Sans Determination

by TheSketcherLass

Summary

Determination is a curious thing. Its powers range beyond the natural magic in this world. If you have too much of it, you can bend reality to your will. If you have too little ... well, Chara is content to let that mystery remain a mystery.

The human kids run away from home for reasons Sans is reluctant to spill.

Notes

Wooh, part 3! It's been a while! This is going to be a series of little moments looking into events spanning ... well, a lot longer than the last two installments did. You'll see.

This is the first bit I've written entirely without help from my beta readers, so I apologize if
there're some typos or weird wordings here and there.

Also, for newcomers: while this series has a fair amount of continuity, this installment /can/ potentially be read on its own if the premise is more interesting to you than the previous two were. If you would like a short summary of the previous installments before reading this one, I'll put one in the notes at the end of this chapter. You can scroll down to the bottom and read that first, if you want to!

As always, additional warnings for themes surrounding emotional manipulation/abuse, anxiety, mild body-horror and good intentions leading to terrible things. Future chapters will involve above-mentioned content re: canon-typical violence and gore. And uh, I feel like I should mention beforehand that Sans is one of my favorite characters and that I am, in fact, not trying to paint him as terrible. I swear it.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Don't Be InSensitive

Living in the basement has, perhaps, been a gentler reintroduction to life above ground than the one the others went through, Chara thinks, so they really shouldn't complain when the day of their departure from the miniature make-shift Underground draws closer and closer. Maybe the basement doesn't really count as being "underground", but it still feels a little like it. Dark, isolated, the weight of stone and concrete weighing down the stale air...

In the morning, they and Asriel are going to go visit Asgore. He kept all their old stuff safe while they were gone, he's promised them. They're going to bring their things home, home to Toriel's place, and they're going to decorate their new rooms and Frisk is going to help, and Toriel is going to stand in the doorway and watch and smile, and try not to meddle in how they set up their toys and their books, and how they fold their clothes, because they finally have their own separate rooms, Chara and Asriel, and they can do whatever they want with all that space.

They're going to go home to their new home and they're going to be a family again.

They're going to go home and they're going to pretend that the last 100 years never happened.

That's how it always is, isn't it? Forgive and forget.

Chara frowns at the ceiling. They roll onto their side, giving their pillow a slap. Doesn't make it much more comfortable. How does sleep work again? You've gotta relax, right? Just relax and lie perfectly still and close your eyes. The ultimate 'fake it till you make it.'

They barely get to the 'close your eyes' part before a noise interrupts the dead silence.

"Y-you're sure he won't feel anything?"

"100%. it's only like, point two milliliters more than normal. hell, with that stuff out of the way, he might even stabilize for good, who knows?"

"YOU HAD BETTER BE RIGHT ABOUT THIS, SANS!"

Chara bolts upright, clutching at the covers. They hold their breath.

"c'mon, when've i ever let you astray? we can always make the other one reload if we screw up."

"DON'T EVEN JOKE ABOUT THAT!!"

Why- why would they need to reload? What are they doing in the basement at this time of night? Chara's first instinct is to go to Asriel. He's asleep in his chamber, he's defenseless like that. And if something could possibly hurt him, that means-

No. No, they need to be rational about this. The others wouldn't want to hurt him, far from it. Sans just said Asriel might even become stable after... whatever this is, just a second ago, and if he's joking about making Chara reset, it can't possibly be that serious, there can't be any real danger, he wouldn't mess around if there was, not about something as serious as that.

There can't be any real danger.

Can there?
The following silence does nothing to soothe Chara's nerves. They can hear the door to the lab open and close. There's no sound of voices, nothing to tell them what's going on. Chara slides out from under the covers and tiptoes over to the door, pressing their ear to the cold surface.

Silence.

Silence.

Then, a loud beep.

"see?"

"Oh, thank god ..."

Inside the lab, hidden away from Chara by two heavy doors, Sans unplugs a syringe from a port in Asriel's chamber and hands it to Alphys. It's filled with bright red liquid. Careful not to touch the needle, Alphys brings it to the other side of the room where she crouches by a small black safe hidden under a table. She enters the code to the padlock and opens it, revealing several small flasks containing the same red substance. With trembling hands, she unscrews the lid on one of them and empties the syringe's contents into it, filling it nearly to the top. The liquid fizzes and pops like cherry soda, but the stench of it is nearly unbearable, harsh and bitter, with a hint of something heady and rot-sweet that clings to the inside of her nose, almost making her sneeze. The stuff hasn't exactly gotten less disgusting over time. It should probably be kept in a fridge or something like that, but it's not like they're going to use it for anything. In fact, it'll probably be safer if it spoils. Quickly, she pops the lid back on the flask and replaces it in the safe, locking it up tightly before daring to turn her back on it. She'd never open it up ever again if it was only up to her.

Papyrus frowns at the safe and crosses his arms, leaning against the wall next to the exit. "YOU TWO DO REALIZE THIS ISN'T A PERMANENT SOLUTION, DON'T YOU? THIS DOESN'T FIX ANYTHING!"

"i told you, bro," Sans replies with a shrug, looking up at his brother a bit apologetically. "it's kinda all we can do for now."

"RELYING ON THE HUMAN NOT TO DO ANYTHING ... RASH ..." Papyrus cringes at the thought, ducking his head down between his shoulders. He shoots a worried look over his shoulder, as though the concrete wall wasn't there to obstruct his view of the human he assumes is currently sound asleep. "... IT ISN'T RIGHT."

Sans is well aware of that. But it's been too late for him to do the 'right' thing for a very long time. There is no other way, not one that he can think of. And Fallen is long past the point where they deserve a fair trial. He's willing to do this. He's willing to do the dirty work if it means his friends won't have to, if it means they'll be safe and able to live with themselves. He'll keep the demon under control. By any means necessary.

It's been difficult. Fallen has been getting better. They're calmer now, less jumpy. They smile more. Genuinely smile. On some days, they can almost pass for a real kid. In no small part, he suspects, because of the other little human spending as much time with them and Asriel as school will allow them to. If only he could separate all three of them without Frisk being upset ...

"I-I guess ..."

Sans and Papyrus shift their attention to Alphys. She glances back at the safe.

"... there could be a way to stop them for good."
What is she talking about?

"Nonono-" she interrupts her own line of thought, rapidly shaking her head and rubbing her temples, eyes squeezed shut. "Forget I said anything! J-just forget it!" She moves over to Asriel's chamber, eyes tracing the swirling fog like she's trying to remind herself why she's doing this in the first place. "A-anything but that ."

Sans approaches her, eye sockets narrowed. "what are you thinkin', alph?"

"I said \textit{forget it!}" she snaps, exasperated. "I-i-it's not w-worth it! It's not!"

He studies her expression for another moment, trying to decipher exactly what kind of idea could upset her so much. Then it dawns on him.

"wait," he says slowly. He rubs his chin in thought, grinding his teeth together. "that wouldn't work unless ..."

"Exactly!"

Wow, that's, uh ... that's pretty brutal. Sans forces himself not to visibly wince at the mere thought. He never would've thought the good doctor could come up with something like \textit{that}. He supposes there's always gotta be a little 'mad' to make a proper mad scientist, but this is just ... wow. Alrighty, then.

Sans gulps and holds a hand to his ribs, as though trying to protect his own soul.

Papyrus moves a suspicious glare back and forth between the scientists. He uncrosses his arms and puts his fists on his hips, leaning away from the wall. "I GET THE FEELING I'M MISSING SOMETHING HERE."

Two doors away, Chara is straining to hear the conversation over their own fluttering pulse pounding in their ears.

Alphys holds her palms up in a defensive motion. "Y-you w-won't- you won't need to! To- to get it, I m-mean! We're not doing this!"

Somehow, Sans hears himself say: "it \textit{would} give us a whole lifetime to figure out the problem ... wouldn't have to worry 'bout keeping the kid alive ..."

He doesn't often find himself being capable of feeling ashamed of anything anymore, but the \textit{look} Alphys gives him makes him reconsider his abilities. Then Papyrus' joins hers as he realizes that she really isn't kidding. Something is terribly wrong and his brother isn't being nearly as dismissive of the idea as he should be.

Sans wishes it wasn't possible for skeletons to feel nauseous. He supposes he owes Papyrus an explanation.

"papyrus," he says, facing his brother with a level of seriousness he isn't sure he's been able to muster before in this timeline. Any of the past few timelines, really. "do you remember anything from when ... from when i used to work with alphys?"

Creases appear between Papyrus' brows. "SOME," he says hesitantly. "WHY?"

"there was a machine in the lab in her basement. it was ..." He strains to remember. He hasn't wanted to for a long time. "it was shaped like a skull of some kind. pretty similar to our blasters. it was red
and it had these massive cables coming out of it."


In the other room, Chara clamps a hand over their mouth to silence the whimper in the back of their throat. No. No, no, no, they wouldn't, they wouldn't-

"YOU DON'T MEAN ..."

Sans can't look his brother in the eyes when he says: "it's an option."

"WOULD THEY SURVIVE IT?"

...

"SANS."

"well, it wouldn't matter, would it? without determination, they won't be able to reset!"

"THAT IS NOT WHAT I MEANT, HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT!?"

"because it's fallen, papyrus. look, i don't- i don't like this any more than you do, but-"

Chara doesn't hear the rest of his words. Slowly, they back away from the door, trying to keep the noise of their breathing down, it sounds so, so loud in the empty room, so out of control, they need to be quiet, they need to be quiet-

They can't tell if seconds have passed or minutes, but they can hear the door outside open. They dive down under the covers, just in time to hide from the white light streaming in as someone opens the door to their room. They keep their eyes shut tightly, so they can't see who it is.

Go away. Don't come in. Please, just go away.

The light disappears. The door clicks shut. Chara releases their held breath, then immediately locks their hand over their mouth again.

Don't make a noise. Don't let them know you heard.

If they close their eyes again, they can almost imagine it's Back Then.

Before.

That nothing after it was real.

But that isn't right. Everything after that was real, is real, they know it is, so why did they end up in the same place? A scared little kid hiding under covers, listening, listening, praying no one hears them, praying no one comes in, praying they'll wake up tomorrow and realize it was only a bad dream?

Chara sits up and angrily wipes the tears from their eyes. Oh no, they are not dealing with this again.

This is not going to be like back then. They're not just some scared runt anymore and they're not going down without a fight. Like hell they are. Sans has no idea who he's messing with.

(Why is he doing this?)

They toss the covers aside and run back to the door, listening hard. Not a sound.
Did he convince the others to go through with it? Did they convince him not to? It doesn't matter. He'll do it anyway. He's found a way to stop Chara with force, he's not going to give that up, Chara's sure of it. Maybe he'll push the others to go along with it for the 'greater good' or some bullshit like that, or maybe he'll just do it behind their backs and let them hate him for it afterwards, he won't care. He won't care!

They have no choice. They're not letting this happen. They won't let anyone hurt them ever again.

They're going to need help.

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It's raining. Thunder's crashing outside. Meaning another sleepless night for Frisk. But it's okay, they remind themself, the bad thoughts will go away in the morning. This won't be forever. And mom will be glad to have an excuse to stay home tomorrow. She hasn't been very happy having to go to school every day and leaving Asriel and Chara alone. All their friends are great babysitters, but she wants to be close to her kids. She wants to make sure they're alright. If she can't go because Frisk needs her here, then she can be with all three of them. That'll cheer her up for sure!

It's only been a little while since Frisk and Toriel moved back to their own house. Asriel is safe in the machine at night, at least, so she's okay with being apart from him when he sleeps. And though Chara probably could've gone home too already, they wanted to stay with their brother. That's okay, too.

Frisk flops onto their back and holds their hands up toward the ceiling, pretending they're grabbing the green plastic glow-in-the-dark stars glued to the wooden sky above.

They're excited for tomorrow. They used to feel really weird about the idea of their siblings living with them and Toriel, but things have been getting better. So much better. Frisk sometimes forgets that the other two were gone at all, that they were apart for six whole months.

Sometimes, they forget that they never really, truly met the others before at all.

It feels like things were always meant to be this way.

They let their arms fall back to their sides. Lift their head a bit to look at the wall at the foot of their bed. By this time tomorrow, Chara's going to be sleeping right on the other side of that wall. It used to be Toriel's office, but the house is pretty small, they didn't have a whole lot of rooms to choose from. Now the bookshelves and cupboards and the folders neatly arranged in both have been replaced by a toy chest and a soft bed with half-moon-patterned covers. The room across the hall from Frisk's, the one that used to hold all the stuff they couldn't make room for in the rest of the house, has been cleared for Asriel and all its contents moved to the attic.

Maybe it's finally over. Maybe they'll finally be able to move on after everything that happened.

Something clicks against the window. That's weird. But no silhouette is visible against the curtains ...

The noise sounds again, louder this time.

Soundlessly, Frisk sits up and swings their legs over the side of the bed. On instinct, they reach for the short, brittle branch hidden between the headboard of their bed and the wall. Clutching it
between both hands, they take a deep breath and stick the end of it in between the curtains, lifting one of them to the side.

Right in that moment, lightning strikes close by, lighting up the night outside and painting the silhouette outside their window black as void, interrupted only by two round, red spheres in the middle of its face.

Frisk squeaks and stumbles back, hitting the ground with a loud thud. Their mouth opens in a silent scream and they roll onto their side. From under their back, they pull a small plastic dinosaur. A very pointy plastic dinosaur, as the bruise forming on their spine is currently informing them. Frisk snarls at the toy and pokes it in the chest, mouthing "We'll talk about this LATER, Juliet!"

Quickly, they stumble back to their feet and open the clasp on the window.

"Chara, what are you doing here?" they whisper, reaching their hands out to the soaked kid shivering in the rain outside. "Come on, come inside!"

Chara takes their hands, but they make no move to let the other pull them in. "Frisk, I need your help," they gasp, voice nearly inaudible through their strained breathing. "I'm sorry- I'm sorry to wake you up, it's an emergency, I promise-!" Frisk can't tell if it's the cold making them sound like a fish on land or if they've been running all the way over here. It could be both.

"Hey, hey, easy now," Frisk interrupts them, gently pulling them closer to the windowsill so they're at least safe from the rain under the outcropping roof. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I-I heard-" They look over their shoulder, hold their breath for a second. Another one. Another one. Then they snap back to reality and continue: "I couldn't sleep and I- I heard Sans talk to Alphys and Papyrus, they're gonna- Frisk, I need to get out of here. I need to get away. Please, I need your help-!"

Nope, nope, this isn't working. Frisk tells them to come in, they can't understand a word the other kid is saying when they're shaking like that. It's definitely neither running nor the cold making their breathing this labored. Chara looks like they're about to argue, but they don't have the strength for it. Reluctantly, they let Frisk help them through the window. Frisk closes the window behind them and pulls the curtains shut, enveloping the room in darkness. They quickly pull the covers off their bed and wrap them around Chara's shoulders. Grateful, the soaked little human pulls the fabric tightly around themself, nearly disappearing into the softness and lingering warmth of it.

Frisk puts a hand on their shoulder to get their attention. Chara breathes with them. Deep, slow breaths. Count back from seven. Seven, six, five, four ... They've done this many times before. Though their roles used to be reversed.

"Now," Frisk says when their friend appears to have regained the ability to breathe. "Try again. From the beginning."

Chara hangs their head. "We don't have time," they sigh. "I heard Sans talk to the others about- about making sure I won't be able to reset no matter if I'm alive or not. They've ..." They swallow hard. "They've found a way."

Frisk's brows nearly disappear under their bangs. That doesn't sound good. That doesn't sound good at all.

"What are they ..?"

"Remember that machine in Alphys' old lab? The one shaped like a skull?"
Frisk shudders. How could they forget? They'll be happy if they never have to see that place ever again. Even though everything down there turned out to be mostly harmless, it was still terrifying. They catch themself hoping Alphys locked that place up real tight. Brr.

Then they realize where Chara is going with this. They can physically feel the blood drain from their face.

"Don't look at me like that!" Chara hisses upon seeing Frisk's reaction. "It's not like I'm going to let them!"

Frisk shakes their head, trying to banish the images flooding into their brain at the thought. "No- no, it wouldn't work!" they argue, clinging to the front of Chara's make-shift bed cover tent and tugging as if they didn't already have their sibling's full attention. "They'd have to kill you! You'd have time to reload before they- before-"

"Not if they do it while I'm still alive, they won't!" Chara retorts, pulling the covers from Frisk's grasp and wrapping them tighter around themself. They're freezing cold, and though the fabric is soaked in gross rainwater now, it's better than nothing. "You know he'd do it, Frisk."

At that, the noise in Frisk's head goes quiet. They wouldn't do it, Alphys and Papyrus. But they're not the ones Chara's scared of.

Would he? Would he really do something like that? Disfigure a child's soul without mercy? To save his friends, his family, his future? Maybe he would. No, scratch the 'maybe' - he would. He doesn't understand. He doesn't get that Chara isn't a threat anymore, he doesn't get that even if they did die, at their own hand or someone else's, they wouldn't reset. At worst, they would reload. Start the day over so it didn't have to happen. Frisk is sure of it.

"We have to tell mom," Frisk says, folding their hands in front of their mouth like they're trying to keep the words in. They spill out anyway. "We have to tell her, she'll protect you!"

Chara doesn't reply right away. Why are they staring like that? Didn't they just say they were running out of time? They bite the inside of their cheek, and finally they look away, expression grim.

"We can't."

"Why not?"

"I can't mess this up for them."

Frisk moves closer again and this time, Chara lets them.

"What are you talking about?" they ask, the question soft and patient. They pull the top of the covers up over their sibling's head, hoping it'll help dry their hair a bit.

"Look," Chara begins. "I worked really hard to make everything like ... nice and everything. I really wanted all of you to be happy. And I guess getting to see how you've all been doing and getting to be with all of you again was kind of okay. I really missed you. But I can't mess this up. I can't. I guess I should've known I couldn't really be with all of you without things turning bad."

"Chara ..."

"I can't let mom get mad at Sans because of me. They mean so much to each other. And he's only pissed at me 'cause I killed his brother a couple dozen times. If anyone did that to you or Asriel, I know I'd wanna rip their soul to shreds."
"That's not why he's doing this," Frisk argues gently. They wrap one arm around Chara's shoulders and lead them over to an armchair nearly buried under stacks of striped sweaters. "He just wants to protect everyone. Me and Papyrus and mom and everyone else ... He's just scared you'll hurt us again." Carefully, they gather up all the sweaters and pile them on the floor, so the two of them can sit down. As though they'd done this many times before, they each sit on one armrest so they can sit across from each other, feet on the seat, elbows leaned on their knees, hands clasped. "He's trying to do the right thing. You just need to show him that this isn't it."

Chara removes one of their hands from Frisk's to wipe their runny nose on their sleeve. "I don't know how. Maybe this is the right thing. Maybe one person shouldn't have all this power. But I don't care. I don't want this." Their voice falls to a growl that's only mildly hysteric. "I'm done with people trying to hurt me. I don't care if I deserve it, I'm not going down without a fight! How stupid does he think I am?"

Frisk cocks their head to the side, trying to read the sullen look on the little ex-demon's face. They don't dare to reach out to their soul. Even without trying, they can feel the thing spark and simmer with fear and indignation. "You're not really going to fight him, are you?"

"Hell no. Fuck that noise. You think I want him dead after everything I did to save you all? I mean, I might have when I first got here and he was getting on my case about everything and ..." Their words fade into incoherent grumbling, something about wanting to put his soul in with a spoon this time for irony's sake, but then they pull the emergency brakes on that train of thought. "No, that's not the point! The point is that me and you had to pull a whole lotta strings to get everyone to the surface in one piece. Even Asriel got his happy ending this time, I'm not gonna mess it up now. I'm also not going to let them hollow out my soul like some shitty overripe pumpkin 'round Halloween. So I guess my only option is to just ..." They push a sharp sigh out through their nose, a little breath of mirthless laughter. A thin layer of saltwater makes their eyes shine in the low light. "... disappear."

"No!" Frisk involuntarily locks their hands a bit too tightly around Chara's.

Chara smiles despite themself. "No, no, come on, Frisk, not like that." Without really needing to think about it, they worm their fingers out of their friend's death grip and put their arms around them instead, running a hand over their head the same way their mom always does. "Not like that."

Chara is still ice cold and trembling, but Frisk doesn't care. They lean forward into the hug, awkward angle be damned, and lean their head on Chara's shoulder. This can't be right. They're all together now, this is how everything was supposed to be from the beginning. This ending isn't right without Chara. Frisk knows that now. After everything that happened, they know. So, maybe their friend isn't always very nice, maybe they have bad days where they say things they don't mean, but ...

"I'm going to need your help," Chara whispers into their hair, the gentle, rhythmic movement over Frisk's scalp almost hypnotic. "It's been 100 years since the last time I was here. I don't know how the surface works anymore. But you're going to help me, right?"

Frisk shakes their head, clinging to them with all their might. "I don't want you to go. Please ... please don't leave me again."

"It won't be forever. We'll find our way back to each other someday. And I'll stay hidden and you won't tell the others, and we won't have to be apart ever again. Doesn't that sound nice?" The soundless laugh returns, but their voice is a little too broken, a little too unsteady to make it work. When Frisk doesn't reply, Chara pulls away so they can look at them. They put on the brightest grin they can manage. "Hey. Look. No matter what happens, you're always gonna be my dumb baby sibling. You know that right? You're gonna be stuck with me no matter what you do. I'm always gonna be here. Even when I'm also really far away at the same time."
Frisk shifts away, folding their arms tightly over their own stomach. "We're not really siblings. Mom just adopted both of us. We won't even get to grow up together."

"But we're both angels, aren't we?" Chara's grin narrows and widens, cheshire cat-like, and they lean into Frisk's space as though they're sharing a grave secret. "You and me and Asriel. The 'angels' of the Underground. We set everyone free. Together. We were born into the same destiny, all three of us. Sounds a little more relevant than genes, don't you think?"

That ... is true. Frisk isn't really related to anyone in their family. They suppose this is the closest they'll ever get to truly belonging with someone they didn't choose to be with of their own free will. Maybe that does mean something more. Maybe they really will meet again. Maybe reality's going to twist in their favor one more time. Someday.

"I need you to help me get far away from here. When we're so lost that the others won't be able to find us, you'll turn around and I'll keep going. And we're both gonna be fine. I promise."

Frisk isn't sure they really have a choice. If Sans decides that Chara's Determination needs to go, he won't hesitate. He won't even care that everyone will hate him for it. He gave up on being a happy a long time ago, Frisk thinks. Now all he cares about is making sure everyone else is safe.

They have no choice. They need to get Chara away from here.

Frisk scoots off the chair's armrest and weave their way through their messy room to their bed. They kneel by the bedside and pull out the drawer hidden underneath it. Chara shrugs out of the wet covers and follows them, peeking over their shoulder.

"Whatcha got there, buddy?"

"If we're running away from home in the middle of the night, we're gonna do it right," Frisk says. They retrieve a golden strongbox from the far corner of the drawer. Then they stick their arm under their pillow, and from under it, they extract a tiny gold key. They turn it inside the lock and the box gives a sharp clack.

Frisk pauses. Listens.

Good thing Toriel's room is at the other end of the house.

Chara watches with wide, curious eyes as Frisk opens the little treasure chest. The inside of it is filled with what appears to be junk at first glance - but Chara knows better.

"You kept my knife?" they ask.

"Humans are really strong. I'm not sure our lockets are gonna have enough magic to protect us if we get into trouble with one. If we get attacked, you can pretend it's loaded so they'll leave us alone."

"Or I could not rely on play-pretend and actually make them leave us alone if you gave me back my knife."
"No. Not happening."

Chara rolls their eyes and puts their hands in their pockets. "Ugh, fine."

Frisk takes the burnt pan for themself, giving it a little kiss and sending a silent 'thank you' to Laura, wherever she is. Then they lock the strongbox again and carefully place it back in the drawer. They really don't want to part with the empty gun, but they know Jordan would have wanted Chara to have it. He would want to give it to the person who needed it most if he were here. He was like that. Frisk should try to be like that, too.

And besides, they still have the plastic star from his cowboy hat.

As Frisk rummages through their closet trying to find clothes thick enough to withstand the late-autumn cold for ... who knows how long, Chara moves back to the window, keeping a sharp eye on the house across the cul-de-sac. The lights are still off. No one suspects a thing. Not yet.

Frisk decides on their favorite shirt, the blue one with purple stripes, it's bound to have some good-luck magic still sleeping in the seams, and also it's the thickest sweater they have. They pull on a pair of boots and a raincoat, and give Chara their winter coat, the one Toriel got them in preparation for snow days.

"What? Frisk, no, you should-"

"I survived passing through Snowdin in a sweater. You turn purple when Sans forgets to turn up the heat in the basement at night."

"No, I don't!"

"Yeah, you do. Also, you're skinnier than me."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"You don't stay warm as easily."

"Okay, but I'm older than you are!"

"By like, a year!"

"And a century!"

Despite continued bickering, Chara accepts the winter coat and slips it on, zipping it all the way up to their nose. They pull up the hood just for good measure. Frisk does the same with the hood of their raincoat. Outside, the rain continues to flood into the streets.

Frisk pockets a wallet lying on their nightstand, along with their phone, and leaves a message in the items' stead. In blue crayon, scrawled on the first page of a pink Hello Temmie notebook, they write:

Don't look for me. I'll be back. I love you.
- Frisk <3

Chara struggles with the clasp on the window for a moment. Then they push it open and jump through it without so much as touching the windowsill. Frisk follows them, flopping out the window in a tangle of flailing limbs and landing on their back in the muddy grass on the other side. Chara pulls them to their feet and Frisk quickly closes the window behind themself.
The cul-de-sac is enclosed in near-complete darkness, street lights fighting to keep their small slice of the night lit to the best of their ability, trees reaching their naked, spindly arms to the starless sky despite the harsh rain doing its damndest to tear them down. The old houses seem to huddle closer to the ground, their windows dark and empty like big scared eyes.

Frisk heads for the sidewalk, but Chara grabs their sleeve and leads them in between Toriel's and Muffet's houses instead. They have to stay out of sight.

They climb over the fence and sneak past the enormous snoring muffin-spider-hybrid chained up in Muffet's backyard, over another fence beyond it, and another one after that and another one after that, into the dug-up, squeaky toy-infested yard behind Dogamy and Dogaressa's home, and further still.

They end up in the small, well-kept garden behind Sans and Papyrus' house. Frisk can tell it's theirs, 'cause no other house has a big rose hedge trimmed in the shape of Papyrus' face. Asgore trimmed it for him when the skeletons first moved in, and he still finds time to come help maintain it and the rest of the flowers here every once in a while. It's only mostly an excuse to come and spend time with his friends.

Chara holds an arm out in front of Frisk, gesturing for them to stay put. For a long, breathless moment, the kids crouch close to the low fence, watching the house. The windows to the backyard are large and black and gaping, and the longer Frisk stares at them, the more they get the sense of looking down, down, down into an abyss pulling at them with something stronger than gravity.

Lightning strikes close by. Frisk gives a startled little gasp. Chara clamps a wet, ice-cold palm over their mouth. It takes all of Frisk's self restraint not to struggle.

"This way," Chara whispers, leading the way in the opposite direction of the house, towards the fence on their left. It's higher than the cul-de-sac's low wooden and living fences, and Frisk has to stand on Chara's shoulders to reach the top of it. When they're up, they reach down to pull the other human up next to them.

Whoever lives in the house they pass by doesn't appear to notice them. Come to think of it, Frisk has never actually seen anyone entering or leaving the place. It might be empty.

So why does it feel like something is watching them from the top window?

Frisk pushes the thought away, moving a little closer to Chara as they leave through the front yard's main gate. The road on the other side is devoid of street lights, save for the one casting a blinking, sputtering beam over the bus stop up ahead.

"When does the next bus arrive?" Chara asks, sounding more like a marine captain demanding a status report than a 10-year-old who didn't bother to look up the schedules of public transport before heading out.

Frisk takes their phone out of their pocket and clicks the button on top of it, shielding it from the rain with their sleeve. It's midnight.

"O-one's leaving for the city in- h-half an hour, I think?" It's cold. They hadn't noticed how loudly their teeth were rattling until now.

"That our only option?"

"More busses leave from the city, so ..."
"Good."

Instead of entering the shelter, Chara pushes through the thick bushes surrounding it, pulling Frisk in with them. A stray branch claws two dark red lines into Frisk's cheek.

"Ow!" they cry out, pulling their wrist from Chara's grasp to protect the open scratches from further harm. "Hey, that hurt!"

"Don't be such a baby," Chara mutters, but they don't attempt to grab them again. Pouting, they lean on the back of the shelter and slide down to the ground, readying themself for a wait that's going to feel a whole lot longer than it needs to in the cold, rainy night.

Frisk rubs their scratched-up cheek, trying hard not to turn their indignant glare on Chara. It was just an accident. Frisk should have been more careful.

It still hurts.

They look over their shoulder, back to the empty street. It's too late to turn around now, isn't it? They've already left their note. They've already broken out of their room in the middle of the night. They've already promised Chara they'll help.

They turn back to the little human huddled on the cold earth under the bushes, their expression hidden under the hood of their borrowed coat. They're all Frisk has left right now.

A little more carefully than before, Frisk slips under the branches and sits close to Chara, hoping to steal just a little bit of whatever's left of their sibling's body warmth. Chara doesn't move to make room for them, but they also don't push them away, so Frisk takes that as a go-ahead to stay where they are.

For a long, long moment, the only sound in the frigid night is the thunder moving further and further away, the clatter of rain hammering against the bus shelter, the too-rapid heartbeats in the children's chests. Chara wonders if they've done the right thing. If it's really worth it, trying to protect themself. But then Sans' words echo in their head.

it would give us a whole lifetime to figure out the problem ... wouldn't have to worry 'bout keeping the kid alive ...

They don't want to. They don't want to go like that. It's not right. It's not. They'd rather cease to exist in any form than go through with it.

Chara doesn't fully understand the process. They're not even sure if it would hurt. The other human souls didn't seem to be in pain at all, shining as brightly as any other soul. But something inside Chara knows that this is utterly, utterly wrong. That they need to run, run far away and never come back. That if they ever look back, they're done for. That's it. Game over. Permanently.

Frisk shifts a little closer to them. Chara can feel them shivering even through both of their jackets. After a few seconds' consideration, they put their arms around their sibling, their ex-host, their friend, as much for comfort as for warmth.

Sitting here in the dark, all alone with only their little counterpart for company in a world that has once again become their enemy ...

... it fills them with Determination.
 Humans and Demons

Chapter Notes

Aaaand here comes all the smaller chapters! For this fic, I've decided to release a bunch of smaller chapters in quick succession in order to keep the pace nice and mellow until the ending, since it's primarily a collection of small moments that tie together and form a bigger whole later.

Also, wooh, I had my betas on board this time! Thank you to Starfog and ShtiyaJust4You!

Warnings from the first chapter still apply/will apply in the future.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Asriel no longer dreams. Aside from that first horrible night after his resurrection, he hasn't dreamt anything in a very, very long time. He wonders if he'll be able to when he gets to sleep outside of the chamber again. He kind of hopes so, even though he suspects there's going to be a whole lot more nightmares waiting for him there. Presumably, it's going to be better than this empty, hollow sleep that leaves his mind stranded in a blank void for hours, shut off from the world, drugged into a kind of apathetic compliance that kills whatever fear or panic or stir craziness that should by all rights set in after hours stuck floating in nothing.

It's boring.

He wishes something would happen for once, something capable of breaking the monotone, something to remind him that this isn't forever, that his memories aren't fake, that he won't be stuck in this for good, waiting for a morning that never comes.

However, when he gets his wish, he's taken by surprise.

There's something around his neck, he's pretty sure, something oddly warm, so warm that he nearly mistakes it for cold at first.

With silky strands of glimmering light, the sensation reaches through the haze in his head and picks at his thoughts, and though he isn't entirely sure how he knows what color feels like, he's certain the magic is red and gold. He's sure that if he could see the thing around his neck, it would be glowing.

Slowly, he sinks into his body, reconnects with his nerve endings and the ache in his spine which has become a permanent presence since he started going out more, wearing the portable stabilizer more, taking more risks and pushing himself more. He opens his eyes, yet he sees nothing but white mist. He lifts a hand in front of his face. Okay, he can see the outline of his hand, too, even though it's a little blurry. He reaches for the warmth around his neck and pulls out - the locket, of course. Hanging in its usual place under the collar of his shirt.

But even in the mist and the darkness, it isn't glowing. Soon the warmth in it fades away, too.

Maybe he was dreaming, after all.

He goes back to sleep.
Frisk falls asleep on the bus. Or rather, they fall asleep on Chara, softly drooling on the other kid's shoulder all the way to the city. When cozy small-town buildings have fully sprouted into hard square concrete and the horizon is hidden away behind a many-layered curtain of billboards, neon signs and windows with lights that never go out, Chara elbows Frisk awake.

"Hey, wake up. We're here. When do we get off?"

Frisk makes a vaguely unhappy noise, rubbing their face into the soft fabric of Chara's coat. Chara puts a hand on their forehead and pushes them away, giving them a few mostly-gentle slaps on the cheek to wake them up.

"Oh no, you don't. Don't bail on me now. Which stop do we get off at?"

Frisk groans and continues to lean the full weight of their head against the other's palm. "I dunnooo," they whine. "Five more minutes, 'm pretty sure."

Chara pushes them fully upright, forcing them to support their own weight. "The hell do you mean you 'don't know'? You live here, how can you not know when to get off the freakin' bus?"

"Quit yelling at me ..!" Frisk rubs their eyes and slouches against the window instead. Their eyes blink open and they try to make sense of the blur of neon colors moving by outside. They don't recognize this place at all. It looks shady. "I seriously think we should wait, this doesn't-"

A loud boop from the front of the bus announces that Chara has made the executive decision of getting off right here, right in the middle of shadytown. Great.

Without removing their hand from the red button on the bar in front of them, Chara fixes their sibling with a lazy 'this is your own fault, you made me do this' kind of half-lidded glare. Frisk makes a little growly noise, giving them a much more obviously angry glare in return. Chara sticks their tongue out at them and Frisk slaps them on the forehead. Their annoyance apparently only serves to cheer the little demon up a bit, if the smug, self-satisfied smirk is anything to go by. Very much not the intended result.

The bus comes to a halt by a dented stop sign. Chara peeks out of the door, looking left and right. Frisk holds Laura's frying pan close to their chest as they sneak a glance past them. Nothing but wet, broken pavement, rubbish in the streets and a faraway bass that loudly and proudly drowns out whichever other instruments might potentially have existed within the music once upon a time before it met this DJ, whoever they are. This really doesn't look like the kind of place where a lot of busses come by. Traffic in general. Or people in any condition to drive.

Frisk puts a hand on Chara's shoulder to keep them from leaving just yet.

"E-excuse me? Mr. bus driver?" they call to the front of the bus. "I think we might have pressed the button too early."

"Ya think this is a goddamn game, half-pint?" grumbles the old man up front, his stringy beard twitching with anger in the rearview mirror. "Move it or lose it!"

Frisk cringes, holding on to Chara a little tighter. "No- no, please, I don't think we should be here, I-"
"Do I gotta come down there 'n kick ya out meself?"

They try to speak up again, but nothing but a startled little squeak comes out. Chara shoves past them, countering the bus driver's frown with their own absolutely withering one.

"You think we even wanna be on your shitty bus!??" they snap, kicking at one of the seats. Probably not the sharpest comeback they've ever come up with. "You think we wouldn't rather fucking army crawl through a sewer than stay another minute on this shit train? Fuck you!" It's really hard to be intimidating when you're four feet tall and purple around the eyes from sleep deprivation. "Come on, Frisk. We don't need this."

The driver yells something after them and shakes his fist, but Chara ignores him, takes their sibling by the hand and leads them into the neon-lit night outside. Frisk keeps their eyes on the ground, barely daring to close their fingers around Chara's. They sounded angry. Really angry. Just like the bus driver did.

But Chara doesn't say anything. They don't even try to make Frisk get off the road and onto the sidewalk. Instead they bump their forehead against Frisk's, so, so softly, and give their hand a little squeeze. And just like that, they're nice again. Just like that, they're caring and sweet and protective, and nothing like the ice cold little bully who made them come here in the first place. Just like that, they're someone else.

Frisk is still too scared to look at them.

The two of them hear voices as they cautiously make their way down the sidewalk a few minutes later. Their hands stay tightly locked together. They try to stay in the semi-shadows creeping into the blind spots of the street lamps and neon signs and glowing windows, but even the darkest shadows aren't enough to hide them. The voices grow louder.

"Keep your head down," Chara whispers. "Walk like you're going somewhere."

"I am going somewhere," Frisk whispers back, but they do as they're told, hoping their hood will be enough to hide their face in shadows, if nothing else. If there's one thing they don't want, it's to be recognized as the ambassador of monsterkind all alone in a place overrun by humans.

Laughter. Someone's laughing.

They pass an alley on the opposite side of the road. A group of humans are hanging around the back entrance to a bar, laughing, drinking, saying words Frisk can't hear over the ringing in their own ears. One of them spots the kids. He points and says something to the others. Another one replies. A third one punches him in the arm and gestures at the children, muttering something between his teeth. Chara tightens their hold on Frisk and quickens their pace.

The alleyway leaves their field of vision, but they can hear something now, a third pair of footsteps, louder, heavier, echoing just out of sync with the orphaned bass.

It's coming closer.

"Wait-!" sounds a voice from behind. "You two, wait up!"

Chara turns a sharp corner and pulls Frisk with them, nearly making the other kid stumble in the process. A car drives by at much too high speeds, its open windows roaring out a beat much faster than the street's own music-pulse. Frisk wishes that the stars at least were visible so they knew which way they were going.
He calls out again, the man, and Chara makes another turn, so they're walking back in the direction they came from on a parallel street. It's obvious their priority is no longer finding a bus station.

But the street they choose - it's a dead end. No street lights. Only toppled-over containers and a brick wall. They instantly whip around, but it's too late. His wide silhouette draws a black square in the yellow-lit street they just tried to escape from.

Chara instantly jumps in front of Frisk, pushing them backwards and further into the alley. "What do you want?" they hiss at the man.

"E-easy, listen, I don't want any trouble!" he calls back. He holds his hands up, but makes no move to come closer. "I just saw you walking by and- look, no offense, but you look like a couple of 10-year-olds. Just assumed you weren't like, midgets or something. This place ain't really the, uh- it ain't the place to be at night for kids, just sayin'. You lost or what?"

He doesn't sound dangerous, Frisk doesn't think. But you never know with humans.

"What's it to you?" Chara calls back, sounding no less aggressive.

"Look, I promise I'm not gonna hurt you, but my friends are gonna beat the shit out of me if I just leave you to the wolves, so do you have, like, a parent I can call or something? I-I won't come any closer, I'll just stay here, or- hell, I can just call the police, maybe that's easier, maybe I'll just-" His bright voice cracks, and when he takes a step back into the light, running a hand over his face in obvious distress, his features are smooth. He doesn't look like he should be out here, either. He could barely pass for someone over eighteen.

Frisk tugs on Chara's arm. "I don't think he's gonna hurt us," they whisper, hoping he won't hear. "We should just tell him we live nearby."

"Don't be an idiot, no one follows two kids around at night just to help them!" Chara retorts, not bothering to lower their voice at all.

"No, no, I'm also doing it to get out of having eleven guys punch me for being an uncaring prick," the man - or boy, rather - adds, rubbing his upper arm. He must be the one who got punched back there. He tries to laugh a bit, but it's half-hearted. He looks like he'd rather be anywhere else.

"He's lying," Chara mutters, not taking their eyes off him. "We need to get out of here."

"Chara, I really don't think-"

Before Frisk can finish, Chara has grabbed them by the hand again and is pulling them towards the stranger, their grip as steely as their eyes.

"Move," they tell him.

The boy takes few steps backwards, holding his hands up again. "No, wait, I really can't- I shouldn't let you-"

With their free hand, Chara unzips the top part of their coat, reaches in between the folds and draws forth the empty gun, pointing it at him without so much as flinching.

"Move."

He stumbles backwards, nearly tripping over himself. "Shit! What the fu-"
"That's right, nice and easy," Chara sneers, walking in a half-circle around him without turning their back to him, keeping Frisk close to their side. "No sudden movements now, my hands are already shaking."

Frisk tries to wrench their hand back, but the other merely digs their nails into Frisk's skin, a silent warning not to struggle. "Chara, what are you doing!"

"Looking after my baby sibling, of course," they chime softly, still staring the man down. Slowly, they pull Frisk backwards, careful not to slip on the pavement still glittering with fallen rain. To the boy, they add: "Remember: you didn't see us, you didn't hear us, and if your friends ask, you tell them you saw us enter one of these houses, greeted by nice, loving parents who'd been waiting for us for only a few minutes. Are we clear?"

"Y-yes! Shit, yes, yes, whatever you say!" he stammers, cowering. "Just put that thing down, for god's sake-!"

Frisk shoves their sibling in the shoulder, a little harder than they normally would. "Chara!" He doesn't deserve this. He doesn't. He's scared, why can't Chara just let him be?

"Good," Chara says, ignoring Frisk's protests. "Now turn around and leave the way you came. Don't look back. I'll be able to tell if you do. Trust me."

The boy does as he's told, keeping his hands on his head as he struggles not to run. Chara keeps the gun pointed at him as he moves, continuing their slow backwards descent into the shadows between two buildings across from the alley. When the stranger is out of sight, they turn around and pull Frisk with them into the narrow street, sprinting across the cobblestone, aiming for shelter behind a flight of concrete stairs leading to one building's second floor.

Safe in the shadow of the stairs, they finally let Frisk go. Frisk yanks their hand back, rubbing the little scratches where Chara's nails cut their skin. The scratches aren't deep at all, but they still sting. Frisk presses their hand to the cooling metal of the burnt pan, hoping it'll make the weapon's healing magic work faster.

"What was that all about!?" They don't normally need to fight to keep their voice low, usually they have the opposite problem, but man, the little demon is testing them right now.

Chara holds a finger to their lips, back pressed into the grimy backside of the staircase. Not-very-healthy-looking spasms tug at the upper part of their chest as they try to hold their breath despite already being air-deprived. They stay frozen to the spot. Listen. Listen.

It takes Frisk a moment to realize that the rapid, pulse-like sparks lighting up their soul aren't their own, that the flashes of fear and anger and malice are echoes emanating from the child in front of them. They're scared. Chara's scared.

They make sure the frightened human sees the movement coming. They make sure Chara sees them reaching out before they close their fingers around the hand Chara is still holding to their own mouth, they make sure that the tension under the cold skin slackens on its own before gently pushing down their hand, prompting them to speak.

Chara swallows, hard, meeting Frisk's eyes with an almost-steady frown. They cough a bit and push away from the wall, brushing a few wrinkles out of the front of their coat.

"It's okay," Frisk says, letting them go. "We're safe."

"No, we're not. You heard him. This place is crawling with humans. We need to leave."
"They're not all bad, Chara. Some of them really do want to help."

The red-eyed kid moves their icy gaze to the ground, shoulders sinking. "Ha. Sure. And how are you gonna tell the good ones from the bad ones? They all look the same. You won't find out until it's too late. You won't find out until ..." Their voice gives out. They grind their teeth together and press their palms into their eyes, trying to keep tears from spilling. It doesn't work. They curse under their breath.

A deep rumbling sounds far away. Thunder. The rain must be catching up to them.

"How are you gonna know who to trust when even the ones who're supposed to take care of you ... when you can't even trust them? Then what do you do?" Chara wipes their eyes and swallows the lump in their throat. "I thought monsters were different. But they're not."

Frisk wants to protest, but they know that wouldn't be fair to either race. If there's one thing they've learned as the ambassador between the two peoples, it's that humans and monsters are far more alike than they give each other credit for. Humans may have far more capacity for destruction, but if a monster got the opportunity to act as humans do ...

It also works the other way around. Frisk is certain of it. Humans can be good when given the chance. Proof is standing right before their eyes, glaring searing holes through the stairs they're hiding behind as if attempting to calculate how far away the boy must be by now.

"We can't trust anyone," Chara mutters through their teeth. Then they turn back to Frisk, expression dark. "Except each other."

That isn't true. They're not alone. They can still find help. They don't have to face this all on their own.

"Right?"

They know Chara doesn't understand. They know they never did. No matter how many times the two of them saved the world together, Chara never understood. They trusted Frisk to know better than them, but they couldn't learn, they couldn't change.

"Frisk?"

It's not their fault they're like this. Someone else did this to them. And now those old wounds have sprung up all over again. It's not their fault, it's not. They have reason to think the whole world is against them, if Frisk was in their position, they would probably feel the same way.

It's not their fault.

Frisk nods. They can't look Chara in the eyes as they do, but they do nod.

They leave the shelter behind the staircase, the soles of their shoes dragging over the cobble as they head deeper into the city, ignoring headaches blooming from weariness.

"Don't worry," Chara says, nudging their sibling with the handle of the empty gun. "I'll protect you."

Chapter End Notes
I'm aiming to release new chapters at least once a week now, since I already have five more done and I've got the whole thing planned out.

In addition to talking fic and headcanons on my tumblr, I've now also opened my ask box to questions directed at the characters! If you want something answered in-character, just address the question to the one you wanna ask! It's super fun, the peeps over there have already upset both Chara and Sans, it's gr8
After a few hours of roaming the city, Frisk and Chara find a map, and with the map, a metro station, and with the metro station, the big bus station in the city's heart. Frisk convinces Chara not to blow all their money on a single bus ride to some faraway place they won't know how to navigate anyway, so the two of them choose a bus capable of taking them to the next town over. Chara has nothing but the money Frisk brought along, after all, and they will need to eat wherever they end up.

They'll find another way to get to the next place. This slightly smaller city is okay for now.

"You're falling behind a bit," Chara says, slowing their pace so Frisk can catch up. Even though it must still be early morning, judging by the gloomy sky, the streets are already packed with busy humans. The runaway kids can't afford to get separated in this chaos.

Frisk trots up to Chara, holding the burnt pan close to their chest with both arms. Their shoulders are aching from hauling the heavy chunk of metal around all night, it's so annoying. "I'm not falling behind, you're leaving me behind!"

"It's 'cause you're so short," Chara teases, grinning like they've just figured out their arch enemy's greatest weakness. "You practically have to take two steps every time I take one."

Frisk refuses to dignify that with a response. Chara is barely two inches taller than they are. Barely!

Soon, the dark sky breaks open again as predicted, pouring water into the streets. Black, blue and dark red umbrellas sprout from the flocks of busy humans, and the kids tighten the strings on their hoods. Apparently, the rain is also capable of washing away people's responsibilities, because the sidewalk quickly clears away and the pedestrians seek shelter under outcropping roofs and in cafes and restaurants, staring out at the sky-water with round, dark-rimmed eyes. Chara takes a deep breath and stretches their arms out, saying a quick 'thanks' to the rain for being a 'reliable bro.' A really impractical one, usually, but a reliable one. It's nice, having a little more elbow room.

A sharp pang in their stomach reminds Frisk that they haven't eaten at all for what must be upwards of thirteen hours. It wouldn't be a problem if they didn't also have a headache from being awake for so long, but they do have a headache from being awake for so long, and now their body doesn't know whether to push for sleep or for food, and if they eat now and then fall asleep, they might have nightmares, and if they have nightmares, maybe they won't get proper rest and then-

A hand waving in front of their face cuts off their messy thoughts.
"Yo. Earth to Frisk."

They squint their eyes shut against the motion disturbing their field of vision and rub their eyes. When they look up again, they've stopped moving and Chara is standing in front of them, giving them a worried look.

"You alright?" Chara asks. "You don't look so good."


Chara draws air in through their teeth in a little sympathetic reverse-hiss. "Can't really help you with that, buddy. The stores don't open before eight. And if that whole mass of--" They wave a hand aimlessly at the dark sky. "- whatever is anything to go by, I'm guessing it's gonna be a little while."

"We could still sleep," Frisk says, watching the endless soft blackness hanging over the city. It looks like a big cozy blanket from down here. They frown a bit when they feel a hand on their back gently urging them to start walking again.

Chara shakes their head. "When we've found our next ride, okay? I'm sorry. We have to keep going." They remove the pan from their friend's grasp. "Here, let me hold that for a while." They swing it over their shoulder, carrying it like you'd carry a heavy sword.

Don't they ever get tired? They've been awake for just as long as Frisk has. Longer, even, they didn't sleep on the bus rides. They've always been good at hiding that stuff, though. If Frisk wasn't busy worrying about passing out themself, they might have been more than a little afraid that Chara would.

It takes Frisk a moment or two to remember how to uncurl their numb, frigid fingers. They rub their hands together, hoping the friction will bring a little bit of warmth into their palms, before forming a cup with their hands and reaching them up to the sky.

The rain should be snow. They're pretty sure the rain should be snow. It's freezing cold.

Chara's hand on their back moves up to their shoulder, signaling for them to stop. Oh. There's a road right in front of them. They were kinda too occupied with freezing their fingers off to notice. When Chara is confident that Frisk isn't about to wander into an actual wall of speeding cars, they let them go and press the button on the side of a traffic light's pole. The traffic light stays red for a moment. And another moment. And another one.

Soon, the rainwater has gathered into a little pond in Frisk's cupped hands. They can no longer feel their skin, but the water looks so round and so clear and so inviting. They hold it up to their mouth.

Chara immediately slaps their hands away, scattering the icy water on the ground.

"Frisk, what the hell!"

What? What did they do wrong now?

"You can get crazy sick from that stuff, you don't know where it's been!"

"I'm pretty sure it's been in the clouds," Frisk mumbles and half-heartedly points up.

A few humans join them by the side of the road, waiting for the light to turn green any time now. Both kids move away from them, putting the traffic light between themselves and the newcomers.
Chara slaps their own forehead with an exasperated sigh. "No, no, come on, dude, work with me here. What's the sky like over a big city? What are city clouds regularly exposed to?"

Ugh, Frisk knows, but their stomach feels like it's collapsing in on itself. And isn't their throat a little dry, too? They know they shouldn't whine so much, but if there's one person in the world they've never minded complaining to, it's the malevolent spirit who decided to turn Frisk's soul into their own personal rent-free apartment. It seemed fair, back then. If Chara wanted to stick around, they'd have to put up with Frisk's whining. Though, now that Chara doesn't really have a choice, maybe it's not such a nice thing to do. Frisk is supposed to be the one helping them out, not the other way around.

"Sorry," they say at length. "Sorry I'm so whiny."

"You're not, shut up. Look, maybe I can ..." Chara puts the pan on the ground, leaning it up against the traffic light pole so it doesn't touch the grimy sidewalk more than necessary. They rub their hands together, similar to what Frisk did for warmth a moment ago. "Get another handful. I can help."

Frisk's brows knit. They're not sure what the other kid is up to. But in the end, they do as they're told. Some humans shove past them, causing them to spill half a handful, but Frisk doesn't pay them any mind, patiently waiting for the water to fill up again. They don't really register that the humans moved because the light has turned green, and neither does Chara.

When their cupped hands are filled again, they look back to Chara, a bit unsure. Chara lays their own clammy hands under Frisk's, moving them closer to themself to inspect the water. Then they touch the surface of the water with a fingertip, drawing a circle across the clear surface, lines appearing in their forehead as they concentrate. One circle, two circles, nothing happens. They take a deep breath, forcing the tension out of their tired body. Frisk's eyes dart to the humans crossing the street. None of them seem to notice what the kids are doing.

On the third circle, Chara starts to hum. Frisk doesn't recognize the melody. Chara might be making it up as they go along.

A line of red traces after their fingertip, then, painting the water's surface, and it spreads through the liquid like leaking paint. Frisk has to struggle not to back away. 'Paint' isn't actually the first association they make, but the color is bright and it glows a little in the dark, so it can't be what they're thinking of.

Chara's melody rises in tone, growing so bright even their chirpy little songbird-voice breaks on the edges of it. Then the red light retracts from the water, compressing into a square disk under the demon's touch. With a sharp movement, Chara grabs it between their index finger and thumb, picking it out of the water before it dissolves again.

They hold it up against the bright whiteness of a street light, looking through it with wonder in their eyes as the redness fades from the object and it turns into a translucent, glass-like material. They lightly press the pads of their fingers down on its blade-sharp edges, but it doesn't break.

"I did it!"

Frisk looks between the glass disk and the water in confusion. "What did you do?"

"I purified it! If there was anything gross in the water, it's gone now!" They're beaming with pride. "It's an old spell water monsters used to make lakes and rivers habitable back before everyone was banished. It captures impurities and put them into these little flat magic squares." They weave the disk in and out between their fingers, then hold it up so Frisk can see it. "Cool, huh?"
"That is cool!"

"You can drink that now." They point at the water still in the process of freezing Frisk's hands off and pocket the disk with their other hand. Might be useful for later.

Frisk downs the water in a single gulp, careful not to spill any. Meanwhile, Chara frowns at the traffic light, which has once again turned red. Figures. They press the button again and wait.

Frisk wipes their cold hands on their jeans, then pull the sleeves over them and stick them in the pockets of their raincoat. "I didn't know you could do magic," they say. They knew humans could learn magic and that Chara would probably want to, but ...

"The others taught me when I first fell down," Chara replies. They pick up the burnt pan from where they left it leaning on the traffic light and lean on the thing themself instead, swinging the pan around by the handle. "Mostly practical stuff like how to make plants grow or how to pacify wild animals. Just in case I ever needed it, I guess." They're not sure when they'd need that second one. No surface animals ever came to the Underground. But then again, the monsters weren't planning on staying there forever, were they? Chara was supposed to make sure they didn't have to.

At least they made good on that promise.

Frisk catches the pan in the middle of a spin, holding it still. It's disturbing their vision and their head still feels like their skull is too tight on their brain. "Why did you hum, though? I don't think I've ever heard anyone hum while casting spells before."

Chara huffs a little laugh, averting their eyes and picking some stray wet locks of hair out of a not-quite-present smile. "It's ... something Asriel taught me. If you have hard time finding the kind of inner peace you need to reach the magic in your soul, humming can help you calm down and feel better. You can't do magic if your soul is all caught up in stress, you know?" They spin the pan around one more time before holding it behind their back.

Frisk doesn't know. Hard as they've tried, they haven't been able to learn any of the stuff their friends have tried to teach them. They haven't produced so much as a spark of magic. At first, the others just thought Frisk needed more practice, but when days of practice turned into weeks of failure, and weeks of failure turned into months of frustration, the lessons just kind of ... stopped. Toriel doesn't know that Frisk has overheard her talk to Doctor Alphys about the possibility of Frisk being something called 'magic-deaf', but they have.

It's not hard to figure out what 'magic-deaf' means. Frisk thought that maybe it was because their level of Determination granted them a different kind of magic that interfered with their ability to do other magic, but if Chara can do it ...

Frisk finds themself gazing into the eyes of their own reflection in a puddle at their feet. The person in the mirror surface looks exhausted. They look like they could disappear into that big raincoat and never be found again. That doesn't sound too bad right about now. Okay, they don't want to disappear forever, they don't, but they do wish they could have just five minutes. Just five minutes of nonexistence. That sounds nice.

"You ... You don't feel bad at all?"

Chara looks back to them, unsure what they're talking about. The smile is gone.

"About leaving him behind?"

"..."
"He's going to be heartbroken."

Chara looks away so Frisk can't see their expression. They're ashamed to admit that they haven't spent a single thought on their adoptive brother since they left the cul-de-sac. He just kind of evaporated from their mind when all the bad stuff entered it. Someone like him doesn't belong in a world where things like this happen. Where children have to run away from home to save themselves.

Chara supposes that for a little while, they forgot he wasn't just an imaginary friend. A happy dream in an awful world.

"He's going to be fine without me," they hear themself say, and even before the last word has left them, they can hear just how fake it sounds. "He ... He doesn't need me anymore, right?"

Frisk tilts their head, trying to see their friend's expression. "It doesn't matter if he needs you. He loves you. All he ever wanted was to be with you."

Right. All he ever wanted was to be with Chara. But that wasn't the whole story, was it? He was lost. Lonely. Desperate to find someone who could make him feel again after he lost his soul. That was what it was all about, wasn't it? He couldn't love them, he couldn't love anyone, he was just thinking about himself the whole time.

Chara is sick of existing for other people.

(They're sick of existing, period, but that's nothing new.)

And besides-

"All he ever wanted was to be friends with someone like you," they tell Frisk. "You remember that, right? How he admitted it right to my face when he didn't know I was there?" The traffic light turns green again. Chara steps onto the road without waiting to see if the cars stop. "He's gonna get his wish now. I won't get in your way anymore."

"Chara, wait!"

Tires screech. A car stops inches away from the child crossing the road. Chara doesn't even flinch.

They're wrong. Frisk knows they're wrong. Asriel might have wished that he could've been friends with someone like Frisk from the beginning, but that doesn't change the fact that he loves Chara now, that he wants to be with them now, that he doesn't want his family to be torn apart again-!

Frisk hurries after their sibling, giving an apologetic wave to the driver who nearly ran Chara over.

They didn't mean to make them upset. They didn't mean to pry. Maybe they didn't even really want an honest answer.

Maybe they'd only hoped bringing up Asriel could change Chara's mind.

***

Asriel clutches the note so tightly his claws nearly break the paper.
Toriel's arms are still closed around him, but he barely feels her there, barely senses the way her breathing is still uneven or the way the paw locked around his shoulder has all five claws tangled up in the seams of his sweater. All he sees is the familiar scrawl on the paper, the little heart written as less-than-three even though the writer could've easily drawn a prettier one.

"We'll find them," Toriel tells him, leaning her chin on top of his head, apparently without noticing that he isn't leaning into her, or making any indication that he even wants her near him. "I promise you, we'll find them."

That's a joke, right? Does she really think that she - or anyone - could stop Frisk or Chara if the humans didn't want her to? No one tells either of them what to do. If something got them so riled up that they felt the need to ditch everyone in the middle of the night, there's nothing anyone can do to stop them.

She's so naive.

... No. No, he shouldn't think like that, he reminds himself. He shouldn't. She loves them, she wants them to be safe, of course she does. How can he be cruel enough to expect anything else of her? She just wants her children back, how could anyone blame her?

He just can't believe they left him behind. That's all. He isn't mad at her.

Maybe he's a little mad at them.

But he's sure they have their reasons. They must have. They wouldn't leave him if they didn't ..!

There's a knock at the door, the door to Frisk's room, and it opens halfway to reveal a solemn-looking Undyne, still in her coat, phone in hand.

"I've called up every ex-member of the royal guard," she says to Toriel. "Sent 'em to city hall. Papyrus is on his way there to give them the rundown of the situation and set everyone to work."

Toriel bows her head to the captain. "Thank you."

"Need me to call anyone else?"

She sighs, and finally she lets Asriel go, getting to her feet as she does. She shakes her head. "We have no one else to call. Asgore will know who to contact better than I do. But if you would drive me to the embassy, I would be very grateful." She leans down and kisses Asriel on the forehead before leaving him with the note, exiting Frisk's room and passing Undyne.

Undyne raises a brow at her. "You sure you wanna involve the humans in this?"

"Certainly."

They keep talking as they leave for the living room. Asriel stops listening. The letters on the paper seem to blur together the longer he stares at them. He sees valleys and hilltops in the childish curve of the Y and the little spirals inside the O's, and he wonders if his friends are in a similar place, crossing streams and overlooking grass still gleaming with last night's rain. He hopes so. It must be pretty.

He just hopes they're not headed for ...

"they're not in the mountain, if that's what you're worried about."

His first instinct is to be pissed off. When he realizes why, a tiny little amused smile makes its way to
his expression despite his best efforts to keep it down. Sans has always been fantastic at appearing without Asriel noticing. Or rather, without Flowey noticing.

Man, Sans is cool.

"You sure?" Asriel asks, turning to face the skeleton who turns out to be lounging in the armchair in the corner, feet up on the stack of sweaters near it.

"checked it inside and out. no trace of 'em."

Asriel gives him a somewhat skeptical look. "You're really quick for someone who doesn't move much." He's still smiling, though. He doesn't doubt that Sans has done his best on this particular mission. His 'best' tends to be far more than necessary, too, on the rare occasion when he deems the situation serious enough to push himself, so if he really couldn't find the missing kids in the mountain, they must be elsewhere.

Sans snorts and pinches the area between his brow ridges, the rubber-like bone giving just a little under his fingers. "yeah. funny how things work out like that. whatcha got there?"

Oh. Right. Asriel is still in the process of digging his claws through the only clue he's got to finding his missing adoptive siblings. Maybe he should, like, not do that. He quickly loosens his grip on the note and smoothes the crinkles before turning it around to show Sans. "Frisk's note."

"oh. 'course." His grin turns a little pained as he looks at the kid standing all alone in the middle of the room, clinging to the ruined paper like a lifeline. "you, uh ... you're pretty upset."

"Uh- uhm, yeah, I ... I really hope they're not in danger."

"you're disappointed they didn't bring you along."

"N-no, I'm not!"

"not even a little bit?"

"No."

"whatever you say, champ."

Asriel averts his eyes, frowning a bit, and holds the note to his heart. That's not fair, blaming him for something like that. The fact that it's true doesn't make it any nicer. Hasn't he been good ever since his resurrection? Why would anyone suspect he was anything but good? He's been doing his best!

"hey." Sans scoots off the arm chair and joins the little one in the room's center, hands in his pockets. "look, just 'cause you used to be not-so-nice back before, doesn't mean you gotta be perfect now."

Asriel tentatively moves his eyes back to Sans, not entirely convinced.

"i get it," Sans continues, lifting his shoulders in a kind of empathetic cringe. "your friends bailed on ya and you can't figure out why. it's okay to be pissed. you can love 'em and kind of hate 'em at the same time. that's like, default settings for family affection anyway."

"You don't hate Papyrus."

"just a word of advice, kid, maybe don't look up to me as your standard well-adjusted adult, okay? you end up like yours truly, your mom's gonna have a bone to pick with me." He gives Asriel a lazy wink and a grin that's a little less hollow than his usual one. It - and the pun, probably - brings the
smile back to the child's face and Sans considers that a victory in itself. He heaves a tired sigh, still a little worn out from searching the mountain, and shuffles over to the window. "seriously, though. don't push yourself to be something you're not. maybe there's still a little bit of that asshole plant left in you, but there's more to you than that. let him be grouchy for a bit, it's good for ya."

Asriel isn't sure it's good for him at all. The seams on his soul are still visible, some of them have even come undone. If he allows himself to be angry, won't that make it worse? If he doesn't hold on to his love and empathy for other people, won't it fade away? He knows the others don't really get what's wrong with him or why he hasn't gotten better, but Asriel thinks he knows why. It's because Flowey is still in there somewhere. Asriel is just one bad thought too many away from becoming like him again, and someone like him can't keep a soul.

If only he could stop being so mean and selfish all the time. But it's so hard to make the bad thoughts go away.

Maybe if he hadn't argued with Chara so much, they and Frisk would have taken him with them.

Asriel doesn't really notice when he moves over to stand next to Sans. He doesn't really notice how alone he feels, reading and re-reading the note in his hands over and over again. He doesn't even notice the commotion outside, neighbors entering and leaving each other's houses, cars parked temporarily on the sidewalk, monsters shouting to each other to hear if there are any leads? Has anyone found any clues? Where do they search next?

All Asriel registers is the shrill voice in his head throwing a tantrum over being left behind. It feels like a terrible headache. He spent so long searching for Chara. And he missed Frisk when they finally got to leave the Underground without him. This is not fair.

"Do you think they're okay?" he asks Sans, re-reading the note one more time.

Sans seriously considers the question for a moment. Then he nods slowly, grinding his teeth together in thought. "for the time being, yeah. yeah, i think so. they're both pretty tough. should prolly be more worried about everyone else, to be honest."

Oh no. No, he did not just go there. Asriel discovers that this is not the tone Sans should be using with him right now. The voice in the back of his mind does not have the self-restraint to be nice about this. He glares at his old enemy from under his brows, lines appearing between his nose and the corner of his mouth in a pre-snarl. "You need to quit being so paranoid about Chara. It's messing them up."

Sans holds a hand up, shifting away from the kid. "hey, easy, i'm just sayin'. someone crosses 'em, i wouldn't wanna be in that guy's shoes."

"You wouldn't just happen to have any idea why they left, would you?" Asriel can hear the wry tone in his own voice and he hates it. Hates how easily it comes to him, how difficult it suddenly is to hold back. He can't let Sans talk badly about Chara. It's Chara. Their name alone still rings holy in his head, or unholy, demonic, maybe, but definitely important. Too important to slander like this. They were apart for too long for him to ever doubt that. He knows exactly what a world without Chara looks like and it's not a world he wants anything to do with.

"not a clue," Sans replies in that subtly over-dramatic way that means that he's absolutely exaggerating and that there's a fair chance he totally does know. "what do i look like, a mind-reader?"

Asriel's almost-snarl fades into a pout. He looks back to the note. He can't say that he isn't at least a
little relieved when his anger dies away on its own, unable to keep boiling when he's this confused and unsure of what's really going on, unsure of what he's missing. He takes a deep breath, letting the bitterness settle back under the surface again.

"I just didn't wanna be left out," he says, hanging his head. "I know it's stupid. I just thought that maybe now that I was myself again, I could kind of ... help the others out, you know? If they ever needed me. Instead of just being a dumb flower making everything worse."

Sans watches him for a moment, brows furrowed. Then he turns away from the window to face Asriel properly, narrowing his eye sockets in a scrutinizing stare. "Say, you want your friends back, right?"

Asriel looks back up at him with wide eyes. "Y-yeah?" He can hear an idea forming in the other monster's metaphorical brain.

"And i wanna make sure no one gets stabbed. Just in general, not pointin' any fingers here."

He ignores the jab for now.

"Whaddaya say you 'n me team up? You made for a real clever evil mastermind back in the day. a right pain in the tail bone, but still. You're used to tracking the humans from a distance, you gotta know how to think like them, right?"

Asriel shrugs, not exactly proud of what he did, but still maybe a little bit proud of how he did it. "I could probably do that."

"Sweet. You wanna go on a road trip with the guy who beat your best friends to death multiple times while trying to save the world?"

Asriel cringes a bit at the thought, but at least Sans is being blunt with him. It's weirdly nice to deal with someone who owes up to their awfulness for once. He raises a brow at the Judgment Hall's old keeper. "You make it sound a lot less cool than it was."

Sans snorts. "Ain't nothin' cool about murder. You do what you gotta do, doesn't mean you have to like it. I'm not saying it wasn't fantastic stress relief, but seeing your own kid's mangled corpse on the floor afterwards kinda took the fun out of it."

"Yeah, I guess ..."

"You wanna come along?"

Asriel digs one of his fangs into his lip, watching Sans for a long moment. His parents won't like it if he goes out alone while their other kids are missing. But he's not really alone. Sans is there. He doubts either of his parents would be able to think of someone more trustworthy than him in a situation like this.

Asriel gives a single, sharp nod. He's determined to find his friends. And if anyone can help him, it's Sans.

"Let's do it!"
"you seem like you know exactly where we're headed," Sans says, and even though it's not really a question, he makes it sound like one.

"I couldn't always keep track of Frisk and Chara while we were in the Underground," Asriel explains, a little distracted. "You kept showing up at weird moments and I had to go hide, and then when I came back, they'd usually already left. But I knew how to find them."

The two of them are walking along the docks in a city by a harbor. It's only a short bus ride from their hometown near Mt. Ebott. Not that Sans bothered to use a bus at all. The machine lodged in Asriel's spine is still wheezing like an overworked laptop after being hauled through a shortcut. Maybe they shouldn't use magical means of getting around too often.

"The trick is to cut them off before they move on to the next area. And who's going to find out if they do?"

Sans looks around the harbor, not entirely sure how a bunch of human strangers are going to be able to help them. Frisk and Chara have already been reported missing, Toriel went to the embassy just this morning to get the humans' help. The few monsters passing by don't appear to be anyone special, either.

"the ... boss at the end of the stage?" Those don't exist on the surface. Here, the final boss are those last twenty minutes before his shift at New Grillby's ends on Friday afternoons. Sans shakes his head and looks at the kid walking next to him. "i have no idea. tell me."

"The one who's going to help them escape, of course!"

Asriel leads him to a an old broken down dingy tied to the dock right next to the harbor's kiosk. It's made of wood, mostly, and when the waves reveal a bit of its underside, they show off a whole farm of barnacles living underneath the boat's belly. Asriel leans down to look into the cabin and knocks on the railing.

"Hello? Mx. River Person?"

Sans grins a bit, impressed. That is admittedly a smart move. How does Asriel even know they live here? He's never been here before, as far as Sans knows.

A bell rings behind them.
"Oh," sounds a familiar creaky voice. "Did you want something?"

When they turn around, they find the River Person exiting the kiosk, a hot dog in one hand and a hot cat in the other. Or rather, wrapped up in their cloak, which appears to wrap around a pair of hands. Those could also be claws. Or an extra pair of very bendable feet. They do use multiple pairs of pants, so who knows.

"Hi!" Asriel greets the River Person. "We were looking for you!"

"Angels," the River Person replies, tilting their hooded head. "A rare sight these days."

Asriel doesn't bother asking what that means. They're kind of a character, not everything they say makes a whole lot of sense. But they do know more than most people do.

"We need to find the missing humans. I know the monsters have sent out search parties and the humans have police looking for them, but I'm not sure we can catch them that way, if they don't want to be found." Asriel takes a few cautious steps toward the mysterious monster. This used to be easier when he was a flower and didn't really care if the River Person wanted to help or not. Usually, he'd make them help, if they didn't feel like being useful. He can't do that now. He won't. "Do you think you can help us?" he asks. "I know you and your- family? Or ... or friends? I-I'm not saying I think all river people are related or anything, if they're not your-! If-!" He pauses when he feels a hand on his shoulder.

"you and your squad run most of the public transportation in this region," Sans interrupts. "junior here wants to know if you'll keep an eye out. I know you guys don't wanna take sides in stuff like this, but trust me, everything's gonna turn out a lot less messy if you just report back to us if-slash-when you see 'em."

Asriel nods eagerly. "Yeah, yeah, what he said! Please, we really need to find them! The oldest one is like, only a week older than me, they could get really hurt wandering around by themselves!"

For a moment, the River Person doesn't move an inch. They only watch, and with their face hidden in the shadows of their hood, Asriel briefly wonders if they've fallen asleep standing up. Then, without a word, they move around their guests and over to the boat. A third appendage moves under the cloak near the middle of their chest and something vaguely hand-shaped reaches out to pet the ship's wooden bow. Suddenly, the wood springs to life, protruding outward and melting into the face of a dog. The dog face gives a happy little bark and sticks out a paler wooden tongue. The River Person scratches it behind the ear and feeds it the hot cat.

"Never give a dog a hot dog," they say gravely. "That would be barbaric."

"amen to that," Sans says empathetically. He gives Asriel an apologetic look behind the strange monster's back. Patience is usually needed when talking to this one.

"Beware of the child with deadly smiles, they are not their own," the River Person continues. "Have you seen the machine in the basement? Same smile." They shudder. Then they take a bite out of the hot dog. "Mrph. 's crrpurhh."

Asriel looks back up at Sans, but neither of them can tell if that's a 'yes' or a 'no.' Are they talking about Chara? There aren't a whole lot of deadly, smiley children running around this place, as far as Asriel knows. Not ones you have to beware of, anyway.

They continue: "I will help you find the little ones. But I can't promise you'll like what you find. Not that it's any of my business." They give the dog head one last little pat before sliding over the railing
and onto the deck of the boat. "I have alerted the others just now. We will tell you if we find them."

Well. That was easier than expected. Less messy than usual, too.

"you're a peach, river," Sans says, grin nearly reaching his eye sockets, and he gives the River Person a thumbs-up.

"No, I'm a Riverman," says the River Person. Then they pause, hood lowered a bit, seemingly lost in thought for a second. "Or am I a Riverwoman ..?"

Sans gives a short, snort-y laugh. "whatever rows your boat, pal. see you 'round, okay?"

Asriel is about to follow him in the opposite direction of the boat, when the River Person calls out to him.

"E-excuse me, your majesty?"

He stops and turns to look back at them.

"Can we ..." Their voice is smaller now, a little choked, somehow, and they bow their head in something like meekness. "... perhaps do things like this from now on? It is much less frightening this way."

They can't mean- can they-? That's not possible. Although it would explain-

"I'm sorry," Asriel says on a trembling breath, halting his thoughts in the middle of the realization. "I'm so sorry-!" He shouldn't be alarmed when people remember. Everyone should remember. It isn't fair that he got a second chance in the first place without consequences for what he did, without anyone judging him, without anyone being able to rightfully hate him for everything he's done to hurt them, he should be relieved when they remember, it's only right-!

"come on, kid." Sans' voice is low and close by, and though he sounds as laidback as ever, Asriel can hear something else at the edge of his voice, too, something a little warmer, a little gentler. "we better get going."

"It is alright," the River Person says and opens the door to the boat's cabin. "I suppose it was in another life. See you soon, little prince."

Asriel wants to stay with them. He wants to tell them that he really is sorry, that it won't happen again, that even if he stops being himself someday, he won't ever let it happen again. He has decided this, no matter what happens to him in the future, he won't repeat his past mistakes. He'll do anything to keep himself from hurting others the way Flowey did.

But all he can do for now is leave them alone. Leave them alone, and when the opportunity presents itself, he'll prove to them and anyone else who might remember that they have no reason to fear him anymore.

He's good now. He won't give anyone reason to think otherwise ever again.

"where to next, boss?" Sans asks him, as the two of them head in the direction of the city's center.

Asriel thinks for a moment. Then he says: "I think I have an idea."
In the evening, Frisk suggests they go investigate the harbor. Chara takes that to mean 'let's steal a boat, how hard can it be', but as it turns out, Frisk was merely aware of the fact that the kiosk there sells fantastic hot dogs, and even hot cats, occasionally - they're not even up for pinching a floating vehicle they have no idea how to drive! Ugh, Chara's never gonna get anywhere with this goody two-shoes nerd in tow.

"You didn't wanna waste all our money on food, I make sure we don't waste all our money on food," Frisk says without a hint of remorse. They're sitting on the wooden dock, legs dangling over the edge of it, sucking on a patch of dried ketchup they spilled on the edge of their sleeve while they ate. "How were you gonna steal a boat anyway? You don't have a boat license."

Chara stomps across the deck of the old wooden dingy they found next to the kiosk. It's in terrible shape, but they had hoped that would mean the locks would also be in terrible shape. It didn't. They're displeased with this development.

"Who needs a license for a boat!?" they shout, throwing their arms in the air. "There's a steering wheel! There's probably a gas pedal! Who the hell am I gonna run over in the ocean!? Frisk, quit eating food off your clothes, it's disgusting!"

Frisk sticks their tongue out at their sibling instead. "Shush, my clothes are the cleanest in the business. I could drink the finest of wines from this and the wine people wouldn't even get mad." They don't know who the wine people are, but since someone has decided that wine can be very expensive, there must exist a people who guard these gross-smelling treasures. It's only logical to assume so.

"Could not." Chara rolls their eyes, but there is a little bit of mirth in their squawky voice. "Mom would freak if you started drinking before you were like, fifty years old."

Knowing Toriel, she's most likely in the middle of freaking already, seeing as two of her children just spontaneously evaporated into thin air overnight without a trace, so Frisk isn't sure what difference it would really make. They lie back on the dock, putting the burnt pan upside-down under their head like a pillow and gazing up at the still-cloudy sky. A few cracks have appeared in the cloud blanket and one, two, three tiny stars are peeking through, desperately trying to light up the night for the children wandering the harbor all alone, before they drown in the clouds again. That's weird. The sea is on the ground, but the stars are the ones drowning ...

A dull thump right next to their head makes Frisk's eyes snap open. When did they close them? They blink a few times, and when they look back up, the cloud cover is as impenetrable as ever. Did they only dream up the stars?

A pale face appears in their field of vision.

"Oh no, no, no," Chara says and pulls on Frisk's arm. "We've been over this. You're not sleeping just yet. Get up."

"The floor is really sooo-ooot," Frisk whines, making themself as heavy as possible. "We haven't slept in two daaaaayys ..."

Without missing a beat, Chara pushes the kid's head up, puts their hands under their arms and hauls them into a sitting position, completely ignoring their protests. "Wrong. I haven't slept in two days. You slept on both bus rides. Move it or I'm pushing you into the water!"
With a wordless, drawn-out groan, Frisk pulls their legs up and gets back on their feet, wobbling a bit. "I do so much to help you," they sniffle. "I don't understand why you hate me."

They expect some kind of snappy comeback, or an insult, or a 'help' is a very generous description', or something like that. When they realize it isn't happening, they turn to look at their friend, confused. Chara turns out to be watching them, a cold gleam in their eyes, gnawing on the inside of their cheek. Before Frisk can ask what's wrong, they counter the unspoken question with a question.

"Can I ask you to do something for me?" they say.

Frisk supposes their own puzzled expression is enough of a 'yes.'

"Don't say things like that."

"Things like what?"

"Don't say I hate you." Their eyes narrow, and suddenly, they're sparking with anger. It comes out of nowhere. "I don't hate you. I never hated you. Ever. Not even when you were messing up my plans."

Frisk shakes their head and steps closer to them. "Chara, I- I was joking, I know you don't hate me, of course you don't!"

"There is no 'of course', after all the shit we've been through, we probably should hate each other! So don't joke about that!" Their voice cracks on the last syllable and they stomp their foot, making the wood creak. The noise ruins their focus and they look down in confusion, seemingly surprised to see the unfamiliar surface under their feet. When they realize where the noise came from, they seem to remember the context of the situation, too. They're overreacting. They know they're overreacting. Their anger deflates like a popped balloon. "Sorry," they say, voice thin and bordering on a strange, kind of resigned hysteria. They wipe the wet rims of their eyes with the back of their fingers. "It's just ... I know I can be kind of a jerk sometimes, but- but I'm really scared and you're the only one who can help me, and I know it's a lot of trouble and I'm putting you in danger, and I promised you I wouldn't do that anymore and-"

Frisk cuts them off with a hug. At first, the frightened kid is rigid in their arms, shivering with cold and weariness and probably fear, too, but then the tension slowly melts out of them. They don't hug back, but they don't struggle, either. Frisk suspects they might be too tired to lift their arms. Their soul feels dull, even though it's only two breastbones away from Frisk's own, the fluttery little thing emitting waves of indefinable energy, as though it's constantly falling asleep and trying to wake itself up again.

"I'm so tired," Chara whispers into Frisk's shoulder. Frisk suspects it's not the kind of tired sleep is able to cure.

"Chara?"

"M-hmm?"

"I didn't wanna ask, because I didn't wanna know the answer. But now I need to ask, and I need you to promise me that you'll say 'yes', or I can't let you go any further."

"..."

"Promise me."
"Okay."

They think about each word, hard, before saying it out loud. No loopholes, no possible double meanings. "When you leave and I go back home," they say, "will I really see you again before I die? Are you really going to be okay? I mean really really?"

Chara doesn't reply. They hardly breathe. But little by little, the odd heartbeat in their soul opens up into a steady, warm energy, a little closer to what it's normally like. Finally, they find the strength to lift their arms and close them around their sibling.

"Would I put this much effort into running away if I didn't want to at least ... try?" The hysteric edge in their voice smoothes and fades, and their tone lowers just a little. "If I die, he could find my soul again. I wouldn't be able to protect myself. I know I won't live forever, I know, but I'm- I'm scared." Carefully, they slip away from the hug, putting their arms around themself instead. "I know that's not really super comforting or anything, but at least it's true, right? I'm too scared to leave you forever. And knowing that maybe I'll get to see you again makes it not so bad. You won't forget me, will you?"

"Never," Frisk promises. They wouldn't be able to if they tried. Sometimes, they have. It never worked.

Chara nods a bit, satisfied with the answer. Privately, they find a not-so-nice part of themself hoping that Frisk will miss them. A not-so-not-so-nice part hopes that Asriel won't. Knowing their luck, it's going to be the other way around. Frisk will forget them, Asriel is going to be too much of a crybaby to get by on his own.

They lied to themself earlier today. They know he won't ever be fine only having Frisk around, because Chara made him care about them, they made him dependent on them, that's what they do - they ruin nice things just because they can. Now he's going to have to learn how to be his own person again and won't that be a sight to see? The kid can barely pick a flavor of spider muffin without consulting Chara first, how is he going to run a whole kingdom on his own? Chara's kind of in the middle of saving their own hide right now.

It's all messed up. They didn't want this. But like hell they're just going to accept having their soul shredded for the 'greater good' or whatever bullshit reason Sans is going to use to justify finally winning the game himself. No, that's not how they're gonna play. Asriel is just going to have to have to deal with things on his own. Chara's kind of in the middle of saving their own hide right now.

"We really should find a place to sleep," Frisk says.

Chara nods again. "Okay."

"And we're not stealing the River Person's boat."

"Okay."

Chapter End Notes

The title of this chapter is, of course, a reference to the song "Take Us Back" by Alela Diane.
Wooh, one of my own favorite chapters! Full o' headcanons.

Should probably mention that Sans + Toriel interactions are supposed to be up for interpretation. Since this really isn't the time for shippy things, I consider it strictly platonic for the time being, but you do you. There's a one-line reference to another tiny boat of mine, but it's just a throwaway line because we need some gosh durn light in this not-so-pleasant time.

The only way Sans is able to convince Toriel to come home at all the following night is by promising to update her on what he and Asriel have found out during the day. It's 4am when she arrives, dark circles around her steely red eyes, fur bristling from equal parts weariness and frustration. She doesn't bother with a 'hello', instead demanding to know where Asriel is. Sans tells her not to worry, the kid is safe in his chamber in the basement. He put the little one to sleep at a reasonable time (midnight is reasonable for normal people, right?), she's got nothing to worry about. Toriel apologizes for being snippy. Sans makes her a cup of tea.

"I just cannot imagine where they possibly could have gone," she says, leaning over the kitchen table she ends up seated at, rubbing her forehead, presumably trying to soothe a headache. "Or why they would leave, for that matter! I thought ..." She swallows hard, steadying her voice. "I thought they were finally going to be alright. They both appeared to be getting better. I thought they finally felt safe where they were."

Sans has a decent idea of why they left. He curses himself for not being more careful. What, he thought the kid actually slept at night? Like beforementioned normal people? Of course they were awake. Of course they heard. The little hellspawn isn't anything like normal people. If they're like anyone, they're like him. Or maybe he's like them. He can't tell the difference anymore. He can't bring himself to care.

"i'm sure they did, tori," he says to her and reaches a hand across the table, palm facing up. "you know frisk. they got something on their mind, they ain't gonna stop before it's done. ain't nothing you can do to convince 'em otherwise, either."

Toriel takes his hand, clinging to it as though for balance, despite already sitting down. Her usually warm paw is shivering cold and the pads are dry and cracked. She must have been out searching for the kids herself in the late-autumn night.

"I only hope that Chara will be able to protect Frisk." Her brows furrow and she glares into the solid black tea in her mug. "I loathe myself for hoping so, I would so hate to see anything more feed into that twisted self-image of theirs, but if ever there was a time when their ... tendencies might be of any sort of use to them ..."

Sans finds himself glad that she isn't looking at him or the look on his face might have prompted more than a few awkward questions. Like why his expression is one of pure terror at the prospect of Chara protecting their adoptive sibling from harm. Or why he's looking at Toriel like she has turned into a ghost.
"so you're, uh ..." He coughs a bit, trying to find a casual tone of voice that won't come on its own. "you're pretty aware of the kid's issues, huh?"

"I am their mother," she replies, and there's grief in her voice, an old grief, the kind one has learned to live with and not question, the kind one has decided is worth shouldering. The steel in her eyes melts into tears that refuse to spill. "Of course I am aware. My poor Chara has never been alright. They have always been convinced that they were wicked, though I cannot for the life of me understand why."

It strikes Sans that he could tell her right now. They're all alone, the others are far away, still searching the city for the missing children, no one else would hear, no one else would interfere. He doesn't need Fallen to be alright anymore, he doesn't need them to feel loved or welcome, their mother could hate them or fear them to her heart's content if she was so inclined and it wouldn't change a thing for him. He could warn her not to turn her back on the human, warn her not to trust them, warn her not to hope that they will protect Frisk, because even if someone else started the fight, they would be the one to finish it, and if they started hurting others now, if they came to remember just how easy it is, he's not sure they would be able to stop.

He could tell her everything, and he and Papyrus would no longer have to be alone in protecting everyone.

But the tears in her eyes, the slump in her shoulders, the way she holds his hand like he's the only thing left in the world for her to safely lean on - he realizes that he can't do something like that to her. He can't tell her that she would be better off if one of her children never came back home. He can't tell her that her child is a murderer.

"But how do you know?" Toriel asks, suddenly sitting upright and moving her glassy gaze to him, frowning. "Have they spoken to you about this? They haven't troubled you in any way, have they?"

Sans paints his usual easy grin back on. "nah, y'know. you try to stop someone from toying with the fabric of space and time for long enough, they tend to get miffed after a while. i thought it was just a side-effect of their whole ... lacking-the-vast-majority-of-their-soul-deal, but it's pretty clear the kid's been through some stuff. i don't blame 'em for actin' out, i really don't." It's so easy to lie about these things by now, it's not even funny. He's not sure why he feels the urge to laugh anyway. He resists. Now is really not the time.

Toriel sighs and leans her head on her free hand. Thankfully, she seems to take his answer at face value.

"They have barely ever spoken to me of their experiences, but I am no fool. It takes no level of brilliance to decipher what kind of childhood they have had. And though I am ... beyond happy to see them being given a second chance, a part of me ..." She closes her eyes and presses her lips tightly together, trying to hold in the tears. She takes a deep, shuddery breath. "For the longest time, I could not help but hope that at the very least, my child had found peace at last. That even though they had been taken away from me, at the very least they had been taken away from pain, too. After everything they had been through, I wished for them to sleep peacefully. Now they're back and I know that instead of being granted peace, they were hurting this whole time. I didn't want that for them. I didn't."

"we'll find them, 'ellie," Sans says to her and puts his other hand over hers, too. "and when we do, we're ... we're gonna make sure they don't hurt again. we'll give 'em the resolution they need." That's no lie. Which makes it worse. If he had a heart, it would ache, but he doesn't.

Toriel finds it in her to look back at him, watery eyes be damned. "Did you find out anything today?
Anything at all?"

"not much, but the kid was a huge help. he's managed to convince the river people to report back to
us personally if the humans go anywhere by the public transportation they control. talked to some
other folks, too. he's pretty damn bright for a 10-year-old, i gotta say." He leaves out how Asriel
knew exactly where to go to find the Temmies' headquarters and how he knew the spell to summon
The Things in the Dark by heart, and how he spent the rest of the day gathering Vulkin lava,
Moldsmal slime, bottled lightning and other oddities that he refuses to tell Sans the purpose of. Toriel
doesn't need to know that her son used to be a criminal mastermind on top of the whole reality-
bending ghost thing. She's already having a rough time, no need to mess her up more.

Toriel agrees that her son is indeed smarter than he's usually given credit for. She's happy that Sans is
looking after him while she searches for her other children, she tells him, but Sans insists that Asriel
really is a great help and that there's nothing to thank him for. Asriel is the one doing all the work.

"you should get some shut-eye," he tells her with something that would be closer to a smile if his
worry didn't shine right through it. "you look like death, no offense."

"None taken," she says around a yawn. "Ugh. Excuse me." She lets her hand slip from his and puts
both paws around her mug as she lifts it to drink, afraid of spilling the hot tea in her sorry state if she
doesn't steady the movement properly. She finishes the rest of it in one go, then stands up. "I am not
sure I can afford to sleep, however. Not until my children are home safe."

Sans scoots his chair away from the table and stands up with her. "naw, come on, man, you won't be
any good to 'em if you pass out halfway across a road somewhere. we got a perfectly good couch
here if you want me to wake you up when me and asriel go back out."

Toriel shakes her head. "I am sorry. I cannot sleep knowing that the two of them are out there all
alone. What kind of mother would I be if I stayed here in the comfort of your home while my
children are freezing to death in this horrific cold?"

A more useful one, he's pretty sure. Something tells him that they're not going to find the humans
over the next couple of hours anyway, no matter how far and wide she's ready to search. But he
knows he can't argue with her. He doesn't want to, either. He knows exactly how she feels.
Sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do.

"alright." He lumbers around the table to follow her out. "but at least go with one of the others, yeah?
i think alphys caught a couple hours of sleep earlier, she can like, help maneuver you around corners
and stuff."

She huffs and gives him a little good-natured backhand-slap on the shoulder. "I am not that
sleep-deprived, thank you very much!"

"whatever you say, 'ellie."

A tired little smile blooms on her face despite her worry lines. She removes her coat from the coat
rack by the door and puts it on with all the grace of a queen putting on her battle cape. Despite her
protests, she does find her phone in her pocket and sends a quick message to Alphys, asking if they
can search together. Alphys warns her that Asgore is searching with her right now, but Toriel really
doesn't have the energy to care at the moment. Alphys promises that they'll come pick her up.

"You will watch over Asriel for me, will you not?" she asks Sans, one hand already on the
doorknob. It's not really a question, he suspects.
"won't leave his side for a minute," Sans says seriously, looking her in the eyes as he does. If making sure Asriel is safe is all he can do for her right now, he'll at the very least try to do his best.

Toriel leans down to kiss him on the forehead. "Thank you."

He doesn't deserve this. He doesn't deserve her gratitude, her affection, not even her trust. If she knew why her kids ran away ...

It doesn't matter. It's for her own good. It's for everyone's. For their safety, for their future. Maybe it's selfish of him to put off the inevitable, to let her believe that she can trust him and that he means no harm, but Sans has already hit rock bottom, hasn't he? How much lower can he sink? He might as well enjoy these last few days with her before she finds out what he's planning and ... well, kills him, most likely. If Asgore or Alphys or Undyne or any of their other friends don't get to him first.

It's going to be alright. He's going to make sure that they'll all be alright. Even if he won't necessarily be there to experience it.

After all, no matter how hard he tries or how close victory appears to be, it's all going to be reset anyway. He keeps trying, he keeps failing, the cycle continues. That's just how it is. The one thing he has left to cling to is his attempts to make things better, despite knowing full well that it'll amount to nothing.

He's okay with that. At least he's got something to do.

"Perhaps you are the one who should be getting some 'shut-eye'," Toriel remarks upon seeing the way he drifts off, deep in thought.

