listen to monster radio. We got good music and terrible jokes. Besides, if anyone would have the sheer, unmitigated, totally innocent gall to ask their captor to change the radio station, it's Papyrus.

"Anyway, I'm glad you all chose to spend your night at Club MTT. Great little place, huh? I mean, except for all the horrible monsters around." I hate that that one always gets a laugh, but it does, so I keep it in. "You guys seen Mettaton yet?" This gets an affirmative. "You like him?" Another affirmative. "Yeah, yeah, he's a great guy, Mettaton. They don't make 'em like that anymore. Which is too bad because every time he breaks down we gotta order parts from overseas." A laugh.

Good, good. I keep going. "You know, one time we thought, hey, wouldn't it be great if Mettaton could do twice as many shows? I mean, wouldn't you guys love that?" Clapping. "Yeah, then we could cut ticket prices in half!" A little laughter. "So anyway, we talked to Dr. Alphys, who made him."

You would be surprised how many people think Mettaton's officially-listed-in-the-press-materials creator is imaginary -- they think he was put together in a government lab, or that he was one of Edison's last projects, or something like that. So whenever I mention her I give her the imaginary doctorate she ought to have. It's not like they're gonna believe me anyway.

"So Alphys kludges together a second Mettaton, and it's a perfect copy! Way, way too perfect. I mean, c'mon, this is Mettaton we're talking about, right? The guy's just so great! You ever doubt that, come work with him, then you'll really know what a wonderful guy he is." A beat. "I mean, it's hard to forget when he tells you so fifty times a day." I grin and skim the crowd to see how I'm doing; I ain't gonna look at the front row because the mayor'll probably be there and ruin my night, but way in the back I see Undyne, cackling, her arm around Alphys, who has her face in her hands. Good to know someone takes my advice. "Anyway, we get our second Mettaton in, and he's great. He sings, he brags, he dances, he brags, he spins plates, he brags some more, he can do the whole show. Except. He wants top billing."

I pause for dramatic effect.

"So I sez to him, 'But Mettaton, you already got top billing!' He says, 'I'm not Mettaton, I'm Met-two-tons!'" The audience groans at that, but they seem to like my Mettaton impression.

I grin wider. "Well, Mettaton is not a fan of the new guy. It's clear there is not room enough on
stage for these two robots, and they start to duke it out. Now, I'm sure you never saw two vicious, killer robots fight each other, but I think I can get it across. I scoot the mic out of harm's way a little, repeating "Yeah, I think -- okay. Anyway. You ever seen two prize fighters, real tough guys, goin' at each other all --" I make my most ferocious fist-fighting gesture, and add a growl for good measure. The audience seems to grasp the concept. "Well, it was nothing like that."

I break for laughter a bit before continuing my story. "See, Mettaton's got a lot of fans, as you know, but he's got one fan who's clearly his biggest, most devoted fan. Comes to every show, reads every review, has every poster plastered all over his walls. Anyone know? Can anyone guess?"

Some dope to my far right shouts "You!" and I point to him and say "That is a dirty lie, I will fight you, sir!" He cracks up, then tries to look tough. "But after the show, not now, I got things to do. Anyone else?" I can't help but laugh myself when I hear Undyne shout, from the very back but somehow also the very loudest, "It's Papyrus!" but I shake my head no.

"Guys, guys, you all got it wrong. Isn't anyone paying attention? Mettaton's biggest fan is Mettaton." Yeah, that gets a laugh. "So here he is staring at this other guy and it's like looking into a mirror. They circle around each other --" I demonstrate, by starting in the prize fighter stance with a ferocious expression on my face, circling around an invisible opponent, and then slowly putting my fists down, standing up straight, and grinning wider and wider, until I'm just walking in circles with a dopey, lovestruck grin on my face. "Neither of 'em could stand to take a shot at something so beautiful, so innately perfect, so --" The audience is cracking up, but they ain't watching me any more. That's never good.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a long metal coil snaking across the floor, with a gloved hand at the end of it. It's coming for me; I see only vengeance in those robo-fingers.

I change my mind. This ain't just good, this is gonna be comedy gold. I make like I don't see it. "So very Mettaton," I finish. The hand makes a grab for my ankle, but I grab the mic and sidestep it like I'm just moving around the stage. "Anyway, they did that 'til it was time to open fanmail." I sidestep the hand again, this time ambling over Mettaton's arm on the floor to walk in the other direction. "Then one of 'em finally clocked the other one, and the other one exploded, because Mettaton is a very sensitive and delicate piece of machinery." Another sidestep. "So now we only got one Mettaton --" I sidestep backwards "-- and to be honest I don't know which one he is, but it's probably for the best."

At this point I'm not so much sidestepping as moving constantly without looking at Mettaton's arm. "Wow, I haven't had this much exercise since that time my brother stopped changing the radio station for me. You know how far I had to go every time I wanted to listen to something different? Two whole feet! It was brutal! Who lives like that?" It is a little tiring, I have to admit, doing all this fancy footwork, but the laughs are worth it. I decide to pick on someone my own size for a while, though, and give Mettaton a little break.

"Yeah, I actually asked Dr. Alphys once if maybe she could make a copy of me, so I wouldn't have to do so much work, but that didn't turn out well either." Mettaton lets up a little, and I can relax. "So after I ask her, she comes up to me and she shows me this -- this guy. First of all, he's human, so that's all wrong. Plus he's got really big hair, and makeup, and a big red nose. 'Alphys,' I tell her, 'this looks nothing like me.' 'I thought you said you wanted a clown,' she says. 'No, no, no, Doc, I wanted a clone.'"

Mettaton seems to be leaving me alone. I'll get back to him later. "So then Alphys frowns. She says 'I don't really see much of a difference.' 'Doc,' I say, 'do you need new glasses? Take a closer look.' So she does." I mime leaning in for a closer look. "Then she turns to me and says 'Ohhh, I see
what's different -- the other guy's funny.'" Another break for laughs. "So she went back to the drawing board, and in a coupla days she comes up to me with a real good copy of myself. And that lousy jerk's still sleeping on the couch at my apartment!" The audience laughs. "He hasn't taken the trash out once!" They're still enjoying it, so I add, "All the food in our kitchen's gone but I ain't ever seen him awake. I was supposed to be living that life!" I tsk. "Life's so unfair."

I take another break, let the audience get it all out. It feels egotistical sometimes, doing this, but most things that feel good make me all guilty like that, so I figure it's probably just me.

"But back to Mettaton," I say, "because this is Club MTT, and you came here for him -- I mean, I'm just as sorry as you are you got stuck with me, I'm doing my best here, ladies and gents -- back to Mettaton. He's a good guy. A very good sport. Any other guy would be trying to drag me off stage or something by now, I'm sure." I let 'em laugh, and look around again. I wonder, idly, if the mayor's having fun, the asshole. So I scan the front row. Mostly rich humans, and then...

Oh.

That. Is not the mayor. That's Tori. Frisk's with her, wildly applauding like I'm the best thing they ever seen, and Tori… Tori is, uh. She's dressed up real nice, in a dark purple evening gown, and she's got her chin on her hand, and she's just glaring. At me. She's glaring at me.

I suddenly feel like a shabby, stupid asshole, and I forget what I was gonna say. "So, uh. So. Mettaton, he's really -- robotic, and --" Shit, shit, shit, were there steel puns I was gonna make last night? I forget.

I'm put out of my misery, though, because a gloved hand at the end of a long metal arm grabs me by the ankle and drags me offstage. The crowd howls with laughter.

Mettaton dangles me upside-down by the ankle, so I'm right at eye-level with him. "What are you doing?" he demands.

"Why didn't you tell me your VIP guest was Toriel Dreemurr?" I demand.

"Well, I didn't want to spoil the surprise, did I?" he says. "Especially since she threatened to set me on fire if I did," he adds, through gritted, steel teeth.

Okay, yeah, I can sympathize. Either way I guess he was gonna get roasted. "All right. I'm sorry. Can you get me out of here as soon as the show's --"

"No," says Mettaton. Shit.

We can both hear the crowd starting to talk to each other; they're probably wondering what's going on. "Well, we gotta finish the show."

"Yes," he says, still real angry. And wow, I really feel like a jerk now.

"Okay, look, if you play along I think we can do this," I say. "Let's just act like our little disagreement was all part of the show. They'll love it. Trust me."

"Sans, sweetheart, I don't trust you as far as I could throw you," he says.

I look up at where he's holding me by the ankle, and consider how far he could throw me. It's pretty far. (Assume a round Sans....) "Yeah, but you only gotta trust me as far as center stage."

He sighs. "Fine. But no jokes about my hair."
"I only do bald jokes," I reassure him.

He hesitates for a moment. "Do you promise?"

"Cross my sternum," I say. And then, because I'm a terrible person, I resolve to remember he's sensitive about his hair, just in case I need some leverage.

We send Madjick out to entertain the audience while we work on our routine; Mettaton's actually real interested in this, but says he was always told comedy was hard. "Yeah, no, that ain't true, I never do hard work," I point out.

We actually have a lot in common, me and Mettaton -- more than either of us would like to admit, I bet. The main difference, if you ask me, is that he performs because he needs adoration, and I perform because otherwise I'd have to be myself, and that's no fun.

So we work our routine out, and after Madjick's crawled back into its hat I creep on stage, exaggeratedly sneaky, look both ways, then grab the mic. "Anyway, as I was saying, Mettaton is really--"

Mettaton's hand shoots out from stage left, grabs me on the right shoulder, and then he walks on, his arm retracting back into his shoulder. "Sans, Sans, are you telling jokes about me? You know we talked about this." He plays up his haughty disapproval.

"Uh. Nope," I say, looking from Mettaton to the audience, giving them that desperate please don't give me away look that usually makes 'em laugh. "You musta misheard, Mettaton. We were talking about, uh, how I met a t--"

His hand threatens to crush my humerus. Oh, yeah, he nixed that one as being "old" and "tired." Well, so am I, what do you expect? Still, I shift gears quickly. "A talented and entertaining performer the other day."

"Gee, Sans, that really does sound like you were talking about--"

"Yeah, it's weird, because those kinda people are so rare," I say, cutting him off. "I don't know anyone at all like that. ...Do you?"

He looks me up and down with a supercilious air. "No, Sans, I don't believe I do." The crowd laughs. "What were they doing, this performer?"

"Oh, she was laughing," I say, nonchalantly.

"Oh?" Mettaton says, all polite curiosity. "That doesn't seem very interesting."

"Well it was interesting to me," I say.

"And how was it a performance?" he asks.

"Well, she was laughing at my jokes," I explain. "She almost convinced me they were funny." The crowd laughs. "It was amazing," I add, starry-eyed. "I never saw anything like it." More laughs. I know my delivery's decent because even Mettaton suppresses a snort.

"Hey, that's pretty good," I ad-lib. "Almost like you mean it. You ever think of going into showbiz yourself, Mettaton?"

"Oh, every now and then I consider it," he says airily. Another laugh. "So tell me more about this
person who liked your jokes," he says, his tone equal parts fascination and disbelief.

"Well..." It occurs to me suddenly that 'poor deluded comedian who thinks he found someone who likes his jokes' is a little closer to home than I meant it to be, and Tori is right there, and I am not looking at her. I refuse.

Mettaton nudges me me slightly; it's a don't you dare freeze up, what are you doing? nudge, and I deserve it. "Did you get her name?" he prompts.

"Yeah, yeah, I did," I say. "Kind of an unusual name, too. Everyone calls her Ina."

"That is an interesting name," he says. "It sounds... Continental?"

"I dunno, maybe. Anyway, next thing I know I was being hauled away by zookeepers." A couple of people in the audience gradually start giggling; they figured it out.

"Zookeepers?" Mettaton asks.

"Oh yeah, I guess she's friends with all these zookeepers," I explain, with as much cheerful obliviousness as I can muster. "They kept coming up and saying hi to her."

Mettaton gives me the most exasperated stare his mechanical face can manage. "Sans," he says. "This lady, who was laughing so much -- she didn't happen to have big pointy ears, did she?" He mimes a pair of pointed canid ears, and some more of the audience gets it. I love watching a punchline ripple across a crowd like that. Punchlines behave a lot like soundwaves; if the timing's wrong, they cancel each other out and you're left in total silence, but if you get it right they reinforce each other and the laughter is like music.

"Yeah! How'd you know?" I ask, excitedly. "Hey, do you know her?"

"Sans," says Mettaton, drily, "I think you were talking to a hyena."

The entire audience is in on the joke now. "Well, that's not a very nice thing to say about her," I say. "I thought she was a very nice girl. Sure, her table manners coulda been a little better --"

"And this is him saying that," Mettaton says to the crowd.

"Jeez, Mettaton, don't interrupt," I tell him. "Besides, there's nothing wrong with my manners! Emily Post never wrote a word about not drinking ketchup straight from the bottle." We go on like that for a while; dumb mug comedian and robot star. He's very good; he can think on his feet, which I guess is a good thing considering how he likes to go on and on about his legs. The crowd seems to be enjoying it too, and by the time we take our bow -- Mettaton does a little flourish; I make like I'm trying to copy it and end up doing a somersault offstage instead -- life seems a little better, at least for now.

When we get offstage, Mettaton tells me, "That was actually a lot of fun."

"You don't have to sound so surprised," I say, but I'm not insulted.

"Now, I suppose I should leave you to your little, ah, tete-a-tete with Mrs. Dreemurr," he says. "She's in the dressing room."

"Oh no, I ain't sticking around for that," I say, starting to look for a place I can duck into and vanish. "I am leaving. I am going straight home and --"
"No, I don't think you are," he says, pleasantly. He clutches my arm less pleasantly. "Don't take this personally, Sans. She did threaten to set me on fire."

"Come on, Mettaton, I don't even know where the dressing room is. I never dress for this shit," I insist, but he is already dragging me away.

"It was wonderful working with you, but I'm afraid I have to insist. If it comes to that, I'll forward your last paycheck to your next-of-kin," he says smoothly, before opening a door and shoving me into a room.

I look around. It is, in fact, a dressing room, although it looks more like it's used for storing costumes, props, and motor oil than for actually dressing. Currently it also contains Toriel. She's still gorgeous, and still real unhappy with me.

Frisk's here too, though, and they get to me first. "You were really really funny!" they say, rushing up to me. "Except for when you forgot what to say. But that's okay, I get stage fright too!" Frisk says, all earnest encouragement.

*This kid.* I crack up, and they look really confused. "You are a good kid," I tell them, ruffling their hair. "Never forget that."

"Uh. Okay," says Frisk, looking confused. Then they hug me, to my surprise. "You smell like burnt toast," they mutter.

"Frisk," says Toriel. "My child, I'm sorry, but Sans and I have to talk about something."

"Are you having an argument?" Frisk asks, frowning at me.

"No," we both say, simultaneously, accidentally. Toriel looks very annoyed. "Nah, it's fine, kid," I insist. "We're just --"

"Whatever, okay, I'll go wait outside while you have an argument," says Frisk, sounding entirely too world-weary for however old they are, but also extremely whiny, so that's reassuring. They go stand outside the dressing room, and it's just me and Tori.
"Uh." I'm completely out of jokes now; just a worn-out nobody in a worn-out suit, full of worn-out excuses. I smile weakly up at her. "I, uh, I guess you really wanted to see me."

"Sans," says Toriel, equal parts furious and disappointed.

"Look, I'm -- I'm really sorry about -- last night was -- I wasn't -- it was a bad day," I finish. She ain't buying it.

"Really," she says. "Did you stay up all night trying and failing to heal a wounded ally, all the while worrying about how nearly half the people you'd arrived with had been taken by the enemy, then soothe a child who's been through heaven knows what, and then have to go to the police station to extricate another wounded friend from the clutches of the very people who are meant to be protecting this city's citizens, and give said friend what is very likely the worst news of his life, and -- and then after that, did you coordinate an enormous meeting, make dinner, and find childcare on short notice? During all of this, were you burdened with finding a solution to an apparently insoluble problem? Because if you had been through all of that, I think you could understand why I am a little bit annoyed that my supposed friend will not trust me with basic facts about his life that might help us during this crisis."

Ouch. "I, uh...." I sigh. "Yeah, I. I see where you're coming from, Tori. I'm a moron."

"I already know that, Sans. It is not what I needed you to tell me."

I wish I'd had the guts to explain myself before, when it wasn't so fraught, because despite having no guts at all I'm starting to feel a little queasy. I sigh. "It's. Look, I. Tori. Papyrus saved my life, you know that, I just -- I swore I'd never abandon him and now that he's --"

There's a real loud knock at the door. "Mrs. Dreemurr? Boss?" Oh god, it's Undyne.

Toriel looks at me questioningly. I do not meet her eyes. "What is it, Undyne?" she sighs.

Undyne opens the door; she's got Frisk on her shoulder, looking mildly belligerent. "Caught this squirt coming out from backstage, figured they were with you."

"I just wanted to see Mettaton," Frisk whines. "Besides, they were arguing."

"Aw, you don't wanna see Mettaton, kid, he's a big jerk in a little box," says Undyne.

"Really?" Frisk looks disappointed. "He always seemed really cool on t-- in the movies."

Mettaton's only ever been in one movie, I remember, and I'm about to shrug it off, but then everything suddenly fits together, and oh hell. That's what's been bugging me this whole time. Why didn't I realize before? I've spent too long here, that's what it is. Gone native.

Undyne shrugs. "I never saw the movie, it sounds like it was a real dog. Not the greater kind of dog, either. Anyway, I guess, uh, have... a nice night?" She puts Frisk down and looks doubtfully between me and Toriel. "I, uh. Alphys said something about me teaching her to dance, so, uh, I, I better run." She's grinning like crazy as she says it. "See ya!"
When the door shuts, Tori turns her attention to Frisk. "Please, Frisk, I know it may not be very interesting, but you must be careful about --"

"Never mind that," I say, cutting her off. "Frisk, I have to know: how'd the Flower Boys find you? Where were you before they nabbed you?"

Frisk looks terrified at this. "I, I, I can't --" they start, and then they fall silent, and hug their chest.

"Sans, is this really necessary?" Toriel snaps. "You are only --"

The door slams open again, and it's Mettaton in his box body. "Sans, why are the police here?" he demands.

"Uh," I say. "Maybe they want your autograph?"

"Ooh, can I have one?" Frisk asks, hopefully.

"What a charming young person," says Mettaton, pulling a pen and paper out from a special compartment in his side. "Who should I --"

"No autographs! Tell me about the cops," I demand. "Or I'll... I'll tell everyone you wear a wig." This is a lousy threat; after all, it ain't like he's got a natural head of hair.

Still, he wheels back slightly and throws his hands up in horror, looking as aghast as a box on a wheel can. But he pauses to give Frisk his autograph before saying, "How could you betray me like --"

"Tell us about the police," says Toriel, enunciating every word slowly and carefully and showing lots and lots of teeth.

This seems to have more the kind of reaction that's useful. "Oh, uh, Mrs. Dreemurr, well, they're -- I've got Undyne holding them off right now, they seem to be looking for Sans -- I don't want an incident -- they have all the exits blocked off, I realize it could be, ah, inconvenient to turn Sans over --" Here he's looking at Tori; I apparently have no say in this. "Nevertheless, if you could go quietly so they don't search the cellars --"

"Got it," I say.

"No," says Tori. "No one is arresting--"

There's shouting from outside, and we all fall silent to listen; someone's shouting "Police! Hey, get out of my way!"

"Stall 'em for a few minutes, Mettaton," I say. "Get all your people to haul all the stuff out of harm's way, I'll think of something to keep 'em occupied, so once they get past you I'll annoy 'em as long as I can."

Mettaton pauses. "Go. Do it now," snarls Tori.

He wheels away real fast, shouting "BURGERPANTS!" which... I guess must be some kinda code word? Eh, I've had weirder code words.

"What exactly are you planning, Sans?" she asks me. "You are not just slipping away again."

"Yeah I am," I say. I motion to the door. "Come on, we'll take a shortcut."
She looks surprised. "Oh! Oh, you can take people -- oh, that explains... well. I suppose... go along, Frisk, it is safe."

Frisk looks doubtful, but I grab their hand, and Toriel grabs my other hand, and the world shifts around us. We walk through the doorway into my place.

Frisk looks around. "Why is your phone --"

"Don't ask," I say.

"There appears to be a plate of something burnt on the floor," says Toriel, frowning.

"Yeah," I admit.

"How do you burn orange juice?" Frisk asks, wrinkling their nose at the jug on the counter.

"It's a very specialized skill," I tell them. I go to turn on the radio. "Look, you two sit tight, I'll be back, and then --"

"What? You are not going anywhere," says Toriel.

"You heard Mettaton, they'll turn the place over if they don't find me." I sigh. "And I told him I'd help, which was dumb of me. Besides, if they shut the place down...."

I rap the radio a few times; it finally comes on, but it's not playing music, so I fiddle with the dial until it at least starts talking. "Oh... Sorry... I guess the police are here...." says the announcer. "So there won't be any more tonight... unless they leave, maybe?"

"There. Now you can stay, uh, apprised of the situation," I say.

Toriel sighs. "No, Sans. I am going with you." She says it like it's just a fact I keep forgetting, like I'm real slow or something.

"What?" I ask. "No, they'll..." I trail off. Frisk looks real unhappy now; they're huddled on the couch as far away as they can be from Toriel and me. I remember the blasé way they left the room earlier, and think, maybe it was a front and the kid don't actually handle arguments well. If we're gonna squabble, I guess we can do it elsewhere, away from the kid, but that means taking Tori with me. "Okay, yeah," I say. "Hey, kiddo, you okay to be alone for a few minutes?" Damnit, and now I have to get out of this thing with the cops, for their sake.

Frisk nods. "I, um." They fumble in their pockets, then show me the pack of cards I gave 'em, held together with a rubber band. "I have these."

I grin. "Okay. See how many pyramids you can demolish for me, all right?"

I get a weak smile back, but it don't last long. "That lady Undyne, she said the police were bad," they say. The question that I think's underneath that statement is What if you don't come back?

I consider what's on the radio; the announcer is explaining that they're hiding under a table because they're afraid the police might make eye contact, or even engage them in conversation. "I'll be all right," I tell 'em. "I got Tori with me. But we gotta get going. For, uh, for the sake of the business model." If they don't hide the liquor in time and the cops shut the club down, we're likely out of business and out of luck, and we got nothing to negotiate with if my plan to spring the hostages fails.

Tori and I leave the kid; I ain't very happy about it and from the look on her face, neither is she.
We're back in the dressing room in less than a second, and only then do I resume the argument. "What are you doing, coming back here? Someone needs to look after that poor kid, and I didn't drop 'em off at Tabitha's, so --"

"I will be caring for Frisk for the time being, and we will come back," says Tori, shakily. "They need a stable place to --"

"Yeah, which is why you should go back," I say.

I'm apparently not too convincing. "You think I would leave you here to be taken in again by those... ruffians?" she asks, indignantly. "You've spent quite enough time at that station recently, and they will know that you are under my protection. Besides, you still have not told me anything. If you think I am letting you get out of this...." She shakes her head.

"I'm not getting out of it," I say, "I'm dealing with the cops to save your business. Up until yesterday, you were fine with this, I don't know why --"

"You would really rather be beaten half to death by the humans than tell me anything?" she asks. "And why on earth were you being so rude to Frisk? That child has been through a great ordeal --"

"Yeah, I think they have, more than you even realize," I say quietly. "But that ain't the --" The shouting's coming close -- it's Mettaton talking to... oh no, it's Mettaton talking to Detective Boone. "Tori, please, we got like ten seconds to get you out of here and get me back," I say, extending my hand. "I dunno how we're gonna explain you being here, or what they think they're getting me on, but I can do this on my own and it'll look --"

Mettaton and Boone are almost outside the door now, so I lock it. There's no getting out and back in time, it's too exhausting to do in that short a time. "Detective, I have no idea who or what you think you'll find back here but I very much doubt it's worth your while!" I hear Mettaton insist.

"Bill, tell the big vending machine to shut its goddamn mouth," snaps Boone. "Either that or tell it to spit out a pack of cigarettes or a snack or something."

"We do have a warrant, Mr., uh, Mettaton," says Dever. "We have reason to believe Toriel Dreemurr was sent to deliver a kidnapped child to one of your performers, a skeleton by the name of Sans." He sounds exhausted, and I wonder what kind of wild goose chases he's been on earlier on behalf of the Flower Boys, but I gotta laugh at the idea that Tori does what anyone tells her to. Like hell she was sent. Sometimes I forget the humans think Asgore's still the ringleader of this three-ring circus.

"Mrs. Dreemurr is of course a pillar of the monster community," says Mettaton, "and she does occasionally visit Club MTT." This is a lie; Tori doesn't really get out much at all, I don't think. She mostly runs the show from her house, and she checks up on people when she can, and sometimes she'll lead us into a raid, but she sure as hell never gets to have any fun, which is a pity, because she is a fun lady when she's not royally pissed at me. "Personally, I like to believe it's because we pride ourselves on putting on a wonderful show. As for Sans, he's -- I'm not sure what connection he has to --"

They start pounding on the door, saying they got a warrant, and I'm ready to just lie like a goddamn rug and try to keep Toriel out of trouble. I look at her and motion to the door, trying to convey, See? I told you! Well, I guess they won't find Frisk, although they're sure gonna wonder what the hell Tori's doing h--

It is at this point that she grabs me, stands me on one of the tables, and kisses me.
It is. It is not quite what I expected her to do. There's a sort of pleasant thrum of magic as she works her way along my jaw; it's something I haven't felt in years, and I didn't know I missed it until now. It's nice! I'm not complaining! It is kind of hurting my neck, though, and the way she's holding onto my tie, strictly for the purposes of balance obviously, ain't helping. I put one hand on her shoulder and the other as close to her waist as I can reach and lean in. For... for balance, and, uh, verisimilitude.

When I run my fingers through the soft fur on her neck before pulling her a little closer, she makes a satisfied little noise. In the spirit of experimentation, I do it again, and let a little magic run through my fingers; this time her sigh kind of turns into a growl, and she lets go of my tie. But it's only to loosen it a little and drag me in closer so she can run her tongue along my collarbone, and that is very, uh. Well. I'm gonna assume I should keep doing that.

The door slams open. "Police! Get your -- get your... hands... um." Toriel pulls away, and I reluctantly regain my own damn balance and try to remember what was going on before.

Boone looks a little horrified. Dever is not much happier. Mettaton's lights are blinking red and yellow, with no discernible pattern, which I think is what he does when he knows he's gonna have to lie but he ain't decided yet what the lie's gonna be. (He really needs to stop doing that; I've won so much money off him in poker it's almost not funny anymore.)

Tori harrumphs, makes a show of smoothing her fur, and says coolly, "What exactly is the trouble, officers?"

"We're, uh," says Boone. He looks from me to Tori, grimacing. "We're conducting a search." Then he glares at me, as if I'm somehow personally responsible.

I become aware that I have the dumbest grin on my face and I'm not even trying to keep it there. In fact, it's kinda hard to dislodge.

"Mrs. Dreemurr," ventures Dever. There is a very slight emphasis on that Mrs., and that starts to bring me back to reality. Oh. Oh damnit, what the hell am I doing? "We're going to have to search this room. We have a warrant."

"May I have a look at it?" she asks. Boone is apparently not used to being asked this, because he looks a little panicky before he hands it over. Toriel takes her reading glasses out to look it over, and she takes her sweet time. "Hm. Well, I suppose we have no choice but to let them search." She waves them in; despite her words, it's more like she gave 'em permission than the judge who signed the warrant. I have to admit, her and Mettaton being here is kind of a relief; the cops have stepped over the lines of their warrants before with me, but usually not when there's multiple witnesses. And Dever plays by the rules as much as he can.

Boone, Dever, and a couple of other cops empty boxes, and check behind racks full of costumes, and in every nook and cranny they can find, even places you'd be hard-pressed to hide an infant. Because I'm a dick, I use magic to put stuff they already looked at back into the next box or cabinet, so that every time they empty half the box it's still full. When it's all over, of course, they still ain't found a kid, or anything incriminating at all. Boone is grumbling about how we gotta be hiding something.

"Mrs. Dreemurr," Dever asks, while they're picking through everything one last time, "do you know anything about the whereabouts of a missing human child, a girl named Frisk Addison? Someone phoned in a tip, said there was a kid here." Him talking about a girl throws me for a second, until I remember humans don't perceive souls real well.
Tori runs with it admirably. "Oh, I did have a child at my table tonight, but it was the son of one of
the human patrons," she lies quickly. "He was far too short to see over the crowd and was asking his
father to hold him up to see Mr. Mettaton here, and since my spot was so much better, I offered --"

"And do you recall the name of this individual?" says Boone.

Tori frowns. "I apologize, Detective; I do not. I had never seen the boy before, and he went back
to his parents after the comedy act."

"You do realize," says Boone, "this place isn't a great place to take the kids --"

Mettaton interrupts him. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're implying! Club MTT is wholesome
and family-friendly; it is a wonderful place to bring children. We do of course suggest that parents
take them home before eight p.m.," he says, "to make way for some of our more, ah, tastefully
sophisticated acts."

"Yeah, who else do you think is gonna laugh at my jokes?" I point out. "I ain't exactly here for the
intellectuals like you, Boone." Dever manages to turn a snort into a cough.

"Don't antagonize the police," says Toriel sweetly, putting a familiar hand on my shoulder, and
that's, uh. Surprisingly nice. Except that once the cops leave, she's gonna drop this whole act and
start asking awkward questions again. Jeez, I knew she could be ruthless in defense of her people,
but this is a little unfair even if she thinks it's for my own good.

I know all of that, but the grin's still there.

"So you didn't bring this kid backstage?" Boone demands. "Because someone saw you --"

"They must have been mistaken," says Toriel. "Sans and I have been quite alone for, ah, for this
entire time." She looks a little flustered now. "I would ask, Detectives, that you not spread this
around," she says pleadingly. "It could cause so many problems. These things happen."

Boone looks totally disgusted. "Come on, let's get out of here and forget this ever happened," he
says sourly.

"Well, if you hear about the missing girl, you let us know," says Dever. He tips his hat politely
before he goes, but I can tell he don't believe any one of us.

"Well!" says Mettaton, clapping his hands together. His lights flash into a red exclamation point.
"That went surprisingly well," he says. Well, it certainly went surprisingly. "Can you please be on
your way before there's any more trouble?" he asks -- not to the point of impoliteness, but certainly
bordering on it.

"Yes. I think we had better get going. Come on, Sans," she says, and gives me a hand off the
dressing room table. Mettaton wheels away, grumbling to himself.

"I, uh. I did not expect that to work," I say, not quite meeting her eye. She still looks kinda
flustered, but I catch my reflection in the mirror and realize she's got nothing on me when it comes to
flustered. I readjust my tie in a hurry.

"Yes," she says. "I... I was also surprised." We're both silent for a minute, not looking at each
other, and then she speaks, in as stern a voice as she ever used. "Now, you are going to tell me what
is going on."

Oh, there we are, life's back to normal again. The dopey smile turns into a cringe. I sigh. If what I
suspect about the kid is true... "I was getting to that before the cops came, but... jeez, Tori, you're gonna think I'm a nut," I say.

"Certainly a very difficult one to crack," she says.

I try to laugh at that, but I can't say I ain't worried. Still, I lead her through the broke-down door out of the dressing room, and into the broke-down door of my apartment.

Chapter End Notes

...happy Valentine's Day?
When Tori and I get back to the apartment, there's a half-finished game of solitaire on the floor. Frisk is sitting on the couch examining the week-old newspapers I forgot to throw out, with more care than I think I ever saw anyone read up-to-date ones. On the radio, the announcer is saying "Oh.... I think they're gone... sorry for the interruption...." Aside from that, it's the same chaotic mess as when we left.

"Frisk?" I ask. They look at me and Tori, real worried now. "Look, we need to know where you're from, okay?"

Frisk is silent.

"Please," I say. Frisk goes back to the papers, not looking at me, but I sit next to 'em on the couch. "Look, remember how I said the Flower Boys got a bunch of our people?"

"Yeah?" Frisk says. They sound really guilty.

"Well, I wanna go get 'em, but --" I nod at Tori behind me "-- she doesn't really want me to."

"I merely --" she starts.

I hold up a hand. "I'm not saying it ain't reasonable you don't want me to, I'm just saying you don't want me to. Frisk, look," I say, "my brother's one of the people they got. I gotta get him back, and to do that, it'd be good to know what it is the Flower Boys wanted from you, and what they're planning."

Toriel sits down on the couch next to me. I try not to think about how sometimes she puts an arm around me, and how this time she's kinda keeping her distance. Not the time.

"They killed me three times," Frisk says, stubbornly. "That's all they wanted."

"Frisk, where are you from?" I repeat.

Frisk glares at me.

"Lemme put it more specifically, Frisk. When are you from?"

Their eyes go real wide at that. "I --"

"Because you ain't seen Mettaton's movie, the only one he's in. You saw him on TV, didn't you?" I press. "And maybe the later movies, the ones where he's the big hero. Right? Maybe you got the action figures too."

Toriel is baffled. "Sans, what --"

"And when you said you were real good at solitaire, you meant on the computer, right? That's why you never played it on your own, with real cards." It's hard to put a word to Frisk's expression now. They're... worried, but also a little hopeful. "And when you said everything was like a gangster movie, you meant everything, didn't you? The hats, the cars, the music, the lingo."

Frisk stares at me for a long while. Finally, they say, "So I'm not going crazy? I -- I really -- this is really --" They start sniffling, and I untie a clean handkerchief for 'em.
"What on earth are you two talking about?" Toriel asks.

"I told you you'd think I was a nut," I remind her. "Frisk somehow traveled back in time. They're from the future."

"What?" Toriel looks at Frisk, who's scrunched up as small as a human their age can get. "Frisk, is this -- is this true?"

Frisk nods. "I thought I was crazy," they say again.

"Hey, kid. If you're crazy, so am I," I say, patting their shoulder. "Now, that might not be reassuring, but..." They don't smile, but they sorta cling to my arm like I'm a life preserver or something.

"Sans, not to doubt you but this seems... farfetched," says Toriel. "Why do you think Frisk is, is, from the future? How is that even possible?"

I sigh. "Look, I tried to figure that out for... longer than it was worth," I say. "I had a lot of theories, but none of 'em ever panned out, so I... kinda gave up."

"But why would you even --"

"Tori," I tell her. "I know Frisk is from the future because I came from there myself."

Toriel frowns at me. "But we have known each other for so long," she says. "How could you be... when did you..." She trails off.

"Yeah," I say. "I've been here too long or I think I'd have put it together earlier about Frisk. I got stuck here sixteen or seventeen years ago, and had to learn to blend in pretty quick. I was a physics student, so most of my life skills involved knowing how to cook disgusting things in the microwave. It was kinda rough."

She's just staring at me now. I can't tell what she's thinking. Maybe she's wondering how fast the men in white coats can get here.

"Please, Tori, say something," I say.

She considers this for a long moment. "What is a microwave?" she asks.

It's so unlike what I was expecting her to ask that I start laughing. "It's, uh. It's like an oven, but a lot smaller and faster."

She seems to find this acceptably futuristic. "Well, I... I can honestly say I was not expecting anything like that, but. Sans, why did you never tell me --"

"Because it sounds crazy," I say. "And I didn't want you to think I was crazy." That... is a little too honest. "Besides, there's never really a good time to bring that kinda thing up, is there?"

She frowns. "I suppose not," she says. "Well, I think this has been quite enough excitement for one night, don't you?" She turns to Frisk. "Frisk, dear, I imagine this explains a great deal of your confusion; I understand why you did not explain yourself, but you need only ask."

"Okay," says Frisk. They don't let go of me; they look like they're expecting me to vanish any minute, which, to be fair, is not a ludicrous worry. I awkwardly hug them with the arm they ain't permanently attached to.

"But you are going to have to let go of Sans for a moment," she adds.
Frisk frowns, but they release my arm. I'm a little confused, but Tori taps me on the shoulder. "Come with us? I will put Frisk to bed and then we can discuss things in greater depth."

"Uh...." For some reason I'm all off-balance again; I expected her not to believe me, I guess.

"You can stay in the guest bedroom," she adds.

"Tori, I have a perfectly good --"

"And tomorrow I will send someone along to fix the door," she says. "I imagine your landlords have been of no use in this matter."

To be honest, I never called 'em. I pay the rent, but Papyrus handles maintenance, and all the other stuff I'd put off until the place was unlivable.

"Okay. I'll take us --"

"No," she says. "You have done enough of that. Go pack a bag; I will call us a car."

A bag? Oh. I guess I do kinda look like I've been leaping back and forth between the frying pan and the fire for the past three days. I don't know if I have a fresh shirt, but I probably at least have one without epoxy and cop bootprints on it.

It takes a few tries before Tori is satisfied that I've got what I need, but I think we're friends again, because she keeps asking me stuff like if you can make pie in the microwave, and it's... it's entirely too adorable for me right now, because I can't forget that damn kiss. Plus the fact of actually telling someone my most closely-held secret is incredibly unnerving, and it takes me 'til Tori's getting out of the car and carrying a sleeping Frisk inside until I realize why. Like Frisk, I was actually kinda worried I was nuts, like maybe I made it all up to feel better about how shit my life had been. Like I was a fraud even to myself, and not just to everyone else.

Frisk wakes up just long enough to insist that they're not a baby and they're not tiiiiiiired and they wanna stay uuuuuup and talk about tiiiiiiime travel, but once they're tucked in they're pretty much dead to the world.

We wait 'til we're down the hall and in the parlor before Tori or I say anything at all. I think back to last night in the kitchen, which feels like it was years ago considering how different the atmosphere is now; things were so comfortable then, and she didn't look at me like she didn't know what to do with me. I mean, I don't blame her; I don't know what to do with me. But being some nice lady's pen pal with the dumb jokes was an escape for me for a long time, back when I was wandering in a nightmare world where everything was both just a few degrees off from where it oughta be, and completely inside-out and wrong. I guess I kinda wanted it to stay that uncomplicated forever. But that's a hell of a selfish thing to want, isn't it?

"Do you... want something to drink?" Toriel offers, uncertainly.

I do. I want a lot to drink. It's been that kinda night... or week... or decade. "Nah, I'm good," I say.

She hesitates for a moment. "Well, I want something to drink." So we go into the kitchen; she pours herself a big glass of some kind of disgusting-looking off-white liquid, and convinces me to try a glass of this plum sauce she picked up special for me out in Chinatown.

She waits for me to take a sip before sitting down. "It's good," I reassure her.

She's still on the verge of getting up. "Because if you would rather have something else--"
"Tori," I say. "It's delicious. Please quit stalling. I know stalling when I see it." I just wanna get this over with, however it shakes out. "It's just me."
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

OMG MORE FANART. Of Mettaton and Sans. Go look, I have been giggling all day about it, it's amazing. :D:D:D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Toriel finally sits down. "Sans, I..." She pauses. "I really do wish you had told me before."

"I dunno what good it woulda done," I say, shrugging. "I mean. Look, I was never a historian, I don't really know half of what's gonna happen. And the other half... well, I tried changing the bad stuff and all I did was... I postponed an explosion by ten minutes, had absolutely no impact on a pandemic, and I think all I changed about the next war is some of the uniforms probably won't have skulls on 'em, which is not what I was aiming for. But you never know." She looks very confused. "Never mind," I sigh, waving it off. "The point is... I can't do anything with it. It don't affect my life, it's just... a thing I gotta live with now. It's just memories. Besides, I've spent almost half my life here --"

"Here, in the past?" she clarifies.

"Yeah," I say. "It's, uh. It's home now, I guess."

Her expression changes subtly, like she found something she was looking for. "Aah. And... may I assume that you've no way back?" she asks.

I sigh, and shake my head. "I don't think I can send that kid back, Tori. My advisor, Dr. Gaster, he did everything he could think of -- worked himself..." I avoid the automatic pun; it seems disrespectful. "...worked himself almost to death on it, and after I... lost him, I did what I could, but - -" I shake my head. "I think between the two of us we tried everything I could think of. Maybe if he was still here -- but alone, I don't think I could --"

"Sans!" She looks horrified at what I just said. "I do not expect you to follow in his footsteps. I was merely confirming what I had already assumed, given your reactions."

I blink, slowly. "Oh. Uh. All right. Well, that's -- that's good, because I ain't touching the stuff anymore, and now I got another reason not to."

"Oh?" she asks.

"I think -- I dunno how, but I think the Flower Boys must know I was into that kinda stuff. I, uh, I got a couple physics papers published when I was new around here, and I wrote a couple more, uh, kind of unwisely, that never got published. I think that's why they want the kid and me so bad."

"And Alphys?" Toriel asks. She takes a sip of her drink.

"Well, I'm just a theory guy. They're gonna need one hell of an engineer, and someone who knows both human and monster biology, if what I think is true. And uh. You know she meets the description." Alphys completely overhauled the process of extracting DT; if she'd done the same for anything else she'd be rich and famous, I think, but the profits all went to fund other stuff and luckily..."
she managed to dodge the infamy.

Toriel nods. "Tell me what you think they want," she says.

"So Frisk said... Frisk said the Flower Boys killed 'em three times. I thought, well, that's crazy traumatized kid stuff, you shoulda heard Papyrus when he was a kid." (Papyrus was not always my brother. Once he was a scared kid on the side of the road, challenging me to a duel of honor and claiming to be the lost prince of the moon. Family is kinda complicated sometimes.)

"That seems entirely plausible, yes. Actually, our Chara...." She trails off, looking off into a corner of the room, seeing something that's only in her head now. "Well. Anyway. You were saying, about Frisk?"

"Well, I dunno exactly why, but traveling like that? It does weird stuff to you. I, uh. I don't quite fit into the fabric of spacetime like I did before the accident." She looks blank. Oh, right, terminology. "I kinda... slip off reality sometimes? Hence the shortcuts."

"Aah," she says. "So you think Frisk might have... no, I do not see --"

"With Dr. Gaster, the effect was, uh, a lot more pronounced and a lot less controlled," I say. "And both of us were skeletons. Who knows what it'd do to other monsters? To humans? To kids? My theory is that Frisk somehow... ah, how do I explain this -- that Frisk somehow got... stuck, and don't die like a normal person when they --"

I stop. Damnit.

"No, please, go on," she says. "I understand so far!"

This ain't gonna be fun. "Tori, the, uh, the other thing I maybe wasn't so forthcoming with you about is that..." I sigh. "When Asgore introduced DT to Ebott, I, uh. I took part in that aspect of the business." I can't help but think there's gotta be a way I can spin this, but she still ain't gonna be happy.

Her expression changes to one of disappointment, and that stings, but... she don't look surprised. That kinda hurts more. "I thought that might be it. And when you said you did not know about Determination when I asked...?"

"I maybe fibbed a little bit," I admit. "I was really not involved in the scientific aspects, though, I was more of a... technician, I just followed a procedure." I stare morosely into the plum sauce. She knew that much, didn't she? She was just waiting for me to admit it. I never fooled her into thinking my hands were clean, and I bet she never thought too highly of me when I was frantically playing the innocent. "I really don't know a whole lot about how it works, Tori. I just know that when you sap all the DT out of a human soul, it... well, it breaks and the human dies, generally, if they were still alive when it happened. Dr. Gaster... in the end DT was all that'd keep him from fading out. I, uh. I saw the... the victims die a couple times." A couple is a wild understatement, and I pressed the damn buttons that made it happen. "That was, uh, before all of Alphys' innovations, too, so it was a lot... messier."

She looks sympathetic. That... is not what I expected, but it ain't good either. "That must have been horrible for you." Her expression darkens. "I should never have left Asgore to his own devices."

Now she's scowling, blaming him for everything. I mean, he kinda set it off, admittedly, but he could never have done it without the rest of us. We're all culpable.

"Hey, you couldn't have known how bad it'd get. Neither could he, really."
"Hmph." I guess she ain't gonna let anyone defend Asgore to her; she's got her mind made up.

"Anyway, I suspect what they want the kid for is -- god, this is horrible -- an endless supply of DT. More or less. They sap Frisk dry, Frisk... dies --" I hate the fucking Flower Boys. I hate myself plenty, too. "-- and then comes back and they start it all over again."

She looks horrified. "That is vile," she snarls. "How dare they?"

"Well, they're a bunch of jerks, what do you want?" I point out. "But, yeah, I kinda wanna --" Snap their damn necks. Burn 'em to a crisp. Fill 'em full of holes. These are not things you say in polite company, and vengeance never did anyone any good anyway. So I'm not gonna do that. "Anyway, I imagine, if I was that kind of jerk, I'd want more people who could do what Frisk can. Which means, basically, kidnapping a bunch of people through time, if my theory is correct about how Frisk got that way."

Boy, she is livid. Not at me anymore, thankfully. "I -- I -- they will never -- Sans, if they --"

I hold up a hand to interrupt. "The thing is, I'm totally useless to them," I remind her, cheerfully. "So you might as well let me go in there and screw around with all their equipment. I'll completely bamboozle 'em and then break everyone out, and since we already know I'm a moron who can't figure out how to fix his own damn time machine, I won't be able to help 'em."

She sighs. "I... I do wish, somewhat, that I could instead send someone to teach them that their plan is... untenable." The way she says it, I know 'untenable' is really just a nice word for 'gonna hurt like hell.' "But if they can be bamboozled, I suppose that is the next best thing."

I nod. "So we're on the same page here," I say.

"I did not say that," she says. "I... suppose we are on the same chapter. I really do dislike sending you in, Sans. I would feel better going myself, or -- or sending Undyne, or someone who could defend themselves --"

"Tori," I start, but she cuts me off.

"Let me finish! I would feel better doing all of those things, but in the end, you seem to have more expertise in what they are doing, if your theories are correct, and I know you have as much of a knack for getting out of trouble as into it." She smiles sadly at me, and sighs. "Besides, as you pointed out last night... I could never stop you. You're quite set on your path."

"Okay," I say. I'm a little surprised, but I'm not gonna argue. "So... you're gonna let me go?"

"As you said," she says, "I would not be letting you do anything. I do not know that I approve. But I will not stand in your way." She hesitates. "Is... is there anything that might help, if it were provided?"

Now, I have put exactly zero thought into that, because I assumed she was gonna keep trying to talk me out of it whatever I said. Although I have to admit, I'm kinda charmed at how she doesn't approve but is asking whether anything might help, just out of curiosity, were a mysterious third party, possibly named Bloriel Bleemurr, to provide it. "If I think of anything, I'll let you know," I reassure her.

I wonder how to tell her about Alphys. Honestly, now that I know what I know about Frisk, I don't know if I should bring Alphys after all, but I dunno how to convince her to stay home. Maybe she'll chicken out on her own? Nah, that'd be too convenient, it'd never happen. And I don't really wanna sic Tori on her, that seems kinda hypocritical.
"Sans?" Tori asks, frowning at me.

"Sorry, my mind's wandering," I tell her, trying not to yawn. It's late and I had a busy night, and... oh, hell, if Tori's willing to work with me on this, I should probably mention Alphys to her. I mean. I guess at this point I'm only kinda keeping it close to the vest out of habit. "So Alphys came to see me this morning. After you sent Undyne with my stuff... which, uh, thanks, by the way. Anyway, Alphys, she wants to come with me. I kinda tried to talk her out of it and honestly I don't know if she'll go through with it in the end, but she might, and maybe she shouldn't --"

"Do you think you can get her out alive?" Toriel asks, worriedly.

I shrug. "Eh, probably. I assume they'll want us working together, I figured it'd be good to have someone I could work with. It's just that she's so anxious, I don't know --"

She interrupts me again. "And she is likely to understand the aspects of what they are planning that fall outside of your expertise. We can use that."

"Whoa, whoa, wait a sec," I say. "Tori, I'm going in to get everyone out, I ain't gonna hang around drawing diagrams of their equipment."

"If you are so set on going, and she is too, you might as well find out their plans," she points out. This sounds a hell of a lot like work, and I am not thrilled by that. "And throw any wrench you can into them." Aargh. "Actually, we still have most of those explosives we managed to acquire in August, if you think you can smuggle some of them in," she says. "Blowing up their Determination-manufacturing facility would be quite a coup for us."

I sigh. "I'm not staying any longer than I have to, Tori. My priority is --" I catch myself before I say it's Papyrus. "is getting our people out alive. If I can do more along the way I'll consider it. But, uh, I gotta say, I could really have a blast with those grenades." What she's not saying is that if we blew the place up we'd be sending a very clear message: do not fuck with monsters. I'm all for warning people off, and if I have explosives I don't have to use anything else. "Yeah, okay, I'll give it a try. No promises."

She nods. "I understand... and, Sans, above all else -- please do try to come back alive."

"Hey, come on, I'm great at not dying, I do it all the time," I tell her. "I'm doing it right now!"

She gives me a look that reminds me all too much of the glare she was giving me back at MTT. "I know you think you are very funny, Sans, but as I see it you have pulled four spectacularly self-destructive stunts in two days, between me, Mettaton, and the police. Otherwise I would not have quite so many misgivings about this rescue mission of yours." She sighs. "I do wish you would take better care of yourself."

And sometimes I wish she'd stop trying to take care of everyone, because it can't be good for her. But, hell, once you get into a habit it's very hard to stop, and neither of us is gonna change, are we? "I'll be fine," I insist.

I tell her about my appointment with Gorman on Monday, and the tentative list I got in the back of my mind. She brings up a couple of things I never thought of and we change the list around a little; I'm surprised at how easy it is for her to put priorities on people's lives like this, but I can tell just because she's used to it don't mean she likes it.

We don't talk about Papyrus and Asgore, the two names at the top of the list. They just sit there. There is a pain just under my fourth rib whenever I think about my brother. He'll be friendly with
the guards if he can talk to 'em at all. He'll be trying desperately to keep everyone's spirits up, if they're keeping the monsters together. He might be worried about me, although I really hope he ain't, that's not his job. I will *not* abandon him. It's the only promise I ever managed to make and to keep without regretting it later, and I don't think he even knows I made it, but it's there.

As for Asgore... I am trying not to wonder why she didn't mention the divorce. Not that it's any of my business. It's definitely not any of my business.

I kind of want it to be my business. I've been trying not to be sweet on Tori since I got the second or third letter she sent me. But on the other hand, if there was ever someone who deserved better, it's definitely her.

What she deserves and what I want is not important right now. Asgore, though, I should probably bring up.

"So, uh. I don't mean to be a spoilsport, you know I'm gonna try and get Asgore out, but, uh, he *is* technically supposed to be the leader of our little band of hooligans, you know? I don't know that they'll let him go so easy."

She sighs. "I was afraid of that too. I have selfish reasons -- not, ah, not the ones you might assume," she adds quickly, "simply --"

"Undyne mentioned the divorce," I say.

It's interesting watching a person who's prepared a lot of things to say find out they don't actually need any of 'em. It's like watching them try to fold up a map without looking at it. "Oh! Oh, I -- well. Yes. He must have told her, then." She rolls her eyes. "Asgore. I was trying to keep it from being spread about, but... Undyne is not always very discreet."

I feel a little bad, so I throw her a line. "Yeah, she ain't really the sole of discretion. I mean, water you gonna do?"

Tori snorts. "If only Asgore had confided in salmon else. When she tries to keep a secret she simply flounders." She sobers slightly. "But, yes, we are getting divorced. He must be there to assert that I left him, or apparently the proceedings cannot go forward. It took a great deal of work on my part to get him to agree. I, ah, could have sued for divorce myself, technically, by claiming him to be a criminal, but -- I do not despise him so much that I wish to see him in prison."

Honestly, the guy's not a saint, but I feel pretty bad for him; he did what made sense at the time, and he couldn't have known he'd introduce DT to the people it'd affect worst, tarnish what little good reputation monsters had, and plunge Ebott into a series of gang wars. And being on the wrong end of Tori's wrath is... uh. Well, I just got a reminder in how it really ain't fun. I'm kinda hoping that if they get de-hitched, she'll start to hate him less? But probably not. I have no idea how you even begin to apologize for fucking up so bad.

"I'll try to get him out for ya," I tell her. "And hey, if that don't work maybe we could stick horns on Greater Dog, bring him to court, and call it a day."

She giggles so much at this I can't help but be a little smug about it. "The judge will never notice," she says.

"Well, at least not until Greater Dog starts drooling," I say.

"I wonder if drooling is grounds for divorce." She sighs. "Well, the court date is next week. Hopefully it will not take you that long to break everyone out."
"Yeah, probably not," I say. And I gotta be honest, it'd be good to have Asgore with me if any fighting came up. He ain't proud of it, but that guy is very good in a fight, long as he's not emotionally compromised.

The conversation's kinda petered out, but I'll tell you a secret: silence makes me kinda anxious. I decide to fill it.

"Uh. Tonight was kinda crazy, huh? I wonder who called the cops on you."

"Oh, it was likely just one of the human patrons upset at the idea of a human child under the supervision of a monster," she says. "I must remember to take better precautions, though, while the police are still looking for Frisk."

"Poor kid." We're talking around it, aren't we? I find myself looking fixedly at a knot in the wood of the kitchen table. "I... guess it's lucky you came up with that stunt at the last minute," I say.

"Sans, I am so sorry," she blurts out, almost before I finished.

"What?" I'm a little taken aback at how upset she sounds. I mean, I uh. I didn't think it was that bad.

"I, I." When I look up at her, she's cringing. "You must understand, I had no other ideas, I was --"

"Hey, relax, it's fine," I say, waving my hands. Well, I feel a little better now having been so caught off-guard. "Heh. We're just lucky the cops bought it. I mean, c'mon, like we'd -- like I could -- like you'd ever look at -- I mean." Why did I start that sentence? Why would anyone in their right mind start that sentence? "Well, anyway. A little implausible, is what I meant." Yup, that knot in the table sure is interesting. I'm just gonna stare at it 'til the roof falls in on my head. So interesting. So knotty.

"Oh, Sans," she says, and it sounds almost like pity and that was exactly what I didn't want, and I'm scrambling for some way to laugh it off because -- "What on earth do you think I have been trying to get through your thick skull for so long?"

Uh. What?

I look up, and she's looking at me... hopefully? Expectantly? In a way that makes me realize that even though I'd like to be happy, I am a moron and I did everything wrong. "I, uh." Yeah, I'm real good with words. "I don't... know..."

"I... I apologize, I must have misinterpreted..." She's apparently not doing great with vocabulary either. It's small comfort, but I'll take it. "I never meant to, to, to force my affections upon you, I..."

She looks a little stricken. "I do apologize, it has been a long time since I --"

"No, no, it's, it was... uh, nice.... I just. I uh. I never thought you'd be interested in... me."

"Oh!" She looks a little exasperated, but really, really happy, and I... I can't return that.

Okay. I don't have to be an idiot about this. I don't have to make anyone miserable here. "I mean, but, look, Tori. You... you deserve better, I don't think we should, I mean, I mean, there's Asgore, and there's the gang, what would people even think of you, and, and, and..."

Oh, jeez. Well, there went that expression. It was beautiful while it lasted. See, this is why she deserves better. She sure as hell deserves someone who's not gonna make her feel like that. The weight of all the stuff I'm never telling her is crushing me. I can't bear to think how she'd look at me
if she knew, but you don't get to keep that stuff from someone you love. "Tori, you don't want me, you want someone who's responsible and who won't -- won't keep you in the dark about his past for years, and --"

"Sans, I understand why you did that now. And why do you think so little of yourself?" She reaches across the table and takes my hand, but I pull it away. (As I think I've established, I'm pretty good at dodging.) "What happened to you to make you think this, Sans? And for that matter, why on earth do you think so highly of me?"

"Because you're wonderful," I say. I thought that was obvious. I've known that much since before I knew her name. My only contact with her was a series of letters in old-fashioned handwriting, full of snail facts and puns and recipes, but her kindness came through like a searchlight on a foggy grey day.

"Sans, I --" She's hiding her face when I look up, but then she props her chin up on her hands and sighs. "Well. There is never any convincing you, is there? I wish that there was some way to prove to you that I can be trusted." She stands, takes her empty glass of snail juice and the last of my plum sauce, and bends to kiss the top of my skull, something that really does not help me stop feeling like a heel here. She makes her way over to the sink, and turns back to address me. "As there is not, however, please at least try to remember that I care a great deal for you, Sans. Not because you make me laugh, or because I find you useful, but because you are kind and generous and you have a good soul."

She turns back to the sink, and I hear the hiss of running water. "Tori, I'm sorry. I just --"

"You should get some rest," she says. "The bed should be made up in the guest bedroom. It is the one at the very end of the corridor. Let me know if anything is not as it should be." She doesn't look at me, and all I really hear in her tone is Please get out of my kitchen, Sans.

Well, uh. I guess that conversation's over, by royal goddamn decree. "Yeah. Thanks, Tori," I say weakly, and then I get up to go.

But I stand in the door for a sec, just watching her. Eh. She'll get over it and find someone nice. And I don't have regrets, not really, except maybe being so obvious about how I felt.

I did what was practical at the time, and she'd hate me if she ever found out, and this way we're all a little disappointed instead of furious and heartbroken, respectively.

Chapter End Notes

On divorce:
This is not really a reference but an explanation! For some reason a lot of people have this misconception that divorce (at least in the US) works the same as it did in the '30s, as I am depicting it here, and you can still somehow force your spouse to stay married to you. (I know people have this misconception because I work for a divorce attorney. Sometimes people have this misconception at full volume over the phone at me! These people are pretty hilarious. Don't do this unless you too would like to be a funny story I tell at parties.)

Back in the bad old days judges could actually force couples to stay married because they hadn't proved that one of them was mostly at fault for the divorce, and I guess
sometimes if they both wanted the divorce they would sometimes actually arrange between them for one of the two to be "caught" cheating. In this particular case, Asgore is petitioning the court to let him divorce Toriel because she abandoned the marriage; this will likely mean that Asgore gets more of the marital assets (money, real estate, etc.) although because Asgore wants to do the right thing here he's not going to just take it all.

Nowadays, I think every state in the US has "no-fault" divorce or something equivalent, which means that nobody has to stay married to anyone they don't want to, it just might take a little longer. Sometimes, admittedly, we have a case where both people are jerks and they probably shouldn't be released back into the dating pool, ever, but I feel like both Asgore and Toriel would be relatively decent clients, if prone to rambling on the phone about their problems. (Also, they'd pay on time. That's always a plus.)
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

So, update schedule is going to slow down, largely because I've gotten busier than I initially was when I started writing. I will still do my best to update often, but it kind of depends on work/other stuff how much I'll do so.

It's both amazing and a little intimidating that this has gotten so much of a response; thank you so much for reading this silly story, and I'm sorry everything is so sad right now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, Tori and I discover that Frisk has vanished. Well, actually, Tori discovers it first. I've never heard her in a panic before, and maybe that's why it don't take me two hours to wake up, like it usually does. When I hear her say my name at first I grumble and try, somehow, to burrow into the pillows, but then I hear "Frisk is gone!" and I open one eyesocket, hesitantly.

"Wha?" I ask. That's a word, right? Probably, yeah.

"Sans, Frisk is gone," she says again.

Although I still don't quite understand what she said, a jolt of panic runs down my spine, and I try to sit up. It turns out that takes more effort than I'm willing to put into it, though, so instead I roll over to face her, and open my other socket. "Morning," I mutter vaguely. Then, in my head, I replay what she just told me. "Frisk what?" I fall out of the bed. "Ow."

"Frisk is gone," she says, a third time. To her credit, she is only looking slightly impatient. "I think -- I think they ran away." She winces. "Oh, this is all my fault, they were angry and I sent them to their room, and I must have said something, I -- I need your help. Can you --"

"Yeah." I pause to yawn. "...yeah, I'm on it. Ugh." I get to my feet, stretch, and put on my slippers, because this probably means I'll have to go outside. Then I yawn again.

"Sans, this is no time to stand around waking up," she says.

"All right already," I snap. "Just let me get my bearings. And, uh, it'd help if you left."

"Oh, right, yes, of course," she says, apologetic. "I'll let you get dressed." She shuts the door when she leaves. I feel a little bad then; I've been lousy enough to her already lately, and of course she's anxious if Frisk's missing.

Still. Dressed? What's wrong with PJs? Is this a formal occasion or something? Eh, whatever, now it'll be easier to blip out of here.

First thing I do is check the roof. It's not where I would go, but it's nearby and kinda dangerous, and I wanna be sure. (I remember, then, that Frisk might not actually be able to die. It's both a comfort and completely terrifying -- that poor kid.) There's no Frisk up here, though.

I pop down to the scrubby yard. There's barely any cover and the land around here is flatter than a
'guy walks into a bar' joke at a temperance meeting; if Frisk's hiding they got some kind of invisibility powers too.

I make short trips up and down the street. At this distance, it's less effort than walking. I'm hesitant to call their name, given our run-in with the cops last night, but I check behind every trash can in every alleyway, under every parked car, and behind every fence.

Hmm. I need more information. I pop back to Tori's kitchen; she's there cleaning stuff up after she made breakfast, looks like. "How long ago do you think they left?" I ask, and she jumps.

"Sans, don't frighten me like that," she says, turning around. "I... thought you were getting dressed and going, why are you still--"

"How long?" I ask.

"Well, I sent them to their room about... fifteen minutes ago," she says.

"Good." So they didn't vanish overnight and they're likely to be nearby, not halfway across the state by now. "Thanks." She blinks, and I step out again to check the outside of the house.

Then I check Frisk's room.

Open window, check. Toybox pulled over to window so Frisk can stand up and get out of it... yup. Looks like they tried tying their sheets together, too, but gave up on it for some reason. Does that even work in real life? This kid has watched too much TV, clearly. Well, that ain't gonna be a problem again for a while.

I get myself onto the box and stick my head out the window. Aah, that's why they didn't bother with the sheets; it's not too long a fall, especially not if you're small and don't fall that hard.

I go outside the house, just under Frisk's window. Now. Where would I go if....

Oh. Of course. Why didn't I think of that? Tori's house is a two-flat, and as I think I mentioned before, Asgore lives upstairs. Or he would be if he hadn't won an all-expenses-paid vacation with the Flower Boys. From here you can just see his balcony at the front of the house, with a little bench and a few potted plants that are mean enough to survive the winters here.

I pop up to Asgore's parlor. There's plants all over the place, and in that way I guess it's cheerier than Tori's place, but it seems a little unlived-in. Asgore keeps to himself pretty much, but you wouldn't know he was ever here with how clean every flat surface is. (Tori, at least, has a small but respectable amount of clutter. Mostly books.) Most importantly, I see that one of the windows overlooking the balcony isn't quite shut.


"No she's not!" Frisk shouts, from somewhere further into the apartment.

Okay, I can work with that. I go into Asgore's kitchen, where he keeps all five billion of his teapots. It gets more sun than Tori's kitchen downstairs, so he's repurposed some of 'em to put plants in. "Course she's worried. Why wouldn't she be?"

"You don't even know me," says Frisk, in a tone that I guess is meant to imply I'm insulting their intelligence.
"Hey, you don't know me either. We're even," I say. I go further into the house. In Tori's house, this room's an office, but Asgore's turned it into a sunroom, and it's got so many plants it looks almost like a jungle. "Kid. Come on. We might not know you but we do care about you, okay? What happened?"

There's a flicker of movement and I see Frisk, sitting behind some little trees in pots. (I did not know you could grow trees in pots, maybe they're very tall bushes or something? But hell, I don't know from plants.) "Nothing happened," Frisk says, glowering.

I sit down and talk to Frisk through a gap in the foliage. "Yeah, okay. But I think it did. She sent you to your room, huh?"

Frisk curls in on themselves, then. "She's not my mom."

"No, I guess not," I say. "Tori... thinks she's everyone's mom, okay?"

"Even you?" Frisk asks.

"Cripes, I really hope not. Look, let's... let's not talk about Tori right now, okay?" I fall back onto my usual backup plan. "What's up with you that you decided to leaf us all alone downstairs? What's stem matter?"

Frisk scowls at me. "No."

"Wow, okay, not into the botany puns today, I guess. Being serious here, though. What's the matter?"

"I want to go home," says Frisk, glaring.

"Okay, well, why don't we just get going and--"

"No," says Frisk. "She's not my mom, and I want to go home but she wants me to eat prunes for breakfast and she's NOT MY MOM."

Ohhhh. I begin to realize what's wrong, and I hate the thought of having to tell Frisk that it's unfixable, but... it just is.

"Who eats prunes for breakfast?" they demand. "Bleah."

"Well, that is a wrinkle I hadn't considered," I admit. "Why would she want to prune a perfectly good morning with that?" I'm rewarded with another glare. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry.... Look, Frisk. You can't get home, not anyway I know of, at least."

Frisk gives me this disbelieving look. "Why not?"

"Well.... Look, I've been stuck here for years, kid. And I have tried to get back home, but I just ain't smart enough. I mean, come on, do I seem like a smart guy to you?"

Frisk considers this for longer than is really flattering. "I guess not," they say, apologetically. "But, but, weren't you a scientist? Aren't scientists smart?"

"You have clearly not met any scientists," I say, thinking of my old classmates.

"No! I have!" says Frisk, insulted at my lack of knowledge of their social circle. "I know lots of scientists."
"Really? Who?"

And then they tell me about their foster-mother, who is apparently a biochemist for a big pharmaceutical company, and how she took them into the office one day to meet all her coworkers. I soon know everything about this lady and her husband; how she sings terrible eighties songs to herself in the car; how he makes omelettes that are, according to Frisk, "the perfect amount of burnt," something they've apparently put considerable thought into from their enthusiastic explanation; how much stricter this couple apparently was about homework than Frisk's previous placement and how Frisk was upset about that, but how surprising it was to Frisk when one day they came home with good grades, and now the teachers all say they're really smart. And how these two wanted to adopt Frisk and "the lady from the agency" was coming in a few days to do some kind of check or report or something, and how great it would be if Frisk had parents before their next birthday.

It is clear Frisk loves these people down to their soul, and, while I can't really tell from this far away in time and space, I also can't imagine these people don't love Frisk right back. So, alas, they will be missed.

The closest we ever got to getting that damn time machine to work again, I had to cut the power before everything went sideways. Who knows where we woulda ended up? If we ended up anywhere at all, even.

Frisk finishes their monologue on Nora the biochemist and Devin, he of the perfect burnt omelettes, and says, "And that's why I have to go home."

"I see," I say.

"So you have to take me home," Frisk says, again.

"Kid. I am so sorry. But I can't.

"But," starts Frisk.

"Look. Your family sounds... they sound great, okay? I would love to see you back with them. The 1930s is no place for a kid, really. You got the gangs, the Depression, all kinds of weird human diseases, there's a war coming up... the world's a mess, I know. I would like to get you out of here. Hell, if I coulda left I would be gone, I got here just before World War I. You know anything about World War I?"

"It... came before World War II?" Frisk asks.

Well, full points for accuracy, I guess. "Yeah. Yeah, it did. I ain't looking forward to the sequel. Sequels are always terrible. Look, my point is, I'm not holding out on you. I don't have a hot air balloon and there ain't no silver slippers --"

"Ruby slippers," Frisk corrects.

"Aah! Not until the movie comes out, which ain't for a few years yet. In the book they're silver." I may not be able to change history or get this kid back home, but at least I have an encyclopedic knowledge of useless shit.

Frisk frowns. "What? Really? No Wizard of Oz?" This seems to worry 'em more than the rest of the worldly ills I have described.

"Have I lied to you yet?" I ask.
"I guess not," says Frisk. "How would I know?"

Okay, that is true, and I have to shrug. I got a great poker face.

The kid sighs, plucks a leaf off a fern, and rips it into little pieces contemplatively. (I hope Asgore won't notice.) They sigh. "But you'll tell me when there's a way to go home, won't you?"

"I'll tell you if I find one," I say, "which is a very big if." I sigh. This is gonna take a while to sink in for them. That poor kid. "Now, come on downstairs before Toriel gets more worried."

"Okay." They crawl out of their makeshift forest hideaway, and I help them to their feet. "But I'm not gonna eat prunes for breakfast. Also, why are you in your pajamas?"

I shrug. "I didn't know what I should wear today, so I decided to sleep on it."

"Aaargh, Sans," says Frisk, giving me an exasperated tackle hug.

We blip back downstairs. She's not in the kitchen. "Hey, Tori. I found Frisk!" I call.

She hurries in from her little office. "Frisk!" She relaxes only very slightly when she sees us, and Frisk kinda tenses up a little.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," they say quickly, cringing.

"Please never do that again, Frisk," says Toriel, getting on her knees to hug them. "This is a very bad neighborhood, there are all kinds of -- well -- I mean -- and the police are looking for you!"

