Ebott's Wake

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/7330132.

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**Ebott's Wake**

by TimeCloneMike

**Summary**

The experiment was simple in principle, and even if it hadn't worked as planned, it would have been a step in the right direction. But something went wrong; time and space turned...
inside out and upside down, and the best hope for monsters to escape the Underground went up in flames with half of the C.O.R.E. Facility. Years later, after the Barrier was finally shattered, that unplanned experiment bears unexpected fruit. And Royal Scientist Wing Ding Aster has a lot of catching up to do.
The grating was refreshingly cool, despite the heat radiating from some distant source far below. It was relaxing, in its own peculiar way, and Dr. Aster didn't feel inclined to move from his spot at first... at least until the pain started.

"Ow. Owowowowowow."

Pushing himself into a sitting position, Aster opened his eye sockets, then immediately shut them closed tight against the stabbing light. Shaking his head, he pulled up his shirt and traced one hand along his rib cage. Where the two pulsing stabs of pain kept bothering him, his fingers detected hairline fractures.

'Ouch. Well, I suppose it could have been worse, after-

The doctor froze as recollection filled in the blankness in his mind like hot metal filling a mold. Images refreshed themselves in his memory; the cooling system breaching and filling the air with super heated steam, capacitors arcing across the facility, alarms screaming, panicked flailing at control panels by unthinking, unguided hands - his hands - trying to shut everything down before...

One last image filled the doctor's mind, blocking out all others and muffling the sensations of pain from his ribs. A miniature star born in the heart of the C.O.R.E. system, doomed to give its all in a few microseconds as containment failed. A supernova in miniature, lancing the facility, Hotland, and the roof of the cavern with electrons so energetic they made stellar plasma look like soft serve ice cream. And next to that star... another skeleton, eyes flashing with blue light, reaching out a hand for the doctor-

"SANS!"

Aster's sudden cry came back to him scant seconds later, echoing through the machinery. Scrambling to his feet, the doctor looked around frantically. He must have been blown clear of the breach and by some miracle he hadn't been hurt except from the fall. But Sans had been on the other side of the instrument panel, and worse he'd been reaching towards the doctor during the catastrophe...

"SANS! WHERE ARE YOU?!!"

Once again, only the empty spaces of the machinery answered back. Aster took a deep breath and clenched his fists. Something was wrong, something was terribly, terribly wrong, and he couldn't put his finger on what it was. Then it hit him all at once.

"HELLO? WHERE IS EVERYONE?!!"

The facility was empty. Empty of scientists, of engineers, of technicians, of puzzle calibrators, of people "just passing through because the city elevator is busy" which nobody was supposed to allow but everyone did because, hey, that elevator was always busy. Asgore had left how many notes on his desk about it? And it always kept sliding back down the list of priorities. There was always another system to upgrade, or another experiment, or expansions and additions to the Underground where and if possible.

Aster's mind choked on the differences between what he remembered and what he experienced in the present; it was too big. It took up all available space, blocked out all thought. By the time he realized he had been running, he was already at the elevator to the castle.
"Gotta report to Asgore. He'll know what's going on." It was a slim chance, Aster knew it in his bones, and he wasn't even aware that he had vocalized the thought. As if giving it sound made it more real and more likely to be true. That thought was like a life preserver in a storm tossed sea and the doctor held onto it for dear life.

He was halfway through the castle before he realized not only that it was empty, but how empty. The lack of people came as less of a surprise, but what he had not realized until the throne room was the lack of something less that was much more subtle. The castle was almost entirely empty of furniture. There were nails on the walls where paintings and calendars had been hung, now breaking up the drab monotony of the gray corridors.

The throne room was still the throne room, although that was no longer the distinguishing, dominant feature. The floor was covered in a veritable forest of golden flowers, and vines crawled up the walls and obscured the windows. Not that there was much light shining through them anyway. Aster walked - with some difficulty - through the entangling flower bed and past what appeared to be another throne under a drop cloth, to the Barrier Antechamber.

He'd spent hundreds, thousands of hours here, setting up sensors, trying various ideas, testing theories, and staring at the strange light that sometimes filled the room. It was about as familiar as a place could be in the underground, barring the C.O.R.E. facility, and that because he had designed and built the thing. But now... Aster's jawbone dropped in stupefied incredulity.

The Barrier was gone.
The Hosts With The Toasts

"You are listening to The Morning Rush on KEBT FM! I am, and always have been, Brett "The Brett" Brinkman, and with me as always is my co host DJ Pantz! How are you doing this morning, Burgie?"

"I slammed my tail in the apartment door this morning. And the car door getting in. And out. And when the studio door shut just before we went on the air."

"...so where is that, like, on a ten point scale?"

"At least a seven!"

"Glad to hear it! And I hope all of our listeners are also having a day that rates as a seven-or-higher this morning, out in scenic Ebott's Wake, the city that seldom sleeps."

"...seldom?"

"Well, we couldn't use never, that's another slogan for another city. And I guess it was a pun on the word Wake? Or something?"

"Oh. Puns."

"Our top story this morning, municipal bond issue passes, gas tax raised by two percent over the next... uh, three months... it occurs to me now that this could have been phrased better. Walter Metzinger, Chairman and Grand Poobah of the Ebott's Wake City Council, was quoted as saying, 'This bond issue has been in the center of a fairly energetic debate over the last month and I am finally happy to see the issue put to bed.' Outspoken opponent of the bond issue, Hal Greene, owner and operator of the Greene Machines Garage, Gas Station and Mini golf, was approached for comment, but FCC regulations prevented us from actually quoting any part of his response."

"On that subject, we also asked if he ever got the windmill fixed on the mini golf course. The answer... paraphrased... was no. So Caveat Golfor."

"The City Council has promoted the bond issue aggressively since the start of the new year, citing an increase in tourist traffic and corresponding wear and tear on the city streets. The actual price per gallon increase on the consumer end is only expected to be 6 cents on the dollar."

"Hey, that still adds up."

"The Council certainly hopes so. In other news, All Fine Labs issued a report early this morning; it says here that remote sensors detected a massive power surge from the Hotland C.O.R.E. power plant under Mt. Ebott. It's not clear at this time what caused the surge, although Dr. Alphys is quoted as saying 'I wouldn't be surprised if the core was just giving out. That thing was built out of tin cans and the circuit boards from first generation game consoles.' Dr. Alphys went on to reassure that the C.O.R.E. plant is in emergency power mode and even if a catastrophic failure were to occur, it would not endanger the town or agitate the dormant volcano under the mountain."

"That is... oddly specific."

"Moving on to coming events, later today the Ebott's Wake Memorial Highway is being dedicated with a ribbon cutting ceremony. Tomorrow, Das Boot Sub Shop is holding their grand reopening party. Saturday, the Ebott's Wake Auditorium is hosting Shyren's concert, featuring her new hit
single You Can't Dodge My Feelings Forever. If you don't have your tickets yet, you had better act fast because the venue is expected to be sold out. Sorry ladies... and some gentlemen... Mettaton won't be there. He's still in California."

"THANK YOU GOD."

"Uh... speaking of holy days of rest, Sunday is the Ebott's Wake Swap Meet, and I have... ugh. I have a paper here from our legal department that is reminding me to remind you that the operative word is Swap. As in trade. Not Swat as in S.W.A.T. Let's not have a repeat of last time folks."

"I never saw an antiques table get raided by police before."

"You shouldn't have in the first place. This coming Monday is the start of the Ebott's Wake Library Book Sale. It'll run from Monday through next Saturday, with all books on Friday being half off, and on Saturday is the dollar a sack day. Get as many books for a dollar as you can fit into a plastic grocery sack. The President of the Library Board has asked us to remind people that this is Banned Books Week, a promotional awareness event on the subject of censorship in not only literature, but all media. The... Vice President... has asked us to read a statement directed to whomever instigated the Torches And Pitchforks flash mob last year during Banned Books Week. The statement reads as follows... ahem. 'I know who you are now. Start running.' Statement ends. Well. That's not ominous at all."

"Are we accessories after the fact now?"

"I hope not Burgie, but I guess we'll just have to wait and see. On Tuesday, the Garden Club is hosting an open air event featuring transplanted Echo Flowers from Waterfall, including a lecture on magic botany. Earplugs will be provided upon request."

"The irony of handing out earplugs to an event with a lecture should be funny, but... I dunno, it just makes me sad for some reason."

"Well, maybe this next item will turn that frown upside down. Wednesday is the Annual Pancake Supper by the Knights of the Road Who Say Ni Mission. It's six dollars a plate, three dollars for kids twelve and under."

"All proceeds this year go to the Dalton Trust Cancer Research Foundation. And remember, these are big pancakes. Like, not quite medium sized pizza, but close. And you get three of them plus a sausage patty. That's a really good buy for six dollars, so that's a good reason on its own. Oh, and uh, because Cancer is bad."

"Truer words were never spoke. Although more eloquent words happen all the time. And fin... it's a good thing this is radio, Burgie. And finally, this time next week, the bulletin board at the Dank Memehaus is being replaced. They'll be selling shirts commemorating the event and they're expected to go fast, so get there early. Just remember that they are legally prohibited from selling alcohol until after six PM."

"And that takes us up to the break, we'll leave you with Tupper Ware Remix Party's Rock and Roll Best Friends and then we'll be back with more Morning Rush and the traffic repo-"

"Sorry to interrupt Burgie but I just got handed an urgent bulletin. The trees in the Ebott's Wake Arboretum have... seriously?... alright, alright. The trees at the Ebott's Wake Arboretum have gone... on strike. Somehow. They have picket signs and they're marching in a circle, I have no idea how that can possibly work-"
"You've clearly never played Don't Starve."

"Look, I told you, I don't like sandbox games and this is not the time to debate genre favorites, alright? The, uh... the arboretum management- oh. Okay, that explains it. The arboretum management has asked all prospective visitors to refrain from coming by until after school lets out for lunch, when Frisk can come by and pick up Flowey the Flower."

"Ohhhhhh. Now it all fits together."

"Yeah. I was thinking that."

"How are we coming along on getting 'Don't Trust the Flower' as the next town slogan?"

"Not fast enough, clearly."

"Yeah. Well, time for a word from our sponsors and station ID. Keep it tuned here for more Morning Rush!"
"Stop smiling at me, you idiot. I just cost you half your lunch break."

The Arboretum was quiet save for the wind blowing through the limbs of the once-again stationary trees. The signs lay on the ground abandoned, save for one or two which had been picked up by visitors out of curiosity. Outside the walls, a child in a striped shirt sat on a bench with an unusually large yellow flower growing next to it. Although the size of the flower was not, by a long shot, the most unusual characteristic it possessed.

"It was spinach egg pie again. I don't mind getting called away from that."

"Not the point, Frisk! You could have just gone home and had some hard boiled eggs! Or made a freaking peanut butter and jelly sandwich! Instead you had to come out here and stop me from pretending to be a union agitator. You should be angry! Why aren't you angry?!"

"I'm just glad to see you again."

The flower blinked the inexplicable eyes in its, for lack of a better term, face. "That answer makes even less sense than the question that it was supposed to address. It's not like I just came down from the mountain. I followed you guys after, what was it, a month? Forty days? Something like that? And you see me almost every other day anyway."

The child just grinned. "It was forty one days exactly. I know because for thirty nine nights I couldn't get to sleep because I was worried about you. And then I finally saw you again, and I could stop worrying."

The flower rolled its eyes, then looked at the child again and raised, for the lack of a better term, an eyebrow. "Wait, thirty nine? So there was one night where you didn't worry about me?"

"The first night. Look, I'd just fallen into an underground civilization nobody knew about, had to fight for my life every step of the way, went on like five dates and the closest I got to sleep during any of it was like two minutes in Snowdin. I swear they made the walls in that inn out of cardboard. I could hear like three or four different monsters snoring next door. The child crossed their arms. "So yeah, I was out like a light the instant my head touched a pillow. Sue me."

"Tempting, but no. I doubt I'd find any lawyer willing to take my case. At least, one that wasn't a no-talent ambulance chaser."

"Did they have lawyers underground? Or ambulances? I probably should have learned more about monster society before agreeing to be their ambassador. Actually I'm still not sure why dad thought a child would be a good choice at all."

"Hah. That's d- that's the king, alright. But no on both counts. I learned about lawyers and ambulances, and union strikes and labor movements, from the human surface net." The flower coughed. "Uh. Speaking of which, you or somebody left a tablet out in the garden shed one day."

The child nodded. "Yeah, I did that. I thought you might want something to pass the time. Actually, I'm kind of glad you're able to use it. The next day I realized you don't have hands."

Flowey stared at Frisk with an expression that seemed to mix exasperation with several other conflicting emotions. Slowly, a protrusion of green grew out of the base of his stem, rapidly taking the form of a long leaf. Flowey waved it back and forth, then reached forward and tapped Frisk on
the forehead with it.

“You set something out for me to use without knowing for sure if I could use it. Thank you for justifying all the times I called you an idiot.”

Frisk giggled. “You're welcome.”

"...I just don't get you, Frisk. I hurt you how much? Tried to kill you how many times? I was even successful once or twice. I..." the flower frowned. "I still don't understand why you're so nice to me."

"You'll figure it out one day. I believe in you, Asr-"

The flower lurched forward, its "face" mere inches from Frisk's face. "DON'T. Asriel is dead, Frisk. Dead and dusted. The only thing that's left are bunch of miserable memories. Asriel wouldn't have done the things I've done. Asriel wouldn't have hurt you or anyone, ever. No matter what happened to him. But I did, so I'm not him."

"I don't believe that. Not for a second."

"You can refuse to believe the sky is blue. Doesn't change the facts." The flower retracted back towards the ground. "I've wasted enough of your time. Go home. Eat a sandwich or something. If you get sick from starvation it's only a matter of time before the queen comes after me with a pair of hedge clippers."

"Flowey?"

The flower stopped sinking into the ground and looked at Frisk with an annoyed expression. "What?!"

"The sky isn't blue at night. That's a fact."

"UGH. Don't you have anything better to do?!" The flower vanished into the ground, leaving no sign of its presence. Frisk smiled, hopped off the bench and started walking down the street... before doubling back and grabbing their backpack from where they had left it leaning against the bench.
"That was Star Bomb with Robots in Need of Disguise, and you're listening to the Morning Rush with The Brett and DJ Pantz. Yes, it's still the Morning Rush, even though we're coming up on one in the afternoon. Why? Because the earth is round and that's what causes time zones. Speaking of Time Zones, Brett, what's your opinion on daylight savings time?"

"It'd be nice if we could actually store daylight in jars or boxes for later use. As it stands, daylight savings is like that joke about the guy who cut off one end of his rug and sewed it onto the other end to make it longer."

"I think there's an app for that now. I'll check."

"And I'll turn things over to the KEBT Meteorologist, Hailey Skye. Hailey, what can our listeners expect weather wise over the coming week?"

"Thank you Brett. Next week is expected to be hot and muggy. That's because we have a low pressure system coming down from Canada expected to collide with the Pacific air and, like old enemies in high school who meet twenty years later but still haven't forgotten what happened, they're going to have settle their differences with slapping and hair pulling and high altitude storm systems."

"That is... a very vivid metaphor. When can we expect these... storm cat fights?"

"No sooner than tomorrow evening, no later than noon Saturday."

"Kind of puts a damper on the weekend, then."

"Look, I just report the weather, Brett. It's not my job to do anything about it."

"...naturally. That makes sense. So, for the rest of the week is there anything our listeners should do, or not do?"

"Minimize being outside as much as possible. Stay hydrated. If you have to go outside, dress in fabrics that breathe. And if you get an invitation to a class reunion, just tear the damned thing up before it drags you back into the purgatory that is Ebott's Wake Junior Varsity Volleyball 1996. Go Truckers!"

"...uhm... are you alr-"

"NO I'M NOT ALRIGHT! I DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO DEAL WITH CRYSTAL WISEMAN AGAIN! THAT SNOOTY STUCK UP BI-"

"Hey everybody this is Burgie, sorry, something... unplugged Mrs. Skye's microphone. Brett's going to get her a cup of tea and possibly a place to lie down for a few minutes, so I'm going to throw open the phone lines to callers. Jeff, who's up first? ...alright, Jeff tells me we have a Mrs. Carmichael on the line. Hello, Mrs. Carmichael, you're on the Morning Rush with DJ Pantz!"

"...hello?"

"Yes, you're on the air!"

"...hello?"
"Yes, we can hear you just fine! How's it going ma'am?"

"Oh! Oh, hello! I just wanted to call in and say how much my husband and I love listening to the radio show!"

"Thank you, ma'am! It's nice to be appreciated."

"I especially love the traffic segments with Mr. Welkin. He's such a charmer!"

"I'll be sure to pass along those sentiments to Gary. Is there anything else you wanted to say?"

"Oh, uh, if it's not an imposition, I would like to give a, uh, Shout Out, as I believe the kids these days call it, to my son Douglas who goes to that new school out by the fishery."

"That would be the Dreemurr Elementary School."

"Yes, that's the one. Hello Douglas! Mommy loves you!"

"I'm... sure he appreciates that. Unfortunately we're out of time and need to move onto the next caller-"

"Oh, I didn't have anything else to say anyway. Goodbye!"

"Well... that was certainly something. Jeff, who's up next? ...really? ...no, go ahead and put him on the air. Just, you know, keep a hand over the censor button. Up next is Dwayne Riley, spokesman for the Anti Monster League. Regular listeners will remember Dwayne, who has made it a point to try to call in a minimum of three times a week, since the first day I started here. Dwayne, how's it rolling?"

"Oh, it's rolling about as well as can be expected when monsters are taking over our streets and indoctrinating our children and stealing our jobs."

"Look Dwayne I told you once I told you a million times, if you want to be on the radio, put in an application at the station. They are always looking-"

"THIS ISN'T ABOUT YOU! This is about an invasion of America by a hostile foreign power and nobody is doing anything to stop it! This is about dissenting voices being silenced, like you do on the radio every time I *BEEP* call in!"

"That's because you keep using profanity. FCC regulations were made by your government, not ours. Not that we had radio stations in the Underground. It's hard to pick up a signal when you have a mountain's worth of rock in the way."

"You just watch yourself, monster. One day there's going to be a reckoning. And everyone you've hurt is going to come back to haunt you."

"Wait, if somebody hurt me, can I come back to haunt them? Because I'd be down for that... Dwayne? Hey, are you still there? Can you hook me up with some of that reckoning? ...not sure if we've just lost Dwayne or if he hung up. Jeff, we got anyone else? Oh, really? Put em on! Hey little buddy, you're on the air!"

"Hi DJ Pantz. It's Frisk again. Just wanted to let you know I went and talked to Flowey and the Arboretum is back to business as usual."

"Glad to hear it. Having said that, shouldn't you be in school right now?"
"I am. Lunch doesn't end for another two minutes."

"Well, alright then. Long as the queen doesn't jump all over my case."

"Also I wanted to say something to that guy who was just on, the guy who hates monsters."

"Well, he already hung up, but maybe he's still listening? Knock yourself out little buddy."

"Mr. Riley, you're a big jerk. And your arguments couldn't even convince a five year old. Just because you can shout the loudest doesn't mean you're right. It just means you're wrong AND loud. And don't even think about coming near my mom and dad, or any of my friends. I know a flower who owes me a favor."

"Ooh. Bringing out the big guns there."

"Yeah, guess I am. I gotta run, time for geography, bye!"

"Talk to ya later, little buddy."

"Hey, I am back and Hailey is resting comfortably. What did I miss?"

"You missed Dwayne and Frisk miss each other in a radio debate."

"Aw. I would actually pay money to see Frisk and Mr. Riley formally debate in a public venue."

"I doubt it would stay formal for very long... what? Say again, Jeff? We have one more caller Brett."

"Alright, put em on. You're live with Brett and DJ Pantz on the Morning Rush!"

"Ah, yes. Hello. I was just calling to ask for clarification. Earlier there was somebody speaking who seemed to dislike monsters as a matter of principle."

"Yeah, that was Dwayne Riley. Head of the Anti Monster League. They're very... uh... diligent. Dwayne especially has had it in for Burgie ever since he got the job here for some reason."

"I see. And is Mr. Riley's opinion a commonly held one, or is the issue more contested than that?"

"Well, nationwide the whole issue is pretty split. I mean, it depends on who is doing the asking, but I'd say contested is a good term for it. Certainly not a consensus going on. Having said that, Mr. Riley's constant calls to the radio station and his apparent obsession with my co host kind of make him seem more influential than he really is."

"So the overall attitude of the humans in the town is more moderate than his, uh, diatribe would indicate."

"Well, first, I wouldn't call it a diatribe. It's more of a screed. And second, no, Mr. Riley's rhetoric brings up too many bad memories for the people of Ebott's Wake, a fact that continues to elude him even though we bring it up almost every time he calls into the station."

"So would it be safe to say that the war between monsters and humans is actually over? I ask because, well, I just came up to the throne room and the Barrier was gone and I knew humans used radio waves to broadcast information and cell phones to communicate, so I wanted to make sure everything was safe before I came down the mountain."

"What the- hey, caller, this is DJ Pantz. I know I slept through most of my history classes but I do
know the War ended well over a thousand years ago. And the Barrier was destroyed over a year and a half ago. Just... just how long have you been down there?"

"I'm not sure. What year is this?"

"Uh... it's 2016."

"What?!"

"2016. But like Burgie said, the Barrier's only been gone for less than two years, so don't worry. You didn't miss much."

"I've been gone for TEN YEARS?!"

"...uh, I can't speak for that, sir. But it sounds like you, uh... Burgie, you alright?"

"Not really. Caller, you never gave Jeff a name. Can I ask who you are?"

"Ten years... my god... my work, my FAMILY..."

"Hey, hey! Stay with me buddy. I need you to tell me your name."

"My name... Aster. Wing Ding Aster. King Dreemurr's Royal Scientist."

"...Burgie, you definitely don't look alright. Wait, where are you going?"

"Cover for me I need to make some calls I'll explain everything later!"

"...well. That is... a thing! That just happened. I guess... okay. We are actually slightly overdue for a break. We will pause for station ID and a few words from our sponsors, and when we come back, you'll be listening to Lindsey's Lazy Afternoon with Lindsey and the Coffee Grinders. Stay tuned, more KEBT coming your way!"
Dr. Aster stared at the table he had carried out of the castle into the mouth of the cave. It hadn't taken very long to put everything together - a radio, a cellular phone, and a power supply for both. An elementary task for somebody with his scientific and technical knowledge - finding the parts was the most time consuming stage of the process.

Some things never changed, apparently.

The wisdom of his chosen course of action, however, still eluded him. From the known facts of A) a Broken Barrier and B) an Empty Underground, any number of scenarios could be extrapolated, but they could all be divided into two very broad categories; either everyone escaped, or everyone was dead. And that second category was far too dangerous to ignore. Information had to be acquired, and as soon as possible.

It didn't take a Royal Scientist to figure out that if human trash included radio receivers, then on the surface radio waves must have been a common means of information exchange. So that was the obvious first step. The equally obvious second step that he managed to forget in his hurried state of mind was that the radio receiver needed a power source.

The results had been... well, informative. The humans knew of the C.O.R.E. facility, the names of several places in the Underground, they had transplanted Echo Flowers, and most telling of all one of the speakers on the radio was implied to be a monster himself. It was a good start, but not something the doctor felt he could risk acting on just yet. More data was required. And so another trip down into Hotland to ransack the C.O.R.E. storerooms for parts and tools was in order, to assemble a communications device. The surface radio broadcast seemed to have an audience participation feature.

Even the time spent simply listening while assembling the cellular phone was informative. The primary purpose of the broadcast appeared to be the transmission of current events, sort of like the state of the underground addresses at the castle... but of course the surface was so large, and the population of humans so high, that the addresses had to be compiled and broadcast on a daily basis. The secondary purpose appeared to be entertainment or possibly the promotion of the arts, in the form of instrumental and vocal music. Advertisement appeared to be the primary source of funding for the broadcasts, as the various promotional ads and messages from "sponsors" seemed to imply.

Then that human called in. The voice was like a carrier wave for anger that Dr. Aster could almost feel through the speaker. He had almost decided to walk down the mountain towards the village to inspect the place for himself and perhaps find somebody who could explain what had happened to the Barrier and where all the monsters had gone... but with people like that on the Surface, that drastically shifted the laws of probability towards the negative. "Calling in" had suddenly seemed much, much safer. Humans couldn't shout a monster to death, although according to Gerson, plenty had tried.

And then the radio broadcasters had dropped that bombshell. Ten years. A lot could happen in ten years. A lot could go wrong in ten years.

Dr. Aster's brooding thoughts were interrupted by the snapping of air and the ripple of magical energy; as if by reflex, he jumped off of his seat and spun around, using his own magic. Space bent under his will, creating a magical bridge just long enough for something to cross...
A part of his mind, standing off to the side like an impartial observer or referee, noted that there was an appealing symmetry to the situation; on each side, a skeleton and two blasters. It didn't get a lot of attention compared to the shock that filled the rest of his mind. Fortunately, it seemed that the same response was occurring to the skeleton on the other side of the mountain path.

Oblivious to the shock of their owners, the blasters floated closer to each other and began cautiously sniffing, and then, without any prompting, began to growl and wrestle. The other skeleton seemed to relax upon seeing the display, eye lights returning to empty sockets.

"welp. can't ask for better proof than that, i guess."

"Sans? Is it... is it you?"

"i hope so, i'm wearing his underwear."

Dr. Aster blinked and walked forward unsteadily. "I thought... when the breach happened, you were right there next to it. When I woke up in the core I thought, for sure, that you... that you were dead. How did you survive? Sans, what happened to the Underground??"

Aster stopped a few feet away from Sans, waving towards the mountain cave with one hand and the village below with the other. "The core's been put into reserve power mode and the entire underground is empty and the Barrier is broken and obviously that's important and related to what I'm about to ask next but where is everybody? Where's Papyrus, where's your brother??"

Sans closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then stepped forward and grabbed Dr. Aster around the waist in a bear hug. "He's fine, dad. Everyone's all right. We found a way out. It wasn't perfect, but nothing is, right?" Leaning back from the hug, Sans looked up into Aster's perplexed face. "I thought... we all thought you were dead, dad. Scattered across time and space as the core imploded on itself. And I haven't been this happy about being wrong since... well, that's a story in itself."

"Dead... the core accident. The man on the radio said it was 2016. The breach must have sent me forward in time by ten years."

"naw. it's actually less than that. he was using the Gregorian Human Calendar. they don't use X in their dating schemes. it's actually been less than five."

"Well. That's a minor improvement. Like only having a half ton weight dropped on me from a great height instead of a full ton."

"heh. kinda. don't worry. we'll get you up to speed soon enough, introduce you to the whole gang."

"I really should report to Asgore... I mean, if he's around. Explain what happened."

"yeah, he's a gardener now. Also moonlights as groundskeeper at Tori's school."

"Wait what."

Sans shrugged. "guy loves his plants. oh, and because everyone thought you were dead, you kind of got replaced. you remember Alphys? she got your old job. then she ended up making really egotistical robots and... well, she can explain that part. anyway the queen fired her. so you might be able to get your old job back, except the barrier's broken, so... heh. it's all a rich tapestry."

Dr. Aster stared at his son for a few moments. "Something tells me I should be writing all this down."
"don't worry. there won't be a test later. come on, let's get back to town before people start getting worried. speaking of which..."

Sans snapped a finger and the pair of Blasters he had summoned shook themselves away from the other and floated over to the small round skeleton, flashed blue, and vanished into the ether. A few moments later, the doctor's blaster pair did the same upon realizing their playmates were not returning. Sans shoved his hands into the pockets of his blue jacket and started down the mountain road.

After a moment to grab the various electronics from the table, Aster followed.

"So... the radio broadcast implied there was no more war between humans and monsters. Except for that one person who called in."

"yeah, the humans actually forgot we existed for the most part. even the legends and myths were way off. as for Dwayne Riley, he's just some lazy bastard with no brains, talent or hustle and wants somebody to blame for his life besides himself. before we showed up he was complaining about other humans. same song, different lyrics, ya get me?"

"I suppose I do. How did the Barrier get broken? A lot of the damage from the original breach was never repaired, so I know it wasn't the core experiment."

Sans' walk slowed a bit. "The same way the barrier went up in the first place. Human Soul power. We did manage to cheat a little bit at the end, though. We'll explain the details later, it's... complicated, and you should be talking to people who can fill in all the blanks at once."

"If you think that's for the best. I still have so many questions I'm having difficulty prioritizing them."

"It's definitely for the best."

Aster stared at the back of Sans' skull. "You don't sound very confident about that."

Sans stopped and looked up at his father, and Aster was suddenly struck by how old his son looked compared to the few years that were claimed to have passed since the breach. "look, just because it was the best possible outcome, it doesn't mean everything was perfect. now let's get a move on. we'll take the long way and I can give you the tour and make introductions if we meet anybody I know. Just... keep a lid on the questions till we get to the Dreemurr House."

"That's not going to be easy."

"a long time ago you told me nothing worth doing is ever easy."

"Yes. I did. And you said that smashing open your own skull with a hammer wouldn't be easy, but that didn't mean it was worth doing."

Sans turned to his father and winked one eye socket.

"and I stand by that statement to this very day."
"I still do not understand. If the robots are aliens, why would they already have the ability to change into common vehicles and household items before they arrived on earth?"

"Oh, they change that with every series. In the original cartoons I think they were made by other aliens and the transforming was a way to add value. In everything else it's just part of their nature or something."

"But Optimus Prime already has the appearance of the front of a semi truck before humans even invented the automobile."

"You got me there mom. I can't explain it. I'm sure Papyrus could show you a twenty chapter fan fiction explaining it though."

"ACTUALLY IT IS UP TO TWENTY THREE CHAPTERS, BUT I'M GLAD YOU'RE TRYING TO KEEP UP!"

Toriel looked up from the television set showing the 1980s era animation and stared at the clock. While Papyrus and Frisk were enraptured by the setting and story and willing to explain at the drop of the hat, Toriel was somewhat perturbed not only by the violence, but the implied ruthlessness of the "bad" robot aliens. And yet, it seemed like the easiest way to keep Frisk and Papyrus "occupied" as Sans had requested in his text, but with her multiple replies asking for clarification on why they needed to be occupied going unanswered it was hard to focus on it.

"I NEVER DID UNDERSTAND WHY THEY ONLY HAD A FEW TRIPLE CHANGERS!"

"Well, the cartoon started in Japan for merchandising reasons. It's not too hard to design a toy that has two different versions, but the more you add the harder it gets. Just look at Astrotrain. The Train Mode and the Space Shuttle Mode have a common central shape. If you wanted a robot that could turn into, say, a biplane and a speedboat, you'd have your work cut out for you."

"NYEH HEH HEH! NO DESIGN CHALLENGE IS TOO DAUNTING FOR THE GREAT PAPYRUS!"

Toriel looked at Frisk, who was grinning at Papyrus' response to the perceived challenge. "You've given a great deal of thought to this, my child."

Frisk shrugged. "Transformers is one of the earliest shows I can remember watching. And it... it had some important lessons to teach."

"What lessons would those be?"

"That appearances can be deceiving, if you have friends you can win against any challenge, and that Freedom is the right of all Sentient Beings." Frisk grinned. "Why do you think I was so eager to get out of the Ruins? I had a job to do. I couldn't not do it, once I knew what was going on. The spirit of Optimus Prime would never forgive me."

"ACTUALLY HE WOULD, BEING A VERY UNDERSTANDING SORT! ALSO, SHAME ON YOU FOR SPOILING THE MOVIE FOR THE QUEEN!"

Toriel looked at Papyrus. "What do you mean, spoiling the movie?"
"Papyrus - against all anatomical possibility - began to sweat. "WELL... HE SORT OF... DIES IN THE MOVIE. BUT HE COMES BACK IN SEASON THREE OF THE CARTOON SO IT'S ALRIGHT!"

"Transformers can come back to life? I suppose that makes sense, as machines they can be easily repaired, but that certainly takes the suspense out of the show."

"No, not all Transformers," Frisk corrected. "Just Optimus Prime, Megatron and I guess Starscream. Seriously, it doesn't really count as a spoiler though. Optimus dies and comes back so many times Transformer Heaven had to install a revolving door just for him."

"OKAY THAT IS A COMPLETELY INACCURATE SUMMARY OF WHAT HAPPENS!"

Frisk winked at the skeleton. "It's not inaccurate. It's just my headcanon."

"HEY... I SEE WHAT YOU DID THERE! GLAD TO SEE THAT MY INFLUENCE IS RUBBING OFF ON YOU!"

"yeah, pretty soon the kid'll be running around with a scarf and monologuing everything. i'm so proud."

"THANK YOU SANS! I'VE ALWAYS TRIED TO BE A GOOD ROLE MODEL WAIT WHEN DID YOU GET HERE?!"

The taller skeleton jumped off of the sofa and turned to stare at his brother, leaning against the side of the doorway with another skeleton behind him. Toriel stood up in order to see past Papyrus, and abruptly stepped back with her paws covering her mouth, making a noise of sudden surprise.

"Mom, what is it? What's wrong?" Frisk hopped up onto the couch and looked at the newcomer. "Sans? Is everything alright?"

"everything's great, kid. Frisk, meet my dad, Wing Ding Aster."

Frisk hopped off the sofa and ran over to the new skeleton. "Hi, Wing Ding Aster! I'm Frisk Dreemurr!"

Dr. Aster flinched as Frisk jabbed a hand out, then gingerly grasped and shook it. "How do you do. Any friend of my sons' is a friend of mine. Your highness, are you alright? You... well, I understand I disappeared quite suddenly, so perhaps your reaction is the appropriate one."

"Dr. Aster," Toriel breathed. "We were all certain you were... that you had..."

"Yes, that would make sense considering what happened. I think I understand what went wrong, but I suppose it's moot at this point, with the Barrier destroyed. I was about to say I am eager to get back to work again, but, well the same situation applies. Papyrus, are you... are you alright?"

The tall, scarf-sporting skeleton had stood stock still, staring. Finally, he lunged forward, almost trapping Frisk as he embraced his father in a bear hug much like his brother had previously done. "DAD! YOU'RE BACK! I KNEW YOU'D COME BACK! NO MATTER WHAT EVERYONE ELSE SAID, I KNEW YOU WERE SMART ENOUGH TO FIGURE OUT A WAY!"

"You, you didn't believe I was dead?"

"OF COURSE NOT! GIVEN YOUR WORK ON MANIPULATING TIME AND THE SCALE OF THE POWER LEVELS YOU WERE WORKING WITH, BEING STRANDED IN
ANOTHER TIME PERIOD WAS ALWAYS THE MOST LIKELY OUTCOME TO THE CORE DISASTER!" Frisk turned towards Sans, mouthing the words 'manipulating time' with a puzzled expression on their face and holding up their cellphone key chain. Sans just winked back.

"I think it's time to catch up and play twenty thousand questions."

"I LOVE THAT GAME! I COME UP WITH THE BEST QUESTIONS! NYEH HEH HEH!"

Dr. Aster tugged at the collar of his lab coat with one boney finger. "That's not going to work out terribly well for me, as I probably have more questions and fewer answers than anybody else."

"NOT TO WORRY, DAD! I'LL CALL UP UNDYNE AND SHE CAN COME OVER AND PLAY AS WELL! YOU CAN BE ON OUR TEAM, WE WILL BE UNBEATABLE! AND BY THE TIME SHE GETS HERE, WE CAN PREPARE DINNER TOGETHER! THE PERFECT WAY TO CELEBRATE THIS REUNION!"

"Papyrus, I am not sure that is-" Toriel started, but Papyrus had already pulled out his cellphone and dialed Undyne's number. With an expression of resigned dread, the queen turned to Frisk. "Frisk my dear, could you-"

Frisk nodded. "Fire extinguishers. I'm all over it."

"Hey, if Undyne's coming, she's going to want to bring Alphys. better add another seat to the table for her too."

"YES! AND THE KING WILL ALSO WANT TO HEAR THIS WONDERFUL NEWS!"

"Sounds like this is going to be one of those sitcom situations where everybody calls everybody else and by the time they're done talking to each other, the meal is over."

"DON'T BE RIDICULOUS, SANS! IT'S ONLY FIVE IN THE AFTERNOON! PLENTY OF TIME TO ENGAGE IN SITUATION COMEDY BEFORE DINNER EVEN STARTS!"
Snail Pie With Whipped Cream

Dr. Aster stared at the table, filled near to capacity with food; spaghetti, pie, hot dogs, kebabs, and a bag of potato chips. The spectacle of the many disparate foods was nothing compared to the crowd that had surrounded it; two boss monsters, two bickering skeleton brothers, a fish woman in a tank top and a lizard woman in a lab coat. And, of course, the human child in a striped shirt, currently inhaling a slice of pie.

"WOWIE! UNDYNE, WHEN YOU SAID YOU WERE GOING TO MAKE HUMAN FOOD ON A SPEAR, I THOUGHT YOU MEANT THAT YOU WERE ATTACKING A REFRIGERATOR!" Papyrus commented, holding up a kebab.

"I know, right?! Turns out like hundreds of years ago humans would use spears to hunt for animals and fish and then cook them on the same thing! So hardcore!"

Dr. Aster blinked and looked at Frisk, who rolled their eyes and shrugged. Undyne put down her kebab and stopped smiling. "Actually though, I did end up impaling the fridge on a spear, so that was the main reason I went with kebabs, so I could use up everything before it went bad." Next to her, the lizard closed her eyes and held one clawed hand over her face.

Dr. Aster had a hard time reconciling his memories of young, earnest lab gofer Alphys with the much older, much more taciturn lizard that sat across from him. The only rational explanation, since she wasn't in the lab during the experiment, was that inheriting his responsibilities had put so much stress on her that it aged her prematurely. Alphys, for her part, refused to meet his gaze. And that was much harder to explain.

"Golly Doc. You sure look confused by something." King Asgore's voice, bringing Aster back to reality; although seeing the King in a simple pair of denim jeans and a floral print shirt was a little unreal in and of itself. Aster shrugged.

"I guess I'm still getting used to the idea of monsters and humans together on the surface. I mean, I spent so long working on a way to break the Barrier, I didn't really spare any thought about what would happen next. I figured, one problem at a time was daunting enough. I used to be out at the forefront of monsterkind's knowledge base, and now everyone is working on the radio or selling snack foods or one of a thousand other things and I'm playing catch up."

"yeah, that's a change of pace. but what a problem to have, right?"

"I suppose it's much better than the alternative."

"Dr. Aster?" Frisk's voice, now that they had finished their slice of pie. "Papyrus mentioned something about time manipulation. Were you trying to go back in time before the Barrier was in place, or what?"

Dr. Aster shook his head. "That's not even remotely close. Not that we had the energy to attempt to send anything, much less anyone, that far back in time."

"Whoa, you guys were working on Time Travel? Alphys is that why you had us marathon Stein's Gate that one weekend?!" Undyne had stopped with a kebab halfway through her giant, toothy mouth, a scene Dr. Aster found both comical and disturbing. Alphys shook her head, still unable to look up at anyone's eyes.

"W-we never got to the point of sending physical m-matter through the time stream. It was limited
to energy only... and after the disaster, there was nobody left who could repair it."

"What? But my notes, my papers."

"What survived wasn't exactly legible. Seriously, your handwriting is atrocious. Took Alph a whole year just to reconstruct the blueprints for the extractor. And everything else, well... neither one of us really knew what went wrong. There was no way to fix the machine when we didn't know how it was broken."

Dr. Aster blinked and looked down at his as of yet untouched spaghetti. "I... I see."

"So if you weren't trying to time travel, what were you trying to do?" Frisk had apparently seized up on the subject and had no desire to let go. Dr. Aster moved his plate to one side and clasped his hands in front of him.

"Well, that's somewhat involved, although the name of the facility probably gave you a hint."

Frisk shrugged. "I've only ever heard anyone call it the core. Or, like on the radio sometimes, they spell it out. C-O-R-E."

Dr. Aster nodded. "That is because CORE is an acronym: Chronodynamic. Optronic. Retrograde. Emitter. Of course we needed a massive power plant to make it work, so we had to build it in Hotland and tap the heat of the volcanic magma. I suppose a lot of people just thought the whole thing was a power plant... it's not like more than a handful of scientists ever really understood the mechanics behind what we were trying to accomplish."

"And what was that? The name sounds like you were trying to fire a laser backwards in time for something."

"You're half right, kiddo. Dad wanted to use the timespace continuum as a lasing element."

Dr. Aster shrugged and grinned. "I actually got the idea a long time ago in Waterfall. I was in a massive room full of Echo Flowers, and thought to myself, what would happen if there was a way to keep the sound emitted by the flowers from degenerating into white noise? Would the room get louder and louder as more flowers joined in? Would the vibrations become strong enough to break the walls and roof of the cavern? And once I thought of that, it wasn't too hard to make the jump from sound to soul power, and the cavern to the Barrier. Of course, we didn't have an abundance of soul power to work with, so I had to cheat."

Aster picked up a single strand of spaghetti and held it horizontally with both hands. "Imagine that this is the timeline. Energy progresses along from the past to the future, always transforming but never being lost. However, even with perfect conversion of energy from different forms and the ability to harness it successively in each form, there is still only a finite amount of energy at any given point in the timeline. But, if you could take the energy in the future, then send it back into the past and use it with the energy as it existed back then, you'd have twice the power to work with."

Frisk blinked. "But if you send future energy back to the past to solve a problem then, doesn't that mean the past energy can't be sent back later, and that will cause a paradox?"

"Precisely correct, and that was the biggest danger with the whole project." Dr. Aster deftly tied the spaghetti strand into a knot. "I knew that was going to be an issue, so I devised an experiment to test the physical influence of a temporal paradox. Sending a single photon back in time one second to activate a photocell sensor and prevent the original photon from being sent. And you will
"Did the time police show up and write you a ticket?"

Dr. Aster blinked, then noticed the child was grinning. "No, that didn't happen. It turns out that creating a paradox like that doesn't break the timeline or erase anything from existence, it just finds a way to maintain energy level parity across the timeline changes. It produces true anti-photons. Negative Light. Are you familiar with the old scientist joke about light bulbs actually being 'dark suckers'? That was what I found. Darkness as a physical force!"

"Dark. Darker. Yet Darker."

Aster turned and noticed Alphys finally looking up at him, and with an expression that much more closely resembled the younger, eager lizard her remembered working with. "The shadows cutting deeper. The darkness keeps growing. Photon readings negative. This next experiment seems very, very interesting. What do you two think? That was the entry I found in the old lab. That... it wasn't much to go on, actually. I thought you were trying to tunnel through reality or teleport past the Barrier by using some sort of pocket dimension."

Dr. Aster grinned awkwardly. "Okay, I admit. That wasn't the most coherent or comprehensive memo I ever made. I was too caught up in the excitement. You see, young Frisk," Aster turned back to the human child, "my original idea was simply to overpower the barrier with Soul energy. Magic is a direct expression of the power of a soul, and the Barrier, made by seven human mages, required the energy level of seven human souls to break it down again. Given the energy density disparity between humans and monsters, that added up to seven thousand monster souls, give or take a few hundred. But, if I sent a single soul back in time seven thousand times and then broke every iteration of the time loop all at once and released it at the barrier, it would destroy it. Of course, doing that with a whole soul would have been fatal even if it hadn't been impossible. So why not send back a single magical attack and add a few thousand more loops to the cycle? A single beam of magic energy, bouncing back and forth between past and future like the mirrored surfaces in a laser chamber. Chronodynamic, Optronic, Retrograde, Emitter. CORE."

"only, discovering anti-light cast a big shadow on that plan."

"SANS! STOP PLAGUING DAD'S SCIENTIFIC LECTURES WITH INCIDENTAL PUNS!"

Dr. Aster chuckled. "I'm glad to see you two haven't changed a bit. But yes. The anti-light recoil, if you will, from the released collapse of several thousand miniature timelines containing the same magic energy, was a problem. We couldn't find anything that could block its effects, and the higher the energy levels in the tests, the more pronounced the effects... *deja vu*, anomalous cold spots, all sorts of gaps in the timespace continuum where energy was sucked out to make up for what was lost in the time loop collapse. I suppose it was like cutting one end off of a sheet, and then sewing it onto the other end in order to make it longer."

"Ohhhh. Now I get it. Like Daylight Savings Time." Frisk nodded sagely, as if they had just resolved a particularly complex physics or philosophical problem.

"Daylight what?"

"it's a human thing dad. don't sweat it. not that it's an option."

"Well, alright then... where was I... ah, yes. We couldn't find a way to contain the anti-light, so in jest I said we might as well aim the anti-light at the Barrier instead, it was the only thing in the Underground we didn't care about protecting. And then I actually listened to what I had said. It
made perfect sense and had an added bonus - by leeching energy out of the Barrier itself using anti-light, we could produce a notable effect even at a lower energy level. Suppose we could only reliably store a thousand souls worth of magic energy before having to break the loop? Maybe because that was all we could store safely, or because beyond that the anti light was too dangerous to let release all at once. If the theory was sound, we could weaken the Barrier enough so that it would only take the equivalent of six human souls worth of power. And we could do it again until it only needed five, or four. And keep doing that until the barrier could be broken solely by the monsters in the underground at that time, or even weakened it so much that a monster could pass right through it."

Dr. Aster's earnest expression faded. "Of course, the first full scale test of the time loop based energy storage system didn't go according to plan. Based on what I saw instead of sending each iteration of the beam into successive empty storage loops, they all combined into the same loop. A super concentrated point of magical energy that breached containment fields that were never intended to hold something that energetic. And because each successive timeline breach was overlapping instead of concurrent, the anti-light phenomena didn't manifest the way we expected based on our early experiments... it created a coherent time energy wave going forward to the future, and it must have hit me on the way. Not to brag but I'm an absolute genius and it makes my skull ache to think about the physics involved."

"and now we know."

"AND KNOWING IS HALF THE BATTLE! NYEH HEH HEH!"

"Yep, you guys didn't change a bit." Dr. Aster smiled again, looking at his sons.

"Boy! Science sure is something, isn't it!"

"Of course... now the Barrier is gone, and nobody's explained how that happened. If it's my turn to ask a question, I would very much like to lead with that one." For a moment, Dr. Aster saw the king and queen flinch, and out of the corner of his eye socket saw Alphys put her head in both hands. "What is it? Did something else go wrong with the core disaster I don't know about?"

"nah. you're in the clear on that, dad. it's just a long, sad tale."

Frisk held up a fork in one hand. "But it has a happy ending! Don't forget that!"
Dr. Aster stood in the backyard of the house, staring at the tree with the tire suspended from one branch by a long rope. Above the swaying leaves, the first few stars of the evening were visible. Looking at the stars was always one of the things he had wanted to do once the Barrier was broken, but now... suddenly there wasn't as much of an appeal to it.

Behind him, the door opened and shut again, and footsteps followed him out onto the grass.

"well. that went about as well as could be expected."

Dr. Aster snorted. "I'm a god damned idiot. I should have known something was wrong when I didn't see Chara or Asriel anywhere."

"not necessarily. they could have been grounded. they were both good kids, but Chara had a love affair with pulling reckless stunts, and there's no way Asriel would ever say no."

"I can't believe it. I just... the mind boggles."

"yeah, but they have medicine for that on the surface now."

Dr. Aster turned to look at his son, who was staring at the evening stars as well. "I don't know which is more incredulous. That Asgore would declare war at all, let alone a war he refused to prosecute, or that Toriel simply walked away instead of shouting some sense back into him, or that this... whole fiasco tore them apart."

"...Dad, if it had been me or Papyrus that was lost in the CORE disaster, what do you think that would have done to you?"

The former Royal Scientist was quiet for a few seconds, then slumped his shoulders. "I don't think there's any way to predict how anyone would react to having other people they care about yanked out of their lives, no matter how it happened."

"that's true enough. Papyrus... well, he always believed in you. so he hardly changed at all. i kinda... gave up. sometimes i'd stop by and help Alphys with repairs to the power plant or heat exchangers, because it had to be done, but... well there's a reason why i ended up working for Undyne instead, once the Royal Guard was set up and given a mandate to catch humans. even if I had known how to repair all the damage to the core and get it working again..."

Sans sighed. "so Paps and i moved from the capital to Snowdin. and once i got a job as a sentry, he decided he wanted to do that too. things could have been worse. he probably would have made a really good sentry, and Undyne said she would have let him in the Royal Guard but he didn't have a mean bone in his body. so maybe it's for the best that he never got to join."

"You were a sentry. So you were tasked with finding and capturing humans for Asgore's plan."

"yep. mostly just for the chance to goof off out in the middle of the woods reading car magazines, but I did run into all of the humans that showed up. and you know what's funny, in a not-actually-that-funny-at-all way?"

"...no, but I get the feeling you're about to tell me."

Sans laughed sadly and shook his head. "Not a single human that fell into the underground died
from losing a fight against monsters. I found the first one on the road from the ruins to Snowdin. Apparently the cold got to it. Another one drowned in Waterfall, and one got sick there too, and it's not like there was ever anyone down there who knew anything about human medicine and diseases in the first place. That's what started the whole mess. One died in Hotland from the heat and steam, and one got killed by the CORE defense systems after they stumbled into a restricted area." Sans rubbed his forehead. "They didn't die because monsters were trying to kill them, although that was certainly happening. They died because nobody was trying to help them. The last one was the worst, though."

Dr. Aster turned to look at his son. "Worse how?"

Sans closed his eye sockets. "That last one... he had a gun. He wasn't like the others, stumbling down by accident. One of the other fallen humans was his brother. He came looking, and he came prepared for anything except what he actually found. He could have done a lot of damage, but I guess he didn't want to run in recklessly and put his brother's life at risk. Very careful. Most people didn't know he was there, and if they did, they didn't realize he was a human. When he found out his brother had died... it was painful to watch. Not sure I wouldn't have done the same, in his shoes. If there's a single spark of truth in anything Riled Up Riley and his cronies have said about monsters, it's that of all the humans to fall into the underground only one came back safe and sound. It's a huge political albatross around Asgore's neck, even though he never actually raised a hand against anyone, or even got the opportunity to try."

Dr. Aster blinked, then his analytical mind filled in the blanks, the parts that his son had deliberately not said. "...guess that's one more thing I have to answer for."

"What? Dad, you were gone, or warped to the future in any case. Asgore declared war, Toriel walked away, everyone else followed their own conscience about whether or not they wanted to be free bad enough to let a human child die or not. None of that is on you. Besides, it's not like you were rushing and making mistakes and ignoring obvious risks. Near as I could tell from the wreckage, the breach happened because an electromagnet burned out, and when you consider the materials we had to work with it's kind of amazing that only one part failed."

"My experiment failing precipitated the matter. Even if the experiment had simply produced no result at all, we could have tried again. Even if the core mishap did nothing but damage the hardware, we could have rebuilt. If nothing else worked we could have moved on to another project. But if it had worked as intended, then even if I had still been lost in time, the controlled time loop would have been charging up. People would have had hope. A distant hope but hope regardless. Perhaps Asriel would never have felt compelled to absorb Chara's soul and make his way here. And when we finally did break the barrier and come to the surface-"

"actually based on what we know, that might not have ended much better. Asriel really drew the short straw when he came to Ebott's Wake. Half the people who saw him belonged to this weird cult that had lasted since the war and not only thought monsters were real, but super dangerous. If everything had gone to plan, we probably would have walked right into the most unwelcoming welcome wagon possible. Although, having said that," Sans winked. "who said the CORE experiment actually failed?"

"...how do you mean?"

"I mean, there's a flower monster around here somewhere, you haven't met him yet. Alphys made him able to absorb souls, so he became the Soul Energy Aggregate Link you said we needed to build once we got the Barrier weak enough to be destroyed by monster soul power. He's a bit of a jerk, but he absorbed the six human souls we already had and blasted through the Barrier, without
anyone having to kill Frisk for their soul. So if he was able to do that with just six souls, the Barrier must have been weakened somehow, right? Maybe the core mishap worked out pretty well. For a science experiment gone wrong anyway."

"...maybe. I still would have liked things to operate on the original timetable."

"hey, so would I. and not just because having the queen adopt a bunch of human kids who wandered into the cavern would be something we could have shoved in Riled Up Riley's face, or anyone else like him. but you can only ask what if so many times. sometimes it's better to take what you got." Sans winked again. "and we got you back."

Abruptly, the short skeleton stretched and yawned. "it's getting pretty late, we should go back inside and say goodnight. especially before Undyne tries to make baked alaska in Tori's kitchen again. and you can crash with me and Paps for tonight, or however long it takes you to get your bearings. i know for sure Paps won't mind."

"Hah." Dr. Aster laughed. "I hadn't even thought about tonight. I've been so focused on getting up to speed on what I missed. Although, not so focused that I didn't notice how awkward Alphys was. What happened to her?"

"...that's for her to tell you, not me."

"Wait, what do you mean? Did she get overwhelmed by the job or something?"

"that probably had something to do with it. you're a tough act to follow, dadster."
Shattered Tranquility

Undyne and Alphys were putting on jackets as Sans and Dr. Aster stepped back inside. "One of these days, Toriel! Baked Alaska! The most hardcore of all deserts, versus your famous Butterscotch Cinnamon Pie! Desert Deathmatch!"

Toriel laughed softly while washing the dishes in the sink. "Cooking isn't about fighting or winning, dear. It's about spending time with and taking care of the people you love."

"It can be both!"

"Undyne, we b-better go. That weather system is supposed to start reaching us soon, and the wind from Canada is really cold."

"UGH! Frisk, your surface world is defective! Who do we see about getting it fixed?"

The young human child stopped drying off dishes that Toriel was handing them. "Uh... Al Gore. He used to be vice president, and he does a lot of stuff on climate change so he would know. Also he invented the human internet."

"WOWIE! A METEOROLOGIST, AND A COMPUTER SCIENTIST, AND A POLITICIAN! THE PERFECT HOLLYWOOD TRIPLE THREAT."

"Undyne, let's g-go already! Thank you for having us over, T-Toriel! It was nice t-to see you again, Doctor Aster! Stop by the lab any time!"

The fish and lizard women pair left, followed shortly by Asgore after Frisk stopped drying dishes in order to give him a hug. Sans waved to the queen and grabbed the leftover hot dogs. "we better get a move on too, Tori. tomorrow's going to be super busy. dad's got lots of ketchup to do."

"SANS! THAT WAS A STRETCH AND YOU KNOW IT!" Papyrus complained, while the queen and Frisk tried to stifle their laughter.

"sure it is, you gotta stretch before exercising. gotta show off several years worth of new jokes for dad now."

"UGH! I'M GOING TO GO GET MY TRANSFORMERS DVD FROM THE LIVING ROOM! AT LEAST I'LL MISS THE NEXT PUN THAT WAY!"

"guess I better work on my aim then. Or better yet, i'll use my special attack."

"You have a special attack too, Sans? Does a dog keep trying to steal yours like with Papyrus?"

"Nah, my special attack can't be stolen because nobody knows what it is. You might say..." the short skeleton paused for effect and winked at the child, "it's a 'secret weapun'."

"SANS! YOU KNOW VERY WELL YOUR SO-CALLED SPECIAL ATTACK IS NOTHING BUT CALLING A 'TIME-OUT' AND THEN GOING TO GRILLBY'S!"

"yup. works every time."

Frisk, giggling uncontrollably from the skeleton brother's antics, suddenly let out a cry of alarm. Dr. Aster noticed that the queen responded immediately, letting the dishes drop directly into the sink and sending a splatter of soapy water onto the floor as she turned; what was unexpected was
how his sons' actions changed as well, immediately looking towards Frisk to see what had happened. A sharp ringing noise got his attention as a plate bounced off the edge of the counter top, tipped end over end, bounced off of Frisk's outreached hand and shattered on the tiled floor of the kitchen.

The human child cried out as if injured, holding up their arms as if to shield themselves from flying shards of ceramic. In a fraction of a second Toriel was kneeling down near them. "Are you hurt, my child? Be careful, do not move too much, you may cut yourself worse."

"CLEAR A PATH! THE GREAT PAPYRUS IS ON THE CASE!" The tall skeleton brother jumped over Sans, landed lightly next to the broken plate and immediately began collecting the largest shards. "SANS, GET A PAPER TOWEL AND APPLY WATER TO IT. WE CAN USE THAT TO COLLECT THE SMALLER FRAGMENTS! FRISK, TORIEL, IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT YOU DO NOT WALK IN THIS ROOM BAREFOOT UNTIL WE ARE SURE WE HAVE REMOVED AS MANY OF THE SLIVERS AS POSSIBLE!"

Abruptly, several spots of blue light began shining from the floor. A small swarm of extremely small fragments of plate floated up away from Papyrus and Frisk, crossed several feet of open air, and dropped into an open trash can. Dr. Aster blinked and looked down at his oldest son, holding up his left hand.

"there we go. didn't get the big stuff bro. looked like you had that under control. how you holding up kiddo?"

Frisk, and Toriel's urging, finally lowered their arms, but nothing seemed capable of stopping the tears pouring down the child's face. At infrequent occasions, it sounded to Aster like they were trying to say something, but the words were drowned in sobbing and could not be recognized.

"Frisk, please try to remain calm, I cannot help unless I know where you are injured!"

"Your Majesty, if I may?" Dr. Aster knelt down near the child and held up one hand. From the hole in the center of one palm, a green light shone out like a searchlight, panning across the child's body. After a few seconds, the light stopped. "No sign of injury. I believe Frisk was simply startled by the breakage of the plate and adopted a defensive posture out of reflex. Which is, of course, the appropriate and healthy response to the risk of flying shards of anything, sharp or dull."

"Is that it, my child? You are truly unharmed?"

In the midst of sobbing, Frisk managed to nod, and seemed to relax as Toriel knelt down and pulled them close in a hug. "Thank goodness. The way you cried out, I was... I am very glad you are alright."

Sans coughed. "Tori, the mess is cleaned up. if you need anything else we're ready and willing."

"AND ABLE! NYEH HEH HEH!"

"Thank you all very much, but I suppose it is time for us all to call it a night. I get the impression that Frisk is very tired."

"you got it. see you later, kid. take care."

"UNTIL WE MATCH WITS AND TRANSFORMER TRIVIA YET AGAIN!"

"Uh... goodbye." Dr. Aster finished, awkwardly.
Abruptly, the child took a deep breath and tore themselves out of the queen's grip, running over to Sans to hug him, then over to Papyrus to hug him as well. "G-Goodbye guys. Take c-care," was choked out through breath made hoarse from crying. Dr. Aster blinked as the child let go of Papyrus and walked slowly out of the kitchen. It seemed like the Frisk he had seen at dinner scant hours earlier was a completely different person.

"welp. better get a move on. it's been a long day. good night Tori."

"GOOD NIGHT YOUR MAJESTY!"

"Yes, good night your majesty."

The trio of skeletons made their way out of the house as the moon began finally peering over the horizon. Sans nodded. "bit of a late start but between the moonlight, the streetlights and everything else, shouldn't be any problems getting back home. You can take the couch, dad. we got some spare sheets and pillows somewhere."

"IN THE LINEN CLOSET."

"oh, is that why we call it that? to keep linens in there? always wondered about that actually." In the dark, the sudden disappearance of one light meant that Sans had winked.

"SANS, DO YOU KNOW IF THAT PLATE THAT BROKE WAS PARTICULARLY EXPENSIVE, OR POSSESSED SENTIMENTAL VALUE FOR FRISK OR THE QUEEN?"

"what? no, that was just a generic plate. they're like six to a package for a few bucks at walmart. they're cheaper than the ones we have actually."

"HMMM. I WONDER WHY FRISK REACTED AS THEY DID THEN."

"yeah, me too. no offense dad, but that's not Frisk's reflexes at work. we both know what that looks like."

"I STILL REMEMBER OUR FIGHT OUTSIDE OF SNOWDIN! SUCH FINESSE! SUCH CONFIDENCE! SUCH STOICISM IN THE FACE OF INJURY!"

"Wait, you fought the human child??"

"i told you earlier dad, Papyrus wanted to be a sentry. he decided the best way to do that would be to prove he could do a sentry's job by capturing a human. fortunately for everybody, Frisk and Papyrus canceled each other out. ain't that right?"

"TOO TRUE! ON THAT DAY I MET MY EQUAL IN ALL THINGS PUZZLE, PASTA, AND PERSISTENCE RELATED!"

"yeah. that kid's something else all right. but what we just saw, that's something i've never seen before."

A drop in the light level in front of the trio as they made their way between streetlights could only mean that Sans had closed his eye sockets. Actually, Dr. Aster amended to himself, that wasn't the only explanation. Beside him, Sans sighed.

"That look on Frisk's face. It meant something."
"Gooooood morning Ebott's Wake! You are listening to KEBT's The Morning Rush! I think, therefore I am, Brett "The Brett" Brinkman, and with me as always is the one, the only, DJ Pantz!"

"There can be only one. Not just because of the prophecy, but for copyright reasons."

"And we hope each and every one of our listeners is having a great day today in scenic Ebott's Wake. Ebott's Wake; Don't Climb The Mountain."

"As true a slogan today as it was years ago when they came up with it, but for different reasons."

"Gary Welkin is on location with Lazy Lindsey and the Coffee Grinders today, we'll be hearing from them later this afternoon; in the meantime, our traffic reporting is limited to having Jeff climb up on top of the roof of the station with a pair of binoculars. So far he's said that Fir Street is completely blocked off by an overturned moving van, West East Road is blocked by a jack-knifed semi truck, and Park Lane is blocked by... a protest demonstration of the Anti Monster League right in front of the Ebott's Wake Town Librarby."

"Are they protesting something the Librarby did, or were they walking down the sidewalk and decide 'hey, this looks like a good spot for a random protest' or what?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe we should send somebody over there to interview them? Jeff, where's Kyle right now? ...that's too far away. What about Winston? ...that's almost next to the Librarby. Go ahead and give him a call."

"In the meantime, we've got some exciting news relating to yesterday's mystery caller. It turns out that, yes, it was former Royal Scientist Wing Ding Aster who called in."

"Yeah, you ran out of the studio really fast when you heard his name yesterday, Burgie. So who is Wing Ding Aster, for the benefit of our human listeners?"

"Okay, Dr. Aster was the Royal Scientist back when that was still a thing. He designed the C.O.R.E. power plant and everything related to it. He's the main reason we had stuff like electric lighting, cell phones, internet and a stable food supply in the Underground, especially in the more recent decades when overcrowding was starting to be a concern in New Home."

"So, Royal Scientist meant that he reported directly to the King and Queen, and he was the resident expert on all things scientific. Exactly what it says on the label."

"Yeah, pretty much. The Royal Scientist position was always tasked with finding a way out of the Underground and destroying the Barrier. Dr. Aster apparently decided it would be a lot easier if we had a larger industrial footprint and could use all the electronics and metal in the human garbage that showed up in the river. He indirectly improved the quality of life for monsters underground like ten times over because of that, so everybody kinda thought he would be the one to finally get us out of that dump. Or, if not him, one of his sons building on what he had already created."

"But when he called in and you heard his name, you looked like... well, it looked like it took you by surprise."

"Well, that's because it did, Brett. About four and a half years ago, he had this experiment. We don't know what it was about, we don't know what went wrong, but something did go wrong. The core went crazy, there were explosions all over Hotland, power went out across the whole..."
underground for two days, and when things finally settled down Dr. Aster was gone. Not dead, not
dust, gone. Without a trace. It was, uh... it was a bit of a low point for everybody."

"So what happened? I mean, he's back now, right, so obviously whatever it was didn't kill him."

"Yeah, according to a text I got from Sans - and keep in mind, I don't actually have a degree in
applied quantum mechanics like he does so I don't know what any of these words mean - Dr. Aster
was, and I quote, 'caught in the backlash of an attempt to store magic power in a stable time loop
for later use against the barrier. the backlash was made of pure anti-photons and dragged Dr. Aster
forward in time proportional to the energy level in the CORE before containment failed.' yeah,
thanks Sans. That really cleared things up."

"So Dr. Aster not only survived, but accidentally discovered time travel? That's kind of
impressive."

"It's not that impressive. He traveled forward in time. Anyone can do that. I can do that. Especially
after an hour at the Dank Memehaus. You know what would be impressive? Going backwards in
time, breaking the barrier sooner, or even averting the Human and Monster War in the first place.
Oh, I just got another text from Sans... 'before you ask trying to travel back in time using anti-
photon waves is totally lethal because the electrons from your future and past self will cancel each
other out and your body will explode like a supernova.' Oh. Well. Suppose it's for the best then. I
mean, in movies and books time travel gets stolen by criminals as soon as its invented. It happened
in Time Cop, it happened in Back To The Future-"

"Wait, Doc Brown wasn't a criminal. And the Libyans he stole the plutonium from never got their
hands on the DeLorean."

"I meant Back To The Future Part Two."

"Oh, right. Biff Tannen."

"What was that Jeff? ...oh. Well, that's just perfect. Listeners, it sounds like one of our reporters,
Winston Devinter, tried to approach the Anti Monster League for a statement about why they were
protesting outside the Librarby, and they started pelting him with assorted objects including, but
not limited to, stones, beer bottles, and... wait, what? Frozen grapefruit? Really?? Uh, they
dispersed and fled the scene after the Vice President of the Librarby Board ran outside and came
after them with an unabridged dictionary."

"Wow. Is Winston okay?"

"Yeah, fortunately everyone at the protest was too drunk to throw anything even remotely where
they wanted it to go. Broke his microphone though so we're getting all this from text messages."

"Drunk? It's not even nine thirty yet! Also, frozen grapefruit??"

"I know, right? Who freezes a grapefruit? Who freezes a grapefruit and then just carries it around
to throw at people?"

"...I suppose it could be worse. They could have had shotguns and hunting rifles. You know, when
they first formed they actually seemed really dangerous and now they're like a caricature of a hate
group instead."

"So... progress, then."

"That's one word for it. I guess it's better than the alternative but all I can think about is having to
deal with Riled Up Riley calling into the station three times a week, and even if his friends are getting dumber and goofier, he's getting angrier. It's very tiring."

"Can't imagine why that is. Anyway, we need to pause for station identification and a word from our sponsors, but stick around, we'll be back later with more Morning Rush!"
On the bench outside the school, Frisk stared at the pages of a book without reading it. When a shadow crossed over the book, they didn't respond in any way until a familiar voice spoke up.

"hey kid. howzit going?"

Frisk looked up into Sans' constantly smiling face and automatically slide over on the bench to give the skeleton room to sit down. Sans, rather than accept the unspoken invitation, sidestepped to stay in front of Frisk.

"you, uh... you don't look too good."

A snorting sound from near the side of the bench got Sans' attention, but Frisk appeared to tune it out. "Don't bother. I haven't been able to get any sort of reaction today. And Frisk skipped lunch again! Don't humans die without food? I swear I read that on the internet somewhere."

Sans scratched the side of his skull, producing an odd scraping sound. "yeah, nobody will be happy if that happens. what's on the menu for the cafeteria today anyway?"

"It looked like fish sticks when I looked in the windows earlier."

"huh. not a fan of seafood?"

Flowey rose up from the ground to be level with Frisk's head. "Even if that was the case, what's the problem with going back to the house and making a sandwich? At this point a handful of potato chips would be better than nothing."

"heh. could always head over to the park and grab a dog off my cart. you qualify for the friends and family discount too."

"Wait. Wait wait wait. Wait. I just thought of something." Flowey extended his stem until his face was in front of Frisk's. "Is this related to what happened last night?"

There was the barest fraction of a response, Frisk moving their book closer to their face, but to the two monsters it spoke volumes. "That's it, isn't it! And is it related to you tossing and turning all night?"

"How do you know about that?" Frisk asked, finally jarred into action.

Flowey rolled his eyes. "Because I was watching you through the window last night. DUH."

"yeah, there's nothing creepy about that."

"Don't read anything into it, bonehead. I look through everybody's windows. On account of not being able to go inside because I DON'T HAVE LEGS."

"point still stands."

The two bickering monsters turned back to Frisk, who had looked up to follow the exchange, and was now nose-deep in a book again.

"you know, there's a lot of advantages to being short like me. nobody asks you to get things off of tall shelves, for starters. pretty easy to find clothes that fit, too, as long as you got a pair of scissors
handy, but the biggest advantage is that it puts me at eye level with you. Last night, when that plate got loose, I saw how you reacted. All due respect to dad, but the way you held up your arms wouldn't have blocked anything from the plate. You put up your arms as if you were bracing yourself from an impact that would have come from above. And that look on your face... that was the look of somebody who thinks the world is about to end."

Frisk slowly looked up from the book, then closed it and slipped it back in their backpack. One handed patted the bench and Sans finally accepted the invitation.

“You and your dad... you got along pretty well, right?”

“i like to think we did. course, we had our disagreements. he always said i had a 'pathological fixation with efficiency' even though i kept telling him i was just lazy.” The skeleton chuckled in recollection. “to be honest i'm still trying to come to terms with the fact that he's back. it's not like the librarby has any self help or counseling books on how to handle thinking a relative was dead but they actually re-enter your life later. guess that doesn't happen much on the surface.”

“It didn't happen that much in the underground either. At least not until the lizard nerd started playing with souls.”

Frisk turned to look at Flowey. “...but that turned out pretty well in the end.”

“A lot of stuff happens between the beginning and the end, Frisk. Happy endings lose a lot of their charm when they're attached to the end of a tragedy or a horror story. And don't think I don't know what's going on. You're trying to steer the conversation topics away from you and what happened last night.”

“...yeah. I am. But still...” Frisk turned to look at Sans. “Even though you and your dad disagreed, you got along well, right? I mean... uh...” Frisk swallowed. “Did you ever do something that made him super, super duper mad?”

“oh you have no idea. you know how much i like winding up Papyrus with my puns, right? i liked to do the same thing with dad, but with technical and engineering optimization. nerd jokes, nerd jokes everywhere. you couldn't stop me. you saw how polite he was about it last night at the table, but soon enough, i'll say something about an electrical circuit design and you'll see him huff and puff. and if you end up getting an electrical engineering degree one day, you'll look back and say, 'hey, I get it now... wow, that was awful.'”

Frisk didn't comment on Sans' attempt to impersonate their voice, if they noticed it at all. “I mean... uh... well... did you ever break something and then your dad...” Frisk trailed off, either unable or unwilling to finish the sentence, then looked up sharply as Sans laughed.

“you better believe it kid. one time i was napping when i should have been down in the Hotland main level, cleaning out filter traps for the steam vents so they didn't plug up and overheat. so of course they plugged up and overheated. six months of work melted and sunk into the lava in six minutes. dad would have boxed my ears if I had-”

Sans found himself interrupted by a sudden hug from the side. “I shouldn't have... I mean... I didn't mean to drag up bad memories like that. We can talk about other stuff.”

“heh. you know, there were a few times when i wondered if me screwing around and slacking off like that is what caused the experiment to go wrong in the first place. guess that's why we moved to snowdin. it was easier to just give up and move on. and you know me, i'm all about the path of least resistance.” Sans leaned back and looked up into the mostly overcast sky. “and here we are
again. Dad's back after all this time. In any case, what I've screwed up is in a completely different league from dropping a dinner plate while cleaning up.”

Frisk's reply was so quiet, Sans almost didn't hear it. “I guess.”

“So unless that plate was a key part of a plan to free another civilization of people trapped for eons beneath the surface of the earth, then I think my screw up out screws-up your screw up.”

“...maybe if it was just that plate. But when I was helping Toriel pack up everything in Home I broke a vase, and last Christmas I tried to put the star on by myself and the tree fell over and I broke a bunch of ornaments and when I tried to help with the spring play I got everyone's lines mixed up and gave them the wrong scripts and when Halloween happened Toriel tried to make fudge and I got the instructions wrong and it got all over the kitchen and-and-”


The child took a few ragged deep breaths and seemed to relax. “Thanks... Flowey. I just... when everyone was looking at the sunset, it felt like we were starting something new. Not just all the monsters but me too. The monsters were leaving the underground behind, and I could leave behind... well... everything before I climbed Mt. Ebott. But everything still feels the same.”

The trio sat in silence for a few minutes, until Sans sat up straighter.

“hehehe. You remember that police officer that Papyrus met? What a first impression, right?”

“I missed the first part. Toriel and I were kind of bringing up the rear of the group. But I remember seeing his face when he realized everyone wasn't wearing really good costumes. That was...” Frisk sniffed and giggled. “That was actually kinda funny.”

“I'll take your word for it,” Flowey grumbled.

“I wish I had a picture, or even a video. It was definitely funny. One second he was smiling all polite while Papyrus was shaking his hand, and then his eyes got real big but his smile stayed in place.”

Frisk giggled again. “Officer Steve did not expect a brush with greatness that day.”

“hah! Nice one.”

“UGH. You guys and your puns.”

“It's just gonna get worse from here on out, with dad back. Hey, that reminds me, I gotta go meet him and Alphys at the new lab, give him the guided tour, all that jazz.” Sans hopped up off the bench and stretched, causing many of his joints to pop inexplicably. “Whoa, pardon me. Must have been something I ate. Anyway, should take a while, so if you wanted to catch up with us after school that would be the place to head to. I bet you two would have... a lot to talk about.”

As the skeleton strolled away, Flowey rose up to stare Frisk in the face again. “Did you tell him something? Is that why he was putting so much emphasis on 'a lot to talk about' just then?”

“I didn't tell him anything. I think he... I think he figured it out on his own. But I'm sort of afraid to ask, if that makes sense?”

“Oh, it makes sense. It makes so much sense you wouldn't believe it.”
The child and the flower monster sat in silence for another minute or so, before Frisk sat up straight again. “Hey, Flowey. I asked Sans about if there was anything that got Dr. Aster really mad at him. Uhm. Do you remember if y- if Asriel had any experiences like that with Toriel and Asgore?”

The flower glared at Frisk for a few moments, then his expression softened. “Actually... there was one thing. I-Asriel and Chara were trying to surprise d- to surprise the king with a pie. But there wasn't enough butter for the recipe. And, not knowing any better, they tried to substitute based on the words. Four buttercups instead of four cups of butter. So Asgore came down with what the internet now tells me is Ranunculus poisoning. He... well, he didn't have a good time. Shaking, dizziness, throwing up, think his mouth swelled up too. He shrugged it off in the end, but I guess being a Boss Monster he was tougher than most. Toriel was not happy about it. Not quite launch-the-person-she's-angry-at-across-the-room-with-a-fireball angry, but pretty close. Maybe she didn't go that far because she realized it was an accident. Chara... huh.”

The flower stood up straighter, with a perplexed look on his face. Frisk coughed. “What? What does huh mean?”

“Sans mentioned that one cop that met Papyrus. How his smile got all weird. If I didn't know better, I'd have thought he was describing Chara's 'creepy smile'. The mouth looks happy, but the rest of the face doesn't, you know, match up. It's funny. For the longest time I thought Chara had just laughed it off, while Asriel felt like the scum of the earth for poisoning his dad. Now I'm not so sure anymore.”

Flowey shook his head as if to dismiss the memories, his petals bobbing back and forth. “In any event, that's still in a whole other category compared to just breaking a dinner plate. Or making a mess in the kitchen. Or mixing up the lines for a play. I'm still amazed you didn't blame that whole comedy of errors on me,” the flower grinned evilly, “because it's exactly the kind of thing I would do. Not even the fudge thing comes close to destroying your people's best hope for freedom or nearly killing their king. Okay, Chara might have disagreed with that last one.”


“You know, Frisk... you never did explain why you climbed Mt. Ebott in the first place.”

“...that's because that's the wrong question to ask.”

“Oh, that's really informative. So what's the right question? 'What's the airspeed of an unladen European Swallow?' 'Who put the bop in the bop-she-bop?' 'Do you wanna build a snowman?' You're not exactly dropping hints left and right here,” the flower huffed. “If I had to guess, I guess the next logical question in the series would be 'Why you didn't go back to your family?' Assuming you actually have living human relatives up here, that is.”

“Close.” Frisk got up from the bench and pulled one strap of the backpack onto their shoulder. “The barrier's been gone for a while, and between the monsters going free and your pranks, everybody in town knows who I am. So why haven't my parents come knocking on Toriel's door asking for me? Or even about me?”

“Well, Toriel is scary.”

“...maybe that's it. I need to get ready for class. I'll talk to you later.”

Flowey watched the child head inside the school, and began sinking back into the earth. “Yeah... see you Frisk.”
All Fine Labs was in many ways a more modest enterprise than the Hotland facility had ever been. Part of that was by necessity, especially when it came to power supplies; while a lot of resources were available in abundance on the surface compared to the Underground, raw geothermal energy wasn't one of them. The lab therefore had a hard limit on what it could do based on the capacity of the regional power grid, and a relatively softer limit based on the utility rates.

On the other hand, Dr. Aster reflected as he looked around the lobby, monsters had by necessity become masters of recycling, re-purposing, restoration and generally just operating on a shoestring budget. All Fine Labs had become the *de facto*, if not *de jure*, recycling center for the entire Ebott's Wake township, and so far its performance had made the original recycling center down the block look almost comically limited.

"Can I help you sir?"

Dr. Aster blinked and snapped out of his scientist trance of comparative recycling analysis and realized that the receptionist had gotten up from her desk to walk over to him.

"I'm quite fine, thank you. I was hoping to talk to Dr. Alphys, to be honest. We used to work together."

"I'm sorry sir, Dr. Alphys has meetings scheduled all day. If you'd like to make an appointment we can try to fit you in some time later in the month."

"I'd rather not go to the trouble. Or intrude upon her time if she's that busy. Thanks anyway."

Dr. Aster sighed as the receptionist headed back to her desk. The experience of having a civil conversation with a human was still novel - and by extension, disconcerting. From Sans' jokes the previous night, he knew that his son still contracted at the lab for particularly thorny technical problems. That had seemed like the closest thing to familiar territory and it also seemed like the best place for a skeleton with his skills to start hunting for a job, now that the position of Royal Scientist had been terminated along with the barrier. As it stood, maybe it was better to get a ground level view and find Sans' hot dog cart. Even if most of his eldest son's effort was expended in a series of what the humans called "get rich quick" schemes, the food service aspect was a reliable standby. The employment prospects weren't as great, of course, but it would give him a much better view of the surface world as it now stood, adapting to the return of monsterkind-

"Dr. Aster! Dr. Aster!"

Dr. Aster looked up sharply and saw a short yellow lizard in a lab coat running through the lobby to his position, then pausing to try to catch her breath.

"Huff... heff... heugh... they just... now told... told me... you were... heuff... here."

"Are you alright, Alphys? You sound like you swallowed a kazoo."

"Haaa... heugh... heh... just... out of shape... too many meetings... not enough... field work."

"I don't envy you. I remember all the meetings trying to organize what we needed to do to build the original geothermal plant underground. And that was with carte blanche from the King himself."

"Yeah... up here... lots of... different people. Want lots of... different things. Investors. Inspectors."
Everybody has conditions. The recycling program helps. But we still need capital. For expansion and special projects." Alphys seemed to be getting a handle on the air situation.

"Naturally. What are you working on right now? Or is one of those conditions that the program is top secret?"

"Oh, nothing like that. Pure research actually. Humans can only see part of the electromagnetic spectrum. So they need instruments to even detect really high and low energy photons. And then they have to put together pictures of what's happening based on snapshots from those instruments. They came up with a lot of theories. Some of them were even on the right track. But they missed a lot too. They don't have a unified field theory yet, they're not even CLOSE to understanding gravity, never mind controlling it for industry or transport, and don't get me started on the whole string theory farce!" In a few short seconds Alphys' facial expression had gone from nervous and awkward to intense and invested. It took a certain amount of effort on Dr. Aster's part to not break out into laughter.

"I did wonder based on the garbage in the river if they simply didn't have the technology for that, or if they had some sort of disposal site that was different from the river, or some third scenario. Guess that's another mystery solved."

"Yeah. I theorized that if we could help revolutionize science and industry it would get more humans who were on the fence about monsters to pick a side. And with any luck it would be the side that didn't call into the radio all the time and rant about how we were pure evil and should all be exterminated or driven back underground again. Oh, and there's also Soul Research! Turns out humans still weren't exactly clear on if Souls really existed." Alphys' expression slowly shifted into a nervous grin. "I was hoping that adding some concrete science to all that philosophy and religion would help clear the air... uhm... it d-didn't quite turn out the way I hoped, and, and I may have, you know, pushed more people toward Riled Up Riley's camp instead. Heh... Burgie has been able to keep the situation from escalatin on the radio, at least... oh, there's some other stuff I'm working on. Maybe you'd like to consult on that? That's actually my next meeting, to be honest, and it would kind of show you what we're working on, what we're trying to do... what we have to work with, that sort of thing."

"It would be my pleasure, Alphys. It'd be nice to work with you again."

"It's... it's just nice to see you again. Well, shall we?"

Alphys lead the way out of the lobby, through several hallways and past what looked like meeting rooms and workshop areas through the windows in the walls, until she stopped by one door marked Exam Room: Extra Large. Carefully she knocked on the door three times, and from within there was the sound of a muffled bark in response.

"Alright. Just, uh... before we go in, full disclosure. This is a mistake I made and I'm trying to fix it. I'm open to any suggestions at this point. Just... try to k-keep in mind that I didn't want this to happen, and if... if I had known-"

"Whatever it is Alphys, I'm sure it's not as bad as you make it out to be," Dr. Aster cut off the short lizard, grabbed the doorknob and opened the door.

After a few moments, he shut it again.

“...Alphys, what was I just looking at?”

“An, uh... amalgamation of five different d-dog monsters into a single physical entity. And
possibly Dogamy b-because he was taking care of them today.”

“Alright. That's kind of what it looked like. Are they in... pain or distress?”

“It's really hard to tell, but we don't think so. We think they adjusted the quickest out of... all of the subjects.”

“All of the subjects. So there's more.”

“Three more amalgamations, plus some sort of anomalous byproduct.”

“Alright...perhaps you should explain how this happened.”

The lizard nodded meekly, opened the door and went inside. Dr. Aster followed, staring at the amalgamation. The dog... thing... seemed to be staring at him as well, though how exactly that was possible was not clear without any visible eyes. Without warning, the dog form leaned down with its face... hole... close to the ground and its many tails wagging and getting in each others ways.

“Hey, looks like they like you! That's a good sign.”

Some sort of foam began to drip from the face hole and the entire creature rolled over on its back. The hooded dog monster sitting in the chair nearby nodded approvingly. “That's an even better sign. Looks like Endogeny wants to be friends with you, Mr... uh...”

“Doctor, actually. Doctor Wing Ding Aster at your service.”

Dogamy blinked. “Did you say Wing Ding Aster? I thought he was dead.”

“Well, I would certainly hope not, since I'm him.” Dr. Aster leaned down and began rubbing the amalgamate's “belly”, and noticed quickly how sticky and fluid the resulting mass was. Turning to look at Alphys at near eye level, he gestured with the other hand.

“Now would be as good a time to fill in the blanks as any.”

“Yeah.” Alphys walked over to one of the empty chairs near the wall and sat down. “I had this idea about saving monster souls from dissipation after death by injecting them with a type of energy abundant in human souls. For lack of a better word, I called it Determination; it seemed to allow humans to survive past the point where their bodies had been injured fatally, so it was literally De-Termination in that sense, but it also tied into some other characteristics I had read about that allowed humans to defy all causal forces and change circumstances using force of will alone. In that sense it tied into the philosophical concept of predetermination or predestination... or rather, it seemed to implicitly defy and refute it. In any event I thought it would allow monster souls to survive, even after the body turned to dust. It sort of copies your idea of storing magickal energy, but... messier.”

Alphys motioned to Endogeny. “I asked the King to request that people bring anyone who had fallen down to the Hotland lab. The plan was to infuse the bodies with determination, wait until they turned to dust, return the dust to the families and store the souls until we had enough to break the barrier. But the monsters didn't turn to dust... and one day one of them opened their eyes.”

Alphys began blinking rapidly. “It was Mrs. Drake. The first thing she asked me when she saw me was where her son was. And the second was where she was. I... I ran some tests and took some measurements. And it *looked* like everybody was okay, and I was ready to just call it a successful failure and move on, and then... and then...”

“I think I can figure it out from there,” Dr. Aster said softly as Alphys began to sob. “Monsters are
mostly made of magic, and humans are mostly made of water. But while magic energy responds
easily to the impulses of a soul, water is physical matter and so the human body needs much higher
concentrations of soul energy just to move around under their own power. When you extracted the
soul energy from the human souls and injected it into monster bodies, it responded to the
motivations of the monster soul...” Dr. Aster lifted up his hand from Endogeny and watched the
amalgamated goop drip slowly off of it and back to the dog creature. “...even though it's still
energy that's designed to move a body mostly made of water. So naturally those properties carried
over, regardless of the fact that there's no actual water for the energy to act on.”

Alphys sniffed, having finally gotten her tears under control. “Yeah. I thought about trying to
extract the determination but that would kill them. And I can't separate them because I can't tell
what parts belonged to who except with certain defining features. About all I can do is try to
stabilize them, and even that's hard to figure out. Maybe if I'd never found those notes for the
extractor...”

Alphys trailed off as Dr. Aster started to chuckle. “The irony is not lost on me. Do you know why I
originally built that thing, Alphys?”

“For the magical time laser project, of course. I mean, I know I didn't get picked for the spin off
project you were working on, but I figured you needed me to keep working on the original design
in case you and Sans hit a dead end.”

“Actually I had an idea almost identical to yours. Extract the soul energy from another creature, or
more than one. Infuse it all into some monster, maybe with some sort of stabilizing or routing
agent, and they could walk right through the barrier. But before I finished, Chara fell down into the
Underground and the royal family adopted them. The project suddenly had a deadline, because I
had to find a way to break or circumvent the Barrier before the end of Chara's natural lifespan. Not
that they seemed at all put out by the prospect of being trapped underground for the rest of their
life. Hmmm... now that I have the opportunity to ask, is that normal for human children?”

Alphys shrugged awkwardly. “Well, Frisk didn't really seem fazed by anything in the underground,
so maybe.”

“That's interesting. I wonder if that's a product of their determination, or an element of human
culture. Where was I... right. I knew that the extractor would work because it was a reversal of the
magical conduit system I used for the C.O.R.E. conversion plant. But there wasn't any way to
integrate monster energy into another monster. Phase resistance, hysteresis losses, and other
headaches. Of course, human soul energy and monster soul energy is almost perfectly
complimentary even though we're completely different species... always wondered how that could
happen. I did consider asking Chara to help with that, but somehow I didn't think Asgore or Toriel
would have been happy if I had knocked on the castle door and asked 'Excuse me but can I borrow
your child's soul for a few days?' So ultimately that entire project had to be abandoned.”

Dr. Aster shook his head. “If this is what happened with human soul energy, I'm not sure I really
want to know what would have happened if I'd ever found a way to make things work with monster
soul energy.”

The lizard woman took a deep breath. “So... what happened with the Amalgamates was just a
mistake. A mistake anybody might have made.”

“Well, anybody with access to fallen monsters, human souls, and an industrial grade magical
induction conduit turned inside out. But yes. After all, the history of scientific progress is the
history of mistakes that were gradually corrected. You and I should both know that better than
anybody, now.”
“Welcome back to the Morning Rush, right near the end of the Morning Rush, actually. Brett Brinkman here and we're just about to hand things off to Lindsey and the Coffee Grinders with Gary Welkin, all of whom are out on location today at the Das Boot Sub Shop. Gary, can you hear us okay?”

“Hello? Am I coming in clear? It's absolute pandemonium down here, guys! If only radio was not purely an audio medium! If you could only see the tableaux of competing ideas!”

“You know Gary, you could just take pics with your cell phone. We can put them on the station's Facebook page.”

“That would ruin the effect by showing the visuals outside of their proper context! If I may set the scene; on one side, Dwayne Riley and his ardent supporters in the persecution of and repudiation against monsters! On the opposing side, an unruly mass of principled townspeople from our fair city who do not cotton to that manner of stinking thinking! And in the middle, Lazy Lindsey, Beanpole Levine and Clutch McGee, as well as yours truly, along with the long suffering staff and management of the Das Boot Sub Shop, for all your sandwich and World War II Historical Reference needs!”

“That sounds like an explosive combination, Gary.”

“It is if you get the new featured sandwich, the Kriegsmarine Special! An eighteen inch slab of toasted bread encompassing sliced ham, sliced corned beef, sliced turkey, tomatoes, onions, dill pickles, and enough sauerkraut to incapacitate a pony, or small horse! Much like the dreaded U-Boats referenced in this eatery's advertisements, the Kriegsmarine Special descends silently beneath the waves of biting teeth, only to later surface and torpedo unsuspecting commercial shipping traffic carrying valuable materiel to a besieged Britain!”

“I uh, don't exactly have a degree in human history, but that sounds really excessive for a sandwich. On the other hand I did work for a year or two selling hamburgers made of sequins and glue, so I suppose anything is possible.”

“Anything except a peaceful resolution to this conflict, Burgie! Even citizens who are ambivalent or undecided when it comes to the subject of monsters have turned out in support of the people at Das Boot Sub Shop, for many years the only reliable source of pickled cabbage and pickled cabbage related foodstuffs in a thirty five mile radius! While no charges were ever filed and the official investigation blamed a simple gas leak as the culprit for the fire three months ago, there remains a strong undercurrent of resentment against the Anti-Monster League in light of the timing of their protest of the shop hiring a monster, and the subsequent conflagration!”

“I remember. Bratty was inconsolable for a week. I'm glad they kept her on. So does it look like things are going to come to blows, or is this one of those situations that can still be walked away fr-What was that?!”

“That was the shattering of some sort of projectile unpleasantly close to my head! Upon closer examination, it would appear to be comprised of frozen segments of fruit pulp and rind! Brett and Burgie, I can say without fear of contradiction that the Anti-Monster League is expressing its displeasure with the state of affairs today with frozen citrus fruits, most likely grapefruit or large oranges-!”
“Whoa, what just- Jeff, was that over the air or a power spike or what?”

“Gary, your microphone cut out, can you hear us? Talk to me, man!”

“Hey, Brett. It's Lindsey. Gary just took another grapefruit to the head.”

“Another?! He's been hit twice now?! Jesus!”

“Jeff, call an ambulance! I don't know what happens to humans with head trauma and I don't want to find out.”

“Lindsey, is Gary still alive?”

“Oh, totally. He's kinda bleeding a lot? But he's totally alive and running after Riled Up Riley with one of the reproduction submarines the shop has lying around for promotion and stuff. Here he comes again, hey Gary! Brett wants you to talk to him.”

“COME BACK HERE YOU REDNECK MOTHERF-*BEEP*-R! NOBODY HITS GARY WELKIN WITH FROZEN FRUIT AND LIVES TO BRAG ABOUT IT!”

“...Brett, should we be rooting for or against Gary in his revenge-driven rage right now? As a monster, I feel morally and ethically conflicted.”

“As a radio personality, I feel happy that Jeff was quick on the draw with the censor button... and that's about it. That's all I got.”