He manages to laugh, though it's a little strained. "prolly should. good luck out there."

"As to you."

***

Even though the humans in the area must surely have been alerted to the situation involving the missing kids by now, Frisk and Chara don't exactly have to be sneaky about where they go in the city by the harbor. No human seems to take notice of the children wandering the streets, one of them pale enough for their face to light up the shadows under their hood, the other one dragging an old frying pan after them and slouching under the weight of it.

They spend the first night hiding in the attic of a church, curled up under dusty old carpets they find in a big wooden chest that conveniently isn't more locked than a swift swing of the burnt pan can fix. When they find no means of escaping the city the following day, they return to the church at night, only to find it crawling with humans and a stray monster or two. It must be some kind of holiday that neither of them are aware of. Against Frisk's better judgment, the two of them break into a furniture shop across from the church, set Frisk's phone alarm to 4am and pass out on a couch in the back.

With the law already thoroughly broken and beyond repair, Frisk does the mental equivalent of aggressively shrugging while pulling a deeply disappointed grimace and throws caution to the increasingly-cold wind.

The next day, the two of them find a train and the conductor of the train finds a thinly-veiled distraction in the form of garbage thrown at one of the vehicle's windows, and then the passengers of
the train find the bathroom mysteriously locked the whole way to their destination.

Chara is convinced that climbing through the bathroom's window and up to the roof is the only way to truly enjoy a train ride. Frisk is convinced that they would like all of their organs to stay on the inside of their skin. Chara calls them the not-very-proper synonym for 'wuss.' Frisk convinces themself that they're changing their mind because they don't want the other child to feel lonely all by themself up on that big scary roof and not at all because they're very slowly losing their patience with all the colorful insults they've been exposed to over the last three days.

Both kids end up on the roof.

The sunrise looks like the backside of a child's water-painted drawing, bright, dull orange seeping through the white cloud layer and promising the beings on the earth below that if only the clouds would part, the sight would be really pretty, no, seriously, trust it on this one, it looks really nice-

The result is a little sad, but at least the sun is doing its best and that's what matters, Frisk thinks.

They look to the misty horizon ahead of the train tracks disappearing over the invisible curve of the flatland. They're kind of scared there's gonna be a low-hanging bridge incoming, or a sharp turn, or some other unforeseen circumstance that'll confirm that yeah, maybe sitting on the roof of a train was actually a bad idea after all. But there's nothing but fields of dull, bluish-gray grass and moorland as far as the eye can see.

Frisk looks to their other side, to the mostly-human child sitting next to them, eyes closed, red hair blowing in the wind, strands of it whipping across their face, apparently not bothering them in the least. Are they smiling? It's hard to tell. When they're happy, really, truly happy and at peace, Chara smiles with their eyes more than anything. Frisk envies them a little. They don't look tired at all.

Frisk pulls their legs up from where they're hanging over the side of the roof and wraps their arms around them.

"Chara?" they say, their little voice almost drowning in the harsh wind. "What do you wanna be when you grow up?"

Chara isn't sure how to answer that. Most kids their age are just now starting to realize that their childhood dreams maybe aren't going to work out, that maybe being an astronaut is a little too trying, or that they should already have been practicing for a long time if they really wanted to be a ballerina. Most children want to be firefighters, adventurers, pilots. The kind of things you see on tv all the time.

Chara used to hope that they would be gone before they grew up. Gone as in dead, gone as in assimilated into the fusion they shared with Asriel, gone as in transformed into something much larger and crueler than their former self could ever hope to be, and finally gone as in forgotten. Maybe if no one remembered them anymore, they could forget, too. Maybe then they could sleep.

They think back to the person they used to be before all this. Before they knew there was a way out. What did that person want? Did they even dare to want anything for themself?

They open their eyes to the odd sunrise and their brows arch down just a little. "I don't know," they admit. "I guess maybe ... I used to want to be a writer once." The blush on their face deepens and they pick at the tips of their hair to distract themself. "But ma didn't like that. She said it was for freaks and loners." Which, okay, isn't too far off the mark, they suppose. At least they're on the right track.
It takes Frisk a moment to remember that 'ma' and 'mom' are two very different people. Chara doesn’t talk about the former much. Frisk leans their chin on their knees, watching their friend with a mix of worry and curiosity.

"That's not true," they say. "Writers tell nice stories about hope and love and friendship all the time."

Chara's gaze drops to the worn knees on their jeans. They kick their legs back and forth a bit, careful not to kick back into the wall of the train, just in case anyone hears. "Maybe hope and love and friendship just aren't for everyone. I don't know if I could even write about those things. I'd probably just write horror stuff. Vampires, demons, people getting maimed ..."

Frisk cringes and tentatively raises a hand. "As your former brain roommate, do I get to veto this?"

"No, you don't!" Chara laughs and elbows the other kid in the side. "Creative liberty!"

It feels kind of wrong to laugh along with them about something like that, but Frisk can't help it. Maybe it's just because they're tired and they haven't eaten in a little while, but sitting here on the roof of a train, far away from home, the sun rising on a world that's barely awake ... the past kind of feels like a different life.

It doesn't hurt so much anymore.

"You'd be a great writer," they say after a moment or two. "No matter what you wanna write. Maybe someday I'm gonna pick up a book you wrote and even though your real name isn't on it, because you don't want the others to find you, I'll still know it's you 'cause when I read it, I can read it in your voice without it sounding weird. And I can show it to Asriel and he'll know that you're okay, because he can hear it too, and when we read it, it's like you're home again. Like you're really there with us."

A little smile lingers on Chara's face, mostly in their eyes, and they nod, softly at first, almost to themselves, and then again with more determination. "I'd like that," they say, and then again: "I'd like that." The smile turns a bit lopsided as they turn it on Frisk. "And what about you? You gonna be everyone's babysitter all your life? Or are you gonna aim higher?"

"I don't think it really gets higher than all of monsterkind's ambassador."

"Sure, it does." There's a familiar drawl in their voice now, and it pulls their smile into a toothy grin. They mirror Frisk's position, putting their arms around their knees. "Azzy's gonna be king, but you could totally rule stuff from behind the scenes. That's what mom used to do."

Frisk pulls a face and sticks their tongue out. "Ew! I'm not gonna marry my brother!"

"Oh, riiiiiight, I forgot, you're gonna marry the armless kid, aren't you?"

"Sh-shut up!" Frisk shoves both of their hands in Chara's face, totally because they're trying to make the other human be quiet and definitely not because their own face is currently in the process of trying to match the color of Chara's hair and they don't want Chara to see.

Chara laughs again and retorts by poking their sibling in the ribs until the little squeaky noises they make reach a frequency only the Annoying Dog would be able to hear. They used to hate how ticklish the kid was when the two of them shared the same set of nerve endings, but now that Chara has a body of their own, it's a very easily exploited weakness.

Frisk ends up grabbing both of their hands to make them stop. "You really are a jerk!"
"The jerkiest of them all," Chara teases, but they stop fighting back and let Frisk more or less throw their hands back at them. Chara puts their arms behind their head and lie back on the roof. "Anyway, I didn't mean you should like, *FLIRT your way to the top, I was just sayin' our bro trusts you and if you like, got a job as an advisor or something, you could rule monsterkind and get stinkin’ rich at the same time. Totally legal. Minimal amounts of underhanded methods required. Just remember to get him hitched to some village idiot with no political know-how and you're set." They shrug.

Frisk puts up their hood and lies back too, drumming their hands on their stomach. It's starting to feel a little hollow. "You sound like you've thought this through a little too much. 's there something you wanna tell me?" They cock a brow at Chara.

"Hmm. Nah." Chara watches the poofy clouds drift by overhead with a faraway look in their eyes. "But everyone's got good days sometimes, right? Days where you wonder if maybe laying waste to the surface world and ruling it with an iron fist while sharing a grotesque amalgamated body with your best friend is maybe ... overdoing it a bit. Heh." Their chipper voice falls to something quieter, softer. "I used to think I was just being weak on those days. But I think that maybe if you'd been there, you could've made me change my mind for real. I wouldn't have minded staying in the Underground forever, if only you and the others were there with me." They close their eyes, shutting out the brightening sky in favor of the reddish-black darkness on the inside of their lids.

They feel something pat their arm. Then they feel it again, a little more persistent this time. They can't help but smile even wider as they remove one hand from its place behind their head and lay it on the roof next to them, so Frisk can hold it.

"Sorry I took so long to find you."

Chara shakes their head. "It's hard to control which century you're born into. No hard feelings, buddy."

Frisk sounds like they're about to reply when a sound like a cross between an angry bear and a baby earthquake sounds from their stomach.

Chara opens one lazy eye. "Wow. You wanna, uh ... maybe do something about that noise?"

"For the last time, I'm not eating my phone cover! I don't care that it's made of leather!"

"I'm just saying that leather is made of the same animal as beef is. You don't have to like it, I'm just saying it's an option."

"It is not! We should get off this train ..."

Chara gives their hand a squeeze before letting go and sitting up to try to judge how much further they've gotten. The moorland still looks as monotone as it did five minutes ago.

"In the next town, okay?" they say. "We'll get something nice. No more junk food."

Frisk crosses their arms over their chest and glares up at them. "You promise?"

"I promise."
"you ever gonna tell me what you're doing or is it a surprise, or ...?"

Asriel cocks a brow at the usually-patient-but-maybe-not-so-much-these-days skeleton walking next to him down the cobblestone path snaking through the enormous greenhouse behind Asgore's castle. "C'mon, Sans. What do people usually use a bunch of random magical artifacts for?" he says with a sly little grin. It feels cool to be the one with an ace up his sleeve, for once. He has admittedly missed that.

Ducking under the low-hanging branch of a still-green oak tree, he locates a hidden path between two thorny, dark-blue hedges, as much by the familiar heavy scent of the plant he's looking for as by memory. He lets his eyes fall half-closed as he weaves through the unkempt hedges, focusing on the smell of summer rain and rock candy and sad lavenders, careful not to touch the poisonous thorns keeping him at sword-point on either side. One barbed vine hangs across the path and he pushes it up so he can duck under it, before holding it up for Sans.

Sans grabs it and tries to move under it as well, but he's bigger than Asriel and the thorns snag on the fur of his hood. "i got a hunch we're not here to pick daisies," he says and fumbles with the thorns for a moment, trying to free himself, "but if you'd tell me what we're doin', i'd artifactualy be able to help ya out."

Asriel reaches up and peels Sans' hands out of the way before summoning a tiny flame in the palm of his paw and holding it up to the wayward vine. A tiny little screech of fear sounds from somewhere deep within the hedge on his right and the vine immediately retracts into the depths of the thorns, letting Sans go in the process. Sans looks after it with a look of dull surprise on his face. Huh. Screaming hedges. You don't see that every day. Ol' Fluffybuns has some cool stuff tucked away here, he must admit.

"I- I can't really tell you what I'm working on," Asriel admits, scratching his neck a bit sheepishly. "Except that it's a spell. And it's gonna work! It's gonna be really helpful! Only, just on the off chance that it doesn't and it's not, I don't wanna tell you, 'cause then I'm gonna look really dumb."

As they move ahead, the narrow path sprouts into a wide, gloomy space overrun by wild plants in blue and cyan hues, the low canopy so thick it blocks out the sunlight streaming through the greenhouse's glass dome in the rest of the garden. Asriel picks his way across the flat rocks forming a series of dry platforms across the shallow water streaming through the cave-like hollow. A few fireflies, as blue as their surroundings, land on his shoulders, curious about the newcomer and where he's going. One of the little bugs flies into Sans' left eye socket and buzzes around in his skull for a moment before he opens his teeth to let it out.

"eh. ain't nothin' wrong with that," he says to Asriel. "no one's gonna blame ya if you mess it up.
"You're doin' your best."

"I'm not sure that's what really counts when your best friends are in danger," Asriel says, but he doesn't sound very sure. He looks up at Sans as though he's waiting for the answer to a question he didn't ask. It's obvious that he would very much like to be told that he's wrong.

"Sure it is," Sans reassures him. "I mean, it's not like we'd anything better to do than go 'round and do whatever it is we're doin'. Ain't nothing we could've done that the others aren't doing already. And you've already pulled so many strings that no one else could, too." He follows the little boss monster to an island in the middle of the hollow, where they pause. "I dunno why you gotta be so hard on yourself, kid. You've done really well.

He means it, every word of it, and he hopes that Asriel can tell. Sans can't help but regret ever doubting this poor thing, it's so obvious that the little one is nothing like the plant he used to be trapped within. He's nothing like Fallen, either. Aside from in those moments when he doubts himself, anyway. When he judges himself by their standards instead of his own. It's painful to watch.

"But not well enough," Asriel replies. With a claw, he traces the wrinkles in the bark of a solitary tree, the tiny island's only inhabitant. "I have a lot of things to make up for. Everyone is counting on me to be good, so I have to show them that I am. Maybe if I save Frisk and Chara instead of being mad at them and blaming them for leaving me behind, I'll actually deserve a second chance." He accidentally scratches off a part of the dark blue trunk. Frowning, he turns it over in his paw with an impatient sigh. Ugh, perfect. Now he's ruining trees too.

"Look... Asriel..." Sans begins and carefully picks the piece of bark out of the kid's hand and places it back on the stripped part of the trunk. It fits perfectly. No one's gonna notice. "Don't tell your mom I'm teaching you bad words, but this whole redemption quest you're tryin'a pull off - it's honestly kinda bullshit. Don't you think you've hurt enough already? There's no need to make it worse for yourself."

Asriel crosses his arms, turning his pouty glare on Sans instead. "You don't seem to think Chara's hurt enough."

"Oh yeah? And do you know what the difference is between you 'n them?"

"Chara's creepy and I'm not?"

"Nuh-uh. You can definitely be creepy when you wanna be. Don't think I've forgotten about that. Nah, I was thinkin' more along the lines of you actively regret what you did while they seem to think what they did was sorta cool and they've been threatening to do it again if given the opportunity. That's the difference."

Asriel decides that this is going nowhere. He turns around to catch the scent he was following a moment ago, nose twitching. "Okay. So nice kids who hate themselves get to be treated with kindness, while sad, angry ones desperately trying to find a way to feel okay and in control get to be bullied and treated like garbage. I get it."

Sans wants to defend himself. He wants to tell Asriel that he doesn't care about the present, he doesn't care about how either of the resurrected kids are acting right now, he's only thinking about the future. He wants to tell him that even though the idea of having any future at all is utopia, it's still all he's got left to fight for, because the present is ever-changing and nothing in it stays for good. The future, that he can fight to protect. He wants to claim that he's doing his best to do the right thing.

But he doesn't. He doesn't say anything. Because frankly, he's not sure there is such a thing as the
'right' thing anymore. If he's really, truly honest with himself, hasn't it felt nice to be the one in control for once? Hasn't he been enjoying seeing his enemy frail and helpless and reduced to a scared little kid, instead of some faceless force of evil he never had a chance of defeating before?

Up until the whole ... 'probably having no choice but to hollow out the soul of his friend's kid' thing came around, he's pretty sure he's been a little too happy about being able to fight back to be capable of labeling himself 'well-meaning.'

Not that he remembers. He feels like he remembers less and less as time goes by. Maybe he's been too busy wallowing in self-pity to commit anything else to memory. Wouldn't be the first time.

Asriel asks him to stay put, 'cause he's going to go to a place in the garden that only he and Frisk and Chara and their dad know about, and he doesn't think the humans would be very happy if he shared their secret with anyone else. Sans leans up against the tree on the island, closing his eyes for just a moment while the kid hops across another line of flat rocks to an out-of-sight part of the tiny forest.

A few minutes later, he returns with an armful of echo flowers. He asks Sans to hold them, before going to retrieve another armful of similar size. Sans still can't fathom what the kid is up to with all these strange bits and pieces. It's not a spell he's ever heard of, that's for sure.

They leave the same way they came in, passing the hedges and stepping out onto the cobblestone path.

"You know," Asriel says quietly, trying not to let the echo flowers catch his voice, "I'm not like Frisk. I won't try to tell you that Chara isn't dangerous, because they are and I understand that having them here with us is a big risk. I'm not naive enough to think that they've really changed for the better. I get why you wanna try to keep them under control and I don't- I don't blame you. But I ... I love them, okay? If I deserve a second chance, they do too. I want to at least try to help them be happy."

Sans lowers his voice as well. "you want it enough to risk your life? enough to put the whole world on the line?"

Asriel looks into the deep, bright blues of the plants in his arms. He doesn't need to say the answer aloud for Sans to know what it is.

Well. At least he never told Asriel about why his little friends left. Something tells Sans he wouldn't be happy if he knew.

He doesn't need to know. By the time he finds out, Sans will be long gone.

And when they someday inevitably meet again, Flowey won't remember a thing.

***

The first town the train passes by is only a tiny village, but a promise is a promise and Frisk and Chara climb back through the window and into the bathroom, and through the bathroom to the rest of the train, where they sneak out the door by hiding behind a very large lady with short blonde hair. The lady gives the children an odd look, though it's more curious than unfriendly. Frisk wants to smile at her, but they're afraid of looking back in case they lose sight of Chara, who's leading the way.
As they walk down the empty road, sunlight streams in between the little cottages clustered around it and their straw roofs paint blurry brown shadows on the cracked pavement. Chara looks at the old buildings with a strange warmth in their otherwise wary eyes and they slow their pace so they can get a better look at the still-sleeping town. Frisk asks them if they're alright. Chara's only response is a bright little "mhmm."

Crows are watching them from power lines strung across the road high above. Frisk worries that they could be monster crows, but their blank beady eyes and aimless hopping about is a pretty good indicator that they're just normal birds. Very cute and smart birds, but not the kind of cute and smart birds who could potentially serve as Asgore's henchmen. Unless he's trained them to be able to write down map coordinates, that is. But Frisk doesn't think that's very likely.

The burnt pan is already making their arms ache again. Frisk swings it over their shoulder, but a sharp burning sensation under their arm makes them wince and lose their grip on the handle. The pan clatters to the pavement and the crows flee to the sky, their cawing nearly as noisy as the metal hitting the ground was.

Chara whips around, one hand on the zipper of their coat, ready to grab the empty gun. When they see it's only Frisk, they let out their held breath in something like an angry sigh. "Ugh, could you not? You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

Frisk hisses through their teeth, keeping one hand on the burning spot under their arm. "Burn marks," they mutter.

"What, already?" Chara comes back to them and waves their hand away. "Let me see."

Frisk worms their arm out of the sleeves of their rain coat and sweater, and pulls the sleeveless undershirt underneath to the side. Ouch. Okay, that looks painful. And gross. It makes sense for it to be there, of course, because they haven't showered or changed clothes since they left home, and skin doesn't like being all sweaty for so long, but it's still really gross.

Chara recoils and holds their hands up to block the view. "Dude. Nasty."

"Did you just wanna see so you could make fun of me or ..?"

"No, I wanted to see if you were just whining over nothing. Good news, I've decided you're not, now put it away."

"Boy am I glad I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere with my dear friend who pokes fun at my literally dissolving skin." They slip their sweater and coat on properly again, wincing at the feeling of fabric against the marks. "What a wonderful way to start a day."

Chara gives them a reprimanding nudge on the shoulder, but there isn't really any force or anger behind it at all. "Quit yo yappin'. We'll find a way to patch you up. In hindsight, we probably should've brought like, more clothes. And maybe some bandaids and bandages."

"Should we have brought a shower, too? And the fridge?"

"You're surprisingly awake for someone who's been complaining about sleepiness for the past ... what, four days? How long have we been out here?"

"Two days, three nights, six hours, forty minutes and sixty-three seconds."

"That would be forty-one minutes and three seconds! You just made that up!"
"Only the last part ..."

"Anyway, listen, maybe we should split up. You can find us some food and I'll see if I can find something to clean your wound with so it doesn't get infected." It would be easier if they were still in the Underground. Monster food provides energy and heals. But the human world is hardly ever as easy as the monsters' is. Chara scans the street with a narrow glare once, twice, then looks back to Frisk. "I don't think any humans are going to bother us here. Small towns like this one are quiet, especially in the middle of the day when everyone is at work. Just keep an eye out and don't talk to anyone, okay?"

Frisk blinks a few times, trying to process Chara's suggestion. That isn't like them. It isn't like them at all. They've been terrified and controlling and overprotective since the two of them left home, if there's one thing Frisk hadn't expected of them, it was for them to suggest either of them go anywhere alone. Why would they change their mind now?

"Are you sure we shouldn't stick together?" Frisk asks, taking a step towards their friend as if to grab them if they tried to leave. "I-I have the pan. If you get hurt, you won't be able to heal up. And if any humans come after me, you won't be there to make them leave ..."

Chara smiles at the worried kid and gently brushes a hand over their head. "Hey, hey, come on, don't be like that. We'll be back together in no time. We're big kids, we can take care of ourselves."

Frisk pushes their lower lip out, clearly displeased, but they don't push Chara's hand away. "You didn't seem to think so when we were in the big city."

"The city is different," Chara says and pulls their younger sibling's hood up so it can protect their ears a bit from the cold. "Cities are full of bad guys. Villages like this one are peaceful. I don't think anyone is going to hurt us here."

Something about that statement rubs Frisk entirely the wrong way. Maybe it's the tone in the other human's voice, or maybe hearing "village" and "peaceful" in the same sentence just leaves a sour taste in their mouth because of ... well, it's obvious, isn't it?

It strikes them that Chara might be biased, but nothing in their calm voice or in the soft glow of their soul suggests that they're anxious, or that they're trying too hard to be calm, or that they're lying to themself. The one reason Frisk can think of that would explain the reanimated child's fondness for a village like this one isn't very nice. It scares them.

Chara pulls their own hood up, too, and says: "We need to find something to eat before one of us passes out. You need medical treatment before you get blood poisoning. We can't go to a hospital in either scenario or the others are going to find us. Please, Frisk. We can't afford to waste time. We have to get this done and over with before the humans here start coming home from work and give us a hard time for being out on our own."

Frisk doesn't like this. At all. But they don't have to like it, do they? Chara's right, no matter if their reasoning is biased or not. If the two of them can just get their respective tasks over with quickly, they can reunite and maybe even catch the next train before nightfall. If they're not mistaken, night seems to come around earlier and earlier each day.

It's going to be winter soon.

"I'll meet you back here in an hour, okay?" Chara says and gives them a little awkward pat on their upper arm. "If I'm not here by then, just wait for a bit. I'll come back as soon as I can."
Frisk nods, their sullen gaze stuck to their own sneakers.

"And remember, don't talk to anyone, if you can help it. And it's okay if you have to break in somewhere. I know you don't like to break other people's things, but this is about survival."

"I knowww." Frisk clutches Laura's pan to their chest. At least they've still got the healing item to keep them company. If only it could heal their ruined skin without the friction from their clothes opening it up all over again.

"Take care."

For a moment, Frisk remains where they are, watching Chara half-run down the road and disappear down a different street with one last encouraging wave to their abandoned sibling.

Frisk needs to stop worrying so much. Nothing is going to happen, everything will be fine. It's only one hour. How badly could things possibly go in just one short hour? They should just be relieved that Chara isn't a paranoid mess right now. It's nice to see them smile again. Even though Frisk has a nagging feeling that it isn't for reasons they themself should be very happy about.

They start walking. There must be a diner or something like it close by.

***

Though a new royal scientist has yet to be appointed after Alphys was fired, Asgore has still had a lab built in the hopes of eventually finding a new brilliant mind with the ability to lead his people to a bright future in, uh, whatever it is that royal scientists are supposed to be able to bring to the table. Technological advancement? Bioengineering? Those didn't go so well the last time. With the barrier gone, none of the monsters are entirely certain which secrets of the universe they want to unlock next, but it's the thought that counts, and so a wing of the castle was furnished with various machinery that no one knows how to operate and white-tiled floors and closets full of clean white lab coats. Everything a laboratory needs in order to be considered a real official laboratory.

Sans watches as Asriel shuffles around the half-empty lab in a lab coat nearly twice as long as the kid is tall, grinding cooled-down Vulkin lava to powder in a mortar, infusing Childrake snowflakes with bottled lightning, mixing Moldsmal slime and the spit of afternoon shadows in a big round flask.

Asriel shakes the flask a couple of times and then grins ear to ear as the serum within turns a vivid neon green. Perfect!

Sans snickers. Asriel shoots a glare at him over his shoulder.

"Quit laughing at me! I'm getting somewhere!"

The skeleton leans his forehead on his hand, readjusting his position on the chair he's sitting on so he can lean his elbows on the worktable. "sorry, sorry. you just- you look like alphys with the whole lab-coat-mad-scientist-grin-combo going on. the resemblance is really uncanny."

Asriel picks the electrified snowflakes up with his claws, briefly causing the fur on his hands to stand on end, and adds them to the potion. A blue, ring-shaped cloud rises from it with a wheezing poof.

"If I were Alphys, I would've finished this thing days ago," he says, shaking the flask again. "I
probably don't even need half of this stuff, but I dunno which of these things I can take out without ruining the whole thing. Back when we were underground, I just kinda tossed a bunch of stuff together in a hole in the ground and uhm, hoped for the best, I guess? So, uh. Sorry. If I've wasted our time. A lot."

Sans waves off the apology and gives the kid his most encouraging grin. "don't worry 'bout it. i'm just curious to see what you're cookin' up. you sure you don't wanna tell me what you're up to?"

Asriel nods, before sprinkling the powdered lava rock into the concoction. "Not yet. I'll tell you when I know if it works. Will you help me with something?"

"sure thing." After climbing down the chair, Sans joins Asriel near the work desks lined up by the lab's windows, the desks they've laid out the echo flowers on. "whaddaya need me to do?"

The smaller monster picks up one of the big blue flowers and spins it between his fingers. "I need you to help me fill all of these with a phrase. It needs to be the same one for all of them and they need to hear it one at a time before we can put them near each other and let the whispers get mixed up."

It strikes Sans that he's essentially indulging an old enemy in a probably half-superstition-based crossbreed between a game of make-believe and a demonic ritual. Should he be worried that the little goat monster is going to start sacrificing his animal counterparts next? That's a really weird thought.

"i can do that, probably," he replies easily. "what's the phrase? what are we tellin' 'em?"

Asriel clears his voice and holds the flower's crown close to his mouth, before speaking the words: "You're calling for help."

Sans had expected an incantation, maybe something that rhymed, or maybe something in one of those old languages that no one really understands but everyone still uses liberally when they wanna sound smart. Not ... whatever this is.

"those're, uh ... those're some unusual 'magic words', i gotta say."

Asriel shrugs and places the flower on a table parallel to the one holding the rest of the plants, so they don't get mixed up just yet. "If you're alone and in danger, and you want someone to come find you, you should call for help. If you keep calling out, someone will come."

That's ... not really an explanation, but okay. Sans can roll with that. Asriel hasn't lead him astray yet. One at a time, he picks the flowers up and whispers the phrase to them. One at a time, he lays them on the other table, so their voices can mingle, the words turning into white noise in each other's company.

When all of them have joined together on the other desk and their echoes sound more like strained sighs than real words, Asriel tells Sans to stand back. Concentration carving deep lines into his young face, he stands over the flowers, palms raised and claws twitching. He shuts his eyes and as he does, a breeze of hot air runs from his hands up his arms and through the uncovered fur on his face, making the white hairs dance. Instantly, a small, yellow flame springs to life in the center of the nearest flower, before flaring up and consuming it and its brethren in a crackling blaze.

Sans stares wide-eyed between the little monster child and his plant victims. Okay, he did not expect that. That's kind of cool. And terrifying. He makes a mental note not to mess with the kid if he can help it. Or Fallen, when he's within earshot. Phew.
Sweat seeping out of the fur on his forehead, Asriel lifts his hands, letting the fire hover into the air and bringing the flowers' remains with it, before holding up his palms and extinguishing the fire, letting the smoldering ashes pour into his cupped paws.

Proudly, he turns around to show Sans the result.

"Look! I did it!"

The two entire armfuls of echo flowers they brought here have been reduced to two handfuls of black, foul-smelling ashes.

Sans looks at the sorry remains of the once-admittedly-very-nice-looking flowers with increasing concern, but then his attention moves to the look of pure excitement on Asriel’s face, the little one beaming with pride and holding his breath waiting for the older monster's response.

He can't bear to disappoint a face like that.

"Wow. Not bad, kid!" He has no idea what he's saying 'wow' to aside from an inferno murdering the shit out of a bunch of cute little flowers, but that's not really the point. He sends Asriel his widest, brightest smile and ruffles the kid's hair, making him laugh. "That was awesome. Where'd you even learn to do something like that?"

"Mom taught me!" Asriel replies, beaming at the praise and jumping on the spot. "I mean, I put my own spin on it, but she showed me how to get started!"

"Your mom's pretty badass, you know that?" Sans says on a laugh. Of course a spooky flame-y murder spell like this one came from Toriel.

"I know, right? She's amazing!" Asriel brushes a thumb through the soft ashes, studying the way the color of it stains his paw pad. "I wanna be just like her when I grow up."

In Sans' private opinion, Asriel has a lot more in common with his dad, and considering his past, perhaps it's for the better if he stays that way. But that's another thing that isn't relevant. Sans' opinion. Asriel can be whoever he wants to be now and that's what matters.

"I'm sure you will be," Sans says instead. He pokes the tip of his index finger in the ash and rubs a bit of it between his finger and his thumb, before giving it a closer look. "You're already on the right track here." It looks just like normal ash, just a purer shade of black, but the grains are finer, too, almost silky on the dull pseudo-nerve endings in his finger bones.

Asriel beams at the compliment, clearly pleased with himself. But then he stops short, apparently remembering something.

"Uhm. There's just one thing."

"Hm?"

"I should probably have put this in a flask or something."

"Yeah?"

"And now I can't use my hands."

"I'll get ya one."

"Thank you."
The third time Frisk passes the garden with the lady hanging clothes out to dry, she calls out to them. "Uhm, excuse me? Little ... boy? Girl? I'm really sorry, I can't tell what you are."

Frisk knows they should ignore her, but they've already paused in the middle of the sidewalk. It would be awkward if they started walking again, right? They look away, hoping their hood will hide their face enough for the lady not to recognize them. "Neither," they say, trying to open their mouth and make their tone clearer than normal, so she won't recognize their voice. Many humans have heard their voice over the last many months, after all. Peace treaties between previously warring races make for good television.

"Oh," is all the lady says in reply. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I haven't seen you around here before and you appear to be retracing your steps quite a lot. Do you need directions?"

They think it over for a moment. Chara wouldn't like it if they knew Frisk broke their promise not to talk to any humans. But Frisk did have something to prove, didn't they? Humans aren't all bad. Most of them aren't, anyway. And even though Frisk maybe doesn't trust them as much as they trust monsters, they still can't judge all humans based on the actions of a few, that's not fair ... "Do you ..." They cough, trying to keep themself from mumbling. "Do you know where I can get some food around here?"

They keep their eyes on a crack in the pavement on the other side of the road, but they can hear clothes being folded on their other side and the shuffling of heavy steps through grass.

"I'm afraid not," says the lady, her voice closer by now and airy with gentle worry. "Child, are you here all on your own? Whatever are you doing wandering a village in the middle of nowhere looking for food?"

Something in Frisk's heart hurts and it takes them a moment to comprehend the fact that it's because the human's voice sounds like Toriel's. For a second, they forget what they were talking about. Toriel ...

"Oh goodness, are you alright, dear?"

There's another shuffle of something like creaking branches and then footsteps sound on the pavement right next to them. A gentle hand on their shoulder turns them around and before they know it, they're looking into a pair of fretful blue eyes. It's the big blonde lady from the train. She seems to recognize Frisk, too.

"It's you!" But not from the train. "You're the monsters' child, aren't you? One of the ones who went missing?"

Frisk recoils, holding Laura's pan in front of their face, as if expecting an attack. Really, they're just trying to hide themself from view. But it's already too late, isn't it?

"P-please don't tell anyone I'm here," they whisper into the metal. "Please don't, it's important, they can't-!"
A deep, rumbling voice sounds from inside the lady's house. "Sarah?" it says. "You alright?"

When Frisk looks over the ridge of the pan, a large, red-skinned troll monster comes into view, trotting through the garden and over to the low bush fence. Frisk looks up at him with wide eyes and he looks down at them with the same expression, his black bushy brows nearly merging with his hair.

"I'll be damned ..." His barrel chest caves as he breathes a sigh of relief. "You gave us a right scare, kid. Glad to see you're still alive."

"Hi, Oni," Frisk says, lowering their gaze in shame. "I'm sorry."

Oni steps over the fence to crouch next to the lady, Sarah, so he can get a better look at the kid. "Are ya hurt?" he asks.

Frisk shakes their head. "I'm fine. Just ... really, really hungry."

"They say they don't want anyone to know they're here," Sarah supplies, keeping her voice low. "Should we ..?"

The woman and the monster look each other in the eyes for a moment, seemingly in the middle of a silent conversation. Finally, Oni reaches a hand out to Frisk.

"C'mon, kid," he says. "We'll fix ya up."

Chara wouldn't like this, either. But they said it themself, this is about survival. And they can't be too angry with Frisk if they're being watched over by a monster. Humans may be unpredictable, but this one can't be too bad if a monster cares about her. Oni's a good person. He wouldn't choose to be with a bad human.

Frisk lets the enormous monster pick them up and sit them on his arm, as he steps back over the fence, followed by Sarah, who gives Frisk's shoulder a little reassuring squeeze.

The couple's kitchen is old and wooden, but the windows are large and the curtains are bright green and white-striped, and the cookies in the jar on the shelf over the oven are leaking caramel onto the glass, and though it looks nothing like either of their parents' kitchens, Frisk feels safer and more at home than they have in days.

Sarah takes their jacket, apologizing profusely when the movement makes the child wince. They tell her about the burn marks. She quickly leaves to find something to soothe the wounds with. Oni makes them a whole plate of tiny sandwiches.

Both the monster and the human let them eat in peace, and then they let them fix their wound in peace, before finally helping them cover it up with a large bandage. It stings, but at least it protects from the clothing brushing up against the vulnerable skin every time Frisk moves.

When they're done, Oni sits across from them at the small round kitchen table, a serious look in his dark eyes. He asks Frisk if what Sarah says is true? Do they really want to stay missing?

"I have to," Frisk tells him, looking down at their own hands in their lap. "I'll come back eventually, but right now, there's something really, really important I need to do and I can't have anyone know where I am. Not even my family."

Sarah sits down next to Oni, still with that terribly soft, fearful look in her eyes that reminds Frisk of their mother. "Whatever it is you have to do, you needn't do it alone," she says. "Perhaps Oni and I"
can help you. Can't we, dear?" She puts a hand on the troll's arm.

Oni nods vigorously. "Of course!"

"And what of your little friend? The little red-haired one ..?"


"Right! Do you have any idea where they are?"

This is bad. This is really bad, because for all Frisk knows, the two of them might actually be able to help, but Chara wouldn't want that. They don't trust anyone but Frisk, they're too scared, and if Frisk tells on them, they have no one left they can trust. Chara might even be right - they're two defenseless kids out all on their own, who's to say Oni won't report right back to the king, thinking he's doing the right thing? They're just children, adults don't trust children to make decisions on their own.

Or maybe they really will help. Maybe they will, maybe they won't, Frisk shouldn't be the one making that choice, they should leave that to Chara, it's their life they're trying to save.

"I-I d-don't know," Frisk lies through the knot in their throat, sinking deeper into their chair, as if the few inches they're putting between themself and the adults will make any difference. "I'm- I'm trying to- to find them, actually. It's important. For the thing I have to do."

"Do you think you could possibly tell us what's so important?" Sarah asks, gentling her tone further. "We won't tell anyone, if you don't want us to. I know you're a very brave child, but you don't have to do this on your own."

Frisk glances up at the clock. Oh no. They should've met up with Chara ten minutes ago! They hope they're not worried.

"I have to go," they say, stumbling down from their chair and grabbing their pan. "Thank you for the food. Sorry I bothered you!"

"No, wait!" Sarah gets up to follow them. "Please don't leave! We can't let you wander around on your own, it isn't safe!"

Frisk pulls their coat down from the coat rack and sticks their arms in the sleeves without bothering to button it up. "Then let me come back tonight," they say. The beginnings of a plan is starting to take shape in their head. "If I promise I'll return, you can let me go, right? I'll come back here and you won't have to tell anyone where I am, 'cause I'll be safe with you, won't I?" It sounds like something Chara could have said. They should probably be ashamed of that, but they don't have time to quell the small amount of pride swelling up inside. This is a smart move. Chara's going to be proud of them. Even though they're not being entirely honest. Or exactly because they're not being entirely honest.

Oni looks between the two humans, clearly conflicted. "You promise you'll come back tonight?" he asks Frisk. "And you're gonna be safe until then?"

"I am, I promise," Frisk quickly replies. "If I'm not, you can call Asgore and tell him I've been through here."

Oni and Sarah exchange a look. They're not happy about letting Frisk go, Frisk can tell, but a moment later, they both nod.
"If you promise you'll come back," Sarah says.

Oni nods. "You know it's for your own good, kid."

Frisk nods too. "I know. Thank you so much for helping me. And for not telling anyone I'm here."

They hurry out the door, speeding down the path leading through the yard and back to the empty street. Sarah and Oni watch them leave from the door. Frisk feels bad about lying to them, they really do, because how many monsters are willing to lie to their king about something as important as this? How many humans are willing to trust a child's judgment enough to promise their assistance without knowing what they're even agreeing to?

But it is still a very, very smart move. Maybe they've been around their less-moral half for too long, but Frisk can't help but feel proud of their sneakiness.

Thankfully, Chara is still there when they reach the road near the train station. When they see Frisk running, they look over the other kid's shoulder to see if anyone is following them, but when they see nothing but deserted street and front yards, they give Frisk a weird look like 'why are you wasting all of your energy' and 'are you planning on stopping before you run me over or should I be scared?'

Frisk doesn't run them over. They stop right in front of Chara, giving them a brilliant grin. "Hi! Sorry I'm late. I was being really smart for a moment, it took me a little while."

"Smart enough to find some food?" Chara grumbles, looking Frisk up and down, but seeing no sign of the items they were sent to fetch.

"I already ate. I couldn't get any for you, sorry. But I will tonight!"

"What about your burn marks? You shouldn't be running around like that, you'll get sweaty and it's just gonna dissolve even more."

"I already fixed that up, too! Listen, I found some people who wanna help us-"

"Ugh, Frisk! Did I not tell you not to talk to strangers!?"

"You did, but hear me out!" Frisk takes a moment to catch their breath, holding their hands up, gesturing for Chara to wait for them to finish speaking. "I ran into a monster I know, his name is Oni and he lives with this human lady named Sarah. The two of them recognized me and gave me some food and helped me fix my skin, but they also promised not to tell anyone where I am, if only I promised them I'd come back tonight so they could look after me, so I don't get hurt. I managed to convince them that I was on a really important mission, so they're not gonna tell on me as long as they get to come with me so they can look after me."

Chara crosses their arms and sneers: "So, when do we get to the smart part?"

"Right now! See, I didn't tell them where you were, 'cause I didn't know if you were cool with it."

"I'm not."

"See? Okay, so I told them I'd come back tonight, right? Here's the smart part: first of all, we get an extra meal. I'll eat my food first and then sneak some out for you. I'll convince them that I'm too tired to keep going for today and they'll probably lend me a couch or something. I'll borrow their shower, let you in through the bathroom window, then you shower, sneak out again, and when they've gone to bed, I can let you in and we'll have a warm place to sleep for the night! Tomorrow morning, we'll get up before them, steal all of their food and then bail! We'll solve all our problems at the same time,
it's brilliant!

While they speak, Chara's expression slowly turns from skepticism to slack-jawed wonder. When Frisk finishes their tale, Chara's teeth shut with an audible *click*.

"Who are you and what have you done to my dumb baby sibling?"

"I can be smart! Of course, we *could* also tell them you're here and just have them *drive* you to wherever you wanna go, but I figured you wouldn't like that." It doesn't really matter if it's logical or not. It doesn't really matter if Chara is just being paranoid. They're in this together, Frisk is here to help their friend, they have to play by Chara's rules. And if Chara's rules say 'make this as convoluted and impossible as humanly possible', that's how they're gonna do it.

Maybe if Frisk makes them proud, they won't be gone for so long. Just a few years. Not too long.

"No way, I wanna steal," Chara replies with absolute confidence, still watching Frisk with something like reverence in their puzzled gaze. "What's with you and stealing, anyway? You're not really very good at the whole 'mine-yours-ours' thing, are you?"

"If Oni and Sarah want to help, I'll let them help. They'd give us all their food if they knew what was at stake. Does it really matter if I ask or not if the result is the same?"

"You're starting to sound like me."

"Which is ... bad."

"It's terrible. But keep going, if it helps you come up with plans like that."

When Chara first came back, even speaking to them felt wrong, somehow. There was an evil under even innocuous conversations about the lockets and memories of Blooky's farm, even under a genuine reassurance that yes, Chara did belong right here with them, yes, they would be missed if they left, yes, Frisk and Asriel did truly want them to stay. There was still a clear distinction between villain and hero, and though they found it in themselves to be kind to each other, there remained a certain distance, one for safety, one to prevent corruption to take hold. It had done so before and the fear that it would do so again was enough for Frisk to keep their distance. For everyone's sake.

But it doesn't seem necessary anymore, Frisk thinks. Chara is not dangerous. They mean that now more than ever. Chara is their friend, first and foremost, and even though they can be a little rash and harsh sometimes, their friendship is stronger than what a few scratches or threats of being thrown in a harbor can ruin, right? All that "good and evil" stuff is so black and white, it doesn't apply to normal humans and it doesn't apply to Frisk and Chara, either. That would be silly.

Chara's just another person who needs Frisk's help. They're just another person Frisk never wants to be apart from again.

It's going to be alright. As long as they can rely on each other, everything is going to be alright. They're going to make sure of it.

***

The sun sets early over the flatland east of Newer Home. Asriel squints against it, shielding his eyes
with his arm. Under his feet is soft sand and in his ears, the slow, rhythmic rush of the ocean's waves. They've been walking for a bit, he and Sans, because they both decided that maybe performing strange and possibly volatile arcane magic in the middle of town or near the bridge leading to it would probably not be the most sympathetic course of action they could choose. So they've walked, all the way across the bridge to the mainland and further along the beach, keeping the floating city within sight so they don't get lost right away.

In Asriel's backpack, lumped in next to his stabilizer, are the two flasks, each with a cork securing the potion and the ashes safely within the glass containers.

They find a nice flat area with plenty of elbowroom, which Asriel informs Sans is very important, and then he fishes out the flasks from his backpack and unscrews the cork on the one containing the ashes.

Icy wind rolls in from the ocean, carrying droplets of even icier water. It isn't ideal weather for this kind of thing. Back in the Underground, the closest thing they ever got to weather was a surface-river leaking into Waterfall in rain-like patterns. What if the ashes blow away?

Asriel is just going to have to test his luck.

Carefully, he pours the ashes onto the sand, moving around in a tight circle, trying to shield it from the wind with his body.

A little bit of the ash escapes on the wind. Not enough to break the circle, but still. Asriel bites his lip, brows knit, trying to think of a way to protect the light material. Suddenly, a row of short, stout bones erupt from the sand, forming a barrier between the ashes and the ocean.

Asriel sends Sans a little embarrassed smile. "Thank you."

"don't mention it," Sans says. "it won't disturb whatever it is you're doing, right?"

"I don't think so. Like I said, I think there's a lot of junk in the potion I don't even need, so a little extra magic in its vicinity won't do any harm, I don't think."

Careful not to spill anything over the edges of the circle, Asriel pours the potion unto the bare sand in the very center of it, waiting for it to soak into the ground before adding more and more until the flask is empty.

He's out of ingredients now. Sans can only guess at what comes next. More fire magic? An actual incantation? Artifact-based magic went out of fashion long before he was born. He shouldn't be surprised that someone who was born in a previous century knows more about it than he does.

Asriel steels himself, fire in his sharp eyes, as though he's already tracking down his missing friends, already on the hunt. Unceremoniously, he reaches his hands behind his head, opens the clasp on his locket's chain and tosses the jewelry into the circle, right in the middle of the patch of soaked sand at its center.

For a moment, nothing happens.

Sans holds a breath he doesn't need anyway.

Then, with agonizing slowness, something crawls out of the earth, small, creeping golden vines wrapping around the heart locket, hiding it in a web of luminescent threads and crawling over one another in an upwards spiral. From within the tangled vines grows a bud and when it opens its plump, golden petals, it lights up the beach like a little new sun ready to take over for its sinking sky-
Sans looks to Asriel, trying to find out if this was supposed to happen, but Asriel only keeps his eyes firmly on the magical plant, still waiting, still hoping.

Suddenly, the flower dissolves back into the sand, seeds of gold boring into the earth, and in the very next second, six smaller flowers of the same kind sprout into existence in a cluster just outside the circle of ash, then six more ahead of them, then six more and six more, and they keep going as they cross the beach, heading north.

Finally, Asriel sighs a little "phew" and holds a hand to his heart. He steps into the circle and digs into its center, peeling the locket out of the ground and dusting sand out of its chain and engravings.

It worked.

Sans watches the path of small golden flowers crawl up the slope, on and on past the horizon, his eyeless sockets wide with disbelief. He looks at Asriel and points in the direction of the flowers. "... a bloodhound spell?"

Asriel nods. "The magic in our lockets is unique. Now that the spell knows what the magical resonance in mine looks like, it's going to seek out Chara's and Frisk's." He gazes across the sand dunes and up the slope to the darkening sky, longing in his bright eyes. "All we have to do is follow the flowers."

Sans isn't looking at the flowers. He's looking at the child standing all alone in the middle of his circle of ashes, paws clasped around his locket as though he, too, can sense his missing loved ones through the metal, so much fear and pain and fragile hope in his overbright eyes, shivering slightly in the cold.

Sans should leave him behind. He should call Toriel, let her take care of the poor kid, he doesn't need to deal with this. He doesn't deserve to. He's been through so much.

But something tells Sans that that simply isn't an option. He feels like he's living on borrowed time. He thought the person he should be fearing the most in all of this was Toriel, but between Asriel's latent magic and his undying devotion to someone he knows is dangerous, yet won't desert no matter what ...

Sans has no idea how he's going to survive long enough to take Fallen out. So many things could go wrong. But what would he be doing if he wasn't at least trying? Nothing, most likely. But he can't do that. He can't just do nothing after everything he's set into motion.

He can only try to finish what he started. For Asriel, for Toriel, Frisk, his brother, everyone.

He owes it to them. Like it or not, it's his duty to try. He can't fail them now.

He needs to stay determined.

***

Come nightfall, Frisk returns to Oni and Sarah's house, and as promised, the couple welcomes them with open arms. They haven't called the police and they haven't alerted Asgore. It seems like they
really do want to help. When Frisk really concentrates, they can vaguely make out the glow of Chara's soul in their mind's eye, the other human staying hidden close by the house, and Frisk is glad of it, 'cause they want Chara to see that the adults are trustworthy. Frisk was right and they want Chara to see that.

As promised, Frisk smuggles food out to the small garden behind the house and leaves it behind a cluster of bushes near the fence, just out of view of the kitchen windows.

As promised, they politely ask to use the home's shower, because they haven't showered in days and maybe they'll get more burn marks if they don't, and- please? They're not sure when they'll have the opportunity again, they won't be long and they'll be sure not to leave dirty towels lying around, honest-! and as promised, they finish up quickly and let Chara in through the window so they can have a turn as well without the others being any the wiser.

Before they slip outside again, Frisk asks them to stay near the house. It's dark out. They don't like the idea of Chara being outside in the dark on their own in a town neither of them know.

Chara only repeats the sentiment from earlier. Cities are dangerous, villages are not. It still sends a chill down the younger child's spine.

Chara tells them they've found an abandoned shed just on the other side of a hilltop behind the house. It's warmer than waiting outside in the cold. They tell their friend not to worry.

Sarah lends Frisk a t-shirt big enough to function as a dress for them. Then she piles pillows at one end of a couch in the living room and finds two nice blankets, and she brushes her little guest over the head and tells them that if they need anything, or if they get scared - it's going to be stormy tonight, so if they do get scared, she will understand - they shouldn't hesitate to wake her or Oni. The two of them will be asleep just down the hall.

Frisk misses Toriel. They miss her so, so much.

Sarah goes to bed. Oni watches her leave, but he lingers in the living room for just another minute, looking everywhere but at the little human curled up on their side on his couch.

"Whatever you're running to or ... from ..." He pauses. Then he finally looks at Frisk, unease lining his otherwise brutish features. "I really do hope you'll let us help you, ambassador. You did so much for my kind. Whatever your new mission is, know you won't have to complete it all on your lonesome this time."

That hurts. Don't they, though? Don't they have to do it all on their own? Just like the first time. Just them and Chara, and fear and missed meals and scraped skin and a path in front of them that seems to go on and on into the dark, hiding a destination neither of them want to face.

Frisk wants nothing more than to accept his help. They want someone to look after them and take care of them.

Someone is already doing that, they try to remind themself. Someone who needs them as much as vice versa.

It's not the same thing.

They request a goodnight hug before he leaves them. Though he complies, he seems a bit taken aback. But then of course, he's only spoken to them twice before. They've spoken to him countless times, learning all about his boring job and his hatred of all the Underground's many puzzles, and his
wish to have a family, because he never had one of his own, and how he wanted to see the surface, but never really dared to hope that humans would welcome them with open arms, and how he speaks to the plants in his garden and how he feels more at home with them than with other monsters. The fact that Frisk learned these things over several resets doesn't matter to them. He may not remember all the conversations they've had, but as with every monster in the Underground, Frisk is okay with caring far more about him than he cares about them. They're content with loving everyone they've met for the first time and over and over without any of them being able to return that love. Love doesn't become any less valuable just by virtue of being one-sided.

Then, they wait. Eyes open wide against a darkness far thicker than the darkness in the city, even thicker than the darkness in their hometown. They wonder how quickly the adults will fall asleep down the hall. They wonder if their own adoptive parents can sleep back home. They wonder if Chara is safe and when they'll come to the house. Frisk can't sense their soul from this far away. They hope they're safe. They hope they'll be here soon. They hope they won't have to wait for them for too long in the thick, lonesome, impenetrable dark.

In the shed on the other side of the hilltop, Chara wonders what time it is. They wonder if the pain in their chest is weariness or if there's something really, truly wrong with them. They wonder if Frisk misses them. They wonder if Frisk would miss them if they just left, right now, knowing their sibling would be safe and cared for. They wonder if they should really be fighting against their own drooping eyelids or if they could catch five minutes before they join Frisk in the warmth and safety of the house ... Just five minutes ... It won't do any harm ...

What happens next, neither of them had prepared for.

Frisk sees it first. A soft glow of gold outside of their window. They sit up, peaking over the backrest of the couch. Something is lighting up the grass outside, something soft and bright orange-yellow. Even from this distance, Frisk is certain that it's warm.

It comes closer, leaking through the grass like liquid gold, and then it cracks open the stone tiles outside of the window, the light sprouting from the cracks and then creeping under the back door.

Breathless at the sight, Frisk feels the warmth of the magic on their skin and the light of it reflects in their eyes, sore from the brightness, as the carpet shreds, torn wide open by a path of small golden flowers slowly, gently dancing on a nonexistent breeze.

The light draws closer as flowers grow forth and bloom in a direct path to the couch. They stop at the foot of it and finally, one flower, larger and brighter than all the others, writhes out of the ground and its big, soft petals burst open, bathing the room in its warm light, and for a fraction of a second, Frisk swears that they see a smile within its depths. They rub their eyes against the sudden brightness and when they look again, the smile is gone. It must have been their imagination.

They feel something around their neck. Something so warm that at first, they mistake it for cold.

They look down at their chest.

It's the locket.

On the other side of the hilltop, Chara has fallen asleep.

Frisk doesn't stop to think. They know. In that moment, they know.

They toss the covers aside, sprint across the floor, killing flowers under their heels without noticing, and they tear open the back door, running into the darkness and the howling wind outside, and they
rip the necklace from their neck, bring it back behind their head and throw it, as hard as they can, seeing the gold lick the shape of a shooting star into the black sky before arching down into the field beyond it, halfway up the hill beyond the garden.

Then they run back inside. The golden flowers lose their glow and rot before their eyes, and creep back into the ground. Frisk hides under the couch. Squeezes their eyes shut. Hopes, hopes, hopes that the magic has only latched onto their locket, not Chara's, not Chara's, please, not Chara's-

They don't see the small figure appearing halfway up the hill, following the glow of the golden flowers sprouted around the locket like the fire near a crash site. They don't see the way he takes the locket between shivering hands and holds it to his own matching one, a sob of fear or grief or anger or something else sending a jolt through his tired body. He leaves for the village in search of the locket's owner.

Chara might be perfectly safe, Frisk argues to themself. Even if the magic has latched on to both of their lockets, Chara must have seen the glow too and realized what was happening before it was too late. They're smart, they would have. And if Frisk goes outside now, they might ruin it - if they get caught, their pursuers will make them confess where Chara is and it will be their fault that their sibling gets hurt again. They have to trust in their friend. They have to hope. All they can do is hope.

In the shed, Chara wakes with a start. There was a noise outside. Seconds pass before they realize that the pitch blackness inside the shed is no longer that. That the metal around their neck is lighting up the dark like a beacon. That they've awoken in a bed of golden flowers.

They stumble to their feet, ignoring the way the blood rushes from their head, whether it's the low light making their vision blurry or the green splotches of color appearing in their field of vision doesn't matter, the result is the same - them stumbling to the door, reaching for it semi-blindly, nearly tripping over their own feet in their desperation to get out.

They slip the necklace over their head and squint against its light, rubbing their thumb over the metal, barely registering the icy wind greeting them outside. They should throw it away. Throw it away and hide and-

But it's theirs, his and theirs and-

No, they can come back for it later. When it doesn't light up anymore, when the magic is spent, when it isn't being used against them like it isn't theirs, like it wasn't always theirs, like it wasn't the only thing they always, always dared to love, and they reach their arm back, ready to throw it as far as they can and-

"don't bother."

They feel faint.

"fun's over, kid."
I'm not sure what I could possibly say to make this okay, but I know I'd like to preface this with a reminder that Sans is still one of my favorite characters and I'm still promising you that there will be a reason for all of this. This conflict has been planned since the beginning of STIAA. It needed to happen.

"why so jumpy?"

The flowers wither away and the glow bleeds out of the locket, leaving the metal cold and dark and lifeless in the night, and leaving the empty moorland with light only in the form of the two white pinprick pupils boring into Chara from the shadow by the wall of the shed.

"it's almost like you didn't expect me to find you."

They drop the locket into the grass and fumble with the zipper of their coat, pulling the empty gun from its depths and pointing it between the white lights.

"hey, easy, easy, i'm not gonna hurt ya." There's a noise over the earth and the lights grow, and then he's stepping out of the shadows, the whiteness of his ugly grin reflecting the few scraps of light left in the flatland, the black in his laugh lines as deep and sharp as cracks in his silver-gray skull. "i just wanna talk. you don't mind talkin', do ya? you've been doin' a lot of it lately. not as much as i thought you would, but still. no one likes a tattletale."

Chara shakes their head, soft as a shiver at first, then rapidly, wildly, desperately. "I'm n-not coming with you! I'm not! You can't make me!"

He laughs, and his voice is warm, the noise is almost gentle, and Chara knows that voice and they know that dismissive wave of his hand, like they've just said something sad and silly, and he's going to reassure them, because he cares. "naw, i know that, you don't gotta tell me. no one can make you do anything, right?" They know that voice because they've heard it so, so many times, telling them everything is going to be alright, telling them he believes in them, telling them he's rooting for them. Only, he wasn't actually talking to them, was he?

He walks past them, looking up at the hilltop ahead, numb to the cold wind. "i gotta say, i'm pretty surprised you didn't just tell toriel. she would've incinerated me at a moment's notice, you know that, right? you didn't have to drag that sorry flesh suit you're wearing all the way out here, she could've protected you no problem."

"You would have told her about what I did," Chara manages through the heavy lump in their throat. "You would've told her about how I was able to kill her without a second thought and that you know I could do it again. She would have trusted you. She- she's already scared of me, did you know that?" They didn't lie to Frisk about not wanting to ruin things between Sans and Toriel. But this reason, this reason is also very, very persuasive.
Sans nods a bit to himself, grin fading as though he actually cares, as though it actually hurts him to know that Chara can't even trust their own mother to believe in them truly, fully, completely, without seeing wariness in her eyes when they push their brother around a little too callously or argue with their twin a little too viciously.

Sans doesn't care. He doesn't give a shit about Chara, he never did, and they're struggling now, struggling not to cry, struggling not to run, struggling not to put his skull in with the handle of the weapon in their hands, whichever comes first, whichever urge overpowers them before the other two follow suit.

"put the gun down, kid. we both know it ain't loaded."

They do so. But they don't put it away. They turn it around so they're holding on to the barrel, ready to strike if he comes closer.

"I know what you're planning," they tell him, fear and anger shredding the words to a thin, trembling growl. "I heard you that night. Don't try to tell me you won't do it, because I know you will." The tears get the best of them. It's only a matter of time before the other options do as well. "You're sick. Who the hell does that? Who would even think of doing something like that?"

He shrugs and crosses his arms over his chest. "people like you. people like me. people like alphys, apparently." The white gleam in his empty sockets drifts to Chara, halved by droopy eyelids, like he's bored of the conversation already. "you really don't give me a lotta credit, y'know? you heard alphys, you heard my brother, neither of them are gonna let me go through with it. so relax. 'm leaving you to live your miserable existence for a little while yet."

"I don't trust you. I don't. You've lied to everyone else, why wouldn't you lie to me?"

Another shrug, this one a little slower, more hesitant. "... 'cause i'm a dynamic individual capable of positive character development and genuine growth as a person?"

Chara's only reply is an incredulous expression bordering on something like panicked disbelief.

When Sans laughs again, it's nothing like the first one, and though it's harsher, louder, colder, it's also less scary by comparison.

"nah, you're right, i totally just lied to you just then. sorry, had to be done. it was worth a try." He wipes nonexistent tears from his face, teeth bared in his usual grin once again, and he turns to face Chara, head lowered just enough to bring to mind a wolf or a jaguar approaching a cornered rabbit, the fur of his hood bristling as though it was his own. "you're right. i'm sick. i'll lie to everyone else and i'll lie to you too. i'm the same as you. i can't go back now. whatever we gotta do, we gotta do. you've left me no choice. and besides, what's it matter anyway? i carve that determination out of you, toriel or asgore or someone else is gonna tear me limb from limb. one of your little friends is gonna take pity on whatever's left of you and give you back what you lost, and you'll reset and i can continue where i left off. you'll kill everyone all over again, maybe once, maybe twice, maybe a hundred times, who knows. then you'll get bored and let us have our happy ending for a while and i'll bring you back again. soon, we'll be right back here, right on this same patch of dirt. that's just how it goes, right? we've found a new can o' worms to get upset over, but hell if it don't wiggle just the same as the ones that came before it." He kicks a rock over with all the resigned laziness of a kid in a cafeteria putting the same indefinable goop on his tray for the hundredth day in a row. "so yeah. pardon me if i'm gettin' just a mite bored of this whole shebang."

He can't be serious. He can't be. How can he be this cold? How can he care so little about what he's putting other people through? How much LOVE does a person need to accumulate to turn out like
Chara knows exactly how much. They've been there. They *have* cared as little as him.

They're not like that anymore. They've learned. They've *learned*.

"I don't care what you say," Chara manages without letting their voice break. They walk in a circle around him, trying to find an angle where neither the shed or the hilltop cut them off in case they need to run. "I'm not going down without a fight. You know I can beat you. I did it with a body I didn't have full control over, I can do it with this one, too. I'd rather everyone hate me again than let you mess with my soul. I'd rather let everyone see what I really am."

Sans watches them with a deceptively calm expression, leaning back on his heels and putting his hands in his pockets in his usual mock-carefree stance. "hmm. well then," he says. "then maybe i should word this just a little bit differently. fallen. 'chara.' whatever you prefer. tell me: where do you think your brother is right now?"

Chara nearly loses their grip on the gun. No. No, he wouldn't hurt him. Sans would never hurt Toriel's child just to get at Chara, he isn't *like* that, he would never- would he? Is he *that* desperate? They can feel their lungs close up and they need to focus on their breathing, need to focus, they can't break down now, not before they know if-

"let me paint you the picture," Sans continues, blind or uncaring to the child's panic, it's impossible to tell which. "he's crossing a moor under a cloudy sky. behind him, there's ... nothing to come back to. nothing he wants, anyway. all he carries with him is a memory, held close to his chest, 'cause it's all he cares about anymore. he's all alone, no one's there to keep him company, everyone has left and he's left everyone behind in turn, and he knows, he *knows* there's no way back now. so he ... squares his shoulder, face turned to the wind. and he keeps going. he keeps walking, with that memory as his only guide. ahead of him lies a peaceful little village."

The gun falls to the ground. Slowly, every movement painful through their tense muscles, Chara's hands come up to cover their mouth or their eyes or their ears, even the child themself isn't sure which, and saltwater flows from their eyes down their sickly-gray face, some of it landing on their numb palms, others staining the ground under their feet.

Sans lowers his voice.

"you know who lives in peaceful little villages, don't you? humans. and some of them are good, you know that, but some of them are also very, very bad, and he faces them alone, doesn't he? he doesn't know what he's agreed to, he just wants to see you happy, he just wants to be with you, *cause it's all he cares about anymore. he's all alone, no one's there to keep him company, everyone has left and he's left everyone behind in turn, and he knows, he *knows* there's no way back now. so he ... squares his shoulder, face turned to the wind. and he keeps going. he keeps walking, with that memory as his only guide. ahead of him lies a peaceful little village."

Suddenly, there's solid ground under their knees, rocks tearing through their jeans and their skin, and they don't know if their legs gave up on their own or if they were forced down, but they can't bring their gaze high enough to see if his eye is blue, all they see is their own distred knees, their head bowed, palms pressed into their temples, and the air won't come, it won't come, and there's a noise in their head now, bright as nails on chalkboard and they wish they were dead so they could sleep without this awful, awful noise-

Above them, out of sight, Sans watches the child on the ground with something a little closer to pity than disinterest. "that's right," he says. "he doesn't come back, does he? not in one piece. brothers are like that, sometimes. reckless, too confident for their own good ..."
Another pair of knees appears in front of Chara's, followed by a hand on their shoulder, the touch far too soft and gentle for the words coming out of the person kneeling in front of them.

"look ... kid ..." His voice is deep and steady and there's a sadness in it that Chara barely has the mind to register. "it doesn't have to end like that. not tonight. we can all go home. just ... tell me where frisk is and we can leave. no one needs to get hurt."

The child shakes their head, moving their hands to their eyes, trying to block out the kind of world that does things like this. "... Why?" is all they manage to croak out before swallowing the grime in their throat. "Why would you do this? You're not like this."

Sans' hand tightens on their shoulder, almost reassuringly. "you know why i'm doing this. come on. tell me where they are. we can go home, all four of us. we'll get this mess sorted out."

They don't have a choice. If Asriel is searching the village all alone in the middle of the night, he's in danger, and Chara can't just stand by and let him down again, let him get hurt again, let him die again. They were so stupid to consider the village safe, the familiarity of it just reminded them so much of their first home, of their end, of Asriel stopping them and saving everyone from them, of Asriel setting everything right, even if Chara didn't understand that it was right at first, but it was all stupid, terrible sentimentality and now he's all alone and it's all Chara's fault, and they can't let him down again.

They can't.

They have no other choice.

Slowly, their trembling muscles start to relax. Sans holds out a hand and in his palm lies the heart locket, the white glow of his eyes reflecting in the metal. Chara isn't sure how he managed to retrieve it without them noticing, but they don't care - they take it back and then they let Sans help them stand up. They tell Sans to follow them, and side by side, the two of them climb the hilltop.

Chara doesn't know that Sans has been to the village before. He knows everyone who lives here, humans and monsters alike.

Asriel was never in danger.

Inside the house at the foot of the hill, Frisk waits and waits and waits. They wish they could see the clock hanging over the door, but the glow of the flowers and the locket left their eyes blind in the heavy darkness, and it seems that no matter how long they wait, what little night vision they had won't return after their eyes were so thoroughly burned.

Minutes pass and turn their fear to paranoia, turn the gentle tick ... tock, tick ... tock of the clock into something alive, something dripping from an open maw or a wound, and the storm outside turns to heaving, troubled breathing in their ear, and though they wait and wait, patiently, not moving an inch under the low couch, they can't feel Chara's soul, they're all alone in their head, and it makes them realize that even if their counterpart is okay, soon they're going to have to live with a noisy world and a silent mind for who knows how long, and it was painful enough when the demon was just a demon, not their flesh-and-blood sibling, they can't even begin to imagine what it's going to be like now that they've experienced having Chara right there by their side, and from here under the couch, trapped inside a stranger's house, the future looks every bit as dark as the night surrounding them.

After another agonizing minute, they can sense the pulse of the familiar soul approach the house. There's a soft tap on the window. Chara is right outside the backdoor.
Frisk pushes forward on their stomach and drags themself out from under the couch, and without thinking, they immediately go to open the door.

The sight that meets them, they did not expect. It's Chara, of course, that much they knew. But the kid they're leaning on, their head on his shoulder and their hands knotted in his winter coat, his arm around them protectively - Frisk had not expected to see him.

Without a word, Asriel draws Frisk into a tight hug. Chara worms their arm out from between the two of them so they can hug Frisk too. They stand there on the doorstep, all three of them, and for a single moment, it feels like the whole world is breathing a sigh of relief. Everything is in balance once again. Even the storm seems to lower its ragged voice out of respect. Frisk opens their eyes just enough to see the monster waiting for them a few feet away, the lights in his eyes averted out of ... respect, maybe. Or cowardice. It's hard to tell. Frisk closes their eyes again.

After what could have been a second or an eternity, they part again, Asriel looking Frisk up and down, trying to find out if they're hurt or if it's only weariness making them shiver, and Chara still clings to him like they're afraid he'll fall apart if they don't.

"We're going home," Asriel says to Frisk. "Do you ... do you wanna come with us?"

Frisk looks at Chara. Then they look past them to the monster behind them.

He's not going to give them a choice, is he?

"you okay, kiddo?" Sans asks them when they follow him out of the garden a minute later, giving them the same worried up-and-down that Asriel did. Frisk doesn't reply, and they keep their distance from him, pulling up the hood on their jacket. He sighs, regret raw in his voice. "nah, i, uh ... didn't think so." The kid stays quiet and he can't blame them. He decides to give them their space.

Asriel looks between Frisk and Sans with narrowed eyes, not at all sure what that's supposed to mean. He moves his attention to Chara, who's clinging to his arm now. Their expression is that of someone on death row, their empty gaze nailed to the air in front of them. They haven't said a thing since he found them. Since they found him. At first, he feared that they were hurt somehow, or starving or sleep-deprived or something else, but the closer he looks at the dullness in their eyes, the more he gets the creeping feeling that this isn't trauma. It's fear. They haven't been hurt yet, but they will be. Or at least they expect to be. With each step, their grip on his arm is getting weaker.

He looks back to the people walking in front of him, to Frisk refusing to meet Sans' eyes, to their white-knuckled fist wrapped around the burnt pan and to Sans' angled shoulders and almost fearful attempts at sneaking glances at the kid next to him without them seeing he's looking.

Something isn't right.

The group heads to the moorland beyond the town, gathering on the hilltop and pausing.

"come on, let's go," Sans says and waves for the kids to come closer, readying a shortcut home.

Asriel and Chara step forwards to follow him, but before they can pass Frisk, the little human holds their arm out, cutting them off.

"Will you do it?" they ask.

Sans' jaw tightens at the question. He's obviously trying very, very hard not to let his unease show more than it already is. "let's not talk about that right now," he says steadily.
Frisk stares him down, unflinching. "Why not?"

Asriel's bright eyes flick between the two of them, back and forth, and he brings his free hand up to hold on to Chara. "Do what? What are you talking about?"

Sans nods in Asriel's direction, but when he speaks, he's replying to Frisk's question, not Asriel's. "That's why."

None of them see the way something ignites in Chara's hollow expression and neither does Frisk feel the way something springs to life in the soul of the frightened demon. Their blown pupils contract, as though seeing in the dark isn't necessary anymore, as though seeing what's inside their head is suddenly vastly more important.

"So you didn't tell him?" Frisk continues, their low, droning voice matching their glare for disgust. "You let him help you find us without even telling him why we left?"

Chara can feel the way their brother's hand tightens around their arm and the way a sudden shiver rattles his frame, and something dawns on them, a bubble of air in the choking fear, and they hold onto it, willing the last of their strength and the last of their courage back into existence.

"That wasn't very nice of you, was it?" Chara continues Frisk's line of thought.

At hearing their tone of voice, shaky and bright and broken as it is, Sans' attention immediately snaps to them instead.

Chara loosens their hold on Asriel and gently picks his paw off their arm, so they can go stand next to Frisk. "You can't just use other people for your own purposes like that. They'll find out your true motives eventually."

"Maybe we should tell him," Frisk adds, "and save you the trouble," and the look on Sans' face alone is enough to stir that little voice in the back of their mind that keeps telling them that this isn't right, he's your friend, you're on the wrong side, but they smother it, because right now, Chara is the one who needs to be saved and Sans is the one who needs to be stopped, and if they're going too far, if they're being cold and cruel and mean-spirited, that's only weariness speaking, isn't it? They've been pushed around too much. Which is okay when it's Chara, because Chara is just a kid and they need help, but when it's Sans giving them a hard time, it's unfair and they're allowed to be mean in return if they're feeling really, really bad, because children are allowed to lash out and be angry. Mom always tells them they're allowed to be angry and stand their ground when people are hard on them. Frisk wonders if this is what she meant.

Asriel moves around his siblings and stands between them and Sans, distraught. "Guys, what are you talking about? Sans, what did you do?"

"nothing," Sans says, a little too forcefully, without taking his eyes off the not-twins staring him down with identical anger in the brown and red eyes. "we'll talk about this later."

Frisk shakes their head. "We won't."

Chara continues: "We'll talk about this now."

"Asriel needs to know-"

"- and you're not going to tell him, are you?"

"He knows about the timelines-"
"- there's no reason to keep it a secret from him, unless-

"- you're scared of what he'll do if he finds out you're the reason we ran away-!

Asriel turns his back to them, his full attention now on the monster he's been blindly assisting for days now. "I knew you were hiding something! You're the reason they left? Why? What were you going to do?"

"you would have found out eventually," Sans replies, throwing his arms to his sides as if to physically throw the guilt anywhere but on himself. He's starting to sweat. "i swear, there was no guarantee everything wouldn't be fine. az, buddy, you know me, right? me and papyrus, we've been tryin'a fix things, everything we do, we do to set it all right!"

Frisk takes half a step towards him, only hindered by their brother putting himself between the two sides, and their voice rises an octave. "This is what you think is right?"

Chara reaches out to the other human's soul to try and determine if they're going too far - they can't afford to let Frisk have a meltdown now, after all, that would ruin their only chance at escape - and then they try to gauge Asriel's stance by his expression, as he looks back and forth between all three of his friends. He seems to be wavering. Good.

Sans tries to tell Frisk to please, please calm down, they'll talk it out later, nothing's settled yet, maybe they can find some kind of compromise, and Asriel's eyes come to rest on Chara, silently begging his adoptive sibling for answers.

"We're not going home," Frisk says, tightening their hold on Laura's pan. "Not as long as you're okay with putting Chara in danger."

Chara tries to find their usual smiley grimace, but they're still too shaken up and they only manage to draw their upper lip back over their teeth in disgust. That's fine. After all, they only need to deal the final blow.

"Who would've known ..." they begin.

Sans' eye-lights flare as he realizes what they're about to say.

"... that a so-called 'judge' could be unfair enough to sentence a child to-

Before they can finish, Sans' hand darts out, grabs Asriel by the scruff of his collar and pulls him backwards, and come the very next second, the humans are staring at thin air where the monsters had been a moment before.

Chara immediately grabs Frisk by the wrist, shouting "Run!" in their ear, and only then does Frisk realize that this is what the other wanted all along. Only when the two of them are speeding down the hilltop, stumbling over grass and uneven earth, do they understand that they have but seconds before Sans returns, and they struggle to keep up when Chara sprints around the fence of Sarah and Oni's garden, in between the buildings and on and on and on, their fear sending shivers through their fingers locked around their friend's wrist as much as through the braid of energy connecting their souls.

Thunder echoes through the clouds high above, even the sky itself is begging them to keep running or perhaps trying scaring them away, for their own good, and tonight, the shadows are not brown or soft or blurry, but sharp and inky and reaching, trees and hedges painting spikes on the cracked road, threatening bodily harm if the humans dare to turn back, if they dare to give up.
Chara stops abruptly in the middle of a crossroad and Frisk crashes headfirst into them, nearly making them fall over. The taller kid doesn't spare them as much as a glance before pulling them down the street on the right, rushing through a street Frisk recognizes from earlier today, faintly, a dream twisted into a nightmare, and when the two of them run headfirst into a shadow between two buildings so dark they can't make out the other side of it, they are, for a heartbeat, certain that they really are asleep and that they've just jumped into a dreamworld abyss.

Then the darkness lifts, just slightly, just enough to make out the low, moving square snailing across the dark gray horizon.

"Come on!" Chara breathes through their overexerted lungs, speeding up to the point where Frisk is certain they're flying, not running, and it's impossible to keep up without tripping over their own feet. "We can make it!"

They're chasing after the square of indefinable black moving quicker and quicker, and before Frisk knows what's happening, the ground disappears under their feet and they're being pulled up, up towards the black until it fills their vision and the sky is no more.

Frisk is heavy, Chara realizes, as they leap with all their might and grab the fence on the last car hanging off the train. The pain in their hand convinces them that they've broken something or maybe dislocated a joint, but they can't stop now, they can't let go, and through determination alone, they haul Frisk up next to them, before climbing over the fence and helping their younger sibling over it as well.

Both of them lean on the door leading inside, chests heaving, throats raw, dark spots appearing in their vision, none of which have anything to do with the solid black country night.

The little village floats away, gently at first, like a great big boat drifting away on the moorland's endless sea, then quicker, quicker, until it's only a stain on the stormy horizon.

Frisk puts their arms around Chara, forcing them to stay in the safety of the vehicle's shadow. Chara puts one arm around the kid in turn, using their free hand to steady themself on the fence, unable to get enough air in their lungs no matter how much they fight to regain normalcy.

They don't know where the train is going to take them. But if nothing else, it will take them away, and that's enough. For now, that's enough. More than enough.

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Asriel stumbles backwards into the darkness and a loud buzzing from the machine embedded in his spine tells him that when he hits the ground, he won't be landing on grassland, either. He twists around in the air and manages to catch his balance against a wall. Though his head is pounding from the unexpected surge of magic running through him, he forces his eyes open and finds-

- the wall in the lab. The lab in Sans' basement.

He whips around, just in time to see Sans catch his balance after the sudden teleport.

Sans feels the burning glare on him before he sees it. He lifts his head and finds himself staring into a pair of bright, sparking magenta eyes. They're nearly red in the low light.
He nervously points over his shoulder, towards the door. "uhm, h-hey uh, maybe i should just-"

Before he can move another inch, bright orange flames burst into existence, circling him like a pack of massive, angry fireflies, reflecting in his glistening skull, searing stray hairs on his hood.

"We had them."

Sans shrinks under the seething voice, trying to make himself smaller to avoid the sputtering flames drawing tighter and tighter circles around his person. "asriel, come on, man, i can explain-!"

"They were hurt." Asriel's voice hitches in his throat and the fire makes the tears in his eyes shine with an otherworldly light. "Didn't you see them!? They needed help!"

Is Papyrus home? No, why would he be? As far as he knows, the children are still missing, he'll still be out searching. Who else would hear if he called? Are any of the neighbors home?

"Well?" Asriel interrupts his train of thought. "Tell me what happened!"

Sans looks across the flames, trying to decipher exactly how scared he should be. The child's face is twisted in fury, but there's pain in it, too, angry tears barely kept from spilling, the claws extended to guide the flames shaking.

He should lie to him. He should keep him in the dark, it's safer, it's safer if no one knows, Sans can't risk anyone trying to stop him before it's done, so many things could still go wrong, Papyrus and Alphys are already suspicious of him, only their pity and trusting hearts stand between him and a very, very sudden end, only their hopes that he can find it in him to show his enemy mercy is keeping him alive, and no one can know, no one can know-

"they know." The words come all on their own, dragged out of him by the little one's broken heart glowing through his tears. "they know i've found a way to stop the resets. permanently."

Asriel's eyes narrow in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

The flames growl and grow, eating up the space in the circle Sans is trapped within.

"i can't leave a power like that in the hands of someone like them."

Asriel's free hand whips forward, ahead of the one holding the flames, and from between the lab floor's tiles writhe a tangle of vines, slithering under the circle of flames and up to Sans' neck, pushing against his chin, threatening to snap his head off his spine.

"I don't like that story," the ex-demon hisses through his fangs. "Tell me a better one."

Sans struggles against the vines, scratching and tearing at the rope around his neck, but the pressure on his spine only tightens and his squirming brings him dangerously close to the flames.

"asriel, i have to try," he says, tone rising in panic, breathing hard out of reflex. "if there's even the slightest chance that i can fix this mess before everything comes apart, i have to try! i'm the only one who can do this!"

"Tell me what you're planning," Asriel repeats, straining to make his voice cold the way he knows he was once able to. "Tell me what you're planning, or I'll snap your neck."

Sans tells him. He doesn't know why, but he can't help himself. Maybe he's been keeping it in for too long, all the fear and disgust and self-hatred. All the bitterness over being the only one who can do
this, the one person out of thousands of better choices who was burdened with knowing too much.

That's the problem, isn't it? He's on his own with a bunch of traumatized kids. No one else remembers what happened. Not even his brother. No matter how many people he could recruit to help him, come the next reset, he'll be on his own again.

It's easier on everyone if they don't know.

Slowly, slowly, ever so slowly, the vines on his neck slacken their hold and the fires die down and dissipate. Asriel's arms fall to his sides, dread replacing anger in his hollow gaze. He brings a paw up to his chest, holding his soul through the flesh and bone. Then his fingers move up to brush the locket around his neck.

"asriel," Sans says and cautiously moves over to stand in front of the other. His voice slows and he says each word with conviction. "listen to me. this is not a death sentence. your friend has far more determination than any human soul i've ever encountered. if we're careful and take the right precautions, we could give them a normal life. they might even feel better than before without that ... constant headache that never goes away, even when you sleep ..." His teeth grind together at the thought, but he forces himself to relax. Now is not the time.

"This is wrong," Asriel whimpers, looking right through Sans. "This is so wrong ..."

"but you can see it, right? why i have to do this? i don't have a choice. think about your parents. think about our friends. think about their friends and their friends' friends. think about the kids who won't get to grow up together. think about the ones who won't get to grow old together. think about the ones who'll see their loved ones die over and over, without being able to do a thing to protect them." He remembers caring, once. About other people's futures. About saving the world. About doing the right thing. He doesn't care anymore, he tells himself. Nothing stays. Hope only ever leads to disappointment, he's learned that by now. But as the only one who can do anything about it, it's his duty to try anyway. And one thing he does dare to hope for is that Asriel will understand this. That he at least still has it in him to care.

Tears tear loose from the corners of the child's eyes. "They all care about each other so much ..."

Sans' voice softens and he lowers his gaze out respect. He knows the kid hates crying in front of other people. "i can't guarantee it won't hurt. i can't even guarantee they'll be okay. but if there's a chance that we can fix this and give everyone the futures they've been missing for so, so long, then we have to take it."

Sans can see the gears working in Asriel's head, turning and turning, as he sees his best friend on one side and the rest of the world on the other, the world he once destroyed and brought back, the world he gave his own life to resurrect.

Could he give up their life, too?

With a deep sigh, Sans pats him on the shoulder, before turning his back on him, intending to leave the poor kid to think it over for himself. But before he reaches the exit, Asriel speaks up.

"Do you ..." His voice dies away. He forces it back into existence. "Do you think Frisk is safe? With ... with Chara, I mean?"

Sans can't bring himself to turn around, can't bring himself to see the look on the other's face himself.

"you already know what i think."
He leaves for the upstairs.

Asriel stays alone in the dim lab.

On one side, the world. Everyone he knows and loves, and everyone they love, and their loved ones' loved ones. On the other side, his best friend.

On the one side, Frisk. On the other, Chara.

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Frisk falls asleep at midnight, curled up around Chara, their arms locked tightly around their friend's back, head leaned on their chest. Chara can't tell if it's Frisk shivering or themself, but the night is cold here on the train's tail end and the door leading inside is locked. Jumping off wouldn't do them any good, the moorland is bound to be just as freezing, if not more.

Besides, they can't stop now. Though the village is far, far beyond the horizon, they have to keep going.

Absentmindedly, they brush their hand over their sibling's hooded head, thankful for the little bit of warmth they share. Careful not to wake them, Chara tips down the collar of their jacket. Nothing but freezing skin and the top of the make-shift dress underneath. They pull the collar back up so it can protect the younger kid's throat from the cold.

With a heavy heart, Chara reaches under their own collar and pulls their locket over their head.

They turn it over and over between their fingers. Vine-y patterns and swirls and letters - *Best Friends Forever* - and the metal is so warm it nearly feels soft, nearly alive.

Are they going to forget? Forget what it's like to be little and helpless and in pain? What it's like to love someone so much they'll hurt for him, hurt themself and hurt other people, die and kill and resurrect?

It's so dark now. Even though their eyes have long since adjusted to the dark, the world is a muddled mess of gray and dark blue, and morning seems so far away. Even so, they know exactly which shade of gold the locket is, they know every scratch in the surface and they know what their reflection would look like in its brilliance.

They know that even in the dark, even when they can't see it, the locket is made of pure gold.

Gently, they peel Frisk's arms away and slip out of their grip. They stand by the fence and watch the train tracks race by on the ground below.

Drawing a deep breath, they hold the necklace by its chain and dangle it over the edge.

This is not forever. Someday, they'll come back. As everything does.

The locket is only metal and chain. Metal and chain and dangerous magic that could lead their enemy back on their trail. Everything they feel for the object is something born within, born of memories and sentimentality and- well, it's love, right? Love doesn't vanish. It will stay with them. Even if warm gold and swirly patterns and *Best Friends Forever* do not.
They let the chain slip between their fingers, just an inch or two. Objects can't look frightened, they know that, but in this moment, Chara swears they sense its fear. It's their own, of course. They're projecting. But the little metal heart looks so helpless hanging from its delicate chain, cold earth and dirt and rotten train tracks speeding by below, threatening to take it away, never to be seen again.

Chara rubs their eyes, their lower lip trembling.

Then they let go.

It's better this way. With them far gone.

They pray Asriel will just forget. Just let him forget. Let him live his life. Let him be safe.

Still half asleep, Frisk opens their arms so Chara can slip back into their spot next to them, leaned up against the train's locked door. What little warmth they'd caught between them is already gone and they hold each other close, trying to reignite it, trying to shut out the cold, closing their eyes tightly and hoping it will make the world and its relentless wind and frost disappear.

The train rumbles across the worn tracks, on and on and on. Where to, neither of them know.

Soon, the clouds tear loose from the sky and on the currents sweeping across the moor rides the first snow of winter.

Chapter End Notes

I knew from the beginning of writing this fic that I couldn't just gloss over Sans' scary side. The side that pretends to be having fun fighting you because he's got nothing left to cling to but gallows humor, the side that threatens to kill you even on pacifist runs because you're a danger to everyone, even when you don't mean to be. The side that wants "Chara" gone more than anything. The side that wants YOU gone.

I couldn't just leave Chara at his mercy without showing the damage he's capable of, without making it an issue that the other characters are aware of, without making it an issue that needs to be DEALT with. Sans' shaky morals is something that needs to be dealt with.

Stay tuned.
Writing this chapter nearly destroyed me, I had a vicious case of writer's block while it was in production, BUT help from cool friends and a heaping helping of capital D Determination eventually ended up making this the chapter I wanted it to be. It's probably better than it would've been if I hadn't been in the process of suffering while it happened, so eyyy

Thanks to Starfog and ShtiyaJust4You for beta'ing the thing, and also double thanks to Starfog for helping me get on the right track with this chapter. I have v cool friends.

When Papyrus releases Asriel from his chamber the following morning, Asriel leaves Frisk's locket on the table next to the machine.

He doesn't spare it another glance for a long, long time.

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Sans feels the creeping frost and hears the snow flurries outside his window before he even opens his eyes.

He saw this coming. He knew it would happen eventually.

Something in his chest caves and he feels the frost creep into the hole it leaves, its icy tendrils snaking through his bones to the ill stomach and the knotted throat he doesn't have, to the headache that never leaves, to the burning feeling in his eye sockets, and god, it's disgusting. He doesn't understand why he can't shut it out, why he can't quit being so weak and just deal with it. Look at Papyrus! He gets to experience having his whole life crashing down on him all at once with every new timeline and does he ever complain?

Of course not. He takes it like an adult and doesn't throw a hissy fit every time this actual regular occurrence that's been going on for an eternity repeats itself.

Sans wants to be like his brother. He can't remember when he gave up trying.

He can't bring himself to open his eyes. He knows that the moment he does, the last seven months of his life will disappear, washed away by inch thick snow and looming cave roofs and a child in a striped shirt that he doesn't know whether to hug or kill on sight, and no matter how hard he tries, he can't be okay with that. He can't not care. He can't keep pretending to be fine with that. It's too much.

He pulls his blanket over his head and presses his palms against his eyelids, trying to commit everything to memory. He tries to remember Fallen, what they're like and what he needs to watch out for the next time they're inevitably standing face to face, but though he tries to concentrate, it's
impossible. No matter how hard he tries to focus, red eyes keep turning brown and sickly pale skin turns olive, and all he sees is that one, not the other one, the first time the little one saw the surface, the first time they faced the humans with their new family in tow, their first day of school, where they were so anxious they needed a skeleton holding their hands on each side just to get through the big double doors, the first time they spoke to him, truly spoke in their own voice, the look of sheer rage on their face when he tried to warn them about the demon, the way they looked at him as though they'd never hated anyone the way they hated him when he tried to take Fallen away from them, and he can't help the water leaking onto his hands.

It's been two weeks. The child has been gone without a trace for two weeks.

At some point, he remembers that it's winter and that winters on the surface means snow. At some point, he manages to open his eyes and see that he's still in his room on the surface. The memories aren't disappearing.

It takes him two hours to get out of bed. Another one to get dressed. Two more to work up the courage to go downstairs.

Everything is slower these days. The world seems determined to pass by without him.

Papyrus is downstairs, just like he feared. Cooking, it looks like, if all the burnt, frozen and otherwise massacred spaghetti drowning the kitchen bin is anything to go by. The pan Papyrus is currently scowling at doesn't look like it was made for any kind of pasta, but he's not letting that stop him from filling it with the stuff and setting it on fire, apparently.

Frustrated, he picks it up by the handle and throws it in the sink with a noise so loud it even makes Sans jump in his exhausted state, and then he turns on the faucet to kill the flames.

Sans tries to turn around as silently as possible. Maybe if he goes back upstairs and waits until his brother has left, he can-

"DON'T YOU HAVE WORK TODAY," sounds a very-much-not-question-like question from the kitchen.

When did he get this sloppy? He used to be great at disappearing without anyone noticing.

"not really feelin' it today," he replies. That's a lie. Grillby fired him two days ago. He doesn't know why. For someone made of fire, the bartender has been strangely cold to him for the last few weeks.

Maybe he knows. Maybe he can tell.

"YOU'RE LYING TO ME AGAIN."

Okay, so Papyrus can tell, at least. Has Sans started saying his thoughts out loud or something?

He sighs and lumbers the rest of the way to the nearest couch. "just ... tryin'a spare you the details, i guess."

Papyrus grabs a sponge and sets to work scrubbing melted pasta from the pan with a little more force than necessary. "YOU CAN'T KEEP SLACKING OFF ON THE JOB! THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS!! THE WORLD ISN'T GOING TO STOP JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE NOT 'FEELING IT'!!"

"you saw me coming home at 4am yesterday, gimme a break," Sans mutters and puts his feet on the table in defiance.
The sponge goes in the sink with a splash and Papyrus' fists go on his hips as he turns to face Sans with fury in his glowing eyes. "AND WHY IS IT YOU WERE OUT UNTIL 4AM ON A WEEKDAY!? REMIND ME."

Sans sinks deeper into the couch and looks away, out at the snow and ice pouring down on the earth, hiding it in a veil of white. "you know why."

"AS ONE OF THE ONLY ONES!!" Papyrus grabs the sponge again and gets back to work on the pan, nearly taking the outer layers of it off with the grease. "DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY TIMES I'VE HAD TO TELL ALPHYS THAT YOU WERE 'OUT' OR THAT YOU WERE 'BUSY' OR 'IN THE MIDDLE OF SOMETHING'!? THE WOMAN HATES USING THE PHONE AND SHE'S CALLED ME ELEVEN TIMES OVER THE LAST THREE DAYS!! SANS, ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME!?"

Sans is trying very hard not to. He hasn't been able to bring himself to face Alphys' wrath since he failed to bring the children home safely when he found them two weeks ago. Papyrus he has no choice with, but at the very least he doesn't live under the same roof as the person he stole this terrible idea from in the first place.

Papyrus has been trying to placate her, reassuring her that Sans won't be doing anything rash, that he has no intention of going through with the plan, she needn't worry. Papyrus is like that, he watches other people's backs even when he's angry with them. Come to think of it, maybe Alphys is doing that too. Trying to gauge Sans' intentions before deciding whether or not it's necessary to tell the king and the former queen about what he considered doing.

"SANS."

"look, i'm trying to set things right, get off my back! what do you want from me?"

Papyrus abandons his task and stalks over to the couch, looming over his brother, fists clenched.

"I WANT YOU TO PROMISE ME YOU'RE NOT GOING TO GO THROUGH WITH THAT HORRIFIC PLAN OF YOURS!" he says and stomps his foot so hard the floorboards creak. "HOW DIFFICULT CAN IT POSSIBLY BE!? IT HAS BEEN WEEKS, SURELY YOU HAVE COME TO YOUR SENSES BY NOW!"