Frisk looks confused for a moment, before I clarify. "Remember I said there were some people claiming you were their kid?"

"Ohhh," says Frisk. Then the weight of what this could mean for them really sinks in; I watch their eyes widen and their shoulders go up and their face crumple up like a paper bag. "Oh, oh no, I'm sorry I'm sorry I won't do it again I'm sorry," they say, burying their face in Toriel's shoulder.

Tori mouths something at me: When did you tell them that?

The thing about lipreading is I'm pretty sure it's easier to be understood if you, uh, have anything resembling lips. I make the attempt anyway: Before dinner Thursday!

Toriel gives me this totally uncomprehending look. What?

There is no gesture that really communicates what I want to say, so I just shrug.

She rolls her eyes at me. "It is all right, Frisk," she says, soothingly. "I am not angry and we will not let anyone take you away." To me, she mouths Where were they?

I point up.

She rolls her eyes again, although whether it's at me or Asgore I couldn't say. Frisk is still having something like a panic attack, and Toriel quietly picks them up and carries them back to their room, shushing and soothing them all the while.
References:
I've been using this website as a reference for what kinds of things were being eaten, and yes, stewed prunes seemed to show up an awful lot on the breakfast menus.

On the other hand, Frisk should be glad they didn't end up in a time when lamprey pie was a thing. Would 100% take snail pie over that.
On update schedules: I have decided I'd rather put out longer chapters more slowly, because that's probably more satisfying to read. So that's what I'm going to do. I will be trying for at least once a week, hopefully a bit more often. Sorry, I haven't ever really written a WIP with an audience of more than like three people before.

I'd like to go back to sleep, but I'm a little worried there's gonna be another interrogation coming up, and Toriel is even more ruthless than the cops in some ways. So I float down a cup, pour myself some coffee, and sit down at my usual spot at the table.

It occurs to me, for the first time, that maybe it's really weird I have a usual spot at Toriel's kitchen table, and that she has a stepstool so I can help with the dishes and actually reach stuff, and that she occasionally just happens to pick up exotic and maybe pricey sauces for me, when I am the only person I know who drinks condiments. I always just figured Tori was like that with everyone, but the more I think about it, the more it feels like she made room for me in her life and I just took it without giving anything back.

Boy do I feel like a jerk now.

Tori set three places this morning; at one of them is a half-eaten plate of scrambled eggs and a barely-touched bowl of stewed prunes. Opposite me, where Tori usually sits, is a totally untouched place setting and an unopened morning newspaper. I guess she was too nervous to eat when Frisk was missing.

I'm too lazy to get up and take the paper, so I float the paper over just to skim the front page and see if any of it rings a bell.

Nope. Nothing familiar. Last week there was lots of stuff in Europe, but today the headline's about the armed robbery of a trio of Knack Cheese executives -- the big cheeses of Big Cheese, if you will -- and their wives last night. They made off with a hundred grand in cash and jewelry, a ludicrous sum of money. Then there was a hurricane on Wednesday -- nowhere near Ebott, of course. Page two is my first sight of something familiar -- this recent business in India, then a discussion of the merits of airplanes versus blimps. Also, crime. Lots of crime. It's amazing how many ways people are finding, these days, to break the law and then fuck up and get caught at it.

Anyway, Tori comes back into the room before I can skim another article, and I quickly fold the newspaper back up. The kid walks in a few seconds later, still a little sniffly. "I'm sorry," they say tremulously. They sit down, and stare at their plate.

"Hey, it's fine," I say cheerfully. "You're here, you're safe, and --"

"And you are going to try at least one bite of those prunes before you leave this table," says Toriel, with the air of a judge passing a sentence.

Frisk looks a little taken aback.
"You better do it, kid," I say. "She has her raisins."

Tori tries to hide a smile, and puts a plate of scrambled eggs down in front of me. "Oh! Eggselfent!" I say. "I plum forgot about breakfast for myself."

"Why doesn't he have any prunes?" Frisk asks, as if they have somehow only just discovered the innate unfairness of the world. "He's the one with all the fruit jokes."

"I don't like 'em," I say. As if in answer to this, Toriel sets down a full glass of orange juice next to my plate, a lot more forceful than she really needed to. I sigh. "Orange you glad you spoke up, kid?" Frisk gives me a very smug grin.

"Papyrus would want you to eat better if he was here," she says briskly. That's cheating and she knows it. Still, she's right.

"In the future, they never make me eat prunes," says Frisk, which is believable enough. But then they push their luck a little too far. "Actually, prunes are extinct in the future. I never saw one before now." Tori and I exchange a look over the kid's head.

"Well, then, if you have never seen one before, how do you know you will hate them?" Toriel asks, pretty reasonably.

Frisk scowls, and pushes the offending fruits around in the bowl without having any. Then they look up at me. "Who's Papyrus?"

"He's my brother!" I say. "You know, the one I was telling you about earlier?" And over breakfast I tell them all about what a great guy Papyrus is, with Tori occasionally prompting me for another story. I tell 'em about that time he saved me from an angry mob in Utah, and about how much he used to want to be a cop, and about how he studied Italian all by himself as a kid so he could make better spaghetti.

"He sounds really silly," says Frisk.

"The Great Papyrus is an extremely serious and important person," I assure Frisk. "Also for some reason he talks in third person a lot. Third person's not really my thing, but you'll get used to it. Anyway, you'll like him." If I can get him back.

"Is he a time traveler too?" Frisk asks.

"Uh." I gotta think about how I wanna answer that one, and Toriel watches me with interest while I put my words in the right order. "No. He's. I'd appreciate if you didn't go spreading that around, kid."

"Oh. Right. It's a secret," Frisk says. They seem pretty happy to be one of three people in on the secret, and I kinda wish I could be that carefree.

Breakfast goes okay; if things are a little awkward between me and Tori, having Frisk around seems to make 'em easier. They eat half a prune without incident, then orate at some length about how gross it is, and about the prune-free utopia that is to come.

Afterwards, Toriel gives Frisk some "homework" she's apparently come up with, which is to pick out a few articles from today's paper and write a few sentences explaining 'em. She assures Frisk that they should do their best but it's okay to be wrong, then skims the paper and ends up tearing out most of the front few pages, I'm guessing because that's where they put all the murders, wars, and natural disasters. Frisk looks real interested, which is encouraging, and I watch them sneakily take the very
front page while Tori's back is turned and they think I ain't looking. Tori sends them into the parlor
with the newspaper, pencil, and notebook she gave 'em.

Even though I think this is about when I usually take my first midmorning nap, I figure I should
probably help with the dishes again, in order to make up for the last time, I guess.

"I want them to have a thorough grounding in current events," says Toriel, "and how people go
about their lives nowadays. I imagine they will not have learned that sort of thing in their history
classes."

"Honestly, I'm not sure they'll know about anything in the 20th century from their history classes at
this age," I say. "It'll mostly be from movies and TV and stuff, and those tend to concentrate on, uh.
A little later." I worry a little, now. I don't want Tori going out trying to save history from itself, so
I'm not sure how much I should tell her.

"Yes, I would imagine." She sighs. "You mentioned the next war last night."

And now I feel dumb, because I was more bitching for the sake of bitching, and it's a can of worms I
don't wanna open with myself, much less with Tori. Of all my attempted interventions, that's the one
I'm least certain about. Should I go back and kill the guy? It's kinda traditional, if you're a time
traveler, but... I know he's gonna give up eventually, and who's to say if I offed him some new crazy
bastard wouldn't pop up in his place? So maybe I should leave well enough alone. This all makes me
real uncomfortable because I've killed plenty of guys for less, but the idea of doing something that
big gives me pause. Besides, I feel like whenever I do actually manage to nudge an event even a little
bit, it usually gets worse. "I, uh. Yeah, it's. You don't sound real surprised."

"There will always be another war," she says, wearily. "Humans seem to have nothing better to do
with their lives than waste them in vast quantities, and we always get pulled in as well." She frowns
down at me. "Sans, that is your worried grin." I have a worried grin? "Unless you think there is some
reason we ought to... relocate, or --"

"Oh! Nah, nothing like that," I say. "Uh. Like I said, I don't think anything I've tried has really
changed anything."

"Aah. You meant to prevent war?"

"Not really," I say. How to talk about this without worrying her? "I was hoping it wouldn't be as bad
as it will be. But I can't make anything better, not even the littler stuff."

"Forgive me if I do not believe that, Sans," she says, absently scrubbing a spatula. "You took
Papyrus in."

And I've been wondering if him getting kidnapped is some kinda cosmic payback for that. Maybe
since he didn't die as a kid the universe is determined to kill him now? No. I can't think about that.
"Maybe someone else woulda come along and got him someplace warm," I say. "Maybe if I hadn't,
he would be happier now and not --"

She tsks. "Sans, for goodness sake, just because I think you have done some good, it does not follow
that somehow everything bad is your fault. Now, after this I am going to call Alphys."

"What? Why?" I ask, pulling the silverware out of the rack and drying it off.

"To see if she has any thoughts on this upcoming operation," she says.

"I thought you said you didn't approve," I point out. "It ain't an operation if you're not --"
"I... I gave it some more thought," she says. "I still have many reservations, but I suspect it would go much more smoothly if I was cooperating."

"Aah. It's all clear now. You want a say in how it goes," I say, gesturing with a butter knife.

"Sans, that is not --"

"Yeah, come on, tell me I'm wrong." I'm trying not to laugh, because this is so very Toriel. She always knows better. I mean don't get me wrong, she's good at taking a crazy idea and making it work, it's just that sometimes she steps in even when you already have it handled.

"Well, what I have to say will be useful," she insists.

"Aw, I'm sure it'll be great, Tori, I'm just ribbing ya." I nudge her with my elbow.

There's a little pause before she laughs that wasn't there before, and I don't think it's because she's suddenly realized my jokes are terrible; pretty sure everyone knows that. We... we still get to joke around together, right?

"Then you are simply trying to get my goat?" she asks, and that reminds me that her jokes are, if anything, even worse, and I love them all, especially if I've heard 'em eight billion times. And then, at least for the moment, everything is fine again. It's like last night never happened and we're just two old friends.

Once the dishes are done, Toriel forbids me from wearing pajamas for the rest of the day on account of it, uh, might give people the wrong impression, and, okay, I guess I have to give her that. When I get back out to the parlor she's on the phone with Alphys. The kid is sitting on the floor, dissecting the newspaper with great care.

I'm just settling in to read the first part of what looks like a deeply awful science fiction story in Astounding Stories of Super-Science (it ain't really analogous to being in my own time and place, but when it comes to glimpses of the future, I gotta take what I can get) when I hear Tori say something that sounds an awful lot like "Yes, of course, bring Undyne!"

What? I make 'no, stop, cut it off' gestures at Toriel, who just shrugs at me.

"Wonderful. Thank you, Alphys. We'll see you shortly," she says, and hangs up.

"Why is she coming over? More importantly, why did you tell her to bring Undyne?" I ask. "Do you want Undyne to kill me?"

"Undyne is not going to kill anyone," says Tori, like I'm being silly or something. "Besides, I am not going to plan a rescue mission without my second-in-command being involved." Okay, I guess... that kinda makes sense. Toriel looks a bit sheepish, though, which is rare for her since, you know, that's entirely the wrong ruminant. "Besides," she says, "Undyne was the one who answered the telephone, so I could not very well make secret plans around her, could I?"

Aah. That makes way more sense. "Uhh. So you, uh, you found a way to break it to her gently how Alphys is gonna be involved?"

That gives her pause. "In fact I... thought possibly Alphys would be more suited to that task."

Ohhh. "You thought that, huh?" I ask.

Toriel looks a little uncomfortable now. "Well. I. How are things coming along, Frisk?" she asks,
dropping the subject completely.

"Okay, I guess," says Frisk. "There's an article in here about a bank robber! Also, I don't understand this comic."

"Let's see it," I ask. Frisk hands over the comic strip they cut out. "Well, there's a simple reason for that," I say. "There's no punchline in this thing."

"Yeah, that's what I thought, but then I thought maybe I was stupid and not getting it," says Frisk.

"Nah, perfectly understandable, kid. They ain't gonna invent punchlines until 1947 at least."

"That's not true. I don't think that's true," Frisk says, suspiciously. "Torielllll, Sans is lying," Frisk says, but Tori's giggling.

"No, it's true, ask anyone," I say. "They just came out with jokes in 1926, the technology's still under development. Nobody knows how I do it. You'll keep my secret, won't you?"

"A punchline," says Toriel, doing a pretty good job of sounding mystified. "How exciting and futuristic!"

Frisk throws their hands up in despair at how dumb and unserious we are, then sits down to squint at another article.

"Here, no, I'll explain it for real if you want," I say, sitting down next to them. "It's a political cartoon, see, that guy's supposed to be the governor, and the horse he's riding is...."

I try to keep my explanation short and more or less neutral, but Frisk looks bored after very little time and says "Never mind, it's probably not very funny anyway," and throws the comic to the side.

While I'm helping them pick out another article, the doorbell rings. When Tori answers it, Undyne shouts, probably as soon as the door opens, "YOU SAID WE WEREN'T AGREEING TO THAT PLAN, WHAT THE FUCK, TORIEL?" Frisk is looking determinedly at their newspapers but their shoulders are up around their ears.

"Undyne, lower your voice," snaps Toriel, and after that I can still hear the both of them arguing, but I can't quite make out what's being said. I hear Alphys try to interject something, but nobody's listening to poor Alphys.

"Hey, kid, it's okay," I say. "Undyne's just... loud, you know she's all right."

"I'm fine, I'm not a little kid," mutters Frisk.

When Alphys steps into the parlor, Undyne and Toriel are still apparently arguing. "H-hi, Sans. I c-can't believe you t-told -- oh!" Alphys is staring at Frisk. "Are you -- is she -- did Toriel decide --"

I shake my head very firmly, because the kid does not need to know the Flower Boys' terms, and Alphys shuts up quickly. "Oh! Sorry, right. Uh. H-hi, you're, uh, Frisk, right?" She grins nervously at Frisk, who has been watching her quietly since she came in.

"Yeah," says Frisk, all shy again.

"Frisk, this is Dr. Alphys," I say.

"I'm n-not really a doctor," Alphys says quickly, like some kinda review board's gonna burst out from behind the couch and drag her away for malpractice.
"Yeah, yeah, whatever," I say. "Alphys is the only smart one here; she keeps her nose clean and stays out of trouble."

"Yeah, that's just what I'm doing now," says Alphys, with a chipper sort of sarcasm.

"And Alphys, Frisk is doing homework, so we should probably leave 'em alone or Tori's gonna have our heads right after she's done with Undyne."

"Oh! Sorry!" says Alphys, cringing. "Uh, g-good luck with homework!" She grins in a way I guess is meant to be encouraging, and gives a hesitant wave, like maybe it's an imposition on Frisk to have friendly gestures directed at them.

I like Alphys, but she's the kind of person who apologizes for lousy weather in January.

Anyway, I go sit on the couch and she joins me. She asks if I can borrow my *Astounding* when I'm done, which, obviously, yeah. Then she hazards a glance at Frisk, who's completely wrapped up in their homework again. "Toriel said you had an idea what the Flower Boys want with us," she says. "Is that true?"

I nod. "It's kinda complicated, but yeah, I think I figured it out."

"It's not... what we used to do, is it?" If anxiety was electricity she'd be powering the state.

"Hell no. Well, I mean, eventually, probably," I acknowledge, "but we'll be long gone before they can get to that. Besides, if my theory is correct they're gonna want more than one good miller and they won't need anyone to do my job, or Asgore's."

As you may have picked up on, the DT extraction business has a few specialized roles. One of 'em is the miller, the person who runs the extraction machine. For that you need someone who really knows the machinery and is maybe a little bit ruthless. Another one's the sower, which is kind of a weird job, but it's at the very heart of making the operation remotely efficient. See, there's more DT in a human soul than you can just get by scraping it all out with even the best extractor. So Alphys came up with a substance -- I don't know exactly what it is -- that'll kinda stir the soul up and make it easier to get at all that DT. Anyway, it's the sower's job to get real close to the target and dose 'em. They gotta be someone who seems real likeable, and also pretty ruthless when it comes right down to it.

I guess you can figure out what I used to do between those roles.

"Sans, that makes no sense, why would they only need m-millers?" she asks. "Or are they aiming for the human m-market again?"

"Nah. My theory is they found a way to keep their sources alive longer. Possibly indefinitely. Their soul would, I guess, grow back its Determination and then they could reuse 'em."

"I was with you until you got to indefinitely," she says. "How is that even possible?"

"I don't understand the mechanism myself. I'm just going offa what the kid told me. I think they're the Flower Boys' first subj--"

"Well!" says Toriel, coming into the room. A rebellious-looking Undyne follows her, carrying a heavy-looking leather case. "Now that we are all here, we should really get down to business."

"Yeah," says Undyne, uncharacteristically unenthusiastic. She sits on the couch next to Alphys, and shoots a glare over her head at me. She puts the case down on the coffee table. At least her arm's out of the sling now, although she's still carrying it real stiff.
"Now, Alphys," says Toriel, sitting in her big chair by the fireplace, "when we spoke earlier you said you had an idea regarding communication?"

"Oh, yeah, uh, h-here, let me --" Alphys stands to open up the case on the table. She brought tools, it looks like, because she lifts off a top tray full of 'em, and then --

"Is that... is that a two-way radio?" I ask, peering at the bulky thing in the bottom of the case. Damn. Musta belonged to some rich hobbyist, even the cops don't use 'em yet.

"Yeah! I, uh, found it in the d-dump," she says, looking uncomfortable. "And I was just, uh, t-tinkering, but when Mrs. Dreemurr --"

"Toriel," Tori corrects, gently, although Alphys is way too polite to call her by her first name.

"-- um, when she c-called, I thought... maybe... we c-could... b-bring one in?"

"Don't you think it'll be kinda obvious?" I ask, because the thing is only slightly smaller than my head.

"No, no, no, this one is for, uh, for someone to keep here," says Alphys. "We're t-taking the other ones."

"Yeah, uh, I wasn't gonna say anything, but a lone two-way radio usually ain't much use. Where's the other ones?"

Here, Alphys grins, and it's a genuine, enthusiastic, oh-my-god-I-can't-wait-for-this kinda grin, and I lean forward because this is gonna be good. "Well, after I fixed the first one I got a pretty good look at its insides, and, uh, I thought, it could be a lot, well, smaller. And, uh. Here." She pulls out a couple little cloth bags from the sides of the case, and pours one of 'em out, gently, on the coffee table. Inside are components I only vaguely recognize, a weird blend of human tech and monster magic. They're also all pretty small; the biggest is about the size of the flat of my palm. Oh, I think I get it. I like where this is going.

"So, uh, yeah, I thought we c-could smuggle them in, in, uh, pieces?" She looks hopefully at Toriel.

I pick up a few pieces -- an antenna, looks like, some kind of tiny specialized magical battery, a microphone -- and turn them over in my hands. I guess I was gonna complain about how much stuff I was being asked to do here, but I can't really, because this is really neat. "This is damn good work, Alphys," I say.

Tori clears her throat and looks meaningfully at Frisk, who is innocently writing about newspaper articles.

"Uh. Darn... good work... no one says that, Tori," I say.

Toriel ignores me, which is probably the smart thing to do. She sifts through the pieces herself.

"Hmm. We could sew these into your clothes, perhaps? We will have to find places that will be less noticeable when the Flower Boys search you."

"Why don't we just hide everything in Sans?" Undyne suggests. "I mean, he's mostly empty space."

I try not to be insulted by this, but I'm not quite up to the task. "Empty space? Don't be ridiculous. I'm full of magic and hilarious jokes."
"I thought you were full of ketchup and hot dogs," says Alphys, amused. "And, uh, whoopee cushions."

"Ha! Yeah, that's not all he's full of," says Undyne. This gets a mild glare from Toriel, and another sharp nod at Frisk. "I didn't say anything! But look, I know you can do it, remember that thing when we almost got caught by those guys from New York and we had to hide all the cash on you?"

"Yeah, but they were tourists," I mutter darkly. "The Flower Boys ain't gonna be fooled so easy. They'll see right through me! Anyway you took care of 'em practically before they could get their hands on me." As I recall, they're in the lake.

"Well I knew you were useless in a fight," she says, rolling her eye. "You sure you don't want me to teach you --"

"No," I say, very firmly. I catch Alphys' eye, and she gets it.

"We r-really just want to get in and out, Undyne," she says. "I, uh, I think it'd be easier to not get hurt if n-no one starts fighting in the first p-place."

"I don't get why you have to go," grumbles Undyne. I admit, I don't get it either but Tori's all for it so I guess I gotta look after her too.

"I... I just do, all r-right?" sighs Alphys. It sounds like she's been saying it a lot this morning. Oh well.

"Why don't you show me how to put these things together and take 'em apart," I suggest, as much out of practicality as to get Undyne to let her alone. We spend the next few hours assembling, testing, and disassembling the portable two-way radios, which look a little like black lollipops when they're assembled. Tori calls Muffet in so the two of 'em can sew as much of the stuff as they can into our clothes while Alphys and I come up with a quick little code so when we call in no one listening will know what the hell's going on in time to do much about it. (Like I said, the cops ain't got this technology yet, but there's no such thing as too paranoid.)

Undyne talks a lot of strategy with Tori while she's working the antenna into the pocket of my jacket, but I'm not sure how to get her to stop bugging me (and Alphys, now she's starting in on Alphys) about last-minute battle training. As it turns out, Frisk comes through; they finish up their homework and wanna help, but there's not much they can do, so instead they get out the cards and challenge Undyne to a game of War. (I manage not to voice my disappointment that it ain't Go Fish.)

By the end of the day, a few more people have drifted in; Muffet calls up Astigmatism and Madjick, who, to the surprise of all, turn out to be real good at sewing. Meanwhile, Lesser Dog has arrived for his daily belly rub and Undyne's briefing him on the situation. I don't think he's paying much attention, though, because by that point Grillby, who is a real lifesaver, has arrived with snacks, and if there's anything LD can't resist it's a hot burger. Or a cold burger. Or a plate that once had a burger on it.

(Of course, the main reason Grillby's there is he heard I was gonna do something dumb and he wants me to pay some of my tab. Understandable, but not real reassuring. But he also brought his daughter to watch Frisk for us so we don't have to talk sensitive issues with the kid in the room.)

It's a surprisingly decent afternoon, considering the pitying looks people don't think I see 'em giving me and Alphys. The weird thing is I can't read those looks as well as I'm used to, and I still don't know why Alphys is so fired up about coming with me. But, eh, if this is gonna be the last Saturday afternoon I ever get, it coulda been a lot worse.
Tori insists I stay for dinner; she invites Alphys and Undyne to stay too, but Undyne drags Alphys off to the movies first, which I think is probably as it should be. (Before she goes, though, I give her my *Astounding*. I got a few paragraphs into the first story and realized it just wasn't a good day for me to read about crazy science cults. The two of us are duly mocked by Undyne for being into this goofy bullshit, but Alphys don't seem to mind.)

Dinner's leftovers from the feast at the council of war, and still very good. Frisk tells us cheerfully about how cool Undyne is and all the stuff Grillby's kid Shelby knows about magic. Things between me and Toriel are... back to something like what they used to be, although I'm still kicking myself letting her think... letting her think I was somehow the kinda guy who could... yeah, well. No. I'm not.

Still, I find I'm almost reluctant to leave; I don't wanna go home to the empty apartment. And Tori seems... a little reluctant to see me go, by the end of the night. We avoid it for a little while; Tori turns on the radio and invites me to sit down and relax while she packs up my stuff (including the suit that now conceals a tiny two-way radio) but I know after that dinner I'm liable to fall asleep on the couch, so instead I help her out and then, still feeling a little like a jerk, I thank her for everything and tell her goodbye.

"Oh. Of course, yes," says Toriel, handing me my overnight bag. "Frisk, come and say goodbye to Sans."

Frisk looks startled. "Wait, wait!" They run back to their room.

"What on earth?" Toriel wonders. She shakes her head. "Well. It is certainly very nice having a child in the house again."

"Yeah, I guess I kinda missed that too," I say. (I wonder if anyone's been reading Papyrus his bedtime story. Probably not. Well, I'll deal with those bastards soon.) "Frisk's a good kid."

"He's still here, he didn't go, right?" Frisk rushes back into the room, breathing heavily, and shoves my deck of cards back at me. "Here!"

"Aw, kid, you can keep 'em, I'm --"

"It's really boring being kidnapped by bad guys," says Frisk, earnestly. "Which nobody ever mentions in movies and stuff. But you should have something to do."

I can tell Frisk would be real disappointed if I didn't accept this gesture, so I take the cards. "Thanks, kid." Then, without warning, they hug me. "Oof. Hey, I need all my ribs, don't break 'em."

"Okay," says Frisk, reluctantly, and releases me.

Then Tori takes my hand. "I will telephone you tomorrow with any new developments or plans, but if for some reason I do not -- do not hesitate to radio for help if you need it."

"Of course not," I say, and I only feel a little bad about lying. I mean, jeez, that's the last thing I want, a bunch of friends and allies around to witness whatever I'm gonna have to do to the Flower Boys if everything goes wrong. "And, hey, thanks for getting on my wavelength about this," I add. She snorts. "They always did tell me I had a face for radio and a voice for print."

"Sans, you *know* that is not true," she says, but she's grinning a little. "Actually, I think you have a very nice voice." For some reason I have no snappy self-deprecating comeback for that, and while I'm staring at the floor like I'm gonna find one there, she squeezes my hand and says, "Sans, please take care of yourself."
I look up at her. She's trying to hide it, but she looks scared, and I don't think I ever saw Tori look scared like that. I definitely never saw her look scared for me. I wish I was better at being reassuring. "You should take your own advice sometime, Tori. But seriously, thanks for everything."

Usually I like to go the wrong way; again, funnily enough, the shortcuts seem to work better that way. But tonight I humor her and use the front door. Before I walk out, though, I turn back to Frisk. "Hey, you be good, okay? Or when I come back I'll break out all my very worst puns."

This gets a laugh outta Frisk, so I get out of there; I wanna leave on a high note, in case I maybe don't come back.

I'll probably be fine, though. I usually am. And since this concerns Papyrus, I can't afford to be anything other than fine.

Chapter End Notes

References:
*I float the paper over just to skim the front page and see if any of it rings a bell*:* All the articles mentioned are based on real articles from the September 6, 1930 issue of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, which is now the *Chicago Tribune*. (I had been looking for an excuse to get a subscription because reading old newspapers can be really cool.)

*what looks like a deeply awful science fiction story in Astounding Stories of Super-Science*:* As with the Trib, all stories referred to are from the actual September 1930 issue of the magazine. You can read the whole issue [here](#) if you're curious. Alphys will probably like it better than Sans, especially the story with the tentacle monsters and hot undersea-dwellers.

*it ain't really analogous to being in my own time and place*:* Astounding Stories changed its name several times; regular SF readers may know it better as *Analog Science Fact & Fiction*. It's known for publishing mostly hard science fiction, the kind of stuff you might like if you like SF "especially when it's real." (The 1930 issue is um. Not what I would consider hard SF anymore.)
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

THERE IS MORE AMAZING FANART. A beautiful and atmospheric inked Sans/Toriel piece from Zhamka, inspired by a song! Check out the whole Project Songtale tag if you like traditional media and/or art inspired by music!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sunday’s uneventful, thank god. I get a call from Tori that afternoon; she outlines the people who are willing to drop everything and help if me and Alphys need the backup -- it's most of 'em, which is really heartening but also kinda sad. Although, heh, you coulda picked my jawbone off the floor when she said Mettaton was on that list. Can that guy even fight? Eh, I guess it's best not to underestimate people. I ain't calling 'em anyway.

Monday, Alphys and I head over to the Ebott Temperance League in our old-new radio-concealing duds. Alphys don't like my shortcuts and it's kinda hard to use 'em for places I ain't been yet, so we take a few buses and a train, and get stared at a lot for our troubles. She's trying to read, but her hands are shaking too much. I don't let it bother me, mostly because I keep falling asleep whenever I'm lucky enough to get a seat, and sometimes even when I'm not. (Those poles ain't comfy, but they'll do if you're tired enough. Or if you're me.)

Once we get off the train, I look around and make sure we're away from anyone who might overhear. "Listen, Alphys, I got a favor to ask."

"What, right now?" Alphys asks.

"Nah, when we get there. Don't worry, it's very easy. When we get in there, they're gonna ask why we didn't bring Frisk."

"Uh. Okay?" says Alphys, uncertainly.

"And I want you to tell 'em we just ain't sure about handing Frisk over," I say.

"B-but. We're not --"

I interrupt. "I know that. You know that. Anyone with an ounce of compassion knows that. They ain't gonna know, though."

"Why me?" she asks.

"Because like hell she's gonna believe a word that comes out of my mouth," I say. "Make sure you're real believable."

"But I --"

"Don't worry about it," I tell her. "Just stay calm. You'll be fine."

Yeah, I realize calm ain't really in Alphys' repertoire. We'll get back to that later.
When we get to the building, I'm a little surprised; I was expecting a big temperance hall or something, and it's just an office building. It's nice enough inside, but it looks like they share the office space and the receptionist with two lawyers, an accountant, and an alderman. Teetotalers ain't so popular anymore now they've won, I guess. When we get there, the receptionist seems kinda startled to be faced with two monsters. "Heya," I say, cheerfully enough. "We got an appointment with Miss Gorman for ten o'clock."

She's trying not to panic, and is making Alphys look almost calm and composed. "Oh, uh, um, let me, let me look you up. What are your names?" She's trying not to stare.

I grin at her. "Well, I'm Mr. Seeum and my friend here is Miss Saur."

Alphys winces pre-emptively. The receptionist gets to ten o'clock in her book, and says, "Ah, yes, I see! Mr. Cal Seeum and, and Miss Dinah..." She trails off. Alphys is burying her face in her hands. "Dinah Saur," the receptionist finishes slowly. She looks like she just ate a lemon.

"That's us!" I say, brightly.

"I'm so s-sorry," Alphys says to her. "He's always l-like this."

Considerably less intimidated now, the receptionist rolls her eyes. "Very well. You can sit down over there and wait."

"Great! I need to catch up on my reading of the Ladies' Home Journal from the Wilson administration," I say, wandering over to the waiting area, where, in fact, there's a stack of ancient magazines about three inches thick.

"Sans, " says Alphys, quietly but extremely irritably. "I t- told you we should have given our real names."

"Nah," I say, picking up a magazine at random. "I mean, look at her, she was terrified of us! Now she just kinda hates us."

"How is that an improvement?" she asks.

I am not sure how else to get the point across. "Well, now she just thinks we're assholes. Before she thought we were gonna eat her or something, I bet."

The receptionist is eyeing us sourly. Alphys sighs and reads my Astounding. I update myself on what shades of lipstick are in fashion and what kinda snake-oil I should take to guard against "night-starvation." (Midnight snacks are apparently not an option.) I determine that I probably haven't become an "intestinal cripple," whatever that is, seeing as how I lack the necessary everything, so that's reassuring. I got enough problems without needing to buy little crutches for my non-existent guts.

It is about 10:30 before anything changes; at this point I'm going over the stuff I got with me, secreted away in mine and Alphys' clothes, and in one really uncomfortable case, rubber-cemented to the inside of my ribcage. I also got my list of hostages in my pocket, and I gotta stop checking to make sure it's still there, because at this rate I look almost as nervous as Alphys. But then the door to the various offices opens, and who should step out but Dever and Boone. Boone's got a look on his face like he's ready to punch the next person who talks to him provided it ain't a lady, or maybe even if it is, and Dever just looks exhausted.

I hide my face behind the magazine real quick, and try to listen in.
"She was lying," Boone snarls.

"Of course she was lying," Dever says. "Have you ever seen her not lying?"

"That's a good point," says Boone. "Ugh. I wish I could have a drink."

Then, unfortunately, the receptionist ruins it. With a world-weary sigh, she says "Cal Seeum and… ugh, Dinah Saur, Miss Gorman can see you now."

While I can hide my face, there's no hiding my sense of humor. There's an awkward little silence, then a hand tugs the magazine down from my face. "You!" says Boone. "What are you doing here, funnybones?" he demands.

"Hey, can't a guy be interested in fixin' social ills in his community?" I ask. "In these troubled times and all, you gotta remember the important things in life -- being a sanctimonious jerk."

"I don't know what you think you're doing," sighs Dever, "but I doubt it's going to end well for you. I think you'll find if you just tell us what you know, the legal consequences will be much less severe."

"Dever. You know I got bigger problems than legal consequences," I say.

"If you work with us," says Dever, "we can protect you from Asgore. Which I imagine you might appreciate."

"I, uh, I will keep that in mind." Jesus. I don't mind pretending to be harmless, but pretending to be the kind of guy who has an affair with a mob boss' wife is a hell of a lot harder. What would someone that stupid even say? Would someone that stupid actually be capable of speech? "But I think I'll take my chances. Come on, Alphys, we got an appointment to get to." I get down off the chair and hand the Ladies Home Journal to Boone. "You really gotta update your wardrobe, Boone. That silhouette is so outdated."

"We're gonna get you in the end, you bastard," says Boone.

I give him a mocking salute as they leave. The receptionist points us through the door the detectives came out of -- "Just down the hall, second door on the right."

Alphys thanks her, then turns to me. "What was that all about?"

"Oh, don't worry about it, they were just being cops," I say, holding the door for her.

Alphys ain't looking real inclined to take my advice not to worry about it. "What did he mean about Asgore?" she asks. "It d-didn't sound like he was just talking about turning t-traitor."

"Oh, that, uh. That's… not important," I say, waving a hand. "It's just -- a thing -- a complete misunderstanding really."

She's staring. "Oh my god, are you blushing?" she asks.

"Don't be ridiculous, I don't even have skin," I point out.

Thankfully, we get to Gorman's office before she can argue the point with stuff like, uh, observable facts, or make any guesses as to why I might be not-blushing. There's a few framed articles outside it, about the great things the Ebott Temperance League has accomplished. Funnily enough, 'creating a huge black market for booze' don't seem to be listed anywhere here, even though it's been a real
boost to the city's economy. It's too bad. People should take credit for their accomplishments.

I push the door open without knocking, and grin a little wider when she jumps in startlement at the noise. "I woulda knocked, but I know from experience you don't like knock-knock jokes," I say.

She don't react with anything but a dull glower. She's wearing a real big hat today, one that covers the place she'd be bruised from when I saved Frisk from her. "Please close the door behind you," she snaps.

"Yes ma'am," I say. Alphys is giving me this look that says Sans, don't antagonize her, but I know it is way too late for that. "So," I say, when the door's closed. "You said you'd trade half the hostages for the two of us. I got a list. You willing to honor it?"

"Where's the child?" she asks.

Alphys and I look at each other. I can tell she's still wondering why she has to do this part.

Now, I like Alphys, I really do, but I know how she reacts under pressure, so I sit back and watch my handiwork. "Uh, uh, w-well, we're. We're not sure? About -- uh, about handing over the h-human. S-so, uh. We f-figured we'd just… g-get an early start and c-come here!" It is basically the least believable thing anyone has ever said outside of "the check's in the mail."

"I see," says Gorman. She looks weirdly relieved, which is not what I anticipated; I was hoping she'd interpret Alphys' nervousness as a sign we don't have the kid anymore, so the Flower Boys won't keep trying to get Frisk away from the Dregmurs, but now I dunno what she thought. "Well. You're aware you're not negotiating from a very strong position."

"I'm aware," I say. "But I got an idea what the Flower wants me for, and I kinda suspect you ain't gonna need the kid if we do what you need us to do. Yeah?"

She looks unsettled. "That's neither here nor there."

"Well, it's gotta be somewhere," I point out. "So I'm gonna guess it's here, and call you on your bluff. You said half the hostages. We're gonna get half the hostages, or we ain't coming with you."

She snorts. "Please. What makes you think you could just walk out of here if we didn't want to let you go?"

I grin real wide, and let my eyes go dark. "Wanna find out?"

"You don't frighten me," says Gorman, coolly, but it's obvious to me, at least, that she's a little rattled. People got all kinds of little tells, humans especially, but the one that's most obvious now is that her right hand sorta twitches towards one of her desk drawers. I'm gonna guess either a gun or the butterfly knife is in there, maybe both.

"Ah, don't worry about it, we'll be good if you are," I say, back to my usual bright-eyed self. "So. The list." I pull it out of my pocket and smooth it onto her desk.

She dons a pair of pince nez -- weirdly old-fashioned of her, although I'm terrible at judging human ages -- and skims the list. "Well, obviously we can't release Asgore," she says. "The others, possibly."

"And why not Asgore?" I ask, hopefully. "He doin' you a lot of good in there?" Sorry, Tori, I tried.

"You know perfectly well why not," she snaps. "As for the others… I will consider. Would you like
to replace Asgore with another monster? We did say half. We do not go back on our word." This is untrue, but she seems to mean it.

"Tell you what," I say. "What if we don't replace him with anyone, and we let you keep the last… three monsters on that list?"

She shakes her head. "I'm under orders. No release of Asgore."

Well, that ain't good. I wonder if, contrary to all my expectations, he has been talking to them about the DT business. Jeez, I really hope not. I'm also a little surprised she's so plain with me.

I don't dare ask about Papyrus at first. I don't wanna draw attention to him. She tells us to sit down, so we sit and wait while she makes a bunch of phone calls, reads the list off several times to whoever it is -- I guess other people working for the Flower? I try to listen for their voices on the other end but I can't make 'em out. She calls one of 'em Ray so I'm gonna guess that's Reynard Tachibana, the prize fighter and Gorman's fellow lieutenant, but the other ones I think are probably underlings from the way she snaps at 'em. She seems real jumpy about something, and I didn't think I scared her that bad. I'm real curious what the cops wanted; did they finally make some connection between the "missing" Frisk and her?

Anyway, the Flower Boys make arrangements to pick us up. I point out we ain't going without making sure our people are released first. This is a whole 'nother song and dance over the telephone wires, and eventually Gorman tells me they're keeping Papyrus as a guarantee of my good behavior.

I'm not entirely surprised, admittedly, but I had hoped. Well, I'll get him out of there.

I say I need proof the hostages are free before we go. She visibly resists the urge to say "Or what?" and I see her tug the hat down self-consciously over the big lump on her head from where she ran into that door.

They wanna drive the hostages out here, and I think it'd be way too easy for the Flower Boys to recapture them on the way home, so I tell them fuck no, and suggest sending them to a nice, easy-to-secure block in the Little Underground. They, as I expected, reject this suggestion, but there is a way these things are done. Eventually we come up with a neutral spot; I call Tori up and tell her where she can send Undyne to meet the hostages. Then Undyne will call from a payphone nearby and we'll confirm everyone's fine.

At this point some of Gorman's associates start asking awkward questions like "You already have them at your office, don't you? You have a gun, don't you?" But fortunately she talks 'em into going to all this trouble without having to put me on the phone. I'd hate to have to call up the 8-bit operator for these jerks. Still, I wonder what the hell's up her sleeve.

We wait for goddamn ever, but when Undyne calls eventually, everything's apparently in order. Then she asks to speak to Alphys, who sits there in silence and goes redder and redder at whatever Undyne's saying. I shrug at Gorman's aggrieved look. "Uh.... Uh. W-well. Thanks, Undyne. I'll... y-yeah." She looks nervously at Gorman. "I, uh, I think I have to g-go.... Yeah.... Yeah, I -- me too."

Jesus. Maybe I shoulda tried harder to dissuade her from coming.

Gorman rolls her eyes, reaches over, grabs the phone, and hangs it up real forcefully. She leads us out of her office. "No funny business," she tells us, which would normally make me laugh pretty hard, except I think Alphys might be holding back tears and mostly I just feel like a jerk for letting her trust me. The receptionist stares at us. "See you tomorrow, Catherine," Gorman says to her.
"Are... you going with them?" she asks. "All day?"

Gorman gives her a hard look.

"Uh. Have a nice day?" the receptionist says. She looks real relieved when the phone rings and she can go back to being bland and helpful.

On the way down in the elevator, Gorman casually pulls a gun out of her purse and sticks it in her coat pocket. I ain't concerned, though. "You shouldn't have asked for me if you didn't want funny business," I point out.

"Or, uh, m-maybe she just doesn't think you're very f-funny," says Alphys. She looks very slightly better now. Very slightly.

"Fair enough," I say. "She's in pretty good company."

"Would you both shut up?" snaps Gorman.

"Nah," I say, shrugging. "Jeez, what's wrong with you? You got half of what you wanted, right? And you ain't gonna need the other half, are you?"

"How would you know anything about what we want?" she says, icily.

Well, okay, if she's gonna play it like I'm a moron, that's all right. "Magic," I say, brightly. She rolls her eyes. The rest of the elevator ride is silent. When we get out of the building through the back, where no one walking by will see us, there's a beautiful blue Ajax waiting in the alley. Gorman's underlings get out of the car; they're couple of tough-looking broads you couldn't pay me to armwrestle. They tie our hands behind our backs and shove bags over our heads. Then we're summarily shoved into the back seat.

I'm not real concerned. You could say I got the ultimate skeleton key; as the car starts moving I can feel a thousand potential shortcuts to places I already been. The not-sound of the not-places between reality echoes in my auditory canals, and I can kinda feel where we are, although I certainly couldn't give anyone directions that would make sense to anyone but me. Or Dr. Gaster.

Nope. Not thinking about that. Alphys is probably terrified; I could do something about that, I guess. It sure beats thinking about other stuff. "Hey, Alphys, what do you call a duck being kidnapped?"

"Ssans."

"Nah, I'm not a duck. Try again!"

"Okay, f-fine! What?"

"An abducktion!"

"Augh," she says, which is the best reaction I can usually hope for from her unless it's an electron joke.

Gorman and her mookettes ain't laughing. I wonder who the driver is. "You want us to make 'em shut up?" one of the ladies asks.

"I'm honestly not sure that's possible," says Gorman. "Besides, we need them both in good condition."
"Talking condition?" she asks.

"Talking condition," sighs Gorman.

"I don't know, I kind of liked that one," says another voice -- a guy. From the driver's seat.

"You would," says Gorman, sounding exasperated.

Huh. Well, maybe the Flower Boys ain't all bad, although that's kind of disconcerting to think about. But I figure I should make the most of this. "What time does a duck wake up?"

"Aw, I know that one already," says the driver.

"Damn," I say. "What do you call a really smart duck?"

"Sans, oh my god stop it," Alphys says. I can hear her wincing.

"Oh, I don't know this one," says the driver. After a few moments' contemplatin, he says, "Eh, I give up, what?"

"A wise quacker!" I get a laugh. Damn, I'm either really good or really lucky, or maybe a little bit of both.

"You're sure we need this one in talking condition?" whines one of our guards.

"Yes, I am sure," says Gorman. "Really, you shot that truck driver last week after I expressly told you not to and you can't put up with duck jokes for a few minutes?"

"They're stupid duck jokes," says the guard.

"You're stupid duck jokes," says the driver. Goddammit, I don't wanna like this guy but I can hear the grin in his voice, and it is real difficult to dislike someone who's as much of a goofball as he seems to be.

"I'm starting to hate everyone in this car," says Gorman. Yet another reason I can't dislike the driver; he's kinda pissing her off.

"Patience is a virtue," the driver says sing-songily.

"I'm especially starting to hate you," says Gorman.

"Aw, I know you don't hate me," says the driver.

This would be a lot easier if I didn't have to think of the Flower Boys as people with friends (or... whatever Patience Gorman has instead of those) and senses of humor (or, again, whatever substitute Gorman has), but I guess I'll have to make it work however it works.

Anyway, I tell dumb jokes for around forty-five minutes, amidst much complaining on the part of basically everyone but the driver. I'm hoping at least if worst comes to worst I got someone around who probably won't wanna kill me, although who even knows with humans sometimes.

The car stops. When we left we were way the hell north of the business district, in one of the quieter neighborhoods, and now we're way the hell south, near the stockyards. We made good time, I guess, considering how much we were looping around, ostensibly to confuse me and Alphys' sense of direction. It's a terrible neighborhood whether you're a human or a monster, although to be fair it's an even worse neighborhood if you're a cow.
Someone drags me out of the car and takes the bag off my head, and I almost wish they hadn't. The smell hits me like a kick to the head. "Wow, I thought you guys were supposed to be henchmen, not stenchmen." I look around quickly. Great. We're at a loading dock of some kind, although since there's no trucks here I kinda suspect it's been cleared out to be used as an impromptu monster prison.

"It doesn't have a nose," the mookette who dragged me out of the car grumbles. As bad as the situation is, I have waited my whole life for a perfect setup like this, and I am so ready when she says, "How does it even smell?"

But I hear Goofy Driver Guy says "Terrible!" before I can even begin to speak. What? Beaten to the punchline by one of the damn Flower Boys? The shame of this moment will stay with me forever.

I turn to make sure Alphys is okay, and watch them take the sack off her head. "Ugh," she says, shakily. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"Well, then do it out here," snaps Gorman.

I look around for her and see her talking to... I guess that must be Goofy Driver Guy. Something about him looks real familiar, and I search my memory for his face. Then I realize, goddamnit, of course I've seen him before. It's another one of the Flower's lieutenants, Reynard Tachibana, who Gorman was talking to on the phone earlier. He ain't a big guy, but boy can he pack a punch; I've seen him stand toe to toe with Undyne. He's been doing pretty badly in the ring, though. Maybe it's all the bootlegging. Or maybe it's karmic retribution for being a jackass.

Anyway, my moment of being real pissed off at him is interrupted by the sound of Alphys losing her breakfast. "S-sorry, I -- I don't do very well on long car t-trips," she mutters.

"Hey, we're hostages, we don't have to apologize," I remind her.

"Oh. Yeah. Gee, thanks, Sans, I almost f-forgot why we were h-here." She sighs. There is basically no cheering Alphys up about half the time, but for some reason I keep trying.

"Okay, come on, get them inside," Gorman snaps at the mookettes. They march us in; I'm trying to see everything I can and Alphys is just staring at the ground. Tachibana and Gorman are talking surprisingly amiably, and I can't quite pick up what they're saying, but he keeps looking back at us with something between pity and dread.

What the hell have I gotten us into?

Chapter End Notes

References:
what kinda snake-oil I should take to guard against "night-starvation": the ad in question.

I probably haven't become an "intestinal cripple," whatever that is: have another ad.

"What time does a duck wake up?": The quack of dawn, obviously.
Gorman, Tachibana, and their underlings do a peremptory pat-down on Alphys and me, and because nobody trusts me, they grab me by the ankles and shake me upside down to see if anything falls out. So that's fun for everyone. (Alphys escapes the shakedown; either they think she's too nervous to be lying or they're worried she'll puke again.) All they get outta me is my switchblade comb, which, you know, is a *comb*, and not real dangerous. "Why do you need a comb?" Gorman demands.

"It has sentimental value," I say. "My brother gave it to me. Can I have it back?"

"Why did your brother give you a comb?" she asks.

"'Cause it looks like a knife, but it's not," I say. "That's cool, right?"

"I have something that looks like a knife," says Gorman. "You know what it is? A *goddamn knife*." She looks like she wishes she could use it.

"Point taken. Well, point hopefully *not* taken, as it were," I say. "Anyway, can I have my comb back? I told Papyrus I'd never part with it."

Tachibana is the only one who laughs, and he don't even laugh that hard. Damn, these people are grim, and so's Alphys. Anyway, after that, Gorman dismisses her mookettes and unties us with her butterfly knife, that looks like a knife and is a knife. (How must it feel to be so predictable? I never wanna find out.) She gives me my comb back, which I guess is nice of her.

"Okay, first off," I say, "I think you should show me where Papyrus is --"

"No," says Gorman. "First Dr. Corcoran has to see you two." She looks at Alphys for a moment, who is shivering, then rolls her eyes. "Ray, get the lizard a paper bag to breathe into or something. We'll be in the Determination lab."

"Yeah, fine, okay," says Tachibana. He looks a little disappointed, but he starts off down the hallway.

Gorman leads us into a big central area. Looks like this place used to be a factory -- and I guess it still will be, if the Flower Boys get their way. "Jesus Christ, lady, how much of this shit were you planning on milling?" I ask, boggling at the scale of the operation.

Gorman says nothing. It kinda speaks for itself. The three massive machines in the center look enough like the DT extractors I'm familiar with that I can pick out the individual parts, but each one has space for eight people. Eight souls.

You'd think they'd have looked at the shape of the things and realized they had to stop before it got out of hand. You'd think. But no, they're still building 'em; there's guys bustling around screwing panels into place and tweaking the wiring.

Off in the corner of the room is a more traditional DT extractor, built according to Alphys' upgraded design. It's the only one that's actually been used, which I can tell because the big machines don't have the arm and leg straps installed yet, and they ain't plugged in, and also because the smaller machine has some suspicious red stains on the table that the... the subject... woulda been strapped
to.

I had no idea I still had it in me to be this pissed off, but, hey, looks like I do. Lucky me. Lucky Flower Boys, too.

I smile at Gorman. She's starting to look real uncomfortable, although not uncomfortable enough for my satisfaction. "So what exactly are we supposed to be doing here?" I ask. "I don't know what the hell to do with any of this stuff."

Someone clears his throat, and one of the guys working on the machines turns towards us. "You won't be doing anything with it if you know what's good for you," he says. He ain't wearing the purple flower in the lapel of his labcoat, but I recognize him anyway.

"That's a nice white coat you got there, Dr. Corcoran," I say. "Hey, it's almost like you're a real scientist."

"Hmph. I would imagine that, at least in the area of formal education, I have more right to call myself one than either of you," he says. He turns back to fiddling with the wiring on one of the extractors.

"Really? Because this don't look like original research to me. Seems to me you cribbed it from Alphys here," I say. "And it ain't peer-reviewed neither."

As depressed as Alphys is over all this, we both hate Corcoran, and for a lot of the same reasons, so it don't really surprise me when I look over to her and she's kinda almost grinning. "Do you think we c-count as peers?"

And he's got a very intent expression on his face. It practically shouts I'M IGNORING YOU! LOOK AT ME IGNORING YOU! It's great. "I dunno, Alphys. Could anyone match the peerless Dr. Corcoran?" I ask.

"I g-guess you're right," she says. "Still, we c-could try?"

"Sure, why not," I say. I contemplate his setup for about ten seconds. "Well, whaddaya think, Alphys?"

"It kind of stinks," she says.

"Wow, that was exactly what I was thinking!" I say. "Crazy!" I don't know a damn thing about these machines, I was just judging on principle. Still, it does seem kinda dangerous to connect all of 'em together like that. Maybe I'll ask Alphys about it later.

"Yes, you're very funny," he says, rolling his eyes. "Patience, I don't know how you put up with these two for this long," he tells Gorman.

She shrugs. "They're your problem now."

Tachibana pokes his head into the room. "Hey! I didn't find any paper bags! But! Water! Monsters drink water, right?" He holds up a glass hopefully.

...Okay, what is this guy doing with the Flower Boys? I have to know. He sticks out like a whole and healthy thumb on a hand full of sore fingers. I don't trust him.

He gives the water to Alphys, who frowns up at him. Looks like maybe she's thinking what I'm thinking. But in the end she takes the glass and drains it. "Thanks," she mutters. "S-sorry."
I guess I'll keep an eye on her for any signs of poisoning for now. She don't look any worse than before. The sensible part of me is pointing out that there's no point poisoning Alphys considering how many people they just traded for her, but the devious bastard part of me remembers they're, well, devious bastards, and I can't possibly think of everything. There's certainly value in paranoia, but at some point you just gotta trust the water's just water.

"Linden, Noyes, watch the monsters, would you?" Corcoran says. He goes to talk to Tachibana and Gorman. Two of the guys working on the wiring hesitate a minute before coming to hover over us nervously, and I almost laugh at how scared they look. They're young, even for humans, and clean-cut, and looking a little sleep-deprived.

"You guys been working for Corcoran long?" I ask 'em. I suspect I know where he found these mooks, and it wasn't at the prison down in Valtrie.

"Yes," says one of them, sounding real defensive. "What's it to you, monster?"

"Don't talk to it, Noyes, it's just going to try and trick you out of your soul," says the other -- Linden, I guess. "Anyway, you have not, this is your first quarter."

"Well I had all those lab courses last spring quarter, it's not like I'm slacking," says Noyes. Aha. Like I suspected, they're students, not hardened criminals. Although obviously a guy can slip. But as they are now, they think they're real smart, which makes 'em hornswogglable as hell. I like that in an enemy.

"So, uh, this is exciting stuff, huh," I say. "Science, and engineering, and all that."

They exchange a look with a sort of look at this thing, it thinks it's clever feel to it. "Yes," Linden says coldly.

I turn to Alphys. "So really, all joking aside, what do you think of the setup they got?"

She turns the empty cup over in her hands nervously. "Well. Um. I don't think I've ever seen a less efficient way to rig up the ducting around the siphon. Even with, uh, multiple 'mouths.' You're going to lose, uh, a lot of p-power."

"Yeah, I was kinda wondering about that, although, you know, not my area," I say. "Also, is it really safe connecting the DT pipes up between all the machines like that? What's preventing backflow if one of the machines has too much DT coming in?"

"It's a work in progress!" snaps Noyes.

"T-to be fair, Sans," Alphys points out, "it's a machine f-for strapping p-people down and s-sucking the life out of them. I'm, uh. Not sure it can be s-safe."

"Yeah, I guess even if they managed the best execution it'd still be, yanno, execution," I say.

"Dr. Corcoran is doing important research," sniffs Linden.

"On little orphan children, yeah," I say. "You fine with that? 'Cause I'm not."

"Scurrilous lies and rumors," says Linden. I guess there's something to be said for loyalty, but boy, do I remember being that guy, and, heh, it did not end well for anyone.

Like I said, a guy can slip. Least I was never far-gone enough to say 'scurrilous' with a straight face. "That's fine, I guess. Don't say I didn't warn you," I say.
Corcoran comes back from his little pow-wow with the others. "Linden," he says, "show Miss Alphys around the facility. Answer her questions. Be thorough."

"Miss who?" Linden asks. Alphys sighs heavily.

"The lizard, Linden," Corcoran says. "You. Mr. Sans. Come with me."

Linden is protesting that he has better things to do than explain engineering to a lizard. Alphys looks helplessly at me. "I guess you're getting the grand tour," I tell her.

"Ughhh, this is the worst thing I have ever done," she moans.

"Nah, you saved a bunch of people by coming here. Remember?" I say.

"N-not this. This, " she says, motioning to the DT extractors.

I consider this. "Okay, point," I say. "Hey, it's probably gonna be okay in the end, all right?" This is a lie, but it's a lie I'm trying real hard to believe, too.

"Ha. You sound, uh, r-really optimistic," she says, like it only makes her more depressed. "It's not like you."

I'm about to answer, but Corcoran convinces his dumb student to follow orders, and we gotta go our separate ways, so I try and give her what is hopefully an encouraging grin.

Corcoran leads me out of this room through another maze of hallways, and we talk as we walk. "Mr. Sans," says Corcoran. "May I just say what an honor it is to --"

"No," I say. "If you're asking permission and all, that is. Let's get to the point, Corcoran."

"Ah. Yes. The point is, I'm astonished that someone so prescient could be so sloppy about covering his tracks. I speak, of course, of the mysterious physicist Henry Didot who came out of nowhere with such interesting things to say about the nature of time, then vanished. The institutions he claimed to be connected with had never heard of him. I'd wondered if there was some sort of error in the authorship that nobody caught, some odd fluke in the printing."

"Or he was a crank, maybe," I say. "I hear a lot of that's going around. There's this guy named Corcoran, claims he's a great researcher but all I see is him being a dick to his colleagues and ripping off monsters' work."

"Yes, yes, enough about me," says Corcoran. "Let's talk about you. Or, I suppose, Didot. You see, in my search for the enigmatic man, I found all those fascinating rejected papers by a Dr. Futura. Wonderful nom de plume, by the way. Very subtle. The papers themselves, on the other hand, were… eccentric."

"Hey, those may not have been publishable, but if you can write something half as good while you're as drunk as I was when I wrote that shit and sent it in, I will be very surprised," I say.

He clearly does not believe me. "Well, that would explain the punctuation. And all the obscenity in the abstracts. But. The entire time?"

"Yup," I say.

"All five of the papers?" he asks. He sounds impressed despite himself.

"It was kind of a bad year for me."
"Clearly." We finally come to a plain-looking door. There's one small, discreet "PRIVATE" sign in the center of it, but it's almost the same color as the door's painted, so it don't draw the eye too much. Sensible. You mark a door NO ENTRY BEYOND THIS POINT! THIS MEANS YOU, ASSHOLE! in big red letters, usually people wanna go in. Corcoran unlocks the door and shows me in; I hear the hum of the lights going on in the room beyond.

Most of the room is filled with an enormous device full of vacuum tubes. I'm admittedly pretty impressed by this, and a little concerned, because I know exactly what it is, and it's a huge goddamn anachronism. I was never involved in that area of study but there's a way and a reason these things happened, and mostly they got no reason to happen until the war.

But Corcoran don't address the elephantine computer in the room; he pulls the tarp off the smaller machine in front of the behemoth, and I see more or less what I was expecting. It's kinda eerie, actually. I didn't think any of our blueprints survived, but maybe I was dumb enough to include some sketches in those Futura papers. "We've had very little luck in getting it to work," he says.

"Well, that's to be expected, since it's impossible," I point out.

"But you yourself wrote --"

"Some drunken bum named Futura wrote a lot of crazy shit," I say. "I got nothing to do with any of that." Still, I look at their time machine. The design's familiar; bulkier than what our research team had, but still very much recognizable. I still don't think it'll ever work, though. I mean, they haven't even installed the shields around the passenger compartment yet, and I'm not sure they got the right materials for those. (I'm not sure we did either, to be honest.)

Whatever. It sure as hell won't work for the Flower Boys if I have any say in it. I turn my attention to the morass of vacuum tubes. "You been kidnapping mathematicians too, Corcoran?"

"Please. We needed some way to do the navigation calculations on the fly, and I already knew it was possible. Once you know that much, you're never tempted to give up reinventing it," says Corcoran. "Although admittedly the lack of microchips was an impediment. Besides, I know you must do this sort of thing all the time. Or was your epoxy trick with the police just an amazing coincidence?"

Shit. I knew I shouldn't have broken my own damn rules so blithely. I mean I never actually follow 'em, but until recently I always at least tried to feel guilty about it for a while. I guess the joy of gluing cops to windows overrode my common sense. "What?"

"I imagine you dropped some helpful hints to the lizard, unless you're a competent chemist as well. You and I both know that that sort of thing won't be available for at least another decade," says Corcoran.

I grit my teeth. "Really," I say. I hate time travel. I decided that long ago, but today is really reinforcing that long-held opinion.

Man, Corcoran looks smug. I mean, smugger than I think I ever looked. As it turns out, while I love outsmarting people and showing 'em up, I really hate being shown up by some smartass. "Really," he says. "When are you from, by the way? I fell through from the late nineties."

"Oh, man, you missed all the fun," I say sarcastically. "Y2K, the plague, the wars with Canada--"

"I'm an unwilling time traveler, not an idiot," he says.

"You can be both," I reassure him. "There's room for both." I know this from personal experience, after all. "Anyway --"
"As hilarious as this all surely must be to someone who cares, I'm not interested in the future I missed," he says. "What I am interested in is you making this time machine work so we can meet our deadline."

"Have you tried turning it off and on again?" I ask. "And, hey, wait a minute, what the hell kind of crappy time machine is this that you seriously have a deadline for it? Why not just take your sweet time and go back to when you need it?"

"That seems a tad irresponsible," he says. "I hate to think the state the timeline would be in after that kind of trick."

"Uh, sorry, what did you say?" I ask. "Not to give you any ideas, but if you're planning what I think you're planning with those DT extractors, what do you think that's gonna do to the timeline?"

"We're making strategic extractions only. No one will miss them," says Corcoran.

"Ya know, I know this neighborhood always smells like bullshit," I say, "but it's particularly bad today. But sure, I guess if that helps you sleep at night." He actually chuckles at that; it's the first smile I've seen on him and it ain't one I like much. "How can you justify doing that to a kid?"

"You really do have no idea what kind of pressure we're under," he says smoothly. "Anyway, they're all going to have to be children. They're less likely to be missed and more likely to retain the time-travel side effects that would be useful for our purposes." He looks troubled for maybe a millisecond. "I didn't make these rules. This would not be the area of research I'd have chosen for myself, trust me."

"Yeah, well. Not mine, either." Wow, I am finding so many new things to loathe about this guy. The thrill of discovery, alas, is turning out to be more of a dull headache.

"Technically, you do have more of a choice than we do," he says, "but I don't think you'd let your brother die just for some kind of petty moral satisfaction, so we're all in the same boat now, aren't we?"

Yeah, he'd better hope that boat has life preservers, because I'm sending it to the bottom of the lake as soon as I can. But I gotta play along for now. "I guess you got me," I sigh. "But I ain't doing anything until I get to see Papyrus."

Corcoran rolls his eyes at that. "Of course you won't. I assure you he's been well-cared-for as any of them."

There's a knock at the door. "Dr. Corcoran! You in there?"

Corcoran rolls his eyes and goes to open the door. "What?" he demands.

Aah. It's Tachibana. He looks kinda panicky. "Uh, so, um, so the machines, the extractors, they're all making this noise."

"Yes," said Corcoran. "I asked Foster and Noyes to power them on once they were done with the rewiring."

"Maybe Noyes is making all the noise," I suggest brightly.

Corcoran tells me to shut up, then Tachibana says "Yeah, so, um, so when they powered them up they started making this..." He pauses. "This kind of a steady 'Womm... Womm... Womm...' sound."
"Yes," says Corcoran, looking impatient. "That'll be the extractors generating a magical field. It has to do that, otherwise the rest of the machine is futile."

"Okay, that's really interesting and um, neat, but," says Tachibana. "Uh. But, uh, how big of a magical field does it have to generate?"

"Well," says Corcoran, clearly annoyed he's gotta spend any time talking to Tachibana at all, "Determination is a very integral part of human souls, so of course the attractive forces holding it in place are very strong and --"

Tachibana interrupts him. "It's just that the noise went from that 'Womm... Womm...' to more of a 'Wom, wom, wom, wom, wom, wom!' kind of thing."

"That does sound like a lotta woms," I say. "Your wom output has doubled over the course of five paragraphs. Might wanna look into that."

Well, I get told to shut my face again, and Tachibana continues. "And then, uh, Foster, I don't know what happened but he screamed and now it's going --" here he makes a fast, convulsive gesture with his hands "-- all 'Wmwo
If you're interested, I put up a list (with links) of some of the Undertale fanmusic/covers that are on my writing playlist for this fic.

References:
This idea about Sans' switchblade comb was too fun not to include.

Corcoran's students are all named for stops on the Purple Line on the El, Chicago's subway/light rail system. (It's called that because it's mostly elevated rail, not below-ground.) I didn't note this earlier, but Frisk's last name according to the police ("Addison") is a Red Line stop. Make of that what you will.

**Didot** is a family of typefaces that were designed during the Age of Enlightenment so that the letters would all have harmonious proportions in relation to each other. Didot fonts have serifs and are very dignified. They are not terribly Sans.

**Futura** was designed in 1927 and would have been an anachronism in the mid-1910s when Sans landed, although probably Corcoran isn't enough of a typeface nerd to know or care.

(I am a bit of a typeface nerd, and if you went back in time and told me-from-a-year-ago that my favorite character now is based on Comic Sans, I'd probably get angry at you and say you were full of shit. Then I'd steal your time machine, obviously. Anyway, if you would like to learn about fonts and also like platformers, you may enjoy the game **Type:Rider**, which is how I know these things. ...also if you can beat the Comic Sans bonus level, I'll be very impressed.)
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

This chapter and the next benefit a great deal from feedback from Morbane! She and some others have been giving me really useful constructive criticism, but there were particularly intense rewrites in this case, and I felt it only fair to ask if I could credit her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"So where is Papyrus? Is he all right?" I demand.

"He's fine," Tachibana says, leading me further down the hall. "He's really friendly. Really friendly. It's kind of weird. I was a little worried about him, honestly. As far as I know our plan was never to, you know, hurt the hostages but some of the guys here are jerks." He considers this. "Okay, most of the guys here are jerks. Anyway. Patience has a plan, which I don't technically think I'm supposed to tell you about yet but I'm honestly a little concerned you're going to murder me if I don't make it really clear I'm on your side here, so --"

"Hey, come on, you can't tell me you're scared of me," I tell him. "Ain't you a big bad prize fighter or something?"

"Yeah," he says. He don't sound real thrilled about it. "But you gave Patience a concussion and scared her pretty bad -- uh, don't tell her I said that -- and she can be really mean when she wants to be."

"So, by 'when she wants to be' you mean 'all the time,'" I say.

"Nah, she's all right, really," he says. I decide not to point out how she had a gun at a kid's head. Or about the time she slashed Undyne up with her knife so bad we were worried she might not make it. He knows about all these things; he was there. But supposedly he's on my side. And if he ain't, well. If he ain't he'll see that a concussion's the least of his worries.

But it looks like he's telling the truth; I start noticing the walls... shimmering, as we pass what looks like storage rooms. That means they're using barrier magic to keep the monsters in. It's the best solution, sure, but it's also a little surprising because human magicians are so damn rare, and you need to have a human soul to cast a barrier like that; us monsters have to rely on walls and fences like everyone else. I keep my guard up, though, because he could just be trying to trick me by throwing me in a cell. Even I can't usually get past barrier magic.

Eventually, Tachibana stops at one of the doors. "Uh. You won't be able to actually go through it, but you can at least see him," he says. "But if you go through I can't get you back out, so. Don't. Okay?"

"I know how a barrier works, kid," I tell him.

"Right. I guess that makes sense, sorry," he says. He pulls a key out of his pocket, and unlocks the door. The doorway shimmers slightly as I open it; I can tell it ain't a real strong barrier because I can see the room behind it pretty clearly. Inside there's a couple Tems, Greater Dog, and....
"Papyrus!" I say. He's really here. They weren't lying. He looks up from trying to draw something in
the dust on the floor. (Not monster dust, they just don't clean much here.)

"Sans!" He scrambles over to the doorway. "Wowie! I can't believe you're finally here! It took you
long enough, how many naps have you had today?" he demands. Then he holds up a hand to stop
me. "Wait, don't tell me, I don't want to know. I heard you on the radio! It was a very good idea to
dedicate a show to me, the Great Papyrus! And your jokes were actually almost funny! I'm so very
proud of you!"

"Aw, I'm glad you liked my show," I tell him. "Although it's too bad you couldn't be there."

"Yes! You performed with Mettaton himself!" says Papyrus. His eyesockets go all wide in
wonderment.

"Yeah, yeah. That was pretty nuts," I say. "I got a real charge out of it. I mean, really, wire we not
doing that all the time? It was --"

"Saaaaans," whines Papyrus. "Do you know, I spent almost a week without hearing an awful pun?"

"Aw, I'm sorry, Papyrus, I really am. If I'da known where you were I woulda popped in and made
some."

"Sans, that is not what I mean and you know it," he says. But he's grinning, and, uh, I can't exactly
get over this, he's alive and okay and I'm gonna get him back from these crazy murderous bastards.

"It's clear I'm gonna have to carefully re-acclimate you to my amazing sense of humor," I tell him,
trying not to look as relieved as I feel, trying to look like... just a guy meeting up with a brother he
ain't seen in a while. "Hmm. This might be a difficult pundertaking."

"Hey, uh, I don't mean to be rude, but Corcoran's probably going to be wondering where you are
soon," says Tachibana. He's leaning against the wall, out of Papyrus' sight.

"Ah! I see you have met my wonderful new human friend, Sans!" says Papyrus, angling himself to
try and look around the doorframe as best he can. "He suffered nobly through all your terrible jokes
on the radio! And I taught him the new version of Tic-Tac-Toe I made up!"

Tachibana shrugs at the Tic-Tac-Toe remark, and comes over to the door to address Papyrus directly.
"Sorry!" he says. "I know you haven't seen him for a while, but we really do have to go, or Corcoran
will ki--"

I do a reasonable imitation of clearing my throat.

"Will, uh, be really worried we got lost," he says hurriedly.

"Oh! Of course! I wouldn't want to make anyone worry!" says Papyrus, cheerfully. He looks less
certain than he sounds, but when he meets my eyes his grin is back at full power. "It's good to see
you, Sans! I was very worried about how you were getting along without your cool and amazing
brother!"