“Okay. Just me?”

“Looks like it. You heard it here first, listeners. The Das Boot Sub Shop is back and open for business and they have a new sandwich to commemorate the occasion which is heavy on the sauerkraut. You have been warned. We'll leave you with a few words from our sponsors and when we come back from the break, you'll be listening to Lazy Lindsey and the Coffee Grinders live on location, quite possibly reporting a blow-by-blow of Dwayne Riley's inevitable comeuppance. This is Brett Brinkman, signing off for today.”

“And this is DJ Pantz, saying, Auf Weidersehen.”

“And this is Lazy Lindsey, saying you really should come by the sub shop if you can. This is, like, soooo hilarious.”

“I'LL BLITZKREIG YOUR HEAD AND SEE HOW YOU LIKE IT YOU WHINY LITTLE UNTERMENSCH! YOU BETTER RUN! WAIT, STOP RUNNING DAMMIT, I CAN'T KILL YOU IF YOU KEEP MOVING!”

“Heh. Hehehe.”
“Now that's the second biggest ball of wire I've ever seen.”

Dr. Aster stared up at the massive assembly of cables, conduits, circuit boards and vacuum tubes, hanging from the ceiling of the laboratory by four thick chains. Beside him, Alphys laughed nervously.

“Yeah. Made from one hundred percent recycled materials. The most ecologically friendly laboratory instrument in the world, I like to think. Uh, don't stand underneath it! There should be warming placards and one of those portable fences around it, but somebody must have taken them away for some reason.”

Alphys hurried over to a table next to one of the walls of the room, where a computer patiently played a test pattern over and over on the attached monitor. Shaking the mouse a bit to wake the machine, Alphys typed in a password and began navigating menus.

“One of the things I noticed while I was... you know... was that each human soul seemed to be different colors. Afterward I wasn't in much of a state to give it serious thought, but since we've come to the surface I've been able to look at things with a clear head, and I started going through the old video surveillance system that Asgore told me to put together after the first human showed up.”

On the monitor, blurry footage began playing in one window. Alphys motioned Dr. Aster to come closer, and the skeleton could see a human child running towards an ice-based monster. Snowflake shaped magic bullets shot out of the monsters hands, only to shatter in midair as the child punched them one by one. The ice monster visibly panicked and ran away, leaving the child to lean over, hands on knees, to catch their breath.

Alphys clicked a button in the dialog box, and the video started over again, but this time with distorted colors. “Sorry, I had to copy all the video data onto VHS tapes for archival purposes, so there's some data loss. False color spectrographs are the best I can do, but for an instrumental purpose it seems to work.”

The white blur in the center of the ice monster's image flared brightly with each snowflake bullet that it produced, and as the humans' fists slammed into the snowflakes to shatter them, the orange blur that seemed to be in the center of the human torso flared as well. Dr. Aster leaned forward, suddenly, his skull practically level with Dr. Alphys' face.

“Wait. Play that back again.”

Alphys clicked the replay button on the window, and Dr. Aster watched the scene unfold again. When the fight recording had concluded, he stood up straight.

“No damage?”

Dr. Alphys shrugged awkwardly. “That's what it looks like. That particular human, by moving towards the danger and attacking it, completely nullified the effect that the attack should have had on their soul. No other human was able to produce that effect, at least not on any of the video recordings we have from the security grid. And we don't know exactly why but I do have one theory.”

“only one? you're losing your edge, Alphys. better not let Undyne find out.” Dr. Aster looked up
and back towards the doorway to see Sans poking his head inside.

“Hi Sans,” Alphys replied, not looking up from the computer. “With human souls being such a reserve of energy, and like you said before, they use it all just to keep moving, I suspect they subconsciously express elements of their personality and disposition in the form of that energy. It's like monster magic attacks, but limited to within the physical confines of their bodies. The problem is that I only have these records of the fallen humans from the underground, and they're neither complete nor comprehensive.”

Dr. Aster nodded. “One sample isn't enough to build a valid model on.”

Alphys pointed back over her shoulder at the instrumentation hanging from the ceiling. “That's what that's for. I was hoping to get some human volunteers to let me scan them, but anyone in the lab would be too close to avoid personal bias, and the only people who've offered outside the lab are Frisk and one of the people from the radio station. Which... eh... probably has something to do with me trying to convince humans that souls were real in the first place.”

Sans made his way from the doorway to stand next to Alphys and patted her on the shoulder. “hey, you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him think.”

“I know.”

Dr. Aster walked over to the hanging machinery. “From the way you were talking, it sounded like you didn't like the idea of bringing in people from the radio station. Do they not know about the... amalgamations?”

“everybody knows about the amalgamates dad. Endogeny keeps jumping over fences and heading to the schoolyard to play with the kids. it's one of those weird things you'd think would make a bad situation worse, but most people thought that was how they were supposed to be. like some sort of slime monster that shaped itself like a dog for kicks. so we had to explain that, or at least as much as we were able to without violating the other amalgamates' privacy.”

“So there's no actual problem with having the reporters here then.”

The lizard began to sweat. “Right, n-n-no p-problem at all with having people rummaging around the lab and t-t-touching random instruments and asking me hard hitting questions.”

Dr. Aster blinked, then looked at Sans, who shrugged. “Alphys gets stage fright even when there's no stage, just a microphone. it's usually not a problem in meetings because she enters super passionate nerd mode and forgets to be nervous and awkward, but outside of that...”

“Oh. I see now. Well, what about that Frisk child? You said they were willing-”

“Nonononononono!” Alphys stammered, burying her face in her claws. “I'm n-n-n-not doing that again!”

“What was that all about? Doing what again??”

Sans walked over next to Dr. Aster and stared up at the scanner. “Back in the Underground, Alphys came up with this plan to try to convince the kid to stay, rather than confront Asgore. It didn't work out. Although some of that was actually Mettaton. You haven't met him yet, he's still in California. Frisk wants to let byebones be byebones, but, heh... the queen saw a recording of Mettaton's demo tape. It had their boss battle together. She, uh... she was a little perturbed.”

“If Frisk gets involved in anything at the lab, and the queen finds out, I'm as good as dead. If they
show up I might as well start making arrangements to let people know what to sprinkle my dust on."

“Alright. I can see how that would be a bit of a deal breaker.” Dr. Aster began pacing around the perimeter of the room, and Sans turned to watch with a twinkle in one eye socket. “What if you weren't the one talking to the reporters? Would that work?”

“Yes, but who else could do it? All the other monster researchers are swamped with other projects and meetings about projects. We have some humans working in the lab but they'd be operating under the same limitations as the reporters. Like a blind person trying to describe color to another blind person. And we can't have Sans do it because he'll drive them crazy with his puns.”

“it's true.”

Dr. Aster stopped pacing. “I could give it a shot. I mean, I know I'm trying to talk myself into a job here, but I'm familiar with trying to explain complex theoretical abstracts into simpler condensed formats for transmission to people without my technical background-”

“OH MY GOD THAT'S IT!” Alphys squealed. “Everyone's already asking about you and where you came from and where you were and what happened and their curiosity would be directed towards the lab and you'd bring in all sorts of busybodies and rubberneckers but some of them would volunteer and we'd get more data and you know how to handle gotcha questions and-”

The lizard abruptly stopped talking and took several deep, raspy breaths. “I really need... to stop... doing that.”

“stop recognizing good ideas when you find them? that's not much of an attitude to have as a scientist.” Sans winked at Alphys. “but it's a great attitude to have as an administrator.”

“Hah. Hah. Hah. I'd like to see you do my job. Or any job where you can't get away with slacking off reading magazines.”

“never gonna happen. i gotta fail at things consistently if i want to maintain my snoozing streak.”
“Hello? Frisk my dear, are you home?” Toriel called out as she pulled off her overcoat and placed it on a wall hook. “I happened to stop by the market on the way home, and I thought we would change up supper this weekend. How do you feel about stir-fried vegetables?”

There was no reply, but as Toriel walked towards the kitchen she could make out muffled voices. Inside, she saw a stack of plates wrapped in a loop of cardboard with a sticky note on top, but before she could lean down to read the text she spotted movement outside the window.

“Frisk? Is that you? Are you playing some sort of prank? I do not find it amusing at all.” The queen quickly walked out of the kitchen and towards the back door, as the muffled voices became louder. She opened the door and stepped outside-

“I still don't understand why a witch would make a house out of edible materials in the first place! Never mind the fact that it was made of candy! If you build anything out of chocolate or cotton candy or peppermint sticks, someone or something is gonna eat it!”

“Well, like all the old fairy tales, it was an allegory. In Hansel and Gretel, it was about not trusting anybody you didn't know because they might try to eat you. Or something like that. I don't think cannibalism was that big a problem back when the stories first got started.”

Toriel let out a breath she didn't realize she had been holding in. Frisk was suspended inside the tire swing, swaying back and forth, and looking down at Flowey the Flower who was wearing an expression of frustrated confusion. The child looked up and waved. “Hi mom. I left you some stuff on the kitchen table.”

“Yes, I saw. What are you two doing?”

“Just trying to explain the Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales to Flowey.”

The flower monster snorted. “And doing a really lousy job of it. Okay, never mind kids wandering in and eating your walls. Never mind ants and other bugs. What about rain? That's going to dissolve everything, sooner or later!”

“You're really stuck on that now, aren't you?”

Toriel laughed softly. “Well, whenever you finish your literary analysis, please come inside and wash up, Frisk. I got some vegetables from the market on the way home and I thought we would stir fry them as a change of pace.”

“Okay.”

As the back door shut with Toriel heading back inside, Flowey shook his head. “Golly that was too close.”

“Yeah. Thanks for warning me. I thought I could hear something but it didn't really register until you said mom was home.”

Flowey grimaced. “...yeah. Stupid reflexes. They're not even really mine.”

“I, uh...” Frisk hesitated and climbed out of the tire swing. “I never asked before, but, when did you... uh... when did you reach the conclusion that those memories weren't yours? Was that before
we met, or-

“After. After our last fight. With...” Flowey sighed. “With other monsters' souls I could finally process the other parts of Asriel's memories, the emotions. I... well, if I'd known in advance what was going to happen I probably wouldn't have tried. I didn't realize how much it would hurt. I mean, it's over a year and a half and I still have this weird after-effect. Like...”

“Like guilt?” Frisk asked, their face filled with an expression Flowey couldn't recognize.

“No, of course not. Without a soul I don't have anything to feel guilt with, remember? This is more like... well, humans can pull muscles, right? I think this is the magical counterpart. I tried to get too much power at once and I should have built up to it.”

“...you know, if Dwayne Riley ever tries anything against mom or dad, I don't think anyone in town will begrudge you stealing his soul. It certainly doesn't seem like he's using it.”

“Bleugh. I wish I had a stomach so I could throw up. It's bad enough being stuck as a flower with somebody else's memories. There's just not room in here for anyone else, especially not somebody who hates me and who would constantly fight me for control of my magic.” Flowey's expression changed from disgusted to crafty. “Now, if there was a way to trade bodies with Riled Up Riley, I'd do that in a heartbeat. I'd have hands and legs again!”

Frisk raised an eyebrow. “And everyone in town would think you were a gigantic jerk.”

“And how is that different from right now?” The flower monster winked. “Besides, according to the internet the best sort of retribution for bigots is to be transformed into what they hate.”

“Okay, that has a certain appeal. Walk a mile in their shoes.”

The flower nodded enthusiastically. “Exactly! You're a mile away from them and they can't chase you because they don't have shoes anymore. It's the perfect crime!” The backyard echoed with a sinister high pitched laugh.

“I guess I better ask this now before somebody knocks on the front door claiming to be you; do you actually know how to do that?”

“Uh... no.” Flowey's expression fell. “But darn it, a soulless abomination can dream! Well, actually I can't do that either. But I can fantasize!”

“Well, if it keeps you out of trouble.” Frisk stretched and began walking towards the back door. “I better get inside and help Toriel with dinner. Uhm, do you want me to...”

“Complete that sentence? Yes.”

“Uh, do you want me to bring some food out for you?”

Flowey blinked. “Is this a joke?”

“No, I'm serious. I mean, if mom uses fire magic to cook it, that makes it monster food, you know? So you don't need a stomach or anything other than a mouth to eat it.”

“...I get everything I need to survive from rain, sunlight, and the soil. And whatever fertilizer the city works department leaves unattended. Why would I need food?”

“I just thought... maybe you'd want some. For a change of pace.”
The flower stared at Frisk for a few moments, until his expression shifted into a cunning grin. "Wait, wait. I get it now. You're trying to get me back for all the crap I pulled in the Underground, by making me homesick for Toriel's cooking. Well, it's n-"

"No, no! That's not it at all!"

Flowey's expression once more became one of frustrated confusion upon seeing Frisk's distress. "Well what else could it possibly be?! Oh my god are you still trying to be nice to me?! Can't you just treat me like an enemy?! Or at least an inconvenience like everyone else in this stupid town? It'd simplify my life a whole bunch."

"But you're my friend! You set everyone free and it cost you so much and it's not fair!"

"I-you-I... we... that..." Flowey took a deep breath. "I will concede the point that life isn't fair. Beyond that, we are going to have to agree to disagree. Now go inside. Mom... your mom is waiting. I have an appointment I need to make." The flower retracted into the ground and Frisk found themselves staring at the backyard lawn.

"...good night, Asriel. See you in the morning." Frisk sighed and opened the back door, walking inside and towards the kitchen. Through the doorway they could see the plates had been unwrapped and the note set aside. Toriel was standing at the counter, carefully chopping vegetables.

"Ah, there you are. Did you have a good chat with Flowey?"

"Uh... we had to agree to disagree on certain subjects. Which is still progress, I think. Um. Where do you need help? I can-"

"Frisk, I read your note. You didn't need to buy a replacement plate, let alone five, out of your own pocket."

The kitchen was silent, save for the repetitive dull noise of a kitchen knife hitting a cutting board. Frisk swallowed. "The plate broke because I dropped it. I dropped it because I let myself get distracted. Just like the lamp, and the Christmas tree... and... and no matter how many times I tell myself it's the last time, and I promise it won't happen again, it... it keeps..."

Frisk flinched as they felt something touch their head, but it was soft and warm. One massive furry paw tousled the human child's hair, and they looked up into Toriel's worried face. "You should not be holding onto those memories the way you do, my child. Such experiences are to be learned from, and then left in the past where they happened."

"I try... I really do try... it's just hard, mom. This is... this is how it's always been. Before the Underground... before I met you, and Sans and Papyrus and everybody else."

Toriel blinked. "What do you mean, 'always been' my dear?"

Frisk shook their head and brought their hand up to their eyes to try to stop the tears that had started. "D-do you remember... when we fought? By the door out of the Ruins?"

"Of course I do. Not my finest moment, to be sure. Using fireballs to try to frighten a child I had just met into letting me have my way... shameful. But I've learned from your example, Frisk. Take people as they are and find the best in them, and the situation... my dear, are you alright?"

Frisk had begun trembling, whether from anxiety or the burden of memory or the intensity of emotion it was impossible to tell. "That fight, that was the first time in the underground that I... it
was familiar. I didn't know how to deal with anything else. But I understood the fight. I... I...”

“Frisk, it's alright. I am right here. Take your t-”

The child lunged forward and wrapped both arms around Toriel's legs. “I don't wanna be a bad kid anymore! I wanna be a good kid! I wanna be good!” Frisk wailed. “But everything I touch breaks and I can't fix it! I want to fix it and I can't cuz I'm still a bad kid and I- and I-”

“Shhh. Shhh. It's alright, Frisk.” Toriel lifted up the distraught child and patted them on the back. Tears soaked through her shirt near her shoulder as Frisk sobbed. “You are not a bad kid. You are a good kid. You've done so much to help people. Monsters, humans, everyone. You are a very good kid. Breaking a plate, or a lamp, or anything else doesn't make you a bad kid. And I don't believe, not for one moment, that you were ever bad.”

“...I don't wanna go back... please, don't send me back. I wanna stay with you, please. I'll be good. I promise.”

Toriel’s fur stood on end. Frisk's pleas had a tone of utter despair and hopelessness at odds with everything she had ever heard them say. To hear such misery from a child that had relentlessly insisted on befriending anyone and everyone that crossed their path, and who took the most vitriolic hate speech of anti-monster protesters with good humor and philosophical detachment, was absolutely chilling. “I won't send you anywhere Frisk. I promise. This is your home. This is where you belong.”

“I don't wanna go back... I wanna be good...”

“You're not going back. It's alright Frisk. Mom is right here.”
Flowers By Alphys

Alphys fumbled with her keys for a moment before finally getting them into the lock and opening the door. The house was almost comically small for one person, never mind two, but it had worked out for several months so far thanks to Alphys' space-efficient shape-changing furniture and diligent fireproofing of all walls and structural members. Dropping her book bag on the kitchen island, she pulled out her cell phone.

6:12 PM: Finally home!! :D Are u still at the school 4 some reason?

Walking over to the refrigerator, Alphys sighed and ran a claw around the patch she had welded into place the previous night. No air leaks, but the metal was cold to the touch. Alphys was reaching for one of the cans of spray-foam insulation she had been using previously when her phone beeped its reply.

6:16 PM StrongFish91: OMG ALPHYS! Paps n me r at the arcade n he's kicking my butt at DDR! HOW DOES HE DO IT

Chuckling, Alphys hurriedly typed back a reply.

6:17 PM: they dont call him the great papyrus 4 nothing

6:19 PM StrongFish91: lol I asked what his secret was n he said there's no secret to his legs just hard work n perseverance

6:20 PM StrongFish91: OMG DID HE HAVE A DDR MACHINE IN THE UNDERGROUND IS THAT WHY THE GARAGE WAS ALWAYS LOCKED HOW DID WE MISS THAT IN THE GARBAGE DUMP

6:22 PM: pretty sure thats not it

6:25 PM StrongFish91: 1 more round 2 try n regain my honor then we head home

6:25 PM StrongFish91: do u want me 2 pick up dinner on the way?

6:26 PM: that would b great I still need to ad more nsulate foam 2 fridge b4 we can use it

6:28 PM StrongFish91: yeah sorry about that. ^-^;

6:29 PM: sok I still luv u crazy spear lady

6:29 PM StrongFish91: Lol

6:29 PM StrongFish91: luv u 2 u nerd!

Alphys sighed happily and picked up the spray can, then opened the refrigerator door. Inside, there was an ugly lump of hardened foam in the door that Alphys touched the nozzle to. Slowly and carefully she dragged the can around the existing patch, leaving a concentric circle of insulation expanding behind it – until the can began to sputter.

“Oh, come on! I can't be out this soon! I just started using this one!” Groaning, Alphys tossed the empty can aside. “Two for one bargain my scaly butt.”
Outside in the yard, Alphys made her way from the back door to the garage; the other half of what made the small house living situation work so well with Undyne. Underneath banks of fluorescent lights, the space was filled with Undyne's weight training equipment, piano, and sword collection on one side. On the other was Alphys' worktable and bookcases full to bursting with books both objectively scientific and subjectively entertaining. And on the top of one bookcase...

“I swear I left that on the work table... whatever.” Pushing over a wheeled stepladder, Alphys climbed up and grabbed the other spray can. Behind her, the door abruptly shut.

“Huzzawha?!” The lizard spun around in surprise, lost her balance, and tumbled onto the cracked stone floor. The stepladder rolled slowly away, much like a person nonchalantly attempting to leave the presence of a friend who was embarrassing themselves in public.

“Golly, that must have hurt.”

Alphys blinked her eyes open, looking for the unexpected voice, and they focused on... a yellow flower with a smiling face, growing out of the cracks in the floor.

“Howdy Doc! We need to talk.”

Alphys shrieked and tried to back away from the flower, but only succeeded in slamming her head into one of the bookcases. Volumes 2 through 6 of *Mew Mew Multiverse Adventure: A Kiss Across Time*, along with a copy of *Caveman Chemistry*, tumbled down onto her head.

“Ow ow ow ow...”

“Are you done freaking out yet? Got it all out of your system?”

“Stay away from me, Flowey! I d-don't want to hurt you but I will if you make me-”

“HAHAHAHAHA OH WOW” the flower began laughing hysterically. “You almost sounded sincere there for a second! Come on, I know you Doc. You might manage to hit me by accident in your panicked flailing, but you couldn't even hurt my feelings if I had any. So let's get down to business, alright?”

The lizard scientist stared at the flower, beads of sweat running down her face. “Wha... w-what do you want?”

Flowey's expression became serious. “First things first. I know you remember the confrontation at the castle. Nobody else ever remembered more than bits and pieces, if they remembered anything at all. Except for you. Every time you see me. Every time my name gets mentioned. You have the *worst* poker face, Alphys. You know what I am, and you know what I can do because you remember me doing it.”

“Y-yes... you stole the human souls while everyone was distracted, and then you tried to k-kill Frisk and take their soul. And when that didn't work...” Alphys suddenly looked confused. “You did something. I don't remember what it was, but there was a bright light and then you were gone and the Barrier was destroyed and Frisk was passed out on the ground... you did the soul absorbing thing, right? That's the only thing that makes sense. You absorbed Frisk's soul even though it was still in their body.”

Flowey rolled his eyes. “And here I was, thinking you were one of the smart ones. For the record, and because I need you to know *everything*, I did connect with Frisk's soul without them dying first. But they fought me tooth and nail even then. But that's not important. What *is* important is that you knew I could do that because that's exactly what you made me for in the first place. When
you took that golden flower from the garden and supercharged it with Determination energy.”

Alphys nodded, unable to take her wide, terrified eyes off of the tiny flower. “Y-yeah. The very first golden flower that grew in the garden.”

Flowey nodded. “The one that must have grown from a seed on Asriel's clothing.”

“Yeah. I always figured that was how they showed up.”

“The one that would have been covered in his dust after he died.”

“Y-yeah.”

Flowey stared at the scientist impatiently. “Well??”

“Well what?”

“I practically spelled it out for you!”

Alphys shook her head. “Spelled what out? I don't understand!”

“UGH! When monsters die, their dust is sprinkled onto an object and their spirit lives on in that object, right? Asriel's dust was on the seed and the seed grew into the flower and you took the flower and turned it into me OH MY GOD I can't believe you're so dense! I have Asriel Dreemurr's memories, understand?!”

Alphys blinked. “What??”

“DID I STUTTER?!”

The scientist cringed and held her arms up in front of her in a defensive posture as vines snaked through the cracks in the floor. “OH GOD PLEASE DON'T HURT ME!”

“I'm not GOING to hurt you, idiot! I need your help! I still have those memories, and you're going to help me get rid of them!

“B-b-but I don't know how that happened! I didn't even know you still existed until Papyrus started talking about flowers!”

One vine coiled around a set of free weights Undyne had left on the floor and threw them through the window of the garage, leaving glass shards scattered on the floor. “That's because you gave up and threw me away! Do you have any idea how terrifying that was?! Waking up alone and thinking I'm this kid because the last thing I remember is being killed by a bunch of jerkass humans on the surface, not being able to move or feel or do anything but scream for help?! And nobody heard me. Nobody came to help.”

Flowey's face leaned forward until it was right in front of Alphys' face, and held an expression that was somewhere between furious and enraged. “The way I see it, Doc... you owe me. You owe me for all of that. So you're going to help me. You're going to get this dead kid out of my head once and for all. No more phantom memories. Or else... well...”

One vine reached up into the bookcase and pulled out a book at random, then dropped it in Alphys' lap.

“Just use your imagination.”
The vines retracted into the cracks in the floor, and Flowey followed them underground. Alphys picked up the book Flowey had pulled out, her hands shaking.

“...*Principles of Electronic Instrumentation*? What the heck? What k-k-kind of implied threat is *that* supposed to b-be?”

Shaking her head, Alphys got to her feet and began to pick up her books and re-shelve them.
“Gooooood morning Ebott's Wake! It's a beautiful Saturday morning and you're listening to the Morning Rush! I'm Brett “The Brett” Brinkman and sitting next to me is DJ Pantz, and we are here for all your weekend musical and current events needs!”

“You asked for it, and apparently you deserve it!”

“Hope your morning is going as smooth as a really smooth surface today in lovely Ebott's Wake. Where our motto is, Don't Trust The Flower. Hey, they finally got it approved!”

“Finally.”

“A quick reminder that today is the day for Shyren's concert at the Memorial Auditorium. The feature presentation is of course the star herself, but there will be group accompaniment. Napstablook will be laying down all the backing tracks, and there will be a special duet with... Lemon Bread.”

“Oh boy, here we go.”

“You would think that being able to speak with eight different voices in perfect unison would be an advantage in this instance. And, to be fair, I don't know. Maybe it will work.”

“And maybe half the patrons will pass out from the smell of sweet lemons. Did the Auditorium ever get the AC fixed?”

“I would think so... but I don't know for certain. Hold on, I'm going to text the arts council.”

“While Brett does some fact finding, here's an update on current and upcoming events in Ebott's Wake for the foreseeable future. The Swap Meet is still on for tomorrow. Good to know for anyone who likes to swap things. It's not my jam, but there's nothing wrong with it. Monday is the beginning of the Librarby Book Sale which will run all week long until this time next weekend. And in light of the impromptu protest yesterday morning, it looks like the Librarby is now another Anti Monster League No Go Zone. Not officially, but the Vice President of the Librarby board will be there, so I imagine Dwayne and his friends will want to be anywhere else.”

“All that and there's books for sale, too! What a time to be alive.”

“I know, right? The prices will be fifty cents for paperbacks, a dollar for hardcovers, ten cents for westerns because they have so many this year, and magazines are free. Tuesday is the Garden Center's seminar on magic botany featuring the Echo Flower and, if we're really lucky, Flowey won't show up with a sword and some face paint leading an army of zucchini screaming about how they'll never take his freedom or something like that.”

“Shhh! Don't give him ideas!”

“Right, because flowers listen to the radio.”

“We don't take chances with this flower!”

“...okay, yeah, that was a bad call on my part. Alright... Wednesday is the charity pancake dinner at the Knights Of The Road Who Say Ni Mission. Eat pancakes, fight cancer. Sounds simple enough. Thursday is the bulletin board replacement at the Dank Memehaus. I know I'm getting a front row
“Sadly I will be unable to join in the festivities. I have to head to Idaho Thursday and I probably won't be back until early Saturday morning. Something about a contested will and a haunted house all the heirs have to stay in overnight or something like that. I actually thought it was a chain letter at first.”

“I'll take pictures for you then. Do you want me to try to get you a T-Shirt?”

“I pre-ordered mine, so no problems there.”

“Good thinking. And this has just been confirmed, the historic state of the kingdom resolution is going to be held next Friday at the Memorial Auditorium.”

“State of the kingdom? I thought King Dreemurr dissolved that a while back. Like, way back.”

“It was a legal thing. With the kingdom of monsters not a separate country, then monsters automatically get US citizenship by being born on US soil. Or under it in our case. Something like that. Hey Jeff, let me know if the phones start blowing up, alright? I get a feeling our buddy Dwayne is about to call in to tell us all of the reasons we couldn't legally do that and we're all illegal aliens here to mutilate humans and probe cattle or whatever aliens do.”

“In most media it's the other way around. Or they're after our natural resources. But that's when they're not just a thinly veiled allegory for communism or something else that scares people. Wait, if the kingdom doesn't exist anymore then what's this thing next Friday?”

“I'm not one hundred percent clear on it but I think it's like, reforming the kingdom as something like a genealogical society or a fraternal organization, which doesn't conflict with citizenship.”

“Like the Knights Of The Road Who Say Ni.”

“Yeah, but with no fezzes.”

“Aw. You'd look pretty good in a fez.”

“No I wouldn't. I've tried. I broke the fez.”

“...we need to come back to that later.”

“No we don't. These aren't the hats you're looking for.”

“You're not a Jedi Burgie.”

“I can put down my religious affiliation as Jedi if I want to.”

“...is there anything else happening in the schedule next week?”

“Aside from the final day of the book sale, nothing. Saturday is wide open for people to do whatever they want. Go ride a bicycle! Fly a kite! Tie a kite to your bicycle and ride while you glide!”

“Uh... don't actually do that last one folks. Wind powered vehicles have been illegal to operate in the Ebott's Wake township since 1922. And that brings us up to the break. Still waiting to hear back about the air conditioning in the auditorium. In the meantime, what do you have for our listeners, Burgie?”
“A musical buffet, a feast for all the senses but mostly hearing and not really the others. We'll be starting you all off with a cover song actually. Dan Avidan's vocal cover of *The Last Unicorn* with instrumental arrangement by Brian Wecht. Stay tuned, more Morning Rush is on the way!”
The Music Makers, and Dreemurrs of Dreams

Alphys woke up to the sound of repetitive knocking, and realized it had been going on for some time. Raising her head up, she looked around. Undyne was still tangled in the sheets, making sounds like a damaged sawmill trying to cut through a petrified wooden log.

The knocking started again, shaking Alphys out of her reverie and causing her to blush. Scrambling off the side of the bed, she grabbed a lab coat hanging off the edge of the chest of drawers and wriggled into it. Sufficiently clothed against all but the most prying of eyes, she made her way out of the bedroom and into the main room where the front door was located. Carefully, she peered into a small viewfinder set up next to the door, then grabbed the door and swung it open.

“Frisk, what are you doing here this early?”

“Alphys, I need your help.”

Alphys stared at the human child and swallowed audibly. “Uh, generally speaking, when people tell me that it never ends well for me. But that's probably just, you know. K-karma. What do you need help with?”

“You're doing research at the lab on human souls, right? I think something is wrong with me and that might be the only way to find out what it is and how to fix it.”

Alphys stared at Frisk for a long time, so much so that the child waved in front of the lizard's eyes. “Alphys? Are you alright?”

Alphys shook her head as if trying to banish the image of a seven foot Boss Monster chasing her through the streets as the world burst into flames. “I, I heard you. I'm just... I mean, well... for starters, we don't even have baseline data on souls yet, Frisk! Even if I was able to get an accurate scan from you, I wouldn't have anything to compare it to. Oh, never mind the fact that if your mom even suspected me of having d-done what you are asking me to do, she'd chop off my t-tail and b-bake it into a pie and force me to eat it! And that's just for starters!”

“She won't find out! This isn't like in Hotland at all. This is me trying to convince you to do something. Not you trying to convince me to not do something. It's completely different. Besides that wasn't that bad anyway. I was never in danger with you up until Mettaton went off script, right? So mom had no reason to come down on your case like that-”


The child put their hands over their eyes. “Hey Undyne. I had a science question for Alphys so I thought I'd stop by and ask.”

“Right... why are you covering your eyes like that?”

“Because I'm trying to train myself to use noise as a form of echolocation, in case I have to navigate or fight in the dark.”

“That's a good idea! If you want the full effect though, you need to get two eye patches and wear them both so your hands are free to hit and block and grapple! I have a bunch of spares, only they're sized for my head and... uh... Alphys, are you alright?”
Alphys’s face had slowly turned beet red as she looked back at her girlfriend, and from the lizard’s mouth came only infrequent, incoherent noises.

“I think she's stuck in a loop between wanting to tell you to put a shirt on and wanting you to stay exactly as you are.”

“Oh.” Undyne looked down at her mostly unclothed body. “Yeah, that makes sense. Wait a minute, that's the real reason you've got your eyes covered right now, isn't it!”

“I can't pull the wool over your eye for long, Undyne.”

The fish woman laughed and retreated back into the bedroom. Alphys made a disappointed whining noise in the back of her throat, then shook her head.

“Sorry, I just got distracted. Really, really distracted. Uhm. What were we talking about again?”

“Soul Research,” Frisk reminded her, dropping their hands. “Something is broken and you might be able to find out what it is. I won't let mom find out, and if she does, I won't let her blame you for anything.”

Alphys rubbed her claws together nervously. “Right... uh, listen. Between all the official projects at the lab right now, plus some... side projects I kind of got roped into doing, I'm kind of swamped. But... okay, here's an idea. Dr. Gaster is starting work at the lab next week and his first job will be Soul Research and fielding questions from the guys at KEBT. We're, uh, hoping that the public attention will bring in volunteers for analysis. If you happened to end up in the test sampling, then we'd have your data and a bunch of other humans to compare it to. And because I wasn't involved, if Toriel finds out she might only b-break all my fingers instead of killing me, so it's... aheh... win / win, I guess??”

Frisk leaned forward and hugged the nervous lizard. “Thank you so much Alphys. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

“Heh... heh, you know, you could have just texted me about this instead of coming all the way to our house.”

“Well, I would have but my phone is still charging.”

“Oh. Right. Well, the dimensional interface is a bit of an energy hog. I keep meaning to bring that up at the labs but-”

“I'm kidding, Alphys.” Frisk let go and reached into their pants pocket, pulling out the yellow cell phone by its keychain attachment. “No looming storm clouds are going to get between me and a chance to hang out with my friends.”


“Hey, what are you two nerds talking about now?” Undyne reappeared, sporting a tank top and shorts combination.

“The weather, mostly. It's probably going to come to a head by ten.”

“Yeah, I know right? Thunder! Lightning! Howling winds! The perfect backdrop for an epic battle for the fate of the world! I am so stoked! The only way it could be better is if Dwayne Riley finally accepted my challenge to wrestle!”
Frisk grinned. “An inbred bigot getting owned in a mud wrestling match with an amazonian fish lady. If we could put that online we'd all be millionaires inside half an hour.” Their grin vanished. “That is, if he lasted that long.”

“Undyne, I explained this before. To defeat an enemy like Riled Up Riley, you have to wait until he builds up his power base, has lots of allies, and he's at the absolute strongest he'll ever get! Then, then,” Alphys punched one fist into the other. “THEN you crush him, and the whole world will see how weak he really is!”

“But that's taking forever. I'm so booooooored with him calling into the radio. Burgerpants gets to duel with him on a daily basis!”

“Actually, you may not have to wait much longer. Mom told me this morning that she and dad and the Grand Poobah all agreed on Friday next week as the State of the Kingdom address, to finally hammer out the legal details. I think the plan is to set everything up as a fraternity?” Frisk shrugged. “So we'll need to pick out three Greek letters, and a mascot, and we'll have to prank other fraternities. I'm not sure on the details beyond that.”

Undyne blinked her one working eye in confusion. “Wha... a fraternity? Like those guys with the fezzes that sell pancakes four times a year?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“Who do they prank? Or, does this mean we'll be pranking them?”

“Both good questions. I'll let you know as soon as I've gotten my ambassador stuff straightened out. In any case, if the Anti Monster League is going to make a move, that would be the time to do it. So, mom wanted me to ask you how you felt about reforming the Royal Guard into the Royal Honor Guard. For the look of things and in case anybody tries anything more dangerous than slurs and picket-”

“HELL YEAH! ALPHYS WE'RE GETTING THE BAND BACK TOGETHER AGAIN!”

“I was never in the band in the firs-ACK!” The lizard squawked as Undyne picked her up bodily and spun her around in place.

“Seriously, this is great news Frisk! I'll call up 01 and 02 right away! Oh, and the dogs! And I suppose Sans too.” Undyne's smiled vanished. “Actually never mind on Sans. We'd be in the middle of tense negotiations and he'd start snoring. That wouldn't be good for appearances.”

“Well, if it's appearances you're worried about, why not let Papyrus in, finally? He's always wanted to be in the guard.”

Undyne stared at Frisk. “You're seriously suggesting that I put a big goofy cinnamon roll of a guy in a position where he can end up in harms way.”

Frisk held up a hand. “Yes, I do remember when we talked about that. But it's an Honor Guard first and foremost and it'd make everyone look good. Besides, we all know that if anything did go wrong and anybody did try to start trouble, you'd have jammed spears up their butts before anyone else realized there was something wrong.”

Alphys, still held in Undyne's embrace, nodded. “Frisk is right. The reason the dogs were in the guard in the first place is their ability to track humans by smell if and when they came out of the Ruins. You were always the powerhouse. And you still are,” the lizard added, blushing a bit.
Undyne's face also began to redden. “OH MY GOD NOT IN FRONT OF THE KID. YOU'RE GOING BACK IN THE TRASH CAN AGAIN!”

The two monsters collapsed into a fit of laughter, Undyne almost dropping Alphys. After a few moments, Undyne got herself under control and give Frisk a thumbs up.

“Tell your parents that I'm down for reforming the guard. I'll call up the big dork later and give him the good news.”

“Awesome! Thanks so much Undyne!” Frisk clapped their hands together. “It took a while but I finally got Papyrus his happy ending! Together we'll make everyone's dreams come true!”

“Yeah, everything except the hot pants one.” Undyne rolled her eye, but her mouth was turned up in a toothy grin. Suddenly, the grin vanished and the eye focused on Frisk again.

“Hey. I didn't notice until just now, but your eyes are all red. Like, super red. When did that happen?”

Alphys hopped out of Undyne's arms and peered at Frisk's face through squinted eyes. “You're right Undyne. Frisk, your eyes are really bloodshot. What happened?”

“Oh... uh...” Frisk scratched the back of their head awkwardly. “I... well, when I was coming over here I ran into... Temmie. And, well, I've kind of been putting off my allergy shots. So that's a thing that totally happened earlier.”

Undyne opened her mouth but Frisk spoke up again before she could say anything. “And before you ask, Undyne, it's not the same. I can block your spears when we fight. I can't block the needle when I get a shot because that's the whole point.”

“Oh. Well, that totally makes sense. Wow, human bodies suuuuuuck. At first I thought you guys were all RARGH SUPREME WARRIOR RACE HARDCORE ALL THE THINGS but it stops being cool when your own body tries to murder you.”

“Not murder in my case. Just blackmail.”

“That's NOT an improvement!”
“SUPERB! WE APPEAR TO HAVE BEATEN THE LUNCH CROWD BY A MARGIN OF SEVERAL MINUTES!”

“You seem very adamant about arriving at a certain time, Papyrus.”

“PUNCTUALITY IS THE POLITENESS OF PRINCES!”

“You do know the Aster family line hasn't been in the ranks of monster nobility since well before the War, right?”

“hey, he's a skeleton with standards. can't fault him for that.”

The three skeletons sat at a table as a fire elemental waitress began placing baskets of chips and small bowls of salsa in front of them.

“Hi Sans, Papyrus. Who's your friend?”

“Roastie, meet our dad, Wing Ding Aster.”

Roastie blinked. “Uh, not to be rude or anything, but didn't you, like, die a while ago?”

Dr. Aster rolled his eye lights around in his sockets. “Yes, but it was very boring, so I came back to life.” Seeing the nonplussed expression on the waitress's face, Dr. Aster sighed. “Sorry, I've been getting that from so many people it's hard to not be sarcastic.”

“Oh. Well, I didn't mean to pry.”

“No no, it was a legitimate question. I shouldn't have snapped like that.”

“hey Roastie, how's your dad doing? i haven't been by the Dank Memehaus in a while. has he forgotten about my tab yet?”

“Hah! Not a chance, Sans. Dad's doing alright. It's been an adjustment not being his own boss anymore but the state is taking forever to approve his liquor license so he can open a new bar. Also, a bunch of drunks thought it would be funny to throw their drinks in the face of the monster bartender.”

Sans' eye lights vanished for a second. “What.”

“Yeah. Jerks. He's fine though. They decided to go for the good stuff. Holloway's Homebrew, neat.”

“isn't that, like, ninety percent ethanol?”

“Something like that.”

“Did anyone else get hurt?”

Roastie shrugged. “I think one guy lost an eyebrow. Or was it eyeball? Anyway, that's enough yammering from me. Do you guys want your regulars or do you need menus?”

“IT IS A MOST SPECIAL CELEBRATION TODAY, AND THAT CALLS FOR VARIETY!”
Roastie smiled. “Okay! Three menus, coming right up!”

As the green-hued waitress headed further back into the restaurant, Dr. Aster looked around the room with a more analytical frame of mind. People were filtering in by twos and threes, some human and some monster. Waiting staff were bringing out chips and salsa and menus and people were ordering food and drinks and... it was all too normal.

“hey, earth to dad.”

“What?”

“i said, what are you staring at?”

“Oh.” Dr. Aster put his elbows on the table and clasped his hands together in front of his face. “Even though this is what we were working towards for all those years, humans and monsters both on the surface, it's jarring to see it happen. Maybe because I'm coming in at the end and lack the context that you two do, since you watched it happen from the first day.”

“MADE IT HAPPEN, ACTUALLY! WHILE THE KING AND QUEEN AND FRISK WERE HAMMERING OUT THE LEGAL DETAILS, AND THE BRILLIANT DOCTOR ALPHYS WAS ORGANIZING THE LOGISTICS OF MOVING EVERYONE OUT OF THE UNDERGROUND, I WAS DOING MY PART TO ENCOURAGE POSITIVE MONSTER/HUMAN RELATIONS!”

“And how did you do tha-”

“Oh my god is that Papyrus?!”

Dr. Aster looked up in surprise as a trio of human girls entered the restaurant and squealed in delight. As one they rushed towards the table seating the skeletons.

“This is so cool I get to meet the Great Papyrus!”

“How can I get an autograph?!?”

“ABSOLUTELY! TO WHOM SHALL I MAKE IT OUT?”

Dr. Aster stared at his youngest son making small talk and jokes with the human girls, then turned towards Sans. “Is this... normal?”

Sans winked. “Actually today is kind of a slow day. Papyrus might have been the lynchpin in the whole humans-accepting-monsters thing. he has a massive social media presence, guessing that insight into how similar the lives of monsters and humans really were helped bridge most of the gaps.”

“Is that all it took? I can't believe that a few instant messages and profile updates could turn people around so much.”

Sans shook his head. “that's because you're looking at it based on the perspective of the historical records from after the war. did you ever read the paper Chara wrote on what humans thought about monsters? if they believed in monsters at all, that is? almost none of it was true, except for the stuff about ghost monsters which was pretty much spot on. you might say it was spookily accurate.”
Dr. Aster turned to look at Papyrus, who was so enraptured in the conversation with the human girls that he didn't seem to notice the pun. Sans chuckled.

“Of course, as amazing as Papyrus has been, he couldn't do it alone. It's been a group effort on both sides to get this far. Having said that, it turns out a lot of humans really like hot animals. And I don't mean the stuff I sell in the park during the week.” Sans snickered. “So that's been just as much of a help as anything Papy has done.”

Dr. Aster shook his head. “Okay, I tried to keep an open mind to this brave new world, but implying that humans are romantically attracted to monsters... no. I'm calling your bluff on this.”

“IT'S NO BLUFF! EVEN DISCOUNTING THE SHEER STAR POWER OF METTATON, AN OVERWHELMING AMOUNT OF TOURIST TRAFFIC IS DIRECTED TOWARDS EBOTT'S WAKE SIMPLY BECAUSE OF THE MONSTER POPULATION! LIKE THOSE THREE LOVELY LADIES WHO STOPPED BY OUR TABLE TO CHAT!” Papyrus pointed to a table near the far wall where the girls were taking their seats, all of whom immediately waved back.

Dr. Aster snorted. “Implying anyone over there is anything more than a fan of yours.”

“i dunno dad, the look on the face of that one with the brown hair done up in a ponytail... that means something.”

Abruptly sight lines were interrupted as Roastie came back with a trio of menus. “Hey guys, sorry it took so long. We've got somebody new in back and their first day just happens to be the busiest one of the week.”

“Sounds like a real trial by fire.”

“SANS!”

Roastie stuck out a flaming tongue at the short skeleton. “So, what do you guys want to drink? I know what you two guys like, but Mister Aster is a myster-y.”

“OH NO, IT'S SPREADING!”

Dr. Aster coughed awkwardly as Sans began to guffaw loudly. “Uh... I don't suppose you have tea available?”

“Absolutely! You want iced tea, sweet tea, or hot tea?”

“I don't think I've ever tried iced tea before. Suppose I'll experiment with that.”

“Coming right up! And your regular drinks, you two?”

“yup.”

“indeed!”

Roastie returned to the kitchen and the skeletons opened their menus. Dr. Aster scanned the items on each side and compared the prices.

“I'm still thinking in terms of the Gold standard, you two. What's the exchange rate these days for the...dollar, I'm guessing?”

“Really in our favor, which isn't as good a situation as you might think. But don't worry about that. This meal is my treat.”
“What do you mean the situation isn't as good? What happened?”

“Well, it turns out Dwayne Riley belongs to a school of thought that thinks money is an absolute and the gold standard would fix all economic problems. Then it turns out monsters have a lot more gold than he and his buddies ever did. Sometimes I wonder if that's what motivated him to start his little fan club in the first place. But that's a thing I can explain in more detail later. Right now we should figure out what to order.”

“I PERSONALLY RECOMMEND THE ENCHILADA DINNER! IT COMES WITH A CHOICE OF REFRIED BEANS, RICE, OR FIDEO! WHICH IS AN INGENIOUS FORM OF SPAGHETTI SOUP!”

Roastie returned with a trio of containers on a tray, and began setting them down on the table one by one. “Alright! Here's your ketchup, Sans...”

“Thanks Roastie.”

“Here's milk for the big guy...”

“THANK YOU VERY MUCH!”

“And finally, some iced tea.”

“Uh, thanks,” Dr. Aster said awkwardly, staring at the thick gloves on the waitress's hands as she passed out the drinks.

“Oh, and before I forget, one of those girls asked me to give you this.” Roastie pulled a napkin out of her apron and handed it over to Dr. Aster, who unfolded it.

“This is a... is this a phone number??”

Sans nudged the scientist with one elbow. “What'd I tell ya? It's that girl with the ponytail, bet you ten bucks.”

“WOWIE! YOU HAVEN'T EVEN BEEN BACK FOR A WHOLE WEEK AND ALREADY YOU'RE GETTING PEOPLE'S PHONE NUMBERS!”

“Heh. All these years and you still got it, dadster.”

“This is serious, you two!” Dr. Aster barked, much louder than he intended. Across the restaurant, the girl with the ponytail cupped her hands around her mouth.

“And you're seriously hot!”

The table degenerated into laughter and another girl pointed at the first one. “Daphne wants you to take her to the BONE ZONE!”

The three girls laughed even harder, while Sans suddenly fell out of his chair.

“What the- Sans, are you alright?”

In response, Dr. Aster heard his son laughing hysterically somewhere in the vicinity of the floor. Papyrus narrowed his eye sockets and turned to Roastie.

“THOSE HUMAN GIRLS... DID THEY HAPPEN TO ORDER TEQUILA SHOTS?”
“Yeah, thought that was weird. It's not even noon yet. How'd you know?”

“AN EDUCATED GUESS.”
“Welcome back to the Morning Rush, this is Brett Brinkman. This just in, the storm system Hailey Skye predicted earlier this week has finally arrived and it looks like it's going to make up for lost time. The clouds are expected to disperse by eight this evening; that said, we are looking at thirty miles per hour wind gusts, heavy lightning activity and torrential rain with a possible risk of flash flood. Burgie, anything you want to add?”

“Yeah, thanks Brett. Everyone should stay indoors and minimize any time spent outside, not just fire elementals. All it takes is a few inches of water to completely immobilize a car, or knock a pedestrian off their feet if there’s a current. Also, to any fire based monsters who do have to get out in the rain for whatever reason; do not, I repeat, DO NOT, crank up the thermostat to boil off all the water into steam. Sure, it might help you stay comfortable, but you could seriously injure anybody physically close to you. Having said that... to all human listeners. If you see a fire elemental fall into a large body of water, do not, I repeat, DO NOT rush over and try to pull them out again, because that is almost certainly what is going to happen out of reflex. The steam temperature and pressure that may result will probably kill you, it will certainly hurt you. And we don't want to lose any listeners out there.”

“Good to know man. I was wondering about that myself. What about the lightning and the wind? Does that pose any serious danger to specific categories of monsters?”

“Yes it does. If you can fly, stop. Get on the ground and stay there until the storm blows over. If you have any sort of electrical magic, stay indoors because if you go outside right now? Between the water and the thunderheads you're basically asking for a lightning bolt, and while it may or may not hurt you it's definitely going to really mess up everyone and everything around you. If you are an ice or water elemental, or you have an affinity for either, you also need to stay out of the storm. The last thing the storm sewers need are huge chunks of frozen water blocking the drains.”

“Wait, why would this be a problem for water-based monsters?”

“Have you looked at the streets of this town? Nobody wants that crap in their gills, much less absorbed through osmosis. About the only monsters that can safely go outside right now are monsters like me, and that's not happening. I don't want to have to deal with wet fur today, and more importantly neither do you. So in summary, everybody needs to stay indoors, or failing that, somewhere out of the wind on high ground.”

“On the subject of grounding, the traffic report has been suspended for today on account of not only the storm but Gary Welkin still being treated for multiple bruises, lacerations, and... if I'm reading this correctly... concussion-zilla.”

“Is that a thing? I don't know that much about human biology, so...”

“I really hope not. For fans of Gary, fear not, he is expected to make a complete recovery and gave me a statement to read on the air. Ahem. Tm Henry the Eighth, I am I am. I was married to the girl next door, who was married seven times before.' Statement ends. And while medical ethics and privacy practices prevent us from getting an accurate summation or even broad generalization of the condition of the various Anti-Monster League members who engaged Gary in fisticuffs to defend their leader, we do know that none of them have been released from the Rita Belle Thurman Memorial Hospital as of yet.”

“Wait. That's the same hospital that Gary's in.”
“Yes. That's because Ebott's Wake only has the one.”

“Isn't that... dangerous?”

“Probably, but if the statement he gave me is any indication, Gary is too high on painkillers to leave his room and finish the job.”

“I dunno. Remember the time the traffic copter was grounded because he had some sort of weird human disease and the medicine made him loopy, and he taped all those fireworks to a hang glider instead?”

“Unfortunately I still do. And it was the flu. Not that weird, or uncommon. But it is very unpleasant.”

“Hey, do you think that's why Dwayne never called in earlier today? He was too worried about what would happen once Gary got out of the hospital.”

“I wouldn't be surprised, but we shouldn't get our hopes up. He probably just ran out of cell phone charge or something. On a lighter note, Shyren's concert was officially canceled due to the inclement weather, but don't worry, it's already been rescheduled for next Saturday. Same time of day, same place, same cavalcade of stars. Hey, what about ghost monsters? Do they have a problem with storms?”

“Not really. Napstablook can basically do whatever they want, rain or shine.”

“I'm sure that's... something that occurs.”

“Whoa- Jeff, what happened? Are we still on the air?”

“Listeners, not sure if you can hear me now but we just had a power surge at the station. Not sure if that was a lightning strike or a short from the rain or what. What? ...alright, sounds like a plan. I'm signing off to go check on the generator. Burgie, cue up a few songs and then help Jeff and Winston run through the control boards.”

“Got it. We're going to leave you all with at least some Shyren today, so here's When You Say Goodbye It's Like Magical Bullets Are Slowly Flying Out Of Your Mouth And Hitting Me, the song that really put her on the map. Stay tuned, we'll be back soon with more weather updates if all goes well.”
Frisk swallowed and clutched the stick to their chest with trembling arms. By the dim light of the basement tunnel, only Toriel's outline could be seen.

“You are just like the others... there is only one solution to this.”

Frisk blinked as the tunnel was lit to full brilliance with several fireballs, revealing at last the expression on Toriel's face. Not angry. Not sad. Simply... tired and frustrated. The look of a mother that had finally had enough of their kid making messes and breaking things and mouthing off and generally being a brat.

“Prove yourself. Prove to me that you are strong enough to survive.”

As if by magic – in fact, exactly because of magic – the tunnel turned into a world of fire, not simply a corridor illuminated by it. Frisk didn't dare look away from Toriel, but they could feel the heat of the fire behind them. Which seemed... wrong, for some reason.

“...okay.”

Holding up her massive paws, Toriel produced what seemed to be a tornado of fire, and with a gesture, sent it down the tunnel. For a few dangerous seconds Frisk was rooted to the spot, unable to think clearly in the face of oncoming doom, until survival instincts took over; the tornado weaved back and forth as it came closer and Frisk lunged forward into the gap it left behind. Scrambling upright again, Frisk hefted the stick and stared at Toriel, the one who stopped that cruel flower creature... with a single fireball. The one that escorted them through the ruins and glared at other monsters that got too close.

Frisk blinked and looked at the stick, then blinked several more times. Unbidden, the image of taking a swing had formed in their mind, followed by the image of a furious seven foot monster turning the entire tunnel into a raging inferno. The stick fell to the floor of the cavern half out of shock from the vividness of the vision, and half out of some other self preservation instinct. Fighting Toriel would mean instant death... or possibly not-so-instant death, which would probably be much, much worse.

What had she said? Prove to me that you are strong enough to survive? But there was no way Frisk could beat Toriel even if their hands stopped shaking. Not with just a stick. There had to be something else to it. It had to be a puzzle, just one that didn't use floor tiles or switches.

Another wave of fire passed, this time leaving snaking trails of smoke and fire in the air; Frisk had to duck underneath one wave of fire, only to see another wave crash into them. It hurt, but it wasn't nearly as bad as Frisk had expected simply from the sensation of heat, and more importantly the fire had not spread to their clothing.

Realization dawned; the magic fireballs weren't as dangerous as actual fire would be because they were a test! It wasn't physical strength that Frisk had to prove, it was strength of character – bravery. That was the puzzle, and in light of all the things Toriel had tested them on earlier in the ruins, it only made sense.

As Toriel raised a paw for another attack, Frisk stood upright and stared. All that they had to do was nothing at all; no dodging, no flinching, no crying out in pain. Finally, some familiar ground in the crazy mixed up world they'd fallen into. The flames slammed into Frisk's chest one after
another, only to dissipa-

And the world fell out from underneath them.

Frisk was suddenly staring at the floor of the tunnel, and in between their scuffed up hands, there was a pool of... blood? It was red, so that definitely made sense. Frisk tried to get back up, but their legs seemed to be asleep. With a certain amount of difficulty, Frisk craned their neck to look back up towards Toriel, expecting to see the next wave of fireballs crash into them, but only the fireballs along the wall remained. Toriel... she had covered her mouth with both hands and her eyes were wide with shock and surprise. She hadn't expected Frisk to do that.

“It wasn't... a puzzle...?” Frisk managed to say, but before there was any chance at a reply, their left arm fell asleep. That was what it seemed to feel like anyway – all feeling seemed to just fade away into a general numbness as Frisk's body collapsed to the floor completely. Toriel was rushing forward, holding out a paw...

“nononoNONO”

Massive fuzzy arms picked up Frisk, who was also feeling extremely fuzzy. A distant memory resurfaced of an attempt to stay up late one Christmas Eve, in an attempt to see Santa Claus in action, but long before the midnight hour Frisk's eyes were closing of their own accord. This wasn't much different, even the overwhelming fatigue and exhaustion was the same.

“Please stay with me, my child. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. Please...”

Frisk's vision darkened. Sounds became muffled and muted. There was pain, but it was mercifully late to the party and couldn't make too much of a headway past everything else. And somewhere, deep inside Frisk's mind as it slid into darkness, there was a moment of realization.

“Wake up... please, wake up... Frisk, wake up! Frisk!”

Frisk's eyes shot open, but instead of a flame-lit tunnel, there was a darkened living room, and instead of Toriel's concerned face, there was the face of Alphys... which was still carrying an expression of worry on it, so that at least wasn't too jarring.

“Oh, thank god. You fell asleep on the couch and we figured hey it's Saturday and there's nothing really to stay awake for but it sounded like you were having a nightmare just now.”

Frisk shook their head back and forth to try and shake the sleep off, then focused on Alphys again. “Did I say anything?”

The lizard looked embarrassed. “Uh, yeah. Mostly you just kept saying 'no' over and over again, and sometimes you'd say 'stop' much louder.”

“ Weird. I wasn't saying that kind of stuff in the dream. But I guess dreams don't have to make sense.”

“Usually they don't. But sometimes, if you fixate on something enough, it migrates into your dreams. Speaking from experience. Hehe... Nothing like having people dissolve into puddles of goop while screaming for you to help them to make sure you wake up refreshed and ready for the day.”

Frisk scooted over as Alphys sat down on the other side of the sofa. “Lucky for me I hardly ever have that one anymore. Uh. What about you? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. It's
just... based on my experience, if helps to have somebody to talk to about these things.”

The human child and the lizard scientist sat in silence for a little bit, then Frisk took a deep, if shaky, breath. “Sometimes... I have dreams about the Underground. Fighting for my life. But those aren't nightmares, those are really just memories. The... uh...” Frisk took another deep breath. “The nightmares are more like... everything seems fine, but I'm scared to death that something is about to go wrong, and then everything does go wrong. I...”

“You don't have to say anything else. I think I know what you mean.” Alphys looked down at the floor with a contemplative expression. “Don't tell Undyne this, but I keep having nightmares where she and I are at the garbage dump again and I tell her all the things I did and she is not anywhere near as forgiving as the real Undyne in the waking world.”

Frisk looked around, then stopped and started rubbing their neck, which based on the sensations coming from it, had been slept on wrong. “Where is Undyne, actually? She's not out in the storm, is she?”

Alphys snorted in laughter. “Of course she is. After the power went out, we tried to call Toriel to let her know where you were, but cell phone coverage was down too. I was going to try to use my dimensional storage app to daisy chain a signal through other phones, but before I could even get my tools out Undyne ran outside. That would have been, I guess twenty minute or so ago? So she should be back any time. Unless, you know, T-Toriel tries to hurt Undyne for leaving you alone with m-m-me-”

Alphys flinched as Frisk reached over to hug her, and then relaxed. “Hehehe... I'm really sorry Frisk. It must get really old hearing me obsess over how everyone hates me or doesn't trust me or wants to kill me.”

“Not really. I actually understand what you mean. We were talking about nightmares, right? Well, in mine, the ones where everything goes wrong... you're the only one I don't... you're not in them, you see? I've had ones where... well...”

Frisk shook their head. “Okay, if there's anyone I can talk about this with, it's probably you. But this absolutely cannot leave this room, understand? I don't know what would happen if any of this got back to mom or dad or anyone else. And I don't want to find out.”

“Oh, I understand completely... some things, you just can't share with other people right away. Or... uh... ever.”

Frisk sighed. “Before I met you guys, before Mt. Ebott and the Underground... I wasn't a very good kid. Or a good person in general. I had a human mom and a human dad and all I ever did was make them miserable. When I finally realized it, what I was doing... nobody ever came back from Mt. Ebott, they said. So that's how I ended up falling into the Ruins. I figured, well, if I never came back, my parents could finally... you know... be happy for once. I thought that would be the end of it, but falling into the Underground, that was my chance to start over, be a better person. So, uhm, that's what my nightmares are about. Not being able to start over.”

Alphys turned to look at Frisk with a concerned expression. “Is that why you kept saying stop in your sleep? You were trying to tell yourself to change and it wasn't working?”

“No, I'm not really sure what that was about. What I mean is... I want to change, but I'm never given the opportunity. So... when I dream about the ruins, Toriel finds me, but she sees right through me so she just moves on, and I get lost in the ruins. Or I'm in Waterfall and I want to make up with Undyne but she drives me away from her house because she knows that if she lets me
inside, the whole place will go up in flames. Or I'm at the Barrier and Asgore sees me as
everything wrong with humans, all the worst traits that led to the War and got monsters stuck
underground for forever and a day, and Toriel isn't there to stop him so... well, that goes about how
you'd imagine it would.”

Frisk and Alphys sat in silence for a few seconds. “There's also some stuff with Sans and Papyrus
but... that's harder to explain. But not you. I never see you in those nightmares.”

Alphys chuckled. “You know that house burning down thing... that was all Undyne, right? She
never once blamed you for that. She's just a relentlessly passionate person. Why do you think I put
so much time and energy into fireproofing this place before she moved in with me? And I suppose
I need to make some sort of armor plating for all the appliances now too,” she added with a giggle.

Frisk grinned. “I'm surprised you two haven't gotten married yet.”

“Oh, there are plans in the works. But with the AML running around like they have been, and all of
the national politics zooming in on Ebott's Wake because it's an election year, the last thing we
need is to agitate anybody else. And I know Undyne hates to think of it like that, but it's... it is what
it is.”

“Hey, how did you and Undyne first meet? When we got to the garbage dump she was already
there and dressed up all fancy, like she expected to meet you there. And then, well, things got a
little off the rails, but I always wondered about that.”

“Oh, yeah. Undyne and I first met at the garbage dump.” Alphys' smile slowly faded. “I had
finished running some tests on the amalgams, trying to figure out what went wrong and how to
reverse it and all the results were... I... well, you told me about climbing the mountain because you
wanted to disappear. I didn't have that option... but there was the Abyss. That waterfall at the
garbage dump.”

“Why do you call it the Abyss?”

Alphys gestured with both claws, creating a glowing sphere of light with her magic. “The Barrier
completely enclosed us on all sides. We had historical records from right after the war of some
monsters trying to tunnel through the other side of the cavern and running into the Barrier there,
too. And it only ever let things in, not out. But we had water coming in from the underground river,
along with all the human trash in it. There had to be a breach in the Barrier somewhere or the entire
underground would have been flooded less than a month after the Barrier was put in place.”

“So the Abyss might have been a way out?”

Alphys shrugged and gestured some more, causing various other symbols to form near the bottom
of the sphere; a glowing ring of light, an intersection with a smaller sphere, and several jagged
arrows pointing at the intersection. “That was a theory a lot of people had but there was no way to
test it safely. It might be a way out, or it might just be another one way trip to somewhere else,
somewhere worse. Or, it might have been that some part of the Barrier wasn't simply an obstacle,
but a destructive force, so anything that fell down there was gone for good. But if that was true
eventually the surface world's water cycle would have been altered enough that the river would
have dried up. There just wasn't any way to be sure. And now with the Barrier gone, there's no
chance of ever finding out for sure, or any need to risk danger or death to find out.” The sphere of
light faded and Alphys rubbed her claws together nervously. “I was in the middle of trying to psych
myself up to make the jump when Undyne showed up and asked me about it. I... well, deep down I
didn't really want to because I went into what Sans calls super passionate nerd mode. I ramble on
for like three hours and Undyne just stood there listening the whole time. Heh. At the time I
thought she was just curiou-

The front door burst open, with wind blowing in rain and letting in the previously muffled sound of distant thunderclaps. Frisk and Alphys scrambled off of the sofa with a pair of surprised shrieks.

“NGAAAAAH! I LOVE THE SURFACE! THUNDER! LIGHTNING! BATTLING THE ELEMENTS THE WHOLE WAY!” Undyne shrugged out of her heavy coat and shook her head, sending a spray of droplets throughout the room. “HEY! Where is everyone?!’’

Slowly, Alphys and Frisk stood up from behind the sofa. A crackling sphere of ball lightning was cupped in each of Alphys’ shaking claws, and Frisk was holding a throw pillow in both hands as if actually intending to use it as the name implied. Both relaxed – slightly – upon seeing it was Undyne who had barged in.

“Oh, Undyne, thank god. I thought somebody d-decided to break in under the cover of the storm. Or that lightning managed to hit the front door. Speaking of which?”

“Oh, right. Totally forgot.” Undyne turned back, grabbed the door and shut it against the elements. “So, good news nerds! Toriel says not to try to risk traveling in this weather, so tonight's a slumber party! Truth or Dare! Pillow Fights! The whole experience! ...you don't seem that excited.”

“That's just the adrenaline. I'll be alright in a few minutes.” Frisk walked out from behind the sofa and headed for Undyne's coat. “Here. I'll hang this up. Alphys, you get her out of those wet clothes.”

The room was awkwardly silent for a few moments, and then Frisk slapped themselves on the forehead. “I probably could have phrased that better.”

Undyne began guffawing as Alphys, her normally yellow scales flushed completely scarlet, buried her face in her claws and shook with some unstable mixture of mirth and mortification.
"welp. So much for our best laid plans."

The bus stop was a little crowded, by necessity; three skeletons, four humans, a dog, and a tiny volcano monster tried to take refuge underneath the small awnings. The irony that buses wouldn't be running in the weather they were taking refuge from was lost on absolutely nobody.

"I can't get any signal on my phone. The storm must have knocked out the cell network," said one human, fumbling with a smartphone. "Heh. I don't suppose anyone here has an old fashioned emergency weather radio in their pocket?"

There were a few subdued laughs, then a rustling of clothing. An emergency weather radio and flashlight with an integrated hand crank was produced and held out towards the man with the smartphone.

"Uh, wow. Can't say I expected that."

The radio was swiftly cranked up and many disparate heads craned closer to try to make out the sounds from the weather band over the howling of the wind and the thud of rain on the roof of the shelter. Not all of them, though; Sans stared at the human that had produced the weather radio.

"so. you're Kevin, right? you work at Tori's school?"

"Yup."

"you're not a teacher are you? just a hunch."

"Nope."

"doesn't leave a whole lot of other possibilities. Woshua is janitor, and Asgore is groundskeeper... so what do you do?"

"Maintenance."

"...you don't talk much, do ya."

"Nope."

"and you just happen to have a weather radio on you."

"Yup."

"...well, this has been educational." Sans turned back to his dad, staring up at the dark clouds being infrequently illuminated by lightning bolts. "quite a sight, isn't it?"

"I'm torn between being terrified and trying to figure out how to harness it for industrial and research purposes."

"sounds about right."

"You don't seem that bothered by it. I suppose you've had a while to get used to it."

"i read a few books on meteorology so i knew what was going on. besides, getting bothered by
natural phenomena is too much work for not enough reward.”

“OF COURSE, TRUST MY BROTHER TO FIND A WAY TO USE HIS LAZINESS AS AN EXCUSE TO BE NONCHALANT IN THE FACE OF THE UNFAMILIAR.”

Dr. Aster managed to look away from the storm at the rest of the people crowded under the bus stop's meager shelter. With the exception of the human Sans had called Kevin, they were all huddled around the vulkin, who was excitedly playing with the dog. The one that had accepted the radio cranked it again.

“It sounded like they said the storm wouldn't really pass until eight. What time is it now? Almost one, right?”

Another human pulled out her otherwise useless cellphone. “I've got 1:06 PM here. Not sure I want to hang around here for seven hours. No offense.”

“None taken. The storm will probably calm down at some point, but there's no way to be sure that we'll still be able to navigate the streets by then. Lot of flash flood warnings.”

“heh.” Sans turned to Kevin. “don't suppose you got an inflatable life raft on ya?”

Kevin made a show of checking his pockets, and for a moment Dr. Aster actually believed that the human might produce the requested item.

“Nope. Must be in my other jacket.”

“hah! nice.”

“FEAR NOT, HUMANS! IN THE EVENT OF A WATER LANDING, MY SCARF CAN BE USED AS A FLOTATION DEVICE!”

“Why do you even wear a scarf? You don't seem that bothered by the wind or the rain.”

Papyrus turned to the human holding the weather radio. “WHY, SO THAT IT MAY FLAP DRAMATICALLY IN THE WIND WHEN I SPEAK, OF COURSE!”

As if by divine providence, the wind chose that moment to change direction, sending a gust into the alcove of shelter that the bus stop had previously created. Papyrus' scarf was caught in the gust and pulled along for the ride as the wind shifted back to a different direction, leaving a half-soaked scarf wrapped around the upper half of his skull, including his eye sockets.

“I KNOW THIS APPEARS CONTRARY TO MY PREVIOUS STATEMENT, BUT THIS IS THE EXCEPTION THAT PROVES THE RULE.”

Sans started snickering as Papyrus carefully removed his scarf from his face and let it drop again.

“SANS, DOES ANYTHING STRIKE YOU AS ODD ABOUT THIS SITUATION?”

“maybe. what seems off to ya?”

“ALL THIS WATER AND ALL THIS THUNDER AND LIGHTNING, AND WE HAVE YET TO SEE UNDYNE RUNNING WILD THROUGH THE STREETS!”

“she can't run through all of them, the town's not that small.”

“HMMM. PERHAPS SHE STARTED ON THE OTHER SIDE OF TOWN. IF SO, WE SHOULD
SEE HER ANY TIME NOW.”

“unless she and Alphys decided a storm was the perfect reason to stay home and watch anime.”

“How would they watch anime without electrical power?”

“if there's a way, Alphys would find it.”

“Well, that much is true! Hey dad, was she always like that or is this a more recent development?”

“Hmm? Oh. Well. I knew Alphys was fascinated by human culture and cultural artifacts when I approved her joining the team. I didn't realize it wasn't purely professional interest until much later, but if anyone was going to find some insight we could use on the core project, it would be somebody who was passionate enough to notice every detail. So I didn't have a problem with it. Unless she came in late and blamed it on analyzing 'human cultural abstracts' the previous night.”

Dr. Aster held up his hands to provide the symbolic quotation marks gesture. “It's funny. When you graduated, Papyrus, I was hoping to introduce the two of you and see if the two of you couldn't come up with some sort of revolutionary breakthrough in robotics or computer science. It would have been nice having the whole family working in the lab, if only because that way I'd get to see you more often.”

“Well, now that you don't have to burn the midnight oil to try and set an entire civilization free, you can see us every day.”

“indeed! With no more barrier to destroy, your potential free time will increase by at least three hundred fifty percent, possibly more!”

“Hah. I've been a chronic workaholic since I learned how to walk. I wouldn't know what to do with free time if I did have any.”

“That's what the internet is for. When the power isn't out, that is.”

“Yes, we're quite popular there! I'm just a dozen away from a seven digit follower count on my blog! Not counting that troll who continues to harass me online!”

“That's the internet for ya.”
“Hey good morning Ebott's Wake and welcome back to the Morning Rush! Today is Sunday and normally you'd be listening to the dulcet tones of Clutch McGee right now, but Clutch is just one of many residents who cannot safely navigate the water-saturated streets of our fair city after yesterday's torrential rainfall. Five and three quarter inches, most of which was received within a single hour and forty minute time span. So you're stuck with us instead; Brett “The Brett” Brinkman and my unusually fluffy co-host DJ Pantz. How you doing this morning Burgie?”

“This humidity is doing crazy things to my fur, but I don't have to sell Glamburgers so I'm alright with it. Having said that, I haven't slept in thirty six hours so I am starting to hallucinate.”

“Interesting. Humans that are sleep deprived don't experience hallucination typically until around the seventy-two hour mark. I haven't reached that point yet so I'm still alright.”

“I don't know if that's true, but I'll keep on believing it anyway!”

“Good for you Burgie. And good news for everyone else! Electrical power has been restored to the vast majority of the Ebott's Wake municipality and surrounding areas, and we are expected to be completely wired up again sometime within the next two hours. The cell network is back up again, so we can take calls in a bit. On the downside, many major thoroughfares and connecting roads remain impassable from standing water, and there have been multiple cases of people being stranded since last night. We cannot stress this enough: If you see high water levels do not take any chances unless your means of transportation is a canoe, kayak, inflatable life raft, jet ski, or World War Two vintage amphibious landing craft.”

“Unless you're Undyne in which case you can apparently do whatever you damn well please. Somebody sent in a cell phone pic of her running through the city streets laughing like a maniac.”

“Well, one man's inclement weather is another man's musical number.”

“I'M NOT PLAYING A SHRUBBERY AGAIN! I'VE HAD IT! I'M DONE!”

“Jeez Burgie, pull back from the mic when you do that. Uh, let's see here... key roads that are still blocked are Park Lane and East West Road. Fortunately West East Road is still clear. Keep in mind that with Gary still in the hospital we don't have a real time feed of events, and have to reconstruct them from social media and official statements from city administration. Speaking of official statements, here's one from the Librarby Board. Statement is as follows: 'Despite the torrential rainfall levels the building has been unaffected by rain or flood waters and the book sale will proceed as planned on Monday unless the roads are still deemed hazardous by then.' Statement ends. Well, that's something to look forward to.”

“Is the Vice President of the Librarby Board outside with a bunch of hoses trying to pump the water away? Because I can see that happening.”

“I don't have any reports to that effect, but it wouldn't surprise me if we heard about it later. Let's see here... right. Fir Street was blocked off by a fallen tree, but by the time the fire department managed to navigate their way to the blockage a Good Samaritan had already dispensed of the fallen tree using a chainsaw, so that's one less thing to worry about.”

“What species of tree was it? It wasn't a fir tree, right?”

“It doesn't say in the report but if I remember correctly there's mostly oak and sycamore on that
side of town.”

“Good. I'm not in any mood for irony right now.”

“Me neither. What? Please stand by listeners... huh? Really?? Great! Hey Burgie, we have a caller, and you'll never guess who it is!”

“Yes I can. Hi Dwayne, how'd mother nature treat you last night?”

“.what? I'm sorry, I d-don't think I'm on the right phone line-”

“What the- Dr. Alphys??”

“As I was about to say, Burgie, apparently Dr. Alphys called into the station just now with some news straight from All Fine Labs on one of their special projects. Welcome to the Morning Rush Dr. Alphys, you're live on the air!”

“I am? Oh... uhm... I... uh... well, I was c-calling about a project at the labs. Soul Research. I know you g-guys were asking about it a while ago. Uhm. With D-d-d-d-octor Aster working at the lab now, we finally have a... the... we have the flexibility we needed to spare people for interviews and public participation and things like that.”

“That's fantastic news, Doctor. I know I've been curious about that ever since you published your first paper on it, and I doubt I'm the only one. What else can you tell us about this new development?”

“Uhm. Well. We'll be opening that b-b-b... that annex of the facility for research volunteers tomorrow. I just c-c-cleared it with the rest of the staff and administration. Doctor Wing Ding Aster will be managing the entire project, handling interviews, compiling and publishing results. The first test runs will run all this week starting Monday and ending on Friday.”

“That's concurrent with the book sale, isn't it doctor?”

“...oh no. Mr. Van Garrett, if you're listening I t-totally forgot, I d-d-didn't mean to step on your toes-”

“Dr. Alphys, I'm reasonably sure that Mike, being as he is on the librarian board, wouldn't begrudge any scheduling conflict that furthered the free exchange of information. Mostly. Uh, can you describe what would be involved for volunteers who wanted to help with this project?”

“Y-yeah. It's basically a superconducting magnetic resonance imaging system that's been expanded to work using a six dimensional... oh, you meant what the volunteers had t-to do, right. Heh. Uh. It's not involved. It's. Uhm. You stand in front of a scanner for about a minute and a half while we record data, and you're done! Uh, there will be refreshments, but we have to ask that people be very careful with what they eat beforehand. If humans ate monster food there are concerns that the magical energy could give false positives. Or false negatives. Either way, it's bad from an instrumental perspective.”

“Doc, you had me at refreshments. Looks like we have another caller waiting but just to wrap up, what sort of results are you hoping to see from this project?”

“Well, uh, if I knew what was going to happen already, I wouldn't need to do it in the first place. But I think it will give us some insight into how souls interact with the world. Humans have an abundance of soul energy but their ability to express that in terms of magic is infinitesimal. It's the exact opposite of everything we know about souls and magic from centuries of studying monster
souls. Beyond the pure research aspect, if I had to speculate I'd say that knowing how the human soul interacts with external magic fields would allow us to make monster technology more widespread because more people would be able to understand how it works. Dimensional storage, lossless power transmission, metastable magic alloys, that kind of thing.”

“Sounds like a good deal. Will it get us any closer to flying cars, though?”

“I think that's, uh, ultimately in the hands of the Federal Aviation Authority.”

“You make a valid point doctor. Thank you so much for calling in today- huh?”

“What?” I'm sorry?

“Sorry, Jeff just tried to tell me something... okay, this is interesting. Jeff says Dwayne Riley is the caller on the other line and he's really adamant about getting on the air, like, right now. You want to field him Burgie? I need to wrap up the call with the doctor.”

“MY BODY IS READY! Hey Dwayne! Hadn't heard anything about you since Gary went after you at the sub shop! You doing alright? You had us worried!”

“I wasn't worried.”

“Brett, please, I'm on the phone!”

“Citizens of Ebott's Wake, I don't know how long I can stay on air before they disconnect me but DO NOT be lured into the monster labs! This so called doctor has already done horrific experiments on other monsters and god only knows what she'll do to human test subjects! There could be all sorts of chemicals and drugs and poisons in those 'refreshments' she's trying to lure you in with!”

“Dwayne, think about it. If Doctor Alphys actually did hurt the first test subjects she wouldn't get any later for a comparative analysis. Duh.”

“She's not even a real scientist! Where did she even get her degree from, the human garbage?!”

“New Home University, same as me. Go Puzzlers!”

“Your fake monster diploma mill doesn't mean squat up here!”

“Oh, is that so? Well, where did you get YOUR degree in... whatever Doctor Alphys has a degree in? Wait, better question. Do you even have a college degree?”

“Sorry to interrupt this little exchange but Doctor Alphys has asked to be connected to the call with Dwayne Riley. This should be interesting.”

“Aww. And Dwayne was just about to try to explain why him not having any higher education didn't matter.”

“DON'T TELL ME WHAT I'M GOING TO DO YOU FAT FURRY F*BLEEP*K!”

“Hehehe. Jeff Walsh, fastest hands in the west. Pew pew!”

“Am, am I connected? Am I talking to Mr. Riley?”

“You! You must think we're all really stupid, that we'll just walk into your trap like lemmings so you can stitch us together like that giant dog freak! You may have tricked some people, but just so
you know, the rest of the world isn't buying it. We see right through you. And the moment you break character, the very INSTANT that you try to pounce on some unsuspecting human, we'll be right there to show the whole damn world. Do you understand me?”

“Now you listen to me, Mister Riley. All I have ever done in my life is try to help people. Yes I have made mistakes. Yes, other people got hurt. And every day I carry that weight. B-but every day I get up and I try again, to fix what I've done, and to keep helping people. When have you ever cared about anybody but yourself? Before we came out of the underground you spent all your time complaining about other humans! All you ever do is tear people down and you never, ever care about anybody from yourself! I'll put up with a lot of crap but I won't take it from the likes of you! And you know what? You know what?! Anybody who comes to the volunteer study this week gets a free T-Shirt that says 'Dwayne Riley is an Imbecile!' I don't know where we'll get them on short notice but I will knit them with my own damned claws if I have to! CHOKE ON THAT!”

“Whoa, what the heck? Sorry listeners, sounded like we had a massive power spike across that audio channel.”

“That scaly bitch tried to electrocute me through the phone lines, didn't she? Well I'm not in the magic talking box, am I? Who's the Imbecile now??”

“Hello, Mr. Riley. This is Frisk Dreemurr. Alphys dropped the phone in her excitement. So now we get to talk.”

“I don't have anything to say to you, you little brat. You brought this plague of monsters down on us.”

“First, don't call me a brat. Not unless you want me to act like a brat. Just remember that I'm shorter than you. So if we ever meet in person I have a straight shot right to your family jewels and no reason not to aim there. Understand me?”

“Don't make threats, little girl. Or boy. Or whatever the hell you are. That stupid goat should give you a damned haircut some time-”

“I'M. NOT. FINISHED. Second, don't you ever make threats towards my friends, or my family, or any monsters, or any humans. Because I will be right there between them and you. And you're going to have a choice to make. Either you fight me, or you run away. Either way people will see you for what you really are. So decide right now if you want to be known as a bully that would try to hurt a child, or a coward that's afraid to fight one.”

“...I gave you a lot of leeway kid. That's because I thought you didn't know any better. I see now that you don't care who you hurt as long as you get what you want. So be it. You stand where you want. See where that gets you when all your so-called friends turn on you.”

“Same to you, Dwayne. Oh wait, that's right. You don't have any friends.”

“...hey folks, Brett Brinkman here. I know I said I wanted to hear it but I still can't believe my ears. Burgie what about you?”

“I didn't hear nothing but Dwayne Riley getting told. In accordance with the laws and customs of the kingdom of monsters, I will now read from the ancient scrolls of told.”

“I'd like to point out to our listeners that it is not in fact an ancient scroll that Burgie is holding but a bunch of computer printouts and wait you've had those lying around in the studio for the past five months!”
“Planning ahead! It's what separates us from the grasshoppers during the winter!”

“Pretty sure that's not how that fable goes.”

“OH MY GOD I CAN'T BELIEVE PEOPLE WOULD RATHER LISTEN TO YOU TWO MORONS THAN OPEN THEIR GOD DAMNED EYES AND EARS!”

“Hey, Dwayne. So you're still on the line. Suppose that's my fault for not double checking the channel lights. So... on the subject of people listening, do you have anything else to say to the populace of Ebott's Wake? I mean, I thought that last round was pretty conclusive but I'm just one man, and there are subjects everyone has to come to terms with on their own.”

“There's no point. I've said everything I can. Over. And over. And over. All of it falls on deaf ears. Because people want to live in a fantasy world and pretend that problems don't exist, so they don't have to do the hard work of solving them. I am so, so tired of trying to warn people who laugh at me at treat me like a fool for seeing the obvious. I will give the lizard credit. I keep doing the same thing and expecting a different result. So I guess that makes me an imbecile. Well. I can learn from my mistakes. From now on, you're on your own. Dig your own damned graves. When it all falls apart and you're crying for somebody to save you, don't look at me. I'm done with this.”

“Until the next time you call in because somebody on the air said something you don't agree with, anyway.”

“Shut up furry.”

“No, YOU SHUT UP! God I am so sick of your crap Riley! It used to be funny! You'd call in with a bee in your bonnet and we'd go back and forth and everybody loved it! Now you're trying to get on your high horse and look down at people, except it's a Shetland pony! You've never once cared about solving any problem, all you care about is blaming somebody else! And I'm mad as hell and sleep deprived and I'm not gonna take it anymore! You know what I'm gonna do? Listen up everybody! Dwayne here formed up an anti-monster group, so I'm going to form up an anti-human group! And it'll be better than your group in every possible way! We'll have blackjack! And hookers! And a tree house!”

“...Dwayne, you still there? Mr. Riley? ...he hung up. Looks like you scared him off. Jeez man, your face. I forgot you could do that until just now. Heart's going a mile a minute. You alright? You don't look so good.”

“The ghost of Benjamin Franklin is trying to prospect for gold in my head. Go away, Ben!”

“I'd uh... I'd just like to take the opportunity to remind our listeners, and for the benefit of those who just joined us, that Burgie and I have been awake for over thirty six hours straight, and he has been hallucinating pretty badly. So, you might want to take most, if not all, of what he just said with a grain of salt.”

“You're not even that smart of an inventor! That kite experiment could have killed you!”

“Uh, most historians think that the key on a kite string thing was a popular myth, like Washington's cherry tree. I'm going to cue up a few songs and help Burgie find a place to curl up and lie down for a few hours. Stay tuned for more Morning Rush.”
“So you finally made it. The end of your journey is at hand. In a few moments, you will meet the king. Together... you will determine the future of this world. That's then. Now. You will be judged. You will be judged for your every action. You will be judged for every EXP you've earned. It's an acronym. It stands for-”

“Execution Points. Yes. I know. A way of quantifying how much a person can hurt others. With enough execution points, Level of Violence increases. The more violent a person is, the easier it is to hurt others. And the harder it is to be hurt in return. That's what you were going to say, right Sans?”

Sans stared at the human. Taller than all the others, with some sort of miniature beard on his face, and the occasional red marks that didn't seem to be injuries. A hat on his head held some sort of odd metal shape, and two cardboard cones stuck out of the sides of it, resembling horns. Behind him, a short length of rope fell nearly to the floor, with a shirt sleeve wrapped around it to make it appear like a tail. And in the human's hand...

“And then you were about to tell me how I never gained any. How I was able to sneak and disguise and bluff my way from the Ruins all the way here. I know you were probably looking forward to that speech, but it gets really old after the tenth time.”

Sans began to sweat, despite the lack of skin and by extension sweat glands. The human smirked.

“That expression you're making... that's the expression of somebody who has no idea he's killed me nine times. And if I'm honest... it kinda takes the wind out of my sails. You know what I mean? So... how about something brand new.” The human looked away from Sans, towards the massive windows of the corridor.

“You know, it's funny. There's these humans on the surface. In Ebott's Wake. That's the town at the foot of the mountain. It's an okay place, I guess. I mean, it's almost standard practice to have an isolated town develop its own weird religious community. But these guys, they're in a different league. They were all about evil spirits in the mountain or something like that. I never really paid that much attention to them. Nobody did. I mean, people did go missing on Mt. Ebott sometimes, but that happens with every mountain. Wild animals. Losing your grip. Exposure. Tragic, but not out of the ordinary.”

The human turned back to the skeleton, his expression hardened. “And then there was that... thing. A monster. Eight feet tall with massive horns and claws as long as a man's hand. Carrying a dead human child as if to say, 'Look at what I can do.' And suddenly people weren't so skeptical. Funny how that works, isn't it? Suddenly they had people's support. People's attention.”

The human raised the gun in his hand, pulling back on one part with a thumb, then letting it return to its original position. “That was the whole problem though. Because the people running that cult
were people too. And people, in large groups, are stupid. Or at least, prone to making really stupid decisions. Although,” the human grinned without humor, “it's not like individual people have any trouble making stupid decisions on their own, right? So in their fear, they kept pushing. They kept making stupid choices. They expected an attack, an invasion from the mountain of monsters that would devour the town, and then the country, and then the whole world... but nobody came. They started getting paranoid, waiting. They kept lashing out whenever they met an obstacle or anyone who disagreed with them, not that they could tell the difference, you know? So... everyone remembered when the monster showed up with the dead kid. But everyone lived with the Sages looking over their shoulder. If they didn't like what you were doing, if they thought maybe you were in league with the monsters, selling your soul for dark powers or betraying humanity so your family was spared...”

The human closed his eyes for a few moments, then opened them again. “There was never anything anyone could prove. Not to people outside the town. But a small town, well, you can't keep a secret in there. You know how it is. When they started looking at my family, we tried to run. But they had a head start. Mom and I made it out. Dad... and Sam... she begged me not to go back. And I knew dad wouldn't want me to risk my life for his sake. But I had to go back for Sam. He was my brother. I know you understand that. Don't you?”

Sans nodded stiffly. “Yeah. I do.”

“The Sages... you know, I don't think it ever occurred to them that anyone they chased out of town would sneak back into town, let alone into their compound. I found evidence of what happened to Dad. Sent that out of town quick as I was able. If it gets to the people who can stop them, all well and good. If they catch on to it and try to stop it, well, that's interfering with the U.S. mail. That oughta get the eyes of the nation on them pretty fast too. But I never found any evidence of Sam. Kids had been going missing for a few years and everyone suspected the Sages were involved somehow, but if it wasn't them... and then it hit me. The mountain. The focus of the cult's paranoia.”

Sans watch as the gun was spun around in the human's hand, rotating around the index finger. The human grinned. “I had no idea what I needed to be prepared for, so I tried to be prepared for anything. And I still wasn't ready for what I found. The Sages were right after all. An entire race of monsters, trapped underground, trying to escape and take revenge on humanity.”

The grin faded and was replaced with a haunted look. “If only it was that simple. If only I hadn't gotten to know you people. Because that's what you are. People. A bunch of people, stuck down in the dark, fighting for your freedom and your lives. Somehow I think that even if the Sages knew, they'd leave that part off of the recruitment brochures. If only...”

The human sniffed and rubbed away tears with the back of the hand that didn't hold the gun. “If only Sam was still alive. I never found his body, or that ratty notebook he was always hauling around, but I think I know what happened. He was smart. He knew the cult was afraid of the mountain so it was the one place he knew he'd be safe. Then he fell down here... found all of you... and then....”

“Sorry, buddy,” Sans said, trying to fill in the silence. “We found him-”

“Drowned in Waterfall, I know.” The human snapped, glaring angrily at Sans past the tears. “You let that slip during fight number six. Or seven. They all start to blur together after a while. What I haven't gotten you to tell me yet is if you really did just find him already dead, or if you found him flailing in the river and watched it happen, or if you grabbed him near the bank and dunked his head under the surface until he stopped moving.”
Sans’ eye lights went out in surprise, and the human raised the gun suddenly. “Ah HAH. That expression on your face... it means something.”

“Buddy... I don't know what to tell you. I did find him in the river. Maybe some monster decided to take matters into their own hands. Maybe they did just watch. Or... maybe he just slipped and the current got him. But if anyone did something like that, I haven't heard, and they wouldn't keep quiet about it. They'd be bragging to anyone that would listen. They'd be called heroes. Given medals. And frankly, you know me. That's way too much effort for me to bother with.”

“Which part? Holding him under, or pulling him out?”

Sans stared at the gun, then relaxed slightly as it was lowered again. “Look, Sans. If it makes you feel any better, I gave up trying to kill you a while ago. And even if I did make it to the King, beat him, take his soul and return to the surface... well, I wouldn't have Sam with me. And I'd have to explain that to mom. It doesn't really appeal. When I realized that, well, it made it really hard to give it my all when we fight. It got you talking at least. You know, for somebody who makes it a point of pride to deliberately be as lazy as possible, you sure put in the effort when it suits you. So put some effort into answering this question: How is it that every time I die, I come back to life here like it never happened?”

Sans stared, then closed his eye sockets and shook his head. “I didn't even know you could do that until you started finishing my sentences. But,” Sans opened his sockets again, “I do have one theory.”

“Let's hear it. Apparently I have all the time in the world.”

“A couple years ago... we had an idea on how to break the barrier, and we started making the tools for it. My... my friend. He had this idea involving time travel, but there were problems. I'll spare you the physics, but the short story is, you can't send physical matter backwards in time. It gets... messy. There might be a way around that, but we never found it. But sending energy back, that's easy. Light. Magic. Information probably, too. Heh. I thought I could make a big telephone to yesterday so we could tell our past selves to avoid dead ends in research. But my friend, he had vision.”

Sans pointed one thumb in the direction of the Barrier, then extended fingers on the same hand one by one as he counted off points. “Send energy back in time. Store it over and over again. Then use it up all at once. The Barrier would either shatter under the force of all that power, or get erased by the paradox of all those time loops snapping in half. But...” Sans put his hand down again, “it didn't work out. Nobody knows what went wrong. Nobody knows enough to try again. And nobody really wants to talk about it.”

Sans stopped smiling for once, and the human stepped back, eyes widening. “They say when we sprinkle a monster's dust on their favorite thing, their memory lives on in that thing. But really... we do that as a way for us to remember them, so their memory lives on in us. With... with him, there wasn't anything left. No funeral to hold. And it seems like everyone else wants to forget. Everyone except me... he would have been able to tell you exactly what's going on. All I can tell you is that, well, maybe when the equipment broke down, it wasn't the only thing that ended up broken.”

The hall was silent for several minutes, then the human opened up the gun. “So that's where we stand. I can't beat you. You can't beat me. And I doubt the king can keep me from coming back either. But... that's the thing, right? To hurt a monster, to hurt them bad enough to kill them, you really have to hate them. And even with Sam gone...”
The gun snapped shut. “King Dreemurr is fighting for the fate of his species. But so am I. If I lose and I don't come back, then you guys just need one more soul. One more kid. And the human race can kiss its ass goodbye. But if I win... Sam is still dead. Why didn't he come back, like me? Unless... he did. And just like me, he got tired of trying and getting nowhere, and got more and more frustrated, until he finally quit. And if he can do it... how many other humans got this far, Sans?”