Sans manages to tear his eyes away from the snow storm outside and lifts his gaze to his brother, glaring up at him from under his brows. "and here i was, thinking you'd just told me off for lyin' to you. think you can make up your mind, bro?"

He can't bear to watch the way Papyrus' expression changes at those words and he looks back to the window, letting the snow distract him.

Papyrus shakes his head slowly, looking at Sans as though he's trying to figure out exactly what makes him so sure that this is an imposter without knowing for certain. "SANS, I CANNOT FOR THE LIFE OF ME FIGURE OUT WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU. THAT YOU COULD BE SO CALLOUS AS TO EVEN CONSIDER SOMETHING LIKE THIS A Valid OPTION ..."

Oh yeah, what was it that happened to him, again? Seeing his brother murdered in cold blood and having to spread his remains over the same damn children's book ten, fifty, maybe a hundred times? Seeing his hometown deserted, everyone he cared about fleeing from everything they'd built over lifetimes of trying to make the best of the godforsaken hellhole they were all trapped in together? Having his own insides spill on snow, rock, gold tiles, or wherever else he ended up until he had to face the fact that no matter what he did, no matter how certain victory seemed, one of those little
beasts, Flowey or Fallen, would find a way to screw it all up again? Knowing that if he left them to their own devices, someday there wouldn't be a reality for them to mess with anymore?

What a wuss, huh? A real crybaby, that Sans.

... He reminds himself that Papyrus has it far worse than he does. Instead of talking back, he only sinks deeper into his jacket, pouting at the window he's still staring through, unseeing.

"YOU REALIZE I CANNOT COVER FOR YOU FOREVER, DON'T YOU?" Papyrus asks, just a little bit of anger draining from his voice to make room for worry. "IF YOU DO NOT CONTACT ALPHYS SOON, I FEAR SHE MIGHT SPILL YOUR SECRET. YOU REALIZE WHAT THIS MEANS, RIGHT?"

Sans does realize what that means. He's told himself so many times over that he's okay with it. Either he'll be gone and everyone else will be okay, or time will reset eventually, as it always does, and he'll come back soon enough. He wants to be okay with that. It is okay. Even on the off chance that this is somehow miraculously the one timeline that sticks, he doesn't belong in everyone else's happy ending. Not anymore. And it's fine.

So then ... why? Why does he feel so-

Slowly, Sans moves his feet back to the ground and sits upright, leaning his elbows on his knees, once again covering the tears in his eyes with his hands. Once upon a time, he wouldn't have wanted to cry in front of Papyrus, but it's not like he's got anything left to lose on that front. This is another reason he likes to keep his brother in the dark in most timelines. Papyrus doesn't tend to be very happy about the kind of person his only family member has become.

Sans doesn't see the pity or the sympathy on the other seraph's face. Papyrus moves around the coffee table and sits across from him. "BROTHER," he starts, his voice warmer, but no less firm. "I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE TRYING TO HELP. I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU'RE DESPERATE. BUT WHAT I CANNOT FOR THE LIFE OF ME UNDERSTAND IS WHY YOU CAN'T FIND IT IN YOURSELF TO JUST TRUST THE CHILDREN WHEN THEY SAY THAT FALLEN ... THAT CHARA HAS CHANGED."

"they're kids, papyrus," Sans forces out through his teeth. He takes a sharp breath and moves his hands to his mouth, silencing a sob. "and they love 'em. of course they do. but we can't bet our whole existence on that. we have to make sure."

"BUT YOU DON'T EVEN TRULY BELIEVE WE CAN, DO YOU? YOU'RE STILL PREPARED TO FACE ANOTHER RESET? AND THE ONE AFTER THAT AND THE ONE AFTER THAT?"

He wants to be. He wants to be prepared. He doesn't want to care. He's been let down so many times, it's easier, so much easier, to assume the worst and just try to make the best of it in any way he can. Just ... eat gross food, have pun-offs with his brother, prank the kid, maybe have a look at that star map he's been drawing for himself whenever they've made it to the surface. Try to live life the way it is and not think so much about how it used to be. He must get used to it eventually. This is his reality now.

"YOU HAVE BEEN IN THIS FOR FAR TOO LONG," Papyrus continues, a little more softly. "YOU'VE LOST YOUR WAY."

Sans doesn't understand. He doesn't understand how Papyrus can be so strong through all of this. They remember the same things now, don't they? And yet he just keeps going.
"aren't you scared?" Sans asks, mumbles, whispers. "how can you not be afraid that this is going to turn out like ... every single timeline up until now? why would this be any different?"

Papyrus lifts his arms in a dismissive gesture. "MAYBE IT ISN'T! MAYBE FALLEN IS SEARCHING OUT A ROOF TO JUMP FROM AS WE SPEAK, BUT WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? LOOK AT YOU, YOU'RE MISERABLE! EXPECTING TERRIBLE THINGS TO HAPPEN ISN'T GOING TO MAKE THEM ANY LESS TERRIBLE, THEY'RE ONLY GOING TO RUIN WHAT YOU HAVE RIGHT NOW!"

"but what if we could actually stop it? what if this is the only chance we're ever gonna get? you're gonna squander that just 'cause the demon looks cute when they cry?"

"HAVE YOU CONSIDERED THAT PERHAPS THE KEY TO SOLVING THIS WHOLE MESS IS TO LET THE DEMON BECOME HUMAN AGAIN? THAT PERHAPS THE SOLUTION IS SIMPLER THAN YOU MAKE IT OUT TO BE?"

He has. Of course he has. Frisk saved the whole world just by being too stubborn about the whole peace-love-and-rainbows thing to hurt anyone and it worked out for them. But Sans is not Frisk and Fallen is not a kindly old king longing for peace, or a warrior seeking justice for her people, or a robotic idol trying to protect the humans he's been fascinated with and inspired by his whole life. Fallen is destruction and plight. Sans is just the universe's janitor trying to keep the demon from making too big of a mess.

"we can't ... do that to everyone. everything is on us. it's too big of a gamble. maybe if it was just you and me who were in danger, but ... this is about everyone. what's one kid's pain next to the whole world's?"

Papyrus looks at him for a moment, brows furrowed.

"AN EXAMPLE," he says, then. "THEY ARE AN EXAMPLE. WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT WHAT WE'RE WILLING TO DO TO ACHIEVE PEACE. YOU MAY HAVE MADE YOUR CHOICE, BUT I WILL NOT STAND BY AND LET A CHILD GET HURT AND POSSIBLY KILLED IN SUCH A GRUESOME MANNER. THIS IS NOT SOMETHING I AM WILLING TO DO. YOUR CHOICE IS YOURS, BUT YOU MUST UNDERSTAND THAT I CANNOT LET YOU. IF I FIND THE CHILDREN BEFORE YOU DO, YOU WILL HAVE MISSED YOUR CHANCE. I WILL NOT TELL ANYONE WHAT YOU INTENDED TO DO, BUT I WILL NOT LET YOU HARM THEM EITHER. I ... I CAN'T. DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M SAYING?"

Sans does understand. This, he's known all along.

Papyrus nods to himself a bit, swallowing the lump forming in his own voice. Then he gets back to his feet and aims to head back to the kitchen to continue his work. He never makes it there, stopping short next to the couch Sans is slouching in.

"WE HAVE VERY POWERFUL FRIENDS, SANS. IF THEY FOUND OUT YOU INTENDED TO HURT ONE OF OUR OWN, THEY WOULD NOT BE HAPPY."

"i know."

"I KNOW YOU KNOW AND IT- IT CONCERNS ME."

"..."

"I WANT THIS TO END AS MUCH AS YOU DO, BUT ... I DON'T WANT AN ENDING
WHERE YOU'RE NOT HERE. NOT A PERMANENT ONE. IF YOU CAN'T RESTRRAIN YOURSELF FOR CHARA'S SAKE OR YOUR OWN, CAN'T YOU AT THE VERY LEAST ... DO IT FOR ME?"

"..."

"I DON'T WANT TO BE ALONE."

Sans sighs. Then he lifts a hand and Papyrus clasps it, neither of them looking at the other.

He wants his brother to be happy. But more than that, he wants him to live. He wants his friends to have a future. He wants the demon gone. He wants to get it all done and over with before he goes soft enough to change his mind. He can't afford to. He doesn't want to see the world go up in flames because he had a single moment of weakness. Because he wasn't strong enough. Because he took the easy way out like he always does.

He wants the human home safe. He doesn't know why that thought keeps worming its way to the forefront of his mind when all of reality is on the line.

No, he does know. He wishes he didn't, but deep down, he does know.

The chances of seeing his child alive and well again are getting smaller by the day.

***

There is a place far to the north, far beyond the mountain and the flatlands and the moors, far beyond the city with dirtied streets, far beyond the city by the harbor, and further still beyond the peaceful little village. It is winter here, proper, icy winter, with snow storms that numb exposed skin and wind that chills one right to the bone, making its victims feel hollow and incorporeal as ghosts.

Among the corpses of old, broken down houses walks a child. No, they don't walk - they slither. Creep from shadow to shadow, as though hiding from the crooked cobblestone church looming over the town, its round, blue glass window eye looking down on the snow-covered roofs with scornful pride despite its own sorry state.

From under the child's hood stares pair of glinting red eyes, obscured by the white clouds of breath filtering through the stolen scarf around their neck and the lower half of their face. They give the church's blue eye a hateful look before disappearing under the cover of a sagging rooftop pouring over the side of its house, weighed down by the snow dripping over its edge.

Chara clutches a heavy backpack to their chest, its one unbroken strap over their shoulder. They found it in a garbage container a while back and though it's probably not entirely sanitary to stick food in it, it's all they have to carry their stolen goods. The bread is still warm, they can feel it all the way through the many layers of fabric, the backpack, the raincoat, the ratty too-big sweater they picked off that one clothes line in an unguarded backyard a few miles back ... It smells good, too. But they resist. There's someone who needs it more than them. Well, they don't need it more to live, but they sure as hell need it more in order to stop whining and that is almost more vital at the moment. At least to Chara's sanity.

They head into the pine forest beyond the town, weaving through the trees on a path they already know too well, easily finding their way through the many completely identical trees.
Within the forest, hidden from the town's view, lies the remains of an abandoned wooden shack. It doesn't keep warm, especially not at night, Chara knows this from firsthand experience. They get the feeling they were lucky to be reborn into this decade and not the next, 'cause the windows already appear to be silently weeping under the frost, discolored from the cold.

Chara slips inside, careful to shut the door before the wind worms its way inside too. The interior is barely furnished, only a fireplace, a stove and an old dusty couch, too large to fit through the door without hacking the thing apart, left behind by the previous owners. Though it almost hurts to let go of the warmth and scent of the food hidden within the thing, Chara throws the backpack onto the couch, aiming for the small, unmoving figure curled up under a rug repurposed as a blanket.

"Dinner's served," they mumble, heading to the fireplace to check if it's still going. It's not. It's nearly burned down, only glowing orange cinders left in memory of the burning fire they left behind only a few hours ago. Ugh, why can't they leave that little worm alone for a minute without everything going to hell? "Frisk, why'd you let it burn out!? I just got it working!"

No answer.

Groaning, Chara piles more wood into the fireplace. "Don't tell me you're too sick to walk five feet to mess with the fireplace. Come on." They have no idea what they're doing, they've never had a little more practice in over the last few days. "Can't believe I have to do everything around here." They stick some old newspapers in there too, hoping the sparks will catch onto those. Maybe if they do it with enough confidence the fire will be too scared to resist. They leave the fire to its fate and stand up, turning to shoot an angry glare at their sibling curled up under the blanket-rug, a glare not unlike the one they aimed at the church earlier.

"This is so you, do you know that? It's so you to make me do all the work! You're so helpless!"

Still no answer.

Chara hisses through their teeth and goes to sit next to the snotty little lump. "What, are you too 'sick' to talk, too? You know what I'm starting to think? I'm starting to think you're not sick at all. I think you're just looking for an excuse to have me look after you. Is that it?" They pull lightly at the matted brown hair sticking out at the top of the rug. "You want me to baby you like old times? Huh? Did you finally get tired of being useful after all?"

... The silence continues. The kid doesn't even move. Chara frowns. That's ... not very like Frisk. They try shaking the other's shoulder. Still no response.

"... Frisk?"

They pull the rug down and grab the other human by the jaw, turning their face up, forcing them to look at them. Only, they're not. Their eyes are closed.

"Frisk!"

Darkness is comfortable compared to the blinding brightness of the snow outside. Dreams stopped being a thing a long time ago. At least it feels like a long time ago. They've stopped counting the days. On and on, they've struggled. On and on, through a world of snow and cities and trains and monsters and humans. It wouldn't hurt to take a break. It wouldn't hurt to stay here for a while, in the dark ...

Frisk nearly panics when it starts to drain away. When light starts pouring through, blurry and muddied, as though they're lying on a lakebed, watching the sun through polluted water.
Then the voice, calling out their name over and over, cursing and hissing, begging and stuttering, shatters the last shards of black in their vision and they blink a few times, just in time to see the other child raise a hand, ready to strike.

On instinct, Frisk grabs their wrist before the hit makes contact. Chara freezes in place with a strangled little noise.

For a second, Frisk can't comprehend the scene in front of them, their friend staring at them wide-eyed, paused mid-movement, rigid in their awkward position sitting half-turned towards the sick kid on the couch.

The moment Frisk realizes what they're doing, they let go. Chara half-stumbles off the couch, rubbing their wrist. It didn't hurt. Still the contact drew bile up into the back of their mouth. They swallow heavily.

"Sorry," Frisk says through the rawness in their throat, pulling their arm back under the warmth of the rug. They know not to do that. Chara has told them not to, multiple times, but it's easy to forget. Especially when you're barely awake. "Reflexes. Why'd you try to hit me?" The questions sounds a little more accusatory than they meant for it to be. They rub their eyes, but the cold has made the skin on the backs of their hands scaly and rough, and it's like dragging sandpaper over their eyelids. Ugh. Gross. You really don't appreciate being a soft, scale-less human enough until you've tried the alternative.

Chara manages to wrench their glassy, frightened eyes off the other kid, choosing to focus on scratching the lingering sensation out of their wrist. "I- I thought you were dead," they say through an admittedly half-hearted snarl, turning their side to Frisk, not happy with the fact that the other can see their discomfort, but not content with leaving them entirely out of sight, either. Just ... just in case. "I couldn't wake you up. I thought you'd frozen to death or something."

"I think you would've noticed if I were dead," Frisk mumbles into the blanket-rug, curling up around themself a little more tightly. Merely lifting the makeshift blanket for a moment let some of the warmth out.

Chara pauses, hands stilling, to look at Frisk, cocking a brow in silent question.

Frisk's gaze briefly flicks down in response. Then it dawns on Chara. Oh. Right. They're kind of linked, aren't they? The path they once carved into the other human's soul remains open to this day, letting in warmth and hope and fear as easily as the wind leaks through the windows. They probably would have noticed if they were suddenly alone.

It's easy to forget. It's easy to forget that the familiar glow of the other soul isn't a part of Chara themself. That it isn't theirs anymore.

... It isn't technically theirs.

They huff and go back to check on the fireplace. "Anyway, don't scare me like that again. Try not to die, okay? I know it's cold, but I still need your help. I want to be able to send you home in one piece when we're done here, please." They grab a stick from the pile of wood they've been able to collect in the surrounding forest, and poke at the fire, hoping to kind of nudge it in the direction of the bigger branches. It works a little too well. Something must be stuck to one of the branches, something very, very flammable, because the fire suddenly takes hold, flaring up and sputtering like a frightened bird unfolding and beating its wings, and Chara rears back with an indignant "woah, chill! Jeez ..." They quickly check their brows and bangs for singed patches, but they've seemingly escaped unharmed. But still. Uncool, fire.
Frisk watches their sibling struggle with the flames through tired eyes. It still surprises them, sometimes, how human Chara really is. They're not sure what they expected before the two of them met face to face. Sure, they knew that their ghostly companion used to be human once, that they must have been a real child once, but ... it was just really hard to imagine them that way. As a scrawny, awkward little kid, more closely resembling a squawky baby bird than the omnipotent force of chaos Frisk initially got to know. And yet somehow, they don't seem quite as far removed from the being they used to be as they should.

"We should get out of here soon," Chara comments, casting a glance over their shoulder to check that Frisk is still awake. "I think we should try to find a ship somewhere. It's only going to get colder if we keep heading north."

Once, that statement would have been followed up by a 'and then you can go home.' The phrase is redundant by now. It's been said so many times it doesn't mean anything anymore.

We just need to get through this city and then you can go home.

We just need to get off this train and then you can go home.

We just need to get to this, do you see this place here-? This is where the tracks cross, if we're quick, we can switch here and keep heading north, keep heading north, if we keep going, if we stay determined, we'll find a safe place, we'll finally be okay, and then-

Home seems like a faraway dream.

Frisk knows they should protest. They know they're only going to get drawn further and further into this, and the longer they put it off, the harder it's going to be to leave Chara behind. Chara has always been thinner than them, but it's somehow gotten worse, something Frisk hadn't thought possible. The purple under the pale kid's eyes has darkened and grayed. Frisk should leave before they start worrying if Chara will truly be able to make it on their own.

Of course Chara can make it on their own. They're strong. Still, it hurts to see their old friend like this. Alone, helpless. Scared. Frisk wants to help. They can't find it in themself to leave just yet. A part of them is starting to wonder if they ever should.

No, no, they shouldn't think about that. They shouldn't even consider it.

It's dangerous.

"I found food, by the way" Chara says. "If you want some." Satisfied with the pyre, they stand up and approach the couch again. But before they reach Frisk's side, they notice something. On the floor, the wooden floor right next to the couch.

Scratches. Scratches tracing shapes.

Frisk realizes what they're looking at and quickly pushes one end of the rug to the floor, hiding the scratches from view. "D-don't look at that!" they stutter.

"No, quit it, I wanna see!" Chara pulls the rug back up and crouches next to the marks, running the tips of their fingers over them. The wood is soft and malleable from rot - the patterns are made up of the crescent shapes of fingernails, drawing squares, circles ...

Chara lifts their head, letting the light from the window reflect in some of the shallower marks.

Tall, square creatures with curved growths on their heads. A stick person with waves from its neck in
the shape of a scarf. Another shape with ridges on its head, another with a ponytail.

One little square with what appears to be droopy ears and stripes on its front.

And next to it, a circle with a grin as wide as its head.

Slowly, Chara's eyes slide from the marks up the couch and up to the child huddled on top of it, the red in them sparkling under the cover of their bangs, flaring hotter than the fire roaring behind them.

Frisk rears back, sitting upright and pressing their back into the couch cushions, pulling the rug up to their chest like a shield. "I-I-I w-was bored! I was just passing the time!"

"Homesick, are we?" the demon drawls, tone far too bright for Frisk's liking.

"J-just a little! I'm not thinking of- I wouldn't-"

"What's he doing there?"

The question catches Frisk off guard. "Wha- who?"

Without taking their eyes from their old vessel's, Chara plants their nails in the wood around the round shape. Then they pull them across it, digging up splinters under their fingertips, ice cold to the way it punctures their own skin, drawing bloody claw marks across the grinning figure.

Frisk presses the back of their hand to their mouth, trying to silence the little whimper threatening to make its way out of them at the sight.

Chara grinds their teeth together, trying, really, earnestly trying to keep a hold on their anger, but it's difficult. Oh, it is difficult, because this child is nothing but trouble, are they? They were supposed to help, but they can't seem to get that into their greasy little head, can they? Slowing both of them down, crying over wounds, getting ill, whining for food like a spoiled whelp, unable to make decisions on their own. Chara thought it was finally their turn to be helped, but no. No, of course not.

It's all take and no give.

It's almost like Frisk is trying to be difficult. It's almost like they're trying to slow them down. It's almost like ...

"... Do you want us to get caught?"

Frisk's face scrunches up in disbelief. Where did Chara even get that idea from? The demon stands up, suddenly, making them jump.

"Is there more of this!?" they snap, throwing a hand out in the direction of the bloodied floorboards. A few of the splinters tear loose from under their nails, spilling unto the patterns.

Frisk shakes their head, drawing their legs up to make themself as small as possible. This makes no sense. They know, they know Chara isn't well, they know they're scared, they know the paranoia has only grown and festered more within them as the days have gone by and their adversary still hasn't shown up again, but this is so out of line, this is insane, there is no reason Frisk would-!

"Let me guess," Chara says, cutting off the other's line of thought. With much too casual nonchalance, they start picking the splinters out of their own fingertips without so much as wincing, and as they do, they take a step backwards, letting their usual cool wash away the burning anger for
just a moment. "You finally got sick of trying to be useful. Being out 'adventuring' with your old friend again wasn't as much fun as you thought it would be. So now you want out."

"I ... don't want to leave you, I didn't think this would be fun!" Frisk tries. "I came with you because I wanted to help you, I've been trying to get you to safety!"

Chara's fury flares up again as suddenly as the fire did and they once again close the distance between themself and their old companion. "And *this* is how you're trying to bring me to safety? By leaving *him* clues!? If he finds this, he'll know we've been here!"

Frisk hadn't considered that. Really, they're not sure they were even completely awake when they started chipping away at the floorboards, waiting for the other to return from their quest for food.

"Yeah, well-!" Frisk's voice drowns in a coughing fit that makes their chest ache, they double over and for a moment, they're unable to breathe. Just as panic is about to set in, something hits them in the back, hard, and the grime in their lungs tears lose so they can cough it up and breathe. There's a metallic taste in their mouth that shouldn't be there. They keep their eyes closed, afraid that their hands covering their mouth will be red when they look.

"Easy," sounds a voice that is both entirely too close and entirely too warm and steady for Frisk's liking. There's a weight around their shoulders now, holding them a little too tightly. "Easy there, just breathe."

Nothing about this makes them want to take it easy.

"You know ..." the other continues, the words barely louder than a breath. "It doesn't really *matter* what you want, anyway, does it?"

The chill running down Frisk's spine has nothing to do with the cold.

"I can't tell if you're being a little traitor right now or if you're just stupid, but the fact of the matter is that you're stuck out here in the middle of nowhere and you have no one but me to turn to. Just like old times. If I were you, I'd just be glad our goal is benign this time around."

Frisk focuses on their breathing, focuses on getting oxygen back into their brain. "I'm not leaving you, Chara ..." They're out of breath, but they push on. "Please believe me. I'm not going anywhere before I know you're safe. I wish you'd trust me ..!

"The situation is a little too dire for me to survive on mere trust, don't you think?" Chara says on a breathless laugh. They throw themself down on the couch next to the human, removing their arm from Frisk's shoulders to cushion their own head against the backrest. "But I suppose if your little piece of floor art there is your best attempt at contacting him, your heart isn't really in it anyway, is it? You don't understand the consequences of your actions. You just want to get home to your soft, cozy little bed in your cozy little house and continue your cozy little life far away from here. I understand. I would too, if I were used to it like you are."

Frisk takes a deep, resigned breath. They already know where this is going. Pulling the rug-blanket up over their head, they slump sideways, laying across the other child's legs, hoping that if they just listen and don't argue, and stay right where they are, Chara won't make too big a deal of it.

"But I'm not used to it," Chara continues, just as expected, as though following a script. They lean their arms on the child cocoon draped over their legs, patting the shoulder sticking out at an angle. It's a little sharper than Chara remembers it being in the past. They continue, unfazed. "In fact, I don't know how I'm going to survive after you leave. But we'll find a way. I don't think you're really going
to betray me, but I do wonder if you'll be strong enough to resist going back on your promise."

"I am strong enough," Frisk mumbles into the rug. They should probably say it a bit more empathetically so Chara will think their cheap tricks are working, but Frisk is exhausted. They've given up on trying to talk sense into their friend. The only thing that works seems to be playing along with the other's games. Chara won't trust Frisk to care about them of their own accord. They can't. Not anymore. Not after the kinds of weeks they've had. But they'll trust in their own ability to twist their old host's will, just like they used to.

If pretending to be under their control is what it takes for Frisk to convince Chara not to be scared of being stabbed in the back, Frisk will go along with it.

It's terrible. But it's nothing new. It's only gotten worse over the last two weeks. After they lost their lockets. After ... whatever it was Sans told Chara that made them unable to sleep at night, that made them keep pushing on when they could barely keep their balance in their half-asleep state, whatever it was he told them that made them resent the mere mention of his name or seeing his likeness in a badly carved drawing.

Chara nods a bit, looking out the window. "Time will tell."

Outside, the rush of the wind grows to a howl. The fire in the fireplace shivers under the cold breath of air rushing down the chimney.

Chara rests their gaze on the snowfall outside. "We'll leave tonight. I'll fix the floorboards before we take off. You should eat something before the food gets cold."

"Chara ..."

"Don't protest," Their voice is softer now, but devoid of sympathy. They're as resigned to their own coldness as Frisk is. "It doesn't matter what you want anymore. You've chosen to help me. Either you rat me out and get it over with, or you do as I say. It's not a question."

Frisk knows why Chara says the things they say. They know why they do what they do. That doesn't make it hurt any less. But Frisk is the only one who can help them. Though the taste of iron still stings on their tongue, though their bangs still stick to the cold sweat on their forehead, and though they're certain their fever hasn't gone down yet, Frisk chooses to relent.

For Chara, they'll do it.

Maybe if they stick around long enough. Maybe if they stay loyal long enough. Maybe if they can stop whining so much, maybe if they can just be there for their friend for a while, eventually Chara will learn to depend on them without feeling the need to try to mess with them.

Maybe time is their greatest asset.

"Frisk?"

"Mhmm?"

"Will you do me a favor?"

"..."

"D... Don't talk about Sans anymore. I don't want to hear his name again. I don't want to be reminded of him."
Frisk isn’t sure they’d be able to eat right now. They go back to sleep.

***

Asgore’s house and the greenhouse gardens by the castle have slowly been filling up with the strangest of drawings. Drawings of stylized hearts and spades, of flowers, stars, children in striped shirts holding hands. Sometimes, the children’s eyes are crossed out in red. Sometimes, the red has been lifted again, the children’s faces redrawn on top of the pink mist, leaving only red-smudged erasers as proof that the art was ever anything but bright and happy and innocent.

Asriel trails the drawings after him like footprints. Asgore has attempted to collect them without looking at the subjects, wanting to give his son that little bit of privacy, that little bit of freedom to express himself in art, if nowhere else, but unexpectedly stumbling upon the pieces on the dining room table or on the floor or in the shade of trees in the greenhouse has made the task a difficult one.

Today, Asriel has chosen an isolated corner of the garden as the birthplace for another dozen scribble-y, colorful pieces of art, hunched over a little tea table made of glass and carved wood, lilacs bobbing gently in the wind overhead. He barely registers his father approaching, only mumbling a quick “thanks” when a cup of tea and a slice of pie appear in his periphery vision, not moving his intense gaze from the lines appearing under his crayon, expression as serious as it has been since he came here.

He wants to be left alone, Asgore can tell, but the little one has already spent so much time on his own, hiding out here or in his room as often as he can get away with between his mother’s visits and his friends bringing him along on their ongoing search for the humans.

The king dares to take the seat next to Asriel’s, the chair creaking under his massive weight. It wasn’t really made for someone his size. It was made for the monsters who live here in the greenhouse, the little ones who live in tree hollows and narrow streams, the ones who prefer the gardens’ warm sunlight and perpetual summer over the freezing ocean breeze weaving through the rest of the city. But the chair holds, even under the boss monster’s massive frame. Of course it does. He made it himself, after all.

"Are you alright, my son?" he asks his little one, politely folding his hands in his lap and bowing his head. He feels like he’s intruding on something, something private, sacred, almost, but Asriel doesn’t dismiss him entirely.

"Mhmm," he says instead. "I'm drawing."

Coming from anyone else, it might have sounded like a very polite way to ask someone to leave, but coming from Asriel, it only sounds like he’s absentmindedly reaffirming to himself what he’s doing.

Asgore nods empathetically, letting the statement hang in the air. His son has always lived, in part, in his own little world. The only one who has ever unlocked the path to this world is Chara.

It is understandable, then, that the path is a little closed off, a little overgrown, these days. Though the little one hides it well, Asgore can sense Asriel’s sorrow. The older monster knows sorrow like this one all too well.

Around the little tea table grows a myriad of bright yellow flowers. Flowers that he knows shouldn’t be yellow, it is worth mentioning. Violets, lavenders, forget-me-nots ... This isn't new, either. The
flowers seem to follow the child whenever he enters the gardens. Some of them watch him with
dazed pinprick eyes, dreamy smiles on their simple, seemingly drawn-on faces. When the wind
rushes through their petals, they blink, slowly, as if trying to come to terms with this new
development in their own time.

Asgore points to them with his chin, giving his son a patient smile himself. "I see your little friends
are coming along very well. Have you named them yet?"

Asriel pauses in the middle of a pencil stroke, lines appearing between his brows as he thinks it over
for a moment. Then he shrugs and goes back to drawing. "I don't think I'm going to name them.
They're ... they're not really alive. They're just an experiment."

Just an experiment. Just another experiment. There have been many of those. Asgore has given up
on trying to offer his help.

Asriel came to live with him a little over a week ago. Officially, that is. Even before then, he'd asked
Papyrus to drive him to the capital every day, so he could spend time in the gardens. At first, Asgore
had assumed that the child merely needed space - that being at home with the somber expressions
and hushed whispers, and the sound of his mother coming home late into the night after another
fruitless search for her missing children had simply been too much for the one left behind. But once
in a while, Asgore would find his son sitting cross-legged on the grass, magic playing at the tips of
his claws, flowers sprouting and twisting, and turning bright gold and yellow at his command. He
wasn't only playing or practicing, his father quickly realized.

These are indeed experiments.

"Toys are not really alive either," Asgore says, watching the little yellow plants with a kind of
peculiar fondness, "but I believe Lieutenant Thunderbolt would still be quite upset if you did not
address him by his proper title."

Okay, at least Asriel is still able to laugh, even if it's just a muted little giggle. The mental image of an
angry little boss monster doll pouting and putting his tiny beanbag paws on his tiny beanbag hips in
annoyance is pretty funny. And cute.

Finally, Asriel looks up at his father with a fragile little smile on his face. Asgore leans down to
nudge the smaller monster's forehead with his snout. The little one reaches his arms up, the way he
used to when he was smaller still, and his father picks him up, drawing him into his soft embrace.
Slowly, the little one relaxes in his arms, letting go of a shuddery breath, as if he'd been holding it for
a long time.

"I am so ... so glad you are here," Asgore tells him quietly. "Please do not forget this."

Asriel shakes his head. "I won't. I'm ... I'm glad I'm here, too. Even though ..."

"I know. I know."

"I just don't understand why they left me behind."

"They must have had their reasons. I am sure they will tell you when we find them."

When speaking to Asriel, his friends and his people, Asgore has found himself wondering just where
the line between hopeful optimism and false hope is located. It seems cruel to reassure those around
him that the children will return when they have been gone for such a painfully long time.

Then he reminds himself that one of the children who has gone missing is Frisk. Frisk who trekked
through the entire Underground with only the ghost of their to-be adoptive sibling for company, Frisk who, in another time, defeated him in battle. Frisk, the human who single-handedly granted monsterkind freedom.

Asgore would be lying if he said he didn't have a nagging feeling that wherever the little human has ended up, they're still staying determined. In their own way.

Hopefully with that old companion of theirs by their side.

Asriel draws his claws through a tangle in his father's beard, letting the task distract him a little. "Do you ... think they're okay, wherever they are? They're just kids. It's hard to survive on your own when you're little."

It's always hard to survive on your own. Asgore would give anything to save his children from that fate. But he can't for the life of him figure out what else he can do. The patrols, the detectives, the attempts at cooperation with the human police force, his own continued search of surrounding cities - all of it has failed. The kids are gone. His one lead was the monster and the human who found Frisk weeks ago, only for the child to disappear overnight. Oni and Sarah. It took everything in his power to save the couple from Toriel's wrath. They only wanted to help the little human in any way they could. They meant well.

Toriel wasn't quite so understanding.

"I believe they can still be saved," Asgore tells his son, laying a comforting paw around the back of his head. "They are both very strong. They have survived impossible odds before."

Asriel wants to believe he's right. He likes this answer. He likes thinking that the others are still struggling on. If only they can stay alive until he finds them, it's going to be okay.

Though a part of him wonders if it's really safer for them to return home than to stay gone. He wonders if it's safer for Chara.

Sometimes, when he draws, he'll only cross out the eyes of one of the children. Which one varies from day to day.

He thinks about Frisk's locket lying abandoned by his chamber in Sans and Papyrus' basement lab. He understands why they threw it away, sure. Frisk is smart, of course they'd realize something was up when the thing started glowing. But seeing an item so precious to him and Chara just thrown away like that still hurt much more than it should have.

"I hope Frisk is okay. I hope Chara treats them okay," he says, as if saying out loud how much he worries about them will somehow make the more mixed feelings go away. "Chara can be a little harsh, sometimes, right? They can be a little mean ..."

Asgore lowers his gaze, as if in respect to the missing child. Absentmindedly, he brushes his thumb over his child's head and holds him a little closer. "They can be. But they love you. You and Frisk both. I haven't a doubt in my mind. When it truly counts ... they will pull through. When it truly counts, they will protect your happiness and your safety."

Asriel traces the heart-shaped bump under the collar of his sweater with his claws. When it truly counts ... Chara has always chosen right, in the end. But it's the lead-up to this "end" that worries him. All the anger, all the hatred, all the stress and the tantrums and the insults present even when they're happy ...

"You have never doubted them before," Asgore remarks. He leans back a little so he can look down
at the smaller monster in his arms. "Why this sudden change?"

"I ..." How can Asriel explain this without telling Asgore exactly what they've all been through? What they've put each other through? He doesn't want him to know. He doesn't want him or anyone to be scared of Chara. Deep down, he doesn't really want anyone to be scared of him, either, even though he thinks everyone deserves to know what he did. It's selfish, but he is selfish. It's terrible. He doesn't know how to fix it. Finally, he settles on just telling it like it is. "I care about Chara a lot. But I care about Frisk, too. I'm tough, if Chara's a little mean to me sometimes, it's okay. But Frisk has been through so many awful things. I don't think they're as tough as me when it comes to stuff like that. They care too much. They're not selfish enough."

Asgore frowns and readjusts Asriel's position in his arms so they're almost at eye level with one another. "You're telling me that Chara has been so unpleasant to you that you feel like someone less ... sturdy, might be truly hurt by this? Is this true?"

Asriel involuntarily jerks back, startled at his own carelessness. "N-no!" This is exactly what he didn't want. He can't let people become suspicious of Chara, they need people to trust them, that's how they're going to get better, that's how they're going to want to get better! "I-I m-mean yes! I don't know ... They're so unhappy, they can't always be nice, right? But you said it yourself, they love me and they love Frisk, and they love everyone else, too, they just don't know how to show it sometimes!"

"My son, please listen to me," Asgore says and gently sets his son back on the ground, holding his hands instead, his serious gaze holding Asriel's. "This is important. When judging others, you cannot merely see their good intentions. I understand that this is in your nature, you are a good person, after all, a caring person-"

It takes all of Asriel's self-control to hold back the sudden wry laugh trying to catch him with his guard down.

"- but their actions will not hurt you any less just because they love you. You need to take care of yourself, too. Good intentions remain intentions alone unless acted upon. Now, please tell me. What has Chara done to make you fret for Frisk's wellbeing?"

Asriel looks away, biting his tongue. What hasn't Chara done? Lied, hurt, maimed, murdered? Lied to him, hurt him, maimed- He closes his eyes tightly, blocking out the images threatening to flood his inner eye, and he needs to concentrate to keep his breathing even.

He doesn't want Chara to be sad. He doesn't want them to be alone, and if being insulted and pushed around every so often is what he needs to deal with in order to be with his best friend again, then, well, it's better than how it used to be. So much better. They need him, they need him to protect them, and he needs them by his side, he can't bear the thought of never seeing them again, he can't.

But he doesn't want Frisk to be sad, either. Even though they left him behind. Even though they threw away the locket. They saved him. He would have ended the world if they hadn't been there to reach out to him, to hold him and forgive him, to be there with him when he had to give up the one thing that had made him feel whole again.

He can't risk Frisk's safety in order to protect Chara. No matter what, he can't let them down like that. He can't let his own selfishness hurt the one person who knows about everything he did, yet still chooses every single day to forgive him.

But it's complicated. He can't bring himself to upset Chara. He wants them to be okay. Putting Frisk's happiness at risk isn't right, but ... It's Chara ...
Asriel shakes his head. "Nothing much," he lies in reply to Asgore's question. "You've seen how they are with each other. They fight a lot. Not seriously, it's mostly just bickering, but still. I don't mind it so much, because I'm tough, but I don't think Frisk was really made for arguing unless they're being really serious. They get stressed out so easily."

Asgore still doesn't look entirely convinced. "I think we should have a talk with Chara about this when they return," he says. "I do not like hearing that my children can't get along."

"B-but we can get along! Maybe if we're a little nicer to them, they won't lash out so much! I wasn't being very nice to them before they left, I kept arguing with them about stuff that didn't even matter, if they get worse, it's my fault!"

His father stares at him perplexedly. He almost looks afraid. "Asriel, nothing Chara has done will ever be your fault. It is on them to treat you and Frisk, and ... and everyone with the kindness and respect you deserve ..!"

"But what if they can't do that?" Asriel asks. "What if that's just not who they are? I can't just give up on them, they need me!"

"What Chara needs is not something you can or should have to provide. It is on us, their parents, to look after them and care for them, and hopefully help them adjust, so that someday, they will be safe for themself and for others to-!"

Asriel wrenches his hands away from Asgore's and takes a step back. He collides with his chair and moves around it, putting it between himself and the bigger monster. "But you don't know them," he interrupts, voice falling to a low growl. "I do." That's a lie and he knows it, and it hurts him. But at least he knows them better than Asgore does. At least he knows about what Chara did. "If you think you can split us up, you're wrong. I'll protect Chara and Frisk. Even from each other!"

Asgore tries to argue. He tries to get his son to understand this isn't on him, he's a child, if there is truly cause for concern, then it is the adults' job to look after them, all of them, but Asriel won't listen. He knows Asgore is right. He knows defending Chara isn't. But right and wrong don't apply to the little demon. Asriel wants to be good, he wants to be kind, he wants to do the right thing, but there is a limit, there is an exception, and the exception is the person he devoted his undeath to. Chara belongs here with him and he belongs with them, and the world is just going to have to come second.

... If only this world didn't also include Frisk.

He hopes they're alright. He hopes that Chara hasn't hurt them. He hopes that there is still time to find another solution.

How did he end up with this choice? How did he end up having to choose?

Frisk or Chara? Chara or Frisk?

There must be a third option. He needs to keep trying. He needs to keep searching.

The yellow flowers' smiles are long gone. The little things are watching their creator with sorrow on their bland faces, though he knows they're still not capable of comprehending why they feel that way, why he feels that way, or why they share that feeling.

He needs to keep working. He needs to find the solution.

Asgore reaches his hands out to his son, silently begging him to understand. "Asriel," he says. "Trust me. Trust me, I know more of what the three of you have been through than any of you know. Let
"I don't know what to do," Asriel whispers, almost to himself. "I just want them to be okay. Both of them. I don't- I don't want to have to choose." His voice breaks on the last word. Finally, he relents and takes his father's hands again. "We're all supposed to be together. I thought we finally could be."

"You will be." If there's one thing Asgore is certain of, this is it. He doesn't know how he knows, but his children - they belong together. They were supposed to meet from the very beginning and now that they have, nothing will ever be able to separate them. Not for good. "Never doubt this. We will get all of this sorted out as soon as we find them. I promise."

Asriel wants to believe it's possible. That there is still a chance. He was never very determined, not while he was truly himself. He cries easily, he gives up easily. He wants to get stronger. He wants to be the person his siblings need him to be. He wants to help them, he wants to protect them, he can't think of anything he wants more in the whole world than to save them.

Somehow he'll find a way to make sure that they'll get to grow up together.

After all, that's what Sans said he wanted, wasn't it? For children to be able to grow up together?

That should include Asriel, Chara and Frisk, too.

Asgore stays with him for another hour. Asriel picks at the tea and the pie slice, though he's not really feeling it. They hardly talk about the missing children after that. Mostly, they talk about Asriel. About how he feels. About what he's going to do when the humans come back. Asriel can't explain how he's going to look after them, how he's going to protect them from the world or each other. He doesn't know. He wishes he did.

Asgore assures him that whatever comes next, he won't be facing it alone. Asriel doesn't seem nearly as reassured by this as his father wants him to be, but the old king supposes that it will take time for the little one to adjust to not being on his own anymore.

Afternoon turns to evening as they speak. Bright blue fireflies drift out of their hollow deep within the thorny hedges, gathering on closing flower petals to wait for the first stars. Asriel finds himself wondering if they're in love with their sky-counterparts. Frisk made him watch a movie not too long ago where a little bug was in love with a star. Okay, it wasn't just about that, but he liked that part the best. Frisk had known he would. That's why they wanted him to watch it, they told him. He always did love the idea of stars.

The yellow flowers surrounding him yawn and their pinprick eyes fall shut as their petals close over their faces. They're still more flowers than magic. Somewhere, an owl hums a little tune. It doesn't hoot, because owl monsters can speak and it would be strange for them to hoot like a flesh-and-blood animal. So it hums instead. A soft and hopeful melody. A weasel monster scurries by followed by his children. One of the little ones pounces on their sibling, bowling them over, and the other kid squeals in surprise, though it quickly devolves into laughter as they take up the play-fight challenge.

Asriel watches the little ones squabble until their father calls on them and they disappear into a nearby blueberry bush. He hugs himself, feeling a little colder, then.

"Look," sounds Asgore's voice from above.

Asriel looks up and follows his father's gaze to the sky.

"The first star of tonight. You should make a wish."
Asriel watches the light pouring through the still-lilac sky, the way it seems almost nervous waiting for its friends to show up, afraid to shine all on its own in the empty sky. He wants to make it feel okay, that little star. It's doing a good job. He thinks about his wish for a moment, how to word it, how to ask for it. He doesn't need much time. He knows exactly what he wants.

"I wish ..." He takes a deep, slow breath and closes his eyes. "I wish for ... one more chance. For me ... and for Frisk ... and for Chara. Just one more chance to set everything right. This time, we'll make it count. This time, everyone is going to be okay. We'll get the ending we always wanted."

He doesn't see the way the older monster looks at him with equal parts pride, hope and sorrow. Asgore wants to believe it's possible. He wants to believe his other children are alright. Whatever it takes to get them home, he'll do it. If only he could think of another way to search for them. If only he knew why they left in the first place ...

"Oh," he says suddenly. Asriel looks up at him, curious. "Deary me. I nearly forgot. Papyrus came by earlier today. He asked me to bring you this." Asgore reaches under the folders of his cape, and from beneath its shadows, he draws a familiar golden heart locket. "You must have forgotten it at his and Sans' house. I ... am guessing you would like to hold on to it."

He tilts his hand, letting the necklace slide through his fingers and into Asriel's paws.

The child only sees his own reflection in the metal at first. Then his vision adjusts and the letters fade in. They say the same thing they always have. They haven't changed a bit.

Best Friends Forever.

Though the necklace looks dull and gray in the low light, even now, even as night settles over the city, even as more stars join their lonely sister in the sky, even as the whole world goes to rest around him - even then, he knows the little heart is made of gold.

Asriel squeezes his eyes shut and holds the locket to his heart. He can only imagine the third locket there next to the other two. Somehow, he'll reunite them. Whatever it takes.

Asgore lays a hand on his son's shoulder and Asriel leans into the familiar touch.

The owl's gentle hum grows a little louder and other melodies join it, filling the gardens with a soft buzzing of voices.

Asriel opens his eyes again, studying Frisk's locket, checking it for any scratches or dents in the surface. Then he checks the chain, making sure it's as strong as it's ever been.

Then he stops dead in his tracks.

"... Are you alright, my child?"

"Uhm. Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

He doesn't show the king what he's found stuck in the clasp of the chain, presumably ripped off in a hurry. He turns his back to the other monster, hiding the fact that he's carefully removing the object from the chain with all the care and precision of a surgeon extracting shrapnel.

He looks at the thing he's holding between his thumb and index finger, nearly invisible in the dark. A single dark brown hair.
Asriel's eyes flick to the sleeping yellow flowers surrounding him to all sides. The faintest silhouette of an idea brushes against his thoughts.

Perhaps this isn't quite over yet.

"Dad?"

"Yes, little one?"

"Do you think ..."

He digs a fang into his lip, seizing the idea and dragging it out of the shadows in his head, kicking and screaming as it is.

"Would you please call Doctor Alphys for me? I need to talk to her."

Chapter End Notes

Due to the whole writer's block thing, I'm unsure of when the next chapter will be around. I'm workin' on it, though! The process is just slower than usual.
Night swallows up the sky over the cities, both the monsters' and the humans', and though the trip from her house in the suburbs to her lab in the concrete jungle to the east only lasts a mere 20 minutes on her motorcycle, Alphys feels like every minute she's on the road brings the darkening sky closer to the earth, threatening to crush her under the weight of the icy stars. She squints against the wind writhing through the streets, trying to ignore the way it grows and strengthens with every minute, and the way it hauls dark clouds in from the southern horizon.

Alphys has nothing to be afraid of, she tells herself. For all she knows, this is nothing. It could be a false alarm. There have been countless of those during the last two weeks. Whatever this is, it could be just as much of a dead end as everything else has been.

Yet the urgency with which the prince summoned her tells her otherwise.

The windows in the building are already alight when she arrives, and in the parking lot she spots both Asgore's enormous gold-and-purple custom van and Papyrus' red sports car, along with two much more mundane-looking gray vehicles. She's the last to arrive.

"S-sorry I'm late!" she stammers as she stumbles through the door on the top floor of the lab, completely out of breath. Why her department absolutely had to be situated at the highest possible floor, she's still questioning to this day. She closes the door behind her, leaning on the door handle for a moment as she adjusts her glasses. "Wh-what's g-g-going on? What have you found?"

The scene that greets her inside the lab is perhaps a little less frantic than she was expecting. Asgore is in the middle of pouring Papyrus a cup of tea. Asriel, as well as Alphys' human colleagues, Galila and Maureen, are all holding little porcelain tea cups that look entirely out of place in the otherwise sterile, not-very-welcoming lab environment.

"Oh," Asgore says, giving Alphys a warm smile in greeting. "There you are. I hope you do not mind me bringing tea into your workspace. I did not want to bother you or your colleagues so late in the day without at the very least offering you a cup of tea while we talk."
Alphys looks at Galila - a middle-aged woman with a permanent lazy, half-lidded glare and a bright purple headscarf - and closes her claws around empty air in exasperation. "We're not? Bothering? With safety protocols?"

Galila shrugs. "Alphie, if you want to be a mad scientist, you must work on the 'mad' part."

"I don't want to be a mad scientist!" Alphys says. "I want to be a live scientist! In a- a sterile environment, please! Please?"

"I don't think Alphys is really cut out to be a mad scientist," Maureen - a stout, mousy girl in her 20's - says to Galila. "She's a miffed scientist at best."

Alphys gives Maureen a look that only makes the human laugh, and then she takes the teapot from Asgore and goes around the table to pour everyone's tea back into the pot. Papyrus gives a disappointed "AWW..." and Asgore apologizes profusely for troubling her, he thought that if the humans allowed it, it would be alright! Galila and Maureen only look smug about having succeeded in getting under their colleague's skin.

Asriel says nothing. He doesn't seem to be listening, his brows furrowed in concentration as he picks at something hidden in his palm.

Alphys passes by him just a little slower than she did the others. It's not like the kid, being this distracted. He hasn't really been himself the past few weeks. When she looks up, she sees Galila watching him too, though more discreetly. The women exchange a glance and Galila takes the hint.

"Anyhow," she says, leaning forward on her elbows, more deliberately turning her attention on the lizard. "You called us for a reason, yes? So, spit it out."

Before Alphys can answer, Asriel seems to wake up from his trance and answers the question for her: "I'm the one who wanted you to come here. I need Alphys' help and I told her to bring her smartest, most trustworthy scientists. That must be you!"

Alphys fishes a potion out of a cabinet by the wall and lets a single drop of the serum fall into the teapot, turning it a bright aqua blue. The smell of soap fills the room. When she's certain the whole pot has been cleansed of... whatever boiling leaf water contains that could possibly react to stray chemicals in the lab, she pours it into the sink. Asgore watches the tea go with a look so defeated, Alphys feels genuine remorse for a second.

"Aww, Alphyyyyyys!" Maureen coos, rocking back and forth on her chair. "We're your most trusted scientists?"

They are, but wow, they do not need the reminder. Alphys rolls her eyes and goes to collect all the tea cups, putting them in the sink to rinse them off, too.

"I think I know how to find Frisk and Chara!" Asriel continues, closing his paws tightly around whatever it is he's holding. "If we're quick, we might be able to find them tonight!"

Alphys nearly tips over the porcelain she's cleaning. She looks over her shoulder at the child. "Tonight...?"

Asriel nods, eyes wide, brows furrowed in reluctant certainty. "I think so," he says on a nervous exhale. "If we do it right."

Quickly forgetting all about safety protocols, Alphys sits down at the table just as Asriel stands up. The kid paces around the table once, something dark in his thoughtful expression as he gathers his
thoughts, and though Alphys can't quite remember where from, she's certain she's seen that look of cold, calculating concentration somewhere before. She pushes the thought out of her mind.

Finally, the little boss monster pauses and with a scrutinizing glare, he looks around at the small team of people he's assembled. There's no way around it, he realizes. If he wants to get anywhere tonight, he's going to have to confess at least one of his too-plentiful secrets. That's fine. It's what partial truths are for.

"Two weeks ago," he begins slowly, absentmindedly running the pad of his thumb over the hair he's been holding on to since he left the gardens at the castle. "I attempted to recreate a spell I learned back in the Underground. Back ... before I was brought back for real."

Asgore and Papyrus exchange a worried look. Neither of them like where this is going.

Asriel continues his pacing. "It was a bloodhound spell. Before, I used it to find Frisk when I lost track of them. I thought maybe attempting the same spell again would be worth a try." The machine in his back gives a soft beep, warning him that the battery is halfway depleted. He ignores it. "I made the spell search for magical signatures similar to the ones in my locket. Frisk and Chara have one each, so I just kind of assumed it would search for both of them at the same time."

"AND DID YOU ... FIND THEM?" Papyrus asks, cringing as though bracing for the answer.

Asriel stops again, averting his eyes, his tone souring. "I found them alright. But something came up and they got away."

Asgore turns fully towards his son and though Asriel can sense the conflicted emotions in his father's voice when he speaks, he can't bring himself to look at him.

"Why-? Asriel, why in the world would you keep this a secret from us?" The old king rarely sounds angry - in fact, Asriel can't recall ever having heard him raise his voice - but the tense edge in his tone is as close as it's going to get and it's a little scary in its own way. It hurts, at the very least. "We could have found out where they were, we- we could have tracked them down long ago-!"

"It's complicated. I'll explain it later," Asriel interrupts. He's not sure how he's going to get himself out of this one, but right now, it doesn't matter. "The point is that they threw away their lockets and I didn't know how to track them down without them. But now-" He takes a deep breath and forces himself to look up at the people assembled, one at a time. "I've got an idea."

Finally, he holds up the hair for everyone to see. Alphys leans forward, pushing her glasses up her nose and squinting at the tiny piece of straw. Asgore and Papyrus don't appear to be completely sure what they're looking at. Galila's forehead furrows in thought and Maureen looks up at her with raised brows, and if Asriel isn't mistaken, the humans appear to be picking up on his idea.

"Monsters' bodies have their own magical signatures," Asriel says, voice shaking a little as he looks around at the adults. "And ... humans' bodies do too, don't they? Only - it's not magic. It's a code."

"Their DNA code ..." Alphys whispers, mostly to herself, and now it's dawning on her too. She quickly looks over at her fellow scientists. All three of them have a pretty good idea of what he's thinking.

Asriel closes his hands around the hair again, afraid of losing it if he doesn't. "I found it on Frisk's locket. I think that if- if maybe there was a way to ... to combine magic and human science, we could make the bloodhound spell search for a matching biological signature instead of a magical one. It's not like Frisk could throw away their own body. And Chara wouldn't leave them behind. We'd find
both of them and we could bring them back home safely!"

A slow grin creeps over Papyrus' face as the kid speaks and at his last words, the skeleton stands up and gives Asgore a hearty slap on the back. "YOU MAJESTY, YOUR SON IS A GENIUS! ALPHYS, THIS CAN BE DONE, CORRECT?"

"I-I g-guess? I think?" Alphys stammers, looking to her colleagues for confirmation. The humans just shrug as if to say 'I don't see why not.' Alphys stands up and shuffles over to one of the cabinets to rummage through its contents. "B-but a bloodhound spell - where would we even find the ingredients? I don't have anything here in the lab we can use! How did you do it the last time?"

"I experimented with it a lot in the Underground," Asriel replies, joining her by the cabinet to see if there's anything in there they can use. "Turns out you can kind of cobble one together using whatever's lying around, you don't really have to use all the fancy artifacts books tell you to use. See, like this stuff!"

Alphys steps aside to give the smaller monster some elbow room and when she does, he crawls in on the second-lowest shelf and comes back out with a bottle full of lightning.

"You can use this to bring the spell to life. It's much easier than learning real life-giving spells. I don't really know how it works, but it does work! And you can use Childdrake snowflakes to bind the electricity so you don't get zapped!"

Alphys shakes her head slowly, looking down at the kid as though nothing about him makes sense anymore. "Wh-where- where did you l-learn all this? How ..?"

Asriel looks down at his claws and scratches one of his ears hanging over his shoulders, a little self-conscious. "I had a lot of time to kill." Wow. Terrible word choice. Good thing Sans isn't here right now. "So, uhm, trial and error, I guess? It didn't always go that well ..."

"B-but it worked two weeks ago?"

He lifts his gaze to meet hers, standing a little taller. "It did. It worked just like I wanted it to."

Alphys reaches out and Asriel gives her the bottled lightning

"Then you might be able to save your friends yet." She presses her lips together over her teeth, trying to suppress a smile. It's too early to smile. They have no guarantee it'll work. They have no guarantee the kids aren't already lost for good. But at least now they know where to start.

Asriel lights up at her words, feeling something heavy lift from his shoulders.

"Dad, Papyrus!" he calls. Asgore sits up straight in his chair and Papyrus clicks his heels together. Asriel almost expects the two of them to salute. "I need you to find the rest of the things we need, stat!"

"AYE, CAPTAIN!!" Papyrus barks, and marches around the table and out through the door. Then he comes back in. "I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT WE'RE LOOKING FOR!"

"I'll write it down," Asriel says and brings out his phone, the old clunky, brick-like one Alphys gave him when he first arrived here a month ago, to text the others what they need. "Galila, Maureen? Will you help Alphys and me with the DNA-thing?"

Maureen sends him a brilliant grin. "You can count on us, kid!"
Galila elbows her in the side. "Someone can smell that raise, eh?"

As the three scientists go to set up the necessary equipment, Asriel finishes his list of items and sends the text to Asgore and Papyrus. Asgore still doesn't look nearly as enthusiastic about the whole ordeal as Asriel wishes he did. He can sense a less-than-pleasant conversation with his father coming up when this is over. He doesn't know what he'll do then, but he'll have to think of something. He can't tell Asgore what happened. Which reminds him ...

When Asgore turns his back, Asriel tugs on Papyrus' scarf and Papyrus kneels down so the kid can whisper into his ... hole-in-his-skull-where-his-ear-should've-been-area.

"Don't let him find out about what Sans is planning."

Papyrus' eye-lights drift nearly inconspicuously to the king and he gives a single, sharp nod. Not that Asriel had expected him to tattle, Sans' safety is as much on the line as Chara's is. Papyrus gives Asriel a little reassuring pat on the shoulder before standing up.

Things have always been complicated, but it's getting worse. So much worse. Asriel can barely keep track of who knows what anymore. Sans and Papyrus know about everything, about Chara and Flowey's deeds in the previous timelines, about Sans' plan to use the DT Extraction Machine, they know what's at stake. Alphys ... Alphys only knows about Sans' plan. She doesn't know why he's so desperate to end the resets no matter the cost.

Who else knows?

No one. Not as far as Asriel can recall. He hopes it stays that way.

When did such an innocent lie - no, it wasn't a lie, just an omission of truth - turn into this? When did wanting to keep quiet about what they did turn into something so complicated? They just wanted to forget about the past and move on. Asriel isn't sure what his family would think if they knew that he and Chara were capable of doing such terrible things. Hurt everyone, ruin it all, try to end the world.

Neither of them were really themselves, he knows that. But he can't stand the thought of seeing Sans' fear of Chara reflected in his parents' eyes, or in Alphys' or Undyne's. Maybe they'd even agree with Sans. That relying on Chara not to end the whole world is putting too much trust in a single person, a child, even, an unstable one who's been capable of mass destruction in the past without showing so much as a hint of remorse over their actions even while fully human.

Maybe any sane person would agree with Sans.

But if his loyalty to his best friend is the last bit of insanity Asriel's got left, he'll allow himself to keep it.

He's just going to have to find some other way of making sure Frisk will be safe, too. This, he can't compromise. He won't let anyone hurt Chara ever again.

Over his dead, lifeless dust.

***

When the heavy clouds part just a little and the moon climbs to the highest point of the star-speckled
sky, Frisk and Chara leave the safety of the wooden shack. The carved floorboard next to the couch has been torn up, littered with shapeless slashes from something sharp, any trace of the familiar shapes the wood used to depict destroyed by its blade-like edge. Above, the night sky is as black as the cover of darkness hiding the cave roof in the Underground, and if it hadn't been for the silhouettes of humans visible through the few windows that remained lit at this time of night, Frisk might, for just a moment, have been able to pretend they were still wandering through the monsters' old prison, that nothing between then and now had ever existed, that the child walking next to them was no more than a ghost.

Okay, to be fair, the moon gives it away, too. It's silver-white tonight, almost blue, and Frisk wonders if any monsters live on the moon. Humans have a hard time getting up there, but maybe some monsters can live in space? You never know with monsters. They can do a lot of things that seem impossible to humans.

The kids wait in the town for a while, hoping a bus or a truck, or some other easy-to-sneak-into vehicle will come by soon. Their chance comes when a horse transport drives by on the main road. Or, well - it's certainly a box on wheels transporting a horse, though the truck in question doesn't appear to have been made for that exact purpose. Really, it looks more like a regular truck with a window crudely sawed into the back of it. The exterior is mysteriously devoid of logos or trademarks.

The driver stops the truck by a diner and when Frisk and Chara follow him inside, they hear the woman behind the counter give him directions.

"I reckon you'll reach the place within the hour," the old woman tells him, scratching her pointy chin. "Less, if the wendigos're on your side."

The truck driver looks a little spooked at that, as if he isn't quite sure if the old lady is joking, superstitious, or if actual wendigo monsters roam the fields beyond the town. You never know these days. He looks over his broad shoulder to the door, and Frisk and Chara duck their heads, hoping the walls of the booth they've snuck into will be enough to hide them from view. Neither of them are in the mood to deal with humans questioning what they're doing away from home at this time of night.

"Just aim west," the woman tells the truck driver with a dismissive wave of her hand. "You'll find water eventually. Head north from there 'n you'll find the harbor."

The driver tips his hat politely and gives her a nod in thanks, before lumbering back to the exit. Chara raises their head just enough to catch Frisk's eyes. A harbor - they must be able to find a ship there! As quietly as they can, the two of them sneak out of the booth and manage to catch the door before it closes behind the truck driver. The bell above the door only rings once and the old woman brewing coffee behind the counter is none the wiser.

Frisk shields their face from the gust of icy wind and snow that immediately greets them upon their return to the freezing outsides, and looks up at the gap at the top of the truck's rear end, where a pair of shimmery black eyes reflect just a little bit of light within the transport. The door to the driver's end of the truck slams shut, making them jump.

"What?" Chara whispers as they pull Frisk closer to the vehicle. "Don't tell me you're scared of horses."

"I'm not scared of horses, I'm scared of getting kicked in the head," Frisk replies, not taking their eyes off the gap at the top.

Chara stands on the tips of their toes and latches onto the uneven frame of the glassless window.
"Look, if there's one thing in this world you can trust, it's animals. This horse is cool, I can tell. Come on, gimme a boost here."

Hesitantly, Frisk comes closer, doing as they're told. They nearly drop Chara on the first try, their muscles giving out under the other's weight. Frisk is weaker than they're used to being. Their swimming vision doesn't make it any easier. The truck's engine starts and Chara snaps at them, ordering them to hurry up. On the second try, Frisk braces against the vehicle and they manage to lift their companion high enough for them to pull one leg over the frame of the window's opening and sit perched on the frame.

"Come on, come on!" Chara motions for Frisk to follow, just as the wheels start to turn.

Okay, now isn't the time to be ill and have bad coordination, Frisk tells themself, and they move back a few steps to get a running start. Though they launch themself up as high as they can, they nearly slide back down before a hand knots in the back of their coat and pulls them the rest of the way up. Chara loses their balance in the process and both kids tumble down onto the floor of the truck. A nervous whinny sounds from somewhere above and the ground shakes under shuffling hooves.

Frisk doesn't bother standing up, instead pressing as close to the nearest corner as they can, hoping the frightened animal will calm down if they just sit still.

Chara claims the corner across from Frisk's. Though the near-complete darkness within the truck obscures their features, Frisk can feel a kind of static in the other's soul, sparking and pulsing like a bad tv signal.

"Are you okay?" they whisper.

Chara lets out a strained huff of breath. "'m fine. Just landed on the backpack."

Aren't backpacks supposed to be soft, though?

"When are you gonna take your stupid frying pan back anyway?"

Oh. Oh! Frisk had totally forgotten about the pan!

"Thank you for bringing it for me," Frisk says, leaning forward.

Chara pushes the backpack across the floor and Frisk drags it back to their own corner, opening it to check on the pan. Laura's pan. They can't really see it in the dark, but it feels just like it usually does, so it's probably safe. Frisk hasn't so much as looked at it since they decided to camp out in the shack in the forest. They would've accidentally left it behind if Chara hadn't brought it.

The static of pain slowly drains from the other child's soul, the surface of their energy field smoothing like a lake stilling after a gust of wind. Frisk can hear the sound of the horse's hooves over the floor of the truck and then faint laughter from Chara. Frisk closes their eyes, focusing on the way the other's soul energy lights up, growing warmer, brighter.

"Hey, quit it," they laugh, but their voice is low and gentle. "Hey Frisk, you should come pet this thing, I think she's lonely."

Though it doesn't make much of a difference in the dark, Frisk opens their eyes and cautiously creeps over the floor to where Chara is sitting. Chara takes their hand and leads it forward into the black until their palm lies flat against something broad and warm and soft. Gently, careful not to spook the nervous animal, Frisk brushes their hand down the bridge of its snout and when they reach the soft bit around its muzzle, the horse huffs and pushes forward into their palm.
Next to them, Chara laughs again at feeling the wave of warmth from their sibling's soul right next to their own. It's so easy to cheer up the smaller human. Just give them a soft pony to pet and they're good.

Frisk bites their lip, trying to stifle the little giggle prodding at their own sore throat. It doesn't really feel appropriate to laugh these days, they think. It's like all of reality's colors have been washed out since winter came, leaving the whole world sad.

Chara laughs anyway, sometimes. Not always at nice things and not as much as they used to, but still. Maybe it's okay. Maybe it's still okay to laugh.

The kids spend another moment petting the comfort-seeking animal they've ended up sharing a truck with, sitting in silence, shoulder to shoulder, letting comfortable silence settle in. At some point, a bump in the road sends a tremor through the truck and the horse jerks upright, the shape of its massive head silhouetted against the slim beam of moonlight pouring in through the window as it struggles to keep its balance with nothing but the ropes tied to its bridle for support, and Frisk once again comes to the conclusion that yeah, this truck probably wasn't really made for transporting a live animal. Poor thing.

Though the moment has past, Frisk stays where they are and Chara makes no move to push them away.

Not that they do that much anymore, anyway.

Frisk has the strangest feeling. Like the lines between the two of them are blurring again. That little voice in the back of their head telling them to be careful has been quiet for a long time, worn out and eventually put to sleep on the long journey.

"Chara?" Frisk says to the empty dark ahead of them.

"Yeah?" sounds the reply from the child next to them.

"Are you sick?"

There's a pause. When they reply, their tone is matter-of-fact, wry mirth tinging the spaces between the words. "What gave it away? The panic attacks or the ... digging floorboards up with my nails thing?"

Frisk shakes their head even though Chara can't see them. "No, no, that's not what I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean ... physically. Are you okay?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You've been near me for days, but you don't seem to get my germs at all. You just hurt your back on a frying pan and got over it in like, a second." Frisk leans their head on the back wall of the truck, though they immediately regret it as the tiny little shockwaves rumbling through the vehicle make their way into their already-aching cranium. They opt to draw their knees up to their chest and lean on them instead. "Is it because you hurt all the time?"

For a minute, the only sound in the darkness around them is the truck rumbling across the uneven road and the horse tossing its head, agitated, scared. Then Chara draws a sharp breath, holding it for a second before they answer.
"This body isn't really mine," they say, finally, voice a little thinner than it usually is. "Right now, it's where I live. But I'm not ... I'm not just human anymore. I ... don't think I'll ever be again. Not after what I did. Some part of me is always going to be more. Or ... less, I guess."

Frisk can feel the other child huddle a little closer to them and they're not sure Chara's really aware that they're doing it.

"So what do I care if this body's in pain?" they continue. "As long as it works, I'm going to be fine."

Memories flood into Frisk's head at those words, the images impossible to escape from in the dark where nothing else stands as clearly or as vividly within their mind as the feeling of blackening bruises blooming on their back and chest, blood crusting their clothes, stumbling along on a broken leg without a care for the waves of mind-numbing pain that would've made them pass out if they were in control of their own body, if they weren't helplessly strapped to their own mind's passenger seat, dragged through the pain of twisted wrists, splintered bones and literal heartbreak time and time again.

Before Frisk knows what they're doing, they feel their own fingertips run across the scar on their cheek. Weeks ago, they might have reprimanded themself for even daring to make the connection. Chara's not dangerous anymore. But Frisk no longer has the energy to argue with themself. They press their palm to the scar, hiding it from whatever might be watching them in the dark, and close their eyes.

"What are you getting sad for?" Chara asks softly, almost nervously. "At least you don't have to listen to me whining over nothing like I have to do with you. You don't have to think about it so much ..."

Frisk only registers the meaning behind the less-than-nice words after rewinding them in their head and replaying them a second time. They open their eyes and look at the blurry shape of a slightly different kind of ink black than the rest of the truck's insides are.

Chara doesn't elaborate. Frisk wonders if they regret what they just said. If they regret admitting that Frisk's pain bothers them.

Maybe because it isn't really true. Frisk isn't sure it's true.

It's not that Chara doesn't care, Frisk reminds themself. Chara does care. Frisk doesn't know when or how it came to happen, but it's true and they refuse to believe otherwise. Still, they can't help but wonder just how much Chara cares, sometimes.

It's true that they're not entirely human yet. If they still hurt people, if they're not used to caring, if they're not used to being harmless just yet, it's not their fault. Especially not now, while they're running for their life, running scared, all alone in the world. They're just a kid.

Frisk chooses not to answer their question, instead leaning their head on the other's shoulder. They can't help but wonder what Chara's LV is now. Has it accumulated across timelines, as static as their memories, the numbers ticking up and up in an endless spiral? Have the numbers gone down on their own, chipped away as their soul grew back? Did their LV ever reset?

Not even Chara will be able to tell now, Frisk remembers. No one this side of their own demise can do so. They could be at level one or level one-hundred, no one would be able to tell the difference before it was too late.

Frisk pushes the thought away. It scares them.
"I wish mom and dad were here," they mutter into Chara's scarf, trying to let the feeling of scratchy cloth on their face distract them. "Mostly mom."

"You can't just pick favorites between your parents," Chara says, though Frisk can hear subtle amusement in their voice. "That's mean."

Frisk laughs again, daring to give it a little more volume this time. "No, not because she's my favorite, it's 'cause she makes better food. I'm hungry."

"Of course you are," Chara laughs along and hooks the other's arm with their own. After another pause, they add: "I wish dad were here more. He wouldn't ask so many questions. He'd just help us out however he could. He'd protect us."

Frisk tries to picture the two of them, their mom and dad, the softness in their eyes when they look at their children, the way their hugs feel warm and gentle and strong all at the same time, like they're trying to envelop the one in their arms in a protective bubble, safe from the world. It's only been a few weeks and still Frisk feels like they're forgetting something about them, something important. They don't recognize the faces they're imagining, they don't feel the warmth they know they would if they saw their adoptive parents again for real, and it hurts. It hurts so much and they don't know how to fix it.

The child sitting next to them is nothing like their parents. They're cold and scrawny, and the longer they're out here, the less their hugs feel like hugs. Hugging them feels more like getting caught in a bear trap.

Frisk creeps a little closer to them, trying to get comfortable against the pointy shoulder digging into the side of their head. A little more time. Give them a little more time. They'll come around.

... There is no more time. Chara's leaving. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but they can't keep Frisk around forever. Frisk needs to go home. Soon, the face they'll be forgetting is their own counterpart's.

They see the silhouette of the animal in front of them move and they feel its breath in their hair before its soft muzzle touches against their forehead, so they only jump a little bit at the sudden contact. Smiling despite themself, they go back to petting the lonely creature. Maybe it can sense the little human's melancholy the same way Chara can. Maybe animal souls are connected to all living things. Frisk wouldn't be surprised.

The wind grows louder outside. The horse raises its head, ears twitching and turning, dark, watery eyes searching the snow shower beyond the window.

The truck slows down, gently at first, before coming to a halt.

There's a noise from the door on the driver's side.

Chara immediately lets go of their sibling, pulling their legs up under themself in an awkward crouch before freezing in place, listening intently. "Shit," they mutter under their breath. "I think he's coming back here."

The muted sound of something heavy being pulled out of the driver's side of the truck reverberates through the vehicle, and Frisk makes to stand up, only for Chara to stop them halfway and drag them back to the floor.

"Stay down!" they whisper, fumbling through their pockets. "I've got an idea."
Finding what they were looking for, they retract their hand, the square disc between their fingers glinting even in the low light, and the horse takes a few nervous steps back, tossing its head in dismay as Chara approaches it. They quickly run a hand over its head, shushing it gently as they take hold of one of the thin ropes tied to the horse's bridle and dig the glinting object into the dry material. They cut through the rope within seconds, before darting under the horse's head to get to the rope on its other side.

Frisk presses into the corner, their fluttering pulse skipping a beat as the door to the driver's seat slams shut and the snow outside crunches under heavy boots, the noise growing louder and louder, out of sync with the rapid *scritsh-scritsh-scritsh* of Chara's blade gnawing through the rope, and for a second, nothing scares Frisk more than the fact that the sounds *aren't syncing up*, it's wrong, it's discordant, they can't think straight, they can't-

It all shuts down. Actions become glimpses, the movie lags, turning into still images.

The handle on the back door clicks.

The blade slices the rope in half.

In one image, Chara's shouting something, the next they've disappeared behind the massive animal, a noise like a cracking whip tearing through the air, and in the third, the creature is gone and only the kids remain in the storage space.

Then, a voice. Harsh breathing vocalized in shaky half-screams.

Frisk blinks, turning their head towards the sound. The moonlight reflecting in the blood leaking across the blue-white snow seems to wash their mind clean, lifting the fog of fear and panic, and suddenly, they can process it again and the world is still in their mind.

The backdoor is blown wide open. Outside on the road, flat on his back, clutching his shoulder at an unnatural angle, lies the truck driver, warm blood carving paths through the ice by his head.

Next to him on the ground lies one of those warm blankets horses can wear when it's cold. Despite it all, he wanted to look after his pet.

Frisk raises their vision just in time to see the horse disappear in the snow and mist beyond the wounded human, the clatter of hooves carried away by the howling wind, red-stained hoofprints trailing after it.

Chara runs past them, shouting "Come on, now's our chance!" and jumping through the open doors, before disappearing around the side of the truck.

"No," Frisk says, voice so low and hollow they're not sure they're even saying the word out loud, so they repeat it, following Chara through the door. "No, we can't leave, he's hurt!"

Instead of following their sibling around the truck, they skid to a halt by the man's side, falling to their knees by his head without a care for the blood staining the already torn knees of their ratty jeans, their hands hovering over him, desperate to do *something*, anything to alleviate his suffering, but not having the slightest idea of how to go about it. Even up close, his features are so twisted up in pain that the shadows pool into them too heavily for Frisk to see if he's meeting their eyes or not.

"Yeah, that was kind of the idea!" Chara calls from somewhere closer to the front of the truck. "Hurry up, we need to get out of here!"

Frisk rummages through the pockets of their coat, but then they remember that their phone ran out of
battery weeks ago, they used up the remainder of it when they had to use it as an alarm clock while staying the night in the furniture shop they broke into so they could get up before anyone found them there. With a quick apology to the truck driver, they begin to pat his pockets, praying that he's got a phone of his own. He recoils from the contact, but the smaller human persists.

"What are you doing?" Chara's voice falls to something lower, sharper, and Frisk isn't sure how they can hear it over the wind, but they can.

Finally, they find what they're looking for. As quickly as their shaking hands will let them, they turn on the display and locate the emergency call button on the lock screen and-

"No, don't!"

They vaguely register Chara coming closer, but they press the call button anyway and hold the phone to their ear, averting their eyes from the one approaching.

Someone picks up halfway through the first beep.

The person on the other end of the line asks them what the emergency is and Frisk tells them, their words calm and steady, despite the flicker of a silhouette passing by the tail lights of the truck. They feel empty, calm in the middle of panic, like the burning sensation behind their eyes isn't their own, like the nausea turning their stomach belongs to someone else, like the waves of something dark and heavy, the waves of a roiling sea brought to life by a lightning storm, isn't really-

- well. That really isn't their own, is it?

"We're sending an ambulance to the location," says the voice on the other end of the line. "Can you please tell me your full name and the name of one of your legal guardians or a contact person?"

"M ... my name?"

A hand clamps down on their shoulder.

"My ... My name is ..."

They look up to see the Chara looking down at them with equal parts anger and fear in their wary, narrow eyes, their pale face like a second moon against the cave-black sky, strands of red hair, turned gray and lifeless in the night, whipping across their face in the harsh wind, and it reminds Frisk of a train ride and a conversation that feels like it happened a lifetime ago.

Chara really would be a great writer. If only their stories didn't always turn out so bleak.

Frisk looks back to the man still trembling in the snow. His screams have died away, though his body is still wracked by labored breathing, and his eyes are definitely open now, reflecting the truck's red tail lights, staring up at the sky unseeing.

"Hello? Are you there?"

"Y-yes."

"I need your name, please."

Frisk lowers the phone. Then they disconnect. The ambulance is already on the way. No one needs to know their name.

They slip the phone back into the man's pocket and briefly lay their hand on his forehead. The
contact alone seems to drive a little bit of the tension out of him and he closes his eyes tightly.

"I'm sorry," Frisk whispers to him. "Help is on the way. Please hang on. Please ..."

He opens his eyes again just in time to see the child slip away.

Frisk puts their arm around Chara's shoulders, leading them away, past the truck and onward, forward, into the dark and the snow and the storm, shielding the pale little human from the south wind. Chara looks over their shoulder at the human they left behind, an unreadable look in their tired eyes. Then they lean into Frisk as they walk, breathing a relieved sigh. It's probably the closest Frisk is going to get to a 'thank you.'

Ahead of them, the road stretches into the unknown.
Phew, it's been a while in the works, but here it is, finally! Sorry for the delay, I was occupied for a few days last week, but I've already written the first draft of the next chapter and I'm well into the one after that, so the next ones should appear fairly quickly after this one. I'm aiming to update once a week until the two-part finale!

As always, thanks to my awesome betas, Starfog and ShtiyaJust4You, and to everyone who's commented over the past two weeks! I really hope you'll all stick with me here, the finale is close by and I'm really excited to share it with you all.

It's only minutes later - or perhaps hours, it's hard to tell - when Frisk can no longer walk. They're tired, worn, ill and on the verge of passing out, though Chara suspects the incident with the driver plays a part in their unwillingness to continue as well, and that ugly feeling rears its head in Chara's chest - something like jealousy without knowing who they're jealous of, something like suspicion, though they're not sure what kind of underhanded plot the other could've possibly conducted within the last half an hour that could be worthy of said suspicion. It makes their insides crawl. They ignore it and wordlessly lead the smaller kid's arms around their neck, hauling them up on their back. It hurts, Frisk is still heavy despite their sharp ribs and hollow cheeks, and Chara's spine is very much not a fan of the insistent pressure and unnatural forward arch, but it's just going to have to deal. It's not like they can leave the kid by the roadside.

Soon, the snowfall softens and then it disappears completely as the last of the clouds dissipate, letting the moonlight chase away the lingering mist. There's a shimmer in the air ahead, and that impossible-to-explain sensation of *knowing* there's water just beyond the horizon. Chara doesn't know if it's the clouds hanging higher or lower in the sky, or if the vast amount of pitch black is a different shade right above the horizon, or if it's all in their head, but they know the ocean is there before they see it with their own eyes.

The low, mournful horn of a lone ferry rumbles across the water's surface as a ship passes by below, heading south. The soft breathing of the half-asleep child on their back stutters for a moment and Frisk tightens their arms around Chara's neck, burying their face into their shoulder, trying to block out the sound.

"Don't do that," Chara says softly, readjusting the other's position. "You're gonna strangle me."

Frisk only hums a little discontented noise in response.

They seem so little and helpless like this. A burden. A liability. Chara isn't sure what the little human was thinking, agreeing to come along for this ... whatever this is. Well, they know *what* they were thinking, they were thinking they wanted to help out their friend, but the *why* behind it can be hard to grasp at times.

Frisk is kind. They're like Asriel in that respect. But they're also tough and ruthless and no-nonsense, and in that respect, they're more like Chara. How they can still find it in themself to show mercy to the person who ruined what remained of their life is a mystery.
Chara wants to question that kindness. Really, they'd probably be happier if they were on their own, free of worrying, free of having another person to look after, too, someone weaker and louder and whinier.

But the mere thought of leaving Frisk behind makes them hold on to their living cargo a little tighter.

Chara climbs a hilltop and when they reach the highest point, a town comes into view, warm lights mirroring the cold stars above in a gentler, kinder echo to the many silvery eyes watching the buildings with disdain from high above.

Chara quickly scans the coast and true to the words of the old woman at the diner, there's a big harbor there, big enough to fit a ferry the size of the one that passed by moments ago. Another ferry must be coming by soon, one that'll take them far away, away to safety.

As if sensing their companion's thoughts, Frisk's hold on them tightens again.

As with the past many, many cities they've passed through, no one seems to take note of the children wandering into town with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the backpack slung over said clothes. Not a whole lot of people are out, it's past midnight after all, but the few who are aren't difficult to avoid. The ones they can't avoid simply ignore them. The ones who don't ignore them - well, a likely-to-be-believed lie isn't hard to come up with at this point anymore. Chara's had plenty of practice after that first night where they pulled an empty gun on a stranger and only had the human's own fear to protect themself with. It wasn't exactly pleasant. They've gotten better since then. At lying. At running away. Hiding when they need to.

It's more difficult while hauling Frisk around. Chara heads for the harbor and moves as quickly as they can.

The only map over ship schedules they can find is a big billboard-sized one standing out in the open - a little too far away from the cover of buildings and narrow streets for Chara's liking - lit by a single yellow lamp hanging over the map. They feel exposed, wandering into open spaces like that. But it's their only option.

When they reach the schedule, they unhook one arm from the kid on their back and reach up to nudge them awake. Frisk makes another unhappy little noise.

"Come on, sleepyhead, my back's starting to hurt."

Reluctantly, limbs heavy, Frisk rubs their eyes and slides down to the ground. It takes them a moment to find their balance and Chara holds on to them until they do, just in case. They're gray-faced, Frisk, and the tremble in their tight little frown would be concerning, if they hadn't looked like this for days, seemingly without the intent of dying any time soon.

That's all that matters, really. Both of them getting out of this alive. Nothing between that goal and the here and now matters.

"Help me out here," Chara says and leads Frisk's attention to the map in front of them. "We need to find a ship that leads far away from here. As far away as possible. Maybe not one the one heading north, though ..." They suppress a shiver. At least it's not snowing anymore at the moment.

Frisk's vision glides over the map and though it's hard to focus, at least all the different routes are marked with differently colored lines. Some lead north, though Frisk doesn't bother to follow them. Some lead west, out across the open sea, but when they check the time of those specific routes, they turn out to only head out once every two weeks. Finally, Frisk searches the routes heading south.
They squint at the colorful lines. Then they tap their finger on one of them, a blue one.

"How about this one?"

"That one's heading south. That's the direction we came from."

"But look." They point to the name of the city the ship is headed to. It's so far away it isn't visible on the map. "- that place is almost half a planet away. I think it's actually technically on a different continent. And it's warmer there."

Chara bites the inside of their cheek in thought and follows the blue line down the map with their eyes. "It's going to sail right past Newer Home. And there's a stop in that harbor where the River Person's boat is."

"But ... that's a good thing, right?" Frisk tries, picking at their backpack's only strap, scratching their nails over a patch of velcro on its front. It makes a low, sharp *rrriiiit*-sound. It's a good sound, a distracting sound. Frisk appreciates that sound. "Then I can use it to go home. If I show up in the harbor north of Newer Home, no one's gonna try to search for you to the south. And I could catch a ride home ..."

Silence closes in around the island of light in the middle of the open space, the rush of the ocean counting the seconds on each wave. It's only awkward at first. Then the red-eyed kid sighs and hangs their head, and just like that, it suddenly feels like the waves are counting down to something. Frisk presses the pad of their thumb to the velcro, trying to distract themself from the feeling that *still isn't fear*, not even after all this time, they refuse, they won't let it be fear, it's ridiculous, Chara's their friend, they have *no reason to-"

"Right," comes the response, finally. The tension pops like a balloon. Chara runs a hand over their face and further up through their hair, trying to drive away the tension. "Right, that's a good idea. Perfect."

"Thank you."

The two of them check the time of the ferry's departure. 6AM tomorrow morning. That's only a few hours away, if the moon's position in the sky is anything to go by. When the first humans start to leave their homes, that's when they have to get moving. It's hard to keep track of this stuff without a watch or a phone, but humans are usually pretty predictable. Humans are like very big watches, their lives function like clockwork.

When they're certain they got the time right, Chara leaves the island of light and steps back into the shadows, wandering - to Frisk's great distress - towards the water and against the freezing ocean breeze rolling past the harbor's border like huge, angry phantom waves.

Frisk tugs their hood as far down over their face as they can without losing sight of their sibling and braves the cold weather on wobbling knees.

The roiling sea beyond the harbor's limit is as dark and as endless as the sky above, silver foam-cobwebs gliding along its surface, and it looks comfortable there, down in the dark, soft and vast, and it would be easy, so easy, to disappear down there never to be found again. They've been running away and hiding for so long. Would it really make a difference?

Chara isn't looking at the sea. They're looking at the sky. At the moon.

"So this is it, huh?" they say. "It's the end."
A small hand slides under their elbow and knots in the fabric of their sleeve. The wind stills, briefly, as if allowing the children this one thing, this one quiet moment.

Chara lays their own hand over Frisk's, still without taking their gaze off the light above. They sigh. "I know, buddy. I know."

Frisk leans their head on their shoulder. "I just got you back," they whisper. "Everything was finally gonna be okay. You and ... and Asriel, you were the only ones I couldn't save. We were finally going to be together all three of us."

Finally, Chara tears their attention away from the light, but their eyes never quite makes it to Frisk's, pausing on the cobweb-surface of the sea instead. A small smile curls the edges of their lips, though it's far more visible in their eyes.

"Someday, we will be," they say, eyes falling half-shut as the light inside their own head clears up the dark outside of it and the to-be memories play before their inner eye, hopes, dreams, a promise of things to come. "At least you and me. I promised you before we left, remember?"

A little sob pulls at Frisk's throat, though Chara can't tell if they're crying or if it's just because they're ill. They free their arm from the younger kid's grasp and put it around their shoulders instead, just in case.

"Yeah. Things are gonna be okay."

Frisk isn't sure anything is going to be okay. Because fine, maybe Chara has been doing most of the actual work when it came to keeping the two of them alive over the last two weeks, but they can't keep this up forever. How are they going to survive on their own out there, all alone in the world, little and weak and defenseless?

Frisk knows they wouldn't be able to help much. Really, they're not so sure how much longer they'd be able to last the way they are now. But leaving Chara behind feels so wrong.

It always felt wrong, in every timeline.

"Everyone at home is going to be really ... really happy to see you, you know," Chara says. Their smile grows wider, a little forced. "They'll get used to me being gone. They did the first time, right? Things will go back to normal soon."

'Normal.' Nothing's ever been normal since Chara came into Frisk's life. The thought of anything being normal ever again is more than surreal, it's scary, and Frisk can't help themself, they can't help already feeling so alone, so empty without the other soul next to their own, so lost and so aimless without their twin and opposite there to lean on, to balance them out, to guide them.

"And ... Frisk?"

They can't open their mouth to reply. If they do, they're afraid Chara will hear them cry.

Big kids don't cry.

"Promise me you'll take care of Azzy for me. Okay?"

They nod. Holding their breath, they tense their muscles to suppress another sob.

"He's ... not as tough as he was when you first met him. He cares so much about other people and I-I know that maybe it can be a strength sometimes, I know that's how you got through the
Underground and everything, but- but it can make you vulnerable, too. I proved that to you. To both of you.” Chara's smile fades, broken under the strain of their attempt to keep it alive. Their brows furrow just slightly and there's something dark in their eyes, something that isn't really regret, but not pride, either. "Look after him for me. Make sure he'll be okay. And if anyone hurts him ... Well, you won't have me there to be a bad example for you. So you'll probably find a way to be bad all on your own. That's how it works, right? As I got worse, I made you want to be better. When you finally do snap and mess up, make sure you use it to protect him for me. Promise me you will."

Frisk is taken by surprise when a sudden stab of jealousy settles, cold and bitter, in the pit of their stomach. So Frisk has to take care of Asriel. But who's going to take care of Frisk? Doesn't Chara care about them at all? Frisk is the one who let them in through their window ten minutes to midnight, hugged them and reassured them, and set out to cross the country, facing starvation and freezing temperatures, and dirty, neon-lit streets and dangerous humans, and Frisk was the one who stayed with Chara when the little demon hurt them and insulted them and made them feel worthless, and don't they care at all?

"That's right."

Frisk's narrowed eyes snap wide open, suddenly remembering that the one next to them can sense the sudden anger transmitted through the bond between their souls.

"Don't hold back."

Chara breaks away from them and turns them around so the two of them are standing face to face, Chara's hands on Frisk's shoulders. A smile tucks at the paler kid's expression again, but its thinner this time and there's a familiar gleam in their eyes that Frisk had almost forgotten the look of.

"There's a certain anger in you, isn't there, Frisk?" Their tone rises to something sweet and chirpy and dangerously warm, sunlight in the shape of a voice, and the softness in it drowns out the roar of the ocean without trouble. "There's something hidden inside you that even I can't match. You hide it really well. But it's still there."

A little bit of the sourness in Frisk's stomach drains away. Once, they would have been unnerved, afraid that Chara was plotting something, that they were trying to get under their skin for their own purposes, but there's no room for complicated feelings like that anymore, because Chara's paying attention to them now, they're giving them that look, like Frisk is a fascinating new type of caterpillar Chara's never seen before and they haven't quite decided whether they want to dissect this strange new specimen or if they want to wait and see what kind of butterfly their subject is going to turn into - and once it was creepy, of course it was, but now it means attention and interest and caring, and it's better, so much better, than the cold, scornful attitude they've been hiding behind over the past weeks.

This is almost like it used to be. This is almost a familiar abnormal.

"I'm proud of you, you know," Chara says, their smile widening into a grin that isn't as pearly as it used to be. "So what if you ended up never hurting anybody? You still came out of it all with more determination and more potential than anyone I've ever met before. And even though I'm still not sure I can trust you not to be a little snitch and even if you really are too weak to remain loyal to me ... at least we had a blast along the way, right? One last journey together."

Frisk can't even bring themself to care about the fact that they wouldn't really describe this whole 'running aimless for weeks' thing as a 'blast', not right now. They nod eagerly, offering their adoptive sibling a smile of their own, a much more genuine one, a relieved one.
Chara laughs softly, though the sound still rings clearer and louder than the wind and the waves.

This is good. This is how Frisk wants Chara to remember them. They want Chara to remember them as someone who stood up for them, someone who proved themself to be a true friend until the end, someone worth coming back to.

More than anything, they want to be remembered as someone worth coming back to.

Still smiling, Chara draws them into a hug, and for once, it's soft, soft and warm and maybe a tiny bit desperate, and Frisk lets themself disappear into that hug, ignoring the way the other's collarbones and skinny arms dig into their own hurting body.

Behind Frisk's back, out of sight of the little human, Chara's grin twists into a strained grimace and they bite down on their lip, hard, and they're glad Frisk can't see their face, because every last remnant of the demon's cocky, self-indulgent amusement crumbles, and they have to fight to keep from tensing up and digging their nails into the sibling's shoulder blades.

This is it. Everything they've been fighting for, everything they've been hoping for. Escape. Safety. Freedom.

It's the end.

When they find that mask of confidence and subtle self-satisfaction again, they slip out of the other child's grasp and hold them by the shoulders again, giving them the most encouraging smile they can.

"You're going to do great," they tell them. "I know you will. Just stay determined. Look after Asriel and look after everyone else, too. Maybe don't do exactly what I would've done, but still. Think of me. And ... draw inspiration when you need to. You're allowed to."

Frisk quickly wipes their eyes, beaming up at their sibling through tears glowing under the moon. Chara smirks and ruffles their hair, then lets them go and turns back to the water, walking all the way to the edge of the harbor, eyes firmly on the moon high above.

"I'll show him determination. Let's see what this pointless world is made of, shall we?"

The wind returns full-force, drowning the last of their words in defiance. Chara only laughs in reply.