"Yeah, I missed you too, Papyrus," I say. "Listen, I'm gonna get you out of here as soon as I can,
okay?"

He nods, but his smile slumps a little. "Yes, of course, but, please Sans, you have to be careful out
there! Some of the humans around here seem very careless! And... not very nice."
I nod. "Oh yeah, I noticed that all right." That maybe came out a little more darkly than I really wanted. Better reassure him. "Trust me, Papyrus, I'll be fine." I grin a little wider. "I know otherwise you're gonna have a bone to pick with me. See you later!"

I shut the door on his exasperated "Saaans!"

God, the sheer amount of relief I feel washing over me after having just talked to him is... kinda overwhelming. Times like these I almost wish I had lungs, because a genuine sigh of relief seems like it'd be useful here. (Seriously, that looks so soothing.) I make due with reminding myself that I still got plenty to do before we're out of the woods. Or, well, the stockyards, I guess.

"Are, uh, are you okay?" Tachibana asks, starting down the hall again. "We really do have to get back, I don't know how much time I bought you away --"

"He was gonna take me to see Papyrus next, actually," I say. "Well, maybe he wasn't, but it was implied. But... this was better. Thanks. You think Corcoran'll believe I talked you into it? He won't hassle you, will he?"

Tachibana considers this. "Yeah, it'll be fine. He thinks I'm kind of dumb," he says. "I mean... maybe I am? But he's a jerk, so who cares?"

I am actually kinda trusting Tachibana. Not absolutely, of course, but he was nice to Papyrus and he really didn't have to be. Also, he has a sense of humor. I decide to push my luck. "How about you take me to see Asgore?" I ask.

"Uh. I don't know," says Tachibana, looking worried. "I think he's down here but I guess the boss' orders are that nobody sees him without permission. I don't have the key."

I sigh. It was worth a shot. "Well, okay. How about you tell me about this plan of yours, then? Or, I guess, of Gorman's?"

"Well..." He looks real guilty again. "I don't think she wanted me to tell you, like I said."

"Great," I grumble. But I'm gonna get as much info as I can outta this guy while I have the chance. "So, stupid question, you know Corcoran's a time traveler, right?"

"Oh, yeah, obviously," he says, looking at me like I'm dumb or something. "Oh, well, I guess not that obviously. But. Yeah, we all are. I mean, not the footsoldiers, but the Flower sort of keeps a watch out for kids who fall through --"

"Okay, wait a second, what do you mean 'kids who fall through'?" I ask.

"Um. I guess... just, kids who fall through? There's been, uh, nine or ten instances, I think?" He frowns. "A couple of them didn't make it, though. Mostly kids. I think Patience was the oldest. They're always from the future."

"You're saying we got a problem with kids falling through time?" I ask.

He frowns at me for a moment, like he don't know what the issue is. "Yeah?" he says, shrugging. "Is that so weird?"

"That is extremely weird," I confirm.

"Why?" he asks.
"Well..." Where do I start? "First off, why is it always kids?"

"I don't --"

I cut him off. "Second, why are they falling through time? That ain't how time is. Time is not like Swiss cheese. Actually we were always supposed to picture spacetime like a rubber sheet, which is weird but it kinda works. I mean, except when it don't, obviously. Not my point, though. My point is people should be able to go about their lives without falling through time, and apparently they can't, and that is bad."

"O... kay," he says, looking like maybe he's starting to regret talking to me at all because I am clearly nuts. "But that's what's happening, so. The kids falling through, I mean." He shrugs again. "Maybe it's just a thing that happens?"

Okay, I can kinda see where Corcoran thought he was dumb, although he probably just don't wanna think too much. "It is a very bad thing, whatever it is. These kids -- were all of 'em human?"

"Um." Tachibana frowns. "I don't really know. They didn't really start letting me in on stuff until recently, before now I was just sort of... muscle. But once when I was a kid I think they got all excited about an... a-nah-ma-lee... but when they came back from checking it out they said it was just dust. So maybe it happens to monsters too, and they just don't survive." He frowns. I wonder how long he's been here in the present day, and how old he was when he got here, and what kinda upbringing the Flower Boys gave him.

"Yeah, that'd make sense," I say, trying to keep the edge out of my voice. Monsters die and humans don't care; business as usual. "Huh. Interesting." The really bad kind of interesting. As little as I apparently know about it, I'm sure spacetime should not be leaking like that.

"Sorry, I wasn't really paying attention, I was never expecting any of their boring stuff to be important," he says, looking embarrassed. "I was nine or so, you know? I just wanted to go outside and do stuff."

"Mr. Tachibana!" someone shouts down the hallway. Shit, did I get him in trouble? It's one of the university kids, although not one of the idiots Alphys and I talked to. He looks kind of nervous as he hurries down the hall. "Hi! Sorry! Corcoran wants you to bring the skeleton back!"

"I was just doing that!" says Tachibana, looking cheerful. "Thanks! It's Davis, yeah?"

"Oh! Yes!" says Davis. He seems real flattered Tachibana knows his name.

"Show us back, could you? I always get turned around back here," says Tachibana. "Hey, what time is it anyway? I have a fight tonight, I should probably get out of here soon."

They have a nice little chat about the upcoming fight -- Davis is apparently a little star-struck, which Tachibana seems to take in stride. I don't care about boxing even a little, except inasmuch as I do not want it to happen to me, so I use the time to look around, case the facility as best I can, and keep track of which doors and walls seem to have barriers on 'em. When they ain't looking I jiggle a few doorknobs as quiet as I can; everything's locked up tight.

We get back to the room full of extractors. Alphys appears to be having a vicious argument with Corcoran, because sparks are literally flying out of her fingers and she's having trouble getting whole words out.

"...appreciate that you saved the facility, but shutting them entirely off was a bit of an overreaction," I hear Corcoran saying.
"A b-b...b-bit of an over... overreaction? You weren't..." She takes a few breaths. That stutter gets real bad sometimes when she's upset. "Weren't here. It was t... t... terri..." She shakes her head and tries another word. "Overloading. It was c-c-completely overloading! You're an i... id...."

"A dumbass," I fill in. I do try to be helpful.

"Yeah! That!" she says, pointing at me.

"Ah. There you are," says Corcoran. "I assume you talked Mr. Tachibana into showing you your brother was still alive and well."

"Yeah, I saw Papyrus," I say. "What, you want me to thank you for not killing him?"

"A little more trust would be nice, seeing as how we've shown ourselves not to be complete monsters," says Corcoran.

"Yeah, that's true, monsters would never pull this kind of shit," I point out.

He actually looks like he's going to laugh at that. "Forgive me, a slip of the tongue. At any rate, I suppose Miss Alphys proved her utility, albeit not in the way I was hoping she would. I expect you to contribute to our efforts tomorrow. In the meantime, my associates are going to have to effect repairs quickly unless they want to be here all night for the testing. Come on, gentleman, we do technically have all night but I imagine you'd like to sleep." The university kids scurry back to the machines, which do look a little worse for wear -- bits and pieces of the casing and the ducts have come unfastened and there's smoke coming out of some places.

"Hey, I have to run," says Tachibana, apologetically. "You don't still need me for stuff, right? I have a fight tonight."

Corcoran gives him an unimpressed look. "No, I guess you had better go. Are you planning on winning or losing tonight?"

That don't sit well with Tachibana, apparently, and for the first time I see him look kinda upset. "I'm planning on fighting," he snaps. Then he turns on his heel and goes.

"So, losing, then," says Corcoran, quietly. He rolls his eyes. "Kids these days, you know?"

Alphys and I exchange a look. She ain't real impressed. I ain't real happy. It's not a very nice look on either of our parts.

"Well, I thought it was funny," says Corcoran.

"Maybe leave the lousy jokes to someone with a sense of humor," I suggest.

"Suit yourselves," says Corcoran. "Aah, before I go -- the two of you are welcome to sit down over there. In fact, you are highly encouraged." He points to a couple of crates. Then he makes a weird sort of looping gesture and I feel something around my ankle. I look down.

There's shimmering purple magic chaining me and Alphys together, stretching back towards the crates. Well, that ain't good. On the other hand, I guess we found our human magician if we need to get through those barriers holding our people in.

"Just so you don't make trouble, of course," says Corcoran.

And so the two of us go sit down to watch a bunch of students repair a machine that murders kids.
"What went wrong with the machine?" I ask Alphys.

"It was going to overload!" she says. "Ugh, it was awful, I almost c-couldn't g-get the words out and then we w-w... w-would... have... b-b...." She's shaking again.

"Hey, hey, it's over now! Sounds like you did good," I tell her. "Tachibana said so."

She laughs, with zero humor whatsoever. "G-great, one of the Flower's lieutenants l-likes me."

I hesitate before I say this next thing, but it bears mentioning. "He made friends with Papyrus."

That gets exactly the exasperated look I expected. "Oh, Sans," she says. "So now you're b-best friends, huh?"

"No! I just. He seems okay," I say. "I mean. For one of the Flower's lieutenants. So not okay exactly. More like... not murderous. And yes, thank you, I recognize 'not murderous' ain't really the same thing. But... look, he says, uh." I look around; no one's listening and considering what I've seen of their tech, as advanced as they are they ain't hiding any bugs around that I can see. I decide it's safe to talk. "Hey, you still got that pulp I lent you? Let's pretend we're sharing it so they don't think we're scheming."

She pulls the magazine out of her coat pocket and flips through it. "That's a good idea!" she says. "We can pretend to be solving the cryptography story on page --"

"Yeah, yeah, anyway," I say. "Tachibana says Gorman has a plan to get us out of here."

"You're j-joking, right?" she asks. Finally she gets the page open to a weird drawing of a bunch of bugs and plants.

I pretend like I care about the drawing and look over the page. "Hey, I'm not saying I trust him! I definitely don't trust her. And I really don't like what I know about her plan so far."

"What is it?" she asks.

"That I couldn't tell ya. The two main things I hate about it are, one, I don't know what it is, and two, she does. I like my plan a lot better."

"Uh.... W-what's your plan?" she asks.

"I'm still figuring that out," I say, "but I still think it has a lot on her plan on account of what I just said."

"Oh." She looks a little glum.

"More seriously," I say, "far as I see it, we at least have some guidelines. First, we gotta figure out where the hell Asgore is and how to talk to him, and hopefully get him out. Second, our people are being held behind barriers. We gotta get Corcoran to break 'em down somehow. Then we'll need an exit plan."

"And," she says, "I think we should, um, d-destroy the extractors," she says.

"Oh, definitely, if we have time. Fuck the extractors. And uh, there's another machine further in I wanna take care of too."

"Oh, I g-guess that makes sense. What is it?" she asks.
I hesitate. This truth stuff is not usually my gig. "Hey, promise you won't laugh?" I ask.

"Sans, p-please, I never laugh at you," she says. "Because you're almost n-never funny."

"Gee, thanks, Doc. Well, uh." Guess there's nothing for it. "It's. It's a time machine."

She looks at me like I got vegetoids growing outta my skull.

"You said you wouldn't laugh," I pointed out.

"I'm not laughing," she says. Then she frowns at the extractors for a while, the magazine in both our laps forgotten. "Sans, are you saying you're a t-time traveler?"

"I don't think I actually said that to you at any point, no," I say. "Did I? I don't think I'd forget saying that."

"I'm n-not sure how else to interpret 'oh by the way the F-flower Boys definitely have a time machine which I recognized on s-sight, and whatever is going on it's serious enough that I haven't made a terrible p-pun for this entire conversation,'" she says. "Which is what you're s-saying, actually. So. Are you?"


She rolls her eyes. "Okay. F-fine."

"You don't, uh, seem real surprised," I tell her.

"W-what was I supposed to think?" she asks. "You k-kept giving me weird hints about c-chemical compounds and w-what was possible and it always worked and at first I thought you were just, just smarter than me and too lazy to d-do anything yourself, b-but, but...." She trails off. "You act weird enough and eventually p-people will put it together."

"No one else did except you and Corcoran," I say. "And, uh. He had some pretty big hints. Besides, I don't act weird, I act lazy. Big difference."

"I'm not sure either of those is an act w-with you." This is a fair point. "So, are you here to make sure the f-future happens the right way?" she asks me. "And -- oh, oh! Is it, is it that the Flower Boys are the bad guys and you were granted amazing powers in order to fight them in a war across time and space and this is a pivotal moment in history because of their horrible evil plans and you've been masquerading as one of us for years but now you're going to --"

"No, it definitely ain't that," I say, although I am a little bit sad I gotta disappoint her. She was clearly gonna get six novels, a movie, and two remakes outta that line of thought. "Although I guess this could be a pivotal moment in history, because they got some impressively horrible and evil plans." I try to outline, as briefly as possible, what the Flower Boys are planning and what I found out about the lieutenants.

"So they're... falling through time," she says. "And monsters d-don't survive. But you did? Oh, I guess, b-because you had a time machine?"

I nod. "It was a lousy time machine, though. Only good for one trip."

"W-well, at least it worked," she says. Then something in front of us catches her attention. "Oh." She frowns at the DT extractors.
"What?" I ask.

"W-well, they just, uh, I think they installed a m-more appropriate fuse so it p-probably won't overload as easily," she says.

"That's good, though, right? Means we're not gonna go kablooey anytime soon... right?"

"Yes, but we k-kind of want the extractors to... go kablooey," she says. "Just not right n-now."

"Well, we'll work something out," I say. "The two of us are smarter than these jerks any day."

"Yeah, I g-guess," she says. "So... what happens in the f-future?"

I don't wanna get into geopolitical stuff -- don't wanna worry her -- but it's been too many years since I could really talk to someone about science, so I tell her. I talk about the theoretical breakthroughs, the inventions, and the glorious world of tomorrow that is to come, or at least the one that would be to come if the world could just get its act together and not be full of assholes. She's fascinated, but it's like she's holding it back or something. "Cloning, really? In such a short t-time?" she asks.

"Well, not people, just animals," I say. "And it's trickier with monster DNA --"

"What's DNA?"

"Oh. Oh, jeez, I forgot you didn't even know about that yet," I say. "It's, uh, the thing that passes hereditary --"

"Oh! Yes, of c-course! Is it nucleic acids? A double-stranded chain of them? Oh, yeah, the letters match -- uh, I guess you w-wouldn't know, not your field, b-but that's what they're thinking now!"

"Actually," I say, "we all learn about that stuff when we're kids, so yeah. I guess it works kinda like a zipper, and --"

"D-don't tell me all of it, I want to be surprised!" She's so excited, like molecular biology is her favorite show or something. "I wish I could be working on that, that sounds amazing." But then her face falls again.

"What's with that look?" I ask.

"N-nothing, it's fine," she says quickly. "I, I guess I just have a lot to l-look forward to."

Well, that's just how Alphys is, I guess. Still, the look on her face is pretty great when she pronounces my account of the moon landing "complete b-bullshit." I know she don't mean it, though, because five seconds later she asks if we got to Mars yet.

Anyway, it's getting late and the students and Corcoran are starting to wrap up their repairs. At some point Davis talks 'em into turning on the radio, so it sounds like we're gonna get a blow-by-blow narration of Tachibana's fight, although most of the other guys are rooting for Pulaski, the hometown hero. The machine hums to life, and this time the woms are steady and slow and a little hypnotic. I'm kinda starting to feel like it might be time for a good twelve-hour nap -- it's been a long day, after all -- but then Corcoran calls his students to attention.

"Good job, all of you!" he says cheerfully. "Now we're just going to have to test it. Just Extractor 1 for tonight, let's not get carried away."

Wait, test it? Like, put people into it? Now?
References:
Actually we were always supposed to picture spacetime like a rubber sheet: This is a fun demo/interesting model for how gravity might work, and if you have not seen it, it's pretty neat! (Cooler in person, though, especially when you figure out how to get the marbles to orbit for a long time.)

Davis is named after yet another Purple Line stop.

We can p-pretend to be solving the cryptography story: This is the first story in that Astounding Stories of Super Science issue I linked, "A Problem in Communication." There is indeed an illustration of the coded message!

trickier with monster DNA: I'm not sure if monsters would actually have DNA, or if they would use RNA (which is more fragile), some other large molecule, or something purely magical/soul-based, but I am saving my speculations on monster biology and reproduction for some other time. (Besides which, there are certainly plenty of other people writing some very in-depth fics about monster biology and reproduction. I love fandom.) Anyway, I am assuming for brevity's sake that in a future, kinder but still human-centered world, most non-biologists would still call it "DNA" because everyone knows what that means and it's less syllables than "genetic material."
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

So remember that "Graphic Depictions of Violence" tag I stuck on this thing when I started posting? It's about to become relevant.

And once again, I would like to thank Morbane for her feedback, especially on the first scene of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I notice a couple guys looking our way, but obviously they can't use us. Right? I mean. Monsters! They know we got barely any DT in us, right? Me especially, but Alphys ain't real determined either. Right?

On the other hand, the alternative ain't much better. God, I hope they don't have any kids being held prisoner yet. Corcoran didn't mention any, but --

"No, not with them," says Corcoran, rolling his eyes. "They're monsters! Use your heads." The students look real confused now. "I only have eight spots on my research team next quarter. There are sixteen of you here; surely you know you won't all make it," he says, and some of 'em switch from confused to worried. "I only intend to take those of you who are truly dedicated. Which is not to say those of you who don't make it in are worthless. After all, it's all grist for the mill."

There's a moment when everything is still, and I look from face to face to face and watch them realize what he just asked 'em to do.

Then everything is chaos -- sixteen shouting, punching, kicking students, like sharks in white coats. Corcoran looks pretty pleased with himself. The guy who had the good sense to grab the pipe wrench is doing real well by himself, though -- he whacks a shorter kid across the face with it, draws the first blood, and Corcoran has his first sacrifice.

I guess he's selecting for ruthless bastards. Well, he does think he's already got me; makes sense to pick some more helpers to match.

"Oh my god," says Alphys, under her breath.

One of 'em breaks away from the pack. He's leaking already, red flowing down his chin, a gash across one cheek. "No! Stop! You can't -- this is crazy!" he shouts. It's Davis, the Tachibana fanboy. Poor kid. Three guys pull him back in and he can't shake 'em off. They're already strapping a second kid into the extractor -- someone stuffs a rag into his mouth to shut him up -- and I see temporary teams forming in an unspoken bond of 'hey, before I kill you, let's pick on the weaker guy."

"Sans," says Alphys under her breath.

"I can't do anything," I snap, because it's true. God, what I wouldn't give to just vanish right now. Vanish, or bring this place down around their ears. But that would be strategically unsound.

"Yeah you c-c-can!"
"It's not the right time," I tell her. "Look, I don't wanna see this either," I add. "Trust me. If I could --"

Two guys grab one of Davis' attackers from behind, and he's free again, just for a moment. He runs, trips over a thick electric cord, scrambles to his feet --

"Sans!" Alphys hisses.

"Fine," I grumble. The cord moves just a little bit higher, apparently of its own accord, and trips Linden and Noyes, who are still both pursuing Davis. He bolts. Corcoran pulls a gun on him and shoots twice. "Ow," I mutter, because jesus, stopping bullets is hard on a guy. The kid makes it to the door. I hope he can find his way out, but I ain't holding my breath, and not just because I got no lungs to do it with. After this stunt, Corcoran ain't letting him get away that easy.

Corcoran sighs. "Don't bother," he tells Linden and Noyes. "Please note that there are now seven spots on my research team," he adds, to the room at large.

Looks like while they were busy with that, Pipe Wrench Guy and a pal nabbed another guy. His skull's caved in. At least he won't suffer.

The machine's half full now, and as I see things, the biggest team is Linden, Noyes, Pipe Wrench Guy, and his rat-faced buddy. (Not that I got anything against people with rat faces -- some of my best friends etc. etc. But humans don't really pull it off well.) Pipe Wrench Guy shouts "Get Wells!" and all four of 'em rush one of the guys real fast and knock him out. Wells' friend tries to insert himself into one of the other groups but they ain't having him, and soon he's out too.

Things go real quickly then. It's four on five, but the group of four includes a tall guy with a pipe wrench, and the group of five clearly don't trust each other one bit. Pipe Wrench Guy suddenly goes for one of the smaller guys on the other team, but he surprises everyone with a sudden burst of magic, manifesting a quick little defensive barrier in front of him; the pipe wrench bounces off it and goes smack into Pipe Wrench Guy's face.

Suddenly, Magic Guy is everyone's best friend. He takes the pipe wrench for himself, and they all help him load Pipe Wrench Guy's motionless body onto the extractor.

There's still one space left. Magic Guy goes straight for Linden, swinging the pipe wrench with one hand and hemming him in with magic walls with the other hand. "What the hell?" Linden says; the pipe wrench missed, but Linden can't move anymore. "What? No, you can't -- come on, Belmont, I always looked out for you! We were friends!"

"No we weren't," Magic Guy says -- Belmont, I guess. "You were always a prick. Nobody likes you. Come on," he tells the others, "he's the last one, we can go home after this."

"Noyes! Marty! You can't let him do this to me! I'm -- I'm better at math than Belmont! I can pay you anything! Please!"

Ratface -- Marty? -- shrugs. "If you're such a math genius, you know we need eight. Which one of us do you want to take your place?" he asks. "Because I call not me."

"I don't care, anyone!" says Linden, in a panic. "Noyes, please --"

Noyes winces. "You should have fought harder. I mean... sorry?" he says, shrugging. "I mean. I don't want to be dead. And you're kind of a wet sock." This gets some nervous, terrified laughter from the others.
I feel bad for Linden, not just because he's gonna die, but because he's gonna die knowing he had all the personal charm of a mothball. As they tie him to the machine, he swears surprisingly fluently for a guy who tries so hard to come off as cultured.

Corcoran goes around feeling for pulses and making notes. From here, I can't tell just how many of the unlucky eight are still alive, but when he throws the switch, at least three of 'em are screaming. Their bodies start to liquefy, the slabs they're strapped to stain red with blood, and the containment tank stains redder with DT. The screaming stops. Eight souls shatter into bits; eight empty ribcages poke up through the remains. Corcoran turns the machine off, and goes to check the containment tank's level.

Belmont's looking real relieved, like he just won a marathon, but the rest look shaky and a little green. They ain't looking at him, either. Revealing that skill was a bad idea; sure, he came out on top, but they're never gonna trust him again. You just don't come back from that shit.

"Wow, hah, you sure showed Frank," says Marty, in a brittle, chipper tone. "I didn't know you knew magic."

Belmont's expression of relief fades. I guess it's sinking in. "He was going to hit me with a wrench! What else was I going to do?"

"Not that," someone in the group says, and Belmont whirls on them, looking more than a little crazed. No one owns up to it.

"Enough of this nonsense," says Corcoran. "You're a team now! Act like it. Good work, by the way. We'll have to run the numbers, but the extractor seems to be performing quite efficiently under the circumstances." He don't look as satisfied as I thought he would. He don't look sad, either, he just looks... blank. It's like there's nothing behind his eyes at all. "Now, we had better clean all this up. Follow me, the acid's in one of the storage rooms in the back." They follow him out. Belmont goes first; the others hesitate.

Alphys and I stare at the bodies on the extractor. It's the ribs that get to me worst. Bones shouldn't look so lifeless, and they shouldn't be covered in so much red.

On the radio, the crowd is cheering for someone, but I can't really bring myself to care who won the match.

"I -- I thought I'd n-never have to s-see that again," Alphys says, in a small voice. "We're blowing these all up before we go, right?"

"Alphys, I'd love to burn this place to the ground, but -- hell, I dunno how any of this is gonna go," I say. "Christ... I gotta get Papyrus out of here... I gotta get everyone out of here. What the hell are we doing here? We're supposed to be smart."

She don't answer my actual question, but after a little while, she does speak. "Ha. Eight human bodies in acid. That's k-kind of a crazy stoichiometry p-problem."

The sound I make could almost be described as a laugh, if you never heard one before.

There's stuff we could be talking about, I guess, but nothing I really wanna say, and she seems to feel the same way. So we just sit there for a long while, listening to ads on the radio and news neither of us cares about. Alphys has my magazine still. I think about asking for it back, but where would that leave her? It ain't doing her much good, though; she just keeps staring at the same page.

Dr. Corcoran sends seven newly-minted murderers home after what feels like a few hours, although
I'm not paying close enough attention to the radio to know, really. He jerks us around with his magic and sticks us in a storage room with that barrier magic around it. I guess we should be flattered, because they prepared it special; there's a bunk bed -- two blankets, two pillows, no sheets -- and two desks loaded with paper and pencils.

Alphys takes the bottom bunk; she mutters something about how the ladder rungs hurt her feet. I take the floor; getting up to the top looks like too much work.

The night is long and sleep ain't very restful, but I always take what I can get.

* * *

I wake up, achy and maybe tireder than I was when I went to sleep. I guess Alphys turned the lights on. My joints crack and pop a little as I stretch, and then I look around for her. She's just kinda... sitting on the floor by the door, facing a wall. "Uh. What are you doing?" I ask.

"Mapping the building!" she says, surprisingly cheerfully. "I think I found your time machine, actually."

"What? What do you mean? Why are you --" I blink, and look at how awkwardly she's positioned. "Alphys, do you have your finger in the electrical socket?" I don't feel like actually getting up, so I crawl over to where she's sitting. She's sketching out a rough plan of the building's wiring with her free hand. "Huh. I did not know you could do that." It's kind of alarming to look at; most fleshy monsters got the same problems with electricity that humans do.

"Yeah, I don't think the Flower Boys realized either." She looks pretty smug. "I'm trying to find where they're keeping Asgore. Did Tachibana tell you anything useful?"

I'm not coming up with much, unfortunately. "If I remember anything I'll get back to you. I guess keep track of anything... weird? How does it work? Your electricity-sensing magic."

"It's kind of like scrabbling around in the dark at night, only, uh, you have a really warm piece of twine to follow?" she says. "I don't know. That probably sounds really stupid."

"Nah, makes about as much sense as anything," I say. "Admittedly, most things make very little sense if you look too hard at 'em." I watch her for a moment, then think of something. "Hey, can you tell how far we are from a power plant?"

"Um. I don't know, things get really hazy the further out I...oh!" She blinks. "Uh. Not that far, I guess? Why do you need to know?"

"I know what neighborhood they took us to," I say, "but I'm a little fuzzy on exactly where we are." Let's see, last time I ended up over here, me and Papyrus had to take a little detour after dropping off a few cases of beer -- special order for a wedding -- and some of the local boys didn't like our faces. And before that, hmm, that was a funeral. It really is too bad what happened to Mr. Kozlow; he always paid on time. Still, those are both pretty far away.

Anyway, mentally triangulating from those two points gets me somewhere vague around 3000 to 4000 West Something and 4000 to 5000 South Whatever. (God bless the grid system or I'da blipped myself into the lake way more times than I already have.) But shortcuts are not really an exact science, and my vague memories of their echoes ain't always gonna be that useful either.

I explain all this to Alphys and we draw a couple maps of the neighborhood from hazy memories, trying to work out where we might be, but in the end her info ain't really very useful when we're relying on guesswork instead of actual cartography.
"Sorry," she says, glumly. "G-guess that was useless."

"I don't think it's your fault they didn't throw Mr. Rand and his buddy McNally in here with us," I point out.

"I guess not." She sighs. "W-we could radio the others and they could sit down with the maps," she suggests.

"Yeah, but let's not just yet," I say. I'm worried once Undyne knows where we are she'll rush in spears a-blazing, and that's the last thing I want. "We should wait 'til we have more to tell them, at least. Although we should probably put those radios together, if only so I can get that stupid thing out of me. I like stick-to-your-ribs cooking as much as anyone, but when it's technology I'll pass." She gives me some privacy while I untuck my shirt and fish around trying to get the piece of the radio; I swear a lot because damn this is uncomfortable.

When it's finally retrieved, Alphys has apparently done what she can with the building's wiring. She shows me the diagram she drew, and I look it over while she puts together the little radios. Alphys can mostly sense the transformers or resistors or fuses or whatever, but she can't sense orientation in space. Her ability to read distances is pretty vague and mostly a function of resistance, so her map's all over the place. Together we make another one that accounts for what we know of the building's layout.

There's a room I ain't seen yet -- we think it's probably near the back of the facility -- that takes a hell of a lot of power to run. Alphys and I both figure this merits closer inspection, and she wonders if maybe it's where they got Asgore. It's only logical that they got something special keeping him in, but I'm not sure what they'd need all that electricity for -- I was thinking magic -- and frankly I find it a little worrying to think about.

"Could they be using electricity to power a really strong barrier spell?" I ask her. "Like, the kind you'd normally need to sacrifice a soul for?" You need a human soul to do barrier magic, like I said, but some magicians don't always just stick with what they got.

"Um. I mean, theoretically, it's possible," she says. "But it's d-definitely not enough power for that."

"Okay. Well. Guess we'll try and find out when they let us out of here. What time is it, anyway?"

"I c-couldn't find a clock," she says. "I hope we g-get some food soon, I'm starving."

"Yeah, I ain't holding out much hope it'll be edible," I say. "It'll probably just go right through me."

"Oh, yeah, I g-guess probably not," she says, frowning. "Are you going to be all right here?"

I shrug. "Technically, skeletons can survive without food for a couple months at least. I'll be fine."

"R-really? How do you know that?" she asks. "That sounds... uncomfortable."

I shrug. "Maybe I read it somewhere. Look, I'll be fine, do I look like a guy who misses a meal? I got enough bone on my bones to last me a little." She don't look convinced. I guess I ain't up to feeling convincing this morning... night... whenever it is. I decide to change the subject. "You can, uh, feed electricity in there too, right?" I ask her. "Could you overload it and blow the fuse?" If this was the future with electronic everything, we'd be set. It's not, but that could still be useful.

She's shaking her head, though. "I, uh, I d-don't think so? I mean, I d-did that at the Ebott Trust & Savings heist a c-couple years ago --"
"That was you?" I ask. "Ha! That was great. Perfect timing. It sure shocked the guard who was coming after me and Papyrus. I think he was gonna subject me to some serious battery otherwise."

She rolls her eyes a little at that, but she's pleased. "Yeah, I g-guess Undyne thought it worked w-well there too! It's p-part of why I thought I could help out here." Then she frowns again. "It's j-just, they didn't really h-have, you know, three eight-p-person DT extractors, um, s-so. It was easy t-to overwhelm their system." She explains this to me like it ain't obvious, but now that I think about it, I guess it is. I feel a little dumb.

The doorknob rattles for a sec; Alphys hurries to shove all her diagrams behind the nearest desk. She tries to look like she was just sitting on the floor in some innocent, non-electrical capacity. (Not a farad in sight!)

The door opens. It's one of the kids who survived yesterday -- Belmont, the one with magic. He looks a little unsettled. He's got a tray of food.

No. He's got a tray with two plates of spaghetti. Marinara, meatballs, cheese, the whole shebang.

I have never been so happy to see a traitorous asshole. Sure, I could take or leave the food, but I'm guessing I'll recognize the, uh, strong flavor right away. If they got Papyrus cooking for the monsters, he'll be so happy.

Chapter End Notes

References:

As before, all of Corcoran's students are named for Purple Line stops. Presumably Wells' downed partner was named Washington. Belmont is full of nightlife and restaurants. Marty is me being silly -- sure, I could have called him Howard, but I decided to name him after the Merchandise Mart, which is not only an El stop but an enormous, beautiful old building.

And you're kind of a wet sock: THIS IS ACTUAL '30S SLANG, at least if the internet is to be believed. I couldn't make this up.

That's k-kind of a crazy stoichiometry p-problem: In chemistry, stoichiometry is a fancy word for "If I have 2 parts of this chemical and 3 parts of this other chemical, how much of the end product will I get out of this reaction?" I always found stoichiometry calculations very soothing, but we never dissolved bodies in any of my classes, thankfully. (Fair warning, that link goes to a pretty gristly article.)

God bless the grid system: I still need to actually memorize the grid but it can be a real lifesaver if my phone's out of batteries and I need to find a thing.

Mr. Rand and his buddy McNally: Rand McNally is an American company that makes road maps. (I did not actually know they were based here until I looked them up to make sure they'd be around in the '30s.)

Not a farad in sight!: Technically, I guess farads are a unit of electric capacitance, not capacity, but hey, close enough.
As before, Morbane and several anonymous people made suggestions that greatly improved this fic!

Also, just a heads up, I will be participating in the Jukebox Exchange for fanworks based on songs and music videos, and that will probably disrupt the update schedule for this fic. I'll try to warn you when it'll be a longer wait between chapters, though. (I figure it's good to occasionally change it up write something else so I don't get burned out on this WIP, much as I love it.)

Edited to add, because I am dumb: Zhamka did a gorgeous full-size version of her earlier shady!Sans sketch for her larger Project Songtale, and you should all look at it because it's amazing.

"Spaghetti for breakfast?" I ask.

"It's surprisingly not terrible," Belmont says.

Alphys looks skeptical. "It's not? D-did Papyrus make it?"

"Alphys, come on now," I say. "Are you saying you don't like my brother's cooking?"

"No! No, of c-course not," she says quickly. She can insult me all she wants, but she knows Papyrus is off-limits.

"It's much better than the dining hall food," says Belmont. For that moment, he seems almost like a normal person, but then I guess he remembers who he's talking to and goes back to his standard issue glower. I feel kinda bad for him then, that the closest to normal he can get to is talking over spaghetti with two prisoners here in the Dorm Room of the Damned.

He waves away the barrier magic on our room. He could be real useful in that capacity, although it would mean we'd have to trust him. Still, he's a real weak link in the chain right now. "I'm supposed to watch you eat," he says. "And take you to Dr. Corcoran after." When we don't respond immediately, he adds, "You had better not try anything! I have magic."

"I think you made that point pretty good last night, kid," I tell him.

He goes real pale, and starts to sputter. "Oh. Yeah. Well! Then you know that I, that I can do --"

"So anyway, if you like the spaghetti, Papyrus and me, we got a restaurant down in the Little Underground," I say.

"-- lots of, um. A... restaurant?" he says. He clearly ain't sure where this is going; the mention of last night really caught him off-guard, I guess. Musta forgot we were there in the midst of all the fighting. See, this is what happens when you get amateurs to do your murdering; they go around forgetting there were witnesses. He hands us the plates, not looking either of us in the eye.
"There's good pie, too, at our restaurant. Excellent pie," I say as he fumbles around on his tray for silverware.

"Pie," he echoes, frowning. He seems to be having trouble disentangling the forks.

"Except you don't get pie if you just straight-up murder people. No pie for murderers!" I say, brightly.

"It's true," Alphys says. "I'm still a p-pie exile."

He looks kinda surprised that Alphys is a pie exile, but he recovers pretty quick and gets back to the main point. "It was self-defense!" he insists. He shoves some silverware in my face, but it's handle-first, which is nice and non-threatening of him.

"Yeah, yeah," I say, taking a fork and twisting up some spag. "Tell it to Tori if you want the pie. She ain't unreasonable, she'll make some exceptions. Spaghetti's for everyone, though." I take a taste. Ugh, this is awful. I'm so glad. "You know, Alphys, I bet she'd let you out of pie exile if you asked. She, uh, she don't seem to take such a hard line if you were just pushing the buttons like Asgore told you."

"I'm t-too scared to ask," she mutters. She takes a cautious nibble of the spaghetti, wrinkles her snout, and then, grudgingly, eats a forkful.

"Eh, don't mind me, I'm just saying, pie is good and murder's bad. You know? Just something to think about for when you're done with Corcoran's little science fair project." I watch Belmont for a sec. He ain't looking at me or Alphys, he's just staring off into space. Yeah, he's definitely a weak link. I'm curious just how he'll break. Think I'll save really yanking that chain for later, though. "Jeez, I dunno what his problem is, I was just trying to make small talk," I tell Alphys, like he ain't here.

"I think most p-people stick to t-talking about the weather," she says. She's still pushing that spaghetti around her plate.

"You know, for some reason people get real uncomfortable when I do that," I say. "Maybe it's my delivery." I grin. "Or maybe it's the context. Anyway, you really should talk to Tori about the pie. See how it pans out. I bet she'll see that that particular decision of hers was a little half-baked and kinda crumb-y."

"You only think that b-because you were --" she starts, but she shuts up real quick when I look pointedly at Belmont. "...y-you were always on her g-good side," she finishes.

"Yeah, yeah, only 'cause I was her pen pal," I say.

"Oh! I think you m-mean, uh, her p-pun pal," she says. "R-right?"

Aw. Alphys tried real hard there. I won't tell her that one's less a pun and more an official designation by now. "Yeah, yeah. Point is, I letter get to know me a long time ago."

"Sans, that one was really bad," she says.

"You people, always trying to stamp out my sense of humor," I say.

"Sans --"

"Well if you ink that, you got another --"
"Would both of you just shut up and eat?" snaps Belmont. "I don't care about pie! Or stamps! Or your stupid pen pal!"

"Ooh, watch out, Alphys, we got a badass over here," I say.

His nostrils flare. "I said --"

"No, really. What are you gonna do to me?" I ask, grinning up at him. "Your Dr. Corcoran needs me and if he don't have me, boy is he gonna be pissed. I bet his magic beats yours sure as rock beats scissors."

He pauses, and looks at me and Alphys like he's only just seeing us, like he's only just realizing he's been threatening actual people. Then he looks ashamed of himself. Well, good.

There's a real awkward silence before Belmont pulls up a chair -- the one from the desk Alphys shoved her diagrams behind. Alphys and I briefly try not to look worried the drawings'll slide out from behind the desk, but they stay put.

We don't talk much; I keep trying to make dumb pasta puns but the way Alphys looks nervously between me and Belmont every time I say something makes me figure it's probably not worth it. Oh well. I know we'll all get pasta this.

When we're done eating Belmont leads the two of us to the room with the time machine in it. Corcoran's there with a couple of the other students, Noyes and Marty the rat-faced guy, who Corcoran keeps calling Mr. Sellers. Neither of 'em look like they got any sleep last night, and they look real spooked when we walk in.

"Aah, there you are," says Corcoran, almost brightly. It's the cheeriest I ever saw him, actually, and it is creepy as hell. "Now, we've been having difficulty with getting the fourth-dimensional rotors and the Cherenkov buffers to --"

"Whoa, whoa, wait a sec," I tell him, holding up my hands. "Talk me through the design, it's a little different from the one we had. Besides, I don't think Alphys has seen one of these before."

"Why are they here?" Noyes asks, glaring at us.

"They're going to be working with us," says Corcoran, patiently. "Mr. Sans has accomplished a great deal in the field of time travel, and Miss Alphys is the person who redesigned the Determination extraction process so that it would actually be cost-effective. The fact that they are monsters is irrelevant." Well, I'm glad the blank-eyed murderer has made that little speech on tolerance. Makes me feel great.

"I don't see why we can't get our subjects from here and now," says Marty. "And he sounds like some kind of grifter, not a physicist. I mean, listen to him. Couldn't we just put the prison population to good use? I think the Determination level of criminals tends to be very --"

"Mr. Sellers, do you want to be a part of this research or not?" Corcoran asks. "Everyone you've worked with has said such good things about your work ethic as well as your intelligence; it would be a pity if you slunk away from this challenge. Of course, I can put you to work on the extractor if you want something easier... no? Well, then."

The kid don't say anything after that, but I decide I better keep an eyesocket on him, because so far it's the closest anyone here's come to telling Corcoran he was wrong. He was clearly looking for guys who wouldn't shy away from killing, and he sure got that. In the process, though, he also got a bunch of guys who were afraid to ask questions or tell him no. I mean, they said "welp, guess we
gotta kill each other" instead of "there's sixteen of us and only one of him, let's tell him to fuck himself and go for some pizza." They might be able to spool out equations like anything, but they can't solve real problems to save their lives. (And trust me, I'm real familiar with the type.)

Anyway, Corcoran gives us a quick rundown on their time machine; Alphys looks like she's... kinda following along and kinda not, and the students are varying degrees of lost. Fair enough; physics will come a long way in the years between now and when I was in school. It's been a while since I used any of this stuff, too, so I gotta make sure to pay attention and stop trying to think of a good pun on "tachyon." (Of course I find one as soon as I give up looking. "Chrome looks so tachyon a time machine, don't you think?" No one's impressed.)

Unsurprisingly, they got stuck in one of the places I kept getting stuck when I was trying to rebuild after losing Gaster. They're also having trouble getting the protective barriers to stick around the passenger compartment -- we had some pretty advanced materials anchoring ours, but, uh, then we skipped the actual spells, because we figured we didn't need 'em given past successes, and we were real impatient, and uh, the guy who was supposed to cast the barriers didn't show up that day. For some reason. I dunno if not having his magic was the reason we failed so catastrophically, but it sure didn't help.

(Someone mighta done some stuff to that guy's car that morning, and then swiped his wallet with his transit card still in it, just so he couldn't get there on time. Someone was pretty angry at that guy, huh? Well, I guess that someone got what they deserved in the end.)

Right now these jerks ain't fooling around with anything real advanced in terms of physical materials, since they don't have any -- although I'm starting to think maybe that's what Alphys is here for. They do have someone to cast barriers -- two someones, actually, although Belmont ain't looking thrilled about being one of 'em, and no one else seems real happy to be working that closely with him.

Well, he did it to himself. And to Linden, and that guy with the wrench too.

We work for a while on the machine. I manage to convince 'em that I actually do know my shit, although I myself am still skeptical on that count. Alphys bears the brunt of their condescending pedantry, which she accepts wearily as the best treatment she's gonna get from these jerks.

Other students pass in and out of the room -- some of 'em seem to be maintaining the computer, some of 'em just have questions for Corcoran, and some of 'em need to borrow Belmont or Noyes or Sellers for a few minutes. It's hard to read those guys, but I try to get a feel for Noyes and Sellers, at least.

Lemme tell you, the signal to Noyes ratio is pretty bad whenever he opens his mouth. The guy's an idiot. I mean, he sure knows a lot, and if you tell him how, he can apply it, but you can't just let him loose on a problem without babysitting. All his opinions are from someone else, and I bet if I spent more time with him, I could pick out which ones are his dad's, which came from his best friend in high school, and which of 'em he read in the paper sometime last week.

As for Marty Sellers... if people are walking around on eggshells around Belmont, they're stomping hard all over him to compensate. There's something setting him apart from the pack and making it real hard for him to gain any respect. He's got a real hard edge to him, so maybe it's just that, but I can't help thinking it's a defense mechanism. Of the three, though, he's the only one who seems to ask any real questions aside from "so what do you want me to do now?" and "when's lunch?"

Speaking of which, when is lunch? I want some damn lunch. Sure, I've been taking breaks, but I'm nowhere near reaching my personal daily quota of not doing anything, and I need a long lunch break to catch up. Ah, well. To be fair, I've mostly been wandering around with a clipboard taking random
notes, looking real close at components, and saying "Huh" and "Hmm" real thoughtfully. But pretending to do stuff is harder than it sounds.

Alphys is explaining to Sellers why one of his ideas is totally wrong, and making a surprising amount of headway -- he's even asking her questions! And listening to the answers! -- when there's a clattering noise from the doorway and we all turn to see Tachibana with a cart full of plates and a big covered tray of something that smells very vaguely tomato-y.

His left eye is turning that mottled purple humans get if you bang 'em up real good. He's all smiles, though, so I guess it's not so bad. "Hey, guys! I brought lunch. It's... spaghetti and eggs. Is that a thing? I didn't know that was a thing." He don't look entirely convinced it oughta be a thing.

"Ah. There you are," says Corcoran. "The boss isn't very pleased with you."

"Yeah?" Tachibana asks.

"You won when you weren't supposed to, apparently." Corcoran shrugs. "It'd be much easier on all of us if you just went along with this, you barely had to--"

"Hey, my arm slipped!" says Tachibana. "You know how hard it is to control this stuff, right? Anyway, it was a pretty good fight! You should've seen it!"

"I'll remember that next time I want to watch a completely pointless and needlessly violent spectacle," says Corcoran, drily. I guess he likes to make his own fun.

Tachibana hands out plates of food cheerfully, but it's a brittle, fuck-you kind of cheer. "Hey, uh, where's the rest of your guys?" he asks Corcoran.

"What do you mean, the rest?" Corcoran asks.

"Um. I swear there were way more of them in here yesterday," says Tachibana, scratching his head. "I found four of them in the big extractor room, and then you guys in here, and obviously I'll feed the prisoners after this, except for Mr. Dreemurr in back -- unless you have the key? -- but I thought you had more students. Didn't you?"

Belmont, Sellers, and Noyes are all peering anxiously at him. Me, I'm trying the grub. Actually, it's not completely awful. Maybe I'll order this next time I'm at Lo Spag.

"No, I don't have the key," Corcoran says sourly. Heh. The Flower don't trust him, I guess. "As for the students, most of them had schedule conflicts, what with the start of the school year. You'd know how it was if you were any kind of scholar."

"Oh, that's too bad," says Tachibana. But there's something off in how he says it; it's like he's almost too unconcerned. He catches my eye and gives me a helpless little microshrug, barely a shake of the head, which don't go anywhere towards answering any of my questions. "I guess if you need me I'll be in the kitchen helping with cleanup!" Tachibana departs, and I'm left kinda unsettled. Did he know there was gonna be a bloodbath here last night? And if so, how much of that did he intend to convey to me, and how much is just him having a lousy poker face?

"What an idiot," Noyes says, after Tachibana leaves. "What's his name, Tackybananana? You think he started out that stupid or did he get punched in the head too many times?"

"Anyone who signs up to get punched in the head isn't very bright to begin with," Sellers says. He looks a little worried as he says it, though. He's probably smart enough to realize signing up for this wasn't the best idea he ever had.
"True, true," says Noyes. He starts carefully picking all the noodles out of his eggs. "Wish he was at least smart enough not to let that idiot skeleton cook, though."

"That's my brother you're talking about," I say, flatly. No one appears to give a fuck what I think, though, which is business as usual.

"You're free to bring your own food," says Corcoran. "The spaghetti is free, and keeps the hostages in good health."

"It is better than the dining hall stuff, you have to admit," says Belmont.

"Ugh, I never go there, that stuff's vile," says Sellers.

Noyes laughs. "That's because you still let your mother make you lunch. Hey, why didn't you bring any of that gross stuff she makes today? Is this awful spaghetti better than her cooking?"

Sellers goes a little red. "Shut up, Noyes."

Noyes puts on a falsetto voice. "Oh Martyyyy, come home! Have some gross pickled fish, Marty! It's so healthy!"

Sellers takes one last bite of his eggs, then pushes out his chair and hurries over to the blackboard where he and Alphys were working. He makes a show of considering it real closely while Noyes continues to be a dick.

Finally, Belmont says "Noyes, I think your problem is you've been hanging around with Linden too long. And you're the one who said he was a wet sock! Guess they come in pairs."

Noyes shuts the hell up, and Sellers relaxes enough to actually consider the stuff Alphys was telling him. He asks her a question -- something about what failsafes she'd install to keep the thing from getting stuck outside of normal time -- and she gets real excited about the answer, so I guess he must be on the right track.

Things are humming along pretty well for a while there. Alphys and Sellers got a couple of real great, ambitious ideas that I don't think anyone can accomplish. Belmont is working his way through a stack of reference books trying to find the kind of material that won't exist for a few decades at least. Noyes is still chugging away at his calculations like a good boy, which is all anyone can expect of him. Corcoran's maintaining his anachronistic computer. And I'm standing in the corner filling up my paper with a list of the stuff in this room and wondering if I could scrabble enough spare parts together to make a bomb. Sure, there's other ways of destroying the extractors, but ugh, I don't wanna do that, it always gives me a headache.

Then Tachibana wanders in again. "Hey, um, sorry to be annoying, I need to borrow both of the monsters."

Corcoran doesn't look up. "For...?"

"Well, uh, it's kind of funny, actually," says Tachibana, looking like he's trying to find it funny, "but basically, so, the skeleton, the cook, Papyrus, he --"

"If you'd get to the point today I'd appreciate it," says Corcoran.

"He wants to see them once a day," says Tachibana, "or he won't work."

Corcoran rolls his eyes at that. "Why don't you just --" Then he glances over to me and apparently
reconsiders. After another moment, he finally comes up with, "Don't be ridiculous. We
don't really need his cooperation."

"Patience says -- well, she says the Flower gave her express orders to keep all the monsters healthy.
Because, valuable hostages, she says," says Tachibana, shrugging. "I don't know, I'm just passing it
along. Anyway, we have to show Papyrus his brother and Alphys are okay. Also he wants to know
how you liked lunch."

"Don't worry, it's fine, I can step away for a sec," I say. "I'll tell him you all loved it --"

"Tell him he could probably get a job at the dining hall," says Sellers.

"Tell him he should run the dining hall," says Belmont.

"Let's not go overboard," Sellers says. "Tell him --"

"I don't care what you tell him, just get out of here and be back quickly," snaps Corcoran.

"D-do I have to go?" Alphys asks. "I'm k-kind of in the middle of --" She nods at the blackboard --
"s-sorry, it's just, I know Sans can t-tell Papyrus --"

"No, I think you'd better come with," says Tachibana.

Now I know damn well Papyrus didn't insist on seeing Alphys, and much as I love Papyrus, I hope
he didn't insist on seeing me either, because that would mean he's worried about me, and I try not to
let him do that. But I better go with Tachibana if I wanna see what's up, and I definitely wanna see
what's up. "C'mon, Alphys, you two can talk puzzles."

She looks confused. "But I d-don't -- uh, okay. I g-guess."

Once we're out in the hallway with Tachibana, his smile melts away. Jesus, he looks
terrified.

"Okay, what the hell --" I start, but he shakes his head.

I exchange a look with Alphys. She don't look real thrilled about this either. Well, if he tries anything
I guess I gotta be ready, but for now I'll pretend I trust him.

We don't talk as he leads us to wherever we're going, but then, surprisingly enough, we do get to the
kitchens. It smells vile, like dirty water and burnt tomatoes, and Papyrus is there washing dishes. He's
got the radio cranked up and he's singing at the top of his ribcage. Patience Gorman is there too,
leaning against a counter with her fingers in her ears.

Papyrus ain't a great singer, but the important thing is he enjoys it.

"If you're bluuuue and you don't know where -- SANS!" he says, not even bothering to dry his
hands off before he kneels to hug me. "Sans! Did the humans enjoy my spaghetti and eggs?"

"Buddy, I know at least one of 'em wishes you'd take over the university dining hall. I'd say you did
an eggселent job." He's so pleased with himself he doesn't even groan at the pun.

"Not that this isn't charming, but we have important things to get back to," says Gorman. She glares
at Papyrus. "So if you could keep singing?"

"Oh! Of course, yes!" says Papyrus eagerly. "Forgive me, Sans! I have an important mission, which
is to be loud!" And he stands up and goes back to washing dishes and singing, and banging a lotta
pots together as he does.
I grin a little wider. If you want someone to be loud, you couldn't do better than Papyrus.

Chapter End Notes

References:
Cherenkov buffers: Chermikov radiation is produced when something passes through a medium going faster than the speed of light through that medium. It is bright blue. A tachyon is a (theoretical) particle that is always traveling faster than light, and if it existed would produce such radiation.

If you're bluuue and you don't know where: Obviously Papyrus is singing "Puttin' On the Ritz."

That's pretty much it for this chapter! Although I will leave you with this amusing anecdote about what happens when you try to steal technobabble from H. G. Wells.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

As before, Morbane provided me with excellent in-depth critique, and other (anonymous) early readers were helpful too!

Just a heads-up that I may miss an update next week because it's my dad's birthday tomorrow and I'm going to try and get my taxes done this weekend and I keep having doctor's appointments. I'll do my best, but it's not going to be a great week for writing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tachibana shuts the door. Alphys is scowling at Gorman as she comes in; Gorman ain't paying her any mind, though. "He doesn't suspect anything, does he?" she asks Tachibana. "Did he see the paper this morning?"

"I doubt he even left the building last night. I don't think he suspects, but how would I know? That guy barely reacts to anything, you know how he is," says Tachibana. "I mean... no offense, Patience, I know you guys kind of can't help --"

" Anyway," says Gorman, sharply, "we have a great deal to discuss. Reynard's apprised you of the situation?"

"In an obnoxiously vague kinda way, yeah," I say. "But what's this about the paper?"

Tachibana makes a face. "The cops are looking for one of the guys who was here yesterday, they're saying he killed someone! But I recognized the picture, it was that guy Davis, he always seemed so nice! And, and, half of Corcoran's students are gone today, I don't believe for a minute they're all at school or whatever --"

"M-maybe in the medical wing," says Alphys, "b-being used for d-demos."

Tachibana takes a second to process this, but when he does, he grimaces. "Oh. Oh, I thought it might be something like that," he says, miserably. "But I was hoping maybe -- oh, this is so bad." He's fidgety and anxious, and nothing like the cheerful thoughtless guy who laughed at a hostage's bad jokes a day ago.

Gorman just rolls her eyes. "Unsurprising. This is classic Corcoran," she says. "Always thinks he can improve on the plan, and he's never satisfied with the quality of his assistants. I'm very surprised he let one get away, though. And he ought to have come to one of us before trying to frame this Davids --"

"Davis," says Tachibana.

"Well, whatever his name is," she snaps. "He should stop calling on the police for favors without telling anyone, is the point." She says it like his only infraction was to use the wrong form for his taxes. Tachibana gives her a lost kinda look, but he don't comment.

"So, uh, back to this mess we got here," I say. "I was told you were gonna help spring us? That sounds kinda fun; mind explaining?"
"Also," says Alphys, "you should t-tell us why we should t-t-trust you. Because I r-really don't." She don't seem real inclined to listen, though, whatever they say. She just glares.

There ain't exactly an awkward silence, but we all hear Papyrus warble along with the radio -- "I'm just a wooooman! That's only huuuuman! One you should be sorry foooooor!" Actually, he almost sounds okay for a second or two.

I make a stab at continuing the conversation. "I think, uh, I think what Alphys means is, you bein' kind of murderous shits and having a history of stabbing us and all... we'd love to work with you --"

"We would n-n-not love to work with you," says Alphys.

"We would love to get out of here alive," I say, elbowing her in the ribs, "which means we might hafta work with you! Which is okay! I'm all for it! But we gotta have some assurance you ain't gonna stab us in the back. Or the front."

"Or the n-n-n... neck," says Alphys, crossing her arms. "Like you d-did with Und--"

"Let's... let bygones be bygones for now," I say to her. Yeesh, she's still pretty upset about that.

"I wanted co-conspirators, not a comedy duo," Gorman mutters. "Look," she says, to us this time. "Here's what's going on. Reynard has to get out of here, and it has to be soon. I know you alone don't have the authority to guarantee the Dreemurrs' protection of him, but I'm hoping helping the monsters escape will make Asgore more amenable to that." She don't sound real certain, for once in her life.

"Uh. You're coming too, right?" Tachibana asks. "I thought you were coming!"

She looks a little stricken. "I don't know if I can," she says. He looks pretty dismayed, so she amends that real quickly. "I'll try. Oh, for -- don't give me that look, it'll be fine." She obviously knows it's not gonna be fine, but she's willing to settle for Tachibana thinking it will.

"Okay," he says, in a small worried voice. "But --"

"It'll be fine," she repeats. "You will be out."

Tachibana sighs. "Right," he says, unconvinced. I'm a little surprised that anyone can be fond of Patience Gorman, but apparently he is. And this is the most emotion I've ever seen her have, this little spark of weird protectiveness.

But she hides that away real quick. "At any rate, I'm willing to assist you in releasing your compatriots if you promise to bring Reynard along."

"Lady, I don't make promises, especially not to the likes of you," I say. "But look, he seems like a ...remarkably non-murderous kid, considering his upbringing, so I guess it's worth a try."

"Gee, thanks," says Tachibana. He don't look that offended.

"I gotta ask, though. What's the hurry?"

"It's complicated," she says quickly. "Look, it's not important --"

"It sounds real important to me," I say. "You sound pretty scared. And I don't like you, Gorman, but I gotta hand it to you, you don't scare easy."

She sighs. "The Flower has a way of... making us easier to command. More like him. I was a good
person once," she says, bitterly. "I know that's hard to believe. Maybe... maybe I just thought I was a
good person, maybe it was all self-delusion. Sometimes it's hard to remember. But. I've seen this
happen too many times before, and I don't want it to happen to Reynard. I want him safe."

"C-c-can you b-believe this?" snaps Alphys.

"Honestly? I've seen some pretty weird stuff," I say. "I don't really believe it yet, but it don't sound
completely nuts."

"I think I know a bit more about the situation than someone who makes singing robots," says
Gorman, looking down her nose at Alphys. "Frankly, I'm not sure why the Flower bothered asking
for you, although these days he never tells anybody anything. What exactly is your utility here, and
why should I care what you think of me?"

"I'm a, a, a scientist," says Alphys, trying to look threatening. She does have big teeth, I'll give her
that, but she's maybe half an inch taller than me and she always overcompensates for being short
instead of working with it. "And you've h-hurt too many of my f-f-friends for me t-t-to --"

"Alphys," I say, "I think we've hurt some of her friends too." Such as they are. "Like, uh, I seem to
recall Undyne picking Tachibana up and using him as a club last time they fought."

"I don't really remember most of that night," says Tachibana. "This Undyne sounds pretty cool,
though!"

Papyrus pipes up from his place at the sink. "Undyne is almost as amazing as me!" he says. "Without
her I would never have become such an expert in the art of spaghetti! It's difficult to believe, I know,
but true!"

I grin at that. "She ain't as cool as you, Papyrus, nobody's ever gonna manage that." I turn to the two
of 'em. "So what's your actual plan for getting us out of here?"

"Not telling you that," says Gorman. "Not unless you agree to work with us."

Papyrus is back to singing. "-- a two-faaaaace, a worrisome thiing who'll leave you to siiiing the
bluuues in the niiiight!" Good. He don't need to hear all this.

"How do you know you can trust us?" I ask, because I'm curious. I mean, hell, I don't even know if I
can trust myself half the time.

She glances at Papyrus, and when she speaks next, it's real quiet, so he can't hear. "I get the distinct
impression that double-crossing us wouldn't be consistent with the image you'd like your brother to
have of you."

Shit. Am I that obvious? Who am I kidding, I'm absolutely that obvious. I let the lights of my pupils
go out. "Heh. Well... if you hurt even the tiniest phalange on him, it's gonna be the last thing you
do."

"Understood," she says. "And the same goes for Reynard."

"I got that impression, yeah," I say. "Now that that's cleared up, if you could let me and my
associates here talk it over... I mean, I guess you could also take the opportunity to plot against us in
privacy if you wanted."

Gorman rolls her eyes. "Right." She turns around and heads for the door. "Come on, Ray. Let's talk
about that fight last night --"
"Oh come on," he whines, following her. "It's not a big deal! Pulaski wanted a fair fight!"

"Yes, it is, and you know perfectly well Pulaski is not the one that matters. We need to have a talk about following instructions," Their voices fade out as they leave.

"So," I say. "Thoughts?"

"She almost k-killed Undyne!" says Alphys, who looks like she wants to strangle me but is fundamentally thwarted by my lack of a windpipe.

"She ain't necessarily gonna be coming with us," I say. "And Tachibana seems... well, if nothing else, I think he really is scared. I know scared when I see it."

Papyrus pipes up. "He's very nice! He talked them into letting me make spaghetti for the rest of the monsters here! I like to think it's made their stay here more like a vacation! Only with guards, and no sightseeing!"

"Just because your b-brother t-t-trusts him --" Alphys snarls.

"And if we don't help 'em," I say, "who's to say they won't make life very difficult for us?"

"I think he and Undyne should be friends!" says Papyrus, although how he can hear our conversation over all the racket he's making, I can't tell. Maybe he's just talking to say something. "Then all of my friends will be friends!"

"Yeah, I bet he and Undyne'll get along swimmingly," I say, cheerfully.

"Yes!" says Papyrus, real pleased with his friend-introducing skills already. "Wait. Sans, why are you making fish puns at a time like this?"

"You're right, Papyrus, it'd be more accurate to say they'd get along like a house on fire," I say. He just groans. "Hey, if you two keep scorching the ceiling during cooking lessons, I think it's only fair I get to make jokes about it," I point out.

"B-but he's one of the Flower B-boys!" Alphys says.

"Not just yet," I point out. "If Gorman is to be believed --"

"If," says Alphys.

"-- he ain't had his evil bar mitzvah yet. And if what she said is true, it'd explain some of -- well. Last night."

"What happened last night?" Papyrus asks. "Was it exciting? Were there adventures?"

"Nah, it was pretty dull," I say. "Just a lot of administrative stuff, Corcoran was deciding who was gonna be in his inner circle. I almost fell asleep."

Alphys gives me a look, one that translates pretty readily as Really, Sans? "I, f-for one, would like t-to know a l-lot more about this ...'evil b-bar mitzvah.'"

"You know, me too," I say, "but I think we gotta make our priority getting out alive. If it goes sour, I guess I'll just have to take care of 'em."

"I think we should definitely do that anyway!" says Papyrus. "By ensuring that they have enough to eat and a place to sleep!"
"Yeah," I say, after a moment's pause. "Exactly that." Goddamnit, he's gonna be heartbroken if they do try and stab us in the back. More reason to lay 'em to waste if they do. "So, are you on board, Alphys?"

She sighs. "With a l-lot of r-reservations."

"What a fantastic idea!" says Papyrus. "Taking them to Club MTT after this is the perfect way to say 'Welcome to not being evil!' You really are a genius, Dr. Alphys!"

"I'm n-not actually a...." She sighs. "Thanks, P-papyrus."

"You're very welcome!"

I can't help but grin at that. Maybe soon we'll be out of this mess and Papyrus and me'll be back home, driving each other a little crazy.

A new song starts up on the radio and -- oh god, it's one of those yodeling cowboy ones. Papyrus loves this shit. Me and Alphys cringe a little as he starts up, but at least no one's gonna be listening in on the conversation.

I knock loudly at the door to the kitchen before cracking it open. "We're finished conniving if you are," I say, cheerful as always. Gorman and Tachibana come back into the room. The door closes. "We've decided you're probably not gonna backstab us right away."

"I'm so glad I've finally gained the science iguana's trust," says Gorman, flatly. Alphys opens her mouth to correct her, but then thinks better of it.

"So, what's your plan?" I ask. "I mean, it's probably a lousy plan but I gotta hear it before I knock it."

Gorman looks just thrilled as hell to be working with us, let me tell you. "Well, first, we have to get Asgore out of the meat freezer."

Papyrus yodels on, apparently blissfully oblivious of the fact that they literally iced our old boss.

"The... w-what?" Alphys asks.

I'm as confused as Alphys at first, but then it clicks. "Oh. Oh, of course that's where you got Asgore. 'Cause of the fire magic, right?" He's gonna need a lot of tea after this. "How were you thinking we'd get him out, though?"

Gorman smiles. It's a weird thing to see. I mean, I've seen her fake smile when she makes those rousing speeches about the demon rum or whatever, but this one's a real smile and for some reason it kinda creeps me out more. "I met with my employer this morning, and volunteered to handle Asgore for the next few days. So he gave me the key."

"R-really? He just... g-gave it to you?" Alphys asks.

"We go back quite a ways," Gorman says.

"Yeah, Patience is about a million years old," says Tachibana.

"Reynard, please," she snaps. He just shrugs. "At any rate, I'll keep Corcoran distracted, you'll let him out --"

"What about the barrier spells?" I ask.
"Well... you're monsters," she says. "You have magic."

"Uh. I dunno what kind of school you went to but it was lousy on magical education," I say. She bristles at that, but I continue. "Only human magic or a lot of soul power can break barriers, everyone knows that. I mean, uh, that's kinda important, that's how you guys locked us up underground for three hundred years."

"But I've seen --" She sighs. "Well, no, that's.... Really, though? Not even Asgore's magic?"

I shake my head. "Maybe," I say, "if it's a real flimsy barrier, but probably not if he's weak from being on ice for that long. And hey, I'm willing to change my mind -- I've seen plenty of weird stuff in my time -- but I never saw that. If you've seen it, you mind telling me where --"

"It's not important, we can't use that," she says. "Well, then, we'll have to get Corcoran to work with us or --"

"One of the students is an okay magician," I say. "Belmont. He's, uh.... He ain't real stable right now, on account of what happened last night. I'm still figuring out where all his buttons are so I can push 'em. It's a work in progress."

"What if I just, I don't know, grab Corcoran and make him do it?" Tachibana asks.

Gorman sighs. "He'll kill you."

"Oh. That's true," he says, looking disappointed. "Hey, what about the time machine? Couldn't we use that to go back in time to before everyone was shut up and then --"

"No," I say, and I am a little startled at how Gorman and Alphys are also protesting.

"Okay, okay, don't bite my head off."

"Could you just ask him nicely?" Papyrus calls over his shoulder. "That's what I would do!"

"Sadly, he don't really appreciate manners like you and me do."

"You and I, Sans," says Papyrus.

"Exactly! You and me, we got great manners," I say. The anguished noise he makes at that gives me strength, really it does. And now I have an idea. "Hey, Papyrus. Does Corcoran take the barrier down to let you out of your room every day? I mean, he has to, don't he?"

Papyrus pauses and turns on all the taps at full blast, creating a deafening roar of water, before answering. "Yes, he does! But he puts it right back up again."

"And does he do anything special to keep you here?" I ask. "Like, uh. Could you walk out of here if you wanted to?"

Papyrus cringes. "Well! I, I could. But! He told me... not to. He said that... some very bad things would happen if I did."

I'd love to sit down and have a long talk with Dr. Corcoran about this. "Don't worry, Papyrus, we won't let anything bad happen. Will we, Miss Gorman." It ain't a question.

"Where are you going with this?" she asks.

"Where I'm going with this is that there's three times a day the barrier's down on one of the cells," I
say. "Papyrus, you're sharing a space with two Tems and Greater Dog, yeah?"

"Oh, yes! Temmie and Temmie are very educational," says Papyrus. "They've been telling me all about the rich history of Tem! It's very interesting! I don't understand any of it!"

"Sounds about right," I say. I turn to Tachibana. "Could you get us a couple big pieces of cardboard, as much as Papyrus can smuggle in under his jacket?"

"Why?" Papyrus asks. "Oh! Oh! Are you going to put something in a box and give it to Dr. Corcoran? He doesn't seem very happy, maybe that would cheer him up."

"Oh, he's gonna get something," I say. "I don't think it'll cheer him up, but I'll be pretty happy if it works." I shrug.

"There's plenty of cardboard," says Tachibana. "But I could probably get you something else if you - -"

"It's gotta be cardboard," I say. "And it's gotta be enough to make a vest for Greater Dog."

Tachibana nods, although he looks a little baffled.

"Okay, that's Corcoran out of the way, probably," I say. "Damn, I gotta get Belmont to come around for this to work. I think Corcoran's too dangerous to try and make him undo our barriers. And I'm still not sure how we're taking out the extractors and the time machine. Plus we're gonna have to distract the other students."

"I c-can do that," says Alphys. "If, if you think you have a way to k-keep Corcoran out of the extractor room f-for a while, I can, uh, I can have them do all k-kinds of things to m-mess it up. I don't think any one of them knows how it all w-works."

"And the time machine?" I ask. Sure, Corcoran could rebuild it but I wanna give him as much trouble as I possibly can.

"Is it good enough to just smash it into pieces?" Tachibana asks. He clearly wants the opportunity to smash something into pieces.

"Yeah, sure, why not," I say, shrugging. "I like this plan a lot so far. I'm doing barely anything! Although, okay, I can think of one thing. But I'm gonna need that key to the meat freezer."

Gorman just gives me a look. "What? Do I really look that stupid?"

"You really do," I say. "Besides, I got something I can give you in return."

"What is it?" she asks.

"You'll see when you give me the key," I say.

"Ooh, I love surprises!" says Papyrus.

"Why do you need the key?" she asks.

"Because if I can't get Belmont to change his mind, I think Asgore could," I say.

"Really?" Tachibana looks pretty skeptical. "I mean, I'm not really following any of this plan to begin with --"
"Except for the smashing," I say.

"Yeah! That's cool!" he agrees. "But I don't see how Asgore could magically talk him into anything."

"You ever met him?" I ask. He shakes his head. "He's like... listen, lemme tell you about the first time I met Asgore Dreemurr." I half expect Gorman to tell me to shut up and get to the point, but she's just looking expectant. Guess her name suits her.