Sans stared for a few seconds, then smiled again. “As far as I can remember, not that it means anything anymore, you're the first. You really made those disguises work for you. Shoulda been on the stage. So you got that going for you. Which is nice, I suppose.”

“I suppose. So if I lose... and another human falls down and also loses... do you think he'll do it? Do you think Asgore will destroy humanity like he promised?”

“...you heard the story. Poor guy lost everything that mattered to him in one night. That... does things to a person. But you know that already.”

“Yes I do. What about you?”

“What?”

“Would you destroy humanity? If you were in his shoes? If it meant Papyrus could see the sun, the moon, the stars. To drive down the road with the wind in his... well, you know what I mean. To not have to worry about humans coming after him. Would you destroy humanity, if you could?”

“Hey, it doesn't matter what I would do, because I can't. Asgore keeps those souls locked up tighter than a really tight thing.”

“That's not how it works. Basic firearm safety; you never, never point it at anything you don't have the full intention to shoot. When you have the power to take a life, whether it's a gun or a knife or because your magic is supercharged with human souls, you either make a decision to do so, or you make a decision to refrain from it. Sans, tell me straight; how far would you go to make Papyrus happy?”

Sans stared at the human, then closed his eye sockets. “Papyrus is already happy. He has a home, he has his best friend, he has me, and he has hope that things can always be better. If I ever thought you or any human was a threat to that, then yeah. You'd be dead where you stand.”

“Good answer. I won't judge you for it.”

There was a small, soft metallic click, and immediately after the hall was filled with a thundering crash. Sans' eye sockets shot open and behind him two gigantic skull monsters materialized-

The gun dropped to the floor with a clatter, and the human dropped to his knees. Blood was soaking through his shirt, right in the center of his chest, and a little bit had already seeped out of the corner of his mouth. A macabre grin showed teeth stained red with blood and Sans stepped back several feet as the human started coughing... no, not coughing.

“You... dirty... brother... killer...”

The human's body collapsed on the tiles.

Sans stood staring at the body after the blasters vanished, wondering if it would make a difference if he picked it up and took it to the Lab or not. Several minutes and one shortcut later, he was standing next to an operating table with the body on top of it. Above it, a magical conduit frame
was aimed at the corpse; Sans flipped a switch on the wall and the conduit began to glow. Verifying that the conduit tubing was still wired up to the containment unit, Sans pulled the hat off of the body and stared at it sadly.

“If we're still friends... you won't come back. And... thanks.”

Another shortcut back to the hall to pick up the gun where it had fallen. Sans opened it like he saw the human do, and six bits of metal fell out, one smaller than the other five. Sans scooped them up as well, and shoved everything into his coat. Another shortcut into the city, to dump all of the evidence into the nearest trash container, and one final shortcut back to his room in Snowdin. Sans checked his coat, his shirt, and everything else for any indication of what he had been doing; everything looked clean, but his hands still felt... dirty. Rubbing them together didn't do anything, and there wasn't any appearance of discoloration or any other mark on them, but still, Sans pulled open a drawer and pulled out a pair of mittens.

Papyrus had questioned why he would need any sort of hand coverings, at least ones that didn't appear stylish and cool like Papy's scarf. That more than anything had prompted Sans to grab them from the garbage dump, just to hear Papyrus bicker about it all the way back to Snowdin—

You dirty brother killer.

Sans shook his head, trying to erase the image of the human, blood dripping out of his smiling mouth. With a little effort, the thought faded away. The image that replaced it, of a scarf covered in dust, was a lot harder to disperse. “I need a freaking drink,” Sans muttered as he opened his bedroom door.

And just in time, as the front door opened dramatically below. “Sans! I have the most wonderful news to report! Undyne has agreed to accept me for one-on-one personal training! It's only a matter of time before I am ready to join the royal guard and help protect the underground with you!”

“That's awesome news Papyrus. I was just thinking earlier today how much easier my job would be with a sidekick.”

“Pish tosh! In your dreams! Which when I say it out loud, seems like a much more accurate appraisal of the situation!”

“Hey, dreams are just more restful thoughts. I was just gonna head over to Grillby's, you want me to get you anything to celebrate?”

“That greasehole? Perish the thought! Although I heard there's this monster who has come from the city to open an ice cream stand of some manner! That sounds like a nice way to end an already nice day!”

“You're right Papy. Let's go get some nice cream.”

“Sans!”

“What? You're smiling!”

“SAAAAAAAANS!”

“Come on, that was a good one.”
“SANS WAKE UP ALREADY!”

“..what?”

“WAKE UP SANS!”

Sans opened his eyes and found himself looking at Papyrus again, but the room wasn't the Snowdin living room. While similarities were obvious, there were key differences that the watchful eye would notice... like more windows, and more sunlight coming through them.

“Papyrus, what's going on-”

“I HAVE THE MOST WONDERFUL NEWS TO REPORT! THE KING AND QUEEN HAVE ASKED UNDYNE TO REFORM THE ROYAL GUARD AND I HAVE BEEN CHOSEN TO JOIN!”

“wait, what?”

“UNDYNE JUST CALLED ME WITH THE DETAILS! APPARENTLY THERE ARE CONCERNS ABOUT THE UPCOMING STATE OF THE KINGDOM ADDRESS ON FRIDAY AND THE ROYAL GUARD IS BEING REBUILT AS THE ROYAL HONOR GUARD! SO NATURALLY I SAID YES!”

“heh. that sure is good news. hey, what time is it? did I oversleep again?”

“AS IF YOU ACTUALLY NEED AN ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION IN PARTICULAR! BUT SINCE YOU DID ASK, IT’S ALMOST ELEVEN IN THE MORNING.”

“oh. not too bad then. where's dad?”

“HE HIMSELF RECEIVED A PHONE CALL FROM DOCTOR ALPHYS A BIT BEFORE UNDYNE CALLED ME, AND THEN HE PROCEEDED TOWARDS THE LAB WITH THE GREATEST EXPEDIENCY! I THOUGHT IT WAS AN EMERGENCY, BUT HE SEEMED QUITE HAPPY ABOUT SOMETHING.”

“welp, maybe we'll hear more about it tonight. in the meantime, i'm late for a meeting with Frisk i just now decided i had to make.”
“hey, howzabout that weather last night, huh?”

“Sans!”

Sans looked up in surprise as he entered the queen's household; while he'd gotten used to seeing Frisk barrel into the room at full tilt after hearing his voice, to see Alphys running towards him almost exactly the same way left him stunned for a second or two.

“Oh my god it was the most amazing thing I can't believe I did that I wish I had a picture or a recording or some sort of memento to commemorate it!”

“Hey lazybones! Get in here so we can tell the story over again!”

Sans blinked. “Undyne's here too then? why am i not surprised.”

In the living room, Toriel was seated in her favorite chair, with Undyne taking up half the couch next to her featuring one of the widest grins he'd ever seen on her face, which was saying something. Alphys sprinted up and practically jumped up next to Undyne, a yellow bundle of nervous energy on a scale Sans had never before experienced. Toriel looked up from her tea and smiled warmly.

“Ah, so good to see you Sans! Undyne and Alphys were just regaling me with a most notable event, for the third time in a row.”

“Yeah! Frisk and I were cleaning up the lawn after the storm last night, and Alphys was inside making the calls to the lab to finalize that soul research stuff! And then she came out and said it was squared away and Frisk said to call the radio station because they were interested and we could start tomorrow if people wanted to!”

“Uh, Undyne, do you mind if I tell this part?”

“Fuhuhuhu! Of course you can tell this part!”

Alphys turned to Sans, blushing furiously. “Well, I called up the radio station, and Mr. Brinkman asked about what we were trying to do and what volunteers had to do and everything went much better than I expected it to... and then Dwayne Riley called in on another line.”

Sans closed his eye sockets. “aw hell, this can't end well.”

“No, no, that's just it! He started in on how the lab test would just hurt people and he brought up the amalgamates and everything and I don't know why but I just... I just snapped! I just yelled back into the phone that even though I may have hurt people I'm still working on trying to fix my mistakes and I never stopped trying to help people and none of that could apply to him and somewhere along the line I think I said that the lab volunteers for the study would get free T-Shirts or something, and I think that's when I dropped the phone because my claws were getting all sweaty.”

Undyne pulled Alphys into an awkward hug and planted a kiss on top of her forehead. “Frisk and I were in the other room and we heard it on the radio and it was AMAZING! So much dedication! So much righteous anger and sass and getting owned! I always knew you had it in you!” Another kiss was planted on Alphys' forehead, causing her to blush even more.
“I, uh, I couldn't believe what I'd said at first and I was staring at the phone and Frisk came and picked it up and gave me the most amazing smile and hug! And then I was walking into the other room in a daze and Undyne...” Abruptly Alphys stopped talking and began sweating, while Undyne also began blushing and grinned awkwardly. “Well, that's, that's not important right now. But it feels... I feel like a new person! Like I can finally let go of all that stuff that was weighing me down! Who knew that all I needed in order to grow emotionally as a person was to get in a screaming match with a racist on a community radio show?”

Toriel laughed and tried to smother the sound behind a paw. “I do not believe that is the correct lesson to learn from this adventure.”

“That's probably true.” Alphys giggled and rubbed her claws together nervously. “Of course, now I have to figure out where to get a bunch of T-Shirts that say 'Dwayne Riley is an Imbecile' on less than twenty four hours notice, but what a problem to have, right?”

“huh. you know, for a while i had a plan to make a lot of money making custom shirts myself. got something called a silk screen printer. Papyrus called it the laziest way to improve shirts ever invented, but it's still in the garage, if only because i could never find anyone who wanted to buy it. you guys are welcome to it. getting the blank t shirts though, that's all on you. unless you want to take it to the lab and people can bring their own t-shirts for upgrades, except then you'd have a whole bunch of humans walking around with no shirts on.”

As Alphys and Undyne laughed and started discussing where to get blank t-shirts on such short notice, Sans pulled out his phone and began sorting through the keys on the key chain attachment, pausing after a certain key.

“Hey Sans, what are you staring at? Hello? You okay buddy?”

“What??” Sans looked up sharply, then shook his head. “yeah, yeah, i'll have a burger with pickle and tomato, and don't skimp on the ketchup.”

Undyne narrowed her eye at the skeleton. “Did you actually just think that you were back in Grillby's just now?”

“hey, if i actually start acting consistently helpful trying to help you guys out, then people are going to start expecting it. gotta slack off somewhere to protect my reputation.”

“OH MY GOD. I can't believe you actually put WORK into being lazy! And I can't believe Papyrus insisted I add you back to the Royal Guard Roster because he knows that better than everyone!”

Sans blinked. “wait, say that again?”

“Hasn't he told you yet? He said he was going to wake your lazy bones up and share the good news!”

“He did, but this is the first i've heard about me being back on the team. course, now that we're not trying to catch humans it sounds even easier than before so why not?”

“Sans, please try to take your new responsibilities seriously,” came Toriel's soft but firm tone. “The Royal Honor Guard will represent the Kingdom of Monsters just as much as Frisk and Papyrus already do as individuals.”

“hey, where is the shortcake, anyway?”
“Frisk is spending the day with their father. After the storm yesterday, to say nothing of the sleepover these two set up last night,” Toriel's face suddenly became stern and disapproving, “it seemed best that Frisk take things more easily before the week started.”

Sans turned to Undyne and Alphys, winking one eye socket. “I'd ask but I'm not sure I want to know the answer. Either way, I gotta find the key to the garage now because it's not on my key chain for some reason. Waddaya say you two come over around three and we'll get you set up with the printer?”

“That sounds great, Sans!” Alphys beamed.

“Alright. I'll catch you both then. Later.”

The king didn't live that far away from Toriel; officially the reasoning was that it made it less of a strain for Frisk to see both adopted parents on a regular basis. The officially unofficial reason was that the construction used in some residential areas was more suited for seven or eight foot boss monsters than other houses possessed; high ceilings and broad doorways were just the start. Sans also suspected that Asgore just couldn't bear to be too far away from the queen anymore, and this was about as close as he could regularly get... but this wasn't a subject he ever opted to bring up in conversation. And he suspected other people independently reached the same conclusion. The upshot was that the short walk negated the need for a shortcut... or would have if Sans wasn't in some sort of hurry he couldn't explain or justify.

Asgore's house was plain inside and outside from what Sans remembered, but the garden that took over the backyard, that was different every time he'd seen it. Asgore, it seemed, was one of those monsters that took the Barrier breaking to its utmost and treated the entire Surface as if it was a living room; the house was more of a place to keep things that couldn't be left out in the weather or fit in the garden shed. Sans reflected on how different people's living spaces gave an insight towards their personality, and snickered when he realized that somebody could get a very wrong impression about Asgore just from looking at the house and not the garden, but his rumination was interrupted by the front door swinging open.

“Howdy, Sans!”

“Lookin' good big guy. I hear from my brother, who heard from Undyne, that you're getting the band back together.”

“Yes, that's true. Between the saber rattling from the AML, Mr. Riley's calls into the radio, and many concerned calls into the Ebott's Wake Police Department, Toriel and I thought it was for the best. But please, come inside!”

“Thanks, you, uh, you and Toriel doing better?”

Asgore's huge smile faltered a bit. “It's... it's very slow going. We've both agreed to try to put things aside for Frisk's sake, but... it's a lot to put aside all at once.” The smile made an effort to recover. “Having said that, Frisk has been absolutely relentless when it comes to encouragement, mediation, and compromise.”

“Well, that's the kind of attitude you want in an ambassador. Where is the kid, anyway? I got a new joke I want to try on 'em about how many monster representatives it takes to screw in a light bulb.”

Asgore laughed a deep laugh. “I can imagine. Frisk is outside in the garden, helping me finalize preparations for the garden show this week.”
“sounds like a real hoot for people who like plants. hope the lab volunteer thing doesn't conflict too much.” Sans noticed the king's perplexed look and shrugged. “with my dad back and working for Alphys they finally have somebody with the time and inclination to explain stuff to reporters without freezing up or getting all sweaty. it all starts tomorrow. that's why i wanted to talk shop with Frisk about this whole honor guard thing, since i might not have time for the rest of the week.”

“That makes sense. You go ahead, I think the kettle is about to-”

Right on cue, a piercing whistle came from the kitchen and Asgore rushed towards the sound. Sans made his way through the pale house to the back door and stepped out into a veritable forest of flowers. At the end of one garden row, Frisk was crouched down near a plot of earth.

“Look it's not my fault the people who planned this town didn't know anything about geology-somebody's coming. Smiley Trashbag, behind you.”

As Sans processed the voice, Frisk stood up and looked back. Sans could see the yellow petaled head of Flowey the Flower peeking out from behind one leg.

“hey kiddo. what a weekend right? a storm, a slumber party, a radio show call in from Alphys and now this. bet you'll be glad to get back to just sitting in a classroom reading books tomorrow.”

Frisk shrugged. “That kind of stuff really seems normal to me now.”

Flowey made a derisive noise. “Normal? In this town? What a joke. Half the people who live here are completely insane.”

“They're not insane, Flowey. It's just a small town. It develops its own culture. And each one is different. So we're eccentric, not insane. It makes us sound more sophisticated.”

“No, eccentric is for RICH people. Totally different thing on a totally different scale.”

“so, what were you guys talking earlier? thought goldenrod here mentioned geology.”

Flowey grew a leaf and pointed at some spot out past the fence. “Not that it's any business of yours, or concerns you in any way, but none of the people responsible for building Ebott's Wake back whenever that was a work in progress knew what the word 'drainage' meant. People don't notice because we're in a mountain range, and right at the foot of one, but this entire town was build inside a giant bowl. That's why every street floods after getting more than half an inch of rain, because that's the only place it can go. Meaning I have to burrow my way back up to the cave to the Underground and wait until the storm blows over every single time.”

“heh. how inconvenient for you little guy. but plausible. so what were you talking about before you noticed me and let that line slip for my benefit?”

Frisk's expression remained neutral, while Flowey narrowed his eyes... then grinned.

“You don't have a monopoly on secrets, bonehead. Catch you later, Frisk.” The flower monster shrunk down and vanished into the earth. Frisk sighed and walked over to one of the decorative benches that divided up the garden space and sat down. Sans took the adjacent seat, pulling out his cell phone.

“I'd say you keep interesting company, Frisk, but I am interesting company so that would be hypocritical and self-demonstrating.”

“I've told you before. I'll tell you again. Flowey's not really bad. He's just... the world hasn't been
very nice to him, so he doesn't see why he should have to be nice to the world.”

“So he gets back at the world with pranks and insults. Suppose it could be worse.”

Frisk shrugged. “Well, that's true of anything in life.”

“That it is.”

The two sat in silence for a few minutes, interrupted only by the occasional bird's mating song.

“Hey Frisk... do you remember when we met outside the throne room, back in the Underground?”

“Yeah. The judgment hall.”

“As good a name as any. You, uh... you seemed a bit bored. Like you heard it all before. So I told you something.”

“Yeah.” Frisk's mouth turned up at the corners a little bit. “The world's most juvenile time travel code phrase.”

“That's kinda the point. If it was something significant either historically or personally, people could figure it out without me telling them. So it has to be something with significance that lies entirely in its insignificance. Not that it ever went anywhere.”

Sans held up his cell phone. “But maybe that was the point. The whole reason to have passwords like those is to indicate trust. But you only need passwords to know you can trust people if you're in a situation where you can't trust them normally. Did you... ever wonder why I gave you that silver key for Christmas last year?”

“Well... you did say something about how you were tired of waiting for the next password, but I figured it was really either a setup for a joke, or you waited till the last minute before shopping and all the stores were closed so you had to improvise.”

“Actually, it's the password thing and not either of the other two options. I know, I'm surprised too. I gave you that key because I knew I could trust you then. Passwords weren't necessary anymore. If you were a time traveler, and I'm not saying you are, you probably pulled out all the stops behind the scenes trying to get everyone a happy ending. But trust is a two-way street. You should be able to trust me too. And...”

Sans sighed. “You don't talk a lot about life before the Underground. But I'm good at filling in blanks. It sounds like you had a bad time.”

Frisk crossed their arms in front of them and leaned forward, staring down at their feet. Sans rubbed his forehead with one hand, producing an odd resonant vibration from his skull. “I don't know what you were running from when you climbed Mt. Ebott, but I know how bad things have to get before you start thinking about running. Whether it's a snow covered town on the opposite side of the underground, or a mountain with a reputation for not letting anybody come back. The only ones I could talk to about it were Papyrus and Alphys, but Alphys had her own problems and... well, I really couldn't talk about it with Papyrus. So I know what that's like too. And I'd rather you didn't, ya know?”

“Sans... do you remember what you told me in that corridor? Just before the secret password?”

“I do. I told you that as long as you held on, and kept doing what's in your heart, you'd do the right thing.”
“...thank you.”

“For what?”

“For believing that I could do the right thing. It was... it was a first for me, having somebody have faith in me like that.”

“Heh. Well, I wouldn't call it faith. Faith is something you believe in, even if you don't know for sure if it's true. I had a pretty good feeling about you by then.”

The backyard became abruptly silent and still. Birdsong stopped, the rustling of the wind stopped, and even the noises of neighbors and traffic going down the street were muffled and muted. If Sans had possessed hair, it would have stood up, but Frisk seemed too distracted to notice and just pulled out their cell phone.

“Sans, do you think even the worst person can change?”

“huh?”

“I mean, that anybody can be good, if they just try?”

Sans stared at Frisk's face, belatedly picking up details that should have been glaringly obvious. Bloodshot eyes and dark circles under them. Defensive posture. Two fingers held the silver key between them and shook slightly. Somehow, against all anatomical impossibility, he swallowed.

“You know, I was over at Toriel's place before I came here, looking for you actually. Alphys and Undyne were there, and I don't remember Alph being that happy since she was picked for the science team after she graduated. The thing is, nothing objectively has changed. She still has the same problems, the same goals, and the same obstacles. But at the same time, everything has changed. Because she's not obsessing over the problems any more. She's hyped up to find solutions. That ain't nuthin'. Here, let me show you something.”

Sans held his cell phone right in front of one eye socket. “Right now, this cell phone is taking up almost all my field of vision. There's barely room for anything else.” Sans held out the phone at arms length. “Now I can see it, and everything else in front of me. The phone is the same size as before, nothing has changed but perspective and position. So... no matter what's bothering you, no matter what has you crying yourself to sleep each night for the past few nights, keep that in mind. It only looks as big as it does because you're so close to it. I won't tell you it's not that important, or it doesn't matter, because I don't even know what it is. But just maybe it's not really as big a deal as it seems.”

“...but what if it's the other way around?”

“What do you mean?”

Frisk looked up to the sky and pointed at the sun, shining valiantly and unobstructed as if the previous day's inclement weather had never happened. “At arm's length you can block out the sun with a few fingers, but that's only because it's millions of miles away. It's actually so big, and so important, that everything else revolves around it. What if this is something so big it can destroy everyone's happy ending?”

“I know you Frisk. You won't let that happen. If you're not giving up on the flower, then you're not giving up on anything or anyone. But... if it really is as big as you think, and that's not just because you're so close to it, then that's a lot of weight to be on any one person's shoulders. No matter how determined they are.”
Frisk put their phone away. “I'm so tired of keeping secrets and being afraid of what might happen. I wish I could just, I dunno, just say anything. To anybody.”

The garden was once again silent, until Frisk spoke again, so quietly that Sans almost didn't catch it.

“But I don't have the words.”

“Well, that's something I never thought I'd hear you say. And not just because you're a ten year old kid that reads at a high school level. Don't sweat it, kiddo. When you do find the right words, everyone will still be here for you. No matter how big or small things really are.”

“It's, it's not about finding the words. I know what the right words are. I... I can't say them. Not right now. Maybe not ever.”

“You will. It's only a matter of time.”

Frisk grinned, even if it was a slightly pained grin. “I don't think you were even trying with that one. And that's like the one thing you ever put effort into.”

“Hey, gotta meet my daily pun quota somehow. And another thing. I didn't answer you before, because I don't know. Because that right there, that question you asked, that's the most complicated philosophical question in the history of ever. Humans and monsters have wrestled with it for ages and nobody's got a surefire answer. But I hope that, yeah, anyone can change for the better if they really want to, if they really put the effort into it... because that's what Papyrus believes. Even about Dwayne Riley and the Anti Monster League clowns.”

Frisk's smile disappeared. “Maybe, but I get the feeling that Riled Up Riley doesn't want to change.”

“You're probably right about that, even if we discount your calls into KEBT. I don't mean to tell you how to ambassadorize but are you sure you should be pushing the guy's buttons like that?”

Frisk nodded. “I've... uh... I've had to deal with people like him before. Their buttons come pre-pushed, if you wanna think of it like that. All I'm doing is reminding him that the rest of the world doesn't share his point of view and if he ever does more than talk trash on the radio call in line, there will be consequences. I'm hoping it'll stall him until he moves on to some other scapegoat. Or gets so worked up about it that he gives himself a massive heart attack.”

“And what if Riled Up Riley gets so riled up that he does something stupid, consequences be damned?”

“That's Plan B for a reason. But the way I've been getting on his nerves he'll go for me first, before anyone else. And no matter how mad he is and how much he hates me, he can't do worse than just breaking an arm or a leg or cracking some of my ribs. Those will heal up in a few weeks but as long as we've got witnesses or recorded evidence nobody will ever take him seriously again... what's wrong?”

Sans eye sockets were completely dark. Slowly he stood up off the bench and turned towards Frisk.

“Make. A. Better. Plan.”
Frisk stared at the eye sockets and seemed to shrink under the unseen gaze. Sans blinked and the eye lights came back, and he shook his head.

“Sorry if I scared you there kid. I just needed to drive that home. I know humans are a lot tougher than monsters when it comes to physical attacks, but that’s a relative quality. Besides, if your battle plan hinges on you actually getting hurt, it’s not much of a plan.”

Frisk looked away and began to fidget. “It’s... all I’ve been able to come up with. Well, except for Plan C. Spray Mr. Riley with barbecue sauce and let Endogeny go after him. But I didn’t think it was right to involve anyone else like that.”

“No, no, that’s good. You should lead with that actually.”

“Wait, really??”

Sans laughed at the human child’s look of surprised and skeptical confusion. “I learned a lot of stuff when I joined the Royal Guard, even if it was just for the paycheck. But a lot of what I learned didn’t make any sense. I may be lazy, but I’m not stupid. So I changed a few things to suit me.” The skeleton held up his right hand and a glowing bone shot up out of the center of his glove, which he then balanced on the tip of his index finger. Whaddaya say I pass that knowledge along? Not only for your benefit, but so that we can get the Royal Honor Guard prepped and ready in case Riled Up Riley tries anything on Friday?”

“Sure!” Frisk’s eager grin vanished as quickly as it appeared. “Wait. Did I just say yes to getting bones thrown at me for the rest of the afternoon?”

“Pfft. As if. That’s way too much work.”
“Like, good morning Ebott's Wake. You're listening to Lazy Lindsey and the Coffee Grinders. The Brett and DJ Pantz are over at the laboratory recycling place for that research grant? Study? Thing? We're gonna talk to them later and stuff. In the meantime you're listening to us because I had to take over for the morning segment and it suuuucks. Having to get up before ten in the morning is like, against my constitutional rights or something.”

“Pretty sure there's no Late Riser amendment. Or anything like it in the main body of the constitution either.”

“Clutch, that's not the point, the point is there should be.”

“That's a matter of some debate.”

“Whatever. I'm too tired to argue right now. So let's throw it over to Kyle Zimmerman at the Ebott's Wake Librarby Book Sale. Kyle, what's the haps?”

“Good morning Lindsey!”

“UGH. Not so LOUD.”

“Oh. Sorry. Didn't realize I was leaning on the mic there. So, I'm at the Ebott's Wake Librarby book sale with the President of the Librarby Board, Terri Snyder. Terri, you've been the brains behind the book sale for the last twenty years, is that correct?”

“Well, uh, I suppose you could say that. But the idea originally came from one of our volunteers, Dolores Carson. She sadly passed away a few years ago, but it was her sense of community spirit and her relentless passion for the written word that shaped the book sale into such a big part of the community. All I've done is to try to follow in her footsteps.”

“Yes, I understand that volunteers helping at the book sale actually have the experience count towards college credit, can be quantified as a property tax rebate, and several other incentives, and this was all on the late Mrs. Carson's initiative?”

“Yes, I understand that volunteers helping at the book sale actually have the experience count towards college credit, can be quantified as a property tax rebate, and several other incentives, and this was all on the late Mrs. Carson's initiative?”

Uh, mostly. We met back when we were both volunteering at the recycling center, back before the monsters built the science lab? And there weren't many volunteers, so we passed the time joking back and forth about way we could actually get people to come in and help. I had no idea she took any of my ideas seriously until I started getting angry phone calls from City Administration.”

“As they say, if it seems strange but works, it isn't strange. For any listeners out there unfamiliar with the intricacies of the book sale, can you explain where the books come from and where the money goes to?”

“Oh, most of the books are actually donations. People's personal books that they've outgrown or are no longer interested in, books from liquidated estates, donations from storage units that have defaulted. Less than five percent are actually librarby books that have gone out of circulation. All proceeds go to the summer reading program, to provide children with books and activities and special shirts, with a different design every year! It's not just a way of promoting literacy, and it's not simply glorified day care as some members of the community have called it-”

“Like Riled Up Riley. Stupid sunnovabigot.”
“GAH! Oh. Hey Mr. Van Garret. I totally didn't hear you sneak up on me just now.”

“Yeah, I uh... I get that a lot for some reason.”

“Well, since you're here, perhaps you can provide the KEBT listeners with your insight into the Librarby book sale and what you do?”

“...It's not that complex Mr. Zimmerman. We offer used books in exchange for money. People bring money in exchange for books. We use the money to promote literacy. People read the books to learn things or be entertained, or in a perfect world both. All I do is move the heavy boxes from the storage unit to the librarby and back again when the sale is done. Oh, and get rid of the pests. It's not exactly rocket science. Although the fact that I have a degree in aeronautical engineering does confuse things.”

“Now, our listeners couldn't see you do the finger quotes when you said the word pests so if I may clarify, you mean the assorted members of the Anti Monster League.”

“I don't like to use the name. It implies they have some sort of legitimacy. But yes, those guys. Dwayne Riley, his drinking buddies, and every other ne'er-do-well in this town with giant egos and tiny... brains. Tiny brains is exactly what I planned on saying the whole time, and not other parts of the body. Though if I were to say another part of the body, that too would be disproportionately small compared to everything else, causing members of the opposite sex to laugh uproariously upon seeing it.”

“Do you really think it's a good idea to antagonize Mr. Riley and his associates like that? He's gotten increasingly confrontational since the group started.”

“If he has a problem, he knows where to find me. He's certainly never had any problems doing it before. Or running away crying like the baby he is when we're done.”

“...right. Well, that's enough tempting fate for me. Back to you Lindsey!”

“Uh, this is Beanpole Levine. We had to cut Lindsey's mic because she started snoring into it. Sorry about that everyone. So it's me and Clutch right now. Clutch, what do you say we toss it up to Gary Welkin for the traffic update?”

“Wait, he's okay to fly now?”

“...oh. I hope so. I saw him out at the helipad this morning.”

“Yeah, yeah, let's check up on Gary. Gary? Can you hear us? What's it look like up to Gary Welkin for the traffic update?”

“Wait, he's okay to fly now?”

“...oh. I hope so. I saw him out at the helipad this morning.”

“Yeah, yeah, let's check up on Gary. Gary? Can you hear us? What's it look like up there?”

“Clutch, it looks like a small town, as seen from a great height! Cars are moving back and forth on streets! Trucks are loading and unloading cargo! Huge crowds are milling around All Fine Labs, in a festivity of recycling the likes of which I have never before seen in my life! And the lighting! The lighting is amazing Clutch! It's almost like I'm in a real helicopter!”

“...what?”

“Gary, it's Beanpole, uhm, for the sake of the people at home what the hell do you think you're doing?!”

“There's no need to get impatient, you can have a turn in the simulator when I am good and done with it!”
“...Gary, you're not in a simulator. You're in an actual helicopter.”

“Don't be absurd! There's no way I am fit to operate any sort of heavy equipment, let alone an aircraft, while under the influence of these pills! All I'm doing is keeping my hand in and my skills sharp until such time as I can once again take to the beautiful blue sky that is my true abode!”

“Yes, we all know you love flying Gary, but you really need to come down. On multiple levels.”

“This is more than a love of flying, Clutch! This is my true nature! I am a bird trapped in a traffic reporter's body and long have I searched in vain for a means to free my spirit from the drudgery of gravity, and to a lesser extent the other three fundamental forces of the universe!”

“Yeah, you're well on your way there already. Just... just land the simulator before you leave it alright? We're... uh... trying to get some achievements that require extended flight time.”

“I'll see what I can do! Hold on, I can see something breaking through the clouds... It's Hotei, one of the seven Japanese gods of fortune, and he has nachos! I think I've unlocked some sort of mini-game, I will get back to you later!”

“...hey Clutch?"

“Yeah?"

“We should really move on from that.”

“Yeah.”

“Did he say something about All Fine Labs?

“Yeah, let's, uh, let's toss it over to them.”

“Brett, Burgie, it's Beanpole Levine at KEBT FM. How are you guys doing at the lab?”

“Hey Beanpole, it's The Brett at All Fine Labs and things have gotten a little bit complicated. To make a long story short, the Anti-Monster League has shown up to protest the Soul Research program. I'm seeing a lot of religious iconography on the protest signs but so far nobody has thrown any frozen citrus, so there's room for hope I suppose. Some of the volunteers are making rude gestures and exchanging vulgar epithets in turn. Fortunately the Ebott's Wake Police Department is here and is making an attempt to keep the groups separated. Or at least prevent an all out fight- oh, the doors are opening... it's uh, it's that new guy. Dr. Gaster. I mean Aster.”

“Attention! Attention please! Thank you for bearing with us, I apologize for the late start. The vacuum tubes take a while to warm up. Any prospective volunteers, in a few minutes Sans and Mr. Cavenaugh will come outside to receive you. When that happens, please come inside and check in at the security desks. You'll get a temporary ID badge for today. Dr. Alphys has told me that they are printing the T-shirts as fast as possible, but there may still be some waiting involved. Once you have your badge, please follow the security guards and they will direct you towards the research lab. The technician will explain the procedure.”

“Alright, you heard him, looks like this is going to be a going concern really quickly. Oh, he's heading over here. Dr. Aster! Dr. Aster! Brett Brinkman, KEBT!”

“Ah, you must be the gentleman Dr. Alphys spoke to on the phone the other day. Glad to see you made it.”
“So am I. I understand this is your first responsibility as a member of All Fine Labs?”

“Considering I was only officially hired yesterday, yes, chronologically that checks out. Soul Research has been one of those projects that was on the proverbial to do list for a long time and now it's finally coming to pass. Everyone on the team is ecstatic about what we might learn.”

“Now, to address the elephant in the room – or outdoors waving picket signs as the case may be. One of the biggest reasons this research came under so much fire in the first place, was that the word soul has a tremendous number of religious and philosophical connotations and associations. Dr. Alphys' original paper stirred up a hornets nest of conflicting believers, disbelievers, skeptics and so on. What would you like to say to listeners out there who are confused, annoyed or threatened by the implied conflicts with their personal beliefs?”

“Well, obviously I can't address each person's concerns individually, but in the broadest sense I can say this: The idea of the Soul in the sense of a non corporeal influence over a corporeal body has been implicitly accepted in most human religions and accepted as an everyday fact of life by monsters. We have compiled no evidence for or against any of the associated belief systems that postulated a Soul as a key principle. Insofar as religions seem to be competing with each other up here, which is the way it was explained to me, nothing has changed. The theological playing field is still level. In regards to the specific concerns voiced by the Anti-Monster League, I can only say that refusing to educate yourself on subjects that are well known to the people you claim are your enemies is a very self-defeating arrangement.”

“Heh. That'd be nice.”

“Is your friend alright?”

“What? Oh yeah. Burgie just had a late night. And day. And night. Hey, Burgie, wake up!”

“HAVE A FAB-U-FUL DAY- oh thank god. It was just a dream. A horrible, horrible dream.”

“Come on man, get out of the van. We're about to head inside.”

“Alright alright. Jeeze.”

“Wait your tail, Burgie your tail-”

“AGH SUNNOVASANDWICHEATINGPERSNICKETYPOODLEMOTHERHUBBARD!”

“...nice save. Doctor, whenever you're ready.”

“Alright then. If you'll follow me.”

“Listeners, we are inside the lab now, Burgie and myself are signing in. Dr. Aster if I may ask a personal question, how does working for All Fine Labs compare to your work in the Underground?”

“Well, it's my first day but I'm already missing having access to a theoretically unlimited supply of geothermal energy. Right this way. You can see the scanner through this window.”

“Wow. That looks... REALLY unsafe.”

“Those sawhorses and warning lights aren't just for decoration. The chains are rated at seven times the weight of the instrument, fortunately. Come on in. I uh, gather from your enthusiasm that you'd like to go first?”
“I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious. What do you need me to do?”

“Just stand inside that box outline on the floor. I'll set up the recording and imaging software to run on automatic for now, but someone will be in here later to verify the information was received properly. Just stand there for a second... uh, you don't need to be perfectly still, just not move outside the box.... alright... wasn't expecting that but that's within the margin of error anyway... alright. Come over and take a look at this.”

“Alright. I am looking at a computer screen. That's a picture of me just now, and... doc I think your camera's broken, everything's gone all blue.”

“No, that's apparently what's supposed to happen. Let me adjust this... okay, here. Turned down the gain. Right here, in the center of your chest? That blue pulsing light? That, Mr. Brinkman, is your soul. The essence of everything that makes you who and what you are.”

“...neat.”

“Granted, it seems a little underwhelming when you look at it like this, but there's more to it than that. If I bring up this recording of me testing it earlier, you'll see that the pulsing light is solid white. And if DJ Pantz was to stand in front of the scanner, we'd get the same result. Monster souls, under spectroscopic analysis, always read monochromatic white. But human souls don't. And the reason why is one of many things we hope to learn from this test study.”

“Sorry Doctor, I don't mean to rain on your science parade, but it does kind of seem anti-climactic.”

“Oh. That's just because I forgot to click this check box. One moment.”

“Alright, what just happened? I see a bunch of numbers and letters.”

“These are your soul's vital statistics. The scanner was able to analyze the energy signature coming from it and break it down into an abstraction for the sake of convenience.”

“LV? EXP? This actually looks like a character sheet for a role playing game.”

“...I'll have to ask what that is later. LV and EXP are, like everything else on this list, acronyms. LV stands for Level of Violence. It's a way of quantifying the ability of the soul to inflict and withstand harm. EXP means Execution Points, which is a way of quantifying the capacity of the soul's ability to cause suffering. Your EXP is zero, which means you haven't killed or tortured anyone in your life. Good job.”

“Wait, a machine can determine that??”

“Broadly speaking, yes. Soul energy is dynamic. It interacts with the world around it, not just the body it resides in. Harming another living organism enough so that their soul hemorrhages energy leaves a trace signature. Like static on a radio signal, by way of comparison. It can't pinpoint actual connections between different souls, so even if we had somebody come in here with a high LV, we couldn't match them up to anyone they hurt or killed. Speaking of which, your LV is one. That's the baseline. Essentially it means you have a working immune system.”

“Well, that's good to know.”

“Moving on to the more advanced attributes... AT 4, DF 9. Very nice.”

“And those mean what exactly?”
“AT stands for Aggression Transfer. Broadly speaking it's your ability to exert your will on the world in a destructive manner, which is of paramount concern if you happen to be fighting monsters. DF is the counterpart of that, and stands for Defensive Field; the capacity of your soul to divert or deflect aggressive energy away when it is attacked. Again, not that important unless you're fighting monsters, because the conventions of human society and technology emphasize the physical.”

“So... you're saying Burgie and I definitely shouldn't be arm wrestling to decide who gets the last can of cream soda in the vending machine.”

“What? ...oh, that's not the same at all. That's fine. Like I said, AT stands for Aggression Transfer. If you're not actually angry and actively trying to hurt anyone, you'd be lucky to inflict even the bare minimum of damage, which would regenerate in minutes if not seconds. It's also worth noting that AT has also been called ATK, for Aggression Transfer, Kinetic; the ability to inflict harm requires a physical connection to complete the, uh, I guess you'd call it a circuit, even if it oversimplifies. Likewise DF can be DEF, for Defensive Emotional Field, since disposition can influence the ability to deflect hostile energy. Broadly speaking though, ATK fell out of favor because... well, it was cumbersome. Some literature still uses it though.”

“What's HP stand for? Hit Points?”

“You know, that's not a bad analogy? It stands for Healing Potential. Your soul's ability to regenerate from damage and interference. More is nice to have because it means you're less likely to be impaired through injury, illness or magical disruption, but honestly as long as you have even a fraction of Healing Potential – and I mean even less than 1, in the decimals – you'll be alright. The ability of the Soul to generate energy ex nihilo like that makes a mockery of Thermodynamics as it is commonly understood. If it hits zero though, that means the energy has been destabilized too much and the soul loses connection to the body, resulting in death.”

“...okay, I only have twenty five out of twenty five. Should I be concerned about that? Start eating right? Exercise? Drinking wheat grass smoothies?”

“Those are all related to your physical body's functionality. And I'm not that kind of doctor. As for your HP value this is better than average, so you're doing quite well. So there's two more values. SPD 6 and INV 3. SPD means Shortest Path to Destination and it actually quantifies your mental acuity and reflexes, how quickly you react psychologically. Which does, of course, affect how quickly you react physically.”

“That's a bit of a cumbersome phrase.”

“Well, it's a bit archaic and refers to a model of consciousness as a simple electrical circuit. I always wanted to update it... anyway, INV stands for Induction Vector. When anyone's Soul is harmed, the disruption in energy creates eddy currents, in the same way that a magnet does in a wire. Have you ever done that trick where you drop a magnet into a copper pipe and it falls slower because of the counter current?”

“No, but I've seen Youtube videos of it.”

“Well, it's the same principle. The resulting counter current in the soul pushes back any further incoming energy, no matter how great it is, until the counter current dissipates. Most historians think that's why we lost the War ages ago – we could only do so much damage at a time and had to wait for the INV effect to wear off, but humans didn't have the same limitation when attacking physically. This also resulted in monster duels and ritualized combat being highly structured, and all of that goes right out the window during a war. My father, Semi Serif Aster, found a way
around that... or, at least, that's what he said. Never found any notes of his, and not for lack of looking, since it seemed like it would help on the Barrier project.”

“Wow. This is a lot to wrap my head around at once.”

“Then don't wrap your head around it, man! Wrap it around your head instead!”

“Damn, Burgie. You're practically sleepwalking at this point. Why did you even come in this morning?”

“Hey, hey, HEY! I'M NOT ASLEEP AS YOU DRUNK I AM!”

“...what??”

“I dunno man, it was like this when I got here.”

“...perhaps we can find an empty meeting room for your co-host to lie down in.”

“Thanks, I'd appreciate it and so would he. Okay, you heard it here first, listeners. Souls are real, they can apparently be analyzed into whole number values, and apparently if you ever hurt somebody, it's as plain as day to this thing. I'm Brett “The Brett” Brinkman carrying... oof... DJ Pantz in a fireman carry... signing off. Back to you guys in the studio.”
“Alright everyone! That was a good session! You really pulled out all the stops!” Undyne grinned at the assorted exhausted kids, both human and monster. “I bet you all really worked up an appetite, I know I did! Class is dismissed, so go get something to eat and drink! Frisk hold up a minute.”

Frisk looked up from the grass that was currently occupying all of their attention, lest they throw up on it. Undyne made a motion to come closer to her, so Frisk reluctantly stopped leaning up against the playground fence and walked over.

“You're looking a little woozy there punk.”

“That always happens after gym class, and it's not just me.” As if to illustrate the point, a young rabbit flopped over on his back on the grass near the door to the school building.

“That's it. I'm dead. Shouldn't have pulled out that last stop.”

The rabbit was poked by a slime with a stick held out in a gooey, see-through pseudopod. “You're not dead.”

“Just wait a minute then.”

“If you're dying can I have your Mr. Baseball cap?”

“How about no?”

“Well, you're not going to be using it. Unless you want your dust on it.”

“Are you crazy, that would ruin the resale value!”

“Then what's the problem?”

“OH MY GAWD!” Undyne leaped over and landed by the rabbit, picking him up and setting him on his feet. “You can't die from training, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger!”

“That's not what it feels like is happening to me right now.”

Undyne narrowed her eye in annoyance. “Just go get a drink, and head to the cafeteria and chow down. Five bucks says you'll feel better.”

“I don't have five bucks. I have...” the rabbit checked his pockets, “two dollars, fourteen cents and two root beer bottle caps. And a Canadian penny.”

“Just as well, pretty sure Toriel doesn't want people gambling on school grounds. Just do it anyway. Consider it an extra credit assignment.”

“Fine,” the rabbit said with a tone of frustrated resignation. The slime followed him into the building and Frisk caught the beginning of some conversation about sports before the doors shut.

“I can't believe how lazy kids are these days. When I was younger I was running around all over the place! Now the only kids I know who put in a 100% in gym class are you, Cinnamon and Poncho.”
“Well, you're a higher energy person Undyne. Nobody else looks at a thunderstorm and thinks 'challenge accepted' like you do.”

“Challenge BEATEN, you mean!” Undyne cackled. “Oh, before I forget, Alphys told me to give you this.” Undyne reached into her pocket and pulled out a blank business mail envelope that had been folded over. Frisk unfolded it and pulled out a badge that said 'All Fine Labs Research Group – Temporary' on it.

“She says that's good for today only, so strike while the iron is hot. Also something about how the bar code is registered to somebody named Alex Carson in the database so nothing will get traced back to you. Just be sure to wear that at all times while in the lab, okay?”

“Got it. Thanks for helping me out, Undyne.”

“Well, technically I'm helping Alphys, but if I can help somebody else at the same time why not? Oh, one more thing. You can't eat any monster food before this test thing.” Undyne's eye narrowed to a slit and she frowned at Frisk. “Wait... just a moment... did you know about that and skip breakfast??”

Frisk shrugged and nodded at the same time. “I heard Alphys talk to Mr. Brinkman on the radio yesterday. Monster food could produce a false result. It's alright though. They're serving refreshments after it and if worst comes to pass I can grab a bag of chisps from the vending machine. Also tonight is New Recipe Night. I'm teaching mom how to make Meatball Soup.”

“That sounds... really disgusting.”

“I think it's Greek but I'm not sure. Anyway, lunch break's already started, so I better get moving.”

“Right! Run! Run like the wind!”

Frisk grinned and headed back inside the school building-

“whoa, where are you off to in such a hurry?”

-and almost collided with Sans. Frisk swallowed and would have started to sweat from nerves, if Undyne's physical education regimen hadn't already taken care of that.

“To... eat lunch. Because it's almost lunchtime and also I just got out of PE class and worked up an appetite.”

The skeleton winked. “don't sweat it kid. Alphys told me all about your little secret mission while we were setting up the printer.”

Frisk raised an eyebrow. “All about it?”

“well, enough. need a lift?”

“If you mean one of your shortcuts, wouldn't the magic mess up the test results?”

“nah, we actually just tested that about twenty minutes ago. before and after scans. no difference. not even a flicker on the analog readout. very strange, but there's probably a whole paper just in that one test result.” Sans winked. “normally i wouldn't bother with it, but i got another e-mail this morning from that one guy at Cambridge University who's still convinced we're all humans in really good costumes playing an elaborate hoax. the opportunity to pester him with electrodynamics puns is just too good to pass up.”
“Can't he, you know, come here and see for himself?”

“nah, that'd be too much work. Dr. Matheson is a man after my own heart, or he would be if i had one,” Sans tapped his ribcage through his shirt. “so waddaya say?”

“Well... it would save time. And after Undyne's PE class I'm not sure my legs will work well enough to operate my bike, so that kind of put Plan A out of action.”

“exactly. let's get rolling. or not rolling as the case may be.”

Sans walked towards the doors leading back out to the playground and Frisk followed him. The doors opened, they walked through the threshold together-

-and stepped out into Sans' office at the lab. Somehow against all known laws of physics and magic, it had gotten even more cluttered than the last time Frisk had seen it.

“I see you're still working on that sock dimension theory.”

“oh, you laugh now, but one day there's gonna be spaceships heading to the stars, communicating in real time with earth and each other using advanced laundry technology, all thanks to yours truly.” Sans opened the door again and walked outside, then pulled out his cell phone and held it up to the side of his skull as he shut the door. Moments later Frisk's own phone began buzzing, with Sans on the other end.

“Yeah, you might want to hold off on that for right now. Lots of people running around, busier than man on a pogo stick on a trampoline. Which is pretty busy even if I don't know what it means. Problem is, Riley and his buddies are hanging outside with picket signs and surprisingly catchy slogans, so everyone's a little high strung.”

Frisk added up the many footsteps coming from the hallway outside the office and Sans' choice of words over the phone. “So I just need to get in line for the study, and then I won't stand out.”

“That's about the best we can hope for. Having said that, I hope you have a backup plan in place once all the cards are on the table. I mean, you don't put a paper out into the public eye like this and not have somebody somewhere start tearing it apart.”

Frisk clipped the badge to the pocket on their shirt. “I was just going to put it down to being the ambassador and putting my money where my mouth was after Riley called into the radio yesterday about the study being some elaborate trap or ruse or scheme. That probably won't fly with mom, so if she finds out, I'm just going to say I wanted my own Dwayne Riley is an Imbecile T-Shirt, and just take the grounding or whatever happens after that. It'll be worth it if this test tells us anything useful.”

“Hey, I do respect your position, and the limitations on your actions because of that position. But I still have to say that you're putting all your eggs in one basket here. These experiments, they might not lead to anything useful when all is said and done. And even if there is something useful in the results, it might take weeks, months, or years of comparative analysis to find it.”

“It's still a step in the right direction. And if it isn't, I can cross it off the list. If I had a list. I should make a list.”

“Make it later. Coast is finally clear. Get out here and get moving.”

Frisk hung up and checked the badge one more time before opening the door. Outside Sans was holding up one hand and a “Magic Eye” picture was glowing blue and floating up to the wall next
to the office door on the opposite side of the hallway. With his other hand Sans pointed down the hallway.

“This might buy you some time just in case. Go.”

“Gone. Thanks again.”

The Soul Research Lab was easy enough to locate, given that there were signs pointing towards it at every major intersection. It took less than thirty seconds for Frisk to find the end of the line of people waiting outside the lab. Looking through the window, they blinked at the huge, cobbled together machine; while it didn't look exactly like the huge skull shaped DT Extractor down in the Hotland laboratory basement, there did seem to be some resemblances. Two antennas stuck out of one side next to each other and pointed towards the box where different subjects stood, and in the spaces that would have resembled eye sockets on the Extractor there were large wheels with lights spinning around on circular tracks inside. Glass tubes with glowing wires, but not exactly light bulbs, stuck out in various spots.

“Looks like it was made out of stuff they found in the trash, doesn't it?”

Frisk looked up at the sound and noticed the person ahead of them in the line, a man in a gray suit with a round hat under one arm, was looking down at them.

“Well, they do run the recycling program.”

“Even so,” said the man, but no other comment seemed forthcoming. The line moved forward for a few seconds and Frisk counted the people they could see ahead of them in the line and inside the lab through the window. It seemed to be taking about a minute for each person, and there were at least thirty people in line. Plenty of time to get everything done and back before geography class started.

Probably.

After nearly half an hour, the initial estimate had been revised upward and the nervous sweat had started again. So focused was Frisk on the line in front of them that they didn't notice the figure on the other side of the window until it tapped on the glass. Frisk turned and saw Dr. Aster with one finger bone up against the window, and in the other hand was a small dry erase board.

\[ u \text{ here 4 test?} \]

Frisk nodded. Dr. Aster pulled a marker out of the pocket of his lab coat, took off the cap with his teeth, then scribbled below his first message.

\[ \text{school trip?} \]

Frisk shook their head, and a hollow feeling began to grow in the pit of their stomach. If Dr. Aster was in charge of the tests, but was the only person not involved in Alphys’ plan, then it was all for nothing. Not only would Alphys not only not be able to get the data, but the doctor would probably be both too honest to agree to subterfuge, and too persistent to let things go until he had answers for everything. Toriel would find out, Alphys would be in trouble, and so would Sans and Undyne for helping her-

More tapping mercifully dragged Frisk from the death-spiral of worry they were caught in.

\[ \text{lunch break?} \]
Frisk nodded and smiled.

Dr. Aster scribbled some more.

**how long?**

Frisk pulled out their cell phone, pulled up the text feature and typed in **till 100** and held it up so the doctor could see it. Dr. Aster nodded and walked away. Frisk turned the phone around and-

The chiming noise indicating 'text sent' startled the child and they almost dropped the phone in surprise. Frisk scrambled to check where they had accidentally sent the message-

12:34 PM Mrs. Momedian: What does 'till 100' mean my child?

“Oh no.” Frisk muttered, and began typing and thinking furiously.

12:35 PM: sorry that wasn't meant 4 you, it was meant 4 sans

12:36 PM: he was asking about movie sequels and asked how high the numbers could go

12:36 PM: it was a joke ;)

12:37 PM Mrs. Momedian: Oh, I see now.

Frisk took a deep breath. The crisis seemed to be averted, at least momentarily. Dr. Aster appeared at the end of the hallway and motioned for Frisk to come towards him.

“Sans said something about you coming by if time permitted. Come on, we'll take the back way in and you can cut in at the front as soon as we're done with the next tester.”

“That's great. Thank you so much, I was starting to get-”

Frisk's phone chimed again and they let out a ragged sigh. “Worried.”

12:39 PM Mrs. Momedian: Actually now I am curious, how high can movie sequel numbers actually go?

12:40 PM: not sure

12:40 PM: think it varies with the studio

12:40 PM: trilogies are always popular

12:41 PM: but some series have gone up to 7

12:41 PM: they aren't that good tho

12:41 PM: just cashing in on the franchise

12:43 PM Mrs. Momedian: I see. Thank you for the lesson. :)  

12:44 PM: all in a days work for THE AMBASSADOR

12:44 PM: i must go, my planet needs me
“Alright, Frisk, we're all set. Just stand in that box marked on the floor.”

Frisk hurried over to the marked area and turned to look at the scanner. Dr. Aster walked over to the computer and began typing.

“Alright... whoa, that can't be accurate. And that can't be physically possible. Frisk, you didn't eat any monster food before you came down today, right?”

“No, nothing.”

“Huh. Well, these readings don't make any sense...” Dr. Aster turned to look at Frisk and immediately focused on the cell phone in their hand. “Wait... that's Alphys' work, right? THAT must be what's throwing off the readings. Let me take that off your hands and we'll try again.”

A minute later, Dr. Aster was still frowning at the readings. “Well. This hasn't shown up before, but at least we're not getting number fluctuations this time.”

“What is it? What's wrong?”

Dr. Aster shrugged and made a dismissive noise in his... whatever the skeleton equivalent of a throat was. “I wouldn't say anything's wrong. LV 1, EXP 0, like I expected anything else. And everything else is within today's range, although having AT and DF default to zero is new for today. HP is twenty over nineteen, which proves' Sans' vital magnetism induction theory... looks like I owe him a bottle of ketchup.”

The doctor grabbed the mouse and clicked through a few windows. “The problem is this.”

Frisk looked at the picture of themselves staring at the scanner, and the false color overlay of red light, or rather, several splotches of red light clustered together.

“Wait. Does this mean my soul is literally broken?”

“Hah! Not likely. If your soul was broken you'd be dead. This is probably some sort of oscillation effect the scanner doesn't know how to resolve. What jumps out at me is your LV CAP.”

“What's that? Sans explained LV and EXP to me back in the underground but he never mentioned that. What does it stand for?”

Dr. Aster shook his head. “CAP in this case isn't an acronym. It's shorthand for Capacity. Your LV CAP is a hard limit on how high your Level of Violence can get before it can't go any higher; it's the point at which even the most hardened, cruel sadist starts being worn down by the violence they see in the world or inflict on others.”

Dr. Aster turned a curious eye light towards Frisk. “Everyone so far has varied, but the highest has been ten and the lowest has been five. Except you. Your LV CAP is twenty.”

Frisk swallowed and the lab suddenly seemed simultaneously too hot and too cold. “What... what does that mean? About me?”

“...nothing. It doesn't actually matter because your LV is 1 and I can't see that ever going higher.” The skeleton smiled and winked. “Worst it can do is skew the test result averages.” Dr. Aster turned back towards the computer and recoiled in surprise. “Oh hell. You've got to be back at school in less than five minutes. Alright. First things first, here's your phone back.”
Dr. Aster handed the cell phone back to Frisk and then turned to a human in a lab coat monitoring some equipment lining the walls of the lab and scribbling things down on a clipboard. “Hey, Stanton right? Joe Stanton? I need you to manage the scanner while I step out for five minutes.”

“Hey, you're the doc, doc.”

“Thanks, you're a life saver. Come on Frisk.” Dr. Aster quickly walked out of the lab and into the hallway and held out his hand. “Here, hold on tight.”

“Are we going to do a shortcut?”

Dr. Aster blinked. “Is that what Sans calls it?”

“Yeah. I never had to hold his hand though.”

“Humor an old man who's had too many experiments explode in his face.”

Frisk grasped the hand while looking at the cracks stemming from the doctor's eye sockets in a new light. “How many experiments was that?”

“More than enough.”

Blue light surrounded the two and in a flash they were in the Dreemurr Elementary School playground. Dr. Aster relaxed his grip and Frisk let go.

“Thanks again, Doctor Aster!” Frisk ran inside the building, joining the tail end of all the other students scrambling to make it to class on time.

“No problem. Study hard.” Another blue flash of light and the doctor vanished. Back in the lab hallway, Dr. Aster pulled out his own cell phone.

12:58 PM: Sans? Are you in the lab right now?

12:58 PM SockPuppet90: yeah waiting on kid

12:58 PM SockPuppet90: running outta time

12:58 PM: Don't worry, I took care of it.

12:59 PM: Frisk is back at the school right now.

12:59 PM SockPuppet90: o thats good

12:59 PM SockPuppet90: thx

1:00 PM: Meet me in the scanner lab ASAP. There's some test results I think you need to see.

1:00 PM SockPuppet90: sure thing

1:00 PM SockPuppet90: wait is this about the kid's scan

1:01 PM SockPuppet90: dad what's going on?

1:01 PM SockPuppet90: dad??
1:02 PM: Just get here, as fast as you can.
“Excuse me, Your Majesty?”

“Oh? Is someone there?” Asgore said in surprise. “Just a moment! I have almost finished watering these flowers.”

“It's alright. Take your time.”

Asgore drained the watering can onto the last dry spot on the throne room floor. “Here we are!”

The king put down the watering can and turned around. “Howdy! How can I...”

Chara?

Asgore took a step back, almost crushing several of the golden flowers behind him. A second look dismissed his earlier knee jerk reaction; while a human child clearly stood in front of him, it obviously wasn't Chara. It couldn't have been, anyway; the king chalked it up to wishful thinking.

That resemblance, though...

“Oh.”

The human held up a hand in greetings. “Hi. Uhm. I think we need to talk. Before we fight, if possible. Is that okay?”

The king stared at the child. “...I so badly want to ask you, 'Would you like a cup of tea?' but... you know how it is.”

“Yeah...”

Asgore walked over to one of the windows of the throne room, looking down on the myriad buildings that made up the city of New Home.

Stay strong, Asgore. You have to be strong. You have to do this. Everyone is counting on you.

“Nice day today, huh?” The king asked, turning back to the human. “Birds are singing, flowers are blooming... perfect weather for a game of catch.”

“Yeah, it's pretty great. I... I don't suppose you'd rather decide the fate of humans and monsters with a ball game? Or... I guess that's just wishful thinking, huh.”

Asgore nodded. “You know what we must do.”

The human nodded. “Uh huh... I have a pretty good idea of what's going to happen next.”

“When you are ready, come into the next room.”

Asgore turned and walked towards the back of the throne room, and heard the rustling of flowers behind him as the human followed in his footsteps.

“How tense...” Asgore found himself filling in the silence, more out of nerves than anything else. “Just think of it like... a visit to the dentist.”
“Well. If I had a choice between getting a cavity filled and getting my soul ripped out, I, heh, I think I'd pick the latter. Human dentists suck.” The human child smiled nervously.

Asgore stopped at the end of the Barrier Antechamber. “Are you ready? If you are not, I understand. I am not ready either.” Stepping through the arch, the king looked up at the Barrier.

Years before, after one awful night that cost him everything, looking at the Barrier steeled his resolve. An insult, a rebuke, that would one day be returned ten times, a hundred times, even a thousand times over on the humans. But, day by day, that had faded.

Now he just felt empty.

“This is the Barrier. This is what keeps us all trapped underground.”

“It makes my eyes hurt just to look at it.”

“If... if by chance you have any unfinished business... please do what you must.”

“The only thing I have left to do is talk. And... I know it sounds like I'm stalling for time when I put it like that. But please hear me out.”

Asgore said nothing, and the child cleared their throat nervously.

“I know... I know what happened to your family. I know how angry you must be. With me and everyone else on the surface. And after what's happened to all of you... you should be angry. There may not be a way to end this peacefully. But I don't want to kill you.”

Behind him, Asgore heard the clattering of metal on stone.

“So I won't. I won't hurt you. No matter what. This is where my journey ends.”

Asgore turned around and stared at the human, wide-eyed with surprise.

“When I first fell down into the Underground, I was scared. I didn't know where I was or what was going on. All I could think about was finding a way out and going back home. But I was so scared that I forgot why I climbed Mt. Ebott in the first place. There's no place for me on the surface. And there's no place for me down here either. Story of my life.”

The child was staring down at the floor, their bangs hiding their eyes, but Asgore could see tears leaving tracks on the child's face. Next to one foot was a cast iron frying pan, forgotten.

“So. I'm the last piece of the puzzle you need for monsters to go free. Here I am. All I ask in return is that you don't destroy humanity. There are cruel people up there. Terrible people. Humans even worse than me, and you'll have to protect your subjects from them. But there are good humans too. People who will accept you with open arms, if you just give them a chance.”

The child wiped away their tears with the back of one shirt sleeve. “All I ever wanted was for everyone to have a happy ending. I didn't realize... until it was almost too late... that I can't be a part of it. But I've come to terms with that. Alright. I've stalled long enough.”

Asgore closed his eyes. “…I see. This is it then. Ready?”

The human began to shake, but did not run or give any indication of getting ready to run. “As I'll ever be.”

_Is it really just a resemblance?_
Asgore blinked and looked again at the shaking human child. “Human... it was nice to meet you.”

The child nodded, and Asgore could hear a faint, hoarse whisper. “You too.”

“Goodbye.”

The human flinched, but stood their ground. Beneath his cloak, Asgore's hands began to shake. In his minds eye he had pictured a terrible battle, a human warrior against a boss monster. But all the others had fallen before they reached the castle. And the one that finally did was a *child*? It didn't make sense.

No, that was an excuse. It didn't matter if it made sense or not; Asgore's hands betrayed his real concern. He did not want to fight. And the fact that it wouldn't be a fight, but a murder... that didn't make it better. Not by a long shot-

The room was suddenly brightly lit, instead of intermittently filled with the waxing and waning illumination of Barrier-filtered sunlight. Asgore looked up just in time to brace himself against a blast of flame; he was still struck with enough force to fly back against the Barrier, which rejected his collision like it did everything else and sent him sprawling.

“What a terrible creature, torturing a poor, innocent youth...”

*That voice!*

“Toriel?!” The child, sounding surprised, confused, and elated all at once.

“Do not fear. It is I, Toriel, your friend and guardian.”

Asgore managed to open one eye and saw the child run towards Toriel and hug her leg. “I- I tried to call you so many times b-but I never got an answer, I thought I'd never... that you had.... What are you doing here?”

Toriel smiled at the child. “At first, I thought I would let you make your journey alone. But I could not stop worrying about you. Your adventure must have been so treacherous...”

The smile vanished. “And ultimately, it would burden you with a horrible choice. To leave this place, you would have had to take the life of another person. You would have to defeat Asgore. However, I realized... I cannot allow that. It is not right to sacrifice someone simply to let someone leave here. Is that not what I have been trying to prevent this whole time? So, for now, let us suspend this battle. As terrible as Asgore is, he deserves mercy, too.”

“It's not like that, Toriel. We talked. We... we worked it out. The war is over-”

The ringing in Asgore's head finally stopped and he could contain himself no longer. Pulling himself upright, he walked towards the woman he had missed for so long.

“Tori... You came back-”

“DO NOT TORI ME, DREAMMURR.” With one hand she pushed the human child behind her, while the other pointed straight at him, and the look on her face plus the tone of her voice hit him harder than any fireball. “You pathetic whelp. If you really wanted to free our kind, you could have gone through the barrier after you got one soul, taken six souls from the humans, then come back and freed everyone peacefully.”

Toriel's hard expression became sadder and more disappointed, which somehow hurt even more.
“But instead, you made everyone live in despair because you would rather wait here, meekly hoping another human never comes.”

Asgore closed his eyes, unable to look at that face anymore. “Tori... you're right. I am a miserable creature... but, do you think we can at least be friends again?”

“NO, Asgore!”

“Stop! Stop fighting!” The human child broke free from Toriel's grip and stood between the two boss monsters, holding out their arms as if they were trying to shield Asgore from Toriel's words, an image so bizarre it would have made Asgore laugh in any other situation. “Please, stop. Asgore was angry and he lost everything and he didn't know what else to do. And I wondered why he didn't just use one soul when he had the chance to leave and get more. But isn't that important on its own? He wasn't willing to go out and kill people just to free everyone. He kept trying to get me to put off the fight. He doesn't want to hurt anyone! Please, just... hold onto that. That might not seem like much right now but that's everything-”

“NGAAAAAAAH ASGORE! Human! Nobody fight each other!”

Asgore, Toriel and the child all looked towards the entrance to the antechamber, where Captain Undyne had barged in. She seemed about to say something, but then looked at Toriel and her expression shifted from ordinary aggression to confused aggression.

“Everyone's going to make friends, or else I'll... I'll...”

“Hey Undyne!” The human waved.

“Hello. I am Toriel. Are you the human's friend? It is nice to meet you!”

“Uh, yeah? Nice to meet you!” Undyne leaped over and landed next to Asgore. “Hey Asgore, is that your ex? Jeeze. That's rough, buddy.”

Again there was a noise at the antechamber entrance and Dr. Alphys appeared. “H-hey!Nobody hurt each other!”

“Oh, are you another friend? I am Toriel. Hello!”

“Uh... h-h-h-hi.” Dr. Alphys looked at the human and said something Asgore couldn't quite hear. The human child simply grinned and shrugged, and Dr. Alphys ran up next to Captain Undyne. Before she had made it all the way over, more footsteps came from the antechamber doorway, and a tall skeleton wearing some sort of body armor and a scarf appeared.

“HEY! NOBODY FIGHT ANYONE! IF ANYONE FIGHTS ANYONE! THEN I'LL! BE FORCED! TO ASK UNDYNE FOR HELP!”

“Hello!” Toriel smiled at the skeleton, who looked at her in surprise.

“OH! HELLO, YOUR MAJESTY! PSST! HEY, HUMAN... DID ASGORE SHAVE? AND THEN... CLONE HIMSELF??” The skeleton's stage whisper carried across the entire room.

“hey guys. what's up?” Asgore was startled as a voice came from behind him, and a shorter skeleton walked up next to the human. Toriel also seemed startled, except...

“That voice!”
The queen ran over to the short skeleton and knelt down. “Hello, I think we may... know each other?”

“Oh hey. I recognize your voice, too.”

The queen smiled brightly at the skeleton... a smile that previously had been only reserved for Asgore himself. “I am Toriel. So nice to meet you.”

“the name's sans. and, uh, same.”

“Oh, wait! Then... this must be your brother, Papyrus! Greetings, Papyrus! It is so nice to finally meet you! Your brother has told me so much about you!”

“WOWIE... I CAN'T BELIEVE ASGORE'S CLONE KNOWS WHO I AM! THIS IS THE BEST DAY OF MY LIFE!”

“Hey Papyrus, what does a skeleton tile his roof with?”

“Uh... SNOW-PROOF ROOF TILES?”

Toriel giggled, and Asgore felt another pang of loss; she was about to say a joke. “No, silly! A skeleton tiles his roof with... SHIN-gles!”

The taller skeleton's screech of anger reverberated in the small space. “I CHANGED MY MIND! THIS IS THE WORST DAY OF MY LIFE!”

The human child's giggling brought Asgore back to reality for a moment... just in time for Captain Undyne to rub his face in what he had lost again, even if that wasn't her intention.

“Come on, Asgore! It's gonna be okay! There are plenty of fish in the sea...”

“Y-Yeah, Asgore! Undyne's totally right about that fish thing! S-sometimes you've just got to, uh... S-stop going after furry boss monsters and, uh... j-just get to know a really cute fish??” Dr. Alphys looked nervous and uncertain, then grinned. “It's a metaphor.”

Captain Undyne smiled. “Well. I think it's a good analogy.”

“OH MY GOD!” Asgore looked up at the sound of an exasperated electronic voice and saw some sort of mechanical monster standing just outside the antechamber, holding a camera in one hand... or maybe it had a camera for a hand. It was hard to tell. “Will you two just SMOOCH already? The audience is dying for some romantic action!”

“HEY! SHUT UP!” Captain Undyne shouted, and the monster ran off with a devious grin. “Man! The nerve of that guy! Right Alphys? ...Uh, Alphys?”

“No. He's right.” Dr. Alphys looked up at the Captain and grinned. “LET'S DO IT.”

“Well? Uh... I guess? If you want to then? Don't hold anything back!”

Captain Undyne leaned down as Dr. Alphys stood up straighter, until Toriel rushed in between them.

“Wait! Not in front of the human!”

The human child made a disappointed noise as the room was suddenly filled with laughter.
“Sorry. I, uh, got a little carried away there.” Dr Alphys grinned awkwardly.

“Hee hee hee,” Toriel giggled, and placed a paw on the child's head. “My child, it seems as if you must stay here for a while. But looking at all the great friends you have made, I think you will be happy here.”

The human smiled and rubbed their eyes with their sleeve again. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I'm okay with this~”

Asgore's vision suddenly became blurry and a moment later, immense pain registered. Something was constricting him, and it looked like everyone except the human was in the same dire strait. A flower burst from the rock and laughed a sinister laugh. Asgore's head ached just from hearing it.

“You IDIOTS! While you were having your little pow-wow, I took the human souls! Soon I'll be able to leave the underground forever, and begin my master plan! A chain of anti-vegetarian restaurants across the surface! That'll teach those humans to eat plants all the time!”

“Flowey, stop it! I defeated you before, and I'll defeat you again! Now let everyone go!

“Hee hee hee. You're very determined, aren't you Frisk? It doesn't matter how outclassed you are, or how much it hurts to hit your head against the wall. You'll do it anyway. Over and over and over. Why on earth would I do what you tell me?”

“Because... because if you don't, I'll be forced to use my special attack!”

The flower... grinned? Asgore couldn't focus well enough to be sure. On top of hurting, everything was feeling fuzzy and dizzy as well. “A special attack? You?! HAHAHAHA! Oh, THIS I've got to see!”

Frisk reached into their pockets and pulled out... a slice of pie??

“If you let my friends go, and put the souls back, I will trade you this quiche I found in Waterfall.”

The flower froze. “No! NOOOO! EGG BASED BAKED GOODS! HOW DID YOU DEDUCE MY ONE WEAKNESS?! AAAAAAGH!”

The world was filled with bright light... and just as suddenly, everything went dark. Asgore eventually opened his eyes, wincing against the sunlight-

Sunlight.

Asgore peered between furred fingers, squinting into the light. Beyond the antechamber, the Barrier was gone. Only the cave mouth could be seen, further down in the tunnel, and beyond that, the setting sun. A brilliant orange.

“Frisk... please wake up. Please.”

Asgore scrambled to his feet and turned to see everyone else in the various stages of getting up off the ground, shaking their heads, and looking at Frisk. Toriel was kneeling over the child, and looked to Asgore with a panicked expression as he walked closer. “Frisk is still breathing, but something is wrong. They're not waking up...”

Asgore looked at the child and cringed. Blood was seeping from their nostrils and the breathing was very shallow.
Much more than a resemblance.

“Frisk... please wake up. You can't come all this way just to give up.”

Asgore knelt down next to the child and took one hand in his massive paw. It was completely dwarfed... just like Chara's.

“Frisk! This is all just a bad dream! Please, wake up!”

Asgore's eyes shot open.

The darkness of the antechamber didn't greet him, but rather the early sunlight outside of the windows. Slowly he took stock of his surroundings and realized he was in his bedroom on the surface.

The clock radio on the nightstand clicked and the room was suddenly filled with a prog-rock musical jingle. “Thanks for tuning into the Morning Rush on KEBT FM! The Morning Rush has been brought to you today by Lapis Lepus brand Nice Cream! It's the frozen treat that warms your heart!”

Asgore slowly sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. There was something off about that dream, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Not that dreams had to make sense anyway.

“Good morning Ebott's Wake! You're listening to the Morning Rush with Brett 'The Brett' Brinkman and DJ Pantz! Burgie, you are looking a lot better now than you were yesterday.”

“Well, it helps that I was able to reach a time share agreement with Benjamin Franklin and three other members of the Continental Congress.”

“Really? Which ones?”

“Roger Sherman, Joseph Galloway, and Lyman Hall.”

“I'm... going to have to check those names on wikipedia later.”

“Why? These guys were born before the steam engine started catching on. They don't even know what a computer is much less how to navigate the Internet.”

“Yeah. Sure. I'm hoping all of you listeners out there paid more attention than I did in history class, and I also hope that you aren't ever forced to sign a compromise with the ghosts of two hundred year old politicians, but that's just the way things seem to go here in glorious Ebott's Wake. Come For The Monsters, Stay For The Weather.”

“Not a lot of monsters happy about that slogan, but it is both topical and accurate.”

“Sadly, yes.”

Asgore snorted and got up off the bed, the voices of Brett and DJ Pantz following him through the house into the kitchen thanks to a series of speakers wired up throughout the house, a holiday gift from Alphys the previous year. A clean kettle was procured, filled with water, and set to boil on the stove. Asgore snapped two massive fingers and a fireball drifted down from his fingers to settle under the kettle. A bundle of herbs were removed from a string of similar bundles hanging from the ceiling, and placed on the counter top next to the oven.

“Our top story this morning, the All Fine Labs Soul Research program has reported nearly seven
hundred volunteers on their first day. Dr. Alphys stated that she is, quote, 'over the moon with the response and I promise to get shirts mailed out to everybody who couldn't get theirs after the scans, as fast as we can get them made.' End quote. The experiment has also added to the amount of national media attention that Ebott's Wake has already been getting a disproportionate amount of over the last year and a half. Statements have been issued by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Electronic Frontier Foundation condemning the experiments as a violation of people's right to privacy."

“Not sure how. I mean, you have to volunteer just to get into the lab. And the thing's the size of a minivan. If Dr. Alphys could have made it smaller I think she would have. And I'm no scientist, but wouldn't you need like a whole bunch of tests to verify that all those readings were accurate? I mean, waaaaay more than just seven hundred. And what if there was a way to fake a test result? Like, obviously some people might want to make their LV seem lower than it actually is, but what if there's a way to make all of it look different?"

“Each and every one of those questions is important. Unfortunately it may be a long time before we get any answers. And I can easily see this becoming the next polygraph scandal.”

“Interesting fact, Brett: Almost all monsters can't take a polygraph test. Either the vital sign baselines are dramatically different, they fluctuate too much, or there is no equivalent. Ever tried taking the pulse for a rock or gem elemental? Spoiler alert, they don't have one.”

“Guess that would make it hard to get a job in the government.”

“I'm alright with that. I filled my lifetime quota of soul-sucking employment back in the Underground.”

Asgore chuckled and made his way into the bathroom. Opening the inside of the medicine cabinet, he pulled out a brush and began smoothing out his beard and mane.

“Of course, Dwayne Riley was none too pleased about All Fine Labs providing many citizens of Ebott's Wake with a fashion accessory that insulted him, and has attempted to file a defamation suit on the grounds of slander.”

“Yeah, good luck with that buddy. He did admit to being an imbecile live on the air. Unless that was another hallucination.”

“No, that actually happened.”

“Glad to hear it. What else is in the news today?”

“Just more Dwayne Riley according to this sheet. He's also called for an official investigation into your non-existent monster supremacist group.”

“Oh. That's right. I have to make an anti-human group now.”

“No, you don't. That's the whole point.”

“Do you think tonight is too soon?"

“Burgie...”

“Do you have any plans tonight? You want to come over?”

“...if you're inviting a human to be a member of your anti-human group, doesn't that defeat the
“I'll have to check the bylaws. I mean, once they're written.”

“...moving on. Hal Greene, owner of Green Machines Garage, Gas Station and Minigolf, has contacted the station to say that he has finally repaired the windmill. So that's good. Also a reminder that today is the Garden Club's special open air event with specimens and lectures on transplanted vegetation from the Underground, including Echo Flowers. The event runs from ten thirty in the morning until seven in the evening. A friendly reminder to all our listeners to stay hydrated and in the shade as much as possible; what that storm on the weekend did to cool down this heat wave, it undid with the humidity.”

“You know what this means?”

“...Return of the Catfro?”

“RETURN OF THE CATFRO!”

“God help us all.”

Asgore laughed and turned his head to get a better look at his neck in the mirror, then froze. In the middle of his beard, standing out like a sore thumb amidst a forest of gold, was a single gray hair.

“...hmmm. Must be all the politics.”

A tiny pair of scissors was retrieved from the medicine cabinet and the hair deftly removed from the surrounding beard.
“Aaaaaaaauuuuugggghhh,” Alphys groaned, letting her head drop to the conference room table. “How could I let this happen? I knew this was a terrible idea and I agreed anyway!”

“hey, it's not your fault. you didn't do anything wrong. somebody else did obviously but at least now we know about it.”

Dr. Aster looked up from the printouts in his hands to see Sans sit down next to Alphys and squeeze her shoulder reassuringly. “Agreed. Nothing good ever comes from a lack of knowledge. Our next step is to decide on a course of action.”

“We can't tell the queen. She'll go ballistic on us. Well, m-mostly on me.”

“think you mean pyrotechnic there.”

“That's even worse!”

“look, Alphys, i'm just pulling your leg there. nothing has changed between yesterday morning and now except what we know. Frisk is exactly the same now as they were this time yesterday. Tori doesn't have any reason to be angry. in fact once the initial shock wears off she'll probably appreciate us bringing this to her attention.”

Dr. Aster tapped on the table. “When I said we needed to decide on a course of action, that isn't what I meant. Personally I think our first course of action should be to confirm that a high LV CAP means the same for humans as it does for monsters. Besides, for all we know, there's still an element of interference we can't account for. Maybe Frisk's been eating monster food for such a long time that there's always a trace amount of residual magic energy around them. And, AND, let's also not forget that Frisk is the youngest test subject in the entire sample size. There's too many other explanations that we have to rule out first. That means more tests and more indexing of statistics.”

“heh. guess we should have paired the scan with a questionnaire with more than ten questions on it.”

“Well, it's not like we expected to have to analyze this, at least not on the first batch of results. Actually, that reminds me, did Frisk even fill out the questionnaire? If time was at a premium, which is how it seemed to me... well, I didn't see them filling one out standing in line.”

“there wasn't enough time. i can drop a copy off at the Dreemurr house and pick it up later.”

“Sounds good.” Dr. Aster pulled another page out of the folder in his hand and stared at the weird, red-tinted false-color image of Frisk's soul. “We can't stop the test run just to tighten up the resolution on the imaging antennas, but as soon as we finish the test run that becomes priority one. I really want to know what I'm looking at here.”

“yeah, me too.”

“No.”

“What?” Dr. Aster looked up to see Alphys with an angry expression on her face. “Alphys, the die is cast. We need to know what's going on here, whether it's just an imaging fault, a difference between human and monster souls, or if Frisk really.”
“That's not what I meant. This is how it started last time. Excuses, secrets and lies. I can't do this anymore. And I won't.” Dr. Alphys hopped off of her chair and walked towards the conference room door. “I'll take the questionnaire to Frisk at school, and tell T-toriel that Frisk came in to participate in the study and we found some anomalous readings that have us worried. With any luck she won't kill me in a public place.”

“are you sure that's smart-

“No, I'm not sure! The only thing I'm sure about was that I should never have agreed to all this subterfuge in the first place! And the only way out is through!”

Sans turned to Dr. Aster after Alphys had marched out of the conference room. “…so. I was going to bring this up later but I think under the circumstances now is as good a time as any.”

Dr. Aster narrowed his eye sockets. “I think you and I have dramatically different ideas of what constitutes a good time.”

“You read my report on the construction of the soul scanner, right? So you know the problems we ran into miniaturization.”

“Right. A tiny sensor element wouldn't intersect enough of the field to measure any difference. Your 'like trying to do astronomy with a magnifying glass' analogy, while both unprofessional and a dramatic oversimplification of optical mechanics, was both amusing and quite appropriate.”

“Well, turns out there might be a way around that. If we can't take the scanner to the subject, and the subject won't come to the scanner, we might still be able to bring the readings to the scanner anyway.”

“...I don't follow.”

Sans winked. “It's simple. I mean, obviously we first have to make sure that the information stays coherent and unaltered, but we can create a low energy, no-mass threshold shortcut between a remote sensor and the main sensor. We flick the thing on and it creates a real time window between here in the lab and wherever the mobile unit is. To the big scanner here it still looks like the test subject is in the room, and it picks up the soul readings just like normal. And it's not like anybody who has the scanner, if they steal it, has inside access to everyone's soul data. The computers here are still needed to parse that information.”

“So why is this coming up now, again?”

“Because with a portable scanner, we wouldn't have needed to do all that secret spy mission stuff with Frisk yesterday. And you haven't mentioned the most obvious possibility for Frisk's readings being wrong.”

“What are you... ohhhhh,” Dr. Aster's eye sockets widened in understanding. “You mean I was in such a hurry, I may have made procedural or instrumental mistakes and not noticed. I suppose, much as I hate to admit it, that such an outcome would be for the best.”

“Damn straight.”

Dr. Aster held up a hand and started counting on his finger bones. “The biggest problem, like you said, is that we need to make sure that the dimensional bridge doesn't corrupt the raw data coming in, and that's a whole project in and of itself. The second biggest problem is that with people coming in all day, even if it is just for free shirts, we have staff stretched pretty thin with the current testing cycle. Adding another project on top of that is simply not feasible. The third
problem is that with Alphys running out to put all her cards on the table with the queen, we might not be able to get Frisk back in for another scan once we do fix whatever is wrong on our end to give those readings. Assuming of course that the problem is on our end.”

Sans closed his eye sockets and pinched the bone between them. “right. So should we try to stop her, or...?”

Dr. Aster shrugged. “Do you really think that's something that's within our power to do right now?”

“...probably not.”

Dr. Aster nodded. “Still, she was right about one thing. The only way out is through. We stick with the project as planned, then while we're crunching the numbers afterward we give the scanner a once-over. Tighten up the feeds perhaps. You go ahead and set up a trial run for a dimensional bridge extension, and we can give it our full attention once Saturday rolls around.”

“once a week whether we need it or not.”

“Hah. Alright, it's about time to start for today. Let's get to it.”

“sure. Better check on the silk screen printer first, had to go out and buy ink twice yesterday. Y'know, we should start selling these in the gift shop.”

“We have a gift shop?”

“we should open a gift shop.”

Dr. Aster rolled his eye lights. “Whatever.”

“hehehe.” Sans left the conference room and walked towards his office, pulling out his cell phone on the way.

7:50 AM: hey kiddo, you there?

7:50 AM: got a science pun with your name on ti

7:51 AM LegendaryFlirtmaster: im here whatsup

7:51 AM: dad called me in to look at ur numbers yesterday

7:51 AM: we think either he was in such a hurry that he screwd up

7:51 AM: or there was some noise in the signal

7:52 AM LegendaryFlirtmaster: what do you mean?

7:52 AM: the imaging software

7:52 AM: all distorted

7:52 AM: for all we know ur moms famous kitchen skills r 2 blame :P

7:53 AM: maybe theres an energy buildup or somthign
7:53 AM LegendaryFlirtmaster: wat about the lv cap
7:53 AM: same thing
7:53 AM: you now how tv works right
7:54 AM: info has 2 b translated
7:54 AM: something must have gotten lost in
7:54 AM: in translation
7:55 AM: so we need u 2 come n 4 another scan after this week
7:55 AM: once we figure out what went wrong and fix it
7:55 AM LegendaryFlirtmaster: y would it just break 4 me
7:55 AM: lik I said, interference and noise
7:56 AM LegendaryFlirtmaster: ok
7:56 AM LegendaryFlirtmaster: class almost starting got 2 go
7:56 AM: ok
7:57 AM: o hey Alphys is freaking out about the test sneaking and might try to blow the whistle
7:57 AM LegendaryFlirtmaster: WAT
7:57 AM: dont worry
7:58 AM: sans is the mans with the plans
7:58 AM: she won't leave b4 lunch.
7:58 AM: study hard k?
7:58 AM LegendaryFlirtmaster: k
7:58 AM LegendaryFlirtmaster: thx
7:58 AM LegendaryFlirtmaster: bye

At his office, Sans grabbed the mouse at his workstation and tried to navigate the computer directory tree with one hand while scrolling through his contact list with the other hand.

8:03 AM: good morning big guy
8:03 AM: how's it rolling?
8:04 AM MisterDadGuy: Howdy Sans!
8:04 AM MisterDadGuy: Looks like the perfect day for the Garden Club show!

8:05 AM: gonna have 2 take your word 4 it

8:05 AM: super duper busy today prolly but if we need to go out and buy more ink 4 the shirt printer might stop by

8:06 AM: if only 2 try 2 sell hotdogs 2 the tourists lol

8:06 AM MisterDadGuy: Hah!

8:06 AM: hey do u kno if anyone in particular is gonna b there

8:07 AM MisterDadGuy: Aside from the Garden Club obviously, I think there's a guest speaker?

8:08 AM MisterDadGuy: One of the faculty from the college I think, I can't remember who or what they teach off the top of my head.

8:09 AM: prolly those horns in the way

8:09 AM: anyway might see you there

8:09 AM: have a good one

8:10 AM MisterDadGuy: You too, Sans!

Sans grabbed the questionnaire as it finished printing, locked his workstation, and backed out of his contact list. A thumb bone went through a series of practiced motions, what would have been called muscle memory if the term hadn't obviously been inaccurate.

“HELLO! YOU ARE SPEAKING TO THE GREAT PAPYRUS!”

“oh good, because that's exactly who I tried to call.”

“SANS? DID YOU CALL ME UP JUST TO PRANK ME? AGAIN?!”

“nah. That was a bonus. Was talking with dad about some of the tests scheduled for today, and I remembered that today is the garden club thing. Were you going to get in on that?”

“OF COURSE! IT WOULD MAKE THE PERFECT SUBJECT FOR MY BLOG, AND ITS ALWAYS FUN TO HANG OUT WITH MY BEST FLOWER FRIEND!”

“hmm. i'll bet. i know the king's going to be there because he's in the garden club, do you know if the queen or Frisk might stop by during lunch?”

“I'M AFRAID I DON'T KNOW, BUT I HOPE SO! A STROLL THROUGH THE WONDERS OF HORTICULTURE CAN LIFT SPIRITS LIKE SOME MANNER OF SUPERNATURAL ELEVATOR! IT WOULD BE THE PERFECT RESpite FROM COMPLETING AND GRADING CLASSWORK! I SHOULD CALL THEM UP AROUND LUNCH TIME AND INVITE THEM!”

“now there's an idea. thinking about stopping by myself if we get a lull in volunteers, or run out of ink again. Can ya keep me posted bro?”
“CERTAINLY!”

“Awesome. You really are great, Papyrus.”

“AS IF THERE WAS EVER ANY DOUBT! NYEH HEH HEH!”
“Okay kids, listen up! I know you were all whining about how it's too hot to have PE today... and you're right. The heat index is like SUPER high today and the humidity doesn't help. So consider this an early lunch break. FOR TODAY ONLY!” The fish lady raised her voice to be heard over the rising crescendo of excited children. “So study, or catch up on homework, or work on extra credit, or go get something to eat. Just be mindful of the elements. If anyone needs me, I'll be in my office with a bag of ice on my head.”

The PE class gradually dispersed, eventually leaving only one child, who followed Undyne back to her office.

“Hey Undyne, can I talk to you for a moment?”

“Sure thing Frisk. I've got nothing better to do for the next hour.”

“So I've been talking with Sans about the stuff at the lab, and the test results.”

“Yeah, how'd that work out?” Undyne sat down behind her desk, opened a portable drinks cooler, pulled out a 40 pound bag of ice with one hand and cleared her desk of all paperwork with the other.

“Sans texted me this morning saying there was some instrumental problem, so my results aren't valid.”

“Ngaaah! He probably cut corners again and left the lens cap on or something like that!”

“Anyway, he explained a few things, but just from the standpoint of science. I don't have a real context for what it means, but I figured you'd be the person to ask. You were captain of the royal guard so all of this stuff would have been important.”

Undyne pulled an ice cube out of the sack and rubbed it on her gills. “Yeah, but it didn't come up on a daily basis.”

“Did you have a giant scanner you used to screen people for the royal guard?”

Undyne snorted. “Nah, we had something about the size of a dartboard. You hit it with a magic attack and it would analyze your stats from that. If it survived I mean.” Undyne grinned awkwardly. “I broke it like three or four times. Of course humans don't have magic attacks so that wouldn't work.”

“Good to know. Still. There's one thing that I never got an explanation for. I know what LV means, but what's an LV CAP?”

“It's when your LV can't go any higher. Hey, what's the over-under on the test results for that? How high can humans go anyway? Been wondering that for a while.”

“I think he said something about the lowest he got was five, and almost everyone was between five and ten somewhere.”

“Wow, that's actually about what I expected. Warrior Race humans, except they probably don't even fight on a daily basis. Your species is really weird, Frisk.”
“Yeah... I've thought that myself a few times. Oh, Sans also mentioned that at least one result came back as twenty.”

The ice cube fell from Undyne's fingers and she slowly turned to look at Frisk. “...did you say twenty?”

“Yeah.” Frisk swallowed. “Is that bad?”

Undyne shook her head in disgust. “I knew humans were violent. I knew things got bad up here. But a Level of Violence Capacity of twenty... that's... God, I hope they're keeping tabs on whoever that was.”

“Undyne, what's wrong? What does that mean?”

Undyne turned to look at Frisk, then looked away, and finally looked back with a smile. “Don't worry about it punk. You've got enough problems of your own without worrying about other people's. Although being ambassador I guess your job involves worrying about other people's problems.... but that's not the point! Hey, what are your stats anyway?”

“Well, like I said, Sans said there was a problem with my scan and the results weren't valid. Apparently I have an AT and DF of zero?”

“Oh, I can almost believe an AT of zero after that love tap when we were making spaghetti,” Undyne cackled. “But a DF of zero? Not likely. Somebody with zero DF wouldn't have tanked some of those spears like you did. And you were all 'that ain't nothin' too. Somebody with DF zero would have cried like a baby! I bet when the thing gets fixed, you'll have something like AT 1, DF 50, HP 30 and an LV CAP of three, ya dorky marshmallow.”

“...maybe. I'm kind of scared to go back again, after all the risks we took just getting there the first time. But if we don't then all those risks were pointless to start with. And now I'm even more curious as to what my stats really are. I'm just hoping I don't also end up with LV Cap 20 at this point.”

Undyne cackled. “YOU?! With an LV cap that high? HAHAHAHA! Yeah, right! I've seen you fight, remember? And more importantly, I know the way you don't fight.” The laughing trailed off and Undyne's face became somber. “Somebody with a Cap that high, they wouldn't be able to-”

Frisk's phone chimed, startling both human and fish monster.

11:12 AM SockPuppet90: hey ur in pe now rite

“It's Sans. This might be about the scanner, he texted me earlier.”

11:12 AM: pe cancelled b cause heat

11:13 AM: in undynes office

11:13 AM SockPuppet90: cool

11:13 AM SockPuppet90: or not i guess

11:13 AM SockPuppet90: got a plan in the works

11:14 AM SockPuppet90: if ur mom wants to go some place over lunch break u might want 2 say yes ;)

Frisk looked up from the phone. “Something about mom wanting to go some place for lunch break?”

Undyne rolled her eye and pulled out another ice cube. “Probably part of another get rich quick scheme. Did I tell you about the time he was slacking off from guard duty to sell hot dogs? If Sans actually put as much effort into a regular job as he does into trying to make money *without a regular job,* he'd be able to buy his own private island.”

“I think I remember that. And they weren't actual hot dogs. They were cattail seed pods in hot dog buns.”