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Asriel yawns halfway through speaking his uh, 'magic words', as Sans called them, into one of the echo flowers, and he pauses for a second just to make sure the yawn really is over, before doing the phrase over. He shakes his head, trying to make the heavy, sleepy clouds in his head clear up a little, and then he goes to put the flower on a table a little ways away. It's been an hour since Asgore and Papyrus came back with the little blue plants and approximately half the items Asriel requested, and the two of them still haven't returned with the rest. Of course, it did take Asriel and Sans several days to collect the artifacts the first time around, but they were doing other stuff in the meantime, and it's getting late now. The shortest hand on the clock over the door has crept past eleven, twelve, one, two, three, and is now approaching four a little too rapidly for Asriel's liking.

It's weird. When he didn't know what to do, it seemed like he had all the time in the world. Like reality was standing still, like his friends didn't really exist when they weren't right next to him. But
now - now that he's got a plan, now that he knows what to do, now that there's a real possibility that he could find them tonight - now time feels short. Like something awful could happen over the next few hours, a fate the others somehow escaped over the past two weeks, unlikely as it is.

Dutifully, he returns to pick up the next echo flower. Dutifully, he recites his phrase.

Alphys pauses in the middle of picking another flower up herself, worrying her lower lip between her teeth. The poor kid has been working for hours, helping her and the humans experiment with linking magic to human DNA, preparing the artifacts for the spell, sharing what little he knows about the kind of magic they're dealing with ... No matter what she says, he refuses to rest. No matter what she says, he continues, tirelessly so.

"Y-you know," she tries for the hundredth time, carefully laying the flower she's holding back on the table she took it from. "You c-could probably catch at- at least half an hour before Papyrus and your dad return. You wouldn't h-have t-to leave the lab, you could just- I mean, I think we have a sleeping bag somewhere, if-

"I'm not tired," Asriel insists, leaving his own echo flower on the other table and picking up another one. "I already told you I'm not." He regrets the sharp edge in his voice before it even surfaces, but he can't help it, he's had to reassure her so many times now and she keeps asking! It's not like he's going to melt from exhaustion or something, what's her problem!?

Alphys still doesn't get back to work, her worried eyes clinging to the dark patches under his eyes and the way the fur on his neck bristles with the strain of staying awake, and he wants to swat her attention away like he would a fly invading his space, but he's too exhausted to pay it any mind anymore.

"Y-you'll- you'll at least need to recharge soon," she says, crossing her arms, not so much because she's trying to look stern as much as she's trying to keep herself awake with the feeling of pressure on her limbs and chest.

Asriel shakes his head. "We moved the machine to Newer Home's labs when I moved in with dad, remember? I'm not going all the way back to Newer Home when we're so close to getting somewhere." His gaze flicks over his shoulder, subtly gesturing to the stabilizer in his back. "The battery's only a little over halfway drained. Like, two-thirds, maybe. I'll be fine until tomorrow."

He goes to pick up another flower, but when he places his paw on the table, the cold surface is empty. He frowns at it. When did that happen? Then he looks over to the other table. He didn't notice when he picked up the last flower, apparently. Huh. Maybe he's just a little tired, after all. But not much! He'll be fine.

A shriek sounds from the other end of the lab space, making him jump.

"Maureen, you keep this up, you will lose what remains of the nerve endings in your hands," Galila says to her coworker, pushing the safety goggles she's wearing up her forehead so she can give the younger scientist a disapproving glare.

Maureen, who's still shaking pain out of her hand after what appears to be a mild electrocution, merely shrugs and gets back to adjusting the cogs on the strange contraption the two of them are working on. "I dunno, maybe I'll finally be able to play guitar, then," she replies. "That's kind of a silver lining!"

"How in the world did you ever become a doctor ..?"
Asriel catches himself watching the two humans work together with the smallest of smiles on his face. Humans are weird. They're scary sometimes, but mostly, they're just weird. He used to wonder how Frisk and Chara could possibly come from the same surface world, but now that he's lived here for a while himself, it doesn't seem as strange to him as it used to. Humans are a lot more unique than the old stories made them out to be.

"H-hey."

Alphys' voice brings him back to the present. It isn't before he sees her expression that he realizes he's toying with the locket around his neck again, running his claws through the swirls engraved in the metal's surface. He quickly closes his hand around it and looks away. It's a little embarrassing. He's supposed to be working right now. He's supposed to be useful, not drifting off like he always does.

"It's o-okay to be sad, you know," Alphys continues, moving a timid step closer to the child. She wrings her claws, the tip of her tail twitching a bit. "And- and it's okay to be tired, too! Or angry, or-" With a sigh, she folds her hands to stop them from moving, and when she speaks again, her words are soft and slow and deliberate. "What I'm ... trying to say is that you don't have to ... You don't have to feel responsible for this, okay? You've already done so much to help. We can take over for a little while."

Asriel forces himself to look up at her and lets a little of the cold determination slide, brows tilting up in worry. "But I'm the only one who can do this. I'm the only one who's done it before. I can't get distracted now, we're so close to finding the others!"

That sounds like someone else Alphys knows. She can't keep the smile hoisted up. In the end, she's forced to let it go. She crawls up on a chair by the worktable and pats the seat next to her own, inviting the little one to sit down. He does so, reluctantly.

"Sans was with you when you found them, wasn't he?" she says, keeping her voice low. "That's why they got away?"

Asriel nods, looking down at his paws. "I didn't know what he was planning before it was too late. I couldn't let him go through with it. I couldn't."

"I'm sorry."

There's a hand on his shoulder now, its grip gentle enough to be reassuring, but tight enough to keep his attention rooted to the other monster, and he can't help but look up at her again despite his overbright eyes, and for a moment, he forgets to be embarrassed.

"You- you did the right thing!" Alphys insists. "You protected your friends! Th-that's what c-counts, right?"

"I'm not really sure that's what counts ..." He remembers not to add 'either' at the last moment. It wasn't Alphys he was talking to the last time this came up. It was Sans. "So ... You're not really happy with that idea either, huh? With the DT Extractor?"

Alphys' expression falls and she draws her hand back as though he'd pushed her away. "Of course not," she says, a little breathlessly. "Of course not, it's horrible! I- I don't get how he even came to the conclusion that it was the only way to- to fix this, I-I mean-" She pinches the area between her brows and shuts her eyes for a moment. "Whatever Chara did can't be that bad, I-I-I mean what could they even- what could they even do to justify something like this? They're like, ten years old!"
"Well ... Eleven, actually ..."

She never did find out, did she? About why Sans warned her not to trust Chara? Asriel can feel his heart sink in his chest, all the way to his stomach where guilt is starting to gnaw at his insides. He can't even imagine what Alphys must think of Sans right now. She's caught in between, she's seen enough to know that something is terribly wrong, but she doesn't know the whole story. A part of him wonders if she'd be better off if she knew what happened. If she knew what Chara did so that she would at least understand her friend's motives. The only thing stopping Asriel from telling her is Chara themself, it's knowing that Alphys might not understand, that she might take Sans' side, that she probably would, because she doesn't care about Chara the way Asriel does.

No one does. Except maybe Frisk, but even about them, he isn't sure.

It isn't right, taking Chara's side. He knows that. But on this one thing, he's already come to terms with being wrong.

"We should tell Asgore," Alphys continues, removing her glasses so she can rub her tired eyes. "I-I know I d-don't- don't understand the whole p-picture, but- if the kid is in danger ..."

"Please ..." Asriel rests his gaze on nothing, but behind his eyes, he sees the past weeks glide by, lies stacked on secrets stacked on avoidance piled high enough to press against the roof of his skull, making his head hurt, and he can barely keep track of it all anymore, but he has to. For them. For their safety. "Please don't tell him. I know all of this looks bad from the outside. But it's more complicated than it looks. You don't know what happened in those other timelines."

A whirring, buzzing sound emerges from the contraption the human scientists are working on and Maureen gives another high-pitched squeak of pain, but this time, it's followed by an excited gasp as the thing on the table lights up with a soft pink glow. Galila says something in a language Asriel doesn't understand, but she sounds happy. Amazed, even. The humans fist-bump before getting back to work, their voices low and excited as they apparently make some kind of progress.

Alphys watches her human friends with something that maybe looks a little like longing, from Asriel's perspective.

"I w-wanted to g-give him a chance," she says, shoulders falling a bit. "I- I wanted to think h-he was just- I don't know, bluffing? Eh ... heh. I d-don't know why- why he would, but- I hoped ... I hoped Papyrus was right. I hoped Sans had ... you know, changed his mind. Or something. I don't know."

If only. But Asriel can't see what could possibly make the seraph give up his mission. For all he claims to be lazy and uncaring, Sans sure does put a lot of effort into making everything more complicated than it needs to be, in Asriel's private opinion.

Alphys manages to find a shadow of her smile again, though it's tainted now, a little broken, nostalgic, almost. "He's not made of stone, you know. I mean he's being a huge ... huge jerk right now, at least, y'know, IMO, b-but he- h-he's not ... 100% impossible to talk to, is w-what I mean."

Asriel narrows his eyes and though he's tired, his ears perk up. What does she mean by that?

"You've p-probably figured this out by now, b-but ... He- he didn't actually- he didn't a-actually have to save you. He could've just drained Flowey's determination and let you die. He hated you, but he saved you anyway." Alphys shrugs like she's just told him she thought for sure she would've been caught in the rain on the way here but escaped, somehow. Like she hadn't just told him he would be dead if it weren't for the mercy of his best friend's would-be murderer. "He r-risked a wh-whole
bunch of unnecessary time magic messing up just so you could have a body to live in after your old one had to go. Even though he didn't really want you around."

That's ... not really very reassuring. So yeah, okay, Asriel knew the others didn't need him to stay alive the way they need Chara to stay alive, but this is still kind of news to him. He hadn't really thought of it that way. He hadn't really thought about how Sans and Alphys could've just put his essence to rest in the dead flower again when they'd removed his determination.

He looks up at Alphys from under furrowed brows, the bridge of his snout wrinkled in something resembling disgust. "So. What? I'm supposed to be grateful 'cause he didn't just... kill me?"

To his surprise, Alphys' expression doesn't change. For a moment, she remains quiet as she watches his reaction closely, deep in thought. "No," she says then, a certainty in her voice that he doesn't hear from her very often. "No, that's not what I mean. What I mean is that I ... I don't think Sans is really ... You know, the type who should be dealing with this stuff."

For the second time within the past 24 hours, Asriel finds himself struggling not to reply with something scathing and he finds that his weariness isn't making the task easier at all. 'Not the type who should be dealing with this'? Sans has dealt with this plenty, he's been guarding the timelines for ages, he's tried to defend it from Asriel and Frisk and Chara for as long as Asriel can remember, Sans has stopped at nothing, he hasn't spared any of them when they stepped out of line, how is that not being the type who should be dealing with this? It's like he was made for this.

"I don't really know what's going on," Alphys says and leans an elbow on the table next to her, clearly as tired as Asriel feels. "B-but I- I know Sans. Kinda. And something- something tells me h-he isn't really cut out for this stuff. This whole ... protecting-the-timelines-no-matter-the-cost thing. S-sometimes, people do things they wouldn't normally do because they're scared. A-and sometimes, they end up hurting other people really badly because of it. That ... doesn't make it okay, but it makes it easier to solve. If they do it out of- out of fear i-instead of hatred, I mean. Then you can talk to them. Instead of having to fight them."

Before Asriel can reply, Galila calls to Alphys from the other side of the lab, asking for her help. Alphys gets up with a deep sigh and smooths the wrinkles on her lab coat.

"A-anyway. I s-still think we sh-should tell Asgore. But- but if you say it'll end badly, I trust you. Just- just don't h-hurt Sans, okay? Maybe- maybe we can still talk him out of it. Maybe there's still another way."

She nods to herself a bit before she goes to join the others. Asriel is too tired to bother hiding his skepticism. With a little tired huff, he folds his arms over the table and leans his head on them. He isn't sure asking nicely is really going to work in this situation. But maybe he's just too ashamed to try. Ashamed to take Chara's side. He shouldn't be. If he's going to make terrible life choices, he should at the very least take pride in them. They won't be worth it if he doesn't. Then no one wins.

Maybe he really should try to talk to Sans when they see each other again. If Alphys is right and Sans isn't as above all of this as he seems, then maybe Asriel can find a way to talk him out of it. Strike where it hurts. Exploit whichever weaknesses he'll find underneath.

It's been a long time since he plotted anything along these lines. His usual fear of thinking like this stays gone, though, and his usual worry remains buried deep, deep down. Is he going numb again? Has his soul come loose? Or is he just overtired?

The clock is nearing six in the morning when Alphys receives a text from Papyrus telling her that he and the king are returning with the rest of the artifacts.
Asriel still hasn't slept by then. And when the other monsters return, he immediately gets back to work.
The Absolute God(s)

Chapter Notes

The end is near.

Thanks to ShtiyaJust4You for beta'ing, and to all the awesome peeps who've commented! You're all amazing, pls do keep comments comin', it sustains me through the dark times that is writing the ending to this giant fic baby of mine.

Sans checks the mountain regularly. Sure, the last time he saw the humans, they were a long way from home, but it must be at least a little tempting, he thinks, to return to the safety of the Underground and its warm, unlocked homes, long-abandoned healing food and safety from the surface world. He'd go there, if he were them. If he wanted to disappear, Mt. Ebott would be his first choice.

He doesn't bother going home tonight. It's not like he would be able to sleep anyway. And the night sky looks nice from here, pouring down on the horizon to all sides, onto the gentle curve of the sea to the west and the distant hilltops framing the flatland that surrounds the town and the city to the east. It strikes him that in trying to protect all of this, he's essentially sealing its end in the same action. If time keeps repeating indefinitely, there's a chance at forever. There's a chance that Fallen will never succeed in ending it all, inadvertently prolonging ... well, everything here. The people, the town, the city beyond. Maybe time will collapse in on itself eventually, fractured under its own cancerous growths, but he doesn't know that for sure. For all he knows, he's taking away this world's last chance to make something eternal.

Except, eternity means that every possibility will eventually be exhausted. The end is bound to come eventually. Besides, in what sick reality would this existence be preferable? Going through the same hours, the same days, again and again, hearing the same words come out of the same mouths, hearing the same promises of forever and knowing that they're only half right ... Sans can make as many excuses as he wants to. Doing nothing when he could be doing something would be unforgivable. He owes it to everyone to try.

He might be taking away their last shot at something resembling a forever. But that's okay. After all, nothing is supposed to last forever, is it?

He picks a golden flower growing on the mountainside. In the next breath, he's forty feet higher up the slope, staring into the depths of the abyss below.

Still somehow wearing his usual lazy grin after everything, he twirls the flower between his fingertips.

"hey," he says to the darkness stretching deep, deep into the mountain. "it's been a while."

No one answers. That's kind of the point, though.

"you're, uh ... prolly wondering what i'm doin'. i would if i were you. heh."

He doesn't do this much anymore. He doesn't like to think of himself as a sentimental guy. He used
"I'm actually still kinda wondering. What I'm doing, I mean. It's kind of complicated and ... I'm not gonna pretend I'm a fan of that. You think I could still just put this whole thing down? Go back to sellin' hotdogs? 's a respectable job. Paps would be relieved, I'll tell ya that." He laughs to himself and takes a seat on the edge of the abyss, swinging one leg over the edge, careful not to lose the untied sneaker dangling from his foot. "He's been really pissed at me lately. Says I'm heartless. I've tried reminding him that that would be the least of my problems if I actually needed organs, but he won't listen! That papyrus, man ..."

Much as Sans appreciates the sun and the general vibe it's got going, he's always a little happier when it goes away. Without the big star in the way, he can see all the smaller ones, and the planets and the Milky Way. He remembers wanting to go to space, once. He remembers borrowing books from the Library about space and he remembers digging through the garbage dump for newspaper articles and documentaries on humanity's findings up there. He remembers running out of information to study and picking up science fiction books and movies instead. He remembers thinking that if humans could write about the stars with so much wonder and so much longing, they couldn't be all bad.

He doesn't remember when he stopped searching. When he stopped collecting. When he stopped imagining.

As he sits here on the mountain, a little bit of air breathing life into the embers of his old passion, he wonders if his magic would be able to reach the moon. Maybe he'll try. Maybe when all of this is over, he'll try to reach the moon.

"What would you say if you were here?" he asks the empty darkness below. "I'm gonna go ahead and guess you wouldn't exactly be proud. That's fine, I'm not ... proud of myself either. Haven't quite reached that amount of LV yet. But uh, still ... I'm just sayin'. This is what you made me for. I'm doin' what you told me to do. Prollly didn't expect it to have to go this far, though, did ya?"

Of course he didn't. The guy was harmless, he just wanted to help. He couldn't have known what he was setting into motion.

Sans shakes his head, his grin growing wider, though it's a little forced. "Nah, me neither. But then it's a good thing I'm here instead of you, right?" He averts his eyes from the stars and looks down, a little bit of blue sparking in his left eye like a sputtering lighter. "You 'n Paps ... I don't blame ya for not wanting to get your hands dirty. But me? I already got shit up to my elbows. Let's drive this one home, yeah? Hope it ends with something worthwhile. Maybe if I keep digging, someday it's gonna work out. Even if it's kind of messed up right now."

Fighting fire with fire might be kind of redundant, but it's not like he can go back now anyway. The one person who's going to be able to hold him responsible come the next reset already knows about his plans, they already hate him, he's sure of it. He's got nothing left to lose anymore, but if he keeps pushing on, maybe he'll have something to gain. Information. A tactic for next time. Something to bring him just a little closer to the end.

"You know, I wonder ... if maybe I'd been ... I dunno, quicker, smarter, whatever. You think I coulda saved the kid? Chara, I mean?"

For once, he wishes the abyss would answer him.

"Asriel's nothing like Flowey. Maybe ... maybe Chara was nothing like Fallen either. Before they started racking up Exp. Maybe if I'd stopped them earlier, they'd still be ..." He cuts the thought in half and
throws away the rest of it. "heh. doesn't matter much now, does it?"

With a sigh, he stands up, not paying much mind to the edge he's standing next to.

"good talk, old man."

He throws the golden flower into the abyss, letting the darkness swallow it whole.

Walking all the way back down the mountain is tiring, but it helps clear his head. On the way down, he receives a text from Toriel. She asks him if he's awake. He asks her if she's okay. She asks him if they can go searching together. He takes that as a 'no.'

'i'll come pick ya up,' he texts her back. 'we can go around the mountain one more time.'

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Frisk and Chara hide in the shadows between rows of boat houses for the remainder of the night, but even though it shields them from curious eyes and the harsh ocean wind tearing through the maze of wooden structures, their make-shift shelter does nothing to protect them from the merciless night frost hanging crystals in the air and in the children's lungs. By the time the town's inhabitants begin to stir, Chara is almost convinced that Frisk has fallen asleep with their eyes open, the smaller human sitting frozen, unmoving, propped up against the wall of one of the boat houses, each of their deep breaths so slow that Chara has time to worry about whether the next one is going to come at all during the time in between.

The first time a human walks by on the road in front of the boat houses, Frisk's empty gaze comes alive and they sit upright, turning towards the movement. Their transformation from inanimate to alive and moving reminds Chara of the way Mettaton comes to life after recharging, a spirit waking up in a dead shell and taking hold of the marionette's strings.

Frisk leans on the wall and gathers their legs under themself. For a moment, Chara forgets why the other is suddenly getting up and walking away. Frisk nearly loses their balance and falls heavily against the wall they're walking next to, staring straight ahead at the harbor visible between the boat houses. Then Chara remembers that oh right, humans appearing means that morning must be coming, and they should be heading for the ferry. It must be here soon.

After a moment's reluctance, they get up and follow Frisk, offering them a shoulder to lean on. Frisk offers them a weak smile in return and links their arm with Chara's for support.

***

By the time the potion is finished, Asriel no longer feels tired. There is no doubt, no fear, no confusion, and maybe that's why. He's not wasting precious energy on things that don't matter.

Chara and Frisk will be safe soon. And that, that is all that matters.

He doesn't bother to tell Alphys, Asgore, Papyrus or the humans to stand back before summoning his
magic. The familiar rush of heat running from his hands up his arms and through the fur on his face is enough of a warning in itself, he thinks.

The others move away, all wide eyes and surprised exclamations that he doesn't bother listening too closely. Eyes narrowed in concentration, he raises his claws, guiding the current into the echo flowers whispering incoherent static to one another on the table, and within the little sea of blue, a yellow fire sparks awake, tearing through the soft petals and consuming them, leaving nothing but black, smoldering ashes in its wake, and without giving the blaze a moment to settle, Asriel lifts his hands, letting the fire bring the ashes into the air like angry, sputtering shooting stars, before commanding the silky material to settle in his open palms. It takes him a little more effort to kill the fire than it did the last time, but after struggling for a moment, the magic caves in and eats itself up, disappearing in a small explosion of heat that rustles through his fur and makes his eyes water.

"We're almost done," he says to the others and turns around to show them the black, shining ashes. "Alphys, I'm gonna need a potion flask for this."

For a second, Alphys continues to stare slack-jawed at the small handful of foul-smelling ashes that used to be a small garden's worth of beautiful flowers. The other onlookers all bear the exact same expression. Then Alphys, as the only one, snaps out of it and tells him that yes, yes of course, she'll get it right away, and she hurries over to a cabinet to fetch a flask for the ashes.

Asriel purposely doesn't look at the others watching him with ... well, he wants to think it's awe. It's probably not, if he looks a little more closely, but he's not going to.

It doesn't matter. He's on a mission.

The machine in his back makes a low, breathy whirring noise in complaint. It really doesn't like it when he uses too much magic, he's discovered. Annoyed, he nudges it with his elbow to make it shut up.

He'll recharge it tomorrow when his friends are safe. It's fine.

It's fine.

***

The ferry arrives in the harbor silhouetted by the moon, nearly silent in its enormous size, looming over the harbor with all the grace and dignity of a mother hawk descending on her nest. The ship is otherworldly in its beauty, the framework of it dark against the white moon despite the many windows allowing light to pour out into the night in the shape of a halo around the colossus.

Sneaking into the mass of humans drawn to the ferry is like trying to pass for soulless among the undead, and Frisk and Chara keep their eyes firmly on the ground, heads bowed to hide their faces beneath their hoods. Not that the mass of humans wandering towards the ferry appear to be able to look away from the promise of warmth behind the glowing windows ahead, their hollow eyes and dull faces turned up towards the light in unison.

Frisk's train of thought hits a bump in the road. They black out for a fraction of a second. Chara makes sure they stay upright as they jerk awake again. Both of them quickly look around, but none of the humans appear to have noticed. Frisk cringes a bit, sending Chara an apologetic look. Chara shifts their hold on their sibling, wrapping an arm around the younger child's bony frame and giving
them a little one-armed hug. They only need to make it onboard without anyone noticing that they
don't belong with the rest. They only need to make it out to sea and they'll be safe.

Next to the humans walking on foot, cars board the lower deck of the ferry. Further away from the
harbor, the town is beginning to stir, more and more humans daring to leave their homes as
responsibilities drag them out into the cold.

Frisk looks back at the town they're leaving behind. There's no turning back now. This is it. This is
the conclusion to their journey.

They tear their gaze away from the awakening town and move their eyes up to the giant ferry
patiently watching over the humans below. They're surprised to see that the windows on the very
highest floor shed no light, the gaping holes in the ship's cranium as dark as the cave roof sky, but
devoid of stars. Shouldn't the helmsman be up there? If he isn't up there, then who's steering the
ship? Maybe he's on break. Or maybe they're switching helmsmen. Of course, they must be. Surely
the one who steered the ship all the way here will need to sleep after being up all night.

Regardless, the highest floor looks devoid of life.

... But then why does it feel like something is watching them from the top window?

Frisk pushes the thought away, moving a little closer to Chara as the horde of humans is swallowed
up by the ship's shadow.

***

It's morning. It's morning and Asriel missed his chance to catch the humans off guard. But it doesn't
matter, he reminds himself, because they won't be able to escape this time. He has outsmarted them
and they're going to come home where they're safe even if he has to drag them all the way there,
even if he has to lock them up, even if it kills him. He's done being helpless. He's done standing by
and being useless while the people he cares about the most are in danger.

They'll regret leaving him behind. He'll make them regret it.

He won't let anyone hurt them ever again.

"Are you done yet?" Asriel asks the group of scientists fussing over the pink-glowing contraption
they've been working on all night now.

"It l-looks like it!" Alphys tells him, expression set in something like determination as she pokes a
few buttons on the thing and tightens a screw with her claw. Then she steps back, waving in the
direction of the object like a magician showing off her latest trick. "Have a look!"

Galila and Maureen move back as well, giving Asriel enough elbow room to inspect the device on
his own terms. He can't claim to know a whole lot about technology - to him, it mostly looks like a
blender taped to an airplane propeller, the glassy bit of the blender glowing a soft pink and emitting a
high-pitched buzz like a bee in a helium balloon. Asriel tilts his head left and right, trying to make
sense of the contraption, to no avail.

"You need help," Galila concludes, raising a brow at the kid.
"No," Asriel mumbles, frowning at the object. "Yes," he then decides and takes a step back. "What is it?"

"Let me demonstrate." Galila snaps her fingers in Maureen's direction a couple of times, and despite the other complaining that it's always her, why's it always her?, the younger scientist plucks a hair from her scalp and hands it to Galila. Without further ado, Galila picks the lid off the blender-bit of the machine and dumps the hair into it and seals it up again. "Alphys, you will do the honors, will you not?"

Alphys nods. "R-right!"

Asriel watches her with scrutinizing eyes as she opens her claws and small, yellow-white sparks of lightning ignite from the tips of her claws and accumulate in her open palm, forming a little glowing lightning bolt. Concentration lining her face, she holds the bolt close to one end of the propeller. A spark jumps from her hand to the machine and - true to its shape - the propeller spins, slowly at first, before picking up speed, and the pink glow in the glass shines brighter as it does.

Suddenly, a squeak sounds from Maureen. Asriel starts, looking up at her with pure indignation on his face. Why is she is making noise? He wasn't prepared, she scared him!

Then he realizes what just happened.

The propeller slows down again and the glow fades. Maureen quickly retrieves her hair from the lid and puts it back on top of her head, still pouting. Asriel goes back to the machine to look at it up close, staring at the glowing glass in wonder. He isn't sure what he was expecting the human scientists to be able to do with his request, but this - this is more than adequate. He really wishes he knew more about machinery, he has no idea what just happened, but it was awesome.

"So this thing helps magic read DNA?" he asks, poking the propeller to make it spin again.

"Well, it is more like ..." Galila waves her hand around in a circle, searching for the right words. "I suppose it translates between magical and physical languages. It is complicated."

"It's cool!"

"Extremely so."

Alphys flicks a switch on the side of the machine and the pink glow drains from the glass. "Y-yes, well-!" She quickly gathers up the cord and coils it around the foot of the blender part. "W-we should t-try it out before we celebrate! W-with the- the bloodhound spell, I mean. That's m-more unstable magic. Especially one with so many, uh, substitutes? Eheh. Let's use it outside!"

***

"I think I felt someone looking at us from the helmsman's deck," Frisk says to Chara once they're safely inside the ferry.

They managed to get aboard the ship without much trouble - the guy letting them in seemed as far gone as the humans boarding the ship. They've been unnaturally lucky over the past few weeks. Frisk is starting to wonder if it really is a good thing after all.
"Saw or felt?" Chara asks, going over to the window to look down at the foam-cobwebs gathering around the hull of the ship. They cross their arms over their chest and lean forward against the window frame, picking at the chipped white paint as they do so.

"Uhm. Felt. It was dark up there. But I think ... I ..." Frisk trails off. Chara has stopped listening, they can tell. Annoyed, they go to stand at the other's side, hoping to get their attention again. "It just really felt like there was someone up there. Maybe it was a monster. Some of them can see in the dark."

"You need to quit being so paranoid," Chara says, still watching the moonlight reflect in the waves below. "That's my job."

"But what if someone really was there?"

"No one was there." It's the final verdict. "You made it up." And Chara has made up their mind. "We're ... We're safe now. We're finally safe."

Frisk's eyes trail to the roof. Safety doesn't seem very certain to them at all.

***

Before Alphys can finish packing up the contraption so they can move it out of the lab, a loud series of beeps vaguely resembling a song sounds from across the room.

Asgore and Papyrus - who have been speaking to each other in hushed voices about ... something, Asriel isn't sure what - look up. Next to them on the table lies Asriel's phone, chirping like a tone deaf bird.

"YOUR MAJESTY, I BELIEVE YOUR PHONE DEVICE HAS SOMETHING IMPORTANT TO SHARE WITH YOU," Papyrus calls to Asriel, trying valiantly to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. He looks tired, and annoyed at having been interrupted. Asriel can't help but wonder what the two of them were talking about.

He instantly drops the line of thought when he makes it to the other end of the room and sees who's calling him.

He nearly drops the phone and accidentally rejects the call in his haste. Fumbling with the buttons, he brings up his contacts, scrolling by the phone numbers of Temmies, spiders, shadows, shades and countless other monsters from all reaches of the realm who have all left messages for him over the past many days. Monsters whose status reports he has stopped responding to after their repeated failures to help him find his friends. Finally, he finds the number of the person who just called him.

Asriel never really questioned why all the river people apparently have the same phone number.

The phone beeps once.

And once more.

And once more ...

Someone picks up halfway through the third one.
"If I bothered you, I am sorry."

"N-no, you didn't! I hung up accidentally, sorry!" Asriel moves over to the window, clutching the phone to his ear with both paws. The night isn't as dark as it used to be. The clouds have passed. The horizon glows purple to the east. "Please tell me why you called me."

"The countdown has begun," the creaky voice on the other end responds, a shudder muting the corners of the sentence. "Time itself has become finite."

That could mean 'we're running out of time', coming from anyone else. But this is the River Person. Asriel can feel the others' eyes on him, but he ignores them and lowers his voice. "What do you mean?"

"Please," comes the reply. "Please, little prince. You must choose wisely ..."

All emotion immediately drains from the child's face. He sees it in his own reflection in the window, but he pretends not to. He pretends to still see the brightening horizon.

"I'm not going to choose," he says, his tone matching the temperature outside. "I'm going to find another way out. Just tell me where they are."

Silence.

Silence.

Something that sounds remarkably like a little sniffle and a deep, trembling breath.

"They're on a ferry. A ferry sailing south. They will pass right by you."

Of course. Of course they'd find a loophole, of course it wouldn't be that easy, of course everything would conspire to keep them away from him, it always does, of course now wouldn't be any different!

Asriel curses under his breath and tells the River Person that he's just going to have to find a way to get them off the ferry then, isn't he? He tells them to watch over the humans. He tells them they'll regret it if anything happens to either of his friends.

Alphys and Papyrus exchange a look behind his back.

"I know you haven't forgotten who you're messing with like everybody else has," Asriel says lowly. "If I were you, I wouldn't do so in the future, either."

He hangs up and resists the urge to smash the phone against something hard. The floor looks adequate for potential phone-smashing. He tries to imagine what it would look like, bits of it flying everywhere. Really, he should be trying to repress thoughts like that, but he's tired, he's worried, he's angry and for the first time in a long time, he's painfully aware of just how much he is in fact 10 years old and miserable. 10 years old for the hundredth year in a row. He's done. It's too much.

He can't choose. He can't choose between his best friends.

Why did they leave him behind?

Spinning around, he meets the others' eyes one by one as he addresses them.

"Galila, Maureen, thank you for your help. You can go home now if you want to, we won't need your assistance anymore. Dad, Alphys, we should set up the ritual by the coast near Newer Home."
Papyrus, you- you should go find Sans. As quickly as you can, please.”

Papyrus salutes for the second time today, though he looks much less eager to leave this time around as he strides out the door, his scarf whipping like a lashing tail in the non-existent wind. Alphys and Asgore head to the other end of the lab to retrieve the potion and the ashes.

A bit self-conscious, Asriel follows Galila and Maureen to the door where they retrieve their winter gear from the coat rack next to the exit.

"I- I'm sorry it took so long," he says to them, lowering his head down between his shoulders in a little cringe. "I didn't think it would take all night. But you really helped us a lot! So- so thank you. And sorry for keeping you awake."

Maureen snorts as she buttons her coat up all the way, and her reply is muffled through the collar of her jacket. "You kidding? This is the coolest assignment we've had in months!"

"One would think working with the merging of magic and science would mean less paper work and more accidentally creating superheroes in convenient lab accidents," Galila adds. "As it turns out, it does not."

Asriel can't help but smile at that, despite the circumstances. Then he remembers why he came over to talk to the humans in the first place.

"Can ... Can I ask you something? I know I've already asked a lot from you, but this is ... kind of important." They tell him to go ahead.

"If you can avoid it at all, could you- could maybe not talk about the things you've seen and heard tonight? At least not too much?" He looks pleadingly up at the humans, folding his paws over his chest. "Everything's kind of complicated right now and I just- I- I don't want too many people to know. About any of this. About the spell or about the machine you made, or-" He stumbles over his words, trying to defend something that maybe isn't entirely fair or rational. He's keeping so many secrets right now and he can't help but feel like the framework of those secrets is growing more and more fragile. He can't keep track of them. He feels like he's missing something. Like every lie-secret-omission stacked on top of the others is weighing down on the cage of illusions keeping everyone safe from the reality of the situation. The fewer clues those around him obtain, the better. He needs to keep information to himself as much as possible, even the bits that maybe don't look so dangerous right now. You never know.

Galila narrows her permanent half-lidded glare and Asriel feels very small under the human's gaze. "You keep your cards very close," she says. "You underestimate those around you. Alphys, at least, I can assure you is sharper than you give her credit for."

That's probably true. But she also feels indebted to him, still. Normally, he wishes she wouldn't feel that way, he likes Alphys, he's got her to thank for his and Chara's second chance, and she's done everything in her power to help the two of them adjust - but right now, her guilt is of use to him.

He can only hope it'll be enough for her to choose to trust him. Or that she will at least feel like she owes it to him not to make things more complicated than they already are.

"And uh, word of advice," Maureen says, sending Asriel a sly little grin. "If you don't want people to be like, super suspicious - maybe save the, uh, the temper tantrums and- y'know, the whole blackmailing thing for when no one else is listening in. Might save you some grief."
Asriel's face grows warm under his fur. That was- That was not a temper tantrum, he just said what had to be said! How could anyone be suspicious? He was just making sure the River Person knew it was urgent, no one could blame him for that!

... He needs to quit defending himself so much. There was no need to be so awful to someone who only wanted to help, he knows that.

Still, being told how to run his rescue mission makes even the idea of apologizing get stuck in his throat.

Galila hoists the strap of her purse over her shoulder and puts her hand on the door handle. "We hope you find your friends, little one. Take care."

"You got this, kid." Maureen's smile grows sympathetic, as she looks at Asriel one last time before following her friend out the exit.

Asriel stands left behind, still glowering at the door, not sure what to make of the humans' advice. A part of him wants to think they have no idea what they're talking about and need to stay in their lane. Another part, a more worried one, knows they're right. He clenches and unclenches his hands, digging his claws into the paw pads in his palm.

"I- I th-think we're ready to go!" Alphys says as she comes up behind him, the potion in one hand and the flask of ashes in the other. Asgore is close behind her, the machine under his arm.

Asriel turns to face them, mulling over his options for a second.

Follow the plan. Right now, he needs to follow the plan. There's still time. There's still a possibility that everything is going to work out.

"Let's do it."

***

Frisk and Chara find an empty seat near a little round window overlooking the coast as it glides by on the right. They try not to think about how they've painstakingly clawed their way over every hilltop and through every maze-like city hiding just beyond the horizon. It was for the best, they tell themselves. They've lost their pursuer. They found a way out. It would've made no difference if they'd gone the other way from the beginning, it would only have clued Sans in on which direction they were heading in from the very start. Their progress wasn't for nothing.

They just need to make it past Newer Home and they'll be free.

Or, well. Chara needs to make it past Newer Home, they remind themself.

Frisk will already have gotten off the ferry by then. Chara will continue on their own. They're going to sail right past the little island of light they've come to associate with a long forgotten home, and when they do, they will be alone again. For good, this time.

They look down at the kid curled up against their side. Frisk is all wrapped up around themself, arms locked tightly around their legs, face hidden by their knees, one arm looped around Chara's. They don't really need to be sitting this close, it's warm in here, but they must've grown used to it, Chara
thinks, over the many, many cold nights they've had to endure with nothing but their companion’s fading body heat to cling to for warmth.

Chara tries to imagine the other human disappearing into their mother's arms, tries to imagine their father healing their wounds and illnesses. They try to imagine Papyrus tugging them in, Undyne and Alphys trying to tell the same bedtime story in vastly different ways.

They try to imagine Asriel crying as he's reunited with at least one of his friends.

The one he'd prefer to have back.

For some reason, the last image is far more vivid than the others and it breaks the whole picture. It makes the rest seem unreal by comparison.

Frisk has changed a lot over their journey. For some reason, imagining them back in the safety of their monster family's arms is difficult. It feels strange to imagine the starved, worn-out, filthy little thing surrounded by white fur and bright scales and glittering, colorful magic. They seem tainted, somehow. A smudge on an otherwise perfect family photo. Just like Chara used to be with their overbright, dark-rimmed eyes and hollow smile.

Frisk would only fit in next to Asriel. With him and him alone, there would be balance between ugliness and purity.

Just like there used to be with him and Chara.

Chara lets out a little huff and pointedly looks away from Frisk and out the window, slipping an arm around their sleeping sibling. To keep track of them. Just to keep track of them.

The demon grinds their teeth.

***

Asgore drops Alphys off at the coast, where she begins to prepare the spell, following Asriel's instructions closely. Asgore and Asriel continue to the capital, driving a little faster than what is perhaps entirely necessary, taking shortcuts through narrow streets, aiming for the glass dome by the castle. When they reach the greenhouse, Asriel tells his father to wait by the car and goes to retrieve what he needs. When he returns empty-handed, Asgore first assumes that he couldn't find what he was looking for - but a closer look reveals deep concentration on the kid's face and a gleam in his eyes that defy the darkness around them, shining a soft purple in the low light.

They take the drive back to the coast slowly. Asriel focuses on the feeling of being in two places at once - in the car next to his father, and deep, deep below the sea and the earth. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he can hear the soil.

As they cross the bridge, he can see Alphys' silhouette on the beach, standing perfectly frozen, facing the car approaching her. It's all set up. The ritual is ready.

Asriel's phone vibrates. It's a text message. He checks the display. 'Papyrus', it says, in bright green letters which have inexplicably changed themselves to the appropriate font without consulting Asriel first.
'CANT FIND SANS. HE'S NOT ANSWERING HIS PHONE.'

Asriel frowns and texts back: 'Then keep searching! He must be somewhere!'

The reply comes immediately. 'WILL DO.' Another one follow shortly after. 'WHEN YOU FIND THE OTHER CHILDREN, DO NOT LET THEM OUT OF YOUR SIGHT. KEEP ALPHYS AND YOUR FATHER CLOSE.'

Like he needs to be told twice.

***

Chara senses Frisk's nightmares before the other wakes up, but they do nothing to help them out of it, leaving them to it until they start awake on their own. Frisk sits upright, breathing shallow, letting their feet back on the ground. They run their hands over their face, either not caring or not remember that it's been quite a while since they've washed them.

They blink blearily and manage to focus their wide eyes on Chara. "Why- why didn't you wake me up?"

"You needed the rest," Chara says and removes their arm from Frisk to give them space. "Nightmares are better for you than sleep deprivation."

Frisk isn't sure that's true. They're not sure that's true at all.

They focus on the air passing by the roof of their mouth for a moment, trying to slow and deepen their breathing, trying to remember what they were dreaming about. All they recall are the same familiar flashes of images, the same light-streaked hallway, the same red liquid dripping down a glowing knife, the same tears on a familiar face, the hollow smile on a different, just-as-familiar one.

It's the same as it always is.

Chara cocks their head to the side, studying the other human with something very close to genuine worry. "Do you want to go outside for a bit?" they ask, folding their hands in their lap as if to imply that it doesn't have to be right now, it's up to Frisk. "To clear your head?"

Frisk is suddenly struck with the absurdity of the situation. They've just spent two weeks on the run, protecting the owner of that hollow smile in their nightmares with their life, protecting them from the one they hurt, the one whose insides they saw dripping down that knife just a moment ago.

This may be reality. This may be the timeline that came to be, instead of the one still lurking in the murky corners of their memories - but the other one was just as possible. Just as real.

A cold hand wrapping around their own slightly warmer one brings them out of their thoughts. They look up and meet Chara's gaze, seeing worry and warmth and caring right behind that cold, glassy stare, and they remind themself that getting caught up in the past is ridiculous. There is so much more to Chara than a hollow smile and a dripping knife. Not all of it is good, but it is there, they're a real person, a friend, a member of Frisk's family.

What happened before was real, but so is this. And this is more important.
Frisk nods, swallowing the dryness in their throat.

Chara finds a little smile for them, a little leftover one from nicer, softer days, and stands up, picking up the backpack abandoned next to their chair and gently tugging Frisk towards the door.

Outside, the early morning breeze blows away the last remnants of the nightmare and Frisk forgets it was there in the first place, opting to simply hold on to the hand still clinging to their own in turn.

***

"Y-you're back!" Alphys says, half-running to meet Asriel and Asgore as they make their way down the beach to the spot she's picked for the ritual. "Wh-what was it you were looking for? Did you find it?"

"I did," Asriel replies, still completely focused on the magic he's dragging along under the earth. "Come on, let's get started."

Alphys looks to Asgore for an explanation, but he only shrugs, looking as bewildered as she does. They quickly follow the smaller monster to the circle of ashes ahead.

Asriel double-checks the circle, makes sure there are no holes or imperfections in the border of it, and he tests the sand within those borders, scooping up a bit of the sand in his paw and squeezing it. It sticks to his fur without a problem. The potion is still fresh within the material.

Placed right in the center of the circle, on top of the soaked sand, stands the machine the scientists built for him. The glass part is still empty, as per his request.

It's ready.

Asriel turns back to Alphys as she and Asgore catch up with him.

"Alphys. The hair, please."

"I-I don't understand," she says, even as she reaches into the folds of her lab coat and unbuttons one of the hidden pockets inside it. "Y-you s-s-said they were o-onboard a ferry, the s-spell w-won't be able to reach them while they're o-on water!" She finds a small test tube and hands it to Asriel.

Asriel digs a claw into the cork stopper sealing the tube shut and unplugs it, before retrieving the little brown hair inside. "I know what I'm doing. Trust me."

***

The horizon grows orange. Papyrus searches his and his brother's home, Sans' stations and work places, Grillby's, he even calls Sans' friends, but none of them have seen him, none of them have heard from him in days.

Fear starts to grow and expand in his ribcage, pushing his breathing up to the top of his chest until he isn't breathing at all as he floors the gas pedal and steers the car towards the city sprouting from the
town.

He knows he shouldn't worry. Sans disappears all the time. It's better if he's somewhere else right now, at least the kids will be safe then, until they find out what to do with them.

None of this soothes his nerves.

He considers calling Toriel, but it's so early. He knows she doesn't get much sleep these days, what if he wakes her up from a rare moment of peace?

He'll give it a little more time.

***

Asriel seals the hair inside the machine. It lights up and the propeller starts to spin, but as soon as he steps back, golden vines breach the sand, writhing and twisting over each other, and they latch on to the spinning metal, keeping it stuck in place, and they crawl further up the machine and cover it in a web of bright, yellow threads twisting up, up, up, beyond the glass and further up, threading together into a bud that unfolds into a big, sun-bright flower - bigger than the one that appeared the last time he attempted the spell, if possible.

The vines wrapped around the machine squeeze and press against the glass and metal, and there's an awful noise, like a trapdoor slowly being pulled off its screaming hinges, and then the glass shatters and the metal snaps, and then the golden plant devours it whole, pulling it down into the sand.

Immediately, six smaller flowers bloom around the circle, perfectly spaced.

No more appear. They don't know how to proceed.

Alphys watches the little plants with pure wonder on her face. Asgore can't take his fearful eyes off his son.

The monster child looks the flowers over for a moment, ice in his glowing stare, fists clenched, not tightly enough for his claws to hurt his palms, but still tightly enough that if he held one of the little plants, it would be crushed.

Expression unchanging, he tosses his head so his ears fall behind his shoulders, and he kneels to the ground in front of the circle, concentrating on the energy below the earth and the sound of soil. The sound turns grainy and static-y as the magic breaks through the layers and unfurls into the sand above, writhing through the darkness, all dark green vines and bright white smiles, and soft, high-pitched little voices that speak over one another in a language that isn't quite a language, a hollow, heartless laughter that isn't much louder than a soft little giggle coming from somewhere within the twisting mass.

Asriel loses himself in that sound. He doesn't notice when his own expression grows into a little satisfied smirk not unlike his familiar's.

The sparkling flowers get eaten from the inside out, their stems convulsing and shattering under the strain of their attackers pushing up through the magic and replacing them. One, two, three, four, five, six. Six pairs of white pinprick eyes shining as brightly as the magic their owners consumed. Six sets of golden petals of all shapes and sizes. Six blank, hollow grins.
Asriel hears someone gasp behind him, though he can't hear if it's Alphys or his father.

Under the sand, he feels the rest of the enchanted flowers crawling among each other, waiting to be summoned.

The six above ground sink back into the sand and reappear right in front of Asriel, giggling that awful little giggle. He reaches out to put his claws through one of them, just to see what it would feel like, but he decides against it. That would be meaningless. There's no time for meaningless things right now.

Instead, he meets their eyes one by one and makes sure that they mirror the action, that they're properly connected to him. They are. Of course they are. He's been experimenting on them for who knows how long now.

The past two weeks feel like a very, very long time.

The plants sense the little bubble of relief and excitement growing in his heart, and they giggle again, their voices so cold and so artificial compared to the warmth turning his breastbone to mush and the hope searing the backs of his eyes, but he can't help but give a little "heh" in return, their laughter is contagious.

Asriel closes his hand around the locket and puts a little kiss on top of it.

Soon.

Soon.

He looks around at the flowers, mirroring their smiles, and then he leans down to them and they lean closer.

"Let's go," he whispers.

He stands up, back straight, shoulders down, and though his face hurts from smiling - it's been so long, really - he can't help but keep it up as the little plants dive into the sand with excited howls and drag bright lights through the ground like shooting stars through the shadows along the coast, weaving in and out between each other as they follow the coast to the north before parting from the ground and continuing through the water, leaving a web of long, spindly vines in their wake.

Alphys and Asgore walk up on either side of him, watching the glowing plants disappear over the horizon.

"I... I swear I recognize that laugh from somewhere," Asgore says, the rumble of his voice so low it's easier to feel it than hear it.

Alphys looks to Asriel, wiping cold sweat from her temple with the back of her hand. "Wh-what do we do now?"

Asriel looks down at the circle, at the center where the machine was crushed and swallowed whole.

Eyes gleaming, he says: "We wait."
Outside on the deck, the air is cool and leaves numb spots on the children's faces, but for once, it feels a little less like the frost is trying to hurt them and more like it's trying to give them a good-luck kiss each. Frisk closes their eyes against the wind and focuses on the way it brushes across their scalp, gentle as their mother's claws carding through their hair, and the feeling of rot and fire and hurt flaring through their body dulls with the rest of them.

They don't notice Chara watching them. Trying to immortalize their little sibling's features in their memory, trying to reconstruct what the younger child used to look like before this journey. Before patches of bluish-black under their eyes, before matted hair, before hollow cheeks and chapped lips.

It's becoming harder to remember. Chara wonders if Frisk is going to look like that ever again.

They haven't let go of Chara's hand since they came outside.

A screen on the ship's outside wall shows the next destination, a map, and a strip of information scrolling by at the top. There's a warning about possible delays, a reminder to keep out of the cars on the lower deck for safety reasons, encouragement to contact a steward if the passengers have any questions or complaints ... Then a pause. Then the time of day, 6:28AM. And then, finally, today's date.

Frisk hasn't been keeping track of time at all during their journey. It became impossible to do so after their phone battery died. But here it says, bright as day - December 7th.

They give Chara's hand a little squeeze. "Hey."

The other human pretends not to have been watching them since they came out here. "What's up?"

"Happy birthday, Chara."

This wasn't really how Frisk thought they'd be celebrating their resurrected friend's first birthday in a hundred years. Really, they were hoping to join their family in waking the kid up in the morning with birthday songs and presents, and maybe even a party of some kind. Maybe. Naturally, there would have been cake. Probably chocolate cake, knowing Chara, but Frisk wouldn't have minded. It would've looked nice on the table.
Chara breathes a little laugh, looking away to hide their embarrassed smile. "Someone's feeling sappy ..!"

"You did it. You finally turned eleven years old." Well ... kind of. They made it to their eleventh birthday, at least. Though whether or not the numbers really add up is another issue. Frisk doesn't think Chara lost their old life on the exact same date they were given their new one, so there must be something messed up along the way. But hey, it's the thought that counts. A birthday is a birthday. "How does it feel?"

Chara thinks it over for a moment, lines appearing between their brows. "It feels ... the same, I guess. I suppose I did kind of pass eleven a long time ago. Even though the only thing about me that ever got older were people's memories of me. I don't think I've really changed much."

Frisk nods a bit. That make sense. "I'm sorry I didn't get you anything. I didn't know the date and also, I'm out of money."

"I know that, dummy," Chara laughs and elbows them in the side. "We're kind of in the middle of, you know, surviving?"

"Yeah, but ... I guess, uhm. I guess there's one gift I could give," Frisk says and looks to the east. The deep orange of the horizon is blooming there, growing brighter, reaching up to the stars that shy away from its touch. "I could give you a wish. So the next time I see a shooting star, I can wish something for you. If you see the same one, you'll get two wishes."

Monsters may wish on every star, but Frisk is still pretty sure shooting stars have more power. Maybe it's a human thing, being greedy like that. Wanting to make absolutely sure their wishes come true.

Chara turns their gaze from the other human to the horizon. If they're being honest with themself ... Well. The only real wish they have is that morning would never come. They wish night was forever. They never did understand the appeal of morning, of sunlight, of the surface. The Underground was fine. At least down there, things were simple. Here ... Here morning comes every day. It's so hard to hide in the sunlight. It's so hard to disappear.

Sensing the other's melancholy, Frisk loosens their hold on Chara's hand and puts their arms around them instead in a little sideways hug. Chara doesn't return it, but they lean their head against the other's shoulder, still watching the growing rays scaring the stars away.

Maybe this morning isn't really one for wishes.

"You ... You know I never forgot you, right?" Frisk says, brushing their thumb over Chara's shoulder. They're not sure where this is coming from. "I never forgot you. Not once." Maybe it's because time is running out. There are so many things they want to say before morning comes for real. "Even when you weren't with me, you were always with me. Everything you said and everything you taught me. And not- not just the bad stuff."

Chara closes their eyes, trying to pretend it's still night. No, that they're still below ground. Only endless black above, no stars, no sun, no morning. No harbor just beyond the horizon waiting to take away the only friend they have left. The only one who understands.

It's not fair.

Frisk sighs, though whether from relief or defeat, their sibling can't tell. "I know we weren't always very nice to each other. I know we weren't really- we weren't really friends. Not at first. And things
were pretty awful. But it's not like that anymore. It's not. And I ... I care about you, Chara." *I care about you more than anyone else. I'll never forget you. Ever. I promise ...*

Slowly, Chara opens their stinging eyes.

"Frisk ..." Their voice disappears in a sob. "Frisk, come with me."

They feel the other's arms stiffen around them. Frisk shifts their hold on them, moving away a little so they can look at the little demon properly.

"Wh ... What?"

"Come with me."

Suddenly gripped by panic, Chara holds on to Frisk's arms so they can't pull away, so they can't go, so they can't leave them again. Once was enough. Seven times was too much. They can't bear to have to face the eighth one, it's not fair, it's not fair!

"You don't have to go, you can come with me! We don't have to be apart again, you can come with me this time, I couldn't follow you the last time, but you can follow me!" They barely register their own voice rising in near-hysteria or their nails digging into Frisk's upper arms. Not before the kid flinches, teeth grit in pain. Chara didn't mean to do that. They didn't mean to hurt them. They let go, quickly, as though Frisk had hit them, and they hold their hands up, carefully backing off to give Frisk their space. They swallow hard and force their tone down to a softer level. "You- You don't have to go home." Breathe. Slowly. "Stay. Please. "Stay with me."

Frisk's mouth is dry and suddenly the wind isn't soft anymore and the sunrays aren't beautiful, they're slow, painfully so, as they rise from the sea and crawl up into the sky, and Frisk finds themself looking over Chara's shoulder to see if the harbor is coming closer, if this is over yet, if they will finally be safe and home with their family soon.

"I- I can't," they stutter, shaking their head. They try to right their shoulders, try to raise their chin, hoping that faking bravery will somehow make it real. They don't want to say this. They don't want to have this conversation at all. "Chara, I can't, I have to go home. I have to go home to mom and dad, and Asriel and Papyrus, and Undyne and Alphys and-"

"And him?"

Before the growing sunlight, drawing a cracked path of deep shadows and thin skin and ice-cold eyes through the warm colors, stands the demon, shoulders drawn up in fear and fury, hands twitching at their sides.

"I don't understand you, Frisk," Chara hisses through grit teeth. "You keep saying I can trust you, you keep saying you're on my side, and yet you still want to go home? You're just going to go home and pretend that everything is fine? How can you even stand to look at him after everything that's happened?"

Frisk steps backwards as Chara comes closer, struggling to keep the fear from showing on their face, struggling to keep it from leaking across the path between their souls. "Sans is your enemy," they say. "Not mine. I'm- I'm not gonna let him hurt you, but I'm not going to hate him either. I'm not turning on him. I'm not, you can't make me!"

"Wrong."

There's a spark in the demon's soul, reflected in their bright red eyes. Like flicking a lighter.
Frisk starts and tries to pull away, only to feel their back hitting something solid. The railing.

"I could make you. But I'm not going to. It's not your fault you're spineless. You'd rather let him kill you than hate him, wouldn't you? Don't answer that. I've seen it happen. Hell, maybe it's gonna happen again. You never know!" Their voice grows to a half-shout and they can't help the frustration that builds at seeing the smaller human cringe. They're so naive. They're so weak, they're so helpless, and Chara doesn't understand why the thought of leaving this ugly, useless little thing behind hurts their heart so much, but they can't help it, because they're weak too, they're lonely too, and their family back home might be too good for them, but Frisk isn't. Frisk is just like them. They're just as corrupted, they're just as sick. Chara should know. They've read the kid's thoughts. "What makes you think he won't force you to tell him where I am?" Chara asks. "Huh? What makes you think it's even safe to go home?"

"He ... He wouldn't." Frisk grips the ice cold railing behind them with both hands, clutching it so hard they lose feeling in their fingers. "He wouldn't, he'd never hurt me!" They look over their shoulder, seeing nothing but roaring black waves laced with foam underneath. They try not to think about the waves closing in over their face as they bleed out on the tiles of the Judgment Hall. Few people know what it's like to die.

Chara pauses and tilts their head to the side, their anger switching from fiery to cold in an instant.

"You played the game with me," they says, voice low in disbelief. "You played the game with me and still you don't know any of your friends, do you? Don't you remember what they did to us in the other timelines?"

Frisk's eyes snap back to Chara. They don't want to remember. It's in the past, it was so long ago, it doesn't matter anymore, they don't want to-

"Mom and dad burned us alive," Chara shakes their head slowly. "Papyrus tried to capture us for Undyne, so she could cut our soul out. Alphys and Mettaton nearly got us killed a million times in their stupid scheme. And Sans? What did he do? Do you remember?"

"He looked after us. Even when we hurt everyone, he gave us a chance to go back."

"He watched as we emptied the Underground without lifting a finger to stop us. Then he laughed as he killed us. As he killed you."

"He- He thought I was already gone, he- he didn't know I was still in there!"

"What makes you think he even cares?"

"He does care!"

"And what if he gets so pissed off at you for letting me go that he forgets he does? Adults do that sometimes, don't they!?"

"Shut up, shut up!"

Frisk kneels down, pressing their hands to their ears and shutting their eyes. They don't want to hear this, they don't want to fear this, this is wrong, they don't want any of it!

Chara's red glare turns to slits that catch the light behind them, somehow, in defiance of physics, nearly glowing against their silhouetted frame. They want to tell Frisk. They want to tell them what kind of person Sans really is. They want to tell them what he told Chara on the very first night they came back to life.
But oh, breaking the little one's heart is too easy. It's so fragile - and what good is a broken heart to someone who needs it? Someone who needs the softness of it, the warmth, the mercy? Someone who's fed on that mercy like a parasite for longer than either of them care to remember, in life as well as in death?

Frisk is all they have left in this world. They can't afford to lose them. Not to a broken heart and certainly not to that damned harbor. They thought they were fine with this, but they're not. They thought they were at peace with it, but they can't be.

Frisk is their friend, their sibling, their counterpart, their vessel. Chara thought they'd grown strong enough to stand on their own, but no, not yet. They may no longer need their old host to shelter the last fragment of their soul, but whether Chara likes it or not, they still need Frisk to shelter their broken heart.

Neither of them have a choice. This is how it's meant to be.

They take another step towards the little human, slow and deliberate.

"You don't belong with them," Chara says softly. "Not any more than I do."

Frisk can't help but let their hands slip up to knot in their hair instead. They can't help but listen. None of this makes sense. Chara doesn't make sense. Frisk will never understand how the other child can be so cruel after feeling so vividly what it's like to experience that cruelty from someone else. They've given their friend so much time. Frisk has been so loyal. They've done everything to prove to Chara that they're worthy of their trust, so why do they keep doing this? Why do they keep hurting them? Will it never end?

Chara's gaze falls to the empty nothing behind Frisk, resting on the softness of the night they're leaving behind. "You're just like me. I've been in your head, I know you're just like me. We ... We can't be around the people we love. We mess them up. We make them care about us and then we hurt them. Sans knows that. Our family won't ever be safe as long as we're around and he'll make sure we won't ever be safe as long as we endanger them. Don't you see? We don't belong with anyone else. After everything we've done and everything we've been through, we only ... we only really belong with each other. No one else should have to put up with us."

For once, there's nothing sweet in that persuasive tone, there's nothing bright or overbearing, nothing chirpy or hypnotic. Only a low, broken gentleness, a strange fragility, like something small and barely alive crawling away to hide after having been crushed under a boulder or run over by a car.

Chara kneels down in front of Frisk, brushing a hand over the little one's hair.

"Come with me," the demon whispers, that fragile voice growing thick and shaky. "We don't have to be apart. You can come with me and everyone will be safe. Me and you and Sans, and everyone back home. We'll just ... leave. Then it'll be over."

Frisk forces themself to look up at the other kid. If they do this, would it finally be the end of it? No more arguing, no more sudden anger, no more pain? Would this one act, this one final sacrifice, be enough to prove to Chara that Frisk is on their side? That they don't have to be afraid anymore?

Morning grows brighter to the east. The stars flee to the west.

Chara stands up and they offer a hand to Frisk to help them do the same.

"I ..." Frisk reaches out, but they pause before they make contact. "I don't know if ..."
It's all so messed up. They don't know what to believe anymore. Humans aren't bad. Monsters aren't either. And Chara - they've come so far and they've changed so much, and they're not bad anymore. They're not.

But their words still hurt. Maybe it's true. Maybe they never will be harmless.

And looking back at all the times Frisk has lied, hurt and stolen over the past few weeks ... maybe they never will be, either. Maybe the two of them really are the same.

Frisk just wanted to be good. They just wanted to help their friend. They didn't mean for any of this to happen. All this time, they just wanted to help.

"Chara, we can't ..."

The ship lurches sharply, coming to a grinding halt, and the kids barely manage to clamp onto the railing before they stumble and fall.

"What the hell was that!?" Chara leans over the railing and follows the hull of the ship with their eyes all the way to its front. "Did we hit something?"

Frisk hauls themself up and looks down into the water. They squint. There's ... There's something down there.

They point into the blackness below. "Look."

Chara doesn't see anything at first. Then a wave slightly bigger than the rest washes over the dark surface, briefly shielding it from the reflection of the moon's rays.

Snakes. That's the first thought that comes to mind. Long, thin, coiling snakes slithering towards the ship just below the surface.

Upon closer inspection, something is growing out of them.

Is it ... leaves?

Chara backs away from the railing, slowly, the whites in their eyes nearly glowing in the dark, but before they can grab Frisk and run inside, a loud crash sounds from down by the water and a tremor like an earthquake tears through the ship, sending the child stumbling to regain their balance, only just managing to clamp on to Frisk's outstretched hand before they fall.

Frisk pulls them back to the railing and holds them there as the tremors continue, growing in noise and power, and Frisk can't shake the feeling that something is coming closer, something is gaining on them, something is headed for them-

The tremors subside.

"Frisk."

They didn't notice when they closed their eyes. They're scared to open them.

"Frisk, let go."

Carefully, they remove their arm from their friend and force one eye open as they do so. At first, there's nothing to see. Just the railing, the sea beyond it, Chara moving away in their peripheral vision.
Then they notice the thin, leaf-covered ... well, they're not snakes, like Chara thought. Though the mistake would be easy to make. The railing and the deck under their feet are covered in organic webs.

There's a noise from behind them. A voice. Laughter.

The coldness of it freezes the blood in Frisk's veins. For a second, their vision goes black, silhouettes of vines and thorns flaring across their field of vision, and a flash of - something. A bloodied hand reaching for a fallen star just beyond their reach.

The star disappears.

"It's ... been a while," they hear Chara say somewhere beyond the fog.

"It's been far too long! Golly, just look at how you've changed! You have a physical form now and everything!"

Fighting back against the tide of panic in their brain, Frisk turns around. Something shines through the blots in their vision, something soft and gold, like a little sun. They blink rapidly, trying to clear the dark away.

"Quit messing around," Chara says, their voice playful, but a little too low, a little too amused. "I know it's you in there, Az. This is kind of messed up, you know."

"Gee, you're a tough critic! Whatever else would you have me do, Chara? My options are a little limited, don't you think?"

Finally, the darkness lifts from Frisk's vision.

And there he is. There they are. Clustered in the middle of the deck, vines and roots curled across the surface, spun across the tiles like the beginnings of a larva's cocoon. Violets, lavenders, forget-me-nots.

All of them are bright gold.

"Buuut I guess I can't fault you for that," the forget-me-not front and center says, twirling his petals to one side. He's one of the six flowers emitting light. "Once unreliable, always unreliable. That's human nature for you!"

Frisk's eyes wander over the ship, across the doors overgrown with roots, jammed shut, and across the windows, where leaves are growing in to hide the deck from the other passengers' view. On the top deck, hidden from Frisk's view, the River Person huddles under a desk, three claw-like hands closed over their mouth, hoping the flowers won't hear their shallow, panicked breathing reverberating through the ship.

Frisk's attention moves back to Chara, feeling the breath hitch in their own throat, but aside from Chara's fingers digging into the edge of their coat, they looks completely unfazed, only leaning down a little to get a better look at the flower.

"Are you alright in there?" they ask. "How does this thing work?"

The flowers' expressions instantly shift in unison, their bright smiles tugging back into jagged, fanged snarls.

"This thing is a reflection of my memories, you jerk!" the forget-me-not snaps. "A reflection of
memories you caused!"

Chara pulls back a bit, wrinkling their nose in disgust. "It doesn't mirror your soul, though, does it?"

"Nothing gets past you ..." The central flower leans back on his stem, seemingly without noticing that he's perfectly mimicking the human in front of him. "No. It's not like I could bring my soul with me, I needed it back home. Don't you worry, though, this vessel is still connected to the real me. I just don't have much of a 'filter' right now is all. I really do blame you. For this." He lifts a vine and lets it twist in the air for a moment, watching it with pure disdain on his face. Then he looks back up at Chara. "And for leaving me behind again."

Frisk tugs lightly on Chara's sleeve. They feel left out. They feel left out and they're afraid the other human has forgotten they're there at all. Maybe if Chara remembers, they won't get upset. Maybe if they remember, they won't forget everything that happened between then and now, maybe this won't stick in their mind, maybe it won't feed that murky, rotten infection in the child's soul.

The painful twist within the energy in Chara's chest tells Frisk their attempts to help are in vain.

Still, the demon's expression remains frozen in a blend of boredom and subtle worry.

"Don't forget this when we reunite," the forget-me-not sneers. "I'll pretend I didn't mean anything I said in this moment, but you know I do. Deep down, you know I do."

Frisk tugs on Chara's sleeve again, more insistent this time. "Don't listen to him," they whisper.

Chara's eyes fall half-closed, skeptical, yet resigned.

Finally, the flowers turn their attention to the other human. "And don't think I've forgotten about you, either, Frisk. I was trying to help you, did you know that? Even when you left me in the Underground, I was the one who talked your best friend there out of resetting again. I didn't think it would lead to you abandoning me again, but here we are."

"I didn't abandon you," Frisk says softly. Though their legs threaten to buckle under them, they let go of Chara and take a step towards the flowers, then another one and another one, slowly. "I was going to come home. I just needed to make sure Chara was going to be okay first."

"I could've come with you."

"No, you couldn't. You need your stabilizer. It wasn't safe for you."

"I don't care what's safe for me!" he screeches, cutting them off. There are tears in his eyes now, in all of the little flowers' eyes. "I won't let you leave! Neither of you! I finally had you back and now you're leaving me again! You didn't even say goodbye!"

Frisk kneels in front of the forget-me-not, opening their arms to him. He recoils, sniffling, trying to hide his tears, but he can't. With a sigh, he gives up and slumps against the little human, letting them hug him. The other flowers flock around them, leaning their heads against them.

"I missed you," the forget-me-not sobs. "But I can't even feel that right now. I'm just ... so pissed."

"You should go home," Frisk says, lifting one hand from the center flower to brush the others pressing against them. The little plants stretch to push against their hand. "If you let the ship go, I'll be with you really soon. And Chara will be okay. They'll come back to us someday, they promised me they would."
Chara feels a stab of hurt seeing their siblings like this. It's not fair that they get to be together and Chara has to leave. It's not fair that they get to grow up together and see each other every day. Chara doesn't need them, they don't need either of them, but that doesn't mean they don't want to stay ..!

They look away from the children and back to the sky brightening to the east. They lift a hand to their heart. Feel the tides of Frisk's hope and sorrow wash against the surface of their soul. Feel the empty bit between their collarbones where the locket belongs.

This isn't fair. None of this is fair.

"Go home," Frisk repeats. "I promise I'll be there soon."

The flowers draw back a little, looking up at Frisk.

"And what about Chara?" the forget-me-not says. "Am I just supposed to let them go? Is that what you're asking me to do? Just ... heh ... let them go?"

Frisk can't find the words to reply. A 'yes' would be too harsh. They look over their shoulder, catching Chara's gaze, but the other human doesn't know what to say either.

"I spent years watching over their grave," the flower continues, pouting up at Frisk in defiance. "I know you can't remember how long we've been resetting, but I do. We've been doing this for years. I ... I kept waiting. I kept hoping they'd come back somehow, just like I did. They were always so strong, I couldn't see why I'd come back and they wouldn't. I thought that even if I couldn't love anyone else in the whole world, maybe they could help me remember what it's like. That's all I wanted. I just wanted to care about someone again."

His roots slide over the ground and he moves around Frisk to face Chara.

"I was so ... so happy to see you again. Even though you've changed. Even though I don't understand you anymore. Even though you hurt me. And now you're just ... going to leave?"

Chara's expression closes completely. They sigh and turn their back to the flowers, and finally, they face the sunrise. "This is about survival, Asriel. You don't need me anyway. Not as much as you think you do. That's a lie, of course. He does need them and they know that. And Frisk needs them too, they both need Chara to look after them, to protect them, but it's not like Chara will be able to do that if they're dead or crippled. "My first priority right now is to stay alive. You understand that, right?"

The plant huffs, glaring searing holes into the back of their head. "Oh, I understand! You don't trust me to protect you, do you? You think I'm too useless to help you!"

"I think it's better if you don't have to!" Chara retorts, turning just enough to return the glare with one glowing red eye. "It's easier if I just disappear. All of you will have your happy ending in peace and I won't get hurt again. It's easier."

"Our 'happy ending' ... Whatever ending I get this time, it won't ever be happy without you in it."

Chara opens their mouth to reply, but suddenly the ground disappears from underneath them. They hit the deck with a pained cry.

Before Frisk can react, the flowers speed past them, climbing forward on twisting stems, and they rise over the child on the ground, pulling them closer by the vines wrapped around their ankles, the many blank faces twisting into nightmarish grins that nearly split the flower heads in half, icy laughter echoing through the forest of thorns and vines rearing up like a cobra ready to strike.
"Stop!" Chara digs the heels of their palms into the deck and kicks at the vines, and somewhere on the other side of the wall of laughing faces, they can hear Frisk repeat the word, though it drowns in the noise from the plants. "Stop, let me go!"

The forget-me-not descends on them, forcing them to give up their struggle and lie flat on their back to avoid the snapping teeth above.

"It would be easy," he hisses, and as he continues, the other flowers speak the same words in an off-key echo. "It would be so, so easy to make sure you never could leave again." Something grows forth on the inside of the vines pinning the human's ankles and they wince as thorns grow into their skin, not deep enough to break it, but deep enough to threaten to do so. "Humans don't need all their limbs, do they? Four is just an excessive number ..!"

Chara turns their head to the side and shuts their eyes tightly, trying to block out the noise, the words, the feeling of thorns in their skin, the feeling of being helpless - again, helpless again, and in that moment, they wish Flowey would get it over with, just make it stop, just make it all go away, though they know it would be temporary, though they know it wouldn't be long before Sans found their soul, just make it stop!

Frisk throws themself into the forest of flowers, trying to rip their way through the stems, trying to tear their way in and get to Chara, but their struggle is futile and the plants shove them backwards until the railing bruises their skin through their clothes.

Their pained whimper makes Chara's eyes snap open.

They need to do something. They can't let this happen.

But what can they do?

The flowers laugh again, yet as they do, they move back, rising away from their target again, looking satisfied, though whether with their own performance or with the other children's terror, Chara can't tell.

"Hmm, but I'd regret hurting you, I think. Mostly." The other flowers' voices die away, leaving only the forget-me-not's bright, raspy drawl. "Just don't try to leave again or I might be tempted to go back to this form on a more, ah ... regular basis. It's strangely liberating when you know you can go back anytime!"

Frisk and Chara catch each other's eyes through the mass of vines separating them. They were so close. Escape was just beyond the horizon. Just out of reach. Everything they've worked for, everything they've suffered for, they were so close ...

"It was nice seeing you again as ... myself. Don't forget what I've told you, now. In a moment, I won't have the heart to repeat it."

Vines wrap around the children's legs, their arms, their necks, dragging them into the forest of grinning faces and laughter like pinpricks in their eardrums, and though they struggle, though they kick and tear at the plants, though they call out to each other, though they beg their brother to let them go, to set them free, nothing works, he persists and the patches of sky visible through the twisting plants grow sparse.

"This is all just a nightmare. Let's wake up now, okay?"

In their struggle, Frisk's hand hits something warm, something that isn't thorns or leaves or petals, and they push through the mess, reaching out to Chara, but as soon as they do, the vines grow a wall
of thorns between the humans, piercing Frisk's hand, and they pull it back with a choked scream.

"You don't need to fight anymore. I'll protect you."

The deck disappears under them and the flowers pull them down into the darkness, into the waves, and though they scratch the stems open, though they rip the leaves in half, though they bite and tear and scream their throats sore, their cries for help go unheard by the other humans trapped within the ship.

Though they fought and stayed determined, in the end when it really counted, nobody came.

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He just stands there. Asriel. The sea breeze tearing through his fur and playing with his ears, his claws kneading the rim of his jacket, his glowing eyes half-lidded, seeing things the others can't. At one point, tears leak out and his brows tilt up in distress, though nothing else about his expression changes.

Asgore resists the urge to break him out of his trance. What can he see? Whatever could have happened to the other children to make him cry even while his thoughts are so far away?

Restless, the king folds his nervous hands and looks pleadingly down at Alphys, hoping she at least has a vague idea of what's going on. She appears to, if the notes she's furiously scribbling down on her notepad are anything to go by. Still, she says nothing, only keeping a sharp eye on the child and the circle as she writes.

Asriel's breathing becomes shallow. He jerks upright, eyes wide, the lights in his eyes flaring.

Asgore is next to him within a second. "My son, are you alright?" He kneels next to the child, instinctively reaching out to hold the little one by the shoulder.

Asriel holds a hand up, not looking away from the northern horizon, gesturing for his father to wait and not break his concentration.

Relenting, Asgore leaves him be, but stays crouched by his side just in case. He can hear the machine in Asriel's spine complain even through the layers of the backpack and over the rush of the waves. The bigger monster holds his hand out and lets a little green flame spring to life in his palm. Thankfully, Asriel has enough presence of mind to accept the help, and he hovers his hand over the flame, letting its healing energy sink into the current of magic drumming through his veins.

Something disturbs the water up ahead. Something breaks the waves, something just below the surface, growing larger as it comes closer, and soon, the first stray flowers arrive, emerging from the sand near Asriel's feet, their vacant stares locked on the unnatural movements in the water, and Asriel struggles to see what's going on up ahead, white noise intercutting with the images of dark waves, lashing thorns and small, soft, breakable creatures with wide, unseeing eyes and fluttering heartbeats.

The tangle of vines breaches the surface.

The sun breaches the sky.

Heaving and sputtering, the humans drag themselves from the tangle of vines and onto the beach, the
pale one hissing like a wounded animal, their counterpart struggling to keep desperate sobs on the inside. Though they were dragged through water, they're dry, and their labored breathing is from fear and exhaustion, not a lack of air. At least Asriel was merciful enough not to let them drown, even while far, far away from his soul.

He hears a gasp hitching in his father's throat. Asgore closes the flame in his hand and gets up.

At first, Frisk sees nothing but sand, pebbles and the red smudge of blood where their wounded hand is pressed into the ground, holding them up. Then a shadow falls over them.

"... Are you alright, my little ones?"

They look up.

And it's wrong. It's so wrong. They've been on the run for so long. Everything they've fought for, all of it is lost, they're back where they started, all their pain was for nothing and they're in danger now, in danger of losing Chara, the one person they've been fighting to save for so long, the one person they were willing to face frost and illness and starvation for, everything is wrong, they've lost everything.

- and yet, when they look up into dark blue eyes, hollow from weeks of worry, wet with seconds of fragile hope, Frisk feels a weight lift off their shoulders.

In the next second, they're buried in the monster king's embrace, safe from the world.

It's horrible. They're a horrible person. A horrible friend.

A deep sigh loosens every hurt in Asgore's body and when the tears come, he doesn't resist. They're here. They're here.

He lifts his gaze to the other human sitting a few feet away and finds them staring at him with wide, frightened eyes. When he meets their gaze, they kick at the ground, scrambling backwards in the sand. But ... why? Why do they look so afraid? They're home now, he isn't angry, far from it, why would they-?

Chara's eyes flick to the smaller boss monster standing a little ways behind their father. They see nothing but horror in his eyes. Horror and a deep, gut-twisting remorse. Asriel looks like he wants nothing more than to undo what he just did.

But he can't. He can't.

"Chara?" Asgore calls, slowly reaching his hand out to the little human, trying not to frighten them. "Chara, are you alright? Are you hurt?"

They shake their head, though the movement is so subtle it's barely visible. They look back and forth between Asgore's gentle worry and Asriel's shock at his own actions, and they want neither.

They're back to square one. Freedom was within their grasp. He took it away.

Chara staggers to their feet and turns on their heel, but Asriel runs past Frisk and Asgore, catching Chara by the shoulder.

"No, Chara, please- wait-!"

He's met with a shove so hard he's forced to take two steps backwards to regain his balance.
"I was so close!" the demon shouts in his face, and he swears he hears an echo in their voice, though it might be the waves. "I was this close to being safe! This close, Asriel!"

"Chara!" Asgore's voice is stern, but wavering. Both kids ignore him.

"No," Asriel whispers, holding a hand over his chest where Chara pushed him, blocking out the pain that isn't at all as light as it should be. His stabilizer whirs. "No, you weren't. You would've been all alone out there. You wouldn't have survived. You would've starved or someone would've hurt you."

"It would be preferable to this!" The demon spins around again, but they know running won't help. Where would they go? All the way back up north? Or swim back to the ship? It's hopeless. Fighting to keep air in their lungs, they run their hands over their face and through their hair, before turning around again, letting their brother see the fury in their eyes, the fear, the hurt. "Didn't he tell you what was happening? Don't you know what you've done!"

They vaguely register Asgore asking them something as he stands up, Frisk still hiding in his arms, Alphys standing by his side, but his words don't come through to them. Nothing comes through to them. Nothing but the look in Asriel's eyes.

Something grows from the remorse in his expression. Something small, but strong, a weed pushing its way to sunlight in the middle of an otherwise perfect garden, and finally, he removes his hand from his aching breastbone and rights his stance.

"I'm sorry," he says softly, but there isn't a shred of insecurity in his tone. "I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't mean what I said back on the ship and you know that-"

"Do I?"

"Don't interrupt me."

Chara involuntarily jerks back, pulling a face like he's just told them to eat the dead crabs lining the edge of the water.

"I didn't mean what I said. Trust me. I didn't mean to put you in danger. I thought I could control Flowey this time around, but I couldn't and I'm sorry. But please, please understand. I can't let you go. Neither of you." Asriel looks back at Frisk, who hides their face in Asgore's shoulder, afraid of what they'll see if they look either of their siblings in the eyes. Asriel turns back to Chara, gentle sternness in his expression not unlike his mother's. "As long as you're on your own, you're in danger. But I can protect you. I promise I will."

He can't. Chara knows he can't. Asriel is kind, Asriel is a coward, the moment he realizes Chara isn't worth protecting, he'll go right to Sans and tell him where they are, so they can finally 'set things right', or whatever. He's weak. He's easily swayed. Asriel has never been able to do anything on his own without Chara and if he doesn't trust them to guide him anymore, he'll find someone else. Chara is certain of it.

"We're going home now," Asriel says. "And you're coming with us." He steels himself, trying to find something resembling determination. "And that's- that's final."

They can't believe he's doing this to them. They can't believe he could be so cruel. He means well, of course he does, but he's so ignorant, it hurts, and he just doesn't get it.

They could never trust him. He's too kind. They learned that the hard way once. Now it's happening again.
A part of Chara wants to think he really could protect them. That he truly will stand by them no matter what, that he'll finally do right by them. But he isn't like that, and Chara doesn't deserve loyalty like that anyway. It was never meant to be.

Chara looks past him, at Asgore watching them with something like disbelief, suspicion maybe, and at Alphys silently begging them to comply with her expression alone, and at Frisk still refusing to look at them.

Traitor. They knew the little human was a traitor. Look at them now. This is what they wanted all along.

Finally, Chara's gaze falls to the sun ever so slowly climbing out of the water.

They wished morning would never come. But of course it did. It always does, relentlessly. They couldn't run away forever. That hope was bound to be crushed eventually.

A familiar grayness creeps into the child's head and heart, weariness catching up to them now that they've stopped, and they suppose they're out of options. For now. For now, all they can do is comply. There's still time. Until Asriel decides to cave in and turn to Sans, there's still time.

On legs suddenly heavy from weeks of exhaustion they've refused to feel, Chara walks past Asriel, their resolve shattered under his words, and they go to Asgore, bowing their head.

He wants to ask them what's happening, Chara can tell, but he doesn't, not yet, and they're thankful for that. He only helps them up into his arms and sits them next to Frisk, holding both of his adoptive children close.

Asriel and Alphys look to each other, but neither of them know what to say.

This is dangerous. They know that. The kids would be worse off on their own, though. Their luck would have run out eventually.

Asgore takes one last look at his son. So this - this is what Asriel meant when he said he feared for Frisk's safety. Asgore has never seen this side of Chara before. Not to this degree, at least. But then again, he's never seen Asriel like this, either. Brave. Steadfast. Defiant. Maybe all of this is new. Maybe there's still time to set things right.

First things first, though. He moves the humans to one arm and extends his free hand to the last of his three children. "Let's go home."

Asriel hesitates. But it's over. For now. For now, he can allow himself to be helped again. For now, he can relax.

"Yeah." He accepts the offered hand with a sigh. "Let's."

The dawn reflects in the car at an angle, blinding him.

Chapter End Notes

Because school ends next week and I'll be out of town on my usual update days because of it, the next chapter will be approximately 2 weeks away. Stay tuned.
Sans takes a shortcut back to Toriel's place and together, the two of them walk the distance back to the foot of Mt. Ebott, tracing the bottom of the slope until they reach the thin forest on the other side of it. They come here a lot, the two of them. Perhaps a little more often than they need to. Any rhyme or reason to their search was left behind weeks ago. They come here out of desperation now, not out of hope that it will amount to anything. The exhaustion of searching day and night dulls the frustration, the guilt, the helplessness in the face of failure. Their search is for the sake of the searching, not for the missing.

Toriel leads the way in between the trees, under fallen logs, across frozen streams that she can cross in a single step while Sans tries to pick his way across them on iced-over stepping stones without slipping on the frost-patterned rocks. His friend doesn't appear to have a destination in mind despite her purposeful stride, but he follows her without question.

Though the branches of the treetops above grow thicker and more closely interlaced, their leafless, spindly crowns do nothing to shield the monsters from the harsh white sunlight streaming in from the east. Its warmth seems to comfort Toriel a little, though. Little by little, she slows down.

"You do not feel the cold, do you?" is the first thing she says to him. Her voice is a little rusty. From a lack of use, maybe. Or crying. It could be either. Or both. She doesn't spend as much time with Sans or her other friends as she used to. Sans wonders if she has other friends, other people to talk to, others to keep her company. He decides that she probably doesn't.

"i don't," he assures her, shaking his head empathetically. "don't worry 'bout it."

She nods to herself, though her thoughts seem to be elsewhere. "No. No, me neither."

He should be looking after her more. He should be talking to her more. Why hasn't he? Why haven't
the others? Everyone's been caught up in other stuff. The kids disappearing really pushed everything out of balance. It's not right. Toriel needs her friends now more than ever. They shouldn't have left her alone.

They walk for a while more. Though they're supposed to be searching for clues to the children's whereabouts, Toriel doesn't seem to focus on much but the empty air in front of her, her gaze locked firmly on the snow ahead, burying her nose into her scarf, arms crossed over her chest. Sans resists the urge to hug her. He's not really a hug-y person, not with her, not with anyone, he's more of a pat-you-on-the-shoulder-and-hope-you-understand kind of guy, but he's pretty confident that only someone soulless would be able to look at Toriel right now and not want to hug her. It's not fair. It's not fair that someone like her has to go through this.

"you, uh ... you holdin' up okay, 'ellie?" Sans isn't asking if she's alright, it's obvious she isn't. But for someone in her situation, the question means something a little different. Alphys pointed it out to him, once. How weird it is that the meaning of 'okay' changes when you're like this. Like Toriel, like Alphys, like Sans.

Toriel blinks a few times, seemingly trying to refocus, trying to see what's around her instead of the nightmares in her head. Finally, she quits trying, opting to stop in her tracks before her distracted mind lands her on a sharp rock or slippery ice. "No," she admits. Her voice wavers as she forces herself to continue. "That is why I contacted you. I ... did not feel safe being alone with myself. You understand."

He does. Finally, he allows himself to at least give her a little comforting pat on the elbow. She unfolds her arms, letting them hang limp by her sides, and Sans takes the hint, offering her a hand to hold. She probably doesn't notice how hard she grips his brittle bones, but that's okay. It's not like he can feel pain anyway.

"It's their birthday today." A tear leaks from each of her eyes and she sniffs, trying to keep her words steady. "It's my child's birthday. Chara's."

Oh.

"They turn eleven."

They would have turned eleven. That's what she means. Sans hears it in her voice, clear as day.

"Though I suppose the years do not quite add up anymore." Toriel blinks again, slowly this time, not to keep the tears in, but to help them fall. It's too late to hold back now anyway. A defeated smile tucks at the corners of her quivering lips. "Perhaps we should start celebrating their rebirth instead. It is only a month's difference, after all. Perhaps it would be more appropriate."

They walk again, the two of them, snow crunching under their feet, and for the hundredth time, Sans contemplates telling her. Maybe it would give her a little bit of peace. Maybe knowing that her child is a murderer, not only capable of killing in self-defense, but for fun, even - maybe it would help her believe that her little ones are still out there. That they're continuing to fight. That they're staying determined.

Toriel pauses in front of a tree much larger than the others. It looks as dead as the frozen earth, just like the others.

"For the first few years after I lost them," Toriel says, "I did not sleep. I would replenish my energy with magic alone. I reasoned that if my children were to sleep in the soil forever, then I, as their mother, should remain awake to watch over them and ..." Her voice breaks. She takes a deep breath,
but it remains brittle, ruined. "... and scare away anyone who would think to hurt or frighten my little ones ever again."

She lets go of his hand to fold her own, as if in prayer to a god she doesn't believe in.

"I wanted to make sure their final sleep would be a peaceful one. I do not know what I expected would happen to them, yet I could not bring myself to rest. Perhaps ... I was merely afraid of dreaming of them. That would not be entirely unlike me, would it? Lying to myself, claiming that I serve a higher purpose, when in reality I am just ... selfish."

Her gaze climbs up the trunk of the ancient tree, following the swirls in the chapped bark all the way up to its thinnest branches reaching up to the brightening sky, blind to the fact that without leaves, they can reach as far and as high as they want to, the light will do nothing for their sorry state.

Sans can read the questions in her weary eyes. How could a tree as gray and dead as the rocky earth it's planted in ever bloom again? He doesn't really understand it himself. He hopes he'll still be around come spring. Just long enough to see the leaves come back. Just long enough to see the days grow a little longer, a little brighter.

"everyone's a bit selfish sometimes," he says to Toriel, putting his hands in his pockets, despite not feeling the cold. "and out of everyone i know ... yeah, no, i don't think you're in danger of overdoing it. at all."

She looks down at him, brows lifting in mild surprise, if not outright skepticism. "You are kidding."

Sans shrugs, smiling back at her. "you're one of the most selfless people i know. you got a lotta catching up to do if you wanna climb that list."

His words pull a short little laugh from her, tears and all. The smile it brings stays, though it isn't quite strong enough to keep the sadness out of her expression.

"can ... i ask what happened?

"Hm?"

"you ... you sleep now." He doesn't really do these things anymore. He doesn't console, he doesn't ask questions, he never tries to understand. He knows that everyone's got their own grief to bear and usually, he tries to be okay with leaving it at that. But it's hard. Once in a while, his resolve breaks. Once in a while, he can't help but want to hear the rest of the story, even though it hurts. "when'd you allow yourself to sleep?"

Toriel goes quiet for a moment, lips pursed in thought.

"I believe ... I believe I fell asleep one night by mistake," she says, then. "I was reading and ... I fell asleep in my armchair. I remember waking up and thinking for just a moment that it was all a nightmare. That I would go into the first room in the corridor across from the living room and find my children sleeping soundly in their beds. Is it not strange? I was afraid of dreaming, when all along, I should have feared waking up. " Her smile grows a little wider, sourer, cold. "And look how history repeats itself. I finally got my children back and I was so afraid that I was dreaming that I barely dared to enjoy their presence, I barely valued the time we spent together, when all along, I should fear their departure instead. Once again, I feared dreaming, when really, I should fear waking up. I have learned nothing, have I? Am I doomed to have only one of my children by my side at a time? One would almost think higher powers are trying to punish me for attempting to raise creatures as dangerous as human children as my own. Psh." She huffs indignantly. "Humans are no worse
than monsters ..."

She heaves a deep sigh and despite his dulled nerve endings, Sans swears he can feel heat radiating from the fire elemental by his side. Toriel crosses her arms and raises her head again, glaring at the leafless treetop, as though challenging it to come back to life before her eyes, as though challenging the twisted structure to prove that it can be anything but an eyesore.

"I gave up on staying awake after that," the former queen continues. "It was hopeless. But still, every year on my children's birthdays, I would stay awake all night and watch over them. When you are young, those days are special, there is magic in the air, and if I could pay them no other tribute, then I would at the least grant them the gift of peaceful rest." There's fire in her eyes now, burning as vividly as the one in her heart, keeping the darkness at bay despite the years, the grief, the heartache. A fire she has struggled to light, one that will never burn out as long as there are people who need her. "I do the same for my other children to this day. The ones who never came back home. After the third child fell, I stopped asking for their names, but I would ask for the dates of their births, so I could at the very least pay them the same respect that I did Asriel and Chara. They were my children too, short-lived as my time with them was. They deserved it as much as my first children did."

Sans thinks about telling her. He thinks about telling her that her child is a murderer. He thinks about telling her that out of everyone in the world who might threaten her children, it's him - one of her closest friends, someone she values, someone she trusts enough to call upon in the early morning hours for help - who has come the closest to taking one of them away for good.

He thinks about telling her and he thinks about that fire burning in her eyes and soul turning him to seared dust and ashes.

Toriel turns to face him and he inadvertently takes a step back.

Sans is not afraid to die. He can't be. He can't afford to be. He needs to stop being so-

"I need to ask you something."

- weak, soft, selfish-

"And I need you to be honest with me."

He swallows his nervousness, focusing on her words despite the rush of something he refuses to acknowledge as fear pulling at the edges of his resolve.

"Should I be holding vigil for my child's spirit tonight? Should I assume that our search has been in vain all this time? Tell me, honestly - in your eyes ... is my Chara alive or dead?"

Sans swallows heavily. He forces himself to stay where he is, he forces himself not to run. This is what he'll be facing. The moment Toriel finds out what he did, this is what he'll be facing.

The alternative is worse, he knows that, but ...

"they're alive," he says finally, a little breathlessly. "i'm sure of it. them and frisk - they don't ever give up. trust me, they don't." If either of the kids were dead, Fallen would have reset or reloaded. They must be alive. They must be.

Toriel observes him a moment longer, searching for any hint in his expression that could betray a lie. She finds none. It seems to placate her.

"Very well." She turns to head around the big tree so they can continue their futile search. "I shall
trust your judgment."

Sans hesitates for a moment before quickly catching up with her.

"It is a strange day when someone else knows your children better than you do yourself."

No kidding.

"But I do pray to these vengeful higher powers that you are correct."

Sans hopes he'll still be around come spring. But when Toriel finds out that the literal monster under the bed she's been shielding her children's spirits from for decades is living right across the street - when that happens, he isn't sure he'll be lucky enough to still be around come the next morning.