"So I'd been having a little fun at one of his casinos. I was new in town, didn't really know the lay of the land, and uh, let's just say luck was with me that night." Papyrus don't really approve of my cheating at cards, so I'll just leave it at that. "Well, at least 'til I found myself bein' tied up and loaded into the trunk of a car by two angry guard dogs." I look around to make sure everyone's following along; Tachibana looks briefly confused when I mention the guard dogs, but I guess he figures it out pretty quick. Gorman I can't really read, but I'm getting used to that.

"So they hauled me in to see their boss, and there I was, sitting in front of Asgore Dreemurr. Now, I'd heard a ton of stories about how scary he was, so I wasn't really looking forward to the meeting." Okay, mainly I heard this stuff when I was growing up, in the future, where the boss monster with a trident is a stock gangster movie villain. "And when I first saw him, he looked terrifying, all horns and teeth and about a million feet tall. Then he frowned down at me, and all I could think was, This is it, Sans, you're gonna die."

"You never told me about this!" Papyrus says, sounding a little upset.

"Hey, don't worry, I come out okay at the end of this story!" I reassure him.

"Oh! Well, good!" he says. "I wouldn't like the other kind of story!"

And that is exactly why he don't know about my past. Future. Whatever. "Anyway, so he looked down at me, all frowny, and I was convinced he was gonna incinerate me there and then. But then he said 'I understand you've been cheating at cards. Please explain to me why you felt the need to do this.' Like he was a school principal or something. I laughed and gave him some kind of jerk answer like 'I just really like money' or something, and he suggested I work for him instead. Anyway, he gave me and Papyrus jobs soon after that."

"Yes! Although not the job I wanted," says Papyrus. "But someday I will prove myself! Which Undyne's cooking lessons will prepare me for! Somehow!"

"Papyrus, don't worry about it! You're doing a great job as a driver, and I pity the poor bastard who ended up with that other job, it sounded lousy," I say. "My point is, though, Asgore's a surprisingly convincing guy. If my bad jokes and needling won't get through to him, maybe good old-fashioned decency will."

Gorman sighs. Then she pulls a key out of her pocket. "Just so you know," she says, handing it to me, "if I'd caught you doing that, you'd be dead."

"Lady, I never doubted it," I say, pocketing the key. "Of course, for all I know this don't open anything. "Out of curiosity, was my story really that convincing?"

"Not in the least," she says. "But I have met Asgore." "Huh! Well, hey, I tried," I say. I'm a little surprised she's met him outside of a fight, but if the Flower trusts her as much as she says, maybe she had to negotiate with Asgore in one of our earlier rounds with the Flower Boys. No point speculating now, though. I pull out the miniature two-way
radio. "Here you go."

"Sans, you can't just g-give that to them!" says Alphys.

"What is this?" says Gorman, looking it over. "Some kind of pen... microphone --"

"It's a two-way radio. Real small, though."

"How did you manage to sneak this in?" she asks sharply. Boy, she looks pissed that she missed something. She should be glad she's working with people this sneaky.

I shrug. "I'm just that good. Anyway, Alphys has another one, so I can let you know if there's any progress on the Belmont situation -- but we got people back in the Little Underground monitoring the frequency, too, so they'll know who to blame if you double-cross us."

"Fair enough," says Gorman. She don't quite look like she believes me, but she ain't gonna try anything, I don't think. Alphys manages to stop gritting her teeth together long enough to explain how to use the radios; I take some time to catch up with Papyrus, and tell him again how great Belmont thought his spaghetti was. He is very eager to meet "a human of such exceptional taste," as he puts it, and I, well. I hope I don't disappoint.

Chapter End Notes

References:
I'm just a wooooman! That's only huuuman! One you should be sorry foooooor!: This is Ethel Waters' "Am I Blue?" (And, dang, the cover I have of it is awful compared to hers.)

a two-faaaaace, a worrisome thiing who'll leave you to siiiing the bluuues in the niiight!: "Blues in the Night." I sincerely apologize for this blatant anachronism, since this was written in 1941 and the good people of the year 193X would not know it, but ...I really don't want to change it, it's a good song. There were... timeline shenanigans. Yeah! Your choice which version Papyrus is singing along with.

Pulaski wanted a fair fight!: So I forgot to mention this last time, but Pulaski, our "hometown hero" boxer, is named for an Orange Line stop, which itself is named after a street, which is named after Casimir Pulaski. Pulaski was an idealistic Polish cavalry officer who fought and died in the American Revolution. He never set foot in Chicago, of course, but because we have an enormous Polish population, every year Chicago celebrates Casimir Pulaski Day, mostly by not having to go to work. I like not having to go to work, so I'm a fan of Casimir Pulaski! ...also, like, freedom, or whatever, that's cool too.

A new song starts up on the radio and -- oh god, it's one of those yodeling cowboy ones: Jimmie Rodgers is not to everyone's taste.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience, and I'm sorry this is late! I made what was supposed to be a small change, but then had to rewrite a bunch of scenes. Thanks to Morbane for concrit on an earlier draft!

Also, FANART. Datchi drew this amazing illustration of Sans onstage at Club MTT.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After I say my goodbyes to Papyrus, Tachibana takes us back to the room with the time machine. When we walk in I see Corcoran's left 'em to their own devices, and also, not that he considered it, left his own devices entirely unsupervised. Sellers and Belmont are examining the computer with interest, talking excitedly about how they think it works and what it is; I'm almost a little sad I already know this stuff, because it kinda ruins the fun. But it's weirdly heartening to see them do something as basic and normal as expressing curiosity.

Noyes looks disappointed when he sees me and Alphys come back; I'm guessing he was hoping for Corcoran. He gets up and leaves without speaking, taking his notes with him.

"How's everything coming along?" I ask, and ha! Sellers and Belmont actually look guilty, like they expect me to be annoyed they ain't doing their work.

"I found something we could use to attach the barriers to, maybe," says Belmont, hesitantly. He grabs his stack of books and opens one to a bookmark. "The main issue is it doesn't actually exist, it's complete theoretical right now, but Dr. Corcoran said you were really good at synthesizing things like that." He looks hopefully at Alphys, and when she don't immediately protest, he shoves some notes in her face.

Then he takes 'em away, muttering, "No, no, not that one." He starts shuffling through papers. Alphys and I exchange a look.

"This is what I get for asking you for that epoxy," I mutter.

"And it's what I g-get for making it," she sighs.

I shrug. "Heh. Guess we're stuck with the results."

She grimaces, and goes over to look at Belmont's notes. After a few moments of animated discussion, they both get up. Belmont says, "Hey, tell Dr. Corcoran if he comes back that we went to look for Sedgwick, all right?"

"Yeah. Sure," says Sellers as they leave. He's still looking at the computer. I walk over to have a look at whatever it is is weirding him out so bad, but he's just staring. He looks like maybe he wants to take the computer apart and see how it works only he's worried it might jump up and eat him any minute now. He finally notices me. "What do you want?" he says, looking wary.

"Just curious what's eating you, kid," I say.
He looks between me and the computer, and I can tell the fear is starting to override the curiosity, although he's not afraid of me -- it's the computer, apparently, that freaks him out. Or maybe it's the situation in general. "This is... this is all crazy. You're a hostage, right? You and the lizard, I mean. You didn't mean to be here. Right?"

"Kinda," I say. "I mean I turned myself in and everything. Figured I was less important than the people they let go."

"Yeah. Well." He stares at the vacuum tubes again. Eventually, he says, "I'm sorry you're stuck here."

"Me too," I say.

Another pause. "Do you think Corcoran would kill me if I ran away?" he asks.

"Kid, I think killing you would be the least he'd do," I say.

"That's what I thought," he says, morosely. "Did you know, the guy who ran away last night, he's, they framed him for --"

"Yeah, I heard," I say. There's an opportunity here, and I should probably carpe that diem before it slips away. "Listen. You and Belmont are pals now, yeah?"

Sellers looks a little dismayed. "He's the only one who doesn't pick on me. That's not really the same thing. I guess pariahs have to stick together, though."

"Yes we do," I say, cheerfully. His frown intensifies, but I continue. "Pal or not, if you and Belmont work with me and Alphys, we got half a chance of getting out of here alive."

The frown goes from confused to irritated. "I don't trust you even a little."

"Yeah you do," I say. "Remember? You just told me all that stuff about wanting to run away! Hey, relax, I ain't gonna rat on you!" I say quickly, after I see him start to panic. "But I got a plan, and for the plan I need a magician, and I sure as hell ain't gonna use Corcoran. Besides, what are your other options?" I ask. "Keep marching to Corcoran's beat? That ain't working real well for you, is it? Corcoran's a fucking psycho and you keep talking back to him 'cause you're too smart for your own good. And you ain't ever gonna fit in with the rest of these assholes. I'm gonna take a wild guess here that you've been working your ass off to keep a scholarship, and that your name ain't really Sellers, and that even if you were richer than God, you still wouldn't be able to move to half the places your classmates are from."

He looks kinda guilty, and then sighs. "Yeah. How did you figure it out?"

"It was when Noyes mentioned your mom packing pickled fish for lunch earlier," I say. I'm really lousy figuring out human ethnicities visually like the humans seem to do, but tell me about the food and I got it licked. "So what is it? Segal? Sokolsky? Solberg?"

"Szczepanski," he says. "I got sick of having to teach people how to spell it."

"Oh, yeah, I guess that'd get old fast," I say. It does have an impressive amount of Zs. "Anyway, you in?"

He looks dismayed at the question. "I don't know what your plan is," he says, "and I still don't really trust you."
"Hey, I get it," I say. "But look, I'm not gonna ask for anything too complicated. There's a locked door somewhere around here, goes to a meat freezer. I think it's toward the back of the building," I say, nodding my head. "I want you and Belmont to come with me when I pay a visit to a friend who's in there."

"You have a friend locked in a meat freezer?" he asks.

"Hey, these things happen," I say. "I don't judge. Anyway, he's not just a friend, he's my boss."
Well, former boss, but he don't need to know that. "And if you're willing to help him, I think we'll be able to keep you safe from Corcoran."

"'We' as in monsters?" he asks. I shrug. "How do I know you're not going to try and take my soul?"

"Kid, I just want my brother outta here safe and sound, I don't care about anyone's goddamn soul. Besides, come on, if you think I'm a threat --"

"Actual harmless people don't act nearly as harmless as you do," he says.

"Fair enough. You're a smart kid," I say, grinning. "And if you're smart enough to see that," I say, letting my eyes go dark, "you're really gonna want me on your side."

"Okay, okay! I see your point!" he says quickly. "I'm in! Please never do that again?"

"No promises," I say. I offer my hand to shake, regretting that I don't have any whoopee cushions on me at the moment, but before we can shake on it, I hear a voice echoing down the hallway.

"I'm s-sorry, w-w-we d-didn't think it would be a p-problem, I was j-just --"

"Alphys! Shit," I say. She sounds pretty panicky. I don't wanna have to get her out of some mess, but -- well, I kinda got her into this. I hurry over to the door and look outside, dreading what I'll find.

Corcoran is looming over her. It's absolutely on purpose, and god, I hate it when people pull that shit on me. Belmont is there too, and he looks as terrified as Alphys sounds, although at least he's more or less at eye level with Corcoran. A guy whose name I don't know, one of Corcoran's recruits from last night, is standing frozen, a little apart from Alphys and Belmont, trying to pretend he don't know 'em, and Noyes is hovering in the background, looking real satisfied with himself. Ugh.

"She's telling the truth, Dr. Corcoran," says Belmont. "We were just --"

"Why would you think wandering around alone with a monster would be a good idea?" Corcoran demands. "And Mr. Sedgwick," he says, turning to the guy I don't recognize, "I would have expected you to say something, at least!" Sedgwick just mutters an apology to the floor.

"Hey, what's up?" I ask. Belmont looks at me like I'm nuts, but Alphys' relief is obvious and immediate.

Corcoran completely ignores me, of course. "Honestly, I thought you were more intelligent than this, Mr. Belmont, why --"

"Dr. Corcoran, can I ask about the calculating machine you have set up here?" says Sellers. Or, I guess, Szczepanski? Good old whatsisface is a lot more helpful than me in this situation, I gotta admit. Corcoran clearly likes the sound of his own voice whether he's berating or explaining.

"Just a minute, Mr. Sellers," he says. Then he turns back to Belmont. "They may be good scientists, but you must never forget that some of these creatures can and will take your soul -- or worse --
given the opportunity." For a moment, I wonder if he might almost be having an emotion of some kind -- is that anger? Sadness? Is he even capable of that? But then his expression goes flat again and he turns to Sellers. "Yes? What is it you wanted to know?" They walk off to inspect the computer.

"F-for the record," says Alphys, "I'm p-pretty happy with j-just my soul."

Belmont shoots Noyes a murderous look, and Noyes goes real pale and edges away. I motion Alphys over while Belmont shows his notes to Sedgwick.

"Please tell me he didn't find something that'll actually work," I whisper to Alphys.

She looks pretty dismayed. "Um." Then she puts on an admirable display of false cheer. "Yeah! N-no! It'll never w-work!" I guess I must have my disappointed grin on because she wilts again. "S-sorry?"

"Eh, it ain't your fault the kid's smart. But you can't actually make it, can you?" I ask.

"Sorry," she repeats, cringing. "You've b-been asking me for all those s-substances from the f-future so I had to d-develop a lot of n-new techniques, and, so, I c-can make it, probably," she says.

Oh, sure, it's my fault now. Well, okay, yeah, it is. "Jeez, Alphys, why'd you have to go and be good at your job?" I say. Her face crumples. "Hey, hey, it was a joke! Can you think of any wrenches we could throw in there?"

"Um. P-probably? It'll t-take a really l-long time without a lot of r-resources," she says. "'I'd d-definitely need more than seven college k-kids for it to be practical."

"Much as I'd like to see Corcoran suffer for killing off half his workforce for kicks, I don't want this thing to even kinda almost work. Jesus, Alphys, you don't know what happened when we tried to restart our time machine. It was bad." I look over her shoulder and wonder how Corcoran's explaining the computer to Sellers, and if Sellers is buying it. "Anyway I think we got Sellers solidly on our side. Kid's scared to death."

"I d-don't blame him," she says. "Belmont d-didn't say anything not about science, b-but he was p-perfectly civil, so."

"Good. I asked Sellers to get him to meet me at Asgore's meat freezer. Think we can find it while Corcoran's distracted?"

She looks at me like I'm nuts, which ain't exactly wrong, to be fair. "He'll k-kill us!"

"Hm." I take another look at Corcoran. He's wrapped up in how great he is, sure, but to be fair, it takes a pretty smart guy to piece all this shit together. And he obviously thinks Alphys could be a threat, which means he might not underestimate me as much as I'd like him to. "Yeah, you're probably right. Guess we'll have to put that plan on ice for a while."

Alphys just rolls her eyes.

* * *

I don't manage to avoid working for the whole day, alas. At one point that afternoon, Corcoran sets me, Alphys, and all the students to work on a set of calculations, mostly to double-check the computer's results. It's embarrassing but I'm a lot better with a slide trombone than a slide rule; in the bright days of tomorrow, we had technology to do all that shit for us. And anyway, given the choice between old-fashioned mechanical methods of calculation, I always favored Napier's bones, for
obvious reasons. But despite these hardships I soldier on through my part of the math, although it's pretty dull work, and I didn't get much sleep last night, and maybe I ate a little too much of that spaghetti and eggs, and I really shouldn't be letting my guard down but c'mon, it's just math, and....

When I jerk awake, Alphys is trying to haul me into a standing position. "Why are you so heavy?" she grumbles.

"Does he do this a lot?" I hear someone ask. They sound familiar.

Alphys just sighs. "Sans! Wake up!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm awake, what?" I snap, slumping back into my chair. Then I remember where I am. "Oh shit, what'd I miss?" I scramble to my feet again, and look around. The room's empty now except -- oh. There's a barrier spell hemming me and Alphys in, and Belmont's waiting outside it, reading my science fiction magazine. Jerk.

"Hey, what gives?" I poke the barrier with a phalange and am rewarded with a horrible stinging feeling. Great.

"No one could move you, so Corcoran left me to watch you," Belmont says. "Also, he gave me a really long lecture about souls." He rolls his eyes.

"I even tried zapping you!" Alphys says. "I guess bone isn't a very good conductor."

"That explains why I never got that job on the Union Pacific," I say, stretching a little. "Okay, well. I'm awake now, what are Corcoran and the rest of our buddies up to?"

"They're, um." Alphys looks uncomfortable. "They're testing the extractors again."

There's a nasty little voice in the back of my head that's still worried they're gonna use it on monsters, but I manage to shut it up. Still, daily? That's a hell of a lot of murdering. "Shit. On who?"

"Just some homeless bums," says Belmont.

I shouldn't get angry at Belmont, since it's not his fault he's an ass, but... he's an ass. "Oh good," I snap, "glad they ain't real people with souls or anything. That's a huge relief right there."

Belmont kinda folds in on himself like a cheap card table. Alphys elbows me in the ribs. "Sans!" she hisses.

"I'm sorry, all right?" Belmont snaps. Shit, is this kid gonna cry? Well he's either gonna cry or get angry, or maybe both. "I don't want to see any more of it either! And all you care about is that they aren't people you know and whether you can use it against me. And I didn't want things to be like this, I thought, I thought it was going to be about -- about science and -- and then when he said we were using people -- I don't know, it all -- I just --"

"Okay, first of all, calm down," I say, before he can get much further into his monologue. This earns me the hairy eyeball from Belmont.

"C-could you, um, m-maybe let us out?" Alphys ventures.

He swallows, waves one hand at the barrier, and we're free.

Huh. Never thought of asking nicely. Didn't Papyrus suggest something like this? I should listen to him more often. "Thanks," I say.
Belmont doesn't answer at first. He still looks furious, but more at himself than us. "I'm glad I'm not in there helping," he says, finally. "Um. Marty said you, um, wanted to -- it was -- I think he must have misheard you, there was something about a meat freezer?"

"Oh, yeah, Asgore," I say.

He stiffens. "Asgore Dreemurr? The mob boss?" he asks.

"Yeah! He's a good guy, Asgore," I say, cheerfully.

"Um. I don't really know if I want to --"

"No, no, he's r-really nice!" Alphys says. "Y-you'd like him. Everyone likes him! Except, uh, Toriel, b-but I'm sure she'll --"

"Can he get me out of here? That's what Marty said," says Belmont. "You'd -- you'd better not be setting me up, though, I have --"

"Magic, yeah, we know," I say. "Look, trust us or not. This ain't a setup."

It takes him a minute to make up his mind, but finally he says, "Okay, fine. Where is he? And why is he in a meat freezer?"

"I dunno about your first question, and as to the second one, probably 'cause he's got fire magic," I say. "He's a boss monster. They got strong magic. Nothing," I say hurriedly, "nothing like human magic, but, you know. Better than the rest of us weaklings." I produce a series of harmless blue knucklebones as a demonstration; they don't even reach him before dissipating into the air like smoke. "Anyway, I guess the Flower's scared of him or something. But like I said, he's a good guy. And like Alphys said, everyone likes him. Anyway, he's supposed to be near the back of the building, but we'll have to go looking around a little bit."

As we pick our way through the building, Belmont's being real careful not to make a noise, and as a consequence is unsubtle as hell. I figure if we bump into anyone unfriendly I'm gonna be the one who has to make up a good cover story, so I start prepping one.

At one point we hear distant screams from the extractor room, and Alphys makes a little despairing noise. "Hey, don't worry, you're gonna be destroying those things real soon now," I whisper to her.

"Yes. Yes I am," she says, getting that determined look again. "Soon." We try to ignore the rest of the screaming -- sounds like it's taking a while. Those poor bastards.

Rather than dwell on that, I try and talk Belmont into walking like a normal person instead of a cartoon burglar. In our distraction we round a corner and nearly bump into Tachibana, who's hauling around a stack of cardboard bigger than he is like it's nothing. He screams and almost drops it, then recollects himself. "Hey!" he says, trying for nonchalant and arriving at slightly panicky.

"Hi. Um. I'm. Taking them to a cell," Belmont says, gesturing vaguely at me and Alphys. He doesn't even sound like he believes himself.

Tachibana catches my eye, and I shrug, trying to convey that everything is fine, but he don't seem to catch my meaning, because he looks real concerned. I guess I could just explain, but I wanna see what happens.

"What are you doing with all that cardboard?" Belmont asks, like this is normal smalltalk.
"I'm... carrying it?" Tachibana says, which has the dubious merit of being perfectly honest and yet sounding incredibly suspicious. "Dr. Corcoran needs it," he adds, almost convincingly.

"Ah. Well. Carry on, then," says Belmont, like he has any authority whatsoever.

Tachibana puts the cardboard down. "Are... you sure you're taking them to the right cell?" he asks, giving Belmont what I think is an attempt at an intimidating and penetrating stare. Mostly he just looks annoyed.

"No! I mean, yes! I mean, obviously I know what I'm doing," says Belmont. "I was chosen because I know what I'm doing. They're, um, they have to go in a special cell. With... with Asgore!" he invents.

"Oh!" says Tachibana, finally putting two and two together. "Are you -- are you Bell-something?"

Belmont is startled. "I -- what? How do you --"

"Yeah, he's with us," I tell Tachibana. "And he's with us too," I add, to Belmont. "For the record, you both really gotta work on lying better."

"Well it isn't like I make a habit of it," says Belmont, "I'm not some kind of criminal."

"Not a professional criminal, you mean," I point out. He winces. "And hey, Tachibana, I expected better of you," I say. He looks glum at that. "Aw, don't worry, it was almost convincing," I say, and he apparently believes me.

We hear more faint screaming from across the building, and Alphys moans to herself. "C-can we hurry up?" she asks. "They might finish their t-test before we get b-back. Do you know where Asgore's b-being kept?" she asks Tachibana.

"Oh! Yeah!" he says. He points us down the hallway. "Just keep going straight." He picks up his bundle of cardboard. "Uh, is this enough for... whatever you were doing with the cardboard?"

"Way more than enough," I say. "Give it to the Temmies in Papyrus' cell and ask 'em to make some armor for Greater Dog. And Papyrus. And as much as they can make with the rest of it. Tell 'em I'll pay for it when we're all outta here." I'm gonna be in debt up to Papyrus' eye sockets after we get out, but I'd rather be broke than dead.

"W-wait, armor?" Alphys asks.

"I'm not even gonna ask, it probably won't make sense," says Tachibana, wandering away. "Thanks!"

"Just trust me, Alphys. Best armor you ever seen," I say, as we continue towards Asgore's cell.

"W-what, like, is it, b-bullet-proof?"

"Almost, yeah."

"What's a Temmie?" Belmont asks.

"A kind of monster," I say. "They're real good at nonsense."

"Which k-kind of bullets is it bullet-proof against?" Alphys asks. "M-magic or metal?"
"Yup," I say, cheerfully.

"What, bulletproof cardboard?" Belmont asks. "That's ridiculous."


"Nonsense isn't a thing you can be good at," he says.

"I happen to be a world-class bullshit artist," I point out. "I think I know from nonsense."

Following Tachibana's directions, we find ourselves at another loading bay and what looks like the door to a meat freezer.

"W-we should let him know we're h-here," she says. "M-maybe some kind of c-code, d-do you think he knows Morse co--"

"Nah," I say. I rap my knuckles on the metal door to the rhythm of "Shave and a Haircut." It's simple, friendly, and completely straightforward, just like me.

If anyone's in there, though, they don't supply the last two knocks like you're supposed to. Instead, there's a long pause, and Alphys and I exchange a worried look before we hear Asgore say, "That rhythm seems strangely unresolved."

"Oh my god, he d-doesn't know," whispers Alphys, trying not to giggle.

Belmont scowls. "Does he not listen to the radio or...?"

"Asgore don't get out much, even when he ain't locked in a meat freezer," I say. "You're supposed to finish it," I say through the door, hopefully not too loud.

"Oh," Knock, knock... knock. Well, three outta two ain't bad. "Like this?" A brief silence. "Sans, what are you doing here?" he asks.

"I've been asking myself that a lot lately," I say as I take the key out. "Right now, I'm pretty sure I'm tryin' to get you guys outta here." I unlock the door, swing it open, and there's Asgore, sitting on the floor with a little circle of flames around him. It's obviously tiring him out to keep the fire going, and already there's little icicles hanging off the tips of his horns. Poor guy. "Cool place you got here. Gotta say, though, you don't look like you're doin' so hot right now." Still, he ain't as much of a Dreemurrsicle as I'd feared.

Chapter End Notes

References:
Sedgwick is another Purple Line stop.

your name ain't really Sellers, and that even if you were richer than God, you still wouldn't be able to move to half the places your classmates are from: It wasn't a great time to be someone with a "foreign" (aka not Anglophone-sounding) name in the US, for various reasons; in this particular case Sans is referring to the historical practice of "gentleman's agreements" barring people of certain races, ethnicities, and religions from buying property in affluent neighborhoods and suburbs. This obviously also affected visibly non-white people regardless of their names.
(Having the right name was important even if you had no interest in living in the suburbs; my great-grandfather, who had a traveling band, ditched his surname because it sounded "too German" and it was affecting their business, despite him... not actually being German. He picked his favorite fictional character's name and then mangled the spelling and pronunciation in an attempt to make it sound French. It does not look or sound remotely French, and nobody can pronounce on their first try, and I kind of love it.)

Szczepanski is a Polish name and is, I think, pronounced "Shepanski." How does Sans know how many Zs are in it? He's Sans.

Napier's bones: For multiplying and dividing large numbers without the aid of electricity. The slide rule could also do trigonometry and other exciting calculations! But... I preferred my TI-83. You can't program games onto a slide rule.

"Shave and a Haircut": You know this tune/rhythm even if you don't know what it's called. Here's a video of a box that only unlocks if you knock in the right rhythm! Which is pretty cool. Weirdly, apparently knocking out the "Shave and a haircut" portion and waiting to hear the "two bits!" ending is something amateur ghost hunters do a lot of, going by my YouTube search results. But what if the ghost doesn't know, ghost hunters? What if the ghost died before 1899? Do they just expect all pre-20th-century ghosts to have kept up with popular culture? This is troubling, to say the least.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the lateness of this update; I wasn't feeling very well last week. I think, because it leads to better fic and is less stressful, I will be updating every other week until I build up a nice buffer again. (Partly I just really want to get this jailbreak stuff right.)

Also, please note that this fic will occasionally contain era-appropriate slurs.

As before, Morbane provided very helpful concrit; in addition, I had some help from an anonymous person who knew a lot about paleography, the study of historical handwriting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Oh my g-god you must be f-freezing," says Alphys, horrified. "Can we get him a b-blanket at least?"

"Please, do not worry about it," says Asgore, waving away our concerns. "I am simply glad that none of our more heat-dependent associates are stuck in here with me," he says. He's putting on a brave face for us, but he looks kinda miserable. He turns to Belmont, and manages a smile despite the cold. "Howdy! I think we have yet to be introduced."

Belmont looks confused as anything. "Uh. Hello," he says. "I'm... apparently supposed to get you out of here."

"That ain't actually his name," I say quickly. "Asgore, this is Belmont. Belmont, Asgore. Listen, I'm workin' on gettin' you out, you think you can stay put for one more day? I got a plan, but we need a little time."

"I do not see that I have much of a choice," he says, sighing.

"I don't think we can manage a blanket, but Alphys, you think you can break this freezer? We got the key, Corcoran ain't gonna come in and check on him."

She considers this. "Y-yeah, I think I can even d-do that from our cell. B-but we should be getting back before he n-notices we're gone, I r-really don't want --"

"Yeah, good point," I say. I nod at Asgore. "Just hold on, we're doin' our best here. Kid, you think you can take this barrier down?" I ask Belmont.

"Um." Belmont gets real close to the barrier, and sticks his palm up against it. "Yes, just a second --" And it dissolves. He steps back quick, like he's worried Asgore's gonna attack him.

Asgore just looks relieved he ain't completely trapped. "Thank you very much, young man," he says. Belmont's eyes are wide. "If, if I help you -- they said you could protect me. And there's another student, he's --"
"Of course," says Asgore. "I will do all that I can to help you once we are all safe."

Belmont breathes a sigh of relief. It's hard not to trust Asgore, but it's clear Belmont was expecting to have to make his case and now he's caught a little off guard. "Okay, well. Good! Thank you!"

Asgore nods. Then he turns to me. "Please, tell me. Were there any casualties? Were the others able to get the child to safety?"

"We don't think there were any casualties, although I haven't been able to check up on all our people stuck in here. Tori and I made a list, though --"

"She escaped?" he says, brightening.

"Yeah. Uh, she ain't real pleased with you right now," I warn him.

He sighs. "No, I expect not. But then, she never is."

"Point," I say. I do feel pretty bad for the guy. "But yeah, she's okay. Think she got out without a scratch. Undyne got hurt pretty bad but she's on the mend," I add, because I always got the impression Undyne was the terrifying, scaly daughter he never had. "Anyway, the Flower Boys say they got everyone on our list, although with these guys, who knows? But I don't think they're lyin', not this time. And they released about half the prisoners when me and Alphys turned ourselves in. Oh, and the kid's fine! The cops are looking for 'em, but they're safe for now."

"The police are looking for the child?" Asgore asks. "Oh. I assume the Flower Boys --"

"Yeah, they're only doin' it because they're in cahoots with the Flower Boys, you know how it is. When we got more time I'll explain, but we think this was all part of their plan," I say.

"Wait, the Flower Boys are working with the police?" Belmont asks, as if police corruption has never occurred to him. "What? Is that why Davis -- oh no, do you think -- do you think they'll send the police after me?"

"Jeez, kid, I thought you were supposed to be smart," I say. "Look, do you wanna be on the run from dirty cops or do you wanna keep having to kill people and risk getting the good cops pissed off at you? Cause those are your options." Okay, not that I know a lot of good cops but there's definitely a couple here and there.

"Well. When you put it like that," he says glumly.

"Hey, g-guys?" whispers Alphys. "I um, I think the screaming st-stopped? We should p-probably -- before C-corcoran --"

"Oh, shit, you're right," I say. "We better get back to class, we ain't got hall passes or anything. Sorry, Asgore. Like I said, I got a plan -- we just gotta give Temmie and Temmie some time to work. I'm thinkin' tomorrow night."

"Thank you. I think I can manage until then," says Asgore. "They are making armor, I assume?" He smiles. "That should be very useful."

"Yeah, they really don't know who they're messin' with," I say.

"Y-yeah, we'll show them!" says Alphys, not quite managing to sound enthusiastic. "I'll t-try to make it a little less c-cold in there," she promises. We lock Asgore up again and hurry back.
I tell Belmont and Alphys I know a shortcut, and soon we're back in the room with the time machine. It's harder to do shortcuts without all the hand-holding, but it's completely worth it for the look on someone's face when they can't figure out how they got somewhere. I can tell Belmont is consulting his mental map of the building and deciding Escher couldn't have managed what I just did, but he can't ask me what's up because Corcoran comes into the room, followed by a few worn-out looking students. Some of 'em have blood on their coats.

One guy is pretty well coated in the stuff -- looks like someone tried to fight back. I watch him peel off his white -- well, red now -- coat shakily and bundle it up so he don't have to touch the stuff. He looks like he's gonna puke. I hope for his sake he's gonna burn that thing when he gets home; getting those stains out is gonna be murder on whoever does his laundry. (It's not him, obviously; he's too rich for that blood.)

Most of the students grab the stuff they left here -- bookbags and jackets -- and head out, but Sellers sits himself down and starts going over some notes.

"Oh, good, the skeleton's finally awake," Corcoran says, glowering. "I was hoping to make more progress on the time machine today."

"What can I say, I'm kind of a lazybones," I say cheerfully.

"I'm very interested in why no one could wake you up, or even move you," he says.

"Guess I'm just a really heavy sleeper," I tell him. He ain't impressed; he clearly don't appreciate the gravity of the situation. "And I dunno if you noticed, but yesterday was pretty eventful. Wore me to the bone. Anyway, I did your calculations for you, what more do you want from me?"

"You didn't finish them, and you drooled all over them," Corcoran says sourly.

"Eh. Sorry they were so boring," I say. "But I was accurate, wasn't I?" He rolls his eyes, but he don't tell me I'm wrong. "Anyway, what's up tonight? We're gettin' dinner soon, right? I never sleep through dinner."

"Yes, yes. And you will be assisting with the time machine, in particular with some navigation issues we're having. Mr. Belmont, thank you for keeping our... guests contained for the duration. You can go home if you like, but I'd appreciate it if you continued your work on the shielding, as it's likely to be our most difficult problem."

"Uh," says Belmont. I can tell he don't think he has much of a choice.

"I'm staying late too," says Sellers from his desk. He's doing a real good job of sounding enthusiastic and friendly, but he looks exhausted and his skin's got a greenish cast to it that wasn't there before. "Dr. Corcoran was going to show me how to check the vacuum tubes on the calculation machine."

"Oh! Okay," says Belmont, looking real relieved not to be alone with two monsters and a guy who orchestrates fights to the death just for the hell of it. "I guess I'll stay, then."

"Good," says Corcoran. "Now, you," he says, grabbing me by the back of my shirt collar and pulling me towards the time machine. "I need to know how you were able to keep the steering mechanism from phasing out of existence on ignition."

How'd they manage to have that problem? Well, whatever the issue is, it's gonna be a long night.

* * *
Corcoran is tireless. Literally, I'm starting to think. I've never seen him actually touch his food either, now I think about it, and, after hours of working on that goddamn fourth-dimensional rudder, he seems just as energetic as he did this morning. Sellers and Belmont finally get out of there when one of 'em realizes it's eleven at night and that's why they can't stop yawning. Before they go, Corcoran has Belmont stick me and Alphys back in our shitty little cell with the bunk beds.

Sellers wrinkles his nose at the place. "Wow, he makes you sleep here?"

"Well, I can sleep anywhere," I say, shrugging. "Look, I know it's late, but you got time to talk? I wanna know about the testing."

Sellers shudders. "I think he's going to do tests for the next three days, just to calibrate... something? I, uh. Wasn't really paying attention to his explanation, I was looking around for an impromptu weapon. Just in case he wanted us to fight again. I know, I know, that's terrible," he adds before I even give him a reason to get defensive, "but I really don't want to die." Well, at least he's got good survival instincts.

"Well of course you did, nobody wants to die," says Belmont. He's apparently trying to be reassuring, but he sounds too uncertain to pull it off. "We're getting out tomorrow, though, right?" he asks.

"That's the plan," I say. "Tems work pretty fast. Where is Corcoran getting these test subjects?" I ask Sellers.

"Tachibana and that lady who dresses like someone's maiden aunt bring them in. From the smell, I'd guess off the street," he says. Ah. Well, I knew their hands weren't clean coming into this, and they had to be hanging around here for a reason.

"She runs the Ebott Temperance League, and I think they try and help people with drinking problems when they ain't shouting at 'em, so that might be where they're getting 'em," I say. "Shit, she'd make a good sower if they knew what our secret ingredient was. Easy access to lots of vulnerable people."

Alphys frowns. "R-really? I'd p-pick Zielinski for sower. With the knife d-don't you think Gorman would b-be a better --"

"Nah, not if she needs Tachibana's help," I say. "And she ain't fast enough. I could see Zielinski for sower, though. She has that soup kitchen, right? And the clinic?" She's another one of the Flower's lieutenants, probably the only one who actually does some decent shit when she ain't helping her floral friends. Even her fellow do-gooders hate her guts, though.

"What's a sower?" Belmont asks.

"DT slang," says Sellers. "The sower drugs you so they can extract more Determination. I hear it makes people go crazy. What?" he asks, at me and Alphys' surprised looks. "My neighborhood was full of that crap after the Dreemurrs -- well."

"Ah," I say. "Well. I'm sorry about that. I think we all are. Really didn't go well for anybody."

"Yeah," says Alphys. "If I c-could go back in t-time and change s-something--"

"Ha! If you could actually change anything you set out to, I'd be very impressed," I say. "I'm guessing they ain't been dosing these guys they're melting?" I ask Sellers.

He shakes his head. "I didn't see that. Maybe before they brought them in they --"
I laugh pretty hard at that. "Nah. You're right, it does make people... well, I wouldn't call it crazy, but
trust me, they'd be fighting a lot harder. You'd know they got dosed." They both look a little freaked
out. "Sorry, sorry. You gotta have a sense of humor about this shit or it'll drive you nuts."

"Arguably it might drive you nuts anyway," Alphys says.

"Either way it's exhausting," I say. "But hey, you two get to go home and sleep, at least. Just one
more day of this shit."

Belmont says, "Oh, god, I hope so."

Sellers ain't buying it. "Well, we'll get out or they'll kill us. So it'll be over either way."

"Well, that's still better than being stuck here," Belmont says, rubbing his eyes. He yawns. "Ugh, I'm
going to fall asleep on my feet if I stay any longer." He checks his watch and grimaces. "And I might
miss the last train." He puts the barrier back up with one hand, and hurries off, muttering,
"Tomorrow. This will all be over tomorrow."

Sellers frowns after him as he goes. "Well at least he's learned cabs don't stop around here," he
mutters. Then he turns to me. "Can you just answer one question for me?"

"I mean, you just asked one, so." I shrug.

"Is Dr. Corcoran..." He trails off. "Is he -- do you know if -- it's just -- there's just something really,
really weird about him. I have a few theories and I want to know if any of them make sense, because
as exhausted as I am this is going to keep me up all night otherwise and I just want to know what
kind of person is probably going to kill me tomorrow."

Alphys and I exchange a look. "Sure, okay. Shoot."

Sellers paces back and forth. "Okay, so, first theory: he is not from this planet. Evidence for: I have
never seen him eat anything. Maybe his species eats rocks or something!"

Okay, I kinda like this kid. He's wrong, but he's observant. "Yeah, I noticed that too. Does he
sleep?"

"Aargh. I don't think so, but I don't know," says Sellers. "Anyway, the other thing is, he seems to
have impossible knowledge of new developments in other fields, sometimes prior to publication, and,
and, there's that calculating machine. It's an astonishing achievement, but he just seems disappointed
and impatient with it. I think he's used to a higher technology level."

I nod. "Yup. Seems plausible."

"But," says Sellers, who is apparently too frantic to get his theory out to actually listen to me,
"evidence against: he looks completely human, as far as I can tell. His magic is human magic, and
given the differences between human and monster magic, I'd assume a third species would have still
different magic! And besides, what would he even be doing in Ebott, getting tenure and working for
the mob?"

"Well, gee, kid, doesn't everyone want tenure?" I ask. He starts to answer, but I cut him off. "That
was a rhetorical question. What about your other theories?"

"You're not going to tell me I'm crazy?" he asks. I shrug. "All right, well, you can just think it, then.
Second theory: he's from the future. It would explain the technology, but it wouldn't explain why he
doesn't eat, and you'd think a time traveler would already have a time machine if he needed one."
Alphys snorts. "Yeah," she says, "only a r-really lousy time t-traveler would lose his t-time machine."

"Hey! Maybe the Morlocks dragged it underground, you don't know," I tell Alphys. "Don't judge a guy for his lack of transportation. Judge him 'cause he's an asshole."

"I'm not c-comfortable with this analogy, especially if we're the M-morlocks," she says. But then she grins. "Anyway, maybe all time t-travelers are assholes!"

And I don't have any evidence against that, so I nod. "Could be."

"So, um, my third theory, if you care at all," says Sellers, "is that maybe he's some kind of... undead thing, left over from what used to be a human. The apparent lack of emotion and the bloodthirstiness, not needing to eat food, his total single-mindedness -- that would fit, and so would the obsession with DT, but --" 

"Wait a sec," I say. "What are you talking about?" I miiiight have a kneejerk reaction to anytime humans talk about "undead things," because I am so fucking sick of being asked whose skeleton I was, like the answer ain't literally staring 'em in the face. Actual incidence of spontaneous human reanimation is incredibly rare, and besides, I doubt it ever results in anyone as delightful and hilarious as me. (I know it's a low bar, but still.) But that don't seem like what he's getting at here, and as long as he's leaving skeletons and ghosts out of his theory I guess I'll give it a shot. "Why would that explain the DT?"

Sellers frowns at us. "You don't know," he says. "You don't know?"

"I don't know," I say. "Alphys, am I missing something here?"

"I... d-don't know either?" she says, uncertainly. "What are you t-talking about?"

Now he looks angry for some reason. "You don't know. You don't know that when people died after they took too much of your shitty DT so they could work more hours, they kept coming back?"

"Well, I know DT can make humans kinda hard to kill," I say. "Are you sure it wasn't --"

"No. They were dead," he says. "Then they got back up and -- and came at us with knives, some of them, or tried to eat us, or --" He shudders. "They were all wrong, is all. The worst part was that some of them were almost themselves, but not enough to stop. My crazy uncle Jacenty said we should start burying them like vampires, and that seemed to work, mostly? And then DT got expensive again, and it stopped happening. But it did happen. I remember it." He's very firm on this point, almost challenging us to call him crazy. Which, admittedly, has occurred to me, but he seems pretty convinced.

Alphys and I stare at him for a second. "Uh. I gotta ask, kid -- why didn't your neighborhood's... corpse problem make it into the papers?"

He rolls his eyes. "Well, it hasn't been in any of the English-language ones. But come on, if we went to any of them, they'd call us a bunch of dumb Polacks and call it a day."

"...eesh. Well, that's. Okay, yeah, I see what you mean. Good news, though, I think it's your second theory," I say. "Mostly because he told me he was from the 1990s."

"What? You made me explain all that even though --"
"Hey, kid, come on, I wanted to see what you were thinkin'," I say. "Most people, they like bein' listened to. Anyway, now I know something new about DT. And, as a fun bonus, it's really disturbing and kinda I wish I could forget it! But, yeah, Corcoran's from the future. Apparently people keep coming back through time from the future, and the Flower is trying to collect 'em all. So, yeah, you're right. Corcoran knows way the hell too much for a contemporary scientist, because he's not one."

He looks kinda relieved that he was right. "Okay. Well... I can't say I'll sleep any better actually, because that just opens up more questions. Also, I still don't understand why he doesn't eat. Does that -- is that -- do people in the future not eat?"

Oh, jeez, it's way too late to get into this. I just shrug it off. "How would I know? You think I've been there?"

"Oh. I guess not," he says. "Well. At least I know what he told you, maybe that was even the truth. Okay, um. I. Thanks. I hope you don't die tomorrow. See you." He shuts the door.

"I'm s-starting to understand why human b-burial customs are so elaborate," says Alphys.

"Yeah. Jeez. Can't keep the bastards down," I say. To be fair I have kept the bastards down successfully many times, but still.

Alphys shudders. "I f-feel kind of b-bad for them now. Especially since we... well, that's n-not important right now! Let's t-try radioing to let everyone know the plan." She hands me her radio.

"You go ahead, I'll t-take care of Asgore's f-freezer."

I turn on the radio. "Hey, this is, uh... Mesodon? Lookin' for Anglicana." Tori and I uh, already came up with dumb nicknames for each other back when we were pen pals. Partly because I was worried about changing history, and partly, I guess, she didn't wanna be connected with Asgore, but mostly because we're ridiculous. "Anglicana, come in? Over!"

"I am here!" says Toriel, brightly. "How are you? Ah, I mean... please advise of your status. Over!" I try not to laugh at that.

"Well, uh, we're gettin' ready to have a party out here," I say. "Might be inviting a couple of you guys out. And we have some, uh, new friends helping us with the decorations." I didn't really expect to find any allies among the Flower Boys, so we didn't come up with code words for that, but I'm sure Tori'll figure it out. "Four of 'em, assuming they can all make it. Anyway, that's tomorrow, uh... probably between the lecture and the comedy act?" That's part of the code; means 5 pm. "Think we're gonna need a couple musicians, but our new friends play too, so that's okay. I think two of 'em are... percussionists." At least, I'd assume Tachibana and Gorman can shoot. "And one of those also plays piano." Tachibana probably won't suplex boulders just because he can, but he can hold his own in a fistfight against Undyne. "We also got, uh, a singer?" Not too sure how to indicate human magician to Tori, but we decided "sore throat" was gonna mean someone couldn't do any magic for whatever reason, so I think she'll figure it out. "You following this? Over."

"I believe I do. And the fourth one? Over."

Hm. Sellers. He didn't do much in that fight, but he'll be useful if we need someone observant and quick on the uptake. "He ain't really a musician, but if he was he'd play trombone, I think. Over."

"Indeed? Do you mean to say that --"

"What the hell is all this?" demands Gorman, sounding very cranky and making it impossible to hear
what Tori's saying.

I wait 'til they both fall silent. "Peanut Gallery," I tell her, "you gotta let Anglicana say 'over' before you talk. Go ahead, Peanut."

"I refuse to answer to 'Peanut,'" snaps Gorman. "Over."

"If you dislike your name, we can surely come up with a worse one," says Tori. "Please keep a civil tongue in your head, young lady. Sa-- Mesodon, who is this? Over."

"Ah. She's one of the percussionists," I say. "Was gonna go to some other guy's party but he's a lousy host. Over."

"All right, now I'm awake," says Gorman, "we're doing this... party... tomorrow? Go ahead... Mesodon, or -- what does that even mean, isn't that the name of a mammoth?" There's a brief silence before she adds a very grumpy "Over."

"Think it's a kind of snail, Peanut. Glad you could join this conversation, though. Tomorrow work for you? Over."

"Tomorrow is fine. Over."

"It is a toothed land snail," says Tori, cheerfully, and I have to grin. I think I'm more of a slug, but hey, I'll take it. "I need to know, though, Mesodon. Will there be pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey at this party? Over." Yeah, I know that's a terrible thing to call Asgore, but at least I managed to talk her out of saying he was a pinata.

"Yup. And spaghetti too," I say, cheerfully. "The party starts when, uh..." Corcoran, how do I refer to him in a way everyone gets? "When Professor Plum joins in. Over." Has that game come out yet? I don't think it has. Well, she'll get who I mean.


"Oh! T-tell her I'm fine," says Alphys. "Also! I think I g-got Asgore's freezer t-to stop?"

"She's here with me working on that pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey game. We're both fine, we just lent a radio to the Peanut Gallery. Over," I tell Tori.

"You gave your radio to the P-peanut-- I mean, G-gorman -- you know what, c-can we just keep c-calling her Peanut?" she asks.

I shrug. "Sure, why not? We might get stabbed, but at least we're taking that risk together," I say cheerfully.

"And where is this party is to be held?" Tori asks. "Mesodon, go ahead."

Do I give her my very vague coordinates in code, or --

"I have the address; how secure is this channel?" says Gorman. "Over."

"Not real secure," I say. "Get me the address and I'll make sure Anglicana knows where she's going. Anglicana, I'll probably be able to get in contact a little after the fire-eating act." That is to say, noon. "Over." And I can make sure the address matches what me and Alphys put together with the magic Gorman don't know about.
"I assure you, Peanut," says Toriel, "we will bring our very best musicians to this party. They would not miss it for the world, and if you give Mesodon the wrong address, they will be extremely put out. Is that understood?" It's the most politely threatening RSVP I've ever heard. If you double-cross Tori, you're definitely gonna have regrets only.

"Loud and clear, Al -- Angle -- Angelina -- whatever your name was," says Gorman.

"Welp, I think that's it for party planning tonight, ladies. Gonna sign off now, unless there's any other issues we gotta cover," I say. "Over."

We all wait for someone to say something. "I believe that covers everything," says Toriel, finally. "Thank you, Mesodon. Over and out."

I click off the radio. "Oof. I am exhausted."

"Y-yeah, me too," says Alphys. "B-but, you c-can have the bottom bunk t-tonight?" she offers.

"Nah, I'll just -- oh, what the hell." I blip up to the top bunk. "There. S'fine." I'm half-asleep as it is. Alphys gets up to turn the light off. "Sans?" she asks.

"Nnh?" I say.

"If I d-don't make it t-tomorrow, you have to t-tell -- to tell Undyne that I, that --" She pauses to get her bearings in the sentence.

"Alphys, you're gonna be fine," I say, trying to keep the annoyance out of my voice. I yawn. "You're gonna be great, you know those machines backwards and forwards and inside-out, and probably in even more topographically unlikely ways. And if you ain't, Undyne's gonna murder me anyway. But trust me. You're gonna --" I can't help yawning again "-- you're gonna be fine tomorrow. Okay?"

She hesitates, then flips the light switch, and it's dark. "Yeah," she sighs. She don't sound convinced, but I'm out of energy to come up with anything more reassuring.

Chapter End Notes

References:

*My crazy uncle Jacenty said we should start burying them like vampires:* This could work in various ways but *generally the idea is to keep them from getting up and eating the living.*

*Mesodon* is, as Sans and Toriel say, a genus of *land snails.* "Mesodon" means "middle tooth."

*Anglicana* is the name of several medieval scripts, although I mostly had *anglicana cursiva* in mind. Toriel's handwriting is *really* old-fashioned.

*Professor Plum:* Clue (Cluedo in the UK) was not around until 1949, so yup, Sans is wrong. He tried, sort of.

*Dejah* is in reference to *Dejah Thoris,* of course.
In general I'm a bit shaky on voice procedure but then, so are the characters. (I did listen to the local police scanner a bit last night, which was unexpectedly exciting. The procedure's totally different and very formal, but I'm relieved to find that the cops are occasionally pretty sarcastic over the radio.)
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

A few things before we get started:

1. I ATEN’T DEAD. I think like three people asked me this in various forms, and I answered them, but if anyone else was worried and didn't ask: don't worry, I'm still here. I'm sorry it took a while to get this out.

2. I'm going to NYC for a week on Saturday, so it may be a few weeks between now and the next update, but the next chapter is about half-written, I just won't have much time to work on it while I'm on vacation. (I haven't gone on vacation for like five years, I need this.)

3. drawingon did adorable fanart of Frisk and Sans! Go look!

4. As with prior chapters, Morbane looked over what I wrote and pointed out the stuff that needed improving, which is good because, you know, now you get a better chapter. I would also like to thank Persephone_Kore for letting me talk over some of my ideas!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nobody's heard of Murphy or his law just yet, but that don't mean it's not in full force and effect. Something will go wrong, and when it does, I will hopefully find out about it in time to nudge everything back into alignment. Hopefully. More likely I'll only find out when everything's on fire. Guess we'll see.

When Belmont comes to give us breakfast and let us out, I talk him into taking a quick side-trip to Papyrus' cell first. He ain't in there right now, of course. I'm here for the Tems.

I am not here for the look on Belmont's face when I tell him that, but it's definitely a plus. "Oh no," he says. I just laugh. He trails after me, confused. "I had to bring them food last night and you were right, they make no sense whatsoever. They won't eat spaghetti! They keep asking for Temmie Flakes! What's wrong with the spaghetti?" he says. He's never had good Italian food in his life, has he? That's okay, in this case it's working in his favor. "Are there any normal monsters?" he asks.

"Are there any normal humans?" I ask. "Cause I ain't ever met one." He actually looks like he's trying to come up with an answer, but I figure that'll take him a while.

Hmmm. Alphys is pretty quiet. Maybe she's just still waking up. Still, it occurs to me maybe I shoulda been more reassuring last night when she seemed afraid. "You okay?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says. She don't sound particularly okay. "Just thinking about the DT s-stuff last night."

"Oh, yeah. That kinda gave me the heebie-jeebies," I admit.

"It's n-not that," she says, barely above a whisper.

"What are you talking about?" Belmont asks.
"Nothing you'd be interested in, trust me," I say. He looks skeptical. I'm about to ask Alphys what's bugging her but we round the corner, and there's the room where Papyrus is being kept. Belmont unlocks the door for us.

"Heya, what's up?" I ask.

Greater Dog's tail whips back and forth and his nostrils twitch. "BORF!" he says.

"hOi!!!" says one of the Tems, hurrying over to the doorway. "u gots foob for tEMMIE?" She makes big eyes at Belmont for a sec, and then her eyes move over to me. (Not the rest of her face, just her eyes. They hover above her head and a little to the side.) "skldfjshgsdghs is a SAN!!!!" she says, hurrying to catch up with her eyes. "we gots ur ARMER!!! v speshal ordr!!!!!

"Hey, not so loud, okay?" I ask.

"k," she says, cheerfully. She looks back at Belmont. "FOOB?

He looks down his nose at her. "I don't have any foob. Food. I mean food."

"nooooo," she moans.

The other Tem rolls over on her back and waves all four legs in the air. "need TEM FLAKES... or will starv!!! (dies)" The effect is kinda ruined when Greater Dog peers down at her with concern before licking her nose. She shrieks, "STOPPPP ITTTT!!!!!!!" and he backs away quickly, spooked.

"You see? You see what I have to deal with?" Belmont asks.

"Okay, Temmie, calm down," I say. "Temmie, I tell the other one, "you said you had the armor, yeah?"

"yayA!" she says. "TEMMIE!!!! u gots teh armeor yah????"

The other Temmie gets to her feet. She pokes Greater Dog in the chest. "is wearing!!! show teh sanZ ur armrs!!!!"

Greater Dog extends his front paws. His tongue's hanging out the side of his mouth; he don't seem to notice.

"did not say arms, ARMRS!!!! tem speek v cleer!!!"

Greater Dog cocks his head to one side, and then, after a lot of effort on his part, figures it out. He opens his jacket to show he's wearing a cardboard vest covered in glitter and doodles. I... I don't wanna know where the Temmies got the glitter. It won't make sense, anyway. "BORF!" he says.

"Good, good," I say. "You got more?"

"yah," says the first Tem. "but we hides!!! tems vera smarts!!!!"

"Okay, well, I'm gonna need Mr. Belmont here to distribute armor to our friends, so, uh, if you could --"

Temmie and Temmie reach into their tiny pockets and produce huge stacks of glittery cardboard armor, somehow. They nose the armor through the barrier spell. "is ok, sANES??? we leav soon, yah?????"

"Yeah," I say, picking up the armor and checking it over. I grin. "These are great! I really owe you
guys."

"Oh, yes, we're well aware," says the first Temmie. She smiles brightly.

Christ, I hate it when they talk like that. It's creepy. "Right. Yeah." Not gonna react. I like the Tems generally -- we got a sort of silly-seeming reality-breaking rapport most of the time -- but sometimes they know way too much. "Anyway, give this to Papyrus, will ya?" I give 'em one of the cardboard vests back. "So the plan is, tonight when Corcoran comes here to let Papyrus out to make dinner, once the barrier is down, Greater Dog, rush Corcoran. Keep your armor on. You can still make that spear, yeah?"

Greater Dog nods, his tongue flopping all over the place. He generates a glowing blue spear and waves it around excitedly; the Tems know enough to freeze in place, and it passes through them harmlessly.

"Good boy!" I say. His tail starts whipping back and forth, and the spear dissolves. "Don't hesitate to ditch the blue magic if he gives you too much trouble, though. That guy's a jerk. Anyway, whatever you have to do, hold him there, make sure he can't get away. Papyrus'll help too." Greater Dog looks really excited at the prospect of bone magic, but then, Greater Dog gets really excited if you just look at him. "And, uh, Temmie, Temmie? You just watch out for yourselves, okay?"

"k!!!!!" says the first Tem. "wil b halp!!!! haf Fun wif ur new AMORS!!!!!!!"

"bOI!!!!" says the other one.

Greater Dog looks sternly at Belmont. "BORF!"

"Sorry," says Belmont. "I'll be back with food soon?"

"so hungr," says Temmie.

"Yeah, and he'll be back with Temmie Flakes," I add.

"yaYA!!!!!!!" the two Tems shriek, jumping up and down with glee.

"...Uh. Right. Yes. Definitely," says Belmont. He shuts the door. "I don't have Temmie Flakes," he says.

"Sure you do," I say. "Temmie Flakes are just ripped-up paper. Just like Mama Tem used to make."

I hand him the cardboard vests. "We gotta get these to the people who'll be the best in a fight."

"And you're r-really sure cardboard armor will..." Alphys frowns at the armor, which is giving the floor a light dusting of glitter every time Belmont moves.

"Hey, I owe my life to this stuff," I say. "This is why I ain't been killed by the cops yet."

"Ohhh," says Alphys. "I always th-thought you used --" I shake my head a little, and look meaningfully at Belmont, who's turning the armor over in his hands. "Uh, that you used, um." She's apparently having trouble coming up with something plausible.

"The undeniable power of lousy jokes?" I ask.

"Sure, why not," she says.

Belmont ain't paying a bit of attention. "I could have been feeding them paper all this time? And they wouldn't have shrieked at me in that... weird accent of theirs?"
"Hey, hey," I say. "Don't disrespect the Tems. They got a rich history or some shit. Anyway, we better get this done fast, Corcoran's probably wondering what the hell's taking us so long."

We hurry around giving armor to monsters, in order of priority. Asgore's first, obviously. He seems to have thawed out since yesterday and is looking a lot better. Dogamy's next; he's kinda weepy when we find him, but once we tell him Dogaresta's okay he's raring to go. I armor up a couple Eyewalkers and am considering whether to give armor to the Froggits or the Vegetoids first -- and you know it's getting kinda dire when those are your options -- but then I notice a monster on my list that I ain't ever heard of before. I remember wondering why I didn't know 'em when me and Tori were going through our list that one night, but I didn't get around to asking who they were and now I'm kinda kicking myself.

"Tulivuori." I squint at my note, which is perfectly legible but still not helping me out here. "Alphys, you know who that is?"

"I d-don't think so?" she says. "I g-guess we'll find out."

"Oh, yeah, that one is terrifying!" says Belmont. His eyes go wide. "It's huge and it's always billowing smoke! When I go in to feed it, all I can see are its eyes under its hat. It's never said anything to me."

"Huh." Could this thing be a new recruit I never heard about, some cousin of Grillby's, maybe? He ain't ever said anything about having any family other than his daughter, but then, Grillby's not real talkative at the best of times.

When we get to the cell, though, I decide that can't be it. Beyond the barrier spell is a hulking and slightly lumpy figure in a trenchcoat and hat. Like Belmont says, there's smoke (or maybe steam) billowing out from under its collar, and I can see two bright eyes peering out from below the brim of the hat.

"Uh. Tulivuori? Don't think we've met. I'm Sans," I say, looking it up and down.

It nods, I think. At least, its hat kinda tilts up and down, in a vague imitation of nodding. There's something familiar about the eyes.

"Actually. Maybe we have met," I say. Why do I associate those eyes with working at the hot dog stand?

"Rrrrr!" Its voice is oddly shrill, and in chorus. "Very scary!" I wasn't real intimidated before but I can't imagine anyone could be intimidated by that.

"Sans!" whispers Alphys. "L-look at its feet."

I do. The trenchcoat is huge, and long, and reaches almost to the floor, and where I'm expecting to see shoes, I just see a multitude of tiny little feet.

And then it hits me. "Okay, guys," I tell Tulivuori, "I'm lava-ing the look and I apologize for interrupting your little costume party, but unless I'm pumice-ing something --"

There's another, shriller, "Rrrrrrrrr!"

"Hey, hey, don't blow up at me," I say. "Just ditch the coat; you're a lot more helpful as a bunch of little monsters than one big one. You wanna help, don't you?"

"Yes! We'll help!" says a voice from about halfway between the trenchcoat's collar and its belt.
"No! Stay together!" says another voice near the floor. The whole pile of little monsters within the trenchcoat goes lopsided and then collapses slowly, revealing a small pile of Vulkins. One of them looks up at me. "Very scary?" it says.

"Yeah, I think you had Belmont here going for a while," I tell them.

He huffs. "No, that's not true. I'm not afraid of -- of tiny volcanoes! Why would I be?"

"Sure, sure," I say. I turn back to the Vulkins. "So, good news! I got a way for you guys to help, okay?" This is actually great for me -- I'm not gonna give the Vulkins armor, because it's cardboard and they'll burn it right up, but Vulkins are formidable, albeit inadvertent, foes. "Once you get out of here, there's a lot of guys who are gonna need, uh, encouragement."

"Oh, yeah, d-definitely," Alphys pipes up. She lives next door to a bunch of Vulkins so I'm guessing she knows their schtick. "You should hug all the h-humans you meet who are wearing white c-coats like this!" Belmont squawks as Alphys grabs his arm and tugs him over to the doorway so they can see him better. "S-see? Long white c-coat, big p-pockets?"

The Vulkins nod, wide-eyed.

"I don't want them to hug me!" says Belmont. The Vulkins look taken aback, and maybe a little disappointed. "Um. Because I'm already really confident," he hastens to add. "Aren't I? Tell them I'm confident!"

"He's getting kinda egotistical if you ask me," I tell the Vulkins. "He definitely don't need any encouraging. Also, kinda an asshole." Belmont, to his credit, makes no objection, although he looks annoyed. "But don't worry, there's a lotta guys out here who could really use a hug. You think you're up to the task?" There's a chorus of excited yeses. "Great! See ya later, then. You, uh, you might wanna get your coat back on, though. Just for now."

They start to climb back on top of each other's shoulders as the door closes.

We finish distributing the armor; I give the last few sets to a couple of Vegetoids, who can be pretty scary if you're not much for eating your veggies, and a trio of Whimsums, who are trembling with fear. They'll probably run away as soon as they can, but hell, they showed up to this fight, and Undyne still tells stories about the one she knew back in the war -- a real hero, sounds like. (Dust now, of course. It wasn't a good war for heroes.)

Then we hurry back to the time machine room. Corcoran is a dick about how long we took, but I shrug it off and Alphys claims I was real hard to wake up. I guess he believes her because he knows it firsthand. I knew my naps would be good for something.

Corcoran is in a bad mood today, yelling at everyone whether they deserve it or not -- and despite my low opinion of 'em, I have to admit some of these kids are doing good work. I wonder how many of 'em woulda gone on to do great stuff in a decade's time if it wasn't for the Flower Boys. I know none of 'em are aiming to end up working under a disused football field five miles away, but Dempster's probably good enough to make it there. Considering what Sellers told me last night about his neighborhood, he'd probably prefer the climate in Los Alamos. And Belmont and Sedgwick clearly coulda had great futures in materials science and magic, their willingness to murder their classmates notwithstanding.

Anyway, Corcoran fobs me off on a guy with the unfortunate name of Wellington Diversey III, who's apparently doing his work too slow for Corcoran's taste. I take the opportunity to pump him for info.
"Jeez, what crawled up his ass and died?" I whisper. "When's his deadline, anyway?"

"Uhh..." Diversey looks wary, but then he says "He's running behind on the extractors, those were supposed to be done and working already. The time machine he wants by November 4th but technically he doesn't need it until February."

There's something about that date that bugs me, but I don't know what. I feel like I already got plans or something. "When in February?"

Diversey shrugs. It's incredibly frustrating how content Corcoran's students are to just not ask questions. On the other hand, I guess it's good for me, because he ain't asking me why I want to know.

"Why?" Diversey asks.

Goddamnit. I just had to make that observation, didn't I?

"I got a very crowded social calendar, kid," I say. "Just wanna know how long I'm gonna be working on this shit before I'm free." I pause, as if I'm mulling it over. "Hey, are you really on board with this stuff? Kidnapping kids through time and using 'em to make drugs?"

Diversey gives me this look like what, are you crazy? "Dr. Corcoran says we'll only be taking the ones who would grow up to be criminals and invalids and other burdens on society, not any who would actually contribute to society." Ah. Eugenics. Great. I was wondering if that was how Corcoran sold his little scheme, and it's nice I've managed to confirm the worst. "And everyone knows about the health benefits of Determination!"

And yet the side effects in humans seem to have gone unnoticed, at least in the English-language press. "Your classmates, the ones you killed, were they burdens on society?"

"I didn't kill anybody," says Diversey. I saw him and Sedgwick nab one of the guys who was trying to attack Davis. Still, I guess if he didn't throw the switch himself he's gonna pretend he had nothing to do with it. "But let's be fair," he says. Yeah, sure, let's be fair, kid. Why the hell not? It'll be a change of pace. "They're probably why we're so behind. I always thought Frank Armitage was an idiot. Aren't you supposed to be helping me?"

So I grit my teeth and help him. He may not understand much about politics or ethics, but he's decent at math -- slow, yeah, but that ain't always so bad when you're dealing with real delicate machinery. It does make my job harder, though, because his deliberate manner is great for catching all my deliberate mistakes.

When Tachibana comes to take me and Alphys for our daily lunch visit with Papyrus, it's a huge relief, or what passes for one right now, at least. I can't let myself get rattled around Papyrus anyway, and it'll be good to see him one more time before the plan goes into motion.

Alphys has been real quiet all day. I ask if she's okay, figuring maybe she's worried she won't get out of here, but she mutters that she's fine, sounding much more like she's anxious and terrified. Oh well, I can't do much about that, can I?

When we get to the kitchen, Tachibana leaves us there and hurries out with a cart to feed the other monsters.

Papyrus is all smiles and spaghetti. The radio's on at full blast again, and he greets us with music and lyrics by Irving Berlin. "-- just got an invitation through the maaaails, Your presence requested this
evening, it's formal, a top hat, a white tie, and taaaails!" He looks very excited.

Normally I'd say it's a little too on-the-nose, but Papyrus don't have one.

Gorman's there too. "You need the address," she says, once the door's closed.

"Yeah, that'd help."

"Who was the woman you were making arrangements with?" she asks. "Angel--"

"Anglicana," I say. "No one you need to worry about, long as everything goes okay tonight. And I think we're gonna be okay! Just don't let the little volcanoes hug you. Right, Alphys?" I glance at Alphys, but she's staring at a stack of tomato cans on the counter that Papyrus has built into a small fortress, complete with little flags made of toothpicks. "...Alphys?"

"Oh!" She startles. "Oh, y-yeah, heh. W-what Sans said!" She smiles like she just got caught carting gold out of Fort Knox and she's gonna try pretending it was an accident. See, this is why I was worried about her coming along -- sure, she's been a real help, but she's anxious even at the best of times.

"Little volcanoes?" Gorman asks. She looks from me to Alphys and back, and then rolls her eyes. "The Vulkins are very encouraging! They mean well," I say. "Now. The address?"

"4325 South Hopwood," she says. This makes sense to me, and when I glance at Alphys, she nods. "Are you going to pass it on now?"

"Yeah, I guess we'd better," I say. "Alphys?"

She don't answer; she's staring into space again. Her anxiety ain't getting to me, exactly, but it's an inopportune time for Papyrus to wail, "And I trust that you'll excuse my dust when I step on the gas!"

"Alphys, you got the radio, I gave mine to some crazy lady with a knife." Gorman glares. "You wanna radio Anglicana or you want me to do it?"

"Oh! R-right! Yeah! I can do that," Alphys says. Jeez, what is wrong with her? She was doing a lot better than this before today. "I d-don't know if she'll be able to hear over, uh, P-papyrus," she says.

"I'll tell Papyrus to turn the volume down for now. If you keep it quiet I don't think anyone'll hear." I leave them at the little card table in the front of the room, and go back to the sinks where Papyrus is working. At this point in the recording, Fred Astaire does a little tap dancing, which Papyrus is clattering his bones along with. I gotta say, his rhythm's pretty impressive even if his voice ain't gonna appeal to mainstream listeners. "Hey, Papyrus! I love the song and all, but I guess Alphys is worried Tori'll be too distracted by the great background music to listen to our own little radio drama."

He stops tap-clattering, and turns to me with stars in his eyesockets. "Isn't it amazing? Fred Astaire is just the eel's hips! I wish I could be just like him, only with more spaghetti!"

And honestly, it's kinda hard to be worried when Papyrus is being so cheerful. "Aw, c'mon, compared to you that guy's just a wet noodle," I tell him.

"Saaans!" He throws a dishrag at my head, which I duck easily.
"What are you complaining about? You're grinning."

"Because of Fred Astaire, not your terrible jokes," he says.

"You know, as soon as I leave this room you're gonna come up with all the best comebacks for my jokes, right?" I say. "It's gonna be a classic case of Astairecase wit."

"No, Sans."

"But really, didn't his mother ever tell him it was rude to Astaire?"

"Sans, you can't ruin my favorite non-robot movie star for me just because he has a name that--"

"I can't help it, all the puns are just Astairing me in the face." I lean on the counter, trying to think up another one in case Papyrus keeps protesting, but he doesn't--he just dries dishes, looking almost serious. "...You tapping out of this now?" I ask.

"Sans, you aren't going to do anything dangerous tonight, are you?" he says, quietly.

"Me? Nah, you know how hard it is to get me to do anything," I say. "Don't you worry."

"But Sans, you came here to break us out without my nagging," he points out. "It's not that I don't applaud your strange industriousness, just--"

"It'll be fine," I say. "We got lots of help."

"That's true. The people here are so nice!" he says, and I can tell he actually means it. He finishes up the dishes and leans back on the counter, watching Alphys and Gorman talk over the radio. "Dr. Alphys looks sad," he says after a moment.