“Oh my GOD he's so lazy that he has to cut corners when he slacks off!” Frisk couldn't tell if the expression on Undyne's face was annoyance or amusement or both.

“Hello? Undyne, are you in your office? I thought I heard voices.”

“Yeah, come on in Toriel. Just trying to keep cool in this crazy surface weather.”

The office door opened and Toriel walked inside. “Ah, hello Frisk. Excellent, I was hoping to find you. Papyrus just called asking us if we would like to visit the Garden Show today over lunch break.”

Undyne snorted. “That skinless goof. It's like the entire outdoors is an oven right now and he probably can't even tell.”

“Actually, he sent me a... rather detailed explanation of heat indexes and recommended a specific window of time for optimum comfort and safety. Twelve twenty to twelve thirty five, I think it was.”

“And all that time I thought all that stuff about 'planning battle scenarios' was an excuse to play with action figures and robots. Not sure if Papyrus was holding out on me, or me not giving him enough credit.” Undyne frowned. “Actually there's still the whole hot pants thing. So the jury's still out.”

Toriel looked confused. “Hot pants? I do not understand.”

Undyne took another handful of ice and rubbed her neck with it. “Papyrus once wished that he had eight legs, so he could wear four pairs of hot pants.”

“I mean, what are hot pants? Are they pants that are worn when it is hot, or pants that make a person hotter by wearing them?”

Undyne froze with an awkward half smile on her face, her eye turned towards Frisk and twitching slightly. Frisk shrugged and turned to Toriel. “They're technically both, but in heat like this that's really, really dangerous. Only a skeleton could really manage it.”

“Ah... I think I see. Except for why he would want to wear four pairs at once.”

Undyne rolled her eye. “It's Papyrus. It's easier just to not ask questions sometimes.”

“Well... I suppose I cannot argue with that. Anyway, Frisk, does the Garden Club event sound like an exciting diversion?”

“Yeah, it really does! We should totally do that!”
“Then it is decided. Let us get ready-”

Undyne's phone chimed and she pulled it out of her pocket. “Oh. Alphys wants to know where you're going to be during lunch, Toriel. Says it's important.” Undyne's eye looked up from the phone towards Toriel and saw a suddenly panicked look on Frisk's face.

“Well, it has been established that we are heading towards the Garden Show. I suppose she can meet us there if that works for her.”

“Alright then. I'll send her the message. Auuuugh. Frisk, how can you live with this heat all the time?! It's worse than Hotland and that was inside a volcano!”

“Ah... well... mostly we try to stay out of it. Also the invention of the air conditioner was a big help. And this year has been unseasonably hot.”

“Hah! No offense Toriel but I can't wait until summer vacation starts.”

“You cannot wait two weeks?”

“Not in this heat I can't. I'm going to spend half the summer in the municipal pool... oh, that's right, I forgot to ask if they ever stopped using chlorine. Screw it, I'll get a plastic kiddie pool from Wal-Mart and fill it with bags of ice if I have to! Like that guy on Youtube did for his dog!”

Frisk giggled. “I could see that happening.”

“I too, for some reason. Frisk, shall we prepare for our outing later?”

“Yeah, let's get that out of the way as soon as possible so we can hit the window Papyrus suggested.”

As the queen and Frisk walked out of the office, Undyne heard Toriel say “It occurs to me that if Papyrus wished to wear four pairs of hot pants, he could simply wear them all on top of one another.”

“Yeah, but then people would only be able to see the outermost pair.” Frisk's voice, finding logic and reason where none existed previously.

“You guys be careful out there!” Undyne called out through the office door, and began typing on their phone with one hand while the other continued to grab ice.

11:19 AM: hey cutie tori and frisk just left my office at the school and they're getting ready to head to the garden show

11:20 AM: papyrus called about something like a good time to be there

11:20 AM: around twelve thirty but they'll only be there about fifteen minutes

11:21 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: alright thanks a bunch Undyne

11:21 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: gotta stop all this before it gets out of hand

11:22 AM: stop what?

11:23 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: this whole secret scan was a terrible idea and I can't start this all over again.
Dr Sci Nosaur: small lies lead to big lies

Dr Sci Nosaur: big lies keep getting bigger

Dr Sci Nosaur: before you know it you have amalgamations trapped in your basement and everyone is furious with you

Dr Sci Nosaur: not anymore

Dr Sci Nosaur: need to come clean about this now so we can clear the air

Dr Sci Nosaur: and focus on Frisk

Undyne blinked, and in spite of the hellacious ambient temperature, felt a cold sweat on her back.

what do you mean

what happened

Dr Sci Nosaur: they didn't tell you about their stats?

they said sans called them

that the data was bad or something

wait was that a cover story

Alphys?

Alphys come on you're freaking me out here

Dr Sci Nosaur: we hope the data was corrupted somehow or there was some interference

Dr Sci Nosaur: but if it is accurate then Frisk has an LV CAP of 20

Undyne dropped her phone and the ice in one hand. She didn't even notice it slide down her back as she scrambled to pick up the phone again

NO WAY

i just talked with the kid

we hang out all the time

Frisk puts in ALL the effort in gym class

and bends over backwards to help everybody

closest to evidence is those phone calls to the radio when riled up riley calls in

and thats way nicer and tamer than what i would say in their shoes

you need to check that scanner because something isn't right
11:33 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: that's what we want to believe here too
11:34 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: but this is so big we can't just sit on it in case it's true
11:35 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: the queen has to know, we have to tell her
11:35 AM: HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND
11:35 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: after all Frisk is her kid now right
11:35 AM: YOU KNOW HOW TORIEL IS ABOUT KIDS
11:35 AM: AND PROTECTING KIDS
11:36 AM: especially after what happened to chara and asriel
11:36 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: but if it's true she has to know
11:36 AM: IT WILL DESTROY HER
11:36 AM: even if it turns out to be a false alarm
11:37 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: I didn't think about that.
11:37 AM: If you fix the scanner and it turns out to be true
11:37 AM: we will find a way to break it to her
11:37 AM: as gently as possible
11:38 AM: o we can't tell Asgore this either
11:38 AM: or we can kiss happy gardening king goodbye
11:38 AM: and I don't even want to guess who we'll get in return
11:39 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: You're right Undyne.
11:39 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: I hate having to keep secrets still
11:40 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: But at least
11:40 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: this time
11:40 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: its for a good reason
11:40 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: and im not the only 1 this time
11:41 AM: hey Alphys
11:41 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: still here
11:41 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: not going anywhere
11:41 AM: Good on you for wanting to clear the air as soon as you realized what might be happening

11:42 AM: if not for those weird readings this wouldn't even be a problem right?

11:42 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: probbly not

11:42 AM: this just needs more testing

11:42 AM: and tact

11:43 AM: once we get that squared away itll all work out trust me

11:43 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: if its tact we need then we are really in trouble

Undyne laughed a short, barking laugh in spite of herself.

11:44 AM: see if s ans dad will help us out on this

11:45 AM: hes almost as good at explaining science stuff as you and he doesn't sweat as much

11:45 AM: or at all

11:45 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: will do

11:46 AM: and Alphys

11:46 AM: its gonna be okay understand me?

11:47 AM: even if frisk does have LV cap 20

11:48 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: I just

11:48 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: I cant believe none of us picked up on this

11:49 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: hey I know we cant tell toriel and why

11:49 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: but do you think maybe we should talk to Frisk about this?

11:50 AM Dr Sci Nosaur: Undyne??

11:51 AM: that is not a conversation that is going to end well for anyone.
“And we are back to the Morning Rush. Coming up on the end of our run and we're just about ready to hand things off to Lazy Lindsey and the Coffee Grinders, but we've got some interesting news for everybody first.”

“Ugggghhhh.”

“First up, Mettaton is back from California! He made a surprise public appearance at the Garden Club show less than an hour ago, before heading back to New Blook Acres.”

“AAAAAARRRRRGGGGHHHH.”

“Moving on... if we can... this time last week showed us the release date of Underventure by Least Dog. I'd just like to re-iterate that Least Dog is his name, not like a value judgment or anything. So there's Least Dog, Lesser Dog, Greater Dog and I guess at some point there was a Greatest Dog? I dunno. Either way it's a proud and noble family tradition I guess. So, right. Underventure, a portmanteau of the words Underground and Adventure, is a game dramatizing the events of Frisk Dreemurr's fall into the Underground and the subsequent destruction of the Barrier, with all that it entails. It has proven relentlessly popular, with record sales in just one week. People are already comparing it to Scatter by Toby Fox, which has basically taken over half of the internet since it was released back in September.”

“Wait, only half?”

“From what I've seen the other half has been taken over by Steven Universe.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense. What, what the heck is Scatter again?”

“UGH. I've only been talking about it off and on for the past seven months Burgie. But for the benefit of our listeners, Scatter is a deconstruction of the conventions of of the top down adventure game genre. In games like Legend of Zelda and its sequels, you play as an adventurer exploring a variety of different areas, delving into dungeons and ruins and such to collect rare artifacts, and use them to defeat an evil king. A big part of the game is fighting other enemies in real time and getting stronger based on what they dropped. Like, if you get hurt, you literally kill an enemy and take his heart and it heals you.”

“Well. That's a bit grisly.”

“Yeah. Toby Fox just took that idea and ran with it. You play some sort of creature from another dimension, or a reincarnated ancient knight, or some science experiment that became self aware, nobody can really agree on what exactly. The plot changes dynamically based on whether you play it like every other adventure game or whether you act like a sane person instead, and even saying that much might constitute a spoiler, so that's all you're getting.”

“Hey, on the subject, can humans get stronger by stealing another creatures heart? Is that what heart transplants are all about?”

“That's like a super involved medical procedure that can take a lot of time and money, and you have to match up the tissue types. I don't know exactly how involved it is, but I do know that human organs are not plug-and-play interchangeable. I mean we have like eight different types of blood for crying out loud. Oh, and the recipient of the organ has to take drugs for the rest of their life that do a number on the immune system, so they don't destroy the donor organ. It can extend
life, but I wouldn't say it makes us stronger.”

“How did you guys win the War again?”

“I dunno. Probably magnets.”

“How would they work?”

“Talk to a scientist. Anyway, most human or monster game developers would probably put all those profits towards things like food, rent, power, water, gas, and of course research and development for the next game down the line. But Least Dog... well, if you see something that looks like a white Pomeranian running around town wearing a top hat and a monocle, there you go.”

“Wait, how did he even program a game in the first place?”

“Hell if I know. Maybe he barked into a speech-to-text generator. You know what they say about monkeys and typewriters. Our next item... ooh. Not sure if people are going to be happy or angry about this one. Maybe both? Anyway, Dr. Martin Stanton of the Ebott's Wake Community College has released a report he and several anthropology students have been working on about the final days of the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi, better known to residents of Ebott's Wake as the Sages... when other, four letter words cannot be used.”

“...I'm sure I'm going to regret asking this but what's the report about?”

“It's uh... well, it says 'detailed chronography' here. I guess that means a step by step reconstruction of events leading up to, encompassing, and discussing the aftermath of the BADTF confrontation. I guess like what Gordon Prange did with the Pearl Harbor attack and the battle at Midway during World War Two.”

“So, not light reading.”

“I doubt it. I also doubt if many people will want to relive those days by reading the report, although odds are there's some important lessons to learn from it. Very few people have a positive impression of the Sages in Ebott's Wake these days. Having to live life looking over your shoulder for several years has that effect. Having said all that, the report is available for downloading off of the EBCC's official website, main page. Just be advised that there is some graphic content that might not be suitable for young readers.”

“I'm going to download that right now. I want to know what those clowns were up to before they killed Asriel Dreemurr.”

“I can save you some time there. They weren't up to much. We all thought they were another kooky new age cult that used Native American tribal iconography because they weren't creative enough to make their own. More of an annoyance than anything else. You ever heard of a guy named Cyrus Teed? He thought the world was hollow and we lived on the inside surface and the only reason it didn't look like it was some sort of optical illusion. They were about on that level of crazy, but they never reached his level of popularity. Probably because they didn't write a whole bunch of books about it.”

“You know if Dwayne's going to call in I hope he does so soon. We're almost out of time.”

“Somehow I doubt it. Probably more than half of why so many of the people of Ebott's Wake rallied around monsters and against Mr. Riley is because they didn't have any patience for anyone that would support the Sages and their horsesh... their behavior.
“Nice save there.”

“Yeah. It was a little close I think. Jeff, are we good?”

“Shrugging doesn't tell us anything Jeff! And neither does that gesture!”

“Ahem... getting back on what little track we have left? I said this over a year ago when Dwayne first called in, but it bears repeating. Before the Barrier was destroyed nobody had any conception of monsters even existing. And, much like what happened with the Dreemurrs and Papyrus, the first thought that anyone normal would have upon seeing any monster would be something like, I dunno, ‘wow that's a really good cosplay they've got going’ or a similar rationalization.”

“Followed swiftly by 'oh god that's not a cosplay', right?”

“Eventually, yes. And mad props go to Officer Steve for handling that like a professional.”

“Yeah. Steve, you da man.”

“Quite so. But the first thought when confronted by the unknown or unfamiliar should not be ‘oh god what is that kill it’ unless that's already your default mindset for pretty much everything, which is a pretty damning condemnation of the Sages. Healthy, sane people don't kill at the drop of a hat like that. You either have to put them through horrific trauma and tragedy, or you have to train them extensively like in the military and even then there's going to be problems. It was only a matter of time before some dumb but harmless kids decided to prank the Sages, dressed up in Halloween costumes and got shot on sight for their efforts.”

“You know, I should invite Officer Steve over tonight. Get his opinion on things.”

“Yeah, good luck with that. So we are out of time on the Morning Rush, we're going to leave you with some words from our sponsors and station ID, and when we come back, Lazy Lindsey and the Coffee Grinders will be here for all your afternoon radio needs.”
A Little Knowledge Is A Dangerous Thing

“Alright, alright, I'm on my way.” Dr. Aster sighed as he made his way to the front door of the house. “I heard you the first three times.”

Opening the door he wasn't sure what he expected to see, but having to lower his gaze implied that he did not expect to see Frisk. “Hello? Did you come by to see Sans or Papyrus?”

Frisk rubbed their hands together nervously. “Not. Not this time. I was hoping to talk to you actually. About the test results and... other stuff.”

Dr. Aster blinked, then looked behind him, and finally walked outside and closed the door.

“Suppose it's a nice afternoon for a walk.”

Frisk wiped some sweat off their forehead, leaving dark brown hair plastered to their face in the process. “Not really, but whatever it takes. I can't handle not having the answers anymore.”

Dr. Aster began walking slowly along the sidewalk, hands in his lab coat pockets. “I'm guessing first and foremost, you, uh, want to know the whole story about the LV CAP attribute.”

Frisk nodded, easily keeping pace with the tall skeleton's stride. “I tried asking Sans about it and he blamed it on the scanner getting some sort of mixed signal or something. And when Alphys showed up at the Garden Club event there wasn't any opportunity to talk to her alone and ask about it.”

“How did that go by the way? She marched out of the conference room this morning declaring she was going to tell the queen exactly what was going on.”

“It didn't exactly play out like that.” Frisk shrugged. “I don't know if she came up with another, better idea, or if she just got intimidated. But she asked mom if she was okay with me being a part of the initial research study, both for the scientific knowledge aspect and as a political element. A way of me as ambassador putting my money where my mouth was. She was okay with it once Sans showed up and explained that it was just like having my picture taken. I was almost done with that paperwork before Mettaton showed up.”

“That's, uh, Alphys' friend, right? I saw some posters in her office.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Haven't had the pleasure yet. Sorry, you were talking about the queen approving the scan?”

“Yeah, she'll be there, and as far as she knows it will be the first time. So there's still some issues with it.”

“Hmmm. Can't be helped.”

“Anyway, that's still a diversion. What does a high LV Cap mean and why does everyone who hears about it suddenly freak out?”

Dr. Aster sighed. “There's some conversations that you just don't want to have to have, much less... with children. But there is nothing to be gained by ignorance. If your Level of Violence is your ability to hurt others and resist being hurt by others, then... then your Level of Violence Capacity is
itself a measurement of... well... it's how much others have hurt you. More specifically, how much
people have hurt you without there being any recourse to avoid it. As you grow older, and your
ability to influence the world increases, the exchange of energy, of force, it's no longer as one
sided. By the time somebody reaches adulthood, LV CAP is almost impossible to increase. What's
worse is that the more somebody's LV CAP increases, that means the more exposed to violence
they've been, and the more it becomes a part of them. It's harder, sometimes impossible, not to see
the world as some sort of endless battle, where every disagreement, however minor, takes on all
the connotations of a fight to the death. It... it literally beats everything good out of a person.”

Dr. Aster stopped walking, suddenly aware that Frisk had stopped several moments earlier. He
turned around in confusion and saw several competing emotions fighting for representation on the
child's face.

“Is there...” Frisk cleared their throat. “Is there a way to fix it.”

“It's a scar on the soul from a cruel and sadistic world. 'Fix' is not even close to being the right
word.”

“Oh.” Frisk's voice was soft and hard to hear. “So... if I do actually have an LV Cap of twenty... what... what's going to happen... after.”

“...you don't really have a cap that high, Frisk. You can't. Sans spotted the problem right away
when he saw your stats. Somebody with an LV CAP of twenty wouldn't be able to trust, or care
about anybody but themselves, or feel any sort of compassion or love for another living thing.
Their entire life would be defined by fear.”

“Dr. Aster... that is my life.” Frisk stared at the ground. “Every day I wake up wondering if this
happy ending is going to fall apart. That I'm gonna say something, or do something, and it's the
wrong word, the wrong course of action to take. It's like... it's like everyone's happiness is
something fragile, and if my hands slip even once, no matter why or how, it will shatter into a
billion pieces and I will never, ever be able to put it back together again.”

Dr. Aster stared at the child, and then his eye sockets widened. “Like that plate.”

Frisk nodded.

“Frisk... I need you to be honest with me. What was your life like before you climbed Mt. Ebott?”

“It... wasn't good. I wasn't a very good kid. Drove my parents crazy. Broke things. I was... I was a
brat. There's no way around it. And I ran away when I understood what I had done.” Frisk sniffed.
“Since the Underground I wanted to start over. Be a better person. But... those numbers are a part
of me, aren't they? No matter what I do or how hard I try, I can't change them. One of these days,
I'm going to... I'm going to...”

Dr. Aster knelt down next to the child, who had buried their face in their hands. “That's not how it
works. The Cap doesn't increase unless something affects you from the outside. Actions you take
are different. That's LV and EXP. You can have a cap of twenty and still never raise your hand
against another person. Other people can't lay out the course of your life like that.”

“Is it even safe for Toriel to be around me?” Frisk sobbed. “Am I going to try to hug her one day
and she just, she just breaks like everything else I touch?!?”

“Frisk, LISTEN. I've only known you for a few days but I already know you well enough. You
couldn't hurt anyone if you tried.”
“I wasn't trying to break that plate but it still got broken! I can't, I can't, I... why do I even exist if all I do is hurt people over and over again?!”

Dr. Aster grabbed both of Frisk's shoulders. “Frisk, look at me. Look at me.”

The child raised their head and two bloodshot, teary eyes looked back into the doctor's eye sockets.

“That is not what it happening, Frisk. You are not some sort of force of random destruction. You are a little kid with a big heart. And because you have such a big heart you feel for everybody. You're afraid of making mistakes, like most people. But mistakes can surprise you. There was a book in the Waterfall garbage dump I found decades ago called Mistakes That Worked, about all sorts of times some human screwed up or dropped the ball and the world was better for it. Like chocolate chip cookies. That was a mistake and it worked out well, wouldn't you say?”

Frisk nodded stiffly and Dr. Aster ginned. He was getting through. “More than half the CORE was built out of items that started as somebody's blunder, but it worked out so well that it was mass produced, ended up in the garbage, found its way to us and became part of the world's most advanced geothermal power plant and physics laboratory. You cannot go through life terrified of the possibility that something you end up doing turns out poorly, and not just because that's a miserable existence. Your mistakes can take you to amazing places. Like a future where monsters and humans are living and working together side by side, which is taking quite a bit of getting used to, believe you me.”

Frisk rubbed their eyes with one hand. “So... this thing. The LV Cap... it doesn't make me dangerous?”

“No. No it doesn't. LV does. The willingness to hurt people. The ability to look at another person and see them as an obstacle, not another living being with their own personality and ambitions and a family that cares about them. And you? You care about everyone. Frisk, if you have an LV CAP of 20, that is not something that you did wrong. That is not something you need to be ashamed of or scared of. That is evidence of what other people did to you that they had no right to do, no matter how rambunctious you were when you were younger. And the fact that you still care so much about people, even after that? Now that is something you should be proud of.”

The doctor stood up and walked a few steps away before turning around to face Frisk. “I can prove it to you scientifically. Right now, I want you to try to attack me.”

“What??”

“Don't worry. I can guarantee you that you can't even scratch me.”

“I... I can't. I can't. I just can't.” Frisk shook their head.

“Ah, do you mean you can't, or you won't?”

Frisk blinked and Dr. Aster pointed at them. “When I asked you to attack me, it felt like your insides all turned upside down, right?”

“Yeah. I guess. Something like that.”

“That's because hurting people is anathema to you. Even the idea of doing so. That's the biggest argument against you having a high LV CAP, and if you do in the end, then so what? It's just a number. Numbers are abstractions. A great warrior doesn't need a high AT or DF, what they need is the will to keep fighting as long as they need to in order to win, to protect their allies and defeat their foes. Even if you're down to one HP or less, you're still alive, and where there's life there's
hope. People are more than their attributes Frisk. Peoples’ choices matter more than their numbers. And you've chosen to be a kind, caring person no matter what else happens. Always remember that.”

Frisk closed their eyes and took a deep breath. “I'll try. It's... it's a new, uhm... new concept.” They opened their eyes again and began to wipe away the residual tears. “Uhm. Thanks. I was kind of expecting the worst when I, you know, came over. Thank you for setting me straight and keeping me from freaking out too much.”

“Well, I was a dad before I was Royal Scientist. I've had experience with this sort of thing.”

Frisk managed to smile a shaky smile. “Sans and Papyrus kept you on your toes, I guess?”

“Oh, you have no idea. My dad told me when I was about your height after I'd made a huge mess of his workshop, 'One day I hope you have kids that are just like you!' And that's exactly what happened. Brilliant and reckless. The entire Aster lineage summed up in three words.” The doctor's face suddenly became distant. “I wish he could have lived to see this. Not just the Barrier being destroyed, but the fact that there's no war afterward.”

“What was your dad like?”

“Semi Serif Aster was a scientist, although not a whole lot of high tech material was coming in through the river back in his day, so his work was more along the lines of blacksmithing and engineering. He was fixated on solving for all possible iterations of a problem. I can see a bit of him in Sans and Papyrus; Sans has his ability to optimize and reduce complex problems to their bare operating principles, and Papyrus has his lateral thinking and creative spark.”

Frisk stared at the doctor, who seemed to be in a world of his own. “...doctor Aster? Are you okay?”

“...yeah.” Dr. Aster sighed. “I just wish Verdana could have seen her boys all grown up.”

“Verdana was their mom?”

“Yes. She... well, she fell down while the boys were still in school. Sans had just started high school, Papyrus was still in elementary... Sans really went out of his way to help take care of his brother after that. I was, well, not as around as I should have been. Losing Verdana had galvanized me to throw myself into my work. I couldn't handle the thought of my boys growing old and falling down without ever seeing the sunlight. Even so, that was a lot to put on Sans' shoulders. I think he always resented me for not being there, even though he never said. I mean, obviously there comes a time in every boy's life where he sees his father as an ordinary skeleton. But he shouldn't have to learn it like that.”

Dr. Aster looked down the street. “She would have loved this new world you all put together. She would have loved to meet you, Frisk.”

“Yeah... I would have liked to meet her too.”

The scientist blinked his eye sockets a few times, and grinned. “Now, Semi on the other hand, he would be a different story. He didn't like humans at all. If he'd still been alive when Chara fell into the Underground, that probably wouldn't have ended well. That's why I would have loved the chance to show him a world like this. Just to see the look on his face.”

Dr. Aster straightened his lab coat. “Well, there's only so many what-if questions you can ask yourself before you have to go back to what is. I'm going to go back inside and check over Sans'
idea for a no-mass dimensional bridge. And I'm betting Toriel is expecting you to get back home before your food gets cold. So I guess this is where we must part ways for today. Unless there was anything else you wanted to ask?"

"...oh, actually there was one. I know that the CORE project was all about sending energy back through time. Were you ever able to send anything else?"

"If you mean physical matter, no. I'll spare you the physics, but it's very... uh, explosive. Photonic and magic energy was all we ever managed."

"Oh. What about information? Could you send a message to a past version of you?"

"In theory, yes. By using the main beam of energy as a carrier wave we could have added information content. Or, if we aimed at sequential moments in the past the pattern of the signal from the future could itself spell out a coded message. Sans was looking at that as a possibility but when the anti-light looked like the breakthrough we were waiting for, that took over all of our attention and effort." Dr Aster rubbed the back of his neck bones with one hand. "If you were to ask Sans, he'd probably say it took up all of our time. Why do you ask?"

"I... well, there's no real way to say this without sounding crazy but I think that happened once or twice... or more." Frisk rubbed their own neck nervously. "Uh. To me. It happened to me. And I don't know why."

"...that's... odd. Although considering I did get thrown forward in time, other distortions are not off the table. What happened? From your perspective I mean?"

"Uhm... well, sometimes things would go wrong. Some monster would want to fight, or I didn't know what to do, and... well, I would... I would die. But there were these... these things. They looked sort of like stars, and they seemed to be scattered all over the Underground. If I died, I would wake up at the last star I passed. And I mean that literally, everything was back how it was when I originally got close to the star, because I was back there again at that moment. It, you know, made a lot of hard situations easier. Dying still wasn't fun though. And... I know there's no way to prove any of what I just said, but."

Dr. Aster held up a finger bone, then pulled out a pen from his lab coat chest pocket and a scrap of paper from another pocket. Turned around, he began scribbling rapidly, and within a minute turned back around and held up the resulting picture so Frisk could see it.

"Those stars you mentioned, did they look like this?"

Frisk nodded. "Yeah. I mean, they were glowing and pulsing and shifting a bit, but that was the same basic shape."

"Now that is interesting. Because during that first full scale test of the CORE hardware, when everything went wrong, this image was the last thing I saw before I was launched headlong into the future."
“Good morning Ebott's Wake! I am Brett 'The Brett' Brinkman and sitting next to me is DJ Pantz, and we both hope you're having a spectacular hump day this week in spectacular Ebott's Wake, Where The Mountain Ends.”

“Is it just me or is the person who comes up with these slogans phoning it in?”

“Actually Burgie, that slogan was first composed and chosen about sixty years ago, more than six months before Ebott's Wake got its first telephone exchange.”

“Well... they still had string and tin cans back then right?”

“I think so. Anyway, launching right into our top story this morning, yesterday was the Garden Club show, which managed to bring in a surprisingly large crowd despite the heat even before anyone knew Mettaton was going to be there.”

“UUUUUGGGHHHH.”

“Yes, yes, we know Burgie. We know. The real show stealer this year was actually Flowey the Flower, who was awarded first prize in the garden club exhibition as an outside entry.”

“I'm still not sure how he made those fake cardboard biceps, let alone put them on.”

“If I had to guess I'd say either Papyrus or Frisk helped him out there. Uh, Echo Flower transplants were much more popular than anyone expected and the event ran out of them.”

“Oh, just wait until they realize how annoying it is to have something repeat everything you say at the drop of a hat. Then there will be PLENTY to go around.”

“Could be. The Garden Club released their official newsletter this morning and called the event an... I hope this is a typo... arousing success.”

“Well, you know what they say about giving flowers to somebody you love.”

“...moving on. Today, tonight rather, is the annual Knights of the Road who Say Ni Mission Pancake Supper. It starts at five in the afternoon, ends at eight in the evening, and all proceeds go to the Dalton Trust Cancer Research Foundation. Six dollars a plate, three dollars a plate for kids twelve and under. “

“And remember, these guys don't skimp. You're getting a whole lot of food in exchange for helping stamp out a medical scourge. Wait, is scourge the right word?”

“Yes. Cancer has often been called a scourge.”

“Okay then.”

“Do monsters not get cancer?”

“Well there's only like ten different monster diseases. I'm looking at a lot of the symptoms for cancer on Web MD right now and none of these match up to anything I learned about in high school. Uh, having said that, I somehow doubt that any human disease has “floppy bullets” as a symptom.”
“Okay changing the subject right this instant, the uh, the Dreemurr Elementary School spring event this year has been changed up yet again. After last year's play mix up that turned into the largest game of mad libs I have ever covered in my radio career, this year's event was originally slated to be an outdoors sporting exhibition and track meet style event. But the average temperatures going into summer have made that very unsafe, so the updated event is the Dreemurr Elementary School Riff-Off.”

“What Off?”

“Riff-Off.”

“Rip Off??”

“RIFF Off.”

“Rickroll???”

“...let me elaborate. The event involves showing one or more bad movies and the student body, faculty and staff are invited to make fun of those movies in real time, a process called Riffing, made popular by the television show Mystery Science Theater 3000.”

“OH. It's a Riff-Off.”

“Exactly.”

“You could have just that from the beginning.”

“I hate you so much right now. Oh, speaking of... hate... how did your little shindig go last night?”

“Oh, it went great! We had a bunch of people over, there were snacks and soft drinks and everyone had a great time!”

“...oh. Well, as long as you're happy with the end result I guess oh hey, I've been waiting for the caller light to go on and look at that. Five bucks says that's Dwayne Riley. Good morning, you're on the air live with The Brett and DJ Pantz on the Morning Rush!”

“How are either of you still on the air?!”

“Good morning to you too, Mr. Riley. And I'm not sure if your question was rhetorical, or if you actually wanted me to explain how radio works.”

“You know damned well what I mean! That monster declares his intention to create a group to persecute humanity and nobody does a damned thing but people like me who try to stand up for the rest of you ingrates get treated like pariahs and criminals! What kind of bullsh*BEEP* is this?!?”

“That is an important question, Mr. Riley. I would love if somebody could provide me with an answer and I hope Burgie can oblige me.”

“...oh, is it my-”

“YES. Talk, please.”

“Alright. Uh, well, if I had to guess, maybe it was just a manner of decorum. The Anti Monster League has a bad habit of showing up and chanting slogans and screaming really hurtful epithets at monsters and humans who associate with monsters. Last night we just stayed in my house and played cards and didn't really cause that much of a public disturbance. Also you guys have this
thing about vandalism and the only thing that got messed up in my place was when somebody dropped the nachos on the carpet. It's, uh, it's gonna take a while to get that out.”

“Ooh. I've done that. You're better off just taking up the carpet and replacing it. Or putting in tile or hardwood instead.”

“Hmmm. Maybe. Do you know anyone who can handle that?”

“Well, there was Wes Peterson, but I think he ended up moving to Wyoming to be closer to his family. Tell you what, I will check my contact list when I get home and I will text you some names and nu- what? Jeff says we have another call on the other line. It's... it's Officer Steve?”

“HAH! NOW YOU TWO ARE GOING TO GET IT!”

“Hello, you are live on the air with The Brett and DJ Pantz!”

“Uh, hello. This is Officer Stephen Ward of the Ebott's Wake Police Department.”

“Officer Steve! Mah man! How you holding up after last night, eh?”

“About as well as can be expected Burgie. I unfortunately forgot that as much as I love nachos, they do not love me back so I was up until about two in the morning with heartburn.”

“Wait, hold up a second. Officer Steve, you were there last night? With Burgie and everyone else?”

“Yeah, I was. He invited me and I figured why not. Also somebody and his friends kept calling the department telling us that some monster was up to some sort of nefarious plot of dubious repute, or dubious plot of nefarious repute. I forget which. Either way they were as vague as the day is long, but I opted to check it out anyway. Obviously this was a first time for everyone, and schedules might conflict later, but I would not be sad to see Monsters Against Humanity become a regular thing. Like every month, or every other week, or something like that.”

“Wait, it's called Monsters Against Humanity? Hold on a second. Hold on a moment please... Officer Steve... for the benefit of all our listeners, and Mr. Riley who according to the sounds I am hearing might be having a stroke, and my own sanity because I think I might have a stroke soon myself... can you please explain what, exactly, took place at Burgie's house last night?”

“Well, I showed up around six thirty, and I brought crackers and a cheese ball. Burgie introduced me to some of his friends I hadn't met, and over about the next ten minutes three or four other people showed up. Then we organized into teams, just because we had so many people and we started playing cards, and this went on for about two hours until some people had to leave for family obligations or night shift work or stuff like that.”

“...I see. So. Burgie decided to create an anti-human group, but it turned into a poker night. That is... that is about... yeah, that fits in with everything else that happens in this town.”

“Oh, it wasn't poker.”

“Alright then. I am afraid to ask, what card game did you all play?”

“Cards Against Humanity.”

“Brett, you alright? You got that look on your face again.”

“Ahem. So. Let me get this straight. Burgie, you created an anti-human group. You called it
Monsters Against Humanity. And all you do is play Cards Against Humanity.”

“And eat snack-”

“And eat snacks yes.”

“...yeah, I'd say that pretty much sums up the evening.”

“I don't know what I was expecting, except that it wasn't that. Officer Steve, help me out here on the legal angle. Is it actually a hate group if the participants just sit around and play card games?”

“To be fair Brett, that one element cannot really function as a criteria for or against identifying a group like that. There are certain behaviors and trends and attitudes to watch out for, but I didn't see any of them last night.”

“...okay. Glad that's settled. Or at least I hope it's settled.”

“NOTHING IS SETTLED! A MONSTER IS ORGANIZING OTHER MONSTERS TO HARASS AND HARM HUMAN BEINGS AND THE POLICE ARE COMPLICIT IN IT!”

“Excuse me Brett but can you connect the line I'm on with the line Mr. Riley is on? I heard that last scream but I'm not sure he can hear me.”

“Already have Officer, you're good to go. I had a feeling about this.”

“Thank you Brett. Mr. Riley, the only people who have done any harassing in this town are you. As often as you call into the station about something you say a monster has done, we get three times as many calls from other people about you and your Anti Monster League. The fact is, whether or not people feel safe around monsters, and not everyone does, they feel safer with monsters around than with you around. This town has already had more than its fair share of people taking matters into their own hands based on the intensity of their convictions.”

“Those words would have a lot more impact coming from somebody who didn't get shuffled over to monster patrol as punishment for embarrassing the force and the town like you did.”

“First, I will have you know that since I got the quote unquote monster patrol beat as you put it, the worst I have had to deal with on the job is public intoxication and vandalism. And a lot of those vandalism cases, well, let's just say nobody really believes one monster would spray paint 'Go Back To The Underground' on another monster's house. If only because a monster would at least spell the word 'Underground' correctly. I haven't had to work a murder or rape or assault or burglary or grand theft auto or any felony when you get down to it. Nobody's aimed a firearm at me. Nobody's tried to attack me with magic. The only monster who hasn't been polite and / or friendly when I meet them is Flowey the Flower. So if you look at the statistics I have the best and safest job in the police department at this point. If that's your idea of what punishment is, I would hate to see what you think a reward looks like. Second, there's nothing embarrassing about having good trigger discipline, or keeping a level head in times of stress. You, Mr. Riley, have done more to embarrass the town of Ebott's Wake than anyone else, the way you carry on.”

“I'm not the one who fainted like a *BEEP*ing *BEEP*sy and had a video of me fainting posted to YouTube and get a bazillion views.”

“Well, I'm not the one running all over town crying like a baby and throwing a temper tantrum whenever I don't get what I want. I'll take my bazillion views of internet infamy over your whining any day of the week, Mr. Riley.”
“...wow. Is it, is it over? Did Riley hang up?”

“Aw. And I was ready with the scrolls of told and everything.”

“It's not a scroll. It's a printed web page.”

“Do not disrespect the scrolls of told!”

“...four years of majoring in journalism for this.”

“Hello? Am I still on the air?”

“Hey, Officer Steve, sorry about that. I think Dwayne decided to hang up. Uh. Is there any other message that you would like to pass on to the assorted citizenry of Ebott's Wake and surrounding areas?”

“Just a reminder to look both ways when driving out of the Knights of the Road who say Ni Mission parking lot. That's a blind corner. Also, anyone driving past the mission tonight, please take it slow. By the time you come over the rise and see if there's anyone in your way, it's too late to stop. Those signs are there for a reason, please pay attention to them.”

“Alright. Thank you Officer Steve. You heard it here first folks. I think it's high time we had a musical interlude, and after that we'll check in on Gary Welkin with the traffic report. Stick around, there's more Morning Rush coming your way.”
And He Cast A Crooked Shadow

“Name?”

“It's on the question sheet.”

“I know, but we need to verify. Legal reasons.”

The man stared at the lab technician for slightly longer than was comfortable, then shrugged.

“Justin Carrow.”

“Thanks. Stand in the marked box Mr. Carrow.”

Justin walked over to the indicated area on the floor and stared at the massive machinery hanging from the ceiling. Instinct and training both screamed at him to get out of the way, as if he was standing on some sort of target. Which, he reminded himself, he was.

“Here we are. Yellow chromatics. Compiling numbers... hmmm. Don't suppose you've eaten any monster food lately?”

“No.”

The technician scratched his head and looked up from the monitor. “Can you hold your right hand up so the scanner can get a better look at it?”

Justin frowned, but his hand was raised anyway.

“Ah. Alright. Some sort of interference but I guess it's motion based, not localized. Compiling stats now... numbers are crunching. You don't have to stand in the target box anymore.”

The technician got up from the workstation and carried over Justin’s questionnaire. Justin glanced at the man's ID badge, which said J. Stanton on it. “You know, you're only the fifth person over the last three days to have a yellow spectrograph.”

“So what does that mean?”

Stanton grinned. “No idea. Isn't this exciting? Getting in on the ground floor of a whole new field of scientific discovery? Makes all those guys hunting for neutrinos and dark matter look like chumps, doesn't it?”

Justin raised an eyebrow. “Not a scientist, so...” the sentence was left hanging and Stanton shrugged awkwardly. “Fair enough. It's not everybody's jam. So I guess if you're not here for the science you're here for the shirt.”

“Actually I was enticed by the promise of refreshments afterward.”

“Oh. So... you wouldn't mind if the shirt took a few days or weeks to get mailed to you? Because we are really backed up on that.”

“Hmm. Can't imagine why.”

The deadpan delivery seemed to tickle Mr. Stanton and he began snickering. “Yeah. It will be forever a mystery.”
“How's it going Joe?” Justin turned to see who had spoken and saw a skeleton with two cracked eye sockets, lit from the inside by floating points of light. One crack reached down to the upper jawline, the other seemed to reach up to the top of the skull. The skeleton was wearing a white lab coat, black slacks, a gray shirt and, for some reason, neon yellow sneakers.

“How's it going Joe?” Justin turned to see who had spoken and saw a skeleton with two cracked eye sockets, lit from the inside by floating points of light. One crack reached down to the upper jawline, the other seemed to reach up to the top of the skull. The skeleton was wearing a white lab coat, black slacks, a gray shirt and, for some reason, neon yellow sneakers.

“Hey Doc! Hey, glad you showed up. Got some weird readings I wanted to run by you.”

“Alright then. Show me.”

The skeleton peered over Mr. Stanton's shoulder at the workstation, his eye sockets narrowing. “Well. That's never happened before.”

Justin stared at the skeleton's face, trying to figure out if the bones were flexible or if the monster just happened to be shaped similar to a human skeleton and the similarity ended there, when Mr. Stanton held up Justin's questionnaire. “Here's the paperwork if you think we should file it, or just scrap the data from this run and try for a call back.”

“...no, let's log it as normal and include it in the run. Maybe we'll find a trend for the interference.”

“You're the doc, doc.”

“Alright Mister... Carrow. Guess the test run is done for now. We might want to call you back at a later date to see if we can't get a better resolution. If you'll come with me I'll see about getting you a shirt and some victuals in exchange for your time.”

“Alright.” Justin followed the skeleton out of the scanner room, down several hallways to what looked like a break room. One table was loaded with platters of cold cuts, donuts, a tray of vegetables and a bowl of wrapped candies. The skeleton walked over to the vending machine and started dropping coins into the slot.

“The donuts and the candy are monster food. Everything else is human made. I, uh... I don't personally recommend the donuts. What's your poison?”

“I dunno. Mercury?”

The skeleton suddenly laughed out loud and Justin jumped back a step. “Hah! Sorry. I didn't see the chemistry joke coming. Is generic lemon lime okay or do you prefer some other flavor?”

“More of a coffee guy myself, to be honest.”

“Fair enough.” The machine dispensed a soda, and the skeleton moved over to a coffee machine. “You don't strike me as the decaf type.”

“Nope.”

“Sugar, cream, non dairy powdered... stuff?”

“Black, just black. So black that light cannot escape its surface.”

The skeleton laughed again. “Coming right up. Provided he actually read my text, Sans will be here in a few minutes with a T-Shirt.”

“I see.” Justin concentrated on assembling a sandwich. “I gotta say, doctor, you're pretty good.”

“How is that?”
“If I didn't know any better I'd say this was just an ordinary chit chat session. But your guy in the lab, Stanton? Not as convincing.”

The skeleton turned around from the coffee machine, holding out a paper cup. “Well, he did say that theater was one of his hobbies. Not one of his strengths.”

Justin stared at the skeleton, trying to get a read on him... and failing. The stance seemed familiar, the tone of voice as well, but everything else was so different that it was impossible to tell if the man was angry, afraid, confident, nervous, or just waiting like a predator for the prey to make a mistake. It was not the most pleasant of sensations.

“So why did you lure me in here all by myself?”

The skeleton's eye lights rolled around in their sockets, which made Justin's stomach lurch a bit. “Because this is where the food and drinks are. Or at least where they should stay. If I find another half filled cup of cold coffee resting on top of the magic spectrograph machine I swear to God somebody is getting their pay docked.... Oh, and you're the first person in the entire testing group to have an LV higher than one.”

Justin's eyes shifted towards the paperwork under the skeleton's arm. After some juggling of cups, the skeleton held out two pieces of paper from the stack; a list of number values and a screen capture. Justin looked at the image of himself scowling, with the yellow light glowing from the center of his chest.

“That guy said there was some sort of visual distortion or interference. Where and what was that?”

“That, I'm afraid, was a little white lie to buy me time to get to the lab. Insofar as your soul's chromatography and energetic spectra goes, they are typical for what we've seen so far this week, even if yellow is a rare color.”

“And these numbers? I know that you can tell if somebody's hurt somebody else from these but that's it.”

“You have an LV of three out of a possible eight.”

“And what does that mean, exactly?”

“Well, that's the problem. As I told a friend last night, these are just numbers. We can quantify properties of the soul down to the basic units of measurement, what human scientists for some reason insist on calling quanta despite the obvious linguistic difficulties that represents. The scanner doesn't provide us with context.”

“So what's the point of having it if it can't tell you what you want to know?”

“To be precise, the scanner does tell us what we want to know. What we need to know to understand what we want to know, that's what we're still learning. And what I know is this. A man who had killed before knew that he was going into a place where people would find out that he had killed. And he did it anyway. That seems like the actions of a man who would like to discuss the matter.”

Justin blinked at the skeleton, who pulled out a chair and sat down to assemble a sandwich. After a minute, Justin sat down in the chair on the opposite side. “How much do you know about recent history? On the surface, I mean.”

“Well, I was late to the Barrier breaking party so I've had to cram a year and a half's worth of
studying just to keep pace with everyone else from the Underground. Between Google and Wikipedia it's not been too bad except for the times I end up staring at a computer monitor until two in the morning.”

“So you know there's been a lot of wars recently. Human against human.”

The skeleton bit off some of the sandwich and Justin half expected to see the food simply fall out of the lower jaw, but that didn't happen. Nor was he treated to a spectacle of teeth grinding the bread, meat and cheese into a pulp. In fact, Justin couldn't see where the food had gone at all.

“Yes. That was referred to early and often in several of my searches.”

“Does that kind of thing bother you? Surprise you?”

The skeleton shrugged. “Until this last decade the overall perspective of humans in the Underground wasn't that positive. But my father was a statistical outlier. He had this conviction that humanity wasn't so much a race or species but some sort of destructive force than cannibalized itself. So I more or less grew up hearing all these stories about humans destroying each other because with the last monsters trapped underground there was nobody left for them to fight. So... no. It doesn't surprise me.”

“Hmmm. I was in Afghanistan back in 2003. Green as a twig, straight outta high school. I enlisted because I wanted to protect my family. Protecting the country was a beneficial side effect. I wasn't old enough to buy beer or cigarettes, but I was old enough to fight... do you know what it means when your squad commander gives you the grenade launcher?”

“That you have a head for ballistic trajectories and arcs?”

“Hah. If you end up with the grenade launcher, it means you're the fastest man in the unit. Because you fire that off once, and everyone suddenly wants a piece of you. I was... credited... with thirty seven confirmed kills. In peacetime, that's the trail of a serial killer. In a shock-and-awe campaign, that can actually fall into the cracks. And maybe it would have been nice to just keep thinking about them like that, as numbers.”

Justin reached into the candy bowl and pulled out a monster candy. After turning it around a few times to look at it from all direction, he began unwrapping it.

“There's a lot on television and in the papers and on the net about soldiers who come back without body parts or organ function or full mental capacity. There's not as much about soldiers that look fine on the outside, but it's there. Only, it focuses on the soldiers who can't leave the war back on the battlefield. You don't hear about soldiers who just start hesitating more and more. I... well, I was smart enough to know that if that kept happening, either I would die or somebody else in the unit would die. So I put in for a transfer over to Engineering. And later to Signals.”

The unwrapped candy was stuck inside Justin's mouth, who blinked in surprise as the monster food evaporated into magical energy.

“Okay, didn't expect that.”

“The first time is always the weirdest. For both sides. Sorry, you were saying something about transfers?”

“Right. I'll spare you the details and the paperwork and logistics involved, but I basically ran out the clock on my enlistment. I was told early and often that I was ruining my career, but I didn't want a career in the US Army anymore. When I had the opportunity to re-enlist, I went back to
civilian life. But even though I wasn't technically a soldier anymore, those thirty seven men stayed
dead. It's... it's not as dramatic as the movies. I don't wake up in a cold sweat in the middle of the
night because I see their faces in my dreams. It's not any one thing you can point to. It's just a
whole lot of tiny details that only you pick up on, to keep reminding you.”

Justin took a bit out of his sandwich, chewed for a bit, and swallowed. “And now you have context
for that number, I guess.”

“Hmmm. Suppose I do. The rest is pretty impressive as well. HP is fifty out of fifty. AT 20. DF 35.
SPD 14. INV is only 2, though. Strange.”

“How is that strange?”

“We've already noticed a few possible trends. Correlations between soul spectrometry and attribute
values. High INV seems common for Purple and Yellow, though since there's only four other
yellow souls we've seen so far that might not mean anything. I was expecting it to be around eight
or nine based on everything else, but that might be apophenia at work.”

“What's an apophenia? Is that some sort of part or material in your scanner back there?”

“Apophenia is the term for finding patterns in raw data. My son would be an even better example.
He can solve a high complexity problem like a crossword puzzle within minutes, but if you give
him something with minimal data points, like Junior Jumble? He really struggles.” The skeleton
popped open the lemon-lime soda and took a sip, and once again Justin found himself disoriented
by not seeing the liquid spill out from between various bones. “Also somebody told me that he
once tried to 'solve' the horoscope.”

“What??” Justin blinked. “How does that even work?”

“Not well.”

The break room was silent save for the sounds of chewing, drinking, and the distant sounds of
beeping lab equipment. Justin looked at the sheet of paper with his attributes listed on it.

“This says LV is three out of eight.”

“That's correct. In our sample size so far, yours is actually average.”

“What does the eight mean?”

The skeleton sipped some more soda. “The eight stands for your LV CAP or Capacity. It is the
point at which LV cannot increase for an individual.”

“Why is that? I mean, besides the same reason you can't put two gallons of water in a one gallon
jug.”

“If you're asking about the reason behind the reason, we don't know exactly what causes some
humans to have a higher or lower LV CAP than others. We believe it has to do with exposure to
violence at a young age, but we don't know what the threshold is precisely. Physical injury,
physical assault, graphic media, violent sports, or even juvenile roughhousing... could be all of
them, could be none of them. What information we do have as a baseline applies to a cross section
of a population of monsters in one geographic spot for an extended period of time. Applying
monster metrics to human soul dynamics isn't going to work.”

“...because we don't have magic?”
“Because you're not made out of it. Your bodies are made of otherwise inert matter held together by water first and foremost. Your tissues self-organize to make the most optimum use of energy, especially your nervous system. And despite a tremendous amount of soul power, you cannot use magic as monsters understand it.” The skeleton unwrapped a monster candy and popped it into his mouth. “It's almost like force attenuation over distance, as with a magnet or the strong nuclear force in an atom. Over very short distances, within your own bodies, the field intensity is tremendous. But it drops off to almost nothing once it gets more than a hair's breadth from your skin.”

“Hah. So we do have magic, we just can't use it. Like having money you can't spend.”

“Actually, that whole subject is a side investigation of our scanner project here. We know historically that human magic users did exist. That's how we got stuck down there in the first place. But when everyone came back up there's nothing to indicate that any human has that ability anymore and most of humanity seemed to think magic categorically did not exist. So nobody knows what's involved in that. It might have been a hereditary advantage of a specific bloodline that died out centuries ago. Perhaps it required exposure to some environmental stimulus no longer found on the surface.” The skeleton chuckled. “Or, maybe anyone can learn magic if they just put the effort into it, but it's easier to use technology or do something physical instead. Why spend months or years learning to create fireballs when you can buy matches or a lighter at any convenience store?”

“I could see that last one happening. Or not happening, as the case may be.”

“Excuse me, Dr. Aster?”

Justin turned to see a short lizard with yellow scales, wearing thick, coke-bottle glasses and a white lab coat, leaning around the corner of the doorway to the break room. The skeleton looked up and smiled. “Hey Alphys. What's happening?”

“Sans sent me a text saying you wanted one of the Riley T-Shirts, but I just checked and we're out of blanks. He's out trying to buy some more right now. We have about two hundred and sixty all stocked for shipping out, but they're already packaged and addressed for the back orders from Monday afternoon.”

“Oh. Well, unfortunate as that is, it's in the nature of the problem. We'll get that mailed out to you as soon as we can, Mr. Carrow.”

Justin shrugged. “Like I told the guy mansing the computer in the lab, I'm just here for the food.”

The skeleton, called Dr. Aster apparently, chuckled. “Well, glad at least that worked out.”
"COME BACK HERE YOU LITTLE BRAT!"

Undyne sent another flurry of spears towards the human, and one managed to clip an arm. The human stumbled forward, clutching the maimed arm with the other one, but did not cry out in pain.

*How the hell did you do that? Is that why you didn't try to kill anyone? Because you're so tough you don't think anyone is a challenge? Oh, you arrogant little sunnova-*

Undyne looked down the tunnel and saw the bridge into Hotland, and Sans at the sentry station. In spite of her exhaustion, frustration, and the rising temperature, she grinned. Sans would block access to Hotland, the human would be trapped, and-

"-picture these vegetables as your greatest enemy!"

The human pushed up their sleeves, yelled a ferocious battle cry and punched one of the tomatoes, which rolled over on its side.

"YEAH! OUR HEARTS ARE UNITED AGAINST THESE HEALTHY INGREDIENTS!"

Undyne followed up with her own punch, spraying everything within three feet with pulverized tomato, including herself and the human.

"Uh... we'll scrape this into a-"

Undyne almost tripped and lost ground catching her balance. *What was that?* It felt like some sort of memory but it had never happened. Undyne was sure of that. With a chill down her back in spite of the heat, Alphys' movies and reference books came back to her; some humans had the ability to control minds. The one Alphys used as a “case study” she called it, she needed physical contact, but what if it worked at a distance? The human must have tried to send some sort of false memory to distract her.

Undyne frowned and formed another trio of spears, when the human stopped in their tracks and turned around. Undyne's frown turned upside down within a fraction of a second. At last, the human had decided to throw down. Maybe they thought the extra heat from being near Hotland would give them an advantage? Well, what they lacked in bravery, they made up for in tactical skill. She just had to finish the fight really fast-

*Is that a cell phone?*

Undyne stared as the human held up one hand in a 'stop' gesture and held up a cell phone to their ear with the other for a few seconds, until they spoke.

"Sure! That sounds great! See you there Papyrus!"

Papyrus.

Papyrus had tried to fight the human.

Papyrus had acted even stranger than usual at the tunnel entrance from Snowdin.

*Papyrus was under human control! He was trying to warn me the whole time!*

The human had resumed running and Undyne sprinted after them, white hot anger giving her speed
she hadn't been able to manage earlier. That was why the human hadn't tried to kill anyone, because they were more useful to them alive! Like puppets on a string! Even if in Papyrus's case the strings were all tangled together at the best of times.

The human sped past Sans' sentry station with a hurried “Hi Sans Bye Sans” and Undyne slowed down in shock. Did the human get to him too? She half expected the dogs in the guard to be bribed with treats and affection but Sans was supposed to be smart.

Pausing in front of the station, Undyne realized that Sans was... sleeping. Even through the clattering of a hundred pounds of steel plate armor, which was feeling less and less like a good idea every second that passed. She lost valuable seconds trying to fit that information into her head, and then charged over the bridge into Hotland. The human was already at the water cooler Alphys had set up-

Alphys!

In her mind's eye, shifting and shimmering in the heat, she saw the human manipulating Dr. Alphys into shutting down the CORE, clearing a path straight to the castle, maybe even taking some of the anti-human weapons she'd been working on...

The heat was sucking the energy out of her body along with the moisture in the air. Undyne stumbled and then fell flat on the ground. For a moment her vision doubled, despite only having one working eye; it had to be an effect of the mind control. One vision had the human sprawled on the ground a few feet away, kicking into the dirt to push themselves away, and the look on their face could only be called sheer terror. The other vision had the human standing at the water cooler, filling up a cup. The second one had to be an illusion, a last ditch defense intended to confuse or possibly mock her. Maybe both.

The metal burned at her scales. The air was too dry, and her eye teared up and closed out of reflex. The world turned red, but through the red she could see a vision, a vision of Asgore being cut down.

No!

The human taking Asgore's soul, and becoming something not quite monster, not quite human. The human smashing the soul containers open. The human walking through the Barrier.

It can't end like this! Get up Undyne! GET UP!

A darkened laboratory with a lab coat and glasses in a pile of dust.

I never... told her...

The heat was pushed back with a wave of cold starting at her gills, and Undyne gasped. Another wave of cold spread across her face and she tasted water on her lips. Somebody had found her lying on the ground and had grabbed some water from the cooler. Maybe Sans? Or maybe Alphys! Either way, she had to warn them!

Undyne opened her eye and saw the human standing in front of her with empty cups in each hand.

“Are you alright? Do, do you need more water?”

Undyne glared at the human, but the only look she got back was a look of concern. On the back of her neck she felt a heat that had nothing to do with Hotland. She'd been defeated in battle by a human who hadn't attacked her once. It would have been impressive if it hadn't made her feel so
pathetic. Undyne turned and slowly walked back down the bridge, back toward Waterfall.

“Do you need any help? Undyne??”

The Captain of the Royal Guard gritted her teeth. It wasn't enough to beat her. The human had to mock her. Stomping past Sans' station, she saw out of the corner of her eye that he had finally woken up.

“wow. what'd i miss?”

“Shut up.”

“aw, i always wanted to see shut up.”

Undyne ignored the skeleton and trudged back into Waterfall, but the armor was still Hotland hot... another wave of cold spread out from her gills and Undyne spun around. Did the human follow her?

“Undyne!”

“Who said that?” Undyne shouted at the empty cave.

“Undyne!!”

“Wha...”

Undyne opened her eye and saw the human inches away.

“NGAAAAHHHH!”

A spear materialized and was launched at them, which they sidestepped with practiced ease. Undyne scrambled off the floor to follow them and-

“Frisk??”

Undyne looked around the office. Yes. Her office on the surface, at Dreemurr Elementary. Frisk was ducking behind one of her file cabinets, waving one arm out from behind it. “Are we good?”

“I... damn, I almost killed you just now, Frisk! Are you alright?!”

“Yeah.” Frisk came out from behind the file cabinet. “You didn't even graze me. And I kind of thought if you woke up suddenly you might attack out of reflex so I was ready.”

“I think this heat is getting to me... I dreamed I was back in the Underground, back when I chased you out of Waterfall and into Hotland and almost died of heat exhaustion... wait, did I fall asleep on the floor??”

Frisk held up a plastic cup. “Yeah. That was a little concerning, but I remembered what worked from last time. I, uh, I'm starting to worry about the whole honor guard thing. If everyone is wearing armor, and the auditorium AC still isn't working? You may not be the only one in trouble but you'll be the one in the most trouble.”

Undyne pushed back her hair away from her face. “You might be right about that. And Alphys is so busy with the Soul Research program that she wouldn't have time to come up with something even if I asked.”
Frisk walked over and grabbed Undyne's other hand in theirs. “Maybe we should work on something as an alternative to armor. We have two whole days to figure it out. I mean, obviously with Lesser and Greater Dog that's a problem—”

“And 01 and 02.”

“And them... you know, I always wanted to ask what the deal was with those names, but my parents named me 'Frisk' of all things.”

“I don't know what their deal was. Not sure if I should feel comforted or disturbed by the idea that some people are worse at naming than Asgore,” Undyne cackled.

“Okay, so... let's figure this out using logic. If the AC is fixed, then it's not a problem except getting there. If it isn't fixed, armor is a bad idea all around. So we need something we can do to the armor, or make something that can replace the armor, that we can make between now and Friday afternoon.”

“That about sums it up.”

“...well, if we do keep the armor, we need a cooling system. What about ice packs? Or soaked towels with little fans blowing on them? I made those to keep cool on summer nights. Evaporator coolers I think they're called.”

“Well, we can put them together fast at least. So there's that. Any other ideas?”

“...well, does everyone have to be wearing the same thing? Because the dogs, two of them had armor, two of them had cloaks, one dressed up like he was going to play golf, and Sans just had the jacket. Oh, and even though he wasn't a guard, Papyrus had that costume of his.”

“Oh, you mean his 'battle body' right?” Undyne laughed. “It was like one part superhero, one part astronaut! It took me five minutes to convince him not to dust that thing off when I called him.”

“Well... yeah, thinking about, the Royal Honor Guard is one of those organizations where pants shouldn't be optional.” Frisk nodded. “Should we say it's okay to wear that Puzzlers hoodie he wears all the time now?”

Undyne sighed. “Might as well. Make the theme for the skeletons casual wear. It's not like we're ever going to get Sans out of that jacket. We'll be lucky if he doesn't just come with with a name tag on the front saying Hi My Name Is Royal Guard.”

The office was silent with concentration, until Frisk snapped their fingers.

“Maybe we're looking at this the wrong way. The Royal Honor Guard isn't just about protection, it's also symbolic of the whole kingdom, right? So it makes sense that there's a cross section of different people with different skill and styles. All we really need is a single common point, right?”

Undyne shrugged. “Not sure where you're going with this but sure, why not?”

“And the kingdom already has a symbol. The Delta Rune. Is there a reason we can't put that on everything the guard wears, somewhere?”

Undyne frowned. “Well... it's already on Lesser Dog's shield. I don't suppose it's that much of a jump. We should run this by Toriel and Asgore first. I know I'm fine with it but maybe they don't want the symbol to be directly associated with a bunch of scary armor-clad monsters.”
Frisk snickered. “I think you mean one scary armor-clad monster and a bunch of distracted armor-clad monsters.”


“Okay, I'll talk to mom and dad this afternoon and get the green light or red light.”

“Sounds good. And in case they don't go for it, I just thought of a backup plan.” Undyne grinned even wider. “You remember that weird symbol on Papyrus' costume? I'll ask him if we can use that for all the royal guard.”

“Do you think he'll go for it? I mean... I know this is coming out of nowhere, but I remember when we were dating in his room and he got a book from the Snowdin Library on how to act on a date. He didn't realize it was a walkthrough for a dating sim and he thought that when it said 'press C on the keyboard' he had to go over to his computer. And then he said he felt really informed.”

“...you two were dating??”

Frisk looked at Undyne's confused face and waved both hands. “It's complicated but he ended up friend zoning me. Which was alright. I mean, I was mostly flirting at that point to make people confused so I could get away from them. I never expected anyone to take it seriously. All I'm saying is that Papyrus has different priorities than most people.”

“Hah! No argument here. Actually, now I kind of want his symbol to be Plan A and the Delta Rune Plan B. I think he'd get a kick out of it!”

“Yeah, we can do that.”

“Undyne? Are you there?”

“Yeah! Come on in Toriel!”

The queen walked inside with a puzzled expression. “Why is there a magic spear embedded in the wall outside of your door?”

Undyne blinked and looked at Frisk, who turned to Toriel. “We were trying to keep track of ideas for the Royal Honor Guard and sticky notes just don't work with humidity this high.”

Toriel narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Would the spears not simply shred the paper upon impact?”

“Yeah. You figured that out in advance, we figured it out... after the fact.” Frisk looked away and rubbed the back of their neck. “Anyway, we were thinking about the problems of the guard in metal armor in the auditorium if the air conditioning still isn't working. Do you think it would be acceptable if we simple had the guards identified by a common theme? Like the Delta Rune, or that insignia on Papyrus' old outfit?”

“Hmmm. I suppose that would make sense, although I should clear the use of the Delta Rune with Asgore first. In any case, Frisk, Alphys called and they will be ready for us at the laboratory shortly, so we must leave right away.”

“Oh, right. Uh, do you mind if I just scribble some stuff down for Undyne and I'll meet you at the door? That way she can hit all the important points when she talks to Papyrus.”

Toriel nodded. “Very well, but write quickly.”
As Toriel turned the corner outside the door, Frisk took Undyne's hand once more. “I think you got all the important stuff figured out, and I can't really imagine Papyrus saying no. So that's not a problem. But, you really scared me when I came into the office and saw you passed out like that. Promise me you'll be more careful. Get another fan, and don't be alone for extended periods of time when it's hot like this.”

Undyne grinned. “Of course. Can't let the weather defeat me before I get the chance to attack it.”

“How would you attack the weather? Wait, never mind. Forgot who I was talking too.”

Undyne cackled and tousled Frisk's hair with her other hand. “Get going, punk. You're on the clock, aren't you?”

Frisk turned and walked towards the door, but stopped and walked back to Undyne. “Just so you know, I uh, I went by the bone brother's place yesterday and talked to Dr. Aster. He explained what a high LV CAP meant.”

Undyne continued to grin but the grin took on a strained quality. Frisk sighed. “I think you figured out who I meant when I said that somebody got a result of twenty. And now I think I know why it bothered you. But the doctor is convinced the numbers aren't right, and he almost has me convinced, but I get the feeling that not everyone is telling me the whole story. It could be because I'm a kid, or it could be because I'm a human. But that's not what's important right now. I just wanted things to... I want... things... to be okay between us.”

Undyne's not-quite-grin slowly faded, and she took a deep breath.

“Don't worry, Frisk. It doesn't matter what your numbers are. I'm always going to have your back.”

“Thank you. That means a lot.”

“Now get going, nerd.”
The lab looked just as busy as it had on Monday and possibly more so, but this was not a fact that Frisk could discuss or mention directly with anyone. There was a long line of volunteers, lab techs and security guards and support staff running around and getting in each others' way, and even more beeping equipment.

“Oh. MY GOD.”

Actually a few things were different.

“Come on doc, don't be like that.”

“Be like what? An exasperated scientist dealing with an unprofessional attitude? Because that's exactly what's happening!”

Through the lab window, Frisk could see a woman with a ponytail standing in front of the scanner, grinning and pointing at Dr. Aster with both hands. Dr. Aster on the other hand was not smiling, which was quite an accomplishment given that he was a skeleton.

“All I was saying was you and I should get to know each other better. Besides, I showed you mine, why don't you show me yours?”

“Because that would be a violation of every major principle of scientific ethics and objective data gathering that goes with it! SANS STOP LAUGHING!”

Frisk noticed that Sans, wearing a lab coat instead of his standard blue jacket, was leaning up against one of the counters that lined the wall of the lab. At Dr. Aster's comment, he fell abruptly to the floor and began to laugh with an intensity that Frisk had never heard before.

“Oh dear. Frisk, perhaps we should leave and reschedule something for later? I am not sure I understand what is going on right now.”

Frisk rubbed their forehead with one hand. “I do. I wish I didn't.” The child visibly flinched as the human with the ponytail tried again to flirt with the skeleton scientist, then pulled Toriel in the direction of the laboratory's other door.

“Come on Dr. Gaster. What could it hurt to just grab a cup of coffee?”

“Okay first that is not my name. I don't know why people keep carrying the G at the end of Wing Ding over to the start of Aster, and it would have been understandable with the accounting department screwing up my paycheck, but I am getting very tired of it, very quickly. Second, I don't drink coffee. Third, I have work to do and you are holding the whole process up with your... I don't know what you're doing!”

“I do,” interjected Frisk, slipping in through the back door to the lab. Dr. Aster spun around in surprise, while Sans waved a greeting weakly from his prone position on the floor, still convulsing with amusement. Toriel closed the door behind them and Frisk let go of her hand to walk over to Dr. Aster. “Good morning doctor. That... lady over there... is trying to flirt with you. She doesn't understand that you're not actually interested, and she probably thinks you're playing hard to get.”

“What does 'hard to get' mean?”
Frisk blinked. “Oh. Right. You're a scientist. You focus on direct information gathering and transparency. Playing hard to get is a dating strategy used by some humans to filter out romantic partners who are simply seeking short term affection instead of a long term relationship. It's one of our variations of the mating dance. That's the closest thing I can think of for comparison, anyway.”

Dr. Aster pinched the bridge of bone between his eye sockets. “No, I think I understand that, even if the term was unfamiliar. I just don't understand why SHE doesn't understand that I don't want any part of it!”

“Hmmm.” Frisk tapped their chin, then walked over to the woman. “Hey. My name is Frisk Dreemurr. I am the ambassador for the Kingdom of Monsters. What's your name?”

“Oh, hello Frisk. I'm Daphne. Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too.” Frisk extended a hand and the woman shook it. “I feel I need to inform you that while you probably didn't mean any harm by your flirting, you have made Dr. Aster both uncomfortable and angry. Neither state of mind is helpful when doing any branch of science. Also you have caused Sans to laugh so much he can't do science either. I don't have the legal authority to speak for the owners and operators of All Fine Labs, so I can't tell you to leave. But I do think you should stop trying to make a pass at Dr. Aster, especially while he's working.”

“...okay, yeah, maybe this wasn't the best time or place. And once I got started it kind of, well, took on a life of its own. Sorry.”

“Right. I know how that works. Just, you know, keep a lid on it and let Dr. Aster go back to plumbing the mysteries of the unknown. What, uh, what are your stats if you don't mind me asking?”

“I don't actually know?” Daphne laughed nervously. “I kind of let my mouth run away from me before we got to that part?”

“Maybe we should pick up there, then.”

At the console, Joe Stanton was punching keyboards while Dr. Aster glared at Sans with his arms crossed. “Numbers compiled a while ago to be honest. LV 1. EXP 0. HP 32 over 32. AT 12, DF 16, SPD 8, INV 10. Yellow chromatography. Guess that brings it up to six, doc.”

“Hmmmph. What's the LV CAP?”

“Let me go back... LV CAP 10.”

“What's that mean?” Daphne asked. “I know what the other stuff means from the radio but you didn't mention that on the air.”

Dr. Aster hesitated, but only Frisk really noticed; Sans was still trying to get his giggling under control and to anyone else the scientist's bearing and countenance would give the impression of deliberation instead of reluctance to speak. “It means your capacity to become violent, and it serves a limit to your LV if you were to engage in violence on a regular basis.”

“Oh. What causes it?”

Dr. Aster stared at the woman for a bit longer than was necessary. “Staying up past your bedtime and not eating your green vegetables. We. Don't. Know. That's why we were doing the study in the first place. Okay you have your numbers goodbye come again. When somebody else is manning the machinery please. Joe, I don't mean to impose but can you take... Daphne... to the break room
to get something to eat and fill out another back order for a shirt?”

“Sure thing Doc. Miss, if you'll follow me? We'll get everything squared away.”

Dr. Aster watched the woman leave and let out a deep breath. “It's been less than a week on the surface and I'm already regretting the fact that there wasn't another War. Somehow I think that would be less painful.” He seemed to notice Frisk for the first time. “Oh. And thanks for your help there. I was about three more awkward comments away from trying to spell out GO AWAY in bones.”

“Wait, how would you do the curved letters?”

“ribs, kiddo. come on, this ain't amateur hour.”

Frisk grinned, and Toriel walked over to the child. “That was very well done, my dear. You made your point clearly while still maintaining a positive presence and with a polite tone.”

“All in a day's work. Alright Dr. Aster, I'm ready. What do I need to do? Stand in that box area?”

“...that's correct. Stand in the targeting zone. I'll man the hardware here, get you a printout and screen capture of the soul chromatiks, and... well, somehow I don't think we'll get you a shirt before the start of July at this rate. Can't be helped.”

“That's alright doctor. Good shirts come to those who wait.” Frisk took up position in the targeting box and waved at the scanner. “Is it working? Can you see me?”

“Yeah, the scanner can see you. Try not to move so much. The last thing we need right now is any visual distortion.”

“Oh. Right.”

Dr. Aster stared at the screen, clicked the mouse a few times, then grumbled something under his breath. Turning towards the other skeleton in the room, he raised his voice. “Sans, can you come over here and look at this? We may need Alphys to get in here to troubleshoot. Again.”

“on it.” Sans walked over and peered at the computer monitor. “...okay, that's not good. And I don't think this is on Alphys' end. Unless you want to throw out the entire day's worth of test data. Or the whole week so far.”

Over in the sights of the scanner, Frisk swallowed. The subtext of those words did not inspire confidence, especially in light of what they had learned the previous afternoon. Frisk's eyes wandered over to Toriel, who was looking at the backs of the skeletons' skulls with a confused expression. How would she react? Undyne had been very concerned about hearing of the high LV CAP, bordering on the closest Frisk had ever seen her get to being afraid of anything. Alphys had been sweating for more than the heat could account for during the Garden Show meeting, although some of that could have been being nervous about revealing the truth to Toriel. Sans... was Sans. He hadn't acted in any way out of the ordinary, but that was probably because he was completely certain that the numbers were wrong to begin with. Dr. Aster had been resigned and detached, but he was a scientist and he could look at things like that. That was his job. Without any further prompting, Frisk's imagination produced an image of Toriel towering over them with an angry look on her face, lips twisted in rage and fire spilling from her paws. Or, much worse, a sad expression of disappointment as she found out that the child she had gone to so much trouble to care for wasn't-

“Whoa, whoa! What was that?!” Dr. Aster pointed at the screen, snapping Frisk out of their trance.
“The chromatics just went completely insane for a second. And I think some of the numbers shifted.”

Frisk swallowed, a task made both more urgent and more difficulty by a sudden dryness of the throat. “What... uh, what does that mean? Can numbers actually change, or are they, you know, static?”

Dr. Aster shook his head, still staring at the screen. “Some numbers are static, or can only be changed from an outside force or a deliberate effort. LV, EXP, CAP, those only get higher. But the four that come up in magical combat, those are responsive to mood and attitude and can rise and fall with it. Your AT and INV just dropped by half for a second, but your DF and SPD tripled. Now they’re back to normal again. What were you thinking about just now?”

Frisk looked up at the scanner. “Well... this thing looks a lot like something I saw in the Hotland lab basement way back when. I guess I started thinking about that. It... uh... it was pretty creepy.”

“I suppose that would explain a great deal. The chromatics, not so much.”

“And you forgot about that,” Sans commented, pointing at another spot on the monitor.

“...oh hell. That can't be good.”

“Yeah. This is actually a lot worse than the worst case scenario.”

“What?” Toriel spoke up, moving closer to the skeletons. “What is the worst case scenario? What is wrong with Frisk??”

“I don't know if this applies directly, but I feel okay except for the heat,” Frisk called out.

“Unfortunately for us, it doesn't.” Sans grabbed the numbers and a screen cap as they were printed out, then motioned for Frisk to come over. “Frisk, Toriel... uh, we should talk. Somewhere private.”

Frisk followed Sans and Toriel out of the lab and down a hallway. Their entire body felt numb despite the obvious physical sensations of heat, the movement of air from air conditioning ducts and the impact of the ground on their feet as they walked. Worse, a weight seemed to be growing in the pit of their stomach. Sans knocked on a room door and, receiving no answer, opened it and motioned everyone inside what looked like some sort of doctor's exam room. The skeleton took a seat by a desk in the corner while Toriel and Frisk chose chairs nearby.

“Okay. Full disclosure. This is not the first time Frisk has been in here to get scanned.”

Toriel frowned in confusion, but said nothing. Sans looked down at the papers in his hands, then reached into one of his pockets and pulled out two other sheets of paper, folded up. Once unfolded the papers were placed side by side and turned around on the desk so Toriel and Frisk could see them better.

“These were our initial readings from Monday. We chalked it up to interference at first, but I spent four hours last night adding filters and baffles to the scanner device for exactly that reason. We got almost the same results so it's not interference.” Sans dropped the other papers on the desk.

Toriel pulled them closer and pulled out a pair of reading glasses to inspect them. “EXP zero and LV 1, of course. Out of... twenty??” Toriel looked over at Frisk, who's throat had suddenly become very dry again. “That's utter nonsense.”
“I know. That's why we were sure it was interference. And yet here we are today with the same result.”

“...I do not wish to be rude, or to dismiss any of the important work you are all doing here, but that scanner machine is clearly defective.”

Sans scratched the back of his skull. “Believe me, Toriel, nothing would make me happier right now than an excuse to throw out these numbers, even if we had to start over from scratch. But... well, look at the other numbers, too. First run AT and DF both showed as zero. SPD was nine, INV was eight. And HP was twenty over nineteen. Now the second results are different. AT 2, DF 12, SPD 6, and INV 6. But look at HP now. Twenty over eighteen. And for a split second, when all the other numbers flickered, it was twenty over seventeen. That means Frisk's healing potential was impaired somehow. And...”

Sans pushed the two screen captures together, and Toriel peered at them.

“This type of phenomena has never, ever occurred with any other human soul. If it had been something we had seen before, or an optical aberration that showed up with extended use of the scanner, that would be one thing. But it's not.” Sans pulled another sheet of paper out of his pocket and placed it next to the other two. Frisk leaned over and saw a gray scale image of themselves talking on their cell phone inside a room filled with high technology and a neon-lit emblem that resembled part of the Delta Rune. Superimposed on their torso was a bright red light.

“I pulled some of the older security tapes from the CORE entrance yesterday, and applied Alph's spectrograph. Same red color as today, but back then Frisk's soul appeared to be a single, high energy point like every other soul. Now...” he gestured to the other two papers, “it looks like many smaller, lower energy points orbiting around a few higher energy points clustered together. It actually resembles a planetary system with multiple suns.”

Frisk cleared their throat. “So my soul really is broken. I mean, obviously if it was gone, I'd be dead. So... it's broken in a way that it still holds itself together when it should be, I dunno, flying apart. And it happened some time in the last year and a half, without me noticing.”

“That about sums it up. We... well, we don't know how to fix this, Frisk. I mean, it's not like this is ever something we had to deal with in the first place, you know? I wanted you to both know how serious this was. But now that I've made that clear, I also want you to know that this has become our top priority. The entire Soul Research program has just become a means to an end. And the end is figuring out what this all means, and the correct response toward it.”

Toriel peered at the numbers once more. “Are you absolutely certain that this is not an error?”

“We can't be absolutely certain, no. There's too much we are unfamiliar with. But there's enough for us to be... confident.”

Toriel took off her glasses and stared at the floor. “...Frisk... I need to ask you to leave.”

“...okay.” Even seeing them coming, the words hit with all the impact of a sledgehammer. The weight in Frisk's stomach suddenly turned into a black hole, sucking everything into it. Color, light, energy, even the air, considering how hard it was to breathe suddenly.

“Kid, she means leave the room. We just need to talk about grown up stuff right now. If you head over to the break room, you can make yourself a sandwich or two. We'll come get you in a bit.”

“...oh.”
Toriel looked back and forth between Sans and Frisk. “Yes, that is what I meant, why did you feel
the need to clarify it?”

Sans shrugged. “Just a hunch.”

Frisk stood up and slowly walked out of the room. When the door latch snapped shut, Toriel leaned
over the desk and lowered her voice. “I wish that you had not brought up the subject with Frisk in
the room. I do not relish any conversations that might come later on the subject of what an LV
CAP this high indicates.”

“Sorry Tori. But we talked it over earlier, me Alph and Dad, and we agreed there was nothing to
be gained from keeping anything from the kid. We didn't mean to put the burden of exposition on
your shoulders, and we can all tackle that subject when the time comes.”

“That... that will not be necessary, but I thank you for making the offer.” Toriel leaned back and
rubbed her head with one paw. “If this is not an error, then I am very worried. Some of the events
that have happened, especially over the past week, have bothered me.”

“I did ask Frisk if it was smart to antagonize Dwayne Riley, to be honest. That's the closest they've
gotten to what we know of as high LV CAP behavior.”

“That is not what I meant. Save for that one exception of Mr. Riley, Frisk... cannot abide
confrontation. They always attempt to deflect, to defuse. What I thought was a natural affinity for
being an ambassador and mediator, what if it is a symptom of some problem? And when they
broke the plate... you remember how they responded, do you not?”

Sans nodded. “I do. The look on the kid's face, that was the look of somebody who was terrified of
what was going to happen next. And did you notice the position of Frisk's arms? That was a
defensive posture. Like they were expecting an attack to come from somebody much taller than
them... and to their left. Where you were standing.”

“...did you know that Frisk bought five replacement plates using their own money after that
happened?”

“This is the first I've heard of it, but I can't say I'm too surprised. But the day after, I stopped by the
school to talk to them, and they steered the conversation in some interesting directions. About how
me and dad got along back in the day. Especially if I'd ever made him mad. Well, what parent
hasn't been frustrated with something their kids have done, or not done? But when I told Frisk
about the one time I screwed up something in Hotland, and how cheesed off Wing Ding got about
that... they tried to change the subject.” Sans scratched the side of his skull. “Not because they
didn't want to hear about it, but because they didn't want me to have to remember it, seemed like.
Toriel, how often has Frisk talked to you about their life before the Underground?”

“It comes up on occasion, but Frisk does not ever offer specific details. Merely anecdotes and
trivia. Television shows they would watch, such as that Transformers show that Papyrus is so
enthusiastic about. Books they had read at the Librarby. Places of geographic or historical
significance on the surface within walking or driving distance. Never anything in regards to their
human family—” Toriel's eyes narrowed.

“...you just figured something out.”

“Well, I remembered something. The day the Barrier was broken, and we were standing outside the
cave, looking at the sunset. Everyone else had gone down the mountain to meet the humans, so
only Frisk and I remained. I asked them where they were going next, since obviously they went to
great effort to leave the Underground. And Frisk said to me 'I want to stay with you.' But the expression on their face... I thought they were afraid of me saying no. But maybe the reason that frightened them was more a matter of what was waiting for them on the surface?"

"Huh. Maybe." Sans reached over and picked up the two sheets with Frisk's attributes. "These numbers are the only things that stay the same between scans. LV 1 out of 20, and no EXP. Now, if I push Frisk to talk about their life before the Underground, all they'll say is that they were a bad kid. And they ain't exactly eager to give up details. Just that they broke things and made people miserable. It's not like the scanner picks up on anything less than torture or murder. So maybe Frisk picked a lot of schoolyard fights maybe?"

"...no. I cannot see that scenario taking place."

"Yeah me neither." Sans tapped the papers with one finger bone. "...okay, I've got an idea. It's really crazy so feel free to bring me back to reality any time. The whole objection we have with these numbers is that Frisk doesn't act like a monster with LV CAP 20. Right? Because a monster that had been that badly hurt would never be able to not hurt others first, to protect themselves. Every conversation, every social interaction, it would be a battle to the death. To them, everything is a fight. And the lucky ones are able to realize that they aren't actually in danger, and they can stay their hand and not risk being attacked in return... but it never stops being a fight for them."

Toriel seemed distracted, but nodded. "Yes, but that does not apply to Frisk. Are you saying that humans develop an LV CAP differently, or handle it in some other manner?"

"Either one might be true, but that's not what I meant. What if Frisk really does think everything is a fight? I've seen how they handled other monsters attacking them in the Underground. They defuse, deflect, try to find some way to appease them and make them happy-

"The fight." Toriel stood up straighter, eyes wide in shock. "Frisk said that they felt ill at ease with everything else, all the efforts I made to make them feel comfortable and safe in Home. But they said the fight was familiar. That they understood it. And they just stared me down when I tried to scare them out of trying to leave the Ruins. Sans... when I was trying to understand what they meant by the fight being familiar, they started crying. And they seemed to be terrified that I would send them 'back' someplace because of things that they had done."

Sans looked up from the papers and saw Toriel staring off into the distance with a sad expression on her face. He did not want to finish his earlier thought anymore, but it was still hanging there, waiting to be completed.

"So maybe... Frisk has been fighting all this time. The only way they know how, the only way they can. Trying to defuse and deflect and disarm. And we never noticed because we were expecting punching and kicking. But if Frisk really thinks they are a bad person... and that everyone is fighting them all the time... what would you have to do to a kid to make them think that?"

As Sans finished asking his question, Toriel's shoulders sagged and she buried her face in her paws.

"Uh, Tori? You, you doing alright-"

"Oh, Sans... I have been such a fool. The signs were there the whole time and I just ignored them."

"Hey, unless you saw a sign that looked a lot like these printouts, you didn't miss anything that we couldn't have known ahead of time."

Toriel sat up straighter, lowering her paws, and Sans could see streaks of tears making their way
through the queen's fur. “Frisk... Frisk goes out of their way to help during meals and clean up
after, to keep their room cleaned without prompting. They have never gotten into a fight at school.
I have never had to chastise them about grades or performance in any class. We have never even
had an argument about any rules I set down. That... is not normal, healthy behavior for children.
They must test boundaries in order to find where the boundaries are to begin with. I see it every day
with all of the other students. The gap, the exception to the rule, it should have caught my attention
on the first day. By the end of the first week, at the latest. Frisk does not test boundaries because
they are afraid of the consequences, or what they imagine the consequences will be. They are...
they are afraid that if they are not the perfect child, then... nobody will want them, or love them, or
care about them. They should not have to be afraid of that. No child should be afraid of that. Oh
dear... that was why you had to clarify my statement earlier, was it not? Did you suspect something
like this from the beginning?"

“No. I just saw Frisk's expression for a split second after you spoke. It was an educated guess.”
Sans stared at the papers on the desk. “Just between you and me, Toriel, if I ever meet Frisk's
human parents, we are going to have a long conversation. I have a lot of questions. And they better
have some answers.”

“I insist that you involve me as well. An apology is the least that Frisk is owed, if our speculations
ring true.” Toriel smoothed out the fur around her eyes, removing the traces of the earlier tears.

“Well... first we have to find out who they are. And if we go into the break room and ask Frisk
who their human parents are and where they live, I can't see them not getting the wrong idea right
out of the gate.” Sans pulled out his cell phone. “Hey, the door swings both ways. You ever get a
knock at the door that turns out to be two humans saying Frisk is their kid, you get hold of me right
away. I'll be there in a flash and hell's coming with me.”

“Of course, Sans.”

The skeleton picked up the folded papers and the security footage excerpt, putting them back in his
lab coat pockets. The remaining two papers he handed to Toriel. “Here. Might as well have some
redundancy. Also, Frisk was serious about this being something they could use as ambassador to
build bridges between humans and monsters, but that's not a binding agreement. We don't have to
release that information to anybody, in any part. How much Frisk shares with anybody is up to
them, same with every other volunteer. Now, let's go get the kid before they completely empty out
that bowl of monster candy.”

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the gravity of the previous conversation, Toriel found herself
laughing. Navigating through the various hallways, Sans led them to the break room.

An empty break room.

“oh. well that's just dandy. probably should have seen this coming.” Sans pulled out his cellphone
and his thumb bones rapidly typed out a text.

12:47 PM: hey shorty where are you

12:47 PM: were at the break room and u r not

12:47 PM: and the clock is ticking

12:47 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: ey sans im in the physics lab w ur dad learning all the
timespace
Sans let out his breath and in the process realized he was holding it. “hey we're alright. the kid's just hanging out with my dad in the physics branch. let's go pick em up.”

12:48 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: he had this idea about the old core thing n he new I was interested in it

12:49 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: also monster physics beats human physics bcause monster physics makes sens

12:50 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: never got how gravtiy could be lik a bownign bal on a bed bcause gravity is y the ball sinks n 2 the bed

12:50 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: if gravity is the curve then wat makes the curve

12:51 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: is lkie the story about the lady who thought the world was on the back of a big turtle

12:51 PM: heh I love those books

12:52 PM: think my favori is moving pictures

12:52 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: and a guy asked her what the turtle was on top of

12:52 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: I like thud the most btw

12:52 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: and the lady said another turtle so he asked what that was on

12:53 PM: I kinda had you pegged for thief of time or night watch actually

12:54 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: and the lady says ITS TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN and you can't do that rly becase u gotta run out of turtles at some

12:54 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: nah thud has a war ending

12:55 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: night watch has a war starting and thief of time has a weird cult of monks

12:55 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: nevr trust weird cults sans

12:55 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: they r jerks

As the texting conversation had gone on, Sans walked Toriel to the physics lab annex and peered through a window. On the other side, a room filled with dry erase boards and incomplete electronics was occupied by a skeleton scribbling a diagram on one of the boards and a human child looking back and forth between their cell phone and the diagram, with the occasional pause to take a bite out of a sandwich in their other hand. Sans opened the door and stepped inside and caught the middle of a scientific lecture.

“-actually thinking about it, the energy had to travel in all directions spatially and temporally when the concentration got too high, but the inability of transmitting mass backwards in time lead to a bias in measurement. I mean, that still doesn't explain how every beam of energy got stuck in the same loop at once, but it's definitely going to throw off any numbers because we could only detect
energetic mass that traveled to the future. Like yours truly.”

“I thought you said you guys never got to the point of transmitting matter through time?”

“Not into the past, no. Going to the future there's nothing in the way because the matter is already decoupled from normal spatial volumes, but if you try to send matter back in time the first thing it runs into is the past version of itself. And because it's going in reverse relative to its past version, that means that the electrons are orbiting in the opposite direction. Charges and currents cancel each other out and neutralize, the electrical field collapses, and there's literally nothing holding all those atomic nuclei in place anymore. Originally I thought that the canceled electrical fields would allow nuclei to fuse at lower energy levels, allowing us to synthesize any element we wanted on demand. But the proton has a higher mass, and its energy level is more resistant to change because of that. So they explode away from each other without electrons to hold the molecular structure together.”

“Wow. You're right, that is messy. Do I want to know how you found that out?”

“Well, we had the caution to start small. Tested it with some hydrogen gas. Went in expecting a light show. Was not disappointed.” Dr. Aster turned to Frisk and tapped the crack in his skull between his left eye socket and his upper jaw. “That's how this happened actually.”

“Ouch.”

“It certainly didn't tickle, I can tell you that. Fortunately the reaction is self limiting, so only the smallest fraction of any given mass would interact with itself before the energetic reactions would overwhelm the time field. Or to put it another way, it could have gone much, much worse. I suppose I'm lucky I got hit by a timespace backlash aimed at the future instead of back towards the past. Or worse, sideways. Who knows where, when, or how I would have ended up.” Dr. Aster looked up and noticed Sans and Toriel standing near the doorway. “Ah, it would appear my scientific ranting must be put on hold. I trust everything has been worked out?”

“Yeah dad. All i's dotted and t's crossed and exclamation points somethinged. Do you guys need a shortcut? It's almost one in the afternoon now.”

Toriel shook her head. “Actually, I think we could benefit from another walk. Thank you for the offer, nevertheless.”

“But mom, doesn't geography start in a few minutes?”

Toriel winked. “Unless I missed an important press conference held by NASA, I believe the earth will still be here tomorrow and without major changes to its natural features. You can afford to miss one day so long as you keep up with the chapter questions in the book.”

“...oh. Alright then. Thank you for the lesson in physics Dr. Aster.” Frisk put their cell phone away and shook the tall skeleton's hand.

“Anytime, Frisk. It's always nice to have an interested audience willing to learn.”

The last bite of sandwich was gobbled down and Frisk walked over to the door, where Toriel rested a paw on the child's head.

“I trust you had a nice chat with Dr. Aster? We were somewhat concerned when we didn't find you in the break room.”

“I didn't mean to make you worry. When he showed up wanting to talk time physics I thought I'd
only be gone for five minutes. Maybe I should have left a note. Or sent you a text, that would have been better. A note could have been lost or overlooked.”

“No harm, no foul, my dear. Just remember for next time.”

“I will mom.”

Sans watched the door shut and turned to Dr. Aster. “Welp. That could have gone a whole lot worse. Explained to Toriel what we thought was going on. Brainstormed a bit. No real consensus on what to do about it except that if any humans contact us claiming to be Frisk’s parents, we trust them about as far as we can throw them.”

“I dunno, I can-”

“Without gravity control.”

“Oh. Well, I guess it wouldn’t be very sporting otherwise.”

“Nope. In other news, I see you’ve been keeping busy.”

Dr. Aster gestured towards the board. “Frisk has got me thinking about the logistics of the time distortion. The energy dispersal had to be omnidirectional from a point, but only the three dimensions in the CORE facility would have provided any resistance.”

“I didn’t see any resistance during the experiment.”

“I was speaking electrically. The energy would have had a preferential bias up and down the time line, and laterally if we could properly map radial directions to the time line like that. Physical matter would be carried forward, but only energy could go backward... this is going to take a lot more thought. I hope once the soul research program is over I can devote more attention to this problem.”

“Well, we can ask Alphys when she finally gets back from the Stop-And-Go with the pizza.” Sans' phone chimed and he pulled it out. “huh. speak of the devil. Alph says all they got left is vegetarian and Hawaiian style now. what sounds good?”

“Either or. As long as it's not triple meat this time. That stuff goes right through me.”

“Well, it's human food and we're skeletons, so...”
And Miles To Go Before I Sleep

“You really like that picture, don't you?”

Frisk looked up from the picture frame in their lap and saw Flowey growing out of the edge of the backyard, a blue ribbon wrapped around his stem. Although the red light from the setting sun (when it made it through the trees or the fence boards) gave it a purple tinge, it was pretty obviously a first prize ribbon.

“Hi Flowey. And yeah. I do.”

“...why were you crying just now? I know you're not injured, and I didn't hear any screaming or yelling from the house earlier, so it can't be either of those.”