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Frisk is convinced that they've never felt so warm or so safe before in their life. Being tucked in is a weird kind of luxury you don't really notice how much you love before your parents are suddenly very far away and you're forced to deal with a lot of stuff on your own with no one to ask for help and no one to hug you through the bad days. Stretching under the covers, they press their back into the little monster snoozing next to them. Still half-asleep, Asriel flops an arm over the side of their face in what would probably be an attempt at affection if he wasn't currently in the process of snoring like the world's softest little chainsaw. Frisk suppresses a giggle and opts to just kind of leave his arm where it is. This ... This is okay. This is good.

They can't bring themself to worry about anything right now.

When they returned to Newer Home, Asgore and Alphys immediately brought the humans to the laboratory wing of the castle, where Alphys put them in some weird-looking scanners. She told them that the machines could read the waves of pain drumming against the surfaces of their souls, and that she could use the information to determine their physical conditions. She sheepishly admitted that yeah, okay, maybe she's not that kind of doctor, but having to put Chara back together during their resurrection did kind of force her to learn everything there is to know about what a human body needs to live.

Chara asked her if the scanners could read their stats. Alphys told them it wasn't possible. Chara remained quiet after that.

Frisk pulls the covers a little tighter around themself, breathing in the smell of soap and clean sheets. They were pretty sure their nose had gone numb after all the time they spent with only rain and the occasional frozen stream to shower in. The warm-yet-airy little room they're in now smells like golden flowers. The clean, patched-up body they're in smells like shampoo. So does their hair, even though their father insisted they dry it before going to sleep. They're already sick, he said to them. They need to be careful not to make it worse.

Still, though. The scans showed that both of the human kids were in surprisingly good shape under the circumstances. Sure, they're both really ill, and Chara had a sprained wrist they refused to acknowledge, but neither of them had any serious wounds, parasites, infections, or anything like it. Really, Alphys told Asgore, the little humans were just very, very exhausted, and more than anything, they needed healing food, showers and a good nap.
Frisk has had all three now, though the alarm clock on Asriel's nightstand tells them they've only been asleep for twenty minutes or so. They went to sleep next to their brother, not at all ready to go back to their own room between Asgore's bedroom and their siblings'. It was a bit of a struggle, getting the wires of the stabilizer's charger untangled in a way that left Frisk enough room next to Asriel, but it's not like Chara offered to let Frisk sleep next to them.

When they went to sleep, Asgore had gone to call Toriel on the landline in his own room. The fact that she isn't here yet tells Frisk that he probably hasn't been able to reach her yet. Now the monster king is seated next to Chara's bed on a comfy-looking chair, his back to Frisk and Asriel. Frisk can just make out his hand moving in slow, soothing strokes over Chara's head, and the little human's hands absentmindedly playing with one corner of their father's cape. They must have trouble sleeping. Maybe they don't want to.

They don't have to be afraid. Don't they see that? Nothing could hurt them as long as Asgore is here. They're safe. They're not where they wanted to be, but they're safe.

Frisk closes their eyes. They want it to be true. They want to think it's finally over.

Chara takes a deep breath and briefly, they follow Frisk's example, letting their eyes fall shut. Stars dance behind their eyelids. They open them again.

They can't rest yet. Not yet.

"Dad?" they whisper.

Asgore rumbles a low "Hmm?", his hand stilling over their forehead.

"Could you ... get mom for us?"

Their heart feels heavy in their chest. Or maybe it's their soul.

"I really want to see her. Please." They open their eyes again, looking pleadingly up at the monster leaned over them. "I missed her. I missed her so much. I missed all of you, but I really wanna see mom."

"I do not think it would be wise of me to leave you," Asgore says softly, though remorse twists his expression. "If your condition worsens ..." or if you run away again ...

Chara manages a little smile for him. "Come on. We'll be fine." They let go of his cape and take his paw instead, hugging it like one would a very big teddy bear. "Alphys is here with us. If anyone can keep us alive and breathing, it's her."

Asgore huffs a little laugh, unable to keep from smiling back at the little human. "Right you are, my child. Right you are."

Still he doesn't move, he doesn't get up. For a moment, Chara can't bring themself to be annoyed. All of this will be gone soon. A soft, warm bed, their siblings' low snoring on the other side of the room, the gentleness and sadness in their father's smile as he looks down at them as though he sees a whole world of wonders in his child's tired eyes. Tears gather in the corners of his own.

"Do you ..." He sighs. "... Oh, of course you remember." He tries to keep his voice steady. He fails. "The last time I sat with you like this."

Frisk dares to crack one eye open just a little. They're out of sight of the two anyway. It's okay.
Asgore gently brushes hair away from Chara's face. "You were so little. You were so frail..." He
swallows the lump in his throat. "I didn't know what to do."

Chara's smile grows a little warmer, a little sadder. Slowly, they push themself up to their knees and
reach up to pull Asgore down into a hug. Hesitantly, he closes his arms around them. They're still
little. They're still frail.

The memory of them pushing Asriel and yelling in his face claws its way to the front of his mind.

He still doesn't know what to do.

"I almost lost you again," he whispers into their hair. "Please. Please, don't ever leave again. I am
begging you."

Chara can't see much beyond the simple gold-embroidered fabric draped over Asgore's shoulder
blocking their view. Hugging their adoptive parents always reminded them a little of hugging a pair
of very large, fluffy dogs, the boss monsters' bull necks craned over their shoulder, silky fur sticking
out all over the place. The beasts could snap any of their children in half without the slightest effort,
yet they're always so, so gentle and so careful with their strength. How something so big and strong
can also be so kind and warm, Chara has no idea.

"I never really left you," they say, brushing a hand through the golden fur pouring down the back of
the monster king's neck. "I was always there. And I always will be."

A shaky breath sends a shiver through Asgore's frame. For a moment, he tightens his hold on the
child just the softest amount. Then he pulls away from them, one hand lingering on their cheek, a
smile on his face so fond and so fragile and so full of love that Chara struggles not to tear up
themself.

"Go get mom," they say, nodding towards the door. "We'll be fine."

Asgore looks doubtful. He has every reason to. But in the end, Chara must look convincing enough,
because he nods, brows knitting like he's trying to get himself together. He stands up from his chair
and Chara slips back under the covers of their bed so he can tuck them in again.

"Try to sleep," he says to them as he brushes the tip of his nose over their forehead, just like Toriel
always does. "She will be here before you know it."

Chara closes their eyes and pretends to get comfortable.

For just a few seconds, Asgore lingers in the doorway, casting a final glance at Chara first, and then
at Frisk and Asriel. He doesn't look happy to leave them. Not at all. But Chara said it, and Alphys
said it before them - the children are going to be fine.

As soon as he's closed the door behind him, Chara opens their eyes again.

They can hear his heavy footsteps getting softer as he moves down the hall, past the hallway and into
the living room. He says something to Alphys and she responds from the kitchen, though Chara can't
hear what either of them are saying. After a few seconds of back-and-forth discussion, they seem to
come to a conclusion. Soon, Chara can hear the front door open and close, a key turning in the lock.
Not to keep anyone out, of course, but to keep the kids in. Damn it...

Well. Alphys should be busy trying to figure out how to make food that isn't instant noodles for a
while yet. Having something edible infused with further healing and curing spells would've been
nice, but Chara doesn't have time to wait for her to finish her cooking attempts. They need to move
while she's distracted.

Soundlessly, they slip out from under the covers and retrieve a fresh set of clothes from the closet, keeping half an eye on Frisk as they change. The other isn't asleep, even though they pretend to be. Chara can feel the jittery, fearful energy in their soul. Hmph. Typical.

Tugging their shirt into place and brushing a hand through their hair to make it look at least halfway decent, Chara considers the wardrobe they've chosen. A green sweater with a yellow stripe across the chest, worn, dark red jeans ... Familiar attire, that. It's only fitting.

Slowly, Frisk dares to let their pretence slip away, opening their eyes. They don't want to move. They really, really don't want to move. It's like their body is trying to convince them they'll die if they move another inch. It's excruciating. And yet they manage to carefully push Asriel's arm away and sit up. They can feel their too-full stomach turn.

"Where are we going next?" they ask, keeping their voice low.

Chara pauses just as they're about to head towards the door. "'We'?" They frown. "What do you mean 'we'?"

Frisk rubs their eyes for the express purpose of being able to send Chara a proper stubborn glare. Instead of explaining themself, they get out of the bed, march to the closet and pull out a sweater-and-jeans set of their own. Without missing a beat, they pull their pyjama shirt over their head and tuck on the sweater instead, before moving on to pants.

Chara buries their face in their hands. "You have got to be kidding me ..."

Seconds later, the ill kid is standing in front of them fully dressed, still shaking and cold sweating, their lower lip pushed out in a defiant pout, as though they're daring their sibling to question their decision. The sweater they chose is the same colors as Chara's. Maybe a shade lighter, but still. Same hue, same cut, same pattern.

"You're hopeless. You know that, right?"

Chara comes closer. Frisk stays where they are.

"You're weak. How can I rely on you when I never know what you're thinking?"

Asriel tries so, so hard to remain asleep. He doesn't like the voices creeping into his dreams. He doesn't like them at all. But if he's asleep, it's not his fault if he does nothing. If he's asleep, no one can blame him for not defending Frisk. The humans are whispering, and if it wasn't for the adrenaline still keeping his sleep much too light, he probably would still be out cold, so this can't be his fault. It can't be.

He doesn't want to upset Chara again. He hopes Frisk can forgive him ...

Frisk doesn't reply to the demon's accusations. They've remained loyal to their old partner in crime for too long to back out now. They refuse to give up. They'll prove to Chara that they can trust them if it's the last thing they do.

Silence creeps into the room as the humans stare each other down, the red-eyed one trying to uncover any trace of dishonesty in the unwavering glare of the other. Frisk doesn't so much as blink.

In the end, Chara backs off. "Fine," they say. "Fine. You get one more chance. Just don't screw it up."
Frisk tries to let out the breath they've been holding as quietly as they can. This is manageable. They can do this. Okay, so maybe they have to leave their warm bed and their warm house and the brother they've been missing for weeks, but it's alright! It's a small price to pay if it means they'll finally be able to prove themselves to Chara once and for all. They have everything they've been missing over the last few weeks and now they're giving it all up for their sibling. If anything could ever prove their loyalty, this is it.

It's okay if Chara thinks they're brainwashed. It's okay if Chara thinks they've finally broken them for good. If that's what it takes to convince the poor kid that they have at least one reliable friend left in this world, then that's just how it is.

They leave the room together, Frisk holding on to Chara's sleeve. Chara lets them.

They only make it halfway down the hall before a groggy voice sounds behind them.

"You, uhm. You can't really go anywhere, you know."

The humans turn around to see Asriel in the doorway, fur a mess and eyes squinty from the brief nap. The wires connected to his stabilizer trail after him like a stringy cape.

"I put flowers at all the exits," he admits, ducking his head as though expecting an attack. Chara looks just about ready to fulfill that expectation. Frisk holds onto their sleeve a little tighter.

"I don't understand why you're doing this," Chara says, fighting to keep their voice sharp and their tone harsh, fighting to keep the despair on the inside, the betrayal. They shake their head slowly, pure confusion in their eyes. "I don't understand why you want me dead so badly."

"Well ... That's kinda the problem." Asriel's tired gaze falls to the ground in front of him, his claws picking at the buttons on his nightshirt. "I don't want you dead, Chara. I want you to be okay. But you keep putting yourself in danger."

Frisk bites their lower lip to kill the little frown before it appears at all. Chara's putting them in danger too, not just themself. Doesn't Asriel care about Frisk's safety at all?

They feel left out.

Asriel hugs his arms around himself, trying to make himself as small as possible. "I can't just stand by and let you hurt yourself. N-not this time. I'm strong enough to protect you now. So please ... please just let me." He forces himself to look up again, into Chara's eyes, the eyes of his sibling, his best friend, his own murderer. Chara's eyes have always been scarier in their human form. They're brighter. More vivid. The spectrum of fury, fear, love and despair is more terrifying than the blank, hollow gaze of any demon. "Let me help you."

Chara can feel their lower lip quiver and they press their lips tightly together to keep it from showing. "No." They close their expression, sealing their hurt and anxiety in a protective layer of ice. "Not after what you've done. If you can't trust me to know what I'm doing, then how can I trust you to know what you're doing?"

"You can trust me because I'm not the one running away in the middle of the night and just expecting everyone else to be fine with it!" He regrets his words before they even make it past his bared fangs, but he can't hold them in, he can't hold them back, they've wanted out for so, so long and he's too tired to deal with this, he's too tired to hold back, he's just so done, and Chara's being so ungrateful- "You can trust me because I still love you even though you left me again! Even though you didn't tell me where you were going, or what you were doing, or if you were even going to be
okay!" His fury drowns in a repressed sob and he angrily wipes his eyes before the tears fall. Being
made fun of is the last thing he needs right now.

Chara can feel their heart hammering in their chest. They want to be angry. They want to retort, they
want to fight back, they want to scream at him for ruining everything and putting them right back
where they started, yet though they open their mouth, they can't find the words before he continues.

"You can trust me because I still care about you even though you don't care about me," he says.
"That's okay! I understand why! It's my fault all your pain was for nothing and it's my fault we died,
and I hurt you so much before I got my soul back, I was awful, and it's okay if you hate me, I can
understand that now! But ... please don't ask me to just stand by and watch while you starve or freeze
to death, or some terrible human hurts you. I can't do that." His anger deflates. He can't keep it up.
Why does everything have to be so difficult? Why can't this awful chapter of their lives just be over
already so they can focus on getting better again? "I love you." Sniff. "And no matter what happened
before and- and no matter what happens in the future, I'll always love you." He wipes his eyes again.
His voice breaks. "Can't we just ... go back to sleep?"

Chara can't help but picture it in their head. Telling him that of course, of course they can, everything
is going to be alright, because they have each other and that's all that matters. They see themself
giving him a hug, careful not to mess with the wires in his back, and letting him cry, really, truly
letting him cry, without mocking him or calling him weak, and they see all three of them going back
to sleep, safe in the room that looks so much like their old one in New Home, and they imagine
falling asleep knowing that they're finally safe-

But they're not safe. They're not.

They can't trust Asriel to protect them.

They trusted him with their life once. They're not going to make that same mistake again.

Chara can feel Frisk's eyes on them, soft and worried, though there's nothing expectant about their
expression. They've already resigned themself to whichever decision Chara makes. It's a little
unnerving. One moment, they act like themself, and the next, they act like they're completely under
the other's control again, as passive and compliant as they were when possessed. Chara doesn't get it.
It's scary. They never know what to expect out of Frisk anymore.

It would be so much easier if the kid didn't have a choice ... 

Alphys' voice sounds from the other end of the house. "Uhm. K-kids? Are- are you alright?" Chara
can hear footsteps behind them, but they don't bother to turn around. When Alphys speaks again,
she's much closer, just down the hallway, and she goes to meet the humans halfway. "Oh my- wh-
what are you d-doing out of bed? You- you should be sleeping, why are you-

"They were trying to leave again," Asriel says. There's no anger in his tone anymore, no resentment.
He's just disappointed. Purely disappointed. Somehow, that hurts even more. "They can't, but they
didn't know that. Now they do." He turns in the door without checking to see if his siblings are going
to follow him. He supposes it's their own decision if they want to try to fight the flowers or not.
They're not going to win. They're stuck here with him, even though they don't want to be.

Alphys makes a little exasperated noise and goes to gently pat Chara on the shoulder to get their
attention. Before she makes contact, they level a withering glare at her over their shoulder. With a
strangled squawk, she pulls her hand back. Frisk turns to look at her properly, and Alphys chooses to
focus on them instead. They look nicer. Less like they're trying to turn her to dust with their eyes
alone.
"L-listen!" she says to the humans. "I just t-texted Undyne. Like, a minute ago. So if you guys can just- just not run away for, uhm, for five minutes? She'll p-probably be here? And I- pft, I mean, it's n-not like Sans is g-gonna stand a chance against her, not in a million years, so-!

Asriel stops dead in his tracks. He suddenly looks far more awake. "Wait ..." He moves back into the hallway, brows drawn together in Budding worry. ". . . Did you tell Undyne about Sans?"

Chara's pale face turns paper-white. "You- you didn't." They turn to face her fully. "You didn't."

Frisk looks between all three of their friends. No. No, no, this is bad. This is really bad. It's bad enough that Alphys knows, it's bad enough that Papyrus knows, it's bad enough that Sans has to deal with two of his closest friends hating him, Frisk doesn't want him to have to face Undyne of all people, no one challenges Undyne, she wouldn't be nearly as forgiving as Alphys and Papyrus, he wouldn't stand a chance-!

Alphys visibly shrinks under the three pairs of worried-angry-fearful eyes, and for a second, it looks like she's about to bolt. But she has to get herself together. This isn't about her, she reminds herself, this isn't even about Sans, or Undyne, or anyone else. This is about the kids. This is about saving Chara's life. Alphys straightens her back and forces herself to give each of the children a stern look in return.

"N-not yet," she stammers. "B-but I- I th-think we should."

Asriel looks like he's about to cut her off, but she motions for him to wait.

"I kn-know what you're- what you're going to say, I know I d-don't know what's really going on, but this is- heh. I'm sorry. But this is too important." Alphys moves her attention to Chara staring up at her with fury in their burning eyes, their cheeks flushed an almost sickly dark red under the grayer-than-usual skin. Alphys forces herself not to look away. They're a child. No matter what else they are or have been or will be, they're also just a child. She can't leave them to perish just because she's scared. "You're- you're not g-going to get hurt. N-not on m-my watch! I won't allow it! A-and Undyne won't either!"

Chara's eyes flash and they back away from her. An ugly, breathy laughter pushes air through their grinding teeth. "You all just love to make promises you can't keep, don't you? 'I'll protect you', 'you don't have to be afraid', 'we'll get through this together ...!' There's nothing you can do for me. This time, I have to help myself. You'd only get in the way."

Frisk's hands fist in the fabric of their jeans. They're helping. Chara knows that, Frisk knows they know that. But to them, Frisk doesn't count as someone outside of 'themself.'

They take the other human's help for granted.

Asriel's fur rises on the back of his neck. "The last time you tried to do something all by yourself, you ruined everything!"

"You think I don't know that!?"

"I think you're- you're forgetting, at least!"

"I would, if you'd ever let me!"

"I'm sorry, but it's true!"
Alphys shuffles over to stand between Chara and Asriel, holding her claws out as if to protect them from each other. "C-come on, guys, we'll- we'll f-figure this out!"

Frisk needs to do something. Chara wants to leave, they have to help them leave. Asriel may be right, Alphys may have a point, but none of it matters, Frisk has to do what Chara tells them to, they have to do this right, they've only got one more chance, they need to show Chara that they're on their side, that they'll do anything to help them, that they'll do anything to set things right-

They can feel adrenaline scrub the last traces of sleepiness out of their body, the stress making their stomach turn and pulling bile into the back of their throat.

It gives them an idea.

"There's nothing to figure out," Chara spits back at Alphys. "If I don't get out of here, Sans is going to end me. If anyone finds out why, everything is going to go sideways. The only option I've got left is to run, it isn't that complica-!" As they move backwards, they bump into a small table by the wall. The vase on it dances for a moment, before settling back in its place. Something next to it catches Chara's attention. Sheets of paper. A stack of drawings.

Asriel gasps when he realizes what they've found. "H-hey, don't look at those!" He tears the wires out of his stabilizer and bolts down the hallway, dodging out of Alphys' reach as he passes her.

"Don't look at those, they're private!"

Chara grabs the drawings and moves away from him as they look through them, pure disbelief in their icy expression.


Children with their eyes crossed out in red.

"You little sicko ..."

Asriel is tearing up now. "I told you not to look!" He makes a halfhearted grab for the drawings. "Give them back!"

Frisk slowly steps away from Alphys and the squabbling kids, and finds a wall to lean against. They focus on their own fluttering pulse. On the fever searing the underside of their cold skin, on the icky sweat crawling down their forehead and into their eyes, making them sting. This is a terrible idea. An absurd idea. But maybe it will buy them the opening they need.

Alphys pleads with the other kids to calm down and when they don't, she asks them if they won't at the very least put their fighting on hold until Undyne gets here. They both give her an incredulous look. She looks embarrassed, but she doesn't apologize. That's fair. Frisk wouldn't wanna be the only responsible adult around when these two are upset, either.

Chara huffs and elects to ignore Alphys. They hold up one of the drawings - one stained in red crayon - and wave it in Asriel's face. "Well, at least I don't have to wonder if you were telling the truth back on the ferry!" they say.

Asriel snatches the paper away from them and crushes it into a ball. "I told you I didn't mean it! I wasn't myself, you know I wasn't!"

"So the flowers drew this, too, huh?"

"Come on, quit it!"
"And you keep saying it's safe here with you. Is it really safe, Asriel? Am I really safe around you? You're sure I shouldn't sleep with one eye open just in case you suddenly get the overwhelming urge to rip my limbs off again? Because - hah, you can't 'help it', can you?"

"I'd never hurt you!"

"You said you wouldn't doubt me, either."

"I was right to doubt you."

Chara throws the drawings aside and the papers beat their clipped wings as they fall to the ground, desperate to get away from the furious demon, and Chara steps up to Asriel, invading his space, about to retort with something, something Frisk doesn't want to know, something they don't want Asriel to know about either, something they want to think Chara would regret saying somehow, despite their refusal to regret anything else - and Frisk decides that now, now is probably a good time to get them out of here.

Their muted whimper is enough to distract Chara. The other pauses, interrupted in what they were about to say, their attention immediately moved from Asriel to Frisk. They look almost offended at having their outburst cut short. Then they realize that Frisk is leaning against the wall, shaking, glowing nearly green under their skin.

Chara steps away from Asriel. They quirk a brow at Frisk. "... Are you okay?"

Frisk shakes their head, afraid to open their mouth. God, this is a terrible plan. But if it gets them out of here ...

Alphys hurries over to the kid's side just in time to catch them by the shoulders and help them sit on their knees as their legs buckle under them. She barely manages to move out of the way before they double over, hands clamped over their mouth.

She doesn't see them slip fingers past their teeth.

Frisk vaguely registers Chara and Asriel coming closer before their vision blurs and blackens. Before the nausea closes like a clammy hand around the top of their chest. Before tears press out of their eyes and run down their face. Before doubts and fears and worries all wash out along with every other feeling that isn't pain, gross, regret, make it stop-

Their heart beats too fast, too hard. Their body feels hollow. They vaguely register frantic voices somewhere above them.

"- m-mustn't h-have been potent enough, or-"

"They'll need something else. They need the energy."

"Are they okay?"

"Of course they're not okay, look at them! Alphys, go get them something else. They're not going to be able to recover on an empty stomach."

Arguing. Back and forth. She doesn't want to leave the kids alone. Asriel says something that isn't very nice, and the fact that Chara doesn't respond at all tells Frisk that they're as surprised as Frisk is, but Alphys only sounds frustrated when she tries to reason with him.

There's a hand gently brushing over their back and when Chara speaks again, they're right next to
Frisk, their voice low, not directed at the monsters, but at the smaller human.

"Hey." Their words sound clearer when they're this close. "Let's go get you cleaned up, okay? Come on, you can hold on to me, if you want."

The monsters' arguing stops as Frisk weakly, blindly reaches out and locks their arms around their big sibling's neck, letting them help them to their feet. Frisk opens their eyes, slowly, and the blur on the other side of their eyelids sharpens just a little as they stand up. Chara leads them around the grime on the floor. It's blue, for some reason, and glowing just a little bit. Monster food really is weird. Frisk is pretty sure the inside of their mouth and throat are at least a little burned from the magic.

Chara sends a sharp glare in Alphys' direction, and then in Asriel's, as they pass them and head for the entrance hall. "Get them food with a proper healing spell. They'll need it. Get on it."

The monsters exchange a glance.

"Where are you taking them?" Asriel asks.

"Bathroom, obviously," they say. "You said it yourself. We can't get out. So stop being paranoid."

Asriel's eyes narrow and his fur bristles again. But then he looks at Frisk, limping along after Chara, shaking with exhaustion, and ugh, they're right, aren't they? They're not going anywhere. They can't. He'll be more useful if he helps Alphys out with creating a different healing spell for the little human.

He looks down at the drawings scattered over the floor. With an angry sigh, he stomps past them and heads for the kitchen without waiting for Alphys.

Alphys eyes the humans with suspicion. She's got a bad feeling about this. But if Asriel is absolutely certain he's blocked off all the exits ... She checks her phone again. Hopefully Undyne will be here soon.

Frisk and Chara make it all the way downstairs before Chara slips out of Frisk's grasp and the ill kid is forced to find their balance on their own again. They rub their eyes and wipe a bit of the glowing liquid from their chin with their sleeve. It's definitely leaving burn marks on their sweater. Maybe pure energy being released as it's digested isn't really the safest method of healing for humans after all.

"Impressive," Chara says softly. The compliment is genuine, Frisk realizes. "I, uhm. Didn't expect that." They offer a little half-apologetic laugh.

Frisk can't help but smile. They did something right. For once, they did something right. Chara's happy.

"What's the plan?"

Frisk swallows the lingering burning sensation in their throat and squints at the door up ahead on the right. "There's a vent in the bathroom," they tell Chara. "It leads all the way outside. Unless Azzy's put flowers in the walls, we should be okay going through it."

Chara's brows disappear under their bangs. "Wow. Okay." Then doubt creeps into their expression. They tilt their head just slightly. "And ... then what? What happens when we're out?"

"We leave."
Chara doesn't understand. They can't understand. They can't believe it. They can't believe that Frisk is really on their side. It makes no sense. But look at them now. Sick and tired, broken and done, and still they're willing to hurt themself and leave behind their hard-earned safety for the other human. Still they're ready to go back to freezing cold nights and fear and uncertainty, all for their friend.

Tentatively, Chara lets their hand brush past their sibling's, light enough that the other kid could just shrug it off as an accident if they wanted to. But they don't want to. Frisk takes Chara's hand and squeezes it, just a little too tightly.

They're shaking. Chara can’t hide the little smile lighting up their face.

This little weirdo. They make no sense. But maybe, just maybe, they've finally relented. Maybe they've finally cracked. Maybe Chara has corrupted them for good.

Maybe they're finally so ruined and so far gone that the two of them can be friends again. Maybe ... Maybe they could even be the same person again.

That would be nice. They'd never have to be alone.

Maybe that's how it's supposed to be. Maybe neither of them are really whole without the other.

***

Papyrus reads and re-reads and re-re-reads the text Asriel sent him earlier.

'We found the humans. We're in Newer Home now. They're okay.'

He wants to be relieved. And he should be! His friends are safe! And that's good. But something that is less good is the fact that his brother has disappeared without a trace. Not only is that concerning in itself, but it makes the whole 'humans remaining safe' situation very, very uncertain. They won't really be safe before he knows where Sans is. That is, before he's made sure that Sans isn't anywhere close to Chara.

Papyrus has parked his car by the side of the road leading to Newer Home. The sun has parted from the horizon completely by now, bathing the snow-covered fields in tiny, orange sparkles that remind him of something he's pretty sure was a dream, but which might also be a memory, depending on how you look at it. Is it still too early ..?

No. No, it's not too early. He needs to make sure. He's searched everywhere else, called everyone else, done everything he could aside from this. There is one more option. One last call he can make.

More than a little hesitant, he scrolls through the contacts on his phone.

Alright. Here goes.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is already close to finished, so it will most likely be up next week!
After the next one, we have the two-part finale where Shit Truly Goes Down. Stay tuned.
A breeze travels all the way from the ocean to the shore, and across the town by the foot of Mt. Ebott, and it narrowly avoids the mountain itself before rushing across the forest beyond, where it makes the leafless treetops dance.

Toriel watches them with an unusual level of impatience. Like she's expecting something to happen today, even though this day shows no sign of being any different from all the ones that came before it. She doesn't normally have it in her to be impatient much anymore. Time doesn't feel like it's moving forward. She's stuck, stuck on a particularly dreary level of Hell, if such a place exists. Her kind has never believed in Hell nor Heaven, but as time wears on and the days blur together, she has become more and more inclined to question her own beliefs.

"I made a vow," she says to Sans still walking beside her, "on that first day after I reunited with Asriel and Chara. I swore that no matter what the future may bring, I would never let anyone or anything separate me from my children ever again. None of them. I would not allow it. I would rather go to war with gods than live without them ever again." Her upper lip pulls back in a snarl. "And in truth, I am still prepared to do so."

Sans nods solemnly. Yeah, she would, wouldn't she? Toriel would do anything for her kids. If she ever got her hands on the SAVE system ... Well. It wouldn't be certain doom. If there's one person he'd trust to use it for good, it's her. But still. The idea is a little terrifying.

"the kids're probably the closest thing we're gonna get to gods 'round here," he says, sending her a little nervous grin. "what with the whole ... you know ..." He fumbles with the words. "... power over time and space thing?"

Toriel's steely stare softens a little. "Hmm." She slips her hands into her pockets, though it looks a lot more elegant than when Sans does it. "They are, are they not?" She sighs and closes her eyes against the cool wind travelling through the woods. "My brave little ones ..."

Nothing can kill those kids. Nothing can make them stay dead, anyway.

"Even so. I shall never stop wanting to protect them. It is a mother's job. Regardless of how capable they may be on their own."
There's a series of low buzzing noises coming from somewhere. At first, Sans wonders if anyone is out here with them, if it's the hum of a motorcycle, or a malnourished car engine. Then he realizes it's coming from the purse slung over Toriel's shoulder.

"uhh, i think your ..." He points at the thing with a thumb. "someone's trying to-

"Oh!" Toriel stops in her tracks and claws at the clasp on it for a moment. Finally, it pops open with a not-so-healthy-sounding clack, and she rummages through it to find her phone.

The noises stop.
Worry-lines draw across her forehead. Missed calls. Who could be calling her so early in the day? She fishes out her reading glasses too and slides them over her nose to check the display.
Asgore.
The change in her expression makes the lights in Sans' eyes flicker.
"what's wrong?"
"Six ...
"wh- what?"
"He ... He has called me six times. Nearly an hour ago. All in a row. The reception must've been ... faulty." Her hands are shaking. She makes no move to call him back. Her voice falls to a whisper. "Six times."
Oh no.
"hey." Sans closes his hands around Toriel's, gently lowering the phone. "hey, look at me. toriel."
She does as he tells her to, but even then, her expression is hollow with dread. He can feel the muscles tense in her paws as she clutches the device.
"maybe it's good news," Sans says, keeping his voice as low and steady as he can under the weight of his own creeping fear. "it could be good news. right? we don't know anything yet. just ..."

He looks around. There. A fallen log. Fighting down the tide of 'what-if's flooding into the forefront of his mind - bad ones, good ones, horrific ones, he isn't sure which are worse - he leads her to the log and steadies her with a hand on her arm as she sits down.
"I ... I swear ..." Toriel sees right through him. "If a-anything has happened to my son ..."

"then we'll find a way to help him," Sans assures her, slowly, ever so slowly pulling the phone from her hands. "just- don't panic. okay? maybe it's nothing. he's fine. the kid's fine."

Her gaze suddenly focuses, like a telescope switching to the right lens, and she bares her fangs, angry disbelief twisting her features. "How would you know!?"
Sans flinches and backs off with a very, very forced grin. "... gut feeling?"
Toriel glares at him, eyes narrowed to burning slits. Then she finally sighs the growing fury out through her teeth and shakes off the tension. "No. No, I'm sorry. I'm just ..."
"i know."

"I can't take any more of this."

"asriel is okay. trust me."

"How can you be so sure?"

Because the child could be dead and still it would only be a matter of time before he returned. As with everyone here. No one ever leaves for good, no matter how thankless their life or how messy their death. At least he can promise her this. When the time comes and they're inevitably pulled back through another reset, Sans is going to bring her children back to her, again and again, as many times as it takes.

"trust me."

Maybe she sees the certainty in the hollows of his eye sockets. Maybe she sees a little bit of sorrow there, too, a little leftover sadness from a time when he still had the capacity for grief.

Toriel closes her hands over her knees to stop them from shaking and takes a deep, steadying breath.

"Will you call Asgore back for me?" she asks. "I ... am not sure I will be able to."

Of course. Of course he will. He tells her he will and she closes her eyes, bowing her head in gratitude. Sans brings up the six missed calls. For a second, even he hesitates. God, he hopes nothing has happened to the kid ... or Frisk. What if this is about the missing humans? What if they're-

No, no, he needs to focus. He said it himself, maybe it's good news. He pushes through his fear and moves to hit the call button.

Right in that second, the buzz sounds again.

Sans panics and hits the answer-button, even though he vaguely registers that the name on the display certainly isn't 'Asgore.' Or even in the right font.

"hello?"

"SANS! I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN I'D FIND YOU WITH HER EX-MAJESTY! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?! I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU ALL OVER THE PLACE!!"

Toriel cringes at the loud voice on the phone, not at all prepared for Papyrus', uh, 'unique' form of self-expression. She gives Sans a bewildered look. Sans shrugs, just as confused.

"hey uh, bro, look, we're kind of in the middle of a possible crisis-slash-fluffybuns-possibly-just-being-terrible-at-operating-a-phone, so uh, could you-?"

"APOLOGIES, BROTHER, BUT THIS IS URGENT! I NEED TO SPEAK WITH YOU. TELL ME WHERE YOU’VE GONE AND I SHALL GET OFF YOUR BACK. FOR A FEW MOMENTS, UNTIL I COME AND FIND YOU. IN WHICH CASE, MY BEING UPON YOUR BACK SHALL RETURN WITH A VENGEANCE. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED."

That doesn't sound good. Sans rolls his eyes with an annoyed hiss. "okay! okay, ugh, fine, we're in the woods. the ones back 'round the mountain. what's so urgent anyway?"

"I SHALL INFORM YOU AS SOON AS I ARRIVE! JUST STAY PUT!"
Is this about Asgore's calls? At the very least Papyrus sounds way too chipper for anything bad to have happened, if that's the case. A little too fight-y for Sans to be completely at ease, but still.

Toriel stares at the phone as though it has personally insulted her. "What in the world was that about." It's not a question. It sounds more like a subtle 'If I were you, I'd start running in the opposite direction of your brother right now. Just to be safe.'

Sans has no idea what Papyrus is up to. He'll have to deal with it later. He needs to call Asgore.

***

In the kitchen in Asgore's house, Asriel helps Alphys cook, and together, they find a healing spell that's a little different from the one they used the first time around. Frisk should be able to stomach this one. It's a little gentler and it works a little more quickly. The poor thing mustn't have had much to eat on their journey. It makes sense that they wouldn't be able to eat much without getting sick.

Asriel doesn't know much about healing spells, but he can cook a little bit, better than Alphys, as it turns out, and she's okay at healing spells, so they kind of cover each other's weaknesses. As the stew on the stove boils and the green energy weaves into the magic-based food, Asriel takes a step back, listening for noises in the rest of the house. He can't hear the humans. Shouldn't they be coming back by now? Maybe they're already back in their beds and he just didn't hear them come upstairs again. That sounds plausible. He's got all the exits blocked off, he reminds himself. He's certain of it. They're not going anywhere. They're fine.

Still nervous, he crosses his arms and leans against the doorway separating the kitchen from the living room. Maybe if he looks relaxed, his brain will be able to cheat itself into thinking he really is.

Alphys kind of half-heartedly stirs the food. She looks tired. Maybe upset, too, though it's hard to tell. She hides it pretty well. He regrets being mean to her. It wasn't fair. None of this is her fault. It's Chara's fault. And Frisk's too, but it's easier to be mad at Chara. It's really, really easy to be mad at Chara.

Alphys must notice his bad temper still simmering just below the surface, because she pauses in stirring the stew and gives him a half-sympathetic-half-impatient look.

"Y-you d-d-don't have to- you know, you don't h-have to let them treat you like that," she says, grimacing at the memory of the children's fight in the hallway. "F-friends shouldn't t-treat each other like that. You already saved them, you d-don't owe them anything." She doesn't like meddling. This is clearly something much, much more complicated than a simple fight, it's something she doesn't understand, something more nuanced than it seems, she can tell. But Asriel is just a kid. A kid she caused a lot of grief. She owes it to him to try and help, even with her limited understanding. His safety is more important to her than her own ego, her insecurities are just going to have to get in line.

Asriel looks away, frowning. She doesn't get it. Can't she see that he doesn't have a choice? Chara is his responsibility. He's the one who's putting the whole world in danger to protect them, he needs to make sure they don't do anything rash. He needs to protect everyone, and he needs to protect Chara from themself.

Though it's becoming harder to remember why he wants to at all.
"You wouldn't understand." He shifts his arms so he's hugging himself instead of crossing them.

The skepticism drains from Alphys' expression, leaving only that soft sympathy that isn't really pity, which makes it more annoying, because Asriel can't even be mad about it, then.

"I ... want to understand, though," she says softly, pushing away her anxiety. It'll be easier to help if she understands why things are the way they are between the two of them. Her gaze lingers on the child for another moment before she turns her attention back to the food and stirs it again. "How could ... one mean little kid be so important? T-to you, I mean." This is something else. Something entirely new to her. But at the same time, maybe it's also kind of familiar. "They're acting so awful and still you- s-still you t-treasure them so much and look out for them and- eheh. It's like something out of an a- ehm, o-out of a movie."

Asriel mulls over her words for a minute. She almost sounds wistful. Can she relate? Asriel realizes that she probably can. Her friend got better, though. He became nicer, in subtle ways. But not before crashing and burning, and realizing his mistakes the hard way. Asriel doesn't want that for Chara. They've hurt enough already, and maybe holding out hope that they'll start learning from their mistakes is a little too optimistic by now. Maybe Chara just isn't the kind of person who gets better.

"They're not always awful," Asriel replies, a little defensively. "I know they can seem a little harsh, but ...they can be nice sometimes, too."

Alphys smiles a tired smile, but it's not a very happy one. "That doesn't make it okay. Friends are ... Friends are supposed to h-help each other. Not t-tear each other down. It's o-okay to set boundaries. Or ask for help ...

The timer next to the stove beeps. Alphys turns it off, turns off the stove and goes to retrieve a bowl in the cupboard next to the fridge. "H-how did you two end up as friends, anyway? If- if you d-don't mind me asking. If it's n-not too personal." She knows as well as anyone how Chara ended up in the Underground. But maybe she also knows better than anyone why they might have ended up there.

"They're not always awful," Asriel replies, a little defensively. "I know they can seem a little harsh, but ...they can be nice sometimes, too."

It takes Asriel a moment to process the question. It sounds so alien to him. How ... they became friends? He can't remember a time when Chara wasn't in his life. Or, well, he can, but he doesn't want to. Things weren't so bad before they came along. He was happy. He thinks he was happy. He wasn't sad, at least. But maybe that's not really the same as being happy.

"We, uhm. We spend a lot of time together after they- after they fell." His expression softens a little as he lets the memories surface. "They were ... They were really hurt." He doesn't mean physically. "I didn't want them to feel alone." Something tight and painful and dark loosens in his chest, a little yarn ball of mixed feelings spun around something much lighter, something much more fragile. He keeps his gaze on the floor, a little embarrassed. What does he have to be embarrassed about? Feeling things isn't embarrassing, he's lucky he's even able to! Can't he do anything right? "That's when we started talking more. And I realized that Chara wasn't really like anybody else."

"What do you mean?" Alphys asks as she returns from the cupboard with a bowl and a spoon. She pours a generous portion of stew into the bowl. The rest of the magic settles within the food as she does so.

"Well ..." Asriel isn't really sure. It's kind of hard to explain. He can't even really explain it to himself. He joins Alphys by the stove to check out the food. It looks pretty good. It's not really breakfast-worthy, but he's hungry and not very picky. And there's enough for two, at least. Maybe he should have some. "When I was little," he begins, "I didn't really have a lot of friends. People were nice! It wasn't that. They were really nice. And I guess many of the kids in the neighborhood and in my school really wanted to be friends with me." He pokes at the food with the big wooden cooking spoon still stuck in it. This is a weird subject. He's never really told anyone this story before. "But I
... I couldn't understand them. I don't know why. They were always so loud and- and all they wanted was to, you know, climb rock paths and play monsters and humans, and-" He shrugs, frowning at the memory a little. It seems so far away. Like it belongs to someone else. "I guess I liked stories more. I liked drawing. I liked imagining things." That little ball of anger and anxiety in his chest loosens up completely. A weight lifts from his shoulders. It's actually really nice to get to talk about this to someone who wants to listen. "They were always so loud..."

Alphys watches him with a kind of tired wonder. He's so little, but he talks about his own childhood like it was a very long time ago.

It was, she reminds herself. It was long before her own birth.

Asriel's gaze lifts to the empty air in front of him and a tiny little light illuminates his eyes. "But then I met Chara." His voice is barely more than a whisper. "And they- they were different." His words come to life, then, tinted with hope and reverence, so shaky and so soft that anyone who didn't know him - anyone who didn't know that these feelings have endured life and death, and years, so many years - would think it delicate. When he continues, he looks up at Alphys, the gentle light in his expression flaring up into the brightest little sunrise. "They weren't like everybody else, they understood! They thought about so many things and they were so smart, and they just got it, they knew what it was like to feel all alone, even with a bunch of people around you, and they knew what it was like to dream about other worlds that no one else could see, and they knew how lonely it is to feel different, and-!

In his excitement, he accidentally lets the spoon fall into the pot, but he doesn't even notice, he looks around the kitchen as though looking for something or someone who can help him explain, but of course, he finds nothing and no one, and he ends up spinning a whole three-hundred-and-sixty degrees around himself before the sudden little burst of energy lets him continue. Alphys struggles to hide the little giggle bubbling in her chest. It's been a really tough night. But it's morning now and the little one finally looks like a real child again. Maybe this is all he needed. To have his friends back. It isn't realistic to expect the kids to be fine right away. They're going to need time to recover, all three of them, and they still need to sort out the whole mess with Sans. But seeing how Asriel acts at the mere memory of meeting his best friend for the first time makes her hope that maybe, just maybe, there's still time to fix this. Maybe things aren't as bad as they seem after all. Maybe there's still time to set things right for all three of Toriel and Asgore's children.

"They told me stories," Asriel continues. He folds his claws over his chest. It looks a little like he's trying to hold hands with himself. For a lack of his adoptive sibling's, maybe. "About heroes and villains and... justice. About saving the world. And about bringing down bad guys! We created these big, beautiful worlds together, and all of it seemed so real, it was like we lived it! No one else understood it like we did, but we had each other, so it was okay, we weren't alone anymore! We-"

Only now does he realize that he's smiling. Really smiling. Not smirking or snarling or almost crying. He sees it reflected on the other monster's face more than anything else, in the way she looks at him like he's the only pure thing left in this world, even though she looks at him like he's the only pure thing left in this world, even though she knows that's far from the truth. Without any real input from his brain, his claws come up to trace the locket around his neck - but of course, it isn't there. It's in his night table. In the drawer, next to the one Frisk abandoned.

That's not right. He isn't supposed to be awake and not wear his locket.

His smile fades. His brows furrow in thought. He can't believe he nearly forgot this. He can't believe he nearly forgot why he's protecting Chara at all. They're the one he's been living for for so long, they were his last hope once, the only one he still dared to hope that he could love even while soulless, and they were the one who made his redemption possible, he may not owe them anything.
but he *wants* to help them. He *wants* to save them.

No matter what kind of person his best friend has become, they will always be the only one who made him feel like he wasn't all alone in the world when he needed it the most.

"When I met Chara," he continues more slowly, "I realized that there wasn't anything wrong with me. I was just different. There's nothing wrong with being different." He looks back to the floor, eyes falling half-shut, blinded by the glow of the memories from so, so long ago. "They made me feel like I was okay just the way I was. Yeah, they were really mean sometimes and they were a bully, but ... at least they made me feel like I was *enough*, you know? They made me think that maybe I didn't have to change. Maybe it was okay to be myself."

Chara wanted him to be strong. Chara wanted him to be brave. Their methods for making him strong and brave seem pretty shady in hindsight, he still doesn't feel okay crying, he still doesn't feel safe showing weakness around them, but they never wanted him to *change*. He almost forgot. He almost forgot what it's like to be with someone who doesn't make him feel more alone than when he actually *is* alone.

He shakes his head a little and the smile makes its way back to his face against his will. "I don't know if they ever really cared about me." He sighs. "But I cared about them. More than anyone else. And I still do."

And if Sans wants to take them away from him again - well. Sans is going to learn a thing or two about what even a small boss monster can do to an overconfident mortal.

Asriel *needs* to protect Chara. No matter what. If there's one thing he can't afford to question, this is it. He finally has his sibling back and nothing is going to come between them ever again.

Not even the fate of the world.

Not even Frisk.

...

That last thought stings and reflexively, he pulls away from it. It feels wrong. He's not going to think about it anymore. He still shouldn't choose between his siblings, that's bad, he already promised himself he'd find a way out of this for both of them.

He'll find a way. Eventually, he'll find a way.

Alphys lets Asriel carry the bowl of stew into the children's room. The place is empty when they arrive. Asriel doesn't understand. Did something happen? Is Frisk okay? He hopes they didn't pass out or something. Surely Chara would've alerted their friends if they did, right?

Asriel leaves the bowl on his night stand. Then he opens the drawer and retrieves his locket. Frisk's too, now that he's at it. He doesn't want to leave it abandoned there all alone.

As he does so, he notices his phone - also left in the drawer - blinking. Well, he doesn't have time for that right now. He pockets the phone and leaves the room, heading through the hallway, down the stairs, to the bathroom-

He still can't hear them.

Alphys' voice sounds behind him, slightly out of breath. "Where ..?"
Asriel knocks on the door to the bathroom. "Guys? Are you in there?"

No response.

He knocks again.

"Chara? Frisk ..?"

Silence.

"I'm coming in, okay?"

Asriel tries to ward off the fear welling up and turning his thoughts to mush, and then he turns the door knob, a little slower than he normally would have because - hey, maybe they just didn't hear him, right? Maybe they really are in there, maybe-

The room is empty.

"Y-you put flowers at all the exits, right?" Alphys' voice is several octaves lighter than it normally is.

Asriel nods, frozen to the spot. "All of them. Except ..."

His eyes trail up to the vent in the ceiling.

It's open.

How in the world he could be so naive, he isn't sure.

Alphys backs away from the empty room, her claws coming up to scratch at the scales on her head. "No ... No-no-no-no-no-" Her already troubled breathing becomes shallow. "I was supposed to look after them, oh my god, Asgore's going to kill me-!"

Asriel feels a buzz in his pocket, several in a row, and he quickly opens his phone. Twelve new messages. All from different monsters he's made deals with over the last few weeks. He quickly skims through them.

Every last message is about the same thing.

'Tem find ... HUMANS!!'

'\textit{saw them on Delta Avenue-}"

'\textit{SToP THeM We CouLD NoT-}"

'\textit{headed for the bridge-}"

'\textit{hurry-}"

'\textit{might still make it-}"

'I am sorry, little prince."

The final message is a blurry photo sent by one of the spiders. It's from the main street. A muddled silhouette rushing across the surface of the water canal running parallel to the cobblestone road. Asriel squints at the image. Then he zooms in.
A cloak blown back by the wind. Behind it, small, green-clad shapes holding on to a wooden railing for dear life. Glowing red eyes that seem to defy the blur of the photo and even the grayness of their surroundings within the image.

Alphys deflates the moment she realizes what she's looking at. "... Aw, crap."

Asriel follows suit. "Swear jar."

A loud, sharp knock sounds from the front door upstairs.

***

Frisk's hands are so numb from the cold that they're unsure if they're even holding on to the railing of the boat properly or if their fingers have given up on their behalf, but they're slipping, they're definitely slipping, the force of the wind is pushing them back and they're certain they're about to fall off, they're certain they're about to end up in the nearly frozen water, the darkness down there is going to swallow them up any moment now, and it's going to be like dying, few people know what it's like to die, but it is like drowning, like falling backwards into yourself until the light above disappears, and it's only a matter of seconds - except, suddenly it's not.

Chara puts their free arm around their weakened sibling, helping them stay put. The demon's other hand is clamped down on the railing so hard that Frisk swears they can see the silhouette of the wood through the other's nearly translucent skin. Chara keeps their eyes fixed on the horizon. Safely tucked under the other's arm, Frisk dares to let their own eyes fall shut. They're not really cool with the idea of getting seasick right now, so. It's probably for the best.

It's strange. Whenever they close their eyes, the magic in Chara's heart seems to flare up that much brighter. Probably because it's easier to focus on it without the distraction of gray buildings, white sunrays and the world spinning around them.

Chara's soul is so much heavier than it used to be. Frisk can almost feel the slow, labored pulse of the determination growing and rotting within it. It's warm, like a fever or the swelling of an infected area.

Frisk leans their head on Chara's shoulder. Why does it have to be like this? They don't get it. What kind of world forces a little kid to turn out like this? The poor thing is rotting from the inside out ..!

"Frisk?" Chara can't tear their gaze from the path ahead, but the wind carries their voice.

"Yes?" The younger child forces their eyes open. Maybe if they look at their friend, the other will look back.

They don't. But there's a reason for that.

"Thank you." Their voice is trembling. "For coming with me."

The small amount of color left in the gray winter world seems to glow just a little brighter, a little warmer. This is all Frisk has ever wanted to hear. Just a simple 'thank you.' Just a little bit of acknowledgement. A little bit of confirmation that they've done the right thing. Maybe they weren't even really ill. Maybe they weren't all that tired, either. Maybe they were just being selfish and attention-seeking. They definitely feel lighter now. Warmer. A little less sick.
They dare to let go of the railing with one hand so they can hug Chara back. It forces them to hold on a lot tighter with their other hand and even the numbness isn't enough to block out how much it hurts, but that's okay. Chara deserves hugs.

"I didn't think you would," Chara continues. "I thought you wanted to go home. I thought you were going to betray me. But you're ... not. You ... You were never going to betray me, were you?"

There is so much soft, brittle hope in that broken voice, and so much fear, too, and Frisk hasn't heard anything like it out of them for so long, they almost forgot their sibling was even capable of sounding like that. Like the child they really are.

Frisk shakes their head firmly, even as they're still leaning on the other human. "No," they say firmly. "I was never going to betray you."

"Heh." Chara takes a deep, if slightly hiccup-y breath, and with that, a little bit of the rot in their heart seems to retreat. Or maybe their determination just grew a shade lighter. It's hard to tell with souls. "Good. That's- that's good."

Frisk smiles a little self-satisfied smile. "I am good."

Chara laughs, and though it's tired and still a little cold, it's real. "You are so full of yourself."

"Am not."

"Are too."

"D2."

Chara snorts. They try to disguise it as a groan. Frisk tries in vain to stifle the little grin forcing its way to their expression. They can't. It's been so long since the two of them were able to laugh together. But maybe it's finally working. Maybe Chara is finally coming around. It's about time! Frisk nearly died for them on multiple occasions! At least it didn't have to go that far.

That's the only thing that really matters, they decide. That both of them are alive and okay. So yeah, Chara hasn't been very nice, and the future seems really uncertain, but they have each other now. They have each other.

And really, when Frisk thinks things through, they don't think they'll have to only have each other. They've lost all their progress and they're in more danger than ever - but maybe they can twist this to their advantage. Their first plan failed, but maybe it had to for their second plan to become possible at all.

Now they know that running away won't do. They can learn from this. They can learn from their mistakes and do something else.

The boat breaches the edge of the city and continues across the sea towards the mainland, now parallel to the bridge.

"Do you know what you want to do next?" Frisk asks Chara.

Chara shrugs. "Not really. We can't go back the way we came. Perhaps we could ..." They reach out to tug on the River Person's cloak, but Frisk holds them back.

"No, wait. I don't think we should run away again."
"... What?"

"We know it won't work. But now that we're back home anyway, we can try something else!"

That makes Chara look back at them. They look angry. But at least they're not shouting just yet. They're giving Frisk a chance. "Whatever you're planning, it had better be good."

Frisk tries valiantly to keep up the smile, even if it becomes a little strained. "It's, uh. It's not really a plan. But now that we're home, we should find Papyrus. You know how much he believes in you, he's not gonna let Sans hurt you. He's tough, and also Sans can't hurt him because he cares about him right? Even if they beat each other up really bad, neither of them are actually gonna get hurt, because monsters only get hurt if someone wants them to get hurt." Their shoulders come up to their ears in what hopefully looks like a casual it's-just-an-idea-I'm-not-saying-we-have-to kind of gesture. "It's worth a try, right?"

Chara glares at the other human for another moment, biting the inside of their cheek in thought. They do not like this idea. So, running away again does seem kind of hopeless, they don't have the head start they did the first time, surely Sans is going to find out that they're in the area soon - but if they trust any of their friends to help them, they're putting their own fate in the other person's hands. True, Papyrus is tough. And sure, neither of the skeletons would be able to hurt each other, Chara's sure about that. But Papyrus won't be able to guard them their whole life. And Sans isn't going to give up that easily.

Running away is risky, but Frisk's idea seems like certain doom.

Before they can reply, a soft, creaky voice sounds from the front end of the boat.

"M ... Might I make a suggestion?"

Okay, uh. Neither of the kids really expected that. But then again, they also didn't expect to see the River Person waiting for them outside the castle, offering to help them escape. Maybe the sea-faring monster is just in a helpful mood today. They seem a little jittery. Frisk wonders what that's all about.

"Fallen child," the River Person says, their voice as light as crinkling leaves on the wind. "Destroy the extractor. Destroy the extractor and you will be free."

Chara's eyes narrow in thought as they stare at the back of the monster's hooded head in bewilderment. "The extractor? You mean the Determination Extraction Machine?"

Frisk shivers. It feels like a hundred little ants are crawling up their back. They tug on Chara's sweater. "No," they say. "No, that's a terrible idea. You know there's bad stuff down in the labs, it's still really dangerous, even without the amalgamates!" They never did find out where the Memoryheads went. Something tells them the creatures may never have left the labs at all ...

Chara hisses through their teeth, deeply troubled by the idea. There's a reason they'd rather run away than try to brave the True Lab the first time around. It's terrifying down there. And dangerous. No human enemy could possibly hope to match the horrors hiding within, facing city after city of potentially dangerous people was preferable to going back to the labs.

But it could be their last hope. It could be their last chance to put a stop to this once and for all.

"We'll destroy the machine," Chara says, suppressing a shiver. "Then we'll go hide behind Papyrus." They lift their gaze back to the horizon, their cold stare now fixed on Mt. Ebott looming in the distance. "Let's see how Sans is going to worm his way out of this one."
Dread creeps into Frisk's bones and they involuntarily hold on to Chara a little tighter.

This is a terrible idea. They're certain of it. Something bad is going to happen if they go to the mountain, they can feel it, they can sense a horrible fate approaching as clearly as the jagged silhouette of their would-be grave.

They never had a choice, though. Chara has told them so, multiple times. If they want to come with their big sibling - and they do - they'll have to do as they're told. Either they're with Chara or they're against them.

So the mountain it is. No matter how much it makes their gut twist in fear.

Land approaches quickly, but the boat only increases in speed until it springs from the water's surface and four wooden legs grow out of its underside, and the children hold on tightly as it crashes onto the beach and pushes away from it again, bouncing across the terrain on stubby, but powerful paws.

The dog face on the bow of the boat gives a delighted "Bork!" and Frisk squeals, while Chara tries valiantly to keep their slightly panicked whimpering noises on the inside, to no avail.

"I didn't know you could go on land!" Frisk tries to yell in the River Person's direction, despite their croaky voice and the noise of the creaking vehicle's heavy gallop drowning out their words.

The monster looks over their shoulder. "I am a River Person. Land travel is only for special occasions."

"Thank you, River!"

They don't reply to Frisk's thanks, merely looking at the child for another few seconds. Then they slowly turn back around and set the boat's course for the mountain without another word.

What's that all about?

Frisk decides not to question it. The quicker they can get to the extraction machine, the quicker all of this will be over. They're just going to have to swallow their fear until then.

They'll do it. For Chara, they'll do it.

The mountain is coming closer and closer.

The end of their journey is at hand.

***

Asgore doesn't pick up. No matter how many times Sans calls him, he doesn't pick up. He must've left his house. They seriously need to get the guy a cellphone, this is ridiculous.

After the sixth call, Toriel's nerves are so shot that she takes the phone back and calls Asgore herself. For a moment, Sans is almost convinced it's going to work. If he were a phone, he knows for sure he wouldn't dare challenge the ex-queen. Though to be fair, he's a seraph with the powers of the underworld at his fingertips and he's still terrified of her. He's pretty sure everyone is. It's just common sense.
"Pick up," Toriel hisses into the phone, pacing back and forth. The device creeks under the pressure of her grip. "Pick up!" She pulls it away from her ear and glowers at it, looking about ready to smash it on the frost-covered earth.

Sans tries to back away a little without her noticing. They need to leave. They can't just hang around here. If something's going on back home, they should be there.

He casts an impatient glance around the forest. Papyrus is just going to have to catch u-

As he looks over his shoulder, a flash of red peeks through the mass of oak trees behind him, interrupting his thoughts.

"AH! THERE YOU ARE!" the familiar voice reverberates through the space between them. Papyrus waves and speeds up to a light jog.

Sans returns the wave half-heartedly. "hey bro." Papyrus can't hear him from that far away, or over Toriel still hissing obscenities into her phone, but the sentiment is there.

Dodging under low-hanging branches and finally clearing the fallen log without breaking a sweat, Papyrus comes to stop in front of Sans, his hands on his hips and an oddly crooked grin on his face. He looks ... nervous? But still overly confident as ever. 'Ambivalent' is probably the right fancy word for this situation. Sans' eyes dart to the side, before coming back to his brother. Personally, he's content with merely looking nervous.

"GOOD TO SEE YOU, BOTH OF YOU!" Papyrus says brightly. Why isn't he mad about Sans disappearing? It's not like he goes easy on him on the best of days, and the past two weeks have been a nightmare.

Sans' brows lift to where his hairline would've been if he'd had one. "you ... too?"

Toriel ends the call she's in the middle of before it goes to voice mail again. She isn't sure how many more 'you've reached Asgore Dreemurr-!'s she can take. "Papyrus, dear, you would not happen to know if anything has gone awry in Newer Home, would you?"

Papyrus' confidence falters a little and he holds his hands up before clapping them together, a few beads of sweat appearing on his forehead. "W-WELL, UHM, I- LISTEN, YOUR EX-MAJESTY, WHY DON'T YOU GO AND TRY TO CALL KING FLUFFYBOY ... ELSEWHERE? THE RECEPTION IS JUST- PHEW, IT'S TERRIBLE OUT HERE! NYEHEH ... HEH."

"I do not think bad reception is the problem," Toriel says, repressing an exasperated sigh. She gives up on the call and shoves the phone back in her purse. "Did you come here by car? Could you drive me to Newer Home? I am sorry to demand this from you, but I- I have a terrible feeling. I think- I think something awful has happened. Or that something is about to happen. Please. Help me."

Papyrus winces under her pleading gaze, pulling his scarf away from his neck a little. It suddenly feels way too tight. He really didn't think this through. He can feel Sans' suspicious glare bore into him, even as he tries to give Toriel something resembling a reassuring smile.

"TORIEL, I AM CERTAIN EVERYTHING IS FINE."

"I am not. Please ..!"

It's hopeless. He can't say no to her, not when she's like this. If he were in her position, he wouldn't be deterred either. He's just going to have to improvise. He needs to help her.
But the three of them only barely make it to the road where Papyrus' sports car is parked before a low rumble announces another incoming vehicle. Papyrus pauses in the middle of opening the door to the driver's seat. When he sees the familiar flash of gold and purple appear around the bend up ahead, he shuts the door again.

Asgore parks on the other side of the road and leaves it in a hurry to meet the group by the red car. Toriel meets him halfway.

"What is going on?" she demands, claws extended as though she's only seconds away from grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him. "Dreemurr, I swear, if anything has happened to Asriel-!

Asgore motions for her to calm down. "Nothing has happened to him," he says slowly, keeping his voice level. "Asriel is fine. Everything is alright."

"Then why-?"

"We found them."

Toriel freezes where she stands. Her breath stutters in her throat.

"Asriel ... He found the other children." A shaky smile lights up the other boss monster's face. Tears well up in his eyes to match hers. "They're home. They're alive."

Sans can hardly believe his luck.
Chapter Notes

The longest chapter of SD to date, and the third-to-last chapter in this arc of STIAA.

This time around, I had the absolute pleasure of actually being in the same room as my betas, Starfog and ShtiyaJust4You, while they read the chapter, as we all met up IRL for the first time just last week! We had an amazing time, despite their threats to make me sleep in the yard after reading this thing. I really hope we can all see each other again soon, they're both completely amazing people.

Thanks to both of them for gently crying on me and quietly yelling at/threatening me late at night, and thanks to everyone who commented on the last chapter! Both of these things are extremely motivating, and seeing as I'm about to start working on the two final chapters, it is deeply appreciated. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The wind rushes through the trees, tearing through the monsters' manes and pulling at their ears. Toriel doesn't feel it. She doesn't feel the salt water nearly crystallizing on her face. There's an emptiness inside so cold that the winter outside could never hope to match it. There's a hole in her chest where her heart used to be, she's certain of it. Her hands come up to hover over the spot.

Then all of it spills out at once. All the fear, all the anger, all the rootless determination, every 'please let them be alive', every 'let them come home soon', every 'let them be dead and gone so they at the very least won't have to face any more of this world's cruelty', and all the self-loathing for having let it happen, for having let her little ones out of sight, for having failed her children again, and before Asgore knows it, there's a sobbing, shivering woman in his arms, clutching him so tightly it hurts.

He looks almost terrified at first. But no, no, this isn't about him right now, he's had his time to cry, he knows that. He's had his time to be scared and overwhelmed and relieved all at the same time. Carefully, he puts his arms around her shoulders and brushes a reassuring hand over the back of her head, the way he used to when they were both very young and very afraid. It was over a thousand years ago. It still comes as naturally as breathing.

For a moment, Toriel lets herself pretend that no time has passed at all.

The skeletons watch from the edge of the forest. Sans goes to stand next to his brother.

"I see. so this is why you needed to find me," he says lowly, solid ice in his eyes as he watches the boss monsters, though his anger isn't directed at them. "afraid i might step out of line again, bro?"

"DON'T BOTHER." Papyrus doesn't even look at him. "YOU COULDN'T BEAT ME EVEN IF YOU HATED ME. AND WE BOTH KNOW I CANNOT EVEN DENT THAT THICK SKULL OF YOURS. IT'S POINTLESS."

Sans mutters under his breath. It's true. His brother is much, much stronger than him. And Papyrus doesn't have the heart to truly wound any monster, least of all his own family. Sans would only tire himself out and like hell he's going to go down like that after everything he's done to get here.
"so, whaddaya suggest we do?" Finally, Sans tears his attention away from Toriel and Asgore, and glares up at his brother instead. "just stand here 'till we get old? heh. i wouldn't even mind that. but thanks to you 'n alphys, we're probably gonna end up back in snowdin before then."

Papyrus sighs and turns so Sans can't see his expression.

Sans looks away too. He wants out. That's all he can think of. He wants to be anywhere but here. Anywhere.

Finally, Toriel's sobs still and she pushes away from Asgore, a little more forcefully than need be.

"Ugh. Forgive me. Just-" She straightens her back and wipes her eyes on her sleeves, too embarrassed at herself to look at any of the other monsters. "Forget that happened."

Asgore backs off to give her space. "Y-yes. Of course."

"It never happened."

"Evidently."

"You are still-"

"- 'the worst', yes, I believe we've established this quite a few times."

"Don't sass me, Dreemurr."

"Sorry."

He looks genuinely remorseful. Toriel only looks very done with everything right now. Sans can't help but marvel at how easily the two of them still communicate after everything they've been through. He doubts he'd have that level of maturity if he were in Toriel's position. Or that level of patience if he were in Asgore's.

Images flash by his consciousness quicker than he can count them. Dust behind a locked door. Dust sinking into the dirt of an overgrown garden.

He's never seen these things for himself. He's only heard about them from the kid. Still the not-memories are as vivid as his actual memories.

He needs to find Frisk.

... No, he needs to find Fallen, he reminds himself.

Stop worrying about the human. Worry about the demon.

His ears are ringing and the pain in his head feels like it's trying to slowly kill him off from the inside out. He can feel the rot in the marrow of his bones.

"I will go see the children," Toriel calls back to her friends. "Are you coming?"

Papyrus waves to her. "WE SHALL BE WITH YOU SHORTLY! I STILL NEED TO HAVE A QUICK WORD WITH MY BROTHER. YOU TWO RUN ALONG!"

Toriel looks confused for a moment. But she doesn't have time to worry about the skeletons right now. She needs to go make sure her kids are alright. With a final nod to the two of them, she turns to follow Asgore to his car.
Sans and Papyrus watch them drive away in silence. Sans can almost feel the anger and sorrow radiating off the person by his side. He doesn't really think Sans would try to hurt him just for a chance to defeat Fallen, does he? Has Sans really scared him that badly?

The smaller monster grinds his teeth together, trying to push the thought out of his mind. It hurts. Papyrus must've forgotten who Sans is doing this for in the first place.

Well. That doesn't matter, does it?

It shouldn't.

Slowly, Sans gathers his magic and in his mind, he brings up an image of the bottom of the staircase in the hallway of Asgore's home, what it looks like from the right angle, how the room is connected to the others, the invisible borders between each area. Numbers scroll by his vision.

There. Room 486.

Electricity plays on the back of his skull, running across his scalp, warning him about the portal opening behind him, and with a final glance at Papyrus, he takes a step back, heading right through the-

The portal is torn apart. Sans walks backwards into a wall of criss-crossing bones.

He only just manages to dodge out of the way before another volley of femurs impale him.

A flame radiates out of Papyrus' right eye, visible even before he turns on his brother, even before he conjures a barrier of white-and-orange missiles behind himself, even before he fixes his sibling with that look of sheer disappointment that burns more vividly, more painfully than any spell or curse ever could.

"DON'T MAKE ME DO THIS, BROTHER," he says, the edges of his magic flickering as though it's taking all his determination just to keep it on this side of reality.

Shock still making his breath catch in his throat, Sans skips backwards, trying to put some distance between himself and the stronger seraph, and out of pure instinct, he summons his own white-and-blue magic, though it's got nothing on the rows upon rows of glowing bones fanning out behind the other.

"y-you said it yourself!" he argues, slowly backing away, ready to defend himself. "we can't hurt each other, fighting's pointless!"

"NOT IF IT KEEPS YOU AWAY FROM THE CHILD, IT'S NOT!" Papyrus snaps. He grabs one of the femurs out of the air and twirls it like a drum major would a baton, before pointing it at Sans. "I DON'T WANT TO FIGHT YOU. BUT IF YOU THINK I WON'T MAKE A VALIANT ATTEMPT ANYWAY, YOU'VE GOT ANOTHER THING COMING!"

So that's where this is going, huh? They're just going to keep pushing each other around until Sans either escapes or keels over from exhaustion. Fantastic.

This is why Sans stopped telling Papyrus about the previous timelines.

(It's not. He doesn't know why he'd even think something like that.)

"Alrighty, then," Sans mutters under his breath, his lop-sided grin nearly reaching his eye sockets. "if that's how it's gonna be." He keeps the image of the room clear in his mind as he summons the heads
of familiar skeletal creatures on either side of him. The blasters snap their jaws, drool dripping down their fleshless chins.

Papyrus’ eye-lights flick between the heads. It's been a while since he used his own. Still, they fade into existence at his command, as bright and as vivid as ever.

"give it your worst."

"I WOULDN'T DREAM OF ANYTHING LESS."

Humans and monsters in the town awaken to the sound of thunder from a clear sky and flashes of blue and orange exploding out of the forest beyond the mountain.

***

Reports keep pouring into Asriel's phone from every monster who has sworn their allegiance to him instead of the king and the human authorities in finding his siblings. Typo-ridden texts predicting the course of the River Peron's boat - which can apparently walk on land? Uhm, okay, he didn't know that, that's new - along with blurry photos chime down the line quicker than he can read them.

"Mt. Ebott," he tells the two monsters in the front seats of the car roaring across the bridge in the direction of the mainland. "The humans are headed for Mt. Ebott."

Alphys sends him a worried look in the rearview mirror. Asriel tries to catch a glimpse of the driver's expression too, but all he can see are rows of sharp teeth revealed in a half-sneer.

Alphys just couldn't stay quiet. She just had to tell her.

Asriel isn't sure what else anyone could have done. Every minute Chara is alone is another minute Sans could find them. It's only a matter of time before Sans hears that his old enemy has returned. Papyrus hasn't reported back in a while, and that's worrying in itself.

What's Asriel going to do when the others confront Sans? He isn't sure. He's just going to have to be there to make Sans shut up before he spills all of Chara's secrets. Asriel has no idea how he's going to fix this, but there must be a way. There must be.

He's not ready to give up. He can't. Chara's fate is in his hands now. He won't let them down again.

The car hits the mainland and when the roads split, it heads straight for the mountain.

Undyne picks up the hunt.

***

The River Person's boat thunders across roads and flatland, past houses scattered haphazardly throughout the landscape, and past the dark oaks framing the fields with spiky, spindly branches, as much of a silent threat as a wall of barbed wire would be. Soon, the mountain is looming over them, huge and overgrown, even in the dead of winter, and so strangely, terrifyingly alive in the middle of
the gray landscape, a resting giant among the barbed wire trees and the town cowering in its enormous shadow.

It feels like it's watching the monster and the human children gathering at its foot. With sympathy, maybe. Or hunger. Frisk feels their heart in their throat as they crawl over the railing of the boat and stumble onto the ground, still a little seasick. Carsick? Is it seasick or carsick when you're sailing a boat on land?

The mountain wouldn't care, would it? The humans are easy prey either way.

Chara leaps over the railing after them, and then they turn back to the River Person and give them a solemn nod. "Thanks for helping us out. You really saved our hide back there."

The River Person only bows their head a little in reply. "I suppose." Their voice is very thin.

"How did you know where to find us anyway?" Chara dusts themself off, shaking their hands to get a little bit of blood back into their numb fingers. "And why'd you decide to help us? All the other monsters are going to be furious with you. I hope you know that." They cock a brow at the hooded figure in the boat.

The monster bows their head again. "The others will not like it. But this is my job. I make sure that people can go where they need to go in order for the story to proceed as it is meant to proceed. I could not risk either of you getting hurt on your way here. That is not how the story goes." The dog head barks and its owner scratches it behind the ear.

Frisk's brows furrow as they move their gaze from the mountain still patiently watching its visitors, to the monster in the boat. 'Story.' They don't like that word. Not when applied to a reality that's very real to them. Flowey used to think of all of reality as a 'story', one where he was the protagonist. So did Chara, for a short while that didn't feel so short for someone who lived it.

It's not fun, being reduced to a supporting character in someone else's story.

"River?" Frisk asks.

"Yes, little one?"

They come closer to the boat, nervously picking at the edge of their sleeve. "You seem to know a lot about our ... 'story.'" Something in the air smells green. Green and alive, so unlike the little crystals in the air freezing the inside of their nose. Maybe it's the mountain. Or maybe it's a little breath of spring that got lost somewhere along the time stream and ended up here. Frisk hopes they'll be around to see that spring. "Can you ... tell me how it ends?"

They sense Chara coming closer too, even before they feel the hand on their shoulder and the resolute flare of energy in the heavy soul beside them. Chara wants to know the answer to that question as well.

The River Person looks at the kids for another moment, still scratching the dog head. Then the dog shakes itself off, rocking the entire boat, and stands up on its paws again. Unfazed, the River Person turns away from the humans.

"Destroy the extractor," they repeat. "Make that your quest and the story shall unfold as it was meant to all along."

That's ... not really reassuring. But it's the only lead they've got.
The boat lumbers in a circle around itself so it's facing the opposite direction, ready to take off.

"This is as far as I can take you," the River Person continues. "Please take care of yourselves. And take care of each other."

Frisk swears they hear the monster's voice wobble again. They're not sure. They look to Chara, and Chara looks to them in turn. Neither of them know what that means. But what they do know is that once again, the two of them are alone. Once again, they have no one but each other. At least they do have each other. That's something.

Chara looks back to the River Person. "Thanks again for all your help. I don't know what we would've done without you. I hope the others don't give you too much trouble."

"We'll come back soon," Frisk adds, though they're well aware they don't sound too certain about it. "Take care."

With fluttering heartbeats, shaking knees and one last glance back at the monster they're leaving behind, the humans turn and disappear into the dark, dreary forest climbing up the mountainside. The gray tree trunks and deep shadows swallow them whole. Less than a minute passes before the River Person can no longer see them within the dry, dead overgrowth.

The monster hangs their head with a trembling sigh.

"I am sorry, children."

Neither of the kids hear them.

Pushing through the spiky cobweb-appendages of leafless bushes and crawling over low-hanging branches, Frisk and Chara make their way up the sloped wall of their adoptive family's old prison. Nothing about the path is familiar, both of them must've chosen different routes on their first treks up the mountainside, and yet ...

Full, green leaves glinting with mid-spring dew. Deep reds and oranges blooming on the horizon like the fire in a sky-wide, star-speckled obsidian hearth. A choir of birds singing soft lullabies to children who have craved rest for a very long time.

They both see and hear it, in the wiry gray-black plants feigning death in the cold season, in the vast, white heavens above, in the raw emptiness pressing against their ringing ears.

But today, there are no brilliant colors or soothing sounds tempting the humans into the depths of the sleeping giant's maw. Today, the mountain shows itself for what it really is. Cold. Merciless. Not hateful, but indifferent, and that's even scarier. It doesn't care if they live or die. It has been here for countless millennia before their births, and it will remain here long after their deaths. The mountain is empty, it has no use for them anymore, and were their fates dependent on its mercy, they might as well flip a coin.

Chara absentmindedly runs a fingertip along the edge of the square disk in their jeans pocket. The pockets in this thing are way too small. There was barely room for anything aside from the disk. If only Frisk hadn't left the backpack with Asgore. The burnt pan would've been useful right about now.

As they continue through the forest, the bushes begin to thin out and the trees separate, opening up into a clearing on the mountainside. Climbing over a small hill of thin fallen tree trunks, Chara leaves the darkness within the forest behind and steps into the open space beyond. To the right, it swerves around the trees and continues down the mountainside, and up ahead, it zigzags around rocky
outcroppings and stray trees, extending upwards.

This must be the path the monsters came down when they first left to rejoin humanity. The cave opening leading into the castle in New Home should be right up ahead. The opening where the barrier once stood. The True Lab isn't far from there. They'll reach it within a few hours, if they're quick.

Chara's freedom is only a few hours away.

Why the thought makes them hesitate, they're not sure.

Frisk stops when they realize Chara isn't moving. They look back at the other kid, worry twisting their features. "Is anything wrong?"

Chara can't bring themself to look at the other human. Their thoughts are all tangled up and pinned to the cave entrance waiting for them up ahead, and the creatures dwelling within it. This is going to be difficult. And dangerous. There's no telling what they're going to find down there. It was horrible even when Alphys kept the place in check, now that no one ever visits the labs anymore, all kinds of things must've been able to breed and spread throughout the place. And no matter what Chara does, they can't get rid of that horrible feeling. That horrible terror lurking just beneath the anger and indignation at having to go through all of this just to be able to remain alive and unscathed. It's not fair. It's not.

They force themself to look at Frisk instead of the mountaintop. They've been so dependent on this grubby little kid for such a long time. They like to pretend it's the other way around, but they know it's not. The human's kind heart has been Chara's lifeline for so long, in more ways than one, and it is so, so frustrating. How helpless do you have to be to have to rely on someone like Frisk for survival? Frisk has been nothing but a liability on this journey, they've just been another obstacle, constantly making Chara worry with their incessant whining and getting sick and getting hurt, if Chara can ignore a sprained wrist, then why can't Frisk at least pretend to be fine?

Chara is so sick of being helpless. They're sick of having no control over their own fate. But there's one person they do have control over, and it's about time that person started pulling their weight. It's ... safer, if they do as their big sibling tells them to. Yeah. Safer.

"Chara," Frisk says, reaching their hands out to the other kid. "You look sad, what's wrong?"

Dead puppies. Think about dead puppies. Isn't that what actors do when they're trying to cry? No, that's stupid, what kind of person has such a flawless life that they need to make things up in order to cry? Chara's got plenty of reasons to cry. They should probably think about those instead. Ugh, why are emotions so hard?

Frisk gasps at seeing the saltwater rise in the other's eyes, quickly moving in for a hug instead. "Hey, hey, don't cry, it's gonna be okay! We're really close now. Don't cry, we've got this." They lean the side of their head against their sibling's and squeeze them so hard it makes it difficult to breathe. Where was this strength every time they ran into a bad human along the way? Where was this strength when they could barely make it aboard a train, and then a truck?

Chara forces themself not to roll their eyes, knowing perfectly well that the movement would stir up not-so-nice feelings within their soul, feelings Frisk would surely sense when they're standing this close.

"I'm scared," Chara whispers, and the words come easily, because it's true, even though it's not really the whole truth. "I don't want to die again, I haven't saved in so long. I don't want to go back. I don't
want to start over ..!"

Frisk pulls back, grabbing them by the shoulders instead, so they can look them in the eyes. "You won't," they reassure them. "If anything bad happens, we'll run. We'll find a way to the machine and we'll mess it up so bad Sans will never figure out how to put it back together ever again!"

They look so determined. Tired, but determined. Chara can't remember the last time they saw them like this. Would this have been easier? Should they have been going about it like this from the beginning?

It doesn't matter. People lash out when they're sad, and if Chara crossed the line sometimes, it's understandable. Frisk is tough, they can take it. Besides, they came along on Chara's terms, they could've just left if things got too unbearable for their precious sensitivities. It's not like anyone forced them to tag along.

Chara sniffs and hangs their head, gaze trailing to the side. "I just ..." They sigh, softening their voice further. "I just can't help but wonder if it's too dangerous. We could get seriously hurt in there ..."

There's a flash of ... something sparking within Frisk's soul, casting a shadow over their expression for just a fraction of a second. Then it disappears. Was it- was it even there at all?

When Frisk smiles at them, Chara is almost certain they only imagined that shadow after all.

"We can always go ask Papyrus," Frisk says, catching the first tear crossing Chara's face and awkwardly trying to brush it away, the same way one would brush breadcrumbs off a tabletop. "Maybe he can come help us destroy the machine. If he was there, we'd be safe for sure!"

... Chara had not thought of that. This wasn't in the script.

"Eheh, yeah, uhm ..." They rub their hands together, squirming under the other's gaze. "... I guess we could, but- but what if Sans finds us first? I don't want them to get into a fight or anything." That's a good reason. They initially left home for this very reason. Not wanting Sans to get in trouble. Frisk has got to believe that, they've got to. Chara sighs again, closing the argument so they can get back to what they actually wanted to talk about. "I'm just so worried about putting you in danger. I know I've already done that a lot and I'm sorry I did, but it'll be nothing compared to what we're about to face in the Underground! Maybe I should just give up instead." They offer their sibling a smile, a small, shaky one. "Having my soul drained couldn't possibly hurt as much as losing you would."

It feels like watching an avalanche from afar. The complete shutdown in Frisk's soul freezes the path between their souls and Chara swears they can taste snow on the back of their tongue.

This is not the reaction they were going for.

Frisk can barely keep from tearing up themself. This is not the apology they wanted. This is not the kind of warmth and softness they were trying to revive within their friend. It's wrong. It's so wrong and they didn't see it coming at all, they got used to the other kind of manipulation, the kind that's mean and harsh and loud and scary, but not this one, and how can Chara lie about something like this? How can they be so cold?

"N-no." Frisk swallows the gross taste in their mouth and tries to close their expression, their soul, the cracks in their heart. "I'd never let you do that." The words come out slowly, like they're reading them aloud for the first time, and they taste like bile. They step backwards, balling their fists and trying to find an expression that could be interpreted as lying somewhere on the scale of disbelieving
and angry. The disbelief is real enough, at least. "We're getting out of this together. No matter what." Okay, maybe the anger is a little bit real too, now that they think about it. Maybe it's more than a little real.

Judging by the way Chara lights up, it seems to be from an outside perspective, at least.

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes. I'd rather die than let you get hurt."

"But I feel the same way about you, how would I live with myself if you perished on my watch?"

"I'm not going to!"

Frisk spent years of their life not uttering a single word. To this day, there's a thorn hedge of anxiety blocking their throat, and yelling is like trying to tear the words out by force instead of gently untangling them like they're used to. They hate yelling, it hurts and it's not very loud anyway, but this is what Chara wants, this is the kind of reaction they're looking for, they want anger, they want desperation, they want to think that Frisk hasn't even considered turning them in, because Chara has decided that they're friends now, Chara has decided that Frisk has proven themself, and Frisk can't let them down. Frisk already decided that they were okay with pretending to be all messed-up and brainwashed again if it meant their sibling would trust them and feel a little less alone, they were fine with it when Chara was just yelling at them, so they need to still be okay with it, or they're being mean and selfish.

Chara does want them to be safe. Frisk knows they do. Chara isn't lying about genuinely caring about them. It just so happens to also look like an easy way to push Frisk to get really angry and overprotective. So really, Chara's just being pragmatic. It would probably work if Frisk didn't know that too-soft voice and false warmth from a time when they were the one who was lost and alone, and in need of a friend. It would've worked if they didn't know exactly what it feels like to have someone worm their into their heart and mind in the most traumatizingly literal sense of the word.

Chara's eyes are glowing through their tears and it takes everything in Frisk's power to keep their anger directed at their circumstances instead of at their friend, because that's what they need to pretend to be - angry at everything except for Chara.

The role is getting harder to play by the minute.

"No matter what," Frisk says, keeping their voice low and deep in their chest to spare their hurting throat, "I'm gonna get both me and you out of this alive. I'll do anything. I'll- I'll fight. I'll fight, okay? If I have to, I'll fight." Their voice breaks on the word's edge. This is what Chara wants to hear. It's okay. Frisk is going to make sure they don't end up in a situation where it's the only way out. There must be another way. There must be ...

Chara can't help but smile, it might break the illusion a little bit, but they don't care. Nothing could reassure them more than this. They should have trusted Frisk all along, they know that now. Not because the kid is really reliable, no, but they're weak, Chara has known all along that they were weak, and sure, it was cute when the little thing was making friends and saving the world, but now - now it's an asset, now it's useful again, just like it was in that first handful of timelines that Chara normally tries to forget existed at all.

Frisk is too weak to stray. They were naive enough to come with Chara, just like they were naive enough to let Chara into their soul when they first met. They're kind. Soft. Too trusting for their own good. And it always turns out like this. With the little one broken and blinded by their own
desperation to be enough, to save everyone, no matter what happens to themself.

"Thank you," Chara says. "Thank you for staying with me. And for protecting me. I mean it, Frisk." That's no lie.

The freezing feeling emanating from the other child warms up a little bit. Frisk lets the anger drain from their expression, and when Chara goes to hug them again, they nearly melt into the embrace, slumping against their friend, as though the tension in their muscles was the only thing keeping them upright.

Chara tries to remember what it is big siblings are supposed to do to calm down their baby siblings. They used to be really good at this stuff. They used to play the part perfectly, and then they became it awkwardly, and then they lost it somewhere along the highway, somewhere in a blizzard, somewhere on a moor, by the shadow of a shed, under the weight of words they didn't want to hear, under the weight of a world so cold it froze and broke off that part of them as easily as an iced limb, amputating what little kindness was left in their heart to spare them a fate even worse than emptiness.

Of course, it's easier to tell themself that their lost kindness never existed at all. That there were no happy feelings to lose in the first place, that they were just playing pretend all along. That the little golden heart they threw away to protect themself was only metal and memories. That's a good narrative. They like that narrative.

Frisk is just a tool. A lifeline, and now, a protector.

Hesitantly, Chara stands up on their toes and puts an itty bitty kiss on top of the little one's head. Maybe that's a bit silly, Chara doesn't like kisses at all, and the only reason their mom and dad ever kiss Frisk on top of the head instead of on their forehead is because their parents are huge compared to them, but it still feels right, it feels like something that belongs in their family, it feels like a little bit of home, even here on the side of the mountain, so far from anything they might have built in the short time Chara and Asriel got to spend with their family.

Frisk giggles despite themself, and the sound is so small and bright compared to their words just a moment ago that the mere sound of it is enough to make the burning feeling in Chara's soul ease just a little. The kids part, still smiling at each other, though it's a little exhausted on Frisk's side, and a little shaky on Chara's.

Who were they before they left home? What kinds of people were they before all of this? What were they to their family back home, what were they to each other?

It's becoming harder to remember.

It feels like a very long time ago.

"We'll get through this," Chara says, and they know they're pushing it now, because they need to be scared and Frisk needs to be tough and angry, too tough and too angry to let down their poor, frightened friend, but something inside that rotten heart can't help but want to comfort the sick little kid still clinging to their hands like they're the only thing keeping them from losing their balance and keeling over. Maybe that's just a part of being promoted to tiny parental substitute for a lack of someone more qualified. Chara has always been a good actor, after all. They've been able to play any part up until now.

Frisk takes a deep breath. "Y-yeah. Together. Right?"

Chara holds their hand up. "Together."
Frisk clasps it properly and gives a firm nod, unable to keep down the tiny hopeful smile breaking through the asphalt in their heart and flowering despite it like the world's brightest, most persistent little dandelion.

They resume their climb up the mount, arms slung over each other's shoulders for support.

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Trees fall within the depths of the forest beyond Mt. Ebott, cleaved in half by white-hot lasers tearing through the terrain, searing bark and splintering branches, and leaving nothing but craters and smoking tree stumps in their wake, and though Sans has far more practice with the blasters, Papyrus' are bigger, toothier and more vicious, and they don't stop at merely breathing pure energy, no, they use their bear trap mouths to crunch up the smaller beast skulls like hard candy.

As another trio of blasters comes speeding towards him, Papyrus jumps over their beams and onto the bridges of their skeletal snouts, crossing them like stepping stones through the air, before bringing a rain of femurs down with him as he descends on Sans, who dodges left, right and backwards, and brings his own bone projectiles up to shield himself from each strike of the club-like bone Papyrus has chosen to wield as a sword, blocking one, two, three times, and retaliating with a dozen sharpened fibulas bursting from his own ribcage like the quills of an angry porcupine, and then, within seconds, summoning a scaffold of bones to carry himself backwards and out of the stronger monster's reach.

Papyrus holds back, keeping his distance as he tries to sense the shifts in the air where Sans is prying at the fabric of reality, and his restraint pays off - he feels the electricity in the air before he sees it, and he manages to block the portal with his magic before Sans can pass through it, with the mostly-accidental side-effect of Sans ending up crushed into the wall of bones by the force of his own magic pushing him backwards.

Papyrus cringes and quickly lets the bones shatter and disappear in a cloud of glowing particles, and the scaffolding follows shortly after. Sans lands on the ground with a dull thud, staggering to keep his balance, but seconds later, he's pushing on, his eye blazing as he tears branches from the fallen trees around them to use in place of his usual projectiles. It must be easier, Papyrus guesses. If there's one skill Sans has trained more than the rest of his abilities combined, it's the art of making things move without having to lift a finger himself.

Using the blasters' laser beams to incinerate the branches is a breeze. Regaining the ground Sans tried to put between the two of them is as well. Actually mustering up the courage to strike at his own sibling is more difficult, but he has to, Papyrus needs to protect the kid, and neither of them are actually in danger, he reminds himself, getting hit is going to sting a little at most and that's fine, Sans is tough, he won't-.

His distracted thoughts leave him blind to the magic shimmering in the empty space right behind him. Suddenly, the air disappears from the hollow within his chest.

He loses his grip on the club. It falls to the ground.

Sans freezes where he stands, one hand outstretched, even though the attack is already finished. He... He should open a portal. This is his chance, maybe the only chance he'll get, he needs to get out of
here, but-

He can't. He can't focus. The scene in front of him won't let him.

Slowly, Papyrus' gaze moves down to the glowing femurs boring through his ribcage. Bits of splintered bone fall to the ground. It looks ghastly.

But of course, it's only a matter of seconds before the cracks spreading across his chest plate and the exposed bone underneath close and heal around the wounds, and soon the invading femurs evaporate and his chest closes completely. Of course it does. Sans would never want to hurt him.

It still hurts.

The pain may not be physical, but it still hurts.

Had he been fighting anyone else, he would've been dead where he stood.

He can't let this go on.

Before Sans registers what's happening, he finds himself pinned to a tree, gnarled bark digging into his skull and his back, bones jammed through his chest. No - between his ribs, he realizes. Nothing is broken or cracked. He's just stuck. He could easily get away if he just ...

Papyrus stands over him, painted dark gray against the whiter-than-snow sky, all sharp angles and cinder-like eye-lights and clenched fists, and Sans cringes before he can even process why, shutting his eyes tightly and lifting his arms to shield himself without consciously understanding why.

Something ruminates within that fear. Something small and icy, the seed left over from a memory long rotted away.

But it's been so long. There's nothing for the seed to grow in.

It belongs in a past life.

With effort, Sans manages to lower his defenses and meet the burning stare above him. There's nothing but remorse and hurt within it. No anger, no cruelty, just pure regret.

What else did Sans expect? It's Papyrus. His Papyrus, the one who'd never betray him no matter how angry he was, the one who's careful not to hurt him even when there are no consequences, the one born within this timeline, born with no purpose and no family but his twin brother to lean on, raised in a world that never understood him, though he would give his life to save it.

Of course this Papyrus would never hurt him. Sans can't believe he'd even be afraid of something like that.

"heh ..." Sans lets his eyes fall shut again as the tension drains from his tired body. "alright. you got me." This isn't right. It needs to stop. He can't fight Papyrus, he can't. He thought he could, but ... No, no, there is another way. He just needs to be smart about it.

Pain drums through the inside of his bones. He wishes it was only weariness. He can feel the rot eating through the calcium.

Papyrus looks doubtful at first. "ARE YOU CERTAIN?"

Sans presses a strained laugh out through his teeth, expression twisted in pain. "pretty damn certain."
Papyrus hangs his head, his shoulders falling. He nods. "ALRIGHT. ALRIGHT, GOOD." He doesn't sound like he finds that 'good' at all. More than anything, he looks defeated.

Sans would destroy anyone else who'd ever even think of making his brother look like that. Like the world has become too heavy to bear, even for him. Like that bright little flame burning in his soul is running out of air.

But Sans owes him a better life than this one. He can't give up now.