I look at her. She's wearing her usual anxious expression. "I think she's just nervous," I say. "You don't know her like I do. She's always nervous."

"Oh. You think?" he says. "That's good! I'd hate for her to be sad! Why is she always nervous? She's the Great Dr. Alphys! Everyone thinks she's great!"

"She don't think she's great is the main problem, I think." I sigh. "Eh. What are you gonna do about it?"

I mean this as a rhetorical question, but Papyrus answers anyway. "I, the Great Papyrus, will be her friend!" And, you know, that actually kinda worked for me. I was a wreck before I met Papyrus. "Only she probably has lots of friends already!"

"One more couldn't hurt," I tell him. Alphys looks up from the radio and gives me the thumbs up. "Welp, guess I'll leave you to your dishes. I better eat my lunch before it gets cold."

"Oh, no, don't worry about that! I decided to experiment with cold spaghetti soup! It's already cold!" he says. "At least, it should be! I prepared it ahead of time and then left it in the refrigerator for a few hours! And it's not one of those hot fridges Undyne has."

"Oh! That's great," I say. "I guess I better eat my lunch before it warms up, then." I guess at least the colder food is, the harder it is to taste?

Papyrus cranks up the radio again, and joins in with Bing Crosby on "If I Had A Talking Picture Of You." I rejoin Alphys and Gorman, who are eating their cold spaghetti soup in tense silence.
"So! How's the grub?" I ask.

"It's like gazpacho, only worse," says Gorman.

"My brother works very hard on his recipes," I inform her.

"I wish he wouldn't," she says.

"N-nobody asked you," snaps Alphys. I know she wouldn't be defending Papyrus' cooking if it wasn't Gorman playing food critic, but it's nice of her anyway.

Gorman rolls her eyes at this, then turns to me. "So your plan starts at suppertime, yes?"

"More or less," I say.

"Do you need Reynard to break the time machine first, or will you need him for backup when you do… whatever it is you were going to do with the cardboard?"

"The plan's to trap Corcoran in one of the monster cells," I say, "and I think we'll be okay on our own but I can't quite say."

"You'll probably want backup," she says.

"Really?" I ask.

"You may have noticed that he doesn't eat or sleep," she says. "I wouldn't say he's necessarily very good in a fight, but he's very difficult to knock out or keep pinned down. It makes him a very frustrating coworker."

I gotta wonder what Flower Boys team-building exercises look like. Not people I'd wanna have to do trust falls with. "Tell me, do all time travelers get lousy superpowers?" I ask.

She emits a single humorless laugh at that question. "Some worse than others. But yes."

"I'm guessing that's why Tachibana's so good in a fight, then. Enough you'd volunteer his help in taking out Corcoran," I say. I'm not real thrilled with the idea of having a human help us deal with Corcoran. No matter how much Tachibana likes my jokes, the fact remains that it'd be real easy for them to just kill Papyrus and Greater Dog and let Corcoran slaughter us.

"Ah. You're worried we're going to stab you in the back at the very last second," she says.

Alphys glowers. "Well, c-considering what you d-did to Undyne --"

"Let's be fair, Alphys, they stabbed her in the front," I say. "Tell ya what," I tell Gorman, "we'll radio you at five when this whole thing starts. We may need you guys to get the students out of the way, or you might actually be better off helping us with Corcoran."

Gorman nods. "We'll be here anyway. Corcoran wants more subjects," she says, rolling her eyes. "He wants to see how much time the machines need to cool down for optimum efficiency."

"Thank goodness you got an unending supply of vulnerable drunks to test that thing on," I say. "I mean, jeez, otherwise the guy might wanna use kids or something."

She sighs. "And as I believe I have mentioned, I didn't want to do any of this, I was just --"

"Yeah, yeah, you were just following orders. Listen, Gorman, I dunno how far in the future you
come from but --"

She holds up a hand. "I know. It's not a good excuse. But it kept me from doing idiotic things like this. Self-preservation is a powerful thing. Don't tell me you've never --"

Yeah, I don't like where this is going. So she did some bad things and she's all sad now. Whatever. I'm not this lady's shrink and she ain't mine. My eyes go dark. "Lady, I ain't gonna tell you anything about that shit, 'cause it's not your business and you can drop it right now." I relent a little and lose the scary face. "The plan, such as it is, is that you and Tachibana will be generally around, possibly with a fresh cargo of winos and lushes for Corcoran, possibly not. That's your problem. At five, dinner happens, Corcoran goes to let Papyrus out, hopefully he finds himself locked up, and I'll let you know where we need you most. That work?"

I think that huffy look Gorman's got now is the one she uses to cover up when I've just scared the shit out of her. "I guess it'll have to work."

"And if you b-betray us," says Alphys, "I'll, I'll, I'll zap you." I can tell she means it. Gorman almost laughs, though. Things sound a lot more threatening if you got the facial expressions (or lack thereof) to back 'em up, I guess.

Anyway, she and Gorman snark back and forth a couple times, which is kinda heartening considering how quiet Alphys has been today. When Tachibana returns, Gorman picks up her bowl of soup and goes to talk to him. "You ready for tonight?" I ask her.

"Looking f-forward to it," she says, still sounding real jittery.

"If you want I could help," I offer. "Obviously I know less about the machines but I'm great at bullshitting, if that's what you're nervous about." I mean, I'd really prefer to be near Papyrus just in case anything goes wrong, but --

"No!" Alphys says, sounding panicked. "No no no it's fine I can do it it'll be great I'll be fine!" she says, not pausing either for breath or punctuation. She wrings her hands.

"You just seem more nervous than usual," I say. "And I don't have nerves, so I figured --"

"It's fine!" she says again. "I, I, I think, b-because I'm always nervous, they p-probably won't notice I'm lying."

Okay, that's kinda plausible, actually. After all, she's been mildly panicky at best this whole time; Corcoran's students seem to accept that she knows her stuff even if she's twitchy. "Okay. Well, if you need someone to back you up when you say the interocitor's busted and the extractors'll need new proton packs or the SEP field's gonna get outta hand, let me know."

She nods. "Yeah. Sure." She still looks real forlorn, and I'm a little disappointed she don't even ask what an interocitor is.

"You'll have Belmont and Sellers along," I say. "They're terrified of Belmont's magic, and Sellers is clever." It's not real reassuring, even to me, but we're working with what we got here. "Anyway, I guess you got a hold of Tori on the radio?"

"No. Oh, d-don't worry, she was j-just out, we t-talked to Mettaton's cousin. They were h-holding down the fort for her."

"Okay, I have to ask -- how does a robot have a cousin? Did you build a second robot? It's been driving me nuts. Are you sure he's not a little screwy? Hopefully he won't throw a wrench in--"
She puts one hand up to make me stop, and if anything, looks even more panicky. "It's. Really n-not my place to t-talk about."

"Hey, it's fine, I was just curious," I say. And now I'm even more sure "cousin" means "secret, somehow embarrassing lover" or something. I can't imagine who would be an embarrassment to Mettaton, but it's not my business, I guess. I'm just real nosy for a guy without a nose. More importantly, though, Alphys is frazzled enough I can't even annoy her with relentless tool puns.

She don't talk much after that, and I end up chattering for both of us, making dumb jokes in an effort to cheer her up. None of them work, and I don't think it's just because I'm not funny. (That's definitely part of it though, don't get me wrong.) Eh, she'll be okay 'til the breakout, and she's sure to perk up once we're out of here. At least Papyrus is his old optimistic self. When we leave, he makes sure to give Alphys one of his extra-encouraging smiles, but she barely looks up.

When we get back to the time machine lab, Corcoran's standing over Sellers and shouting at him. As soon as I'm within arm's reach, Corcoran shoves me at him so hard I almost fall over. "Fix this idiot's mess," he tells me. "Miss Alphys, I need you in the extractor room." She has just enough time to shoot me a worried look before he drags her out the door.

I look at Sellers, who's gone almost as pale as I am. "Jesus, kid, what the hell'd you do?"

"Uh. Well. I did something wrong with my calculations and now some things have melted and Dr. Corcoran is really angry with me and --" here his voice drops to a whisper "-- I think he might kill me, which is really bad because for this whole week I've basically only been doing things because I don't want to die." He cringes, apparently waiting for me to berate him, and shuffles the notes in his hands.

"Yeah, that's a lot of work wasted right there if he kills you." I guess I could be less of a jerk about this, but there you go. I watch him, waiting for him to explain anything he just said.

After a moment he looks around to make sure everybody else is busy with their work, and then whispers, kinda defensively, "I meant to do it! Mostly. I mostly meant to do it." He looks worriedly down at his notes.

I wonder where exactly this is going, and take the notebook to look the numbers over. On one sheet, extensive calculations about efficiency and resistance. He definitely misplaced a decimal point somewhere in here where he was calculating how long to let the extractors rest between extractions, and I'm pretty sure he shouldn'ta multiplied when he was calculating power input, and -- is that a sign error? Oh, kid, I know you're better than this. On the other sheet, data collection on the extractors' magical output that abruptly goes off the rails six rows down, and then, even though it's obvious from the numbers how wildly wrong everything is, continues on for four more rows. I can distinctly see the moment when the handwriting goes from lab-standard sloppy to illegible panicked scribbles. "What exactly happened?"

"The fuse... fused before it got too bad but, um, the extractors still damaged the -- I was -- I was running blanks, sort of --"

"You mean you weren't killing guys strapped to extractors," I say, to clarify.

He nods. "And, and I kind of damaged the tables, although I guess that doesn't matter because probably nobody cares how comfortable the, uh, the subjects are. But, um, but the fuse -- Dr. Corcoran doesn't think they can find a replacement, and he's really, really angry, and --"

"So you broke the extractors and we can't run 'em," I say. "That's just terrible." I grin.
"Um. No." He looks even more nervous now. "He's just going to bypass the fuse, I think. We can run them but if we put too much power through them, uh... that'd be bad."

I don't let the grin go, but I'm not really feeling all that pleased anymore. "Oh, right, Corcoran's mixing his usual crazy pills with that brand new stupid serum. I forgot."

"I didn't really... mean to do it," says Sellers. "Not in the sense of, you know, intentionality. Which is a word," he adds, lest I object. "It started to happen and then I just, um, let it keep happening because it's -- it's not a good machine anyway and I thought maybe it'd break, and, and, it did, I guess."

"Hm," I say, noncommittally.

"Did I just ruin everything?" he asks.

"You're getting as bad as Alphys," I say. I put down the page of calculations. "You see what you did wrong, right?"

"Oh," he says. He looks at the page. "Oh, that was -- um, I should have divided there."

"And, uh, I think your decimal here's a flyspeck," I say, pointing it out.

"Oh," he says again, sounding queasy.

"And there's a minus sign you ignored over here. It's probably feeling kinda left out now. You should send it a little apology note."

"Uh. Okay. Well. I won't do it again. Unless you think I should do it again. Do you think I should do it again? I don't want to do it again."

"I think you should calm down, and then I think you should try not to piss Corcoran off for the rest of the day. And I've also decided that maybe you shouldn't go to Los Alamos after all until you can handle stress better. For everyone's sake." He looks real confused and I sigh. "Don't worry about it. Just redo the calculations."

"Oh god, I'm an idiot," he says under his breath, skimming the calculations.

It's my turn to double-check no one else is listening, and they aren't. Noyes is rushing through some kinda calculations while Diversey frowns at his notes, deep in concentration. Belmont and Sedgwick are at a table and appear to be assembling something out of balsa wood. I'm guessing they're trying out prototype shielding shapes for the time machine.

"Lots of people are idiots," I say, although I'm kinda worried about letting a supremely nervous Alphys alone with extra-pissed-off Corcoran, especially today.

"Isn't the Alamo in Texas?" he asks. "Why would I go to Texas? I don't even know what I'd do in Texas."

"Los Alamos, New Mexico. Different place." I say. "You better worry about the math before you start tackling geography, kid."

He works in shaky silence, and I indulge my worry for just a few moments, going over to the door and opening it a crack to see if Alphys and Corcoran are coming back. They're not, but I also don't hear any of the ominous noises I'm starting to get used to from being here too long.
I'm sure it's fine, though. Sellers said they were "running blanks," and it's too soon for Tachibana and Gorman to return with today's unlucky drunks.

"Where do you think you're going?" snaps Noyes, getting up from his desk.

"Nowhere," I tell him, shrugging. It's the truth, but I got a broad, dishonest face. I turn around and shut the door. "Why, you need help with math?"

"Not your help," says Noyes. "Diversey says you're terrible at it anyway, and if you're worse than him that's pretty bad."

"Hey!" says Diversey, actually sounding surprised his classmate's an asshole.

"Noyes?" says Belmont. He's frowning down at the notes on Noyes' desk, his model-making forgotten for the moment. "I think you did your calculations assuming spacetime's an ideal gas. So obviously you're going to have to redo them. I'd like the figures by the end of today, because Dr. Corcoran mentioned he could get us access to a wind tunnel downstate next week if we hurry, and I'm sure he'd say --"


Belmont shrugs and hands the notes to Diversey. After a moment, Diversey says, "Wow, you're terrible at aerodynamics."

"What? No I'm not. I'm better than you," says Noyes, but Diversey is bent over his papers, folding 'em, and in a few seconds he throws a paper airplane straight at Noyes' nose. "Ow!"

"I'm definitely better at aerodynamics than you," says Diversey, cheerfully. He and Sedgwick exchange a look and cackle while Noyes rips up the paper airplane, then crumples the pieces and throws them at Diversey. It only makes them laugh harder.

"Fuck you," says Noyes. He storms over and throws a punch at Diversey, but he shrieks like a little kid when his hand is blocked by one of Belmont's barrier spells.

"Are you in grade school?" demands Belmont. "If you don't sit down and redo that I'm going to tell Dr. Corcoran --"

"Fine," says Noyes, glaring daggers at Diversey. But he picks up the crumpled pieces of the airplane and sits down to redo his calculations while Diversey studiously ignores him and Sedgwick keeps snickering to himself.

I'm a little concerned about how at home Belmont seems to be as Corcoran's little enforcer, but then he shoots me a hopeful and slightly pathetic Did I do all right? look and I don't think he could fake that, no matter how good he is at pretending to be Corcoran's minion. I nod at him once I'm sure both Noyes and Diversey have their head down.

Then Sellers is shoving papers at me. Whoops, I almost forgot about him. "Look, here, this is fine, I fixed it. You don't think Corcoran's still going to be angry, do you?" he asks.

"Well, he is a mad scientist," I point out. I take the papers and look 'em over. "Yeah, looks like you fixed it. I'll check 'em over but so far so good, kid. No, no, look disappointed, pretend I'm saying ya fucked up big time, we gotta talk about the jailbreak."

It's not real hard for him to pull an upset face, since he's already pretty tightly wound today. "I should have called in sick today," he moans. "And gone to Texas or New Mexico or, or wherever."
"Come on, you think Corcoran'd let you get away?" I ask. "Better you're here and on your way out, kid. But you have to pull yourself together right now," I say. "Between you and Alphys I'm getting kinda exhausted being the nice and reassuring guy I am." Sellers snorts at that. Good. "But you gotta keep the act up for your classmates right now -- not to mention for yourself. You'll feel better if you're pretending you're not worried."

"I don't think that's true," he says.

I don't know whether it's true or not but it'd sure be helpful to me if he believed it and made an effort not to panic. "Look, kid. Corcoran's got an ego the size of the moon, and it completely eclipses his common sense. And your classmates are a bunch of morons who've never had a real problem in their lives. But you've seen zombies. You can handle this shit no problem," I remind him.

"I think they were vampires," he says.

"Well, either way, this bunch of suckers should be less of a challenge than that bunch of suckers."

He don't look real convinced. He takes his corrected calculations back from me and stares at them moodily. "What do I do now?" he asks me.

I shrug. "If you're really set on actually working, you could help those bozos over there. Considering what you did to the extractors they probably won't like it, but Belmont'd have your back." I pull out the pack of cards Frisk returned to me. "Me, I'm gonna play solitaire unless you wanna play Fizzbin. You know how to play Fizzbin, right?"

"No," he says. "I've never even heard of it."

"I'll teach ya. Usually it's better if there's more than two players, though." I start shuffling the cards in a fancy schmancy way that makes it easy for me to predict which cards are gonna end up where in the deck.

He scowls then, and I assume he's going to accuse me of trying to hustle him or something, but then he says, "I should give Corcoran the calculations right away, so he thinks I'm trustworthy."

I blink at him. "That's a terrible idea, kid. The more you interact with him when you're rattled like this, the less believable you get, especially if you suddenly get all obsequious and shit. Cards'll get your mind off things." I start dealing.

"Sellers and the skeleton are playing cards! Shouldn't you be working?" Diversey asks.

"You want me to deal you in?" I ask him.

"Just ignore them," says Belmont sternly. "You know how monsters are. Weak souls; they're all vice." I raise a brow ridge at this, but I have to admit it's what people tend to believe. "Anyway, I don't know about you, but I don't want Sellers mucking up these calculations."

Noyes, Diversey, and Sedgwick agree wholeheartedly with this, and Sellers cringes. "But, look, what if he knows?" he asks, once their attention is back on their work.

"Stop worrying about it," I say. "Look, is this 'cause you think I'd cheat at cards? Because I promise -- hey!" He stands, and his cards go fluttering to the ground. I grab 'em and follow him. "What the hell are you doing?" I say under my absence of breath.

"I'll be right back," he says, cheerfully, and loud enough for everyone to hear. "Just going to talk to Dr. Corcoran." He leaves.
Well, it's not my problem if he wants to get himself killed. It's definitely my problem if he blows it and Corcoran finds out about our plans, but I dunno how to go after him without causing a scene aside from just vanishing, and that'd cause more problems than it'd solve.

So I decide I won't do anything. Doing nothing is always easier anyway.

I lay out a game of Beleaguered Castle, then think better of it, reshuffle, and lay out a game of the much easier King's Audience instead. I'm just about to start playing when Sellers bursts into the room, grabs me by the humerus and pulls me out of my chair.

"What the hell, Marty?" demands Noyes.

He waves one dismissive hand at them, as if to keep them in their little corner of the room. "It's fine," he says, aggressively. It's obviously not fine. Then he drags me to the door. "Dr. Corcoran said he needed to talk to you. In a hurry."

"Uh," says Belmont. "Should... should I come too?"

Noyes pipes up. "Wouldn't he have asked for you if –"

"Nah, it's probably fine," I say, cheerful as ever. "He asked me to look over Sellers' calculations, so –"

"Right!" says Sellers, too quickly. "So we should go."

"We should go," I agree.

We go. No one is convinced. I hear Belmont trying to keep the peace as we hurry down the hall, and a hum in the background I can't quite place. "What gives?" I ask Sellers.

"Alphys! She's – it's – do you have a broom or something?" he asks.

"I'm a skeleton, not a cartoon witch," I point out. "There better be a good reason for all this running, I hate exercise."

"You're not even out of breath!"

"I don't have breath, numbskull," I snap.

"She's – the extractor –"

I assume the worst. "She's not in the extractor, is she?"

"No!" he says. "But she's – I don't know if she did it on purpose or – and I think it's overloading, and –" The lights flicker.

"Shit." I decide we better take a shortcut, and when the lights flicker again, we get there in that brief moment of darkness.

The noise of the machines is overwhelming. All three of 'em are on, melting holes in the tables. No one's strapped in, thankfully.

But then I see Alphys. She's clutching a live wire leading from the wall to the nearest machine. I can't tell if she's involuntarily pouring electricity into it or if the electricity is pouring into her, but her eyes are wide and she ain't moving. Corcoran's lying on the floor, not moving either.
Like Alphys said (and like I found out firsthand once), bone ain't a great conductor. It's not fun being shocked, though, so I'll try and avoid it for now. I grab the collar of her labcoat and pull her away. I need a little extra magical oomph to do the job, but I don't think Sellers notices.

Alphys twitches a little, but makes no move to stand. "Alphys? What happened?"

"Ow," she says, in a little voice. Then she starts crying.

I guess they were trying to bypass the fuse and, uh, didn't turn the power off? No, that's even crazier than I'd have expected from Corcoran, and he's not near any live wires. This makes no sense. What the hell was he trying to accomplish here?

Chapter End Notes

References:
The Murphy in Murphy's Law was a real person, Edward Murphy, who was an engineer. In the '40s he was designing a rocket sled (that's right: a rocket sled. Sadly not quite as cool as it sounds -- it runs on rails, not snow -- but still pretty cool!) and, well, things just kept going wrong.

I swiped the idea of a bunch of Vulkins standing on each other's shoulders from theslowesthney. Personally, I am amazed at how well Vulkins can draw with those stubby little feet and invisible shoulders! This is an inspiration to us all. If you're having trouble picturing this, here is an artist's conception. Tulivuori is the Finnish word for "volcano."

"I know none of 'em are aiming to end up working under a disused football field five miles away, but Dempster's probably good enough to make it there. Considering what Sellers told me last night about his neighborhood, he'd probably prefer the climate in Los Alamos." Both references to the Manhattan Project -- the first working nuclear reactor was constructed under a football field at the University of Chicago. Los Alamos, New Mexico was basically commandeered by the US government in order to conduct nuclear research and testing there during World War II.

Wellington Diversey III: Wellington and Diversey are two Purple/Brown Line stops. (The Red Line skips them so I kind of think of them as the same stop.)

Papyrus is singing "Top Hat, White Tie and Tails" and "If I Had A Talking Picture of You."

"The eel's hips" is a real slang term, along the lines of "the cat's meow" or "the bee's knees."

The interocitor is originally from a short story that became the novel This Island Earth, but Sans almost certainly knows it from the Mystery Science Theater 3000 sendup of the movie. It's kind of like alien Skype, but with lasers.

Proton packs are, of course, from Ghostbusters, although I assume in this universe the franchise was/is/will be called "Ghoulbusters," unless I come up with a better name for it.
A SEP field is a Somebody Else's Problem field, as described by Douglas Adams in *Life, the Universe, and Everything*. It refers to people's tendency to just ignore things that are too weird or uncomfortable for them to want to acknowledge.

Fizzbin is a card game *Captain Kirk makes up* during "A Piece of the Action," which is the episode of ST:TOS where the ship visits a planet that has based its entire culture on a history book about 1920s Chicago gangsters. THE ORIGINAL MOB AU.

**Beleaguered Castle** and **King's Audience** are both *types of solitaire games*. (Or, as Wikipedia calls them, patience games.)
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Blaidsumu drew Sans dodging Mettaton's noodle arm at Club MTT. I absolutely love how he's just kind of shrugging off the attacks of a killer robot.

And Zhamka drew Sans and Belmont's meeting with the Tems. It's amazing and Belmont's expression is perfect.

And a warning: this chapter has some pretty typical mafia AU violence and a little gore, but there's also some other stuff that might be upsetting. The warning is spoilery, though, so click where it says "See the end of the chapter for more notes" if you want more specifics.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The machines are still making that noise. It's way past the woms Tachibana described earlier. There's just a constant loud buzzing that rattles my teeth. It makes my bones ache in all the places where the cops have broken 'em. It's actually hard to think in this din. And here I thought I was an expert on all kinds of racket except for tennis.

"Is she all right?" Sellers shouts over the noise.

"Dunno," I say. I try helping her to her feet, but she's deadweight. "Alphys?"

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," she says. "I, I, oh g-g-god." She's panicking. There is absolutely no time to help her calm down, though, or to even begin to do anything about her scorched palms, and… whatever else the shock did to her. I hear it's not great for organs, but I wouldn't know, would I?

"Alphys, I'm sorry but we gotta get out of here now," I say, hoping she can hear me over the noise. "I don't know how long the extractors'll be a problem, but if they blow up… can you walk?" She stumbles to her feet, sways, and lurches towards the extractor. "Guess not," I say, pulling her away from it. "Okay, Sellers, here's what we're gonna do." There's no answer. "Uh. Sellers? You still here?"

When I turn to look for him, he's staring at the door. Noyes, Diversey, and Sedgwick just walked in, and they don't look real happy. "What did you do?" Noyes shouts over all the noise. "We have to shut them down!"

Diversey and Sedgwick, meanwhile, hurry over to Corcoran. "Dr. Corcoran?" Oh, sure, rush to the aid of the guy who made you a murderer, kid. Great idea. Didn't turn out too good for me, but you go right on. He tries to help Corcoran up but Corcoran's dead to the world right now. "He's still breathing!" says Diversey.

"Is she okay?" Sedgwick asks.

It takes me a sec before I realize he's asking after Alphys, and I'm thrown a little off-balance by this show of inhuman compassion. "Not too sure," I tell him. He looks confused, like he don't hear me, so I shrug with the shoulder I'm not using to keep Alphys on her feet.
Belmont stumbles in after them, shouting, "I told you to stay there, where are you going?" Then he sees the extractors, and just stares. "What -- what even happened?"

"I think we should find a way to unplug the machine," says Sedgwick. "Otherwise it'll overload, won't it?"

"Did you do this?" Diversey snarls, grabbing Sellers by the front of the shirt.

"No!" says Sellers. "Dr. Corcoran helped me turn them off before he dragged me back to the lab!"

"Hey!" says Sedgwick. "We need to make it stop, whaling on Sellers isn't going to help."

"So Belmont should fix it," says Diversey, dropping Sellers and rounding on Belmont.

"You're being ridiculous, Well, stop it," says Sedgwick. It takes me a sec to realize "Well" is a nickname for Wellington Diversey III. Well, no wonder he turned out rotten. Then again, I'da called him Third. In a strong Ebott accent it's especially unflattering.

"He has magic!" says Diversey.

"I don't have magic that'd help," says Belmont. "We should get out of here."

"You got the right idea, kid, we should absolutely get the hell outta here," I say.

"Who died and made you king?" Noyes says.

"Kid, trust me, if everyone died I'd still find a way not to be king. I sure as hell don't measure up enough to be a ruler. But I think we got enough noise in the room right now. You three --" I gesture at Noyes, Diversey, and Sedgwick "-- take Corcoran and get back to the time machine room. I dunno how long we got before these things blow, but that room's safer than here. I'm gonna stay here. Electricity don't work so well on bone. I'll see if I can put Belmont's magic to work. I'll need Sellers too. He's responsible for this mess!"

Sellers flinches, and shoots me a betrayed look. He's about to say something, but then he realizes what I'm doing.

The others hesitate, but Sedgwick takes another look at the extractors and says, "Do whatever you want, guys, I don't want to die." He tries to drag Corcoran's body, which is a little too hard for him 'til Diversey goes to help him. Very reluctantly, Noyes follows 'em out, but he shoots a glare back at me before he goes.

"Great!" I say. Once they're safely away, I motion for Sellers and Belmont to help me with Alphys, and we all get out of the room. I shut the door behind us, and the din becomes much more bearable. "If I had ears they'd be ringing right now," I say. "Alphys, how are you?"

"'mfine," she mutters, leaning grumpily against the door. This is obviously not true. "Din't -- d-didn't -- you didn't have to c-carry me -- I'm f-fine." She's a little twitchier than usual. The burns on her hands are a charred brown-orange, in contrast to her unburnt yellow scales, but her eyes are focused. Probably not in immediate danger of dying.

On to more urgent stuff, then. "Alphys, give me your radio," I say.

She fishes it out of her pocket and gives it to me, doubtfully. "I'm s-sorry," she says, apropos of nothing.
Or maybe it's apropos of the radio, which looks a little melted. When I try the broadcast button it won't depress. "Uh. Looks like it's fried."

She winces. "Sorry," she mumbles again. When she tries to put her face in her scorched hands, she cringes and jerks them away again. "I r-ruin everything, d-don't I?"

I could probably make up a long bullshit speech about how she hasn't ruined anything and she should cheer up and whatever, but we don't have time. "Good thing you made a spare," I say. "Only some asshole gave it away. Sellers, you gotta find Patience Gorman."

"That creepy old woman?" Sellers asks.

"Probably," I say. Human ages are weird. But she's creepy and she's female, so close enough. "Tell her I need to get a hold of Anglicana and I need my radio. I'll meet you by the meat freezer."

"But she's with them, isn't she?" Sellers asks.

"She's been working with us for a while now," I say. "But if she pulls her knife, you should probably run."

"I could go," says Belmont. "I mean, I have magic --"

"Nah, I need you here," I say. I can't tell which of them finds this more worrying, but after a moment, Sellers nods and speeds off down the hallway.

"So what do you need me for?" Belmont asks. "I know a little first aid, I don't know if it works on reptiles, but if I had some bandages, I guess I could use this coat but it's really hard to rip and --"

"I said I was fine!" Alphys snarls. Belmont takes a step back.

Alphys could probably use some first aid, but not when she's so pissed she ain't even stuttering. "Well, I didn't exactly lie; I think I can use your magic here. Make sure your classmates are in the time machine lab, then put a spell up to keep 'em there. Where's the other two? Fullerton and Dempster?"

"They went to find lunch," says Belmont. "I don't think they like Italian food," he says apologetically.

"Eh, guess we can't worry about 'em now," I say. "Lock the others in, and then go spring as many monsters as you can find. Alphys, you good to walk?" I ask.

She stands, shaky but indignant. "How many t-times do I have to s-say --"

"Okay, okay, keep your tail on," I say.

"But, uh, Dr. Corcoran has the keys," Belmont says. "Are you sure you don't need bandages, or --" He stops abruptly when Alphys gives him a look.

He's right, though. I was thinking he had the keys since he was stuck taking breakfast to the monsters, but he gave the keys back to Corcoran after that, who gave 'em to Tachibana so he could bring everyone lunch, and then Tachibana returned them. "Make something up, say you need to check on some kinda mainenance thing, I dunno, improvise."

"Um. Okay," says Belmont. He don't sound real convinced. "Are you sure you don't need help…" He glances briefly at Alphys. "…with anything?"
"It's fine," I say. "I got it. Get outta here." He gets. So now it's just me and Alphys. "You doing better?" I ask. She's leaning against the door again, trying to make it look like she's standing on her own. "Here, you can lean on me."

"I'm f-fine," she says, for the thousandth time. It's still a lie. "L-let me alone here and --"

"Hell no," I say. "C'mon, we gotta get going, those things are gonna blow soon."

"N-not without my input," says Alphys. "They'll -- they'll slow d-down and --" Alphys looks pained. "I have to go b-back in and finish --"

"The hell you do," I say. "Look, if they don't blow up without you we'll figure something else out, now we got Corcoran and his cronies out of the way. Is that what you were trying to do? Alphys, you coulda died." She looks real guilty, but makes no answer. "And here I thought I was dumb for the time with the microwave," I grumble. Maybe I should tell her that story; I can make it pretty funny if I want to. 'Course, that was a different situation. I didn't really care what happened to me that day, I just kinda wanted to --

Oh. Oh, hell. Maybe it was seeing the extractions again when she thought she'd put it behind her, or maybe it was finding out about the zombies our DT made. Whatever it was, Papyrus spotted it. And I brushed it off like it was nothing. Then, I've been ignoring that big empty pit inside for decades. And apparently, Papyrus can see it clearer than I thought.

"What k-kind of research were you doing on microwaves?" she asks, suddenly all fake-interested.

"We'll talk about it later," I say. "Come on, we're going to see Asgore." With some effort, I blip us to Asgore's meat freezer. I prop Alphys up against the wall and unlock the freezer.

Asgore's real surprised. "Already? Or am I losing track of time?"

"Things happened too fast. Not that I don't wanna get the hell out of here, but --"

He steps out of the freezer and stretches. It was a big freezer, but Asgore's bigger. "Well, I, for one, am very relieved. Does Toriel know the plans have been pushed forward?"


"No," she says, piteously.

"Oh, you're gonna be honest with Asgore but not your old friend Sans," I say, but I'm kinda glad she's admitting it even if this entire situation is much more fucked up than I thought it would be. God, I just wanna get out of here.

We hear distant shouting down the hall -- sounds like Noyes is cursing out Belmont.

Asgore materializes his trident. "Please excuse me, I think I will go see what that is."

"Knock yourself out," I tell him. "I'm gonna stay here with Alphys. We got a backup radio coming soon. Uh, and if you see Patience Gorman or Reynard Tachibana, they're supposed to be on our side, so --"

"Patience Gorman?" he asks, eyes wide.
"Yeah, I was pretty surprised too," I say. "But I believe her. Mostly." I shrug.

"Well. I will keep that in mind," he says. Then he lumbers off down the hall.

Me and Alphys sit in awkward silence for a while. "So," I say finally, "you wanna tell me what happened with those extractors?"

"I, I," she says. Then she puts her face in her hands. "I d-don't -- I c-couldn't let them -- the extractors -- I -- I'm s-sorry, I'm such an inc-c-convenience, I --"

"Hey, hey, Alphys," I say. "All this bullshit is an inconvenience. You aren't personally an inconvenience. It was a little inconvenient what you did, but, uh, I guess we're gettin' out of here a little earlier --"

"And it's all my f-fault," she says, sniffing. "If I n-never redesigned the extractors -- if -- I mean, all those p-people, all those people you and I k-killed -- a-and the humans c-coming back from the d-d-dead, and --"

"So you made some mistakes, so what?" I ask. "I don't really think that merits death by electrocution. Well. Okay, it might if they got you in court but heh, let's not let it come to that, all right? Listen, lemme tell you some stuff that might make you feel better, okay?"

In the background I hear Noyes screaming, followed by Asgore saying something in a real apologetic tone. Noyes is such a whiner; Asgore probably only singed him a little. Then I hear the door slam shut. Good.

Alphys sniffs. "I d-don't think --"

Okay. Gotta come up with something good. Best just to leap into it. "So when I was growing up," I say, "there was this cartoon about the amazing Dr. Alphys. Guess they couldn't get the rights to a cartoon about Mettaton, so they made one about you."

"That's t-terrible," she says.

"No, no, it was great!" I insist. I'm lying, of course; in the cartoon Dr. Alphys was one of those bright pink humans with cloudy tufts of white hair and a mustache, as per crappy cartoon laws about mad scientists. He worked with a club of five evil-fighting kids, and his eccentric inventions were always just what they needed to save the day.

I distinctly remember hating the one monster on this five-kid team, because I knew so long as he was on the team, he was taking up the valuable monster slot I coulda used so much better. He was some kinda felid, I think. If they gotta have monsters around, humans always prefer the fluffy monsters that remind 'em of pets. There were never any slimes or insectoids on TV, and skeletons were usually the bad guys. I don't know why I liked that lousy cartoon so much.

Anyway, I don't tell Alphys about any of that. It would just be counterproductive. I make up a much better cartoon where she's some kinda science superheroine. In my version she brokers peace treaties with aliens and mentors kids and foils bank robbers. I start to invent an episode where she and a thinly-veiled Mettaton expy learn a touching lesson about friendship and lasers, but as it turns out, this was way too much effort to go to for absolutely no payoff. "B-but I'm nothing like that! F-future cartoon me is a total fraud! I sh-shouldn't even --"

"Okay, I guess we won't keep talking about that," I sigh. Well, there's another story I could tell her, I guess. "You wanted to know about the microwave incident?"
"Uh. Yeah," she says, confused at the sudden change of topic.

"I wasn't doing microwave experiments, I just had a microwave oven in my dorm room to cook food in college," I say. "They're gonna be real common, give it a few decades. Anyway, I was goin' home to see my mom over Christmas break and I had to unplug it before I left, that was the rule, and at the time I actually cared about that shit. But the outlet was behind a bookshelf and I couldn't quite reach -- my magic was lousy back then, see. And I also couldn't do shortcuts, so I was gonna be late for my train home. So I did the dumbest thing possible, and grabbed the nearest thing to close that last few inches of distance and lever the plug out. Which was a fork. Metal. Of course, the fuse blew, and I got enough of a shock I was seeing stars. After a couple seconds I was fine, and I caught my train, but it was all a big hassle when I got back."

She frowns at me. "But d-didn't you know --"

"Hilarious, right?" I say, making a 'ta-da' kind of gesture. "Me! A physics student! Not knowing basic electrical safety! Good thing I was okay, huh? I got a lot of mileage telling that one. People were thrilled to know such a dumbass."

"Um," she says, frowning. "But h-how did you not know --"

"Of course I knew, Alphys," I say. "But it's not a funny story if I mention the part about how I thought I'd failed all my tests, and my dad had just died, and I couldn't stand making my mom drive halfway across the state in the snow to retrieve me if I missed my train back to Ebott under those circumstances. I'd be miserable, and she'd be miserable. Pointless." I shrug. "I couldn't find anything else, so I grabbed the fork, decided I'd rather be dead than late, and, well, I took that chance."

"But." Alphys is horrified when someone else is apathetically self-destructive, apparently. It's just herself she don't care much for. "B-but wouldn't she have had to come out and, and get your d-dust if --"

"Yeah, she woulda had to do that. When she found out. And somehow I don't think she'd have thought it was just an inconvenience if I'd died. It woulda been real inconvenient, of course, but she wouldn't be cursing my irresponsibility, she'd be bereft. 'Cause, you know, she cared about me. People care about you, Alphys. There's a way to fry those machines that won't involve putting yourself in that kinda danger, and it's worth it to me and all your friends if it takes a little more effort to make that happen, even if right now you don't think bein' dead sounds so bad." This is all getting real serious, so I add, "Also, like I think I said about five times now, if anything happens to you, Undyne'll weigh me down and throw me in the lake."

"I'm s-sure she wouldn't," says Alphys.

"And," I say, "if anyone oughta be sleeping with the fishes --"

"Oh my god, Sans, shut up!" she says, punching me in the humerus.

"-- in a fun way, I mean --"

"Aaargh." She tries to put her face in her burnt hands again, and again she lets out a little moan of pain. "I have to s-stop doing that," she mutters.

I'd love to keep annoying her with terrible puns, because as lousy as my jokes are, when Alphys is complaining about my sense of humor she's not throwing herself on live wires. But I can hear people coming down the hall towards us, and I assume at least one of them is Gorman, unless one of
Corcoran's students has taken to wearing heels. When she rounds the corner, she's already got the radio out. "What the hell is going on?" she demands.

Sellers follows after her, looking real uncomfortable. "Are you sure she's working with us?"

"This useless boy won't tell me anything," she says.

Sellers says nothing, he just gives me this terrified look. I ignore it, and take the radio. "Thanks!"

"What happened to your radio?" Gorman asks Alphys.

I wave her off and get on the radio. "Anglicana, come in!"

"Oh… hi…?" says a voice that is definitely not Tori. "Sorry… I guess you were hoping to talk to someone else…? She left me with the radio… and now you're disappointed… sorry…" There's a real long pause. "Oh… sorry…. I guess I have to say 'over'….."

"Right, yeah, good," I tell the person on the other end. I look perplexedly at Alphys.

"It's Mettaton's cousin," she says.

"Oh, great," I say. To Mettaton's cousin (or 'cousin'? I say, "Listen, you gotta get Anglicana to send the, uh, caterers up here ASAP. I hear my associates Dejah and Peanut contacted you earlier today with the address of the party. Can you get a hold of her? Over."

"I… guess?" says the dope on the other end. "Sorry, I don't want to bother her… but it's probably very important…? I'm not very good at this…… Over…"

"Wowie! Isn't that the radio announcer for the Spooktunes Hour?" says Papyrus, startling the hell out of me. He's come from the direction of the cells, and I can hear doors slamming open down the hall.

"Oh, yeah, I guess so," I say. Hadn't really thought about it, but that's probably why the voice is familiar.

Papyrus grabs the radio from me and says into it, "I love your show, it's amazing!" It doesn't transmit, though, because he's not pressing the button, and he realizes this almost immediately and turns it over in his hands. "Oh, fooey, how do you --"

"Sorry, Papyrus, I'll see if you can tell 'em later, okay?" Reluctantly, he gives me the radio back.

Into the radio, I say, "Listen, she's gonna bother you a lot more if this party don't go off like we planned, okay? Actually, couldja get her for me now?" They sound nice and all, but I don't know if I trust this person. Even if Papyrus does.

"Oh… I guess… I'll be back….." says the voice on the other end.

Monsters trickle in as Belmont and Asgore free 'em, and after a minute or two they join our group. Greater Dog's standing behind 'em, tongue lolling out, and the Tems look real pleased with themselves. Things are going unexpectedly well, actually, especially since this way Papyrus gets to stay out of Corcoran's way, hopefully.

"You trapped Corcoran and the other students, right?" I ask Belmont.

"Yeah," says Belmont, looking kinda guilty. "And I locked the door once, um, Mr. Dreemurr here helped me get the keys. They weren't happy about it, though. And I think probably Corcoran can
break my barriers, so --"

"You think he can get through a locked door, though?" I ask him.

"Of course he can get through a locked door," snaps Gorman. "Our connection with the Flower can go both ways, unfortunately. If he hasn't called upon that, it's only because he doesn't want the Flower to know he's failed."

"Or he's still napping," I say.

"What?" she asks. "What do you mean? Corcoran doesn't sleep."

I nod at Sellers. "Tell her what happened, wouldja?"

"But I don't know what happened!" Sellers points out.

The radio crackles. "Mesodon, come in!" It's Tori. I decide to leave Sellers and Gorman to their own devices.

"Hey, Anglicana! I'm here, just wanted to make sure you got my message. We gotta push the schedule up. Get your musicians here soon as you can, okay? Over." Asgore's staring intently at the radio, and I wish he wouldn't. He asks Alphys what it is, quietly, and she starts explaining.

"Yes, of course," says Tori. "Is anyone hurt?"

"Uh." I look at Alphys, who appears to be doing a lot better now, although she could just be putting it on. "Dejah's a little -- you should look at her when we get back but I think she's gonna be okay."

"T-tell her not to tell Undyne," Alphys tells me, and though I don't know if it's the right choice, I gotta respect her desire not to tell a loved one about some bad shit.

"And don't bother our piscine pianist friend about that, if ya could? Over."

"Understood. I will start sending them along, Mesodon. Anything else? What about pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey? Over."

"Yeah, uh, the game's all set up," I tell her, avoiding looking at Asgore. "Lemme ask about the rest." As we've been talking, the other monsters have been joining us; the Whimsums are buzzing around at the edge of the crowd looking nervous, Loox is telling his cousin Anyskin off for picking on him, and there's a couple Moldsmals wiggling their way down the hall.

"I sent Reynard around with keys to let the others out," says Gorman, "as we're apparently doing this now." She glares at Sellers, who looks like he'd like to turn invisible.

I get back on the radio. "Yeah, Anglicana, looks like everyone's okay. We'll try and meet you in the alley in the back. Avoid the front of the building. It's uh, real noisy right now. This party is dynamite. Over."

"But I did not send you with party favors," she says. She means those grenades she offered earlier, of course. We didn't have a good way to smuggle 'em in. "Please explain, over."

"Let's just say someone mighta put a few too many candles on the cake," I say. Alphys hangs her head guiltily, and I add, "Think it's for the best in the end, though. Over."

"And we have to move quickly," Gorman says, once I ain't broadcasting. "I can't believe anything managed to knock Corcoran out," she says.

"Uh," says Alphys. "I -- I thought -- I thought I k-killed him."

"He was still breathing, I guess. That's a sure sign, with humans. Just sleeping. Probably do him some good, though," I say.

"It'd take a lot to kill him," says Gorman, looking pretty impressed with Alphys. "And once he's up again he won't be going down easily."

"Why exactly are you helping us?" Asgore asks her. He sounds real suspicious, and I can't blame him.

"Hey, guys!" says Tachibana, turning the corner with a jangle of keys. "I got everyone out! Also these tiny volcanoes are, um, really... warm." He's looking a little scorched, and the Vulkins following in his wake are gleeful as I ever seen 'em. "When do I get to break the time machine? I opened that door but there was a barrier and three really angry physics students. So I closed it again."

"Actually, Sedgwick is a physical chemist," says Belmont, like that's important right now.

"There's a time machine?" Asgore asks, in mingled disbelief and annoyance.

"It's a long story. We're at least twenty chapters in, maybe more," I say. "I'll try to summarize when time ain't so tight."

"And why has Toriel changed her name to Anglicana?" Asgore asks. He don't sound very annoyed about that, at least. Just exhausted enough to make me feel a little guilty.

"Uh. Also a long story," I say. I don't offer to explain later. "So! Let's get going. No point in most of you guys coming along," I tell the milling group of monsters. "Humans with me and Asgore. Alphys, you too. Papyrus, you're in charge of these guys. Make sure Greater Dog don't drool too much on the Vulkins. If something's wrong, get outta here and radio Tori. The button's here," I say, showing him as I hand it off. "Don't use any real names over the radio, we don't know who's listening. Tori's callsign is Anglicana."

"Yes! Of course! Did you hear that?" he asks the other monsters. "The Great Papyrus will lead and protect you! Nyeh-heh-heh!"

Some of the monsters exchange doubtful looks. They don't know Papyrus. "You'll do great, Papyrus. Keep yourself safe."

As we start down the hall, Asgore sighs. "Tell me, Sans, am I the pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey game?"

This ain't a grin anymore, it's a grimace. "Yeah. Well. I talked her down from, uh, the other thing."

"I think the other thing was a g-good sign," says Alphys. "It's, it's like a metaphor! Yeah!"

"What was the other thing?" Asgore says, although he don't sound like he actually wants to know. Still, he did ask. I kinda have to answer. "Originally, you mighta been the piñata," I admit.

"See?" says Alphys. "Toriel thinks you're, um, r-really sweet inside?"
I don't wanna know how the small matter of the baseball bat comes into this metaphor. Better change the subject. "So, how 'bout them Flower Boys?" I say.

"Yeah, how do I break the time machine with all the physics students in the way?" Tachibana asks. "And, I guess, a chemist. Do you, um, do you want me to break the physics students? And," he says, glancing at Belmont as if daring him to say anything, "do I have to handle the chemist differently?"

Belmont scowls at him, but he don't say anything.

"Well," I say, but before I can explain my master plan of letting Asgore deal with it because I don't wanna, we turn the corner and see that the door to the time machine room is wide open.

Gorman sighs. "I told you Corcoran would be trouble," she says.

"You sure did," I say. "I'd give you a blue ribbon for Most Predictable Prediction but I don't have one on hand." I turn back to Tachibana. "Anyway, someone might have to break the physics students, but for now it looks like you're clear to deal with the time machine."

Asgore turns around and tells the other monsters to stay here. "You, come with me, please," he tells Belmont. "And you." He nods at Tachibana. They creep up close to the door and Asgore leans his head in the door and looks around. "They haven't left a guard. Is that really a time machine? That big wall of vacuum tubes?"

Now I know it's safe, I go up to make sure it's all still there, which it is. Good. "Nah, the thing in front of it is the time machine," I say. "But Tachibana oughta break the computer too."

"That's a computer?" Tachibana asks. "Wow. My mom had one that fit in a briefcase."

"What are you even talking about?" Belmont asks. Asgore'd also like to know, judging from the look he's giving me, but because he's smarter than Belmont in most of the ways that count, he's holding off on asking 'til we're all pretty much out and in one piece.

"Not important right now," I say. "Tachibana, you have fun breaking stuff, okay?"

"Yeah!" he says, hurrying into the room. He lifts the time machine -- which is mostly made of metal and thick heavy glass -- like it was nothing. Then he throws it into the vacuum tubes. The cacophony is music to my ossicles.

"Guess the kid can take care of himself," I say. He's having a hell of a good time, looks like. "Shit, we gotta find Corcoran and his pinheads, don't we?"

"Could we just leave?" Belmont asks. "I mean. The extractors -- Miss Alphys seems to have, um, taken care of them."

"I would imagine Dr. Corcoran and his students are working to fix that," says Asgore. "What exactly did you do, Alphys?" he asks, curious.

"Um," says Alphys.

"She did a pretty bang-up job, but since we haven't heard 'em blow up yet, I think maybe I should pop in and check on 'em, just to see they're well and truly fried." I pause. "Not meaning to change the subject or nothing, but I don't think I mentioned the extractors to you, and you don't seem real surprised about them. It mighta just slipped my mind, though, I'm a slippery guy."
"The Flower mentioned them to me," he says, stiffly. "He ...he visited."

"Oh. Well that was real friendly of him," I say. There's something big I'm missing here. Gorman actually looks worried. She's got her hand on the pocket where she keeps her knife, but she's not reaching for it, just checking to see it's still there. Nervous. Huh.

"I would very much like to see these extractors," says Asgore. "Preferably broken to the point of uselessness."

"That m-makes three of us," says Alphys, shakily.

After a moment, Sellers says "Four." He sees Belmont's face and amends it. "Or five."

Gorman don't say anything. I guess she doesn't care, and doesn't care enough to lie. But she looks calmer now. We head toward the extractor room.

Not for long, though; there's a flash and a gunshot from one of the doorways Tachibana and Belmont left hanging open when they released all the monsters. Asgore immediately steps forward, shielding the rest of us, and sends a burst of flame into the doorway. An enormous red trident materializes in his hand, and he points it at the doorway.

"Drop your weapon and you will not be harmed," he says.

There's no response at first. Then Wellington Diversey III's face comes into view. He raises the gun slowly, shaking. "I'll kill you," he says. "I can do it. I've had practice."

"Lead bullets aren't very effective against monsters," says Gorman, stepping forward. "You'd have done better with a knife." She's right; it's because bullets are more disconnected from the actual intent of the person tryin' to kill us. Whacking us upside the head with a gun, on the other hand, is actually real effective. I've seen someone get dusted a couple times like that when people ran outta bullets.

"Miss Gorman, please stop giving him advice like that," says Asgore. She ignores him.

"Did Corcoran send you out here to hold us off with that thing?" she asks. "You must be the stupid one. He only means for you to slow us down."

He jerks the gun away from Asgore and points it at her. The corner of her mouth that I can see twitches up. Is she smiling? "You're not a monster. I could kill you with a bullet."

Gorman sighs. "Either kill me or don't. Make up your mind!"

He swallows, and takes aim again. "I could kill you," he says again, and I realize he thinks she's making fun of him. "I could, even if you're a lady. I won't hesitate." He is blatantly hesitating. He's also shaking. "Are they making you do this?" Aah. This must be some kinda chivalry thing. Weird coming from someone who attacked a classmate from behind so he could shove him into a DT extractor. "Did... did these monsters take your soul?"

Gorman snorts. "What, after where it's been?" she asks. Then, before any of us can react, she draws her knife, lunges forward, and slashes his throat open. He coughs, gushing red all over his nice pressed shirt and his white coat, and falls to his knees. The gun goes off once, driving a bullet into the concrete floor, and then he drops it. He's gasping and putting his hands to his throat, trying to keep the blood in, but it keeps coming.

Gorman retrieves the gun and shoots him in the head. The kid goes still. Death in humans is hard to
gauge, but they mostly don't live real long with their brains spattered all over like that, so I think it's safe to say there's not gonna be a Wellington Diversey IV.

"I don't think you had to do that," says Asgore. He steps back to avoid the pooling blood.

"It was taking too long. I don't always live up to my name. We need to find Corcoran." She holds up the gun. "Would anyone like this? I already have one."

"Give it to Sans," Asgore says. Gorman looks a little surprised. "I doubt I will need it." And he's not great with firearms, either; he's a much better shot with actual fire.

"Gee, thanks," I say, taking the gun from her. It's a little big for my hands, but we all gotta make do in tough times like these. I check and see it only has five rounds in it, which is obnoxious because I know for a fact Gorman's nasty little pocket pistol holds ten rounds and she probably ain't used any of 'em yet today.

"Well, if he wants to keep us out of the extractor room, I guess we ought to keep going," says Belmont. He sounds real unhappy about it. But as Gorman leads Asgore to the extractor room in front, Belmont and Sellers trail behind. "Um. Don't Marty and I get guns?" he asks.

"You got magic, kid, you don't need a gun," I say, pocketing the gun.

"You have magic," he points out.

"You've seen my magic. Nothin' to write home about."

"What about Marty?" he asks.

"I'm fine," says Sellers, very quickly. "I don't know how to shoot anyway."

"See? Besides, he's a smart guy, Sellers."

"I'm smart!" says Belmont.

"Then you don't need a gun, do you?" I shrug. Belmont has no answer to that. "I'm smart, right?" I hear him ask Sellers.

"Yeah, definitely," says Sellers, a little dubiously. "Well. You and I are definitely the smartest of the complete morons who trusted Corcoran." He seems like he's on firmer ground with that assertion, and Belmont makes a noise of unhappy assent.

"You doing okay?" I ask Alphys, quietly.

"No," she says. "I'm not made of g-glass, Sans," she adds, quickly.

"That's true. Glass is an insulator and you're a conductor. Look, if I didn't think we'd need your know-how with the extractors I'd'a had Papyrus keeping an eye on you, but if you wanna back out I'm sure we can still break the things."

"I want to see them melt." She says it with such fervor that I'd be a little afraid of her if I was a DT extractor.

"Well, okay, so long as you don't melt with 'em."

Asgore and Gorman come to the big double doors to the extractor room, and Asgore stops and looks
back at us. "Are you ready?"

He's not exactly talking to me; no observer would say he was talking to me. But he's definitely talking to me. "Guess we gotta be ready," I say.

"Y-yeah, I guess so," says Alphys.

Belmont and Sellers nod, their faces bone-white. Gorman takes her gun out.

Asgore pushes the door open. The noise has let up very slightly but it still ain't good; it's kinda like the difference between a thousand screaming demons and, I dunno, nine-hundred and ninety-nine demons trying to talk over each other at one hell of a party. Sedgwick and Noyes are there, armed with lead pipes and looking tense, and Fullerton and Dempster are, totally incongruously, sitting on a box eating sandwiches. Well, they're trying to; Noyes is standing over 'em waving his lead pipe with fervor while they ignore him. I recall Belmont's suggestion that they didn't like Papyrus' spaghetti lunch, but despite that I can see these are a couple of guys with their priorities well-thought-out.

The noise of the extractors means they don't notice us come in immediately; it's Fullerton who spots us, pointing and dropping his sandwich and grabbing Noyes' lead pipe out of his hand. Noyes hastens to find himself another weapon. He grabs a pipe wrench. It's still bloodstained from that first fight between Corcoran's students.

Dempster keeps eating. Fullerton and Noyes shout at him, but he indicates his sandwich and gives them a broad shrug, as if to say "What more can I do? Are not all men helpless in the face of really good pastrami?" I dunno if he's following the great example I set for him over the last few days or if he's in the henchmen's union and he don't wanna be a scab, but either way I can respect a guy who takes a lunch break and sticks with it.

Fullerton and Noyes give up and come towards us, shouting some more. They motion for us to leave, and as they come closer I hear Noyes say something like "…of here, when Dr. Corcoran comes back you'll --"

The lights go out suddenly, and the extractors wind down as they lose their momentum. "-- be sorry!" Noyes shouts into a suddenly much quieter room. A much darker room. "Ha, see?" he says. "Dr. Corcoran stopped your evil plans."

"Kid, the day Dr. Corcoran stops anyone's evil plans is the day he's stolen 'em for himself, nothing more," I say.

Asgore lights the room with a little ball of fire; we don't need much light to see, but the humans do. I guess it's a gesture of good faith. Or maybe he wants Patience Gorman to be able to stab 'em if they get out of hand. "You should leave this room, humans," he says. "This does not have to be your battle."

"Yeah? Well, I hear you monsters aren't so tough, anyway," says Noyes.

"You were terrified of him ten minutes ago," says Belmont. "Do you really think that pipe wrench is going to stop him?" That pipe wrench didn't even stop Belmont, as I recall.

"Says the guy hiding behind a monster and an old lady," says Noyes, gesturing at Gorman and Asgore.

"I think he might be right," says Sedgwick, hesitantly. "I mean, if we die here I don't think Dr. Corcoran's going to be short of new students who want to work with him. And they are, you know, monsters."
"That's irrelevant," says Fullerton. "Monsters are all talk anyway. I'm with Noyes."

"You kidding, kid?" I ask. "Noyes is the one who's all talk. Lives up to his name. But you can sure as hell trust Asgore. You better do what he says."

"Oh shit, that's Asgore Dreemurr?" says Sedgwick. "The mob guy? Screw this." He throws down his lead pipe and goes out the front door.

Dempster, meanwhile, is hurriedly wrapping up his sandwich. He stands and leaves without another word.

"I can't believe you guys!" says Noyes. "We're supposed to stand guard." He's getting real whiny.

A door slams somewhere near the front of the facility, and I hear someone whimpering, and footsteps. In the dimness at the edges of Asgore's pool of light, Dempster scrambles back in, and another figure -- no, two figures -- follow.

One of them is Sedgwick, and the other one, the one who's got a gun pressed to Sedgwick's head, is Dr. Corcoran.

"Thank you, Mr. Noyes," says Dr. Corcoran. "And Mr. Fullerton. Your loyalty speaks well of you. Which is more than I can say for my associate here," he says, turning to Patience. "Really, you threw in with them? You, of all of us?"

"I want it to be over," she says.

"We all want it to be over," says Corcoran. Sedgwick is trembling. Dempster looks like he'd like to find a way out, but since he's only armed with a sandwich it ain't looking too good for him.

I clap my hands together. "Well, that's great. Glad you got so much in common. Why don't you two talk that out while we destroy these machines here?" I suggest.

"Oh, shut up," says Corcoran.

Asgore and I exchange a look, and I let my eyes go black. "I'm being deadly serious here. I'm counting down. Anyone who wants to live better get the hell outta here before I reach the end."

"Dreemurr's little fireballs don't scare me," says Corcoran.

"Five," I say, holding up all the fingers on one hand.

"Sir, no disrespect intended, but they terrify me," says Sedgwick. "Could you please let me go? I won't, I won't betray you or --"

"Four," I say. "But I guess no one's payin' any attention to me."

"No, Mr. Sedgwick, I can't see how you could," says Corcoran. He pulls the trigger, and lets go of Sedgwick, who falls, his brains and most of his face spattered all over the floor. Then he takes aim at Gorman, cocks his pistol, and fires again.

The bullet bounces off a barrier. "I won't let you shoot us!" says Belmont.

"Ah. Mr. Belmont. Another traitor," says Corcoran. "She deserves to die, you know. Even by conventional standards."

"Pi," I say, just to shake things up a little.
"Sans," says Asgore. "Please, let us get this over with quickly."

Right. He's got a thing about pie. "Three. Anyone? Leaving? You should leave. I'm just sayin'."

Dempster makes a break for it, and when Corcoran tries to shoot him, Belmont stops the bullets. "Damn you!" says Corcoran, shooting at Belmont, but Belmont's shielding our entire group now.

"Uh, e, I guess? You're gonna have to take that thing down when this fight starts, Belmont, I'm running out of mathematical constants," I tell him.

"Then bring on the fighting," says Corcoran.

"Or," says Sellers, "you could run away like a sensible person and we could just not try to kill each other?"

"Two. This is the mob, kid," I say, "and I think he's got a death wish anyway. Belmont, you hear me? Take the hamster ball down."

"Do you really think the Flower will be happy with you?" Gorman says. "This is a complete failure, you have to admit that."

"He'll be easier on me if it looks like I put up a fight and lost," he says. Then he laughs. "Who knows, maybe Dreemurr will actually be able to kill me. But I doubt it."

"Square root of two. Belmont, are you even listening?" I ask. "No need to be irrational about this."

"I'll take it down when you get to zero!" says Belmont.

"Good, good. Noyes, Fullerton, you wanna save your skins?" I ask.

Noyes don't look real thrilled to be on Corcoran's side, but he gets a better grip on his trusty pipe wrench. Maybe he's forgetting how Belmont killed its previous wielder. Fullerton's a little smarter; he's way off to the side of Corcoran, making ready to bolt. That won't help him, though.

"Guess not," I say. "Good you're leaving the snappy comebacks to me, though. Let's all stick with what we're good at. One. You guys might wanna hang onto something," I add, quieter, to our group. "Specially you, Doc."

"Wait, what?" Sellers ask. "What do you mean, hang on to --"

"I'm f-fine," Alphys reassures me.

"Zero," I say.

Belmont takes his barrier down and Asgore throws his trident. It whizzes right past the personal barrier Corcoran has thrown up.

"You missed," says Corcoran, sounding baffled and a little disappointed.

"Oh, no," says Asgore. "I jammed the door behind you." He conjures another trident, and throws it at the door towards the rest of the building. "Now no one can leave."

The merest traces of doubt start to creep into Corcoran's expression.

"Go ahead, Sans," says Asgore. He steps back, grabs a hold of a pipe jutting out of the wall, and gets to work throwing fireballs at the extractors.
I raise my left hand, and the room goes upside-down.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter contains a fair amount of discussion of suicide, serious depressive apathy, and dealing with the death of loved ones.

References:

In a strong Ebott accent: The best-known Chicago accent turns some "th" sounds into "d," as in, most stereotypically, saying "da Bears" instead of "the Bears." Occasionally the other kind of "th" sound changes too. The city has a huge variety of accents, though.

Gorman's nasty little pocket pistol holds ten rounds: Hi, I know nothing about guns! Which is awfully inconvenient, considering what I decided to write about. Please feel free to correct me if you know things about guns, readers. Anyway, Gorman's pistol is meant to be a Savage Model 1907 and the one Sans receives is a Colt M1911, which is apparently a bit more reliable than the Savage but holds fewer bullets.

I'm running out of mathematical constants: Everyone knows pi, hopefully, and the square root of two is pretty self-explanatory. e is Euler's constant, the basis of the natural logarithm (that little "ln" button on your calculator). I don't think my teachers ever actually explained why this was a thing or where this number came from, so I went and looked it up and apparently I'm not the only person who was perplexed. e is also a part of Euler's equation, which gloms a bunch of important numbers together and shows how they fit together. You are probably not here for math lessons, though!
Chapter Notes

This chapter's going to have some gore in it, although you probably saw that coming.

New fanart roundup:
Blaiddsumu included Never a Lovely So Real in fanart with a whole slew of other cool AU's! I'm so flattered to be included!

Drawingon drew the very end of Sans' countdown and had a lot to say about the chapter! I still love his creepy smile in this.

Aaaand last but not least, aceface98 drew Altertale!Mob!Toriel. Small secret badass shady goat lady, yes!

Other stuff:
Thank you to the people who gave me concrit on this chapter! You know who you are. <3

Happy anniversary, Undertale! Happy birthday, Hnery (whose art inspired this whole fic in the first place)! Happy, um, Thursday and/or Friday, everybody else?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I think this is as good a time as any to stop for a couple stories about Papyrus, don't you? I mean, what kind of wacko wants to hear all about all this depressing violent bullshit I've been talking about?

Don't give me that look, buddy.

So! Let's talk about my brother.

I met Papyrus maybe four or five months after I'd completely given up on the time machine, physics, life, etc. During that time, I'd acquired a trombone, a drinking problem, and a little white dog that followed me around and yapped at me when it thought I was going the wrong way.

I don't know how that damn thing stayed white the whole time, since the roads were real muddy that winter. Dogs work in mysterious ways, I guess. I didn't name it -- didn't wanna get attached.

Anyway, I was wandering around way the hell downstate, just outside of Saqqara. Yeah, that's SAK-ruh, like okra but not. I didn't really wanna be going to a town whose main claim to fame was broadcasting their inability to pronounce Egyptian city names, but the dog didn't want me to go north and I had some vague idea that maybe if I stopped in enough cities and talked to enough people, the plot would pick up again. I thought maybe I'd meet another time traveler to work with, or a kindly wizard to send me back home, or some shit like that, I dunno. I wasn't thinking real clear for a number of reasons, and I still thought I was in a time travel story instead of a shipwreck survival story. Anyway, I kept putting one foot in front of the other, and usually I'd remember to set aside some of the cash I earned hustling pool for a little food for the dog. When I woke up one morning in February, though, it was gone, and I realized I'd forgotten to feed it for the past few days.
Project Don't Name The Dog Or You'll Get Attached was a miserable failure. The dog was pretty much all I had and I'd fucked it up, and for some reason I got real bad tunnel vision and decided if I didn't find the dog I'd just have to give up. So I bought a loaf of dense brown bread at the first farm I found where they'd even talk to me, and went off looking for the dog. I walked back and forth over the same few miles, shouting "Dog! Hey, dog!" I checked the riverbank, wandered through a couple cornfields, and scared the hell out of a few human kids walking home from school. I found nothing. I figured I must've missed something obvious -- I'm not exactly Davy Crockett -- so I went back and did it all again, over and over, all day.

Eventually the sun started to get real low in the sky, and it was starting to snow again, so I gave up. Just for the night, I told myself. Maybe the dog would find me again. My dad always said things were better on a full night's sleep, and he was usually right. But I still didn't like giving up on it -- hadn't really learned that skill yet -- so when I saw a flash of white moving ahead of me, along the slope down to the river, I got real hopeful, because I thought maybe I'd found my pal.

Once I got close, though, this little skeleton kid leaped onto the road, brandishing a muddy stick. He shouted "En garde!" and waved the stick at me a couple times. I was pretty disappointed, I gotta admit. Not my dog, just some dumb kid playing stupid games. I surrendered immediately, though; it seemed rude not to.

He didn't see it that way, though. "No, no, no, you have to put up a fight!" he said. "You have to! It's not fair otherwise. Here!" he said, snapping his branch in half and handing me one of the pieces.

It wasn't a very big branch to start with. We mighta been better off dueling with drinking straws. But this kid was committed. "There, now you're armed! Prepare for the battle of a lifetime! I will never surrender while my heart still beats within my chest, foul brigand!"

"You, uh, you don't have a heart," I pointed out. "Hey, could we have a time out for a second? Have you seen a little white d--"

"Do you really think you can bamboozle the Great Papyrus?" the kid asked.

"And I'm not a brigand," I told him. "Look, I don't mean to be rude but I can't really play with you right now, kid, why don't you --" He lunged at me, and I sidestepped.

"Nyeh-heh-heh! You're already on the run!" he said. "But you won't get away from --" He waved the stick wildly again, and I dodged easily "-- me, the Great Papyrus, Prince of the Moon, Duke of the, uh, of the Dukedom of Also the Moon, and Marquis of Probably Somewhere That Isn't the Moon Maybe In Europe Somewhere --"

"Kid! Would you listen to me?" I grabbed the stick out of his hand. "I'm not gonna fight you. It's not happening. I just want to know if you've seen my dog, okay? And I don't want to hear any nonsense about the moon or Marquises, okay? I just want my dog." I kinda resented him, I guess, being there all optimistic and full of hopes and dreams and shit like that.

He looked up at me with these wide sad eyesockets and I realized I was being a real jerk. "Um," he said, hesitantly. "I've… I've seen dogs before? Um. But not today. W-what's your dog's name?"

I also realized this kid wasn't wearing shoes. And I don't mean he was wearing something more comfy, like slippers -- I mean barefoot in the snow in February. Not that skeletons really need protection against the temperature, but the problem with not being bothered by the cold is you don't notice when the ice and road grit works itself into your joints until the friction starts to wear away at your bones.
Now, I admit, part of me really wanted to tell this kid that he wasn't a marquis and he wasn't from the moon and that he'd better stop ambushing people on the road and find some goddamn shoes, you know, all the stuff a responsible adult woulda told him. But those sad eyesockets gave me real pause, and I couldn't bring myself to do it in the end. The kid seemed to really enjoy his nonsense, whereas I, Mr. Realistic, was miserable. Besides, it was cold out and he was probably hungry, and nobody was ever fed or warmed by a lecture about being more serious.

"The dog doesn't have a name," I told him. "So. Papyrus, huh? Moon prince, et cetera?"

"Yes," he said, real hesitant. "A-and marquis!"

"And marquis," I agreed. "It's getting pretty late, kid. Do you have somewhere to go? Moon's gonna be up pretty soon, and once it's in the sky, it might be hard to get back there."

"Yeah!" he said, real defensive. "I'm -- I'll -- I'll be fine! Moon princes can take care of themselves! In fact! In fact, it's my duty to protect everyone! And since you are not a brigand, I, um, I was wondering if you knew of someplace warm to go to around here because it is very cold and even if you are not a citizen of the moon, I care about you!"

"Huh," I said. "That so?"

"Yes! The great and generous Prince Papyrus is very concerned about the people of the Earth!"

At this point I was wondering why I was such a sucker and reminding myself that I was a drunk irresponsible murderer who had yet to find his lost dog and almost made this kid cry, and that there were definitely other people out there who'd be better at looking after the kid.

Then I remembered how long it took me to find a farm where anyone'd take my money, and that this kid had no shoes, and that it was snowing, and I at least had some food.

"Well, I don't exactly know where I'm stopping for the night yet, but why don't you come with me, just to make sure I get there okay. Okay?"