“I don't know.” Frisk wiped their eyes with the back of one hand. “Just scared I guess. I talked to Dr. Aster today. Told him about what happened to me in the Underground. How I kept coming back.”

“You what.” Flowey burrowed into the ground, then burst from the soil next to Frisk a few seconds later. “Frisk why?! Do you have any idea what the monsters will do to you if they find out that all of this can be undone?!”

“Yes. I think I know what happens next.”

“And what about Sans? If Dr. Aster is involved in this then it's only a matter of time before Sans is too. He already knows too much about both of us.”

Frisk stared at the picture for a while, then held it close to their chest and took a deep breath. “I know. But it's the right thing to do.”

“What definition of right are you using? Because it's not the one I'm using.”

“Flowey, do you remember what we talked about on Valentine's day?”

“This year or last year?”

“This year.”

“Yeah, that was when I told you about how I woke up in the garden the first time.”

“Yeah, but I meant after that. When you realized you had the power to change history.”

“Oh. Right. How I could always come back no matter how bad I was hurt. And then you showed up and stole it. And you were so good at it you only got knocked back a little bit if you died. Not all the way to the Ruins.”

“Did you ever see anything in the Underground that looked like glowing stars?”

“Subject change much?” Flowey snorted. “Closest things to stars down there were the crystals in the Waterfall cavern roof.”

“Flowey, the power we had, I think that came from the CORE or the experiment that they did at the CORE. I described one of those stars I saw that nobody else seemed to notice and Dr. Aster said that it sounded like the same thing that happened when the experiment went wrong.”
“You know those days when we'd talk about things that actually made sense? I miss those.”

“Do you remember what happened when we got out the first time?”

Flowey blinked, and then his face was contorted in confusion. “...you got out, and you went back to where you originally came from, right? Sorry, I was a bit too busy exploring something new after a personal eternity of the same damned thing over and over. Thanks for that, by the way. Dragging me back into that prison with you.”

Frisk flinched, and Flowey rolled his eyes. “Oh, don't be like that. I'm a jerk, Frisk. You should have stopped trusting anything that came out of my mouth the moment I tried to kill you when we first met in the Ruins.”

“Bringing you back with me, undoing everything... that's why I had to talk to Dr. Aster. I didn't realize that if I died up here, I would go all the way back to when I fell into the Underground. If something happens to me... or... this, all of this, has to be safe. If Dwayne Riley realizes he can put all the monsters back underground just by shooting me, he'll do it. Whether or not he knows that he won't remember after.”

“That's not likely, Frisk. The only people who would even know to look for it, let alone what to look for, are people like Sans with his inside knowledge and trust passwords. Although, thinking about it, I could see Dwayne Riley shooting you on principle. You're living proof that he's wrong and stupid and stupidly wrong about everything.”

“Exactly. That's why I had to talk to Dr. Aster about it, so he could find a way to stop it. Because if that happens, everything will be gone. Mom's school. Dad seeing mom again. Alphys's lab. Every storm Undyne has run through. Burgie's job on the radio, Mettaton's movies, Blooky's album, Shyren's concerts... Sans and Papyrus seeing their dad again. I can't let that... can't let it be taken away. I can't. I can't-”

“Or, you know, you could just not get shot.” The flower monster stuck out his tongue and winked. “You are spending waaaay too much time worrying about the what ifs. And not enough time worrying about what would happen to the time line if I ever got that power back. Unless... oh, you're trying to get rid of the power itself. Not just your connection to it. Spoilsport.”

“It has to stop somewhere, Flowey.”

“Stopping it here and now also means stopping the chance to make things right later. Don't think I didn't notice all the little bits you did different on the second run to make people happy. Laughing at that bird's stupid puns. Setting up that hangout between Burgie, Bratty and Catty. Putting Temmie through college... although I'm still not sure exactly what happened there.”

“Me neither. But foresight isn't enough. I knew from experience Sans would pull the loose cap on the ketchup bottle prank. I had no idea he was going to drink it after I said no thanks!”

“It's Sans. There are some questions you're never going to get any answers to.”

“That's not what I meant. The instant I made a change based on what I thought I knew, everything else changed after that so I was back in uncharted territory, stumbling through the Underground blind. Or worse, trusting a map that was no longer accurate. At least when I had no idea what was coming, I was cautious. If I thought I knew what was going to happen and I was wrong I could rush right into something I couldn't undo.” Frisk tapped a part of the picture on their lap. “The only good thing about this power is that if somebody died, I could go back and change events so that it never happened outside of our memories. But if I have to take everyone's hard work, everyone's
struggles and triumphs and throw it all away... how can anyone make that choice? Between one life and everyone else's life?”

“I never had a problem with it. Although I didn't exactly have a lot going on in the empathy department.”

“Well... it scares the hell out of me. Wondering if I'm going to wake up one morning and hear on the news that somebody got... cornered by the Anti Monster League. Wondering if I'll have to make that choice. Wondering, if I do go back and redo everything, if the things I changed will make any difference at all, or if they will make things worse. No, Flowey. No one person should be able to dictate the terms of anyone else's life like that. Even if they mean well, they could just make things worse by accident.”

The flower monster glared at the human child, but eventually his expression softened. “Well... you did manage to pull off in two runs what I never did in... to be honest, I stopped keeping track after eighty. And as final timelines go this one isn't too bad. Never won a garden club contest before. Or entered one, which is probably one of the reasons why. And this town is so crazy I will never get bored, I bet.”

“I told you before. We're eccent-”

Frisk's insistent terminology was interrupted by the sound of a door opening and closing, followed by a muffled voice with a familiar tone. Flowey looked back at the house.

“Welp. Toriel's home. Don't suppose to have a random topic in mind?”

“Oh, um, Back to the Future.”

“Time travel and history changing. Why am I not surprised.” As the back door opened, Flowey burrowed over in front of Frisk to face them directly. “The thing about the end of Part Three is that they were in such a hurry to leave because they thought that Doc Brown was going to get shot on Monday. Once Mad Dog got knocked into the manure cart and arrested they were literally off the clock.”

Behind Flowey, Toriel giggled from the back door.

"Frisk, do not tell Sans I said that. Where was I? Oh right. They could have just gone back to the DeLorean, taken it back to the blacksmith shop, and had Doc rebuild the engine so it could run on booze or steam, or just replaced the whole thing with a solid fuel rocket booster. Easy peasy.”

“Flowey, the whole point of the trilogy is that making changes like that, for better or worse, can have results that nobody can anticipate. It worked out fine for the McFly family and for Clara, but both of those were accidents. The whole Alternate 1985 with Biff's Casino was an example of how easily that can go wrong. The longer they stayed in 1885 the greater the chances that something else would go wrong. Like Mad Dog breaking out of jail or something.”

“If he was gonna do that, he would have done it in the past while Doc and Clara are raising Jules and Verne. Duh.”

“Also you're forgetting the most important reason they had to steal the train.”

“If it was the most important, you should have started with it.”

Frisk grinned. “The movie was based on Westerns. You can't have a good western without a bar brawl, a showdown, or a train robbery, and it's best if you have all three.”
“That is not a reason! That is an excuse!”

From the back door, Toriel giggled again. Frisk held up a hand and waved, while still looking at Flowey. “Hi mom.”

“Hello Frisk. Hello to you as well Flowey.”

“Hey M-Mrs. Dreemurr.” Flowey grew a leaf from his stem and waved, then turned back to Frisk. “Okay, if you want to pull the train argument, how about this? At the end of the movie Doc shows up with a flying time machine based on a steam locomotive. Obviously he had to travel to 2015 to get it hover converted, but to get there he had to build a time machine out of nineteenth century hardware and materials. So they could have thrown in the towel and avoided stealing the train after all! Hah HAH! You just activated my trap card!”

Frisk fell backwards onto the ground and started snickering. “That joke was past its sell by date before I was even born, I think.”

“If there's one thing I've learned from the human internet, it's that memes never die. They just mutate.”

“Okay, yeah. That's something that happens.”

“Excuse me Flowey, but I was wondering if you would like to stay for dinner tonight?”

The flower monster slowly turned to look at Toriel, with an expression on his face that wasn't easy to read. Eventually he shook his head.

“Best not. I... I have places to go.”

“I understand. But you may consider that invitation open for the future.”

Flowey blinked. “Uh... thanks? I think? This is kind of uncharted territory for me. Catch you later Frisk.” The flower shrunk into the earth and Frisk slowly got to their feet.

“Frisk... have I ever told you how proud I am of you for being so kind to Flowey?”

“Uh... maybe once or twice.”

“Well, it bears repeating.”

Frisk looked down at the picture in their hands. “A lot of people give Flowey a lot of grief for being such a troll and a prankster. But they mostly think of how what he does affects them. They don't think of how he feels. He's very lonely, and very bored, and after everything that happened with Alphys and her experiments, even though she meant well... he tries not to let it show, but I think he's still hurting. He's... Flowey isn't a bad person. Flowey is a good person who has had a lot of terrible stuff happen and doesn't know how to handle it.”

Frisk flinched in surprise as something soft and warm touched their head; they had been so focused on the photograph that they had not noticed Toriel walking across the yard towards them.

“And that is what I meant by being proud of you. So many people tried to hurt you, and you never lashed out in anger of fear or frustration, and you never held it against them later.”

Frisk shrugged. “Well, if I held a grudge against everyone who tried to kill me I wouldn't have any friends... wait. I shouldn't have said that.”
Toriel laughed and knelt down to hug the child. “No, you are correct. I remember when I made my way to the castle after leaving the Ruins. You had no weapon and you weren’t looking at Asgore... you were trying to reach him in the same way that you reached me, were you not?”

“...something like that.”

“And when I interfered, you immediately jumped to his defense. You had just met him, but you already cared about him.”

“Yeah. Thank you for giving him another chance.”

Toriel squeezed Frisk even tighter for a moment. “It... hasn’t been easy. What he did was terrible, but instead of staying and trying to convince him, no matter how long it took, I simply left. And that was equally terrible.”

“Mom... I never asked before, but... what made you decide to leave the Ruins and come looking for me?”

“...after you left, I could not stop worrying about you. My imagination ran wild with terrible visions of what misfortune might have befallen you once you left the Ruins. I wanted to call you several times, to make sure you were safe and perhaps to provide advice, but I could not find my cell phone. And every time I convinced myself that you would be overcome one challenge, then of course my thoughts had to move on to the next obstacle, until I imagined you facing Asgore. Thinking of you being assaulted with fire by somebody who would not listen to reason... it possessed a horrible familiarity. That was when I understood I could no longer hide in the Ruins anymore.”

Toriel leaned back from the hug and smiled at Frisk. “And do you know what makes it all so funny now? As I made my way to the castle, I asked those along the way if they had seen a human child in a striped shirt. They had no idea what I was speaking of, until I described you in detail. It would seem that they saw you being kind and polite and funny and assumed you were some manner of monster they had never seen before.”

“Guess that’s why I got chosen for the Ambassador job. Dad liked my resume.”

Toriel laughed and stood up. “Why don't you come inside and wash up, my dear. I have a surprise for dinner tonight.”

“Okay.”

Inside the house, Frisk made it up three steps of the staircase before the doorbell rang.

“I'll get it!” Frisk called out, carefully placed the picture frame on the coffee table, and ran up to the door, opening it before the second ring.

“ey Frisk. not too early for dinner am i?”

“Hey Sans! I think mom was starting something but I don't know what it is yet.”


“well i can't explain how that could possibly happen. howzit goin' Tori?”

“Quite well Sans, and thank you for asking. I was just about to prepare dinner, in fact. Er... is
everything alright?"

Sans saw the worried expression creep into the queen's face and waved a hand dismissively.
“everything's running along like a well oiled machine. i just stopped by with something for Frisk.”
Opening his trademark blue jacket, Sans pulled out a book from some inside pocket.

“dad could not stop raving about how much you loved his science ranting, so i got to thinkin'. this
used to be mine way back in the day. the authoritative reference work on photon-magic interaction
in the Underground. Applied Magical Optics by Wing Ding Aster himself. thought you'd enjoy a
little light reading.”

Toriel and Frisk both broke out into fits of giggles, and Frisk gingerly took the book from Sans' outstretched hand. “Thank you so much, Sans! I promise I'll take real good care of it!”

“hey, don't worry 'bout it. books like those are meant to be read hard, until they're held together by binder clips and staples and wishful thinking. it's only in such good condition right now because i was too lazy to study.” The skeleton winked at Toriel. “seemed like just getting it all memorized the first time i read it would be less work.”

Toriel sputtered and held one paw up to conceal her smile. “Only you, Sans, would put such tremendous effort into expending no effort at all.”

“that's my jam alright. welp, better head back to the lab. nice seeing you guys again.”


“Frisk is correct. Surely you have time to spare for a few minutes of visiting, even if you cannot stay for dinner?”

Sans held up his hands in a shrugging gesture. “sorry, but it ain't in the cards today i'm afraid. Alphys had a huge brainstorm riding back to the lab with the pizza earlier and we're gonna add an interferometer using the old monster bullet analyzers. she thinks it's possibly to get the human soul to imprint on an external electromagnetic field, like a photographic negative. you know, what everyone had to use before cell phones? not only will it scale the scanner down to something that doesn't need blinking hazard lights on it, we might be able to figure out where those different color effects are coming from.”

“Well... if you are adamant on the subject. Can you at least wait a few moments while I prepare a care package for you, Alphys and Dr. Aster? All of that human fast food cannot be good for you.”

“fraid i can't even wait that long. i was supposed to just shortcut over to the hardware store to get a conduit bracket after our last one broke. but i figured now would be the time to drop that book off before i got too wrapped up in anything else. but thanks again for the offer.”

“Wait.” Frisk looked down at the book and up at Sans again. “You went out of your way to get me this book on the pretense of getting a replacement part?”

“nah, just hitting two birds with one bone.”

Frisk narrowed their eyes at Sans. “I'm starting to think that the whole lazybones thing is an elaborate ruse.”

Sans snickered. “can't keep you in the dark about anything, can i. just keep it under your hat, okay? i got a reputation to live down to. so if you go around town spreading malicious rumors about me being a hard worker, i'll call you a lying liar who lies a lot.”
Frisk grinned. “Don't worry Sans. Your secret identity is safe with me.”

“Glad to hear it.” The skeleton turned on his heel, waved back at the doorway, and vanished in a flash of blue light.

“Truly, only Sans would spend years honing dimensional magic to such a fine degree that he can use it in place of simply walking around.”

Frisk giggled as they shut the door. “I remember when I was making my way to Snowdin Town. Sans was teleporting back and forth in front of me and behind me depending on where I was looking and I couldn't figure out how he was doing it. I tried to catch him by spinning around really fast and I got super dizzy and fell over. It was actually really funny. I better go put this in my room and wash up.”

Upstairs, Frisk carefully replaced the picture frame retrieved from the coffee table in its place of honor on the chest of drawers. Like so many other picture frames next to it, it featured a combination of humans and monsters posing in front of a camera. After a moment positioning the frame, Frisk opened the top drawer and pulled out a soft cloth rag to remove the finger marks and smudges on the glass.

With the photographs properly cleaned, the cloth was placed back in the drawer, and the book that had Sans had provided was placed on the nightstand table next to the bed, along with a reading lamp, a cell phone charger, and some sort of red sphere. On impulse, Frisk pulled out their cell phone to check the charge level, and plugged it into the charger... knocking over the book in the process.

“...yeah, that's not a good sign.” Frisk picked up the book and noticed a sheet of paper had been knocked out from between the pages. Unfolding it revealed what looked like some sort of branching chart labeled “Timeline Recursion Map” at the very top. However, Frisk’s eyes were drawn rapidly towards two handwritten notes in blue ink, one at the bottom of the sheet labeled Anomaly Critical Mass: Darkest Timeline and the other closer to the middle with the label Causality Reasserts Itself: Optimal Timeline and an arrow pointing to a specific spot.

There was another note next to the arrow, in much lighter blue ink, but in the same handwriting.

You Are Here. -Sans
Unintelligence Gathering

Justin scowled at the house for reasons that had nothing to do with its state of deterioration, turn of the previous century paint job, or the lawn in desperate need of either a lawnmower or an intrepid explorer wearing a pith helmet. With an exaggerated sigh, he put on the cap, grabbed the clipboard from the passenger side seat of the car, put on the fake grin of of the service worker, and walked up the cracked sidewalk to ring the doorbell.

Which either was not connected, or simply didn't work. Fantastic.

After a few minutes of intermittent knocking, the door finally opened and Justin found himself grinning at a man dressed in ratty jeans and a garage band T-Shirt with a faded logo.

“Good Afternoon!” Justin launched into the speech immediately. “Speedy Brothers Delivery Service! I have a package for Mr. Reinhardt at this address.”

For a few seconds Justin stared at the confused look on the man's face, before realization or recognition kicked in. “Oh. Yeah. Right. He's right in here. Do you wanna...?”

“Normally it's against company policy, but normally it's not a hundred and two degrees outside. Thank you sir.” Justin followed the man inside the house and pulled off the cap as soon as the door was closed.

“Mr. Riley is down in the basement.”

Justin nodded. “Of course. I think he'll be interested in what I've discovered.”

A short walk through the house and down a rickety staircase that felt like it should collapse if a mouse happened to climb on it, Justin found himself in an unfinished basement with cinder block walls, exposed pipes and wiring, and an overpowering odor of mildew. Out of reflex more than allergies, Justin sneezed.

“Can you keep it down? This is supposed to be a secret meeting.”

“Right, because there's nothing suspicious about meeting in a poorly lit basement.” Justin walked over to the card table underneath the single incandescent light bulb and pulled up a chair across from the other man.

“Our agents saw you enter the monster laboratory building this morning.”

“Yes, I know. I saw them while I was standing in line. Marching around with picket signs like that protest-happy church in Kansas. Credit where it's due, hiding in plain sight like that.”

“Yes. Were you able to uncover anything?”

Justin held up the clipboard and pulled on the spring. The papers slid off onto the table, and he picked up two of them. One had a series of letters and numbers, while the other one had a color photograph.

“Whatever else is going on at All Fine Labs, they can pick up what they say they're looking for, with an added bonus. That's a list of attributes one of the doctors mentioned. The picture is a picture of what he says is my soul. I was skeptical at first, but... look at those first three numbers.”
Dwayne Riley looked over at the list of numbers. “LV 3. EXP 37. CAP 8. What does any of that mean?”

Justin leaned forward, noticing how the shadows in the corners of the room shifted slightly as he did so. “It means that the monsters could tell that I killed people just from that scanner. So whatever they've got, they were being honest about that. And that's the tip of the iceberg.”

Mr. Riley looked up from the papers. “What do you mean?”

“The guy in charge of the machine must have sent an instant message or something to the monster in charge. He's not that good an actor but he might have fooled somebody not looking for it. And the monster in charge, a skeleton they called Aster, walked me to the break room. We ended up talking for forty five minutes.”

“What about?”

“It started with those numbers. He knew I'd killed people, but he didn't seem bothered by it. He definitely didn't seem afraid of me. When he asked about it, I told him about my time in the Army. Not all of it, but enough.”

“It sounds like this intelligence gathering idea of yours was more for the monsters benefit than ours. They now know what one of ours looks like, but we don't know anything more than we did this morning.”

Justin glared at Dwayne Riley and leaned forward again, no longer caring about the shadows. “Okay, listen to me very carefully. First, neither you, nor these ass clowns,” Justin looked up towards the two corners he could easily see, pointedly staring into the dark, “nor anyone else in your fan club knows the first thing about actually fighting an opposing force, overtly or covertly. I mean come on. When I first contacted you, you were having everyone meet in your garage for fuck's sake. You don't strike me as the kind who reads spy novels so you wouldn't know about safe houses or dead drops or the cell system, but you have seen the Bourne movies, right? There's some useful stuff in there once you get past the unrealistic action scenes.”

“Hey, I like the action scenes.” The voice came from one of the corners behind Justin, and he turned his head.

“I never said they were bad. Just unrealistic.”

Justin turned back to face Mr. Riley. “Second, just by my going in, we have learned that their Soul Research program is at least partly based in fact. There is no other way I can think of where they could have known what I've done over in Afghanistan besides hacking a good portion of the military information infrastructure, which if they can pull off, we might as well give up on fighting them right now. Third, we know that they don't know everyone who associates with you or the Anti-Monster League, or I would have been stopped the instant I walked inside. I didn't even have to wait longer than normal to get a temporary badge.”

Justin reached into a pocket and placed a wrapped monster candy on the table. “Fourth, their cooking science is clearly centuries beyond ours. Wish the Army had been stocking these instead of MREs.”

“You actually ate the food there?”

Justin rolled his eyes at Mr. Riley's alarmed expression. “Right, because I was going to go into a place filled with monsters, for an event organized by monsters, and pointedly not eat the monster
food. As if having a Level of Violence of 3 didn't already make me stand out. One of the things I learned in the service is that sharing food is a way of building trust.”

“That works a lot better when the food isn't poison. You realize that right?”

“That rabbit's been selling magic monster ice cream for over a year and nobody's died from it. And before you say something stupid about slow acting poisons, I should point out that oxygen, which is something we all need constantly to survive, will destroy human tissue in high enough concentrations.”

“...fair enough. That's still a hell of a risk to take. Even if it's not dangerous, it might be used to track people who eat it. So much for being better at this cloak and dagger stuff.”

Justin wasn't sure if his patience had snapped or if his jaw had clenched so hard that one of his teeth cracked, but he managed to keep most of the emotion from reaching the rest of his face. His hand returned to the pocket that held the monster candy and pulled out a flash drive.

“If you're averse to risk, then you shouldn't be fighting people that you think are dangerous. And you definitely don't want these files I got from the lab's network.”

Dwayne blinked and focused on the flash drive. “You got into their network?”

“I got something. I don't know what it is yet. This flash drive uses a bootsec exploit that... well, I'll spare you the computer science lecture. Did you bring the laptop like I said?”

One figure detached itself from the shadowy corner and brought over a rather old and clunky laptop, but as Justin noted to himself anything with a working USB port would have sufficed. The screen was unfolded and powered on, and after a lengthy boot sequence followed by the Windows XP loading sound, Justin plugged in the flash drive. As the light on the drive began to flash, several windows opened.

“There. Results dot log. That will tell us what the drive was able to find out about All Fine Labs network security.” Justin explained, pointing over Dwayne's shoulder. Dwayne clicked on the file... but nothing happened.

“Is it working? God, I forgot how slow this thing is.”

Justin shrugged. “Well, laptops can't be as beefy as desktops because there's not enough room for the big fans and power supplies. What do you normally run?”

“Run? Oh, home computer? Nothing special. Just enough to get me on the internet, check mail, watch YouTube. But for all that it's faster than this.”

“What operating system?”

“Uh, Windows seven. I switched over about a year ago.”

“Just in time to get all those notifications about upgrading to Windows ten. Word of advice, uh, don't. I tried it. Had to go back to Windows seven like two weeks later.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“I'm sure it's good for some things, but compatibility mode is broken to hell and back. It's not quite the same thing that hamstrung Vista but it's in the same ballpark... and I just realized why it's not opening, this machine doesn't default to open log files with notepad. Uh, right click, scroll down to
Open With, and... okay, we're in luck. Notepad is right there. Select that.”

The screen was filled with lines of text, but most of them said the same thing. Justin leaned forward slightly. “Timed Out, Timed Out, Timed Out... okay, credit where it's due. Whoever set up the All Fine Labs network knew enough to not alert the intruder that anyone was on to him. Hah. Like a honeypot. Aha! Down there. They didn't secure the recent files. Close out of this and let's go to the other folder.”

In the other folder, a number of different icons could be found. Justin waved his hand across the screen. “For convenience sake there's an option that allows you to keep track of the most recently opened files used by specific software. Word processors, audio and video players, that kind of thing. This grabbed the ten most recent files from the five most frequently used pieces of software on the workstation I plugged this into. Looks like two of them were... fuck if I know. Probably software used to organize scientific data? I don't recognize these extensions.”

Dwayne moused over a different file. “But Word documents are still good. I got Word on this. Even if it hasn't been updated in forever.”

“Yeah... actually I'm surprised that's not in docx format. They must be running legacy templates from Word 2003 or earlier. Well, their first lab was built out of stuff they found in the river. So I'm even more surprised their network doesn't run on punch cards and vacuum tubes and tape reels.”

Dwayne clicked on the file and Word opened it, slowly populating the screen with text. Justin leaned back and sighed. “Great. Just a normal administration memo. Might be something useful in there on the theater level, but not locally.”

Another file was opened and revealed a letter draft. Dwayne closed it and scrolled through the rest of the window. “Okay, Word documents, Excel Spreadsheets, and Access database files. There's got to be something useful in one of them. The other stuff, just figuring out what the file extension is for might tell us something. This could be big. How did you manage to pull this off?”

Justin straightened up and stretched. “No matter how good your software is, if somebody gets physical access to your hardware it doesn't matter. To be more specific, there was some crazy lady with a ponytail in the scanner lab hitting on the doctor. A lot of people were watching that, so they didn't see me... oh, and apparently the monster queen showed up with that kid, so that got even more stares. Always a big help. Speaking of help, copy those files to the laptop locally so you'll have them. I want to take that flash drive back to my rig and see if I can figure out what those other twenty files are. Could be encrypted.”

Dwayne nodded and started the copying process. “Well, if the monsters don't want us to know what the files are, then we need to know what they are.”

“By that logic, everything here is something we need to know. Which is why we got it in the first place. So we came full circle there.” Justin blinked. “That didn't take as long as I thought.”

“What didn't? It's still copying.”

“I meant tracing the logic. Usually there's more steps than that. It's like that puzzle about the man going to St. Ives. You know? A man with seven wives, each wife had seven sacks, and so on. It's set up as a multiplication problem but the question at the end is who is going to St. Ives? The person asking the question. So the answer is one.”

“That was in Die Hard With A Vengeance.” The voice from the dark corner again.
Justin nodded. “That's how I heard about it. It was a while before I realized it was a lot older than
the movie.”

Dwayne scratched his head. “Wait, where the hell is St. Ives anyway?”

Justin shrugged. “I want to say Greece but that's probably wro-”

The laptop emitted a sound effect indicating the operation was complete, and Dwayne ejected the
flash drive, removed it, and handed it to Justin. “The Anti-Monster League appreciates your
contribution to the cause.”

Justin slowly took the flash drive from the outstretched hand, staring at Mr. Riley. “I feel I must
once again explain that your cause is not my cause.”

“Yes, yes. Your payment will be waiting for you upst-”

“That's not what I meant. I am helping you because eight children disappeared on Mt. Ebott, and
only one came back. This is not about species, or politics, or economics, or anything so abstract.
This is about kids who never got to grow up, who never got to learn to drive, to graduate, to fight
with their parents over cell phone use, or even got to attempt to do all the things screwed up people
like you and me wish we had never done in the first place. Seven kids had their futures stolen. As
far as I'm concerned, there is nothing else.”

Justin hadn't raised his voice, and if anything his tone was much more subdued than at any other
time in the basement. Despite (or perhaps because) of that, Dwayne Riley leaned back away from
the ex-soldier. The flash drive was placed back in its pocket, and Mr. Carrow walked towards the
staircase.

After the sounds from upstairs indicated that Justin had left, Mr. Riley let out a breath. “So... now
that you've seen him, what do you think?”

A figure slowly emerged from one of the shadowy corners, but not far enough into the circle of
light to make out identifying features. Even the voice was nondescript, save for sounding
masculine, but if Justin had heard it he would have recognized it from twice before. “He is
dangerous, but he is useful. He has anger. Anger may be directed.”

“That's what I thought.”

“He is also remarkably astute. He described the essential nature of the problem. Seven. Seven
human children. Almost like retribution.”

Mr. Riley waited for a few seconds, but the speaker had apparently concluded his thoughts. “We
only have tomorrow left before the monsters start congregating in the auditorium. Do we start now,
or do we look through these papers for something actionable?”

“There is not enough time to start anew. Begin preparations tonight.”
“HELLO UNDYNE! I'M HERE WITH MY DAILY REPORT!”

Underneath the massive suit of armor, it was impossible for Papyrus to see any expression on Undyne's face.

“You don't have to call it that Papyrus. But whatever. How's everything in Snowdin today?”

On the other hand, even if it was muffled by the helmet, her voice served as a pretty good benchmark for her mood and state of mind.

“UHHH... ABOUT THAT HUMAN I CALLED YOU ABOUT EARLIER...”

“It was a rock again, wasn't it?”

Papyrus tried to find something else to look at, but his gaze kept coming back to Undyne's helmet, and at the same time he really didn't feel up to looking her in the eye. Not that he could actually see her eye even through the helmet visor. After a few moments the armor suit shifted slightly with a change in posture.

“Wait... it was really a human this time? Papyrus, did you try to fight them??”

“UH, DID I TRY TO FIGHT THEM?”

“Yes, that is literally the question I just asked you.”

“Y-YES! OF COURSE I DID! I FOUGHT THEM VALIANTLY!”

“Really?? And you're alright... wait, did you capture them?!” A note of excitement had crept into Undyne's voice, and to Papyrus it sounded as though she was impressed. Which made what he had to say next much harder.

“What? Did I capture them...?”

“Papyrus, stop repeating what I say to buy time to think. Everybody knows that trick. If you fought the human, did you capture them?”

“W-WELL... NO. I TRIED VERY HARD, BUT IN THE END... I FAILED.”

“...it's alright, don't worry about it. Humans are really dangerous, formidable opponents. I'm just glad you're still in one piece right now. I'll take it from here.”

“W-WHAT? YOU'RE GOING TO TAKE THE HUMAN'S SOUL YOURSELF?”

“Papyrus, do you remember how far the last human got? All the way to the CORE! They could have shut down everything in the Underground. Lights, food, communications, all the work Dr. Alphys put into anti-human defenses for when we get to the Surface. We're lucky the security grid killed them before they could do any damage, but we can't rely on luck again. If they get inside Waterfall, they won't be leaving alive.”

“BUT UNDYNE! YOU DON'T HAVE TO DESTROY THEM! YOU SEE... YOU SEE...”

Undyne turned to the skeleton. “What are you talking about?? We need seven souls. We have six.
This human is number seven. It's basic math... wait... Papyrus, are you alright? You're sweating, and you don't even have skin... wait a moment... I think I know what's going on here.”

Papyrus blinked and somehow managed to sweat even more.

“Look, you don't have to try acting tough around me. We're friends. This was your first big battle against a serious threat. It isn't exactly what you were expecting, and now you're not sure of anything anymore, right? That happens in war sometimes. It doesn't reflect poorly on you.”

Papyrus looked down at the cavern floor and shrugged, which Undyne apparently took as an affirmative.

“Alright then. I'll take care of everything. You head back to Snowdin. Watch some of that robot's show. Experiment with a new spaghetti recipe. Whatever helps you calm down. After I deliver this soul to Asgore, I'll head over and we'll hang out, alright? Celebrate the last day before we can return to the surface.”

Papyrus nodded.

“Oh, and if you can think of anything that might help when I fight the human, give me a ring, alright? If you made it out okay, obviously you found a weakness to exploit, and that would be really nice to know ahead of time.”

“I UNDERSTAND. I'LL HELP YOU IN ANY WAY I CAN.”

Papyrus headed back towards Snowdin, his mind rapidly filled with conflicting images and scenarios of the human and Undyne fighting-

“Arf!”

His reverie broken, Papyrus looked up to see Least Dog standing in the middle of the path.

“UGH. WHATEVER YOU WANT RIGHT NOW, I AM NOT IN ANY MOOD FOR IT!”

“Bark! BARK!”

“YOU TAKE THAT BACK! WHATEVER IT WAS!”

“Wake up!”

Papyrus blinked. “WHAT? WHAT DID YOU SAY?”

“Wake up, Papyrus! You overslept!”

“OKAY, NEVER MIND THE FACT THAT SUDDENLY I CAN UNDERSTAND YOU. I AM CLEARLY WIDE AWAKE RIGHT NOW! ALSO, I HAVE NEVER OVERSLEPT! NYEH, HEH, HEH. YOUR JAPERY REQUIRES ADDITIONAL TRAINING BEFORE IT CAN STAND A CHANCE AGAINST THE GREAT-”

“wait, i got this. Papyrus, if you're gonna keep sleeping like this, you're almost as bed as me.”

“WHAT IN-”

Papyrus opened his eye sockets and found himself looking up at the concerned faces of his father and brother. He was not walking along the path between Snowdin Town and the entrance to Waterfall, but rather lying in his bed.
“WOWIE! I HAD THE STRANGEST DREAM! I WAS BACK IN WATERFALL TALKING TO UNDYNE AND THEN LEAST DOG STARTED PESTERING ME!”

“are you sure it was a dream, then?”

“Normally you're up at five thirty sharp every morning. What happened this time?”

“THAT CAN'T BE RIGHT. MY MTT-BRAND ALARMING ALARM CLOCK SHOULD HAVE GONE OFF.” A boney hand reached over to the bedside table and picked up the appliance, an extruded plastic copy of Mettaton Classic with the light panels on the front replaced by a digital clock readout... which didn't read anything at all. “AHA! THAT EXPLAINS IT! THE BATTERIES HAVE RUN OUT. WHAT TIME IS IT RIGHT NOW?”

“almost seven. you just wasted an hour and a half in bed. pretty soon you'll be grabbing catnaps and spending a full eight hours at night catching z's, just like me.”

“DON'T BE RIDICULOUS! THIS WAS AN EXCEPTION CAUSED BY AN EQUIPMENT BREAKDOWN, NOT THE BEGINNING OF A TREND.”

“Search your feelings, you know it to be true.” Sans' voice had suddenly gone deep to perform an impression. Papyrus rolled his eye lights, while Dr. Aster stepped back suddenly.

“What in hell was that?”

“SANS IS ATTEMPTING TO BE HUMOROUS BY INVOKING POP CULTURE REFERENCES, IN THIS CASE DARTH VADER FROM THE STAR WARS SERIES!”

“...I think I read something about that during one of my research binges. A bunch of movies about space fighters, right?”

“oh man, i totally forgot that you didn't keep up to date with all the media that washed up in the garbage dump. we need to introduce you.”

“SANS, WITH THE SCHOOL YEAR CONCLUDING WITHIN A FEW WEEKS, IT IS POSSIBLE THAT MOVIE NIGHT WILL ONCE AGAIN BECOME A REGULAR OCCURRENCE! WE SHOULD BRING UP THE SUBJECT WITH FRISK, AND ADD STAR WARS TO THE LIST OF FILMS TO WATCH!”

“Movie night??”

“it was Frisk's idea. a way to get us all up to speed on the media that influenced human thought the most over the past few decades. at least, that's what they said. it's more an excuse to just hang out in Tori's living room and eat snack food. Thing is, when the parent is a teacher and the kid is a student, Movie Night just doesn't work out during school nights, and everyone was too busy with other stuff on the weekends.”

“That stands to reason. Well, Sans, we better get moving. And Papyrus had to... actually, what do you do, Papyrus? You've explained it over dinner every night this last week and I still can't wrap my skull around it.”

The tall skeleton hopped out of bed and struck a dramatic pose. “WHY, I AM A POPULAR INTERNET CELEBRITY AND THE MASCOT FOR ALL MONSTERS! I KEEP TABS ON CURRENT EVENTS IN EBOTT'S WAKE AND POST THEM ON THE INTERNET FOR THE WHOLE WORLD TO SEE!”
Dr. Aster blinked. “Nope, still not getting it.”

“let me put it this way. the human internet system is so complicated, and with so many participants, that people can actually make a living doing that. writing articles, posting videos, recording themselves watching video games. oh hey, that reminds me, we need to sit you down at some point and have you watch his Let's Play of Scatter. well, two thirds of it.”

“AS I HAVE STATED REPEATEDLY I HAVE NO INTENTION OF TOUCHING THE APOCALYPSE RUN WITH A TEN FOOT POLE! OR ANY OTHER LENGTH OF WOOD OR METAL! MY PLAYTHROUGHS OF THE OBSERVER RUN AND THE CHAMPION RUN ARE EXHAUSTIVE AND SO FAR AS I AM CONCERNED THAT IS THE TOTALITY OF THE GAME!”

Sans shrugged. “he just doesn't want to have to lie to Opal at the end of act one.”

“Yeah, I don't know what either of you are talking about.” Dr. Aster turned towards the bedroom door and started walking out. “Come on Sans. If we're going to test your dimensional bridge adapter, the time to do it would be before the main tests start. See you this afternoon, Papyrus!”

“LIKEWISE DAD!” Papyrus slid over to the closet and began to prepare for the day. A scant three minutes later, Papyrus opened up the front door dramatically, dressed in his Thursday best with camera in hand, and-

“Howdy Papyrus!”

“AHA! GOOD MORNING FLOWEY! I SEE YOU ARE STILL SPORTING YOUR BADGE OF VICTORY IN THE GARDEN SHOW CONTEST!”

“Well, it's the first time I ever won a contest. It'll take a while for the novelty to wear off. What have you got planned for today?”

“I'M GLAD YOU ASKED! TODAY IS A CELEBRATORY EVENT FOR THE HUMANS OF EBOTT'S WAKE! THE DANK MEMEHAUS IS REPLACING THEIR BULLETIN BOARD!”

The flower stared at Papyrus for a few seconds. “They're holding a celebration... to replace a piece of furniture. Have you noticed how weird humans are? Or is it just me?”

“QUITE A FEW UNUSUAL BEHAVIORS AND CULTURAL ELEMENTS HAVE MADE THEMSELVES OBVIOUS TO ME, BUT I FELT IT WAS RUDE TO SAY ANYTHING.”

“Like what?”

“IF I SAID ANYTHING, THAT WOULD BE RUDE!”

Flowey frowned. “Hey, you're the... no, wait, I guess that does make sense. Dammit. Hey, can I ask you something totally unrelated?”

“I DON'T SEE WHY NOT!”

“Your brother and now your dad, they both work with Dr. Alphys at the laboratory and recycling center, right? Do they ever bring their work home with them?”

“AS IF YOU HAVE TO ASK! THE LAST THREE DINNERS HAVE BEEN ALMOST NOTHING ELSE BUT SANS AND DAD TALKING ABOUT SCIENCE FICTION MADE REAL! DIMENSIONAL BRIDGE TECHNOLOGY, ITERATIVE TIMELINE MAPPING, THE
“Wait wait wait. Back up a moment. What was that about timelines?”

“OH, DAD AND SANS WANT TO ISOLATE THE FAULT IN THE ORIGINAL CORE EXPERIMENT FROM YEARS AGO, AND THEN MAP EXACTLY WHAT THE DISASTER DID TO THE TIMELINE AS A RESULT BESIDES SIMPLY LAUNCHING DAD INTO THE FUTURE.”

“Huh. That doesn't sound too bad. From what Frisk said, I-” Flowey abruptly closed his mouth.
“Actually, never mind what Frisk said. So, you're heading to the Dank Memehaus?”

“EVENTUALLY! THERE'S A GREAT DEAL TO DO AND SEE IN EBOTT'S WAKE BEFORE THE APPOINTED HOUR ARRIVES!”

“Sure there is. Do you mind if I tag along? I don't really have anything better to do right now, if I'm honest.”

“THE MORE THE MERRIER!”

The skeleton continued his march along the sidewalk, while Flowey tunneled into the ground, burrowed ahead of him, and popped out again.

“Actually this is going to get old real fast, so maybe you should just tell me where you're heading and I'll meet you there. Also, this has been bothering me for a while now. Why is your blog called Cool Skeleton 95's Cool Blog of Cool Surface Things?”

“TRUTH IN ADVERTISING! NYEH HEH HEH!”

Flowey stared at Papyrus for a few seconds, then winked and stuck out his tongue. “Well, you're not wrong about that.”

“NATURALLY NOT! AND IN RESPONSE TO YOUR EARLIER SUGGESTION, I INTEND TO PROCEED FIRST TO THE BAKERY TO INTERVIEW MUFFET ABOUT HER NEW WEB CRULLERS!”

“Yeah, I'm sure people have a lot of questions about those... for various reasons. Hey, before we split up, can I ask you a personal question?”

“OF COURSE! THAT'S WHAT FRIENDS ARE FOR!”

Flowey looked around to see if anyone was in earshot, then looked back towards Papyrus.

“Okay, so, you remember how I told you to get everyone together and head towards the castle to stop Frisk from fighting Asgore? And then I showed up later? Uh... what exactly do you remember happening then?”

Papyrus stared at the flower monster with a confused expression on his face. “WELL, IF I AM TO BE PERFECTLY HONEST, I DON'T PRECISELY RECALL! OBVIOUSLY THERE WAS A GREAT DEAL GOING ON AT THE TIME, WHAT WITH LEARNING THE QUEEN HAD RETURNED, AND EVERYONE ELSE SHOWING UP IN SUCCESSION LIKE THAT. BUT I DO SEEM TO REMEMBER YOU SHOWING UP WITH A BRIEFCASE AND A FAKE MUSTACHE AND YOU CALLED YOURSELF 'HERB THE SOUL INSPECTOR' AND THEN I THINK THE BARRIER WAS DESTROYED NOT LONG AFTER.”
Flowey blinked. “Wait, really?”

“WAS THAT NOT WHAT HAPPENED?”

“Uh... I'm not sure myself. Like you said, a lot of stuff was going on. I was hoping somebody could jog my memory but mostly what I remember was after that. Frisk came by to see me one last time before they headed out of Underground. I... well, I wasn't ready to head to the surface yet.”

“I DID WONDER WHERE YOU WERE FOR THE FIRST FORTY DAYS!”

“I was back in the Ruins. Uh... okay, it's hard to explain, but broadly speaking when I visit new places and meet new people, it's ended poorly for me more often than it's ended well. You and Frisk are like the exceptions to the the rule. So I just needed to work up the courage for it. But that's water under the bridge. Or mountain. Or something. I'll see you at Muffet's, then?”

“I SHALL AWAIT YOUR ARRIVAL WITH GREAT ANTICIPATION!”

Flowey stuck out his tongue again. “Not if I get there before you!”

“YOU DARE THROW DOWN THE GAUNTLET OF CHALLENGE BEFORE THE GREAT PAPYRUS? A RACE IT IS THEN! NYEH HEH HEH HEH HEH!”
“Good Morning Ebott's Wake! Surprised to hear from me? So am I! This is Brett 'The Brett' Brinkman coming at you, and with me is my nonplussed co-host, the one, the only, DJ Pantz!”

“I wouldn't say I'm nonplussed, but I am curiou- no, let's say I am interested in hearing what happened.”

“It's a long story. And by long I mean short. Turns out that distant relative with the will that had a bunch of conditions to it? Still alive and perfectly healthy.”

“Oh. Guess that's good to hear. So, did they try to fake their death for tax reasons or something?”

“No, there was some identity theft that escalated quickly and got out of hand fast. Lucky for me I was waiting until the last minute to pack, otherwise I would have been driving to Idaho for no reason.”

“Well, glad to see you're here.”

“And I am glad to be here. And I hope all of you listeners are glad to be where you are today, wherever you are in magnificent Ebott's Wake, Bastion of Propriety.”

“That's a new one.”

“Actually, given today's significance, I've been asked to use an old slogan that dates back to a concerted effort by the Sages to influence social policy, one dating back to shortly after the formation of the Ebott's Wake township and the foundation of the city itself. So in light of all the terrible things the Sages did, the city administration wants to rub the irony in their faces. Metaphorically speaking.”

“Is there a way to do it literally?”

“...I'm not sure. And now that's going to bother me all day.”

“Glad to help. So, today is, as I understand it, a momentous occasion for the town of Ebott's Wake. The Dank Memehaus is replacing its bulletin board.”

“Yes indeed. That's coming up later today, so it's up to the two of us to tide all you folks over until then.”

“On a related note, Gary Welkin will be our eyes on the ground during this event, meaning that once again our traffic reporting will be limited to whatever Jeff Walsh can see through his binoculars from the roof of the KEBT building. So far we have, let's see here, a collision right in front of the Librarby, so anyone heading to the book sale is better off walking it. Fortunately there were no crashes outside the Knights of the Road Who Say Ni Mission last night during or after the charity pancakes, so that's clear and safe. Or as safe as a blind corner like that can ever get. We'll try to keep everyone on top of any further traffic related developments.”

“Thanks Burgie, and thank you too Jeff. And now, it's time once again for the weather report and Forecast with Hailey Skye. Hailey it's good to have you back, and if I may, you look a lot better today.”

“Oh, so I didn't look good last Thursday?”
“I, what?”

“What. Don't answer that Brett. Every answer is the wrong answer. I read about this. Ahem. Hailey, what can you tell us about the weather this coming week?”

“Hmmph. The weather will continue to be unseasonably warm even for late spring for the remainder of the week, but we will get occasional relief in the form of intermittent cloud cover over the next few days. This cloud cover will eventually reach critical cloud mass and create a potential thunderstorm system by next Wednesday, followed by light showers for the remainder of next week.”

“Unfortunate, but them's the breaks.”

“As I have told you so many times before, my job is to talk about the weather. Not to do anything about it.”

“Yeah... that does come up a lot... hey Brett! Is it too soon to throw open the phones lines?”

“I dare say that you are correct. Jeff, let's start the call-in segment early today, so we have time for Gary's monologues later- what? Oh, that's convenient. We already have a caller waiting on the line, Burgie!”

“Will wonders never cease. Put em on. Hello? You're live on the air with the Morning Rush!”

“...oh... hi...”

“...Napstablook, is that you?”

“i thought I should call in early in case there was a long wait... but I guess I called in too soon instead...”

“Actually we started the call in segment early so everything exactly canceled out. So, what's on your mind today, buddy? Got a new album in the works, any up and coming new talent in the music scene, maybe some juicy gossip about my old boss I could laugh about?”

“...oh...well... I did have a question and I thought maybe somebody listening to the radio might know the answer...”

“Fire away, buddy! If we don't know the answer, somebody out there will!”

“...well, I was going to put together a party for some other ghosts, after your card game was so popular... but it's harder to find ghost ingredients on the surface... whole sheet bread... phantom chocolate... spooked ham... but thinking about it most of the listeners on the radio are human or monsters with bodies... so I don't know how any of them could know that... oh no, I ruined the segment...”

“No, it's not ruined. I told you, if we don't know the answer, somebody else... Napstablook? Are you still there? ...I think they hung up.”

“And now I'm curious. How does ghost food even work? I mean monster food I understand, even if I don't understand how magic works. But ghost food? That's a new one.”

“Uh... I think I remember something... this came up in orientation when I started working at MTT Burger, but... ugh. Sorry, man. Those memories are repressed for a reason.”
“Well, if anyone out there happens to know anything about ghost food, be sure to call in. Or if you have other things to talk about, that's also good. We're not that particular, at least not this early in the morning.”

“Until then, I'd just like to thank one of our sponsors for this week, Joe's House of Stuff. The oldest thrift shop still operating in the Ebott's Wake municipality. Joe's House of Stuff. 'If we don't have it, we will someday.' I actually got this shirt from there.”

“Yeah, I can tell. It's got their logo and the name on it. Which is a good idea, really. The people in this town will do almost anything if there's a free shirt in it for them.”

“Do you think Dr. Alphys realized that when she called in?”

“...not sure. Maybe subconsciously? I know she wasn't ready for the response. I've seen Sans at the Cotton Bin every day since Monday.”

“Why were you at the Cotton Bin every day this week?”

“Oh, they're doing an Alternate Reality Game.”

“...I suppose that's as good a reason as- what? Oh, hey, Jeff says we have another caller!”

“Excellent. Hello caller, you are live on the air with the Morning Rush!”

“Oh, hello there. Didn't expect to get connected so quickly.”

“Dr. Aster! I'd recognize that voice any day of the week. How are things at All Fine Labs?”

“Things are going quite well, Mr. Brinkman. The Soul Research program is almost concluded, with tomorrow being the final day. We've already made some interesting discoveries, the most important one being that human soul attributes can vary according to emotional state just like monsters.”

“So those numbers the scanner spit out can change?”

“Yes, depending on your attitude and your experiences. This actually surprised me. I thought that the human soul would be rather static, with so much of its energy dedicated to maintaining the connection with the physical body; but it turns out there is precedent for it since human science discovered something called biofeedback, a means of exerting conscious influence over biological functions that were originally considered completely automatic. It's an amazing parallel between monster and human physiology.”

“I'll have to take your word for it, but I'm glad that the program is bearing fruit, especially less than a week in. A lot of scientific studies you don't find anything useful from it until months or years later.”

“Well, these are immediate, general trends. I'm sure we'll be sifting little gems of insight out of the raw data for the next decade.”

“Did you ever figure out what that color thing was?”

“It's too soon to say, but there are some very rough correlations between soul chromatics and personality or disposition. I say rough because about all we've gotten for sure is that everyone who came through with cyan chromatics had minimal problems waiting for their shirts to be sent to them. And those with green chromatics were less likely to respond to the protestors outside with
vulgarity or personal insults. More broadly speaking, all human souls seem to have some sort of optical characteristic that matches a seven color spectrum.”

“So it’s like a rainbow. Can't see that making Riled Up Riley mad.”

“Actually, I would say that instead of matching the Newtonian spectrum of Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo and Violet? It more closely matches the three primary light colors of Red-Blue-Green, the three secondary colors of Yellow-Cyan-Magenta, and then Orange. Not that I understand the significance of any of it yet, or why the rainbow analogy would irritate Mr. Riley even more than he already seems to be irritated.”

“Speaking of Mr. Riley, have you had any further problems with his friends?”

“So far the picket signs and slogans have been the worst of it, and given the weather conditions on the surface it starts to trail off as the morning goes on. Only the most dedicated remain by the time everyone breaks for lunch.”

“That's good to hear. After your Soul Research program is finished, what's next for you, or are you the type that focuses on one problem at a time?”

“Are you kidding? I already have more side projects going than you can shake a stick at. But the one that personally intrigues me the most is an idea I got from Frisk Dreemurr about dimensional computing. What human science fiction calls quantum computing. What can only be achieved with pure technology with great difficulty and expense might be miniaturized and reinforced through the inclusion of dimensional magic. It would effectively reduce the distance between components to zero, creating a virtual point singularity of processing power unlimited by light speed transmission through electrical or optical elements.”

“...So... a really fast computer?”

“And, potentially, an instantaneous modem.”

“Sold. I am already willing to pay upwards of my life savings for this technology.”

“Well, first we have to make sure it's physically possible. Then we have to build it. Then, if my experience is any indication, we may have to rebuild part of All Fine Labs. But I'll keep you in mind for the beta testing... oh, there was one other thing I called in about.”

“Yeah, what's that?”

“You were asking about ghost food earlier. Ghost food is a type of monster food that is completely made out of magic, not simply saturated with it. So you need a master template of food, and then a magical point source emitter, and at least half an hour. Then when you remove the master template it will leave behind an ectoplasmic echo of the original.”

“Ah, right. It's all coming back to me now... I really wish it wasn't. Hey Brett, are you gonna be okay alone for about half an hour? I need to go eat some human food so I can throw up, and then curl up somewhere rocking back and forth for a while.”

“Do you think it can wait until the break?”

“Do you want magic dry heaves in the studio?”

“Well... I have no idea what that would look like, and now is not the time to satisfy my curiosity. In the meantime, thank you again for calling in Dr. Aster. Always a pleasure.”
“You too Mr. Brinkman.”

“I guess we'll run a PSA or three and when we come back we'll go over next week's event calendar. Stay tuned for more Morning Rush, everybody!”
Looking Forward To A Premonition

Dr. Alphys stared at the computer readouts, clicking the mouse several times and navigating different menus. At one point she pulled off her glasses, polished them as much as possible on her lab coat, and put them back on again.

“Alright, Joe. Take the shot.”

“You're the doc, doc.” Joe Stanton held up a plastic pistol with wires and old Christmas lights sticking out of it, took aim at a metal plate that had a similarly cobbled together look to it and a dart board hanging in front, and pulled the trigger. A flash of purple light shot out of the barrel and slammed into the dartboard just to the left of the bulls-eye.

“Can I try again? I think the sight is crooked.”

“Wait until the numbers compile.” After a few seconds, Alphys squinted at the screen. “LV 1 of 5, EXP zero across all three boards. AT... three sixes. DF... three eights. SPD... three sixes again. INV... two elevens, and the bullet analyzer reads it as twelve. Alright, that's not too bad.”

“How can it not be bad if it doesn't match?”

Alphys pointed at the large scanner hanging from the ceiling. “The other two readouts are of the same machine. So the dimensional bridge works fine. The bullet analyzer was built for monster attacks, not translated human signals. We'll keep it like it is for the remainder of the run and maybe we'll see a trend we can correct for, either in the sensors or in the emitter, or in the software that analyzes the results.”

“Suppose that makes sense.”

“Also, I’ve learned not to trust anything that works the right way the first time.”

“Just like Thomas Edison. Which isn't that flattering a comparison.”

“Huh?” Dr. Alphys blinked. “Did'n't he invent the light bulb and the telegraph and the record player and stuff like that?”

“Well, he invented some stuff.” Joe shrugged. “But most of his success had less to do with his inventing and more to do with his business practices. In fact the main reason American film industry got its start in California is because it was as far as they could get from Menlo Park and Edison's patents on film camera technology. Whether or not the guy was a brilliant inventor is up for debate, but the current historical consensus is that he was definitely an asshole. Oh, there's also the whole Electric War between him and Nikola Tesla when they were competing for people to adopt Direct Current or Alternating Current. Edison tried to 'prove' AC was dangerous by electrocuting an elephant.”

Dr. Alphys rubbed her forehead. “That's really screwed up.”

“That's one way to put it.” Joe held up the pistol again. “All things being equal, you're definitely higher on the science and inventing ladder than Edison. Of course, so is everyone else in the lab. Including me, and I'm not the one that made a magic laser pistol out of an old Nintendo Light Gun.”

“Hey, remember to be careful where you point that. Just because you only have an LV of 1 doesn’t
mean that can't hurt somebody.”

“Hey, give me a little credit. I don't play around with scientific instruments like they're toys, even if they were made out of items that were toys origi-”

A blast of purple light shot out of the barrel of the pistol and a light bulb shattered, raining glass down on the floor below. Joe froze, staring at the pistol with eyes wide.

“...uhm... I retract my previous statement.” With exaggerated care Joe removed his hand from the grip of the gun and held it between thumb and index finger of the other hand, then carefully placed it on the counter top up against the wall of the room next to some tools and a tangled ball of old Christmas lights. “I will go get a broom and shop vac.”

“Yeah. That's probably for the best.”

“whoa, do I wanna glass what happened while I was gone?”

“Good morning, Sans,” Alphys sighed as the lab door shut behind the skeleton. “Just an instrumental error. Joe's going to go grab the shop vac and clean this up.”

“Yes, that's what I was doing. Catch you later Sans.”

“eh, fuggedaboutit.” Sans gestured towards the glass and a blue singularity of light pulled all the glass fragments together, lifted them up, moved them over to the trash can and dropped them. Joe stared at the skeleton.

“Transcendent power over gravity and you use it to clean up. Seems like a waste.”

Sans shrugged. “if you got it, flaunt it. so what's on the docket today? i ask because around eleven i gotta head over to the auditorium to meet Undyne.”

“Right. She mentioned something about getting the honor guard and the royal family together to hash things out before tomorrow.” Alphys scratched her nose. “For the most part it's just the same old, same old. You'll be happy to know that your dimensional bridge adapter works fine.”

“sweet.”

“Between Dr. Aster and Joe this place should be running alright for most of the day, which is good because I have to go to some sort of investors meeting. Ugh. When I started up the lab I thought I'd be doing science, not marketing. Hey, if your dad ever gets tired of working for somebody else, let him know I'm happy to switch places and let him try to convince people to spend money on something that might or might not happen.”

“fat chance. that's the one part of the job he says he doesn't miss. even with the king just smiling and nodding at everything he said back with the C.O.R.E. facility was being built.”

Sans' phone chimed. “oh, hey. Papyrus is at Muffet's Tuffet, wants to know if we want anything.”

Alphys made a face and shook her head. “Ugh. No way. Muffet's an absolute sweetheart but I wouldn't touch her baked goods if you paid me.”

“kinda figured. Joe, you up for some spider based pastries?”

“You're joking right? I'm arachnophobic. I can't even be in the same room as Muffet without hyperventilating. Or do you not remember that Valentine's Day party Alphys dragged me to?”
“oh yeah.” Sans snickered. “I've never seen somebody take down curtains and curtain rods and turn them into a hang glider to get out of a social event before.”

Alphys frowned. “Hey, now that you bring it up, I've always wondered. Why did you yell 'Victory or Sovngarde!' before you jumped out the window?”

Joe shrugged. “Hell if I know. I wasn't thinking very clearly at the time. I don't even like Skyrim that much.”

“Hmmm. Alright, if the clock on this computer is still accurate, it's almost time to let in all the people who want a T-Shirt. Sans can you go grab your father and drag him away from whatever pet project is eating all his attention?”

“all over it,” Sans replied with a wink, then vanished in a flash of blue light. Less than thirty seconds later, a pair of blue flashes occurred and Sans reappeared with Dr. Aster next to him, holding a soda in one hand.

“and there ya go. Anything else ya need while I've still got my foot in the dimensional bridge?”

“Uh... unless you can think of a store you can hit up that has blank T-Shirts that you haven't gone to yet, not really. Oh, but here's something you might need!” Alphys grabbed an SD card from the table next to the computer and walked over to Sans. “This has the software drivers that let the dimensional storage app on your phone work as a dimensional bridge to the scanner. We can test it right away to verify there's no signal loss over the cell network or the wifi.”

“aw, but i didn't get you anything.”

Alphys stuck out her tongue at the skeleton and headed towards the lab door. “If anything comes up, you'll know where to find me.”

Sans slotted the card into his phone's reader and saw a series of progress bars flash across the touch screen, ending with opening the camera app. Pointing it at Joe, Sans saw a purple light shining in the center of the technician's torso, with a transparent box to the side populated with letters and numbers.

“well. on the plus side, this is really going to streamline the process. on the other side, all those people complaining about violating people's privacy with the scanner might have a point after all.”

Dr. Aster peered at the computer monitor. “Do you happen to know how many phones on the surface have dimensional storage access?”

“not that many. Alphys, Undyne, Papyrus, Toriel, Asgore, you and me... I think Catty and Bratty, oh, and Burgie... Mettaton... hey Joe, did Alphys ever upgrade your phone?”

Joe shook his head. “She offered but I'm pretty sure that would void the warranty. And I think that was the attitude of a lot of people she made the offer to. I mean, there are people who won't even use nonstandard chargers for their electronics in case of malfunction, and Dr. Alphys was talking about adding the hardware to allow it to defy everything human science knows about space. I'm sure at least one or two people accepted the offer when it was made but I couldn't tell you who.”

“heh, by the time it got to us the warranty was a non-issue, but i guess that makes sense... hmmm... Frisk, definitely. I know that for sure because I've seen them use it to stash books and snacks.”

“So it isn't that common.”
“naw. Alphys calls it an app, but to even run the software you need the right hardware, and she's really the only one who can install that right now.”

“Well, in that case we just need to watch out in case anyone with a dimension-enabled phone loses it or has it stolen. Okay Joe, automation is running. Let's get this party started. Send in the first lucky contestant.”

“You got it doc.”

As Joe walked away, Dr. Aster looked up from the monitor. “Actually, if Alphys is the only one who can configure and troubleshoot dimensional bridging hardware like that, we might be in trouble if there's a problem with the network and she's unavailable for some reason.”

Sans shrugged. “the Dimension Boxes are all in the basement behind three security doors and a few souvenirs she brought to the surface. even if remote access fails we can still keep everyone's stuff safe here.”

“Uh... souvenirs?”

“bits and pieces of the C.O.R.E. security system. Alphys also asked Papyrus to help her come up with a really devious puzzle to stall any burglars while security responded. he was so happy he cried. and it's actually really good, like his best puzzle work ever. you should see it.”

Dr. Aster looked up at the first test subject that Joe had guided to the target box and began clicking the mouse. "Better get down to business. Name?"

"Jason Taylor," the test subject responded. "But it was on the sheet of paper I filled out so why did you need to ask?"

"Redundancy for error correction, in case people leave the line or somebody cuts ahead, that kind of thing," Dr. Aster explained.

"Hmmmph. Waste of time if you ask me."

Dr. Aster shrugged. "Well, they say time waits for no man. But we're monsters, so could go either way. Scanners are running. Collecting signal. Should just take a little bit."

Sans walked up to the computer. "so... about seeing Papyrus's magnum opus?"

Dr. Aster nodded. “Yeah. I think I'd like that. I mean, once we don't have an endless stream of people coming into the building, of course. I would have said so sooner but...”

“right. i getcha.”

Dr. Aster looked down at the screen again, then looked up at Sans, smiling. “Just like old times, isn't it? Me staring at a monitor, you standing around doing nothing.”

“yup. you would not believe how much i missed this. it's good to be working with you again dad. or in my case, not working.”

“Well, I didn't have the chance to miss it... but if there was any part of the Underground I'd want to bring with me to the surface, this would be it.” Dr. Aster glanced at the screen again, and his smile reverted to a frown. “Oh, this is just dandy. We have a problem with the third scanner Alphys set up, it's not reading anything.”
“Oh, right. Dr. Aster, it’s not broken, it’s just missing a part.” Joe ran over to the counter top where he placed the magic emitter pistol, picked it up, and jogged back to the target box. “Here, Mr. Taylor. Just aim this at the dartboard and fire once. Uh, the sight is a little crooked so you may need to aim slightly to the right.”

Mr. Taylor stared at the device in his hand. “What in hell is this?”

“It’s a soul energy emitter. Sort of. There’s a sensor behind the dart board and it analyzes your stats based on the energy that comes out of the barrel. Makes the scan more accurate.”

“Huh.” Two orange blasts hit the bulls-eye in quick succession. “Like that?”

“Pretty much. But you should have just fired once.”

“Why? Does it jam the sensor if you fire more?”

“No, it’s just the thing runs on nine volt batteries and we only have eight of them and they have to last us through Friday.” Joe shrugged awkwardly. “Turns out all these free t-shirts are really cutting into our parts budget.”

“Hah. Budgets. Don't get me started.”

Joe turned towards Dr. Aster. “How's it look now, doc?”

“Uh... there we go. Scanner three just lit up. Everything matches. Orange chromatics.... Wait, the bullet analyzer says INV is 14. Everything else says INV 13.”

“Yeah, Dr. Alphys said we should just roll with it for now. Look for a trend in the mismatches.”

“she probably just didn't want to have to fix it right away,” Sans joked. “Alphys has been spending way too much time around me. alright Mr. Taylor, if you'll follow me I'll lead you to the break room and we'll fill out a form for your shirt.”

“Actually, Joe, can you do that? I just realized, that magic emitter is going to see a lot of different hands today. Sans, can you head to the janitor's closet and get some paper towels? And possibly see if there's some of that hand sanitizing gel humans seem to fixate on.”

“already on it.”

Sans bridged away in a flash of blue light, and Mr. Taylor blinked. “Didn't see that coming.”

Joe shrugged as he took the emitter back. “It's amazing how fast you get used to it.” Walking up to Dr. Aster, he handed off the emitter. “Here you go doc. Mr. Taylor, if you'll follow me I'll lead you to the break room-”

“Oh, one more thing. Let me give you some change since you'll be heading there. Get me a lemon-lime soda if we're not out.”

Joe blinked. “I thought you didn't want any food or drinks in the lab areas, never mind near the instruments?”

Dr. Aster stood up straight and stared at Joe while one hand rummaged through pockets in pursuit of coins. “That rule was made by a past version of myself, who was not dealing with the level of caffeine withdrawal that present me is confronting at this instant.”

Joe blinked, and then nodded. “Well, alright then.”
“Good. We're all on the same page. And hurry back, alright? We've got a long day ahead of us.”

“And it just got longer. Yeah, I know, I know.”

Joe walked out into the hallway with Mr. Taylor in tow. “Alright. Follow me and we'll get you set up.”

“Why'd you take that from that guy?”

“Take what, these coins?”

Mr. Taylor shook his head. “No, no! The skeleton bossing you around like that, having you go fetch drinks like some sort of gofer.”

“Well, that probably has something to do with me being official lab gofer. And besides,” Joe interrupted as Mr. Taylor opened his mouth again, “you can't blame a guy for needing caffeine. I know I've had mornings where I planned premeditated murder when people asked me to do anything before I had my second cup of coffee. I mean... obviously I was too tired to actually do it. But I was thinking about it.”

Mr. Taylor snorted in a way that might have been laughter. “Heh. I know what that's like.”

“Doesn't everyone? Here we go,” Joe pointed towards the break room, where a bear monster was tapping on the glass of the snack vending machine.

“Hey Gunther. Skittles get stuck again?”

The bear threw up his massive paws. “No, I tried to get something else with a different shape. And it's still sticking on me! And only me! Are we sure a ghost didn't possess this thing?!”

Joe began dropping coins into the soda machine. “Well, that implies you made an enemy out of a ghost at some point. Or mildly annoyed a really bored ghost. Or both.”

“Ugh... don't suppose you know where Sans is?”

“Gunther, we talked about this. If the vending machine company finds out that Sans can jiggle stuff loose from these things they're probably not going to provide the service anymore.” Joe stared straight at Gunther with one hand in front of his body, pointing at Mr. Taylor to one side of him and also looking in that direction repeatedly with his eyes.

“Oh... yeah. Guess that would be... a bit short sighted. Well, I'll come back later and hope nobody got a free box of Mike and Ike's on my dime.”

“That's the spirit.”

“Is it?”


“I will.”

As the bear walked out of the break room, Joe grabbed a printed form from a box on top of the fridge and presented it to Mr. Taylor. “Here you go. Just fill out your address data and we'll get that shirt sent to you as soon as we can make it.”
Mr. Taylor blinked. “Oh. Right. I heard about this on the radio. You guys were backed up so far because that lizard didn't know this town loves T-Shirts.”

“That's a pretty good summary of the situation. I'll be right back, better get this to the Doc before it gets cold. Or, before it gets warm, stops being cold. Had it backwards for a second there.”

“You really ought to stand up for yourself, bud. That's the only way to get ahead in life.”

“Oh, I'm great at stand up. I went up on stage once and said 'I'm a comedian.' Everyone laughed.”

Joe snapped his finger, pointed at Mr. Taylor, and winked, then ducked out of the break room.

Out in the hallway, Joe's expression became grim. With Joe's body in the way, Mr. Taylor hadn't seen Dr. Aster's other hand, or what it was doing. Specifically, he hadn't seen the small magic bones that shot out of the hole in the skeleton's palm, arranged themselves into patterns, and then faded into the ether:

L, V, and then the Roman Numeral for six.
A Plague Of Whippersnappers O'er The Land

“Welcome back to the Morning Rush with Brett and DJ Pantz on KEBT radio. We're coming up on eleven AM pretty soon, and that's particularly relevant to the Community Calendar segment we're about to start.”

“Yeah, we just found out about this last night. Apparently there's been a lot of irons in the fire lately so last minute changes had to be made. Sorry Brett, didn't mean to talk over you there.”

“S'alright. Okay, today, in just over an hour, Dreemurr Elementary School is closing early with a half-day so that the Queen and Undyne can set up at the Auditorium for tomorrow. Apparently they were going to do that anyway, and some other faculty were going to cover for them, but some of them had to change plans for various reasons and they just don't have the manpower to watch the whole student body. So, all those kids are free range as soon as we hit noon.”

“So if you're out driving, watch out for kids. If you're out walking, watch out for kids. If you're in an air balloon, watch out for kids. Not just the young monsters that can fly, also all of them still on the ground. Just in case.”

“Later today, as stated previously, we will have Gary Welkin on location at the Dank Memehaus for the historic bulletin board changeover. Tomorrow, the word on everybody's lips is the Monster State Of The Kingdom Address. I know I have plenty of questions, and with any luck, some of them will be answered.”

“The Address starts at ten in the morning and will last until at least noon, possibly as late as one or two in the afternoon depending on just how much ground is brought up that needs to be covered, and how quickly it can be covered. I'll be there both as a concerned citizen and as a media representative and KEBT will be broadcasting the event live. Brett will also be there, but as a media representative.”

“Hey, I'm concerned. Well, I'm more curious than anything else. Either way that means you all get Lazy Lindsey and the Coffee Grinders in the morning again.”

“I hope you're all happy about that, because she's not. The salt levels are off the scale. But guess who won't be salty tomorrow? All the kids at Dreemurr Elementary School. It will be closed because of the same Address.”

“Saturday morning will see the delayed Shyren's concert finally coming to fruition after this last Saturday saw the event rained out. Meanwhile, Saturday afternoon brings us the Ebott's Wake Kludge Derby, a spring tradition the City Council was on the fence about this year because of the heat. For that reason there are only six entries this year so far, and the window for the late sign up ends tonight. So if you have some sort of transportation that was never originally intended to move under its own power, you have until six forty-five PM tonight to head to the City Admin building and fill out the appropriate paperwork to enter it into the race.”

“Now there is some overlap so if you want to see both events, you need to hit the Auditorium early. Because of the heat problem the Derby can't be delayed until later in the season, but they decided not to cancel it, and then when we had the storm last weekend... well, it's all a rich tapestry. So far the official entries are Todd Clemens with Snooze Patrol, a motorized adjustable hospital bed; Quentin Forsythe with Tinfoil Herald, a giant metal pyramid; Mike Van Garrett with the Bookmobile, a... wow... a ground-effect vehicle made out of all the outdated and broken hardware the Library can't use or replace; Alex, Barry, Chase and Delgado, the All Fine Labs Lab Mice,
with the Cheesemonger, a... nobody really knows what it is except that it was probably a table at some point; Hal Greene with the Meane Greene Machine, a rocket-powered shopping cart; and Justin Carrow with Speakeasy, an old style bathtub.”

“You know, good luck to all of them, but I'm really disappointed that we're not seeing the return of Hans Therrick and his Zeitberecht after his dark horse victory last year. Of course, if the primary motive part of your kludge cart is a giant plastic ball, then heat becomes an even bigger concern in weather like this.”

“No kidding. The Derby event itself runs from four in the afternoon to seven in the evening, with the actual race proper starting at exactly five PM.”

“And as a reminder, Saturday is the last day of the Ebott's Wake Librarby Book Sale, and it'll be sack day. That's all the books you can fit into a plastic grocery sack, in exchange for one portrait of George Washington. Also, to backtrack a little bit, tomorrow is the half price day at the Librarby Sale. Almost forgot about that, until I saw this notice from the Librarby Board. They have asked me to clarify an issue for the listening public. Everywhere else in the United States, Banned Books Week takes places over the last week in September, but owing to a combination of various civic bylaws and one statute passed during the 1950s intended as a stand against the threat of Communist infiltrators... which has never been repealed for some reason... Ebott's Wake has had its own Banned Books Week in May and it was originally for the purpose of actually banning subversive literature. Even after Banned Books Week was adopted as an awareness campaign against censorship and the history thereof nationwide, the local initiative to suppress and filter information was propped up by a number of local religious authorities, including but not limited to the Sages.”

“So when did it turn into another censorship awareness campaign?”

“Oh, officially on the paperwork it's still all about censoring literature. But nobody's even tried to use it in that capacity since the Sages got taken down. The social stigma is too huge. So you know all those weird laws that make it illegal to operate a car without a flag on the front, or to drive a horse and buggy on city streets without the horse wearing a bowler hat, or you can't give a donkey a bath on Sundays? Weird random cross sections of the problems people cared about in a different era? This is our contribution.”

“...okay, I know it's part of the town's rich history of... god only knows what... but I really think that should officially be changed to be against censorship.”

“You and me both. And the Librarby Board. And most of the faculty at the college... moving on. This Sunday is the Chili Cook Off in the Ebott's Wake Arboretum, starting at nine thirty in the morning and continuing until three in the afternoon. Police will be on hand to make sure that the demilitarized zone between the Pro Beans camp and the No Beans camp is respected by both sides.”

“Well that'll be a nice change of pace. Last year it was a mess. At least when Flowey was messing with the trees he didn't attempt to set any of them on fire.”

“Oh, on that subject-”

“Please tell me Flowey isn't going to enter the Chili Cook Off.”

“...if Burgie could let me finish a sentence, I was about to say, after last year's breakdown and attempted arson, Hal Greene has been banned from the Chili Cook Off until 2018. But not from the Arboretum, for some reason.”
“Now there's a mystery we'll never solve.”

“Monday doesn't have any local events of note, but we have an interesting national news item relevant to everyone's interests. That is when Last Week Tonight with John Oliver airs their follow up story on monsters and Ebott's Wake. So if you don't have HBO be sure to find their channel on YouTube and watch it there.”

“Tuesday the Historical Re-Enactment society is going to Re-Enact the Battle of Ebott's Wake, which... I'm not sure I'm reading this correctly, but if I am, consisted of an accidental shootout between the Royal Canadian Air Force and... the Ebott's Wake Volunteer Fire Department?”

“Oh yeah. That's a thing that happened. For all our listeners who are unfamiliar with that chapter of Ebott's Wake history, the Battle of Ebott's Wake took place prior to the United States becoming officially involved in World War Two. A military training flight from Canada went off course due to a combination of bad weather and instrumental breakdown, and made an emergency landing at the Ebott's Wake High School football field. Keep in mind that this was the early 1940s so this was the old high school, and the football field was where the fishery is now, over by Dreemurr Elementary. Even though the United States was still technically neutral, in spite of Lend Lease and everything, and there was a strong political push towards isolation? A lot of people also wanted to get into the war against Germany at the time. And people were worried about fifth columns and sneak attacks and spies and saboteurs. So when the plane showed up out of nowhere...”

“People got the wrong impression.”

“More or less. The police response was to try to call the governor's office, the army, and so on. The fire department, who I remind you were volunteers and used to acting on their own initiative without support or permission, armed themselves and tried to mount a counterattack.”

“Question. How did this NOT cause a diplomatic incident with Canada?”

“Well, the Canadian trainees, due to logistical and economic problems at the time, were not issued actual guns and ammunition during the exercise. And apparently the Volunteer Fire Department was so drunk that they couldn't even hit the ground. So a plane wasn't going to happen.”

“Okay, now I kind of want to see this. Let's see... ah, good. The re-enactment proper takes place between two and five in the afternoon Tuesday. That's after Lindsey and everybody takes over.”

“Maybe I'll see you there, then. Finally, Wednesday is the Ebott's Wake Sustainable Aquaculture Initiative open house, so you can stop by the fishery and get a tour of the facility, then sit in on lectures by speakers on subjects like... well... aquaculture I guess.”

“And on that note it's time for some station identification, some words from our sponsors, and possibly a song or two. Stick around for a bit, there's still some Morning Rush left after this.”
“HELLO BEAUTIES!”

Frisk looked up from the clipboard they were holding to see a rectangular box with tubular arms on each side and a sophisticated light panel on the front, rolling into the auditorium on a single wheel. Other people's gazes were also drawn to the spectacle.

“WOWIE! METTATON HIMSELF HAS COME TO SEE US REHEARSE FOR TOMORROW'S EVENTS!”

Frisk grinned at Papyrus's obvious fanboy euphoria. “Well, it's more of a dry run? But you're right. Still pretty cool.”

Mettaton rolled over towards the Royal Family and the Honor Guard, and Frisk dropped the clipboard on the table and ran forward, sprinting deftly around Toriel as the queen tried to move in between the two.

“Hey Mettaton! Welcome back!”

“Oh, it's so good to be back as well!” One tubular arm reached behind the rectangle, resulting in a loud click, and suddenly parts began to shift around. In the time that Frisk was able to cover the last few yards, the rectangle had been replaced by far more... fabulous hardware. “I was hoping to touch base with everyone sooner but my dear, you would not believe the people in Hollywood these days! It's absolutely scandalous! There was no way around it, I just had to spend most of yesterday recharging.”

Frisk scratched their head. “I thought Alphys replaced the batteries with a miniaturized nuclear reactor?”

“Oh, she did! The same stunning craftsmanship she puts into everything she creates. I meant I was emotionally drained, Frisk, not electrically.” Mettaton dramatically held one hand over his face. “Oh, it's a travesty! All that creative energy, all that earnest passion for the power of the silver screen to transform the way people see the world, all bottle-necked by so-called 'marketing' experts who couldn't sell water to a man dying of thirst!”

“...they want you to do a family comedy again, right?”

“Never work with children or animals, Frisk. You being the sole exception of course,” the robot added hastily. “I had to put my name out there somehow so I broke the cardinal rule. Now it's so popular that in the minds of those buffoons I'm essentially typecast as a malfunctioning robotic personal assistant, simply because Dotcom Daycare grossed five million more than Shadow on the Window or The Cloud or A Lost Voice.”

“Wait, am I the exception to the children part of the rule or the animals part?”

Mettaton blinked at Frisk, and then the two of them broke out into giggles. “Oh, you haven't changed at all. Your comedic timing and delivery are perfect.”

“Yours too, really. I loved The Cloud. So did Papyrus. Even Sans liked it.”

From across the auditorium, a figure lounging in the seats spoke up. “Ey, don't put words in my mouth like that. cuz they'll fall out.”
Frisk shrugged. “Okay, yeah, he also said it needed more puns.”

“As they say, punning is the lowest form of wit. Even if wit is the highest form of humor.”
Mettaton added with a wink.

“NYEH HEH HEH HEH HEH! YOU HEARD IT, SANS! VINDICATION AND CELEBRITY ENDORSEMENT ALL IN A SINGLE DAY!”

Sans grinned and leaned back in the seats again. “sure did bro. I'll just save em for tomorrow then.”

“THAT'S NOT WHAT I MEANT!”

“Sans will you GET DOWN HERE!” Undyne snapped. “We need to get everybody in position!”

“Oh. Everybody includes me, I think.” Frisk turned to the robot. “Do you want to stick around and watch or do you have places to go and stuff to do?”

“I always have time to watch fellow performers hone their craft!”

Mettaton and Sans traded positions while Undyne and Frisk tried to hold the attention of the Canine Unit. “OKAY! For the fifth time, we start with the national anthem. The honor guard procession starts on both sides of the room. I'll lead the South side, Papyrus leads the north. Doggo, you'll be right behind me. Sans, behind Papyrus. Dogamy, Dogressa, behind Sans. 01 and 02, behind me. Greater Dog behind 02, Lesser Dog behind Dogressa. Everybody with me so far?”

Most of the responses were drowned out by a wave of excited yapping from Greater and Lesser Dog. Undyne shrugged. “Hope that's a yes. Once the procession comes to a halt, the King comes out... ideally in armored regalia instead of a floral print shirt and denim jeans of course,” Undyne grinned.

“Sure thing, Undyne!” Asgore nodded with a smile.

“Then the queen comes out, then Frisk. They take position behind the table. We wait for the anthem to finish and the Royal Family takes their seats. Then we file in behind them and take our seats. Now, the Grand Poobah will already be there, and the president of the Arts Council because we're using the Auditorium, but there's been a change of plans. We were supposed to have the county commissioner here, but she is SUPER allergic to dogs. Which kind of puts everyone in a bind. So we have a blank spot on that side of the table and we don't know who will be filling it, if anybody at all.”

“We could rearrange the table once we know for sure nobody else is coming,” Frisk pointed out. “But we'd have to do that at the last minute.”

Toriel, standing near the table and carefully arranging chairs, papers, and nameplates, shook her head. “I hope that we can avoid such a scenario, to leave the option open for somebody to take that place. A great deal stands to be gained by having multiple humans and monsters seated together here, both symbolically and politically.”

“Right. Okay, everybody get into positions! We'll run this one from the top! Backstage, now!”
Undyne barked out, and the guard scrambled to follow with one exception.

“Sans, come ON! You're representing all of monsterkind here!”

“heh. somebody somewhere really dropped the ball.”
Undyne narrowed her eye. “I still don’t understand why Papyrus insisted I include you.”

“me neither.” Still, Sans vanished in a flash of blue light. As Undyne followed suit and headed backstage, Frisk scrambled over to the table and reached underneath, grabbing a large, unwieldy cassette player with large speakers; a boom box, one of the distance ancestors of the modern MP3 player. Pressing the “Play” button, the slightly scratchy sounds of the Monster National Anthem began to play, and the two sides of the Royal Honor Guard marched out into the main floor.

“Alright, turn off the music. How did we look?” Undyne asked.

Frisk pushed “Stop” followed by “Rewind” and looked up from the device. “I thought it was okay. As long as Lesser Dog doesn't get super excited during the actual event I think that's about as good as it can get. Should we try it with everybody?”

“Yes, that's the next step. Mettaton, can you come over here and manage the music?”

“Absolutely, darling!” The robot walked over to the table and ran a finger across the boom box. “Although why you're not using a digital playback system tied into the building announcement speakers is beyond me.”

Undyne rolled her eye. “That was Plan A. Plan A depended on one of the guys from the Arts Council who had the keys to the stage manager's office being here today. And they're late, assuming they are going to show up at some point.”

“It's the arts council. they think deadlines are more like suggestions. ain't that surprising really. we're lucky they got the air conditioner working in time.”

Frisk grabbed some of the papers from the table and began leafing through them. “We'll have to bring that up with... right, Mrs. Valentine. Wait. No. Valiantine.” The child shook their head. “You know, assuming she shows up tomorrow.”

Undyne growled. “After all the emphasis they put on having a representative seated at the same table as, you know, actual governing figures? You would THINK-”

“I'm here! I'm here! Sorry I'm late, I was-” a man rushing onto the main floor stopped and paused for several deep breaths, “I was doing some tech support for a friend and I lost all track of time. But I'm here now and I'm ready to set things up!”

Undyne rolled her eye. “Finally. We've been practicing for almost forty five minutes now.”

“Undyne, do you remember what I told you about gift horses?” Frisk asked, picking up the boom box.

“Yeah, you can't make them drink. What does that have to do with this situation right now, exactly?”

Frisk blinked a few times. “Uh. Nothing. Just testing your memory, I guess? Okay, I got the anthem right here. Let's get it wired up to the speakers.”

The man stared at the boom box. “...did you guys not have a record player handy or something?”

“I don't know. What's a record player?”

“Uh... guess it doesn't really matter. They're almost extinct in the wild anyway. I'm ready if you're ready.” The man held out a hand. “Justin Carrow, city maintenance and all-around odd-job guy.
Nice to meet you.”

Frisk took the hand and shook it. “Nice to meet you Mr. Carrow. Frisk Dreemurr, Ambassador for the Kingdom of Monsters. And in this... box... is the national anthem of the kingdom of monsters.”

“Cool. And Justin is just fine, by the way.” Justin picked up the boom box, pressed Eject, and pulled out the cassette tape. “Now there's a blast from the past. Haven't seen a tape like this since I was in high school. So this national anthem, what's it called? What do I write in for the soundboard for whoever is managing the audio hardware tomorrow?”

“It's literally just called Monster National Anthem.” Frisk pointed towards Asgore. “The king is a really nice guy but he's not got a lot of imagination when it comes to names.”

Justin narrowed his eyes, looking at the king, then back at Frisk. “Do I want to know what the lyrics are?”

“Oh, it doesn't have lyrics. It's a pure instrumental arrangement. I'm... guessing that the Underground learned its lesson at some point.”

“Huh. So monsters can learn from their mistakes.” Justin snorted. “Wish humans could do that. Okay, I'll get you wired up. Give me about fifteen minutes. I don't know for sure if they still have something that can read a magnetic cassette tape. Or if they have cable adapters for something this old. It's been a while since I had to mess around with the sound system in here.”

“So you weren't involved in the concert setup last Saturday?” Undyne asked, walking over. Justin shook his head.

“That was all handled in-house. From what I understand, Napstablook did everything. Or at least, everything up to the point where it got rained out.”

Mettaton snapped his mechanical fingers, creating a ringing metal echo in the building. “You know, if push comes to shove, I'm sure Blookie would be more than pleased to be your sound mixer for tomorrow.”

Undyne opened her mouth, then closed it and tapped her chin with a finger a few times. “That's not a bad idea. Napstablook knows audio hardware inside and out. And we can have them do a digital copy of the anthem. Avoid all this fuss with cables and adapters.”

“Hey, I did just rush over here after I realized I was late. At least let me try things out so I didn't nearly trip and break my neck on the steps outside for no reason.”

Justin hefted the boom box and quickly walked back towards the lobby, and Frisk and Undyne looked at each other.

“Okay, one less thing to worry about. We're going to have sound hookups, and we'll have working air conditioning. How's it going on the uniforms?”

Undyne pointed a thumb over her shoulder at Sans. “Don't let this leave the building, but lazybones over there somehow got iron-on symbol patches for Dogamy, Dogaressa and Doggo. And Papyrus hand stitched the symbol onto one of his sweatshirts. For armor we have a stencil and some spray paint.”

“What about Sans?”

Undyne rolled her eye. “Waddaya think?”
Frisk stared at Undyne. “...he's doing the name tag thing isn't he.”

“I don't know why you're surprised. I don't know why I was surprised either.”

The building speakers crackled to life as somebody unwittingly interrupted Undyne.

“-built the whole thing back in the fifties, so we're probably lucky it even works. Remodels or not.”

“How'd you learn all this stuff, anyway?”

Frisk blinked and looked away from the speakers and back at Undyne, whose expression had gone from exasperated to confused. “Is that Poncho? It sounds like Poncho.”

The fish lady nodded. “Yeah. Which leads to our next question. Why is Poncho in the stage manager room with Mr. Carrow?”

Frisk moved their fingers in the air, as if tracing a path on an imaginary map. “We walked part of the way here, at least to West East Road. But I didn't see him come in.”

“Wait... oh, I bet he tried to sneak in because he didn't realize the building was open to the public.” Undyne sighed. “And he loves getting in where he's not supposed-”

Over the speakers, Poncho's question was finally answered. “Picked it up in the Army. Engineering, then Signals.”

“You were in the army? So you're a soldier, just like Gerson! That's cool!”

“Who's Gerson?”

“They call him Gerson, the Hammer of Justice! He's super old, he fought in the war between monsters and humans, and he survived!”

“Heh. Bet he's got some interesting stories he wishes he could forget.”

“Hey, did you ever kill anybody?”

The various other sounds in the rest of the building seemed to drop to nothing. Certainly nobody in the main room was speaking. After a few seconds, the reply to Poncho's question came over the speakers.

“Yeah. It comes with the job, mostly. The, uh, movies and TV shows tend to make it look a lot more glamorous than it actually is. If I hadn't learned how to run a dozer and fix computers, the whole thing would have been a waste of my time.”

“Hey, who did you fight? There weren't any monsters on the surface till we showed up, right? So, did you, like, fight other humans?”

“Yeah. War's kind of become humanity's international pastime. For better or worse.... mostly worse, if you thi-”

The building was suddenly filled with a buzzing, screeching squeal, punctuated by what might have been shouting, before the audio cut out entirely. Frisk carefully pulled one hand away from an ear. “Okay, I didn't see that one coming.

“-n't supposed to happen. Is there a short in the PA system?” The speakers crackled to life, but with a static-laden, muddied sound dampening the voices.
“Yo, dude! What just happened?!”

“Some sort of massive feedback spike. I'd better run through all the channels one by one, because this thing shouldn't even be on right now.”

“What were those words you were yelling?”

There was a longer pause than normal before the reply. “Words I probably shouldn't have been using with a child in earshot. Do yourself a favor, kid. Never use those words when somebody can hear you.”

“How'd you know my name was Kid?”

“How?”

“My name is actually Kid. Everyone just calls me Poncho because of my shirt.”

“Huh. Will wonders never... oh.”

“What?”

“This stupid microph-”

The speakers abruptly cut out, leaving a silence that was, in its own way, deafening. Toriel walked away from the table she had been organizing, a stern expression on her face.

“I believe I should go fetch young Kid before Mr. Carrow can expand his vocabulary any further.”

Undyne covered part of her face with one hand. “Oh great. Nobody's going to be happy at the end of this. At least the feedback was too loud for you to hear any of those words, or that human would be in real trouble.”

Frisk stared as Toriel marched into the lobby area, then looked up at Undyne. “Uh... don't tell mom, but I know all those words already.”

“...so there wasn't any actual reason for me to make up the word grooty way back when.”

“No. I knew what you meant.”

“...well, as long as you didn't learn it from me, I'm in the clear!” Undyne grinned. Frisk grinned back and started snickering, which was interrupted by the speakers crackling back to life with some music.

“Yo, I think it works! I can hear music from outside the room!”

“Wait, what? Oh my GOD. Some Eye Dee Ten Tee service technician wired up the manager microphone like one of those lights with two switch-”

A loud rapping noise was heard over the speakers, and Toriel's muffled voice shortly after. “Kid, you get out of this room right now! Stop harassing people while they are working!”

“Yo, how did she know?!?”

“Never trust microphones, Poncho. They gossip more than the Navy-”

The speakers cut out once more, and Frisk scratched their head. “So... who do you think is in more
trouble right now? Poncho, or Justin?”

Undyne shrugged. “That’s like asking which weighs more, a pound of feathers or a pound of lead.”

“Oh! I KNOW THIS ONE!” Papyrus interjected, running over to bestow upon Frisk and Undyne the benefits of his puzzle solving experience. “FIRST YOU HAVE TO KNOW THE EXCHANGE RATE FOR THE BRITISH POUND STERLING—”

“or you could just drop both of them on your feet and find out that way,” Sans pointed out with a wink.
Dr. Aster stared at the whiteboard on the wall, covered in diagrams, schematics and equations, plus the occasional (apparently) unrelated note. Several sections had been encompassed in boxes with the label “Do Not Erase” scribbled nearby. So concentrated was his attention, that he didn't notice the door opening behind him until it shut.

“What the-“

The skeleton spun around and saw Frisk standing by the doorway, clutching a book.

“Um... is now a bad time?”

“...no, now is fine. I wasn't really getting anywhere with this.” Dr. Aster tossed the marker in his hand in the general direction of the whiteboard, and a blue glow guided it carefully to a spot on the shelf below. “You would think because I built the thing, I would know how the C.O.R.E. works, and by extension what would break it. And yet... here we are. Actually, wait. I know why I'm here. I work here. When did you show up? Are you back for another scan, or did Alphys give you some sort of universal backstage pass at some point?”

“Naw, I just hitched a ride with Sans once the rehearsal was over.”

Dr. Aster blinked and then slapped one hand against his skull, creating a ringing echo in the room. “Oh, hell. I completely forgot. Once we got through the day's volunteers I just went straight here to start working on the time disruption problem. How did that go?”

Frisk shrugged. “Well, we got some practice in, and the new uniforms are being fixed up, and I think everyone knows what to do. There were... problems hooking up the sound system though. Mom was a bit upset so we called it there. Maybe we could have done more, but we kind of lost our momentum.”

“Yeah, I know what that's like. What time is it?”

“Almost three thirty. So we have a little over half an hour before the Dank Memehaus is replacing its bulletin board.”

“Uh... is that significant somehow?”