Papyrus, with a wave of his hand, pulls the bones from the tree with Sans still stuck to them and gently sets him down before letting the magic disintegrate. Sans immediately loses his balance and falls to his knees on the hard earth. Papyrus kneels down and catches him before the rest of him follows suit.

The sparks of the evaporated magic stick to the air, maybe in the frost, and they look like diamonds floating in the clearing by the roadside. They don't look like they belong. Not among craters opening the earth like smoldering wounds, not among seared tree stumps still breathing black smoke into a too-bright sky, not here, in the clearing burned and scarred by the wrath of angry beasts from a forgotten underworld.

Seraphs don't really belong in this world.

"... CAN WE GO HOME NOW?"

Sans shakes his head weakly, though Papyrus doesn't realize that it's in response to his question. "i want to."

Papyrus manages to find one last smile for him. Then he pulls his brother into a hug.

Sans allows himself to close his eyes. Just for a little while. Will this ever happen again? Will he ever have another moment like this with the only family he's got left? Surely this isn't the last timeline. Surely he's going to fail, this can't be the last time they're going to go through this, right? There's no way he could win. He needs to try, he owes it to Papyrus to try, even if it seems hopeless. But this can't be the end.

He realizes that he doesn't want it to be.

He clings to his brother a little tighter, maybe too tightly, and he can feel himself shaking. How selfish can he possibly be? He needs to end this. He needs to do everything in his power to end this, even if it kills him. It's the lesser of two evils he can choose from, he knows that.

"hey. i'm ... i'm sorry. you know that, right?"

"OF COURSE I DO," Papyrus says, not exactly softly, but not entirely unkindly either. "YOU'RE RECKLESS, NOT A VILLAIN!"

Sans hopes he's going to remember that. He hopes Papyrus will hold on to that belief, no matter what happens next.

"i hope you're right."

"WHAT DO YOU MEA-" Papyrus' vision goes blue. He freezes with a strangled gasp.

Slowly, careful not to push him, Sans slips out of his grasp and skips backwards a few steps to admire his own handiwork.
Light blue bones. Crisscrossing through every fragment of the bigger skeletons body. Papyrus can do nothing but stare up at Sans in disbelief. Blue means 'stop', after all.

Sans can't help but send him a sly little grin. "aanyway. it was nice catchin' up."

"SANS, I SWEAR TO-"

With a short salute, Sans steps backwards through a ring of blue electricity and into a darker reality beyond it, and though Papyrus reaches out to cut him off, the trap immediately activates, tearing him limb from limb.

The portal closes with a zzzap.

Even as his fragments are still parting in a cloud of soggy dust and armor shards, Papyrus bolts upright, pulling his parts together in a crackling whirlwind of angry outbursts sounding vaguely like several colorful curse words mashed together into unintelligible gibberish, and as his shape reforms, he grabs the bone out of his own underarm before it reattaches to his body and throws it at the ground in fury.

"UGHHHH, GOD DAMMIT, SANS!" he finally settles on howling at the sky. His brother had better hear it.

Still seething, he finds his phone and calls Alphys up, even as his arm is only partially reformed.

He can only hope she and the kids will be able to get away in time.

***

Toriel is certain that Asgore couldn't possibly have gotten to Newer Home any more slowly. She regrets not having her own driver's license. If she'd been behind the wheel, they would've gotten here in a fraction of the time they did. He's lucky, she thinks. He has already seen their children, he's already been able to hold them and comfort them, and see with his own eyes that they're alive and breathing. Toriel herself can still hardly believe the king hasn't simply cracked under the pressure, kidnapped a random pair of humans and given them his missing children's names.

When they step into the familiar hallway, the house is eerily quiet. Not the faintest sound echoes through the neatly decorated walls, no creaking of floorboards, no quiet brush of sleeping figures tugging their blankets closer around themselves.

Only a deep, silent, choking absence.

Toriel looks over her shoulder at Asgore, who seems to sense it too, his brows lightly furrowed as he looks between the kitchen and the hall to the right.

Nearly afraid of disturbing the silence for fear of pushing this strange stillness out of balance, Toriel calls out, softly, in case the little ones really are just asleep: "Frisk? Chara ..?"

No reply.

Quietly, unusually so for a creature her size, she moves around the corner and follows the hallway to the first door on the left. With trembling hands, she presses the door handle down and lightly pushes
against the door.

Unmade beds, covers pushed aside in a hurry. Pajamas left on the floor. The closet door left half open. The cords and wires extending from behind Asriel's bed - the ones that are supposed to be plugged into his stabilizer - haphazardly bundled up on his bed, as if thrown onto it at the last minute.

Toriel can't even find it in herself to be angry. Or sad. Or fearful, or bitter, or anything else that she should be feeling, anything else a normal person would feel at having arrived too late. She's as empty as the quiet in the house, and for a moment, she can do nothing but stare at the empty beds and wonder if the last century happened at all.

"She promised ..."

Toriel feels the air warmth in the air and hears the crackle of flames before she even turns around.
"Asgore, no-!"

She whips around, grabbing his upper arm to restrain him, but Asgore doesn't even register the attempt as he tears his arm from her grasp and thunders down the hallway, smoke and cinders and bursts of crackling flame billowing out of his nostrils and through his bared teeth.

"Alphys!" The force of his roar makes the walls tremble and the sheer rage searing the edges of it echoes inside the hollow space in Toriel's chest, and if anything could reawaken her own fury, it's the sound of her ex-husband's anger, and she chases after him, demanding he calm down and listen to her, though he doesn't hear a word she's saying.

The boss monsters stomp through the hall, and at the bottom of the staircase, Sans presses his back into the corner, praying neither of them spot him. Okay, so - well, the kids aren't here, it sounds like, that does not sound like a happy reunion up there, that sounds like the prequel to a house burning down, or possibly an entire city laid to waste, and Sans does not wanna mess with that.

Where'd the humans go? Did Asriel and Alphys go with them? Or did they chase after them ..? When he's sure the other monsters have moved on to the kitchen, he leans away from the wall a little so he can look upstairs. He needs to go look for clues in the kids' room, though he has no idea how he's supposed to do that with two angry dragon goats stomping around up there. Ugh, why'd Papyrus have to go and distract him for so long? Things are never gonna be easy, are they?

The heavy footsteps and one-sided arguing grows louder again, and Sans presses into the corner again, trying to remind himself that he doesn't need to breathe, he could just stop, if only that stupid reflex would let him, and he closes his eyes and grits his teeth, trying to remind his body that it's pretty much as dead as they come and needs to chill with the not-actual-breathlessness and not-actual-adrenaline. It doesn't work.

There's a pause in the sounds from the hall. Then:

"Toriel, look at this."
"... Where did you fi-"
"Pinned on the door."

Silence.

"I take back everything I just told you. If you feel the need to rampage in Doctor Alphys' general direction, be my guest."
"I was perhaps thinking something more along the lines of a sternly-worded question regarding the location of my missing children?"

"Question her? With the broad side of a sword?"

A sigh, shaky, like a disguised sob. "No ... No, you're right." His voice cracks on the last word.

There's a sound like paper crinkling and then the door opens before slamming again, leaving the house to its dead silence. Sans stays put for another moment, waiting, listening. Nothing. Not a sound. They must have left. Finally.

What did they find?

In the next second, he's upstairs in the hall, gaze flicking over the decorated room. Nothing seems out of the ordinary. Not a picture hangs askew on the walls, though he swears he can still feel the ground shake where the boss monsters walked.

His eyes come to rest on a ball of paper seemingly thrown on the ground without a second thought, despite the fact that it's still smoking a little bit, hues of glowing orange playing at its edges. He picks it up and unfurls it, squeezing the little sparks to death between his fingers, just in case not everything in Asgore's house has been fireproofed just yet. Sure, it's been six months since he moved here, but it's Asgore. Poor guy's always too busy for his own good.

The note is hard to decipher - Alphys' handwriting is an alphabet all of its own - and the contents of it are vague, clearly scribbled down in haste. Apparently there was an incident of some kind. Frisk got ill, Asriel and Alphys left them with Fallen to go prepare a healing spell, the humans vanished. It isn't much help. He pockets it anyway. Briefly, he considers going to pick Alphys up before he chases after the kids again, she really doesn't deserve to face Toriel and Asgore on her own, but Undyne's with her, right? The note says so, anyway. He shivers at the thought of anyone trying something when Undyne's around. Even the king and the former queen should know better than to challenge her.

Come to think of it - he should find Fallen before Undyne does. If she got in his way ...

Soundlessly, he moves down the hallway, gaze travelling across the walls, the floors, the doors up ahead. He gingerly steps over a stack of papers scattered across the floor - drawings, he finds out, when he crouches down to get a closer look, with subject matters that make a chill run down his spine. He doesn't stick around to study them closer. They give him the creeps. These kids need help, man.

Getting back to his feet, he continues to the first door on the left, left open by Toriel when she went to chase after Asgore, but just as he moves to go inside, a sharp riiriiriiring splits the silence, nearly making him jump out of his non-existent skin.

Breathing shallow, sweat appearing on his forehead, he freezes up, listening for the source of the noise.

Asgore's room. It's coming from Asgore's room further down the hall.

It's probably nothing. He's the king, plenty of people call the king, right? It's probably just someone who wants to know about ... whatever, things kings know about. Taxes. Whatever. Or maybe it's Alphys calling to see if he's come home yet. Or Papyrus calling to tattle. It could be anything!

... Yet Sans gets the feeling that this 'anything' certainly isn't 'nothing.'
Next thing he knows, he's passing Asriel and Fallen's room, and then Frisk's room, until he arrives at
the door to Asgore's.

_Riiiiiiiiing_ the phone repeats.

Sans casts a glance over his shoulder. But of course, no one's coming. He kind of wishes someone
would stop him. He's got a bad feeling about this. So why can't he bring himself to go back?

He heads inside and pulls the handset down from the phone body on the wall, nervously twisting the
cord.

"hello?"

The person on the other end of the line takes a deep breath. When they speak, their voice is low and
airy, resigned almost, and far, far colder than Sans has ever heard it before.

"They are at the mountain. I told them to destroy the extractor. You can make it there before they do
so, correct?"

Sans holds the phone away from himself for a moment, squinting at it in disbelief. Then he holds it to
his head again, clutching it with both hands. "... river?"

"Though he means well, the angel of death still seeks to fulfill his destiny. This time, he will not be
satisfied with emptying the Underground. He does not understand what he is about to unleash."

This makes no sense. Why does this one always have to talk in riddles? Whoever's providing free
manuals to this reality seriously needs to find someone a little less fond of cryptic advice to share
information through.

"river. dude. the 'angel of death' or whatever is a 'them.'" Just 'cause the kid's destined to literally end
the world as they know it, doesn't mean you gotta be rude yourself. Sans leans on the wall,
impatiently toying with the cord. "and i kinda get the feeling they're too busy running for their life to
stop and mow the flowers right now. the hell are you on about?"

"Get to the mountain," the River Person repeats. "Stop the humans. Set things right. And do not let
the angel see you. He is lost and I fear that when the time comes, he will choose wrong. Please. You
still have the power to save us all."

Sans stops short in the middle of twirling the cord and it swings back and forth like a pendulum until
it stills. He opens his mouth to reply, but decides against the first thing that comes to mind. What, he's
just going to tell them that it's hopeless? To give up before they've even tried? There's no need to put
that burden on someone else. Sans may wish that someone stronger and less messed up in the head
had gotten this job, but it's his now and there's no reason to go and make other people miserable just
because he is. What good would it do? It's better if everyone else stays hopeful. At least they'll have
that, then. Hope.

He nods, mostly to himself. "okay," he says. "okay, i'll try. i'll do whatever it takes. you don't gotta
worry 'bout a thing, i'll take care of it." He runs a hand over his face, trying to ward off the rush of
pain rattling his skull before it even shows up. "thanks for the tip. i'll go after 'em."

"That is all I ask. Please be careful."

Click.

Sans lowers the phone, staying where he is for a moment, afraid of losing his balance if he pulls
away from the wall. He can feel the infection in his marrow grow and consume, beating like a pulse, making his bones brittle. He's got a lot of things to thank his old man for, but this - this isn't one of them.

He hangs the phone on the wall again, wiping sweat from his brow in the same movement. He can't afford to slow down now. He can't afford to worry about himself. He needs to use this, use it to his advantage, even if it kills him. There is no way around it. He needs to stop Fallen before it's too late, even if it seems hopeless. He's got to try.

Though he can't help but wonder if the River Person was talking about the demon after all. They referred to Fallen and Frisk as 'humans', so the 'angel' ... Could they be talking about someone else? There is a third child, after all. Perhaps there are still things that Sans doesn't know about Asriel Dreemurr.

He's not going to stick around to learn more, though. Time is running out.

Summoning his strength, he pushes away from the wall, focusing on keeping the world moderately upright. When the rotten pulse inside threatens to be too heavy to carry, he demands it help carry him forward instead, and it does - though it makes a noise like a dying Lesser Dog echo in his aching head, it does actually keep him upright. Huh. Maybe he should use this power more often.

He doesn't sense his left eye glowing and sparking in its socket as he wills a shortcut into existence in the air in front of him, the light stuttering like a bad tv signal.

Neither does he feel the color switch from neon blue to a dark, muddled red.

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Stammering and rubbing her eyes under her glasses to ease her exhaustion, Alphys explains the children's disappearance to Papyrus over the phone, and as Undyne's black BMW starts the steep climb up the mountain path, Alphys can hear the engine of Papyrus' own car on his side of the conversation.

Another call interrupts the conversation and Alphys tells him to meet them on top of Mt. Ebott, before answering the other person.

Toriel impatiently clicks her claws against the arm rest by her seat in Asgore's van as it speeds across the bridge connecting Newer Home to the mainland. She's about to hang up when Alphys finally answers her call.

"T-T-Toriel, I-I'm s-so sorry, I didn't-"

"Where are my children, Alphys?"

The tone in her voice, like a massive silhouette moving just beneath the surface of a still forest lake, is nearly enough to make the monster on the other end of the line drop her phone.

Far above, the humans ascend the mountainside, pushing through bushes lined with thorns where the vengeful forest has reclaimed the path, helping each other up ledges where the slope of the rocks is too steep to walk on. They encounter a wide stream, and though Frisk only needs a small running start to cross it, Chara nearly slips and falls. Frisk catches them at the last moment and helps them up
the curve of the terrain. And okay, sure, they get mud in their shoes and nearly trip themself, but Chara didn't fall face-first into a semi-frozen stream of gooey, muddy water, so it's cool. They complain about it anyway. It makes Chara laugh. Which makes Frisk laugh in turn, because the little jerk's snort-y giggle is really contagious, and also it's nice to see them being a little more cheerful.

Neither of them know about the monster stalking through the woods at the mountain's peak, the sputtering glow of his eyes the only source of light in the deepest, darkest part of the overgrowth.

Pulling information out of Alphys is like pulling teeth, but eventually, Toriel tells Asgore to head for the entrance to the Underground.

Asriel turns his phone off and stuffs it in his backpack next to the stabilizer. He doesn't need any more reports. He knows perfectly well where his friends are headed. He knows what they're up to.

Alphys prays they'll find the kids before Sans does. Or perhaps, that they'll find Sans before Toriel and Asgore find him. If they figure out what he's planning ...

Frisk and Chara pause halfway up the mountain, casting one last glance in the direction of the town below. Then they look to each other. The last time they climbed the mountain, they were alone.

Not this time, though. Not this time.

Far beyond Mt. Ebott, the River Person's boat sinks back into the water where it belongs, and the River Person cranes their neck, hoping whichever gods still bother with this world will be able to forgive them for stealing one of their own from their ranks.

Somewhere, a scientist crashes on her colleague's couch, safe in the knowledge that the two of them helped save the world last night.

Somewhere else, a team of doctors and nurses fight to bring a dead man back to life.

In a third place, a monster sets a cup of tea next to a human anxiously flicking through news channels, hoping to catch just a glimpse of the child who escaped on her watch.

In a school in the big city, a young man - no, a boy, rather - averts his eyes from a picture in a history book depicting a lookalike of himself getting shot at a protest.

And on the path to the mountaintop, the heroine feels everyone's hearts beating as one.

***

There's no snow on the mountaintop. Which is weird, because the forest on the other side of it is full of snow and even the town at its foot has big hills of the stuff scattered on street corners and grimy, downtrodden sleet in the gardens, still sticking around after several days of no real snowfall. Maybe the magic in the mountain warms it from the inside out. Maybe it's the Core.

Not that it feels warm. Frisk is pretty sure the mud lining the ankles of their jeans is frozen stuck to their skin. Next to them, Chara breathes white clouds into the air and watches them rise into the even whiter sky. They're probably pretending to be a dragon, Frisk thinks. Or a boss monster. Yeah, that's probably it. A fire elemental, just like their mom and dad and brother. Frisk imitates them, though their own clouds aren't quite as impressive, despite the illness boiling their insides.
The road swerves to the right. Chara moves to follow it, but Frisk grabs their sleeve, making them stay put.

"Wait," they say, and with a thumb, they point over their shoulder in the opposite direction, into the darkness among the trees huddled there. "Come this way, we shouldn't go through the main entrance, I think."

Chara casts a nervous glance over their shoulder. They wouldn't mind leaving the open road, actually. They don't feel safe in open areas anymore. If there's anything being on the run has taught them, it's that it's better to see your enemy before they see you. Nodding to their companion they turn around to follow them to the trees.

Something's watching them. Chara can feel eyes pinned to them.

"There's this one path into the Underground that's a little different," Frisk explains as they lead the way. "We're not really supposed to use it, it's kind of closed off. But it's not locked, so I think we're gonna be okay."

Chara takes their hand for comfort, looking over their shoulder again, gaze flicking over the skeletal forest surrounding them to all sides, and the road leading in the other direction.

Frisk shrugs. "It's an emergency. So it's okay if we break the rules. If mom gets mad, just tell her it was my idea, okay?"

Chara can feel their heart skip a beat when Frisk leaves the clearing's white sunshine and crosses into the long, blade-sharp shadows bleeding out of the trees' roots.

"It won't hurt if we take a shortcut."

Something seizes Chara's soul, stopping them dead in their tracks.

The choked sound in their throat makes Frisk start.

"funny. i thought the same thing."

Frisk doesn't want to turn around. Maybe if they don't turn around, they won't see him. Maybe if they don't turn around, maybe if they don't see him, maybe if they just keep holding on to Chara's hand, the world will stop and let them breathe, just give them a minute to breathe before the next thing happens, but no, they don't think any number of minutes could prepare them for this. They'll never be ready. It's been so long and they don't want to be here again, they don't want to face him like this, them on Chara's side and him on everyone else's, they never wanted this to happen again, they swore it would never happen again, and yet here they are, and here he is, and they can feel Chara's nails in their skin and their terror in their soul.

Slowly, they turn around.

Chara's clutching their chest. Red light streams out between their fingers, a splash of color in the middle of the forest and mountain's whites and dark grays.

Movements slow and forced, like they've forgotten how to unclench their muscles, Chara pulls their hand from their chest, and sure enough, there it is - a warm red glow in the shape of a heart shining through both flesh and bone, skin and shirt, as saturated as a sunset and as striking as a full blood moon.

Chara lifts their eyes from their soul to Frisk, pure horror in their wide eyes, and behind them, Frisk
"not really the most appealing of days, this one," he says, seemingly more to himself than to the kids. "kinda bland, if you ask me. still, you gotta appreciate what you get. 's not every timeline you get to see a brand spankin' new day, fresh out the oven." He huffs a laugh as he stops a few yards from the humans, the grin on his face unnaturally wide. "i wouldn't mind waitin' around for a better one, though. what do you think? you wanna take your chances with tomorrow? or are you going to keep doing the same days over again and again hoping things are somehow gonna turn out differently?"

Finally, his gaze comes to rest on the back of Chara's head. There's something different about him. Something in the hollows of his eyes, darker than normal, the lights within them flickering like a flame almost out of air, and there's something about the stiffness of his movements, like he's in pain, but long past the point where he's gotten used to it.

In the harsh colorless sunlight, his skinless features stand out all the more. For the first time in their life, Frisk can't shake the feeling that their skeleton friend looks truly, utterly dead.

Chara doesn't face Sans. They can't, they're afraid of what they'll do if they see him standing there laughing in their face like he's already won, like their defeat is somehow inevitable, like it's only a matter of time now. They can feel the square blade in their pocket burn, but no, no they don't want this, they know they'd regret it if they hurt him, they only want to be free. It's their one goal, not going down like this. They don't want to get hurt, but they don't want to hurt him either.

"Why can't you just leave me alone?" they manage, though their voice is wavering. They can feel the fear drumming through Frisk's soul, but they ignore it. This isn't about Frisk.

Sans struggles to keep his focus on the demon. He won't look at Frisk, he knows exactly what he'll see if he does. He can't afford to get distracted. He needs to deal with Fallen, not get emotional about the little human that's been missing for so, so long and who must've been through so many things he doesn't even want to think about.

Now is not the time to start caring. Frisk has died in the crossfire of his and Fallen's war plenty of times. He should be used to the little one getting hurt by now. He needs to get himself together.

Tearing his attention away from the child, he replays Fallen's question in his head one more time. "well," he says then, "sounds a lot like something i asked you a long time ago, don't it?"

Chara turns just enough to look him in the eye, they can't help it. "Is the answer the same too, then?" they ask, venom dripping from their words, the coldness in their eyes melting like heated metal into pure hatred. "Because you can, and because you can, you have to?"

Sans' grin grows a little forced. At first, he has no idea how to reply. That's ... not entirely wrong. That's actually pretty spot-on. Huh. Whaddaya know. The little hellbeast has a point.

He shrugs. "yeah. yeah, i think that sums it up pretty well. you're pretty sharp for someone who somehow came to the conclusion that ending literally everyone but yourself would make you feel less shitty about your own situation. funny how that works out." He comes closer. Slowly. "there's a key difference though. reverse suicide ain't gonna fix your brain, kid. ending the world won't make things better for you. killing us won't make you happy. but me?" The lights in his eyes go out. "i'm gonna be a lot more cheery with you gone."

Chara whips around, ready to defend themself, but before they can react, Frisk darts out of their
shadow and puts themself between them and Sans, arms spread to block the monster's path.

"Sans, stop," they beg, voice so small it nearly disappears even in the complete silence, and he's forced to look at them now, he's forced to see their hands shaking, their brows furrowed in concentration at the mere act of staying upright, the tremble in their lower lip. They look like they're about to cry. "Please, just- just let them go, okay? They're not gonna hurt anyone if you don't give them a reason to, so just stop, please-!"

"get out of the way, frisk," Sans interrupts without missing a beat as he advances. He can't let it get to him. He can't stop to think, not now, or it's going to be the end of him.

"Is that the best you can do?" Chara says to Frisk, keeping their voice low and their burning stare on their enemy. "You talked an entire nation into accepting monsters with open arms, but as soon as your objective is to protect me, you can't manage more than a 'please'?"

Sans has to concentrate to summon his magic.

Frisk has to concentrate not to let the force of their fury leak through the soul link.

"you should go home," Sans says, ignoring Chara. "your mom's been really worried. let me handle this."

They've already talked about this. It feels like a lifetime ago, but they have. Frisk stands by what they said back then. They can't let him hurt their friend, no matter how much Chara has hurt everyone else. They just can't.

*Do you know how much you come to care about a person when you feel their pain for so long?*

Frisk shakes their head. "I already told you no. You'll kill them!"

Sans groans and rolls his eyes. "so what? even if i do, you think this is the last we're gonna see of 'em? nothing's been able to kill 'em off for good up until now. why would this timeline be any different from the others?"

Waving for Chara to start moving, Frisk backs away from the monster coming closer and closer, keeping themself squarely between their friends. "B-because you're going to shut down the system. If they can't reset, no one can. That's the wh-whole point, right?" Their tone of voice is growing brighter, anxiety threatening to swallow it up completely, but they fight it, because this is Sans, he's their friend, he'd never hurt them, no matter how mad he looks, he'd never, ever hurt them, and they need to defend Chara, they need to be useful-!

"oh, they'll find a way, won't they?" Sans says with a disgusted sneer. "they always do. something's gonna happen, something's gonna screw it all up again, just like it always does. but- but maybe if we keep trying ..." He sounds breathless. Like he's already exhausted from the countless timelines he's so sure he's going to have to face yet. For a second, the fury in his expression wavers. "maybe if we keep trying, someday- someday it's gotta stick, right? it has to. i can't stop now, i'm so close ..!"

Chara's terror washes over Frisk's soul, adding their growing panic to their sibling's, and Frisk can barely push through it, they can barely hold a thought long enough to form a sentence. "Sans, it doesn't have to end like this!"

"go home, frisk."

"Don't tell them what to do!" Chara cuts in. The look Sans shoots in their direction is enough to make them wince. Then they realize something. Isn't it kind of ... *strange* that he hasn't attacked them
yet? Why did he even bother to talk to them at all? He could've just killed Frisk and pushed Chara through a shortcut to the DT extractor. Chara thinks his words over one more time.

you should go home. let me handle this.

go home, frisk.

Then it dawns on them.

Sans stops by the bend of the road and the ground shatters in a half-circle around him, glowing white femurs sprouting from the frozen earth.

"I'm done with giving up," he says, a dark echo clinging to his words. "I've neglected my purpose for too long. You're a problem, Fallen. And it's about time someone solved you."

Magic springs to life within his skull, dyeing the inside of his left eye socket an electric neon blue. Realizing what's about to happen, Frisk turns their back to him and pulls Chara into a tight embrace, trying to hold on to them and shield them with their body all at the same time.

The noise of a roaring engine splits the air.

Sans' magic stutters and goes out, and he barely manages to jump back before the BMW charging up the road flattens him against the mountain.

Tires screeching, the car drifts around in a full three-sixty-degree circle before coming to a halt right between Sans and the humans, the massive vehicle a barricade right in the middle of the road.

The doors on the humans' side burst open and Asriel runs to his friends, Alphys right behind him.

"Are you alright?!" Asriel asks, grabbing both of his friends by the shoulders.

Frisk casts one look between Asriel and the car, before throwing their arms around their brother and pulling Chara in with them. Chara stiffens for a moment, they and Asriel weren't exactly on good terms the last time they talked and perhaps they shouldn't ... Aw, to hell with it. They close their arms tightly around both of their little siblings and shut their eyes, trying to keep themself from shaking. They don't want the other kids to know how scared they are, even though there's no way Frisk won't be able to feel it through the soul link.

"Y-you're okay!" Alphys breathes a sigh of equal parts relief and frustration. "I wish you'd- ugh, h-how are we s-s-supposed to protect you if you k-k-keep running off like that-!

Sans glares at her across the hood of the car, fists clenched, something like a growl forming in the back of his throat, but then a click interrupts his thoughts.

The door on the driver's side opens. Sans involuntarily takes a step back.

And there she is.

Red hair dancing on a stray breeze, wild as a forest fire, yellowed fangs bared in a gruesome gash of a grin, more like a weapon rack than a smile, her one golden eye narrowed and fixed on him, the slit pupil blown the way a cat's would be upon spotting a new toy.

Undyne slams the car door behind her, making him jump, and then she squares her broad shoulders, opening a webbed claw at her side. A spear of pure ice heeds her call.

"Hey asshole!" She rests the spear over her shoulder, grin widening. "I got a bone to pick with you."
"heh heh." Sans swallows audibly. "g-good one ..."

Chapter End Notes

Because I want to release the last two chapters at the same time, I'm not completely sure when I'll be able to have the next update done. This story means a lot to me, so I want it to be the best it can be. I hope you'll all keep commenting, as well as chatting with me over on tumblr (thesketcherlass.tumblr.com) in the meantime! Comments and asks really help get the creative juices flowing for me, your feedback helps a ton!
If the finale doesn't deserve a title that's both a double-pun and has three different meanings, one of which can apply in two different ways, then I don't know what does.

It's the end. I don't even know what to say, except that I can hardly believe I actually managed to create an ending that 1. concludes a huge story that I've been working on for almost a year, 2. concludes it exactly how I planned from the beginning, 3. somehow managed to grow even bigger, more nuanced and more meaningful to me than I ever thought it would.

I can barely describe how I feel right now. I'm just so happy that I managed to finish this story with more emotion and heartfelt dedication than I thought I'd be able to after working on it for so long. I managed to finish this just a few days before I'm finally moving out of a bad home situation and out into the world for the first time, and I don't think I've felt this happy and hopeful and emotional since I was a little kid. Writing this, coupled with knowing I've finally got a future ahead of me, feels like a complete turning point in my life and I'm just so happy that everything has worked out in the end.

These chapters were beta'd by Starfog only, but I still want to give a huge, huge thanks to both them and ShtiyaJust4You for helping me out all throughout this journey. Not only were the two of you helpful, beyond what I can properly express, in your feedback, support and sheer enthusiasm for this story that means so much to me - you're also just friggin amazing people and I'm so thankful I get to spend time with you, period.

On a similar note, I want to thank everyone who has taken the time to comment on STIAA in its entirety. This story has been extremely personal for me, writing it helped me through one of the worst times in my life, and while sharing something that's so close to my heart with the whole world has been a little anxiety-inducing sometimes, all your kindness and encouragement has made it all worth it. I hope the word count on these last two chapters isn't too overwhelming, and that you'll still want to comment one last time. <3

Finally, a gentle reminder that this story does warn for violence, most of which comes into play here in the finale. I'm sorry in advance. As always, I can only ask sensitive souls to trust me here.

And without further ado - welcome to the finale.

"Frisk, Chara, run!" Undyne barks over her shoulder without taking her eye off Sans. "We'll catch up with you when we're done here." She tightens her grip on her spear and the ice creaks under her strength, the sound as deep and grating as the crunch of a tooth breaking in your mouth.

The humans move away from Asriel, who can barely find it in himself to let them go. But no, Undyne's right, they need to get to safety, that's more important, he knows that. They need to get out of here, they need to get far, far away from Sans. With one last look at both of them, he lets them go, and they turn around and make a run for the safety of the forest's shadows.
A second before they disappear into the woods, Frisk looks back at him, giving him the smallest of reassuring smiles. Asriel feels something small and warm, like hope, fluttering in his chest, but once he realizes it's there, its wings ice over and drop into the pit of his stomach.

Expendable. He decided that Frisk was expendable. That Chara meant more to him after all, that he'd rather fight for their survival than for the very reality Frisk exists in.

Does Frisk know? Did they ever expect anything else? He can almost feel the lockets hanging side by side around his neck heat up and sear the fur under his shirt and jacket, revolting against him for his betrayal.

When she's sure the kids are out of sight, Undyne takes a step towards Sans, and he can't help but back up as she comes closer, fear gripping a heart that isn't there and stealing the breath from his just as nonexistent lungs. He keeps his magic at the edge of his fingertips, but his shaking hands make the energy flicker just out of his reach.

"Hmph. Never thought I'd see the day," Undyne drawls, eye narrowed to a glowing yellow slit, one claw drawing infinity symbols in the surface of her spear. "Pity. I was really starting to come around. Thought I had you wrong the whole time. That maybe you really were doing your best, just more subtle than everyone else. You're Papyrus' brother, after all, I mean ... hah. I wouldn't've been surprised if you actually were a better person all this time and you were just hiding it really well." Her grin turns sour, scornful. "But nah. It's not like that at all, is it?" Somewhere in her cold expression, Sans sees a glimmer of that same disappointment that he saw in his brother's eyes. It stings like a wound reopened. With force, he pushes the feeling away, struggling to remind himself why he's here, what he needs to do, why he's done all the things he's done.

It's so much more difficult with the heroine of monsterkind looking at him like that. Like he's a criminal, something to be taken down and dealt with.

She's ... not entirely wrong, is she?

Sans can feel his sins crawling on his back.

"undyne-" Sans takes a deep breath. He may not need air to live, but he does need it to speak. "listen to me. that kid isn't human. there's more to it and i swear i'll explain afterwards, but right now, you're just gonna have to take my word for it and-"

"Your word!?" The knight throws her head back and huffs a ragged laugh, before taking the weapon off her shoulder and ramming its blade into the ground, where a jagged pattern of cracks fracture the hard surface. "What kind of worth does your word have when you're the one threatening to take away everyone's hopes and dreams all over again? Do you even realize what these kids mean to everyone? You gave our people closure to the most violent, meaningless tragedy we've had to endure since our banishment! You think you can just take that back? You think I'm gonna let you!"

Sans can feel Asriel and Alphys watching him from the other side of the car, the child glaring at him with pure hatred in his fearful eyes, the scientist by his side looking remorseful more than anything else. Sans can't be angry at her for telling on him. Not really. He knows perfectly well just how bad this must look from her perspective.

It was selfish of him, trying to keep the truth away from everyone just so he could have a few more days with them before they all turned on him for good. They all deserved better. Especially her.

"Tell me," Undyne continues, her voice falling to a growl so deep he can feel it reverberate within his chest. She pulls her spear from the frozen ground and comes closer, forcing him to back away.
"How can someone like you be related to someone like Papyrus? Huh? Tell me how someone can spend so many years with a person like that and still turn out like this?" She gestures at him, dismissively, disgusted. "Willing to mutilate a child's soul just 'cause they used to be a problem? Turning on your family and lying to your friends? How could you do this to them? Do you know how much Toriel relies on you? Do you know how much Asgore trusts you? I trusted you and believe you me, that ain't an easy privilege to win!"

Sans has made his peace. He knew this day would come. When everyone finally found out what he'd been doing all this time. That he was the reason the children disappeared. That because of him, one of them might never come back home.

He has made his peace. And he's not backing down now. But man, right now - he wishes it was already done and over with so he wouldn't have to worry about surviving this.

Undyne's massive shadow falls over him and she comes to a stop right in front of him, a tower of wrath and spikes and shining scales looming over him. "I get it, you know. It's only been a couple months since I was the same as you. I didn't hate any single person, no, but I hated humans. Even Alphys' 'human history' couldn't change that fact, no matter how cool it made 'em look. I hated them with every fiber of my being. I couldn't ever forgive them for what they did to my people. What they did to my family. But ... times change. And holding grudges ain't gonna fix what happened."

This close, he can see the white clouds of breath carrying her words into the sky and taste the frost emanating from her spear, and the air around her drops in temperature as if the water within it is swearing its allegiance to her, ready to come to her aid if she needs the extra power.

"Let this go. Or I'm gonna have to make you."

"I get what you're trying to say here," Sans replies slowly, choosing each word carefully. Something tells him he's only one wrong word choice from obtaining a shiny new fashion statement in the form of a spear in his sternum. "but you don't know the whole story. there's something you should know about them. something you, uh ... probably won't like very much."

His enormous adversary gets down on one knee so she's at eye level with him, her crooked fangs inches from his face. Sans wills himself to stay put. Her breath smells like raw meat.

"Try me."

For a long moment, he can do nothing but stare back at the warrior glaring him down, trying frantically to remember how to put words together in the correct order.

Death has never been permanent before, he reminds himself. And if he doesn't find Fallen in time, his death definitely won't be. So what's he worrying about? He shouldn't be worried, there's no need to be worried, he should stop being-

"you really don't remember anything, do you?" The question stumbles out before he can stop himself.

"What are you talking about?"

"from the previous timelines. it's all gone." Maybe this is exactly what she needs to hear. Him being honest for once. "it's funny. sometimes i hoped ... heh. i guess i hoped that maybe some of you remembered a little bit. just ... bits and pieces. but if you remembered, you wouldn't be protecting them now. not you."

He can feel Undyne's slit pupil roam his face. He doesn't think she's ever seen him like this before.
Genuine. Maybe that's kind of shitty of him, in hindsight. But telling the truth never worked out before. Either no one believed him and thought he was ill and needed help, or they did believe him and he ended up scaring them without having any idea of how to use what he knew to help them. Telling the truth never helped anyone. But this time, it might just be his only option.

"the kid you know as 'chara' ... they're long gone. and they never came back. that thing following frisk around, the one that i brought to life - that's a creature me and all the other sans-es in all the other universes know as 'fallen.'"

At first, he doesn't realize where the light in the corner of his eye is coming from. In those precious few milliseconds, he wonders if it's the sun reflecting in the window shield. Then he hears Undyne shout something he can't comprehend, and in the same instance, her steely grip closes around his upper arm, and when she jumps to the side, she pulls him with her.

A fireball explodes in the spot where the two of them stood less than a heartbeat ago.

Undyne releases Sans and whirls around, spear raised, only to find-

One clawed hand outstretched, lips drawn back in a beastly snarl, crouched on the hood of Undyne's car like a living gargoyle - Asriel Dreemurr, surrounded by sputtering, hungry flames.

"Shut up," the boss monster hisses, and the flames light up in tandem with his words. "Just- Just sh-shut up."

The River Person's words echo in Sans' mind. Though he means well, the angel of death still seeks to fulfill his destiny.

"Asriel, no!" Alphys runs up next to him and tries to reach him through the fire, but the circling flames sear the edge of her sleeve and she yanks her hand back, unable to do anything but watch as the inferno grows taller, angrier. "Wh-wh-what are you doing?"

"He's lying," Asriel says without missing a beat as he turns his fiery gaze on Alphys, making her jump. She can't tell if there's fire playing inside the magenta of his iris or if it's just a reflection. "He's trying to manipulate you, don't listen to him!"

Both Alphys and Undyne immediately turn their attention back to Sans, who takes another step back without meaning to.

The stab of regret in the little boss monster's heart is so dull that he barely registers it at all. If lying is what it'll take to protect Chara, then so be it. Sans lied to him in order to trick him into helping him find the humans the first time around, didn't he? Or maybe he just didn't tell the whole truth. Asriel doesn't care. Sans is the reason his friends ran away and Sans is the reason Asriel almost lost them again, so why should he care what happens to him?

"oh no, nuh-uh, don't you start with me, kid," Sans says, pointing sharply at Asriel. "i'm warnin' you here, you don't wanna go down that route again."

Doesn't he? He isn't sure. He was awful in the past and no, he didn't want to go down this path again. But he had no choice. Sans made sure he didn't have a choice. What, he's supposed to just watch passively from the sidelines while this guy destroys the person he cares about the most? Asriel is supposed to just accept losing them again?

It was his own fault he lost them the first time around. He's not going to let them go ever again. He'd rather lose his soul than lose Chara, if that's what it takes.
Maybe that's what's happening. Maybe the last seams on his soul are finally coming undone. The thought makes his eyes sting.

He can feel the machine in his back heat up. Hesitantly, he lets the fire around him die down and he lowers his hand. He doubts he'll be able to take Sans down all on his own, at least not without messing himself up in the process. Fortunately, he knows other tactics beyond brute force.

"Please," he says, and then he looks over at Alphys, letting her see the tears welling up in his eyes and the desperation he barely feels anymore. He learned this little trick from Chara. It's only fitting. "Please don't trust him. Chara needs us, if we don't stop Sans, they're going to end up dead, or—something even worse." He hates crying in front of other people. But he isn't crying because he's weak this time. Quite the opposite. "I missed them so much, please don't let him take them away again!"

Alphys has no reason not to believe him. He's been honest with her from the start, even telling her when he was keeping secrets and when there were things he couldn't share. And Undyne... she's biased. He's the son of the man who practically helped raise her, and Asriel himself is a symbol of hope to the people she dedicated her life to protecting.

And it works. Just as expected. Both of the scaly monsters look at Sans with something between disbelief and hurt. Like they're trying to say - isn't it enough that you're threatening to hurt a helpless kid? Do you have to lie to our faces too?

Sans doesn't look at either of them. His attention is chained to the kid playing them like a fiddle. The magic he had such a difficult time reaching just a moment ago rushes back to him now and he can barely keep it from worming its way into reality, because this is Fallen's tactics Asriel is using, this is exactly what that little freak show does, this is exactly what they've always done. Lied. Manipulated. Used the face of the kid they stole and corrupted a century ago to play with people's heads and make them play out their roles exactly according to script. Of course they'd be a bad influence on someone as sad and desperate as Asriel. And of course he'd go on to cause trouble in their name. Sans should've seen this coming.

"you don't wanna be playin' with fire right now," he says to Asriel, edging away from Undyne and trying to determine which area in the mountain would be best to shortcut to. "not today." Have the humans reached the Underground yet? Would he be able to cut them off in New Home? "stakes are a little too high for me to mess around right now, don't start something you'll regret."

Asriel isn't sure he'll regret it. Which isn't very nice, because surely he should regret getting into a fight with someone who's only trying to save the world, but he doesn't care. If it's for Chara, he doesn't care.

... That's another bad sign, isn't it?

Asriel shakes his head and lets the fire circling him flare up again. "I don't think so. I'm sorry."

Sans huffs. So be it. With a wave of his hand, he summons femurs from the ground once again, and this time, he lets a pair of blasters join them, the drooling beast heads fading into existence on either side of him.

Asriel stands up and the fireballs turn almost liquid in form, streaming in rivers around him and pouring into the shape of a pair of flaming wings connected directly to his stabilizer, draining the machine's power right from the battery.

Alphys looks up at the child ready to fight to protect his best friend, and back to Sans, willing to fight
to save the world. She doesn't want to hurt either of them. But when she brought Asriel back, she made a promise. She swore she'd protect him and do everything in her power to give him the second chance he deserves. And if Sans really is lying ... She opens her claws, letting lightning bolts spring to life in her open palms. They don't have to hurt him, she tells herself. Just distract him long enough for the humans to complete their task.

Undyne twirls her spear, standing between Sans and the others, her cold iron glare nailed to the seraph in front of her. "We'll see who's gonna regret this by the end of it ..!"

She's the true heroine of the story. Sans knew this from the start. And she's not the only one. Alphys, Asriel, Papyrus ... They're all heroes, in their own ways. But none of them remember the things that Sans remembers. And none of them can do what he's predestined to do.

That's okay. A permanent ending needs people like them. It doesn't need people like him. This is what his entire existence has lead up to. This is all he was created to do. Once this is over, he will be obsolete anyway. It won't matter if he's alive or dead. The others will live on and have the futures they were meant to have from the beginning.

He needs to be okay with that. He needs to be okay with sacrificing everything so the others will be okay. And for a single, excruciating moment, he's certain that he is.

Asriel strikes first. The others follow suit.

Sans is perfectly aware that he doesn't stand a chance.

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Chara tears through the overgrowth, twigs catching in their hair, branches breaking under the soles of their shoes, with only the blur of brown and light green in front of them to lead the way through the maze of tangled bushes, dry, brittle vines and gray tree trunks. When a thorn bush snags on their sweater and holds them back, Frisk is by their side before Chara even realizes that they've turned around, and instead of wasting time on trying to untangle the stubborn branch, Frisk snaps it in half with their teeth, pushing for Chara to keep moving, keep moving, keep moving, even as they're wiping blood from their lip where a thorn broke the skin.

Chara follows without stopping to question their friend. They've got this. Frisk knows what to do. They've got to. Chara's done for otherwise.

Soon light filters through the silhouette-black patterns of vegetation up ahead, and in the next heartbeat, the humans burst through on the other side of the forest. No, not on the other side of the forest, Chara realizes - it's a clearing, surrounded by rows of trees spaced so tightly they look like the walls of a fortress.

In the middle of the clearing, resting on the mountainside as though it's been waiting for them, bathed in white, shimmery sunrays, lies an ornate, square structure. It looks a little like a mansion, a big one, built of heavy stone bricks, beautifully carved pillars supporting the shiny, dark purple tiled roof. The windows say 'church' more than anything - they're huge, tapering at the top, and the colors within the glass form patterns and images that Chara can't quite make sense of from this angle. The spire on top of the building, depicting the pieces of the Delta Rune floating motionlessly in the air, makes the building resemble a tiny cathedral.
Even as Frisk pushes them in the direction of the big double doors behind the pillars, Chara's eyes linger on the symbol hanging perfectly still in the air over the structure. They find themselves wondering if it would be possible to climb up the wall, if they could cross the roof without falling off, if they could snatch the rune's feathery little wings without anyone noticing. The building has that feeling about it, like it's been lonely for a very long time, like it's trying to hide this loneliness with perfectly polished roof tiles and spotless windows, but overlooked the cracked stone stairs and the overgrown path connecting it to the outside world. It would probably be a while before anyone noticed the missing wings. Would anyone care if they disappeared?

Frisk leads Chara up the small flight of stairs and towards the main entrance. The doors bear the Delta Rune too, though only the angel part. Six. There are six angels, Chara notices, as their fingers trace over the rough surface of the pillar they pass by. They squint at the symbols. They feel like the angels should remind them of something. Or someone.

"What is this place?" they ask, keeping their voice low. It seems appropriate. They sense that this is the kind of place where you keep your voice low.

Frisk turns the big golden doorknob, and then they press their shoulder against the door. It looks like they have to put their whole weight against the door just to get it to budge, so Chara joins them, helping them push. The hinges creak in the dead silence.

On the other side of the door lies an enormous open hallway, wide enough to fill the space between the structure's outer walls and long enough to extend deep, deep into the mountain.

On either side of the door, rainbows pour through the colorful windows, and now - now Chara can see what they depict. The realization makes something seize their heart, something nowhere near as frightening as Sans' magic, but just as painful.


Green, yellow, blue, orange, purple, cyan.

***

Asriel unfurls his fire wings and a dozen flames tear loose from their underside, hurtling towards Sans. Undyne joins in, pulling spears out of thin air and sending them the same way, and Alphys tosses a bolt of lightning after the ice projectiles, which pings between the spears in midair and powers them up before they hit their target - who raises a wall of bones just in time. The fire turns the first row of bones to cinders and the ice pierces the rest, one of the blades cutting right through the barrier and stopping a hair's breadth from Sans' forehead. He doesn't allow himself time to reflect on what getting hit square in the face with an electrified ice splinter would feel like - he gets the feeling that would be counterproductive to his current mission of not having a panic attack and dying before he can save the world - instead tearing the wall apart and the spears with it. He retaliates by sending the blasters forth, the skulls opening their fang-filled maws and pouring light and heat and pain into beams tearing through the air and aiming right for Undyne and Alphys.

Undyne narrowly avoids the laser targeting her and jumps in front of Alphys, splitting the other beam with the tip of her spear, the white-hot energy washing over them like a wave, but leaving both of them unharmed.
Heaving from the strain of resisting the force of the attack, Undyne looks back at Alphys and puts her hand on her shoulder. "You alright?"

"I-" Before Alphys can finish her response, she sees the blasters prepare another attack - "Look out!" - and she jumps past Undyne, sending a strike of lightning into each of the beast's mouths to shut them up before they can finish charging. The blasters' jaws slam shut with a pitiful whine and the beams go off inside their skulls, shattering them.

Sans grinds his teeth. His eye flickers blue-white-blue-red-white. Four blasters take the place of the previous two, their horned forms casting Undyne and Alphys in shadow.

Right before the beams strike, Asriel stands behind his friends and closes his fire wings around them in a protective bubble, shielding them from the beam, before letting the fire explode outwards in a shockwave of heat that swallows up the blasters and turns them to ash.

Sans shortcuts to the nearest tree, closing his eyes tightly as the wave passes. When he looks up again, the forest around him has turned soot-black, the slumbering plants littered with stray flames.

And when he peeks out from behind the tree, he ends up face to face with the angel of death himself.

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Head bowed, Frisk moves forward into the big mansion-church-cathedral, and though they step softly on the golden-brown stone floor, the walls throw the sound back until it fills the whole room. Realizing they're falling behind, Chara picks up the pace until they're walking behind their sibling, their wide eyes still travelling along the swirly carvings in the ceiling, the curved pillars fused to the walls, the colorful crystals glowing like torches in their black iron sconces.

"Mom wanted them to have a real memorial place," Frisk says, keeping their eyes on the ground. Chara gets the feeling that Frisk has seen this place many times before already. "There's a shrine to them in Newer Home, but ... it's very far away from where they're buried. And it's very noisy in the city. This is better." They nod to themself. "Much better."

Chara looks at the stone tiles under their feet as they walk. Even the tiles have pretty carvings, every second one, like a chessboard.

Then they get that same creeping sensation that they did on the road in the forest, right before Sans appeared. Like they're being watched.

Suppressing a shiver, they look up - and stop dead in their tracks.

Frisk pauses when they hear the sound of Chara's footsteps fall away and look back at them, puzzled. Then they realize what the other's looking at. Okay, that's- that's understandable. Frisk felt a little nervous too, the first time they saw these. Not scared, not sad, just ... overwhelmed. Overcome by some strange feeling they still don't know how to describe. They go back to stand next to Chara. This is okay. Sans won't catch up to them anytime soon. Frisk isn't sure he knows the way here at all.

"That's Laura," they whisper. They can't help but smile a little. "She's pretty, right? She looks really nice."
Green eyes. That's all Chara sees. Green eyes, soft and warm, yet fearless, under dark, angled brows. Their gaze flicks over the rest of the painting, the canvas itself nearly as tall as they are, and they pick out unruly reddish-brown hair, what looks like an old-timey wooden pegleg, a stained apron and a pan raised like a shield, before their eyes drift back to the depths of the defiant green glare. The cavern wall behind her is painted red, a river of lava illuminating the sharp rocks from below and casting an otherworldly glow around her small, round body.

Chara glances down to the gold plaque under the portrait. 'Laura Montes' it says in black lettering. Under the plaque is a heart carved in emerald. On the floor is a small half-circle garden of fresh green ferns.

Frisk turns to continue down the corridor, their smile fading a little. "I wish I could've met her."

***

Sans can feel his energy dwindling with each blink across space, but if he stays in one place for more than a second, the kid is going to put a fireball through his chest.

"why do you keep doing this?"

"You know why!" Asriel beats his wings and a wave of fire expands around him. The tears in his eyes have long since evaporated.

Sans teleports to the top of a tree right behind him, crouching down on one of the branches, elbows leaned on his knees. "look, i can't say i don't understand why you wanna protect your sib and everything, but manipulating our friends and putting the whole world on the line? you don't think that maybe you're uh, overdoing it a bit? i know i told you not to look up to me as your standard well-adjusted adult or anything, but man, even i can tell this probably isn't the brightest idea you ever had."

Asriel turns and slices one of his wings right through the tree trunk, and the tree topples over. Sans manages to open a portal on the ground and instead of being squished into the dirt, he hops through it and lands close by, just out of sight.

"If you're so smart, then you figure out a better way to save them!" Asriel spins around again and again, searching the forest around him for any trace of his enemy. "There must be another way! I can't let them down again, I can't!"

"they're not your responsibility," the shadows say in Sans' voice. "they're mine. you don't have to get involved. let me take care of this."

Asriel knows that Sans is right. But on this one thing, he has come to terms with being wrong.

***

Next to Laura's portrait hangs different one, this one showing a child with a toy cowboy hat and what probably used to be a cowboy costume before it became too grimy with blood, mud and dust
for anyone to be able to tell for sure. The gun he's clutching with both hands and aiming at the ground is real enough, though. The desperation in his dark expression is too.

"That's Jordan," Frisk says. "He looks upset. But I think he meant well. Mom says he only ever hurt people in self defense. I know I always told you that I didn't wanna do that, but Jordan didn't have a ghost friend who could bring him back from the dead, so I think it's fair enough that he fought to defend himself. He didn't have a choice like I did."

His plaque states his full name as Jordan Barr. His gem is cut from citrine. Underneath is a small garden of flowering dandelions.

"How do you know all this?" Chara asks, though they barely have enough air to form the vowels. They can feel the portraits' eyes following them. "How do you know who they were?"

Frisk shrugs. "Some of it's guesswork. But dad did the paintings. He learned how to paint just so he could do these. He, uhm ... H-he had a lot of time alone after mom left. And he didn't ever wanna forget what they looked like, so he did the paintings to help himself remember. He was the last person to see them alive." Their voice gives out, but only briefly. It was a long time ago. "He's also the one who found their names. He asked everyone in the Underground and it seems like some of the humans did tell the monsters their names before they died. He couldn't find all of them, though."

The name plaque next to Jordan's only contains a first name. Seth. His gem is a dark blue sapphire. His garden is overtaken by skullcap flowers. When Chara looks at his portrait, a stab of fear makes their pulse race in their ears, and it isn't only because the cold gleam in his eyes tells them everything they need to know about the dust covering his hands and his torn skirt, as well as the dainty silk shoes he wields as morning stars, holding them by the ribbons. There's something familiar about those eyes, about his snarl, about the angle of his jaw and the contempt in his expression, lit only by Waterfall's glowing water and bioluminescent mushrooms.

"No one else knows what kind of role they played in breaking the barrier," Frisk says. "But that doesn't really matter. They died so everyone could be free. The monsters wanna show them respect. Especially mom and dad."

Before Chara registers what they're doing, they're reaching out to Seth's portrait, their fingertips tracing the outline of his skirt. The paint is bumpy, like it's been painted over many times. Asgore must've wanted to get every little detail just right.

Frisk is still moving. Chara doesn't want to leave the boy's portrait. But their pursuer wouldn't stop to let them catch their breath if he escaped Undyne's wrath. They need to keep moving.

***

One of Undyne's spears snaps the branch Sans is standing on in half, revealing his hiding spot. When he tries to open a shortcut before hitting the ground, the energy wobbles under his will and he doesn't make it in time, landing heavily on the bare earth, one hand pressed into the dirt to keep him from falling over.

His energy is running out. He needs to get out of here. Soon. Or he's going to run out of magic before he can open the final portal.

He feels the heat approaching before he sees it and he stumbles backwards, away from the attack.
Wow, that's ... that's actually kind of pretty damn burning hot up close.

Two electrified spears swish by, narrowly missing him. They feel different, somehow. Different from the fire. Less murder-y. It's like the very dust he's made of is shying away from the heat. Asriel seems *really* invested in stopping him from finding Fallen. For the first time since Asriel's resurrection, Sans wonders if an essence could keep its LOVE after being disconnected from one kind of DT and transferred to another.

He decides that he probably doesn't want to find out the hard way.

Undyne and Alphys reach the edge of the forest and the endless cycle of fire, ice, electricity and whatever element calcium and lasers are supposed to be, continues. He wouldn't die if Undyne or Alphys hit him, he doesn't think. He wouldn't blame them if he did, but he actually doesn't think it's possible. Asriel, though. His attacks feel different. Lethal.

Despite this, Sans doesn't really blame him either, when he thinks it over. After the kind of life this child has had, it's no wonder that he's clinging to the last threads of happiness he's got left. How Fallen could make anyone happy is beyond Sans, but love is blind and all that. He knows that *he* wouldn't hold back if someone threatened to take away *his* sibling, no matter how many lives or realities were on the line.

But then it's a good thing it's Fallen holding the key to the world's demise and not Papyrus. Tearing it from their hands - or their heart, rather - seems far, far less off-putting when it's *them*.

The fallen child. The fallen angel. The demon.

His eye flashes red again. He doesn't realize it himself.

Next thing Undyne knows, she's nailed to a tree, two sharpened fibulas piercing her flesh, boring through her stomach and deep, deep into the oak pressing against her back. Her vision goes dark.

***

The next portrait shows two figures, a little curly-haired one in a too-big purple sweater and a tough-looking kid in a ratty t-shirt and cut-off shorts. Their hands are clasped, and the bigger of the two is standing in front of the smaller one, shielding her with their body, rage on their face, their free hand clenched inside a boxing glove. Though the smaller one's glasses are foggy, it's clear that she's the only person in any of the portraits who isn't looking at her to-be murderer - all the fear and worry and reverence within her overbright eyes is directed at the child risking their life to save her.

One of them only has a nickname on their name plaque. Maybe they would've wanted it that way. Just like Frisk. 'Magpie and Kaisa Madaki,' it says. Their shared garden holds lavenders and orange tulips. Their gem - and they do only have a single gem between them - is a brilliant ametrine.

"Dad never wanted to hurt anyone," Frisk says. They keep their eyes firmly on the decorated tiles and they hug their arms close to themself, even though none of the winter's cold can reach them in here. "He only wanted everyone to be okay. He didn't feel like he had a choice."

Chara's eyes move from the fallen children's expressions to their interlocked hands and back again.

*Because you can, you have to.*
Frisk turns their back to the paintings. "There was nothing he could do. If he set the monsters free, there'd just be another war. And if he went back on his promise, everyone would lose hope again. He was just ... trying to find a way to make everyone happy again."

Scraped knees. Kids are supposed to have scraped knees, it means they've been playing outside, that they've been climbing trees, that they've had fun with their friends, that they've done all the things kids are supposed to do when they're little, but this one - the big angry kid - theirs aren't just scraped. They're cut open and bleeding. One eye is bruised, purples and blues lining the socket. Kids are not supposed to look like that.

There's a scar across their cheek.

Frisk absentmindedly traces their own matching one. Even though their back is still turned to the portraits, they know every detail in every single one of them.

Chara shakes their head, slowly, mostly to themself. This isn't right. This is not right, this isn't how it's supposed to be, this is not how the story is supposed to go, they know that, they may not know much about doing the right thing, but this - this can't be it. This can't be right. Can it?

With effort, they tear their eyes away from the little ones holding hands.

Instead, their gaze lands on the final portrait.

She's crying. Tears are streaming down her face, visible even through the long locks of hair falling across her face, and her watery, light blue eyes are barely more than narrow, reflective mirror shards in an expression twisted by fear and despair. Her bare arms are blue with cold, frozen by the snowstorm obscuring her form, and soggy band aids cover her arms and fingers, a few peeling off to reveal cut skin. Silver dust collects in the open wounds.

She's the youngest one here. She can hardly be more than eight years old.

Frisk closes their eyes tightly, trying to keep their own tears from spilling. "He ... He just wanted to keep everyone safe."

Chara looks down at the garden below the child's portrait and finds forget-me-nots. Her gem is aquamarine. But her name plaque ...

"Where's her name?"

***

"Undyne!"

The familiar voice jolts her awake. How long was she out? A minute? An hour? It must've been less than a second. She blinks a few times and with each blink, light, contours, colors and details return.

The pressure in her stomach disappears in a burst of white light. She falls forward, but a pair of arms catch her before she hits the ground. Slowly, Alphys lowers her until she's rested against her side, one arm slung over the smaller monster's shoulders.

"Are- are you alright?" Cold claws brush over Undyne's cheek, willing her to look up.
"I'm okay," she rasps through the dust in her throat. Neither Sans nor Asriel seem to have realized that she's down. With unsteady claws, Undyne feels the wounds on her stomach. They remain open, but ... superficially? She looks down at her palm. It comes away from the area with only the thinnest layer of dust. The silver grains sparkle in the white sunlight, barely visible against her shining scales.

Alphys gasps. Undyne looks at her, seeing her own surprise reflected in the other's expression.

Sans could have seriously wounded her with an attack like that. No, scratch that, he could've killed her. If he'd wanted to, he actually could have killed her. This is how he leaves her instead?

"He doesn't want to fight." They're both thinking it, but Undyne says it out loud. They both turn their attention back to the other monsters still throwing everything they've got at each other.

Almost. At first glance, the fight looks equal. But even though Asriel is doing his damndest to turn his enemy into a pile of crisp, smoking dust, none of Sans' attacks hit anywhere near the little boss monster. He summons a blaster right behind Asriel, but when his target doesn't notice the incoming laser, Sans redirects it so it narrowly misses instead.

He doesn't even want to risk hitting someone as frail as Asriel.

So, what? He's cool with massacring the soul of his friends' kid, lying, beating people up and picking a fight with his own brother, but actually genuinely hurting anyone who comes between him and his target is crossing the line all of a sudden?

Undyne scowls, confused. "What's he playing at?"

***

The question sounds like a cracking whip in the silence and it bounces off the walls for several seconds before it dies away.

Frisk quickly wipes their eyes and turns around. "Wh-what?"

Chara turns away from the painting and takes a step towards their sibling. "Her name!" they insist, gesturing to the empty plaque. "Everyone else's names are here, but what about her!?"

Frisk cringes and their gaze trails off to the side, apologetic. "He never found her name. She was ... the first one who fell. Mom hadn't gone to the Ruins yet. She didn't go until after dad got the first soul and changed his mind about using it after all. He says that after killing her ..." They look over Chara's head at the crying child in the portrait. "... he knew he couldn't go through with another war."

And in their sibling's eyes, Chara sees that very same despair found in the nameless child's own. If they looked closely at the other portraits, they know they'd see it in the other children's eyes, too. Fear. And hopelessness. Finally realizing that everything was meaningless after all. That they're going to die alone and afraid, and no matter how much they cry out for help, nobody will come. No mom or dad will be there to rescue them, no big sibling, no best friend.

It's the end. It's over. And they never got to see the happy ending they deserved.

"Mom was furious," Frisk whispers, the sorrow in their eyes turning into fear. "Dad changed his
mind too late. If he didn't go to war like he said he would, that little girl died for nothing. And after losing you and Asriel ..."

Chara can picture it clear as day. Their adoptive father crouched in the snow, his shaking, bloodied claws shielding a light blue soul from the raging snowstorm, the queen of monsters screaming at him, demanding he give her the soul if he's too much of a coward to go through with it himself. She can't stand any more meaningless death. But neither can he.

"I don't think she'll ever forgive him. Not really."

Chara faces the portraits and steps backwards across the tiles, looking between each image, each face, each expression, at round cheeks and little hands clutching make-shift weapons, at torn clothes and bruised skin, at defiance, desperation, coldness, rage, love and despair.

They're looking at people. Real human beings who perished, who were killed for the greater good. Individuals, irreplaceable ones, with fears and hopes and dreams, just like everybody else. With friends, and families, with people who missed, or people who didn't miss them, even people who wouldn't ever notice that they were gone at all. They were people. They died alone.

Only now does it truly sink in. Only now does it truly dawn on Chara that all the other souls were the souls of children just like them. They don't remember them from before their resurrection. They barely remember the first time they met Frisk.

They forgot. Just like everybody else forgot about all the meaningless sacrifice it took for them to see the sun again.

Chara is standing in front of the portraits of six forgotten souls. And behind these souls, they know countless others lie. Children who suffered and children who were lost. Children broken by a world which, like the mountain, never truly cared.

Frisk goes to stand next to their friend. They can feel the grief pulsing through the demon child’s heavy heart. Gently, they put their arms around the other's shoulders, hugging them from the side.

Chara's hands come up to hold on to Frisk’s arms. They can feel bumpy scars under the thin fabric of their kid sibling’s sweater. Scars just like the nameless child's.

They swallow the lump in their throat. They'd cry if the creeping terror welling up inside would let them.

"I don't want to end up on that wall, Frisk," they say. There's empty space on both sides of the portraits. They wonder if they would be considered the first fallen child, or the last. "I don't want to die for ... for the greater good, or whatever. I know I tried to sacrifice myself for something bigger once, but I've changed my mind. I've changed my mind, okay? I'm not ready to die. I don't want to. I don't" Their voice drowns in a sob. Frisk holds them tighter. Chara angrily wipes the tears from their face. "This isn't right. What kind of world lets this happen? What kind of world lets little kids die alone and scared like that!?!"

Frisk leans their head on their shoulder. "Sometimes, bad things just ... happen for no reason." Not a lot of things in this world make sense. Frisk knows that trying to make sense of it all is only going to make you even more sad. At some point, you're going to start blaming yourself. "Sometimes, life's just unfair. There's nothing we can do about it."

Oh, so Chara is supposed to believe that bad things just happen for no reason? That they just appear out of the blue with no known cause and no one to blame? Is that how it is? The universe is just
trying to right itself? Frisk has got to be kidding. Bad things don't just happen. There is always a cause.

The children in the portraits paid the price of Asgore Dreemurr's mistake with their lives.

Asriel paid the price of Chara's mistake with his.

Frisk knows what it's like to die at the hands of their own family and friends.

Chara knows the exact shape and feeling of their misery by heart.

Asriel knows the shape and feeling of Chara's misery in turn.

It's the same kind, exactly the same as Frisk's, and exactly the same as the other fallen children's, and all the children who came before them, and all the children who will come after them. It's the feeling of knowing that the world is broken beyond repair, that something went wrong along the way, that this isn't how it's supposed to be, but righting something so wrong seems so infinitely impossible when you're little, and the world seems so huge and hungry and merciless, and you're not sure how you could have ever thought it to be good or kind or bright or worth saving.

Chara lets a hand fall to their side and they press their palm against the square disk in their pocket. "Life isn't unfair," they say. Frisk raises their head to look at them, and Chara looks them in the eyes, the embers in their gaze glowing and growing with equal parts anger and realization. "People are."

Though Frisk tries to hold onto them, they slide out of their grasp and go back to the portrait of the boy with the gleaming eyes. Seth. The familiarity of his features simultaneously make Chara want to cower under his gaze and reach through the painting - reach through time, rather - and give him one last hug.

Like all the others, he called for help, yet nobody came. But regardless of the form they take, Chara will always be the demon that comes when you call its name. If there was a way to save him and all the others ...

There isn't. But there is a way to save at least one of the fallen children.

They can save themself.

"If Sans still thinks I'm going to go down without a fight," Chara says slowly, feeding that thought to the fire growing within and letting it consume every last fear, every last doubt, every insecurity, and every 'maybe things would be better if I gave in', "then he's got another thing coming."

They turn around, and for a second, Frisk swears they see the demon's eyes light up as they fix them with a look so very similar to the cold stare of the boy in the portrait behind them. The heat emanating from the rotten red soul feels like it's solidifying, stabilizing, waiting for something, like a star just before a supernova.

Then Chara's expression closes, turning calm and passive, and they right their stance, suddenly devoid of any trace of fear or anger. Frisk feels that fear instead, a knot of repressed memories stabbing at their consciousness and making their heartbeat stutter. It happens so quickly, that change from frightened little kid to ... this. Something very big sealed inside something very small. Something timeless, something existing everywhere at once, concentrated inside the mind and body of a human child.

The Fallen child.
In that moment - although nothing about them has changed - Chara doesn't look human.

They cock their head to the side like a bird considering a shiny object. "Well?" they say, voice suddenly too clear, too cold, too unaffected by their flushed face and shimmery eyes. "We should get going, shouldn't we?"

Frisk glances at the empty spaces on the walls next to the first and last of the portraits. They're not sure they can really deny being scared of their old friend anymore. But the fear comes second. Something else comes first.

They try to picture Chara's portrait there, next to the nameless child's. Their name written in black on gold, their soul imitated by polished ruby, roses under their portrait.

They can't for the life of them picture that happening. It would never work out. If ever there was a constant in this world, if ever there was one thing Frisk could rely on to be there, for good and for bad, it was the demon, in whichever form they inhabited at the time. Whether they were Fallen - immortal, destructive, older than time and space, and present in every dark shadow under their bed as well as in their head - or just sad, broken, fragile and oh-so-human Chara, they were always there. A help, a hindrance, a corruption, an anchor, ever-changing. Frisk never set out to become a counterpoint to them, but someone had to be. Someone had to restore order. When evil grew too strong, good had to step up its game.

The two sides becoming invested in each other's survival was just a really weird side-effect of that.

Frisk nods at Chara, more determined than ever.

Only a few hours. Only a few hours and Chara will be free. Only a few hours and all of this will finally be over and they can go home. Only a few hours and the demon can finally become a child again.

They're going to be free.

Chara smiles back too, even though it's a little hollow. This is good, they think. At least they have one friend. One person they can trust. One person who won't turn their back on them. They try to repress the rush of affection threatening to choke the fire in their soul. Not right now. They don't have time right now. But soon. Soon they can go back to not being scared and angry all the time. Soon everything can go back to normal and they and Frisk can continue where they left off - learning how to be real friends. Siblings, even. 'Angels born into the same destiny,' as they put it once, many, many moments of heartbreak ago. Chara didn't really believe what they were saying back then, they were just trying to comfort Frisk, but when they really think about it, it actually is kind of fitting. They can't think of a better way to describe this.

Both of the humans turn their backs to the portraits of the fallen children who came between their respective falls. Neither of them forget, neither of them will ever forget, but they're going to remember them for very different reasons.

As Frisk and Chara head through the building and leave for the staircase leading into the Underground, the sanctuary of the six human souls once again becomes as quiet as their graves buried deep, deep in the mountain below.

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He can't land a single hit on Sans. No matter how hard he tries, his enemy is quicker than him. It's only a matter of time before he gets away. He'll get away, and he'll find Chara, and he'll take them away again, and Asriel can't let that happen, he won't allow it, he'd rather risk losing his soul than lose them, no, he'd rather risk losing all of reality than lose them, and he's ready to make that sacrifice, he's ready to put his fate in Chara's hands, he's ready to put everyone's lives in danger, even his friends, even his parents', even Frisk's, because he can't question this, this couldn't possibly be wrong, loyalty can't be wrong, caring can't be wrong, protecting someone's life can't be wrong, and he'll prove it to Sans even if it means destroying him, he'll prove it even if it means putting the whole world on the line, he'll prove it if it's the last thing he'll ever do, if only. He. Could. HIT HIM.

Vines crawl from the earth, but Sans skips out of their reach effortlessly, commanding the beam of one of his blasters close enough to incinerate the plants, as well as using it to block another volley of fireballs now that he's at it. Unimpressed, he puts his hands in his pockets and faces his opponent with the smuggest, most shit-eating grin Asriel has ever seen in his life.

"y'know, when i heard that some kid was throwin' a hissy fit the size of a natural disaster, i pictured 'em a lot more like you," Sans says with a shrug. He blocks the next burst of fire with a web of bones. It doesn't hold completely, and he can feel stray cinders drift through the shield, through his sockets and into his skull. "lost, lonely, pissed off for their own reasons. someone who needed a friend more than they needed a sword between the eyes. wouda been just a mite easier to sympathize with, dontcha think?"

With a howl of rage, Asriel closes the gap between his wings and with the strained whir of the stabilizer pounding in his ears, he pours all his energy into a tower of flame shooting straight up into the air before curving downwards, heading straight for Sans. "Shut up, shut up, shut UP!"

Sans snaps his fingers and four blasters fade into existence, countering the roaring flames with their own searing hot breath weapons. "people like you don't need to be put out of commission permanently. you just need the right kind of motivation to simmer down."

The lasers cleave the flames, tearing them to shreds. As though the magic was a solid material, cracks appear in the fire, spreading all the way down to the machine it's pouring out of and shattering the red-orange stream. Sickly black smoke pushes out of the backpack and the stabilizer's grinding noise dies down to a low hum before stopping completely with a sharp clack.

"you're a good kid, asriel. i wish you'd taken my warning seriously."

Asriel stops mid-movement. No. No, no, no, this wasn't supposed to happen, he recharged, he should've been able to- at least for a little while, he should-

"too late now, i guess."

It's busted. Broken.

He's a long, long way from home.

He can hear Alphys call out to him from somewhere far behind him.

Sans' expression doesn't change. Not one bit. Asriel doesn't understand. He doesn't understand how someone can be so cold. He doesn't understand how someone can care so little. Even soulless, Asriel tried to care. Even when he couldn't care, he tried to find the one person who could help him do so again.

Sans is hollow. Asriel can't find a single trace of sympathy on the other's face.
"Y-you don't care about saving the world at all," he whispers, breathless. "You don't care about anything. You- You just want revenge."

The laugh starts low enough for Asriel to mistake it for a rush of wind, but the wind is nearly quiet today. Then Sans doubles over, laughing so hard tears appear in his eyes, though it still barely makes a sound.

"oh man," he wheezes, wiping water from the rims of his sockets. "you're a real comedian, az. you tryin'a steal my job too? 'cause you're gettin' there. phew. anyway." Still chuckling to himself, he stands up straight, turning his back to his defeated foe. "i got places to be. catch ya on the flipside, buddy."

Frozen with terror, Asriel presses his palm to his heart.

Stay calm. Stay calm, he tells himself. Stay calm, or that precious energy hidden underneath his breastbone is going to tear loose completely.

He's done for.

Sans finally decides on a location to shortcut to. Asriel inspired the choice actually. What was it he said he did whenever Frisk got away from him back in the day? He cut them off before they could move on to the next area, right? Sure, the humans probably haven't gotten that far yet. But maybe then he'll have a moment to rest before they show up. They'll have to go through the place Sans has decided on if they're really headed towards Alphys' lab, and there's nowhere to hide in the room he's chosen either.

Asriel is gonna be fine. Why would Sans hurt him when he could just leave him unfit to fight? Kid must've forgotten that he's BFF's with a living battery charger. Alphys' magic isn't going to be strong enough to recharge his stabilizer, but she'll be able to keep it running until the two of them can get home. That gets both of them off Sans' back. It's a win/win.

As if on cue, Alphys reaches Asriel in the next second, reassuring him that everything is going to be okay, they'll fix this, it's not a permanent solution, but she'll get him home safe, don't panic, don't panic, you're going to be okay-

The terror in her voice makes something twist in Sans' chest and he smirks, laughing on the inside, fighting off that sick feeling with a different kind of sick. He tells himself he doesn't care. He tells himself that this is all just a big joke to him. He tells himself it doesn't matter, because he's seen this person evacuate the entire Underground and say goodbye to one of her closest friends knowing he would die trying to save her, and Sans has seen the look on her face when she checked her security cameras and found the dust of the woman she loved abandoned cold in the caves of Waterfall, and Sans has, more than once, been the one to find the last note she left the survivors when she could no longer stand to face any of them, let alone herself in the mirror, and by comparison, this should't matter. None of this matters, none of this compares to what it could have been, Alphys is alive, Asriel is alive, everyone is alive, and if Sans wants them to remain that way, he's just going to have to get his shit together and quit being so weak.

This should all be a joke to him. He's had so much worse. And it's not like this is final anyway, right? He's going to have to do this over a million times before it sticks, just like he had to with everything else up until now. That's just how it is with him.

That's how it is with Fallen.

He can't wait to see the look on that little hellspawn's face. They're gonna think he murdered
everyone to get at them, aren't they? He wonders if they'd care. Or if they'd only be afraid because they knew that they were next. He knows they care about Asriel, enough to surrender the first time Sans found them, but everyone else ...

It doesn't matter. What matters is that if he plays his cards right, he'll be able to finish this off without having to compromise his dwindling power levels. He needs to prioritize his energy. If he's lucky, he'll be able to scare the demon into complying instead of fighting them. It's better for everyone. It's better for-

He pushes the thought away before his racing mind can finish it for him. Not right now. Not right now, that mess is going to have to wait. He can't hold back, not when he's gotten this far, not for anyone.

Sans opens a portal to familiar corridor. Golden light pours into the white-gray-black landscape atop Mt. Ebott.

When he moves to go through it, he finds that he can't.

"wha ..?"

It takes him a moment to realize that the relatively large, shiny blue spear sticking out of his chest isn't supposed to be there. Uhm. Okay. He might have to deal with that before he can go.

"What the hell are you planning?" The rumble of the much bigger monster's voice sounds right behind him. Above him, almost. She's leaned over him, both hands gripping the spear impaling him. "You've betrayed us, but you don't want to hurt us. You scare the crap out of us, but it turns out it's empty threats. You think you're safe from guilt just 'cause you're too much of a coward to follow through? You think that makes it okay? Do you think there's any way we'll spare you if you hurt that kid?"

Sans sighs. If only it were that easy. If only he could actually hope for something like that. At least then his motive would be kind of sympathetic, like Asriel's. But nah. He's not like that. He hasn't been like that for a very long time.

"you know i'm right, undyne," he says, watching the flecks of dust gleam in the golden light within the hall on the other side of the portal. It's monster dust. There's a lot of that in the Underground. No one minds, usually. It's natural. People come, people go. It's not like humans mind graveyards either. Monsters' graveyards just happen to be the air they breathe. "deep down, you know."

Undyne leans down further, pushing on the spear. "I don't believe you. Whatever it is you're saying Chara did to us, I don't believe you."

"that's fine. i can't make you." Sans bows his head, his grin turning a little lopsided. "but let me ask you one question."

The portal wavers. The blue energy at its border flickers red.

"if 'chara' never did anything wrong during all those resets ... then why do you know what the underground sounds like in dead silence?"

There's a sharp intake of air above and behind him, like she's about to say something, but she changes her mind at the last second. She can't find the words.

"why do you know exactly how the sound of snow crunching under your feet echoes off empty cave walls? it doesn't sound like it does right now, when you can still hear things scurrying around in
"snowdin's corners - when it's really, truly empty, the sound goes on forever and you wonder if you'd still be able to hear dying breaths the same way if only you could tune out your memories of the same thing. why do you know exactly how to preserve an echo flower so you can hear the voice of someone you care about one last time over and over?"

Sans tilts his head back so he can look up into her yellow eye wide with ... is it fear? That's funny. He doesn't think he's ever seen her afraid before. He didn't think it was possible.

"you know what it's like to die. you're not meant to, but you do, don't you?"

"I ... How did you ..?"

He winks at her. "that's my little secret. or, ours now, i guess. do with it what you want."

Undyne's spear shatters under her grip, disappearing in a cloud of blue crystals. The holes in Sans' spine and chest close immediately. Bless that 1HP. Unless someone seriously wants to end him, they won't do any damage at all. It's surprisingly useful.

Before Undyne can process what he just told her, he slips through the portal and closes it behind him. The warrior is left staring at the empty spot where he disappeared.

In the next moment, Asriel finds two pairs of golden reptilian eyes staring at him. The steady stream of electricity flowing from Alphys' palm and into the still-smoking machine in his spine dies away. She doesn't seem to notice.

They know he lied. Even if they didn't fully believe Sans, Asriel is sure they can read the truth in his own fearful expression.

He reaches over his shoulder and shuts his backpack, stumbling away from Alphys before she can stop him.

"N-no, wait, you're not-!"

"I'm the same, you know," he interrupts, looking back and forth between the older monsters as he backs away. "I was just as bad as Chara. Do you want me to die?"

Alphys shakes her head, reaching out to him, not to stop him, but to ask him to come back to her. "Of course not!" She looks up at Undyne. "R-right?"

Undyne frowns perplexedly, eye narrowed. She didn't expect that. Asriel can tell she didn't. She looks unsure. Like she doesn't know who to believe. Like she isn't sure even the demon child in front of her really knows the truth.

He doesn't like that expression. He doesn't like that she's hesitating.

Undyne once swore to kill any human that fell into the Underground. She was ready to take the life of a child to save her people. She didn't hesitate then. She barely questioned her mission. She may never have encountered another human before Frisk, but she had seen firsthand what a human could do to a monster.

They could take someone's children away. They could break a heart so thoroughly even nine decades couldn't heal it. That was enough for her. Knowing that even as they kept the sky to themselves, humans would never be satisfied with the kind of pain they'd inflicted on monsterkind. They would keep going until they had crushed every last monster they could find, inside or out. They didn't care which.
Undyne changed her mind when she met Frisk. She thought she'd been wrong about humans.

She didn't know that all along, she should have feared the eighth fallen human more than any of the ones who came before them.

Asriel calls upon his magic, feeling the heat coil in his hands.

"I won't be mad if you think I deserve to die for what I did," he says to Undyne. "Sometimes, I think the same thing." He opens his claws and a pair of twin flames spark into existence. "But if you so much as think of letting Sans drain Chara's soul ..." His voice breaks. "... I will take every last drop of determination for myself and I will erase the world you were born in."

Undyne moves towards Asriel, frills flaring, something under her eye patch glowing white-blue-white-blue, but before she can close the distance between them, Alphys jumps in front of her, her hands on her partner's upper arms.

"Don't," Alphys says quietly, trying to stand tall enough to catch the other's eye. "P-please. Undyne, leave him alone, we- we'll f-figure this out, okay? No one h-has to get hurt, especially not him, please don't-!"

Undyne can't tear her gaze away from the child still backing away, the little demon not daring to turn around just yet. She grew up hearing about this child. About how he and his adoptive sibling brought light and happiness to those who needed it most. And now he and Sans are telling her that they were the greatest threats to both monsters and humans the world has ever seen? She can't believe it. But neither can she lie to herself. Or the almost-memories scratching on the locked doors of her consciousness. She can feel the hinges creek.

"Did you know about this?" she asks Alphys, her eye still locked with Asriel's over the shorter monster's head.

Alphys shifts her grip on Undyne's arms so she isn't holding her back, just ... holding her. Supporting her, almost, as Undyne seems to lose her strength all at once, barely able to hold herself upright.

"No," Alphys says. "N-no, of course not, I ..." She can't finish the sentence. She doesn't know how. Her head's spinning. Nothing makes sense anymore, because Asriel is the one who lied, Sans is the one she should've trusted, he was right all along, he was right to fear Chara, he was right to tell her to watch her back around their frankensteinian patients, and why didn't he tell her? He brought demons back from the dead in the bodies of harmless-looking little kids and he made her think she was protecting them?

No. No, something isn't right. Asriel is no demon, she's seen that he isn't. He's a real child, a child who loves his family, a child who only wants to live, a child who wants his best friend to live - if Sans and Asriel are really saying what they think is the truth, then they're both missing something. Something important.

Least of all the one person she swore to protect with her life. She looks back at him, but he ignores her, focusing on Undyne alone.

"I know," Undyne says, voice low and shaky, like she's in the presence of something much bigger and scarier than herself for the first time in her life. "I know all of those things Sans talked about. Why do I know ..?" She should remember. She should remember, so why doesn't she? She should remember what it's like to walk through an empty Snowdin. She should remember what it's like to see homes abandoned in haste, as if everyone expected to come back. She should remember what it's like to find a pile of dust half-buried under snow, a red scarf peeking through openings in the white
frost.

He comes around in those timelines. To claim the dust and the scarf. Sans. She yells at him, sometimes. For not intervening. For daring to stand there and tell her it's pointless. That this has happened before, so many times that he has given up counting. For telling her there's nothing she can do.

Maybe she does remember. Maybe it's her imagination. Right now, she can't tell the difference.

Asriel kneels just beyond the edge of the woods and gently blows air on the magic in his hands. It flares up and fans out, taking root in trees and bushes and debris, clawing its way across the line of trees unnaturally quickly, a wall of fire erecting within seconds and working its way inwards until the little boss monster is standing within an impenetrable barrier of towering flames. At last, his gaze falls from Undyne to Alphys.

Did he mean it? Would he really end the world for Chara?

He's been asking himself that question for a long time. He knows that he'd risk the world for them, but end it himself ..? It's irrelevant. It wouldn't solve anything, so it doesn't matter. It was just a threat. If he really did get his hands on Chara's DT, he'd use it to rewind time so he could get them back instead. He doesn't care about revenge. He cares about his best friend. He cares about getting to be with the one person he cares about the most.

The image of Frisk looking back at him and smiling one last time pushes its way to the forefront of his mind. He doesn't have the strength to push it away. He can't keep the tears from welling up again, either.

Frisk is going to be okay, right? So there's no need to worry about them. Chara's the one who's in danger. It's okay to prioritize them over Frisk for now.

He turns and heads into the forest, following the path the humans took and ordering the flames to follow him so neither Undyne nor Alphys will be able to do the same.

"Asriel, wait!"

The roar of the inferno drowns out Alphys' voice.

Beyond the fire barrier, she can do nothing but watch as he disappears out of her reach again, alone and vulnerable, and no matter how hard she tries, she can't picture him ever coming out of that mountain alive again. Maybe Sans tried to get him out of this alive, but if the seraph is faced with letting both of the demons he let back into the world escape, or taking away both of the lives he gave...

She hides her face in her hands. This is all her fault. She never should've let the humans out of sight. Undyne has no idea what to say to comfort her. Her mind is racing, trying to unlock all the almost-memories trying desperately to find their way back into her head, only to be blocked by - something. The fact that they never took place at all, maybe. The fact that she's trying to remember a past that never existed.

The roar of an engine cuts her train of thought in half.

Charging up the road comes Asgore's huge gold-and-purple van, its metallic hide reflecting the sunlight, making it look like a glowing lightning strike climbing the slope of the mountain, and it comes to a screeching halt in the middle of the road, its doors flying open before it's even stopped.
moving.

From within the vehicle's belly, the hulking horned beasts appear, their snowy fur dyed yellow and orange by the towering flames, and in unison, they crane their heads back, watching the canopy of fire growing from the trees and far, far into the sky above, and the looks on their faces - Undyne doesn't tear up. It's not her style. But right now, it's close. She's seen that look on her father figure's face before too many times. When another human fell. When he woke up from brief accidental sleep after a long day of training and realized that his happy dreams remained dreams. He always tried to hide it. She always saw it anyway.

Asgore forces his eyes away from the blaze and they fall on Alphys instead.

"What happened?" His words are barely louder than the crackling fire. Then they grow as he steps towards her, grows to a question, then a yell, then a roar. "Where are they? You promised me you'd watch them, why didn't you, where are they?!

Instinctively, Undyne steps in front of Alphys, blocking his path.

"There's no time to explain," she says, swallowing her building fears and letting her almost-memories fall back underneath the surface. Not today, existential dread. Now is not the time. "The humans went to the Underground. We have reason to believe they're headed for Alphys' old lab. Asriel went to go look for 'em, but he blocked us off with his magic." She gestures to the burning forest. "Something's going on. We need to get inside now."

"I'll find Asriel!" Toriel cuts in, already prepared to go through the fire.

Alphys starts out of her trance and elbows past Undyne, frantically waving for Toriel not to go. "N-no-no-no, wait! P-please, be careful, Sans is down there!"

Toriel stops short, wincing at the mention of her friend's name. "... Sans?"

Alphys already hates herself for what she's about to say. She knows how important Sans is to the children's mother. But she's got no choice. She's done with secrets. They all are.

"Whatever you do," Alphys says slowly, "don't let Sans find the kids. A-any of them."

Undyne puts a hand on her shoulder to show her support, looking solemnly between the boss monsters. "Guy's got it into his head that your kids weren't just regular old soulless spirits toying with the fabric of time out of boredom. He thinks they were demons. And that they spent those time loops grinding for EXP."

Asgore lurches back as if she'd threatened to spear him in the chest. The disbelief on his face is exactly the same as Toriel's. "... What?"

"B-but we d-don't know if it's true for sure!" Alphys says quickly. "They h-have their souls back, s-so at least they can't be anymore! R-right?" She looks up at Undyne.

"We have no idea," she admits, "Maybe he's right, maybe he's delusional, I seriously have no clue, but it doesn't matter, we need to stop him! It's about time everyone sat their asses down and talked about this before someone gets hurt." She summons a spear and rests it over her shoulder, the look in her eye telling everyone present that she intends to provide said hurt if necessary. She may not be sure what's real and what's not anymore, but she intends to find out the answer. No one's getting lynched before she knows for sure that they deserve it. Least of all her friends' kids. 'Sans has been threatening to use the DT Extraction Machine in Alphys' laboratory to take Chara's powers away for good. That's not a fate anyone deserves, no matter what they did in the past. I don't care if that kid
ended a hundred worlds, mutilating a living being's soul is sick!"

Toriel can hardly believe what she's hearing. No, she won't believe it. This makes no sense, Sans would never do something like that, he's her friend, he's been there for her all this time, he wouldn't lie to her, he wouldn't-

It strikes her that there's a possibility that he might be right. That it might not be Sans' character she should be questioning, but her children's. She thinks back to the subtle changes in their personalities she witnessed in those precious few days when she had them back. The way they seemed ... braver. More independent. Like there was something else driving them, something stronger, something older.

What if Sans isn't even wrong? What if Chara really is dangerous?

The thought that the children she was reunited with might not even have been hers, but demons wearing her children's faces makes nausea rise in her throat and she can feel the blood rush from her face.

It's wrong. She knows it as clearly as she knows her memories of them. Those were not imposters. Those were her missing loved ones. Maybe they still haven't fully recovered. Maybe they're corrupted. But it is them. How can Sans not see that? How could anyone doubt that?

Toriel runs a hand over her face, trying to focus on the here and now.

Asriel. She needs to find Asriel, he went in there last. She needs to find him first and then she can go look for the others.

She needs to stop Sans. It doesn't matter if he's right or wrong. If he thinks he can put her children in danger and get away with it, he's about to learn something else.

"You three -" The coldness in her voice seems to scare even the heat in the air around them away, and she gestures to her fellow monsters with all the authority of the war veteran she used to be.

"Take the entrance leading to level four and work your way to New Home from there. Find Sans and remove him from the Underground by any means necessary."

"A-any means?" Alphys interrupts, suddenly scared for her friend.

Toriel frowns. "Correction: by any non-lethal means. We are not murdering someone simply for being so utterly incompetent at saving the world that they are willing to challenge a potential demon, let alone someone like ..." She can't help the sorrowful little smile forcing its way to her face.

"Someone like my Chara." She gets the feeling that if the others don't succeed in 'freeing' Sans from the Underground, then there's a real possibility that her little angel could do it all on their own. She doesn't want that. Not for him, and not for them either. But the same way she couldn't help but feel better knowing that Frisk was at the very least accompanied by a person with dubious strengths like that while running away, the same way she can't help but feel comforted by the fact that at the very least her children aren't defenseless now either.

Alphys breathes a sigh of relief. Undyne only looks mildly disappointed.

"I will go after the children," Toriel finishes, turning back to the forest fire ahead. One of the trees near the clearing cave under the flames, falling to the ground with a hollow crrrash.

Asgore bows his head. "Please ... Please be careful."

"These are our children we're talking about," she says quietly, coldly. "I absolutely refuse."
He looks like he wants to argue. He decides against it, accepting her words with a small nod. "Then bring them home safe."

Now that's something she intends to do. With one last look at Undyne and Alphys, she heads across the road and into the fire, and the flames swallow her up just like they did her son.

Undyne turns to face her king. "What do we do now? How do we get in?"

Asgore sighs, scratching the back of his neck. "The entrance to level four is quite a far way down the mountain. It is on the other side, too. I suppose we could drive there, but -"

"WORRY NOT, YOUR MAJESTY!" sounds a familiar voice from further down the road. All three monsters' attention immediately snap to the source of it - a certain skeleton in the process of slamming a red car door behind him. "I KNOW A SHORTCUT!!"

Undyne's jaw drops. "Oh my god, don't tell me you can teleport too!"

Alphys crosses her arms, giving him a skeptical look. "Come on, that is w-way OP."

Papyrus cringes a little, holding his hands up. "OH. OH! NO, NO, BAD WORD CHOICE, MY APOLOGIES! SOME CHARLATAN LASERED A HOLE INTO THE MOUNTAIN A LITTLE WAYS DOWN THE ROAD. I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT LIKE TO KNOW!"

Alphys snorts. Asgore gives Papyrus a grateful smile. Undyne groans. She has a pretty good idea of who that 'charlatan' could be.

"COME ON!" Papyrus says, grinning and waving for them to follow. "WE HAVEN'T TIME TO WASTE!"