"That sounds like an excellent idea!" said Papyrus.

That night we snuck into a barn and slept there -- it smelled bad, but at least we wouldn't get covered in snow. Papyrus shook me awake at some godawful hour well before dawn, yelling something about meddling canines, and when I opened my eyesockets there was my little white dog, cheerfully finishing off the last of that brown bread I bought yesterday. It was just as well, though, since we had to scram before the farmer found us in his barn.

That day me and Papyrus (and our little dog too) got to Saqqara pretty fast, and we stopped in at a couple ghost-run saloons they had in town. Ghost food ain't my favorite, but as long as it don't go right through you it's pretty filling stuff, and they do serve great spirits. Anyway, while Papyrus was busy explaining his princely status to the dog, I asked around about a skeleton kid gone missing. I didn't find anyone who'd cop to having lost track of a kid that day, though, and I didn't have any more luck for the whole week we spent in Saqqara.

I was pretty naïve back then. I shoulda asked if anyone had lost a worker. Near as I can tell, from little things Papyrus has said here and there in the years since, I think he got sent downstate on an orphan train to be taken in by farmers. He was expecting ghosts -- he was terrified of ghosts as a kid, apparently -- so he was real relieved when the people who picked him up were human.

He's never said why it didn't work out, and I don't need to know. I think he'd have been real happy to stay with 'em if they'd wanted to raise him as their kid, so I suspect all they wanted outta him was
labor they didn't have to feed much or keep warm. It's probably a good thing for everyone involved that I never did end up finding 'em, although who knows, maybe I'm just too much of a pessimist.

I kept up the pretense of tour guide to the prince of the moon for a while, at least 'til we got to Nashville, the nearest real city. By then I'd started to put the pieces together about where Papyrus had come from, and anyway, whether or not he was justified in running away, he sure as hell didn't want to go back to wherever he came from.

Anyway, once I realized Papyrus was gonna be around for a while, I decided I'd better get a real job, brushed up on a couple truly awful standup routines from college, started going to every amateur night I could find, and finally managed to get the booking agency to take me seriously. Well, okay, that's not true, but I finally got 'em to laugh at me in the way that meant they'd pay me, at least. Me and Papyrus weren't quite brothers yet, although that's how I introduced him if anyone asked, but the idea of relinquishing him to some more responsible person or organization was getting less and less appealing.

One day, on the train to St. Louis, I finally decided if he knew I was gonna leave him with some actual responsible adults it'd make it harder for me to keep putting it off. I really splurged on the train ticket -- it was pricy, but I figured Papyrus deserved a comfier train trip than we usually had, hiding on some freight train. It was kinda threadbare way back in the Monsters & Colored car, and the humans were kinda skittish around us, but it was warm and we had seats.

It was midmorning, and we'd just finished up a round of the Alphabet Game, where he'd look out the window trying to find things starting with each letter of the alphabet in order He'd kinda cheated on Z, since he only saw his own zygomatic arch in reflection, but I can respect a good cheat, and I kept thinking about all the cool stuff I wouldn't get to teach him and how little fun it was being on the road alone.

I decided I'd better get it over with, so, like an idiot, I blurted out, "So, I think there's a children's home in St. Louis. If you want to..." And then I noticed Papyrus was staring real fixedly out the window now, like I'd discounted his zygomatic arch so now he was trying to find a herd of zebras or a zither player. "You okay?"

"Fine, I just --" I caught sight of a couple tears, which he tried frantically to wipe away. "There's something in my eye!"

Well, that wasn't gonna hold water with me. "Papyrus, if you don't --"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" If he'd had lungs he mighta been hyperventilating a little. "I, I tried really hard to be smart and not bad and not too loud and --"

"Hey, hey, Papyrus, it's gonna be okay. You don't have to --"

"-- and I know I'm stupid and annoying and -- I'm sorry, I know nobody likes me, I just --"

"Papyrus! Kiddo. Calm down! You aren't any of those things, you have to know that!" He sniffed as I put one arm around him and pulled him into a slightly awkward hug. "You're definitely the coolest person I know. I mean, c'mon, you're the Prince of the Moon, and the Duke of Also the Moon, and I think, although I could be misremembering, that you're the Marquis of Somewhere in Europe? How many people can say they know that guy?"

"Um." He took a reasonable facsimile of a deep breath -- one of his nervous tics I can only attribute to spending too much time around only humans -- and looked up at me with big worried eyesockets, empty but for the tears. "I'm, I'm actually not a prince, or a duke, or even a marquis." He paused for
a worryingly long time, and then says, "I thought you knew."

"Well, yeah, but there's no reason you couldn't," I said. "I mean, I think Europe's mostly spoken for, but nobody owns the moon yet. We could divide it up between ourselves, you and me."

He dried his tears on his sleeve. "Huh? What do you mean?"

Papyrus liked maps, even then; I always let him look at the train maps and schedules I picked up around the country, and sometimes he actually came up with better routes than me when we had to get somewhere in a hurry. His shortcuts weren't quite as short as mine, but they were a lot more practical. "Well, you know geography, right? You know all the continents and oceans, and all the states, and --"

"Yes I do!" he said, brightening. "Of course! The information is irrevocably seared into my brain! It will never escape!"

"Uh-huh," I said. I'd long since given up explaining to him that he had no extraneous organs. "Well, the moon has seas too, and mountains, and --"

"No! The moon is made of delicious cheese! Everyone knows that," said Papyrus.

"Sure, sure. So they're cheese seas," I said. "Anyway, I'll see if I can find you a map so you can decide where to situate your principality and dukedom. Maybe we can get a telescope, even," I said, although at the time, that was a long shot -- we were dirt poor and telescopes are pretty pricy. "Then you can check up on, uh, the moon, and... make sure all the cheese is still there. That sound good?"

He frowned. "Would you be a prince of the moon too?" he asked.

"Nah, I'm not cut out for nobility. All I want is a little fishing shack on the shores of Mare Humorum."

"Sans! That is not a real place on the moon," he insisted. "You can't trick me!"

"Sure it is," I said. "Although I prefer its other name, Sinus Sirbonis. I guess if you thought I really needed a title I could be Sir Bone of Sir--"

"Noooo," he said, giggling. Then he paused, serious again. "Sans?"

"Yeah?" I looked at him. He wasn't looking at me anymore, just kinda staring out the window watching farm fields rush by.

"I don't want to go anywhere else," he said.

"Well, kiddo, that's kinda what the train's for, so --"

"No, I mean. I want to stay with you." I will always remember how he sounded when he asked for this thing I'd assumed could go unspoken -- like it was too much to ask of anyone, and like he regretted voicing it the instant the words were spoken. Like he'd learned that wanting to have a place in the world and someone to care about him was some kind of unreasonable imposition.

I decided that was some bullshit.

"No, no, no! You're not going anywhere you don't want to," I told him. "I, uh. I just thought maybe you'd prefer having one place to stay and a real bed, and, you know... someone responsible around," I said. "I meant to give you that choice a long time ago, I just kinda never got around to it,
and… yeah. Figured I'd mention it now before I, heh, lost my nerve. Not that I have any of those, but --"

He surprised me then, by pretty much grabbing me and burying his face in my shirt. "Sorry," he said, all muffled. After a moment's pause, he added, "I'm not crying, by the way."

"Nah, of course not," I said, patting his back.

And the rest was… not history; that's a loaded term for me. The rest was just life, I guess.

Once we got to St. Louis, I took an ad out in one of the bigger nationwide monster newspapers, offering bad jokes in exchange for good advice, and got a post office box I could blip over to check once a week when Papyrus was asleep. I wasn't sure anyone'd be crazy enough to take me up on the offer, but, well, I didn't think there was anyone like Tori out there 'til that first letter of hers.

Papyrus was always a real good kid, and I was actually pretty successful on vaudeville in the end, at least with the monster audiences. It was a pretty good life, but I knew vaudeville wouldn't last forever, so I got out while the getting was good and moved back to Ebott with Papyrus. And that, in the end, is why I'm getting ready to murder this asshole professor.

Here's the thing that gets me, though: when we got here, we really did try to be law-abiding citizens. Papyrus wanted to be a cop, believe it or not, but they laughed him out of the station when he asked about it, and that's when they started hassling me. That made it real hard for either of us to get a job, even at places where they'd hire monsters, so I fell back into my old habit of swindling people for my supper. It went great 'til Asgore explained to me in no uncertain terms that his casinos were off-limits to cheaters, but when I told him about our situation -- younger brother to feed, cops hassling us both, new in town, et cetera -- he was sympathetic, and offered to hire us.

And when a guy with a rep like his offers to hire you, there's a little pressure not to turn him down, you know? So I showed Asgore how he could cheat-proof his casinos better, did a little smuggling here and there, and sent Papyrus to talk to him and see what he could do around town. He was a delivery driver for a while, and I thought that'd be that 'til one day he came home all excited about his new job.

See, he told me he was gonna be one of Asgore's personal guards. But that didn't sound right -- Asgore had plenty of guards, chief among them Undyne, who I found pretty intimidating back then. She was fresh from the war, having served under Asgore there, and was still mourning the loss of her eye and probably most of her war buddies. Between that and whatever else she went through in the trenches, she was dangerously short-tempered and a hell of a lot meaner than she is now, but she was Asgore's favorite and I couldn't see him replacing her with some cheerful-to-a-fault kid he barely knew.

Anyway, something smelled fishy, and it wasn't Undyne, so I made an appointment with Asgore to find out what was going on.

Now, a neighborhood gets pretty expensive to run, especially when the city gives no fucks and outsiders like to come in and treat your neighbors like punching bags. Food, guns, and aldermen don't pay for themselves, ya know. Don't get me wrong, crime pays real good if you do it right, but Asgore wasn't in this game for the cash, and as a consequence, even though Prohibition was making life easy for most of the brass knuckles and tommy guns set, the Dreemurr gang was low on dough and high on ruthless asshole competitors trying to steal their merchandise and drive 'em out of the city. In hearses, if necessary.

Asgore thought he'd found a cheaper way to extract DT, which at the time was a real high-status
drug, for rich guys who needed more time and energy to do more stuff. He had a brand new primer agent he'd discovered and a young engineer was refining the extraction process for him. He figured he could, uh, be a little more proactive weeding out those competitors, and get something useful out of their rotten souls in the process.

And, being the boss, he was in charge of picking targets. He liked to sit ’em down and try to negotiate first, which I always thought was being a little too charitable. It was risky, and it never worked. But once he'd given up on ’em, he'd slip something into their tea and let them go off and stew. Then we'd sit back and wait a week while the primer made ’em real, real Determined, and his engineer would mill their souls into pure DT. After that, it would be easy enough to turn the, uh, new-milled flour into lots and lots of dough.

But Asgore was a busy guy back then -- in addition to being expensive, running a neighborhood is pretty exhausting work, and he liked going around town keeping track of everyone and making sure things was all right. So he needed somebody else to hunt down the now super-Determined human targets and bring them just to the brink of death without destroying their souls.

Or, in the language of the whole wheat and flour metaphor we had goin' at the time, he needed somebody to reap what he’d sown.

I will grant Asgore this: based only on his skills, Papyrus woulda been perfect for that job. He don't know the full extent of my magic, but I've had to learn some pretty fine control over the years to stay out of trouble, and I like to think I taught Papyrus all that stuff pretty well. He was always real careful fighting me anyway, because he knew how fragile I was.

Fragile or not, though, there was no way in hell I was gonna let Papyrus go around killing people. He'd have been a wreck before the first day was done. More to the point, there was no way in hell I was gonna let Asgore give Papyrus that job, and I was ready to have a fight about it if it came to that. But instead, he asked me if I could think of anyone who'd be better for the job. I said I thought I knew a guy, he gave me the name of a problem in Detroit who needed solving and said that if my guy passed the test he'd be happy to have him on board.

I considered just taking Papyrus and leaving, but… I couldn't do that to him again. He was finally making friends, and he really, really liked it here, I could tell. So I dealt with the Detroit problem easy peasy, and Asgore made me his reaper.

Yeah, I have some regrets, but the pay was good and Papyrus really likes being a getaway driver. Besides, after she came home from Europe, Tori put an end to the DT scheme for good. So, you know, it coulda been a lot worse.

And because I know someone's gonna ask, I guess I better tell you about the dog. You people, always with the dogs! You're watching folks get murdered left, right, and center, but you just gotta know -- is the dog okay? Sans, what happened to the dog?

The dog's fine. Some rich lady in New York bought it off me after a show, and it seemed pretty happy about that, although maybe that was just 'cause she dropped a whole bag of popcorn during our negotiation. It's a lot easier to find a place for a cute dog than it is to find a place for a loud kid, I guess. But I got to keep the kid, so I ain't complaining too much.

* * *

So, where was I?

Oh, right, this asshole. I blip to stand on the ceiling as soon as everything goes topsy-turvy. There's
a brutal snap as Noyes makes contact with the ceiling headfirst, and he lies there at the top of the room in a limp pile. It's too bad, because that means no more Noyes puns. Noyes will be silent forever. Oh well. Fullerton manages to put his arms out to stop his fall, though, so I guess he's still playing.

Corcoran's got a barrier ready to cushion himself, of course. He gets to his feet real quick, and then he starts throwing fireballs at me. Which is outrageous, and cheating! Only I'm allowed to cheat, obviously. Sure, what I can do ain't in his Monster Manual, but I figured my Human Handbook was a more up-to-date edition. "You didn't think to mention this, Gorman?" I ask.

I turn, and see that Alphys is hanging from the control panel for one of the extractors, and Gorman is hanging from Alphys' tail. Alphys looks real unhappy about this. "I said the connection with the Flower went both ways!" says Gorman. "What did you think I meant?"

I have no time to wonder how that was supposed to mean he could throw fireballs; I've got things to do and people to murder. I slam Corcoran and Fullerton into the left wall, then into the right one, popping back and forth instead of letting myself fall. The extractors tremble; they're bolted down to keep from moving around too much, but those bolts were never meant to support the machines' full weight while the entire room's gravity shifts repeatedly, and they won't last much longer the way I'm throwing the room around like this. Normally I'd rather not fuck with gravity itself quite this much -- it's exhausting, especially the continuous teleportation -- but we got two humans and three extractors to destroy, and there's a limit to how many balls I can keep in the air with levitation alone.

Corcoran momentarily gets tangled in some loose wires that have been whipping back and forth in all the gravity shenanigans. He drops his gun and tries to disentangle himself. I send a flurry of sharp bones at him but he puts up a barrier and they clatter away. Still, he's gonna be stuck for at least a minute detangling himself. Not sure I can get through his barrier with anything I can throw at him, and I'd rather pick off the low-hanging fruit while I take a breather.

So I turn my attention to Fullerton, who looks dizzy and seems to be having trouble standing. When he sees me raise a hand to send another flurry of bones at him, he says, "Wait! Wait, wait, I want to surrender! I don't want to die!"

"Now, now, kid, you had your chance," I say.

"He shot at everyone who tried to leave!" says Fullerton. He struggles and gets up, but I think I see him grab something first. Nice try, but no dice.

"Yeah, I guess you got a good point, kid," I say. "'mere and get your hall pass and you can go back to school, no harm done. We'll shake on it." I walk over, real casual, and hold out my hand. But when he draws Corcoran's gun, I'm ready. As six long bones pierce his stomach and chest, his body jerks backwards and he staggers and falls. He struggles for a second or two, but it just makes him bleed more. Eventually he goes limp. Humans need a lot of blood to function right, I guess. It seems kinda inefficient to me.

Once I decide this mook's not gonna be a problem anymore, I turn back to the villain of the week. "Looks like you're all that's left, Corcoran." I float the gun out of Fullerton's loose grip, and pocket it.

"How are you doing this?" he demands. He jumps, experimentally, and falls back to the wall. "This is the wall. If I broke through the wall would I fall to the ground, or --"

"Hell if I know," I say, taking the time to shrug before I slam him between the ground and the ceiling again, landing on my feet every time. The corpses of Fullerton and Noyes make dull thuds every
time I switch the orientation of the room. "Just one of those things, you know?" I sweep everything to the left. "I just woke up one day and I could do a new ton of stuff. Gee, you look tensor than before."

"Damnit, where's my gun?" he snarls, patting his pockets. "Did that idiot take it?" Oh yeah, I keep forgetting he can't see real good in here now it's all dark. The best part is that's all his fault.

"Hey, my puns aren't that bad," I say. I let the gravity go back to normal and then pick him up by himself and slam him against the wall. Yeah, this is a hell of a lot easier, and I don't have to keep teleporting around to stay upright. "Sorry I can't give you a straight answer, Corcoran, I bet the curiosity is killing you." Then I call up my own personal backup, and an enormous canid skull is hovering in front of Corcoran, its eyesockets glowing. "Oh, wait, sorry, that ain't curiosity."

The thing -- the old stories call 'em "grotesques," but Dr. Gaster and me always called 'em blasters -- opens its mouth and vomits a stream of pure magic energy at him. He's got his barrier up before it hits, and when I call the blaster off, he looks relieved -- until his barrier goes a sickly purple color and starts to flicker. He's looking as tired as I'm starting to feel; he's breathing heavy, and his hair's plastered to his skull with sweat. I kinda suspect his barriers ain't up to the usual abuse.

"How are you doing this?" he demands. "How? That isn't -- I'm not --" He goes wham against the ceiling again. "I, I, what -- how --" He gets caught in a blaster's beam for half a second and it ain't pretty. "Aah! No!" He scrambles out of the way of another set of bones I send at him once the barrier goes down, and a couple manage to catch him in the arm -- "Ow, fuck!" -- and now he's bleeding and clutching his arm. "This doesn't even make sense! You don't even -- argh!" He tries to set me on fire again in retaliation, but I'm not interested in the rib roast, so I vanish and reappear behind him. He's so mad he actually takes a swing at me with his fist, which is hilarious because I'm gone by the time he woulda connected -- instead, he punches into the open maw of a blaster, which lets loose a split second later.

He looks around for a sec and doesn't see me -- the lights in my eyes are out, that's probably why -- so he starts chucking fireballs at Asgore and Alphys and the humans. But it looks like his fireballs can't get past Belmont's barriers, and boy am I glad we got Belmont on our side. I will personally buy him a steak in the shape of Mettaton's face if I get out of here alive.

Once Belmont's barrier is down again, Asgore steps forward to help; he rakes his trident at Corcoran but only hits his barrier. It cracks a little, but Corcoran seals it up again real quick.

Then, out of nowhere, some slicey magic shatters Corcoran's barrier. What? Is that weaponized barrier magic? I guess it must be, because Belmont steps forward, making a few fancy-looking gestures. When Corcoran tries to roast him, he snaps his finger and bounces the fire back. They play a little sudden death ping pong and then Corcoran nearly slices Belmont in half with his own take on the weaponized barrier. Asgore uses the opening to stick Corcoran in the ribs with his trident, and then I slam him up and down a couple times. He's looking a little the worse for wear, but the bastard is really goddamn hard to kill.

The next time he takes his barrier down to set me on fire, Gorman shoots at him and -- holy shit, Alphys and Belmont have come up with some kinda electrified barrier blade spell. I'm impressed. Corcoran's shocked, and the brief moment of disorientation allows Gorman to take another shot. She only gets his shoulder, which is gonna slow him down a little with the barriers. I pull out the gun we got from Diversey, but before I can shoot his barrier's up again.

Then, out of the corner of my eyesocket, I notice -- oh hell. Sellers is creeping up, holding Noyes' pipe wrench, and before I can tell him to stop he throws it at Corcoran's head. Of course it bounces right off his barrier, hard, and goes flying into the air. Fortunately I duck before it knocks me out.
"Nope!" I say, pulling him back with magic. Corcoran rewards his incredibly stupid ingenuity by trying to fry us both, and it's all I can do to blip out of the way of that flame. "Go find something to hide behind, kid, you're a danger to yourself and others," I snap.

"I had to do something!" says Sellers. "Everyone else is doing something!"

"Everyone else is a goddamn moron. Go!" I say, waving at him.

I take a brief break and watch Belmont try to keep Corcoran's barrier down so Asgore can hit him. I can't speak for the rest of us, but I'm getting a little winded. It's been a while since I killed guys on the regular, and I guess I'm out of shape.

I try to levitate one of the extractors. It's heavy as hell, but at least it comes free from the floor eventually -- my gravity shenanigans loosened 'em up like I hoped they would. Then I send it hurtling at Corcoran, and I hear the barrier crack again as it pins him to the far wall.

No one should be able to survive that, but no one should be able to do a lot of what Corcoran's doing, and I've learned that it's best not to rely on impossible things never happening, so when I draw the extractor back and Corcoran steps out shakily, battered but not beaten, I'm not real surprised. I hit him again a couple times, but the guy's more resilient than a cockroach.

I call up more of my blaster -- figure I'll try the good old circular firing squad on Corcoran. They cluster around him like really proactive vultures; he swears when he sees 'em and throws up a barrier before they deluge him with lasers; when they're done, the barrier's down but he's still standing. And throwing fire at me again, goddamnit.

I scramble out of the way of the flames, then hit him with another dose of karma kickback, making the blasters whirl around him again.

I keep a couple trained on him, but vanish the rest of 'em. Corcoran's not standing anymore. He's on his knees, still breathing, but clearly having a hard time of it. His white coat is now blackened and charred. His skin also blackened in places; in others it's a livid red. "I -- I've changed my mind, I can, I can help you, I, I, stop, please!" He throws his hands up wildly, and manages to stand and stagger backwards a few steps. "Patience! Please! You can't -- you can't let him --"

"I'm not sure I can stop him, Constans," she says, shrugging.

"I'll do anything!" says Corcoran. "I changed my mind, I don't want to die, I want --"

I put my hands in my pockets. "Listen, Corcoran. What you want is very, very low on my list of priorities."

"I could be useful!" says Corcoran.

"Can you believe this guy?" I ask Asgore.

Asgore doesn't say anything, but he looks very doubtful.

"Well, I don't," I say. One of my blaster buddies opens its mouth -- Corcoran throws his arm up to shield his face like that's gonna help -- and then there's nothing but blinding light. When it fades, he's dead. I think. "Anybody got a stick to poke him with?" I ask, frowning down at the extra-crispy remains of Corcoran. He don't have much of a face anymore -- his head's just a blackened lump. I can see bits of his ribcage, though, and his legs and other arm are charred but recognizable. All that's survived untouched are his ankles and feet, which is just disconcerting enough that I briefly consider wasting magic to fix that.
"He was begging for mercy," says Gorman. She don't look upset, but there's confusion in her voice. "I thought you monsters were supposed to be merciful."

"If everyone did what they were supposed to, we'd all of us be out of jobs," I point out. "Anyway, you know how much work it'd be to figure out if he was lyin' or ready to work with us? Screw that." I nudge Corcoran's corpse with one foot. "Well, I guess that's gotta be good enough, we can't exactly wait around for the coroner, huh?"

Sometimes it's exhilarating, being powerful. Well, I should qualify that: it's exhilarating, having the illusion of being powerful. I can't change much, truth be told. I can only make people dead. And this queasy feeling afterwards always reminds me that that's all it is. That's setting in right now, between the stare I'm getting from Belmont, Asgore's silent regret, and Patience Gorman's continuing confusion.

Alphys, at least, just looks relieved. "G-glad that's over," she says shakily. "Oh, oh god." Then she bursts into tears, and I -- I have no energy left for her right now, which makes me feel pretty lousy, but there's not much I can do about it.

"Okay, you definitely don't need a gun," Belmont says, self-righteous as fuck.

"Are you still whining about that?" I say. I hold out Corcoran's gun for him, and he takes it, glowering and ungrateful.

"And the other one," he says. "For Marty."

Sellers stumbles out of a supply cabinet. Glad someone takes my advice. "Uh, I really don't need -- what even -- how did you --"

I find Diversey's gun in my pocket and hand it over, and Belmont passes it on to Sellers.

"I don't want this," says Sellers, looking down at the gun. "I don't know how to shoot."

"Yes, but he doesn't need a gun and you don't have any magic," says Belmont. He's getting a little self-righteous about this.

"I feel like this oughta go without saying, but I'd rather you guys didn't, yanno, spread this around. No one outside this room knows about this." My eyes go black again. "You get it?"

Sellers looks nervously at Belmont. "Would you shut up about guns?" he says.

"I wouldn't tell anybody! We won't tell anybody," says Belmont, all wide-eyed. He's not afraid, I realize, just surprised. Huh. "I completely understand." He doesn't, but I guess he thinks we're secret murder magic pals or something now.

Sellers looks plainly terrified, though. "Yeah, definitely not," he says quickly. "You want your gun back?"

"Keep it kid," I say. "Just don't shoot anyone I like."

He swallows, and looks at the remains of Corcoran. "Um. Can we. Can we cut his head off and stuff his mouth with garlic? I just want to be sure."

"Uhh. He don't really have much of a mouth to stuff, but tell ya what, I'll see if Papyrus has any left in the kitchen," I say. "You guys might wanna get out of the way now, I'm gonna finish off these extractors before we go." I sic the blasters on the remaining two extractors, and remind myself that
with Corcoran dead their ability to rebuild all the shit we just smashed is drastically reduced. It makes me feel a little better.

I hear Sellers explaining vampires to Belmont behind me, and when I turn to check on Alphys, Asgore's giving her a big boss monster hug. So that's okay, then.

Gorman is watching the blasters melt the extractors down to nothing. She lets me finish the second one and start on the last one, the one I used to try and bash Corcoran's brains in, before talking. "You were right. He was probably lying." There's a weary disappointment to her words.

"Yup," I say, starting on the third extractor.

She doesn't take the hint. "So. You were Asgore's reaper, then?" she asks.

"How'd you guess?" I ask. "Was it all the laser skulls that tipped you off, or did my skill at murdering hard-to-kill assholes make you think maybe I could be that guy?"

She shrugs. "Just a hunch."

"My mom woulda been so pissed off if she ever knew," I said. "Conforming to speciesist stereotypes and all that."

She snorts, to my surprise. "I think my parents would have a few things to say about my career choice as well." Then she gets serious again, which is much less disconcerting. "The Flower will be coming to stop us. Corcoran accessed his powers to fight us, so he'll know --"

"Wait." I hold up one finger, and process that, and pause to reprocess it, just to make sure I'm not nuts. "Wait, is the Flower a monster?"

"Sort of." She looks uncomfortable. "It really isn't my place to talk about."

"Gorman, a week ago I opened a closet door and found you with a gun pressed to a little kid's skull," I say. "I think social niceties are a little above you. Spill. Is he a monster, or is he not a monster? It's a real simple question."

She looks at Asgore, who is still comforting a weeping Alphys. "Asgore is the one who could tell you --"

"He's busy, looks like," I say, folding my arms. "But we better get going, if what you say's true. Hey, guys!" I shout. "Sounds like the Flower knows something's up."

"How?" Alphys asks. Then she rounds on Gorman. "You t-told him, d-d-didn't you, you --"

"Calm down, Alphys," I say. "Corcoran apparently was using the Flower's magic? Somehow? Gorman won't explain." We head towards the door to the rest of the facility, and, with some effort, Asgore pries his trident loose from the door.


Gorman gives me this See, I'm totally justified in jerking you around and not telling you anything! look, which, no, no she is not. "Could you maybe tell us how?" I ask.

"Well," says Asgore, and then when the door won't open on its own, he steps back. "Just a moment," he says, then rams his whole weight into it. It collapses outward into the hallway, and all we can see through the door is chaos. Apparently the Flower's already here; Tachibana is fighting
three guys at once.

"Reynard!" shouts Gorman, and she shoves past Asgore to go help him. I don't think he needs the help, though, because he manages throw one of the guys through a wall.

Oh, shit. Papyrus was at the other end of the building -- which is the only other way in, far as I know.

"'Scuze me," I say, stepping backwards into the ruined extractor room and blipping off to the meat freezer, where we left Papyrus and the other monsters.

I catch sight of two humans talking, and duck into a closet that, until recently, housed a couple Whimsums. I press my eyesocket to the crack between the door and the frame, and watch them. One is Phoebe Douglas, one of the Flower's lieutenants; the other is a stranger with a huge gold lapel pin in the shape of a flower. She's calling the other human "boss." Is that the Flower? They don't look like a monster, and their soul feels strange to me. Human, but --

But, no. That's not a human soul. That's five human souls, mostly staticky and not quite there, like echoes or reflections. I realize a little of what the Flower has done to his lieutenants when I look closer, because one of 'em is Gorman's, and another I recognize as Corcoran's, and -- shit. Shit. No wonder she wanted Tachibana to get the hell out of here. The creature itself seems not to have its own soul, and it ain't quite got the humans' souls, but it has some power over them all the same, and it's leeching off them.

I should probably listen more closely to what Douglas is telling this soulless thing, but I need to find Papyrus. There's no dust here, so hopefully the monsters we left here got away and are hiding somewhere.

I blip off to just outside the kitchen, and find myself in the midst of a brawl. Greater Dog has pinned down a Flower Boy and is licking the poor guy's face, drowning him in slobber. Another Flower Boy is being menaced by some kind of horrific abomination with long, twisting legs and --

"hOI, sNAS!!!!" says the horror. I look up and see that yes, in fact, it is a Temmie. "humans r so CUTE! is very funnee wen dey try an ekscape!!!" She twists one limb to wrap around the unfortunate thug's neck, and he looks pleadingly at me like maybe I can help him.

I'm gonna miss sleeping without nightmares, but eh, fuck that guy, he's a Flower Boy. "So uh, you seen my brother around?"

"paprusy YES!!!!" she says. "at front lions! blooOO attaKS! is good at!!"

"Oh, good," I say, hurrying off to find him. I pick my way around a crowd of trembling Whimsums, and past the Eyewalker cousins, who are staring down a cornered human together, ruthlessly taunting him. Dogamy's waving his axe at a guy who, judging from one ragged, bloodied pants leg, didn't pass the sniff test.

Eventually, the hallway I'm walking down ends in a T-shaped junction. To the left, I can hear Tachibana and Asgore having an argument, a long way away, and the hallway going off to the right leads to the zigzagging area with the meat freezer and the back exit, near where Douglas and the Flower were. And Papyrus, thankfully, is a few feet down the stem of the T, lecturing a couple of the Flower Boys on his magic. "If you'd stop moving these blue bones wouldn't hurt you at all! It's very easy! Here, let me show you again!" Looks like he has their arms pinned too, so they can't shoot, but they're still struggling too much not to be in pain.
"Papyrus! Hey, how ya been?" I ask.

"Sans, these humans are very frustrating!" he says. "They broke through the door and were very unkind, and we all had to retreat, but I said to myself, 'What would Undyne do?' And obviously Undyne would be amazing and protect everybody, so I tried to do that, but the humans simply would not cooperate!"

"We're gonna shoot both of you assholes in the head when we get free, you better start running!" says one of the thugs.

"Yeah, sure, whatever," I say. "Right now my brother and I have a bone to pick with you, so osseous staying here 'til that's finished. Might be stuck 'til this time to marrow."

"Sans, can't you be serious for once?" Papyrus demands. "Vulkins! I think these humans are in need of encouragement! Would you be so kind as to --"

"Oh! I'll help!" says one, scrambling up to the struggling Flower Boy. Another shouts, "So warm! Very helpful!"

"Get off me, you piece of shit!" snarls one of the guys.

"Ahh… Not… helping?" says the Vulkin, drawing back a little.

"Ah, don't worry, he's just shy," I tell the Vulkin, and, trusting me, it goes back to soothing the Flower Boy's wounds with heat, proximity, and occasional flecks of molten lava. "You still got that radio? Does Tori know the Flower Boys are here?"

"No!" says Papyrus. "But Undyne does! They took the radio with them in the car!"

"Oh good," I say. "Uh. What are they using to power the thing?" I didn't know it had its own batteries.

"Mettaton generously donated his battery! Isn't that amazing?" says Papyrus.

"Yeah," I say. "On a Wednesday. One of the slower nights at the club. To save his creator, the Great Dr. Alphys. He's the steel-hearted soul of generosity, right there."

"He's so dreamy," says Papyrus.

"Okay, okay, I surrender!" says one of the Flower Boys. "Just make these volcano things go away!"

"Yeah," says another one.

"You guys are wimps," says the third one, who ain't yet had the pleasure of being part of a Vulkin cuddle pile.

"Vulkins?" says Papyrus, briskly. "This man urgently needs hugs!"

"Hugs!" say the Vulkins gleefully. They pile onto the guy, and once he reconsiders his earlier pronouncement, Papyrus uses his gravity magic to convey the three humans into one of the cells that was holding the monsters.

"I hope they'll be all right in there," he says, real concerned. "Do you think we should leave them water and food?"

I shrug. "Eh, they'll be fine."
One of the Tems scampers up -- I can't tell if it's the one I found wound around a Flower Boy or not, 'til she asks, "hO! u foind ur BOTHER, yah??"

"Yes! I'm so glad he's all right!" says Papyrus, before I can answer.

No matter. "Aw, I knew I was your favorite bother," I say, grinning.

"U has cavlary coming??" Temmie asks.

"Yup, should be any time now," I say.

"Is beggining of rush our," she points out, sounding a little worried.

Shit, how long have we been at this? "Well, Undyne's almost as good a driver as Papyrus, I'm sure she can get through easy enough."

"We should get a getaway airplane!" says Papyrus. "Then we could just fly everywhere!"

"yaaas!" says Temmie, warming to the subject. "Orr getaway TANCK."

"Or a getaway dragon!" Papyrus says.

"oR getway FLYIN STEAMBOTE," says Temmie.

"Don't be ridiculous," Papyrus sniffs. "A flying steamboat?" He is, to all appearances, entirely serious. It's the first time I've ever seen a Tem look really puzzled.

But then the other Temmie appears. "frend temmEy!!" she says. The Tems embrace. I guess I feel a little better having them here to uh, be even weirder than Papyrus and me.

Another human thug comes around the corner to the right. He tries and takes a shot at one of the Tems, but Papyrus manages to weigh the bullet down first, and pins him real easily with a blue bone. Everything's going well and between the four of us we're incapacitating humans left and right -- I try not to kill 'em around Papyrus, and so far the Tems ain't either -- but then I see Phoebe Douglas and two of her thugs come around the corner.

Unique among the Flower Boys, she don't carry a gun; she don't need one, not even against humans. She leaps into the fray bodily, punching a Vulkin into dust, leaping over a stack of her own bone-caged henchmen like she weighs nothing at all, then kicking one of the Tems straight into a wall. The Tem disintegrates before our eyes.

The remaining Tem narrows her eyes. "You will regret this," she hisses, both sets of ears flattened back. Then she leaps towards Douglas, claws out.

Douglas leaps back, missing each swipe of Temmie's claws even as Temmie's limbs elongate grossly. Papyrus tries to pin Douglas down with magic, but it's no use; gravity has no effect on her if she don't want it to. So he focuses on the two thugs, who are a lot easier to pin down with blue magic. Still, the thugs are strong and Douglas is a being of pure wrath, so we're losing a lot of Vulkins to her punches and kicks, and she's amazing at dodging both bone attacks and Temmie's claws.

It ain't looking good for us, but then, and I never thought I'd see the day, Patience Gorman saves our lives. She barrels around the corner and shoots Douglas in the shoulder.

The pain calls Douglas' attention away from us, but it don't seem to slow her down. She punches
Gorman in the stomach, then kicks her legs out from under her, and Gorman falls hard, with no grace.

Douglas stands over her. "So it's true. You've betrayed us. The boss is really angry. You're gonna hurt." She says it straightforwardly, no particular expression on her face, as she pulls Gorman to her feet. Gorman fumbles for her knife, but Douglas grabs her wrist before she can lunge. "Uh-uh. Think I'll take tha--"

Papyrus sends a blue bone through her middle. "Now you can't move!" he says. "Nyeh! The Great Papyrus triumphs ag-- aah!" I knock Papyrus' legs out from under him just before Douglas launches herself at him, ignoring what must be a pretty painful stomach wound. Thanks to me, she flies over our heads and lands between us and most of the other monsters, and that's not good at all, but it's better than Papyrus being so much dust.

But Temmie launches herself at Douglas again, and this time she gets a foothold, snarling and hissing and clawing at Douglas' face. It takes her a few moments to shake Temmie off, by which time Gorman's recovered a little and, more helpfully, Tachibana and Asgore have caught up with her. "You okay?" Tachibana asks Gorman.

"Yes," she says, although she's clearly still hurting. "Mostly. Don't let her--"

"I'll be fine, what's the worst that could happen?" he says. Then he sees Douglas. "Oh fuck."

Douglas smiles at him then. It's genuine, but it's not at all sane. "Hey, Ray! He isn't happy with you either. I knew you had a bad name for this business. I told him, that's a tricky name, Reynard. But he said you weren't smart enough to be tricky." She tsks, wiping blood out of her eyes. "Ha. I always knew he was wrong about you."

"I'm not -- I'm not tricky," says Tachibana. "I'm just afraid. But you don't want this either! I know you don't want this!"

She shrugs. "Don't have much of a choice, now, do I? You wanna fight? Always wanted to fight you, you're almost as good as me." She grins and puts her fists up. "Come on! I'd go easy on you if it wouldn't get me hurt."

Tachibana's a lot taller than her, and a lot stronger than any human I ever met before, but he's terrified of Douglas, that much is clear. Still, he tries to put on a brave face. "Yeah. Sure I'll fight. If I win, you let us go. Deal?"

She throws back her head and laughs. "Hey, boss!" she shouts down the hallway. "Ray wants me to let him go if he wins a fight! Can I? Please?"

"Ha! What an idiot!" The voice that echoes down the hallway is surprisingly high pitched; the soulless thing looked pretty big, and I assumed it'd sound big, too. But I guess that's a dumb assumption, especially coming from me.

When Asgore hears that voice, though, it's like all his worst fears have come true at once. He doesn't say anything audible, but I see him mouth No. He shifts the weight of his trident anxiously, but there's something real uncertain about his stance, like he's not sure if he's getting ready to fight or flee.

When the thing with five souls rounds the corner, it's clutching a gun of a make I can't quite place, and its grin is -- well, I don't think humans have teeth like that.

Then it opens its mouth and speaks. "Hey, Dad. Sorry to hear you're not enjoying my hospitality
anymore." As it speaks, its voice warps. Its body begins to twist and shift, making awful snapping, squelching noises. It eventually coalesces into a boss monster. It's younger than Asgore; not quite full-grown, with long, curving horns and the beginnings of a mane. But its grin is like something out of a nightmare -- dark soulless eyes, rows and rows of vicious teeth, a smile wider than -- well, wider than mine, which is worrying since, uh, I don't actually have lips. "How's Mom doing? Wait 'til she hears about this! Sorry, she probably won't hear from you. At least, not once I kill you!" Then it laughs.

"Asriel, please don't do this," Asgore says to the Flower. "Please."

Now, Tori don't talk a lot about Asriel, but this is definitely not how she described him. She said he was a sweet, sensitive kid.

Also -- and this is kinda key to the whole thing -- she said he was dead.

Chapter End Notes

In honor of Undertale's first anniversary, I'd love to hear if you've done anything particular in honor of the date, or to hear about other people's art/fic/music/other fanworks for the Undertale anniversary that you love! (Other than Toby's amazing and informative Q&A, of course.) I'm currently really enjoying listening to [Fallen](https://fallenalbum.com), an album of fancovers; the [first track](https://fallenalbum.com) almost made me cry on the train, and there's also a beautiful string version of Another Medium/CORE.

References:

**Yeah, that's SAK-ruh, like okra but not:** This is, of course, this universe's version of Cairo, Illinois.

**I think he got sent downstate on an orphan train to be taken in by farmers:** Orphan trains were a real thing. The idea was that rural families wanted and could care for more children (and often needed them for labor), and cities were overcrowded and full of children who either had no parents or neglectful parents. These adoptions didn't always end badly, but where would this fic be without angst? (More importantly, where would Sans be without Papyrus?) I think technically Sans might actually kind of be kidnapping Papyrus in the flashback? But, you know, it's not the worst thing he's done.

**Mare Humorum:** A Real Place On The Moon™ And yes, actually also called Sinus Sirbonis, although I'm not sure how that's pronounced.

**and Asgore made me his reaper:** Obviously the terminology is somewhat inspired by Renrink's Reapertale AU where Sans is one of the Gods of Death.

"I just woke up one day and I could do a new ton of stuff. Gee, you look tensor than before." Newtons: a unit of force, and thus used to express measurements of gravitational force on a given mass. Gees or G's are a unit of measurement of acceleration; one G is acceleration due to gravity on Earth. I could not actually explain tensors to you if you had a gun to my head, but they are involved in describing space-time time curvature in general relativity. Yeah, I need to brush up on my physics, sorry.

The gravity aspect of Sans' magic was largely inspired by this animation of Sans'
the old stories call 'em "grotesques": "Grotesque" is also the name of a particular early style of sans-serif fonts.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

This is gonna be one of those violent chapters, fyi.

And I've been a bit busy, sorry about that. In the interim, here's some neat Never a Lovely So Real-related things that happened:

friends-call-me-wobbly-hands/sister of a down is translating the fic into Russian! This is super exciting and flattering to me, and I'm enjoying learning all kinds of Russian idioms whenever a new chapter goes up.

Zhamka drew some awesome badass art of Patience Gorman looking like she has Had It With This Shit. She also created a fanmix, A Lovely Daydream, AND made cover art for it.

I did two fanmixes! The first one is called tell me a story and make it pretty and it covers basically chapters 1 through 12, so, basically all the stuff before Sans and Alphys turn themselves over to the Flower Boys.

The second one is called show your teeth when you smile and covers 13 through this chapter (24) and has some spoilers for the end! The cover art for both fanmixes belongs to Zhamka.

I also made a little post with some songs I haven't included in either fanmix. There's some future event foreshadowing in a couple of them, but generally I just love the songs and think they fit the 'verse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We're all of us distracted from asking what in the billion sweltering hells at the heart of every sun is going on here when Alphys shouts, "EVERYBODY D-DOWN!" There's a roar from above, and the ceiling comes down. Douglas gets conked out, and a piece of concrete smacks the Flower in the face. His shocked expression is pretty satisfying despite everything else going on, but I lose sight of him in all the dust and noise before I can see if it knocked him out or what. Papyrus tries to shield me from falling rubble; he don't notice when I divert a big chunk of ceiling away from his skull. We both end up in the floor.

When the dust clears, there's a gaping hole in the ceiling, leading into a dark attic crawlspace above. When I get to my feet again, I see Alphys is standing triumphantly in front of a small pile of rubble about three feet high and several yards across, just at the cross of the T. The Flower and Douglas are nowhere to be seen.

After a moment of stillness, Sellers drops down from the new hole in the ceiling, followed by Belmont. "We blew up the right part of the ceiling, right?" Sellers asks. He looks around the stunned Flower Boys. One is dead or unconscious, I can't tell which, and one's on the floor bleeding badly from cuts on his arms and chest. The remaining three look kinda dazed, either because they got hit on the head or because the element of surprise is just that powerful.
"Yeah, I -- I think so," says Alphys, looking around uncertainly. "I th-thought they'd p-probably converge on the c-c-crossroads, uh, so to speak, of the hallway, s-so, uh…" She looks up at Asgore, worriedly.

"Ah.  Alphys, there you are," says Asgore. He apparently grabbed Gorman and shielded her from the explosion; he's covered in plaster and a little bruised, but otherwise fine. He looks doubtfully at the mound of rubble.

"Was -- was that all right?" she asks, hopefully.

"Ah.  Well," says Asgore, clearly not wanting to say no. But his eyes keep going back to where the Flower was standing. "Well, I. Under the circumstances, yes."

Gorman, though, has no such compunctions. "Why couldn't you have waited a few seconds more?" she demands, before shoving Asgore aside and kneeling to claw through the rubble frantically. I realize then that Tachibana must be under there too. Whoops.

But soon Gorman finds a hand and pulls, and Tachibana stands up, his dark hair now white with plaster. "Ow," he says, and looks down. He's got a long, deep gash in his side. "Oh, wow, that really hurts." He pokes it and his finger comes away red.

Then the rubble stirs, and the Flower rises up out of it. It's less like he's getting to his feet and more like he's… flowing upwards. One long, sharp horn is stained red, and Tachibana looks up at it in dismay. "How dare you?" says the Flower, although it's not real clear who he's talking to. Tachibana? Alphys? The world at large? Maybe he's just hammerier than Mettaton playing Hamlet reimagined as a hog butcher?

I gotta get Papyrus out of here before that thing notices us. Right now the Flower's focused on Tachibana, which ain't great but I'd much rather see Tachibana die than Papyrus. Trouble is, I really, really don't want the Flower to notice my shortcuts, even just out of the corner of his eye, because even if the guy wasn't worrying enough on his own, he pretty much owns the cops in this town.

"Oh, that's what stabbed me," says Tachibana, still looking at the Flower's horn. "Yeah. Yeah, I could see that hurting pretty bad. Are you okay?" he asks Patience. "I think I'm okay!" Some of the rubble shifts under his feet and he threatens to lose his balance. "Or, uh, maybe not." Patience grabs him and drags him onto solid ground, heedless of the Flower looming above them both.

"You idiot! Did you think you could run away from me? Do you think your stupid little friends could hurt me?" says the Flower. It -- he? He, I guess. He has far, far too many teeth and, oh god, that is the worst smile I've ever seen, it just keeps getting wider, and wider, and, impossibly, wider, extending beyond the boundaries of his actual head. Every time I look there's more goddamn teeth, molars and incisors scattered seemingly at random, and way, way too many canines. He lunges to grab Tachibana, but Gorman snarls "Leave him alone!" and throws her gun at his head.

The gun goes splat into the Flower's head and comes right out the other side. His head reforms instantly, like he was made of clay or something.

"You have to stop this," says Gorman, her voice shaking. "This plan is insane, you know that, don't
you? If it actually made sense he wouldn't have talked you into keeping so much of it from me. It was his idea in the first place, wasn't it?" Him? Who's this guy they're talking about? Not Asgore, clearly. Corcoran?

"No," says the Flower, obviously lying. "Anyway, it's a great plan! And if I just had one more soul --" He pauses, and glares at Tachibana. "And why do you care about that stupid kid and not me?"

"You made it very difficult for me to care about anything," she says, sighing. "Anyway, I don't think our souls have done you much good. The real you would have been able to see how wrong this was. And I know I've gone along with it, but I can't stand around and just let these things happen anymore."

"The real me?" says the Flower. "The real me?" He laughs. It's still a horrible sound, like he has too many voices and none of them are quite his. "This is the only me there is! Everything else is gone, isn't it?"

"Asriel," says Asgore. "Please, I don't know what's happened to you, but --"

"He's not Asriel, not really," says Gorman. "He doesn't have a soul, he's just a parasite --"

"You never shut up, do you, Patience?" says the Flower, and he shoots a tendril of magic from his hand into her chest, where her soul still is. She winces, apparently paralyzed with pain, and the echo of her soul within the Flower flickers.

Then, jerkily, she draws her knife and turns towards Asgore. "Don't," she says. "I won't -- I'm not - - I'm not going to do this!" She takes a step forward.

The Flower laughs at that. "We'll see about that, huh? Anyway, you're wrong about me! I do have a soul! I have five!"

"You jerk! Let her go!" Tachibana yells, and lunges towards him.

The Flower treats him to a blast of fire and a rain of sharp shards of magic, and he screams and falls to the floor. "Why are you all such morons?"

Gorman lurches closer, but Asgore grabs her wrist and squeezes it. There's a nauseating crunch, and she yelps and drops the knife. The Flower yelps too, and his tendril of magic withdraws. Then Asgore releases his grip on her, and she immediately kneels to help Tachibana.

"Asriel, please," says Asgore. "I don't want to fight you but if I have to --" He takes a deep, shaky breath. "If I have to, I --"

The Flower just laughs. "You old fool! Do you really think you're a match for me now?" He points that strange gun at Asgore's head. "Go ahead. Try to kill me before I shoot you! This should be hilarious."

Of course, Asgore absolutely freezes up. Fuck. It's not like I expect him to be able to kill his own kid, and I don't even think this guy can be killed, but -- but goddamnit, someone's gotta deal with him and Asgore's the only one with a fighting chance right now.

Papyrus shakes my shoulderblade. "Sans, I can't think of anything to save Mr. Dreemurr! Can you?"

"Nope," I say. Oh fuck, he's gonna try and rush in there, you know, like Great Prince Papyrus of the Moon and Wherever Else would. I get ready to weigh him down with as much blue magic as I can
muster. No heroics on my watch. "So don't go leaping in there, 'cause if Asgore kicks the bucket we're gonna need you to help clean it up." He don't look happy about it, but he don't move a joint.

I forgot about Belmont, though. He leaps forward and puts up a barrier spell. "No!" he says. "Look, I don't know what's going on, really, but, but, I guess he's your father? So you can't just -- and obviously you've done some terrible things, but -- but look, you don't have to, you could --"

"Who is this nitwit?" says the Flower, to his nearest lackeys. They shrug. "Well, whatever." He trains that weird gun on Belmont. I don't know the make of it but I do not have a good feeling here, and when the Flower pulls the trigger, there's a rainbow blaze, like Lisa Frank decided unicorn stationery was for chumps and the real gold at the end of the rainbow was in small arms.

As soon as the rainbow hits it, Belmont's barrier spell shatters like it was glass. Fragments of it go flying all over the place, and a horrible burning sensation shoots through my arm as I raise it to cover my face. I'm gritting my teeth so hard from the pain I think I feel a tooth crack. When I feel Papyrus try to get up and help, I grab him by the back of his shirt and weigh him down with magic, because if he rushes in there like a hero he will die like a redshirt.

And whaddaya know, Belmont's nice white shirt is already pretty bloody. I guess he bore the brunt of the barrier shattering. Before I can tell Papyrus to close his eyesockets, the Flower slides his saber through Belmont's chest like it was butter. He grabs Belmont's shoulder and twists the saber -- I hear the snap of bone, even as Belmont howls. Then the Flower slides the saber out and Belmont falls, hands clutching over the enormous gash in his chest. His face is frozen in an expression of unspeakable pain.

Poor dumb kid. I shoulda found out his first name. I hear this happens way less often to guys the narrator knows the first names of. On the other hand, I guess that didn't do Wellington Diversey III any good.

"We have to go now," says Asgore, to the survivors in his group, although I think only Alphys is listening; Sellers has backed off and is hiding behind the rest of the group, like a sensible guy, and Gorman's trying to revive Tachibana. Asgore looks around. "Where are the other --" He sees me and Papyrus, and his eyes skim over us and the other monsters, trapped in the stem of the T.

The Flower is standing where the three hallways meet, wasting time laughing, which would be a classic rookie supervillain mistake if he wasn't overpowered as fuck. He reaches a hand into the rubble and pulls Douglas out. She's not conscious, and the smears of white plaster stand out on her skin. "Wake up, wake up! You missed the funniest thing!" he says, shaking her.

Her eyes flutter open, and after a moment she forces a laugh. "I'm awake, boss, what'd I miss?"

"Sans, can you get them over here?" shouts Asgore, gesturing at Temmie, the remaining Vulkins, the Eyewalkers, and, well, all the monsters we came to free. They're all trapped over here; the only two escape routes are both being blocked by the fucking Flower.

There are a lot of things I want to say, mostly variants on the word no, mostly because no I can't, not all of them, not all at once and not in time, but also because no, Asgore, I'm not gonna show off my shortcuts in front of your batshit crazy DT-addled undead kid, that's the worst idea I've ever heard, and I've encountered more bad ideas than the Patent Office's perpetual motion division. I just shake my head.

The Flower drops Douglas unceremoniously, then turns towards me and Papyrus.

Fuck. I'm gonna have to kick his ass, aren't I? I struggle to my feet. "Sans, what are you doing?"
Papyrus whispers -- oh, now he worries about someone getting involved, but when he's risking his neck, he don't even think twice. "Sans, you can't --"

"It's fine, Papyrus," I say. "Stay back --"

"Yes, Papyrus, stay back!" says the Flower, cheerfully, moving -- flowing? -- towards us. "Run and hide! My goodness, is that a Tem I see?" He smiles malevolently down at Temmie.

"Careful, boss, those things bite," says Douglas. Temmie hisses at her.

The Flower stretches his arm out -- farther than it oughta go -- and grabs the Tem by the scruff of her neck. She yowls and swipes her claws at him. "U R NOT CUTE AT ALL!!!!!!" she shrieks. "TEH WORST FLOUR!!!!! WILL MAK U SUFFR!!!!!!"

"I think I'll leave you alive," he tells her. "Give my regards to the Council of Tem." Then he pitches her at Asgore, who only just manages to catch her. He turns back to me and Papyrus.

"You leave my brother alone!" says Papyrus. "Sans, let me --"

"Ooh, brothers! I love tearing families apart!" says the Flower.

"Asriel, you have to stop this, please!" says Asgore. He is completely ineffective right now, goddamnit. He can say he'll fight the Flower all he wants, but that just makes him even more of a joker than I am.

"Papyrus, get out of here, please," I tell him. "Run. I swear, I'll drive you off with puns if you don't --"

"Don't be ridiculous!" he says. "The Great Papyrus never abandons his brother!"

"Hmm. Which one of you should I kill, though?" the Flower asks. "It's a difficult choice."

"Me," I say quickly. "Trust me, I'm a lot more annoying, I've lived with me long enough to know that. Papyrus, get out."

Papyrus don't listen -- he sends a row of spiked bones at the Flower. They go right through him, just like the gun did. "I'm warning you," he says, and he's trembling so hard I can hear his bones clattering together. "I'm -- I'm really -- very powerful, and -- and if you surrender I'll make you my most amazing spaghetti! But if you don't, you'll -- you'll really want that spaghetti!" He summons up his one blaster. His one blaster. It could wipe out a normal opponent easy peasy, but there's nothing about this guy that's normal, and I'm not sure my whole array of 'em could put a mark on him even if I wasn't exhausted. "I don't want to hurt you, but! If you think you can hurt my brother --"

"Look at the two of you! This is hilarious, it's like you actually care about each other," says the Flower.

"You can't beat him, Papyrus, he's all Determined and shit, you just gotta get out of here, take the others and go hide somewhere. I'll hold him off --"

"With what?" Papyrus asks.

This is actually a pretty good question. I'm still exhausted from the fight with Corcoran, and I dunno how much I can manage. "I dunno, I'll think of something!" I say. "Papyrus! It's your job to protect them! Besides, I get the impression this guy just wants a really unfair fight."
The Flower smiles. All those fucking teeth -- way too many to fit in his skull. The effect should be cartoonish; instead it's nauseating. Guess I just don't have the stomach for this shit right now. "Oh, yes. I love an unfair fight. It's like you know me! Have we met?"

"No, Sans!" says Asgore. He steps forward, and I guess the Flower thinks he's gonna attack, rather than telling me not to kill his son, because he sends a barrage of flames down Asgore's hallway and gestures for Douglas and the Flower Boys that are still conscious to hold him back. "Logan, Irving, Phoebe, keep an eye on my dear old dad for me, would you? Don't kill him yet. He's family! He gets special treatment."

While the Flower's distracted, I shove Papyrus towards the wall, towards the other monsters, who are looking terrified. They need leadership, and Papyrus is all I have to offer them. But he looks so hurt. "Go. I'm sorry." Then I turn back to the Flower. "Gotta be honest, I kinda wish weed never met, bud," I tell him. Aah, a flower pun. I'm on firmer ground here. The Flower shoots his Lisa Frank gun at me and I leap out of the way. "Getting outta this one's gonna be a thorny dilemma to be sure. What kinda pistil is that, anyway?"

"You were right, you're definitely more annoying," says the Flower. It's the first time I've seen him not smiling. "So what are you, another of my dad's performing monkeys?"

"Oh, yeah, I got the little hat and everything," I say. He shoots at me and I duck. It's real convenient to be short sometimes. "Not the first time I've played second banana, of course. It ain't appeal work but it's what I'm good at." I hazard a glance back at the concrete wall, which has actually melted from whatever weird rainbow wizardry the Flower and Corcoran concocted.

"Sans, stop fighting bad guys with puns!" shouts Papyrus, from somewhere behind me. I don't take my eyes off the Flower, who's still got his gun out, but if I can hear Papyrus that well he's still too close. "Didn't I tell you to slip away?" I yell back. "Go on and split!"

I get an "Aaargh, Sans!" from him, but he ain't coming any closer, at least. Good. I hear him direct the other monsters down the hall, and I hope he follows them.

Douglas looks from the Flower to Asgore. "You want me to go after the other skeleton?"

"Ah, leave it," he says. "Stay here and watch me murder this wannabe funnyman! It'll be great!"

"Sure it will," she says. She looks skeptical.

"Aren't you going to fight me, skeleton, or are puns all you can manage?" he asks.

"It's really just the puns," I say. "I used to have a great routine I did with a unicycle and some pies, but --"

"Oh, I like pie," says the Flower, his eyes going wide. Right. Tori's kid. That is weird and fucked-up and I can't imagine how she'd feel if she was here, so I run through pie puns in my head instead of thinking about any of it.

"Yeah, yeah," I say, "I was, uh, out on the Chimera Circuit doin' some of the best slapstick you ever seen. A real pie-oneer. Heh." I'm laughing at my own jokes. I am fucked. "Too bad I don't have any pies now, 'cause right now this is lookin' like it'd be custard's last stand."

"God, he's so bad," says Douglas, looking genuinely dismayed. "You should put him out of our misery."
"Hey, I'm trying here," I tell her. "Just filling in, ya know?" Pie filling! It's funny! No, no it isn't. I can't even laugh at that one. My arm throbs where the shattered barrier hit it, and Christ, that still stings. "You might ask yourself why the routine had a unicycle instead of a bicycle? Well,ahaha, uh, I was two-tired. I mean, the bicycle was -- I was falling asleep because --" Oh, fuck it. I give the joke up as a lost cause, I can barely handle this, it's a wheel challenge." The Flower shoots at me again, and I dodge. "Eh, maybe I spoke too soon. So, wait, you're the Flower, but you're also a boss monster, right? Asgore and Toriel's son. Did I get that right?"

"Something like that," says the Flower. "Not really anymore!" He shrugs. "It's hard to tell!"

Yes, good, I've set up the ultimate flower-goat pun. "So, so, would that make you an or-kid?"

The Flower pauses for a moment to figure this out, then snarls and shoots at me three times in quick succession, almost before I can dodge. "Whoa, bud, leaf me alone, I ain't pun nothin' to you," I say.

"Let's see if we can get to the root of your problem before you kill me, okay? I gotta say, I've seen huckleberry bushes, but this is the first time I ever seen a heckleberry." He shoots again.

Douglas makes a face. "Boss, uh --"

"Not now, Phoebe," he snaps.

"Although I guess you boss monsters are good with fire, maybe you're more of a snapdragon? I gotta say, I am really sorry about the pies, I didn't know you were coming or I'd'a prepared better. I just haven't botany, so --" He shoots again, and fails to notice what I suspect Douglas is trying to point out to him, which is that I'm gradually sidestepping in a circle, doing my best not to stumble over the pile of rubble in the center of the hallways. As he turns to follow me, he's turning so his back's to Papyrus and the gang.

He shoots at me again. I wonder where he got the Lisa Frank gun. If it can pierce barriers, maybe Corcoran made it for him? But he seemed more like a No Fear kinda guy to me.

I take another few steps, and then I've come full circle. Asgore, Alphys, and the humans are behind me now -- I almost trip over poor dead Belmont -- and I can see Papyrus behind the Flower, watching cautiously, manifesting rows and rows of long, sharp bones. I don't think he'll use 'em, though; he's... well, he's even less likely to hurt the Flower than Asgore. Asgore's at least capable of being dangerous.

Douglas is looking over her shoulder and getting more and more frantic. She takes a step towards Papyrus, but his blaster hisses at her and she backs off. "Boss, look, you have to --"

"I'm busy, damnit," snarls the Flower, knocking her across the room. She hits the opposite wall and staggers, and Papyrus takes the opportunity to cage her in a series of blue bones. This kind of blue magic works on her, fortunately; it's just gravity she's immune to.

"Boss, there's --" she starts again, and without looking, he fires the Lisa Frank death ray inches above her head. There's a deep, charred hole in the wall now. "Okay," she says, resigned. She looks like she wants to leap through the bones anyway, but Papyrus' blaster has her cowed for now.

"Quit staring at her, pay attention to me," says the Flower -- I dunno if he means me or all of us, but I'm gonna keep an eye on her just in case.

"Alphys, you got any more flower puns?" I whisper. "Not really a biology guy here --"

"Uh, uh, c-can you do anything with xylem or phloem?" she asks. "Or! Or! Gibberellin! It's one
of my favorite words, it’s --"

"I dunno, Alphys, I think I’ve already been gibberellin' for the last few minutes," I say.

"No, if you were a plant hormone you’d definitely be abscisic acid," she says authoritatively. "I think I'm ethylene, only, eheh, more useless."

Asgore, meanwhile, is still trying to reason with the kid. "Asriel, you have to stop. We can -- we can talk about this. Your mother and I missed you so much --"

"Liar!" says the Flower. "You didn't even look for me!"

"We thought you were dead." This is killing Asgore, I can tell. Not literally, not yet, but -- oh, god, are we gonna have to tell Tori about this? No. No, there's gotta be a way to avoid that. Other than dying. Which is still definitely a possibility, but really not ideal. "We did look, but -- but you must understand, we thought --"

"You didn't even try. Who cares, anyway? Look at me now! I have friends, I have power, I have --"

"You got five human souls in captivity and they're the only think keeping you from dripping through into the subway system every time you walk over a grating on the sidewalk, kiddo," I tell him. "That's… something, really it is, but it ain't anything to --"

"Sans," hisses Asgore. "Sans, that's my son, you can't --" The Flower tries to shoot me again, three times in quick succession.

"Sans, Sans, Sans! I'm going to shoot that stupid grin off your skull," snarls the Flower. "Sans what, I wonder?"

"Uhh." It'll be Sans Serif on my real birth certificate, and it's Comic Sans on all my fake papers nowadays, but all I got in the vein of smart remarks is eighth grade drama class, and that one fucking line no one would stop reciting at me. "Eyes? Taste? Everything?" I'm feelin' the urge to exit stage anywhere, whether pursued by a boss monster or not, but Papyrus is still stuck behind the Flower, Douglas could probably kill him easy, and even if I could motion for him to use the Flower's distraction and flee, he wouldn't, I don't think -- his eyesockets are glued to me and the Flower. "Probably taste," I babble. "I'm pretty tasteless."

"Everything! Sounds about right," says the Flower. I'm a little insulted on behalf of Tori that he missed the reference. I'm sure she'd’a taught him better than that if she coulda. Then again, she probably taught him manners, too, like don't kill people before you've been formally introduced.

"Whatever you say, kid." I sidestep him so I got my back to the wall. If he tries to shoot me again, I don't want him to hit any of the others.

I don't know what to do. I'm out of ideas, and nobody else can help me. Best I can do is keep him busy, I guess. Asgore looks devastated and Gorman's sitting on the floor trying to keep Tachibana from losing any more blood while her broken wrist swells to roughly the size of Vermont. Sellers is sitting against the wall, staring blankly ahead. Temmie is curled up in his lap like a cat, shivering slightly, and he's patting her absenty, but he don't really seem to notice what's going on. His breathing is labored, and he's gone a little green where you can see his skin, except he's covered in blood, and I'm a little worried until I see Alphys is too, and I realize, oh, they tried to help Belmont. They turned him over so he was flat on his back, but it don't look like it did much good -- he looks pretty dead to me. If I squint I can see his soul's still hovering there above his chest, aqua and ready
to shatter into pieces any second now.

And then there's Papyrus, who I completely failed to protect, who is trapped because I told him to go help the other monsters, and who absolutely won't leave without me. Or them now, probably.

"What, you want me to entertain you again? You didn't like my jokes before, what makes you think I can do any better?" I ask him.

"I'm not here for the jokes, funnyman," says the Flower. "I'm here for that unfair fight."

"Okay, you got it," I say. "Here goes nothing." I dunno if I can do anything, but -- well, the Flower really didn't leave much of a choice. I get ready to tap into whatever juice I got left, although, god, I'm so tired. And kinda dizzy. I lean up against the wall, but it almost feels like the wall is buckling, and --

The wall is buckling. As I watch, a blue scaly fist punches through it, several inches to the left of my head.

"Ngaaah! Nobody messes with my friends and gets away with it!" Undyne shouts, and, shoving the wall down all the way, she lands a spear in the Flower's chest.

The cavalry has arrived. Bricks bounce off Knight Knight's helmet as she strides in with her morningstar over her shoulder; she starts swinging, and soon enough she's putting down a lot of Flower Boys for long, painful naps. Aaron flexes in through the hole in the wall, showing off his guns, and gets Douglas in a headlock before she can escape.

When Dogaressa comes through, she immediately confronts the trapped Douglas, snarling and waving her axe. "Where is my husband?" she demands. "If he's hurt I'm going to chop you into tiny little pieces!"

Douglas struggles a little. "How should I know?" she asks. "Do I look like a dogcatcher?"

Aaron winks at her. "We could make it worth your while, if you know what I mean." Then he waggles his eyebrows like he's trying to win some kind of world championship for creepiness.

Douglas pulls a face at this, and Dogaressa smacks him.

But then the Flower pulls Undyne's spear out with a *splorch* and throws it away. "Who the hell are you supposed to be, fish face?" he asks her. "Oh well! I don't care that much!" He sends a wave of fire at her, but Undyne drops and rolls under it, trying to slash his ankles out from beneath him. Her blade just goes through him, like everything else.

"Undyne, no!" shouts Asgore.

She stands and frowns at him, perplexed. "Uh. Wow. That didn't go like I thought it would!" says Undyne. "Whatever! We're still gonna fight! Yeah! Don't think you're getting away from me! The rest of you, spread out! Take care of the human mooks, knock them out if you can!" she yells at the rest of our rescuers. "This fight's just gonna be me and you," she says, getting right in the Flower's face. "What are you, Asgore's evil clone or something?"

The Flower starts laughing, but when he tries to take a step forward, he can't. He's, heh, put down roots. "What the hell?"

"Yeah, that's right, jerk!!! You can't run away from me now!" says Undyne.

"Undyne," I say, "we should probably focus on --" She waves one webbed hand at me to shut up,
and punches the Flower in the face with all her might.

The Flower snarls and snakes more of his vine magic out to grab her, but she slices it up with her magic spears.

Papyrus comes up from behind the Flower then, pinning both of the Flower's arms to his sides with bones. "Nyeh heh heh! You'll never defeat the Great Papyrus, or his cool friend Undyne!"

"Hey, I wanted to fight him alone!" says Undyne.

"Yes, but it seemed unfair to deny the rest of these monsters the spectacle of seeing me fight," says Papyrus. "Monsters, onward!" he shouts, and his group of Whimsums and dogs and Froggits hurries past the Flower and his minions, taking advantage of their distraction to run through the wall. "Also, I think Sans has missed one too many naps."

Undyne, I think, sees what I see -- that Papyrus is barely holding the Flower at bay -- so when she says "Yeah! Yeah, that is pretty spectacular! Good job, Papyrus!" she sounds a little worried. She surveys the rest of the scene briefly, and then hurries into the fray, throwing spears here and there, and helping injured monsters to their feet, or whatever they have instead of feet.

Papyrus keeps all his focus on the Flower, and if I could do much of anything to help, I would, but god, I'm so fucking tired. Undyne's rushing around bodily carrying people out of the building if they're going too slow, and Papyrus is enclosing the Flower in a cage of bones that he can't maintain forever, but me, I'm standing here being generally useless. Dogaressa's probably found Dogamy, and Aaron must be off somewhere flirting with someone, because both of 'em have left Phoebe Douglas to slip away. She starts sneaking down the hall, but she's so busy making sure the Flower don't see her leaving that she runs right into Undyne's fist without even seeing it coming.

I overhear some argument Gorman's determined to have with Asgore. "You have to heal him," she says. "You can do that, right? You can -- you must be able to --"

"My wife is more skilled than I," says Asgore, "but please, we have to go now."

"Wait, wait, wait, hold on. Why should we help you?" snarls Undyne. Gorman glares at her like she's inconsequential and not the person who just saved all our asses.

"They're on our side now," I tell Undyne.

"What? Why?" she asks. "How do we know we can trust them?"

"Mr. Tachibana really liked my spaghetti!" says Papyrus.