“Well... it's a lot more important to the people in Ebott's Wake than it might sound. Papyrus is covering it for his blog, Sans is going to be there, the radio station is going to be there... it might help you clear your head. Approach the problem with a clean slate, maybe?”

The skeleton smirked and pointed at the whiteboard. “As chaotic as that looks, starting over with a blank work space isn't going to be a step forward.”

Frisk walked over to one of the tables, covered with empty cans of lemon-lime soda. “I've known Sans and Papyrus for over a year and I still don't understand why this just doesn't spill everywhere when you drink it.”

Dr. Aster shrugged. “That's one of the advantages of a magic-based physiology. Toriel... your mom, she's a pretty good cook, wouldn't you say?”

“The best ever of all time.”
“She uses fire magic, right?”

“Yeah, almost all of the time. It's cleaner, and it makes the food into monster food. I'm not sure exactly how, though.”

“That's a little complicated. First, do you remember what we talked about yesterday about six dimensional space?”

“Most of it. Some of it was harder to follow, but Sans gave me this book and a lot of the diagrams helped. Especially the ones about moving stuff around in a shadow cast by an object and the multiple overlapping stained glass windows.” Frisk held up the copy of *Applied Magical Optics* and Dr. Aster's eye sockets widened in surprise.

“Sans gave you that??”

“Yeah, yesterday. After school was over and mom was starting dinner he just showed up at the door, handed this over, and teleported away. Said he was supposed to be grabbing a part for the scanner or something.”

The skeleton rubbed his skull and walked over to a relatively clear and uncluttered desk, and sat down. “Hmmm. So that's why it took him so long.”

“Why? What's so important about this book? Besides what's in it, I mean?”

“It's not the book itself proper, although it's nice to see he held onto it and took such good care of it for so long. What's important is that Sans went out of his way to bring it to you. He must have thought it was really important for you to have it.”

“...maybe that's it. He asked if it was too early to join us for dinner, but he left before mom invited him in and he didn't even stick around long enough for her to send some stuff to you guys.”

“Well, that's disappointing. Like you said, the queen's cooking is the best of all time. And that's what we were originally talking about, monster food and monster metabolism. And that requires a working knowledge of dimensions, so... okay, pop quiz. List the six primary dimensions of the timespace continuum.”

“Okay. First, time isn't a dimension, it's a measurement of change in energy states. So that's a trick question. And length, width and depth are the three dimensions of physical matter, but energy has to be measured in three others. Frequency, Amplitude, and... uh... Face? That doesn't seem right.”

“I think you meant Phase. But you were close. Not at all bad for retaining a brand new subject that goes against everything you've been taught before. And while technically both matter and energy occupy all six of those dimensions, it's always easier to pick a single one and use it as a reference point. You can figure out the height of a building from its external surface area, or dividing its total area in floor space by its perimeter, but it's always easier to just figure out height directly... so! Because magic is energy and monsters are mostly made of it, we grasp the six dimensional framework intuitively. Human sense organs are physical matter and rely on cross-sections of energy interactions with that matter. Which is probably why you guys can't control gravity yet.”

“Well, we did come up with the internet. I kinda figure that's a good trade off.”

Dr. Aster shrugged. “It's certainly helped me out. On to monster food. Magic saturates the physical matter during the cooking process and shifts a lot of it into those other dimensions. That's why it seems to break down instantly when humans eat it; the energy is interacting with the body to take all of those materials where they need to be, right away, without going through the process of
chemical digestion. In the other direction, monsters eating human food use their own magic to process it in real time. Sort of like digestion. No, wait, it's **exactly** like digestion. Humans use physical acid to break down the physical matter for chemical energy to power your metabolism, and more physical matter for making new cells. Monsters use energy to transform food and extract its energy content; chemical, thermal, electrical, everything.”

Frisk scratched their head. “But with humans, there's always stuff... uh... left over. And monsters don't need to make new cells, right? Or do they? We haven't covered monster biology or anatomy yet in school. Apparently you can't teach kids that until they get older or something?”

“Well, to call them cells isn't exactly a perfect metaphor, but we do rebuild parts of the physical structures of our bodies that were lost to injury or simple wear and tear.” Dr. Aster tapped the crack underneath his eye. “Unless the injury is severe enough to affect the magic that organizes how the matter is arranged, that is.”

“So it's like a scar.” Frisk grinned. “Proof that you were stronger than whatever tried to hurt you.”

“Hey... that's catchy.”

“I got it off the internet. I don't know who came up with it originally.”

“Hah! In any event, once food has been completely stripped of all energy and useful material content, obviously what's left has to be... well, disposed of. The cooking process normally handles that outside the body, and an important industry in the Underground was recycling cooking residue like that in the same way humans recycle leftover fat and oil for its fuel content. But when it's done internally... I'm guessing humans are used to it, but believe me, the novelty for monsters tends to wear off after the first time.”

“Well, that's good to know. I guess. Trying not to think about it too much.”

“That's usually my policy as well.” Dr. Aster turned back to stare at the whiteboard. “Except in my case that's because it distracts me from the issue at hand.”

Frisk walked over closer to the board and stared at the various diagrams and equations, but they made no more sense than they did from further away. Behind them, the door to the room opened and closed again.

“so have you figured out how to square the circle yet?”

“Ah, Sans. Frisk tells me that the rehearsal for the assembly went fairly well.”

“wouldn't know, since i slept through most of it.”

Frisk grinned. “No he didn't. He was dragging his feet a few times but he was putting in some effort at least.”

“lies and slander.” The short skeleton walked over to Frisk and tousled the child's hair with a gloved hand; Frisk in turn stuck out their tongue at Sans.

“curses, the one human gesture i can't do.” Sans looked over at Dr. Aster. “so, any major breakthroughs yet?”

Dr. Aster narrowed his eye sockets. “No, and not for lack of trying. We know that there was a mechanical bias towards matter going to the future. We don't know for certain if that means another mechanical bias towards sending energy to the past to maintain parity, but it's a reasonable
scenario. So I’ve mapped out two different condition sets for the core breakdown based on each situation. Whether or not there was an energy bias as well as a matter bias, we know that for physical containment to fail the actual concentration of energy in the core loop would have had to basically be hotter than the surface of the sun. Or, at least, the equivalent energy level in electron volts.”

“which is a lot.”

“Yes, it is.” Dr. Aster pointed at the drawing in the corner of the whiteboard. “Does that look familiar, Sans?”

There was a long enough pause from the short skeleton that the other two occupants of the room looked at him, and saw empty eye sockets staring at the whiteboard.

“A little bit. I was more focused on you at the time.”

“...are you alright? You have your serious face going on right now.”

Sans closed his eye sockets, shook his head, and opened them again, with eye lights back in their proper locations. “Nah. I'm good. Just didn't expect to see a blast from the past like that today.”

“So... you haven't seen anything like that again since the core disaster?”

“Last I heard, nobody else tried to turn the timespace continuum inside out, so how could I?”

Dr. Aster looked at Frisk, and Sans followed in confusion. The human child suddenly began to sweat.

“Frisk told me earlier this week about seeing... well, the description matches what I remember about the anomaly at the heart of the core during the breakdown. And considering that only happened a week ago to me, it's still fresh in my memory.”

“Huh. Must have missed that. Okay, was that down in the Lab Basement or something?”

Frisk rubbed their hands together nervously. “Actually, they were...”

“They? As in more than one?”

“Yeah... they were scattered all over the Underground.” Frisk closed their eyes and started counting on their fingers. “There was one at the entrance to the Ruins, after Toriel found me... two in the Ruins themselves, one at the end outside Home, one on the Snowdin Road right past your sentry station-”

“What?? How did I miss that?”

“I don't know. I don't think anybody except me could see them. And there were a lot more of them, all over the place. But especially in New Home for some reason. I mean, the New Home Castle. The one time I was in the New Home city itself, after we came back to organize the move after talking things out with the Ebott's Wake City Council, I didn't see any. And I never saw the inside of the Ruins city, so I don't know how many are there. And...”

Sans stared at the child. “…and??”

Frisk took a deep breath. “Okay. All cards on the table now. At the hallway outside the throne room, you pointed out that it always seemed like I knew what was going to happen next. Well... I
didn't always, but a lot of stuff I had seen before. If... if something happened. If I lost a fight, mostly. I would wake up at the last one of those underground stars that I had gotten close to.”

“Aha. So you really are a time traveler.”

“I wouldn't go that far. I can only go back, and I have to die for it to happen. Pretty sure Doc Brown, Marty McFly, and Doctor Who didn't have to deal with that.”

“Okay, first, the guy's name is The Doctor. Doctor Who is the name of the show.” Sans pointed out. “Second... this actually explains that look on your face when I joked that I was so good at my job that you hadn't died a single time.”

Frisk shrugged. “Yeah. I didn't really know how to explain it, so I didn't try.”

“That makes sense. And this also explains all that deja vu everyone was having. I bet some of the information from the future came back with you.”

“Well... maybe.”

“Hey... what's that look supposed to mean? Is there something else to it?”

The child scratched the back of their head. “I don’t know. I don't know how any of this works or why it happened to me. I just want to find a way to make sure it stops.”

An uncomfortable yet expectant silence descended over the room, and Dr. Aster took the opportunity to speak up. “Frisk, how many times exactly did you... die?”

“I... I can't remember. Not exact numbers. After a certain point it all, uh, blends together. I know the first time was when Toriel was trying to keep me from leaving the Ruins, and-”

“Whoa whoa whoa. Whoa. Whoa.” Sans held up his hands in the classic Time Out gesture. “You're telling me that Toriel... who asked me to protect any human that walked out the door into the rest of the Underground... murdered a human herself?”

“Okay, first things first. DO NOT tell her that,” Frisk pointed at Sans. “Second, it wasn't murder. It was an accident. She was trying to scare me into staying. I thought it was a... a test. I let the fireballs hit me to show her I wasn't afraid. I didn't realize it wasn't a test until I was dying. And she completely flipped out. I haven't seen her that upset about anything since.”

“Wow. Ya think ya know a boss monster,” Sans joked, or at least tried to. “Okay then. And based on the deja vu Papyrus and I were having, one of his traps must have worked... was it the bridge one? Because that seemed excessive.”

Frisk shook their head. “No, none of the Snowdin traps ever hurt me. And Papyrus and I only ever fought that one time and then we were friends. I think that deja vu was because...”

The child trailed off, but saw that the two skeletons were waiting expectantly, and sighed. “I did say all cards on the table, didn't I. Okay. I think most if not all of the deja vu came from it being my second run.”

“Wait, what do you mean by 'second run' Frisk?” Dr. Aster asked. “You mean you went through the Underground more than once?”

“Just the two times. I screwed up a lot of stuff the first time, but the worst was at the very end.” Frisk looked down at the floor. “I knew from Alphys that I couldn't make it through the Barrier on
my own. I didn't want to have to do what needed to be done to change that. But I was still scared. Still surrounded by people that wanted to kill me. I just wanted to go home, and I wanted it so bad I forgot why I ended up in the Underground in the first place. And when it came down to it... I put that fear ahead of everyone else's happiness. Everyone else's hopes and dreams...”

Dr. Aster noticed that the child's hands began to shake. “Frisk, are you alright?”

“No. I'm not. And I never will be. The scanner says I don't have any EXP. That I never hurt anybody. And Asgore is alive and perfectly fine. But I remember what I did. I remember why I did it. Because I was stupid and selfish and a coward, who does not deserve to have a... a father like that, who cares about me like he does. That... that was why I came back. I screwed up everything. For monsters. For humans. For everyone. I tried to be better the second time around. I... when I met Asgore again... I couldn't... I just wanted to....”

The laboratory became silent, except for the sounds of labored breathing and the occasional choked sob. Sans felt sweat start to bead on his skull.

“Hey, hey... it worked out pretty well for us this time around. And for you too. So there's a lot to be said for second chances.”

“...you can't understand how this feels.”

Sans blinked. “What?”

“Having Asgore hug me, and remembering him dissolving into dust. Remembering all the times I died and having to just pretend none of it happened. And now that it seems like everyone's free, everyone has a happy ending? I'm terrified of what happens if I die up here again, because that's how the second run started. Terrified that one day, without any warning, it's all going to be reset.”

Frisk blinked back the tears and looked up at the two skeletons. “That's why I had to talk about this. Ever since I knew what you guys were working on back with the core, and how it affected time. If anyone can figure out how to stop this... weird loop thing, that I seem to be part of, it's you two. And I'm...” Frisk flinched. “I didn't know how to bring it up, Sans. I know I should have told you sooner. I was afraid of how you would react. How anybody would. But I can't afford to care about that anymore. Just tell me what you need me to do to help you figure this out. Tell me what I need to do to keep monsters on the surface. Tell me how to save this happy ending from being reset-”

Dr. Aster stood up suddenly. “Wait. What did you just say?”

“I said, just tell me what you need me to do to help figure this out and fix it.”

“No, no. You said the word save.”

“Yeah. To keep this part of the timeline safe. To protect it from another reset or anything like that.” Frisk blinked at the tall skeleton, who had started pacing around the lab, occasionally waving one boney finger at nothing at all in midair. “Uh... Sans, is your dad alright?”

“I think so. This is how he gets when he thinks he's close to a solution to a problem-”

Dr. Aster rushed past Sans towards the whiteboard again, grabbed the eraser, and began furiously scrubbing at some equations. With a wide enough clearing to work with, the scientist grabbed the marker he had tossed aside earlier and began drawing lines and letters inside of it. After a frantic minute of scribbling, Dr. Aster stepped back.
“Haha! It's so simple in hindsight!”


“I mentioned that we had to deal with the possibility of a mechanical bias towards energy going backwards in time, to maintain parity with the matter going forwards, right?”

“Yeah... I think I remember that coming up less than ten minutes ago. Why?”

“I was fixating on the wrong problem. Energy can go in either direction, future or past. It didn't matter. And that's what we should have been concerned about.” Dr. Aster pointed at the center of the diagram he had hastily scrawled. “This, in the center, is the original experiment. All that energy concentrated in a single localized area of the timespace continuum. Energy was supposed to be shunted into successive independent time loops, but it all got fed back into the same loop instead. Not only was it super-concentrated in a physical location, but each time the energy traveled through the same loop, it was also compounding the paradox. It wasn't just a matter of having x number of loops, because each successive loop depended on the loop that came before it.”

Dr. Aster grinned and looked back at Sans and Frisk, who looked back at him with various expressions of confusion.

“Sorry dad. I understood every word you just said and I still don't get it.”

“Okay, try thinking of it like this. Running the energy through the set of independent but sequential loops was like wrapping a wire around a cylinder to create an electromagnet or solenoid. Even when we broke the earliest loop, there was still energy in the later loops for us to discharge, in the same way that electromagnetic induction maintains a charge in the circuit even after the power is cut. That was the whole point, we needed that asymmetry in the time loop breakdown to create the anti-photons.”

Sans shrugged. “Sure, why not? Makes sense to me.”

Frisk rubbed their forehead. “I... kinda get it.”

“Excellent! But with all the energy leaving the loop going back into the same loop, it was more like running a wire around a torus. We created a cross section of space time concentrated with energy so high that it didn't just breach the physical safety systems of the Hotland labs, it surged out through the timespace continuum at the same time. Like a fusion reaction. We created a super critical plasma and it escaped through the weakest points in the containment field. And until the physical hardware overheated and broke down, the weakest points were the naturally existing thresholds of energy transfer between dimensions.”

“Ya had me and ya lost me, dad.”

Frisk blinked. “Wait. It sounds to me like you're saying that when the experiment went wrong, it was like setting off a bomb in timespace.”

“Yes!” Dr. Aster shouted, almost deliriously. “And those lights you kept seeing underground are the shrapnel! That's why they look like the original event during the experiment, because each of them is a piece of the original! Each one tracing a line in the continuum from its point of origin to the present day! Each one creating a shortcut for energy exchange between timelines! Just like a dimensional bridge.”

“Uh... bridges work in both directions dad. And I didn't see any anti-photon phenomena after the experiment until much later. And I was looking.”
“That’s what had bothered me earlier. Everything I just told you two, I actually came up with hours ago, but I couldn’t explain the lack of paradox effects. But at lunch today I was reading Alphys’ notes on the Amalgamate experiments, how she isolated DT Energy from the human souls. She pointed out that it was not only why human souls persisted even after the body connection was destabilized, but how the souls could maintain that connection even after the body itself had been damaged to the point where there shouldn’t have been a connection possible anymore. But she used very specific words. ‘The will to keep living. The power to change fate.’ And fate is another word for predestination or predetermination.”

Sans scratched one side of his skull. “Dang, I was almost caught up there.”


“I’ll try to double back and explain again. The ability to influence the world mechanically via magic, and to defy the operations of deterministic mechanical actions, are effectively the same physical and metaphysical force. Humans have more of it because their bodies have more matter, and it doesn’t extend out from the body in any significant manner. So not only is there more of it, but it occupies less space. That means the median energy level is higher for the same reason that the temperature of a gas increases with pressure when volume is reduced.”

“Is that why human souls are supposed to be more powerful than monster souls? We just have more... soul stuff... in a smaller space?”

“That’s part of it. So, let’s look what happened to the Amalgamates. Once the subjects were infused with DT, the sequence of events that would have resulted in those monsters turning to dust was replaced with a sequence of events that ended with them staying alive. Fused together and unstable, yes, but alive. And Frisk. When you died, you woke up next to one of these, these bits of shrapnel, but you remembered all the events leading up to you dying, right?”

“Yeah, I did. And because I knew what went wrong, I could do things differently...” Frisk blinked. “I... okay, yeah, I see why Alphys called it the power to change fate.”

Dr. Aster smirked and walked up to the diagram again, writing down more letters underneath the mess of lines. “That’s the missing piece that makes it all work. Anti-photon readings wouldn’t be constant because energy wasn’t constantly being sent back in ways that prevented its own transmission. We didn’t get hot or cold spots from direct transmission because energy levels in the past and future were in equilibrium, even across a shortcut like this. The only way that would change would be if there was an excess on one side, or the other. How do you get a sudden increase in energy level? You break containment. Destabilize the soul link and that power is no longer confined to the body. Suddenly there’s more power in the future part of the timeline than there was in the past, at the point where Frisk got near these spatio-temporal anomalies. So the energy goes back in time to Frisk’s earlier body, and brings all the future memories and knowledge with it, producing just enough anti-photon radiation to maintain parity with the DT Energy used as part of the process...”

Dr. Aster stepped back from the diagram, and Sans and Frisk could see what he had written: SAVE.

“Sentient Achronal Variation of Events. A conscious awareness of past and future events, and a deliberate influence over how exactly those events play out. The power to change fate. The power to choose your own fate. The power to prevent that fate from being altered by anyone or anything else. The power to SAVE a past, or a present, or future. And it defaults to the highest level of DT Energy or Determination in a system...” Dr. Aster stepped forward again and wrote a capital D at the end of SAVE, “so a timeline that has been prioritized over all other possibilities is SAVED.”
Sans turned to look at Frisk, who was staring at the diagram. “Are you sure you want to give that up, kiddo? Sounds like a sweet deal to me.”

Frisk turned to look at Sans in the eye sockets.

“...okay, that's the look of somebody who doesn't think something is a sweet deal.”

“Sans, the first time I died, I didn't know what was happening. It was like parts of my body were falling asleep. I could hear Toriel freaking out, and then I woke up outside Home. And when I went inside... Toriel was waiting for me, just like I remembered before. She showed me to the room that used to be Asriel's... and she left to check on the pie she made, just like before. And I went inside the room and I cried myself to sleep, because I thought that I was in hell. That this was the universe's way of paying me back for all I'd done. Here, Frisk, this is what you always wanted. A place to feel safe and somebody who cares about you. Except you can never, ever have it. You just get to watch yourself ruin it over and over again like you do everything else. Forever.' And I had to live through that one more time, after the reset. Toriel's happiness at seeing me. Her anger and disappointment that I wanted to leave. This isn't a superpower, Sans. This is a curse. And I need help so I can break it. So if anything does happen to me, monsters are still on the surface, and this ending can't be taken away.”

The room became silent again, and Frisk looked away from Sans, staring down at the floor. The short skeleton looked up at his father, who shrugged. Sighing, Sans looked back at the human child.

“Hey, Frisk. Did you happen to find a sheet of paper in that book I gave you?”

“...yeah, I did. I'm using it as a bookmark.”

“You take a look at it?”

“Yeah... didn't understand it at first but it looks like a map of timelines.”

“Well... that's because it is. A long time after dad disappeared, I finally found a way to make my original idea work. A way to send past me information from my present, and receive information sent from future versions of me. But it didn't work like I expected it to. In fact, it barely worked at all. It took months to figure out that the reason was interference. When I mapped out the signal strength and progression through my machine, I realized what I had found.”

Frisk turned to look at Sans. “What did you find?”

“A massive anomaly in the timespace continuum. Timelines jumping left and right, starting and stopping.”

Frisk swallowed. “Was that... me? I know I died a lot, but was it really tangling everything up that bad ?”

Sans winked. “You know, I thought the anomaly was doing what it was doing because it was unhappy. That eventually it would stop once it got what it wanted. And you know... it never even occurred to me that maybe the anomaly was doing what it was doing because it wanted everyone else to be happy. Changing timelines over and over until it found the right one, the one that was best for everybody.”

“Sans... are we still friends? Even after...” Frisk looked away from Sans again. “Even after everything that happened to the timeline? After I kept this from you for so long...?”
Sans took a deep breath.

“Frisk... I know how hard it must be... to try to handle all that on your own. And I know how hard it was to share that with anybody else. I promise you... we won't let it go to waste.”

Frisk looked back and saw Sans holding out his arms. “c'mere, pal.”

Frisk closed their eyes, reached out, and embraced the skeleton... and the room was immediately filled with a familiar sound. Frisk leaned back from the hug, their expression a mixture of resigned annoyance.

“Sans... did you just set me up for-”

A gloved hand reached underneath his shirt, and Sans pulled out a deflated whoopee cushion.

“you just got dunked on, kid.”

Frisk blinked a few times, mouth corners twitching and slowly turning upwards. Then the giggling began.

“and if you think that's good, wait till you see what i've got planned for tonight at the Dank Memehaus. i've harnessed the surface world's most advanced rubber chicken technology.” Sans pulled out his cell phone with the other hand. “oh. speaking of which, we better get moving if we want to get there in time.”

“Won't they be packed anyway? We'll have to watch from the outside.”

“nah, i crossed a few palms with silver, so to speak. they're saving me a seat.”

“...wait, did you actually pay your tab?”

“Frisk, please stop with all this character assassination. first you're telling people i'm helpful, now you're implying i'm responsible. and here i thought we were friends.” The short skeleton winked at the human. “come on, buddy. let's go watch history get made.”
“Greetings Ebott's Wake and all occupants thereof! You are listening to KEBT Radio and I am Gary Welkin, your host for this most special of occasions! With me are my colleagues from the Morning Rush, Brett 'The Brett' Brinkman and DJ Pantz, and we are speaking to you live from the Dank Memehaus, your friendly neighborhood dispensary of the hair of the dog that bit you!”

“I forget when you're not in the helicopter how much your voice naturally projects on its own.”

“Thank you very much, Burgie! I worked long and hard to cultivate lung power such as this!”

“How?”

“Years and years of table tennis practice!”

“That has nothing to do with your lungs.”

“And yet, the results speak for themselves!”

“Hi folks it's Brett Brinkman here, I have hijacked the airwaves for an unauthorized broadcast of what we were actually supposed to be covering in the first place. As Gary said, we are standing in the Dank Memehaus, and that's fortunate for all of us because it is standing room only here. Just from where I am right now, I can see Grand Poobah Walter Metzinger, Hal Greene, jeez I hope those two don't get any closer, uh, I can see a quorum of Knights Of The Road Who Say Ni, Dr. Stanton from the Ebott's Wake Community College, Papyrus is taking pictures for his blog I suspect, Officer Ward is here- hey, there's Dr. Aster from All Fine Labs. And Sans, of course. And... oh, I hope Mrs. Dreemurr knows her kid is here right now.”

“Do you? Because that's the exact opposite of what I'm hoping. Think about it.”

“We're just going to have to agree to disagree about- whoa, hold that thought, it looks like they're starting. Elijah McGraw has taken the podium.”

“Wait, they have a podium?”

“It's right there, Burgie.”

“Wow, when did that happen?”

“Attention! Attention please! Thank you all for coming by this evening. It's, it's really great to see everyone. Uh, I had a speech I prepared earlier, but I can't find it, so I hope nobody minds if I just wing it. Heh... nearly a hundred years ago, my great grandfather opened a tavern in Ebott's Wake. It started as just a business. When people are happy they drink to celebrate, and when they are sad they drink to forget. That might as well be the McGraw family motto. But something happened along the way. The McGraw Drinckhouse became a place where the people of Ebott's Wake got together to do more than just imbibe alcohol. The first bulletin board was just a place to post announcements and advertisements, but like the tavern itself, it changed and became something else, something better... excuse me, I need a drink myself. Not used to public speaking. If I could beg your indulgence for a few seconds...”

“Brett here. Mr. McGraw has just taken a drink of water. At least, I think it's water.”

“Okay, that's better. Now, a lot changed over the years. And we had to change with them. My great
grandfather had to contend with Prohibition, the Great Depression, and the Great War. My grandfather had to contend with the war after that one and the anti-communist hysteria that followed. My father had to deal with Vietnam, the Cold War, and the moral panics of the eighties. The name has changed quite a few times, from the McGraw Drinkhouse to the Dry Sudshouse to the Drunk Poolhouse, all the way up to the Dank Memehaus. And the building has changed, from wet bar to speakeasy disguised as a soft drink brewery, to a pool hall and burger joint, to a hybrid cybercafe and bar. But three things have remained constant. The McGraw family legacy, and the people of Ebott's Wake coming here and making this place more than just a place of business... and the bulletin board.”

“Mr. McGraw is walking over to the bulletin board now…”

“This is a lot harder than it has any right to be. You wouldn't think that an inanimate object would carry such significance, but it does. For everyone in this room, in this building, and in this town. Because in 2012... someone came from Mt. Ebott. Asriel Dreemurr was trying to bring Chara Cater back home again. And people the rest of us used to think were simply annoying suddenly got much, much worse. Asriel was forced to run back to Mt. Ebott. And the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi, the Sages, they prepared for war. A war that never came. And when the tide of monsters they expected never showed up, they started going after other humans.”

“...Mr. McGraw is pulling a drop cloth off of something... it looks like a plaque.”

“These are the people we know that the Sages hurt. There may be others that we never found out about, because the evidence was destroyed or they were too careful. But, we do know about the people on this list because of Ebott Wake's old postmaster, Mr. Byron Thorton. And because of what Mr. Thorton started, this list is much, much smaller than it might have been otherwise. Nobody knows how Mr. Thorton first figured out what he knew. That knowledge died with him when the Sages caught up to him at last. But he clearly knew the risks, and did it anyway. He left notes here on the Dank Memehaus bulletin board. Knowing that everyone in town either comes here or knows somebody who comes here. Men, women, children, whole families given advance warning that something terrible was about to happen, and given a chance to escape. And as the Sages started getting more aggressive, more paranoid, the notes got more obscure, but also more numerous. People were fighting back, warning each other about what the Sages were trying to do. Their greatest advantage was secrecy, and all of us, together, were taking that away.”

“...Mr. McGraw is walking back over to the bulletin board.”

“...that is what makes it so hard to say goodbye. This isn't just wood and paper, metal and cork. This is a symbol of who we are, as a community. People from the rest of the state, the rest of the country, and the rest of the world can point fingers at us and laugh, because we have so many quirky little customs. Let them laugh. Because this is who we are! Right here! We are people who pull together when everything looks hopeless. We are people who fight back when somebody tries to hurt one of our own. And when we are faced with the choice between the path that is easy, and the path that is right, we choose to do the right thing. No matter how hard it is, and no matter what anyone else says!”

“Wow. That's a lot of cheering for before the Memehaus starts serving alcohol. Jeff, can you check the audio levels? I think we went into the red there- never mind he's starting again.”

“They say those who don't learn from history have to take it again next school year. The old bulletin board will be kept on display. People should see what was important to us back then, and people should see how we handled the problems we faced. But just because the Sages are gone, does not mean that there won't be more problems in the future. In the past year and a half, the
world has changed in ways that none of us could have predicted, even after Asriel Dreemurr showed up. And we are right in the middle of it. But that's what's most important. We, the people of Ebott's Wake, are in the middle of this. There's a lot of people out there in the world that think they know all the answers even before the questions get asked. They say they know how the world works, or how it should work. But it's not up to them, is it? We, here and now, are making choices that could affect the fate of the entire world. And that is why the old bulletin board must be replaced. Not because that part of our history is over and done. Because another part is still going on, still being written.”

“He's pulling another drop cloth down... wow, that is really impressive.”

“I hope that this new bulletin board will never be used for anything other than selling cars and power tools, advertising lawn mowing and odd jobs, and community event reminders. But if anyone ever needs to leave a warning for friends or family or peers, you're in good company. Thank you all again for coming tonight. And it isn't six yet, I would still like to ask all of you to join me in a toast. Grillby, Darcy, Tom, if you could start passing these out to people... for legal reasons we cannot serve alcohol just yet but we do have other beverages. Milk, soft drinks, and so on.”

“Wow. If that was Elijah going off the cuff, I would love to see what the original speech notes were like!”

“You and me both Gary. Listeners, looks like we are about to partake in a toast to something or someone. If anyone wants to play along at home, now would be the time. Burgie, you alright?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. Just got something in my eye.”

“I know man. Me too. Ah, thanks Darcy. You know, I'm glad to finally have it on record that Ebott's Wake fought back against the Sages. Everyone who lives here knows this, but a lot of people outside the town don't know or don't care. Yes, the BADTF raided the Sages compound, but we denied the Sages intelligence and leverage and supplies for a long time. We did make it easier to fight them. That ain't nothing.”

“Brett, he's starting.”

“Whoops-”

“Ladies and gentlemen, humans and monsters, youngsters and oldsters. Please join me in a toast to the memory of the Thorton family, the first to fight the Sages and the last to fall to them before the great battle that destroyed them all. To Byron, the postmaster. To his wife Cynthia. To Andrew, the older son, and Sam, the younger son. You've made a huge difference to everyone. Wherever you are, we all hope you know that.”

“...I don't think we can say anything to add to what just happened tonight. Although we do have to break for station identification right about now- okay, that's a lot of drunken laughter for people who haven't had any alcohol yet.”

“SANS! STOP PLAGUING PEOPLE'S LIVES WITH SYNTHETIC POULTRY!”

“And just like that, the mystery is gone.”

“You said it Brett. This is DJ Pantz and Brett The Brett Brinkman with Gary Welkin, live at the Dank Memehaus, pausing for station identification. Stay tuned to KEBT for more news from the Memehaus.”
“You are listening to KEBT community radio broadcasting out of Ebott's Wake. KEBT is a community owned and operated radio station. Thank you for your support. Part of this program has been brought to you by Muffet's Tuffet, pastries and baked goods by spiders, for spiders, and All Fine Labs, turning trash into treasure since 2014.”

“...and we're back! This is Brett 'The Brett' Brinkman here at the Dank Memehaus with DJ Pantz and Gary Welkin. We are speaking with the various patrons of the Memehaus who came here for this historic occasion to get their impressions. I'm here now with Walter Metzinger, Chairman of the Ebott's Wake City Council.”

“And Grand Poobah.”

“And Grand Poobah, yes. Mr. Metzinger, would you care to share with the people of Ebott's Wake your thoughts here, tonight?”

“I believe that Mr. McGraw put it as plainly as possible. The people of Ebott's Wake must keep their heritage alive, and part of that heritage includes resistance to tyranny, no matter how that tyranny may present itself. He was also spot on when he said that Ebott's Wake is shaping the future of the world now. We live in a world where monsters and magic are not only real, but they have become normal, everyday parts of our lives here. There are people in the rest of the country that would welcome that change and there are people who would resist it even more vehemently than some of our own holdouts. The timing could not have been better for this, an affirmation of who we are and what is important, before King Dreemurr's State Of The Kingdom Address tomorrow.”

“Actually I am very glad you brought that up, as there has been speculation all week as to what the Address will be about. We have gotten a very large number of calls to the station asking. You wouldn't believe it. Can you give the people of Ebott's Wake any sort of insight into what will be going on tomorrow?”

“I'm afraid largely the events have been organized by King and Queen Dreemurr, and while I am privy to their agenda I wouldn't want to steal their thunder. What I can do is provide context and background, if that is acceptable?”

“I'll take whatever I can get at this point. Anything to take the strain off of Jeff.”

“Well, first we must start with general background. The legal status of monsters has remained unclear ever since the Barrier under Mt. Ebott was destroyed. They could have been categorized as any number of things; refugees, or perhaps an undiscovered indigenous tribe. Both possibilities would have involved the US State Department, and the second the Bureau of Indian Affairs. However they could not implicitly be granted US citizenship because they were already citizens of a country at the time, a hereditary monarchy. When Asgore dissolved the Kingdom of Monsters as a legal entity, the Ebott's Wake City Council unanimously voted to recognize them as extant US citizens based on the fact that they have been inhabitants of the land this country claims as territory for longer than the country itself has existed. If, as Mr. Trump claims he plans to do, monsters were deported back to their point of origin, it would be under Mt. Ebott, which is United States territory. Ergo the country that the monsters are citizens of must be the United States of America, by default.”

“I have heard that argument and I've also heard the counter arguments that it either does not apply for any number of legal reasons pertaining to citizenship, or that you and the City Council were not legally able to make that decision and that it should have happened on a state or federal level.”

“I've heard those arguments as well. The United States has vacillated on laws and legal issues
before, including those of citizenship. But what we have done here in Ebott's Wake is establish precedent. Precedent is key in all matters pertaining to law. In the process of doing so, however, monsters lost a great deal of what they had previously relied on insofar as organization and administration. Now, since most of that effort went towards surviving underground and finding a way to the surface, a transitional state was not only expected but desired once the Barrier was broken. The King merely made it official. Monsters have integrated into human society with no problems, save a single, botanical exception. What the State of the Kingdom Address will rectify is a lack of direction and cultural cohesion, insofar as I am able to divulge anything. Legally, the king and queen are still king and queen in name only, very similar to the British Royal Family; hereditary titles but no actual governing authority, which in Great Britain is now centralized in the Prime Minister and the Houses of Parliament. This Address will also clarify their position in that respect as well.

“Thank you for your time and your candor, Mr. Metzinger, it's been nice to see you here tonight.”

“Always a pleasure Mr. Brinkman.”

“Now seems like a good time to cut over to one of our other correspondents... alright, Jeff tells me that Gary is speaking with Dr. Stanton. Gary, how's it going?”

“Spectacular, Brett! I am standing here with Dr. Martin Stanton of the Ebott's Wake Community College! Dr. Stanton, could you share with the people of our fair city, your thoughts on this most momentous of occasions?”

“Speaking strictly from a sociological perspective, it is a reinforcement of group identity through ritual action and common experience. Speaking personally, I'm glad to be here and Mr. McGraw's speech gave me chills.”

“As it did for all of us here, I have no doubt! Would it be possible to elaborate on your statements of group identity?”

“If you think that is what your listeners want to hear. Much of the identity of people who live in and around Ebott's Wake was built upon, until very recently, many of our anomalous traditions and conventions; from our misspelling of our book repository to our colorful history with the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi to the simple small town trends that evolve on their own and become entrenched in the culture, like the Kludge Derby. When Asriel Dreemurr appeared the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi suddenly became much more of a fixture. Many people who had either seen Asriel personally, or later saw the videos and photos, were convinced to join, or at least of the accuracy of the group's claims. Guided by their lore, the records allegedly passed down from what we now know of as the war between Humans and Monsters, they were completely terrified of the dangers of monster magic. Thus, their initial efforts were defensively oriented. But their defenses were never tested, and the psychological toll of expecting an attack at any time grew until it essentially forced a shift towards aggressive, offensive action.”

“Which resulted in many of the unsavory practices which our community has resented ever since.”

“Precisely so. The Sages' lore had been translated multiple times and reinterpreted several more times as the group attempted to evolve, adapt, and stay current to changing cultural pressures and conditions, thereby attracting new members to carry on the titular legacy. What they had on hand when Asriel appeared in Ebott's Wake was so far from the reality that it might as well have been fabricated from whole cloth. But the Sages believed it wholeheartedly and with a fervor that eventually reached a fever pitch. Their persecution became just as much a part of our identity as everything else, and forced the responses that were started by Mr. Thorton. By the time that the BADTF actually made their move, opposition to the Sages was rapidly becoming a fundamental
part of the community. Fortunately, the raid on their compound was swift and decisive and also removed the pressure from the collective psyche of the town, to say nothing of minimizing property damage and loss of life."

“Their efforts to defend against a magical assault from the mountain proved ineffectual against a human enemy with tear gas and battering rams! Truly, that was a great day to be a news reporter in Ebott's Wake.”

“While I can't speak for the latter part, the former is spot on, and in less than three days, the Barrier was broken and the first group of monsters came down the mountain to greet humanity for the first time in ages. Again, the timing was fortunate for both sides. The vindication of opposing the Sages, and the euphoric high that resulted after their defeat, had completely permeated the town. Nobody was willing to give any thought to critically analyzing the Sages' lore, or giving them any amount of credit for being right about monsters existing in the first place, no matter how grudging. And so Asriel's appearance existed in a sort of psychological, sociological limbo where people weren't sure how to cope with it. So, naturally, when skeletons and large furry boss monsters showed up, that issue suddenly moved to the front of the line. As I stated previously, nobody was willing to cut the Sages any slack, or admit that they could even remotely be right about anything at all.”

“And thus, as recorded by video and then uploaded to Youtube for posterity, the immortal words of 'any enemy of the Sages is a friend of mine!' were spoken.”

“Quite so. With only a handful of contrary opinions, the citizens of Ebott's Wake all independently reached the same conclusion. Even if the Sages were right about the existence of monsters, they had to be wrong about everything else. The Sages claimed the monsters were evil and would destroy humans. Ergo, the monsters must actually be perfectly fine. And fortunately for both humans and monsters, this supposition matched the actual facts of the matter.”

“Dr. Stanton it has been a privilege to speak to you tonight, and I am sure all of our listeners thank you for your insight into our history, the why and hows and the meanings thereof! For now, we must toss it back to Brett Brinkman. Thank you doctor, and good evening.”

“Good evening to you too, Mr. Welkin. You're welcome.”

“Alright everybody, it's Brett again! I am actually at the bar right now, with the one and only Grillby! Mr. Grillby, can you give us your thoughts here at this momentous occasion?”

“....not sure what everyone's so excited about, but at least they're happy. That's good.”

“Do you have anything you would like to say to the people of Ebott's Wake tonight?”

“...don't drink and drive.”

“Well. That is certainly good advice-”

“eeeeey Grillbz. what brings a hotshot like you to a place like this?”

“...I work here, Sans.”

“and here i thought it was some amazing coincidence. kiddo, what sounds good to you right now?”

“I'm not that hungry, and I shouldn't spoil my appetite for dinner anyway, but I would like a root beer please, Mr. Grillby. And Dr. Aster would like a lemon lime soda, any brand. Here you go.”

“...Coming right up.”
“Oh! Sorry Mr. Brinkman. I think we just ruined your radio interview segment thing.”

“Actually I think the opposite is true... so, as long as you're here, Frisk, what are your thoughts on this event?”

“Well, a lot of this is news to me. You know, nobody tells you anything when you're a kid. So I'm really looking forward to coming back when I'm twenty one and looking at the old bulletin board in the display case and having everything click.... Oh, that gives me an idea! Hey, DJ Pantz!”

“Hey, little buddy! How are you doing?”

“I am super caffeinated right now. The first drink of the root beer is always the best. Would you and Brett and Mr. Welkin like to join us for a picture in front of the old bulletin board?”

“Absolutely! Hey, Gary! Get over here!”

“Excuse me, Ms. Darcy? Could you take a picture of everyone in front of the bulletin board? Here, use my phone. Thank you!”

“Well, it looks like I'll need to sign off for a moment listeners, but don't you fret. We'll be back with more goings on at the Dank Memehaus before you know it.”

“EVERYBODY SAY 'NYEH HEH HEH!'”

“Nyah heh heh!”
“Mom! Come quick! Somebody needs help!”

Toriel dropped the book she had been reading and shot up out of her chair at a speed only possible for a mother who had heard a small child cry out. Within seconds she was out in the castle courtyard, sprinted around the blooming tree, and saw her son with somebody leaning on his shoulder.

“Asriel, what is wrong? What is it?”

“Please, mom, they're hurt! I think they fell down from the Surface!”

Toriel looked away from Asriel's face once she was certain he was not injured, and focused on the person leaning on him. They were roughly the same height, wearing a striped shirt, and with a great deal of hair on their head but not elsewhere.

“Asriel...? What's going on? Where are we going?”

“It's alright, Chara! We made it home! This is my mom! She'll make everything okay again! She always does!”

The person leaning on Asriel, whom he had called Chara, raised their head slowly and pushed their hair out of the way. Toriel looked into a pair of dark maroon eyes, one wide open and the other peering through swollen and bruised eyelids. The eye that could open all the way managed to get even wider, and Chara began to shake.

“Uh... I don't think that's what's going to happen.”

Toriel blinked and knelt down on the ground. “Hello, little one. My name is Toriel. Asriel said your name was Chara?”

“Y-Yes. It's... uh...” Chara swallowed and winced in pain. “It's nice to meet you. I would, uh, shake your hand b-but that arm doesn't feel right-”

Chara squeezed both eyes shut and leaned back as Toriel reached down and placed a massive paw on the child's head. Green light began to glow around Toriel and Chara, and the child opened their eyes again in surprise.

“I... I feel a lot better now. What just-how??”

“I told, you Chara! Mom can make anything better!” Asriel grinned.

Chara looked around at the courtyard, the tree, and Asriel and Toriel. “Where... where is this? We're under Mt. Ebott, I do understand that, but what is this place?”

Toriel motioned to the door across the courtyard. “Perhaps you should both come inside. I believe we have a great deal we must discuss.”

“Yeah, come on, Chara! I'll show you my room! Hey, can Chara sleep over tonight? They can have my bed!”

“One step at a time, Asriel.”
“Hey, dad! You'll never guess what happened today!” Despite Toriel's admonition towards caution and patience, Asriel rushed forward into the castle, leaving Toriel and Chara alone. Chara looked up at the towering boss monster.

“Uh... is Asriel, you know, always like this?”

“Actually this is quite unprecedented. I have never seen him so excited to meet anyone new before.”

“Oh.”

Toriel reached down to offer a hand to the child, who flinched again, but eventually reached out and took it. Toriel smiled warmly. “Welcome to Home, Chara. The capital of the Kingdom of Monsters.”

Toriel and Chara walked to the door, went inside the castle, and-

-Chara stared at the Barrier, the way it pulsed and distorted light. They held out one finger and tapped it once, leaving a rippled that radiated outwards, then rubbed that finger with their other hand.

“...weird. Like trying to write your name in concrete.”

“What was that, little one?”

Chara looked back at Toriel. “Oh. On the surface, humans make a lot of stuff out of something called concrete. It's like crushed stone and sand and a bunch of chemicals, and it gets poured into a mold and it hardens. It's really tough, but before it sets, it's so soft you can draw in it, put your name or initials in it. But this is like soft and hard all at the same time.”

“Chara, my dear... you do understand what we meant earlier, right?”

“You mean, why I can't go home again? I understand it now.” The child looked at the Barrier, nodded, and turned back to Toriel again. “After all if anyone had figured out a way through it or past it, they would have done it by now.”

“You... you do not seem upset about this. Do you... not have places on the surface you wish to return to?”

For a split second, Toriel thought she saw a flash of emotion on the human child's face, but it was gone. “It's alright, now. I was actually worried that you meant I couldn't go home because you were fattening me up to eat me or something.”

Next to Toriel, Asriel made a sputtering sound as he started laughing. “You what?? Oh wow! I can't wait to tell that to dad!”

“Asriel, do not make fun of people like that,” Toriel reprimanded her son. “It has been a long time since humans and monsters interacted with each other, and that ended in a terrible war. It is completely reasonable that misconceptions should arise.”

The trio stared at the Barrier for a little longer, until Asriel stepped forward and took Chara's hand in his. “Don't worry about it, Chara! You saw that big machine in the lava earlier, right? That's the CORE! Doctor Aster is almost finished with it, and he's going to use it to destroy the Barrier once and for all!”
“Ah, yes. Speaking of which, we should head back to Hotland now. No doubt your father and the good doctor have finished discussing the serious issues of construction and planning, and have moved on to more frivolous subjects.”

The trio turned and walked back through the cavern-

-into the Hotland laboratory complex. Toriel looked down to see Chara wiping sweat from their face, plastering their long hair to their forehead in the process.

“Chara my dear, are you alright?”

“I'll be okay. It's just the heat. Actually I was going to ask how you and Asriel are doing, because, well, you have all that fur.”

“I suppose it is one of the advantages of being naturally attuned to fire magic, so that heat is not as-”

At the end of the room, past a cluttered desk littered with tools, papers, a computer, and several framed photographs of skeletons, a door opened.

“-now why it would help to have a dedicated transport infrastructure here, then. Going around the rim of the magma chamber might be safe, but it's going to take forever every time we need to move parts or people.”

A skeleton had walked through the doorway, followed by a giant boss monster who had to stoop to get his horns in underneath the doorway.

“Well, when you're right, you're right, Wing Ding. And you're right about this. I'll rubber stamp what you need for your elevator network.”

“Much appreciated, your majesty. This will literally shave a decade off of our construction timetable.”

“Glad to hear it. How about your staffing issues?”

“Well, I know people are going to scream nepotism, but I think I'm going to have to have Sans as my assistant for the foreseeable future. Alphys has been a great intern but I can't put off the appointment for another year until she graduates. So Sans it is.

“Well, it is what it is. How about your other son? Papyrus, wasn't it?”

“He's doing... a lot better than I expected. Losing his mom was... these last few years have been very hard on him. Well, it's been hard on everyone, but him especially.”

The lab became silent as a building filled with buzzing electronics, struggling heat pumps, and various fans could get. After a while the skeleton shook his head. “Ahem. Uh. Well. If we stand around feeling sorry for ourselves we'll never get around to anything else-”

The skeleton suddenly noticed the presence of others in the room, and turned to look at the queen, then bowed. “Ah, hello your majesty! I didn't notice you until just now, my apologies.”

“It is good to see you again, Doctor.” Toriel nudged her son forward. “Asriel, remember your manners. Say hello to the Royal Scientist.”

Asriel's eyes grew large as he looked up at the tall skeleton and raised a shaking hand. “Hello d-d-
“Doctor Aster, Asriel,” Toriel corrected.

“Right. Sorry.”

“It's alright, Asriel. It's not the first time people have made that mistake, and I doubt it'll be the last.” The skeleton's eye lights rolled around in their sockets. “Well, if you're all here, why not make this a special occasion? I can show you the prototype in the basement, run through the trials I have planned, and of course if you have any questions now would be a great time for them.”

“In fact, doctor, we have somebody here for whom your work has an especially important significance. Doctor Aster, meet Chara.”

Toriel stepped to the side and Chara stared at the skeleton, who stared back. After a few awkward seconds, Chara raised a shaking hand and waved. “Uh. Hello. My name is Chara. It's nice to meet you, sir.”

“...likewise. Doctor Wing Ding Aster, Royal Scientist. I hope you don't think this a rude question, but you're not by any chance a vanguard for an invasion force, are you?”

“I don't know. I mean, I know what an invasion force is, but what's a vanguard?”

“A vanguard is a part of a group that leads out in front.”

“Oh.” Chara seemed to consider this new fact for a few moments. “Well, if anyone follows me it'll probably be because they were looking for me. But that doesn't mean that anybody like that will actually fall down here. I kind of... tripped on a root.”

“Chara will be staying with us for the foreseeable future, Dr. Aster.” Toriel explained. “Until such time as we can safely return to the surface, and also return them to their proper home and family there.”

“Hmm.” Dr. Aster turned to look at Asgore. “I think I see now why you were suddenly interested in all of my ideas to shorten the timetable.”

Asgore shrugged and grinned awkwardly, and Dr. Aster started to smile again himself. “Well, whatever gets the job done. Hey, Asriel!”

The Royal Scientist waved at the young boss monster with one hand and pointed at the escalator behind him with the thumb on his other hand. “Why don't you head upstairs and check the scale model? I've made a few adjustments since last time.”

“Okay, sure! Come on, Chara! This thing is so cool!” Asriel grabbed Chara's hand and dragged them forward again; however, Chara's eyes remained locked on Dr. Aster as they were pulled across the room. When Chara and Asriel were out of sight, and Asriel's excited but muffled explanation of the CORE model could be heard from upstairs, Dr. Aster turned towards Toriel.

“So... this is certainly a thing that has happened. Asriel seems... taken with the human, to be honest.”

“It was Asriel who found Chara in the first place. He refuses to be separated from them for any significant length of time. And we have already learned a great deal from them.”

“Like what?”
“Like the war's over, friend.” Asgore laid a large, but kind, paw on Aster's shoulder. “Chara says that most humans don't believe monsters exist. That monsters never existed at all, really. There are no more human mages, meaning no more Barriers.”

“Oh. Great. All that time and energy I put into training the blasters was for nothing. With all due respect, have you both taken leave of your senses?” The Royal Scientist hissed as his eye sockets narrowed. “All it would take is one surprise hit from that thing and your son would be gone. And you're walking around like nothing at all is wrong, that this is perfectly ordinary. Why?”

Toriel narrowed her eyes and stepped forward, but Asgore raised a paw. Dr. Aster turned to the king in confusion; Asgore's eyes were sad where Toriel's had been angry.

“Because, if by some miracle Asriel managed to find his way out onto the surface, I would hope that any human who found him would watch out for him instead of treating him as a threat.”

Dr. Aster blinked, looked over at the escalator, then back at Asgore again, and finally back at Toriel. “Well... as unlikely as it would be, I would hope something like that would happen to Sans or Papyrus if they were in the same situation. Somehow I missed the fact that... Chara... is a child. And I suppose once we do break the Barrier, being able to point to a human child that fell down here and was kept safe and sound will also help build bridges with the humans.”

“Precisely correct,” Toriel said. “Chara says that they are ten years old. About how long, on average, do humans live?”

Dr. Aster shrugged. “They're lucky if they make it to a hundred years. But even if Chara lived that long, if it took us the better part of a century to break the barrier, everyone they knew on the surface would be long dead. If we're going to do this whole bridge building new-era-between-humans-and-monsters thing it has to be within the next ten to twenty years.”

“Alright, Doctor. Just tell me what you need.”

Dr. Aster looked at the earnest face of the king and grinned. “Well, a way to let people commute faster to and from Hotland would also help. I don't suppose you could move the city closer to this end of the cavern?”

The king ran one finger through his beard, and after a few moments, Dr. Aster's grin disappeared. “Asgore, that was a joke.”

“Well, think about it Wing Ding. The reason we built Home so far back in the Cavern is to avoid human attacks, right? In case they tried to get inside the underground and finish us off. But we know now that this won't happen because the humans don't even think we exist. So there's no real reason not to...”

“Asgore, I was joking. You realize that, right??” The Royal Scientist followed the king out through the door. Toriel smothered a giggle under one paw and headed up the escalator—sitting by the fire, with the clicking of needles by the chair indicating that Chara was leaning up against the side. Toriel leaned over the side.

“Chara, you do not need to sit on the floor. We have sufficient chairs for everybody.”

There was a brief pause in the clicking of the knitting needles. “I'm fine like this.”

The room was uncomfortably silent for a few moments. Toriel was about to try again when Chara spoke up.
“About what time are Asriel and Asgore supposed to be back from Waterfall?”

“Some time within the next few hours, if they are not overmuch delayed.”

“Alright. I have until then to try to finish this.”

Toriel blinked. “Is it intended to be a surprise?”

“Sort of. Mostly it's a sorry-I-almost-killed-you-and-destabilized-your_entire-kingdom peace offering. Or as close as I can get to that when my only useful skill is arts-and-crafts related.”

“...Chara, you have been very distant lately. Is that because you are still worried about your father?”

Chara snorted. “Asgore isn't my father. You're not my mother. Asriel isn't my brother. I'm not a Dreemurr, I'm a stray that Asriel found one day, somebody too arrogant to listen to the legends and warnings about Mt. Ebott. He should have left me where he found me.”

“Chara, do not say such things!”

“If he hadn't brought me back, Asriel and I never would have tried to make that pie, we never would have screwed up the ingredients, and Asgore never would have gotten sick.”

“My dear, that could very easily have still happened regardless of your presence.”

“I'm the one who convinced Asriel we could figure it out on our own to keep the pie a surprise. He wanted to find and ask you. I convinced him not to. He was right. I was wrong. There is nothing else to it.” The human child sighed. “Story of my life.”

Abruptly, Chara put down the sweater-in-progress and turned to look at Toriel. “I need you to promise me something. When Dr. Aster breaks the barrier, don't let Asriel out of your sight. He has no idea what the surface is really like even after all I've tried to explain about-”

Without warning, the floor began to shake, and from the doorway to the kitchen the sound of clattering utensils and dishes could be heard. Overhead the lights began to flicker. Toriel was on her feet in an instant.

“Quickly my child, to the doorway! Stay there until the tremors have stop-”

Abruptly Toriel was thrown to the ground by a massive shockwave, accompanied by a massive roar. Somewhere, just on the edge of the range of hearing, the screech of warped metal could be heard. The light fixtures stopped flickering and began shining brighter than ever before.

“Chara! Hold on to something!” Toriel looked around, trying to find her bearings, but Chara was nowhere to be found.

“CHARA!”

Slowly and with difficulty, Toriel pulled herself upright and made her way to the doorway; despite the shaking ground she was able to stay balanced, and managed to see a flicker of motion as something or someone ran out of the door into the courtyard.”

“CHARA STOP!”

Toriel ran after the child, but by the time she finally caught up, Chara was already clutching the railing of the castle balcony, looking out over the city of New Home and, just beyond, the orange
glow of Hotland. The CORE facility out in the center of the magma was arcing with energy both
electric and otherwise, and one vast section of piping and cables broke away with several
thunderous cracks, falling slowly into the molten rock below.

And then the Underground was filled with light.

A split second later, the report shattered the air and Chara and Toriel both clutched their ears.
Explosions rocked the CORE as beams of white light shot up and into the roof of the cavern, and
stopped as if somebody had flipped a massive light switch. Below, the lights of the buildings in
New Home went out, section by section, street by street, until the only light in the darkness was the
distant glow of the magma and the occasional glimmer of the reflective stones on the cavern roof.

Toriel and Chara stared, dumbstruck. Off in the distance, Toriel could hear the faint echoes of an
alarm, mindlessly repeating to the Underground what everyone already knew, that something had
gone terribly wrong. Closer to New Home, Toriel could hear cries from the city below as people
tried to connect with each other in the sudden darkness.

“Mom,” Chara asked, their earlier claims forgotten. “Dad and Asriel, they weren't in that, right?
They were still in Waterfall. They have to be. They have to be.”

“Chara, I must go. I need to help keep everyone calm in the city.” Toriel gestured and fireballs lit
up around her, pushing back the darkness, then gestured again and a faint blue glow surrounded her
body. Levitating over the side of the balcony, she began to drop down to the city below.

“Please be alright. Please be alright. Please be alright...”

Toriel looked up to see Chara bent over, head down and hands on their head. For a moment royal
responsibility and motherly instinct fought each other tooth and claw, until a truce was reached;
while Chara was in obvious distress, they were not in any danger. Looking down again, Toriel
increased her descent-

-but could not stop pacing in the Barrier Antechamber. Asriel had been gone for so long, but no
monster had ever been outside the Barrier before, so how long was too long?

“There he is! I see him!” Asgore shouted. Toriel immediately turned and saw a distant speck
running up the mountain path to the Barrier.

No, no, no...

The figure ran through the barrier as if it didn't exist, which was true for that figure and that figure
alone. In its arms, a lifeless body was still clutched.

No!

Breaking through the Barrier, Asriel stumbled into the garden, falling to his knees as he did so.

“We... we made it...” came a voice that Toriel barely recognized. “Humans... panicked. They
fought. I ran. We made it.”

“Asriel...! You're, you're...” Toriel tried to tear her eyes away from the gaping holes in Asriel's arm
and shoulder, from which dust was already beginning to fall. Toriel raised both paws and green
light shot from them, bathing her son in its restorative field... but the dust wasn't stopping.

Asriel looked up at Toriel and smiled. “I told you, Chara. Mom can... make... anything...”
Toriel jerked upright in her chair, and looked around. A quick inspection of the surroundings confirmed that she was on the surface and not in the underground. The fire in the fireplace had burned down to what would have been embers if it had been a physical fire burning logs instead of a magic fire, and a glance at the clock said 11:25 PM.

What had happened? Obviously she had fallen asleep in her reading chair, but before that? Carefully Toriel filled in the gaps in her memory: The rehearsal, coming home from the auditorium, starting dinner, Frisk coming home holding a rubber chicken wearing a small bow tie, Undyne stopping by with last minute paperwork...

Moving quietly through the house, Toriel checked the kitchen. Plates drying in the rack on the counter top next to the sink. Upstairs, Toriel crept slowly up to the door to Frisk's room and eased it open. Opposite the doorway, Frisk's bed sat underneath a window and by the waning moonlight, Toriel could see the child's hair on the pillow and the rhythmic rise and fall of the covers. Frisk was fine.

Slowly and gently, Toriel closed the bedroom door again and headed downstairs again. On the coffee table in the living room, she noticed a picture frame that hadn't been there in the morning. One paw picked it up while the other retrieved her glasses; the photograph showed Frisk, Sans, Papyrus, Dr. Aster, the two radio announcers, Grillby, and several humans she did not recognize standing by an old cork bulletin board covered in tattered papers, staples, and push pins. With the possible exception of Grillby, everyone was smiling.

The picture frame was placed back on the coffee table, and Toriel made her way over to one of the bookcases that lined the walls of the living room. A paw reached out and pulled a large, thick tome off of a shelf, which was brought over to the coffee table and opened. Inside were photographs, many of them black and white or sepia-toned. The earliest one portrayed two boss monsters standing in front of a tree; the female was somber and proper, while the male had a big goofy grin on his face.

'The Dreemurrs, 197X, Home Courtyard. Photograph taken by Royal Artificer Semi Serif Aster using a camera obscura of his own design and manufacture.' Written in Toriel's handwriting, the adjacent text provided information not readily apparent in the image itself. Turning the page, more photographs followed; some in the castle, some in Hotland, some in Snowdin Town, and some in Waterfall. Toriel found herself tearing up at several points; aside from her and Asgore, most of the monsters depicted in the album had fallen down long ago.

Finally, she came to the photograph she had been dreading, even though it was the reason she had pulled the album off the shelf in the first place. Herself, Asgore, Asriel and Chara in the New Home flower garden and throne room. Asriel and Chara were both holding huge bouquets of flowers, and Asriel was obviously laughing, while Chara had buried their face in the flowers.

There were several other photographs after that; a candid shot of Chara knitting, a side angle shot of Chara and Toriel in the kitchen, a shot of Asriel riding around on Chara's shoulders....

Behind her, Toriel heard the stairs creak, and she turned around to see a child in blue-and-white striped pajamas peering over the banister.

“Frisk? What is it? Is something wrong?”

Frisk walked the rest of the way down the stairs. “Nothing's wrong. I just woke up for a drink of water and couldn't get back to sleep. Which is a bit of a problem because tomorrow's a big day.”
“That it is.”

Frisk sat down next to Toriel on the sofa and looked at the photo album. “I guess I'm not the only one having problems sleeping tonight.”

“That is also true.”

The room was silent for a minute or two, until Frisk looked up at Toriel.

“Mom, you remember when we were... trying to find the families of the other humans that fell down underground?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

A small hand found its way into a much larger paw and squeezed. “Thank you for letting me come along and help. Even though I didn't know their names or what they looked like until then, I felt like I was being reunited with old friends.”

Toriel smiled. “I know precisely what you mean. Every human that fell down, including you, always felt so familiar.” Toriel stopped smiling and blinked. “Except... for Chara, for some peculiar reason.”

“What was different about Chara?”

“Nothing was truly different. Everyone who fell down was hurt, scared, confused and lonely. Eventually, they opened up in their own way. But Chara... even after several years, they were very closed off. There was only one moment I really felt I saw the true person, when they were talking to Asriel about astronomy, and how once the barrier was broken they would take Asriel to the top of Mt. Ebott with a telescope and they would explore the whole universe and be back home in time for dinner. Asriel had always had a fascination with stars, and when Chara was explaining constellations and cosmology....”

Toriel stared sadly at the photograph of the Dreemurr's with Chara's face concealed by the flowers. “And then, Asgore got sick and Chara became even more closed off.”

“Was this...” Frisk cleared their throat. “Was Chara afraid of losing somebody they cared about?”

“I believe so, but mostly because they blamed themselves entirely for Asgore becoming sick in the first place. I do not recall if I told you this story or not, but once Asriel and Chara tried to make one of my recipes as a surprise for Asgore, but we did not have all of the ingredients available at the time. They attempted to substitute ingredients, and accidentally included poisonous flowers in the recipe.”

“I think I remember this from...somewhere.” Frisk said.

“When you live as long as I have, my dear, you accumulate a large number of stories. And with that, you begin to lose track of which ones you have shared with what people.”

“I'm glad you shared this one with me. I think I understand Chara better now.” Frisk pulled Toriel's paw towards their chest and clutched it with both of their hands. “If something happened to you or dad, or Sans or Papyrus, or Alphys or Undyne, I don't know what I'd do. But I can imagine.”

Toriel looked down at the child clutching her arm. “Frisk... earlier you brought up when we tried to find everyone's families. In light of recent events, I feel I must ask, even though I know this is a subject which makes you highly uncomfortable. Before I adopted you, what was your surname?”
Toriel felt the tremor before she saw it. Frisk's eyes closed, and the child took a deep breath. “I... before Mt. Ebott, before the Underground... I was Frisk... Taylor. T-A-Y-L-O-R. And I guess I will be again.” Frisk tried to clear their throat, but could not keep their voice from choking up. “I... uh... I do want to say, thank you for giving me so many chances—”

“What? Oh, no no no! Frisk, I did not mean it like that!” The small child was pulled close to the boss monster in a hug. “I have no desire, now or ever, to send you back to them.”

Frisk let out a strangled sob. “Oh thank god. I thought... I thought... you probably figured out what I thought.”

“Yes, and I should have explained myself more clearly, instead of leading with that question. I apologize. Yesterday, while you and Dr. Aster were discussing scientific theories, Sans and I discussed what we knew about where you had come from, and that was precious little. My question had nothing to do with any intent to send you back to your family, and everything to do with protecting you from them.”

“Protect me? From them? ...that might be backwards.”

Toriel raised an eyebrow. “And why is that?”

“...I shouldn't have said anything.”

“No, Frisk. As Dr. Aster is so fond of saying, there is nothing to be gained by ignorance. Did you ever raise your hands against them?”

“I... no.” Frisk flinched at some specter of memory. “I never wanted to hurt anybody. It just happened no matter what I did, and kept happening.”

“What happened, Frisk?”

The child took another deep breath. “It wasn't really about what I did. It was about what I didn't do. I didn't keep my room clean, or clean up after myself. I didn't do the chores I was assigned. I didn't... I broke... so many things. I completely destroyed a washing machine, ripped sheets apart... I dropped plates. Everything I touch, I destroy. That's why I ran away, and that's how I ended up on Mt. Ebott. I couldn't stand it anymore. And for a while in the Underground it looked like it stopped, but you know how that ended.”

Frisk looked up at Toriel. “Mom... if you ever do change your mind, and you decide it's too dangerous to have me around, I understand. Please don't feel to you have to put yourself in harm's way.”

Toriel blinked incredulously. “My word, where is all of this coming from all of a sudden?”

“I didn't actually wake up because I was thirsty. I woke up because I had a dream. I was in the kitchen, and we were washing dishes, and everything started cracking and shattering, even the ones I hadn't touched yet... and I couldn't stop it from happening. And,” Frisk took a ragged breath, “you didn't realize I was doing it. And I... I knew I shouldn't. But I hugged you anyway... and you were gone. Dust everywhere. All because of me.”

Frisk turned away from Toriel's stare and looked down at the ground. “Dr. Aster says that can't happen. No matter how high my LV Cap is. But I know what I am. I know what I've done. It's only a matter of time before I....”

Toriel waited, but no further response seemed forthcoming. Gently, she placed her paw on Frisk's
head. “Frisk... it does not matter what may have happened in the past. I will always be here for you. And you do not need to say anything more tonight. You have already said a great deal.” And what you have not said, but clearly wanted to say, also speaks volumes, Toriel thought to herself.

“...it's not fair. You shouldn't have to deal with me breaking things every other day, you shouldn't have to deal with me breaking down crying every other day. You shouldn't have to put yourself and everything you own at risk trying to take care of me. And I wish I could make it right, but I can't. I don't know how. And that's wrong. And I'm so s~” Frisk flinched as if they had been struck physically.

“Frisk, what happened? Are you alright?”

The child shook their head.

“I remember what you said last week, about how you 'understood the fight'. Frisk... why are you afraid of being sent back to your human relatives? Is it because of something you have done, or because of something they have done?”

Frisk flinched again, and Toriel pressed the advantage. “Frisk, why did you really run away from the Taylor family?”

“...after I ran away, but before I fell down into the underground, I started trying to convince myself that... it was all a big mistake. That once they noticed I was missing, they'd start to worry about me. That I could go home and all would be forgiven and I could start over. That I could do better next time. But... but... when monsters were free, and we were at the press conference, there was nobody in the audience screaming 'that's my kid!' or calling the town hall or dad or you after the fact. I was gone and they either didn't notice, or they didn't care. I didn't matter. I don't matter. And now that monsters are on the surface, that's what I keep waiting for you to realize.”

Toriel blinked, unable to process what her ears were telling her.

“I tried to put that off for as long as possible, I tried to be good at something, anything useful. Because even though-” Frisk’s voice cracked, but they only paused for a moment, “even though I knew I would screw everything up, I wanted to stay with you. Oh god, I’m such a selfish brat.”

Before Frisk could finish the sentence, they found themselves picked up in strong, fuzzy arms and deposited in Toriel’s lap.

“Listen to me very carefully, Frisk. This may be the most important sentence I ever tell you. You may want to take notes. Are you ready?”

Frisk blinked at Toriel, dumbfounded.

“Frisk, it is not selfish to want to be loved. Do you understand? I believe that the reason that your family never came forward is because they were fools. They had a child with a heart big enough for the whole world, but they did not understand what they had. And their loss is the gain of all monsters, and you did not stop being important to all of us simply because the Barrier was destroyed. My child, do not ever doubt that you are loved. By myself and Asgore and Sans and Papyrus and Alphys and Undyne and everyone else who got to see the sun for the first time. Even Flowey the Flower, no matter how much he might protest otherwise. I see the way his face lights up when he sees you.”

Frisk was silent for a minute, then swallowed. “There was a book. In the Snowdin Library. It said that monster Souls are made of love. But not human Souls. When I read that, it was like a light
bulb going on because it explained so much. Why you and Sans and Papyrus were so nice to me even though you just met me. Because that's a part of you guys. But I kept breaking things and hurting people because that's what I am.”

“Pish tosh. That book was written by a monster that resented losing the war and being trapped underground for ages. Understandable sentiments, but nothing more than sentiment in the end. As Dr. Aster and Alphys can both attest, the true nature of the Soul, monster or human, is unknown. But I don't need to know what the nature of the soul is to know that love is not exclusive to monsters, because I know what love really is. Love is a question. The only question that matters. And you know what that question is.”

“Huh??”

“Think for a moment. What is the first thing that comes to mind, the first thing you ask yourself, the instant you see me, or Asgore, or Sans, or Papyrus, or Alphys, or Undyne, or Flowey?”

Frisk stared at Toriel for a few seconds, then closed their eyes... and after a short but expectant silence, opened their mouth.

“What do I need to do to make this person happy?”

Toriel pulled Frisk close and kissed the child on the forehead. “Exactly. The words may change. And the answers are always different. But the feeling is always there. That feeling? When you care for somebody so much, they have to be happy for you to be happy? It's you! And you make it happen every day, in little details and small ways that are not little or small at all, because they build upon each other. A smile, a kind word, a joke at the right time and the right place to make a bad day better, or a good day a great day. You do matter, Frisk. There is only one of you in all the world. Everyone that you love and care about, also loves you and cares about you. And believe me, you are worth any number of broken plates.”

Frisk blinked back tears that had threatened to start again, and hugged Toriel back. “...thank you, mom. Thank you for believing in me. I promise I'll make you proud. I promise...”

“You already have, my child.”

...some time later, an upstairs bedroom door opened, and Toriel walked into the room carrying Frisk in both arms. With exaggerated care, the sleeping child was placed on the bed, and covers pulled over them. The boss monster leaned down and kissed the child's forehead again.

“Good night, Frisk,” she whispered. “See you in the morning.”
In the light, there was darkness.

The darkness kept growing.

The darkness stopped growing.

The darkness ... saw.

Flowey took a deep breath, despite not having lungs. “Hi.”

The darkness waited.

“Seems as if everyone is perfectly happy. Monsters have returned to the surface. Peace and prosperity will rule across the land.”

The flower smiled. “Take a deep breath. There's nothing left to worry about.”

The darkness waited.

Flowey felt his smile crumble. “Well. There is one thing. One last threat. One being with the power to erase EVERYTHING... everything everyone's worked so hard for.”

The darkness shrank.

“You know who I'm talking about, don't you? That's right. I'm talking about YOU.”

The darkness waited.

“YOU still have the power to reset everything. Toriel, Sans, Asgore, Alphys, Papyrus, Undyne... if you so choose... everyone will be ripped form this timeline... and sent back before all of this ever happened.”

The darkness waited.

“Nobody will remember anything. You'll be able to do whatever you want. That power... I know that power. That's the power you were fighting to stop, wasn't it? The power I wanted to use. But now, the idea of resetting everything...”

Flowey blinked several times, trying to dispel a vision; two children, standing by a bed of golden flowers, in a circle of sunlight.

“If you see me again... don't think of it as me. I want you to remember me like this. Somebody who was your friend for a little while.”

“...it doesn't matter what you are, Asriel. You'll always be my friend. If... when you feel like you're ready... you made this happy ending possible. You deserve to be a part of it.”

Flowey shook his head. “I don't think I could do it all again. Not after that.”
The darkness waited.

“So please. Just let them go. Let Frisk be happy. Let Frisk live their life. But, if I can't change your mind... if you DO end up erasing everything... you have to erase my memories too.”

The darkness waited.

“I'm sorry. You've probably heard this a hundred times already, haven't you?”

Flowey managed an awkward smile.

“Well. See you soon. Chara.”

Who?

Flowey's smile turned into a rictus of terror. If he hadn't been talking to who he thought he had been talking to... then who was... what was-

The darkness faded away.

Flowey stared at the circle of sunlight. He stared at the other golden flowers. He remembered hearing the question, even though he hadn't actually heard a sound.

“Nuh uh.”

Flowey burrowed into the ground, and kept going. Past Home. Past the doorway of the Ruins. Past the tiny, abandoned town. Past the damp caves, now only echoing the sounds of falling water. Past the caldera of lava. Past the massive machine, still humming but not as brightly lit. Past the city, past the castle-

Flowey blinked at the sunlight; the sun was high in the sky, obliterating all shadows except those behind him in the cave, leading to the the New Home throne room. His breathing was slower and easier, and it was almost possible for him to convince himself that what he had seen was just a figment of his imagination, a hallucination brought on from isolation and boredom. Almost.

Compared to that, convincing himself that his tears were just from the bright light posed no difficulty at all.

Navigation to the town was relatively simple. It was, after all, downhill. Once closer, though, Flowey began to hesitate. Memories of screaming, both from the humans and from Chara inside his own head were the worst part. Not that the sensation of bullets ripping through his body was in any way a viable alternative.

“Hey, you alright there? You look lost.”

Flowey froze, and slowly turned to look at the voice. A human was standing behind him, dressed all in blue with some strange hat, a shiny piece of metal on their chest, and a gun in a holster. Flowey stared at the gun for a bit longer than was comfortable, then looked up at the human's face.

“Uh. Hey. This is, uh, this is a long shot, but do you know somebody named Frisk?”

“The queen's kid? Yeah.”

The queen's kid. The phrase touched off something inside Flowey, something it shouldn't have.

“Uh, do you know where they are?”
“Not off the top of my head, but I can guess. This time of day I would check the Library, the hot dog stand at the park, the planetarium or the arboretum. Possibly the recycling center too. Sorry I couldn't be more help.”

“Thanks anyway.”

“Hey, what's your name?”

Flowey stopped mid-burrow and looked up at the human. “As- Flowey. Flowey the Flower. Uh, what's yours?”

“Officer Stephen Ward of the Ebott's Wake Police Department, at your service.”

“Ebott's Wake? So that's what this place is called. Always wondered.”

“Well, now you know. And knowing is half the battle.”

“It is? What's the other half?”

“Good question.”

Flowey blinked, then burrowed underground and began tunneling. This place did not seem like the same place he and Chara had... well...

Snippets of sound came down to him through the earth as he made his way underneath the town.

“Oh my GOD Bratty! Did you hear, Burgie got a job at the radio station!”

“Like, I totally heard already. He's an intern. It's not like we're ever going to hear him on the radio.”

“I know! But he works at the radio station! That means-”

“Wait, oh my god!”

“Yes! It means he can introduce us to-”

“Gary Welkin!”

The shrill duet of fangirl enthusiasm reached Flowey even under several feet, and he moved on as quickly as possible. Some distance later, another conversation reached him.

“Okay your turn. Scariest thing you can think of, but it has to be physical and it can't be something incapacitated by common household objects.”

“Uh. Gimme a second.”

“You got ten seconds.”

“That's not enough time!”

“You just asked for one second, I'm giving you ten times what you asked for! What part of my generosity is a problem?”

“It's the part where you're overly pedantic!”

“Oh, using the big words. That college education really pays for itself.”
“Just you wait Hal. When Dr. Alphys opens that lab? I am going to be first in line with my application. I'll be learning how magic and shit works while you're still working for your dad at that garage, getting oil all over your face and having to deal with screaming children on the minigolf course.”

“Well... yeah. But I didn't have to take out student loans to learn how to do any of that.”

“...you make a valid point.”

Flowey pushed on until he ran into a mass of tree roots and had to surface to get his bearings. He seemed to be in some sort of forest, but the trees were dramatically different from the trees that had covered the slopes of Mt. Ebott or the cavern around Snowdin. In fact they more closely resembled the tree that was in the courtyard of the Home Castle, in the Ruins. Especially in how they dropped their leaves onto the ground; Flowey had to extend his stem a lot to get a good look at the ground around him.

“Flowey?!?”

Flowey spun around so quickly it made him dizzy and saw a child running towards him at full speed. For a moment, less than a split second, memory overlapped the present and he saw Chara running towards him. When it subsided, Flowey saw that Frisk had either tripped, or deliberately gotten down on their knees to be closer to him, and had a smile wider than he had ever seen on their face in the underground, under any circumstances.

“Frisk, don’t-”

“FLOWEY! I WAS WONDERING WHERE YOU HAD GONE OFF TO! NOW I SEE YOU HAVE BEEN HERE THE ENTIRE TIME! IT MAKES PERFECT SENSE IN RETROSPECT! CONGRATULATIONS, YOU HAVE JAPED THE GREAT PAPYRUS, NO EASY TASK!”

Flowey looked past Frisk at the tall, scarf sporting skeleton that had traded that ridiculous costume for cargo pants and a sweatshirt, and a yellow lizard wearing a skirt, blouse, straw hat and expression of utter terror.

“It's so good to see you again! I was starting to worry you'd never come down from the mountain!” Frisk's smile, if converted into electrical energy, could have lit up a city. “You won't believe everything that happened while I was underground! So much has changed! So much is still changing! I can’t wait to tell you everything!”

Flowey blinked a few times, still trying to wrap his mind around the idea that somebody was happy to see him....

Then he opened his eyes. Looking around, he saw he was in the corner of Asgore's garden shed, the part with one board missing.

“...a dream. Now that hasn't happened in a while.”

A leaf reached up to the surface of a table, moved around until it found a plastic bag, wrapped around it and pulled out down over the edge. Closer to the ground two other leaves unzipped the bag and pulled out a tablet computer, turning it on. After the boot screen disappeared, Flowey's eyes went to the date and time displayed in the corner...

The flower monster sighed and turned the device back off, slipped it back into the plastic covering, sealed it and put it back on the table. With Frisk's gift suitably protected against moisture, dust and direct sunlight, Flowey receded into the earth and began tunneling again, following a practiced
When Flowey surfaced, he was outside the Dreemurr household, or to be more specific, outside the Queen's house. Next to him on the lawn was the newspaper, which meant that some time soon...

After waiting for a few minutes, a child in striped pajamas opened the front door, walked across the lawn, picked up the newspaper and turned around. They were halfway to the door before they stopped and turned back towards Flowey again.

“...uh... good morning?”

Frisk shook their head. “I must still be asleep. There's no way Flowey would be that polite.”

Flowey frowned. “Hey, don't tell me how I can and can't act!”

“...okay, maybe I am awake.”

“Frisk, can we talk for a bit?”

“...sure.”

The human child walked over to the house and sat on the front steps. Flowey burrowed over next to them and popped out of the ground again.

“So what did you want to talk about? Is something wrong?”

Flowey looked down at the ground. “Well... I'm not sure. This last week has, well, it's been weird for me. Like, way weirder than normal in this town. And don't start on the whole weird versus eccentric thing again please. And, uh, last night? I had a dream. I don't have those very often. It was about, about before I came down the mountain to see you finally.”

Flowey looked up to see Frisk waiting patiently, and he swallowed. “I guess I never really got over the whole mistaking you for Chara thing. When we died, our souls were fused together... but when Alphys infused Determination into this flower... only Asriel woke up. I don't know if it's just the memories of growing up with them, or the side effects of the experiment or what, but I always felt like a part of me was missing. Above and beyond the whole not having arms and legs I mean.”

Frisk nodded. “So... is that why you thought I was Chara?”

“Maybe? I dunno anymore. I know from talking to people, especially in other timelines back when I had that power, that Toriel took Chara's body and buried it in the Ruins. Where all the humans fell. Including you, I guess. And this determination that made me what I am, it comes from all of them. So... there were a lot of reasons for me to stick around there.”

“...that makes sense.”

“Yeah. Is that, do you think that's normal? When you lose something so important to you that it's a part of you, to try to get it back, no matter how unlikely it is? To hold onto the barest slivers of hope like that?”

“Absolutely.”

Flowey blinked. Frisk's response was out of their mouth almost the instant he had stopped talking.

“Well... that's what kept me there. I couldn't tell you what I was expecting. A ghost, or a disembodied voice only I could hear, or another flower like me, brought to life by your
determination just like I was brought to life by the determination from the souls of the other six humans. I figured, especially if there was a flower with Chara's memories, I could help them... adjust. Being alone when I first woke up, not having anybody there... I wanted to spare them that.”

Frisk nodded, and Flowey continued. “But, I was down there for so long... and nobody came... and when they did, I didn't know how to handle it so I freaked out.”

Frisk blinked. “Wait, what??”

“I don't really know how to explain it... Frisk, when you were going through the underground... did you ever feel like somebody was watching you?”

“Well, yeah. Because there was. Alphys had cameras everywhere, and I know you were following me some of the time, and Sans was definitely keeping tabs on me.”

“That's not- that's not what I meant. And yeah, I know everything in the Underground was new and weird compared to what you knew about the surface, but did you ever feel like some parts were... even more bizarre, more, I dunno, alien than anything else?”

Frisk looked at Flowey with a strange expression on their face. “Not really? I mean, nothing I couldn't blame on stress, fear, worry or adrenaline.”

“Huh.” Flowey looked down at the ground. “I don't think it was all my imagination, but maybe I'm just reading too much into things. Sort of like expecting Chara to come back somehow.”

The flower monster cleared his throat. “Well, either way... whatever happened... I realized there was no point in hanging around the Underground anymore. That's when I dug my way out and started looking for you. I guess I finally came to terms with... not being able to say goodbye.”

“...I wish you could have found what you were looking for. But I'm also glad you came to the surface.” Frisk looked down the street. “The State of the Kingdom Address starts in a few hours. I should get ready. Hey, do you think you'll be there?”

Flowey tilted his head to one side. “I might grow up the side of the building to get to one of the high windows, but they'll probably be closed with the air conditioning running. So I won't be able to hear much, and if there's any audience participation, mine will be limited to trying to make you laugh by making funny faces.”

“...what if you got transplanted to, like, a flowerpot and somebody could carry you inside?”

Flowey shook his head violently from side to side. “Nope nope nope huh uh no way absolutely not. I still remember what it was like to be trapped in one spot, before I learned how to burrow underground and tunnel my way from place to place. I don't ever want to experience that again.”

“Oh... yeah, I can see how that would be a deal breaker. Well... it's going to be live-streamed, and the recordings will also be put up on the All Fine Labs YouTube channel. So you can watch it there later if you want.”

“Heh. I still haven't gotten around to watching that video of Papyrus meeting the cop and the cop fainting, and you had that in the favorites list when you first gave me the tablet.” Flowey grinned awkwardly. “For somebody that doesn't have a job or school or any real social obligations, I should have way more free time. But that's not what happens. And things keep slipping by me.”

“You know... somebody told me something very important back in Waterfall. They wanted me to meet somebody they knew. But the opportunity never came up. In fact I didn't meet Suzy until the
end of this March. But I do remember what they said, when I was backtracking to see you and make sure everyone was alright.” Frisk cleared their throat. “This world has infinite opportunities. But there's a limit to the things you can do today. Accepting this is healthy.”

“...I guess that does make sense.”

“Normally, when I feel overwhelmed or worried or just not that good, remembering that helps me calm down. Normally. To be honest, you're not the only person who's been having a weird week.”

“Hah. Wonder if it's contagious.”

The human and the monster waited in silence for a while, watching the sky get brighter, until there were sounds of movement inside the house. Frisk got up and tapped the paper in one hand against the other. “Well, mom's probably wondering what's taking me so long to get the paper, so I better get inside and start getting ready for the Address.”

“Right. I'll catch up with you after.”

Flowey watched as Frisk opened the door and walked inside, then heard the muted sounds of conversation.

“Good morning my child. I trust you are ready for today?”

“I have my notes all set up. Clothes laid out. I's crossed and T's dotted.”

“I believe that the expression works better in the other direction.”

“Oh... well in that case, we're in real trouble.”

Toriel snickered, and Flowey dove into the ground and began to burrow; after hearing Toriel laugh, something had caused his eyes to start stinging.

And that hadn't happened in a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Undertale Anniversary, everybody. :)
The alarm on the dresser clicked over, repeating a high energy J-Pop song until yellow claws found the snooze button.

“...Alphys. Is time t'get up.”

“Five more minutes.”

The darkened bedroom was silent for a few seconds.

“Can't. Address is today.”

“...oh. Right...”

The room was silent once more.

“...stupid surface heat.”

“Do you need me to get some ice?”

“...no. Just not looking forward to that part of today.”

There was a sound of rustling bedsheets and a lamp clicked on. Alphys looked up at Undyne, sliding off the edge of the bed and unsteadily walking over to the doorway.

“Now that's a sight that would wake anybody up.”

Undyne snickered without looking back towards the bed. “I'm going to hit the shower first, if that's alright.”

“Sure. I'll get breakfast set up. Preferences?”

“Anything, as long as it's monster food.”

Alphys slid off the side of the bed, shaking her head and blinking her eyes. Glasses were picked up off the end table and the lizard made her way out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. Squinting against the light, Alphys pushed a few buttons on a machine that looked like the distant, black sheep relative to all the other appliances in the room, and a humming and grinding noise began. In less than a minute, A slot opened up and a plate rolled out on a tiny conveyor belt, covered in what looked like a series of thin pastries of increasing size, rolled up into cylinders and arrayed next to each other, smothered in syrup. Another set of buttons were pressed and the machine began humming and grinding again, and when the slot opened up, what rolled out was very wrinkled but smelled of cinnamon.

Alphys took both plates over to the dining room and set them on the table, then backtracked to the kitchen for utensils, and then again for cups, and one last time to put the kettle on the stove top burner. By the time the tea was ready, Undyne had walked in wearing a tank top and shorts, and Alphys had rapidly forgotten about it.

“Careful you don't get tea everywhere,” the fish woman teased. Alphys immediately closed her mouth and looked back at the kettle in her shaking claws, her scales turning crimson.

“Uh... sorry.”
Undyne laughed and sat down at the table as Alphys brought the cups of tea over. “Pan Cakes and Raisin Bread. It's like you read my mind while I was in the shower. What's your day look like? It's the last part of the human soul scan thing, right?”

“Yeah. We don't know if we're on the downhill stretch though. Maybe the lab will get swamped with volunteers who put things off until the last minute. So I won't know for sure until I get in there today if I'll be able to make it to the Address and watch you at work.”

“That sucks. Especially now that I know how much you love a girl in uniform,” Undyne said in a low pitched voice, which quickly became high pitched cackling as Alphys blushed and held her face in her claws.

“I instantly regret opening up about everything last night.”

“You shouldn't. I certainly don't.” Undyne's voice pitch dropped low again. “Maybe you'd like to help me into my armor in a few minutes?”

Alphys's face got even redder and she started to sweat. “Yes p-please.”

Undyne cackled once more. “Oh my god you are so adorable when you freak out like that! And all this time, I thought you were watching my fight with Frisk because you were trying to analyze my fighting style for science, or something like that.”

Alphys froze. “You... you know about that??”

“Naw, it was a hunch. But now I know that hunch was right!” Undyne grinned, then abruptly frowned. “Wait a minute. That line from Mettaton during his quiz show... did you really write fanfic of us together? I used to just think that was him ad-libbing, but now—”

“I still write it!” Alphys blurted out. “It's over five hundred chapters long and I can't stop! Please please please don't ask to see it! It's diverged so far from reality that it almost counts as an original work of fiction on its own!”

“...well now I'm really curious. But,” Undyne added hastily as she saw Alphys cringe, “it doesn't have to be today. Or anytime soon. Whenever you feel ready to share.”

“After last night I think I've shared way too much already.”

“Don't say that.” Undyne reached out and placed one webbed hand on Alphys' claw as it was reaching for her fork. “I am so proud that you're finally breaking down all those walls that have been holding you back. You had a major breakthrough when you told Riled Up Riley to suck it, but you've been sticking with it even after the momentum is gone, and that's hard. But you've been making all sorts of positive, forward thinking decisions this week, and it's pretty obvious to anybody that looks at you that you're doing a lot better. In fact the way I hear it, you managed to get some investors the other day. Something about soul mood rings?”

Alphys shrugged. “It's a bunch of trinkets and novelty items with very little practical value. I didn't want to lead with it but nobody was interested in geothermal energy and I lost Sans' notes for the plan to mass produce no mass dimensional bridge hardware for instant communication, so I just went with something in the margin of my notes... wait, how did you know about that? I know I didn't bring it up.”

Undyne grinned. “A little bird told me. And Woshua told them.”

“Who told Woshua?”
Undyne stopped grinning. “Uh. I don't know. Huh. Something to keep in mind when I head back to work Monday.”

“Do you even have to go in anymore? It's like a week, and it's so hot outside that Physical Education has canceled more often than not.”

“Ugh, don't remind me. And yeah, I have paperwork to catch up on. Oh, and it's actually two weeks or so close as makes no difference. Last Friday is a half day. You know, when Toriel and I talked about the pros and cons of a gymnasium, I don't think either of us had any idea how hot it gets up here.”

“Well, it has been unseasonably warm. It wasn't anywhere near these temperatures last summer. And be honest. Even if you'd known about the heat, you would have been set against a gym building. There's no way you'd go along with having monster kids staying indoors when they could be outdoors for the first time in thousands of years.”

“Well, that's true.” Undyne grinned as she grabbed her fork. “There's no reason to let all that fresh air and sunshine go to waste.”

The couple ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes, or at least in the low volume background noise of forks clinking against plates, chewing, swallowing, and sounds of satisfaction. When Undyne put her fork down again, she leaned back and grinned.

“I am so glad you convinced me that the automatic breakfast machine was a good idea. Your work is amazing.”

Alphys laughed nervously. “It's just kitchen chemistry and physics. Anybody with a working knowledge of computer programming and magic point source emitter mechanics could do it.”

“Yeah, right. Just because I don't know how to program doesn't mean I didn't notice how hard you worked on that thing. You miniaturized a nuclear reactor for Mettaton. You made the most advanced recycling system the surface world has ever seen. And that scanner that's got everyone excited? Didn't the faculty at New Home University say that kind of thing was impossible?”

“Well, specifically they said that it's impossible to analyze human soul characteristics through bullet sampling, for obvious reasons. All I did was build the thing so big that its interferometer cross section was wide enough to treat the whole human body as a bullet in a magic attack. Fortunately the emitter pistol I built does an end run around that limitation, so when we start the follow up studies later they will go faster. It's based off of something I built for Frisk's phone during the-”

Alphys stopped talking and stared off into the distance for a moment, then put down her fork and slid off of her chair.

“...I should go take my shower now.”

Undyne jumped up from the table. “No, no, no! Don't start backsliding now!”

“Undyne... thanks for trying to help me think positive about things, but that doesn't change the fact that I did things that I shouldn't have. I can't just pretend that didn't happen. Passing off Mettaton as an anti-human defense system when all he wanted to do was entertain? Turning Hotland into a giant puzzle for Frisk instead of just leveling with them? Hiding the results of the DT experiments? Just because everything turned out alright in the end doesn't justify any of those choices. Especially when things turned out as well as they did because of a choice that somebody else made-”
Alphys squeaked as Undyne picked her up, carried her into the living room, set her down on the sofa, and sat down next to her.

“...you know, if you have to apply that logic to what you did, you should apply that to what I did, too. I tried to kill three of the humans that fell down, including Frisk. I believed, with all my heart, that we were at war. It's easier to hurt somebody when you don't see them as a person. But they were all people, right? And none of them wanted anything except to go back to the surface. Just like all of us. So we should have been allies from the moment they showed on your security system. But it was easier to be angry. And just because I didn't ever succeed at killing a human and taking their soul doesn't mean I wasn't trying.”

“Well, that was your job as captain of the Royal Guard-”

“And it was your job as Royal Scientist to find some way, any way, past the Barrier. You had an idea, you tried it, and it didn't work. But that's science, isn't it? You come up with a theory and you test it and if it doesn't work you move on to the next one. Sooner or later, you find something that works. Nobody gives me any grief about trying and failing to take human souls, especially now that we're on the surface and there's no war. You're the only one giving you a hard time about everything that happened underground for the same reason.”

“...somebody has to.”