***

There is so little light down here. The crystals casting a soft bluish-purple glow over the underground city haven't been charged since ... well, since most of the monsters left. The cavern is cast in a cold, starless twilight. The few monsters who remain here - the ones scurrying around in the shadows and watching the human children wander through the streets from the highest windows in the looming buildings - don't mind the darkness down here.

The last time Frisk and Chara passed through an empty New Home, they shared a body. Even now, Frisk can't help but glance at their sibling every other second just to check - just to double check, just to triple check - that their hair is red, that their skin is pale, that their eyes are bright red. That they really do look nothing like Frisk.

Having your mind and body stolen isn't ... It's not like getting pushed out of yourself. It's not that Chara pushed Frisk out of their body. It felt more like they grew in around them, grew in the cracks of their heart, overtook them, swallowed them up, drowned them, put them to sleep deep, deep inside themselves, huddled on the seafloor of an ocean of warmth and comfort so thick and so sweet that it seared the inside of their head and made them taste burned caramel.

Frisk can still recall the feeling of falling back under the surface of that ocean. It's like dying. Like dying, but worse.
It's not like that anymore. This is nothing like the last time they were here in this eerie, quiet version of the city. Still Frisk can't stop double-checking.

They absentmindedly grab on to their old friend's sleeve. Chara doesn't respond.

The mountain is so, so cold. The depths of a corrupted soul are so very warm. Would a hug really be too much to ask for? Just one? Frisk knows that Chara is the one who should be scared. They know that wanting closeness right now is selfish. But even though they can feel their twin's soul right there next to them, still warm and glowing like a little almost-supernova, and even though they can finally see their friend alive and awake - within their own head, Frisk has never felt more alone.

They move their other hand to their collarbones, realizing too late that not even the little heart of gold that belongs there is with them anymore.

Chara pauses halfway across the wide road overlooking the countless rows of stone-gray buildings, domes and cathedrals. Frisk follows their gaze across the gloomy city's violet rooftops and deep-black shadows. With its abandoned, dusty streets, dim purple light and scattered pairs of glowing eyes watching idly from dark corners, New Home almost looks like ... well. Home.

They've been on the surface for so long. Adjusting. Surviving. Living. Started all over for the seventh time with all the hope and courage they did all the other times, so sure that this time, this time Chara would let them go, this time Chara would let them live.

They did. This time, they did. Frisk feels like they've been away from the Underground for a millennium. They knew that without their old captor, going back wouldn't feel the same anyway.

Now they're here. And with them by their side, Frisk thinks that the empty city feels a lot like lowercase-home too.

"Are you nervous?" Chara asks Frisk, though with the way they're resting their empty eyes on the streets below, it seems a little like they're asking the city as well.

Frisk takes a deep breath. Then they lean their tired head on their friend's shoulder, letting the fearful flutter in their soul speak for itself. Chara sighs and pulls them into a hug, and Frisk can't help but feel relieved at having the rotten, feverish energy radiating from the other human's heart a little closer. It feels familiar. Stabilizing.

Like dying, but worse. Like home.

Chara brushes a hand over Frisk's head, slowly, soothingly, carding their fingers through their baby sibling's wiry hair in a half-hearted attempt to untangle it. Bit by bit, the little white soul goes quiet, latching onto the slow pulse of their own red one, leaning on the much stronger heart for support. Frisk could fall asleep like this, they think. Sleep, and forget that time is moving forward at all.

They passed by the other fallen children's graves on their way here. At the far end of the souls' sanctuary is a door, and beyond the door is a spiral staircase, and at the bottom of the spiral staircase is a garden thriving with no sun and only the softest of light crystals watching over them. Here, the fallen children are buried. Here, they get to sleep forever.

Someday, Frisk wants to sleep next to them. They're a fallen child, too. They should be with their own kind. They hope Chara's going to end up in the same place. They're not sure they'd be able to sleep if their other half wasn't there.

A soft breeze emerges from deeper within the cave, bringing dry leaves and stray grains of dust with it, as if to remind the children that they still aren't safe, they still haven't completed their mission. If
they don't hurry, their final resting place could be right here, right where they stand.

That shouldn't sound as tempting as it does.

Frisk closes their eyes.

***

Asriel hurries down the stairs and bolts through the graveyard below the sanctuary, following the stone path snaking through the garden and jumping down the three steps leading to the exit corridor, but before he makes it outside-

... whereareyoustaygoing?withdon'tusleavebrotheruswesstaymisswhereyouit's safe-!

He whips around halfway through the doorway, ears perked, eyes darting around the garden. Nothing. The gray tombs are as still as their sanctuary high above.

Without daring to look away from the graves, he reaches into his backpack and retrieves his phone, turns it on and brings it up to his ear.

Static. Static. Static.

...

A child's laughter.

*Click.*

He waits another precious minute. Nothing. He puts the phone back into his backpack, frowning at the garden. "Whose side are you on, anyway?" he mumbles, before turning around and continuing towards New Home.

Mere minutes later, Toriel passes through the graveyard too. She pauses halfway down the walkway, unable to ignore the graves resting on either side of her. She's the one who chose this place. She's the one who buried her children here. Asgore tends to the flower garden surrounding them, but she's the one who established the rock tombs themselves.

She doesn't have time to dwell on the past. She's got living children who need her, living children who can still be saved, living children who still have a chance to make it out of the Underground alive.

Would Sans really be able to go through with hurting someone like that? Destroying their soul? And not just someone's soul, but the soul of her child?

What if he's right to do so? Is she selfish for being ready to defend Chara with her life regardless?

Calling upon her magic, Toriel lets six little flames drift into the crystals keeping the light on in the underground garden. They flare up in a myriad of colors, lifting the shadows crawling in the corners of the cave.

Toriel once stood idly by while someone she once cared about took the lives of innocent children in the name of so-called 'duty.' Not this time. Never again. She has the power to stop this.
No one has to die today.

With one last look at her lost ones, she leaves to find the children who can still be saved.

***

Frisk and Chara hesitate in front of the old castle slumbering at the edge of the city. They're going to have to pass through it in order to reach the other side of New Home. It's placed squarely in the middle of the walkway connecting the city's downtown areas to its heart. The old walkways - the ones that used to circle around the castle, carved into the cliff side falling away into the water on one side - are long gone.

It's just an abandoned castle. Nothing's going to hurt them in there. Sure, the hallway they'll have to go through on the other side isn't so nice and it brings back some bad memories, but ...

Something moves in the corner of Chara's eye. Something light blue.

They almost stumble turning towards it.

The sight that meets them makes their heart feel hollow, though not really in a bad way.

A moonset. That's the first thought that comes to mind. A bright, cold moon setting over water colored deep dark blue by a starry night sky. There is no sky here, of course, and there is no moon either. But in the dim light, Waterfall's glittering stones and blue mushrooms might as well be one. Both humans know very well what New Home looks like from across that starry lake, visible only through that one missing wall in the caverns on the other side. They never wondered what that little window in time looked like from the other side.

The old inscriptions in Waterfall's walls remain mostly forgotten today. The tale of the war between humans and monsters. Everyone has laid down their weapons. Everyone has moved on.

It makes sense, Chara thinks. Monsters are no better than humans, after all. Chara always wanted to hope that they were. That they would be safe with monsters. But they're not. They know that now.

So why does that might-as-well-be-moon still soothe that boiling infection in their soul?

Frisk tugs on their sleeve again. When Chara looks at them, they nod towards the castle.

There's no turning back now.

They'll have to go through.

***

Papyrus leads Asgore, Alphys and Undyne through the makeshift passage to the Underground. It lands them on the outskirts of Hotland, near the MTT Resort. The building lies in darkness, long since abandoned. Asgore hands each of his friends a little yellow flame, the kind that doesn't burn, but only gives off light, and then all four of them head through the glass doors and into the darkness
They head across the front hall, passing by the fountain in the middle of the room. The water within it has run dry. The plaque remains readable, though. ‘Royal Memorial Fountain,’ it says. ‘Built 201X (Mettaton added last week).’

Asgore looks away. Mettaton tried, he knows that. The robot tried, in his own eccentric way, to keep everyone’s spirits up. To give them something else to care about, something new. To make them forget their anger over what happened to the princes. And that’s good, that’s noble, that’s how it should be. Even Asgore couldn’t stay angry at humanity for long, anger won’t solve anything, anger won’t fix what happened.

But still some small, selfish part of him can’t help but be angry that everyone moved on and forgot about all the kids who died so they could be free. The princes, the fallen children. All of them lost their lives trying to save his kind.

Maybe he’s still just angry at himself for causing it in the first place.

He won’t let it happen again. Sans may believe he’s doing the right thing by hurting a single person to save everyone else, but Asgore knows from experience that this mindset will never work out.

Every life, every experience, is unique. No one is replaceable. Kill one person and you might as well have destroyed a world.

In New Home, Frisk and Chara try not to wonder what this part of the city looked like when everyone was still here. It already feels far too empty as it is.

Asriel ignores the eyes watching him from the shadows, hurrying through the streets of this place that looks so much like his childhood home as quickly as he can.

Somewhere deep, deep within the city behind him, he can hear his mother calling his name. He ignores her, pressing on, trying not to think about the deadweight still lodged in his spine and how it remains as cold and quiet as the buildings framing his path.

When Papyrus, Asgore, Alphys and Undyne reach the Core, they realize that it's been shut down. None of the doors work. Getting through is going to take forever.

Elsewhere, Sans slumps against a pillar, one hand pressed against his left eye socket. It hurts. It hurts. Time is running out. But he can’t stop now.


Frisk.

And the whole world is ending.

***

Golden light. Chara never did find out where it came from. The surface, maybe? Is there another opening into the Underground near that place? That can't be it. Even today, when the sunlight is
whiter than the snow below the sky, that familiar corridor glows as warmly as a summer day. The gold leaks across the doorstep to the gray hallway, gentle waves of yellow washing over the colorless tiles, as if beckoning the little humans forward. They pause just beyond the entrance to the too-familiar area.

"Do you ever miss it?" Chara asks quietly, their gaze tracing the spaces between the tiles on the other side of the doorstep. "Being one person? Never being alone? Never having to choose for yourself? Never being scared, because you know I'll protect you?"

Though they don't mean to, and though they don't know that they're doing it, Frisk traces the exact same lines in the exact same pattern. Then they stop in the middle of the movement, hanging their head and looking away. Their reply is barely louder than a sigh. "Sometimes."

They would protect Chara with their life. After all this time, Chara finally dares to trust in that fact. If ever there was proof that Frisk was as twisted as them, this is it. They may be a demon themself, but Frisk is a human willing to sacrifice everything for a demon. Ha. Maybe that's worse, even. Come to think of it, it probably is.

Chara leads the way into the Judgment Hall.

They always forget how utterly enormous the place is. Everything is so much bigger than them here. The heavy stone pillars carrying tons upon tons of granite with unwavering diligence, the chessboard tiles painted gold by the rivers of light pouring through windows too bright to look through. Chara feels like they've shrunk to doll-size. The wings on the Delta Runes embedded in the windows would be big enough to carry them.

Chara has never considered themself religious - after all, what need does a god have for other gods? - but this place makes them question their own beliefs. This place makes them feel watched.

In the light so bright it hurts their eyes, they see the last living moments of their loved ones. In the soul of the child by their side, so bright it hurts their own aching heart, they see the one reason those deaths never came to pass. The only reason. The weakest link in their own resolve. The one variable that changed everything.

But if it truly changed everything, then why did they still end up here?

Their steps echo against the cold stone. Frisk tries to synchronize their steps with Chara's, trying to make as little noise as possible. In the rivers of light they pass through, they can smell dust and sunshine.

Chara keeps their eyes locked on the far wall, trying to ignore the visions playing in the corner of their eye. It's just their imagination. It's just their imagination, there's nothing here, no one's here, it's just an empty hallway, just memories, just memories, just memories, just bad, bad memories and fear, and they just need to make it to the end of the hallway, just make it through here, make it through central New Home, make it through the Core, make it to the laboratory, destroy the machine, they can still fix this-

A gasp right next to them makes their heart skip a beat. The footsteps synchronized with their own stop.

Chara looks back to find-

Frisk. Frozen to the spot, shaking hands lifted as if they were about to reach for the other human, staring straight ahead at something behind the other, mouth open though nothing comes out.
Confused, Chara follows their gaze to the end of the hall. At first, they see nothing. The room looks the same as it did a second ago.

Then they realize what Frisk is looking at.

"you know, it's funny."

A figure. Barely more than a dark, blurry shape, obscured by the curtains of light separating him from the humans. Not even his eye-lights are there anymore.

"that first time you got us to the surface, i ...

He bows his head, laughing to himself, something low and broken, ragged, like an engine with no fuel.

"... i actually thought you were done with us. hysterical, right? i actually thought that maybe, just maybe there was some good left in you. a ... 'glimmer of a good person', if you will. i don't know why i thought that. i don't know how i could be naive enough to think that our universe was special. it's not like you let any of the other sans-es have their happy endings. but i thought ..." His words shrivel up at the memory. Then he pulls that lifeless grin back into place, eye sockets narrowing, and shrugs. "well, don't matter what i thought, does it? you're never gonna be done with us. you're just gonna find new ways to screw with us. killing us wasn't enough, so you thought 'what's worse than taking their lives?' i gotta give it to ya, kid. dangling our freedom over our heads and taking it away from us over and over until the few who remember come to associate fresh air and real sunshine with fear was a stroke of genius. points for creativity, really." His voice falls to a growl dripping with venom. "couldn't've come up with a better form of torture myself."

A twist in Frisk's chest tells them that he has initiated the fight before they've even had a chance to look down and see the white heart glowing through their shirt. Chara immediately reaches for the disk in their jeans pocket, but before they can withdraw the blade, Frisk grabs them by the arm and pulls them back, jumping forward to stand in front of them, just like they did on the mountaintop.

"I-it wasn't meant as torture!" they manage through the fear making their breathing shallow, and they reach backwards, holding Chara's hand with their right hand and clutching the rim of the other's sweater with their left, scared of what's going to happen if they lose track of them now. "They missed us, I told you already, they just wanted to see everybody again-!"

"frisk, stay out of this," Sans cuts them off, and his not-smile immediately falters, worry lines appearing between his brows and in his forehead. He looks older suddenly, Chara notices. He looks older when he's looking at Frisk. Tired, a different kind of tired than when he looks at Chara themself.

They were right, weren't they?

They can barely suppress the smirk pulling at the corners of their mouth.

Frisk shakes their head, brown hair falling over their face. "I'm not going to stay out of this, you're both my friends, I can't let you hurt each other!" Tears well up in their eyes, because Chara was right, they used to be good at this, they used to be able to help people, but they can't anymore. No matter what they say to Sans, it's like he can't hear them. No matter what they do, he just doesn't understand, it's like he's become a lost soul all over again!

They wanted to do whatever they could to save Chara. But what if 'whatever they can' just isn't good enough?
For a single heartbeat, they swear they see the lights in Sans' eyes flicker back to life. Then he pointedly looks away, and they wonder if it was only stray dust reflecting the glowing windows.

"this isn't your fight," he says, voice low, though it still echoes against the cold stone walls. "this never should've been your fight."

Frisk knows that as well as anyone. But it became their fight, and Chara became their responsibility. They're the reason Chara grew as strong as they did. If Frisk had never reached out to them, none of this would have happened. But they can still fix this. They can still fix this, and no one has to get hurt. They swore to save everyone. 'Everyone' includes the person who put them through hell.

"I know," they say, leaning back. Chara lets go of Frisk's hand and rests their elbows on the shorter child's shoulders, hands folded behind their old host's neck. "And I know you've been trying to protect me." Frisk can feel the other's thin, crooked smile in their soul as clearly as they would be able to see it if they turned their head. "But you need to let me protect you, too. Both of you."

They can feel the demon's breath close to their ear and it makes the inside of their mouth taste like bile.

"You promised me something on our way here, didn't you?" Chara stage-whispers without taking their eyes off Sans. "You're not failing me now, are you?"

"Shut up," Frisk hisses under their breath, struggling to control the anger still creeping around the edges of the path between theirs and Chara's souls.

"So now you're talking back to me?"

Before they can stop themself, they instinctively turn around and push the demon in the chest, hard enough to make them back off just a step. "I said, shut up!"

Chara suppresses a giggle.

"I'm trying to save your life here!"

Their only response is a very un-smile-like smile.

Frisk grinds their teeth together. This wasn't the plan. They were supposed to be pissed off at everyone but Chara. That was the role Chara wanted them to play, right? So what's this all about? What are they supposed to do now? If they want Frisk to play along, they're going to have to stick to the script!

Chara looks over Frisk's shoulder and right before he hides it again, they catch a glimpse of Sans' reaction. This is almost entertaining. Funny, even.

"I know you are," they say, their smile twisting into a wry grimace. "Shame you're doing such a terrible job of it."

Frisk's shoulders fall, anger turning to hurt. "Just tell me what you want me to do ..!"

A deep, crunching noise behind them makes them start, and they quickly spin around, backing up and closing the distance between themself and Chara again, so they're shielding them from the source of that noise.

Bones. Femurs. Bursting out of the ground, framing the empty, sunlit tiles separating the humans from the monster, like the borders of an arena.
His eyes are alight. Faintly, but definitely there. Sans holds one hand out, ready to attack.

"frisk, just leave while you can," he says, and his voice is shaking now, his eyes darting from the child to the demon behind them. He summons a skeletal blaster over each of his shoulders. "don't." He swallows, hard, and purposely, he extinguishes the lights in his skull again, voice going dark, that heavy echo reverberating through it as clearly as the echo from the walls. "Don't make me force you."

The child whimpers, terrified, and as clearly as Fallen sees their sins of the past reflected in the windows, Sans sees the past six months in the little human's frightened eyes. They've all forgotten. They've all forgotten who he's doing this for. They've all forgotten why he's doing this.

Fine. Fine! Let them forget! It doesn't matter, it shouldn't- it shouldn't matter. It shouldn't.

The blasters open their mouths, light blooming behind their glinting fangs.

Maybe it's better, anyway. If they remember him as something awful. Maybe then they won't miss him.

Frisk presses their lips together to stop them from trembling and they clutch the rim of Chara's sweater so hard their hands shake. This time, the demon snakes their arms around their vessel's throat in a very, very pale imitation of a hug.

"If you want to hurt Chara," Frisk manages, despite the anxiety trying to drown the words in their mouth. "You'll have to kill me first." They can feel that heavy, rotten heartbeat as clearly as they can feel the blood in their own veins. "It's the only way you'll get rid of me." They don't want to be alone again. Ever. "I'm sorry." There is always a way out.

They'll show Chara that they can trust them even if it kills them. They'll prove to Chara that no one has to die and no one has to be alone, even if it's the last thing they'll ever do.

The demon's smile splits into a toothy grin.

"Well, that shouldn't be much of a problem, should it?" Chara says slowly, brightly, cocking their head to the side to look at Sans directly. "After all, nothing's permanent anyway. Right?"

A chill runs down Sans' spine. He loses his concentration and his outstretched hand falls just slightly, the energy within the blasters' mouths dimming.

"Oh, that's right! You never did tell them, did you?" Chara can feel Frisk tense up in their arms, and they can see the fear on their old enemy's face, and god, if the way their own bright little voice sounds thrown back from the empty walls at twice its strength doesn't feel exactly as intoxicating as hearing the rush of their own tainted blood echoing through all of reality itself right before they tore it apart, broken like a toy in their frail mortal hands- "About what you told me on that first night of my resurrection."

They're not the angel of death anymore. Not really. But what they gave up their destiny for is much more important anyway. They lean their head against Frisk's, almost certain that they can hear their little sibling's thoughts through their skull. If they can sense their feelings in their heart, then why not the thoughts in their head, too?

"You called their potential death ... What was it again? Oh right ..."

Sans can barely make himself look Frisk in the eyes. But at the same time, he can't look away either.
"Business as usual."

*His* child. Not by blood, not by formal adoption, not by anything that means anything to anyone else, but still *his*. His light, his star, the one person who understood, the one person he wished with all his heart didn't understand, the only one who could make him care, the only one who could make him hope. He should hate them for it. He should hate them for giving him false hope.

He can't.

"You said that I couldn't use them against you, because when it came down to it, you'd killed them exactly as many times as you've killed me, and you were willing to do it again." Finally, Chara loosens their hold on Frisk, moving their hands to the human's shoulders instead. "So tell me - " Their icy stare softens for just a moment. "- what's holding you back?"

Nothing should be holding him back. He meant what he said back then, Frisk is expendable. If they die, it'll be undone. They've already died in the crossfire of his and Fallen's war countless times, why should this be any different? Did he have *any* qualms about killing them back then, if it meant getting rid of the demon?

No. He didn't. He may not have known that Frisk was still alive somewhere deep, deep within that beast, but even if he had, he wouldn't have stopped.

He was the only thing standing between the Fallen child and the end of the world. It's the same thing now. Saving this reality is all he was created to do. It's his one purpose in this miserable life, a purpose no one else has the power to fulfill, and no matter what, no matter how hard it is, no matter how much he wishes that someone else would take all of this away from him and do it right, do it better than he can - he still owes it to everyone he cares about to try.

For his friends. For his brother. For-

The kid doesn't cry enough. Not for someone their age. For someone who's seen the things they've seen. Maybe they did in the first few timelines where they got to be themself. He can't remember anymore.

"What are you waiting for?" the demon presses on, voice growing sharp, so unlike that false softness in their expression. "It's all going to be reset anyway, right? So why care at all? Why not just kill them right where they stand? It would be easy. And painless. And you would've done your job, you would've done whatever you could and no one could call you a coward for being weak and failing everybody!"

Frisk tries to back away from Sans, but this time, the person behind them doesn't move an inch. "Chara, be quiet, please, please be *quiet* -"

Sans straightens his back and lifts his hand, though he can't stop it from shaking. The lights within the blasters' mouths grow back to full strength. He aims them at the little human.

A sacrifice, for a future long overdue.

A casualty, in a war more important than any single life could ever be.

A temporary loss, needed for a permanent victory.

"Get it over with!" Fallen hisses at him, digging their claws into their victim's shoulders. "You think you're so above everyone else, so prove it! Prove that you'll do anything for the future!"
Sans tries to will steel into his resolve and ice into his heart, and an otherworldly wind circles him like an angry hurricane, tearing at the fur on his hood and numbing his already dull nerve endings.

"frisk, do you- do you remember what i promised you? a couple timelines ago?" he says, trying to drown out the rush of the wind and the roar of the magic building up within the skulls hanging over him. "i promised you that someday, you'd get to grow up. i promised you i'd make sure of it. remember?"

Something lights up within that scared little kid's eyes. Something that overshadows the fear. They nod, almost invisibly so. They do remember. They were afraid that he didn't.

"you saved all of us." His voice breaks. "now let me save you." He can't hide behind a plastered-on smile anymore. He doesn't have the strength. "get out of here. go find the others, go be with the people who love you-!"

Frisk knows it would be easy. It would be so easy just to turn their back on him and Chara, and pretend none of this ever happened. It would be so easy to opt out, to let them solve their conflict on their own, to go find their mom and their dad and their brother, the parents who took them in when they had no one, the brother they missed for so long and cried themself to sleep missing, it would be so, so easy to give up.

But they didn't get this far by giving up.

With a heavy heart, Frisk slumps back against their counterpart and closes their eyes tightly, awaiting their fate. If Chara is going to die, then Frisk wants them to know in their final moments that they at least had one friend. One person who loved them. One person who's waiting for them on the other side. It's all they can do for them now. And they're willing to do it.

A wave of electricity seals the blasters' charging energy beams within a bubble, ready to fire at full force at Sans' command. They're waiting. Just waiting. He could end this right here, right now.

He has every reason to.

If you hurt Chara ever again, I can't promise you I won't take their side.

He can't stop now.

They need me.

The blasters open their fanged maws.

I love you.

The wind dies down.

The blasters freeze. The magic buzzing in the backs of their mouths shrinks and fades until the bubbles of light look like just another pair of glimmering dust specks dancing in the golden light. Then their eyes fade within the darkness of their skulls, and at last, the beast heads themselves fade back into nonexistence.

The femurs lining the battlefield disappear the same way.

When Frisk realizes that nothing's happened, they look up - and right into the monster's eyes.

The lights are solid now. No more flickering. Tears line the rims of his eye sockets.
He failed.

Dead silence fills the Judgment Hall, thick as water.

Chara's hands slide from Frisk's shoulders down to their upper arms, their grip gentling. They sigh, and Frisk can feel their own relief mimicked in the ill soul behind them as clearly as cold shade washing over them on a summer day.

"I thought so," Chara says, a smile in their voice as they watch their foe crumble under the realization of what he's just done. "You call yourself the judge of the Underground, but you don't even trust your own judgment. I know what you're thinking. 'What if I'm wrong? What if this really is the last timeline?' It's just like you said. The only thing more evil than breaking someone is to give them reason to think there's any way they could ever piece themself back together. The only thing crueler than despair is hope."

Chara ignores the way the visions in the windows change. How knives and dust fade away to reveal a familiar figure, green-and-yellow-striped shirt, white fur, a bright smile free of fear. He reaches out, offering the onlooker a small heart of gold on a chain.

They force the tremble out of their voice and lean to the side so they can look at Frisk. "See? You can be useful when you really try! Where were those puppy eyes the last time he found us? You're such a wildcard, Frisk!"

Frisk isn't even listening to them anymore. Sans ... Sans spared them. For real this time. They were the only thing standing between him and completing his mission, and he spared them.

"Though to be fair, I didn't realize this was the way to go about it until today, either." Their hold on Frisk falls away completely, and for a moment, Frisk almost dares to hope that it's all over. "Who would've known that all he needed to leave me alone was a bit-"

They're wrong.

"- of -"

And they realize it too late.

"no, don't!"

"- motivation."

In the very next second, Chara's arms are back around Frisk's neck, and Frisk pushes their back against the other's chest, trying to move away from the small, square blade grazing the surface of their throat. Chara digs their heels into the ground, forcing them to stay put.

"wait!" Sans interrupts, taking two steps towards the humans before he can stop himself, palms raised to show surrender. "don't- don't hurt them. come on, neither of us want this, you need them, and i, uh, appreciate them not ... y'know, bleeding out on the same godforsaken stone floor for the millionth time in a row? heh heh." He can barely force a laugh anymore. His breathing is shallow. "come on, let them go, okay? we can work this out."

"Let go," Frisk says, fighting to keep their words level. They pull on Chara's arm, the one holding the blade, but their twin is made of stone now, inside and out. "Chara, let go, it hurts!"

"Trust me," the demon breathes through their teeth, too low for Sans to hear. They raise their voice to a cold, sing-song-y shout, addressing him instead. "You shouldn't have let me know you cared,
Sans! It's almost like you want me to take them away from you. Is that it? You want me to kill them so they won't blame you the next timeline?"

Sans shakes his head, backing away again. "no-no-no, look, i'll let you through, alright? go do whatever to that machine, i really don't care, just let them go, let them come with me-

"Not a chance!" Chara presses the disk tighter against Frisk's skin without meaning to and the child swallows a high-pitched noise when blood stains the blade. Chara pulls it back, quickly leaning forward, meaning to assess the damage - but before they can do so, they catch sight of Sans' reaction. Looking just about ready to run to them, one hand extended, not to attack the child this time, but to reach out to them, to save them, his expression pulled into a grimace of distress, fear, desperation. 

Now he's the one who gets to be scared. He's the one who gets to be helpless. Chara can't help the wicked grin splitting their face once again, and they reapply the pressure on their sibling's throat, shutting out the little one's pained whimper. "Frisk is the only thing you've left me with in this life. If you think I'm gonna give them up just 'cause you ask nicely, you're more of an idiot than I thought. Now step aside."

Sans looks over his shoulder, trying to imagine what kinds of horrors must have accumulated in the lab while Alphys was away. "but wait, what if-

"Move."

Against every instinct, Sans forces himself to comply, moving off to one side as the humans walk in a half-circle around him without turning their backs to him, the Fallen child keeping their vessel close, the two of them briefly silhouetted by the too-bright windows, their shapes blurring together into something grotesque.

"Don't follow us," Chara says to him, lifting their shoulders. "I'll be able to tell if you do."

Frisk pulls weakly on the hand holding the blade against the widening tear in their skin, stumbling as the other pushes them along. "Chara, it hurts-!" Speaking hurts. Fighting back hurts, no matter what they do, it hurts.

They trusted Chara. They shouldn't have. They knew they shouldn't have, but they couldn't help it. They had missed them, they just wanted to be with them again. But they forgot. About what kind of person it was that they missed.

"You said you wanted to help me," sounds the dark reply close to their ear, and though it must be their imagination, Frisk swears they can smell rotten plants on the breath of the undead child. "Were you lying to me again?" Their tone rises an octave. "You were lying to me again, weren't you!?"

Frisk tries to push past the noise in their head and reach out to the energy behind them, but at the end of the path between the two souls, where they hoped to be able to find just a trace of the heart they once knew, they find nothing but pure, searing radiation.

"I wasn't lying to you, why would I lie, why would I want to?" Frisk whispers, leaning their head on their sibling's shoulder in another vain attempt to escape the pain shattering their thoughts. They just don't understand, how can Chara still be scared of them after all this time? How can they still be scared of getting hurt, of being lied to? Frisk has done everything they could to help them, there's no need for them to be scared!

Chara keeps their burning red eyes on Sans as he passes the stone pillars on the other side of the hallway, and shifts their hold on their hostage, holding them more securely. "Because you hate me."
"I don't!"

"It's okay. I understand why." Chara doesn't notice when their own voice softens, completely focused on the monster in front of them. Just look at him. Cowering like a wounded animal. They've finally figured out his weakness. They've struck him where it hurts. "Don't worry. I don't blame you." They brush a thumb over Frisk's shoulder with their free hand. "I know you hate yourself, too. But I love you enough for both of us."

Frisk doesn't get it. This is not love. This is not understanding. "If I hated you, then why would I try to help you?"

Chara stops them in their tracks. Sans stops too. They're standing in their correct places now. Right where they stood at the end of every timeline up until this one.

... Wouldn't simply leaving be kind of rude? That's not how any of the previous timelines went. Besides, where's Frisk going to go when all of this is over? Back to him? It's not like he ever forgave Chara for what they did to him, so why should they forgive him in turn? Why should he get to get off that easily? Chara is finally the one in power again. They might as well have their fun before they end this war for good.

No one has to die. That's what Frisk taught them. In a real happy ending, no one needs to perish.

But it's not like toying with someone increases your LOVE.

Chara laughs so softly it makes Frisk's stomach turn.

"Since when were you the one in control?"

Something snaps.

Frisk didn't understand what it was they were hoping for when they felt lonely. When they missed not being alone in their own head, when they missed someone else taking over for a little while so they didn't have to think for themself, act for themself, be themself. Maybe their memories were too blurry. Or maybe Chara buried them before they left.

It feels like burning alive.

Searing hot energy, invisible to the eye, pours through the link between their souls, tearing down what weak defenses the white one has left and pouring pain-fear-anger-hate into the child's heart, red split lines like crooked hands dyeing the glow on their chest from the bottom and clawing their way to the top, corrupting and twisting the determination they never owned, and stealing a spirit that never was theirs to take.

Somewhere over the screams in their head - dying screams, they know them too well, their own screams, they don't think they've ever heard those before - Frisk can hear Sans' voice, desperate, begging, threatening, but even as it comes closer, the blade against their throat doesn't press closer into the wound.

Instead, the hold around their throat loosens. Their hands fall to their sides, heavy as lead. A cold hand brushes against their own much warmer one, and as easily as if Chara had moved the weapon between their own fingers, they slide it in between Frisk's.

Go ahead, sounds the whisper in their drowning heart. Show him what happens when you mess with us.
And it would be easy. Frisk knows that it would be so, so easy, because they know exactly how his battle goes, they could win it in their sleep, and they could dream up his death with complete accuracy, because they've memorized that too. Whose fault is it that they've been on the run and missing their family for weeks? Whose fault is it that they've had to survive on stolen food, shrunken dreams and the mercy of humans? Whose fault is it that they're like this now? Whose fault is it!

The dust, the reflection of knives and glowing red nines - it all fades from their vision, and finally, they can see him. Though they swear they heard him come closer, he's only a few steps nearer than before at most. He's frozen in place, his broken heart so clear on his face it almost makes them want to laugh.

"frisk?" He takes another step closer. "can you hear me?"

They can feel Chara's heart beating in sync with their own.

"kid, i'm so sorry. i didn't want you to get mixed up in this again, i'm so sorry, this is my fault, i should've just listened to you, i know i should've, but i was-"

Slowly, they raise their weapon, warning him to stay put. The translucent disk gleams in the sharp light, and in the hands of Frisk's shadow on the floor, its reflection looks like a beacon.

Sans stops, relenting to their will. "i ..." He's got nothing left to lose. Least of all his pride. "i was scared." Not for himself. He could teleport out of here right now and neither of the humans would be able to stop him. But he hasn't been able to care about himself for a long time.

Frisk features pull back in a snarl.

Whose fault is it that their happy ending was ruined again? Whose fault is it that in the one timeline where everyone was safe, even Chara and Asriel, everything still went to hell? Whose fault is it? Whose fault is it?

Who's to blame for all their pain?

A vein-y claw reaches for the last white spot on Frisk's rotten, reddened heart. Then it jolts back, as if it had been stung.

Frisk knows who's to blame.

With every bit of force left in their weakened body, they pull their arm back and ram their elbow into Chara's stomach, knocking the air out of them.

The blade clatters to the ground, and to the sound of a stream of angry cries behind them, Frisk sprints across the floor and throws themself into Sans' arms, nearly hard enough to bowl him over.

"frisk!" Laughing from sheer relief, he spins them in a half-circle in midair and sets them down on his other side, so he's shielding them from Chara with his body, his back turned to the little freak show. They are not his priority right now. They should be, but he already messed that up. He can't bring himself to care. "jeez, you really know how to keep me on my toes, don'tcha?"

The little human hides their face in his chest, clutching him so tightly he's pretty sure he's gonna end up with a bruised rib. He doesn't care about that either. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry-" They can't even speak properly, anxiety blocking up their vocal chords, but still they push the apology out on a whisper.

Sans holds them close, brushing a hand over their head, almost frantically, like he's trying to make
sure they're really here. "hey, hey, come on, don't apologize, this is my fault, we established that, remember? come on, buddy, you're gonna make me cry too ..." They're so small, they've lost so much weight, their hair is so thin, but they're here, they're here, they're here, and they're safe, they're alive. Still shaking, he leans his head on top of theirs and closes his eyes. All the other times he hugged them like this, he thought it was just another one of Fallen's tricks. But it never was. It was Frisk all along. His light. His hope.

An angry shout sounds from behind him. "Hey, what about me!? Don't turn your back on me!" Chara yells breathlessly, rubbing the sore spot under their ribs. They're back to sounding like a little kid throwing a tantrum now. That's easier to deal with. Sans ignores them.

The sobbing little thing in his arms makes a strangled noise and pulls away a bit. He looks down to find them trying to rub what is probably actually the world's smallest blood stain out of his jacket, looking distressed, as if they're worried about ruining his clothes more than the fact that they're still bleeding.

"aw shit, i forgot about your- can i see?" Sans gets down on one knee and Frisk obligingly leans their head back so he can see the wound on their throat. "it's gonna sting for a moment, okay? i'm uh, heh. a little out of practice." As slowly and as carefully as he can, he smoothes his thumb over the cut, a soft green glow playing around his fingertips. The skin closes under his touch, good as new. "there you go."

Frisk reaches their hands up and experimentally pats the skin. No bumps, no bruises, no pain. They breathe a shaky sigh and circles their arms around the back of the monster's neck, leaning their forehead against his.

Sans puts a hand on their head, meaning to ruffle their hair, but he's too tired and he ends up just kind of gently holding them in place. "you are so grounded."

Frisk can't hold back the soft little laugh bubbling in their still-aching chest.

Chara can hardly believe what they're seeing. They were so sure that Frisk was on their side now. Were they lying? Chara didn't actually think they were, they just wanted to be reassured! But they overestimated their old host. No, Frisk wasn't lying. They're just weak. Too weak to be truly loyal. Chara knew that already. But they had at the very least hoped that Frisk would also be too weak to disobey them.

They weren't. Something very small and weak and soft in the back of Chara's mind tries to ask them if maybe, just maybe, they weren't the one who was weak after all. If maybe they should have thought twice before giving into the temptation of messing with Sans without thinking about Frisk at all. The thought drowns in their fury before they can finish it. They don't have to explain anything to anyone. Sans meant to drain their soul while they were still alive, how can Frisk forgive him for that!? How can they take his side, they and Chara are supposed to be friends, they're the only one Chara's got left!

"Don't ignore me!!" They stomp their foot on the tiles, only barely able to stop themselves from cringing when the noise is thrown back at them from the stone walls, much louder than they thought it would be. "Frisk, you can't just leave me here, you're supposed to be on my side!"

Frisk starts back, seemingly having forgotten that Chara was there at all for a moment. Sans stands up so he's blocking the children's view of each other. "put a sock in it, will ya?" he grumbles, not dignifying their anger with so much as a glare. He pats Frisk reassuringly on the back and lowers his voice. "come on, pal, let's go home."
"You— you can't be serious!" Chara persists. "Frisk, you promised!"

They only catch a glimpse of the look in the smaller human's eyes before they turn around and let Sans guide them back towards the end of the hall, the one leading to the castle. The way they came from. Without Chara. They're leaving without Chara. The humans came in here together and now the only friend Chara had left in this world is leaving side by side with their enemy.

"... Are you really giving up that easily?"

The question isn't directed at the other human. Both the monster and the child in front of them stop.

"After everything you've done to hurt me, you're just gonna leave? And for what? For some brat who doesn't know how to pick a side?" Their voice breaks and they suppress a sob as best they can. They disguise their wobbling voice behind a laugh. "They're just like me, you know. They're filled with determination too, just because they can't reset, it doesn't mean they're not dangerous! Hell, if you took my determination, I could always use theirs! That's what I did the first time, did you know that? And you're protecting them!"

"playtime's over." Sans' tone is darker than the void in his eyes. "cut your losses."

"You know I'm right!" And Chara knows they shouldn't be running their mouth, but they can't help that either, they know they're only putting Frisk in danger, but maybe they want Frisk to know what it's like, maybe they want Frisk to understand. If there's one thing Chara has learned from all of this, it's that monsters are no better than humans. It's only a matter of time before Sans turns on them as well. Frisk doesn't belong with him, they don't belong with any of the monsters, they belong with Chara, they belong with someone who's just like them, just as dangerous just by existing, just as messed up, just in need of a friend. They've always belonged together, the two of them. "You can't trust him, Frisk. Me and you are the same, and you can't hide that forever. We'll never be safe with people like him around."

Sans is done. He came here to complete his mission and he failed. That's it. Done, over with. He wasn't strong enough, Fallen wormed their way out of their sentence a second time, but at least he got Frisk back, at least he got the kid out of this alive, and really, he can't even bring himself to be disappointed when they're back home with him.

But he can't deny that his adversary has a point. Not in regards to Frisk, of course, no, that poor little thing has been through enough, just because they happen to be a conduit for Fallen's evil, it doesn't mean they have to shoulder the blame - but simply giving up because Fallen managed to hit him where it hurts? He isn't dead. Frisk is safe. Fallen is defenseless.

He doesn't actually have any excuse to quit now, does he?

Before he can turn around, Frisk stands in front of him, holding him by the arms. "N-no, Sans, leave them alone! They're just upset, they don't mean it!"

"they're not wrong, though," Sans says through grit teeth. "leaving them like this does seem a little anti-climactic, don't it?"

Frisk hugs him again, though he gets the feeling they're trying to hold him back as much as they're trying to comfort him. "You don't have to do this, I know you think you do, but you don't. Let's just go home, okay?"

"Yeah, go home," Chara says with a disgusted sneer. "See how long it takes him to realize that you're the reason he missed his one chance to save everyone."
He can't stand the look on Frisk's face. Guilt. Then begging for forgiveness without a word, like this is their fault. Like this could ever be their fault. He should've just killed them. Better for them to fear him and think that he doesn't care, than for them to blame themself.

"Just wait until I reset. You think he's going to keep his promise to mom this time?"

Sans crouches down so he can look the little human in the eyes. "do you trust me?"

Frisk hesitates for a moment, thinking their response over. Then they nod.

"then believe me when i tell you that none of this is your fault." He nods over his shoulder. "it's theirs. and it's mine. alright? you can never be responsible for something someone else did." He gives their hand a little squeeze. "i'm sorry, kid. take care of yourself."

Frisk realizes what he means a second too late.

*Pling.*

Their soul turns blue. Gravity shifts.

"Sans, no, don't hurt them!" They claw at the tiles as they slide down the floor, but it does nothing to stop their fall, and in the next moment, their back hits the frame of a window, magic weighing their soul against the wall, trapping them.

The monster turns around, left eye ablaze, bones and blasters returning at his command, and Chara goes from pale-faced to deathly gray.

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"Asriel!"

She's close by now. He didn't want to stop. He didn't want her to catch up before he found the others, everything would be so much more complicated with her there, but the city is very big, and he is very small, and the castle looming over him makes old emotions stir that he doesn't have time for and doesn't want to give in to. He stops in front of it against his will.

Claws scrape over the road somewhere behind him. "Oh Asriel, there you are, thank god ..!"

He turns around just in time to open his arms so she can hug him. He doesn't want to be alone. Not right now. Not really.

"I am so glad to see you, my son, are you hurt? I could see the earth was charred on the mountaintop, were you involved in the fight?" Toriel leans away to look at him, holding his face between gentle paws.

"I was, but I'm okay," Asriel lies. He doesn't want her to worry. If she finds out that his stabilizer's busted, she won't let him go another step. "We need to find Chara, they're in trouble!"

"So I have heard," she says, a cold edge in her words. She takes his small hands in her own big ones and looks him in the eyes. "Have no fear, my little one. For as long as I live, not a soul shall take Chara away from us again. This I promise you."
Asriel believes her. For a moment, he actually believes her. Nobody's stronger than his mom. Nobody. She's going to set everything right, she always does.

Still holding one of his hand, she stands to her full height and gestures towards the castle with her horns. "We have no time to lose."

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Chara jumps across the bones emerging from the ground and threatening to tear them limb from limb, and they dodge to the right and then the left, as laser beams blast the bones to charred splinters, and when they run out of the makeshift stepping stones, they bounce against the closest stone pillar and drop to the floor, rolling to break their fall. They can immediately feel a bruise bloom on their shoulder, and though the pain is easy to ignore, knowing that they'll actually want to use this body when they're done with it makes the damage infinitely more stressful than it was the last time they fought like this. At least this body is more responsive than the last one they inhabited. They only stumble twice when trying to stand upright.

"now i'm not one to fight dirty," their enemy quips. "and i don't break my word, but you're right. i would be pretty disappointed in myself if i passed up this opportunity. whaddaya know, i actually had some spare standards lying around somewhere." He makes a sideways cutting motion through the air and one of the blasters breaks rank, charging at Chara at full force and snapping its jaws shut in the place they stood milliseconds before.

Chara jumps forward to avoid the small explosion denting the tiles where the skull crashes into the ground. In the next moment, they're on their feet again, frantically looking around.

There. Behind one of the pillars, glittering in its shadow.

Sliding under another barrage of light beams, they throw themself towards the disk.

Frisk pushes their legs underneath themself so they're standing upright against the wall, and they claw at the stone floor, scratching their fingertips raw against the surface, desperately trying to find leverage. "No, stop, don't hurt them, please don't hurt them, Sans, don't-!"

Chara ducks behind the pillar and grabs the disk, narrowly avoiding the femurs shooting past it on either side and boring into the stone, nearly splitting it in half.

"i get it," Sans continues, ignoring Frisk. "you finally understand that you're not above consequences. you're vulnerable now. so instead of picking fights, you try and intimidate people. well, i'm pretty good at that myself. you wanna hear a scary story, kid?" Suddenly, his voice sounds much too close. "i know a great one."

Clutching the blade between their shaking fingers, Chara darts out from behind the pillar, slashing at the person leaned against the other side of it, but he's quicker than them, moving effortlessly out of their range and summoning bones from the ground to hinder their path.

"it starts with a kid, about your age and your size." Their weapon slices a few hairs off his hood, but he barely takes notice. "their life isn't perfect, but they've got every reason to be happy. they've got friends, they've got people who love them. they have a home, they got food on the table, they're safe, no one would ever dare to hurt 'em as long as their family is looking after them. but expectations are high. they're supposed to do something that no one else has been able to do before them. and they
don't wanna disappoint."

Frisk bangs their fists on the stone floor, begging him to leave them alone, begging Chara to run, unheard, ignored. Again.

Chara cleaves one of the femurs trying to impale them in half, hoping to wield it as an extra weapon, but with a wave of his hand, Sans vaporizes it, and the gleaming particles blind them for a single precious second. They stumble backwards and find something sharp. They grit their teeth, biting down the scream trying to force its way out of their throat. They put their weight on the wounded leg without a second thought. It holds, despite the gash on their ankle. It's fine. They've walked on broken legs more times than they can count, a superficial wound is nothing.

When they look up, they find Sans watching the blood leaking onto the floor with cold disinterest.

"someone comes up with a plan. someone elsemesses it up. and next thing that kid knows, they're not so safe anymore. they're alone. it's not that they've changed, it's ... the world around them." He sounded sadistically excited when he began his so-called 'story.' Not so much anymore. "everyone seems so far away and no one understands, and they wonder if their memories are even real or if it's always been like this. they remember someone who isn't here anymore and as time goes by, they become more and more sure that this person was something their imagination cooked up. a happy dream in an awful world."

Chara pauses. The femurs stay where they are, sprouting from the ground between themself and Sans. The blasters hang motionless over their heads. Even Frisk doesn't break the silence, their teary eyes darting back and forth between the monster and the demon, confused, unsure, afraid.

"you probably think this story's about you." Sans raises his glare from the blood to Chara's eyes. "you think every story's all about you." His eye sockets narrow, not with hate, not with contempt, but with pure disappointment. In what, or in who, they can't tell. "not this one."

It's like he suddenly remembers that they were fighting. All at once, the blasters open their mouths and release beams of pure energy, and the bones leave the ground, aiming straight for the child. At this angle, their only choice is to go forward, and they throw themself towards Sans, holding their weapon in front of them like a spearpoint.

They don't expect Sans to grab them by the wrist. They don't expect him to twist their arm painfully until they drop the blade, sick, nausea-heavy memories pouring into the forefront of their mind and breaking down the determination that might have helped them resist the pain. They don't expect him to let them go, only to pick them up by the collar and slam them into the nearest pillar, hard enough to make their vision go black for a heartbeat.

"you think i'm so much better than you, don't you?" His voice is much too close. Chara shuts their eyes before their vision returns, hoping the world will go away if they can't see it. "you think you can terrorize frisk out in the open without me taking it as an invitation to kick your ass, so clearly you think i'm better than you. well, i hate to disappoint. frisk is nothing like you, but i am. i'm just as petty and angry and done with this as you are. and i - i would've been fine, y'know?" His tone rises to bright near-hysteria. "i could've dealt with it! yeah, whatever, i lost everything and i'm never gonna see him again, but life goes on, right? only, because of you and that damn flower, it didn't." He pulls them back from the pillar only to knock them back into it, harder than before, and a low, ugly cracking noise echoes in Chara's head. They can't tell if it's coming from the stone behind them or their own skull.

Slowly, they open their eyes, forcing themself to stare into the blue light within his cranium. "Then what are you waiting for?" They don't know why they're saying this. "It's revenge you want, right?
So get it over with." They don't mean it, they don't want this, they just wanted to be free, they just didn't want to get hurt anymore, so why can't they stop themself?

Sans grinds his teeth together and his eye flickers blue-red-white-red-blue. The circle of sharpened fibulas around him change aim.

Still trapped against the wall, Frisk realizes what the projectiles are aiming for. Not Chara's heart or head, but their hands and legs. He's not going to kill them. Only cripple them.

He's still going to drag them down to the DT Extraction Machine. Alive.

Out of pure reflex, Chara grabs the hand holding them by the collar and lurches forward, trying to sink their teeth into Sans' arm, and it works - it actually works - and he lets them go and stumbles backwards, cringing away at the unexpected attack, and the projectiles go off too late, flying over Chara's head as they move to follow him again.

He's got 1HP. They read it themself, when they existed outside of reality. And if their own LOVE is as high as they think it is, they don't even need a weapon, do they?

They dodge around the projectiles heading their way, easily now, as if some part of them still knows every one of his moves by heart, and throws a punch in his direction that catches him off guard and barely misses. They wouldn't be able to hurt a human. Not really. But a monster's damage isn't calculated by how capable their opponent is. It has been every monster's downfall up until now, and Chara decides right then and there that it's going to be his, too. For themself. For Frisk. For the other fallen children. The ones buried here, and the ones that came before all of them, and the ones who will come after them.

Somewhere far away, they can hear Frisk's crying turn into choked, breathless sobs.

Still trapped in warped gravity, Frisk weakly leans their forehead on the cold stone. They can't watch this. They can't watch their friends tear each other apart while they're powerless to help either of them. Not again.

They can't lose either of them again.

***

Papyrus sends another barrage of lasers hammering at the door. He only succeeds in turning the blue door a charred black. What are these wretched locks even made of!? He gets the feeling he of all people should know, but he can't remember.

Asgore puts a hand on his shoulder. "Careful. Let me try."

A loud CRASH! later, the mangled door hits the floor. Asgore rubs the root of one of his horns, suppressing a hiss of pain. Has it come lose? Perhaps a little bit. It's been generations since boss monsters used their horns for anything but show, and 'generations' is a long time for immortals.

Undyne gives the king a congratulatory punch in the shoulder. "Dude! That was-

"Uhm. G-guys?"
She pauses when she hears the tone in Alphys' voice. At first she doesn’t realize what’s making her nervous. Then she looks past her and into the room ahead.

"Oh no ..."

It’s the bridge. Or, it used to be.

Only three more rooms and they would have been in New Home.

Only three more rooms and they would have found Sans before he found the kids.

Half the room has collapsed, boulders pouring through an open wound in the Core's wall and ceiling. It's filled up, all the way from the bottom of the seemingly bottomless pit below and up through the broken roof.

And though all four of them immediately go to find an opening in the solid wall of rock, they all know with dread in their hearts that they’re never going to make it in time.

***

Sans doesn't know why he cares so much about Frisk. It makes no sense. It's almost laughable. But people like them have always been able to change his mind about the strangest things. People like them have always been able to make him care about things he wouldn't normally care about. People like them have always made him care, period.

Chara picks their blade back up from the floor as they skid around another web of laser beams. Seemingly just for show. They've realized they don't need it, but they use it anyway.

He doesn't think he would've gone on for this long if it wasn't for Frisk, Papyrus, their friends. Deep down, he knows that he wouldn't have. He wouldn't care about a world where the others didn't exist. The promise of time itself running out so he could finally have peace would've been tempting, even. It's the kind of thing you only really admit to yourself when you're at the end of your rope.

Sans angles the blasters so their beams flow into a single stream of light and heat, and it follows Chara as they sprint through the room, the magic felling the pillars on the far side of the hall, the side opposite the windows. The stone structures come crashing down, the low, heavy roar of stone grinding against stone making the ground shake.

Chara never wanted anyone to get hurt. Not in their first life, not in this one. They thought they did, but now they understand what they really wanted - safety. To remove the people who would try to hurt them before they did so. As a spirit, they couldn't tell where the anger in their broken soul ended and where the violent intrusive thoughts plaguing Frisk's ill brain began. And so they emptied the world hoping it would empty out the fear, too.

The pillars fall like trees in a thunderstorm and when their enormous bodies hit the ground, the dust of the ground-up rock fills the air, a cloud painted yellow by the windows' bright light and expanding upwards, blinding Sans. He turns around again and again, trying to catch sight of Chara, listening for them, trying to sense their still-glowing soul.

He doesn't see them ascend the fallen pillar right behind him, blade in hand. He doesn't see the way their red eyes gleam unnaturally through the cloud of dust, as brightly as the heart on their chest, and
he doesn't see that there's no victorious smirk or grin on their face, only an angry snarl, twisted, like they're about to cry. He doesn't hear them when they jump down from the pillar, their weapon raised over their head.

He only senses them at the last moment.

Without thinking twice, thinking only that he needs to get them away, he lets go of the soul he has pinned to the window frame and catches Chara's soul in midair instead, pushing them backwards and towards the opposite wall.

Frisk catches themself against the floor as the magic releases its hold on them. They hold a hand to their chest, gasping for breath through a body wrecked from crying. They look up, locating Chara's blue-glowing soul on the other side of the room, and then the glow of Sans' magic pouring out of his eye.

Chara lands on the wall with ease and with momentum on their side, they launch themself towards Sans again, knowing that he'll see them coming this time, but also knowing that he won't have time to get out of the way or aim a non-fatal shot, and if he wants to survive - he's going to have to kill them before they kill him.

Neither of them knows how they ended up here. Neither of them wanted this. Sans only wanted to protect the people he cares about the most. Chara only wanted to be free. They don't understand how wishes so simple could lead them back to this exact place.

Reflexively, Sans summons a circle of bones and sends them hurtling towards Chara, shooting to kill.

He doesn't hear the rapid footsteps thundering across the floor before they're right next to him.

He doesn't see the child approaching before they throw themself between the demon and the magic aiming for their heart.

Gravity shifts. The blue color lifts from Chara's soul and they fall mid-strike.

The world goes dark.

***

"Come on," they say, voice still shaking with laughter. "Tell me what's wrong."

"Hope, no thanks," Chara replies, holding their hand up as if to block out the invisible cloud of rainbows and puppies and good vibes Frisk radiates near-constantly. "Don't need your pity."

"Was it Sans? Was he mean to you? I'm gonna punch him. I'm gonna punch Sans in the ribs."

"You cried when you stepped on a snail down at Blooky's farm. I don't think you're gonna punch Sans."

"I'm gonna do it," Frisk assures them. "I'm gonna punch him."

"The snail was fine. You still cried. The snail had to fetch you a handkerchief. It took three hours."
"Right in the ribs, Chara!"

It feels kind of wrong to laugh along with them about something like that, but Frisk can't help it. Maybe it's just because they're tired and they haven't eaten in a little while, but sitting here on the roof of a train, far away from home, the sun rising on a world that's barely awake ... the past kind of feels like a different life.

It doesn't hurt so much anymore.

"You'd be a great writer," they say after a moment or two. "No matter what you wanna write. Maybe someday I'm gonna pick up a book you wrote and even though your real name isn't on it, because you don't want the others to find you, I'll still know it's you 'cause when I read it, I can read it in your voice without it sounding weird. And I can show it to Asriel and he'll know that you're okay, because he can hear it too, and when we read it, it's like you're home again. Like you're really there with us."

A little smile lingers on Chara's face, mostly in their eyes, and they nod, softly at first, almost to themself, and then again with more determination. "I'd like that," they say, and then again: "I'd like that."

Frisk leans their head on their shoulder. "I just got you back," they whisper. "Everything was finally gonna be okay. You and ... and Asriel, you were the only ones I couldn't save. We were finally going to be together all three of us."

Finally, Chara tears their attention away from the light, but their eyes never quite makes it to Frisk's, pausing on the cobweb-surface of the sea instead. A small smile curls the edges of their lips, though it's far more visible in their eyes.

"Someday, we will be," they say, eyes falling half-shut as the light inside their own head clears up the dark outside of it and the to-be memories play before their inner eye, hopes, dreams, a promise of things to come. "At least you and me. I promised you before we left, remember?" When Frisk doesn't reply, Chara pulls away so they can look at them. They put on the brightest grin they can manage. "Hey. Look. No matter what happens, you're always gonna be my dumb baby sibling. You know that right? You're gonna be stuck with me no matter what you do. I'm always gonna be here. Even when I'm also really far away at the same time."

Frisk doesn't reply. They never do. Not when it's Chara. They just bury their nails deeper into their adoptive sibling's back, hiding their face against the kid's shoulder. There's bile in the back of their throat, but they force it down. Focus on the familiar presence, the familiar soul resonating with their own. Focus on the numbness that isn't shock, that isn't fear. Really. It's not.

"Sorry I took so long to find you."

Chara shakes their head. "It's hard to control which century you're born into. No hard feelings, buddy."

"I love you."

"I love you too."
"I'll miss you."

***

Their skin is scraped. Bruises line their right side where they hit the floor. For the first time since they can't remember when, they can't shut out the pain. Chara pushes their palms against the stone floor, wincing at the way dust and small bits of granite dig into their raw skin. They raise their head, looking through the cloud of dust as it settles and up at the figure protecting them.

They're so little. It's like Chara didn't really see that until now. They're so little, they don't fit in here. How could Chara ever think that something so small could carry a burden so big? What made them think they should?

Children are supposed to be protected. Children are supposed to feel safe, and never, ever question if they're loved. And all this time, Chara was so busy worrying about gaining justice for themself that they didn't realize they were ruining both for their little sibling.

With trembling hands, Frisk touches the blood leaking from the open wounds in their chest where three glowing white femurs bore all the way through their back and out on the other side. They look down at the warm red liquid on their fingertips. It's the color of Chara's soul, they think. Before it went dark. They liked that color, once. It felt like lowercase-home.

Shock makes Sans' hold on his magic slip. The bones in Frisk's ribcage evaporate in a cloud of white lights. Their legs give way underneath them and they fall to their knees.

"No ..." It feels like waking up. It feels like waking up from a terrible nightmare. Chara struggles to stand up, stumbling forward until they reach the little one's side, catching them before they fall. "No, no, no, Frisk, why did you do that? Why did you do that, how could you be so stupid?!" They turn the smaller child around in their arms so they can look at them, frantically brushing brown hair away with clumsy hands until there's no more hair left and they're brushing the little one's forehead instead, unable to stop.

Frisk looks up at them with dull eyes and they reach up to pet Chara's arm, leaving bloodstains on their shirt sleeve. Tears roll down their face, matching their twin's.

"Don't be sad." They can only breathe the words, not speak them. "I hate it when you're sad."

"I'm sorry ..." Chara can barely speak louder than a whisper themself. They clutch the bleeding little form to their chest, not caring about the red color staining their shirt, their jeans, their hands. The little human feels so thin and so warm. Warm like an infection, warm like a fever. Did Chara really do this to them? They're not supposed to be back here, this was supposed to be over! They were never supposed to hurt them again, they were supposed to be good now! They were supposed to finally be the big sibling Frisk needed from the start! "I'm sorry, Frisk, I'm so sorry, I didn't ... I didn't want to- I didn't mean to-" They can't force the words out through the convulsions in their chest, their words drowning in the whimper pushing out of their throat.

Frisk follows three glittering specks of dust as they flitter up into the air. They're silver, unlike the brown dust from the pillars. They must be monster dust. One by one, they leave the ray of light pouring down on them through the window, becoming invisible in the dark.

"Will you tell mom and dad what happened?" they ask. They know it's not very nice. Not to Chara,
not to Sans. But- "I think they should know."

Chara knows it would mean telling Toriel and Asgore that Sans was following them. They know it would mean telling them why he'd want to hurt them at all. But they don't care anymore. "Of course." None of it matters when the only person they had left in this world won't be coming home with them.

Frisk leans their head against Chara's chest. "Don't hurt Sans. Remember what Azzy told us." They take one last breath through what's left of their ruined lungs. "Don't kill." They can feel the moon under their skin. "Don't be killed."

They let their eyes fall shut. Their hold on Chara's arm slackens.

"Frisk ..."

There are so many things Chara wanted to tell them, but there's not enough time. There's never enough time. Everything they've ever wanted to tell their twin comes down to a single prayer, from one former god to another.

"Please don't leave me alone."

No reply. There's no reply and they don't know what to do. Out of it, they look up to find Sans staring at them, frozen to the spot, shivering all over.

"Don't just stand there, help them!" Chara shouts at him, fingers digging into Frisk's back and scalp. "You can heal, can't you? So fix them!"

Sans opens his mouth to reply, but nothing comes out. He can't. He could barely heal a scratch in the human's skin, there's no way he can heal something like this. He's powerless. There's nothing he can do.

A light in the corner of their eye makes Chara look back down at the wounded kid in their arms. It's the light glowing through their chest. The soft glow grows bright, too bright to look at, and when the sharpness of it dies down again, the little heart is floating in midair in front of Chara. As clear and as white as the souls of their adoptive family.

How could Chara ever think of ruining something so small? Frisk isn't useless, Frisk isn't gross, Frisk isn't corrupted, how could they say things like that? How could they be so blind? Frisk didn't deserve this, Frisk didn't deserve any of this, how could Chara be so cruel?

They reach for the little soul. They can't help it. If only they could keep it here, if only they could make sure it doesn't leave, maybe there's a way, maybe they can still fix this, maybe it's not-

The light shatters inches from Chara's hand.

The shards fall softly, like scattered feathers, and fade away before they land on the child's body.

Frisk always had a soul like a monster's. Not even Chara could make something that bright and soft and fragile stay past its time.

Gently, like they're trying not to wake them, Chara lays their baby sibling on the ground, closes the little one's eyes and kisses them on the forehead. They still don't like that. But it always helped Frisk sleep.

Chara feels like their body isn't really their own as they stand up. It's like they're pulling the strings
When they look up, Sans still hasn't moved an inch. He's not even looking at Chara. Only Frisk. He might be in shock.

... Why? He's seen Frisk die a million times, he's killed them himself, why is this any different? Just because he's had a few deathless timelines to get to know them? Just because their death happened to be more obviously meaningless this time? Frisk's death was always meaningless. Killing never did anything for any of them, none of the others' deaths meant anything either, it was all for nothing, none of their pain or grief ever amounted to anything, so why is this different? Why does he care?

Chara steps over the little human's body, standing in front of them so Sans is forced to look at them. He does so, but it feels like he's looking right through them.

"So?" they say, trying without success to keep their words steady. "Are we even now, is that it?" They ball their hands into fists, digging their nails into their palms. Their voice grows to a half-shout. "I kill your sibling and you kill mine? Is that it?" The walls throw their question back at them over and over, but this time, they don't flinch.

They can't honor Frisk's final wish. They can't, not after this. They wanted to be free. They didn't want anyone to die. But Sans ruined that too. Frisk is dead because of them, because of both of them. What's the point of having a happy ending if they're not here? What's the point of being good and playing nice if they're gone?

Chara crouches down, and without taking their eyes off Sans, they pick up the blade they lost when they fell. Only then does he react, taking a step backwards.

Then something dawns on him.

"Reset," he says.

Chara frowns, cocking their head to the side. "What?"

"Reset," Sans repeats. "You can undo this. We'll start all over, we'll do it right this time! Now we know that this path doesn't work out, we can try again, we can try something else!"

"Not a chance," Chara says, darkness creeping into their words, steadying them. "You brought me back into the mortal realm, tried to manipulate me and hunted me across the world with the sole purpose of destroying me and taking away my powers, and now you want to use me to cheat your way out of this?"

"This isn't about you." His breathing is labored. He rubs his fingertips against his temples, trying to think, trying to ground himself, but it doesn't work. "This isn't about you and it's not about me, this is about them, we can't leave them like that, we can't let them die-"

"You wanted a permanent ending." Chara points towards the body on the ground with their weapon. The lump in their throat threatens to swallow up their words again. "Here it is."

Neither of them knows how they ended up here. Neither of them wanted this. Sans only wanted to protect the people he cares about the most. Chara only wanted to be free.

Neither of them wanted to hurt Frisk, yet it's all they've been doing all this time.

Chara raises their weapon again, pointing it at Sans in imitation of what Frisk did what already feels
like years ago. "If you want me to reset," they say, "then make me."

For a second, Sans can do nothing but stare at them, expression blank. He knows he's betraying everything he's worked towards. He knows he's betraying everything he was created to do. But imagining a permanent ending is hard enough on its own. Imagining a permanent ending without Frisk is impossible.

He thought he was ready to sacrifice anything to fulfill the purpose he was made for. Now he knows he's not.

He summons two skeletal beast heads on either side of him.

With a cry, Chara throws themself back into the fight.

Asriel and Toriel hurry through the castle as quickly as they can, ignoring old memories blooming in their minds as they go.

Asgore, Alphys and Undyne try to pull at and dig up the heavy boulders barricading their path.

Papyrus jams a femur under one of the smaller rocks and tries to pry it lose, but the bone splinters in his hands instead.

Easily - because they really have done it before so, so many times - Chara ducks under the lasers aiming for them and dances around the bones sprouting from the ground, and with each swing of their makeshift knife, they come closer and closer to hitting their target.

They trip him, and the unexpected fall makes his hold on his magic slip, and both the bones and the blasters vanish before he hits the floor. He hits the back of his head. It shouldn't logically do anything, but the whole world is spinning. Maybe it wasn't the hit that did it. Maybe it wasn't even the fall. Within his body, he can hear the rush of a furious acidic sea.

Pressure on his chest brings him back to reality. He looks up to find - red eyes. And a smile. Only, when he looks closer, it's not really a smile. Not in this timeline.

Chara presses the sole of their shoe harder down on his ribcage and brings the blade high up into the air, taking aim.

And if their own LOVE is as high as they think it is, it'll be over in a second.

He doesn't even look angry, they realize. Not even like he's trying to laugh it off in his own sick way, like he did all the other times they fought like this. He looks scared. Not for himself. Chara knows that. It's been a long time since Sans was able to care about himself or what happened to him.

He's afraid that if he dies, no one will be there to make Chara reset. He's afraid that with him, Frisk will die for good.

Chara strikes.

And muddled, dark determination, its stench as harsh and bittersweet as the rot within Chara's own soul, pours out of his ribs and onto the tiles.

Chara jolts back, looking at the wine-red liquid coating their hands. It stings. It stings like nettles, hot to the point of boiling, and they can feel the blisters on their own skin form as clearly as they can feel the panic gripping their heart. Then they realize that they still have one foot planted firmly on their enemy's chest.
They look down at him, furious, pure hate in their teary eyes, but Sans looks just as disgusted by the liquid as they do. It wasn't that color the last time either of them saw it. It used to be a bright, vivid red. Just like Chara's soul used to be.

Then something makes both of them pause. It dawns on them at the same time.

Sans hasn't turned to dust.

They both look down at the gash stretching from just below his left shoulder to the bottom of his ribs on his right side.

The stream of determination stops and the gash closes right in front of their eyes.

No. No.

Asriel and Toriel run the last few steps down the corridor leading to the Judgment Hall. Asriel makes it through the door first.

Stray brown dust still billows through the air on the other side, settling little by little on cracked tiles and broken granite. Warm golden sunshine falls through the big bright windows, just like it always has, day and night, for as long as he can remember.

In the middle of the hall, surrounded by rubble and fallen pillars, haloed by that warm light, he finds his best friend, his sibling, the person he once ended the world to reunite with, the one person he decided, not once but twice, was worth more than everyone else he had ever come into contact with in his short life - and he finds them with blood on their hands and a blade so reflective its shine hurts his eyes.

A gasp sounds from behind him.

He quickly turns to see what his mother is going to do, but Toriel isn't looking at the demon bathed in holy light at all. She's looking at the child lying in the shadows between two of the glowing windows. Even in the gloom, their blood is dark against the cold floor. Their eyes are closed.

"Frisk ..?"

Toriel runs past her son and into the room, falling to her knees by the small figure. "No, no, oh god no, please ..." Green flames light up in her hands and she holds them to the little human's wounds, to their head, to their heart, but try as she might, the magic won't take. "Please, I can't do this again, Frisk, don't make me do this again, wake up, won't you?" She puts her arms around them, carefully lifting them off the ground and cradling them in her arms. "Come back to me ..!"

And Asriel can't believe he could be so naive. It's not that he really thought Chara had changed. It's not that he really thought they weren't dangerous anymore. He didn't even really, truly think Frisk was safe with them. But he thought, no, he hoped with all his being that they had at least learned from their mistakes and learned to care. That they did, in the end, love him and Frisk and everyone else as much as he thought they might.

He forgot. He forgot the one thing he learned from putting Frisk and Chara through all those terrible things in the Underground.

That in the end, he didn't regret holding Chara back from killing those villagers, even though it cost him his life.

Asriel had decided that nothing mattered more than Chara. Not even the rest of his family. Not even
Frisk. Did he learn nothing from everything he went through, after all? Didn't he understand that you can't let innocent people get hurt just to save someone else? That nothing will ever turn out right if you do?

He didn't. He didn't learn anything. And Frisk paid the price.

He can't stand to hear his mother cry.

Chara brings the blade down again, blind to the acid spilling over their hands, but the wound closes again, even quicker than before, and they strike again and again, burning hot determination taking the skin off their hands, the blade itself digging into their palm and adding their own blood to the concoction.

They spent timelines upon timelines building up their LOVE. All this time, they felt safe knowing that they were stronger than any human or monster alive. All this time, they felt safe knowing that when it came down to it, they could erase this world and make anyone who would ever try to hurt them again disappear.

Chara thought they were above everyone else. Too far removed to ever belong.

Never once did they think that they might be truly human again.

Exhausted, they bring the blade up one more time, clutching it between both hands, ready to put all their strength into one final blow.

Then a vine wraps around their wrists.

The next thing they know, they're hanging in midair, kicking at the plants snaking tighter and tighter around their burned hands until they release the blade, which only makes the vines release their arms and grab on to their legs instead, letting Chara drop until they're dangling upside down, hair in their eyes. They desperately try to brush it away so they can see, but they forget about the boiling, acidic liquid on their hands, and the searing determination leaves streaks of red burn marks on their pale face. They bite back a cry of pain, looking at their stained hands like they're only now realizing just how badly they hurt.

"I protected you."

The broken voice tears them out of their thoughts and they look down to find - him. A claw lifted to direct the vines, grief and rage in his hard expression, and pain too, though it's subtle. Anyone else would've been terrified. Chara's first reaction is relief. Pure relief, simply at knowing that he's here with them. That they exist in a time where he's alive and okay.

But he's not okay.

The vines wrapped around their legs grow thorns and this time, they can't hold back a strangled scream.

"I fought for you. Do you know what that's like? Becoming a version of yourself you hate for someone you love?" He clenches his claws, like he's trying to puncture the air, and the thorns grow bigger, boring into Chara's skin without mercy. A drop of dust tears loose from the underside of Asriel's hand and falls to the ground, where it scatters into silver-white particles.

Chara looks up from where they're clawing at the vines. The dust on the floor makes them stop dead in their struggle. "Asriel, you're destabilizing!"
He knows. The machine in his back is colder than his little sibling's blood by now. He doesn't have much time. But Chara - Chara's got all the time in the world. "Remember the last time I put all of reality in danger for you?" he asks, pouting like the little kid he is, the little kid he's always been, through resets and soullessness and godhood alike. "That didn't go so well, either. But Frisk helped me understand my mistakes. And I ... I think they just did the same thing again." A tear rolls down his cheek, carving a dark path into his white fur and skin. He's coming undone. "But this time, I need your help to set things right. Will you help me, Chara?"

It takes them a second to understand what he means. Something cold settles in the pit of their stomach. "No- No, Asriel, don't do it-

"You played the game with me, you know how it works," he continues, voice growing calm, almost trance-like. His eyelids fall half-shut, and dust droplets fall from his eyelashes. "You're a responsible player, right? You must have remembered to SAVE. You always did before."

"It wasn't me, Asriel, please, I didn't kill Frisk, I swear, it wasn't me-!"

Flowey always terrified them. The idea of being at the mercy of a being incapable of caring always scared them more than anything else. All this time, they didn't realize that they should be fearing someone with the ability to care much, much more.

Asriel's eyes drift to Sans leaning heavily on one of the fallen pillars and holding a hand to his red-covered chest. He's not denying it. He's not saying anything at all. Asriel looks back to Toriel still rocking her lifeless child in her arms, whispering to them, whispering to herself, too out of it to register what's happening around her.

The sight makes the last seam on his soul snap. He can hear it, physically, as if the magic was an actual piece of string.

He looks back up at Chara, his lower face torn up by the warm tears that continue to spill, even while he feels so painfully, familiarly hollow. "I don't believe you," he says. "You've lied to me so many times. And even if you were telling the truth, it wouldn't matter. This isn't the happy ending we wanted. You've ruined everything. Frisk and me, and mom and dad, and everyone else ... Now it's up to you to fix it."

"Please ..." They can't do this again. "Asriel, I never meant for this to-" They can't do it all over again. "I never wanted them to get hurt, you have to believe me -" They've been through so much, too much, and if they go back, it was all for nothing, they can't take it, they can't bear to wake up in a world where none of their struggles mattered at all, they can't do it, they can't do it- "Please don't kill me ..!"

"If we're really friends," Asriel says, "you'll reload and set everything right."

He raises his hand to the two lockets hanging side by side around his neck and squeezes them. If this is his final death, he wants to die remembering what meant the most to him.

"And if you reset? Well. Then you know where to find me."

A circle of familiar-looking white pellets appear in a circle around him, making a noise like a machine gun. Asriel snaps his fingers and the pellets catch on fire.

...
You cannot give up just yet ...
Cha... Chara!
Stay determined ...

***

Frisk shifts a little closer to them. Chara can feel them shivering even through both of their jackets. After a few seconds' consideration, they put their arms around their sibling, their ex-host, their friend, as much for comfort as for warmth.

Sitting here in the dark, all alone with only their little counterpart for company in a world that has once again become their enemy ...

... it fills them with

**DETERMINATION**

***

Chara starts awake, and for the first hour, the first minute, the first second, all they see is a sputtering streetlight, raindrops sliding down leafless, night-black bushes and hitting the ground endlessly, the clear water pouring out of a cloudy gray heaven hanging far too low over the shadowy night, filling their ears with static and their nose and mouth with ice crystals, and for that first fraction of a second, they're certain that this is not their body, this is not their soul, their flesh is too soft, there's no dryness in their throat, no burning sensation behind their eyes, no stiffness in their back or neck, and that pounding headache that's only gotten worse and worse is almost nonexistent, and their soul-
It's so light. So light and bright and clean, not quite like Frisk's, but still so very close. It feels so new. It feels so young.

Unable to stop themself, Chara lifts their hand to their chest, cupping the glowing, fluttery little thing under their breastbone. Their fingertips brush against something between their collarbones. Instinctively, they trace its shape.

The locket.

A heart of gold.

They look to the child sitting next to them. They're staring straight ahead, eyes wide with shock, a
hand clasped over their mouth to hold back a whimper, a cry, the air they can't seem to keep in their lungs. Tears spill down the little one's face.

"Frisk-!" Chara quickly pushes themself up on their knees, reaching out to their little sibling sitting right here with them, eyes bright, color in their cheeks, radiating warmth and health and life, they're so alive, they're alive- "Are you okay-?"

Frisk jolts away from them, scrambling backwards to get away, the terror in their eyes now directed at Chara.

Chara resists the urge to follow them, holding their hands up in front of them to show that they mean no harm. "No-no-no, I'm not gonna hurt you, it's alright, it's alright!"

Wincing at an unfamiliar pain, Frisk pauses and lifts one grimy, mud-stained hand to their cheek. The scratches. They used to be scars. Not very pretty scars, not very well healed, but at least healed. Now, when Frisk pulls their hand back, red stains their fingers, mingling with the wet black soil. They can't believe it. They can't believe it, it healed, they healed, they healed-

"Chara ..?"

"Frisk- Frisk, no, wait-!"

They push themself to their feet, and fighting to stay balanced on unsteady legs, their hand over their mouth again, this time to hold in a scream, they back out of their hiding place behind the bus shelter, the spindly hands of bushes and low-hanging trees clawing at their hair and clothes, leaving even more red lines in their scalp and across their hands.

From under the flickering street light, they can see the home - the time - they left behind what feels like so, so long ago. The same street, the same houses, the same city lighting up the sky in the distance like an imitation sunrise. On the horizon, the black silhouette of Mt. Ebott looms over the town and the city, as cold and as passive at it always has been.

This is the bus stop they go to every morning with Toriel.

This is the bus stop they used to go to every morning with Toriel.

When they were at home. When they were alive.

Right now - they should be neither.

Chara hurries after them, hiding their face under their hood and their hands in their sleeves, and escaping with minimal pain. "Wait, where are you going?"

Frisk doesn't know themself. Where can they go? There's nowhere left to hide. They travelled the world, they almost made it out. They were captured, but they escaped again and almost made it to the Extractor. Why? Why do they keep failing? Why does nothing ever work out, why are they back here, what did they do wrong? They did everything they could to save their friend, but it just wasn't enough, they weren't enough, didn't they try? Didn't they do everything they could?

"I died," they whisper into their hands, voice bright and breaking on the edge of panic. Already, the memories are slipping away. But they know what it feels like. They know exactly what it feels like. "I died for you." They can almost feel their own overheated blood leak down their skin.

"But you're okay now!" Cold hands grab their shoulders, shaking them. "You're okay now, I
brought you back!" One hand leaves their shoulder and softly, gently, Chara brushes stray hair out of Frisk's eyes so they can look at them. "You're okay ..."

Frisk can't meet their eyes. No. No, they're not okay. They can still feel the echoes of that terrible fire filling their heart, red claws blotting out the white energy, a blade opening their skin and slipping between their fingers, and even as the many cold winter nights spent far, far away from everyone they love fade, even as the memory of the warmth of every comforting hug from their big sibling turns cold, even as all the fear and desperation and fragile hope evaporates in the frost in the air, they can still feel that terrible, terrible aimless rage corrupting everything they are.

They wanted to protect their friend. They couldn't imagine a world without their counterpart. They were ready to risk everything to save them. But-

"But it's not okay!"

Pushing the other's hands away, Frisk backs away again, stepping onto the glittering, rain-soaked road. Their hood falls to their shoulders, but they ignore it, welcoming the cold water washing the blood and dirt from their face, and hiding their tears.

"I can't do this anymore!" They never should have done this in the first place. How could they be so gullible? "You tried to control me! You tried to make me hurt him, how could you do that to me!?"

"I- I-I was scared, I needed you!" Chara stutters, stumbling over their own words. "I knew he wouldn't hurt you on purpose, so I thought-"

"What did you think?"

Chara doesn't know. They don't know what they were thinking. That Frisk would understand? That they'd forgive them, just like they forgave everything else Chara's done to them?

Frisk shakes their head slowly, looking at them like they're only now seeing them for the first time. "I keep waiting for you to trust me," they say, "but no matter what I do, it's just never good enough. I thought that maybe if I stayed with you for long enough, you'd ... come around. And stop being so mean all the time. But you're not, are you?"

Chara has no idea what to say. They want to go to them. They want nothing more than to go give Frisk a hug, to apologize, apologize for everything, for this timeline, for every single one before it. But they don't dare to leave the sidewalk.

"I didn't mean for this to happen, I didn't. I was just-" They force a deep breath into their lungs. They need to make themself heard. They can't stay quiet now. "I was so alone, Frisk. I couldn't lose you too. You were all I had left and I was so scared ..."

It's all so blurry now. Like waking from a dream. Frisk can't even remember what Sans said to them when they hugged him anymore. Was he afraid of them? Was he angry?

"I did everything I could to make you feel safe ..." They use their sweater sleeve to wipe the dirt from the open scratches on their face. Even under the raincoat, the sleeve is soggy and cold. "I even let you think all your mind games were working, just so you'd trust me." They sniffle and wipe their nose on their sleeve too, the side of it that isn't gross with mud and blood. The lump in their voice is almost too thick to speak through. "I'm not that gullible, you know. I don't fall for your tricks anymore."

Chara doesn't get it. Frisk knew that they were being manipulated? That doesn't make any sense. That can't be true, they must be lying. If they'd known, surely they would've left? Surely they
would've known they were in danger from the beginning?

"You didn't know!" Chara argues, unable to hide the scoff in their tone. "You were doing everything I wanted you to all the way up until the end!"

"Because I didn't want you to hurt anymore!"

Wait. What?

Frisk closes the distance between them again. "I couldn't bear to see you cry anymore, I'd do anything, anything to make you stop." This close, Chara can tell their sibling's tears apart from the raindrops making their hair cling to their reddened face. "You were so sad and you were so afraid, and I couldn't leave you. You lost everything all over again and you couldn't even risk dying to escape all of it, and I just wanted you to know you weren't alone. I didn't care what I had to do, I just needed you to know, I needed you to know you could trust me no matter what, I just wanted you to be okay-!"

A sob chokes their words. Trembling under the force of the convulsions making their chest heave, they press their palms against their heart, trying to focus on the clearness of their soul, how light and soft and gentle the energy is, how unlike that burning energy in Chara's heart it is, and it's their own, this is their own soul, this is how it's supposed to be, this is how it always should've been, and they can't believe the demon could take it back so easily, they can't believe they could bring themself to steal it back so easily, Frisk didn't want that, they never, ever wanted that.

Chara can hardly watch. But at the same time, they can't move. They can't look away.

They did this. They made this little thing cry like the whole world has ended again.

They feel like they're back in the void. Alone, clutching their vessel's fragile little soul, left with nothing but that relentless, undying love that little kid held for all their friends coursing through their formless being, corrupting and cleansing, unbearable and impossible to leave at the same time.

"If you were so above it all," Chara says, darkness creeping back into their voice and coldness into their eyes, "then why didn't you leave before it was too late?" They knot their fingers in the fabric of their sleeves, hard enough to make their fists shake with repressed anger. "If you thought I was so pathetic, then why did you give me a chance at all? Huh? Why'd you let me keep hurting you if you knew what was happening?"

Frisk's sobbing stills, bit by bit. They dry their eyes, and when they lift their chin and look Chara in the eyes, Chara can barely hide the small spark of fear in their soul. It feels like getting the air knocked out of them all over again.

"... Why do you think?" The little human's voice is cold now, colder than anything Chara could ever muster, and the embers in their dark eyes hold so much more power than the demon ever did, too.

Frisk tears their gaze away from their twin and lets it roam across the shadows hiding just beyond the unsteady streetlight. Snow hasn't fallen yet. Not in this timeline. Now they know the exact number of days until winter begins for real. Even as their memories wash away, a few catch on, remaining steadfast through the tide. Some things they've learned on this journey erased, they'll never forget.

"You never could believe it. When people told you they cared about you." Frisk raises their eyes to the heavy clouds shrouding the night in moonless darkness. "No matter what they do for you, you always think you just manipulated them into doing what you want them to. You couldn't imagine a world where someone could love you just the way you are. I should know. You've been in my
head." One corner of their mouth twitches up in a mirthless little smirk. That's another one of Chara's shadows. Another scar they left on their mind. The smirk fades away again as Frisk looks back to their old friend. "But I'm not you. I never were you. And you can't keep treating me as badly as you treat yourself."

Chara doesn't realize that they've unclenched their hands. They don't realize every illusion of coldness and anger has lifted from their expression, leaving nothing but crippled shock. Water runs down the rim of their hood, down their bangs and into their vision.

"I want you to be happy." Frisk moves their fingers to the places on their chest where blood was pouring out precious few moments ago. "And I want you to be safe." Even now, they almost expect their hands to come back red. "But I can't keep putting myself in danger to protect you. I tried... everything to make you understand. How much I care. And how much I love you just the way you are." There is no blood, of course. It's all gone. Just like everything they worked towards. Everything they suffered for. "It just wasn't enough. It's never going to be enough with you."

As Frisk's eyes dry, Chara's water in turn. Finally, they dare to take a step towards their sibling. Onto the empty road. "I..." They swallow, and then they put more force into their voice, speaking up even though Frisk will be able to hear it tremble. "I'm sorry."

Frisk holds their gaze, their brown eyes softening a little, with empathy, with sorrow, with regret. But in the end, even as Chara can feel their heart breaking, Frisk shakes their head.

"That's not enough."

Chara can do nothing but let the tears fall. They have nothing left to lose. "I never wanted you to get hurt. I was just- I was just playing."

Frisk turns their back to them. "The game is over, Chara." They cross their arms, hugging themself. "It's been for a long time."

Try as they might, Chara can't silence the little whimper in the back of their throat. They'd ask - no, they'd beg them to stay, if they thought it would help. But in that moment, they know it wouldn't.

"If you want to run away again... you're on your own."

Frisk leaves them there. By the roadside. Chara can do nothing but watch as their counterpart crosses the road and leaves the streetlight, swallowed up by the dark, rainy night. Soon they can't even hear their footsteps anymore.

Chara raises their eyes to the sky above, just like Frisk did a moment ago. Their hood falls, and cold, crystal clear rain washes down their face and through their hair, freezing their skin and stealing away their tears. It's so empty up there. In the sky. No stars, no moon, only clouds, heavy and dark gray, impenetrable.

Chara never considered themself religious. They never thought a god could have need for other gods.

It wells up inside all at once. Fear, anger, loneliness, despair. Everything they've held on to, everything they've tried to forget, everything they've forgotten and everything they've remembered, and they cry, out loud, in a way they haven't since they were very small, so, so long ago.

They cry, and they keep crying, until it's all out, until there's nothing left. Even then, silent sobs
continue to make their tired body twitch.

For what feels like a very long time, they think nobody will come. No one ever does, right? Not for them. Maybe for Frisk, but ... not for them.

They didn't notice when they closed their eyes. But they sense the rain disappearing before they see it. They open their eyes and blink a few times, and then they look up at the sky, confused.

Above them is a dark blue umbrella.

"so. level one, huh?"

They sniffle, wiping their eyes with their sleeve. Sans heaves a long, tired sigh.

"let's go home, kid."

***

Half an hour later, Chara is seated at the table in the skeleton brothers' kitchen, wrapped in a towel taller than they are and about three times as wide. Their soaked sweater, jeans and socks have been slung haphazardly over a drying rack by the door, water still dripping into a little puddle on the floor. They eye the mug on the table in front of them suspiciously. It's filled with hot chocolate, which they love, obviously, but it also says "LITERALLY THE WORST" on the side, scrawled on in black permanent marker in a very familiar font. Something tells them it might have been a not-so-passive aggressive gift from one exasperated brother to a slightly more chill one. Probably some kind of inside joke or reference. They don't really feel like asking.

"so just fyi, this is used laundry, this is not ... new," sounds Sans' voice from the other room. He lumbers through the living room area and into the kitchen holding a big light blue shirt with the words 'party animal' printed on the front. The word 'animal' has been crossed out, and underneath it, also scrawled on in black marker, is the word 'skeleton.' Sans squints at it appraisingly. "prolly from yesterday-ish. my bro keeps his clean shirts in his room and since i'm not gonna wake him up and-or let you touch any of my shit, this is gonna have to do. catch."

He throws it and Chara grabs it out of the air, before putting it on under the towel. In the meantime, Sans retrieves a mug of coffee for himself, clearly having given up on getting anything resembling sleep tonight. Once their borrowed shirt is on, Chara hesitantly picks up the hot chocolate and glares into the depths of it, as if trying to decipher whether or not it's safe to drink.

Sans scowls at them, impatient. "look, if i was gonna poison you, i woulda given you coffee. actually the world's slowest, most painful possible death." He sits heavily on the chair across from them and as if to demonstrate, he takes a swig of his mug. It disappears without spilling through his jaw. Must be monster coffee.

Still a little wary, Chara tries a little bit of the hot chocolate. It's been a really long while since the last time they had some. It's still good.

With a deep, slow breath, Sans sets his mug down again and crosses his arms, leaning his elbows on the table. "so," he says, giving them a look that ... isn't exactly nice, or understanding, but also not quite as disdainful as it normally is. It's a little jarring. But welcome. "you, uh ... wanna tell me what's really going on?"
They don't. Not really. But what other choice do they have? There's a lot of explaining to do. Not all of it makes sense, even to Chara. Most of it doesn't, in hindsight. But Frisk is right. The game is over. And it has been for a long, long time. It's about time they came clean. About everything.

"I'm not going to pretend I feel bad about everything I did when I was dead," they start, words coming slowly, like they've been lying on a shelf in their mind somewhere for quite a while, waiting patiently to be spoken. Chara runs a finger across the top of the mug in a careful circle, resting their eyes on the soothing movement. "I can't. It's just not possible. Most of the time, in those early timelines, I was nearly soulless. And unlike Asriel, I wasn't really ... awake." They close their eyes. "It took me so long to even remember who I was. When I finally did, I'd built up too much LOVE to be able to care. My soul almost withered away completely."

Sans' brows furrow just slightly, but he doesn't interrupt. He watches and he waits. Chara supposes there isn't really any rush. Not anymore.

"I ... think there were two exceptions, though." Of course there were. Chara can't imagine a life where they don't care at least a little bit about their two exceptions. "I cared about my brother. Or at least my memories of him." They remember the look on Flowey's face when he realized that Chara no longer saw Asriel in him. When they decided, hollowed out by LOVE and determination, that the flower holding their best friend's memories was an insult to his memory, a mockery of the person they used to love more than life itself. They don't think like that anymore. But they did back then. Chara sighs and leans back in their chair, holding on to their mug a little more tightly. "... And I cared about Frisk."

Sans takes another sip of his coffee. He's trying to hide the fact that he's tense, Chara thinks. Truth be told, they didn't think he was that attached to the little human. Enough to give up his mission for them. Enough to wish for a reset to save their life. They suppose you don't really know a person before you've seen what they do when nobody else is watching.

"Not the way you care about a friend or ... even a person, I guess," they add, shrugging, uncomfortable. "But the way you like a new toy. Or a chair you stand on when you want to steal something from a high shelf. They were convenient for me. I appreciated that. That was all there was to it."

They don't like thinking about it anymore. They can't really feel bad about what they did to everyone else, but Frisk and Asriel ... Those two didn't deserve any of the things that happened to them. None of the others did either, but most of them don't remember, so it doesn't matter. But Chara's siblings do remember. Chara wishes they had the power to erase all their memories from before, forever.

They don't. And because of their paranoia, Frisk now has even more bad memories than they used to.

Chara's heart feels heavy again. Not with determination, this time. It's the opposite.

"But then this one timeline happened." Their voice falls to a whisper. They remember that one as clearly as they remember the yesterday of this time. "I'd grown stronger. Frisk had grown weaker. And ... for once, they couldn't stop me."

They keep their eyes on the warm mug between their hands, but still they can sense that Sans is holding his breath. Maybe they can hear it. They're not sure.

"Do you remember it?"

"i, uh ... can't ... say i do."
"But you can imagine it."

"I can imagine it."

Chara has never told anyone about this before. Not even Frisk. Sometimes, in the past, they wondered if it happened at all. But what else could have made them change their mind back then? They were barely even the shadow of a person anymore. There’s no way they’d be able to see just how horrifically they messed up on their own. It must have been real.