"Oh, that makes sense, your spaghetti's great!" says Undyne, but anyone can see she ain't convinced the way she scowls at Gorman. Still, she scoops Tachibana up in her arms. Gorman scrambles to her feet, watching Undyne like she might up and drop the kid any minute. "Where's Alphys?" says Undyne, once she's got a hold of the kid. "Alphys! Oh good! You're here! What happened to you? Come on, let's get out of here!" She starts climbing through the enormous gap in the brickwork. "You need help? I can put this guy in the car and --"

"It's n-not that b-b-bad, I --" Alphys pauses to breathe. "I'm, I'm f-fine."

Who is that weird boss monster, anyway?" I hear Undyne ask, but I can't make out Alphys' reply.

"You really saved the day, Papyrus," I say. "Glad you threw this guy a bone."
The Flower groans. *I love* that he's not smiling anymore. "Let me go!" he says.

"I can't wait to get out of here, though," I continue, ignoring the Flower. "I know this great little hole in the wall."

"Sans, please, I need to concentrate!" says Papyrus, but that is a genuine grin if ever I saw one. "And before you say it, I'm *not* smiling! My face is just like this!"

"Pff, I know you better than that," I say.

"Do you want money?" says the Flower, desperately. "I'll pay you!"

"I don't think anyone's ever tried paying Sans not to tell horrible jokes," says Papyrus. "That's a really good idea!"

"Bud, you couldn't afford it," I tell the Flower cheerfully.

"Are you *stupid?* I meant paying *you,* you idiot skeleton!" the Flower shrieks at Papyrus.

"Why would you pay me not to tell jokes?" Papyrus asks, wide-socketed. "All of *my* jokes are as amazing as me!"

The Flower makes a noise of immense frustration. "Are you being stupid *on purpose* or are you actually as brainless as you sound?"

"Actually, skeletons don't have brains!" says Papyrus. "That is a fun fact!" Oh, that ain't fair, I told him this story about how I said that once in first grade when someone called me braindead. It was the worst comeback I've ever come up with, and now he's ribbing me for it.

The Flower is pretty livid, though. "You nitwit! I didn't mean -- argh!" Papyrus grins at me, and I have to admit I'm proud as hell he's giving this jerk such a hard time.

"Okay, guys, I think we're ready to clear out of here," says Undyne. "You want me to take Sans?" she asks Papyrus.

Papyrus glances around briefly, and sees Belmont lying on the floor in a pool of his own blood. "What about that human over there? He was very brave! I think he was knocked out."

The Flower laughs heartily at this. "Wow, you really are as dumb as you look! That's amazing!"

"Shut up, asshole," says Undyne. We exchange a look; apparently neither of us are real comfortable telling Papyrus that Belmont's dead.

"Papyrus, he's, uh, not goin' anywhere," I say, quietly. "He's dead. The Flower killed him."

"Jeez, you guys must be the lousiest gang in the city if you don't even know what a dead guy looks like," says the Flower. "I'm surprised you're still alive! Oh, come on, you must've killed *someone,* what's-your-name, Papyrus."

"You be quiet," he tells the Flower, sounding a little sulky. "I don't think I like you at all." His face has gone all serious and worried, and I wish I could just lie my ass off about Belmont. "Are you *sure* he's dead? His soul is still there, and Mrs. Dreemurr is really good at healing, I've seen her --"

"Papyrus," says Undyne, "trust me, he's dead. That's what dead humans look like. Now, are you going to carry Sans or am I?"
"Can we take his soul?" Papyrus suggests. "Otherwise -- otherwise they might use it."

The Flower is giggling helplessly at this. "Oh my god, you really are a complete moron."

"Papyrus, I don't wanna think about what'd happen if the cops found us with a whole, disembodied human soul," I tell him. "DT was bad enough, but if we just kept it, we'd... they'd think we were gonna use it." It's not even what the cops would do to us, it's what the rest of the city would do to us once it hit the papers. I've seen enough monster hunts set off by untimely accidental deaths -- a soul would be grounds for rioting.

"I'll take care of it," says Undyne. She shatters the soul with one handy thrust of her spear. "And if you don't get the hell out of here, Papyrus, I'm going to drag you away myself."

"Good idea," I say, weakly. I could probably walk to the car or truck or whatever they drove here. Or at least most of the way.

"Fine," sighs Papyrus, reluctantly. He gives Belmont's corpse one last worried look, like maybe he'd like to leave a memorial plate of spaghetti. Then he sniffs, and blinks, and a couple tears roll down his cheekbones.

The Flower laughs. "Are you seriously crying?"

"No," says Papyrus, now furious and definitely crying.

"Okay, guys, everyone out!" shouts Undyne, and her reinforcements hurry out. Papyrus don't move 'til she grabs him by one shoulderblade, at which point he releases the Flower, scoops me up, and they run like hell through the hole in the wall, leaving bullets and fire magic in our wake.

"You up for driving?" she asks Papyrus. "I'm taking the truck, and I figured the Flower Boys owe us a new car so we're taking that gorgeous Ajax with us -- that crazy bitch Gorman gave me the keys and she refused to ride in the truck so you'd have to put up with her -- but I'd rather you than Doggo, and --"

"I can drive it!" says Papyrus, wiping his tears off his face. "Yes!" He's still sniffling a little, but it's just the distraction he needs.

"Great!" she says, throwing him the keys. "See you at Alphys' lab, yeah? That's where the boss wants us."

"Nyeh heh heh! You'll never get there before me!" says Papyrus, jogging towards the car.

"It's not a r-- oh, what the hell. IT'S A RACE!!" says Undyne, climbing into the truck.

He drops me in the front and we peel out. I'm not exactly the best guy to ride shotgun, though, because I start to drift off to sleep as soon as he puts me down. I struggle to stay awake long enough to see who's in the back, and I catch a glimpse of Gorman in the backseat. Tachibana's slumped against her, not looking so good, while Temmie and a couple Vulkins sit morosely.

One of the Vulkins offers to heal Tachibana, clearly desperate to do something helpful, but I don't hear what her response is, because I am just too damn tired to stay awake.

Chapter End Notes
like Lisa Frank decided unicorn stationery was for chumps: If you were a little girl in the US in the '90s you probably remember Lisa Frank.

more bad ideas than the Patent Office's perpetual motion division: Technically there isn't a perpetual motion division of the US Patent and Trademark Office, but it is the only kind of patent that you have to have a working model of if you don't want your patent application to be rejected. (Which kind of surprised me! I assumed all patented things actually worked to some degree.)

Logan and Irving: Logan Square and Irving Park are stops on the Blue Line.

"Uh, uh, c-can you do anything with xylem or phloem?: Xylem and phloem are the two types of vascular tissue in plants. They are roughly analogous to veins or arteries.

Alphys then refers to a bunch of plant hormones, because I just love writing jokes that I know only two people will get. I would claim this is the first time I've ever had to think about which of my characters is like which plant hormone, but actually in college I came up with a mnemonic for plant hormones based on a family of OCs in an RPG I was in, so. Uh.

Gibberellin is a plant hormone that promotes stem elongation, flowering, and general growth, among other more complicated things. It technically was not known anywhere other than Japan at this point in time, but I figure if anyone in this AU's gonna be reading obscure Japanese things, it's Alphys.

Abscisic acid is kind of the opposite of gibberellin; it inhibits growth and causes dormancy.

Ethylene can promote growth, but it can also inhibit growth. It also promotes loss of leaves.

#tag yourself I'm cytokinin #and a huge nerd

eighth grade drama class, and that one fucking line no one would stop reciting at me: This is from the end of the famous "All the world's a stage"/seven ages of man monologue in As You Like It. Leave it to eighth graders to read a line about old age and death, and then just repeat it over and over to annoy their classmate with a funny name.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

So in fanart news, there were not one, but two (TWO!!!) interpretations of the Soriel kiss scene and I was ecstatic about both of them:

Here is an animation by cactu-art and an accompanying picture of Toriel's dress.

And here's smashedkittkate's take on the scene for Soriel AU week!

On a more serious note, I am offering to write fic for donations to charities in the Fandom Trumps Hate fan auction. My very messy contributor page is here and while I wrote too many words, um, you can tell I can... write words, at least? So if you'd like to support one of the charities listed and you want me to write you a custom fic, well, here's your opportunity! In addition to Undertale fic, I'm willing to write Harry Potter, Doctor Who, Homestuck, Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell, Gravity Falls, and original fic prompted by individual songs or music videos. I'm mostly good at humor, angst, and worldbuilding, but you probably knew that.

(I would like to avoid RL political discussion in the AO3 comments, though, please. Thanks!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I dunno how long it takes for us to reach Alphys' lab, because I spend the entire drive only vaguely aware of Gorman's bitching and Papyrus' particularly sharp turns, my consciousness drifting around somewhere between dreams and memories. When I feel the car come to a stop, I wrench open my eyesockets groggily. Normally I would just let Papyrus haul me out, but since he's just been through so much, I wanna make sure he gets looked at by Tori or whichever other monsters with healing magic she's got in here. He won't think to do it himself; his feeling is that nobody should ever worry about the Great Papyrus. My feeling is that I'm nobody enough that I get to worry.

Anyway, Papyrus gets out first; he fails to argue with Gorman for a few minutes, despite her best efforts. Finally they both agree to leave Tachibana in the car for the moment. I slooowly push open the door and get out, blinking into light and wakefulness. I look around for Undyne and the truck with the rest of the monsters, but she ain't here yet, looks like.

Alphys' place is a nondescript two-flat a little smaller than Asgore and Toriel's house; she lives up top and has a kinda quasi-doctor's office and general repair shop on the ground floor. The buildings here are packed tight, with thin alleys and lots of yellow-green weeds sprouting out of the eccentric sidewalks and bumpy roads, but it couldn't be a more beautiful sight to me, because we're safely in Dreemurr territory here.

The door slams open and Tori comes down the stairs in two steps. "There you are! Where are the others?" Her eyes widen as she sees Gorman. "You!" She conjures a flame, ready to burn her to a crisp.

"Hello, Mrs. Dreemurr!" says Papyrus, cheerfully hurrying to meet her. (In the process, he steps between Toriel and Patience Gorman, so she extinguishes her flame.) "I think Undyne got stuck in
traffic! I don't know why she doesn't just go over it! Oh! And could you heal my cool new friend?"
he asks, nodding back at Tachibana. "He's very badly hurt, but I'm sure --"

"Please," says Gorman. "I don't care what happens to me, but --"

"We help?" say two of the Vulkins hopefully.

Toriel goes from wary to worried once she sets eyes on Tachibana. She decides to start with the Vulkins. "Could the two of you please go inside and warm the place up a bit?" she says, and they scurry out of the car and up into Alphys' office gleefully.

Then she shoots me an inquisitive look. I shrug. I assume she wants to know if these humans are some kinda threat, although the fact I'm letting Papyrus turn his back to 'em should really tell her enough. "Tori, this is the peanut gallery."

"I see," says Toriel. She has clearly not warmed to Gorman in the least, but she's businesslike when she says "Let us take him inside and see what I can do for him. Papyrus, could you help Miss Gorman out? And let Woshua have a look at this young man as soon as you get inside, he needs cleaning up before I can do much."

At this point, I guess Gorman figures she got this far by trusting monsters, so she finally lets Papyrus levitate Tachibana out of the car and up the stairs; all the while he chatters about pasta, as if Tachibana is conscious, which I don't think he is.

As they go in, Tori helps the Tem that rode with us out of the car. "Ah. You must be Temmie! Your friend Temmie was very worried about you, as well as her friend Temmie. Is she..."

"tx foar reskew, misses TORIEL," says the Tem, downcast. "Temmie not maek it tho."

"I am very sorry to hear that," says Toriel. "Please let me know if you think there is anything I can do for her family. I am certain she fought valiantly. In the meantime, Temmie is inside waiting for you."

Temi sniffs. "tx," she says again, shakily. She hurries inside.

"Poor girl," says Toriel. "Were there many casualties?" she asks me.

"From what I saw, we lost one Tem, three Vulkins -- I think? -- and one of the humans helping us. I dunno how many injuries, but honestly given how bad it got in there I was expecting worse."

She sighs. "You recovered no dust, I assume?"

"Not sure. I think mostly not, though. We had to get out in a hurry," I say. "Sorry."

She shakes her head. "The ensuing funerals are the risk of this whole sordid business, I suppose," she says. Then she smiles a little wearily. "But it is so good to see you! Let me have a good look at you." And without any further warning, she scoops me up and sets me on top of the car, I guess to verify it's actually me. "I was very worried, I kept thinking about how I sent you into such a dreadful situation practically defenseless, and--"

"Hey, it's fine," I tell her, grinning wide. I really did miss her. "It was my idea anyway, I know you didn't wanna--"

"But you are back now, and I apologize for doubting you, Sans. I know you must have come up with some wonderful trick to get out of there! You must tell me all about it!" she says. And she
means it, even though she knows I have a habit of not telling her any goddamn thing. The way she's beaming at me now is making me go real stupid; now I know how much she likes me, all I can think of is that I could just reach out my hand and bring her face closer, and then if she chose to act further... well, that real stupid part of me would have no objections.

I'm not a complete moron, though, so instead, I say "Tori, let's not do this again."

Her face falls, and she recoils like I burned her, putting her hands firmly behind her back. "I am so sorry, Sans, I only--"

"No, no," I say, because I hate seeing her upset, and because I know she never meant to make me... uncomfortable. "You didn't do anything wrong, I just wish...." I wish a lot of things, and it's hard to pick just one. I reach out to take one of her hands in both of mine, but pain shoots down my left forearm, and I wince.

"Sans? Are you injured?"

"Nah, I'm --" I drop my arm, then, but every time I move it hurts too bad not to cringe.

"Can I look at your arm? I will not -- I will not, ah...." Up close I think maybe the insides of her ears are going pinker than usual. "I just -- to heal it, is all." Wait, is she blushing?

Well, at least we're both dumbasses. "Oh! Right. Yeah, sure. Go ahead, I guess."

She takes my arm gently and, with some difficulty, unbuttons the sleeve so she can roll it up. When she does, we both just stare. Most of the ulna's just gone, like it was sliced away by something real sharp.

"How on earth did you manage to do that?" she asks.

"Dunno," I say, trying to concentrate on the details so I don't think about the real problem. There's a thin sliver of bone facing in towards the radius, connecting the knobbled caps of the bone. (They're called epiphyses, if you wanna be all classy about it.) "I, uh. There was some weird stuff with barrier magic goin' on," I say, recalling Belmont's stupid, stupid last stand, and how I put my arm up to shield myself. She looks real worried, so I add, "I'm sure it's nothing, Tori --"

"Yes, it is nothing where something ought to be," she says. "I think I have reason enough to worry!"

Lady's got a point, I guess, but I'm not real concerned if it's just gonna hurt to move my arm. Pain I can handle. I just gotta get used to it and stop wincing so much. "Listen, Tori, could you take a look at Papyrus real quick? He was under a lot of stress and...." I can see she thinks I'm trying to distract her from my sudden, very localized calcium deficiency. "No, no, I don't mean... I guess look at my arm later, fine, whatever you say," I concede. "Just make sure Papyrus is okay, please? For me? I didn't see anything hit him, but I didn't notice this arm thing either. And I think he mighta overdone it in that last fight."

"Of course," she says. "Can you walk?"

"Tori, I'm fine," I say. "It's my arm, not my leg. Besides, it's just an ulna, who even uses their ulna? Ulnaver miss it."

Tori gives me this exasperated look. "I think most people who have one...." But she trails off and looks over my head. I turn and see that Undyne's truck just turned the corner and is pulling up right now.
She gets out, and helps Alphys out of the shotgun seat. Alphys looks at least a little better for spending an hour stuck in traffic with a fish, so that's a relief, and Undyne is looking only mildly cranky. "Sorry I'm late!" she calls to Tori. "I had this jagoff in front of me who -- Jesus, Sans, what happened to your arm?"

"Like I told Tori, it's just my ulna, it's no big deal." I carefully roll my sleeve back up. "It's like, uh, what is it, that thing they take out when you wanna go somewhere. Uh. There's an X in it." It's been a long day.

"All I can think of is extradition," says Tori after a moment's thought. "But you cannot possibly --"

"No, no, it's like, something you don't need," I say, "but apparently most people have one anyway, and it's always causing problems--"

"A xylophone?" says Undyne, who is enthusiastic, but not great at word games. "I accidentally took a xylophone to Miami once! I wondered why my suitcase kept clinking."

And to think, eighty years from now I couldn't even get on a plane with a tube of toothpaste. "No, I, uh, don't think it's that," I say. "But next time you travel, yeah, you should definitely take that out."

Undyne rolls her eye. "Well, yeah, obviously I learned that lesson."

"Uh, uh, an appendix?" Alphys asks, very hesitantly, and I point at her.

"Yeah! That! Sorry, I'm... pretty tired, can't think straight."

I immediately realize I shouldn't have said that, because Tori shoots Alphys a look that's very plainly do something about him! and Alphys says "I'll take a look at it inside!" Her cheer is definitely forced, but her stutter's gone, which is a great sign.

"Thank you, Alphys," says Tori. "I will help Undyne unload the truck. I assume my husband is in there?" She says the word husband like it's a euphemism for something terrible. "I need to speak with him."

"Oh! Yeah, he is!" says Alphys, who don't seem to have noticed Tori's demeanor is chillier than that freezer we pulled Asgore out of. "Come on, Sans," she says, shoving me up the sidewalk with more force than I think is warranted. As we go inside, she whispers, "Maybe she'll realize how much Asgore still means to her! Do you think they're going to have a tearful reunion?"

"I sure hope not," I say, "but Tori can be pretty mean when she wants to be, and he's probably pretty fucked up after what happened, so maybe. Poor guy." I look around Alphys' place; the front is mostly full of half-dissected machines she found in the garbage dump or stuff people brought in to get fixed, but someone's industriously cleared away a lot of the debris and set out cots, cushions, and tables for wounded monsters. Two Tems sit near the door, weepy and even more incoherent than usual, and one lone Vulkin is trying to cheer them up with lava while it waits for its injured friends to get treatment.

None of Alphys' lights come on when I flip the switch in her waiting room, so we gotta make do with the light from outside, which is low and orange-red. The room is so full of junk that I take the lump on the couch in the corner for a funny-shaped lamp until it takes off its lampshade and grumbles to itself, and I realize it's Patience Gorman, who's just taken her hat off and looks like she don't know what to do with herself. Her broken wrist has outclassed Vermont and is looking more Kentucky-sized. Hopefully for her Tori'll have some healing left before it gets to Montana.

Alphys glares briefly at her before she heads into the back room, where presumably Woshua is
cleaning up Tachibana. (I can hear Papyrus trying to be encouraging, although I don't hear Tachibana making any response, so he's probably still out.) "Hey, Woshua! I, uh, I can take care of this guy from here, I think! B-but we might still need you, so stick around."

Woshua shuffles out and sits himself down next to the Tems. "Your soul is unclean," he tells Gorman, before starting to clean one of the injured Vulkins.

"Good to know," says Gorman wearily, not even looking up.

I poke my head into Alphys' exam room, where Tachibana is looking slightly better than he was last I saw him. He's still not awake, but at least he's not losing any more blood that I can see. Papyrus is trying to heal him, but skeleton magic ain't great at that and Papyrus is already bone-tired.

"Why don't you rest up a little, Papyrus?" I suggest. "You've done plenty today, and Tori'll take care of him when she comes in."

"Well, I have to help out somehow! What would everyone do without the Great Papyrus?"

"Hell if I know," I say. "But I think you'd be more help to Undyne and Tori, don't you? The sooner they get everything taken care of outside the sooner they can come in here and start healing Tachibana." And Undyne and Tori'll look out for him if he really does need a rest.

"All right," says Papyrus, hesitantly. "But -- is he going to be okay? He's not going to -- to --" His sockets are wide and worried, and I think I see tears starting to form again. "I mean -- I mean, what about --"

"Nah, I'm sure he'll be fine," I say, although I have no idea, of course. "Right, Alphys?"

"Um," says Alphys. I grin a little wider at her, and she looks a little alarmed. "Yeah!" she says. "Definitely!"

"Oh, good!" says Papyrus. "If anyone would know it'd be Dr. Alphys!"

"I'm n--" she starts. I grin very pointedly. "Of c-course," she says instead. As he leaves, she shuts the door quietly behind him. "Sans, I have no idea if he's going to be --"

"I don't want Papyrus to see my arm, all right?" I say. "And I don't want him worried. He's been through enough. If Tachibana dies let's come up with a nicer story."

She sighs, and ignores this question. "Hold out your arm?" I guess I should let her take a look, so I do. "Uh, this might hurt," she tells me, so I brace myself, but it would have been nice to warn me what she was actually gonna do, which is stick her fingers in the gap where there should have been bone.

I withdraw my arm quickly. "Hey, uh, maybe don't do that ever again?"

"Oh, g-good, you still have sensation!" she says, brightly. But when she sees my face, her smile vanishes and she takes a step back.

I realize I've got my most pissed-off smile on, and let the little white lights come back into my eyes. Whoops. "Yeah, but Alphys, I coulda told you that," I say.

"Sorry, sorry, I just -- I h-had to see, and um, you aren't's always... very... honest? But! But! It looks like your magical field wasn't disrupted which means that you're probably going to make a full recovery as long as you watch it carefully and drink a lot of milk and... and keep a positive attitude!"
She smiles hesitantly.

"Yeah, sure. Sounds easy," I say, unconvinced.

She catches my tone and cringes. "So, uh. A lot of milk," she says. "Or, or broccoli, that has a lot of calcium too. Or--"

"Tell ya what, I'll pick up some sidewalk chalk tomorrow morning," I say. "Develop a pack a day habit. How's that?"

She sighs. "Maybe Toriel knows some special k-kind of healing magic that will work? Or. Papyrus? Skeleton magic is good for bones, right?"

I don't really want Papyrus to make a big deal over it, but I guess it's possible. I shrug. "Guess I'll hafta figure something out." I nod at Tachibana. "What about him? What's the prognosis there?" I wanna know if I'm gonna have to tell Papyrus we sent his new friend to live on a farm.

"Ugh, I don't know," Alphys moans. "I'm w-worried he might need actual human blood, and, and, I d-don't even know where we'd get that --"

"We got some humans, don't we?" I say. "I know they don't need all their blood. I've seen 'em lose enough of it and then get back up and --"

"It's n-not that simple, there's, there's four different kinds of human blood and even then it's still risky!" she says.

This seems needlessly complicated to me, but I guess Alphys would know. "Okay. Do we have any humans with the right kind of blood?"

"I don't know, you can't t-tell someone's blood type just tell by looking at them," she says. "It's, it's complicated, I can't test for it here, and if you get it wrong --"

"Yeah, but can't they tell just by looking? I thought humans were obsessed with that? I mean, all their color coding and shit...." She gives me this look like I said something really dumb. "What?" I ask.

"No! No, nobody can tell blood types just by looking, Sans! Don't you know anything about humans?" she says.

I shrug. "Look, Alphys, all I know is they get all red and sticky if you throw 'em around too much. For all I know they could be full of ketchup."

She opens her mouth, presumably to explain human anatomy to me, as learned by her from first aid manuals and those, uh, lavishly-illustrated magazines she likes so much, but there's a shout from the front room and both of us rush out to see what new bullshit is going on.

Undyne's clutching Patience Gorman by the shirtfront and snarling at her, and Gorman's looking about as unhappy about this as anyone marginally sane would be. And Papyrus is behind Undyne, wearing his slightly frightened smile. The other monsters -- the Vulkins, the Tems, the Eyewalkers and a small collection of dogs -- are looking on worriedly, ready to fight again but all looking a little battered from the last fight.

I see the glint of Gorman's knife on the floor, where it must've fallen when Undyne picked her up. Her wrist is still fucked up, so I'm not sure how she grabbed it in the first place.
"It's fine, don't worry, I'm sure she was just being friendly! That's probably just a thing the Flower Boys do!" he says. He sounds optimistically worried, which I've never seen anyone else really pull off before, but my brother is very talented at having mutually contradictory emotions.

"I -- I didn't -- I --" says Gorman. The way she's struggling makes it look a little like she's trying to tread water, which is a skill she might need if Undyne throws her into the lake. "It wasn't me!"

"Hey," I say, waving from the doorway. "What's going on?"

"She tried to stab Papyrus!" says Undyne.

Gorman stops struggling with Undyne, and looks at me with something a little like worry.

I don't react much. "Huh. That wasn't very smart of her," I say. "Why'd she do that?"

"Maybe it was a mistake," says Papyrus. "Anyway, I don't think she was trying to stab me? I mean! She's not a very good stabber if she was, I'm completely unstabbed! Don't worry, Miss Gorman, I'm sure you can do better next time," he says, giving her an encouraging smile.

"Also, um, n-not to defend her," says Alphys, timidly, "b-but her wrist is, um. It's."

"Thoroughly fucked up?" I supply. "Yeah, that's some pretty serious devotion to the cause of stabbing my brother. And failing." Then I see what Alphys is getting at. "Gorman," I say, "did the Flower make you do it?"

"What?" Undyne asks. "Come on, that's bullshit, he can't possibly --"

"Oh yeah he can, we saw him do it," I say. "And I'm not real forgiving about that shit, you know that." Gingerly, I pick the knife up from the floor and pocket it. "Maybe you should put her down."

"She tried to stab Papyrus!" Undyne shouts. "Don't you care?"

I shrug. "You'll stop her if she does it again, right?" I mean, obviously she will. But Undyne's still pissed off and she don't care much about what I think.

The front door opens and Tori comes in, shouting over her shoulder at someone else. "--absurdly reckless and stupid!" I hear Asgore say something vaguely apologetic from a long way off. "Well that is fine!" Tori snarls. She finally faces front and looks around at all of us. "What on earth is going on?"

"She tried to stab Papyrus!" says Undyne, turning towards Tori. She's still holding Gorman suspended, and the wild gestures she makes ain't doing Gorman any favors.

"Well. Either the Flower tried to stab Papyrus, or Gorman is lying through her teeth, which admittedly is something she's real good at," I tell Tori. Occam's razor suggests she's lying, but I can't exactly just blast her to smithereens for it right now -- apart from everything else, Papyrus would be devastated. And she's probably smarter than to try and kill one of her rescuers in a situation like this, especially given what she knows about me. "We saw the Flower take control of her earlier and... I don't think she was foolin'." To be fair, she could've arranged that little song and dance with the Flower ahead of time to make it all look more believable, but I'm finding that harder and harder to believe.

Toriel sighs. "Undyne, please put her down," she says. Undyne dumps her on the floor and she lands on her wrist.
Once she sits up, I can see she's grimacing in pain and holding her wrist pretty gingerly. "I don't think I was trying to stab him," she says, not looking anyone in the eye. "I think I was trying to stab..." She waves vaguely up at Undyne. "You. The fish."

"Oh, wow, that makes it so much better!" says Undyne, favoring her with a very threatening smile.

"Undyne, please calm down," says Tori. "I will handle this. Alphys, is there any reason you cannot continue treating these wounded monsters?" she asks pointedly. "I will help you once I have dealt with Miss Gorman."

"Oh! Um! Yeah! I should do that!" says Alphys. "C-come on, guys, why don't you all, um, line up and I'll take a look at everyone. Woshua, um, c-could you--"

"Wosh u patients?" he asks. (Gorman looks at Wosh, a little startled, before her gaze drops to her wrist again.) "Okay!"

"Thank you," says Tori. "There are some Vegetoids on their way to help as well." Once Alphys is in her exam room and Woshua's busy going down the line and administering a little healing scrub to everyone, Tori nods to the far corner of the room. "I think we should sit down to talk. Over there, where we can have some privacy. Can you stand?" she asks Gorman.

Gorman manages to climb to her feet awkwardly and get to a couch. Tori sits on the couch perpendicular to Gorman's, facing her. Undyne opts to loom over Gorman and glower with one eye, but I'm too lazy to keep standing around, so I sit myself down next to Tori and motion Papyrus over. That way both Tori and I are in between Gorman and Papyrus if she does try and hurt him, and if I drift off, whoever I end up falling asleep on will be used to it. "So," says Toriel. Her tone is cheerful but her face is dead serious. "Why exactly are you here, Miss Gorman?"

"I needed Reynard to be safe," says Gorman miserably. "That's all." She's looking at the ground. "You don't have to keep me around, I'm obviously dangerous."

Tori don't seem like she knows what to say to this at first, but eventually she decides upon, "Miss Gorman, I do not have to do anything. If Asgore made any promises, I am sorry to tell you that they are null and void, at least where this organization is concerned."

Gorman shrugs. "I don't think you're listening to me. Look, can you heal Reynard? Will you keep him away from the Flower? That's all I care about. I know it's a lot to ask, I just --"

The door opens, and Asgore comes in; another batch of monsters needing healing limp in after him. Everyone looks up to see him come in, except Tori, who's putting on a big show of giving him the cold shoulder.

"I think nearly everyone is out." He frowns as Knight Knight gets into line behind the Eyewalkers, two wounded Froggits in her arms. "Or. I suppose nearly everyone is in." He looks like he could use a drink or twenty, and he don't seem to notice everyone staring at him as he picks his way between Alphys' science projects and collapses onto the couch the only place there's room for him, which is right next to Gorman. (Gorman in particular boggles at him, like he's some kinda alien life form.) "Mr. Szczepanski is rounding up the last three of the Whimsums. He looked like he needed something useful to do."

"Uh. Good for him," says Undyne, doubtfully. "Maybe he needs some help, though? Papyrus, you wanna make sure he doesn't get lost?" she asks.

That's fine; I don't think Sellers is gonna hurt him, and I'm not sure I want Papyrus here with what's
probably not a real stable isotope of Patience Gorman. Plus, I'm pretty sure there's a boss fight comin' up, and much as I like and respect both Tori and Asgore, the two of 'em together get pretty tiresome sometimes. (I think Undyne's thinking along the same lines. She can be oblivious sometimes, but she's real good with Papyrus.)

"Oh! Of course!" says Papyrus, springing up immediately. "And I'll help him carry all the Whimsums!"

"Don't worry if you don't find some of 'em at first," I tell him as he gets up to leave.

Papyrus pauses on his way out the door to turn and stare at me. "What? Sans! That would be awful! Those poor lost Whimsums! Don't worry, I'll find them all no matter what!"

"Nah, you shouldn't let it bother you," I say. "After all, you Whimsum, you--"

"Aaaargh, don't you dare finish that--"

"--lose some," I finish, grinning.

"Sans, no."

"Sans, no."

"S--Sans," he says carefully, rolling his eyes a little, "you must understand we were in a very difficult position, I only said I would do what I could to--"

"What exactly are we supposed to do with these--"

"These people?" she decides on, grudgingly.

This part is technically my fault, and Asgore shoots me an irritable look before he opens his mouth to talk. Whether he's gonna make an excuse or throw me under the bus I can't tell, because Gorman starts talking first. "Please, I just want Reynard to be safe," she says. "I have money!"

"You tried to stab Papyrus," Undyne tells her. "Okay, maybe it was your boss or whatever, sure, fine. So how do we know he's not speaking through you right now? And how do we know he's not gonna take over that Tachibana guy?"

"He doesn't have any control over Reynard's soul, I'm not lying, I swear I'm not, I-- I'm doing all I can to keep him from hurting everyone!" Gorman snaps. "Look, if you kill me now--"

"Miss Gorman, we are not going to kill you now," says Asgore, apparently trying to be comforting and not doing a great job. "Well, not me, at any rate."

But it's like Gorman can't stop herself from talking. "-- if you kill me now I have, in my purse, I have bank account information, what little paperwork he has, so if you could give him a new name-- please try to talk him into taking one that's not Japanese, that's going to be so much trouble in a decade, I understand if he wants to keep his but I'm worried they'll-- look, I just-- I wasn't even supposed to be here, I don't know how to convince you, if he was awake he'd be himself and you
could see, he's not like me, he's barely killed anyone and I know he never meant to and I don't want him to die or lose his conscience to that fiend, but if you won't help him, I, I, I'll, I'll have too..." She looks around at Tori and Asgore and Undyne and me, realizing there is no way she could take us all with a broken wrist and no weapons. "Um."

"I think I am lacking quite a bit of information regarding recent events," says Toriel. "Would somebody mind explaining... anything?"

Undyne looks between me and Asgore. "Yeah, I'm not sure what's going on either," she admits. "Guys?"

"Ah. I admit I do not know much of the story myself," says Asgore. He hesitates. "Toriel, this may not be a good time to -- I suggest we speak more of this somewhere more private."

She don't take real kindly to this, so I decide I better speak up, especially if I wanna save Tori from a lot of heartache for a little while, at least. "Well, I can explain the basics," I say. "So the Flower is apparently a monster who's had a little too much DT. He's been taking human souls -- kinda --"

"He doesn't take them, he just... uses them to root himself," says Gorman. "We didn't realize -- at first it was just so he could gain... stability, but now -- you see, his soul was taken from him and --"

"How could any monster survive that?" Toriel asks.

"I think it must have been the Determination," says Gorman. "Partly from -- from a human soul he had taken previously, but mostly I..." She pauses. "I didn't realize how much it would change him when I gave it to him. We just wanted him to live."

"How on earth..." Toriel trails off. "This has become quite complicated already. Sans," she says, turning to me, and I'm dreading her next question, because we've gotten way too close to stuff she doesn't wanna know. "Did they want you and Alphys for the reasons we discussed previously?"

"Uh. Yeah, something like that," I say, thankful that's all she wants to know. "They had a time machine, and they were gonna exploit it basically the way I thought they were, but this operation was on a terrifying scale. The kid, Tachibana, destroyed the machine and the extractors are also out of service. And, uh, Corcoran didn't survive. He was a magician, though, I don't think he woulda let us get out alive if he hadn't be taken care of."

"I see," says Toriel. She shoots another irritable look at Asgore before standing. "Well, let me see if I can help Alphys with her patients." As we've been talking, the line's gotten pretty short; it's just an Eyewalker, two Froggits, and Knight Knight now.

"Toriel --" Asgore starts.

"Not now," she snarls, barely sparing him a glance before disappearing into Alphys' exam room.

"Uh," says Undyne. "Is this to do with that whole weird thing where the Flower's one of your cousins or something?" she asks Asgore.

Asgore grimaces. "I think it would be best if she found out about that from me," he says to Undyne.

I decide I better say something before he gets carried away. "I think it'd be better if she just didn't find out. You know that could kill her, right? I'm not being metaphorical, bad news like that could actually --"

He rounds on me. "Sans, I am painfully aware of what bad news can do to its recipient, and in
particular its effects on *my wife.* He's bearing his teeth.

I ain't scared of that, though. I'm always bearing my teeth. "I'm just saying. C'mon, I know you want her to be happy, and --"

"You cannot shelter everyone from everything forever," he snaps. "Which is something I fear you will learn to your great detriment someday." Then he turns to Gorman. "It appears we have much to discuss, and I think I can heal your wrist should my wife and Miss Alphys be too busy treating others to see to it. At the very least, I have some tea that will help the pain. I imagine you may want to see Mr. Tachibana now, but when you are ready, I think Undyne can drive you to my house?" He looks to Undyne first.

"Oh! Yeah, uh." She looks a little dismayed to find herself chauffeuring Gorman. "Yeah."

"Thank you," he says, smiling at Undyne. "You made me very proud today, Undyne." He pulls her into a hug, and whatever she tries to say in response it comes out all muffled. When Asgore releases her, he turns to Gorman, waiting for her answer.

She looks startled. "I suppose I owe you... a lot of explanations. I'm so sorry about --"

"Yes. So am I," he says. "We will discuss it later." And then he leaves.

Undyne glares at Gorman. "I'm going to be watching you *very* closely," she says through gritted teeth. I hold off on making a joke about her keeping an eye on Gorman, because I'd rather Undyne don't punt me into the river. It has been known to happen.

"I don't blame you," says Gorman, shrugging.

"And when you're having tea and whatever with Asgore, if you hurt him I'll be *pissed.*"

"She'll be really tea'd off," I confirm.

Undyne rolls her eye, but she forgives tea puns easy enough. "I guess I walked into that one."

Having delivered her threat and gotten a total non-response in return, Undyne don't seem to know what to do with herself. Eventually, after an awkward silence, she turns to me. "So! Uh.... Got any plans for Ascent?"

Oh yeah, it's gettin' to be that time of year, I guess. I shrug. "Tori kinda hates Ascent 'cept for the food so I figure me and Papyrus'll have dinner with her and then he'll probably go to the carnival. Maybe he'll take the kid along if they want, but I dunno if Tori'd be okay with that -- I guess some of those puppet shows might be too violent or something."

"I don't know if that's a great idea anyway," says Undyne. "That kid's a handful."

"What? We must be talkin' about two different kids," I say. "Frisk's great!"

"I mean they're a nice kid," says Undyne, "but --"

"What?" Gorman asks. "You still have the child? I thought you'd lost her!"

"Huh?" Undyne asks.

Oh. Right. I forgot I had Alphys pull that little bit of unwitting deception. "No, no, I just kinda set it up so you'd think that."

"Is she somewhere safe? If they get her --"
"We won't let anything happen to Frisk, trust me," I say.

"Well. They ran away three times while you were away," says Undyne. "Wore me out going to get them. So that could be a problem. Especially for you." She has a new reason to glare at Gorman, though, so she takes advantage of that. "Why are you suddenly so concerned about Frisk, anyway? It's your fault they're so scared!"

"She has an extremely powerful soul," says Gorman, "and if the Flower was to get a hold of her we'd be screwed. She's incredibly lucky the Flower agreed to my overly-complicated plan to get her the hell out of his clutches for a chance at monster hostages."

I ignore Gorman. I don't know if I believe she was plotting this from the start, but Frisk's more important, I think. "They ran away? Really?"

"Yeah, Toriel was..." Undyne trails off. "You know I think you're full of shit mostly, Sans, but you might have a point about bad news hurting her, depending. She's putting on a good face, but she's scared, I can tell. Because of, you know. The... other kids."

For some reason I feel a little guilty about this. I guess it's 'cause I couldn't be there for her or whatever, but I can't be there for her anyway, so it's not like that's much of a change. "Well, hey, maybe she won't listen to Asgore."

Undyne looks doubtful at this. "What's this terrible news that's got you all worried, though? Is the Flower like, her favorite cousin or something?"

"He's their son," says Gorman, before I can stop her. I glare at her with empty sockets; she don't pay any mind.

"What?" says Undyne. "What? But how could he possibly -- he's been dead, that's the whole --"

Eh, the Flower's out of the bag now, I guess. "He was in real good health for a dead kid," I say. "Also a lot older than he was when he's supposed to have died. Also... weirder."

"Shit," says Undyne. "Holy shit. That's. He's. And he's the Flower?"

I shrug. "Yup!" Undyne looks absolutely horrified. "So, hey, I didn't ask, what about your plans for Ascent?"

"Toriel doesn't know?" Undyne asks. "Shit. You can't keep that from her, Sans! Shit. Holy fuck. This is --"

"C'mon, I thought you were with me on this! You just said --"

"Yeah, but she's gotta know that," says Undyne. "I mean, c'mon, think about it, if Papyrus went evil, you'd want to --"

"Aw, c'mon, Undyne, you know Papyrus'd never --" The door opens, and Sellers and Papyrus come in, with three shivering Whimsums. Sellers still looks pretty shell-shocked.

"I'd never what?" Papyrus asks. "I assure you, the Great Papyrus is more than capable of whatever needs to be done! Or not done! As the case may be! The Great Papyrus cannot give up!"

"See? That's exactly what I was getting at! I was saying 'Papyrus would never let anyone down, or desert them.'" (Papyrus is more than capable of running around, however. He has a lot of energy. So I leave that out.)
"Of course not! How could you think such a thing? Who's saying I might? I must track them down and give them a hug and a big plate of spaghetti at once!" says Papyrus.

"No one's saying that," says Undyne, quickly. "Sans is just being weird." She glares at me for a moment before turning back to Papyrus and firmly changing the subject. "So! I hear you're taking the kid to the Ascent carnival?"

"Oh! Am I?" says Papyrus. "I haven't met them yet! I'm so excited."

"Yeah, they're a lot of fun," says Undyne. "I got, uh, a lot of exercise helping Toriel watch them this week! And -- oh, oh, I have something to tell you about!" she says, going from fake excited to real excited. "C'mon, out here, it's secret best friends stuff!" she says, tugging him towards the door.

"Is it about Alphys?" Papyrus asks.

"Shut up, shut up!" she hisses, dragging him out the door.

"UNDYNE, did you tell her--"

"SHUT UP." The door slams behind them; a split second later I hear Papyrus shouting happily about something. I guess maybe this has something to do with what she said on the phone to Alphys just before we turned ourselves in? Eh, whatever it is I'll be hearing about it; Papyrus is terrible at keeping secrets.

Sellers sits on the couch, as far away from Gorman as possible. He still ain't looking so good.

"Hey, kid, you okay?"

"No," he mumbles.

"He's probably in shock," says Gorman. I think she sounds like she's back to her old impossible-to-read self until she adds, with a brittle, panicky kind of cheer, "I think so am I. It's interesting, actually, from the inside. I wasn't expecting it at all, I thought I was much too far gone for this."

"I'm fine," says Sellers. "I'm just a little bit..." He don't finish the sentence.

I wish I could ask the humans what they're doing for Ascent, that being the awkward smalltalk of the day, apparently, but, well, being humans, they probably don't even know what it is. A lot of humans these days take offense to the very concept; they're always sending the cops out to try and shut the carnival down for being too loud or too rowdy or too, well, monstery. At any rate, it's not a good icebreaker for this crowd. I think Alphys still has my Astounding, so I break out my cards. "You guys wanna learn Fizzbin?"

"No," says Sellers, more aggressively than I think is warranted.

Gorman frowns. "Isn't that the fake game from Star Trek?"

I shrug. "It was worth a shot."

"What's Star Trek?" Sellers asks.

"My college roommate's favorite show," says Gorman, rolling her eyes. She frowns and then turns to me. "I forget, does he know we're from the future?"

"You're from the future?" Sellers asks.
"Well, he sure does now," I say.

"How are you from the future?" he asks. "Did you come with Dr. Corcoran? Did you know him? Why didn't you tell me? You said you'd never been to the future!"

"I had a time machine," I say. "It broke, I got stuck. Corcoran got here by accident, I think."

"He was exploring an abandoned house," says Gorman. "I ran away from a Halloween party."

We both look at her.

"Is that a normal way of time travel?" Sellers asks me. I shrug.

"I was in college. I got into an argument and punched someone," she says, "and then I felt awful about it, so I ran away. And then I got stuck over a century in the past. I was... in a somewhat altered state, so it took me a while to figure out what happened." She sighs. "In about forty years I'll catch up with myself. Not looking forward to that."

"What do you mean 'altered state'?" Sellers asks. "Is that a time travel thing?"

Gorman snorts. "No."

"Wait a sec," I say, frowning at her. "I thought it only happened to kids. The falling back in time thing -- Tachibana said --"

"It mostly happens to children," she says. "We retrieved a few adults, but mostly they didn't survive for very long. Corcoran said it probably had something to do with psychothaumic resiliency, which tends to get lower the older you get. I think I was just on the cusp of -- well. I was sick as a dog for a week. It was awful."

Sellers is frowning. "But... you're not eighty. If you got kicked back in time over a hundred years when you were nineteen and now it's only forty years --"

"I'm a hundred and four," she says. "Apparently time travel gives you..." She glances at me briefly. "How did the skeleton put it? Shitty superpowers. Ray got strength and Corcoran didn't need to sleep or eat. But I just... take forever to look older, and it is really fucking hard to get anyone to take you seriously when you're stuck in your twenties for thirty goddamn years. I just... stay in place and everything else changes. Either too fast, or not fast enough. Both, I guess." She looks like she could probably use a drink.

Sellers, though, elbows me, glowering. This is kinda good because it means he's not too traumatized to be sick of my bullshit, but it jolts my arm, which is very bad. "You said you hadn't been to the future!" he says.

"I asked if you thought I'd been," I say, managing to disguise my grimace of pain as a smile. "You said no and I let you assume. That's just what you get with an unreliable narrator, kid." He ain't impressed.

"When are you from?" he asks us.

"2015," I say. It was not, as I recall, a great year for me even without being sent back in time -- I had a really bad breakup and my favorite author died. And the Egrets didn't even win the World Series like they were supposed to, which I didn't much care about as a baseball fan, but as a Back to the Future fan it kinda stung. I was really looking forward to 2016, frankly. But now I don't even know if I'll survive the 20th century.
"Oh! You and Phoebe are from the same decade!" She pauses. "Well, not that you'd care."

It's weird to think of Phoebe Douglas -- dancer, actress, terrifying gravity-defying assassin -- as someone who might actually get my popular culture references. "No, that's. Great. I guess."

"Are there a lot of other people from the future?" Sellers asks. He looks worried, like people in silver jumpsuits are gonna materialize out of nowhere and, I dunno, try to teach him Fizzbin.

"I don't think so? Just a buncha the Flower Boys," I say, nodding at Gorman.

"Tachibana too?" Sellers asks.

"He was only four when we got him. He got lost playing hide and seek. He deserved better. We all did." Her expression softens for a moment. "Do you think it would be -- I mean, I can wait, but -- if I went in and saw him would it hurt anything?"

I shrug. "You can try. Hey, actually, I should go say bye to Tori and get my brother and go home -"

"What? You can't leave me alone in a room with her," says Sellers, getting off of the couch to follow me. "She stabs people!"

"What, you think I'm safer?" I ask. That does give him pause.

"The skeleton has my knife," Gorman reminds him. Sellers sits back down again.

"Look, kid, if you really wanna hang out with me and Papyrus I'm sure he'd love that, but you look like you need a couple years' sleep and some hot food in ya. Tori'll be able to find you someplace to sleep and something to eat."

"I just want to go home," he says, sounding much younger than students at his level tend to be. Then his expression turns into horror. "Oh, fuck. My mom, what if they go after her, what if --"

"We probably have a little while before they figure out which students are dead and which ones booked it, yeah?" I say. "I'll mention your mom to Tori, okay?"

He nods, numbly.

I wander over to the door to Alphys' exam room. "Anyway, I'm gonna tell her bye and see if she wants me to take Frisk for the night. I'll ask if you can come see Tachibana," I add, to Gorman. "Alphys said something about him maybe needing blood --"

Gorman is by my side so fast that if she was any quicker I'd wonder if she could teleport too. "I have blood. I don't know if it's the right type, but I'm absolutely sure I could get some --"

"I don't think she'll want you to stab people," I say.

"-- from hospitals, where I have contacts," she finishes, scowling.

"Oh. Right." I push open the door and slip in. Gorman keeps the door open just slightly -- just enough to see and hear, but not really enough to be seen. "Hey, guys! How're ya doin' in here?"

Alphys is wrapping some kinda bandage around Kight Knight's wrist, and Tori's using healing magic on the bandaged-up gash in Tachibana's side, but both of 'em look up from what they're doing when they hear me. "Um," says Alphys. "Are we almost d-done? Because if we're almost done we're doing okay!" She looks exhausted.
"Yeah, you just got a couple Froggits and some Whimsums," I say. "Between you and me, I don't think the Whimsums need anything more than a pat on the head and maybe a little gin."

"I'll keep that in mind," says Alphys.

"You might wanna take a look at the other human kid, though, I think he's gonna need a lot more gin. There's also Gorman's broken wrist, but Asgore offered to heal that --"

"No, no, no, do not let her go to him! He is dreadful at healing magic," snaps Toriel.

"He said there'd be tea," says Gorman, weakly, cracking the door open a little more. "Can I -- can I see how Reynard is?"

Toriel looks up from what she's doing, then, and I guess she must feel bad for Gorman, because she says, "I suppose so, yes. Do not touch him," she warns.

Gorman makes a show of putting her hands behind her back, and comes forward. "Oh," she says, looking down at him. It don't seem to make her feel any better, but I guess the fact she's feelin' anything at all with such a loose grip on her own soul is pretty impressive.

"Tori? You want me and Papyrus to look after Frisk tonight? You look pretty beat, and that's usually my job."

"Oh! Did you not want me to look him over -- and what about your --"

"I think he'll be okay for now, maybe tomorrow. Looks like this guy's takin' up most of your time," I say, motioning to Tachibana. "So. Frisk?"

"If you could, that would be very kind of you," says Tori. "They are at my house, being watched by Grillby's daughter. I, ah. We did have some issues with them running away sometimes, when they thought they had done something wrong."

"Undyne mentioned. I think Papyrus and me can handle it," I say. "The other human answers to Sellers, but his real name's Marty Szczepanski if you need it for some reason. Think he lives with his mom but the Flower Boys ain't gonna be happy with him, so he probably shouldn't go there, and she should probably leave. You want me to have Papyrus drop him off at Grillby's with directions to the Snowed Inn? You could deal with it if you want but I warn you, he's kinda mouthy."

"Poor boy, he looked very lost when I saw him," says Toriel. "I will see what I can do. Thank you for everything, Sans."

"Hey, anytime," I say. "Oh, and I almost forgot, Gorman here says she can get you some blood if you need it for Tachibana." Tori glares disapprovingly at Gorman.

"From hospitals!" she insists again.

"Right, hospitals," I say, cheerfully. "We should all try to be a little more sanguine about this. Anyway, uh, unless there's anything I can do here, me and Papyrus'll go get Frisk. See you around!"

She beams at me. "It is good to have you back. Go get some rest, Sans."

I laugh. "Oh yeah, I could definitely use a nap or ten." I leave them to their work, and go outside to find Papyrus.

As it turns out, he and Undyne are deep in conversation out on the front stoop. As I open the door I
hear Undyne say, "I just don't know what she -- oh, uh, hi."

"Hey," I say. "Alphys is still workin' on Knight Knight, looks like, and Gorman's still being... well." I shrug. "Papyrus and me are gonna pick up the kid from Tori's house now."

"Oh! Yes! And then we can have a Welcome Home Party for all three of us!" says Papyrus. "Undyne, do you want to come?"

"I think I'm gonna wait for Alphys if she's not done before I take Gorman to Asgore's," she says Papyrus. I'm kinda surprised he don't rib her about that; he just nods. "Do you guys really trust that Gorman bitch?" Undyne asks.

"Her friend Mr. Tachibana is really nice, actually!" says Papyrus. "Although he doesn't have very good taste in jokes."

"What, Papyrus, you don't like my jokes? I had no idea!" I say.

"Anyway," Papyrus says, glaring at me, "he has lots of redeeming qualities! Like! He likes my spaghetti!"

"Yeah, don't judge Tachibana fusilli reasons," I tell Undyne.

"Ugh!" says Papyrus. "I'm going to get the car started! I don't have to listen to these so-called jokes!"

"C'mon, if I didn't make terrible puns all the time you'd know I was an impasta," I call after him.

"NOT LISTENING!" he shouts back.

Undyne is giving me this expectant look now he's out of earshot, though. "Come on, what do you really think of Gorman? I know Papyrus wants to be friends with everyone, but you can't possibly trust her."

"I don't," I say, "but I think right now she's tellin' the truth. No guarantee she won't sell us out later on, admittedly, but she doesn't have a plan. What I could read of her was just... a lot of uncertainty. I don't think she thought she was surviving today." Undyne follows me up until I get to that last thing, at which point her face kinda falls.

"How's Alphys?" she asks quickly, and then I see how she got derailed. Did Alphys tell her? That'd be new. And surprising.

"She looks like she's holding up okay right now," I say. I see Undyne's eye narrow when I say 'right now.' She's not as dumb as she looks, Undyne. "If you wanna check on her after you get back from Asgore's place, I don't think she'd mind." She nods. "Anyway, me and Papyrus are gonna look after Frisk, I talked to Tori about it."

"Right. Yeah." Her eye narrows. "Okay, I can't be too pissed, you brought her back alive, but what the hell were you thinking, bringing her with you? Or even going at all? You're totally useless, and everyone knows it except for Toriel." She pauses, then grudgingly adds, "And Papyrus."

"Well, clearly I'm not, since I did get us out --"

"I got you out --"
"Okay," I say, shrugging. "Fair enough. Anyway, look, they wanted me so I went. They wanted Alphys, and she volunteered, so I took her with me. Undyne, I even told her if anything happened to her you'd kill me, and was I wrong?"

"Something definitely happened to her," says Undyne. "The scales on her hands were all... fried, and she was --"

"Was I supposed to tell her no?" Undyne gnashes her teeth in frustration. "Look, I know you care about her but I'm telling you, I couldn't have done a damn thing about it, she'd have gone on her own if I hadn't volunteered myself." I hear a horn from the street and see Papyrus sitting in Tachibana's gorgeous stolen car, waiting. "Welp, that's my ride, gotta go. Maybe talk to Alphys about this shit if you want a better answer, okay?"

"Fine," she grumbles, getting up. I hear her slam the door as I walk to the car.

I fall asleep in the car again, of course. It's barely a ten-minute ride, but I manage. I'm very talented like that.

Chapter End Notes

References:

**four different kinds of human blood**: At this point in time, ABO blood types were known, but Rh blood types were not. There are actually a bunch more different variations that can make transfusions difficult. (Sans is of course confusing blood types with race, something he has trouble distinguishing in humans anyway.)

**lavishly-illustrated magazines she likes so much**: Not manga, but girlie pulps. (Click at your own risk; some of the covers are NSFW.)

**please try to talk him into taking one that's not Japanese, that's going to be so much trouble in a decade**: In case you're not familiar with this particular part of US history, Gorman's referring to the camps the US government set up to "relocate" (read: imprison) Japanese-Americans during World War II. The name "Tachibana" means "wild orange" in Japanese.

**my favorite author died.** I'm not sure he'd be Sans' favorite author, and I don't know that he's even my all-time favorite author, but I cried a lot about Terry Pratchett's death. I guess that's more of a personal thing than a research note, but anyway, in this fictional universe someone amazing and hilarious died in 2015.

**And the Egrets didn't even win the World Series like they were supposed to, which I didn't much care about as a baseball fan, but as a Back to the Future fan it kinda stung.** In Back to the Future Part II the Chicago Cubs win the World Series in 2015. In reality, they didn't win it until 2016! Sans doesn't know how close he came! (I feel like if he was actually into baseball and lived in Chicago he'd be rooting for the Sox, though.)
When we get to Tori's place, Papyrus must just kinda haul me out of the car bodily, because I only wake up about halfway to the door, tucked under his arm. I yawn. "Want me to walk?" Normally I wouldn't offer, but he's been through a lot.

"Don't be ridiculous, Sans, I'm perfectly capable of carrying you myself!" he says, sounding a little insulted.

Fine by me. He raps on the door, and after a minute or so, Grillby's daughter Shelby opens it just a crack, leaving the door chained. She's made of fire, so a human attacker would probably think twice before hurting her, but we got a pretty bad problem with street gangs in this neighborhood, with very few humans involved, so Shelby's smart not to take chances.

But when she sees it's me and Papyrus, she perks right up and lets us in, and Papyrus puts me down. "Hey, Shelby, how's everything been since --"
"SANS!" A stripey blur collides with me.

"-- oof. Hey, Frisk," I say a little weakly. Usually I couldn't possibly be hurt by someone happy to see me, but I was being all careful not to move my arm and I'm gritting my teeth real hard. "How ya been, kid?"

"Okay," says Frisk. They're lying, but I mighta missed that little shake in their voice if Undyne and Tori hadn'ta told me about the running away.

"Um. Mr. Sans, um," says Shelby, "my father wanted to know --"

"Sure, sure," I say. "Tell him I'll have the money soon." This is a lie. "Frisk, kiddo, this is Papyrus, my brother."

"Hello, small human!" says Papyrus, holding out one hand. "It's good to meet you! I hope Sans didn't make a bad first impression! He's extremely lazy!"

"I like him, he's funny," Frisk tells Papyrus.

"Oh no! Not you too!" Papyrus says. "Sans, you're a terrible influence. My jokes are far superior to Sans'."

"He constantly ribs me for it," I say.

"Sans! Just for that I'm not carrying you back to the car."

I shrug.

"And the human can ride in the front, with me," he adds. "Only cool people in the front of the car! That's the rule!"

"My name's Frisk!" says Frisk. "You're really tall."

"Come along, small human named Frisk!" says Papyrus, scooping Frisk up with both hands and putting them on his shoulders. "You get to ride in front with the Great Papyrus! Tell me, do you like... spaghetti?"

"Uh," says Frisk. "Yeah?"

"You sound uncertain! Fear not, the Great Papyrus will remind you just how much you like spaghetti! Nyeh heh heh!"

Frisk looks worriedly down at me and I wink. "Okay!" says Frisk.

"But look, um, before you go, my father just wants to know, when is --" Shelby tries again.

"Thanks, Shelby, I'll tell Tori you did a great job lookin' after Frisk," I say. "Papyrus, c'mon, we better get home, it's getting late."

"Yes! Onward, to home!" says Papyrus, opening the door.

"Yeah!" says Frisk.

"But --" says Shelby, but we're halfway out the door already. Just before I close the door behind me I hear her mutter, "Oh, rats."
Eh. I'll pay him back eventually. Probably. Hopefully.

That evening, we have a grand old time, although unfortunately for Papyrus, Frisk prefers hot dogs to his spaghetti. Papyrus don't have a mean bone in his body, though; he thanks Frisk for their generosity in letting him have all the spaghetti, and carefully stores it away in the fridge. Papyrus and the kid spend the rest of the night doing a jigsaw puzzle, and when they get sleepy Papyrus lets 'em have his bed. He insists on reading them a bedtime story, even though usually that's my job. Frisk says they're too old for a bedtime story, but Papyrus tells 'em they're never too old for a bedtime story, and soon he's reading 'em the first few chapters of The Magical Land of Noom.

It occurs to me then that Papyrus really doesn't need me anymore. It's not like I didn't know that, obviously, but it hasn't really hit me until now. It's a little scary, but on the other hand it's proof I did okay.

I relax on the couch for a while, getting ready to keep Papyrus from sleeping on it. He should have a real bed tonight. Not, uh, that my bed is fit for sleeping in, I realize; reluctantly I get up to make mine. There's not enough time to move all the stuff under the bed to somewhere more secure; I just better hope if he goes poking around, the eight-pagers on top of the mess will dissuade him from looking any further and finding my collection of weird shit that's gonna be valuable someday.

Papyrus finds me trying to get the bottom sheet to lay flat without using my left arm. "Sans! You're making your bed!" He looks delighted for a millisecond, but then his smile turns skeptical. "Sans, why are you making your bed?"

"So you can sleep in a real bed--"

"Don't be ridiculous! I don't even need sleep!" The first time he told me this, his eyesockets slid shut about thirty seconds later and he started snoring, so it's gonna be a hard sell if he keeps using that argument.

"Papyrus, come on, you've been sleeping on the floor with a bunch of Tems and a dog monster. You deserve a real bed. Besides, you know I can sleep anywhere."

Papyrus sighs. He sits down on my bed, giving me the look he usually reserves for repeated pasta punning in front of someone he wants to impress. "What's wrong with your arm?" he asks.

Damnit. "Nothing, it's --"

He pulls my sleeve up, and his eyesockets go wide. "Sans! Couldn't Mrs. Dreemurr do anything about it?"

"Uh, I think she was busy with that Tachibana kid," I say, pulling the sleeve back down.

"Sans, you need to take better care of yourself!" He crosses his arms. "What did Dr. Alphys say?"

I feel like Alphys would want me to remind him she's not a doctor, but I'm not that good a friend. "A high-calcium diet and optimism. And rest. But don't worry, I'm not gonna milk it."

"Sans," says Papyrus.

That's my cue -- more calcium puns it is, then! "Just chalk that one up to --"

"Sans," says Papyrus again.

"Yeah?"
He looks genuinely anguished. "Sans, you get hurt a lot."

"Don't worry about it, I'm always fine, ain't I?"

"What if one day you're not, though?" he asks.

I shrug with just my right shoulder. "It's never happened yet. Don't borrow trouble, Papyrus, I'm always fine."

He scowls at me for a solid ten seconds, then bursts into tears and pulls me into a hug. "I just don't know what I'd do without you!"

I would attempt to pat his shoulder comfortably, but my good arm's pinned to my side. "I'm gonna be fine, Papyrus, don't worry about it --"

"Not if you keep -- keep doing whatever it is you keep doing," he says, releasing me to wipe at his eyesockets.

"Whaddaya mean?" I ask. Now I'm a little worried about him, to be honest.

"I -- I d-don't know what Mrs. Dreemurr has you doing that you're always getting arrested, Sans, but I don't like--"

"Oh, that! Don't worry about that, I can handle a couple cops every now and then. It's just deliveries and stuff -- you know, the usual."

"It's more often than every now and then," he says. "It's just. This didn't happen nearly as much when Mr. Dreemurr was in charge. And you got to sleep a lot. Didn't you like that better?"

Ah. Well. I don't have a great answer for that; 'at least I'm not killing people much these days' is a non-starter. "Papyrus. Trust me. Haven't we always got out of whatever crazy mess we got into before?"

"Yes, but --"

"So just trust me." He gives me a look so doubtful that it hurts more than my arm, and I forget whatever bullshit I was gonna tell him next. "Look. Papyrus. This hurts a lot and I've never seen anything like it, and frankly, having finally seen the guy, the Flower terrifies me." He saw me up against the Flower; he already knows that. But I usually wouldn't admit it. "But cops are easy peasy. You don't have to worry about me and cops. I'll see if Tori can help me out a little tomorrow, okay?"

"All right," says Papyrus reluctantly. He's not crying anymore, which is good.

"And we can argue about sleeping arrangements too, if you really wanna, but --" I yawn, and it's not entirely theatrical "-- I'm way too tired for that, so I guess you're gonna have to take the bed and be happy with it."

"Oh all right," says Papyrus, crossing his arms and scowling at me. He hasn't taken the extra step of manifesting illusory eyeballs just to roll his eyes at me, though, so I think we're good.

* * *

I don't get to sleep in 'til two the next day, as is my preference, but the relief of waking up to Papyrus singing along to the radio is enough to make up for the lost sleep. Usually it don't wake me up, but I guess I got used to it being way too quiet around here.
"I used to walk in the shaaade, with my blues on paraaa-- oh! Sans! You're awake! Finally," he says.

I crane my neck to look at the clock on the other wall without actually having to sit up. It's ten past six. "Yeah, finally," I say.

"The human is still asleep, I think! Don't wake them up, I'm making them a surprise!" he informs me. I hear the scrape of spoon against cookware, and from the smell of it, something is probably burning.

"Is it spaghetti?" I ask.

"No!" says Papyrus. "Well, I mean, it's spaghetti-inspired!" I hear more pan-scrapping. "Hmm. Now that I consider it, technically it is spaghetti! But only in the sense that it's last night's leftovers! So that hardly counts! Do we have any pancake syrup?"

I decide I'd better take the kid to Grillby's for brunch after this. "Uh. Probably?"

"Sans, did you drink it all?"

"No?" I suggest hopefully.

I hear him opening the fridge door and closing it, and I guess he found something, because he doesn't berate me until -- "Sans, did you put the syrup bottle back empty?"

There's no good answer to that, so I pretend to be asleep until he's done cooking. He ends up borrowing some syrup from Mr. Kunkel next door and all is well.

Frisk don't seem real excited about Papyrus' cooking, but to their credit, they're polite and cheerful and manage to eat half a pancake before giving up and having a bowl of cereal. My breakfast is repeatedly interrupted by phone calls -- most people know better than to call me before noon, but I guess it's nice I'm in such demand. If only supply could keep up.

On the other hand, the first caller is Tori, so I can't really complain. "Sans! How are you feeling?" she asks, after Papyrus passes the phone to me.

"Eh, I'm okay. I uh, I got some orders to come see you about the arm, if you got the energy for that. Papyrus made no bones about it."

"Good," she says. "Do you think Papyrus can take over some of our supplies runs? Sadly, for the last few days we have been running on a skeleton crew in only a metaphorical sense, and there is much to retrieve. I know you were worried about him but --"

"Hey, Papyrus, you up for a little grocery shopping today?" I ask him.

He grabs the phone back from me. "Hello, Mrs. Dreemurr! The Great Papyrus would love to help you, but I think I might need a different car, because between my very beautiful new car and me, its very handsome driver, everyone will be staring! I don’t want to cause accidents!" Yeah, the cops ain't gonna look kindly on Papyrus driving Reynard Tachibana's car, especially if the Flower Boys have 'em looking for him.

Whatever Tori tells him makes him even more excited.

"Oh boy! Yes, that sounds fantastic! Can I help make the soup?" His face falls a little. "Oh. Oh, of course!" He floats a pencil and a scrap of paper over to scribble down Tori's shopping list.
"You're soup gangsters?" Frisk asks me, looking a little disappointed.

"Tori runs a soup kitchen," I explain. "Lotta hungry people in these parts, and Tori tries to take care of 'em all." This is not the whole of it, of course; as Papyrus carefully writes down "one hundred pounds of potatoes" from a particular domovoi grocer across town, I know that there's gonna be ten crates of vodka in there, and "thirty pounds of sugar" means the chickcharney family that nests near the lake has some rum for us. And the soup kitchen always needs more bread, so "eight hundred loaves of bread" will definitely be bread, but it's also gonna include Canadian whiskey just smuggled in from Detroit, which is the easiest kinda liquor to get our hands on without makin' it ourselves. It's not the most ingenious or opaque system, but every time the cops have searched Tori's soup kitchen they either find all the stuff she asked for, or something delicious she made out of it, and it's not illegal to give soup away.

I'm kinda surprised when Papyrus puts twenty pounds of greens on his shopping list, though. We almost never get absinthe in, because the numbskull who runs New Orleans has a thing against boss monsters, and the Dreemurrs were always either too nice or too busy to set him straight, so here in Ebott we pay through the nasal cavity for their evil green shit.

Papyrus writes it all down cheerfully -- he's definitely gonna need a truck for all that -- and then he hands the phone back to me and goes to find a map so he can start planning his route.

"Hey, Tori," I say. "Uh, it's great Papyrus is up to all this but --"

"I asked him to stop at Alphys' first, so that he could get a checkup," she says, anticipating exactly what I was gonna whine about. "If he is not well, I will make other arrangements."

"Oh, thanks!" I say. I should never have doubted her. "Sorry I'm so --"

"And I would like to see you here as soon as possible, because that arm looks terrible," she says, as if I hadn't said anything. "I do not think I can help much today but I would like to at least examine it more closely."

"Uh, well --"

"Also, I am making tomato soup for lunch," she says. She knows all my secret weaknesses.

"Twist my arm, why don't you," I grumble into the phone. "But, uh. What am I gonna do about…" I look at Frisk, and cast about for a euphemism that ain't too obvious. "My cousin from Sacramento?" Frisk looks baffled.

"Your cousin from Sacr-- oh! Yes, your cousin! Would you believe, I almost forgot they were staying with you? Bring them along, please!" She sounds kinda guilty. "How are they doing?"

"Yeah, I don't blame you." Yesterday was a long day for her, I bet. "They're doin' okay. Listen, we'll be over when we can, all right? I gotta call Mettaton, make sure I ain't fired. See ya?"

"Yes! I will be here!" she says, and hangs up. It's good she sounds so cheerful -- means probably things worked out okay with Sellers and his mom, and Tachibana and his ...blood shortage, or whatever. Also, she don't yet know that her dead kid got himself some evil superpowers.

"I'm not from Sacramento!" says Frisk, as if their honor as a resident of Ebott has been impugned. "I don't even know where that is."

I shrug. "Sometimes the cops listen in on phone conversations. They're kinda nosy. I think it's in Ohio."
"It's in California!" says Papyrus, mildly horrified that I could have misplaced such a distinguished city. "We've been there!"

"I musta slept through it," I say, shrugging. I reach for the phone to call Mettaton when it rings, startling Frisk.

I pick up the phone. "Yeah, what?" I ask.

"Sans!" says Asgore's voice, sounding worried. "Have you had any news from Toriel?"

She lives downstairs from him, and if I didn't know her I'd tell him he should just go and ask whatever it is he wants to ask. But I can see why he'd rather not. "She's just got some errands for Papyrus, and me and my cousin are gonna be over in a little bit. Why?"

"Your cousin?" he asks.

"From Sacramento. Did I not mention my cousin from Sacramento? That's in California, or so they tell me."

"Ah, yes, your cousin," he says, after a minute. "I, ah, as it happens, also have a... relative staying with me, and she is quite anxious to have news of her nephew, who is very ill."

It takes me a minute to figure this one out, but eventually I remember Asgore offered Gorman tea and, inevitably, because Asgore is a nice guy, sympathy. And I guess even sociopathic possessed ladies gotta sleep somewhere, although I hope for Asgore's sake he's got a lock on that guest room door, just in case she goes all stabby. "Uh, well, she didn't mention the nephew but she seemed pretty happy, which I don't think she'd be if she knew someone's nephew was real sick. Even if he was the nephew of one of your relatives who she didn't like so much."