“No, somebody doesn't, that's exactly the point I am trying to make! Here, let me ask you something. Has Frisk ever said they resented you for the whole Hotland Mettaton puzzle thing?”

“...they haven't said so, but-”

“But nothing. You know who Frisk really should resent? Me. Because I tried to kill them multiple times. And it wasn't all underground, either. Earlier this week, when Frisk found me passed out from the heat in my office, I freaked out when they woke me up and almost put a spear through their chest. Probably wouldn't have killed them outright, the kid's hardcore. But still, they have every reason to resent me and be afraid of me. But they don't and they're not... Frisk actually asked me earlier this week, after the whole scan thing, if we were still good. I think, after what I said about high LV Caps, they were worried I was afraid of them instead of for them. So, if they don't resent me for trying to hurt them, why would they resent you for trying to protect them? That's what Mettaton said your plan was on the show; you wanted to present yourself as somebody they could rely on so they would listen to you when you tried to convince them not to fight Asgore.”

“...yeah... didn't exactly work out, of course.”

“Not the point! Look, what time is it? Doesn't matter, sun's up. In a few minutes, call up Frisk. Ask them, straight up, if they hold any grudges about everything that happened in Hotland.”

“...I really don't want to bother them when they're getting ready for the Address-”

“Frisk is not going to mind! How's that line go again? If you don't believe in yourself, then believe in me, because I believe in you!”

“...alright. You've convinced me. I'll go get my phone.”

Alphys slid off the sofa, walked over to the bedroom and removed her cellphone from its elaborate charger dock. Shaking claws navigated the menu for Frisk's contact data-

“Oh no.”
“What?”

Alphys walked out of the bedroom, staring at their phone. “My claws were shaking and I clicked Frisk before I meant to—”

“Hello? Alphys?”

Alphys blinked and brought up the phone to her head. “Frisk? Are you, are you there?”

“I'm here, what’s going on? Did you find out something about how souls work?”

“Uh. Aheh. Nothing quite that serious. Uh. So sorry t-t-to bother you this early, and when you have so much busy... so much of a busy schedule for today. I just, I, I just had to ask a question.”

“Okay. Go ahead.”

“Uh. You. You remember all the, uh, the stuff in Hotland, right? Me and Mettaton setting up that... that elaborate thing. I just... it's been on my mind a bit since Monday so... I wanted to know... what are your feelings about that?”

The line was quiet for a minute, and Alphys squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself for the answer.

“Alphys, could you repeat that? I had to put the phone down for a second and I forgot to put it on speaker—”

“Frisk, do you hate me for what I've done?” Alphys blurted out. “All the lies, all the manipulation? Everything that happened underground?”

“What?? No, no, of course not! You wanted to stop the war, right? You wanted to keep me from reaching Asgore because you thought I'd lose.”

Alphys let out a ragged breath she hadn't realized she had been holding.

“Alphys? Are you okay? What happened??”

“Nothing, I just... I just didn't expect that. I, uh... thank you, Frisk. Thank you so much. You will never know how much I needed to hear you say that. I sure didn’t.”

“Hey, if this is about the whole keeping the scan secret, I told you, that was my idea. I didn't want to worry mom. And when we were walking back to school Wednesday after the second scan, I explained that to her. She's not going to come after you.”

“No, that's like... that's like another thing. But that's... that's... it's good too.”

“You, uh... are you crying?”

“Just a bit.” Alphys sniffed. “It's weird. I feel better, but...”

“I know what you mean.”

Alphys took a deep breath. “It's just... I should have been honest with you from the start. I'm sorry Frisk. I got so used to lying. It never occurred to me to tell the truth.”

“It's alright. Uh. To be honest, I kind of knew you and Mettaton were working together from the start.”
“Really??”

“Yeah. It was mostly a hunch, and then when the quiz show segment was over, I heard you mumble something about how he wasn't supposed to ask the question about your crush. That kind of clinched it.”

“Oh... you, uh, why didn't you speak up then?”

“I thought about it, then I remembered how much Papyrus loves Mettaton's show. I didn't want to ruin that for him. Or, or you. Even then, I could tell how much effort you put into everything.”

“So... you just played along to make everyone feel better?”

“Well, I knew Mettaton's show was broadcasting everything to the rest of the underground. And I remembered what you said. Watching somebody on a screen really makes you root for them. I figured that might help my chances later. So there was some self interest there.”

Alphys snorted in laughter. “Well... do you think it worked?”

“Hard to say. I'm glad I didn't have to find out the hard way.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

There was a rustling sound on the other end of the line and Frisk spoke up again. “Hey, Alphys. I wanted to ask you about something, while you were on the line? Uh... when I was in the laboratory basement, I was reading a lot of your notes. And you used the phrase 'fallen down' and I didn't realize until then that it was a phrase with a very specific meaning for monsters.”

“Yeah.” Alphys pushed her glasses back up, and Undyne noticed her posture change from 'trying not to get in anyone's way' to 'time to science'. ‘Monsters are mostly magic and magic is an expression of will and intent. When monsters get old, I mean, normal monsters, not boss monsters, eventually, well, you just get tired. It gets harder and harder to keep going. And eventually, you stop. That's what happens just before monsters die, when the magic field completely collapses.”

“So, it's like a human coma. Except no monsters ever woke up from falling down.”

“Well, some did.” Alphys squeezed her eyes shut. “And that was only because I cheated.”

“I wouldn't call it that. I go to school with Snowy. I know it's made a difference for him having his mom back, no matter what.”

Alphys sniffed. “Well, I am glad that worked out the way it did. Hey... thinking about it now... what got you thinking about monster mortality?”

“Uh... honestly? Some bad dreams. I just needed some real facts to stop the speculation.”

“I can understand that.”

Frisk cleared their throat. “On the same subject, about how long do monsters normally live? I know for humans a hundred years is pushing it, even with the best medicine.”

“Uh, heh, we don't actually know? A lot of what was normal before the war was lost because we were so focused on survival and defending against further human attacks that we didn't keep it preserved or pass it down. And underground, well... I do know from the royal census that the average lifespan decreased the longer we were down there. There was only so much that Dr.
Aster's work, Chara's appearance, and, uh, Asgore's declaration of war could do to push back against the idea that we were never getting out of there. But, now that we're up here? Nobody's fallen down yet. It might be a long time before we find out what the outer limits of a normal monster lifespan is again.”

“I see... thanks, Alphys. I've been checking my notes for the Address, and it's easy to forget between all the Anti Monster League stuff and the religious nuts and the political party fighting and infighting... that as bad as things are right now, they are still better than they used to be. I, uh... like you said. I didn't realize how much I needed to hear that until you said it.”

“No problem, Frisk-”

“Oh shoot.”

“What, what's wrong??”

“I just looked at the clock and I really need finish getting ready.”

“Oh! Oh god, I'm sorry, I took up so much time!”

“It's alright, I needed the shot in the arm, but I need to hang up now.”

“Okay, goodbye Frisk!”

“Bye Alphys!”

The phone clicked and Alphys looked at her shaking claws, then looked up to see Undyne standing in the doorway.

“Well?”

“You... you're right. Frisk doesn't resent what I did. In fact, they knew what was going on with Mettaton the whole time.”

“Hah! See? What'd I tell ya?” Undyne walked over and picked Alphys up again, spinning her around; Alphys clutched her phone with both claws to keep it from slipping away and being slammed into the wall via centrifugal force. “If you ever feel like life is dragging you down again, remember this moment! Now... what were we talking about before all this?”

“Uh, I think the breakfast machine and how it got made.”

“I mean, before that.”

“Uh... the school year, and before that what the day looked like for both of us.”

“I mean...” Undyne grinned at Alphys. “Before that.”

Alphys stared at Undyne as a crimson blush spread across her face once again. “Undyne, I, I, I have to get ready for work!”

“So take your shower after.” Undyne carried the mostly golden lizard through the house to the door to the backyard and the garage. “You're just going to get sweaty again anyway!”

Some time later, the door to the garage opened up and Undyne marched out, clanging as metal rattled against metal.
“Alright! Time to get this address started! If I don't see you there I'll see you this afternoon anyway! Love ya, hun!”

After Undyne began running down the street, a very sweaty, very red lizard stumbled out of the garage door, leaned up against the side of the building, and slowly slid down until she was sitting on the ground. After a few seconds, Alphys' dazed expression turned into a shy grin and she covered her face with her claws.

“I love that woman. So much.”

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Oh. I'm great. I'm on top of the whole world right now.” Alphys stared at her claws; they still tingled where they had touched Undyne's bare skin as she helped fit the different pieces of plate mail into position...

“Well, that's good. Because we need to talk. Again.”

Belatedly, some part of Alphys' mind began analyzing the voice of the other speaker, raising important questions like where they had come from. And who they were. Turning her head, Alphys saw a yellow flower staring at her with a slightly confused expression.

“AAAGH!” The lizard's head whipped back, slammed into the wall, and from inside the garage the sound of something falling off a shelf and clattering to the floor could be heard.

“Oh great. Not this again.”

“Ow,” Alphys groaned, clutching her head in her claws. “Why does this keep happening?”

“Hey, you're the scientist. You figure it out.”

A clenched fist slammed into the ground. “Ugh! What do you want this time, Flowey?!”

The flower monster blinked. This had never happened before. “Well. Believe it or not. I came by to apologize.”

“Oh. Listen, that whole thing last week with me making threats and throwing stuff around in the garage? That was out of line. I shouldn't have been doing that to anybody, but especially not to people I was asking for help. So... I'm sorry. I don't know why, I don't know how... but I am.”

The lizard turned towards the flower monster with a perplexed expression.

“Yeah, yeah, I know how it sounds. Either believe me or don't, either way, can we move on for now? Have you learned anything from the soul research program yet?”

Alphys rubbed her head again. “All we have is raw data, and not enough ancillary data to create a framework. Losing my patience with Dwayne Riley had, uh, side effects. I pushed the entire program into effect before we were ready. Even with Dr. Aster, we've been short on manpower, the demand for shirts has been higher than I expected so we're short on materials, and both the shirts and refreshments have gone through not only our petty cash but our parts allocation budget, so we're short on money. I just hope that Soul Mood Ring idea I tried to sell doesn't fall through.”
“Wait, what? I know what all three of those words mean, but you put them together in a way that doesn't make sense.”

Alphys gestured and her magic formed a model of a ring with a gem inset, spinning slowly in the air. “A few decades ago, there was a fad; a sort of pre-internet meme fixating on possession of a physical object. In this instance, the fad was about mood rings. The actual, original design had an inset of some sort of polymer or electret, depending on the manufacturer, that responded to body heat. The spinoffs just used semiprecious stones, plastic or glass and didn't produce that response. The idea that the ring's stone would respond to the emotional state of the person wearing it wasn't entirely accurate, but a lot of people bought them. It wasn't quite on the same scale as the pet rock craze but it was there.”

“Wait, there was a craze for pet rocks?”

Alphys rolls her eyes. “You have to keep in mind, a lot of these fads happened during a time of elevated drug use among humans. Nobody was thinking clearly, even the people who weren't putting bizarre chemicals into their bodies. It's called a contact high if I remember right.”

“...so everybody used to be as crazy as this town is right now?”

“That's up for debate. I only checked the demographics insofar as I needed to do market research. To be honest, I have my doubts about it, even though the investors seemed interested. We don't know what the soul colors even mean, so what's the point of broadcasting to people something that nobody understands the meaning or purpose of?”

Flowey gaped at Alphys with a look of shocked befuddlement. “Is this a joke? Are you brain dead? That's half of the internet right there! You know this! Twitter and Tumblr and Facebook and YouTube and every single blogging site ever! Humans will send pictures of their food to everybody they know! It doesn't even have to be a really good meal!”

Alphys looked up sharply, jaw hanging open, and then slapped her forehead with one claw. “OH MY GOD OF COURSE.”

“Hah! Once you get these things made, you are going to sell out so fast it's not even funny. If you're really lucky, the Anti Monster League will freak out and claim you're tricking people into wearing tracking devices, or that whatever you use for the inset will poison people. It's basically free advertising.”

Alphys snorted. “Things that are free are definitely sounding good right now. Although since you bring it up, I really should check if humans can be hurt by synthetic quartz.”

“While you're at it, think about designs for other types of jewelry. Necklaces, earrings, other decorative piercings, lapel pins, cuff links, bracelets, everything. I don't know how much that will affect your production time and setup, but I'm pretty sure once your investors realize the potential, they'll want to cash in. Having designs ready to go will save you time later, and make you look good in their eyes.”

Alphys turned to look at Flowey. “That was really good advice, and you only insulted me once.”

“I know and it's freaking me out!” Flowey looked panicked and angry at the same time. “What the hell is going on?! Is this a long term side effect of Determination or what?”

“I don't know!” Alphys threw up her claws in frustration. “Even if there were personality changes in the Amalgamates, they already underwent changes because of the whole... fusing together...
thing. It'd be impossible to isolate.”

The lizard and the flower stared at each for a moment. Eventually, Alphys got to her feet. “Actually, as long as you're here, stick around for a moment. I have an idea.”

Alphys disappeared into the garage, and came back out holding a metal panel with circuitry sticking out of the outside edge. Flowey stared as the panel was set up to lean against the outside wall of the garage.

“This is one of the older scanners Undyne had me build to help test Royal Guard applicants, back when that was a thing. You don't have a soul, so it can't extrapolate soul attributes from your magic attacks, but we might get some insight as to what happened to you... why you have the memories you do, that is.”

“...sure. Alright, let's go with that. How many bullets? Does pattern matter?”

“No, and just the one bullet is fine. Closest to the center that you can get.”

A pellet shot out from Flowey and slammed into the center of the target. Alphys walked over and peered at the digital counter on the outside rim. “...huh. That's interesting. I thought they'd be higher.”

Flowey bristled with annoyance. “What? What's wrong with my numbers?”

“It's not your numbers, it's the scanner. And I was being sarcastic. Everything is nines. 99 AT, DF, SPD, INV... even EXP, LV and CAP are all nines. I think it's trying to solve a divide by zero equation, since you don't have a soul with attributes to solve for.”

“...I thought calculators were supposed to automatically shut down when you tried to divide by zero.”

“In normal arithmetical operations yes, dividing by zero is an exercise in futility. But in physics, especially magic physics, you ignore any term of the equation at your peril, no matter what that term solves for on its own. But that's not exactly pertinent to our situation now. I'll have to come up with something else.”

“Hey, what about your phone thingy? I know from Papyrus that you did an end run around the hardware size by using dimensional magic, using Sans' design.”

Alphys shook her head. “That's just a relay for the soul scanner. It works just as well on monsters as humans, but the key word is soul. The scanner wouldn't even know you're there.”

“Ah. Snubbed by technology again. Just my luck.”

“I'm not giving up on this, Flowey. We will figure out what's going on, how you ended up the way you did. And then we can do something about it. Whatever it is. But I'm afraid I've run out of things that I can try today.”

The flower monster looked away from Alphys. “Yeah, I get it. I guess it was worth a shot. No pressure.”

“...Flowey? Are you... are you crying??”

“No, of course not. I just... the air is really dry so it's a reflex action.” Flowey half burrowed into the ground. “When you get the next idea, call Frisk. They'll let me know. I need to, I should, I have
a doctor's appointment at the dentist bye.”

The flower disappeared beneath the earth, and Alphys stared at the lawn for a bit, trying to sort out her feelings. Eventually she shook her head and went inside the house again, trying to reconcile what she knew had to be true with what she had just seen.
“Good morning Ebott's Wake! You are listening to The Morning Rush on KEBT, broadcasting on location at the Ebott's Wake Memorial Auditorium! I am, and always shall be, Brett 'The Brett' Brinkman and sitting next to me? You know him! You love him! It's DJ Pantz!”

“Sup.”

“We are here at the Memorial Auditorium today for the much expected, much anticipated State of the Kingdom Address. Monsters and humans are filling up the place and not long ago Undyne ran inside in full plate mail. Which was both cool and terrifying.”

“Just like old times! WAH HAH HAH!”

“Whoa! Uh, hey Gerson. Didn't see you there, sneaking up behind me where I can't see anything. So, uh, what are your thoughts on this Address, as long as you're here?”

“Well, it's been a while since we had a shindig like this! And it's nice to see all the young folks all excited about something. I just hope the queen remembers to turn off her microphone before she hands it to Old Fluffybuns this time! WAH HAH HAH!”

“...well. That was interesting. That was Gerson, The Hammer of Justice; archeologist, veteran, and antique appraiser. You know, might just be me jumping to conclusions, but I never expected a monster that resembled a giant turtle to have so much energy.”

“It's like I always tell you Brett. You can't judge a monster by the size of his stock portfolio.”

“You have literally never said that to me in all the time we worked together. Except just now, obviously.”

“Traditions have to start somewhere. Ah, speaking of traditions, it's Elder Puzzler! Glad to see you here today, sir! If you'd like to share your thoughts with the people of Ebott's Wake?”

“PAH! Unless the King and Queen are bringing back spike traps and tile switches, this whole thing is a waste of time! What's the point of getting to the surface if we have to discard our native culture?!”

“Well, there's sunlight. Fresh air. Abundant food and space. Access to the human internet. Not having to sell hamburgers made of sequins and glitter in a restaurant built inside of a dormant volcano. Also, not to overplay devil's advocate here, but humans do have spike traps. They just reserve their use for the police, and they only deploy them to catch criminals.”

“Well what's the point?! It's not even a puzzle is it? When you can just take the long way and not rob anybody!”

“Actually that's just it. The puzzle, if you can apply monster terms to human culture, is how to rob people and get away with it.”

“...THAT'S THE DUMBEST PUZZLE IDEA I'VE EVER HEARD IN MY LIFE!”

“I think I should point out now, many humans do love puzzle games, enigmas, mysteries, anything where you have to think your way through a complex process. It's just very few of them want to have to figure out the murderer in a whodunnit every time they go to the store for some milk. That's
“...and that was Elder Puzzler, everybody. Wow, we just got a surge of people coming in.”

“Indeed we did, Burgie. There's Dr. Stanton, who listeners may remember provided some valuable insight last night into the evolution of the culture of Ebott's Wake, especially over the past few years. I can also see the Dean of the Ebott's Wake Community College, Fredrick Callahan. There's also Century Gothic, current head of the Mass Communications program at the college, and her sister League Gothic who, uh, I think still works at the fishery? Don't quote me on that. And right behind them is everyone's favorite conspiracy theorist, Quentin Forsythe. I'd ask him to come over and give his opinion on the Address but there is a clear possibility that he would monopolize the broadcast for the next hour and a half.”

“Yeah. And for all you Forsythe Fanatics out there, that's why we don't accept his calls anymore. He's not being censored, he didn't get too close to something, and we're not in on anything trying to suppress his ideas. He just goes on and on and on, and we are legally obligate to take breaks for station ID, public service announcements, and stuff like that. So please stop calling in on his behalf.”

“Tra la la. The human that looks for the history behind history. Looking for himself. Tra la la.”

“Oh, hey... you. I'm sorry, I don't think we've been introduced. Brett Brinkman, KEBT Radio.”

“I am the riverman. Or am I the riverwoman? It doesn't really matter.”

“I... will take your word on that. Dare I ask why they call you the river... person? I assume it has something to do with a river.”

“I got this one Brett. The underground river that brought us so much human stuff reached every part of the cavern, and the riverboat pilot ferried people from place to place. It was a real time saver.”

“I see. And what is your name, uh...?”

“Tra la la. Names are the sounds that others give us to match what they feel when they think of us. But, there are some who call me Tim.”

“Okay. Thank you, Tim. I have the feeling I am going to regret this, but what are your thoughts on today's Address?”

“Tra la la. The crown is very heavy today. Tra la la.”

“If you mean that Asgore probably has a lot on his plate right now, we can definitely agree on that.”

“Tra la la. Politics is the art of the possible. Solutions to political problems are impossible.”

“Well, that would certainly explain the last two hundred years. Or two thousand, really.”

“Beware the man from the other world. Kindness can be the greatest cruelty. Tra la la.”

“Wait what?”

“Tra la la. I may see you again. Or I may not. It doesn't really matter. Tra la la.”
“...Why does, uh, 'Tim' keep saying that?”
“Hey, everyone needs a hobby.”
“...okay then. Guess we'll move on to-”
“hOi!”
“GAH! Oh. Hi Temmie! Glad to see you here today.”
“TeM pARtcipat in DemcraZZY!”
“Yeah, that's... that's actually a really apt term for our government and political climate these days. And I see you've brought your 'Tem Shop' box with you today.”
“yaYA! Go tO TeM ShoP!”
“But if the box is here, that means we're already at the Tem Shop.”
“WHOA!!!! DAS FAST!!!”
“Uh... can you not try to pet me right now? Personal space please.”
“Bbut! SucH a CUTE!!!”
“Uh... thanks?? I guess? But I do have a job to do, and I'm on the clock. Sorry. Anything you want to say to the people of Ebott's Wake, Temmie?”
“hOi! an... bOi!”
“That covers just about everything... oh, there's Lesser Dog, come out from backstage... looks like Undyne's coming to get him. Oh well, there's always one thing that goes wrong, right? So if they get it out of the way before the event, the event itself should go off without a hitch.”
“While your logic makes sense, that has certainly never helped us out. Oh, hey, look who just came in. Everybody's favorite spooky DJ Napstablook and HNGGGKGH.”
“And Mettaton. Who is coming over here. Well, that's just great. It's been nice knowing you everybody.”
“Mr. Brinkman, Burgie, how wonderful to see you today!”
“Well, we go where the news is. Speaking of news, what are your thoughts on the Address?”
“I can't pass up a chance to see so many fans in a single spot!”
“Well, that's... I don't know why I would be surprised by that answer. Is there anything you hope to be addressed during the, uh... Address?”
“My dear, I'm more than happy with whatever the King and Queen and Ambassador have in store for us. They've all done a marvelous job to date and I expect that trend to continue for a very long time. Oh, but I'd best get to my seat before your co-host explodes. I know, Burgie, I missed you too. Ta-ta!”
“...holy sh- shenanigans. I am really impressed right now. You looked like you were going to kill somebody!”
“...that's not off the table.”

“...okay, well, I really hope this event starts soon because speaking of tables, Burgie is leaving indentations in ours. But that doesn't look like that's going to happen, uh, hey you!”

“Huh? Me?”

“Yes, you. What is your name and what are your thoughts about the State of the Kingdom Address?”

“Uh, I'm Justin Carrow, and I thought I was supposed to be the sound guy for today but the Arts Council couldn't have bothered to tell me that the plan was changed until literally six minutes ago, so that's just great.”

“Well... I shouldn't throw more gas on the fire, but to be fair timeliness is something they could stand to improve. So what brings you to the Address today sir?”

“Is this a trick question? I mean I just said. I guess now that I don't have an official reason to be here, I might as well hang out and see what happens. I mean, I'm not normally one for politics, but it's something to do until the Kludge Derby tomorrow.”

“Ah, that's right, I remember now. You are one of the six original entries.”

“Yes. I'm glad Eli finally decided to enter. I know he's been working on Kernel Panic since the last Kludge Derby. Can't wait to see it in action.”

“You're friends with Elijah McGraw?”

“Of course I am. I took shop class with him in high school.”

“Well, that'd do it. Oh, looks like they're starting. It's been a pleasure Mr. Carrow.”

“Stay classy Mr. Brinkman.”

“Heh. Burgie, you alright?”

“...better.”

“Glad to hear it. Mr. Metzinger is coming out now, along with Gloria Valiantine of the Arts Council and... oh, hey, the county commissioner. I thought she had to cancel because of allergies?”

“Well, with any luck the event won't be punctuated by constant sneezing. Although that would make for a great YouTube video. I mean I'm not advocating that should happen, I'm just stating-”

“YOU SUCK METZINGER!”

“-and that would be Hal Greene. Of course. I don't know why this surprises me, anymore than I know why we have seats less than six feet away from him.”

“There are things man is not meant to know, Burgie.”

“Yeah, but I'm a monster, so I should at least be entitled to read the Cliff's N-”

“Attention. Attention. Please stand if you are able for the national anthems of the United States of America and the Kingdom of Monsters.”
“...glad they went with instrumental for Star Spangled Banner.”

“Burgie can you not talk turning the anthem.”

“Sorry.”

“...And the monster anthem is starting now.”

“...Undyne looks really happy.”

“Burgie...”

“Sorry.”

“...Alright, everyone except the King is sitting down.”

“Attention! Your attention please. Thank you all for joining us today on this historic occasion. I'd also like to thank Chairman and Grand Poobah Metzinger for helping organize the events today, Mrs. Valiantine for the use of the Auditorium, and Ms. Lilian Hartley for joining us as well. I especially want to thank all the citizens of Ebott's Wake. When the Barrier was broken, we had no idea what to expect on the Surface. Fear, scorn, hostility... the best we dared to hope for was ambivalence or cautious disinterest. But you took us into your homes and made us a part of your community. Not a day goes by that I don't think about the kindness that you have shown all of us, and I can no more take that for granted than I can take the sun for granted, after so long in the dark. I am proud to be a member of this community, I am proud to be your neighbor, and I am proud to call each of you mine. Thank you.”

“WOW. That is a lot of clapping. Jeff, check the volume levels... yeah, thought so.”

“Damn Burgie. I've never wanted to applaud opening remarks for a speech before, but... I see why Asgore is the King. He really knows how to reach people.”

“Told ya. Everybody loves that guy.”

“I will now cede the floor to the Monster Ambassador, Frisk Dreemurr.”

“...ahem. The first order of business under discussion at this assembly is the subject of monster citizenship. It is the principle question from which all other subjects derive from and must be addressed first as a result. The Kingdom of Monsters predates the founding of the United States, as well as the claim by any nation on earth still extant as of this assembly, of Mt. Ebott or the surrounding lands. The Underground, not being an exemption to traditional recognized national boundaries because it was not suspected to exist, would otherwise qualify as de facto US territory and, with the dissolution of the Kingdom of Monsters as a legal entity, there is no nation to dispute that claim. Additionally the United States did not recognize any sovereignty claim made by the Kingdom of Monsters, because none was made, so that land also defaults to part of the United States under that principle. Implicitly, this should make all monsters natural born citizens of the United States, though without official recognition by the US Congress or retroactively through a
Supreme Court decision, this is not an officially recognized fact. Therefore as of this assembly, we believe that monsters are categorized as United States Nationals. US Nationals are not allowed to vote in state or federal elections, among other limitations, but they are also not subject to United States income tax, though other taxes do apply including sales, social security, *et cetera*.”

“Jesus Christ. Kid's ten years old and they're smarter than me.”

“Jealous, Brett?”

“Duh.”

“The benefits and drawbacks of full citizenship are open to subjective debate compared to status as Nationals, although one subject of political importance is the right to vote in elections. A draft of these issues, with the language formalized, has been written by the law firm of Banner, Banner and Paulson, and sent to multiple members of the United States Senate, House of Representatives, Department of the Interior, and Department of the Treasury, with the intent of prompting an official recognition either one way or the other. To speak plainly, once we have established where we stand, then we can decide whether to stay there or attempt to move someplace else.”

“Excuse me! Justin Carrow, with a question from the floor.”

“You are recognized by the assembly Mr. Carrow. What is your question?”

“If the status of monsters isn't officially recognized by any governing body, why did the Ebott's Wake City Council vote to recognize monsters as United States Citizens in the first place?”

“The necessity of establishing precedent in legal matters was paramount, as I understand from my records, and in that regard the City Council's vote reflected the intents and desires of the populace of Ebott’s Wake and the surrounding affiliated regions of the township. This also legally and formally establishes a process in the United States legal system, so that one way or another there must be a response from successively higher levels of government, either to support or refute each decision, until such time as it either is resolved to the satisfaction of all involved or the Supreme Court hands down a decision. To speak plainly again, it allowed us to get our foot in the door.”

“I see. Thank you. Question withdrawn.”

“Are there any further questions before we continue? ...very well. Our second topic involves the creation, ratification, and enrollment of membership of a not-for-profit organization functionally equivalent to a fraternal order or fellowship. This organization, as yet to be named, would provide a central social and cultural focus for monsters to maintain established traditions and folkways and also preserve them as an educational resource for later generations. Secondary goals may include political or legal activism on behalf of monsters and monster interests, unless the organization membership elects not to incorporate such functions into the charter, in which case another separate entity may be established for those purposes. We will now take questions on-”

“I've heard enough.”

“What the- BURGIE GET DOWN!”

“EVERYBODY DOWN ON THE GROUND! NOW!”

“ROYAL GUARD! DEFENSIVE STATIONS!”

“Frisk, get behind me- Frisk!”
“Gimme that microphone, asshole! Attention! This building is now under the jurisdiction of the Anti Monst-”

“Get your own microphone, weirdo! I'm the DJ!”

“Burgie don't antagonize the man with the gun!!”

“Gimme that or I'll send you straight back to hell- AUGH MY KNEE! YOU SONNOVA-”

“I can't go to hell, I'm all out of vacation days!”

“Jeff, we've got guys with guns all over the building get the police get the fire department hell get the freaking department of motor vehicles aw shit-”

“...you are listening to KEBT Radio. We are experiencing technical problems at this time. Please bear with us and stay tuned. ...You are listening to KEBT Radio. We are experiencing technical problems at this time. Please bear with us and stay tuned. ...You are listening to KEBT Radio. We are experiencing technical problems at this time. Please bear with us and stay tuned...”
The Choice

“NGAAAAAAAAAH!”

The barrage of spears abated for a moment and Undyne took the chance to scan the rest of the room. Monsters and humans in a panic and scrambling to get into and out of each others ways. Assorted humans with guns of some sort, all of whom were too preoccupied to care what anyone else was doing. A flash of blue light was followed by dozens of bones seeking out those guns, and over half of them lodged themselves in the barrels.

“BLUE ATTACKS ARE MOST DAMAGING TO TARGETS IN MOTION! LIKE BULLETS! I DO NOT RECOMMEND PULLING THE TRIGGER AT THIS TIME!”

Several attackers promptly leveled their guns at the tall skeleton, pulled the triggers, and were rewarded with several sounds nobody holding a firearm ever wants to hear. One weapon exploded, showering the unfortunate people next to him with blood and fragments of what used to be the barrel, as well as what used to be the man's fingers; their cries of alarm, pain and disgust were all drowned out by the gunman's screech of shocked agony.

On the other side of the building, a human up in the higher seats had grabbed one of the gunmen from behind and had managed to get him into a choke hold. In Undyne's peripheral vision on her right hand side (that is to say, Undyne's peripheral vision), another human had somehow gotten less than ten paces from Asgore, raising his weapon and firing. But Asgore wasn't there anymore; Undyne very nearly had a flashback to her sparring matches with the King years ago. A scythe solidified from the ether and sliced through the barrel of the weapon multiple times, leaving useless fragments to fall on the Auditorium floor. Undyne turned her head and saw the entire Snowdin Unit piled onto one attacker, growling and barking and swearing; 01 and 02 were tag-teaming another.

As counterattacks went, it was fairly decent. Of the thirty five attackers she had originally identified, it looked like twenty one had been dealt with in a matter of seconds. A fireball soared over her shoulder as the Queen got into the action, and one attacker that had taken cover behind the radio broadcaster table suddenly found out his safe refuge was no such thing. 'Make that twenty two' Undyne thought to herself, and began to laugh.

“HAHAHAHA! Is that the best you've got⁉️”

“maybe save the gloating for after the battle is over,” came a too calm voice from behind her.

“Sans what are you doing⁉️”

“keeping the humans safe. somebody has to.”

“They're safe! Help put these guys down before-”

A bullet ricocheted off of Undyne's armor, and she turned to face the human that had gotten a bead on her; before she could launch a spear at the man, his gun began to glow blue and he was lifted up towards the ceiling, then slammed down into the ground. Fortunately for him he let go of the gun at that point, and was spared the rest of the ride. His weapon was not so fortunate and parts rained across the auditorium floor.

“I MUST INSIST THAT YOU STOP SHOOTING MY BEST FRIEND IMMEDIATELY! AS WELL AS ALL OTHER SHOOTING! YOU ARE DISRUPTING THE STATE OF THE
A few of the attackers seemed to have gotten over the surprise counterattack and grouped together, but in so doing made a critical mistake by grouping together next to-

“How dare you!”

Metal legs swung out, knocking one man head over heels down the steps and into some people scrambling to leave their seats. Another one jumped back to avoid the same fate but slipped as his foot missed the step and ended up joining his friend anyway. The other two opened fire at point blank range, and the robot fell backwards, sparking but unmoving.

In spite of the chaos of battle and the energy surge that came with it, realization cut Undyne like a knife. **Mettaton was dead.** Maybe other people were dead, too. But Mettaton was dead. And Mettaton and Alphys were friends.

*How am I going to tell her?*

Apparently somebody was waiting for the lapse in concentration; Undyne felt something slam into her chest, over and over again, driving her back each time she tried to counter with a spear, until she collapsed on one knee. Her breathing was shallow and pained, and despite being hit in the chest and with the armor taking most of the kinetic force, her whole body ached. Clearly whoever had just shot her did not like her that much.

“Frisk, get down! What are you- **FRISK NO!**”

The queen's cry of alarm reached Undyne through the haze and she squinted her eye, staring up at the sudden change in light patterns; something or someone was in front of her now with arms stretched out to the sides to block the way to her, and with a sinking feeling Undyne realized who.

“Get out of my way you little brat!”

“No. I told you, Riley. I'll be right here between you and them.”

“I won't tell you twice.”

“I don't care.”

Undyne gulped and tried to form a spear to use as a crutch to get upright again before Riley shot his way through Frisk to get to her, but in her panic the magic wouldn't organize into the shape she wanted. Seconds seemed to last forever as Undyne waited for the next gunshot, trying to ignore the images her imagination was conjuring up...

“Well? Aren't you going to shoot me?”

“Goddammit kid! We're trying to help you!”

“Well, you're not. You're hurting my friends and family.”

“They're not your family! You're a human, they're monsters! Think about it!”

“I'm not moving. I'm not getting out of the way. You have to shoot me.”

**“Frisk!”** The queen was rapidly approaching the borders of hysteria, and Undyne could sympathize. Carefully, she managed to pull together a cluster of spears behind her, where Riley
wouldn't be able to see them.

Undyne growled. “Frisk, get down now.”

Without moving their head, Frisk answered back. “This isn't PE class right now Undyne. You can't tell me what to do.”

“The hell I can't!”

Frisk stepped forward, closer to Riley, arms still stretched out. “Look at me Riley. Ten years old. No weapon. Are you afraid of me?”

“Of course not.”

“But you're pointing a gun at me.”

“That's because there is a bloodthirsty fish lady behind you!”

“That's an excuse, and you know it. You're afraid of me. Good. Because if you shoot me, that's the end of the line for you. I don't have a gun. I don't have a knife. I don't even have a stick. I can't possibly hurt you. So you can never claim self defense. If you shoot me, you're telling the whole world that you don't really care about monsters or humans. All you care about is getting what you want, and nothing else. Your cause will fall apart because nobody wants to be associated with a child murderer. If they don't catch you right away, you'll spend the rest of your life running. And just maybe everyone else in the world will see what you've done, and decide that if this is the kind of man who hates monsters, then monsters must be alright.”

Looking past Frisk, Undyne saw that Riley was still aiming at the kid, but something was, well, different now.

“Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much?”

“You'd be the first. But fine, I'll dumb it down. Fight me or run away.”

Undyne spared a glance towards the rest of the building and was both pleasantly surprised and somewhat disturbed at what she saw; the Anti Monster League group had almost been completely routed. A handful of other humans had wrestled away various guns and what the AML had gained in surprise, they had not only lost, but had been pushed back onto the defensive.

In front of Frisk, Dwayne Riley glared at the humans child. “You really think the world will see things like you do?”

“You really think they won't?”

Undyne gritted her teeth and reached forward to grab Frisk's shirt. If push came to shove she could do just that, send the child flying a few feet out of the way and let Riley have it with all she had left. If he was still standing after that, the rest of the guard would finish him off-

“I... I am going to count to three.”

“Don't bother. I made my choice long ago. If you're going to shoot me, do it now. Otherwise, put the gun down. Here, I'll count for you. One. Two. THREE.”

Undyne's eye widened in shock as the human's hand shook, and then Riley lowered the weapon, dropping it on the floor with a loud clatter; as angry as his expression was, he wasn't aiming at
Frisk anymore.

“God damn fucking brat.”


Slowly, shakily, Undyne got to her feet, and put one webbed hand on Frisk's shoulder. “You alright kiddo?”

“...I think I'm going to throw up.”

“Frisk!”

Undyne turned and saw the queen rushing forward from the overturned tables that had provided some amount of cover to Frisk and the various human officials earlier, fire spilling from her hands. “Frisk don't you ever scare me like that again!”

“Mom, don't hurt him! He put down his gun! He's not a threat-”

“Pathetic.”

Undyne turned back to face Riley; the word had come from his direction, but it didn't sound like his voice.

The gunshot caught her entirely off guard, and she watched as Riley grabbed his shoulder and fell to his knees, yelling. Behind him, one of the other AML attackers had aimed his rifle at his leader and fired, then shifted his aim.

Later, Undyne could not remember hearing the second gunshot; her entire attention had been on seeing Frisk fall backwards against her. She was also vaguely aware of Toriel screaming, but again, the sound was drowned out in her mind by what she was looking at.

The man shifted his aim at the queen who had crouched down to grab Frisk, and shouted as Undyne came back to reality and readied her spears.

“My name is Jordan Cater, of the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi! You killed my daughter, and what you have done will be repaid a thousand times ov-”

Mr. Cater's defiant shouting ended as abruptly as it began. Spears, bones, fireballs, and even some lightning bolts slammed into the same spot, but the real show stopper was the pair of massive beams of raw magic energy. When the light show stopped and it was possible to see again, the man remained standing, and Undyne cursed as she readied more spears... until the man fell forward and collapsed on the auditorium floor.

Sans walked up to the body with some sort of giant skull monster floating next to him, which he patted on the nose affectionately. Next to him was Papyrus with a similarly shaped skull monster, only this one had an oversized pair of sunglasses taped onto it. Sans grinned at the body with a smile that had nothing to do with being happy and everything to do with being a skeleton, and his eye sockets were pitch black.

“Get. Dunked on.”
The sounds of clicking drew Undyne's attention away, and in a surreal moment Undyne saw Frisk tapping on their phone with one hand. The other hand seemed to hang limply at the end of an arm crowned by a shoulder covered in red, soaking through the dress shirt the kid had been wearing. A flash of blue light from the phone left behind a monster candy, and Frisk tore at the wrapper with their teeth, then lunged forward and stuffed the monster food into Dwayne Riley's swearing mouth.

“Eat now. Yell later.” they said breathlessly. Frisk's hand went back to the phone, but their actions had become slower and more clumsy.

“Frisk!” Toriel's shocked trance had been broken and she lunged towards the child, picking them up; her efforts were rewarded with a sudden scream and Frisk's good hand clutched at the spreading red stain on the opposing shoulder. The cell phone was dropped and clattered onto the auditorium floor.

“Tori. Frisk has been shot. We gotta get them to a hospital.”

Sans walked towards Toriel, then recoiled as he saw the expression on the queen's face. Her eyes were blazing both metaphorically, and in a more literal sense. No force on earth could have separated parent and child at that instant. Undyne reached out to place a hand on the queen's shoulder, then thought better of it.

“Your highness, Frisk needs help. Frisk needs a human doctor. Hold onto them if you must but we need to leave now.”

“My notes... they're all over the floor.” Frisk mumbled, and that confused statement seemed to reach the queen when logic and reason could not penetrate the fog of panic. A paw was raised and Frisk was surrounded in a faint, flickering, green halo.

“Mom. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do.”

“It's alright, Frisk. Everyone is alive. That is all that matters.”

“But. I thought I saw Mettaton get shot. Is he okay? Can he be fixed?”

Undyne closed her eye, the realization hitting her full force with the fight no longer occupying her attention. “Sorry, Frisk. I saw him go down too. I don't think there's anything Alphys can do-”

“THE REPORTS OF MY DEATH HAVE BEEN GREATLY EXAGGERATED!”

Undyne opened her eye and spun around to see a box rolling forward on a single wheel, dragging an AML member by the heel in each hand. “THESE MISCREANTS ARE GOING TO BE GETTING A STEEP BILL FOR SCRATCHING MY PAINT BEFORE THIS IS ALL OVER. TO SAY NOTHING OF THE LEGAL CONSEQUENCES OF GOING TO A PUBLIC EVENT AND FIRING WEAPONRY ALL WILLY-NILLY!”

“Is anyone else hurt?” Frisk asked, their voice stronger as Toriel's healing touch became stronger and steadier as she calmed down. “We need to call the hospital. Get ambulances.”

”and the police. and everybody else. assuming somebody hasn't already, which is very possible. still, couldn't hurt.”

In Undyne's peripheral vision, a human had walked down from the seats towards the main floor and was standing next to the fallen human that had called himself Jordan Cater, and nudged him with one boot. “Did dis guy say he was a Gawdian of dah Legacy of dah Magi?”
“Why are you talking like- oh.” Undyne turned her head and saw that blood was seeping out of the man's nose. “I guess he said something like that. I was really distracted though.”

“Huh. Guess dat explains some of der reaction way back when. Guy thought he wad avenging hid kid. I mean, he's an ass, bud now we have... I dunno. Reference.”

“Buddy, I can't understand half of what you're saying. But I do like your work. You were that guy choking one of the Anti Monster League gunmen earlier.”

“Util he hid me id de frikken node wid hid frikken rifle stock!” The man tried to wipe away some of the the blood, but it didn't seem to make much difference. “I had a spider donut ad dat helped but still stuffed up with what came out before.”

Undyne held out her hand and grinned. “Hey, as long as you were going to town on the jerks. You're... yeah, you're the guy who hooked up the sound system and got Poncho in trouble yesterday. Carrow, right? You're just turning up all over the place aren't you?”

“Yub.” Justin took Undyne's hand, shook it, and tapped Mr. Cater's body with his boot again. “I swear on a stack uh pancakes I heard dis guy's voice before. Dunno where or when or how.”

“Justin! I got Steve on the line! Police and paramedics are already en route. Radio station called them.”

Undyne looked up to see another human over by the radio announcer table, which Burgie and the human announcer were trying to put back together again. His hand was cupped over his cell phone mouthpiece and Burgie's hand shot up to cover one ear; the man's voice could really project.

Justin held up his hand in the circle and forefinger gesture that meant 'okay' and pointed a thumb at the fallen man. “Thangs Hal. Can you come down here and take a look ad dis guy?”

“Gimme a sec. We're trying to get KEBT back on the air.”

“Don tage too long.”

“So. No wonder we were defeated so quickly. We had a mole on the inside the whole time.”

Undyne turned to look at Dwayne Riley, sitting on the floor and sulking while holding the shoulder that had previously been shot, then followed his line of sight back to Justin, who had pulled some sort of rag out of his pocket and was blowing his nose noisily.

“Wait... you worked with Riled Up Riley??”

“Ugh. That came out of me? ...what? Oh, right. Right. He hired me on two non-consecutive occasions, first to turn his little club into something a little more organized, second to get him intel on the Soul Research Project. Which worked out well for us because we'd been trying to get somebody into the Anti Monster League for almost a year. Also, I'm not a mole. I prefer the term double agent. Sounds cooler. Not that I got much of a chance to do any double agent stuff. Like I said, it was more like a club. Almost nobody who wasn't a close friend of Riley was let in.”

“And I should have stuck with that,” Riley spat, glaring at the fallen human that had shot him. “I mean at least you I suspected would sell us out because you were a mercenary, but that asshole came out of nowhere, no documentation, he just knew things we needed to know and he knew that we needed them.”

“I think I got it! I think I got it! Brett, microphone!”
Undyne and Justin turned away from Riley and towards the radio table where DJ Pantz was holding some wires together. The other announcer, Brett, plugged a microphone into a socket on some of the electronics on the table and tapped it a few times.

“Jeff, it's Brett, can you hear me? ... yes. I'm seeing minor injuries all over the place, but other than that we're all okay. No piles of dust, no corpses... you took the words right out of my mouth. Hey, can we go live right now? I heard some interesting stuff and the town should hear it.”

Brett looked up at Burgie. “He says we got thirty seconds. Also he wants to hear from you.”

Burgie leaned down towards the microphone. “Hey, Jeff. My headset got broken in the scuffle so I'm just going to imagine all your replies as 'in accordance with the prophecy' in my head instead. If that's okay with you, say 'in accordance with the prophecy' now.”

Brett snorted. “Jeff wants me to tell you that despite the name paint chip, the stuff coming off of the walls in the auditorium is not edible and you need to stop eating it.”

“Hah!”

“And five, four, three... Attention citizens of Ebott's Wake. This is Brett Brinkman at the Memorial Auditorium. The State of the Kingdom Address has been interrupted and disrupted by an attack by the Anti-Monster League, which was thwarted by the Royal Honor Guard and a number of bystanders. Multiple injuries, but no, I repeat, zero fatalities. I understand that the Ebott's Wake Police Department has sent both a police and a paramedic response who should be arriving soon. Please do not call the police or the hospital requesting information on friends or loved ones, so that communication lines will remain clear to allow them to coordinate their efforts. Please do not attempt to travel physically to either location, or the auditorium itself, so that police and paramedics can travel quickly and easily as needed. What information we can provide right now is limited but we can report that a member of the AML claimed to represent the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi before being neutralized.”

Undyne heard the distant wail of sirens become louder as it got closer, and she was clearly not the only one.

“I can hear the sirens right now, it would seem help has arrived. We will have to sign off for the moment, but we will be back as soon as is practical. Remember. Stay off the phones, off the roads, and don't panic. This is Brett Brinkman signing off.”

The building's front doors opened up and police began to pour in, followed by Emergency Medical Technicians. And at the vanguard of the force...

“Jesus Tap Dancing Christ.”

“You think it looks bad now? You should have been here earlier.” Hal Greene had walked down to the auditorium floor and made his way over to Officer Steve, who was still dumbstruck by what he was looking at. “I counted at least thirty guys before I got my hands full.”

“Thirty five.” Undyne, Justin, and Sans all corrected at once.

“Hey, cut me some slack. I'm a mechanic. I don't have any fancy Army training. Or Royal Guard training. Or...” Hal turned to look at Sans. “Uh... hot dog... seller... training.”

“not surprising. ya gotta stare at a hot dog for hours at a time. you might say it's-” Sans' build up to what would have inevitably been some sort of hot dog pun was interrupted as a small child collided with him; Frisk, finally free of Toriel's protective embrace, tackled the short skeleton in a hug
while sobbing.

“I screwed up. I screwed up. I couldn't think straight, I panicked,” Frisk slurred out, occasionally interrupted by hiccups. The skeleton patted the child on the back.

“It's okay, Frisk. You're alright. Everybody's alright. We're all okay. Everybody's right here. That's what matters.”

“QUITE RIGHT, FRISK! EVEN WITH THE ADVENTAGE OF SURPRISE, THE ANTI MONSTER LEAGUE WAS INCAPABLE OF INFlicting ANY LASTING HARM!”

Frisk broke off from hugging Sans and tackled Papyrus's legs. “You... you... Papyrus, you were amazing. I saw... I saw how you jammed their guns. That was awesome.”

“IT WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE AWESOME HAD THEY HEeded MY WARNING NOT TO PULL THE TRIGGERS! THEN PEOPLE WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN Pelted BY SHRAPNEL AND... EUGH.”

Somehow, it was Papyrus's words that finally shifted Undyne's focus back towards the people in the auditorium. The air was filled with cries of alarm, groans of pain, angry remarks as tempers flared, a fair amount of crying, and no small amount of background noise as people tried to keep each other calm (or, in some cases, the opposite) or checked on each others well being, or attempted to make phone calls to friends and family. The sounds and sights had always been there, but the heat of battle had narrowed her focus to a razor's edge... having it all come back at once was disorienting in the extreme.

The ambassador ran up to Asgore and grabbed his legs in a similar hug, and a few moments later, let go and ran over to Undyne, who knelt down to get on their level.

“Frisk, what the hell were you thinking?!”

“I... I don't know, I just-” Frisk stopped short, staring at Undyne's furious expression.

“Don't you ever. Ever. EVER. Put your life on the line like that. Especially not for me. My job is to protect you. Not the other way around.”

The human child looked down at the floor of the building, tears running down their face. “I couldn't watch you die. I couldn't. I panicked. I'm... I'm...”

“...hey, c'mere punk.” Undyne pulled Frisk towards her and hugged them. “I'm sorry I snapped like that. You just scared the hell out of me, that's all. But in the future, remember to take care of you first. Makes my job simpler and easier. Okay?”

“...oh god, everything's so screwed up.” Frisk choked out. “The building's a mess, there's blood everywhere, people are freaking out-”

“Ahem,” came a cough from one side, and Undyne looked up at Justin's still bloodstained face. “The first gunfight is always the hardest. That stuff's pretty common. Crying, shakes, throwing up, sometimes fainting or freezing up, or worse. It's good that it's happening now, after it's over. You know, instead of during? So. You're already ahead of the curve, kid.”
“Yeah. Guy's got a point. And you totally stared down Dwayne Riley. You beat him without a weapon. That's so hardcore!” Undyne grinned as Frisk seemed to calm down and even smiled back a little. “Total battle of wills going on there! Alphys is going to nerd out when we tell her. Oh. Oh hell. I should call her. If she's been listening to the radio she must be losing her mind right now.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Hey. I am. I have never been. So happy. For somebody to be late to something. It was bad enough watching Mettaton go down.”

“OH, FRISK DEAR, I DIDN'T MEAN TO CAUSE ANY UNDUE DISTRESS. JUST A DEATH SCENE TO GET THEM TO LET DOWN THEIR GUARD AND GIVE ME AN OPENING.”

“Well. It convinced me. You're good. Too good...”

“FRISK, ARE YOU ALRIGHT? YOUR COMPLEXION IS VERY SICKLY, EVEN FOR UNDER THIS GHASTLY LIGHTING.”

“I think I. I'm in shock. It's my first shootout and I'm still scared. If it's alright with everyone. If it's alright. I'm gonna pass out. I just need. I just.”

Frisk fell to their knees, and from there fell forwards, catching themselves by the hands, but one arm gave out and Frisk leaned over on that side, slamming that shoulder into the ground and eliciting a howl of pain from the child.

“Frisk! What is wrong?! Please, tell me!”

Justin stared at the child, then over at Dwayne Riley, who had one hand up as the police apprehended him, and the other somewhat lower. Justin looked back at Frisk as they were picked up by the queen and swallowed.

“Oh, shit. Steve! Get some paramedics over here right now! We need to get this kid to surgery five fucking minutes ago!”

Undyne turned to stare at Justin. “What do you mean?! The queen already healed them!”

“That's just it, look at the shirt. Look at the blood! It's all on the front, from the entry wound. It hasn't soaked all the way to the back, because there's no exit wound! Just like Riley over there!”

“But the queen didn't heal Riley- wait. Frisk's phone. Frisk pulled out some monster candy from storage and made him eat it after they got shot.” Undyne blinked, then turned to look at Frisk, then at the paramedics running over with an ambulance stretcher. “Wait, does the AML have bullets that wreck healing magick?!?”

“If only it was that simple. The queen patched up the entry wound and stopped the bleeding, and that's all that happened. The bullet is still inside Frisk. And god only knows what kind of damage it's doing right now.”
“Patient, Human, Ten years old, female. X-Rays show bullet fragments inside the left shoulder.”

“I don't see a gunshot wound. Double check the paperwork.”

“The wound was healed over with monster magic. Just look at the discoloration. Internal bruising, internal bleeding.”

“...alright, prep her for surgery. Isaac we have more people coming in so you scrub up too. Somebody call Jamie and tell her that her day off just got canceled.”

Frisk blinked against the light and tried to process the words around her. They were in a hospital, yes, but beyond that it was hard to think straight. The light got much less bright and some man in hospital scrubs appeared holding a tiny flashlight.

“Patient is responsive now, but definite signs of possible internal bleeding.”

“This. This is why healing magic is a bad idea. The band aid mentality.”

“Hey, it kept her from bleeding out while they brought her in. That's not nothing.”

“Scrub up, dammit! Clock's ticking.”

“Can.” Frisk swallowed and tried again. “Can you guys not fight while you work on me. It's very stressful. More than the bullet.”

“Responsive and showing signs of levity. That's a pretty good sign. Okay kid, I need you to answer a couple of questions for me. Can you do that?”

Frisk felt the darkness growing on their peripheral vision and closed their eyes. “No. I think I'm gonna pass out again...”

“Now's not a good time. Stay with me, kid! ...shit.”

“Frisk what the hell were you thinking?!”

“I...I don't know, I just...” Frisk stopped short, staring at Undyne's furious expression.

Frisk's eyes shot open as a sharp, stabbing pain started in their shoulder, and they gritted their teeth trying not to cry out.

“Whoa, everything just tensed up. Aw hell, she's awake! I thought you had her sedated!”

“We can't sedate her with that much blood loss!”

“Then give her a local so I can pull out these fragments without her trying to fight me!”

“That. Is not my fault. Reflexes.” Frisk slurred as the clarity that came with pain faded away.

“...hey, kid, we're not blaming you, alright? Just hold on for a bit. We'll get you all fixed up in no
“Will I. Will I be able to play the piano?”

“Sure. I mean, if you already knew how.”

“...heard that joke before huh?”

“Yeah. We get a lot of comedians in here.”

There was some subdued laughter from some other people in the operating room, and Frisk started to grin before the darkness pulled them back under.

“M...macaroni and freeze.”

Frisk sidestepped the icy blades spinning through the air and glared at the bird monster. “That's not funny. It doesn't even count as a clever pun.”

“Is your flesh as rotten as you?”

“You can't just go around attacking strangers with ice magic if they don't even give you a pity laugh for your stupid not-jokes! Do you think your parents would be proud of you for that? Forcing people to give you the response you want?”

The monster's eyes widened in shock, then squeezed shut. Tears began to form, crystallizing into snowflakes as soon as they started falling.

“...oh god, you're right. Dad was right. I really am a disgrace to the family.”

Frisk felt a knot in their stomach and held their hands up. “Wait, wait, that's not what I meant-”

The monster covered its face in its wings and ran into the trees; in its haste and emotional state, it didn't notice something fall onto the snow. Frisk walked over and picked up a small cloth sack and untied it; inside were more of those gold coins with that strange symbol on Toriel's robes on one side, and the profile of a monster with massive curved horns on the other.

“...I'll give them back if I see that monster again...”

Frisk's eyes opened again, then squeezed shut against the operating room's lights.

“She's back! She's back.”

“Good. Keep that adrenaline handy just in case. We can't stop for the defibrillator and I don't want to have to do chest compressions with this artery like this.”

There was a loud crash of metal on metal and Frisk jerked their head, trying to see what happened.

“God dammit!”

“Somebody pick up that tray and count the fragments! Then count them again!”

“Heart rate's spiking, respiration's spiking, kid don't do this right now! Kid!”
Frisk opened their eyes and stared into the maw of the Extractor. Down in the lab basement, with only emergency lighting, the machine had looked even more sinister than its mere shape would imply, and not just because the shape was terribly familiar. Frisk got up to leave, or tried to; looking down they saw metal bands on their wrists holding them to some sort of operating table. Turning their head to one side, Frisk could see Sans, Alphys and Dr. Aster standing at a computer console.

“Sans, what's going on? Sans??”

Sans looked up from the console to stare at Frisk. His eye sockets were black and empty, and he looked back down at the computer again.

“This is why I never make promises.”

“DT Extractor at eighty percent. Starting sequence.” Dr. Aster's voice.

Frisk looked up at the machine, which started to glow... and in the dark pits that had resembled eye sockets, something began to grow. Frisk stared at the machine... and the machine stared back.

Frisk screamed.

“Jesus Christ!”

“Hey, I'll take whatever sign of life we can get.”

“Nurse, suction! Suction! I can't see anything!”

“The artery isn't holding. Get another bag of O Positive. We'll have to come around again.”

A masked face appeared in Frisk's field of vision. “Kid, can you hear me? Everything's under control. Just relax.”

“What's happening? Am I dying?!”

“Not on our watch kid. Just calm down. Your heart rate is all over the place. Try thinking about kittens or something.”

“Oh god. The vein grew back around one of the fragments.”

The masked face looked away and then back at Frisk. “Kid, I'll be right back.”

“There's too much blood, we have to cauterize.”

“We can't cauterize what we can't see! Just gimme more suction!”

The sunset should have been beautiful. Any amount of sunlight should have been beautiful after so long in the dark. But Frisk barely heard Undyne and Alphys and Papyrus raving over the sights and sounds and scents of the surface world, or anything else.

“YES! FRISK WILL BE THE BEST AMBASSADOR! AND I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WILL BE
THE BEST MASCOT! I'LL GO MAKE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION!"

One by one, the ledge cleared out as monsters ran down the mountain... until.

“Frisk, you came from here, did you not? So you must have somebody waiting for you.”

Frisk looked down the mountain at the town, then back up at Toriel. “I... I want to stay with you.”

“Can they mom? Can they?! They can have my bed!”

“Azzy you would give your bed to a moldsmal if they asked you.”

“That only happened once!!”

Frisk looked at the teasing children, then looked up at Toriel, and their heart sank at the expression on the queen's face.

“What?? Oh... oh Frisk. I am sorry. Please, do not be offended. You are a wonderful child. Kind and funny and wise beyond your years. But with these two, I'm afraid I have my paws full.”

Frisk nodded and looked down. “I kind of suspected. But. I had to ask.”

“Frisk, what is wrong? You do have somebody waiting for you... or...?”

“It's alright. Don't worry about me. Uh. I'll just watch the sun go down some more. You should probably catch up with Asgore before he puts his foot in his mouth again.”

“Foot in mouth? I do not understand.”

“It's a human thing mom. Don't worry, I'll explain on the way down.”

“Well. All right Chara. I will trust your judgment.”

The boss monster took one of each child's hands in hers and turned towards the mountain trail.

“Come along now! Everyone is waiting for us!”

Frisk turned to watch the trio walk down the mountain, but looked back towards the sunset as Asriel turned his own head to look at them. It was a stupid idea, a selfish one. They saw a happy family and their first thought was how to become part of it, never considering if there was even a place for them to begin with....

“It's not going down. It's still rising.”

“Ice packs. We gotta cool her down now.”

“Jesus Christ. Even if she had auto immune disorders it shouldn't spread this fast.”

“Hey kid, can you hear me? Can you see me? Come on, gimme a sign. A curse word even. Anything. I promise we won't tell your parents.”

Frisk's hand (the hand that they could still feel, anyway) reached up and grabbed the doctor's wrist.

“I'll take it. Stick around alright? You're running a very high fever and we're trying to cool you off. We need to know, are you allergic to penicillin? Or any other antibiotic?”
“Doctor. You have to tell Sans. Tell him I couldn't start over. Not after all this. I can't just throw it away. He'll understand.”

“You can tell Sans yourself, kid. Are you allergic to anyYEAGH!”

Frisk's grip on the doctor's wrist squeezed down as hard as they could. “Promise me. Promise me you'll tell him.”

“Jesus kid let go of my wrist and I'll promise you all the gold in Fort Knox!”

Frisk let go and the doctor shook his hand.

“Wow. What say you put some of that grip into holding on to life, okay?”

“You promised. You tell him. Don't forget.”

The darkness was growing again, and Frisk closed their eyes, hearing but not really listening to the words from the medical professionals around them.

“By the way, it's not Fort Knox that has the gold.”

“What? When did they move it?”

“They didn't, it's just the wrong name. Fort Knox is the army base. The gold is kept in the Bullion Depository.”

“I think you watch the History Channel to much.”

“Actually I got that from the American History Channel. I stopped watching the History Channel after Ancient Aliens.”

“Good call. Alright, that's the last of the samples. Get those down to the lab five minutes ago....”

Not only light, but sound was consumed by darkness. Space, time, all of it became nothing. There was the barest fragment of a thought, and a broken memory, that surged back against oblivion...

“Dark. Darker. Yet Darker. The Darkness keeps growing. The Shadows Cutting Deeper...”

And at the very end, just before even that was lost...

Frisk heard somebody call out for help.

“How long... do human medical procedures normally take?”

The waiting room was crowded, but at least new people were no longer rushing inside. Toriel, Asgore, Sans and one of the humans that had helped fight back against the Anti Monster League attack all stood clustered in one corner, as the chairs filled up with various varieties and flavors of walking wounded.

“Actually this is pretty normal. Takes a while for everything to get put back together. I mean,
assuming all the parts are still there.”

“buddy can you not say stuff like that right now?”

“Sorry. Hey, I think I heard Doctor Ross got called in, so your kids odds just went way up. She was the lady who stitched my thumb back on after I severed it working on the windmill. And, and! I got full nerve sensation back once I had one of those monster ice creams that blue dude was selling. So that literally covers everything. Doesn't it?”

“there’s a lot more at stake here than Frisk being able to play the piano.”

“Sans, that's enough.” Asgore raised a cautionary paw. “Mr. Greene, thank you for accompanying us to the hospital, and for helping us deal with much of what the doctors and nurses requested of us. I'm afraid our experience in human sickness has been... limited, and there is much of that meager experience that is painful to remember. And with the differences in physiology... monsters are not accustomed to illness. We have only a few diseases. Humans have so many.”

“heh. remember when Frisk had the flu back in November? and they joked that they should have gotten the flu prevention shot instead of just the flu shot? they pulled out of that just fine.”

Toriel smiled weakly. “And even then, they were adamant that I provide them with their school books so that they could keep up with everyone else. Though perhaps they could have waited to complete some of the essay assignments.”

“i dunno Tori. they made a pretty persuasive argument for the invention of the Slinky being the root cause of the creation of the internet.”

“But the assignment was a book report on Jules Verne's From The Earth To The Moon.”

“...oh. i didn't know that. yeah, in the future we shouldn't let Frisk work on school stuff when they're sick.”

“Excuse me? You're Frisk's parents, correct?”

Asgore and Toriel turned to see a man in hospital scrubs standing with a clipboard in one hand.

“Sorry to bother you but Frisk is having a fever spike. We think the entry wound was a vector for infection and we need to know if Frisk is allergic to any antibiotics. We can't find anything about that on the earlier paperwork.”

“Allergic to... what??” Asgore blinked in confusion.

“Penicillin, Ampicillin, and so on.”

Hal stepped forward to address the two boss monsters. “Uh, human medicine includes chemicals called antibiotics, because they kill off bacteria that cause many illnesses. But sometimes when people are given them they have allergic reactions. The body panics, thinks the antibiotic itself is some sort of pathogen, and the immune system goes crazy trying to fight it off.”

“I... I do not... I do not know.” Toriel shook her head in a daze, and Asgore had to place one massive paw on her shoulder before she seemed to come back to reality.

The ringing of a cell phone startled everyone, given the tense nature of the situation and the subject matter. Hal fumbled with his pocket, pulling out his cell phone, and muttered an apology as he walked a short distance away. “Hal Greene. Talk.”
“hey, doc. what would happen to Frisk if you gave them antibiotics and they turned out to be allergic to them anyway-”

“What?!“ Hal's sudden yelp derailed the conversation yet again and he turned to look at the Dreemurr's with a shocked expression on his face. “No, no! I heard you the first time! Shit Mike... look, I'll call Justin, you call Joe... no, Steve's at the Auditorium with Joe. Least he was when I left... alright, I'll call Joe too. Just be careful out there!” Hal no sooner than ended the call when the phone began to ring again. “Hal Greene. Talk.... Joe?! I was just about to call you! ...what. Oh my god. No, Mike just called me. I was going to call Justin and you, so can you call Eli? ...okay, not complaining or doubting, but I'd love to know how you know that... oh. Okay, but if I'm doing that I can't call Justin... I know, right?! This is exactly why I wanted to set up a Skype room! Everyone can talk to everyone else at the same time instead of playing fucking phone tag! Alright alright. We'll hold down the fort. Good luck.”

Hal looked at Sans and began snapping his fingers. “Hey, Sans! You know that giant skull thing with laser breath? Can you do that again?”

“Maybe a couple times. Why?”

“Because apparently everybody miscounted the Anti Monster League guys. From what Mike and Joe told me, it sounds like the attack on the Auditorium was supposed to be a signal for everyone else. And maybe some of them are heading straight for the hospital. So we probably need to stop them.”

“you were talking to Joe Stanton, right? recognized his voice.”

“Yeah. We're old buds. We took shop class together.”

“huh. small world.”

“Nah, small town.”

“don't suppose you want to explain how he knows what he knows?”

“We probably have time for the Cliff's Notes version. I need to get Justin and Steve, maybe they'll pass on the hospital if there's an obvious police presence. Turns out a lot of the protestors outside All Fine Labs today brought more than just signs and racial slurs. Lab is under lockdown.”

Sweat beaded on Sans' skull. “Oh god. Dad and Alphys.”

“If the lockdown had been breached I think Joe would have had something to say about that. And there's all that crazy technology from the Underground, right? They should be safe.”

Hal had no sooner put his phone up to his ear than the waiting room doors opened as the nurse left, and at the same time a tall skeleton, armor clad fish lady, and a very winded human sprinted inside. The human pulled out his ringing cell phone and stared at it as the ringing abruptly stopped.

“Justin! Hey, we've got a problem. The AML is attacking All Fine Labs, the Librarby, and they're on their way to the hospital and who knows where else.”

“I... I know... Steve... got... a call... from Eli... it's everywhere... fuck man... how the hell did you two run... so far and so fast without... passing out?!“ Justin asked, looking at Undyne and Papyrus.

“THERE'S NO SECRET TO MY LEGS! JUST HARD WORK AND PERSEVERANCE! ALSO I DON'T HAVE LUNGS AND SO I AM NOT LIMITED BY OXYGEN EXCHANGE.”
Undyne grinned. “You think that was fast? Once I made it from my place to Papyrus's house in Snowdin in under ten seconds. Now that was a workout!”

“Showoff...” Justin waved in the general direction of the Auditorium. “Steve's taking statements. They won't attack. The same place twice. With police. And their own guys losing. And if they do. It'll be a short fight. So everyone there is still safe. But the police can't cover the whole town. It's not that sma-”

The waiting room flashed with blue light and when the light receded a tall skeleton and short yellow lizard, both wearing lab coats, appeared out of nowhere.

“UNDYNE!”

The lizard ran over and Undyne leaned over to hug them, wincing as they did so. “Ow. Hey nerd. Might have been safer for you in the lab, but it sure is nice to see you-”

“You're hurt!” Alphys touched the dents in the armor with her claws. “You didn't say anything about that in your text!!”

“We had bigger things to worry about. Besides, I'm fine. Just a little sore.”

“You are not fine!” Alphys had pulled out their cell phone and pointed it at Undyne. “Look at your numbers!!”

Undyne took the phone, switched over to selfie mode, and started to sweat. “Uh. Wow. I knew Riley didn't like me, but I didn't realize it was that bad.”

“Sit down. Now. I brought some food just in case.”

Justin's phone rang again and he looked at Hal, who shrugged. The phone was held up to Justin's ear. “Justin Carrow. What is it? ...oh. Hah. Wish I coulda seen that. What? No, I'm fine. I just ran all the way from the Auditorium. To the hospital... yes. Thank you for that. Jerk. Alright, stay safe man. We'll keep you posted.”

The phone was returned to its pocket and Justin looked at Hal. “So, the good news is that Mike drove off the AML outside the Librarby.”

“How?”

“Like I said, he drove them off. He got in his truck and just chased them until they scattered and broke up. That's the good news. The bad news is he says it looks like they're heading our way, to meet up with the guys already coming towards the Hospital.”

“Gee. Wasn't that nice of him.”

Justin shrugged. “Look, I told you guys from the very start. No battle plan survives contact with the enemy, and that's a two way street.”

“Yeah, yeah. Alright, what do we have to work with for defenses? In case the police are spread too thin to get here in time? I have...” Hal emptied both pockets and held up the contents. “My multitool, a paperclip, and a punch card from the Stop And Go.”

“Hmm. That oughta put the fear of god into them. 'Tremble before me, I only need to buy three more chicken strip baskets and my next one is free!' Not that I've got you beat. Swiss Army Knife, para cord, and a USB stick.”
“Hmm.” Hal looked over at Undyne, who was definitely preoccupied; Alphys had stopped just short of shoving monster food down her throat. “The Captain seems to be busy, but we still have two other heavy hitters. Do you think we can get to the garage and back in time to help?”

“Not likely. My place is closer but still not close enough for a round trip. And all I have is a tear gas launcher anyway.”

“Wait, what do you mean about heavy hitters?” Dr. Aster asked.

“the whole reason Frisk is in the hospital is one guy decided to shoot them. ain't nobody here gonna take that sitting down.”

“And so we used our special attacks! He was very nearly blasted to smitheroons!”

“Yup. nobody's gonna miss that waste of water.”

Dr. Aster held up his cell phone, pointing it first at Sans, then at Papyrus. “Was anyone else attacking this target at the same time?”

“Oh yeah. there were spears, fireballs, lightning bolts, hurtful words, and I think somebody threw some dirty socks at the guy too. it was a real team effort.”

Dr. Aster turned, aiming his cell phone at Undyne, the Dreemurrs, and several of the humans, before putting it back in his pocket. “I don't suppose you remembered what I told you about crossing the beams?”

Sans stared, and then closed his eye sockets. “He's still alive isn't he.”

“Well, you two still have zero EXP. And if you both hit the guy with a blaster at the same time, that would have supercharged his INV after. I mean, if he survived that first hit.”

“...oops.”

“Well even if he did survive, that means he passed out! He'll have plenty of time to reconsider his actions once he wakes up... inside the police holding cell!”

“...suppose there is that. Frisk did everything but bend over backwards to talk down Riley, so they'd probably want the same chance extended to this cater jerk-”

“Frisk!”

The queen's outburst turned every monster head towards the patient being moved down the hallway outside the waiting room, and Toriel ran outside only to see that several nurses had to block the path to the moving gurney.

“Ma'am, you can't see Frisk right now. She's still in critical condition. We need to get her set up in Intensive Care. We will let you know as soon as possible when you can see her.”

“But Frisk is right-”

“Mrs. Dreemurr. Your daughter has a fever of 105 degrees, she is very sick right now. You have to understand. We are doing everything we can, but there is a real possibility that Frisk could die if this is not handled correctly.”
The queen stared at the nurse for a few seconds, then turned and walked slowly down the hallway.

“I... I do not understand... Frisk is human. Humans are so strong. How could this happen...”

Dr. Aster walked up to Toriel and placed a hand on her shoulder. “I'm sorry your majesty. But strength is relative. Just because humans are mostly physical matter doesn't make them invincible. Intent to harm means nothing to them, and that's all they have that we don't. If anything disrupts the structure of their bodies, be it a change of temperature or microbial contamination or any amount of physical injury... it puts them at risk.”

“...now I see.” Toriel looked down at the floor and closed her eyes. “Every human that falls down is the same. They come. They leave... they die.”

“Hey. don't count out the kid yet. they had a fever when they had the flu too. they shrugged that off. Frisk convinced Dwayne Riley to put down his gun. a miracle comeback is not out of the question.”

“Excuse me?” A human wearing a white coat over hospital scrubs stepped into the hallway where the monsters and two humans were gathered. “I'm Dr. Ross, Chief of Surgery here. And you must be Frisk's parents,” the woman said, turning to Toriel and Asgore. “I'm sorry about what just happened. Ordinarily we take patients to rooms through alternate routes but we have a large number of people coming in and that is not an option.”

“No, I am the one who should apologize. I allowed emotion to cloud my judgment, and could have endangered my child's survival.”

“There's nothing to apologize about Mrs. Dreemurr. We see that all the time and we are trained for it. I came out here to talk to you about Frisk's condition right now. Frisk suffered considerable blood loss from internal bleeding and the gunshot itself served as an entry point for infection. I understand that you attempted to use some manner of healing magic on her not long after?”

“Yes, I... it did not occur to me that such a course of action could be harmful.”

“It wasn't, ma'am. You did fix a lot of damage. Unfortunately with the fragments of bullet still in there, any amount of motion would have caused them to tear through the tissue again. That was what caused the internal bleeding. I don't know if my colleague Dr. Akron has talked to you yet, but please disregard anything he may have said about how you shouldn't have used magic. You stopped the bleeding, you bought Frisk time to get here, and seconds are worth more than solid gold in this job.”

“I... thank you. I do not believe we have encountered Dr. Akron as of yet.”

“Then I'm glad I got here first. We were able to find all of the shrapnel and fortunately none of it severed any nerves, so Frisk should retain full sensory and motor control in that arm, but we had her under the knife for a long time and some of the blood loss may have interfered with that. We can't tell without her waking up and telling us. However, Frisk has a serious infection that is causing a high fever. We don't know what caused the infection to spread so fast, but we have ice and cooling packs on hand we are using to lower her internal temperature as much as possible. Any amount of prolonged high temperature can cause permanent brain damage, even if she survives.”

“Oh god.”

“Well... on that subject... it cannot hurt at this point to pray. I have been working here for a long time. I deal in hard medical facts. I have seen recoveries that I cannot explain from a purely
medical standpoint, and to speak frankly, there's no such thing as too many of those. I don't know what your religious position or practices are, or even if monsters have anything similar to what humans have. But we do have a chapel here on the ground floor, if it will help.”

“...thank you, doctor.”

Dr. Ross looked to the other monsters in the hallway. “Also, which one of you is Sans?”

“Down here. why?”

Dr. Ross looked uncomfortable. “Frisk was in and out of consciousness several times while we were in surgery. She was responsive and coherent every time, if naturally frightened. However, the last time before she went under, she told Dr. Simmons to pass on a message to Sans. And since he's scrubbing up for the next patient, I opted to bring the message to you. Frisk said something about how she couldn't start over or throw everything away after what had happened. She said you'd understand.”

Sans' eye lights went out.

“...excuse me, sir, are you alright?”

“I... I...” Sans looked up at his father, who had a similar expression of shock and alarm. “That can't... could you have misheard?”

“I don't think so. I was very close. But it is possible that the fever was already affecting her thought processes at the time. She may have thought she was saying something else. I just felt I needed to pass that along. Frisk was very insistent about it.”

“That... that must be it. Frisk never gave up on anyone or anything.”

“I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news. If you need anything the staff can help you. And it should go without saying that I hope Frisk recovers fully.”

As Dr. Ross headed back into the staff sections of the hospital, Sans turned around. He didn't seem to notice that so many eyes were upon him.

“Sans? What does that mean??”

Sans squeezed his eye sockets shut, then opened them again, still empty. “If Frisk actually meant what they said, it means that... they don't feel that they can keep going. That they think they aren't going to wake up. And we have to go on without them. I don't think that's what's going to happen... but I don't think we can rule it out either.”

The hallway was silent as the implications of the statement struck home.

“...WAIT, FRISK IS FEMALE?”

“Yeah, I'm a b-bit surprised at that too.”

Hal and Justin looked at each other, and Hal turned towards the monsters. “Okay, the way the kid's hair looks, it's hard to tell. I didn't know, the rest of us didn't know... but you're literally the kid's closest friends and family. How could you not know?”

“WOULD YOU BELIEVE THE SUBJECT NEVER CAME UP?”

“You have to understand, Mr. Greene,” Dr. Aster spoke up. “Monsters come in a variety of shapes,
sizes and varieties. Compared to the differences in physiology between, say, different elementals, the qualities of sexual dimorphism are easily lost in the shuffle if they are present at all. If we can't always tell who is what among members of our own species, spotting the differences in another species isn't a reasonable expectation.”

Hal scratched his chin. “Okay. That's fair. But you're saying the kid never brought it up??”

“THAT IS WHAT I SAID.”

“Wow. I don't even know how to respond to that.”

“Excuse me? Who here had the bright idea of healing a gunshot wound with the bullet still in it?”

All eyes turned to another doctor that had stepped into the hallway. Toriel narrowed her eyes. “That was my doing. You must be Doctor Akron. Doctor Ross mentioned you might stop by.”

“I'll bet. Listen to me. What you did put that girl's life in danger. You left contaminated shrapnel in an open wound and sealed it up without even trying to sterilize it.”

“I... I am not familiar with the details of human medical treatment—”

“Exactly! You have no business making those kinds of calls! All you did was make things worse! Even with the X-Rays we had to perform exploratory surgery to find all of those bullet fragm—”

Hal Greene suddenly pushed past the queen and stood face to face with Dr. Akron. “Hi there doctor! You sound cranky, you could use some fresh air!”

Before anyone could respond, Hal grabbed the doctor's shoulder, knelt down, pulled, and twisted in one seamless movement that left the doctor in a fireman's carry across his shoulders.

“What in the- PUT ME DOWN THIS INSTANT!”

“I can't put you down here, you silly billy! The fresh air is outside the building! Let's go! DAH NAH NAAAAAH DAH NAH NAHHHH....”

Every person in the hallway watched in confusion as Hal carried the angry doctor on his shoulders, running down the hallway, into the lobby, and presumably outside the building.

“...WAS THAT THE ROCKY THEME HE WAS TRYING TO SING?” Papyrus scratched his skull in confusion.

“Yeah.” Justin shrugged. “Hal loves underdog stories.”

A cell phone rang and Justin pulled his out of his pocket. “Please be good news, please be good news, Justin Carrow. What is it? ...that didn't take long... oh? Okay, I can tell em right now. Uh, just saying, long as you're out, might as well make a run for the garage. Right. Yeah... maybe? I don't know. We'll deal with it later if we have to. Good luck.”

Justin hung up and looked up at the monsters. “Hal says there's a crying flower outside the hospital who wants to see the King, Dr. Alphys, and Sans.”
"This is KEBT Radio broadcasting out of Ebott's Wake. This is a warning. The city of Ebott's Wake is under siege. The City Council has officially declared a state of emergency. Do not attempt to enter the city limits of Ebott's Wake. Repeat, do not come to Ebott's Wake. The Anti Monster League is rioting throughout the town."

"Brett! Just got a call from the Librarby! The AML has been driven away!"

"Can we confirm it?"

"Winston's there right now... he says we're good!"

"Attention! Attention citizens of Ebott's Wake! If you are on the streets, take shelter! The Librarby is now confirmed to be a safe zone! Remember if you are in your homes or places of work, do not leave unless circumstances force you to evacuate!"

"Kyle just texted me, he said the lab is still under lockdown. Whoever told us the lab is safe is a lying liar!"

"That's why we double check. Attention! All Fine Labs is still contested! Stay away from All Fine Labs! ...what was that? Finally! Alright, soon as Gary has anything, patch him in directly."

"Kyle wants to know where to go next. He doesn't want to stick around the lab in case they notice him."

"Tell him anywhere. Get him out of the danger zone, we can redirect him to a hotspot later."

"Right."

"Jeff, where's Winston going next? ...alright."

"Hey, we got another call about the school."

"Of course we did-"

"No, wait, it's not Dreemurr Elementary, it's James Madison Elementary."

"What?! That place has nothing to do with monsters! It's a competitor for students and state funding... you know what, never mind. Maybe they just don't care anymore. Jeff, call Winston, send him to Madison Elementary instead."

"Elijah McGraw just called, says the Dank Memehaus is clear now. Can we confirm?"

"Hold on! Gary, where are you right now?"

"Passing over the fishery now, Brett! Dreemurr Elementary is smokey but still standing! Presumably the necessity to accommodate students capable of producing and in some cases composed of magical fire requires construction using materials that are highly resistant to combustion, and by extension arson!"

"How long till you can get over to the Memehaus?"

"Less than two minutes! Do you want me to pick up something? How about Burgie, what does he
want?"

"Just, just confirm that it's clear or not."

"Can do!"

"Actually if he's gonna land I could go for a-"

"BURGIE!"

"Just trying to lighten the mood, jeeze. Bite my head off why don't you."

"Attention. We just got a report of the AML congregating around the Arboretum. Any citizens in the area please leave as soon as possible."

"Probably still worried about Flowey the Flower."

"Yeah, where is he anyway? I would have thought he'd be out in the middle of all this, having a... what? ...oh thank GOD. Attention! Attention citizens of Ebott's Wake! We have confirmed reinforcements! Police, firefighters and emergency medical services are on the way from Lone Point, Triton, and Robin's Egg! The forest service from Cornucopia Valley Nature Preserve is also sending a rescue chopper, just in case! Help is on the way!"

"I take back every nasty thing I ever said about Robin's Egg."

"Brett, Burgie, Jeff, we have a problem!"

"What is it Gary? Talk to us!"

"I just flew over the old Phillips 66 gas station on Harrison Drive and there are a lot of people congregating in and around that particular area! Their goals are unclear but their armament is obvious, their disposition unpleasant, and their aim inadequate, which is the only positive in the entire scenario!"

"Harrison Drive, wait, that's only three blocks away from the Librarby!"

"As the helicopter flies, yes! However, I do not think they are attempting to push back-"

"What's that alarm?! Alarms in helicopters are bad! I read that on the internet!"

"There's no need to get hysterical Burgie! One of the miscreants below has finally managed to tag the traffic chopper! At this rate I could just circle for ten minutes, fly back to the station, and the AML would have to give up for lack of ammunition!"

"...Gary, Jeff would like me to tell you to, and I quote, get your brain damaged ass out of the danger zone. Apparently he's sick of having to do the traffic report by climbing up the broadcast antenna with a pair of binoculars, and doesn't want that to become a permanent part of his job. Or to attend your funeral."

"The joke's on him! I keep my brain in my head, not my buttocks!"

"You know, going out of the way to say the word buttocks makes you more of a tool than if you just said butt or ass."

"Well, that's just, like, your opinion Burgie!"
“...did I just get Lebowskied?! Sonnova-”


“That was what I was trying to say! From the old gas station they have an almost straight line to the Rita Belle Thurman Memorial Hospital! At the risk of speculating wildly, I suspect they may be attempting to liberate their comrades who were injured in the initial attack at the Auditorium!”

“Well, we can't have that. Jeff, call the police, let them know if they don't already... wait, what? Wow. And they say there are no coincidences... understood. Attention Ebott's Wake. Officer Ward would like to address everyone directly. Jeff's setting up the connection now.... alright, Steve. You're on the air.”

“Ahem. Citizens of Ebott's Wake. I have some graven news. We have lost an ambulance transporting a prisoner to Rita Belle Thurman. This prisoner's name is Jordan Cater, suspected associate of the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi. These suspicions have been corroborated by statements from witnesses to the Auditorium attack. We have reason to believe, with Dwayne Riley incapacitated and in custody, Cater is now the ranking leader of the Anti Monster League... under these extenuating circumstances, I have requested, and been authorized, to make the following statement... All citizens of Ebott's Wake who have reached the age of majority, are of sound mind and body, without history of criminal wrongdoing, and unaffiliated with the Anti Monster League are hereby authorized to take whatever actions they see fit for immediate future. I, personally, would ask all of you to think of your families, your friends, your peers, and yourselves, each of whom will have to live with what you choose to do, or choose not to do, today. For your own sakes, make sure the acts you take, by commission or by omission, are ones that allow you to look at yourself in the mirror when the sun rises tomorrow. Thank you. This is Officer Stephen Ward of the Ebott's Wake Police Department. And may God help us all.”

“Burgie... did Officer Steve just say what I think he said?”

“I don't know. Trying not to think about it. Jeff... Jeff, how close is Winston to the Arboretum right now? ...got it. We'll have to let that slide- Clutch?! Damn man, good to see you! No, just sit with Jeff, help man the phones! We'll keep the lights on yet! ...actually, yeah, do that. If the AML notices what we're doing here it would be nice to have a backup power supply.”

“Or a bazooka.”

“That would be pretty handy too. I think Das Boot has a genuine vintage Panzerschrek, but I don't think they have live rounds for it, even if they could get it over here, which I doubt. That is something to ask Bratty about when this is all over though...”

“Just got a text from Lindsey, says that there's a whole crowd of AML going down her street. So all listeners living on Dogwood Drive, stay hidden. At this point whether you're a monster or a human, if those guys see you it could be the end.”

“Hey, has anyone heard from Beanpole?”

“Last I heard from him was a misspelled text about eleven last night about how he wanted to have my babies. I think, well, I hope that he was just completely hammered after the whole Memehaus thing.”

“Wouldn't that be something. If Beanpole sleeps through this whole mess, and then he wakes up hung over to hell and back, and sees all the damage...”
“...Burgie, you know what this means right?”

“I mean we have to survive this, just to see the look on his face.”

“Not only that. We have to convince him that he got so drunk last night he did all of it.”

“...That is pure evil I am in. But first we have to stop the AML.”

“Naturally.”

“Brett, Burgie, if I may interrupt your devious machinations for a moment!”

“You in, Gary? It's not gonna work if anyone tells him beforehand.”

“Ordinarily I would jump at the prospect, but there are pressing issues unfolding on the ground below! I know that you have urged the citizenry of Ebott's Wake to remain indoors and protected against potential hostilities outside, both for their own safety and to minimize the quandary of friend of foe identification in a civilian environment for the police response! However it would appear that scores of men and women have discarded this advice and are taking to the streets in droves!”

“The hell?!”

“My sentiments exactly! Let me see if I can get a little bit closer... yes, as I suspected, over half of the people below are wearing the same signature T-Shirt, portraying to all and sundry that Dwayne Riley, once the leader of the Anti Monster League, is an Imbecile!”

“You can see that??”

“I remind you Burgie that I am a pilot, and one of the requirements of becoming so is meeting or exceeding certain standards for visual acuity! Also the swoop on the first I in imbecile is very distinctive! Whoever does the graphics for All Fine Labs really understands how to grab people's attention!”

“What... what are they doing?!?”

“I couldn't hazard a guess, but if I was forced to at gunpoint, I would surmise that this was somehow related to Officer Steve's earlier statement!”

“Well... great. That's just great. Oh. I just had a terrifying thought. Gary can you check around town and see if that's happening anywhere else?”

“Consider it done!”

“What was that Jeff? ...oh. Attention! We have confirmed that the Dank Memehaus is in fact clear of AML presence now, so it is another possible safe area. Turns out Beanpole Levine drove over there after he heard us talking about it on air. He also heard our discussions about our plan, too. So that's not going to happen.”

“You win some, you lose some.”

“True, and I hope this is a battle we end up winning. Jeff, put my warning on repeat again. I'm going to go check on the windows. And let me know if you hear from Kyle! This is the worst possible time for prolonged silence.”

“This is KEBT Radio broadcasting out of Ebott's Wake. This is a warning. The city of Ebott's
Wake is under siege. The City Council has officially declared a state of emergency. Do not attempt to enter the city limits of Ebott's Wake. Repeat, do not come to Ebott's Wake. The Anti Monster League is rioting throughout the town...."
Flowey stared at Frisk.
At the bandaged arm.
At the IV needle taped to one hand.
At the layers of ice cold freezer packs that the hospital staff had placed on the child.
At the beads of sweat on Frisk's forehead.

Flowey could not put names to what he was feeling, but at least it drowned out the claustrophobia that came from having Asgore transplant him into a flower pot so he could be carried inside the hospital. As soon as the nurses had said that Frisk could see a few visitors at a time, Flowey had been placed on a table nearby the hospital bed. For both safety's sake and the size limits of the room itself, people had come into the room two or three at a time, everyone trying in their own way to reach Frisk, to reassure them, to convince them to keep fighting.

“Fifteen over seven HP. It’s getting worse.”

Flowey turned to look at Dr. Aster, who had propped up his cell phone on a table, aimed at the hospital bed Frisk was lying in, and was scribbling down notes. Next to him, Alphys was texting on her phone, and sweating almost as much as Frisk was.

“Joe says the people outside the lab have finally dispersed, but they were heading in this direction. They're keeping the lab locked down for the time being though.”

“Good thinking. It might be a ruse.”

“Right.”

“...I think I know why the attack hurt as much as it did, now. Why the infection is so serious.”

“You do?”

“I mean, I can't be certain and there's no surefire way to test it, but I have a theory. Frisk's soul isn't concentrated, it's fragmented. It doesn't have the same cohesiveness that an ordinary soul of any kind would have. That could mean it doesn't have the same resilience to outside impulses. So... that gunshot affected Frisk in the same way that it would have affected a monster. That impulse to harm was carried all the way through the body and Frisk is having trouble fighting it off.”

“...so what do we do to fix it?”

“Still working on that. So far the best idea I've had was to go back to the lab, recover your
remaining Determination samples, and infuse them into Frisk, but with everything so unstable that might just keep her body alive while her soul is destroyed.”

“Then don't do it.”

Aster looked up at Flowey, who was half surprised by his own outburst. “Everything that makes Frisk Frisk will be gone. She won't be able to love anyone or anything. That's not something you do to somebody you care about.”

Alphys nodded. “Flowey's right. If it's a choice between those options, it would be better to just... let her go. But we can still find an alternative!”

Dr. Aster looked at the scanner readout on his phone again. “It would help if we had a way of measuring DT levels directly, but I certainly didn't expect to need that data before phase two of the scanning project anyway, whenever that starts.”

“If it ever happens at all. And if All Fine Labs doesn't close down after this.” Alphys looked at her phone again. “All those people I met in the investor's meeting today, well, having to leave them in a facility under security lockdown probably ruined my chances at making a good first impression. But that's a problem for Future Alphys to have to deal with.”

Dr. Aster snorted. “…under the circumstances we may be lucky to have a future at all.”

There was a knock at the door and in his haste to get up Dr. Aster knocked over the table with his cell phone on it.

“Hey, no need to get up on my account.” Sans walked inside and looked at Frisk, his eye lights finally back, but his constant smile gone. “Any changes?”

Dr. Aster shook his head and righted the table, leaning over to pick up his phone. “Just maximum HP dropping at regular intervals. And the intensity of the red light on the scanner is getting dimmer. What's the situation outside?”

“We finally got useful intel; when the whole 'attack every place friendly to monsters at the same time' thing didn't pan out, the different groups all converged together. They're not far from here, and Justin thinks they're consolidating their strength for one final push on the hospital. The police can't even get near them, they're so built up and dug in.”

“I don't suppose the police themselves can call for backup?”

“Yeah, we got a call from officer Steve. Ebott's Wake PD called for any available units from every other town in the county, and they're coming, but the police choppers are just now getting here. The closest guys on the ground are from Triton and even they're still twenty minutes away. We have to handle this on our own.”

Alphys sighed and brought her phone up to her head. “Joe? It's Alphys. I just got some news from Sans about the situation... oh. I'd ask how you found out but that's not important right now. Listen... under the circumstances I don't think we have any other options, so I want you to follow my next instructions very carefully... you know how in my office there's a stack of anime DVDs on one corner of my desk? Third from the bottom should be a box that says 'Mew Mew Kissy Cutie 2' and... I don't, that's the point. I need you to take the disk inside that box, and take it down to the basement. Just before you reach the high security door that says Dimensional Storage, there's another door that says Project NEO on it. That's N-E-O. Inside there should be a bunch of old robot parts, and a workstation. Power it on, put the disk in the optical drive, and you should be prompted
for a password... you mean you're not? Please don't tell me I have to start over. Oh. Okay. Well, you may need to write this down anyway. First password is snail underscore ice underscore cream, all lowercase. Second password is DUSTBOWL, all caps, all one word... yes, that's why I used it. You'll understand in a bit. Third password is..."