They take a deep breath and close their eyes again, letting the visions pour into the forefront of their mind without resisting. This is their past. They can’t deny it any more than they can forget it. "I took away ... everyone." They know exactly how the sound of snow crunching under their feet echoes off empty cave walls. "I emptied the Underground. And I ended the world. It was what I was born to do." It feels like a different life. A life that isn’t theirs. "I didn’t feel bad."

They don’t dare to look at Sans. They know the look on his face would haunt them until their dying day.

"But determination kind of does its own thing, most of the time. I may have ended the world, but determination doesn’t work within the laws of our world anyway. One day, in the middle of the ... plain nothingness that comes after the end ... Frisk showed up." If they strain enough, they can oh-so-faintly feel the pulse of Frisk’s soul emanating from across the cul-de-sac. The energy is steady and mellow, a little lighthouse in the dark. They must be asleep. "We struck a deal, they and I. I were to bring the world back exactly the way it used to be ... and in return, their soul would be mine."

A pained noise sounds from Sans, even though he seems to be trying to keep it in. Finally, Chara looks at him. He’s shaking his head and rubbing his temple. Chara can’t help but smile at that.

"Heh. I know, right?"

"For fuck’s sake, Frisk ..."

"They only deal in absolutes."

"You don’t say."

Chara’s smile fades again, as they reach for the other memories. They don’t like what happened next very much, either. This memory isn’t a happy one.

"Anyway," they continue, not all that eager to continue, "I accepted, I guess. I ... don’t remember why. And I brought the world back. And I revived everyone I’d taken away. And everything was supposed to be back to the way it was on the day that Frisk fell into the Underground. Only ..." They tighten their grip on their mug, trying to use the heat to ground themselves. "... it wasn’t."

Sans crosses his arms again, tilting his head a little in a kind of nervous curiosity. He’s never seen them like this before, he doesn’t think. They look sad. Not the kind of sad a little kid should be. Not the kind of sad a demon should be able to be. They suddenly look older, he thinks. Tired.

Chara hangs their head and with one hand, they pull the towel closer around themselves. And quietly, they say: "Frisk wasn’t there. I was alone."

They don’t remember much from that time. Only the feeling. They try to concentrate, try to pick apart the details and the many, many timelines they spent without their mind-twin. They can hear Waterfall in the rain drumming against the roof and the windows. If they listen very closely, they can almost
hear the low, sorrowful chime of an old music box.

"I had their soul, of course. That was the deal. And I had their body as my vessel, just like I always did. But I couldn't hear them anymore. I couldn't sense them anymore. I don't know why." They blink away the water threatening to spill from their eyes again. "I tried to go through the Underground again, but ... no matter how long I waited, they didn't come back. I tried to do what they'd do. I chose mercy and I tried to be good. I even got everyone to the surface. But nothing worked. I was all alone. And I couldn't ... stand it."

They remember holding that little soul in their chest, so much brighter and softer and more frail than their own fragmented one. They remember the love within it, all the caring and understanding, and that endless, undying hope plaguing them in every waking moment and filling their dreams with peace they didn't deserve. Chara never had a conscience of their own before. It was torture.

"I did it all over again. I turned the world to void. But even then, even in the dark, where nothing was supposed to exist but me, even after everything was over, their soul was still there. I couldn't just throw it away. I was so alone."

Sans recognizes the dread in their voice, so soft and so helpless and so unlike anything he thought them capable of. They sounded like that when Frisk died. He remembers that now. Already, his memories of the humans' disappearance and his search for them are fading. But this, he remembers. This one thing, seeing this ruthless, otherworldly being break down and cry as they cradled a passing mortal life - this he'll never forget. Not many things have the power to surprise him anymore. This did.

"So I fixed it the only way I knew how," Chara continues, and their voice and eyes go hollow now, hollow with dread, hollow with anticipation, as if they're reliving it all over again. "I couldn't stand to exist in a world where Frisk wasn't there with me. I was ready to do anything to get them back. So I opened up the very fabric of reality. And I tore out a piece. Not enough to undo everything I'd done before, no, only enough to remove the one timeline that took Frisk away. The timeline where I killed everyone."

So he was right. Sans was right all along. The demon was a threat to existence itself.

"you could have unraveled the fabric of space and time."

Chara swallows heavily, feeling cold sweat on their forehead at the memory of what they did. They knew it was dangerous. They knew the risk. But they were desperate. "Their soul turned me human again. I could finally feel how much I cared about them. How much I cared about everyone. I had to risk it. I had to. And it worked. I got Frisk back. My determination levels went down again and ... I guess my LOVE did too, even though I couldn't tell at the time. I started all over. All the way from the beginning. And we- we did it right this time. Frisk did it right." They can't believe they forgot. How important their friend is. To them, and to the world. After they brought Frisk back the first time, they swore they'd never hurt that little human ever again. How did they end up breaking that promise? "I didn't mean to hurt you by bringing you all back to the Underground over and over. I ... I missed being with everyone. I felt everything Frisk felt. I got to know you through them. Most of you don't even know me, but to me, you all feel like family now. Even you." They tried so very hard to hide the fact that no matter how much they hated Sans, they kind of missed him, too. There's no reason to hide it anymore. "I missed living through Frisk. I spent so many years of my life wanting to die, but when I was finally gone ..." They can't finish the sentence. But they think he can guess where it's going.

Sans really, really messed up. The realization hits him like a shovel to the face. He freaked himself out, made himself paranoid. This is not the kind of person who can end the world for good. Maybe
they used to be, but they're not anymore. He can tell they're not. This is not the demon he made them out to be. Or at least, that's not all there is to them.

"you're not really fallen anymore, are you," he says, but it's not really the question it should be.

Chara is quiet for a moment, eyes half-lidded in thought. Then they shake their head, slowly, but not in response to his question. Sans leans forward on his elbows again, listening, concentration on his face.

"I think you got it wrong," the child says, then. "When you talk about me - when you talk about Fallen, I mean - you make it sound like there's some big, scary force of evil stretching all throughout the universe and all throughout the other universes, too. Like they're a - a being, something cruel, that wants nothing but destruction. But I don't think a being like that exists."

His first instinct is to assume they're lying. This is the foundation of everything he knows to be true. That something out there is to assume they're lying. This is the foundation of everything he knows to be true. That something out there wants all of them dead. But he pushes past that, he tries to listen. Because if this kid - if they really are a kid - is willing to turn themself in to save someone they care about, then they can't be all gone, right? If their LOVE really has gone back to one, and he has felt it on his own body that it has, then they should by all accounts be mortal. A real person. Not just a vessel for something bigger. They should have no reason to lie.

"Fallen is ... winter. Fallen is forest fires. Fallen is death and strife, and little kids getting hurt because their parents carry grief they can't shoulder on their own. Fallen is the end of the world."

Chara sets their mug back on the table and folds their hands in their lap, straightening their back and willing themself to look Sans in the eyes.

"I am Fallen. But so are you. And so is Frisk. And so is everyone else. No one is free of sadness, that pain exists in all of us. We all get hurt, no matter what we do to protect ourselves, and we all hurt other people without meaning to, those are the conditions we accept every day we're alive. It's the price we pay for getting to be with the people we love and experience all the good things we can before we leave. My one fatal mistake, the reason I came to embody all the hurt in the world, was that I let all my pain blind me. I was so busy being messed up about everything I'd gone through myself to realize that in trying to gain revenge for what I lost, I hurt innocent people. Including the people I care about the most." They put their hand over their heart, reaching out to that familiar energy sleeping soundly on the other side of the cul-de-sac. "I thought I was destined to end the world. I thought it was too sick to be good for anything anymore. But I was wrong. Frisk made me realize that. I ... I think I forgot that." They take a deep breath to steady their voice and they avert their eyes in shame. "I've been a terrible friend."

For a long, quiet minute, Sans only looks at them, conflicted. Chara awaits his response with patience. They can't demand anything from him anymore. They can't demand anything from anyone. They messed up again. Their past mistakes were unforgivable in the first place. Now, they know for sure they don't deserve his mercy. Or Frisk's.

"listen." Sans leans back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. "i'm still not gonna make excuses for you. and i'm not gonna pretend what you caused was anything less than a tragedy, not back then and not this time, either. you did some real, real messed up stuff, and people i care about suffered because of it."

Chara shrinks under his words. They know. They know. If they could do it all over again, they would. They have done it all over again, but it's not enough. For as long as even a single person remembers what happened, it will never be enough.
"... but nevertheless ..."

They hold their breath.

"i misjudged you." For once in his life, Sans looks dead serious. "i thought you were something you weren't. frisk told me your whole no-soul-deal was just like asriel's, but i didn't believe 'em." He bows his head to them, holding their gaze. "i'm sorry."

It's like something very big and very heavy finally lifts from Chara's shoulders. They choke up again, but they don't cry. They didn't really realize how much they wanted to hear him say that until now. They've been so busy playing outlaw on the run that they forgot how much they once cared about this person, how much they still care about him when they're really being honest with themself.

Hearing him apologize is a relief. Still they can't really help but wonder if he should be doing so at all. He was right, in the end. They were dangerous. Not in the way he expected them to be, but he was still right about them, in a way. Frisk is the one who misjudged them, in the end.

Chara sighs again and takes their mug back from the table. Their hands are still freezing. The warmth seeping through the ceramic helps. "Frisk probably hates me now." Chara knows they would if they were them. "We were just getting around to being friends for real and then I screwed it all up again."

Sans thinks it over for a moment. Frisk has never hated anyone. Not for real. Nearly everyone in their family used to be a threat to their life. Frisk doesn't hold grudges. Not even towards Sans himself.

"i wouldn't be so sure 'bout that," he says. His attention drifts to the window, where rain is still pouring down the glass panes. Two of Muffet's spiders are sitting in the windowsill, watching the downpour together.

Chara winces. "What do you mean? I was horrible to them, I said so many terrible things and I- I tried to control them again, I was awful! They should hate me!"

Sans nods, mostly to himself. It's not that he disagrees. Really, Frisk should hate both of them. This meaningless conflict between them ended up hurting Frisk more than anyone. But he knows that little kid too well to think that's going to be the case.

"true. hell, in a perfect world, they'd give up on both of us. but frisk ... they don't ever run out of second chances to give. no matter how little someone deserves 'em." He remembers the first day he brought them over to visit the resurrected kids. He got angry and scared them. The next day, they would barely accept an apology. "my guess is that come tomorrow, they're gonna pretend that none of it ever happened. they're gonna pick up where they left off."

That makes no sense. Chara can't believe that, why would Frisk do that to themself?

"That's not how you deal with your problems!" they blurt out, expression pulled into an incredulous grimace. "You can't just bottle up your feelings like that, how's that healthy?!"

"it's not." Sans downs some more coffee. "and it's something we're all tryin'a help them unlearn. but that stuff takes time. best thing you can do is be patient with 'em while they sort that stuff out."

That's not fair. Frisk can't just let this slide, no single person should have that much forgiveness in their heart. They need to think more highly of themself, Chara can't bear it if they don't. They can't bear it if they get off that easily, it's not fair-!

"it's the worst kind of punishment there is. having to look at that little kid every day and knowing
you're the reason they can't sleep at night. Having to watch them smile at you while you know perfectly well that they'll never be able to forget what you did, no matter how hard they try."

Silence presses into the room, heavy in the air, only interrupted by the sound of the rainy night outside. There's empathy, in that silence. Companionship in the emptiness. They've both done terrible things. Things that could have been avoided so, so easily, if only they hadn't been so very scared. Scared of each other, scared for their lives. The memories may be fading, but the feelings remain. And the knowledge that Frisk's will too makes it that much harder to bear.

Finally, Chara dares to ask: "Do you ... think Asriel will remember?"

Sans thinks it over for a second. "I doubt it," he says, then. "Are you gonna tell him?"

Chara nods. "Are you going to tell Papyrus?"

He hesitates. Then he nods too.

Chara sets their mug back on the table and pushes it away with their fingertips. They don't think they'd be able to drink any more of it. It's starting to go cold anyway. It takes them a moment to find the words for what they want to say next. It goes against everything they believe in. Everything they've believed in since the first time they fell into the Underground. They realized it before they even hit the ground. That their pain was not their own fault. That they shouldn't be punishing themselves, but everyone else, everyone who made them cry, everyone who corrupted this world and made it impossible to survive without losing yourself. They decided they'd never let anyone hurt them ever again. But this is not about them. They've been too caught up in their own misery for too long. They were so busy feeling sorry for themselves that they didn't realize how much misery they were causing the ones closest to them.

No more. They get it now. They've made their choice.

"If you still want to remove my determination," they say, "I understand."

Sans' brows shoot up near where his hairline would be if he'd had one.

"I get it. No one should have this much power. Least of all someone like me. I won't run away anymore. And I won't fight you for it, either." They brush a stray lock of hair behind their ear and raise their chin, trying to find strength within themselves despite their shallow breathing. "If you think I'm too dangerous to keep around the way I am ... I'll go through with it." They close their hand around the locket hanging around their neck. "For them." Both of them. Both of their little siblings.

For a second, Sans can't find it in himself to reply. He should accept their surrender. It's for the best. It's best for everyone, everyone who's involved in this. He has it right here in front of him, the key to putting a stop to all of this, every reset, every reload, he'd never have to be afraid again, he'd never lose anyone again, at least not to his old enemy.

This is everything he's been working towards. Everything he's been fighting for.

And yet, knowing what he knows now, his resolve wavers.

"You, uh, you sure about that?" They're not a demon anymore. Or at least, they're not just a demon. "You know it's gonna screw you up pretty bad, right? Like ... you-might-die-or-something-even-worse-bad."

Chara presses their lips together, steadfast. They were never any good to anyone alive anyway. They don't trust themselves not to do something like this again in the future, and they don't trust themselves not
to reset, either. But maybe if they go through with this, they will at least be able to pay off their sins.

They don't move an inch as Sans stares them down, they don't even try to read his expression. He may have misjudged them in the past, but all the cards are on the table now. Whatever he decides, they'll trust him.

But instead of passing their judgment, he asks them a question.

"if i told you," he says slowly, watching their reaction carefully, "that SAVE, too, is an acronym ... can you guess what it stands for?"

Chara pauses, confused.

They think it over for a moment. But no, they can't.

"it stands for 'Secure A Variable Ending.'" He gestures at them. "and that's what you did today."

He should end them before morning comes. He knows that. It's his duty. If he doesn't, he's letting down everyone who's in danger as long as the person before him exists in the state they do now. He's betraying them. Or, at least that's what he thinks. What he's been assuming all this time.

"as you probably know, there's different kinds of DT. you can have the ... the 'good' kind of determination, the harmless determination. that's ... frisk, undyne, my brother, etcetera. white DT. or you can have the bad kind, the kind living inside you 'n me. that's red DT. and even though it can be really useful, punching holes through reality and coming back from death and everything, it also sucks." He breathes a laugh, even though it's not really funny. "you get 'em too, right? the headaches?"

"Yeah."

"obsessions?"

"I once tried to murder every single Vulkin in Hotland because one of them spilled ketchup on my notebook."

He claps his hands before opening them again, as if to say 'there you go.' "the good news is, it's a sliding scale. the bad news is also that it's a sliding scale. i'm gonna go ahead 'n guess that your determination went darker the more you focused on your task and neglected frisk, am i right?"

"I didn't just neglect them, I abused them," Chara says, disgusted, though only with themself. They recognize the patterns, in hindsight. What they tried to do was so out of line, they can barely wrap their head around it. They were just lucky Frisk could see it coming a mile away. "The more I thought about what would happen if you caught us, the darker my soul grew and the more I treated one of my best friends like garbage, it was sick!"

"yeah, welp." Sans drums his fingers against the tabletop in thought. "that's the corruption setting in. prolly would've killed us if we managed to off each other, too. but guess what."

"What?"

"it didn't."

Chara almost wishes that it would have. At least then they'd have justice for their siblings. The fact that everyone made it out alive, with only the one who suffered the most remembering what they and Sans did, only feels like salt in the wound.
"we're both alive. we're both back to who we used to be."

"I don't really like who I used to be, either."

"welcome to the club, bucko." He stands up from his chair and grabs both of their mugs. "but here's a riddle for ya. if DT is a sliding scale, and getting so caught up in your own bullshit that you end up hurting people you care about makes it go dark ..." He goes to pour the remaining coffee and hot chocolate into the sink and lets the water run for a bit. "... then what do you think is gonna happen if you get your act together and try to be better person?"

Chara ... never actually thought about that before. The answer to the question lingers just beyond their thoughts, but they hardly dare to reach for it. It seems too easy. There must be a catch. "What?" They want to hear it from him. They've been let down and gotten hurt too many times, they won't even let themself guess, if it means they're only going to be disappointed again. "What happens?"

Sans turns off the water again and leaves the mugs by the side of the sink. Then he turns around and leans on the edge of the counter, putting his hands in his pockets.

"dunno." He winks at them. "i never tried."

But he kind of wants to find out.

All this time, he's been convinced there was no other way to save the world. But all this time, he was also convinced that the child sitting right here in front of him was no more than a force of evil masquerading as an actual person. He was wrong about that, at least, wasn't he?

Frisk. Asriel. Papyrus. They all tried to tell him that there was another way. Maybe it's about time he listened to them instead. They're always right in one way or another.

"look. you had the opportunity to reset and take revenge on me for everything i put you through, but instead, you reloaded to your most vulnerable moment just to save your kid sibling from having to go through the underground again. you chose to come back here and turn yourself in, just so you could see them one more time. that doesn't exactly say 'genocidal force of destruction' to me, and frankly, even if it did, i wouldn't be surprised if frisk could befriend a beast like that too. so here's an idea: how about instead of inflicting some kind of dramatic self-punishment to atone for our sins or whatever, we face what we've done and try to fix it? huh? how's that sound?"

Chara pulls a face. "That sounds hard!" The words stumble out before they can stop them.

Sans snorts. "i know you can't see it on my face right now, but i can assure you that i, too, feel a certain sense of existential dread at the prospect of putting effort into something that doesn't involve putting your soul through a meat grinder, but it's obvious that frisk cares about both of us and i know that i, personally, do not feel up to putting that little kid through any more unnecessary drama. so whaddaya say? you wanna bury the hatchet, pal?" He leans away from the counter and extends a hand for them to shake.

Chara instinctively shies away. They're not sure they can trust him. They don't know who they can trust anymore. But it doesn't matter either way. Worst case scenario, Sans is going to come for their soul some other day. And if there's even the slightest chance they can undo just a fraction of the pain they've caused and help Frisk recover ...

They stand up and face him. Take a deep breath. Then they reach out and shake his hand.

Plurhtbtbthbtthbtbthbleeeuwrhp.
Chara yanks their hand back. "Oh. My. God! Oh my god!"

Sans can barely speak through his laughter. "i can't believe you fell for that, this is the best day of my life-!"

"You freak! You're friggin' asking for the end of the world, aren't you!"

"this is your life now! this is your life now, get used to it!"

"I can punch you without murdering you now, you know!"

"why didn't i get that on camera- shit, i shoulda gotten it on camera, this is the best-"

Sans leans on the counter, laughing so hard he can barely keep his balance. Chara muffles a scream of frustration in the towel still slung around their shoulders. So yeah, okay, they've gotten rid of 'trying to drain the life out of them' Sans, but 'relentlessly messes with anyone who dares come within a ten mile radius' Sans is still alive and well, that's great to know! That's just perfect! They almost want the other him back instead.

"Just kill me and get it over with ..." they groan, falling back into their chair.

"welcome to the rest of your mortal life, buddy," Sans wheezes and stuffs the whoopee cushion in his pocket. "far as anyone knows, we're friends now. you chose this."

"And I'm regretting it already." They lean their elbow on the table and put their forehead in their hand. They've got a very, very long eighty years ahead of them.

Slowly, Sans' smug giggling dies down. At the end of it, he looks relieved. "yeah. i'm glad you did, though." In a way, he was right too. He did initially think the demon would stop if only they got what they wanted. Turns out, they really did just need good food, bad laughs, nice friends ... It just took them a little longer to realize it than he thought it would.

They look up at him. They're smiling now. Just a little. Mostly with their eyes.

It's going to be hard. Pretending nothing is wrong. Pretending to be friends. But maybe it's going to be better, too, not having to watch their backs around each other all the time. At least they have a common goal now.

"anyway." Sans brushes off his hands, as if he's just finished the last of his workload for today. "'s gettin' late. i got a deal with a ceiling i gotta stare at for the nexttt -" He looks up at the clock. It's nearing one AM. "- five hours, approximately. i'm gonna hit the hay."

Chara follows him with their eyes as he crosses the kitchen. They still can't help but wonder about the things he said. About selfish single-mindedness turning determination dark. And about how logically, being kind should be able to change it into ... something else. Would they really lose their powers if their determination paled? Is that even possible? Would they finally be safe for the people they love, then? Could they really become a good person if they just ... try?

Maybe striving to be 'good' is a little too big of a goal. They doubt their soul will ever go completely white. But hey. Maybe they don't have to be perfect to be harmless. And pink is Frisk's favorite color.

"would you, uh, turn off the lights when you go to bed?"

"Okay."
"obviously you know how to get out anyway, so i'm not gonna lock you in tonight. don't go smotherin' me in my sleep, alright, chum?"

"Okay."

Sans lingers in the doorway for a moment, looking back at the little demon still watching him from their seat by the kitchen table. He really, really hopes he made the right choice.

... And, well. If he didn't, he can always try again next timeline.

The kid looks up at him, still looking very unsure of themself. "Goodnight, Sans."

He doesn't want to hope for the best. They were right. It really is the only thing more painful than despair.

But he can't help it.

"goodnight, chara."

***

The next morning, Sans and Papyrus go down to the laboratory in the basement to free Asriel from his chamber for the last time. Chara waits by the door, nervously pressing the pad of their thumb against the engravings in their locket. A part of them still hopes that he'll remember. Another part fears it. They don't know how to feel about it. They want him to know anyway. He deserves to know.

Sans presses a button on the console next to the machine. With a loud fwoosh, the mist behind the glass dissipates, and then the machine opens up, revealing the little boss monster curled up tightly around himself.

"GOOD MORNING, YOUR TINY MAJESTY!" Papyrus greets him brightly.

"'sup," Sans adds with a grin, putting his hands in his pockets.

Asriel suppresses a yawn, slowly unfurling from his position and running a hand through the little lock of mane on top of his head. "G'morning, guys!" He scoots forward and gets to the floor, smoothing his PJs a bit.

Then he realizes Chara is there. And for the first time in their life, Chara notices the way his demeanor changes instantly.

"Oh-! G-good morning, Chara!" He tries to sound like he's happy to see them. He tries to smile, but it's strained.

Chara knows that look in his eyes. Not that they've noticed it in him before, but they know it from themself. He's trying to figure out if they're happy. He's trying to figure out if this is a good day, or a bad day, or a sad day, and he's trying to figure it out before he does something they don't like and finds out the hard way.

They can't believe they never noticed before. Has he always looked at them like that? Even in their first life? Is it new? Was it after they hurt him in those other timelines? Or was he always scared of
them? How long has he been afraid of saying even a simple 'good morning' to his best friend?

Why did it take so long for them to notice?

Chara makes a decision then. They're never going to give either of their siblings a reason to be scared of them ever again. It's over. They're done playing games. They're done with even pretending to be the demon they used to be. It's not fun anymore.

Frisk was right. Chara has always been unable to accept that other people really care about them, not because they've made others care about them, but because their friends actually like being around them. Chara may not fully understand why anyone would want someone like them as a friend - but it's not up to them to understand.

They send Asriel the brightest smile they can. "Hey bro!" They take a few light steps towards him, hands folded behind their back. "Ready for our big day?"

They can only try to become the kind of person who deserves his friendship.

Asriel instantly livens up, relief making his eyes shine. "Golly, you have no idea!" He closes the last of the distance between them, nearly jumping on the spot in excitement. "I can't wait to get all my old stuff back!"

"Forget about our stuff, we're finally gonna have separate rooms!" Chara laughs and throws an arm over his shoulders. Together, they head for the door leading to the stairway. "By the way, I need to tell you something today and it's kind of important, but dad's gonna come bring us our things any minute now, so it's gonna have to wait. Remind me later?"

"Uhm, sure, I guess? Is it something bad?"

"Don't worry 'bout it. Today's for having fun, okay? I'll tell you later."

"Okay then! Do you think mom is gonna let dad stay for a little while today? I miss him."

"If she doesn't, I'll just start crying. She hates that. Besides, she'll have to get used to us seeing him at some point!"

Sans watches the kids leave for the upstairs, chatting away like nothing happened between yesterday and the present. He supposes that in the reality they live in now, nothing did happen. He doesn't doubt that Chara will tell Asriel everything that happened eventually. He can only hope the little ex-demon will be as willing to accept a truce as Chara was.

Papyrus watches Sans in turn, a little skeptically. "FORGIVE MY SNIDENESS, BROTHER, BUT THIS CHILD DOESN'T EXACTLY SCREAM 'ANGEL OF DEATH' TO ME. ARE YOU COMPLETELY CERTAIN YOU HEARD THE RIVER PERSON CORRECTLY?"

"you ain't seen nothin' yet, bro," Sans says with a grin, though it's a little self-deprecating. He looks up at the other seraph with something he hopes translates to regret in his expression. "i feel like i'm kinda gettin' off easy not remembering most of it."

"YOU ARE," Papyrus says dryly. "I SHALDN'T COMPLAIN ABOUT MY OWN LACK OF MEMORIES, HOWEVER. THAT TIMELINE SOUNDED AWFUL!!"

Sans nods, a little reluctantly. "yeah." Truth be told, he couldn't imagine how things could ever go back to normal. "it was."
Papyrus hisses a sigh through his teeth. Whatever is he going to do with this no-good brother of his? He starts by giving said no-good brother a little comforting pat on the shoulder.

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Frisk doesn't dream that night. Not anything they remember, at least. They were too exhausted. It felt as if all those cold, sleepless nights they spent following Chara around caught up to them all at once. They barely had time to shrug out of their soggy clothes and hide them in the back of their closet before they collapsed on their bed.

They wake to the sound of their mother asking them something they can't quite discern. In the soft darkness between sleep and the waking world, just hearing her voice again makes a little tear run down their cheek.

She says something else, something muffled by the covers pulled over their ear. She sounds distressed. Then her voice sounds again right next to them, and then the mattress dips as she sits down. The back of a warm paw brushes against their cheek, brushing away the tear. Finally, Frisk's eyes blink open.

"Dearest? Are you awake?"

They look up. And there she is. All soft, white fur and big worried eyes, enveloped in the scent of baked sweets and gentle warmth, like one of her non-burning fires.

"You were crying in your sleep," she says, voice low, and cups the side of their face with her big paw, careful not to scratch her child with her claws. "Did you have another nightmare?"

Memories push at the surface of their consciousness, demanding to be let in. A few have already taken hold, claiming a place among the many, many other memories they would rather forget. Holding their breath, trying not to cry anymore, Frisk frees their arms from under the covers and holds on to their mother's paw, snuggling into the familiar warmth to escape the ... the bad dreams. That's a good name for them. Things they remember that never happened. They're just like bad dreams.

"Oh, my poor, poor little one ..." Gently, gently in a way Frisk had nearly forgotten anyone was capable of, Toriel scoops her baby up in her arms and holds them close to her heart, brushing them over the head, just like she has done since the first time they met. "It is over now, have no fear. Shh, easy now ..."

Frisk knots their fingers in the fabric of her dress, silent little sobs making their shoulders shake. Nothing can hurt them anymore. Not here. Not when they're with her. Toriel makes all the bad dreams go away. Even the dreams that aren't really dreams.

Little by little, their tears subside.

"You have nothing to fear anymore, my child. I will always be there to protect you." She leans away from them, just a little bit, so she can look at them and make sure they hear her. "Always."

That's not really true. But she tries to always be there. That's all Frisk wants anyway. They offer her a shaky little smile.
It fades when they realize she's looking at their cheek.

"Hm?" With the side of an index finger under their chin, she tilts their head to the side so she can look at the scratches on their face. "Oh goodness, Frisk, what happened? Please, please, sit still for a moment, won't you?"

A little reluctantly, Frisk lets her call a little green flame to her hand. The wounds close under her touch, easily, like it takes her no effort at all. It probably doesn't. Toriel is really strong. In healing, too. She's probably the strongest monster they know, Frisk thinks. And the kindest.

She seals the healed skin with a kiss, making them giggle despite the tear paths still shining on their face. Their laughter makes her smile.

"Frisk, you do not have to put up with wounds like that, you know this," she says, readjusting their position so they're sitting on her arm, high enough to be at eye level with her. "You can always come to me if you get hurt, no matter how lightly. I promise you, I will always want to help you. Alright? Do not be afraid to ask."

Frisk nods. She's told them this many times before, but they don't want to be burden. They play outside a lot. They get scratched up a lot. It's no big deal. Usually.

Still, they take her words to heart, keeping them there, safely locked away. They have a lot of bad memories. If they ever want the good ones to outweigh them, they'll have to hold on to those twice as hard.

"Do you want to tell me where you got those scratches? No one hurt you, did they?"

Their eyes begin to sting again. They shake their head, as much for an answer as to ward off another bout of tears.

"It was an accident?"

They nod.

"One we could prevent happening again?"

They hold their breath as they shake their head again.

No. They can't prevent it happening again. Not for sure. They don't think it would be as scary if they could.

"Alright, then ..."

Toriel doesn't look very happy with the answer, but she accepts it, at least. She doesn't push for a real explanation. Frisk is grateful for that. But maybe a little worried about her, too. Does Toriel ever have nightmares? About losing her kids, both Frisk, Asriel and Chara, and all the ones she couldn't save?

She probably does. She hides it so well, though. She always puts all her own worries aside for her children. She's the best and the most hardworking mom Frisk could ever ask for. They're not sure how they're ever going to become perfect enough to deserve someone like her.

They lean against her again, and she leans her cheek against the top of their head, letting her eyes fall half-shut. Frisk doesn't know that they're right. Toriel does have terrible dreams, sometimes. Including last night. She can't remember what it was about, but ... Oh, it's no matter. They're here
now. It takes a little getting used to, still. Waking up and remembering that the children's room in her house is no longer empty. She supposes it's going to be even more difficult now - remembering that there are three of them.

How could she be so miraculously lucky?

There's a knock at the door.

"Oh goodness me, I forgot!" Toriel quickly sets Frisk back down in their bed and kisses them on top of the head before standing up. "I meant to tell you that Sans texted me a minute ago saying he and the others would be over in a minute. It must be them at the door. Please excuse me, dearest."

Before Frisk can process what she just told them, she's at their bedroom door, about to leave. She looks back at them before she does so, giving them a little encouraging nod.

"Come join us when you are ready, okay? Take however much time you need."

Then she's gone.

Wait. Wait, wait, wait, Sans texted her? And he's- they're- all of them? How can that be, that isn't right, they can't all be- ...

... Chara didn't run away?

Cold dread tears up what's left of the comfortable haze of sleep clouding Frisk's mind. Within seconds, they've pulled on a pair of leggings and snatched a sweater from the pile next to the armchair in the corner, and bolted out of their bedroom.

Out in the front yard, Asriel and Chara run to hug their mother, who stoops down and holds them both close.

"Welcome home, you two."

Out by the road, Asgore hands each of the skeleton brothers a big cardboard box, thanking both of them for their help. He gives a little surprised "Oh" when Sans picks it up with his magic instead of his hands, and Papyrus complains about the other being too lazy for his own good and tells him to be careful not to drop it - the objects inside survived a hundred years before he came along and they better survive another hundred afterwards as well!

A loud *crash* sounds from inside the house. Everyone pauses in what they're doing, turning to look towards the noise, surprised.

In the next second, Frisk comes to a skidding halt in the open front door, sweater on backwards, hair a mess, clutching the doorframe like they're trying to withstand a hurricane.

Chara is sure they feel their heart stop.

For a long, long moment, Frisk can do nothing but stare at their mirror image frozen to the spot halfway down the path between their home and the open road.

Though they hold each other's gazes, Frisk barely sees the other on the outside. Everything, their mind, their soul, everything they are can only focus on one thing - and that one thing is the soft, familiar heart echoing in their own, as strongly and as brightly and as undeniably, painfully *alive* as ... as it always has.
Chara's right here. They're not gone. They haven't run away, they haven't died, they're unharmed and they're here.

They're right here. With Frisk. Where they belong. Where they've always belonged.

Frisk doesn't stop to ask themself how it's even possible. If this isn't just another dream - they swear they're never going to question anything ever again.

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Between Toriel, Asgore, Sans and Papyrus, the cardboard boxes quickly disappear from the van and into the house, to the middle of the floors in Asriel and Chara's new rooms. Asriel's room fills nearly to the edge. Chara's barely need to be stacked in order to fit.

"Mom, do you think you could help me unpack?" Asriel asks, scratching his neck a little nervously as he looks up at the small mountain of old stuff packed into his admittedly-not-very-big-when-there's-more-than-a-bed-and-a-desk-and-a-closet-in-it new room. "There's, uhm. There's a lot." Where's he even going to put all of it?

Toriel laughs and tells him that of course she will, she'll get the big boxes from the top of the pile! Then she looks down at Frisk and nods towards the other room across the hallway. "Frisk, why don't you go help Chara? They have not accumulated quite as many things."

Frisk looks over at Chara, who was in the middle of looking their new place over from the doorway when Toriel mentioned their name, and they look up at her, and then at Frisk. The little humans look at each other for a single, drawn-out heartbeat.

But of course, Frisk agrees. Why wouldn't they? It's just- It's just Chara, right? They don't mind being alone with Chara. They don't.

What happened in that other timeline didn't really happen after all. Chara is back to who they used to be now.

Asgore tries to find a polite way to excuse himself. Papyrus asks him if he's leaving already? He thought everyone was going to hang out today! Undyne and Alphys will be over in a minute too, they could make a get-together out of it!

Toriel can't help but roll her eyes as she listens to her ex-husband trying to stutter his way through some half-baked excuse for why he really should get going, and she nearly knocks over the tower of cardboard boxes instead of taking the first one off the top like she meant to.

She can't explain to herself why, but ... Asgore leaving seems wrong to her. No, she doesn't want to be around him any more than she has to, but she feels like he deserves it, somehow. To get to stay. She can't recall what he possibly could have done to make her think that way. Maybe it's just having her children home with her making her soft. Nostalgic.

Ugh, she doesn't want to think about that. Those memories are poisoned for her, end of story.

Toriel doesn't realize that she has paused with only the first box between her hands before she feels Asriel looking at her. She quickly chases away the gray cloud in her expression and smiles at him. Maybe it looks a little stiff, 'cause it doesn't make him look any less worried.
"It's okay if you want him to stay," her son says, picking his way around the pile of boxes until he's standing next to her and putting a small paw on her arm in understanding. "That doesn't mean you've forgiven him. He's our dad, you used to care about him a lot. That stuff doesn't go away just 'cause things get more complicated."

Her smile softens at that. What did she do to deserve a child like Asriel? She balances the box against her hip, freeing one hand to brush over his head. "Since when did you get so wise, my little one?"

That sentiment makes her nostalgic, too. Or is it ... deja-vu? She gets the feeling she wondered the same thing at another point in time. Under less happy circumstances. It made her worry. No, it scared her.

Her own child scared her.

Maybe it's only that strange nightmare from last night still playing tricks on her. The one she can't quite recall. She lets the thought drift away. She has nothing to be scared of anymore. Everything is as it should be.

Out in the living room, Asgore is about to say his goodbyes to Sans and Papyrus when Toriel appears from the hallway.

"Alright, Dreemurr, you can cease your swan song. Where do you expect me to put thirteen cardboard boxes once we have unpacked? Not everyone lives in a castle like yourself, you know."

She gestures to the couch area at the end of the room. "Sit."

"Oh! Oh well, I- I didn't." Asgore catches sight of Asriel standing just behind his mom, giving him a double-thumbs-up. "Uhm. Thank you! I think?"

He looks down at Sans, trying to confirm that this actually is a positive development. Sans shrugs and shoots the puzzled old king an encouraging grin. Meanwhile, Papyrus exclaims that that settles it!!, and immediately goes to help himself to some tea in Toriel's kitchen. It's not a real get-together without tea, after all! It's only proper! He wonders what's taking their scaly friends so long? They should've been here by now, shouldn't they?

Toriel can't suppress the slightly smug little half-smile worming its way to her face. She looks down at Asriel, who gives her a big hug as thanks. She supposes the kids don't get to see their father as often as they probably should. Maybe she has been a little overprotective of them. Asgore may have been tragically, fatally incompetent in the past, but at the very least, she knows there is no safer place for Asriel, Chara and Frisk than with him.

Really - she'd hate to see the poor fool who'd try to endanger their children.

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Frisk leads the way into Chara's new room. Chara closes the door behind themself, a little nervously. Would Frisk prefer it to be open? Maybe they would. Or maybe they don't care and Chara's worrying about nothing. Or maybe they do, but they don't want to admit it. Would they say so if they were uncomfortable? Why is being considerate so godawfully difficult?

"So, uhm, this is ... your new home. It's- It's cool, right?" Gingerly, Frisk edges around the small stack of boxes in the middle of the room and over to the window on the wall across from the door.
"You can look out at the backyard from here. It doesn't look very nice right now, but it's gonna be spring soon. After winter, I mean. It's only a few months."

Chara stays by the door. They can't see much beyond Frisk's silhouette in the window. That's okay. After everything that happened, they don't really want to look at anything else anyway. The steady rise and fall of their little sibling's breathing is all they can bring themself to care about right now. The pulse of their soul, soft and steady like a heartbeat, is all they need.

"It's gonna look really nice ..."

Frisk lingers by the window for a moment. Then they move over to the big toy chest at the end of Chara's bed.

"And- and look at this!" They sit on their knees in front of it and push it open. "I remember you told me, when we were, y'know, when we were in the Underground - you said you didn't really own a lot of stuff back in your first life, 'cause you were really depressed and when you're depressed, it's hard to like things a lot of the time, so I, uhm. I put some of my stuff. In here." They try to sound upbeat. Excited, even. They had been yesterday, when they went around their own room finding things they thought Chara might like. But yesterday was a very, very long time ago. "I hope that's okay. You can just ... throw it out if you don't like it. I won't mind." They pick up the small, slightly worse-for-the-wear star cruiser at the bottom of the chest. It's missing a few bits and also they may have spilled pink nail polish on it when they were trying to make one of their plastic dinosaurs a little more flashy, but they actually still really like it. Knowing Chara doesn't would ruin it for them, though. Might as well throw it out, then.

Chara doesn't get it. They just can't understand, how can Frisk even try to act like they're okay after everything Chara did? How can they just ignore everything that happened? They're not okay, Chara can tell they're not okay, this is wrong, why would they do this to themself? They're just a little kid. They shouldn't have to accept what happened to them. They shouldn't have to pretend to be fine. Least of all when they're with the person who caused all of it.

Half-heartedly, Frisk tries to scratch a little bit of the nail polish off the cruiser. It doesn't work. It just looks even uglier.

"You don't have to pretend, you know," Chara says, voice a half-whisper. They can hear the others talking outside the room. They don't want them to hear. "I ... I understand. It's okay not to be okay. You don't have to pretend with me anymore."

Frisk stays quiet, their back turned to Chara as they keep trying to fix the toy. They wanted it to look better, but no matter what they do, it only seems to get worse.

"You- You don't have to say anything, okay? I just want you to know one thing." The image of Asriel's expression when he saw Chara this morning pushes its way into Chara's head again. "You ..." They swallow the lump in their throat. "You don't have to be scared of me anymore. Ever. If you are, I get why. And I get it if you hate me or if you wanna hit me or if you wish I'd never come back to life in the first place or-"

They wait for Frisk to interrupt. They wish they would. But they don't.

Chara hangs their head. This is not the kind of defeat they thought they'd succumb to when they first ran away. Somehow, this is worse than anything they could have died to.

"I still mean what I said yesterday." They mean it even more now. "I ... I'm sorry." They can't believe they've been so ignorant all this time. "I'm so, so sorry." They never wanted this to happen.
This was the last thing they could ever want. "You don't have to forgive me. I wouldn't if I were you. But I'm going to get better. That's a promise. Okay? So don't worry about me hurting you ever again, because I won't. I swear I won't, Frisk ..."

Frisk's shoulders fall. They let their hands drop into their lap, clutching the mangled little star cruiser between their fingers. Maybe they're not so sure they'll be able to part with it after all.

At last, they speak up. "When I heard that you were coming over this morning after everything that happened, I thought ..." They can hear the plastic creek in their grip. Carefully, they place the toy back in the chest and shut it in the dark. "I thought you were already gone. I thought you'd already ..."

Yeah. Yeah, Chara gets what they mean. They thought Sans had already put them through the procedure. They thought it was too late.

"He, uhm. He pardoned me, I guess," Chara says, kicking at the floor a little, kind of embarrassed about the whole thing. It was solved so easily. If they'd only talked to each other from the beginning instead of getting scared, none of this would have happened. "He said that if I was fine with turning myself in as long as you were okay, then I probably wasn't so bad after all. At least not bad enough to reset. Also, my LV might have gone back to one anyway, so." They shrug with one shoulder, even though Frisk still isn't looking at them. "I guess he thought I wasn't really a problem anymore."

Frisk isn't sure what they expected from Sans. A part of them almost hoped he'd be angry enough to make Chara disappear forever. The rest of them hated themself for even thinking something like that. They didn't want Chara to get hurt. They didn't. Not for real. They nearly tear up again, as much at their own bad thoughts as at the idea of losing their big sibling forever.

Deep down, they always knew that Chara wasn't completely healed, but they accepted that, they were okay with that, because they love them anyway and they don't ever want to be apart from them again - so how could they even think of wanting something so cruel for someone they care about so much?

"You don't have to keep it in." Chara doesn't realize that the anger and hurt in Frisk's soul is directed at the kid themself and not at Chara. "If you're mad at me, you can say so. I won't be angry, because I'd be mad too if I were you. I'd ... I'd hate me." They wish they would. It would be so much easier if Frisk just hated them. Then maybe they wouldn't have to hate themself so much.

Frisk rubs their eyes, willing away the tears before they even form. Then, finally, they look back at Chara, smiling even though it hurts.

"Hey." It doesn't matter. They shouldn't be upset, because that timeline never came to pass. "Don't be silly." Chara saved them, all of them, they set it all right again. "I could never hate you." Frisk doesn't understand why they still feel so hollow. Why that terrible fear still lingers, even as their memories dissipate bit by bit. "It never really happened anyway. You made sure it didn't." Why can't they just move on and be thankful that Chara is here?

Because it was real, they realize. Maybe not for everyone else, but for them, it was real. Just like all of those bad timelines before this one. And try as they might, they can't just force those feelings to go away.

They survived all the bad timelines before this one. They're going to survive this, too. But it's going to take time.

Chara wants to argue, but it wouldn't help. It's not up to Frisk to hold them accountable for their
mistakes. It's up to Chara to make sure they don't commit the same mistakes again. It's all they can do for Frisk now. Get better, and remain steadfast in their decision to become the kind of person Frisk could trust if they chose to.

In the end, Chara nods in response to Frisk's statement, accepting it even though they don't want to. That makes Frisk relax a little bit. They'll do things their way, this time. The peaceful way. It may not be the way that ensures justice - but it is the only way anything will be able to grow afterwards. It is the only way they'll be able to move forward.

Frisk opens the toy chest again, and without needing to be prompted at all, Chara goes to sit next to them.

It's all garbage, of course. All the weird stuff Frisk has put in there. All of it's a little broken, a little messed up, a little mistreated. But Chara never had toys like these before. Real toys, that you can play with without being afraid of breaking them. They can almost feel the joy all these little bits and pieces brought to their previous owner radiating from the plush and plastic.

They'd never throw any of this out. They're going to treasure it for as long as they remember who gave it to them.

***

Soon, Alphys arrives to recalibrate the charger for Asriel's stabilizer. She incorporated it into his bed, so he can recharge while he sleeps, just like he did in his chamber in Sans and Papyrus' lab. Undyne tags along too. She wants to say 'hi' to Asgore while he's in town. Asgore tries to tell her that they see each other every day at work. Undyne gives him a hug that nearly collapses both of his lungs and tells him to quit ruining the moment.

After a few minutes of tinkering, Alphys wipes sweat from her forehead with her sleeve, gives a relieved "phew" and stands back to admire her handiwork.

Asriel, who's been sitting on one of the still-unopened cardboard boxes (one with clothes in it, of course, he'd never sit on his toys) and pretending to watch with rapt attention even though he's mostly listening to what everyone else are talking about in the living room, jumps down from his box and goes over to stand next to her.

"Is it working?"

"It should!" Alphys says, looking proud of her work. "Wanna give it a test drive?"

He does, just to be sure. Alphys quickly shows him how to untangle the cords from the side of the bed and which plugs go where in the stabilizer. He can't really see them while he's wearing it, but he can reach all of them pretty easily, so it shouldn't be too much of a problem.

"I've, uhm, c-color coded most of them? I think? S-so if you can't tell them apart, just look at the, uhm. The colors. Eheh." Alphys taps her chin with one claw, frowning. "I should make a chart. I should probably do that. To make it easier."

Asriel unfolds the stringy cape of cords attached to the metal in his spine, feeling very cool, but at the same time also maybe a little vulnerable. Magic electricity probably isn't the most stable thing in the world. "What happens if I put it together wrong?" he asks, only a little bit terrified all of a sudden.
"N-nothing!" Alphys reassures him. She still double-checks that she did it right. "Nothing, don't worry, I m-made sure it's safe!"

He feels bad for doubting her. Of course she did. She's done nothing short of her best in trying to help him, he shouldn't expect anything else. Alphys is awesome.

When she's sure the cords are where they're supposed to be, she goes over to the wall by the headboard of his bed, where a big lever is sticking out of the wall, connected to the machinery behind the bed by wires embedded in the wall. "You ready?"

"Ready!"

She pulls the lever. Immediately, the machinery whirs to life, sounding like the rush of an ocean at first, before it quiets down to a soft, whispery hum, nearly inaudible over the sound of the highway in the distance.

"Woah!" Asriel turns, trying to see the machine over his shoulder, but it looks like it always has. He almost expected it to start glowing or something. "Oh man, that feels super weird! It's like there's bees in my spine!"

Alphys cringes a little. "Eheh, yeah, it m-might feel a little weird the first few minutes, but-"

"No, no, it's cool, it's working, that's all that matters!"

Next thing she knows, there's a small, overexcited child hanging around her neck.

"Thank you so much, Alphys, you're the best!"

... He knows just what to say to break her heart, doesn't he?

It's weird. Normally, she wouldn't get that upset at a compliment, even if it was genuine and completely off at the same time, she'd know the person in question meant well, she'd be able to tell herself it's the thought that counts. But for some reason, hearing this from Asriel of all people, makes her tear up. And not for the reasons she thought it would.

He knows how much pain her mistakes caused him, right? So why does she get the feeling that he doesn't know just how wrong he is?

Careful not to touch the cords attached to the machine in his spine, she hugs him back and closes her eyes, trying to block out that strange feeling. Worrying won't make things better. She knows that for sure. And if Asriel has the heart to forgive her for what she did - then who is she to get in the way of his recovery?

An indignant shout sounds from the living room.

"I thought I was the best!" Chara says.

"I'm the best," Frisk says, their little crow voice barely loud enough to be heard, even through the open door.

"UNDYNE IS THE BEST!"

"Aww, Papyruus ..."

"WAIT, WAIT, NOT THE HEADLOCK OF CAMARADERIE!!"
"C'mere, buddy, you've earned it!"

"BROTHER, AVENGE ME ..!"

***

Even after the cardboard boxes have been folded and stuffed back in Asgore's van, and even after the children's rooms have been set up if not neatly, then in a way they themselves like, and even after the tea has gone cold, none of the monsters can bring themselves to go home, and Toriel can't bring herself to tell them to. They don't spend enough time together all nine of them. Even now, people are missing, people she may not fully count as friends to herself, but then at least as important friends to her friends. It feels right, this way. Getting as many of their own together as they can. Not necessarily to do anything in particular, just ... talk. And cherish the time they have together.

It may still be that nightmare messing with her. She can't quite tell. It already feels like it happened years ago.

As late morning turns to early afternoon, the big group splits up into little groups. Toriel agrees to teach Papyrus how to bake a spaghetti pie ("No, dear, not a quiche, a pie."). Asriel drags his dad over to the tv in the corner, talking maybe a little too loudly about all the great games Frisk owns and about how he wishes he had his own games, and about how it's his birthday soon, not- not mentioning that for any particular reason, but just because! Frisk hovers a little between the adults, who all sense that today is maybe not such a good day for the little human, all of them picking the kid up without a word and trying to include them as best they can. Chara says to Alphys they need to talk to her about something important and the two of them go off to talk in private.

Sans ends up leaned against a wall at the far end of the room, watching his friends and family carry on with their lives like nothing has happened at all. He forgot how jarring it is. How difficult it is not to question his own sanity. He knows he could just go ask one of the humans if he wanted to be sure. But they've never felt really real, either. Neither of them. It feels a little like they and he and Papyrus and everything they've been through belong in another world. Like they all came from somewhere else and intruded on a much happier place.

A subtle "ahem" catches his attention.

Wow. Okay, he didn't notice her showing up next to him. When did Undyne get this stealthy?

"Someone's being suspiciously quiet today," she says, leaning back against the wall, just like he is, and crossing her arms. ")'s there something you wanna share with the group, buddy?"

He doesn't like her tone. There's something in there, something that makes his teeth rattle. He forces them to stop, sending her an easy grin.

"no idea what you're talkin' about."

Sans doesn't like the idea of Undyne remembering past timelines. He doesn't like the idea of her learning how to figure out what happened without remembering, either. Could it be possible? She holds immense amounts of determination, that's for sure. It's white DT, though. It's not supposed to break the laws of reality, only bend them. But who knows?

"Y'know, when Alphys came home yesterday, she was pretty upset." Undyne drums her claws
against her scales. It makes a clicking noise, like pebbles thrown at glass. "Didn't wanna talk about it, either. But she was over at your place, wasn't she?"

So that's what this is about. Sans feels like he should be relieved. He's not.

It's not that he forgot about Alphys - god knows he owes her one hell of an apology, even if she doesn't remember half the troubles he caused her - but it's easy to forget that everyone else has problems too. Things that have nothing to do with the timelines, or the Fallen child, or remembering or not remembering things.

Toriel and Asgore lived a century thinking their children were gone for good. She lost six more children to the man she once trusted with all her heart. He still sees their blood on his hands when he hears a kid crying on the street.

Undyne spent her entire life training for a war that never came.

Alphys got so caught up in her own fear and lies that she nearly ended her own life to escape it all, and her guilty conscience hasn't given her a break ever since then.

All four of them went through things they never deserved. Some of it self-inflicted, some of it caused by other people, some of it just ... accidents. Happenstance.

And yet they're still here. They fought to be here. They fought to be happy. Thinking of this world, of their world, as something innately happy and pure that him and his brother and the kids are messing up is an insult to everything his friends went through. He needs to stop thinking of everyone else as 'perfect' and of himself as a failure. It's not helping anyone. If he doesn't want to feel left out in everyone else's happy ending, it's about time he did something to earn his place here instead of just feeling sorry for himself.

The first thing he can do is make sure that Alphys doesn't blame herself for the DT-thing.

He holds his hands up in surrender. "say no more. i'll talk to her, alright?"

Undyne looks down at him with a frown, clearly not expecting that. "Really? I don't gotta threaten you with bodily harm at all?"

"nope." He sighs and meets her eye, unapologetic in his, well, in his apology. "i said some preeetty screwed up stuff last night. not gonna try to make excuses for it, to be honest. 's not worth it. she deserves an apology."

"Dude, are you feeling well?"

"better than ever."

"You little freak, you cut that shit out before I call the cops!"

She's laughing now, and he can't help but laugh with her. She seems genuinely relieved, like she was expecting him to brush her off. Was he really that cold before? Just laughing off other people's problems because he had his own things to deal with? He remembers being kind of distant, at least. And maybe a little too busy with things going on inside his own head.

Well. Trust Chara to replace that gray, apathetic haze of depression with crippling anxiety and over-thinking.

He leaves Undyne with a small salute and she gives him an approving, if still slightly perplexed grin
in return. As he moves down the hallway leading to the kids' rooms, he can hear voices coming from
the second one on the left.

"H-hey come on, you were scared, people d-do weird things when they're scared-"

"I know. But that doesn't excuse the way I treated you. You've done so much for me and my brother,
and all I've done is put you down for it. It was out of line and I didn't mean any of it. I'm sorry."

"Eheh. W-well, okay then. Apology accepted."

Sans thinks about maybe coming back later, but in the next second, the door to Chara's room opens
and they and Alphys emerge, still looking a bit awkward, but happy too. They both seem happy.
Then they notice Sans coming towards them.

"Uhm. Hi?"

Chara lifts a hand. "Yo."

Sans does something resembling very half-hearted finger guns in the kid's direction before turning his
attention to Alphys. "hey alph, you got a minute?"

"Not you too." She doesn't realize what she just said before the words are out of her mouth. "Uhh, I-
I mean, sure! I guess? P-probably?"

Chara tells the monsters to stay out of their room, 'cause it's theirs now and no one's allowed in
without permission, so the two of them stay in the hallway. It's fine, he's gonna keep it brief if
Alphys doesn't want to talk. He just wants to make sure she's not worrying over nothing.

Once Chara is out of earshot, Alphys turns on Sans, already rubbing her temples as if to alleviate a
migraine. "Look, if this is about your gross DT extraction plan, I am not in the mood-"

"it is, it is, but i just wanted you to know that it's not gonna be a thing and i-" He groans at his own
inexperience with this stuff. How can you be inexperienced with just being not an asshole, why is
that so hard? "i wanted to apologize for bringing it up at all. in hindsight, it was super creepy and
complete overkill." Maybe not so much when dealing with a demon hellbent on bringing about the
apocalypse, but when dealing with a terrified little kid just trying to be edgy and scary 'cause it's the
only way they know how to feel in control? Yeah, not cool. "i just wanted to say that you don't have
to worry about me going on some knight templar quest to vanquish the last threat to our permanent
ending or whatever. we're cool now, me 'n chara. so don't get messed up about it."

"W-w-wait. Really?" Alphys looks just as perplexed by his sincerity as Undyne did. "D-did Papyrus
yell at you or something?"

Well, he did. But even that couldn't change Sans' mind.

"well, truth be told ..." She deserves to know. She's involved in this, she's been involved ever since
he recruited her to help him revive the kids. It's no use keeping secrets if they do more harm than
good. Sans chooses his words carefully, keeping his voice low so the people in the living room won't
hear. "there was a bad timeline. i tried to go through with it on my own, but it set so much awful stuff
into motion that i couldn't set right again and ... in the end, chara reloaded. we lived a month into the
future. last night, we came back here."

Alphys puts a hand over her mouth to silence a gasp. "... Chara died?"

Sans nods, looking down, hands clenching to fists at the memory. "and they weren't the only one."
He takes a steadying breath and forces himself to look back up at his friend. This isn’t about him right now. "do you want to know what happened?"

Alphys mulls over the question for a moment, looking torn. On the one hand, a mix of fear and morbid curiosity makes her want to know. On the other ...

"I ... I don't think I do." She’s not sure she’d be able to stomach it. It's bad enough, knowing the very reality she lives in used to be twisted beyond recognition, a plaything to a pair of miserable children grieving their own deaths. Knowing the kinds of horrors that might have taken place had things gone differently sounds like it would only make everything harder to bear. "Are- Are you going to t-tell the others?"

"i don't know," Sans admits. "not sure how much good it'd do." But at the same time, it's hard to face Toriel and Asgore knowing he nearly caused the deaths of all three of their kids.

Alphys doesn't know what to tell him. Coming clean about what happened to those who want to know might be for the best, but ... if it really won’t do any good, then wouldn't they be risking a whole lot without anything to gain from it? If Sans ends up telling any of the others and they get sad or scared over what he has to say, then wouldn't he be upsetting someone for no reason? Everyone is here now. Everyone is alright. Should he really risk destroying that? Is the truth really more important?

She doesn't have the answer. Neither of them do.

***

Evening comes early in autumn. Or the darkness does, rather. But it still feels like everyone has collectively decided that darkness means the end of the day, and the end of the day means that night is waiting just beyond the horizon.

Dry gold-and-red leaves scurry across the circular road of the cul-de-sac, and where they go, the streetlights open their glowing yellow eyes, as if woken from sleep by the soft swishing noises across the pavement.

Undyne and Alphys wave back to the rest of the group gathered in front of Toriel's house as they head home hand in hand, shivering in the cold. Undyne looks at Alphys before entering their garden, and Alphys looks back up at Undyne, smiling at her and giving her hand a little squeeze. Undyne flashes a row of sharp, shiny teeth in return, and together, they head inside. Soon, the lights in their house turn on, casting warm light onto the garden and out into the darkness nestling among the houses like a big, soft soot-black cat.

"I should get going too," Asgore says, though he can still barely keep his eyes off the kids flocking around him, Asriel and Frisk holding his hands, and Chara holding on to his jacket, not content with being left out.

Asriel tugs on his hand. "Nooo, come on, it's not even that late! Can't you stay a little while?"

Asgore stoops down and gathers all three of his kids into his arms before standing up again. "I do not think it would be wise of me," he says with a small, secretive smile, and looks over his shoulder at Toriel, who looks a little skeptical, if not outright impatient. "But Friday is only a few days away. Then we'll have all the time in the world." He brushes his nose over Asriel's forehead, a small cloud
of smoke billowing out of his draconic nostrils and dyeing his son's white fur gray. Asriel laughs, but Chara immediately takes it upon themself to brush the soot out of his fur.

"Dad, no, you're gonna ruin his look!"

That only makes the kid laugh even more, and he obligingly tilts his head so Chara can fix his 'look' for him. Frisk leans their head on their father's shoulder and brushes their fingers through his beard. They always did love the texture of their boss monster family's fur. They feel like really soft, clean, long-haired dogs, and everyone knows that dogs have the best fur.

"Now, you three have to promise me you'll look after one another until we see each other again, alright?" It's not that he thinks they need to be reminded. It's more that he needs to remind himself that his kids are capable of doing so. "Especially you two." Asgore looks between Asriel and Chara, and carefully readjusts Frisk's position, so it's a little easier for them to lean on him without their neck hurting. "You're both big siblings now. That's a big responsibility."

Asriel straightens his back, looking very serious. "Of course! We'll do our best, right, Chara?"

Chara's eyes linger on the little human half-asleep against Asgore's shoulder. Frisk is looking back at them, but they can't help but wonder just how awake the younger kid really is. They both had a bad time last night. It's no wonder Frisk is tired.

After maybe a second too long, Chara nods in reply. Yes. They will do their best. They didn't deserve to get to see their baby sibling alive and safe once again, but someday, they'll be the kind of person who does. They'll make sure of it. And what Chara sets their mind to, they'll always achieve.

As Asgore says goodbye to his children for the night, Toriel, Sans and Papyrus stay close by. Toriel can't bring herself to hurry the children along. She can tell it's hard for them. Adjusting. Getting used to the lives they've been handed without their consent. She allows herself the comfort of knowing that though she has known them for a hundred years, her children are still children. And as long as she is around, she'll ensure that they have many, many years to learn and get better ahead of them.

She lets her eyes wander across the empty cul-de-sac, the dark clouds above, that one sputtering streetlight in front of Sans and Papyrus' house. Without being quite certain why, her attention is caught by the big windows in Undyne and Alphys' house, the yellow lights pouring through nearly as bright as sunlight, and for a second, she almost thinks she sees-

- a small figure lying in shadow between two beams of light, blood pooling on the floor under them, a hollow shell devoid of life, devoid of soul, green flames dying in her hands-

... but the vision is so brief and so blurry and so far from the edge of her consciousness that she barely even registers it in the fraction of a second where it exists at all.

Still a chill runs down her spine. She blames the cold, hugging herself to retain a bit of warmth.

Sans looks up at her, worried. Papyrus notices it too.

"ARE YOU ALRIGHT, TORIEL?" he asks, keeping his voice as low as someone who's used to perpetually shouting can muster.

Toriel blinks a few times while processing the question. "Ah- Yes, yes, I am quite fine, don't you worry about me!"

Sans isn't really convinced. She doesn't look alright. "you can always call us if something's up," he says.
"OR ALPHYS!" Papyrus adds, nodding eagerly. "YOU CAN CALL ANY OF US ABOUT ANYTHING AND WE'LL BE OVER AS QUICKLY AS WE CAN, PLEASE DON'T WORRY!"

Toriel can't help but light up at her friends' helpfulness. Really, how could she worry about anything with friends like these? She shouldn't. Everything is alright. For the first time in a very long time, everything is alright.

"Thank you," she says to them. "Both of you. I do not deserve friends as kind as you."

A stab of regret pierces the place where Sans' heart would have been if he'd had one. He wishes he knew what she thought when she went to the Underground to look for her kids. Did she know that he was the reason they went down there? Did Undyne and Alphys tell her? How did she feel if they did?

He'll never know for sure now. But he can guess. He can't help but wonder what she'd do if he told her about what happened now. Out of everyone here, he wants her to know the most.

Papyrus reassures her that of course she deserves friends as kind as them! Good people deserve good friends! He seems to be able to cheer her up a little. In the end, she tells him they should go pack up the leftovers from that spaghetti pie they made together so they can have some again tomorrow, and they agree to leave Asgore to say goodbye to his kids in peace.

They ask Sans if he's coming. He tells them he'll be there in a moment.

Asgore sets the children back on the ground and gives them one last hug.

"And remember what I told you," he says to them. "Be good to each other. The three of you are a family now. You must have each other's backs when it truly counts, do you hear me?"

He's smiling, trying to brush it off as fatherly advice, but Chara sees the way his eyes linger on them a second longer than their siblings. He takes their hand for just a moment, a small reminder that he means no ill will by his warning, that he loves them, even though he worries about them. Chara brushes their thumb over his paw, hoping he understands that they're not upset. If nothing had happened between today and yesterday, his words would have been very, very warranted, too. They certainly don't blame him for hating the distance preventing him from keeping a closer eye on his children.

Finally, Asgore stands to his full height, and as he does, he looks back at Sans still lingering just beyond the entrance to the garden.

Sans feels flattened under that look. It is so rare to see the kindly old king look anything but friendly and harmless - but right now, his expression calls to mind the last lingering clouds after a thunderstorm.

And in that moment, Sans is dead certain that Asgore remembers something from that last timeline. Maybe not enough to know exactly what happened, but enough to know that in another time, this person, one of his most trusted friends, could have been his enemy.

"Watch over my children, Sans."

Sans breathes deep, finding courage he didn't know was there. "I'll guard 'em with my life."

Asgore watches him for another moment, as if to make sure that Sans is really going to stand by that promise. Then he smiles again, though it's more thankful than cheerful.
They could have become enemies in another time. But not in this one. In this one, they're on the same side.

They bid each other a good night, and Asgore gets in his car, and soon the taillights of the big gold-and-purple van disappear through the cul-de-sac's exit. All three of his kids stay by the entrance to the garden, watching him leave.

Asriel is the first to leave the group. He looks a little sad, but he also looks like he really wants to get back inside and look at his new room and all his old things again. He manages to get a little fist-bump out of Sans as he passes by and Sans tells him "cheer up, buddy."

He can't help but watch the kid out of the corner of his eye as he disappears into the house. Sans isn't sure Asriel is going to feel quite as positively towards him once he finds out what Sans almost did in another time. What he almost caused. What he would have caused, if Asriel himself hadn't intervened and made Chara reload.

Sans can't help but feel a little disappointed at that. Which is kind of silly, 'cause his priorities should probably ideally be slightly different, but he can't help the fact that he plain likes that little weirdo. Sans ain't made o' stone. It's not his place to judge, though. He did kind of try to murder the shit out of said little weirdo's best friend. If Asriel isn't super fond of Sans once he finds out, that's fair.

Frisk and Chara stay by the sidewalk for a little while, watching night settle in the middle of late afternoon. Then they look at each other in that creepy, synchronized way they always do, seemingly having another full conversation completely silently, expressions completely neutral. Finally, Chara leaves Frisk to the night and heads after their brother, giving Sans an unreadable look as they pass by him.

Sans doesn't know how to feel about the fact that he was right about Frisk. About them choosing to ignore everything that happened instead of being truly angry with Chara like they probably should be. He isn't sure he'll ever fully understand the humans' bond. But if Chara really intends to get better - if they really intend on becoming someone Frisk can trust with their life if need be - then maybe he doesn't need to understand.

He wants to know if Chara's determination can pale. He wants to know if it's possible for them to truly change.

For another minute, Sans leaves Frisk to their silence. Maybe they want to be alone. But there's also a solid chance that they don't. Actually, the child feels lonely more often than not. He goes up to them.

"hey kiddo."

Without a word, Frisk pushes his arm up and slips under his jacket. Sans huffs a laugh and puts his arm around them, holding the jacket in place so it's covering their shoulders. They're shivering, and they feel cold, even in their sweater, which has somehow turned the right way around sometime during the day.

"wanna go back in the house?"

They shake their head.

"wanna yell at me for being a hardheaded jerk with no impulse control?"

They nod.
"let 'er rip."

Frisk frees their arm from his jacket and slaps him limply in the face. It feels like getting gently smacked with a dead fish. He kind of feels like he might deserve a little more karmic justice than that, but he's not gonna push it.

"you feel better now?"

"No." Frisk retracts their hand again. It's cold out. It's better under his jacket. They're just gonna live here now, they decide. "You're a jerk, but I don't even really remember why, so I'm just gonna keep slapping you in the face until I stop being mad. It'll come when you least expect it."

Sans shrugs. "that's fair."

The little kid sighs, leaning their head against his chest. He can feel the way their mood plummets, the way their hands grip his ribs a little too tightly, the way they lean on him, as if the weight on their shoulders is too much for them to carry on their own. Sans knows he can't do much but simply stand a little firmer and be patient. They'll be okay eventually. If there's one person he trusts to be okay, it's Frisk.

"Could you tell me what happened again?" they ask, voice so quiet that he can barely hear them. Fortunately, the night is quiet. "I don't remember all that much ..."

Sans wonders if he should leave some of the details out. He's guilty of doing so before. Just to spare the little one's heart. But he thinks that even though this timeline wasn't very happy, it was still maybe a little too important to forget. At least for the kids and him.

It was a warning. More than anything, it was a warning.

"do you remember the determination extraction plan?" he asks.

"Mhmm." Frisk wishes they didn't. "You were going to hollow out Chara's soul so they couldn't reset anymore."

"yeah." That was the gist of it, wasn't it? "and you wouldn't let me. you cared too much. you couldn't let them get hurt."

"So me and Chara ran away."

"and you were gone for a very long time." He almost tears up at the memory. He doesn't remember when he got this soft. Or when he got so scared that he started caring again. It feels natural now. Like it's always been a part of him. In reality, he thinks this might be the most he's been able to feel since ... well, since the first dozen timelines. He's not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. "when i found you again, i scared chara really bad. do you remember that?"

Frisk's brows knit in concentration. Then they nod again. They do remember that. It made them really mad. Chara never did tell them what Sans had said to them to make them come along without protest, but they were clinging to Asriel like their life depended on it afterwards, so Frisk can guess. That wasn't fair. It wasn't okay.

"you got away again. and the next time i found you, chara had gotten ... really scared. and really angry and hateful, and i think it might have been my fault. for scaring them that first time."

"They tried to control me again."
"they did, yeah. they ... found out that i really cared about you and they tried to use you against me. to get back at me. it didn't work. you were too tough for them." He gives them a little playful nudge.

Frisk looks up at him, eyes still dull with memories fading. "But you went to fight them anyway, right?"

"i did. i'm sorry i didn't listen to you. it wasn't fair."

That seems to placate them a little. Knowing that their anger isn't over nothing. Maybe knowing that both Chara and Sans regret what they did helps them feel safer, too. At least they can still trust both of their friends. Even though they messed up in another timeline, they're back to the people Frisk used to know. Better, maybe. Better than the people Frisk used to know.

They close their eyes and pull his jacket a little more tightly around themself. It's all so confusing for them. Their memories are a mess. They know Chara tried to control them and they know Sans fought Chara even though Frisk begged him not to hurt them. They know they died. They died to save Chara. They don't know what happened after that. Their soul never did stick around for long after their death. Even if it had, they're not sure it would be able to sense what happened.

"I don't understand," they say. "We went through so much bad stuff, but none of it mattered in the end. Everything's back to how it was before me and Chara left, and no one but us even remember what happened. What was the point of it all? Did we really go through all that pain for nothing?"

Sans forces himself to meet their gaze, knowing full well that Frisk's eyes are teary again. It hurts so much, seeing them like this, but it would hurt even more to look away and pretend this isn't the reality they ended up with. The ending they got.

"listen, kid ..." He doesn't know how to tell them this in a way that won't make them even more sad. He doesn't know how to make this seem like a happy ending. "sometimes ... bad stuff happens. and it's not always because someone gets angry or greedy or envious, or because someone wants something they can't have. a lot of the time, there is no real bad guy behind it all. just a lot of ... sad people. and scared people. and people who care about others a lot and want to make sure they're safe. and things get complicated. they get so caught up in their own stuff that they don't realize just how badly they're hurting the ones they love. it's not about being right or wrong, 'cause sometimes right and wrong aren't as clear-cut as they are in the underground. it's ... easy to lose sight of what matters the most. sometimes, those sad and scared and caring people end up hurting each other without meaning to. i don't think there's any real lesson to be learned there. except maybe learn to communicate your problems before you chase some 10-year-old across the country hellbent on putting their soul through a paper shredder." He breathes a laugh, but it's not a very happy one.

"And not everything can be resolved by just being nice," Frisk finishes. They follow a few stray leaves with their eyes as the debris dances through the open road on a cold breeze.

"yeah. yeah, that's it exactly." That doesn't mean you can't strive to be a good person. It just doesn't solve everything. Sometimes there is no right option. Sometimes life is more complicated than that. They're all just lucky they got a chance to do it all over again and do it right this time. Most people don't get a chance like that. "you're a smart kid, y'know."

Frisk doesn't bother to give credit where credit is due on that sentiment. They're too caught up in thoughts. They wanted so badly for Chara to trust them of their own volition, but in the end, they had to give up on them. They suppose it was just their luck that it helped Chara to understand where they went wrong more than anything. Frisk would've given them a second chance anyway if they came
back, no matter how bad it might have been for themself, because they can't stay mad at Chara, but now they at least won't have to be scared anymore. Chara has finally decided to become a better person all on their own without Frisk pressuring them into it. That's big for them.

Maybe this timeline wasn't so wasted after all. Even if what they gained seems so, so small and inconsequential compared to what they lost.

Who knows. Maybe in time, it'll all make sense.

"anyway," Sans says. "if you ever wanna refresh your memory, i wrote down everything i could remember when i first woke up in this timeline, as per usual, so you can always come over whenever, okay? don't be afraid to ask."

Frisk commits that to memory, at least. They think they'll want to read it themself at some point, just to sort it all out and catch all the little details that Sans might have skipped over.

Not tonight, though.

Tonight, they're going to get a full night's sleep.

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Asriel hasn't slept in a regular bed since the first night he came back to life. He hasn't been able to dream since then, either. Since his own nightmares nearly took his new life before it even started. He still wonders if any of the things that happened afterwards were really real, sometimes, or if everything that came after that day was only a dream, or a delusion. Sometimes, he wonders if he has even really left the Underground at all.

It's okay, though. If this is just his imagination, he doesn't want to go back to the real world.

Even long after he has said goodnight to his mother and his siblings, he lies awake in his bed in the dark, unable to close his eyes. Though the dark green curtains are pulled, a small slice of the night sky peeks through on one side, as dark and as starless as it has been for the past many, many days. There's a light on the horizon, however, visible between two big houses on the other side of the cul-de-sac. It pulses, slowly, slowly, like a warm, steady heartbeat. Toriel said it was a lighthouse meant to warn ships away from the coast. Asriel wonders if it can ward off bad dreams, too. Or maybe it can summon back the stars. Why are they hiding, anyway? They have nothing to be afraid of. Why are they leaving everyone on the ground all alone?

He watches that heartbeat, syncing his breathing to it, and bit by bit, he lets his eyes fall shut.

There's a small knock at the door. Soft, hesitant, like the person on the other side doesn't want to wake him if he's already asleep. Then, careful not to make the hinges creek, they turn the doorknob and push the door open just a little.

At first, Asriel thinks it's Frisk - but then the low light reflects in the little human's eyes. They're red.

"Hey."

"Hey."
They're clutching a pillow in their arms, tightly, like they're trying to hug it and like they're a little upset it isn't hugging them back. "I'm sorry if I woke you up. I ... h-had a nightmare." They look away, self-conscious. Then they look down the hallway in the direction of Toriel's room, and as they do, the light catches in the lines running down their face. They've been crying. Maybe they feel him looking, 'cause they lower their head, nearly hiding their face behind their pillow. "Could I ... maybe sleep in your room tonight?"

Asriel can't hide the puzzled look on his face. That's not really a very Chara-like thing to ask for, is it? Maybe it would have been back in their first life when they were just a scared, lonely little kid who needed to be comforted and taken care of a lot, but they don't need that anymore as much, do they? Chara's always so tough now. They're the one looking after him and Frisk most of the time, not the other way around.

"Of course ..." He quickly moves over to make room for them. If a nightmare could upset them that much, it must've been bad.

Chara mumbles an embarrassed little "thank you" and quickly comes over to curl up next to him. Still they stay very close to the edge, giving Asriel a lot more space than he's really sure he needs. They look uncomfortable. Nervous. Like they're not sure if they're really supposed to be here.

Asriel can't help but wonder why they didn't go to their mom or Frisk. It's not that he doesn't want them here, of course not! But him and Chara have still been a little tense with each other since their resurrection. Things aren't really back to the way they used to be. It's hard. Getting to know each other again. More than once, he's been a little afraid that him and his best friend just wouldn't really get along anymore, ever.

But maybe he was wrong.

"Do you want to tell me about your dream?"

Chara nods, even though their eyes remain downcast. They knead their pillowcase between their fingers, trying to find a way to begin. It all seems so big in their head. Insurmountable. Making sense of it seems nearly impossible, but he deserves to know. He should know. This was his dream, too. Even if he doesn't remember it. They decide to start from the beginning.

"I dreamed," they say, voice barely above a whisper, "that I was in a lot of danger. I dreamed that the resets could be fixed without me. So you didn't need me around anymore."

"That's not the only reason we need you around," Asriel interrupts without meaning to. He puts his paw over their hand, as if to stop them from disappearing right in front of his eyes. "I don't care about the resets, I just want you here with me."

Chara isn't so sure he will after hearing about the rest of their nightmare.

"There were others who didn't. And I had to run away." They release the pillow to run their fingers over his claws instead. He always did have weirdly sharp little needle claws. They're sharper than either of their parents'. Chara doesn't know why. "I went to a faraway place where I couldn't see you anymore. And I had to survive on my own. For a while ... I almost forgot you ever really existed."

Slowly, slowly, the lighthouse pulses in the distance. Slowly, slowly, the clouds in the sky drift along a gentle wind, heading south. Outside, the town is asleep in the dark. Asriel wonders why nightmares exist at all. If they didn't, night would probably be his favorite time of day. He moves a little closer to Chara, listening, sad that he didn't come wake them up before their dreams got so sad. He knew he couldn't have known, but he still wishes he had.
"I wasn't really alone. Frisk was there. They wanted to help me escape because they were worried about what was going to happen to me, but I couldn't understand that. I couldn't understand why anyone would want to help me." Least of all someone they hurt so, so badly in the past. It didn't seem logical. Chara never would've helped someone who hurt them like that. "It became winter. And it got cold. And we both got very sick." Maybe not in the same way. But both of them did get sick. "I said so many awful things to Frisk I didn't mean. I thought so many bad things too, and I- I don't know where it all came from. I was just... so scared. I didn't want to die, not for real, not like that. And I was so afraid of being alone again. I thought I could make Frisk stay with me if I was just mean enough. I didn't think they'd dare to leave. I was so horrible to them."

Asriel isn't really sure this was a dream at all. The thought makes his heart feel heavy. This must've been what Chara wanted to talk to him about earlier today. He wonders when it happened. Or when it didn't happen, rather. When Chara saved and when they reloaded to.

"Did I find you?" he asks, moving a little closer and hoping Chara will understand it as an invitation to take up a little more space themselves too. "If you disappeared, I must've gone out to look for you. I'd never leave you out there all alone."

He did. He did find them. That memory is even more blurry to Chara than the others are. But they know they were mean to him as well. He tried to save them, but they didn't trust him. Why didn't they? Was it for the same reason they didn't trust Frisk? Or was it something else?

They nod, moving a little bit away from the edge and holding his paw with both hands. "You found us. But I was so out of it that I was bad to you too. I pushed you and I told you that I couldn't trust you, and I said that because of you, I was going to die. You were so sad. You'd been looking for us for so long and you were so desperate to save us, but when you finally did, I just got angry at you."

"It sounds like you had a good reason to be angry, though." This doesn't sound like something they should feel all that guilty over, he doesn't think. No, they shouldn't lash out against him if they were angry, and definitely, definitely not against Frisk, but it seems like they were just really afraid. It would make sense for them to be in a weird mental place with something like that hanging over their head. It's not like Chara's normally very nice on the best of days, Asriel doesn't get why they're so upset over this. No one should have to go through something like that, least of all a little kid, of course they'd be out of it.

Chara shakes their head, their tired, puffy eyes glazing over. "No, no, I took it too far." They release their hand frantically try to wipe away their tears before they spill, but they're not quick enough, and drops of saltwater stain the pillow under their head. "Everything got complicated. I got angrier and angrier, and I forgot why I left at all. Why I didn't just tell mom that- that he was after me-"

Asriel has a terrible feeling he knows exactly who this 'he' is.

"I didn't want him to get in trouble. I didn't want him to tell anyone about what I did back in the past timelines, but I didn't want him to get hurt either, I knew I was the bad guy and he was just trying to set things right, I knew that from the beginning, I didn't want anyone to get hurt, I wanted everyone to get out of this alive and okay, but I forgot and- and I-"

Asriel pushes himself up so he's sitting against the headboard, and though Chara resists at first, he manages to get them to sit up so he can hug them and they can cry into his shoulder, their tears soaking his nightshirt.

"I hurt Frisk." They lay their palm flat against their heart, and he instantly knows in which way they mean. "And they ended up dead because of me. You thought I killed them on purpose. So..." Their voice goes hollow. "... you made me reload." They think they remember Asriel dying too, dying
with them, just like that first time, but they're not sure. Maybe it's just their imagination. A really, really bad kind of wishful thinking they didn't think they were even capable of anymore.

Asriel doesn't move. They expected him to, they expected him to get angry, to throw them out, to treat them with all the contempt that Frisk didn't. But he doesn't. He stays with them, holds them, lets them cry, patting them softly on the back, as warm and as gentle and as patient as ever.

Chara once tried to kill that kindness within him. They once tried to ruin the very reason they came to love him in the first place. Just like they did with Frisk. Why? Why do they do these things to the ones they want the most to be happy? They don't understand themself anymore. They don't understand why they even try.

"That does sound like a really bad dream," Asriel says.

For a second, Chara forgets what he's talking about. Then they remember that they weren't actually going to tell him that all of this really happened. They were just going to tell him it was a nightmare and then tell him the truth some other time. Did he catch on? Did they out themself?

Chara pulls back a little so they can look at him. Yeah. Yeah, it seems they did. The look on his face is a little too harrowed for him to think it was anything but real. But he doesn't look upset, at least. He looks calm.

"Good thing you woke up."

This explains why Chara was so nice today, Asriel thinks. They must have been happy to see their siblings again. And they must have felt guilty.

Chara never really was one for guilt. They always said that they were meant to be bad, that it was who they were, that they couldn't help it, so feeling bad about it wasn't going to do them any favors anyway. But Asriel never really believed that. He was never completely sure if Chara cared, but he knew they were capable of doing so if they let themself. He knew they could be a good person if only they tried.

He didn't want them to be scared into doing so, though. He'd rather Chara be cold and cruel all their life than see them go through any of the things they just said. They were already getting better before this. They didn't need to through so much awfulness to realize what really mattered to them the most, he's sure of it.

"Do you ... remember anything? Anything at all?" Chara asks, sliding back down under the covers and moving their pillow just a few more inches away from the edge of the bed.

Asriel follows them, rolling over on his side and hugging his knees to his chest. "Mh-mh. Sorry."

Not one bit. "When did you reload to?"

"Last night. Frisk got really mad at me for everything that happened and ... they went home. I couldn't do it all over again on my own, so I went back to Sans and Papyrus' house. Sans felt really bad about everything too, so we made a truce. It's fine now."

Asriel nods slowly. That's good. Everyone did seem to be doing alright today, even the ones who should remember bits and pieces. Well, everyone except for Frisk. They were a little down. Or maybe mostly shook up, in hindsight. It's no wonder.

"Do you think they're going to be okay?" he asks.

Chara isn't so sure they know the answer to that anymore. Frisk doesn't really know how to cope
with this stuff in a conventional way. They internalize all of it, choosing to have nightmares and
terrible intrusive thoughts and violent urges they never act on over taking the time they need to be
upset with someone. Chara can't help but be worried about the little one's future and how they're
going to handle people who don't intend to change for the better. Some people just can't change.
Some people don't want to change. Would Frisk be able to leave a person like that? At least they
were able to leave Flowey back in the Underground. So perhaps ...

All tangled up in thoughts, the two kids lay on their backs and stare up into the wooden ceiling
above. It's covered in little green glow-in-the-dark plastic stars. Frisk must've put them there. Just in
case Asriel was afraid of the dark like they used to be once. They wanted him to remember that even
if he felt alone, he never was.

Asriel pats the mattress between them and Chara takes his hand again, not so much for comfort this
time, but mostly for companionship. Just to feel someone next to them. Just to remind themself that
even as the nights grow ever longer and even as winter threatens to come for them once again,
promising to be just as bitter and cold as the timeline they just abandoned, they're safe here, in a soft
bed in a warm house, with their mother sleeping just at the other end of the house, and with their little
almost-twin right on the other side of the hallway, and with him - their lost one, their best friend, their
brother by choice - right here by their side.

Little by little, their tears subside.

"Chara?"

"Yeah?" Chara almost thought he'd fallen asleep already. His breathing is so slow and calm and
steady. But he hasn't. Not yet.

"I didn't really mean what I said back in the Underground. About wishing I'd been friends with Frisk
instead of you."

They had nearly forgotten about that. Usually, remembering that makes them feel all messed up and
jealous. But not so much now. Now they know why he said that. Now they understand why he
needed to realize that Chara maybe wasn't as amazing as he once thought he were.

"I thought I wished I'd been friends with Frisk instead of you. But that's not true. I think I just wished
that you'd been nicer." He smiles despite the tears in his eyes. "You two are really different. I
wouldn't want to choose between you. You're both my best friends. Things are better when you're
both here with me. I'm sorry if I made you feel like you could ever be replaced, because you can't." It
takes someone really strong and really caring to admit when they've done something bad. Chara are
both of those things. Asriel doesn't really blame himself for doubting that, because Chara really
wasn't very nice in their first life, but they're so much better now, so he can admit to being wrong,
too.

Chara doesn't think they should feel as comforted by that as they do. They agree, though. Things are
better with all three of them together. "No hard feelings, bro."

"Can you tell if Frisk is asleep?" Frisk does often have trouble sleeping. If they're awake, Asriel
doesn't want them to be alone.

Chara's eyes go unfocused for a moment as they reach out to the white soul across the hallway only
to find-

They pause. When Asriel looks like he's about to ask what's wrong, they hold a finger to their lips.
As quietly as they can, they slip out from under the covers and tiptoe across the floorboards. And when they open the door, a little human comes flailing backwards across the doorstep, landing on the ground with a dull thud.  

"I wasn't eavesdropping, any further interrogation will be discussed through my lawyer!" they rattle off, pointing up at Chara in defiance.  

"Oh my god, just go get your pillow, you little gremlin," Chara laughs despite their words, hiding their face in their hand. They should have seen this coming.  

Frisk gives them a completely stoic thumbs-up, rolls back upright and goes off to fetch their pillow. Chara and Asriel exchange a look, unable to keep a straight face at Frisk's shenanigans. They can't help it, either of them. Somewhere along the way, that strange little kid who gave them so much trouble became a friend, and somewhere between then and now, they became family as well. Chara never wanted Asriel to have any other friends in their first lives. Now they can't for the life of them imagine excluding Frisk ever again.  

"No, but seriously," Frisk says as they come back with their pillow under their arm. "I couldn't actually hear anything through the door except for Chara being really sad and I don't like that, so would you please tell me what you were talking about?"

"You," Chara says nonchalantly. A little less nonchalantly and a little more awkwardly, they add: "And I guess I was telling Asriel about ... our, uhm ... 'misadventure', a moment ago."

Frisk hums in response. They kind of suspected that was the problem. They think they also heard them talk about something else, but they're going to let it rest for now. It seemed a little too big for them. A little too emotional. They're not really in the mood for any more big, emotional things tonight. They're too tired.  

Asriel scoots back against the wall, untangling the cords in his stabilizer and shoving them down the side of the bed. Suddenly, his relatively large bed seems pretty small, and Frisk isn't really a 'personal space' kind of person the way Chara is. True enough, they flop backwards squarely across the middle of the bed, planting the back of their head firmly in Asriel's stomach and prompting a strangled "Ugh" from their brother.  

Grinning despite themself, Chara kicks at Frisk's feet with their knee. "Come on, you little anarchist, don't make me sit on your legs!"

Frisk sticks their tongue out at them, but they do end up turning the right way around, and they reach their arms out to Chara in a wordless demand for them to lie down already. It's not a real sleepover if people aren't sleeping!  

Chara rolls their eyes and complies, crawling in next to them and letting them hug them in greeting, kind of awkwardly patting the little hug monster on the elbow. Frisk heaves a contented sigh, pressing the side of their face into their big sibling's shoulder. Chara looks over their head at Asriel, who does look a little conflicted. Not nearly as much as they feel, but still.  

Frisk is a complicated person. They don't deal well with anger, and they don't hold grudges. Chara supposes they ... prefer to quite literally befriend their demons.  

The awkward pat on the kid's elbow turns into a small, actual hug, as a bit of an afterthought. It kind of helps, knowing Asriel isn't sure how he feels about Frisk's coping methods either. Like Sans said, it's probably best to just be patient with them. They need time.
Yawning, Frisk worms one hand under Asriel's elbow so their arms are linked with both of their siblings', and then they wiggle into the mattress until they're comfortable and close their eyes, safe between the other kids. Soon Asriel follows their example, happy to have this one last wish fulfilled. Now things are perfect. With all three of them together.

Maybe he's right, Chara thinks. Maybe things really are just the way they're supposed to be. They wouldn't call this ending 'perfect', but ... all three of them are alive. All of them are safe. And as long as they keep moving forward, they can get better.

As long as they stay alive, they can get better.

They think about Toriel surviving the deaths of both of her children and living another century in the dark, isolated, struggling on until the day when a child fell who brought her and her people back to the sun.

They think about Asgore laying down his weapons and making peace with the very race who chased his people into the dark and took those very same children away from him.

They think about Sans, and about Papyrus, torn from the lives they used to know and thrown into a world they didn't belong in, finding friends and a family, and learning to be happy with what they had left.

They think about Undyne, growing up with the heartfelt, yet impossible wishes of her people whispered into her ear in every corner of Waterfall, training every day of her life to become the kind of person who could grant them all the lives they longed for, only to find that someone else could give the monsters back the surface peacefully.

And finally, they think about Alphys. About a person who messed up so horrifically and caused so many people so much grief - and yet managed to turn it all around and do right by the ones she hurt.

They can feel Frisk's breathing turn deep and slow, steady and mellow. They look over at them. The little one is asleep. Not dead, but asleep, gentle dreams enveloping that fragile little soul in peace and warmth and rest.

Next to them, Asriel is asleep too, his head drooping onto Frisk's shoulder.

Chara thinks about both of them. About children who were lost. About children who saw so many awful things, yet came out of them softer and kinder and even more deeply caring than they were before. About a child who ended the whole world just for the chance to see his best friend one more time, and about a child who forgave him for everything he did and held him while he cried out the last shards of his broken heart.

Both of these children are smiling in their sleep.

A little stray tear runs down Chara's temple and into their hair - but they're smiling too now.

The fight isn't over. It's only just begun. Death is easy. But being alive ... It's worth the price.

Careful not to wake either of them, Chara curls up on their side, leans their head on Frisk's and reaches over them to hold Asriel's hand. Finally, they dare to close their eyes. They don't even notice how tired they are before they do so.

They best get some sleep. Tomorrow is another day. Another day of fighting, another day of hoping despite everything inside of them telling them not to, another day of things that are ... complicated.
They're not sure how they ever thought they were ready to leave all of this behind. Maybe they were too angry to really think straight. Or maybe they were too scared. They can't tell anymore.

It's becoming harder to remember.

Chapter End Notes

If writing had credit songs, this would be it.

Credit for the idea of Asgore learning to paint in order to immortalize the fallen humans goes to my friend, Marvelous_Jester here on AO3, without whom I never would have been able to play Undertale in the first place.

More little stories in the STIAA verse will most likely pop up in the future, so do keep an eye out if you're craving something slightly more fluffy and light.

If you want to, please do leave a comment or come send me asks on thesketcherlass.tumblr.com. And if not ...

Goodnight. <3

End Notes

Short summary of One Last Threat and Dress Code: Smile - In this verse, Sans and Alphys have worked together to bring Asriel and Chara back to life in order to prevent them from resetting. Papyrus has regained his memory of the previous timelines. Everyone else has just been told that the kids' undead selves had been messing with time, but they're unaware of just how murderous Flowey and demon!Chara were. The fate of the timeline now hinges on Frisk's ability to keep Chara interested in being alive - because if Chara dies, they'll regain their ability to reset. Meanwhile, Sans has been doing his best/worst to scare Chara so thoroughly that they wouldn't dare to reset even if they wanted to, with mixed results.

Reading the previous installments will help you understand the characters and their situations and relationships in more detail, but as mentioned above, this can also be read independently.

Three more chapters are currently done, with a fourth and fifth in the works. As always, you can come yell at me over on tumblr (thesketcherlass.tumblr.com) if you wanna, I am an extremely chatty writer and feedback sustains me

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!