"Ah. Well, that is -- reassuring? Wait a moment," he says, and I hear a muffled conversation between Asgore and some lady -- yeah, it's gotta be Gorman. "Yes, of course, but --" She cuts him off, sounding hostile, although the only words I catch are "your wife!" and "completely fucking ridiculous."

"You should probably just go downstairs and check," I tell Asgore. "Gotta be better than bein' stuck upstairs with your relative."

"Whose side are you on?" he grumbles into the phone.

"Mine, usually," I say, "but sometimes yours. Look, calling me about this is a little, uh..."

"I know," he says morosely. "Trust me, I know. It is only I am worried about how Toriel will -- it is -- and tomorrow is -- is our court date, and I had hoped..." He trails off. "Not important, and not something to trouble you with. I suppose I ought to get this over with. Thank you, Sans." He hangs up.

I shrug. I didn't do anything, but sure, I'll take it. I put the phone down and wait, just in case eight other people are gonna call.

"Someone's nephew is sick?" Papyrus asks, concerned.

I shrug. "Apparently --" I look at Frisk, who is watching me with curiosity, and decide they probably don't wanna know we're helping out two of the Bad Guys who killed 'em. "-- uh, you know that friend of yours who got hurt yesterday? His aunt's asking about him."
"He has an aunt?" Papyrus asks, his face lighting up. I wonder how much of Tachibana's story he knows. Then he must realize who I mean, 'cause he stops grinning and just looks a little worried. "Oh! Her."

"Yup."

"She seems very sad," says Papyrus.

"Who?" Frisk asks.

"Oh, some lady," I say. "I think Papyrus is bein' kinda generous, I think she's pretty mean."

"Lots of people are mean because they're sad, though," says Papyrus.

"That's what Nora says, but I don't know if she's right," says Frisk. "I think some people are just mean. But then when I bite them I get detentions and everyone's all disappointed so I try not to do that anymore."

"Nora? Who is Nora?" says Papyrus. So Frisk launches into an explanation of their foster-parents and I'm safely able to avoid explaining anything.

Instead, I call Mettaton. It takes a minute to convince the receptionist he'll wanna talk to me, but when she puts me through I'm rewarded with the kind of enthusiasm I've come to find worrying coming from robot stars. "Sans, there you are! I was wondering when you would be back from your vacation! And just in time to help me out with the special Ascent show!"

"Uh." This is a new one on me. "Hi, Mettaton. What Ascent show? I thought it was a Monday this year. We're closed Monday. And, uh, your regular crowd ain't gonna be real enthused about Ascent. Considering what it's about. "Sans, there you are! I was wondering when you would be back from your vacation! And just in time to help me out with the special Ascent show!"

"Uh." This is a new one on me. "Hi, Mettaton. What Ascent show? I thought it was a Monday this year. We're closed Monday. And, uh, your regular crowd ain't gonna be real enthused about Ascent. Considering what it's about. The true meaning of Ascent is not exactly friendship, or generosity, or family, although that's what people will try and make it about in the future.

"No, no, no, it's not for them," he says. "I feel like I ought to give back to the community. It'll only be in the monster papers, it's just for us. You know? Especially for people who, you know, won't be able to see their family this year. I just thought it would be nice."

I Just Thought It Would Be Nice could be the title of Mettaton's completely fictional autobiography. The guy's always got an angle. Not that I don't mind helping him out sometimes, if it's the right angle, but it ain't acute when he acts like I'm obtuse. "You just thought it would be nice," I repeat. "And?"

"And the rest of it's none of your business," he snaps. Yeesh. "Anyway, you have to --"

"I'm starting to regret I called," I say. "Look, we'll talk about Ascent later, okay? I just wanna know if you want me to go on tonight or what. Tori might need me for some stuff --"

"Oh, I imagine she will!" says Mettaton. I know that whether or not the body he's wearing right now has eyebrows, he's wiggling his eyebrows.

Oh jeez. "So. Tonight do you want bad jokes or no jokes?"

Mettaton sighs. "You know, everybody liked that bit with you and I feuding. I really think we could polish it up, make it even better. I had no idea you were so --"

"Yeah, yeah, sure. Tell me about tonight."
He starts to sound a little irritated. "Sans, if you have other obligations I'll get Snowy to cover your --"

"I thought he was having family problems," I say.

"Well, his jokes aren't very good either, and at least my pianist isn't a mess anymore," says Mettaton, "so I'll manage. It would help if you could come around this afternoon, though, I'm auditioning a couple new acts later this week so I won't have much time, but I'd like to run through the feud bit a few times, maybe see where we can make improvements."

I'm not really looking forward to running around the stage with this arm all fucked up, but at least we can probably come up with better dialog now we ain't at each other's throats. "Okay, yeah, I'll see what I can do. Later, Mettaton."

I look up from the phone, expecting to get the usual queries from Papyrus about why I'm so rude to Mettaton, but as it turns out Papyrus is halfway through clearing the table, distracted by a piece of paper Frisk's showing him.

"Wowie! Sans, did you know that Frisk has Mettaton's autograph?" he asks me.

"Yup."

"I got it the night the police came after his show!" says Frisk. "Oh, but I guess you weren't there. I bet you were like super busy being kidnapped and all."

"I heard that show on the radio, actually! Including the part with the police!" says Papyrus.

"But I thought you were kidnapped," says Frisk, and I decide it'd be a great idea for Papyrus not to talk about his new pals Gorman and Tachibana, so I interrupt.

"Hey, Papyrus, you better get to Dr. Alphys' place, Tori's gonna be needing her soup ingredients. She'll be souper happy if you get it done real fast, too." I feel stupidly anxious about sending him off to do his job, since he's been away, but his route's mostly inside Dreemurr territory and there'll be in a truck with clean plates waiting for him at Alphys'.

"Oh! Yes!" says Papyrus, standing and striking a heroic pose. "The Great Papyrus is off to buy groceries! Nyeh heh heh!" he declares, and speeds out of the room, traveling so fast I'm not actually sure he's moving his feet.

Frisk turns to me as the door slams. "Is he always like that?"

I grin. "Yup! Isn't he great?"

The door slams open again. "And! Sans! You have to go see Mrs. Dreemur! She said so! I said so!" He pauses. "Maybe I should drive you there. Surely that is souperior to walking!"

It's good to have him back, and it's extra good he's in such a good mood he'll pun back at me. "This may souprise you but I kinda wanna stretch my legs a little. I'll get there in my own time, don't worry about it," I say.

"Very well, then! Groceries await!" And he's gone again.

"Does he not know about your... shortcut thing?" Frisk asks.

They're a smart kid. "Not sure," I say. "If he does, I ain't ever told him. C'mon, let's get going."
They take my hand, and we walk out the door of the apartment, into...

Uh.

Into the hallway outside the apartment. Frisk, understandably, looks a little underwhelmed. I try a couple more times, going in and out of the apartment. "Are you broken?" Frisk asks, watching me lock up the apartment door.

Before I can make up a smartass answer that's as entertaining as it is uninformative, the Kunkels' door opens. "Good morning! I was just coming over to ask for the syrup bottle back, since --" Mr. Kunkel trails off, blinking through his glasses. His eyes linger on Frisk a little, but then they snap back to me.

The expression on Frisk's face is *like* a smile in that teeth are involved, but there's way too much fear in it to count. "Don't worry, they're suppos'ta be here," I say quickly. "Would appreciate you not spreadin' it around, though; it's all Dreemurr business."

"Of course!" says Mr. Kunkel. He's not, strictly speaking, part of the Dreemurr gang, but he's Alphys' uncle and he runs the local lending library, which Toriel likes to buy books for, so he certainly don't wanna interfere with Dreemurr business.

His kid, Micah, shoves past him, sees Frisk, and immediately blurts out what their father is so clearly thinking. "Is that a human?" They look worried, try and step back, and trip, falling flat on their face.

Frisk's fear vanishes, then, replaced with concern. They step forward and offer Micah a hand up. "Are you all right?"

"It's okay," says Micah, struggling to their feet without Frisk's help.

Frisk offers a hand for them to shake, then realizes Micah is completely armless. They put their hands behind their back, looking a little embarrassed. "Hi, yeah, I'm --"

"This is Quinn," I tell Micah. I like Micah, they're a good kid, but kids blab. I pick up on the confusion that flashes on Frisk's face, but I don't think Micah picked up on anything but bein' introduced to a human that's willing to help them up.

"Micah, don't bother them, go get your bookbag," says Mr. Kunkel. He frowns at Frisk for a moment, apparently evaluating 'em, and then he turns to me. "Mr. Sans, if you're going out, would you mind making sure my little one actually goes to school?" He finishes this last sentence with a pointed glare in the direction of his kid. "We've been having some problems with that." Ah, the parental we, far worse than the royal we. "I'm just home from work, and I've had a long night."

Micah's eyes widen at the idea of going to school with a human, and they dash back into their apartment and grab their stuff before I can make up some kinda excuse. I guess I could be an asshole about it, but now Micah's asking Frisk about where they go to school -- and is real impressed when they say Toriel is tutoring 'em -- and I can't. I know friends are hard to make when you're decades displaced and lonely, and seeing a human kid and a monster kid chattering away like they're already good friends, like it wouldn't even make sense for them not to be friends, is unexpectedly cheering.

So after I return Mr. Kunkel's syrup, we set off, on foot, down the stairs and out the door. As we walk down the street, I feel every crack in the sidewalk and every step jars my fucked-up arm. I grind my teeth a little even as Frisk asks Micah what their favorite cartoons are and Micah presses Frisk for information about Undyne, who they see a couple times a year when Alphys brings her over for the holidays, and who they are in awe of. "I'm gonna be just like her when I grow up,"
Micah assures Frisk. "I'm gonna punch the mean ol' cops and tell them they can stay out of the Little Underground!" I know Undyne wouldn't be too happy to hear this; she may be gung-ho about punching but once upon a time she wanted to be a cop.

"But you don't have any arms," Frisk points out. "Sorry, that's probably rude, never mind --"

"They're late growing in," Micah says quickly. "Or, or, I could run into the cops and, um, ram them with my head! Yeah!"

"Where I come from the cops come to school and talk about how you can always go to them with problems, or how, like, if you find a gun you should call them and not touch it," says Frisk. "I wish you could have those kinds of police here instead of jerks who deserve headbutting." Heh. I remember being young enough not to realize Officer Friendly could be a bad cop too. "Ooh, I bet Dr. Alphys could make you a special helmet so you don't get headaches. Do you know her?"

"She's my cousin! She came up from downstate to help Dad right after my eema died, when I was new-hatched. She's really nice."

"Oh, neat," says Frisk. "What's an eema?"

"My other parent," Micah asks. "I miss them."

"Yeah, I miss my mom too," says Frisk, and I watch them as their face falls, and falls again, like it's all just sinking in. They never mentioned their biological mom before, and I'm wondering if maybe I should intervene. But then their face brightens, as if by force. "Um, wait, did you say you hatched? From an egg?"

"Yeah! Like normal people do!" says Micah.

"I didn't," says Frisk, sounding extremely jealous. "That's so cool!"

"Hahaha, you're weird," says Micah, but there's no hostility in it. "I'll race you to the end of the block?" they suggest.

"You'll probably win, I'm the worst runner in my class," says Frisk.

"Hey, uh, kids," I say, "you mind not running anywhere while I'm running the show? 'Cause I don't do exerc--"

"Haha, but isn't your class just you?" Micah asks, completely interrupting me. "Because you said Mrs. Dreemurr--"

"On three?" says Frisk, and then, without waiting for Micah to even nod, says "One, two, three!"

This open and notorious cheating is completely inexcusable; I thought the kid was better at subtlety. We're gonna have to have a talk about that, I guess.

"Hey!" says Micah, charging after them. They trip and fall flat on their face immediately, because of course they do, and I'm torn between trying to catch up with Frisk and helping Mr. Kunkel's kid up. I opt for the latter, because it's less work, and immediately regret it, since as soon as Micah's on their feet again we hear Frisk yelling up ahead. It's not a shout of triumph, either, it's just plain scared.

Not good. I'm not exactly in shape, so Micah gets there first. "Hey, that's my friend, leave them alone!"
Frisk is struggling in the grip of a snowboy with a jagged cap made of ice, I see now, and we're facing the Snowballs from Hell, one of the two gangs of stupid teenagers that run wild through the Little Underground.

I'm already exhausted and I haven't even caught up with 'em yet, and my arm hurts more than any broken bone I've ever had, but I keep going 'til I catch up.

"Oh yeah, what are you gonna do, pipsqueak, bite us?" says the snowdrake in the sunglasses, suddenly deluging the poor kid with magical snow. "Guess we're gonna show you what we do to humans in the Little Underground. And their friends."

Cold's not good for lizard monsters, and Micah's yellow scales already have a slight greenish-blue tinge. But suddenly Frisk manages to grab their captor's cap.

"My hat!" says the snowboy, frantically covering his head and letting Frisk go. "Give me back my hat!"

"Hey," I say, finally, elbowing my way in between Frisk and Micah and the teenagers bothering 'em. "Snowbody messes with these kids, unless they wanna get iced." It's an empty threat; Tori's not above scaring a bunch of dumb teenagers, but she ain't gonna hurt 'em, and even if I could I wouldn't 'cause I'd have less of a chance than, well, a snowball in that very warm neighborhood of the afterlife that I'd probably be destined for if it existed. They know it, too -- I get a pretty cold reception.

"What's it to you, skeleton?" says the other snowdrake -- the one I recognize as Snowy's kid.

"Hey, kiddo, your dad's worried about you," I tell him. "I'd go back home if I were you."

"You don't know me! You're not my stupid dad!" he says.

"Guys, you don't understand. It has my hat," says the snowboy. "What am I gonna do about my hat?"

"Cool it, Ice Cap! Or don't you think we can take a dumb old skeleton and some lizard kid?"

"Yeah, just chill, we'll get it back."

Well, icy where this is going. I crack my knuckles and prepare to plow through these slippery kids before this situation snowballs out of control. "Okay, fellas, let's not skate over the issue. Howsabout you let the lizard kid free and the human kid'll give the hat back? Then we can all just let this slide."

"Ugh, your jokes aren't even good, you know that?" says Snowy, Jr. "You are a joke. Which one are you, the Dreemurrs' lapdog or the dumb brother?"

"Guys, I dunno why you're giving me such a chilly reception," I say. I scramble for another snow pun. "You're Kelvin me here." Okay, not my best work. I want my shortcuts back.

Still, it perplexes the snowdrake in sunglasses enough that he makes a face. "Wait, was that supposed to be a pun?" His concentration slips and his magic melts away, leaving Micah free to headbutt him; as it turns out those glasses just aren't cool enough, because there's an audible crack and the snowdrake falls to the ground, holding his beak.

In the confusion, though, Ice Cap's grabbed his ice cap back, and now that his confidence has been restored, he surrounds us in icicles. I try to subtly float them away -- nothing doing. I try to unsubtly break them down with bones but all I can do is sad little blue knuckle bones that don't do anything to anyone.
I try once more to take a shortcut, just to somewhere a few feet away, and I'm rewarded with a sort of staticky sound in my ossicles. That is a really bad sign. Snowy Jr. cackles, and Ice Cap's carrot nose spins in delight at my apparent inaction.

I am so mad at whatever the hell's happened to my magic right now, but I definitely wanna avoid whatever happens when I push it, so I give up.

And that's when we're saved, because a series of fireballs melts through the icicles like they were nothing and we turn and see Tori stalking down the cross-street, furious. "What exactly is going on?" she snarls.

Disappointingly, the Snowballs from Hell don't freeze. They scatter, and soon it's just me, Tori, Micah, and Frisk. "Uh. Hey," I say, waving at her.

"I am going to have a very long talk with their parents, if I can find them," she snarls. "Little hooligans. Are you three all right?"

"Yeah!" says Micah. "I, uh, what was the word you used?" they ask Frisk. "I headbutted the one guy! It was great!"

"Small one, you should be in school," she says, "not having to defend yourself." Micah's face falls.

"We were on our way to that!" says Frisk, in defense of their new friend.

"I am certain. Come along, no one will bother you when you are with me," she says, gently guiding each kid with one hand so they're walking in front of her where she can see 'em.

"Thanks for breaking the ice, Tori," I say, hanging back with her. "Sorry about that."

"When you took a long time to arrive, I became worried. I am glad I found you in time. Did you not want to take a shortcut, because --" She nods very slightly at Micah.

"Tori, I couldn't find one," I say, in a lower tone. "Least, not one that went anywhere I wanted to end up. I, uh. I think I broke more than a bone."

I regret saying that, because she looks so upset, like suddenly it's her that's in pain. But then she puts a gentle hand on my shoulder, and while she's not actually using her magic, the sensation that floods me is about as strong as that. For some stupid reason I find the gesture incredibly comforting. "We will find a way to fix it," she says, and I know she can't know that for sure, but it sounds enough like a fact that I find myself nodding along like some kinda optimist.

"Yeah, I'm not worried. I could probably stand to relax a little, you know, since I work so hard," I say.

She smiles sadly at me, and if I had a heart it might break a little at that look. "You do, though." Then that smile goes a little crooked and a lot happier. "In some ways, at least." I don't know what to say to that, and it occurs to me suddenly, in the part of my mind that's not being ridiculous about Tori, that I don't know if it's a good idea to have her fixing whatever's gone wrong with my magic. What if she figures out I got more than shortcuts going on? "Did Frisk behave for you?" she asks, derailing my train of thought.

"Oh, yeah, they're a good kid."

"No running away?" she asks.
Does the race count? "Nah," I say. "They kinda slipped away from me just before we ran into the Snowballs but they were just having fun with Micah Kunkel. I hope that's okay, I just... figured the kid could use a friend. I introduced Frisk to the Kunkels as 'Quinn,' and I think they get that they ain't supposed to use their real name."

I was kinda second-guessing myself, but she gives me this beautiful, warm smile, and I know I did okay. "That was a very good thought, Sans."

After that we just walk in silence for a while, listening to Micah and Frisk chatter away about school subjects. (I get a little worried whenever Frisk says something wildly anachronistic, but Micah's either real credulous or too polite to call Frisk out on obvious bullshit, like pocket calculators or whiteboards or the idea of monsters and humans goin' to the same school.) It's actually a pretty nice day out once we don't gotta deal with annoying teenagers who think they're tough, and I could maybe get used to this walking-to-places-on-foot stuff if it always came with Tori catching my eye at some unintentionally funny thing one of the kids said.

Tori shoos Micah into the school building once we get there, and sighs as they go in. "All the books I bought for the school are gone," she says to me. "Again. I stopped in a few weeks ago. They are still using those horrible old ones they have had for thirty years or so."

I shrug. "I think you better stick to helpin' out the librarby, Tori."

"Are you sure that's a school?" Frisk asks, looking skeptical. "The windows are all full of newspaper."

"Yeah, there was a storm about a year ago, they never fixed the windows," I say. "C'mon, kiddo, we got places to be."

"A year ago?" Frisk asks.

I shrug. "Ain't no money around here. 'Specially not for monster kids."

"But --" Frisk scowls. "But doesn't it get cold in winter?"

"You know those monsters, they all got fur," I smile bitterly. Tori informs me that this was the actual reasoning our alderman gave when she went to him in a rage.

"But -- you don't even -- what?" says Frisk.

"Come along, my child," says Tori gently, taking Frisk by the hand. "The longer you stand outside, the greater your risk of being seen."

"Yeah, okay," says Frisk. "That kid was nice. Did you make more pie?" they ask Tori. What can I say, the kid's got good priorities.

Anyway, it's not a real long walk to Tori's place, and she's apparently made peach pie, so Frisk and I walk a little quicker. In a few minutes Frisk is sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of milk, a slice of pie, and a book of poems Tori wants 'em to read. Then she nods at the door back to the living room, so I head back there and sit on the couch and wait for Tori to finish making sure Frisk likes their pie.

Well, she heads in and from the real concerned look on her face I know this ain't gonna be fun. She sits down next to me. "Can I see your arm again? I would like to examine it more closely, if you would let --"
"Oh, uh, yeah," I say, helping her roll up my sleeve again.

"I am sorry," she says, after looking it over, "but can I touch --"

"Yeah sure okay," I say quickly; this is gonna hurt a lot and I'd just like to get it over with and go back to the level of searing pain I'm getting used to. I press my eyesockets closed -- I'm not normally real squeamish but this is something much worse than I'm used to, and -- fuck, it hurts. Tori's being real careful about it, I can tell, but I let out a hiss of pain as she tries some experimental healing magic on the space where my ulna should be.

She stops at once. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, look, just do what you need to, ignore my whatever," I say, miserably.

I brace myself for pain, but instead she rolls my sleeve back down and takes my hand in both of hers. "I think you can open your eyes now," she says, gently, and when I do, I see her smiling apologetically down at me. "The good news is that I think it will be responsive to healing magic, over time. But I have very little energy for any healing today. I am still very tired."

"Huh. Really? You can heal me? Okay," I say. I just figured this was my life now -- half my arm gone and having to walk everywhere. "Uh, what about the -- the other -- the shortcuts?"

"That I do not know about," she says. "You said that was due to your travel through time. Do you know why it would be disrupted by a physical injury?"

"Hmm." I try to ignore the part where Tori's still got my hand. "Well, uh. Skeletons are mostly magic -- we'd fall apart otherwise -- and I control where the shortcuts go to with magic -- so it might just be that for me a physical injury puts enough strain on me that the magic don't quite work right. I'll talk to Alphys, I guess. She might know more. Jeez, I hope it comes back, otherwise I'm not gonna be able to do all those deliveries you got lined up for --"

"Sans, I am far more concerned about the arm than the rest of it!" she says. "Although... it would be better if had your usual escape route; I dislike the thought of you being forced to deal with those hooligans outside." While I'm still trying to figure out how to reassure her that I'll be fine, she adds, "You know, Undyne mentioned that she offered to teach you to fight -- perhaps you should --"

"Aw, c'mon, Tori, you know I'm only good at throwing punchlines." She smiles faintly, so I continue. "I'm more of a slug than a slugger."

"Sans," she says, rolling her eyes and grinning. "I am only saying --"

"If I'm gonna be carrying a club, it'll be up my sleeve with all the other cards."

She snorts. "Sans, I --"

"And I'd rather take a wooden nickel than brass knuckles any day," I add.

"Sans." Very abruptly, she's not grinning at all. "Stop trying to distract me. I see that you do not want to fight. It is admirable, but -- I worry. I so disliked sending you to meet the Flower's minions without any sort of defense."

"Hey, I got out okay."

"Except in all of the ways you did not! Alphys informed me that you very narrowly avoided being attacked by the Flower himself!"
"Yeah, it took a lot of doing to get him to leaf me alone," I say.

She don't laugh, she just goes worryingly silent for a few moments and looks down at her lap. Finally, she looks me in the eye and says, "Sans, you have to be honest with me about something."

The hell I do. "Yeah?"

"Yes. Please. Because --" She takes a deep, shaky breath, and I am in such deep shit, aren't I? "While I was attempting to heal that human, he said some things that --"  Fuck fuck fuck. "Sans, was the Flower a monster?"

Goddamnit.

And I don't have a story ready. "Tori, I --"

"Yes or no? You have to tell me, Sans."

She's gonna find out. She's gonna ask Asgore and he'll blab about it out of some misguided sense of doing the right thing. But she looks so exhausted and so upset, and I can't be the one to do this to her.

"Sans, was the Flower a boss monster?"

Well, the jig's up, I guess. I better be honest and cover my own tailbone here. "Uh. I. Yeah. Yeah, he was." I try not to sound too guilty, but I don't think I really succeed.

She makes an angry growling noise, savage and startling, and I gotta admit it makes me jump a little. "Who was it, Sans? Did Abracax Ackourde finally come back from wherever he vanished to? But he barely had horns." Then another thought occurs to her. "It is not Randolph, is it?"

"What? No," I say, and honestly I wish I could strangle myself for saying that; if I was at all strangleable I'd make that attempt here and now. If only we could blame Ackourde and be done with it, but I killed the guy myself on Asgore's say-so, so I'm pretty sure he ain't comin' back. Then, stranger things have happened lately, so what do I know? I'm surprised at her other guess, though; Asgore's nephew Randolph Dearborn is as sanctimonious a do-gooder as ever I saw, and while he's 90% ego by mass, I think he's pretty honest, except about bein' related to one of the most notorious criminals in the city.

"What -- uh, what did Tachibana say?" I ask.

"He briefly awoke, and I asked him how he had obtained that great big gash in his side," says Toriel. "He muttered something about the Flower's horn. But if it is not Ackourde, or Randolph... and I had thought better of him, so it is a relief to know that much... Sans, did you know him when you saw him?"

"I'd never met the guy," I say, quickly.

"Then it must be one of those ridiculous North Shore types," she snarls. I know who she's talking about -- the young and trendy set of boss monsters who are always gettin' their horns trimmed and dressin' as human as possible. They own big houses and throw big parties at big country clubs which skeletons are not permitted to join. (Not, as a wise man once said, that I'd wanna be in any club that'd have me as a member.) She sniffs. "Well, whoever it is they will be dealt with," she snarls. "One of our own! For heaven's sake, considering all the Flower Boys have done..." She trails off in disgust.

And... she's gonna find out. I know she is. She's gonna go straight upstairs and demand the truth from Asgore at the first opportunity, and then...
So I better tell her now, because otherwise she'll know I left out a pretty big part of the truth, and I won't have any excuse. "Tori, it wasn't one of the North Shore crowd either."

"Oh?" She looks at me. "Sans, what is wrong?"

I guess I'm cringing pretty hard if she's having that reaction. "Okay, Tori, but you have to -- you have to promise me you're gonna be okay," I say. She gives me a funny look, and unfortunately I don't mean ha-ha funny. "I mean. I, uh, I mean that --" I decide I better just rip off the metaphorical bandage. "Oh, Jeez, Tori, it's. He's. They called him Asriel."

She goes very still, and I freeze too, suddenly terrified that she's gonna just dissolve into dust or something. I know that's not how death by emotional shock works -- you fall down first, and the coma lasts for a few days -- but it's always how I pictured it happening when they told me about my dad, and it's the damnedest thing; I can't get it out of my head. So it's a horrible few moments, and while I don't have any guts to wrench I would say they got wrenched pretty bad anyway.

"What?" she says finally. She's struggling to find a way to parse that, I can tell -- a way that doesn't hurt, a way that makes some kinda sense. "But. You must have misheard, Sans, how can --"

"He called Asgore 'Dad.' He wasn't -- he wasn't really a monster anymore, I don't know what he was, okay? I mean I don't think there was much of your kid there, I know your kid would never --"

She swallows hard. "And he knew about this, did he not?" The upward glance, the furious snarl -- I know exactly who he is. "He knew! HE KNEW. There are tears now, leaking from the corners of her eyes, and every time she blinks more go streaming down her muzzle. "He knew and he never told me and -- Sans, if you will excuse me --" She stands before I can stop her and rushes out the door. I hear her stomping up the stairs to Asgore's place.

"Hey, kiddo, how's that poetry? Pie okay? Milk, uh, dairy-like?"

"Uh. Don't think so," I say. I hear her pounding at the door upstairs at considerably higher volume than would be required for a friendly visit. "Listen, are you gonna be good here for now? I uh, I wanna see if I can keep that from getting too bad."

Frisk frowns. "What, he's real? No! He's just like, a fake bad guy. Like Blackbeard! Come on, Sans, I'm not stupid, you can't fool me!"

There is a slightly muffled, but still fairly audible "Asgore Dreemurr, you open this door right now!" from upstairs.

"So, yeah, I'm gonna go make sure they're okay, if that's okay with you," I say. "You just sit tight, read your poetry, finish your pie, drink your milk, and so on, and I'll be back as soon as possible."
Frisk nods meekly, and stares fixedly at their poetry book like it has all the answers they'll ever need. I figure that's gotta be good enough, and hurry upstairs.

Chapter End Notes

References:

*The Magical Land of Noom* is a lavishly-illustrated children's chapter book about two children and their grandparents, who go to the moon! It was published in 1922.

*Eight-pagers*, better known as Tijuana Bibles, are short, sexually-explicit comics that were popular in the '30s. They often feature pre-existing comics characters or thinly-veiled versions thereof. I'm not providing a link because obviously they're usually pretty explicit and I can see someone unthinkingly clicking all my links, but if you're curious there are a lot of easy-to-find sites that have full versions of them scanned. Like modern explicit fanworks, they run the gamut from cute and sweet to very dark.

"I used to walk in the shaaaaade, with my blues on paraaa[de].": Papyrus is singing along to *"On the Sunny Side of the Street."*

*spaghetti pancakes*: I don't think they would go well with syrup, maple or otherwise. Honestly I'm not sure why they exist.

*Tori runs a soup kitchen*: For the most part my characters are not based on real historical people, but I couldn't help adding a reference to *Al Capone's soup kitchen*. To my knowledge it wasn't used in smuggling the way Toriel's is -- it was opened after the stock market crash, fairly late in Capone's career -- and I think was probably not created with particularly charitable motives in mind, since being popular among the locals is very useful if you're some kind of crime lord, but it did exist, and it did feed a lot of hungry people.

*Domovoi* are *Russian house spirits* and *chickcharnies* are *bird-like Bahamian nature spirits*.

*Canadian whiskey just smuggled in from Detroit*: *Detroit was a point of entry for large amounts of whiskey from Canada, mostly for geographical reasons.*
Quinn is the name I used on my first Undertale playthrough! (I habitually use a gender-neutral name in games because so many of them don't tell you you're playing a guy until like an hour in and I don't want to get attached to my PC being female. Undertale was surprising in that this worked out well for totally different reasons.)

Randolph Dearborn: Randolph and Dearborn is an intersection I've always thought sounded like a person's name.

North Shore: this is the name for the cluster of (mostly affluent) suburbs directly north of the city. It can get pretty snobby up there. (That's where I grew up; I know whereof I speak.)

Not, as a wise man once said, that I'd wanna be in any club that'd have me as a member. Sans is of course paraphrasing Groucho Marx here, of course, although he didn't originate the sentiment and the specific phrasing is apparently disputed.
Whew. A lot has happened in the past year. Most of it was pretty good, but most of it also got in the way of me actually continuing to write this fic!

First off, fanart:

Followerofmercy drew a fantastic goopy evil Asriel with his rainbow gun!

I commissioned mintkupocream to do a diptych of Sans reading a letter from Toriel on the train in his vaudeville days, and Toriel reading a letter from Sans at a field hospital in WWI. They came out beautifully! If you like these and want some minty art of your own please go here.

Aaand Perry/skeleplatypus did an amazingly adorable pic of Toriel picking Sans up and Sans being very flustered.

Then there's fan... fic?:

Sparrow wrote a fic basically where mob AU Toriel gets to hold A Sans. Not her Sans, just... a Sans. It's complicated, just go read it. It's really sweet and sad.

Sky wrote a parody of a scene I was having trouble writing that had me crying laughing. Maybe don't read it 'til you've read this chapter if you don't want ANY spoilers, but it's amazing.

(Also you should read Sky's Detective Papyrus fic, which isn't mob AU but it's first person Papyrus noir pastiche. If you've read this far, you will hopefully trust I know what I'm talking about when I say that Sky does first person and noir pastiche really really well.)

Finally, fannish Discords! (Not discourse. That's not my department.) I do most of my fan activity on Discord these days, which is a free chat service that allows for multiple channels. I actually started my own Undertale Discord; it is called True Reset and is not meant to be for my works or this fic, but for Undertale and Undertale fanworks generally. It's 18+ only, because I am a lazy mod and don't want to deal with the headaches that come with all-ages spaces. (Sorry, younger readers.) Check out the rules if you're interested. (If you want to friend me on Discord, please let me know who you are some other way, though! Sometimes I get random spammy/weird requests and sometimes I mistake nice people for random spammy/weird requests, because on Discord there's no way to tell.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stairs are not my forte and I haven't taken 'em for a long time, so I'm actually a little surprised I get up there before Tori gets inside. But as soon as I open my mouth, the door swings open and Asgore's
starin' out, looking a little lost.

"Asgore Dreemurr, you useless lying coward." When she puts it like that I wonder if maybe Tori has a type.

He sighs and shoots a look at me that is, in equal measure, Can you believe she's doing this? and This is probably your fault. "What have I done now?" he says, resignedly.

She takes even more offense to this, and grabs his shirt front with both hands, pulling him in so they're almost snout to snout. "How long have you known about Asriel?"

It's like she punched him, his expression changes so fast. "Oh, Tori. I am so sorry that --"

She lets go of him and steps back. "Do not mock me with your false apologies and --"

"I only found out after I had been captured!" he snaps. "For heaven's sake, Toriel, I had no interest in keeping it from you."

"Then why did you?" Toriel snarls. Asgore glowers at me, and only then does she notice I'm there. "Oh! Sans! You did not need to come up here, I am fine!" She furiously pushes some tears out of her eyes with the palm of her hand. "Please, please do not -- I am -- this is not your --"

"Toriel," says Asgore.

"DO NOT INTERRUPT ME," she snarls, then turns back to me, trying real hard to stop crying. "Please, Sans," she says. "Do not worry about me, I am --" She sniffs. "-- I am fine. Or I will be fine. Unlike certain people."

She turns back to Asgore, who takes a step back, and the both of us are preparing for the onslaught when Gorman's bored voice comes from somewhere inside Asgore's living room. "Actually, I think hiding it from you was the skeleton's idea."

Tori is speechless for a moment, looking between me and Asgore and (presumably) Gorman. Finally she sputters "You stay out of this, you -- you knife-wielding maniac! Have you not done enough to - -" and then I can't hear the rest of her sentence because she's pushed her way past Asgore and into his living room to vent her spleen at Gorman.

Asgore sighs heavily, and gives me a very exasperated look. "Well? Are you coming in? Apparently everybody else is."

"Not sure I wanna do that, no. Not sure you wanna do it either," I point out.

He gives me the unfriendliest look I've ever seen on his face. "Sans, if you do not help me fix this ludicrous mess you made, I will tell Papyrus everything."

I admit I've been guilty of underestimating Asgore's ruthlessness before, but I should really know better by now. I sigh. "Fair enough."

When I get inside Tori's still dressing down Gorman about all the mudder times we had together, the Dreemurr gang and the Flower Boys. I take the opportunity to slip behind them and collapse on the couch.

"-- incident with the building on Gaddis -- there were people inside! Or the time you killed that delivery driver from New Orleans and 'delivered' us his dust. With a note. A note! And let us not forget what you did to Undyne."
Gorman is watching her placidly, not saying anything. She takes a long, thoughtful swig of tea, and swallows. Finally she says "Undyne is the fish, right?"

Tori's snarling now. "I have more than one pisciform under my employ, as it happens."

"Your employ?" She gives Asgore an insultingly brief glance before turning back to Tori. "I see. To clarify, Undyne is the fish who was trying to shove me through a plate-glass window, an action that would've left me severely bleeding and probably dead in a matter of minutes. Right? Or is she a different fish? Sorry, you'll have to refresh my memory here."

This is a fair point, well made, and I'm actually starting to feel kinda friendly towards Gorman here, if only because while Tori's all mad at her about other stuff, she don't have to think too much about her kid, and not thinking about her kid is safer for her in the long run.

Except then she ruins it, because while Tori is sputtering, Gorman adds, "But I don't get the impression that's what you came here to yell about. You want to know about Asriel, right?"

"Miss Gorman," Asgore starts, sounding a little panicky, "please do not --"

Tori cuts him off, though. "Oh, are you going to tell her not to talk about Asriel? How stupid must you be that you would think --"

"Actually I was telling her not to antagonize you," says Asgore, "but by all means, if you would like to continue assuming the very worst of me, that would be very --"

"How dare you speak as though I am somehow being unreasonable --"

"You always do this, Toriel, you never --"

And then he gives me and Gorman a sidelong glance, and abruptly breaks into a completely different language. Their special argument language is all fulla rolled rs and words that almost sound like they make sense, and I'm pretty used to it, but Gorman's not. It's the first thing that's made her react aside from Tachibana's injury, and the look on her face is baffled and a little offended.

"Do they argue in foreign languages often?" she asks. She sits gingerly on the other side of the couch to finish her tea, as far from me as possible.

I shrug. "Maybe once a week or so. Mostly they argue in regular old English, not this Beowulf bullshit."

She eyes Asgore and Tori warily. They're throwing around the word "dædbana," which is something they talk about a lot. I don't know what the hell it means, but it really don't sound like a compliment.

On the one hand I'd like to remind 'em that there's a scared little kid waiting downstairs hoping this'll stop; on the other hand I'm not sure I wanna tell 'em that with Gorman sitting right here. Maybe I should study up on their language myself.

Gorman watches them for a moment, sighs heavily to herself, and then pulls out a flask from one sleeve and tips it into her tea. When I raise a bone brow at a Prohibitionist drinking booze, she holds my gaze, as if daring me to say something. But then Tori and Asgore's argument starts to subside, and she fumbles to screw the cap back on and hide it.

"Miss Gorman, I think you should explain what happened," says Asgore, as calmly as if he's asking her about what she thinks of the weather. "Tell her what you said last night. Which, by the way, was
"You are not out of the woods yet," Tori snarls at him. Then, I think partly to spite Asgore, she sits in the big comfy chair -- Asgore's usual chair, I'm pretty sure -- and stares intently at Gorman. "Explain."

Slightly put out by Tori taking his seat, Asgore eyes the space between me and Gorman on the couch. There's not really enough room for him. He looks at me, a little put out that I'm not gonna get up for him, and then he looks at Gorman, who ain't yet realized we're playing a game of musical chairs.

"Well," she says, frowning into her spiked tea. "I suppose it started when --"

"Wait a moment," says Asgore, and he stumps into the kitchen and drags out a dining chair -- human-made, armless, and absurdly small next to him. I'm surprised he even has 'em -- when I lived alone I just ate at my desk -- and then I remember his only regular houseguest is Undyne.

"Jesus Christ, get up, you look ridiculous. We'll trade," says Gorman, standing.

"Oh, no," says Asgore, "I should --"

"When you are all quite finished playing musical chairs," snaps Toriel, "I would like to talk about my dead son, who is actually alive and apparently a killer!"

"I think I will stay where I am," says Asgore, quickly. "You were saying?" he prompts Gorman.

Gorman looks between Asgore and Toriel, who are together a study in how different misery can make a person look; he almost looks like he's bracing himself for impact, but she's barely holding back her rage. "Right. Yes." She takes a deep breath. "He wasn't like that when I met him. I mean, he -- he saved our lives -- when -- I'm going to have to start earlier than this. I was born -- will be born, I guess -- in the year 1950, in a small town downstate."

Tori apparently don't react like either Gorman or Asgore expects her to. "Go on," she says icily. "Tell me about Asriel."

"Oh, so this is old news," she says, glancing irritably at me. "Well, anyway --"

"You do not seem very surprised," Asgore says.

"Sans and I discussed this earlier," says Tori.

"That skeleton of yours has a really big mouth," mutters Gorman. Tori bristles a little at this, but she continues blithely on. "So maybe you're familiar with the rest of my origin story, then? Idiot from the future gets stuck in the past?"

"Yes," says Tori.

"Well, I got stuck in 1845," she says. "At which point, once I sobered up, I --" She laughs. "God, I was dumb back then. I went to the authorities and asked for help. Got thrown in a nuthouse for my troubles while they looked for my parents or husband -- of course they found no one -- and after fifteen or so years they realized I wasn't aging at the same rate as all the other inmates, and I was... collected, I guess you could say, by Dr. Corcoran. The original Dr. Corcoran, not... not poor old Constans. They never met, but his identity was convenient when --"

"I would appreciate if you would get to the part of your story that is actually relevant," Tori says.
"He saved you, and somehow you made him become some sort of --"

"We didn't make him do anything," says Gorman. I can't tell if she's trying to sound bored or faking defensiveness, but she's halfway between the two. "We just -- he should have been dead but he was just stuck there, we had to do something for him, and Teo tried to give him his soul, but --"

"What do you mean, he should have been dead?" Tori demands.

This isn't gonna go anywhere good. Of all the days for my shortcuts to stop working, it had to be today?

"If you want to hear what I have to say, you'll have to let me talk," snaps Gorman. Tori's teeth are still bared, but she don't say anything more. "Fine. I'll -- I'll try to be brief. Asriel somehow took Chara's soul, Chara wanted it back, and sh-- and he carved it out of Asriel. But somehow Asriel didn't quite die, he was this -- this sludgy, soulless mess. It was horrible. We tried to stabilize him by giving him... footing, in our own souls. Teo didn't make it; Constans blamed himself and gave up his own soul next. I couldn't let him do that alone. And after that everything was much simpler, because we couldn't feel a damn thing between the three of us."

Tori looks at Gorman skeptically, then turns to Asgore. "And you believe this nonsense?"

"It is true. Look, I will show you her soul," says Asgore. "If --" He looks at Gorman, who nods.

Most monsters can see souls a little -- those of us without physical eyes tend to be better at it, and worse at distinguishing purely physical differences -- but boss monsters can use their magic to make a person's soul visible to everyone, and it's not something you agree to lightly, so I'm a little surprised Gorman's cool with this, but she did just say she couldn't feel a damn thing, so maybe it's not that weird after all.

He brings Gorman's soul outta her chest, and I gotta say it's a pretty sad thing for a human soul. It's a dull powder blue, and it seems resistant to being moved even a little further so's we can see it. Spread out across the surface is a lacy pattern of what looks almost like roots. They dig into the soul here and there, and honestly it's pretty gruesome if you know how a soul's supposed ta look.

Tori can't argue with it though. "Asriel -- Asriel is alive and he -- somehow did this?" Her voice shakes. "No. No, it must have been someone else, it must have been --"

"He hasn't been himself for a long time, Mrs. Dreemurr," says Gorman. "You're trying to square this with the way you remember your son and I can tell you it's not going to happen. He had a good soul, but it was taken from him."

"And another thing," says Toriel. "Chara would never --"


"Yes, well? What do you think?" Tori snaps. "Please explain, I am just so fascinated by what you have to say these days."

"I think this is my fault." He rubs his face with one hand, like he's trying to massage a headache away.

"Really? Really, do you think it might be?" Tori says. She sounds a little crazed now. "I am astonished! I would never have expected that!"

"If you'd expected any of this shit, I would be very impressed," says Gorman. She drains the last of
her teacup like it's a shotglass. "Good tea, by the way," she tells Asgore. "Also I think you should lay off the poor bastard, he was trying his best," she tells Tori. "If you want to get mad at someone I'm the person who should've known Chara was up to something."

"Miss Gorman, let me explain this to her," says Asgore.

"Yes, do," says Tori, dryer than whatever was in Gorman's flask.

"In the weeks before the fire, you will recall, Asriel was struggling somewhat with his magic, and Chara had been ill a few times previously, so I was teaching him some first aid. Just to ease his mind," says Asgore. "When I was about his age, I learned a way to stabilize a soul on the brink of breaking, to keep someone alive long enough to get them to safety if they were not yet dust, so I decided to teach him that. I wanted to give him something useful to concentrate on. I think... I think when he and Chara left the house during the fire, Chara got into trouble and Asriel accidentally pulled their soul out."

"But that is ridiculous, how could Chara have survived that? That would kill anyone, human or monster!" says Tori.

"Not necessarily," says Gorman. "A normal human, yes, but Chara was incredibly determined, and for whatever reason his shitty superpower was --"

"What do you mean, superpower?" Tori asks.

"Oh, sorry, I thought that was old news, you kept telling me to skip over it," says Gorman. "Chara was from the future. I'm not actually sure he can die."

Tori freezes, and I don't blame her.

"So yes, he survived, he didn't have a soul, and let me tell you, when you don't have a soul it's a lot easier to hurt people. Trust me on that." She looks to Asgore. "Could I have some more tea?"

Tori rounds on Asgore again. "Dreemurr, why did you not tell me all of this as soon as you knew it?"

"I did not know it until..." He sighs. "Until Asriel showed up to gloat after the Flower Boys had captured me."

"What about yesterday?" says Tori. Then she frowns, and looks at Gorman, who's lying back on the other end of the couch, eyes closed, and appears to be half-asleep. "She said..." Then, slowly, Tori turns to me, and sighs.

The force of her disappointment hits me before she even starts talking. I get up from my spot on the couch. "Welp, this was, uh, informative, I should probably go downstairs and --"

"Sans," she says.

"Look, you had a lot on your mind, I didn't -- I didn't think anyone should bug you about it." This is a tiny, tiny part of the answer, and it's weak as hell, but I don't really wanna explain in front of fucking Gorman, and I'd rather she stays furious than being reminded of all the despair that must be just underneath the surface. Even if she's furious at me, because that means she's not dust.

"Sans, that is an absolutely terrible --" She pauses. "What was that?"

I heard it too -- a small sound. A footstep on the porch outside. We all go silent, but the noise don't
repeat itself.

Tori asks to herself and goes to look through the peephole on the door. When her shoulders relax in relief I know it's not the cops, and when she opens the door and stoops down to talk to them, I know exactly who it is. So I have no excuse except simple, total idiocy when I let what happens next happen, which is:

Frisk says "You were really loud! Is Asgore Dreemurr really here? I told Sans he's not even real but Sans says --" They pause when they see me, and then they see Asgore and their eyes go real wide.

And then they see Patience Gorman, dozing on the couch, and they turn and run.

Gotta say, I shoulda seen this coming.

"Frisk!" shouts Tori.

Gorman's eyes snap open. "What? What happened?"

Asgore rushes after 'em, and Tori grabs his arm and yanks him back. "You are staying here," she snaps, and dashes after the kid herself.

Probably that's for the best, since Tori isn't a legendary criminal in the kid's native time. Anyway, time paradox shenanigans aren't really on my mind at the moment. Asgore and Gorman are lookin' at me like I should be helping or something. "What do you want?" I snap.

"Should you not be going after the child?" Asgore says.

"My shortcuts broke along with my arm," I say. I've learned not to shrug by now, 'cause it hurts a hell of a lot. Gorman doesn't gotta know I don't have any magic just yet, but I should probably tell Asgore when she's gone, so he don't think I can get him out of any more dumb scrapes.

Tori comes back pretty soon, breathing heavy and looking absolutely gutted. "I -- I lost track of them," she says. Then she glowers at Asgore and Gorman. "You keep that woman away from my -- from the child," she snaps.

I can't help but think that uh, the kid just took care of that faster than even Asgore could right now.

I stay quiet, though, 'cause Tori's understandably pretty upset. She pushes past us into the kitchen, and picks up the phone.

"Toriel, she does need somewhere to stay," says Asgore, following her like he thinks there's a chance she'll listen.

Tori ignores him. "Undyne? I am afraid I need your help."

Asgore sighs. "Please do not ignore me in my own home."

"I can and will ignore you wherever I please!"

I leave them to their arguing; nothing good can come of me getting underfoot, and I hate to see her so unhappy. I wonder if maybe I can get more out of Gorman about her time travel story, but when I look to the other end of the couch, she's out cold, body slumped against the armrest and neck twisted the other way. It looks too dumb for her to be faking it. Still, I lean over and poke her shoulder with one finger. Nothing.

"She must be very tired after everything that happened," says Asgore, who I guess has given up on
Tori by now. I turn just in time to see him reclaim his favorite chair from his soon-to-be-ex, who's still in the kitchen talking to Undyne. Asgore looks gormless as ever; he's good at that. But his bland concern for Gorman don't fool me.

"Bet she was hoping that tea would keep her awake; weird how she was the only one drinking it," I say. "Musta been some of that decaf herbal bullshit."

"Indeed," says Asgore. "A strong passionflower tisane. She probably should not have been mixing it with alcohol, though. You did not happen to see where she was keeping her flask, did you?"

"Left sleeve," I say.

"Could you get it for me?" he asked. "You were always so good at picking pockets."

I roll my eyes and carefully fish the flask out of her sleeve. He unscrews to smell it and his nose wrinkles. "Not even the good stuff, eh?" I ask.

"Not at all." He puts the flask in his coat pocket. "Your shortcuts are broken?"

"Shortcuts, arm, ...blue magic. I'm outta commission."

"I see." He sighs, and glances back towards Tori, who's still on the phone. She sure has a lot of advice for Undyne, on how to find her lost handbag, which is Tori's usual code for a witness who fled the scene and has to be convinced to forget everything. "So when exactly did 'do not tell Toriel what happened to Asriel' become its exact opposite?"

"Uh. She -- look, it's not how you think, it's just -- look, first she decided your nephew did it and then she was gonna accuse Abracax Ackourde --"

"But he is dead," says Asgore. "Is he not? You said you had taken care of him."

"Yeah, well, she don't know that," I remind him. "And we don't really want her to go poking around and find out, do we? Anyway, I dunno, I just -- I couldn't lie to her, not about that."

"And yet strangely you can lie to her about everything else. And make me look like a liar while you are at it." He shakes his head, like he don't know what else he coulda expected from me.

"Hey, you ain't exactly bringing the honest tea here," I say, nodding at Gorman. She's started snoring. It's not real dignified. This is the most like a real person she's ever looked, I think. Wish I had a camera.

"She was awake all night worrying about that Reynard boy! And I did not exactly feel safe falling asleep with her still awake, considering what she is capable of. She is human, after all."

Okay, yeah, I gotta give him that.

Tori walks out of the kitchen, glances at Gorman asleep on the couch, at Asgore, now looking guilty, and at me, trying to look innocent. "Did you use that stupid valerian tisane?" she asks Asgore, scornfully.

He looks pained at the idea. "I would never serve that to a guest, it smells horrible."

"Well, thank goodness for small favors. I have arranged a room for her at the Snowed Inn; a car will be along shortly to bring her there. I suppose transporting her in this condition is for the best, though." She sighs. "I think I have done all I can to find Frisk; hopefully they will come back on
their own, but in the meantime trusted allies will be searching." She pauses for a long time, then, simply studying the tableau of nemesis, ex, and me. "Sans?" she says, finally. She don't look happy at all.

"Yeah?" Aw hell, she don't miss a trick. Sometimes I wish she did.

"We have a lot to discuss. Please come downstairs for a moment." She walks out, not waiting for me.

Welp. Guess there's nothing for it but to see if I survive the wrath of Toriel. "See ya, Asgore," I say, hopping off the couch. "And look, uh, I really am sorry I got you in trouble. I thought it'd be for the best if she didn't--"

He holds up one hand to stop me. "I have been in trouble for decades. Go."

A better guy would argue, but I'm real good with not taking the blame, so I go.

Tori don't talk all the way down the stairs. I'm not lookin' forward to being chewed out by her, especially since I can't vanish like I did before.

On the other hand I'd rather she be furious with me than dust, and infuriating people I care about comes natural. So I steel myself up for some yelling and some flaws of mine to be shoved in my face like they're evidence of anything I don't already know about myself. I'll lean into it like a late November rainstorm.

The door clicks shut and I wait for her cold rage. Instead, she collapses on the couch, holding her face in her hands.

Well, fuck.

"Sans, why would you conceal this from me?" she asks. Her words are wobbly but there's still some fire in her too, which is reassuring.

Still, it's hard to explain without sounding stupid. I'm starting to think that when I do something Tori ain't gonna like, I should think about how dumb I'm gonna sound when she finds out and I explain it to her. "Tori, I'm sorry, I didn't think it was a great time to bring it up."

"You had --" She sniffs. "You had a better time in mind?" she asks.

"No, I..." I contemplate pissing her off more to keep her mad -- that was the plan! -- but I don't think I have the strength for that. Not on purpose, anyway. "Tori, I was scared, I didn't know if you could handle it. I didn't --" I don't wanna say it, because I don't want it to come true.

She blows her nose. "Did you think you and Asgore could somehow hide it from me forever?"

To be honest I wasn't thinking that far into the future. "I didn't want you to die, Tori, all right? You've been through so goddamn much already and I didn't --"

"You did not -- excuse me?" she asks. Her expression is one of total disbelief. "Why would I -- oh Sans." She wipes the tears out of her eyes and looks at me. "I have survived so much. This is --" She blinks tears back. "This is terrible, I feel terrible, but -- really, Sans, did you think I could not survive this when that idiot upstairs managed to soldier on?" She looks pretty insulted now and I guess when you put it like that, the only real issue I take with it is that Asgore may be a goof but he's no dummy.

"I'm sorry, Tori. I thought -- see, it's --" Well, I can either tell her or not, but she knows plenty more about me than anyone else, I might as well. Still, I feel kinda bad talking about myself when she's so
upset. "My dad fell down after some real bad news, we thought. Mom always blamed herself. I don't like seeing people unhappy." We both know this is bullshit -- some people I love seeing unhappy -- but I don't think I should tell her I don't like seeing her unhappy. It won't make her feel better to be reminded.

She smiles weakly through the tears, though, and my soul does an uncomfortable little flip over that. "Can you stay here? I -- I do not want to simply wait here for news of Frisk alone, and I want to be here if they decide to come back on their own. I apologize, I can call someone to drive you home if --"

"Nah, I didn't have any big plans today 'cept some real important naps." I sit next to her on the couch. "My shortcuts are broke so I can't be much use to you anyway."

"You are here. That is more than you need to be doing," she says, giving me that sad smile again, and then her eyes fill with tears again. "How did he seem?"

"Huh?"

"Asriel. Did he look well?"

He looked like an overpowered goopy jerk with too many teeth and too many souls. She don't wanna hear that though. I search my memory for anything positive I could possibly say about the Flower. "Well, uh, he was definitely alive," I say, and immediately wish I'd kept my mouth shut.

She nods. There's something a little broken behind her eyes. "I suppose that is the best I can expect. Did you see Chara?"

"I don't think so. What did they look like?" I have trouble telling humans apart sometimes if I ain't looking close at their souls, so I probably won't be able to give her a good answer, but I might as well try, for Tori's sake.

She considers this for a moment. "Small and pink, with a red soul and a cheerful demeanor. They would have been... hmm... in their seventies or eighties by now. Not so small anymore."

A lot of the humans in the fight at Corcoran's lab were vaguely pink -- all of Corcoran's students, anyway. I try to remember if any of them had those skin creases older humans get, but I can't remember. I don't think any of 'em had red souls, either. "No pink humans with red souls, sorry. I think there was a tangeriney-souled one who was fighting with Douglas?"

She shakes her head. "I suppose it was too much to hope that both of them would be alive still. I suppose at least Chara was not party to what the Flower Boys have been doing." She blinks back more tears, and laughs, hollowly. "I do have a knack for getting the most awful good news. What that woman said about Chara -- I cannot believe it. They were a strange child but even in anger they were always terribly polite, and a monster with a human soul... well, I doubt very much any human child could hurt Asriel in that form, but especially not Chara. They were so close. That Gorman woman must be lying."

I got a 'space where my gut would be' intuition that Gorman was bein' honest, but... for Tori I can lie, long as she wants to hear it so badly. "Maybe it was a misunderstanding." Something else that might be eating her occurs to me then. "Tori, you know this ain't your fault, don't you?"

"But what if --" And she starts crying a whole lot more then, sobbing and gulping for air like she can't fathom how anything will be okay ever again. Jeez, this poor lady. "I must have done something wrong, how did we not find them after the fire? How could either of them have done --"
She sniffs. "-- any of those horrible things, they were only children, Sans."

I really, really hate to see her like this. I want so much to tell her it's all gonna be okay, that maybe it was a different boss monster named Asriel, that probably the Flower didn't mean to be a murderous son of a... well, anyway. I wish I could make up some easy way to make everything better again. "I'm so sorry, Tori. I wish I knew what to say."

"I wanted them back so badly, but not like this." She takes a deep breath, collecting herself, and looks at me, wiping her eyes. "I am sorry Sans, this is not your problem, I just --"

"Hey, it's fine. You need a shoulderblade to cry on, I'm not goin' anywhere. Least, not 'til they find Frisk." That part I feel like maybe I shoulda stopped, but I'd rather not mention this to Tori. She needs someone safe to cry at and I'm... entirely too willing to be that.

"Oh, Sans, I could not ask --" She's starting to cry again; I probably shouldn't have mentioned them at all. But she's slumped down enough on the couch that I can actually kinda hug her, so that's what I do, awkwardly, with my good arm. She grabs me and buries her face in my shoulder and I feel like an asshole, because I shouldn't be doing this, I shouldn't be letting her think of me as a safe person, even though she needs a safe person to cry to right now.

Lots of things I shouldn't do, I do. She needs this more than I deserve to not feel guilty about it later, I tell myself, and I stroke the fur on her head and neck gently, and I try real hard not to think about the context of the last time I did that. (Or the strength of her hands, the buzz of her magic, the scrape of her teeth -- well, I try but I don't really succeed.) "Tori, shhh, they'll find Frisk," I say, 'cause it's all I can think of that's even a little comforting, and it's probably even true. I bite back some bland platitudes she's way too sharp to accept. She deserves so much better than any of this.

After a while, after she's gotten some of it out of her system, she pulls away, nuzzling my cheekbone a little before she sits up, and I feel real guilty about letting her get so close. She wipes tears out of her eyes, looking kinda embarrassed. "You are -- I --" She looks away, out the window, though there's nothing there but the street and the sidewalk and the leaves blowing by. Then she looks back at me, taking my hand and squeezing it. "Thank you, Sans. I did not mean to impose upon you so. I - - I have probably only worried you further, but I promise you I have -- I have survived worse."

And she's looking down at me with such trust, such love, despite every shitty thing she's gone through, that I don't really know what to say. "Uh. Sure," I say.

She looks distressed, drops my hand. "I am sorry, I do not mean to --"

"No, no, no," I say, hating myself, taking her hand back -- well, two of her fingers, anyway. "It's fine, Tori. I just wish there was a way to make you happy."

I regret saying this immediately, because actually I think I might be blushing now, whatever I told Alphys skeletons were capable of.

Fortunately for my dignity, the phone rings. Tori leaps up fast and hurries to answer it, leaving me to calm the hell down. "You have them? Oh thank goodness. Yes, we will be right over to collect them." She puts the phone down with a clatter and hurries back to me. "Undyne found Frisk! They are all right!" Then, without asking me or anything, she scoops me up, tucks me under her arm, and heads out.

Welp. Guess I'm coming along for the ride.

* * *
Frisk and Undyne are waiting for us on Alphys' front stoop. Their eyes are red from crying, one part sullen and all parts scared. Undyne has a tight hold on their wrist. She's trying to smile and say soothing shit but the thing about Undyne is she wouldn't know soothing if it sent her on a weekend trip to some lake town in Wisconsin, and her teeth would make a saber tooth tiger wonder if she'd ever heard of orthodontists. (She hasn't.) "Thank you, Undyne," says Toriel. "Frisk, what have I told you about --"

"No!" says Frisk.

"Frisk," says Tori. "What have I told you about --"

"She's here, the lady who killed me, she's going to --" Tori clamps one hand over the kid's mouth, and it's not great optics to have a monster holding a human kid's mouth shut but it's even worse to have that same kid screaming about someone killing 'em.

"You should be careful about doing that," says Undyne. Frisk is squirming, trying to get away, but Tori grabs them and picks them up bodily. "They actually bit me. Alphys says humans aren't venomous though, so I'm probably fine!"

Alphys, who has come outside to see what the noise is about, makes a terrified little squeak. "You didn't say they bit you, you just asked --" She grabs Undyne's wrist. "C'mon inside, we have to wash that off right now, which hand was it?" The door slams shut behind them.

Frisk hasn't quite given up but they're slowing, like they're struggling more for show than out of any real expectation that they're gonna get loose. "I am sorry to have frightened you," says Toriel, her voice low and soothing. "But I promise you will be safe. That... person... is not going to be around you at all. I had her sent away." She starts back towards the car. "Now please be a good child and do not run away again." She puts them down into the back of the car, and, sullenly, they sit there. Tori takes shotgun (though I haven't seen her use one in a while) and I climb in the back to keep an eye on Frisk. The driver is some weirdo in a hood.

"Hey, kiddo, sorry I left ya all alone, you were probably pretty scared to see that Gorman lady all of a sudden, huh?" I say.

Frisk just glares.

"What's with that face? I didn't know she was up there when I went upstairs." I probably coulda inferred it from the phone call I got this morning but hey.

Frisk turns away from me and stares out the window at the neighborhood going by. Our driver gives commentary on everything that we pass -- "Spiders have a favorite food," they say, as we pass the spider bakery. "It's spiders!" Frisk makes a slight movement that catches my eye as we're going by a crummy little house with yellow weeds all over its lawn, and then they are leaping out of the moving car, so I do the only thing I can do, which is grab 'em. They're heavier than me so they take me with, and we're bouncing down the pavement like some seriously ambitious roadkill. The pain in my arm is gonna kill me if the rest of this situation doesn't, and Frisk's probably not doin' too good either.

"Let me go!" Frisk screams as we roll to a stop.

"Sorry kid, I can't let you run off like --" Frisk takes a swing at my face, real hard, and I duck out of the way just in time. There's real anger in 'em, the kind that makes a lady stab her cheating husband or a guy push his jerk boss off a building. I don't think I woulda survived if it had connected.

"Let me go, let me go, let me go," Frisk is screaming. "I hate you! I just want to go home, let me
They try and punch me again, and this time I can catch the fist and bring it down gently. Tears are running down their face and they're still mad but I think... I think I'm safe.

I shouldn't have let my guard down, all the same. They're human and potentially lethal. Humans say you should always treat a gun like it's loaded, but monsters don't have that much to fear from metal bullets; instead we tell our kids not to be alone with humans, not to make them mad, not to let them get so far as to raise their voices, and to always, always stay at arm's length. At least, that's what my mom taught me. Probably monster parents these days are stricter.

Frisk is crying, now, looking for all the world like just any old kid, a bundle of terror and loneliness and water and carbon. "I hate you, I hate you, just let me go home, I just want to go home," they sob. The anger has mostly ebbed away now.

By this point the car's backed up so Tori can hurry out to inspect the damage. "Frisk! Never do that again!" She grabs Frisk's shoulders. "Please." The word catches in her throat, like she's remembering someone else. "You could hurt yourself. Or someone else." The look in her eyes says she saw what Frisk tried to do; her words suggest she still don't quite believe it.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't even -" Frisk takes an enormous breath. "I didn't even think the door would open, I was just -- and then -- I'm sorry I'm sorry I didn't mean it," they say, and they don't mean it anymore, but I know damn well that they did. Our ride back to Tori's place is mostly silent, with scattered sniffles, and one very cheerful "Feeling tropical!" from the driver. The feeling is emphatically not shared by the rest of us, and we glower, and they shut the hell up for the rest of the drive.

When we arrive Tori heals Frisk's scrapes, double-checks the new locks on the window in their room, gives them the good old "you could have been killed!" lecture, which they shrug off, and what is frankly an incredibly weak version of the "you could have killed someone!" lecture, although I don't think she has the stomach for the full version right now. Then she tells 'em they're not gonna come out until Toriel's decided they've had enough time to think about what they did.

I'm wary, though, because every time this kid goes unsupervised they cause trouble. I'm mad at myself, too, because what else did I expect from a human but violence? And then again, I know I'm holding 'em to a ridiculous standard, because in this neighborhood, kids who don't get tough better stay inside or run fast. Our earlier run-in with the Snowballs from Hell is proof of that much.

But monster kids can't kill other monsters as easy as Frisk can.

I really don't wanna leave Tori alone right now, not with the weight of an evil dead kid (two, maybe?) looming over her, and an upset, unpredictable live kid lurking in one of her spare rooms. So I follow her back to the kitchen without making any noises about having to get home or check on Papyrus, even though I usually find a payphone and check up on him after his grocery routine is done, wherever I am at the time. Not like I could do much to protect her if that live kid mood-swung back to angry, but she does seem like a magnet for children of ambiguous morals. "You gonna be okay here, with..." I don't wanna finish it.

"Sans, I am distraught, not fragile. I have raised humans before; I have seen and endured worse tantrums than that." She puts the kettle on the stove and lights a burner with a wave of her hand. "Would you like some tea? Sadly it is not laced with herbal sedatives, I just have bags of Salada." She rolls her eyes at absent Asgore, although I personally prefer a sleeping Gorman to an awake one.


"Not Chara," she says, too quickly. "Chara never did that sort of thing. They did get lost
occasionally... they loved exploring... when they were upset it was -- it was often inward. And I thought I could handle that, I thought I understood, I..." Her eyes fill with tears again. "I thought they were doing better when we left them alone that day, and when we came back...."

"Tori, whatever happened that day, you weren't expecting the fire to get so bad, and you had no way of knowing the kid had time travel superpowers, since they clearly didn't tell you," I say. "It's not your fault. That's the kind of situation nobody sane coulda predicted." I don't ask her what I'd like to know, though -- what other humans has she raised?

Tori seems lost in her own private regrets about kids and death as she pours boiling water into a teapot. But eventually she speaks. "Sans... I really should tell you some... things. After all, you trusted me with your story." She puts three spoons of sugar in her own cup, and two in mine.

"What, are you secretly running an orphanage as a tax shelter or something?" I ask. I hope not. I hassle both Tori and Asgore not to get in trouble with the IRS every April; it's the only little piece of history I'm still trying to change, I guess.

She blinks, looking up from adding the cream. "What? No. Do people do that?"

"Wasn't that in the news or something?" I swear I read an article about some guy doing that.

She shrugs. "Not that I have seen." She hands me my cup of tea. It's more of a mug for me -- boss-monster-sized -- and I take it very carefully with my good hand. "No, this is... you are familiar with the history of Ascent, are you not?"

"Uh, yeah, Tori. I grew up watching cartoons of the Monarch of Souls curbstomping the evil magicians, and we went to the carnival at the community center, and my family did the whole big dinner, including the part where Aunt Asterisk drank way too much ranch dressing... you know, the whole megillah."

"Cartoons? Well that has to stop, those puppet shows are bad enough," she mutters under her breath. She takes a long sip of tea. "Sans, I am going to tell you a story, and it is one that I am... not proud of. Please let me finish it before you ask questions."

I blink. "Okay." The third possibility as to why Tori hates Ascent was always, to my mind, that someone she loved died that day, and whaddaya know, I end up being right. But I'm getting ahead of myself here. "Go ahead, Tori. One of us is all ears."

Chapter End Notes

dédbana is the Old English/Anglo-Saxon word for "murderer, a perpetrator of murder, an evil-doer."

passionflower and valerian are both apparently used to treat anxiety and also insomnia by herbal medicine aficionados. I have no experience with herbal medicine, but I'm going to trust Asgore knows more about both plants and tea than I do because like, I can't even keep succulents alive. Valerian is the more recognizable of the two, but I found out that it smells really terrible ("like something died," one website says) so I didn't think he'd be able to stealthily spike Patience's tea with it successfully.

bags of Salada: A tea company. I honestly am not sure if they had distribution in
Chicago by the 1930s but I wanted tea bags, not loose tea, and unlike Lipton, Salada was distributing tea in bags in the US by the 1930s at least. Any tea historians are welcome to correct me in the authors' notes on this important issue. (Apparently they made Red Rose, which was my mother's brand of choice when I was a kid. I miss the little ceramic animals they put in every package.)

*running an orphanage as a tax shelter:* Sans is probably thinking of this [2010 review of the game Yakuza 3 by actual yakuza.](http://example.com)

*I hassle both Tori and Asgore not to get in trouble with the IRS every April; it's the only little piece of history I'm still trying to change, I guess.* Famously, they finally put away Al Capone on charges of tax evasion, because [there is an actual form you can fill out to report illicit income to the IRS](http://www.irs.gov) and he of course didn't do that. So that's also what happened to Asgore in the future Sans is from. (The form is inadmissible in criminal court, because otherwise it would be in violation of the Fifth Amendment.)

*the whole megillah:* a popular saying, yes, but the actual Megillah belongs to a different holiday, Purim. You may see some similarities with Ascent if you're familiar with how [Purim](http://example.com) is celebrated; I have basically smooshed a bunch of Jewish holidays together with US Thanksgiving to create Ascent.

(I also posted a little bit on [Jewishness and monsters](http://example.com) in the world of Never a Lovely So Real if you're interested in that kind of thing.)

End Notes

I have been posting some of this to Tumblr (along with research notes, bits and pieces of great mob AU art, etc.) [here](http://example.com). It will contain spoilers, but if you're interested in more, that's where you can find some of it. My [Weird Research I Have Done](http://example.com) tag also sheds a little light on my writing process.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!