Alphys looked up at Sans and Dr. Aster, then resumed her conversation. “Third password is MegaloVania... yes, like from Homestuck. M and V are capitalized. Put any of them in in the wrong order and you'll set off alarms, but with the lab in lockdown that's not that much of a change. In the right order, you should see... well, you'll know it when you see it. I trust you to use your best judgment after that. You've been a good friend Joe, and I hope we get the chance to nerd out over everything later, but right now hope is not enough... I know. Thanks. Good luck.”

Dr. Aster stared at Alphys for a moment. “So... what was all that about?”

It was Sans who answered. “Alphys had plans for upgrading Mettaton into an assault weapons platform, if a human ever fell down who heard about Asgore's plan and decided the only way to save humanity was to wipe us out. Project NEO grew out of that; when the AML started getting loud, we put our heads together and came up with a little insurance, just in case.”

Alphys grinned nervously. “It's gonna be a bit cramped, since it was designed for somebody about the size of Sans or me. But I think Joe won't have any problem making it work. He's smart. And out of everyone in that lab, I trust him the most to do what might need to be done.”

“Hmmmph. Considering how careful you guys are to not mention exactly what this Project NEO thing actually is, I suppose I must resign myself to waiting for the movie, so to speak.” Dr. Aster looked down at his phone again and held it up to look at Frisk.

Then narrowed his eye sockets and slowly turned it towards Flowey.

“...Alphys? Can you activate your phone's Scanner application and point it at Flowey?”

“...sure. I g-guess.” Alphys began to sweat even more profusely, but held up her phone and looked at Flowey. A claw immediately slammed over her mouth to muffle a shriek of surprised alarm.

“That's imp-p-p-p-...that can't b-b-be happening!!”

Flowey looked away from Frisk at the two scientists. “What? What's happening?!?”

“Flowey... look!” Alphys turned her phone around with selfie mode on the camera, and Flowey saw a gray image of him played back in real time... but with a small bright red speck of light hovering somewhere in the vicinity of his petaled head.

“...no. This is a trick. Some kind of sick joke.”

Alphys looked through her phone at Flowey again. “Augh! This is why the bullet analyzer got all nines when I had you try it this morning! It wasn't dividing by zero, it was overloaded with human soul energy!”

“But how did it get inside me?! I don't understand!”

“how do you think, flowerbud? Frisk spends more time with you than with anybody else. you must have picked it up somewhere along the way.”

“Like hell! I would have noticed if I found a bit of a soul lying around!” Flowey scowled at Sans, then his expression softened.
Asriel laughed as one of the magic projectiles finally collided with the human. In this dimension, where thought was all and magic rained supreme, he should have been invincible, unstoppable, but the human had evaded everything as if they had seen it all before. Which, considering how he was now the master of the timeline, was impossible.

With senses so refined and obscure as to be alien to anything known to human or monster experience, Asriel saw the soul shatter under the force of opposition... the fragments drifted apart... and then, they refused. The human gritted their teeth, and smiled, and made a gesture as if to challenge Asriel to try again.

It was so familiar, so essentially them, that Asriel smiled too. Only one person would know his attacks like that...

Flowey turned to look at Frisk. “...wait... the last time we fought. I tried to absorb their soul. They fought me off... but that still doesn't explain...”

“say what?”

“Frisk...I have to go now. Without the power of everyone’s souls, I can’t keep maintaining this form. In a little while... I'll turn back into a flower. I'll stop being myself... I'll stop being able to feel love again. So, Frisk... it's best if you just forget about me, OK? Just go be with the people that love you.”

Asriel looked down, unable to meet Frisk's face... but Frisk walked up to him and put their arms around him, patting him on the back. He could feel the human child's tears trickling into his fur, and he heard them whisper.

“Please don't say that, Asriel. Stay here with me. It's going to be okay. I promise.”

“Ha... I don't want to let go...”

“Don't... you don't have to let go. We can... there has to be a way. Please don't give up. Not like this.”

“...uh... you still in there?”

Flowey shook himself, blinked a few times, and watched the tears from his eyes fall into the soil of the flowerpot.

“...of course. That explains everything. This last week especially.”

Out of the soil in the flowerpot, two vines burst out and made their way over to Frisk, one wrapping around each hand.

“Time to put this right back where it belongs.” Flowey looked at Sans, who was sweating, and Alphys, who had reflexively backed away. “I better say this now, because when I’m done I won't care anymore. All of Frisk's troubles seemed to come to a head this last week. But based on what
I've been feeling... Frisk has been having trouble for as long as any of us have known her. That's over a year and a half, and people are just picking up on it now. If this works... you guys really need to step up your game in the future.”

“Hey, Sans! We gotta-” Hal Greene poked his head into the room and saw the vines around Frisk's hands, which gave him pause for a moment. “Okay, I have several questions, but there's no time. The radio just broadcast an alert. The KEBT traffic chopper has been watching all the AML guys. They're on the move and they're heading here. It's all hands on deck.”

“Welp. Looks like somebody out there wants to have a bad time.”

“Sans-”

“Sorry dad, you can't talk me out of this. I have a promise to keep. And you have a job to do here.”

“...I know... just, just remember what I taught you. Got it?”

“Don't worry. I'll make you and Grampa Semi proud.”

The human and the skeleton walked out of the room, and Flowey turned to Alphys and Aster. “There's no telling what I'll find. I've never tried to do this with anyone who had a fever. Or who wasn't already awake, for that matter. Watch Frisk's readings like a hawk, and do not let the doctors and nurses disconnect me. Or who knows what will happen.”

Turning back to look at Frisk, Flowey closed his eyes, then leaned over, and then the petals around his face closed up. Alphys held up her phone and saw the larger soul cluster, and the small lonesome soul fragment, begin to brighten and darken in unison....

“...ow...”

“What was that??”

“...ugh... is anyone there? Please... I need help...”

“It sounds like it came from over here... oh! You've fallen down, haven't you? Are you okay?”

“I... I don't know. Everything hurts so bad...”

“Here, get up...”

“Oof... thank you... My name is Chara. What's yours?”

“Chara, huh? That's a nice name. My name is Asriel.”

“You have a cool name. Thanks again for... for helping me. I thought I was going to die down here. Which... which might still happen, the way I feel.”

“Oh no! Hold on, Chara! We just need to get to Home! My mom can make anything better! You'll see!”

“I'll... I'll try.”
“Just lean on me. It's going to be okay!”

“...uhm. Asriel?”

“Yes?”

“You look really... fuzzy. And you feel fuzzy too.”

“Oh, that's because I am.”

“...so I'm not hallucinating. That's good. I think?”

Eyes opened up, and blinked rapidly, trying to block the pain of bright light. A furry paw came up to try to assist, and in doing so, drew attention to other important facts.

Asriel pulled himself upright and looked at his body. Arms, legs, everything.

It seemed like Asriel was standing on some sort of trail, and as his eyes followed the path on the ground, the white fog that seemed to surround everything parted. In the distance, Asriel could see a lamp post or street light, with somebody standing beneath it.

“Frisk? Frisk! I'll be right there!”

Asriel ran up the path, occasionally losing sight of the lamp post through the fog, until he finally arrived at a clearing. An empty clearing, with only the lamp post and nobody else.

“Frisk! Where are you?! FRISK!”

“A long time ago, a child lived on the surface.”

Asriel froze. That voice... there was no mistaking it. Slowly he turned around, as if sudden moves could frighten them away.

“Chara?”

They were looking down at the ground, but it was definitely them. Chara stood there, close enough to touch, and Asriel held up a paw... only to have it pass right through empty space as Chara vanished.

“Chara, wait! Please! Come back!”

Asriel looked around frantically, and saw another path leading from the lamp post uphill to what looked like a massive tree. Somebody's silhouette was superimposed on the trunk, and it didn't matter if it was Frisk or Chara at that point; Asriel ran up the path as fast as his legs could take him.

“Frisk... it's you. Come on, we need to get out of here.... Frisk?”

Asriel stared at the human child, who was sitting on a tree root, reading a book. And, Asriel belatedly noticed, seemed to be transparent; as they moved around, he could see the pattern of the bark on the tree behind them. Two other shapes seemed to be forming out of the fog as well, taller than Frisk. They had no distinguishing features Asriel could see, but they sat down next to the
child, who smiled at both.

“The child had a mother, and a father, and everyone was happy.”

Asriel blinked as Frisk and the other figures faded away, and turned to face Chara again.

“This... these are Frisk's memories, aren't they? Places and people.”

Chara said nothing more, but raised a hand and pointed. When Asriel looked, the fog had parted again, and the path led up to a house; when he looked back, he flinched. Chara had once again vanished without a sound.

“Can you stop doing that please Chara? You're really scaring me.”

Asriel walked up to the house, and was only slightly surprised to see Chara waiting beside the front door.

“One day, everything changed.”

The young monster didn't even blink as Chara faded away again, and opened the front door. Inside... seemed to be an ordinary human house. Furniture, appliances, light fixtures, pictures on the wall, everything.

“The mother and father stopped being happy. Every day, they were more upset. Every day, they were more angry.”

The house... warped. Pictures fell off of walls, discoloration spread over the floor and across some furniture, and there was Frisk, peering around the edge of a doorway, eyes wide and focused on two shadows on the wall, gesturing wildly. The air was filled with distorted sounds that might have been angry voices, but Asriel couldn't hear individual words in the cacophony.

“The child did not understand. The child could not understand. They did not know what was wrong, or what to do.”

Frisk, the fighting shadows, and the noise faded, and Asriel moved deeper into the house. In a room with a sofa and chairs and a television set, he found Frisk again, sitting on the floor with a pile of books. Asriel moved closer and knelt down by the books, which unlike many other things in the house seemed clear and distinct. Some of the titles he even recognized: *Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel* was on top of the pile, and in Frisk's hand was *The Giving Tree*.

“Then, the child had an idea. They would find a way to make everyone happy again.”

Frisk and the books faded, and Asriel saw other versions of Frisk moving from room to room, carrying trash and clothes and food.

“When the table was bare, the child would cook. When the closets were empty, the child did laundry. When dishes piled up, the child would clean them.”

All the Frisks faded away, and the house... warped again. More discoloration. Flies buzzing over empty, neglected dishes. Cracks in the walls and in the windows.

“But it was never enough. Soon, dishes piled up. Clothes were ruined in the wash. Food burned on the stove top.”

The air was filled with the sound of breaking glass. Chara's voice, coming from everywhere and
nowhere, continued as if there had been no interruption at all.

“And plates were dropped.”

Asriel walked into what had to have been the kitchen. A shattered dinner plate was lying on the floor, and Frisk was staring at it, sleeves rolled up and hands covered in soapy bubbles.

And...

“God dammit! What's all that racket?!”

“I'm sorry! I'm sorry dad! My hands were all soapy and... and...”

As Frisk's father entered the kitchen, the bottom seemed to drop out of Asriel's stomach. For the first time, the shadowy indistinct quality of the memory world dropped away. Asriel could see every hair, every pulsing vein, every angry twitch of a muscle.

“You're always sorry! You always say you're sorry but this SHIT keeps happening!”

Frisk cried out as the human reached out to grab the child and dragged them over to the broken plate.

“Apologize again!”

“I'm sorry dad! I didn't mean t-”

“Not to me. To the plate.”

“What??”

“DO IT.”

Frisk looked down at the plate. “I... I'm sorry.”

“Is the plate still broken?”

Frisk sniffed. “Yes...”

“Exactly.”

The human shoved Frisk down and walked away, leaving the room. Frisk slowly picked themselves up and began to try to pick up the shattered fragments of the plate, tears running down their face but not making a sound beyond the occasional sniff. Asriel didn't even wait for the memory to fade out on its own before running out of the room.

Chara was waiting for him.

“At last, the child understood. The child was creating more problems than they fixed. The child was the reason everyone was unhappy. The child was the biggest problem of all.”

Chara walked away instead of vanishing, and Asriel followed, the pit in his stomach growing bigger and bigger with ever step. When they came to a closed door, Chara finally disappeared, and Asriel twisted the doorknob.

“The next day...”
The door opened to reveal a mostly empty bedroom. There was a bed, and a dresser, and a pile of books, and an open window. Asriel walked up to the window and saw Mt. Ebott looming in the distance, even through the white fog. And much closer, a speck running through the fog, away from the house.

“The child ran away.”

Asriel didn't even look back as he heard the angry noises in the house behind him. Diving through the open window, he rolled as he hit the ground, scrambled to get upright, and began running after Frisk.

Behind him, other sounds started. Sirens, yelling, screaming. He ran faster, pushed his body harder. When it seemed like the path was lost to the fog, Chara appeared in the distance to set him right again. After what felt like forever, a cave mouth appeared through the fog and, deep inside, a child was standing in the middle of it. Asriel stopped to catch his breath, and Chara appeared once more.

“The child stands on the brink. Again. They will fall. Again. This time...”

In the cave, Frisk took a step forward and vanished as they fell into the hole to the Underground. They didn't make a sound. Not a single cry or scream or even a rough intake of air.

And that scared Asriel most all.

“This time... there will be no one to pick them up.”

Asriel walked towards the hole in the middle of the cave floor. It was a long way down... that Chara had originally survived the fall, without anything below to soften the impact, was nothing short of miraculous.

“Why aren't you smiling? Aren't you happy?”

Asriel blinked and turned around. Chara was standing behind him, and seemed more real, more solid, than anything else in the memories.

“What??”

“She will never hurt anyone ever again. She will never say the wrong words. She will never get anyone else into trouble. She will never break another plate. And you will inherit the power to change the world.”

Chara finally raised their head, and Asriel looked into dull brown eyes, devoid of that spark that made Chara the person he had remembered, that he had loved.

“It's The End. You Won.”

Asriel swallowed. “This... isn't what I want. I want to see what happens next. I want Frisk to wake up. And... how do I stop this, Chara?”

“...Frisk made her choice long ago. She wanted to disappear. She climbed the mountain so that everyone would be happy. Why would you take that away from her?”

“Frisk is DYING! Nobody is happy with this! ...if she really thinks, if she thinks this is for the best, after all this time, after everything that happened underground... I won't let it happen. I won't. This is...” Asriel swallowed. “This is her happy ending. She deserves to enjoy it. She deserves... to live her life, and not be afraid that everything she loves will be taken away.”
Chara stared at Asriel... and smiled. As if a switch had been flipped, Asriel saw the spark inside Chara's eyes again. A hand was held out, and Asriel responded in kind. Fuzzy fingers interlaced with hairless pink ones, like they had years ago. Asriel could feel them.

“Then Continue. Find her. Tell her. And bring her back.”

Chara faded away, and Asriel's fingers passed through empty space. He wiped his eyes with the back of his paw, then turned towards the hole in the cave. Jumping down inside, he waited for the inevitability of impact with the ground... but that didn't happen. Areas passed by him, filled with snow and lava and fallen leaves and glowing mushrooms and the ever present haze of fog. Until below him, the fog broke and he fell into the underground river with a splash. Swimming against the current, he made his way over to the shore, looked around to get his bearings, and found himself in what looked like the garbage dump. He waded through the shallows until the pool of collected garbage intersected another part of the river, pouring endlessly into...

The Abyss. And standing at the edge of the waterfall was Frisk, staring down at the dark.

“...was this always going to happen? When I fell down here the first time... were you always here, waiting for me?”

Asriel slowed down, moving closer but quieter, trying not to startle Frisk into falling.

“...is there a world out there, somewhere... without me? A world where everyone is happy? If I'm gone here... can I see that one?”

Asriel stepped away from edge of the cavern wall and walked over to the platform Frisk was standing on. The sound of splashing footsteps didn't seem to register, either because the sound of the waterfall drowned it out, or Frisk was too preoccupied to notice.

“...never mind. I know what the answer is. What it has to be.”

Asriel stepped up onto the platform.

“Frisk. Whatever you are thinking about doing right now, stop.”

Frisk froze up, then slowly turned around.

“...Asriel??”

Asriel swallowed. “Yes, Frisk. It's me. Your best friend.”

* Asriel confronts the Lost Soul.
“How's the headset?”

“clunky.” Sans fiddled with the microphone and earpiece. “this thing's going to fly off as soon as I pull out my opening attack.”

Hal rolled his eyes. “Look, it's not my fault you don't have ears and can't use the ear buds. This is the best I could do on short notice. Remember, Justin's only got three tear gas grenades, so he can't cover the entire crowd. If anybody looks like they're getting too close, I'll try to distract them.”

“by distract them you mean put big gaping holes in their bodies, right?”

Hal patted the hunting rifle. “Can you think of a better distraction than that?”

“yeah, a whole bunch of rubber chickens falling from the sky.”

“...okay, yeah. That might do it too. Can you pull that off?”

“nope. Used all my rubber chickens at the Dank Memehaus last night.”

Hal blinked. “Right, that was last night. It feels like it happened weeks ago.”

The audio circuit in the headset buzzed.

“That's normal after a lot of fighting. Adrenaline affects your perception of time.”

“Hey Justin,” Hal held a hand up to his ear to block out errant noise. “You find a good spot yet?”

“Spots don't matter. The instant I send these care packages everyone is going to want a piece of me. Access points, cover, and sight lines matter.”

“Alright. I'll be up on the roof before too long.”

“Make it snappy. The stage is set and the show is about to start.”

As Hal made his way to the stairwell, Sans walked over to the doorway to the lobby to find Papyrus and Undyne waiting. The tall skeleton had his own headset, which he was holding in place with a pair of sunglasses, which were in turn held in place by black electrical tape. Undyne was currently fitting an ear bud into her large, fin-like ear; despite the obvious differences in physiology, it seemed to stay in place.

“...welp. last chance to back out.”

“Not happening, lazybones.”

“THE HOSPITAL SHALL NEVER HAVE THEM! EXCEPT AS PATIENTS OF COURSE. WHICH AT THIS POINT IS PRACTICALLY A CERTAINTY.”

Sans blinked as Undyne handed out ears of corn nestled in hot dog buns. “Alphys really went all out with the emergency food supply. Not that I expect us to need them. Nobody's going to catch us off guard this time.”

Sans looked out of glass doors of the hospital, past the parking lot and down the street to where a
large and unruly mob had congregated.

“...no point in putting it off. let's go.”

Sans pushed open the doors and walked towards the street. High above, he could spot the KEBT traffic helicopter, and much closer one of the police helicopters. Some distance behind, Papyrus and Undyne followed.

“Alright, I'm in position. Pretty sure they can't get me from here even if they see me.”

“Hal... don't say shit like that.”

“I'm just saying-”

“Saying shit like that is like asking the powers that be to put a giant neon sign next to your position for the benefit of counter-snipers. Saw it happen a lot.”

“...alright then. Any other military wisdom you can share?”

“Well... none of these clowns have any idea what they're doing. A mob can do a lot of damage, true, but they all fight as individuals instead of as a team. They won't be able to reinforce success, or dig in properly if they get put on the defensive.”

Undyne chuckled. “Too bad for them. Because I'm seizing all of the offensive, and I'm not sharing.”

“UNDYNE, SHARING IS CARING!”

“...alright, Papyrus. I'll share the offensive with you. Because that's what friends are for!”

“Uh... I should probably point out that what we're doing here is essentially defensive.”

“So?! The best defense is a no-holds-barred offense!!”

“...oh. You're one of the Cult of the Offensive types then, Captain?”

“Wait, is there a church all about the offensive in this town? I need to get in on that!”

“...I'll explain later.”

Sans snickered. The mob seemed to be getting more animated as he got closer, but they didn't move forward any faster...

Aha.

Sans would have recognized that face anywhere. Jordan Cater stood at the head of the assembled mass of townspeople.

“hey there.” Sans stopped and put his hands in his pockets. “you've been busy, huh? don't suppose you've come to apologize to Frisk? drop off a get well soon card, that kind of thing?”

Cater stared back, eyes narrowed. Sans winked.

“Nah, of course not. Just making conversation.”

“You know how this is going to end.” Cater's voice was clipped and controlled and projected fairly
well, and there wasn't the slightest tremor of fear. At least, not in his voice....

Sans snickered. “Buddy, right now, everybody who's been watching knows how this is going to end.”

Cater held his arms out to the sides. “Look at me. Your most powerful magical assault, and here I am. Alive and well. Not even injured.”

“Yeah, my bad. I was a bit distracted. This time, we'll do it right. Don't you fret.”

“Your king, your queen, your military leader and your... mascot, all together with you, could not inflict any lasting harm. What made you think, after they all failed, you alone would succeed?”

“Me? Fight all of you alone? That's hilarious. What made you think, after what you did, that I'd let this be a fair fight?”

Behind Sans, behind the hospital, a humming noise could be heard. Some sort of... machinery appeared; it resembled the skull monsters that had previously attacked at the behest of the skeleton brothers, and hovered just above the ground, with a heat shimmer below it.

Sans heard Hal whistle over the headset. “Looks like Joe finally got here. Nice work by the way. I like it. You should enter it in the Derby some day... If we live, I mean.”

Sans shrugged, pulled out his cell phone, and looked at Cater's image on the screen. Numbers lined up next to a gray video feed, with a strong purple light being the only color.

“Well. Look at that. No wonder you came through without a scratch. Not only is your DF crazy high, your LV is 4... out of a possible 4. Now that's never happened in the studies.”

“What??” Cater looked confused. “What does any of that mean?”

“The lowest LV CAP of anybody in the town who came in for the scan was five. And the amount of people who had an actual LV higher than one, I could count on the fingers of one hand. It's an abbreviation, you see. Level of Violence Capacity. Everyone's had bad times at some point. That's just part of life. Some have it worse, some have it better... but compared to everyone else in this town? You must have been sheltered and very lucky. And yet you're completely maxed out on that. I wonder... is that because you were protected from violence? You didn't know what you were doing because you hadn't been on the other end...?” Sans winked. “Nah. Of course not. That's an excuse people tell themselves when they don't have the bones to admit they fucked up. Nobody's Level of Violence goes up by accident. And what really makes it funny, is that not only do you suck at being a good person, you really suck at being a bad person too, and you'll never get any better at it. You peaked early pal.”

“Are you going to fight, or are you just going to try to talk me to death?”

“Wouldn't that be something? Don't worry. There's just one more thing you need to know before we start. Something very important. You may want to take notes. Ready?”

“Why should I wait even a moment now that you're in my sights-”

“I think you know exactly why.”

Cater stared at Sans with a face that communicated not only anger and disgust and pride, but several other important pieces of information.
“A long time ago, in the Underground, a skeleton made a promise to somebody he had never met. If a human ever walked out of the Ruins, he would watch over them and protect them and keep them safe. Guess who that skeleton was.”

“Lies. Eight children climbed the mountain. Seven children never came home. Just as seven magi sacrificed everything to seal you and your kind away for good. That, alone, is proof of your nature. Your king's crocodile tears are insulting, and the queen keeping that remaining human child like a pet, or a trophy, is disgusting.”

Sans narrowed his eye sockets. “I watched each of them, best I could. But I couldn't be everywhere at once. So you're right about one thing, and only one thing, in all of that. I'm 1-6 on that promise right now. Or maybe 0-7. Guess that depends on the kid... as if it ever didn't. But I told you that story, so I could tell you this story.”

Cater didn't reply, and Sans grinned even wider.

“Our First Christmas on the surface, Frisk asked me what I wanted. Well, I already had everything I wanted, and more than I expected to get in my lifetime. There was only one thing that could have made it perfect. But it wasn't something Frisk could find in a store. So I told them I was good, and when they insisted, I told em some random silly thing. More socks, even though I don't even wear the things. Fast forward a few days. The kid comes by and drags me away from my hot dog stand to the auditorium where other kids are meeting Santa. Turns out, much to my surprise, that the guy wearing the red suit and the beard is my brother. In the roll he was born to play, inspiring people to be the best they possibly could. Frisk had pulled out a lot of stops to get the City Council to agree to that.”

“Yes. The local government has been disturbingly accommodating towards you and your kind. Once we're done here, we will have to see to that.”

“I think you're missing the point. Because, you see, that was when I made another promise, to myself. A promise that if anyone hurt, threatened, or even looked at Frisk cross-eyed? There might be enough of them left over for their next of kin to hold a funeral... monster style. And you shot them. Are you picking up what I'm laying down? Now... I'm not unreasonable. Or vindictive, really. Holding a grudge is a lot of work, and I'm really lazy. Ask anybody. So, I'll make you all a deal. Tell all your friends to climb back in their cars, their trucks, on their bikes. Turn around. Go home. And that'll be the end of it. We'll all pretend this never happened. But. If you stay...”

Sans eye lights disappeared, leaving only blackness.

“You are REALLY not going to like what happens next.”

Behind Sans, there was the clank of metal boots from one side, and the tapping of leather boots on the other.

“YOU HEARD MY BROTHER. LEAVE NOW. OR THE AMOUNT OF FUN YOU WILL PROBABLY HAVE, IS ACTUALLY RATHER SMALL I THINK.”

“This isn't about monsters anymore, is it?” Undyne glared at Cater. “It's not even about your daughter. If it ever was to begin with. You'll hurt anyone, kill anyone, who gets in your way. Monster, human, it doesn't matter. Well... you fucked up. Right now, everyone in Ebott's Wake is united against you. We all have one goal. And that goal is stopping you. Prepare however you like. But when you step forward... we will fucking end you.”

“yeah, what they said.”
Cater stared at the trio of monsters... then abruptly started laughing.

“Oh my god! Is this how you freaks prepare for fights? Anecdotes and threats? Humans prepare for fights by setting up traps, barricades, defenses and sniper positions.”

Cater raised a hand, and-

Sans pulled his left hand out of his pocket and thrust it out to the side, one eye socket shining with blue light. Behind him, Cater could hear the shattering of glass, the crumbling of brick and mortar, the cracking of wood, and the screaming of snipers as they were pulled from their spots.

“Papyrus, remind me to send everybody over at the radio station a fruit basket or something. Those guys really take 'seek the truth and report it' to heart.”

“I WAS THINKING ALONG THE SAME LINES, ONLY INSTEAD OF FRUIT IT WAS A SELECTION OF ARTISINAL CHEESES!”

“heh. great minds think alike.”

“You arrogant prick,” Undyne growled. “Of course we know how humans prepare for battle. We have humans on our side too. And they're a LOT better at this than you are. We know where every sniper, every ambush, every choke point is. Not that you'll get a chance to use any of them. This ends right here, right now!”

Cater glared at Undyne, then turned to Sans. “I am going to personally kill all three of you with my own bare hands.”

“This is it, then.”

Sans looked up at the sky, then back at Cater.

“Nice day, isn't it? Birds are singing. Flowers are blooming. It's way too hot, though...”

Cater wasn't sure what happened; there was a flash of blue light, and suddenly the skeleton's eye sockets had gone dark again.

"Better get used to that."

Space and time bent under force of will, leaving behind a massive floating skull that looked like it might have once belonged to some sort of dinosaur, except that it was clearly a monster of some sort. Opening its jaw, a beam of white light lanced out and struck the front of a pickup truck. The hood popped off, spinning end over end, and the radiator exploded as steam pressure overwhelmed the hardware. Blue bones shot up out of the ground through tires, popping them like large rubber balloons. And all around, a wall of bones grew bit by bit, until the mob and the monsters were all enclosed in a massive arena... and in the process, cutting off all escape. Between the monsters and humans, another wall of bones shot up from the ground, this one blue tinged.

Sans winked at Cater, who had turned around to look at the carnage, and now looked back towards the trio with an expression of shocked confusion.

“here we go.”

Spears and bones began to fly through the crowd, knocking people back, or down, depending on the circumstances. The magical assault was met with physical bullets, but the sudden appearance of smoking canisters in the crowd proved very distracting, as were the beams of yellow energy
firing out of the mouth and right eye of the skull-machine hovering by the hospital entrance. Cater pulled out a pistol and sighted carefully between the blue bones, then fired... only to have the short skeleton blink out of the way in another flash of blue light.

“If you think I'm just going to stand around and wait for your bullets to reach me, you're sadly mistaken.”

The follow up bullets were no more successful than their predecessor, and Cater swore as a blue bone lodged itself in the pistol barrel. One hand reached up to remove it-

“AGH FUCK!” Cater shook his hand as if it had been burned, and stared at his fingers. There didn't appear to be any damage, but they hurt a lot. In fact, they throbbed.

“My father knew your daughter, back in the day. Not as well as the Royal Family, but they talked. A few days before the CORE disaster, he said something funny. Funny weird, I mean, not funny ha ha. He said that out of everyone in the Underground, that Chara, the one who had the most to come back to on the surface, was the one who was least excited about the idea of escaping.”

The human looked up at Sans again, still too preoccupied with what had happened to his hand to fully process what had been said.

“Heh heh heh... that's your fault, isn't it?”

A trio of bones shot out from the center of a glove, and Cater dove for cover, the magic attacks missing him by inches.

“I don't think you really understand how this feels. When you have somebody you care about, but you don't actually know if you'll ever see them again. You should. And you claim you do. But you don't.”

“Do not. Tell me. How to feel!” Cater gritted his teeth, yanked out the bone from the pistol barrel, and opened fire again; flashes of blue light indicated where Sans had been, moments before. “You don't know anything about me. You don't even know what it's like to care about somebody else. You spent the ages down in the dark scrabbling and infighting like wild animals.”

Sans rolled his eye lights.

“To be honest, for a long time I just gave up on everything, including making it to the surface. Because even if we did pull it off, we'd just have to deal with people like you again, right? Knowing that, it really made it hard to put in more than the bare minimum of effort into anything.”

A single errant bone spun lazily towards Cater, who didn't even have to move to avoid it.

“Well, that and just being lazy. That's just how I am, you know?”

The single lazy bone was followed by a flurry of bones weaving back and forth across each others flight paths; one clipped Cater in the arm as he jumped to the side and he dropped the pistol out of reflex, his other hand grasping what he expected to be a huge gouge. Yet, despite the constant burning sensation, everything seemed to be whole and intact.

“Or am I? Because I've accomplished more in the last week than I have in the last year.”

The giant skull monster appeared again and Cater was caught by surprise by the sudden flickering beam of energy, not only by its speed, but by its effect; his skin burned as if it had been sprayed with acid and he howled in pain as he tried to get out of the way. The skull closed its jaw and
retreated back from whence it came but Cater's skin still crawled as he scrambled to pick up his fallen pistol.

“It's amazing the difference just one person can make. Not that you'd know what I'm talking about…”

“SHUT UP!” Cater screamed and unloaded the rest of his ammunition at the short skeleton, all to no avail; Sans vanished and Cater frantically attempted to replace the magazine. From somewhere outside his field of vision, he heard the skeleton taunt him again.

“You probably figured out by now that I've been pretending to be a lazybones all this time. And I'm dropping the act, just for you.”

The magazine slipped out of Cater's hand and he reached out to catch it... when he felt movement behind him, and heard a low voice right next to his ear.

“Don't you feel special?”

Cater spun around, swinging the empty pistol like a club, but Sans wasn't there anymore. Something slammed into his knee from behind and he lost his footing, followed by a second impact on his back that, due to the properties of inertia, resulted in Cater literally face planting onto the hot asphalt of the street below. When Cater pushed himself upright again, Sans was standing less than a foot away and had a bone attack waiting an inch from the human's face.

“It's funny. Frisk asked me a few days ago if I thought anyone could change. If anyone could be a better person, if they just tried. And... I wanted to believe. If Frisk were here, she'd bend over backwards to try to help. To reach whatever part of you was still good, the part that once really did care about Chara. Hell, it worked with Dwayne Riley, the man who made all sorts of new words just to describe how much he hated us. Guy's in a heap of trouble now, of course, but in the future, maybe he could be an ally... or even... a friend?”

Cater had said nothing as Sans had speculated, as somebody else was running up behind the skeleton, his hand raised with an improvised club in the form of an empty shotgun... and suddenly the shotgun was dropped from useless fingers and the attacker was clutching at his own shoulder, screaming in pain.

“Thanks Hal.”

Cater heard the tinny sound of a voice over the skeleton's headset, but couldn't make out the words.

“But Frisk isn't here,” Sans continued. “Frisk is in that hospital, fighting for her life. Because you put her there. So you better believe me when I say... you're fighting for your life, too.”

Cater tucked and rolled as the bones shot past him and finally managed to get another magazine into his empty pistol, only to have it glow blue; gripping it with all his might, the human was lifted off the ground and thrown across the street, scraping against the ground, until he finally lost his grip.

Sans was already there, waiting.

“You know, I never met Chara personally. But I've seen pictures. And her expression in them... heh. You called her your daughter. How long did it take you to even notice she was missing? A week? A month? Or was it seeing Asriel bring her home that finally jogged your memory?”

Cater scrambled to his feet and lunged for the skeleton, who stepped to one side and spun on his
slipper as Cater tripped on the curb and scraped himself further on the sidewalk.

“I wonder, if she could see this world as it is now... what she would say to you killing her best friend.”

“SHUT UP! SHUT THE FUCK UP! YOU TOOK MY DAUGHTER, YOU TOOK MY FAMILY, YOU TOOK MY FUTURE, BUT YOU WILL NEVER! HAVE! MY! WORLD!”

“Ohon that subject, in the unlikely event you actually win this, what comes next?”

“There IS no next! We win, you die, THE END!”

Sans danced out of the way as Cater finally attempted to connect with something more refined than a grappling charge, using a series of jabs and strikes that nevertheless fell short.

“Hah. Seriously though. If you wipe out all monsterkind, and all humans who are okay with monsters, who's gonna be your next target? Might as well give them some advance warning now just in case.”

“You really think anybody will be left to support your cause after you're all dead?!?”

Cater reached out and almost connected, but a blue glow surrounded his arm, then the rest of him, and he was thrown back out into the street. Sans walked over, his smile gone and with a flickering glow in the other eye socket.

“That's not what I meant. I know your type. The type that screams that they're not afraid to a dark, empty room. You think just because you can keep your voice from breaking that nobody can tell how scared you are. How's that human saying go again? Something about people who protest too much? You'll just find somebody else that makes you feel afraid, and makes you feel ashamed for being afraid. Somebody to blame for all your problems, over and over, until... well, one day, you'll pick the wrong scapegoat, and they'll wipe you out.”

Sans lifted Cater off of the ground and slammed him down into it again.

“And as luck would have it, that day is today. Because all this lack of self awareness on your part is really pissing me off.”

In spite of the circumstances, Cater laughed a pained laugh. “My lack of self awareness? You're all killers! You're killing human beings in broad daylight! You think your friends on the radio are the only people watching this unfold? Everyone in the world will see you for what you are after today. Kidnappers. Murderers. Bullies and cowa-”

“People who interrupt other people, don't forget that one.”

Cater spat at Sans as he struggled to his feet. “You're not people. You're things. Things that act and pretend to be alive and thinking and feeling when they can't be. Imposters and liars. Why do you think humans won the war thousands of years ago? Because we're stronger. And that's why we'll win today. We are strong. And you are weak.”

“Oh, really? then this won't hurt.”

Sans held up one hand and a glowing bone shot out of his glove and slammed into Jordan Cater's groin. The human fell to the street surface, curled up into a ball, and began making a high pitched wheezing noise.
“Jesus Christ Sans! I felt that up here.”

“Same,” Justin added over the audio circuit. “You might have crossed a line there? Still, can't argue with the results.”

“...you know, I'm kinda disappointed. I was hoping he'd last long enough for me to use my special attack. honestly, this whole fight has been a bit of a let down.”

The ex-soldier was silent for a moment. “Wait... I though the giant skull with the plasma halitosis was your special attack?”

“nah. that's what Papyrus calls a really cool regular attack.”

“Well... he's not wrong... but when he was talking to Dr. Aster he said that you guys both used your special attacks in the auditorium, so did I miss something when I was trying to not drown in my own blood or what?”

“Hey Sans?” Hal interrupted. “You know that whole wall of bones thing you did? You might want to drop it now.”

Sans looked up at the crowd of people that had once followed Dwayne Riley, and more recently Jordan Cater; despite, or perhaps because, of what had just happened to Mr. Cater, they didn't seem all that interested in him.

“why, what's happened?”

“Uh... not sure how to explain this, but there is a distinct chance of friendly fire. A lot of people are coming up Harrison Drive. They do not look happy. Also, I just got a text from Joe. He is actually stuck in that floating weapons platform thing, so I'm going to go get a crowbar or a giant shoehorn-”

“Holy shit! Whoa, okay, yeah, I just saw that. I agree with Hal. Drop the bones and let them scatter. Otherwise we're going to have a real bloodbath on our hands.”

Sans stared at the crowd, then shrugged and snapped his fingers. The bone barricades vanished into the ether, and Sans bridged over to where Papyrus and (especially) Undyne were panting and sweating.

“WOWIE... THAT WAS QUITE... THE WORKOUT!”

“...I think I'm going to get heatstroke if I stay out in the sun for more than five more minutes... but that won't stop... wait where are they going?!?”

Sans shrugged. “does it matter? we just dunked their leader. again. actually, I was so focused on him I didn't notice much about what happened to the rest of them. how was it?”

“BLUE ATTACKS FOR ALL AND SUNDRY! GENEROSITY IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY, THAT'S WHAT BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOR IS ALL ABOUT! ALSO NOT LETTING YOUR DOG GET INTO SOMEBODY ELSE'S YARD!”

Undyne narrowed her eye. “Not sure what they were expecting, but I don't think they were expecting what they got. And what they got was an endless stream of bones and spears. The blue attack shield took care of almost all the return fire.”

“what do you mean almost?”
“Well...” Undyne traced a new dent on her armored chest plate with one finger. “Something tells me I'm going to get another tongue lashing from Alphys when I get back inside. And not the fun kind, either.”

Sans stared at Undyne, then coughed and pointed at his headset. Undyne's eye went wide, her face became red, and she reached for her own ear, where an ear bud was still residing. “Uh... you two didn't hear that, understand?!?”

“Well there's a mental image that came out of nowhere. Thanks Captain.”

“You didn't have to say that, Carrow.” Undyne growled.

“I mean, I'm not complaining. Matter of fact-”

“YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO SAY THAT, CARROW!”
The Fallen Child

“Asriel... what are you doing here??”

“I heard you call for help. I'm sorry it took so long to get here.”

The human child stared. “That's why I didn't see you in the Ruins. You never ended up as a flower. At least... at least I got one thing right in all this.”

“What are you talking about? I don't understand.”

“I died, Asriel. I got shot. The doctors couldn't save me. Which meant everything got reset. But I screwed it up. I wanted to stay in the future. I broke the timeline. Everyone is trapped in the Underground again and it's all because of me.” Frisk closed their eyes. “And everything changed. There aren't any human souls. Because they know. Everybody remembers the future now. Everybody knows what they've lost. What I stole from them.” Tears seeped through Frisk’s closed eyelids. “And I can't fix it. I broke everything and I can't fix it. But maybe I can stop myself from doing any more damage...”

Asriel stared at Frisk, a sinking feeling forming in his gut. A memory came back suddenly, without warning; two children standing by a bed of flowers.

“Was it foolishness? Was it fate? Or was it... because you...?”

Frisk hadn't said anything then, but the fact that they had looked away, and the expression on their face, was an answer in itself.

Asriel started wading through the water towards the wooden platform Frisk was standing on; Frisk's eyes opened and they backed away from him, towards the Abyss.

“Asriel, stop. Please, don’t come any closer. It’s not safe around me.”

“I can't stay away, Frisk. I'm here to help you. I have something that belongs to you. Something you need.”

“Don’t you understand what's happened? What I've done? The only way... the only people you can help are mom and d- Toriel and Asgore. Toriel is in the Ruins, I think Asgore is still in the castle. If they see you... still you, maybe that will soften the blow.”

“There's no point in doing that. Listen to me very carefully, Frisk. None of this is real. Right now, you are lying in a hospital bed in Ebott's Wake. You were shot in the shoulder during the state of the kingdom address at the auditorium. The gunshot wound got infected and now you're running a fever. All of this? Everything you've seen, everything you've experienced? It's a fever dream. That's why it's so screwed up. Your body is trying to fight off the infection and you're overheating, and it's affecting your brain. You need to wake up before you get too hot.”

“I don't feel hot. And I still felt cold when I walked through Snowdin.”

“That's because they already covered you with ice packs. They said you were at 105 degrees. If you don't cool down soon, you could die.”

Frisk looked down. “...so what's the problem?”
“What?? Frisk you told me over and over how much you wanted to keep everyone's happy ending from disappearing. If you want to save everyone else, you have to save yourself first.”

“...no. I can't keep doing this. I can't keep doing this. You understand, right? I know you understand. Remembering what it's like to die, over and over again.” Frisk's eyes closed again and their voice became quiet. “But the other humans, before me. They didn't come back. And mo-Toriel had the same feelings with them as she did with me when I came back. Which means they found a way out. A way to stop it.”

“Whoa, whoa whoa. If you die and the timeline gets reset, that's one problem. If you die and the world goes on without you in it, that's a lot of problems.”

“No. It solves problems. If I'm right, and this is real, at least the damage is stopped. As bad as things are... there is always the chance they could get better, without me in the way. But if you're right, and none of this is real, and I'm still in Ebott's Wake... then everyone is free. With me gone, the time loop stops. Everyone is safe and happy on the surface. Everyone gets to keep their happy ending.”

“It's not a happy ending! You'll be dead! Do you have any idea what that will do to Toriel? Or Asgore? Or literally everybody else who knows you?!”

From what Asriel could see of Frisk's expression, it was pained. “This is for the best. I'm sor-”

Frisk stopped talking abruptly and flinched as though they were about to be struck. For a split second, Asriel thought he saw the shadow of Frisk's father behind them.

“Frisk. Do you know what is happening right now? In the hospital, outside it? In the town? Doctors and nurses are scrambling to try to do something, anything to bring your temperature down. Dr. Alphys and Dr. Aster are keeping an eye on your soul, trying to come up with a way to stabilize it. Sans, Papyrus and Undyne are outside, trying to stop a whole bunch of anti monster bigots from attacking the hospital. People all over the town are fighting back! They know what happened to you, and they're not taking that lying down! And the only reason Toriel and Asgore aren't out there ripping the head off the guy that shot you is because they want to be right here when you wake up! If a timeline without you is really for the best, then why is everyone trying so hard to keep you in it?!?”

“I don't know,” Frisk whispered, so softly Asriel could barely hear it over the rushing water. “I can't understand. I can't understand. People take a chance on me and I screw things up and they give me another chance. And another. And another. They have to know. They have to understand. But they smile... and say it's alright... even when it's not...” Frisk's face crumbled into a grimace of pain. “I just can't understand. They should be angry. But they're not. Why does that hurt worst of all?”

“Because it's proof. Proof that it's not your fault. Frisk, on my way here, I saw... things. Bits of your childhood. I saw what your mother and father were like. I saw what your dad did when you tried to apologize. And I see now why all of this has come to a head in the past few days. Frisk, you are not a brat. You are not responsible for everything that goes wrong. You are not a bad person. You did not deserve any of what happened to you.”

The human child stared down at the flowing water.

“But... it all happened.”

“Yes, but it shouldn't have.”
“Not what other people did. What I did. Every broken plate. Every time I ruined something, or lost something. If you're right, and this is really a fever dream, how could I possibly wake up? Knowing that in a minute, or an hour, or a day, or a month, I'd just hurt somebody again?” Frisk shook with emotion and tears leaked out of eyes squeezed shut in pain. “They ought to give that Cater guy a medal. The man who finally stopped me from hurting anyone else.”

“Stop saying things like that!”

“I can't do this anymore, Asriel. Every time I break something, I keep waiting. Waiting for the hammer to fall. For the yelling to start. But Toriel just... sighs and shrugs things off. So does Asgore. And I keep waiting, waiting for it to catch up to me. I can't live like this. But I can't stop it either. I can't change what I am. Please. Go back. Let me do one thing right in my life.”

“Asriel... turn everything off for a moment.”

“What? Turn the camera off?”

“Yes.”

“.okay. It's off.”

“I brought up the buttercups because I have an idea. I know how we can free all monsters. All we need is one human soul and one monster soul to pass through the Barrier, correct?”

“Yeah, but-”

“Well, we have one.”

“What? Where?? How?”

Chara stared at Asriel and tapped their chest several times with their index finger. “Where else?”

“Oh. Right. Hah. Sorry, Chara. Sometimes I forget...”

“I wish I could. It's a simple plan, Asriel. I eat enough buttercups to get sick and die. When I do, you absorb my soul. Together, we can cross the barrier. At the foot of the mountain, there's a-”

“Wait, you said your plan was to die?!”

“Well, how else do you get a human soul out of a body? After Doctor... after the disaster in Hotland, everyone's hopes of getting out of here were crushed. But the way out has been here the whole time. I've known it since mom explained it. Now... I keep waiting for everyone else to realize it.”

“You don't have to die to free everyone, Chara! Dad will choose a new Royal Scientist soon! They'll come up with something!”

“You say that as if Asgore hasn't already thought of what I've been talking about.”

“Chara!”

“Think about it, Asriel! I'm a human. I very nearly killed the king of all monsters. There should be
wanted posters all over New Home with my picture on them and the words Wanted, Dead or Alive.”

“That was both of us, and it was an accident! You know it was!” Asriel started to tear up and automatically began wiping his eyes with the back of his paw.

“Asriel... look, could you stop crying, please? And listen to me. It’s only a matter of time before somebody else has the same idea. So we might as well act on it now and save everyone the time and trouble. All we need are six more souls. We’ll free everyone. That should make up for me almost killing the king-”

“But you’ll be gone! I don’t want that to happen!”

“...Asriel, please. We have to do this together. It takes a human and a monster. Please, just help me do one thing right in my life.”

The memory passed and Asriel very nearly fell over into the water. It had suddenly become painfully, even agonizingly clear why and how he had convinced himself that Frisk had been Chara. That expression. That tone of voice. That decision...

*Chara, I'm so sorry. I wish I had understood. I wish I could have helped. But even if I can't help you anymore, maybe I can help somebody else.*

Asriel splashed through the water towards Frisk, who backed away again; but Asriel was faster and his arms wrapped around them.

“Asriel, what are you doing?”

“Frisk, what do you want? Really?”

“It doesn't matter.”

“Yes it does, and that's not an answer. You are hurting so much right now. Every thought. Every memory. It feels like broken glass, doesn't it? Cutting you up from the inside.”

“...yes. I just... I want it to stop. Please, just let it all stop.”

“I don't want you to suffer, Frisk. Nobody does. And they have no idea how badly you've been hurt.”

“Then let me go. Let me do one thing right, even if it is at the end.”

“Frisk. Listen to me very carefully. Chara said the same thing to me, years ago.”

Asriel couldn't see Frisk's face, but he felt them tense up at the revelation.

“When Asgore got poisoned, Chara thought they were in trouble. Not 'you're grounded' trouble. They thought they were going to die. That they were going to be *executed*. I told you Chara hated humanity. Asgore getting sick, it reminded them that they were human too. They came to me and they had an idea. A way to free everybody... but Chara had to die for it to work, and after what they did, they felt that was what they deserved. Maybe Chara wasn't the greatest person, but Chara was still a *good* person. A good person that made a simple, honest mistake. And because of that
one mistake, they thought that everything that was good about them didn't matter."

Frisk was silent, and Asriel pushed on, trying to fight off the lump forming in his throat. “I don't know what happened on the surface to make them feel that way. When we combined souls, they still kept so many things secret. But I could feel what they were feeling. Anger, anticipation, vengeance. And fear. So much fear. Chara was terrified of what would happen to monsters in the underground once the barrier was broken. But Chara was also afraid of everyone in the Underground. All this time and nobody realized, nobody knew. Now, finally, I understand. Mom and Dad loved them, but Chara was always, always waiting for it to stop. Waiting for angry words and fireballs. When dad got sick—"

“Chara thought that was the last straw,” Frisk finished the thought.

“Yes. And that's why they asked me to help. I was the only one Chara was never afraid of. All they wanted to do was make things right. All I had to do was refuse, get them to talk things out with Dad, so that they understood that they didn't have to. And I didn't... do you understand now, Frisk? I can't let this happen again. Please wake up. Please come back with me. I know it hurts. I know you feel like all you've ever done is make things worse. But that's not true! Everything that happened to you before, everything that made it so that you can't see anything good in yourself anymore, it's all wrong. I told you. Everyone will be there for you.”

“...but nobody was there for you. After everything I've done, people will still stand by me. Even if they shouldn't. But all you did was try to help. And it hurt you so much. And nobody was there to help you. It's all wrong. It's all backwards.” Frisk's arms came up and wrapped around Asriel.

“I'm... I'm sorry, Asriel. I know that doesn't make it right. I know that doesn't help. I just... I wish I could have done more. I wish I could have found a way to save you. I had the power. I could have gone back a third time. Or a fourth time. Or as many times as it took to find some way to bring you back. And you, and Toriel, and Asgore, you could all be a family again. On the surface, in the sunlight. But I didn't. I didn't. I was tired and selfish and I kept going. Now look at what I've done...”

“No.” Asriel pulled away from the hug and looked Frisk in the eyes. “Look at what they did to you. You fell into a world where everyone was trying to kill you. You never raised your hand against any of them. You took the power I abused out of boredom, and tried to make everyone happy. Monsters are walking under the sun and in the fresh air for the first time in nobody knows how long. You made it happen.”

“That was you, Asriel. You absorbed the souls. You destroyed the barrier. You made this happy ending possible, and you couldn't be a part of it, because I didn't find a way to—”

“Frisk. Remember what I told you at the castle? It all happened because of you. You cared about everyone, and everyone cared about you. Everyone came together to protect you... and you didn't even call out for help. You got everyone together in one place, and when I stole all of their souls, you reminded me of what I had forgotten. What I chose to forget because it was too painful. If anyone else had fallen into the Underground in your place, even with the power to change everything, do you really think they could have done better? Frisk, do you really think that they would have come back, to do everything over a second time, to try to find a way to make sure everybody else was happy? You set everything up. You put everything in place. It was you who made this happy ending possible... but... you cannot accept it.”

Frisk lowered their eyes and tried to pull away, but Asriel grabbed them by the shoulders. “That was what your parents did to you. Everything good that you've done, you think it wasn't good enough, or somebody else made it happen. They didn't just hurt you, they made it impossible for
you to be happy with what you've done, so you can never get better. And now... even when you
don't realize it, you have their sins crawling on your back, weighing you down, telling you that
you're not good enough, that you'll never be good enough. But you keep trying... because even after
all that, you still love them, don't you?”

Frisk nodded.

“That was worst of all. They took a child that loved everyone and they twisted that love, turned it
inside out. That's why it tears you up inside when you make a mistake. Because they never let you
be you. You had to be perfect, and they told you that for so long that you believe it. You think...
that the only reason you exist, is to make other people happy. And it tears you apart. Because you
want everybody to be happy, but you're also afraid of making everything worse. You want to let
everyone make their own happy ending, but when things don't work out, and they can't get the
ending they hoped for... you blame yourself. Because you have the power to make it happen. And
because you can, you have to. And you think you're an awful, selfish person if you don't.”

“...but I am.” Frisk looked up again and Asriel saw their face; hurt, scared, but more than anything
else exhausted. “Toriel and Asgore don't say it. But they miss you so much. Toriel should be
hugging you at the end of a bad day. Asgore should be talking with you about the future of humans
and monsters. I sleep in your bed, and I eat at your place at the table, and it's not right. It should be
you there. When the barrier broke, Toriel should have been holding your hand walking down the
mountain. I... I stole that away from you. I understand if you hate me, Asriel. I hate me too.”

“Frisk I don't hate you. Remember? I asked you to take care of mom and dad for me. I let the souls
go even though I knew I would turn back into a flower. I thought I was alright with that, because
without a soul, I wouldn't be able to feel bad about what I'd done, what I'd lost. But that's not what
happened.” Asriel held up one paw and a point of red light coalesced into being.

“When we were fighting, your soul shattered, but you refused to die. Instead of dissipating, the
fragments stuck together. Except this one. That's what's happened to you, to us. That's why your
soul is so unstable, it's like a puzzle with one of the pieces missing. And now that we know that, so
much else makes sense. I was carrying it for so long... I started to feel things again. When
something bad happens to you I worry. When you say things like what you've been saying, I get
scared. And when I see you smile... I want to smile back. Those feelings. Being happy, being sad.
Those were not mine, they were yours. And the way you stood your ground against Dwayne
Riley... it's a two way street. That's my anger, my frustration.”

The fragment of red light was held out to Frisk.

“It's time for this to go back where it belongs.”

“...I can't. I can't. You won't be able to feel anything anymore.”

“Frisk, it was bad enough being a flower with no feelings at all. Now, I'm a flower that is
surrounded of reminders of a life that I miss but can't have. That is not an improvement. Maybe the
closest I'll ever get to happy is the absence of sadness, and if that's the case I'll take what I can get.
But that's not important. What is important is you taking this back and waking up. Everyone is
waiting for you. Everyone is counting on you. I know you, Frisk. You can't let yourself walk away
from that. And that's not something that somebody forced on you... that is the real you.”

“...I never wanted to die. I never wanted to disappear. I just wanted everyone to be happy. I wanted
it to stop hurting. Is it really, is it okay if I come back? Will everything be alright?”

“I can't promise you that everything will turn out fine. I don't know. But I can promise you this.
Whatever you decide to do next, I'm coming with you. If you wake up, we wake up together, and whatever happens next, we'll deal with it. Together. If you decide to go back to the underground, reset everything, try to make a future that doesn't result in you getting shot? I'll be at your side the whole way. And... if you decide to quit... I'm coming with you too. As scared as I am to find out what happens when something without a soul dies, I'm more scared to go on without you. I'm not ready to say goodbye. I'll never be ready. Every day, I miss Chara. Every day, I'll miss you.”

Asriel pulled Frisk closer and hugged them again. “I'm not letting go. Never again.”

Slowly, Frisk's arms came up and wrapped around Asriel.

“...thank you. Thank you for not giving up on me. I won't give up either. I'll find a way to save you. I promise.”

“Ha... Don't you remember? You already did.”

* Knowing that the people that you love also love you... fills you with DETERMINATION.
Wake Up

“Alphys! Something's happening!”

Dr. Aster stared at the scanner as the fragments of light began circling faster and faster, closer and closer. The numbers on the sidebar began to flicker, running up and down the meter from zero to all nines and back again. “Alphys, uh... you might want to double check this.”

The lizard pulled out her phone, tapped the scanner app button, and saw what Aster had seen on the scanner. Even more sweat started dripping off her brow. “Those readings look a little like the ones I got when I scanned Flowey. B-but that happened because the bullet analyzer was calibrated for monster soul energy levels, and he had a fragment of Frisk's Soul... this doesn't make any se-

Abruptly, the scanner screen flickered as the fragments converged, leaving behind a single, solid, and above all bright red light. The numbers on the sidebar stopped fluctuating and became static, and Dr. Aster pulled a pencil and paper out of his pocket and began scribbling.


Dr. Alphys looked at the medical equipment. “Neither one of us are human doctors. We better get them to come in here and-”

“Flowey?”

The two doctors immediately turned and stared at the hospital bed. Frisk's eyes were open, and she was staring at the vine wrapped around her hand.

“Flowey, are you there?”

On the table next to the hospital bed, the flower moved slightly in its pot.

“Ugh... I don't wanna go to school today, I got a headache...”

Frisk tried to reach up with her other hand to unwrap the vine, but sucked in air in a hiss of pain.

“C-careful, Frisk! The doctors had to cut out the bits of bullets that were in there. Don't tear out your stitches.”

“Alphys.” Frisk turned to look at the lizard scientist and grinned, even as her eyes watered in pain. “I have never been. So happy. To see a friend.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth! ...oh! Oh my god. I need to go tell the King and Queen! I'll be right back! Don't go anywhere!”

Alphys scrambled towards the door and made her way out into the hall. Dr. Aster walked over to the bed and looked down at the human child.

“Well. You sure gave us all a scare. Some of us more than others.”

Frisk closed her eyes and looked away. “I know. I panicked. When I realized Undyne might die... that was all I could think about. I put everything at risk when I jumped in front of her like I did.”

Dr. Aster reached down and squeezed Frisk's hand.
“That isn't what I meant.”

The doorway to the hospital room was suddenly filled to capacity with boss monster. Frisk looked up as Dr. Aster backed away, and saw Toriel and Asgore at the foot of the bed.

“Frisk!”

Frisk opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out before the queen had engulfed them in a hug.

“Do not ever, ever scare us like that again! We thought... I thought...”

Frisk's eyes teared up for reasons that had nothing to do with the rough handling of an injured shoulder.

“Mom, I-”

“Your father and I have been worried sick!”

“Uh, your Majesty, Frisk's shoulder is still-”

“What on earth possessed you to run out and put yourself at risk like that?!?”

“...mom... I'm so sorry...”

Toriel looked down and saw Frisk trying to hug her with one arm, and belatedly remembered why Frisk was in the hospital in the first place. Even as the queen relaxed her grip, Frisk tightened hers.

“Mom, please don't go-”

“I am not going anywhere, my child. And I should be the one to apologize.” A massive furry paw stroked the human child's hair. “Frisk, I am not angry with you. I was just frightened. Words cannot express how happy I am to see you awake right now.”

Frisk sniffed. “You... you can thank Flowey for that. He found me. He woke me up. He... he was the one who brought me back.”

Toriel turned to look at the flower monster. Flowey's vines started to unwrap from Frisk and retract into the pot, though the flower itself was still staring down at the floor, its expression concealed by the petals around it.

“Thank you, Flowey. You... you will never know what this means to me. Thank you. Thank you a hundred times, a thousand times over.”

The flower swayed in its pot, still looking down. “All I want to do is buy a futon, I don't see why this has to be so complicated...”

The queen blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Ahem. Your Majesty, Flowey connected with Frisk's Soul directly to reach them. Alphys turned him into the Soul Energy Aggregate Link I theorized we needed to build at some point, but the connection... well, it took a lot out of him.”

“I see... I did wonder why Flowey was holding your hands, Frisk. I thought he was merely trying to comfort you.”
“He did that too, mom. I had... I had the worst dream. Everything was all wrong... monsters were trapped Underground again, and it was my fault, and I couldn't fix it. Flowey... he convinced me it was a dream.”

Frisk leaned back from the hug and looked at Asgore, then smiled. “Hey dad. I didn't mean to leave you out. Come here big guy.”

“I'll go, uh, see how Alphys is doing,” Dr. Aster mumbled as Asgore, Toriel, and Frisk all shared a group hug, bridging out of the room and some distance down the hallway.

“-but the real problem isn't the size anyway, it was the lack of air conditioning. That thing runs really hot, and it wasn't like I could just crack a window.”

Dr. Aster stared at Joe Stanton, covered in bruises, cuts and scrapes, cradling one arm, and talking to Sans.

“again, not something either one of us thought of. Alphys is sort of cold blooded, but her tolerance for heat is a lot higher than Undyne's. and heat doesn't bother me at all really.”

“Yeah, I figured that out on my own, thanks. You walking around in the middle of summer wearing a fur lined bomber jacket kind of gave it a way.”

“you know what they say, if you can't stand the hint get out of the kitchen.”

“SAAAAAANS!”

Dr. Aster looked up and saw Papyrus some distance down the hallway, talking to another human.

“IT'S A GOOD THING WE'RE IN A HOSPITAL, BECAUSE YOUR JOKES MAKE ME SICK! NYEH HEH HEH HEH!”

Sans snickered and turned to his father. “So. Alphys just came running by with the good news. Frisk is awake.”

“Yes. How did things go outside? I heard some excitement earlier but I didn't dare take my eye sockets off the phone.”

“honestly? a little disappointing. for all his talk that Cater guy couldn't fight to save his-”

“Wait. Did you say Cater?”

“Yeah. And it's about what it sounds like. The guy said he was Chara's father. Which I guess explains the abiding hatred of monsters, but it doesn't justify shooting anybody else, especially not other humans.”

Joe nodded. “The Wisdom of Solomon defense doesn't hold up in court.”

“The wisdom of what?”

“Oh. Right. Uh, long time ago there was this guy named Solomon. He was a famous king, very wise, very rich. He had like a massive diamond mine or something. Or maybe that was just in Civilization five? Need to look that up... not important now though. The thing is, he often had to arbitrate between people with disputes, and there was one example about a dispute about two women as to who was the mother of a baby. Solomon's solution was to recommend the baby be cut in two so each woman could have equal parts.”
“Well, the idea was that the real mother would want her baby to be alive no matter who was taking care of it, and the fake one wouldn't care, and that happens in the story. But there's all sorts of problems with the story if you think about it for thirty seconds. Like, what kind of weirdo is okay with half a baby? But that's a whole other thing unrelated to the subject at hand. What I'm trying to say is, when they drag Cater's ass into court, if he tries to argue that his kid died so he killed somebody else's kid, because that's fair, he won't be doing himself any favors.”

“Court? You mean the human legal proceedings to establish guilt or innocence?”

“Yeah. I wouldn't worry about that right now. If Cater really was part of the Sages, there's no chance in hell that he'll get a fair trial in Ebott's Wake, or anywhere else in the county. They'll spend the next eight years trying to find a change of venue.”

“Hmmm. Suppose that gives us time to write up statements and file them away for future reference. Or whatever is involved in human courts.”

“Not a lawyer, so I don't know for sure. But writing down notes when the events are still fresh in your memory is always a good idea.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

Dr. Aster turned around to see a human wearing a white coat over hospital scrubs.

“Oh. Hello. Doctor Ross, wasn't it? You were the one who told us about Frisk earlier.”

“Yes, and now I'm hearing that she's awake? I was on my way to check on her but I have to ask, did anyone use any more magic on her?”

Dr. Aster shook his skull in the negative. “Not that I saw, and I was paying very close attention. Not that it would have done any good against an infection. I suppose it could have helped repair the damage from the bullets and heal up the surgical incisions easily enough, but the situation must have made everyone wary of trying.”

“Hmmm. I personally don't care as long as the patient walks out at the end, but some of the other doctors, and the hospital administration, have serious reservations about it.”

“Like Dr. Akron, yes. He stopped by to deride the queen in particular and everyone else in general. Fortunately a human gentleman picked him up and removed him from the premises, so we were spared a long lecture.”

“Wait what? Who was that? I'd warn him to watch his back. What Dr. Akron lacks in bedside manner he makes up for by holding grudges.”

Dr. Aster pointed down the hallway. “I don't remember his name, if I heard it at all, but that's him speaking to my son right now.”

“Hal Greene?? I don't know why I'm surprised. Well, if Robbie wants to go toe-to-toe with one of the Greenes, it's his funeral.”

“...you changed your position very rapidly. Couldn't help but notice.”

Dr. Ross laughed. “Yeah, guess I did? Anyway, thanks for the input. I should go check on Frisk.”
“I should also check to make sure everything is alright,” Aster replied, following Dr. Ross down the hallway. “And if you have further questions for the King and Queen, I can translate some of the medical terminology.”

Dr. Ross tilted her head to one side. “You're a doctor too, I take it? Where'd you get your degree?”

“Well, I'm a scientist. I got my doctorate in magic physics from Home University, back before the city was moved to the other side of the cavern. No actual medical training, per se, but enough anatomy textbooks washed down from the surface for me to get a solid grasp on the fundamentals. How about yourself, where did you acquire your knowledge?”

“Oh, I'm locally sourced,” Dr. Ross grinned. “The community college here does a pre-med program, and after that I went to Briggsby Medical up in Quarterhorse Fields, then I came back here. Becoming Chief of Surgery is a story in itself, but that'll have to wait for another day.”

Dr. Aster turned to see that they had arrived at the door to Frisk's hospital room. Inside, The king and queen were seated in chairs while Frisk was talking.

“...hey. You look different without the face mask.”

“Hey, kid. I'm Doctor Jamie Ross.”

“Hi Dr. Ross. Frisk Dreemurr. Nice to meet you officially.”

Dr. Ross smiled. “How are you feeling?”

“Still kind of weird. Hot and sweaty and if I move too fast I get dizzy. Is that normal for after a fever, or are those side effects from whatever is in the IV stand?”

“They're not uncommon in cases of fever...” Dr. Ross peered at the numbers on the machinery Frisk was still hooked up to. “Your temperature is still a bit high, but you're awake and you're lucid. Which is pretty good for somebody who died on the operating table three times.”

The room became silent, save for the various medical equipment. Frisk looked at Dr. Aster, then at the king and queen, and finally at Dr. Ross again.

“It sounded just now like you said I died.”

“Yeah. Your heart stopped for long enough to make everyone worry, then it started up again, every time. We didn't have to do anything.”

Dr. Ross noticed the looks Asgore and Toriel were giving her. “It's rare, but it does happen. Usually we have to kickstart things with adrenaline, chest compressions, or a defibrillator. But some people, well, soon as death shows up to claim them, they sit up on the operating table yelling 'Not today!' Sometimes literally. I guess that's what happened here.”

“So I died three times... but I'm still here?”
“Impressive, isn't it? If you keep brushing with death like that you should probably add him on Facebook. Otherwise it's gonna get awkward.”

“I don't have a facebook page though... oh. That's a joke. Was that to get me back for the joke about playing piano?”

“Maybe. I'll never tell.” Dr. Ross looked over towards the Dreemurrs. “On that note, if we could step outside for a moment, I have some other factors I'd like to discuss. Doctor... sorry, not sure I got your name.”

“Aster. Wing Ding Aster.”

“Wing Ding? Really??”

“Yes, really. Why?”

“...nothing. Anyway, Dr. Aster, if you could keep Frisk company for a bit? I think I can break down what I need to say into layman's terms.”

“...alright. I'll be here if I'm needed.”

“Doctor Alphys might work faster.

But the old Royal Scientist, Wing Ding Aster?

One day he vanished without a trace.

They say he shattered through time and space.

How can I say so without fear?

I'm holding a piece of him right here.”

All heads in the room turned to look towards Flowey, whose own head was bobbing up and down unsteadily and his eyes weren't focusing on the same point at the same time.

“Flowey?” Frisk asked. “Are you feeling okay? Or... anything?”

“I'd be better if this stupid hospital wasn't built on a trampoline... seriously, I am sick to a stomach I don't even have. How do you work under these conditions.”

Dr. Ross pointed at Flowey. “Something tells me he shouldn't be here.”

“Good. We agree on something. The walls of the pot are closing in on me....”

“Doctor, Flowey is a close friend of Frisk... strange as that may sound.”

“Well... just as long as the administration people don't find out. Somebody's going to lose their minds and file some sort of suit. Anyway, if we could step out for a moment.”

“Of course. We will be right outside, Frisk.”

“Thanks mom. I'll be alright though. I can talk science with Dr. Aster.”

“Oh, speaking of science! I think you'll be very interested in the latest development in the Soul Research program...”
“Mrs. Dreemurr... Mr. Dreemurr... when we were removing the fragments of the bullet in Frisk's shoulder, we didn't have time to do anything but that. After she was out of surgery and we needed information on her reactions to medication, I took a gamble and checked to see if anyone named Frisk had ever been brought in before. It's not that common a name. And as it happens, there was a Frisk Taylor that was brought in here a few years ago.”

“I see.” Toriel's face was impassive.

Dr. Ross tapped the upper part of her right arm. “Frisk Taylor was brought in multiple times in a very short time span for various bruises, cuts, and most seriously a minor fracture of the humerus that reached into the shoulder joint. Among children, that particular level of physical injury isn't unheard of, either out of reckless adventurism or clumsiness or general bad luck. However, once the shock wears off, many such children will be, in a word, noisy. They're often speaking at great length about how cool the stunt was that injured them, or arguing with other children over whose fault it was, or if nothing else screaming and yelling in pain before any medication can take effect.”

Dr. Ross looked down the hallway towards Frisk's room, then back at the Dreemurrs.

“Then there are the kids who are silent and actively avoid making eye contact with anyone.”

Toriel nodded stiffly. “I see. And I assume Frisk Taylor fit into that category?”

“According to notes left by the attending physician, there was enough evidence for him to want to call Child Protective Services. Unfortunately all we have are Dr. Thompson's notes. He was one of the unlucky people who were hunted down by the Sages before they were stopped.”

Dr. Ross ran her finger and thumb down the edge of her coat for a moment in some sort of nervous habit. “I'm bringing this up because the Frisk that I've seen is quiet, but in the sense of being reserved, not afraid. She makes eye contact. She has a sense of humor. If it is the same child... then clearly there have been changes for the better over the past few years.”

“Dr. Ross,” Toriel spoke up, “a great deal about Frisk's past and human family is not known to us, and even their surname has only recently been brought up. Much has come to light over the past week. What you have told us matches what we have discovered so far.”

“I'm surprised, but not that surprised. People who survive abuse tend to hide the evidence. Typically because bringing it to other people's attention usually results in reprisals later. But I thought at least some friction and confrontation would have occurred with Frisk's human family.”

“It is peculiar that you should mention that. Last night Frisk commented that during the initial press conference where we announced our presence, they had expected some sort of response from their parents. If not during, then after the fact. And, with their presence and actions being inseparably related to the return of monsterkind to the surface, it stretches the bounds of credulity to expect anyone to be ignorant of their existence. I...” Toriel's voice faltered for a moment. “I suspect that this has negatively affected Frisk's self worth, as their original parents did not even make the effort to bring them back, but the more I learn of Frisk's life with them the more I feel this is a blessing.”

“I agree.” Dr. Ross nodded. “Based on what we know now, it is a certainty that this is the same Frisk. I will amend her records with a new surname and add the gunshot incident. However, for legal reasons all hospital incidents involving gunshot wounds or related injuries must also be filed.
with the police. That was why I wanted to talk to you about this, because once it enters their system it can go many different places, both officially and unofficially.”

The king finally spoke up. “And this could come back to cause us problems later.”

“Yes. From what I'm hearing on the radio, nobody is going to take the Anti Monster League seriously again, if they even exist after today. But there are still people out there who don't like the idea of humans and monsters being close as family, even if they don't mind monsters under any other circumstances. I could see somebody trying to file a reckless endangerment suit, or possibly negligence, to try to send Frisk back to the Taylor household, or failing that some human foster family.”

Asgore's eyes flared with blue and orange light. “That's not going to happen.”

“Agreed.” Toriel nodded. “We will oppose any efforts to have Frisk taken back to anyone who may have harmed them in the past. What must we do?”

“That's not my area of expertise, but if things get contentious you can probably expect a visit by child services to inspect your home for safety, cleanliness, and other standards. For any sort of prolonged legal contention, you'll need to retain a lawyer just to navigate the courts. If the issue becomes somebody's crusade you'll have to deal with a lot of media attention; although at this point you might be used to that.”

“I see. Thank you Dr. Ross.”

“No problem. I do have one more question that you might be able to answer, though. Frisk is female, but you use they and them when referring to her. Why is that?”

“Oh. Yes, that is a monster convention. Our pronouns default to they and them for various reasons. I do know that Frisk is a girl, and I asked them long ago if they would prefer me to refer to them as such. I got a most peculiar response; Frisk said 'It doesn't matter to me either way because you'll be talking to other people when you do that.' Which is true, of course. But when I asked if they had a preference as to how they saw themselves, Frisk looked at me strangely and asked if Dr. Alphys had shown me something called 'tumbler' on the Internet.”

Dr. Ross narrowed her eyes. “I suppose that kind of thing does show up on Tumblr a lot. So... these pronouns have nothing to do with identity and everything to do with language.”

“Well, after Frisk said they did not care, they amended their statement by saying that if I referred to them as a boy things could get confusing later.”

Dr. Ross snorted. “Kid's got a sense of humor alright.”

Asgore ran some fingers through his beard. “I did notice that Frisk's friends seemed surprised to find out about it, and they started referring to Frisk like that right away. But the Aster family, Captain Undyne, and Dr. Alphys aren't old fashioned like we are. If Frisk has a problem with it, they'll let everyone know.”

“I see. Or I think I see. I'll try to catch Dr. Monroe and let him know, he's our lead staff psychologist and I'm guessing he hasn't stopped by yet? Given the number of people who have come in today from the Auditorium, the Memehaus, or just fighting on the streets, it's been almost as bad as the Fourth of July.”

“I do not understand, why would a psychologist need to see Frisk when their injuries were physical in nature?”
“It's called psychological first aid. After any sort of traumatic event, the mind is... expanded, and not in a good way. By establishing a personal connection, creating a comforting environment, and processing the events in a constructive way as soon as possible, lasting trauma or stress can be avoided. To use Frisk's situation as an example, somebody who was shot and didn't have support might develop any number of unhealthy behaviors that grew out of a psychological need to try to prevent or protect against further assaults, or develop an overwhelming, irrational dislike of anyone they felt was responsible for attacking them, or possibly even believe that the attack happened for a reason and become suicidal because they think they were supposed to die. And as bad as they are, those aren't even the worst possible outcomes. By creating a stable, supportive environment as soon as possible, we can show people who have experienced trauma that it was an exception, not the rule; that way they don't cultivate unhealthy habits trying to defend against constant danger.”

Toriel nodded. “I understand now. Thank you. After what has happened to Frisk today, that would be for the best.”

“I'm pretty sure that seeing you, and any friends, will go a long way towards helping Frisk in that respect. Having said that, do give her time to rest. A lot's happened in a short amount of time and that takes a lot out of a person. Somebody will come in to check on Frisk regularly, and depending on their vital signs, we may want to keep them overnight for observation. So when the streets are safe again you may want to go home and pack overnight bags for her and for yourselves if you plan to st-”

The hospital public address system crackled to life. “Dr. Ross to the Radiological Department. Dr. Ross to Radiology.”

“And that's my cue. Patients work from sun to sun, but a doctor's work is never done.” Dr. Ross grinned. “We'll have to finish this up later.”

“Yes, by all means. And thank you again!” Toriel called out to Dr. Ross's retreating back. “I think it is time we check in on Frisk... Asgore?”

The king was staring down at the tile floor of the hallway.

“I should never have asked Frisk to be the ambassador between humans and monsters. If they weren't in the Auditorium today during the attack, they wouldn't have gotten hurt.”

Toriel stared at Asgore for a few moments... and reached out, taking his paw in hers.

“Asgore... Frisk has done an admirable job as ambassador, and I have never seen them work harder, or with more excitement, than when they are organizing a project for bridging the gap between monsters and humans. Your choice may have been unusual, but Frisk is an unusual child. And there is only so much any of us could have done, even if we were possessed of perfect foresight, to prevent or discourage any sort of attack by those who have already committed themselves to hating us.”

“...you are right.” Asgore smiled sadly. “You always are, in the end.”

“...not always.” Toriel's own expression grew sad for a moment, then rallied into a playful grin and a wink. “But often enough. Now come along. Let us see what mischief Frisk and Flowey have gotten into in our absence.”

“Ho ho ho ho!”

The two boss monsters returned to the door to Frisk's hospital room, only to find the room filled
nearly to capacity by three skeletons, an amazonian fish warrior, and a short yellow lizard.

“No, what's actually funny about all this? I figured out Frisk was a girl waaaay before any of this.” Undyne grinned a massive grin. “And I didn't have to crib off of school paperwork or check to see what bathroom door they used either.”

“heh. guess old flower power there was right. i don't have a monopoly on keeping secrets after all.”

“Go directly to Yale! Do not pass Harvard, do not collect two hundred students!”

“Are you sure you're okay, Flowey? You've b-been very heavy on the non-sequiturs for a while now.”


“Oh great. We traded an angry, rude flower for a conspiracy theorist flower.” Undyne snorted. “I thought there was a rule or something about that. Like, limit one per small weird town.”

“We're not weird, we're eccentric,” Frisk and Flowey replied in unison.

Undyne's eye became very wide all of a sudden. “Okay. That was a little creepy.”

“Tell me about it,” grumbled Flowey.

“Seriously though Frisk, what d-do you prefer to be called? I know that's a really big issue these days for humans, especially on the internet.”

Frisk stared at Alphys. “It's not that big a deal for me. I mean, yeah, that's unusual, especially for somebody my age. There is a story behind it. And a reason for it. But so far this day has gone way, way off the rails for me, and I just don't feel up to digging it up. It doesn't matter to me. Call me whatever makes you comfortable. He, she, they, it, whatever.”

“if we start referring to you as 'he' then things are gonna get really confusing in a few years.”

Undyne, Alphys and Frisk laughed, while Papyrus stared at Sans. “I DON'T GET IT.”
“Good Morning Ebott's Wake! This is Brett 'The Brett' Brinkman joined by the irrepressible DJ Pantz! We are looking at a magnificent Saturday today, the perfect counterpoint to last Saturday's storm and a suitable cap on top of this week, what with its assorted hullabaloo.”

“Really? Hullabaloo?”

“It's a real word.”

“...I'm checking the dictionary.”

“As is your right, Burgie. In the meantime, I hope all our listeners out there are having a wonderful weekend to the extent that they are able, here in fabulous Ebott's Wake, Land of the Free and Home of the Daves.”

“What??”

“This slogan refers of course to The Daves, the most popular band to come out of Ebott's Wake during the Seventies, featuring Dave McGee on vocals, Dave Harrison on saxophone, Dave Thorton on keyboard and Dave Greene on theremin and pyrotechnics.”

“Wow. I knew about Clutch's dad but this is the first I've heard about the band. Although having a Greene on pyrotechnics shouldn't come as that much of a surprise.”

“Agreed. And now, current events! Ebott's Wake and indeed all of the municipalities in Lost Eagle County are still recovering from the events of yesterday's attack by the Anti Monster League. The assault on the Memorial Auditorium was followed by near simultaneous attacks against All Fine Labs, the Ebott's Wake Library, the Dank Memehaus, Das Boot Sub Shop, and Dreemurr Elementary School.”

“What about James Madison Elementary?”

“Yes, as events unfolded, many of these groups either left or were driven off, and left a trail of collateral damage as they converged near the Rita Belle Thurman Memorial Hospital. In addition to James Madison Elementary, other locations that were attacked en route included The Cotton Bin, Rick's Hardware, the Wanton Wonton Chinese Buffet, and Joe's House of Stuff. According to this statement from the Ebott's Wake Police Department, they were spread too thinly after all of these attacks to mount any sort of coherent response to the attack on the hospital, but at the same time the Anti Monster League spread themselves so thin that there was little they could do beyond graffiti and light property damage. This is believed to have contributed to the extremely low body count; while there were complications from various injuries, so far there have been no reported fatalities.”

“That said, it still looked very bad, especially once they all started marching on the hospital. That could have gone much worse. Good thing Sans and Undyne were there.”

“Yes, definitely. I still get chills listening to Gary's play-by-play of the fight. Or maybe that's PTSD.”

“For those of you who missed it, and if you were in Ebott's Wake yesterday you had the perfect excuse for missing out, some guy was leading the Anti Monster League after shooting Dwayne Riley. We do not know why the AML was trying to attack the hospital, but the current theories
were to try to attack the monster king and queen, or the ambassador.”

“How is Frisk doing by the way?”

“No idea. Haven't gotten a phone call from them or the Dreemurrs or anybody.”

“Hmmm. Well, given what we saw at the auditorium, I hope they're doing alright. In the meantime, we have to carry on and that means it's time to talk about changes to the event calendar. First up, Shyren's Concert and the Kludge Derby have both been postponed by one week... again... subject of course to changes in the weather.”

“I'm starting to feel really bad for Shyren right now.”

“You and me both, Burgie. Tomorrow's Chili Cook Off will continue as planned, but the historical re-enactment previously scheduled for Tuesday has been canceled.”

“Aww, nuts.”

“I know Burgie, I was looking forward to that too, but it just wouldn't be right to have a mock battle so soon after a real one. At least, that is the explanation by the historical society. Wednesday's Aquaculture Initiative Open House has been pushed back to Thursday, and Friday we are possibly looking at the mild storm systems that Hailey Skye predicted a few days ago. Next Saturday, rain or shine, is the charity Sports Fishermen Tournament, so come on down and watch your favorite people who love to fish make fools of themselves on the gridiron and in the outfield, respectively. It's for charity!”

“Speaking of sports, here's a reminder from the Lost Eagle County Little League Association to register your kids no later than June first. Let's not have a repeat of last year's train wreck. We also have an advanced notice of the pairings, though the schedule is still subject to change according to heat advisories. Our own Ebott's Wake Lumberjacks will be going up against Lone Point's Sharks first, followed by Gemini Road's Burglars. Triton's Clowns are next on the docket-”

“Sorry to interrupt Burgie but I just checked and they actually changed that back to Zombies.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yeah. I know, I know. They changed it before last season because there was talk about 'Zombies' being insensitive to certain monsters, but they got so many complaints about the new mascot costume giving kids and adults nightmares that they just changed it back this year.”

“Oh. Then why does this sheet still say Clowns?”

“I don't know. Maybe there was a typo or somebody didn't know how to use Find and Replace.”

“Huh... okay, right, after the Triton Zombies, the Lumberjacks are set to face the Robin's Egg Artists, and after that are the Quarterhorse Fields Pathfinders. Second round pairings will be determined after the first round wins and losses have been tallied but we'll be sure to bring them to you here at KEBT.”

“On that subject, I'd like to give a Morning Rush Shout Out to all of the previously mentioned communities that sent help to Ebott's Wake in our hour of need, and also the forest service people working at Cornucopia Valley. You really came through for us and nobody's going to forget that any time soon. Jeff?”

“HAY YOO GUUUYS!”
“Thanks Jeff. I'm glad we got the soundboard fixed so we can do that again.”

“You know, I still haven't watched The Goonies.”

“What?!”

“I've been busy, alright?”

“What are you doing after work today? Whatever it is, clear your schedule. We are going back to my place and we are fixing this once and for all. I have the special edition DVD and everything.”

“You're really adamant about this.”

“It's a classic, and it's also the product of its era. You don't often get overlap like that.... what? Oh. Listeners, it would seem that we have a caller on the line. Hello, caller, you're on the air on the Morning Rush!”

“Yes. Hello... hello.”

“Hello?”

“...yes?”

“Caller, this is Brett Brinkman, can you hear me?”

“Yes! Yes. Sorry. My name is Eliza Casper, and I'm calling you from Gemini Road to say that our Little League team is not called the Burglars anymore. Please get it right.”

“Allright. Wouldn't be the first name change this season. What is the Gemini Road Little League team called now?”

“The Cyclists. It promotes a much healthier attitude towards sports than conflating it with common criminals.”

“Well. Suppose I can't argue with that. You heard it here first, folks. The Gemini Road Little League team is apparently called the Cyclists now. Not sure exactly when that happened... hey Burgie, what's the date on that sheet you got?”

“Well, it says May first, but the people from the Little League Association only brought it by on Thursday.”

“Well. That figures.”

“Yeah, I remember because Clutch and I were watching a Best Of Montage from the Game Grumps playing Super Mario Maker while we were waiting for Beanpole's Request Line to wrap up.”

“And now we know. And knowing is half the battle.”

“It is?”

“Thank you for your call Mrs. Casper-”

“Miss.”

“Thank you for your call Ms. Casper. Jeff says we have another caller waiting, hello! You're on the
air with The Brett and DJ Pantz!”

“Hey...”

“Yes?”

“Hey man.”

“Hello?”

“Yeah, I want to, like, order a sixteen inch with bell peppers.”

“...uh, what?”

“Also, maybe bread sticks. I dunno. Is it too early in the morning for bread sticks?”

“...Oh. Sorry caller. This is KEBT Radio, not Pizzageddon.”

“But, I have like, a coupon.”

“And I'm sure they'll be happy to redeem it. Thank you for calling.”

“Aw great, now I'm hungry for pizza. What time does Pizzageddon open again?”

“I don't remember. Jeff, do we have any other callers? ...got it. Hello, you are on the air with Brett and DJ Pantz!”

“Hello there Mr. Brinkman.”

“Dr. Aster! Always a pleasure.”

“The feeling is mutual. I was just calling to say that despite the, uh, disruption yesterday, Phase One of the Soul Research Program is complete. We have extensive raw data, and now comes the difficult task of parsing it and looking for patterns. So, to everyone who came by to be scanned or who helped us make this happen in other ways, I’d just like to say thank you.”

“Now, you said this is Phase One of the program. What's involved in Phase Two?”

“Actually based on some unexpected data I saw yesterday, Phase Two has been dramatically revamped. Originally it was in depth correlation and causation research between specific personality characteristics and soul chromatics.”

“Like how some people with a certain color seemed to have less of a problem waiting for the shirts to be sent out.”

“Exactly. But after yesterday, that part of the work will be an adjunct to analyzing light intensity and energy level, to determine the specific physical characteristics of Soul energy and how human and monster souls compare and contrast. And on the subject of the shirt back orders, so long as we don't have another widespread civil order breakdown, we should have everything sent out to all volunteers and participants no later than... let me see... ah. June sixteen.”

“That's good to hear and I'm sure everyone out there is waiting for those shirts with great anticipation. Now you said physical characteristics, while the most common conventions of the Soul involve the metaphysical.”

“Well, for the Soul to influence physical matter in the form of a body, it has to have some physical
attributes. At the very minimum it's a form of energy that is highly selective in what matter it interacts with, and under what conditions.”

“And what would be the practical upshot of figuring this out?”

“Well, at this point it's impossible to say with any certainty, but one of the original goals of the Soul Research program has been to make magic-integrated technology more widespread. Because magic and Soul power are inextricably connected, this seems to be our best course at this time; as of right now any sort of technology that uses magic as a key operating principle or component can only be assembled by monsters. For technology to become widespread it needs to be possible not only to mass produce it, but to maintain it.”

“And at the same time, you have to be wary of the consequences of humans suddenly getting access to magic, even indirectly. If the AML had guys who could toss fireballs or lightning bolts or gusts of icy wind, yesterday could easily have been much worse.”

“Interesting you should bring that up, Brett. While the study itself was not exhaustive, and gives us a small cross section of the population of Ebott's Wake, it does support one of the theories that the ability for humans to learn and use magic is some sort of inherited trait that was eventually removed through natural or unnatural selection for some reason. Of course, if the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi are in part descended from the original mages that created the barrier, then they might have had that trait. Or perhaps the theory is wrong and scanning them would have refuted it. Either way, any survivors who had previously been affiliated with the group would probably not be open to volunteering for the scanner project, no matter how many free shirts we offered as recompense.”

“That's one way to put it. I've been slowly making my way through the paper that Dr. Stanton and his team put together about the Sages. Turns out they were up to some pretty grisly stuff way before they started making everyone else unhappy.”

“I've only had a chance to skim it myself, so I'll have to take your word for it for now. And on that note I must say goodbye; there's a lot of cleanup that has to be done at the lab if we're to start Phase Two on Monday.”

“Of course. Good luck with that Dr. Aster, and have a good day.”

“You as well Mr. Brinkman.”

“And that was Dr. Aster of All Fine Labs there. Great guy. He makes learning fun. And while that was happening, Winston came in with a piece of paper for Burgie. Good news, I'm hoping.”

“Well, better news. We just got word from Kyle again. Turns out he's over in Lone Point.”

“...okay, I'm not sure what I expected but it wasn't that. Do we have any context for how he got there?”

“According to this, a bunch of people broke off from the mob outside All Fine Labs yesterday and literally chased him out of town all the way to the Lone Point township. And apparently the main road in and out of Lone Point isn't paved, so he went right into the ditch trying to make a sharp corner. And that's when the AML stopped chasing him because the Lone Point PD was coming out at the same time. I mean, they're good people, but they drive like there's rockets duct taped to the trunk. So... yeah, could have been worse.”

“No kidding. I was worried he was dead.”
“Well, he did fracture his wrist in the crash.”

“Ouch.”

“He says he's charging the hospital bill to the station.”

“Double ouch. Huh? Okay. Jeff says we have another caller on the line. Hello! You are on the air with Brett and DJ Pantz.”

“Hey Brett. Hey DJ Pantz.”

“Little buddy! Glad to hear from you! How you holding up?”

“Ugh. Probably better than can be expected from getting shot and then dying three times on the operating table.”

“...what.”

“Yeah. That's apparently a thing that happened. We just got back home from the hospital, and I heard you guys on the radio, and I figured I'd call in and touch base. Or something.”

“Frisk, Brett here. Are you sure you're well enough to be up and about?”

“I kinda think so. I mean, I feel kinda slow and I don't know how much of that is from the fever, how much is from the shock, and how much is from the medication. But if I ignore the physical symptoms of illness and injury, I feel pretty good.”

“Kid, if you have to start your position with ignoring injuries, then you're already in trouble.”

“Well... you're not wrong. Anyway, I called in about the State of the Kingdom Address. So we kinda got interrupted.”

“Buddy if that's your idea of an interruption, I'd hate to see your idea of an actual fight.”

“Heheh. Yeah. My notes kinda got messed up but I did manage to cover one of the ten main points. Monster citizenship or lack of. I was hoping to cover the creation of a genealogical society for history reasons, the role of the Exchange Trust, and tying in the C.O.R.E. geothermal plant into the Lost Eagle County power grid, among other things. But all that will have to wait until next time.”

“Any idea when that will be?”

“Burgie the kid just got shot. You know what convalescence is, right?”

“Yeah, when you a design a car or a phone or a computer to wear out by the time a new model is available for people to buy. What does that have to do with recovering from a gunshot?”

“Actually DJ Pantz, that's obsolescence. Specifically, planned obsolescence. Convalescence is when you recover after getting sick. Which I probably should be doing right now. So, anyway... I haven't heard back on when the Address is rescheduled, and there's not any way to be sure the same people will get involved again, but somebody will let you guys know once a date and time is set.”

“Alright. Looking forward to it. Thanks Frisk. You take care of yourself.”

“Working on it. You guys have a good day.”
“You too. And that brings us up to the bottom of the hour, we're going to pause for some PSAs and some words from our sponsors this week, and when we come back it'll be time for everyone to put on their thinking caps as we bring back Trivial Concerns, KEBT's weekly call-in quiz show. Stick around, we'll be back before you know it!”
Recovery

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

10:45 AM: UNDYNE! WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THIS SUNNY SATURDAY?

10:46 AM StrongFish91: hey papyrus

10:46 AM StrongFish91: at book sale

10:47 AM StrongFish91: got a whole bunch of books on human anatomy and surgery

10:48 AM StrongFish91: human medicine is HARDCORE

10:48 AM StrongFish91: STAB THE DISEASE TO DEATH

10:49 AM StrongFish91: BURN THE TUMOR WITH A LASER BEAM

10:49 AM StrongFish91: CHoke ON THIS TOXIC COckTAIL

10:49 AM: PLEASE STOP TEXTING SUCH GROSS THINGS.

10:50 AM StrongFish91: hey did you know if human bones don't set right the first time doctors will rebreak them and reset them

10:50 AM StrongFish91: lol

10:50 AM StrongFish91: sorry

10:51 AM: I DID NOT NEED TO KNOW THAT.

10:51 AM StrongFish91: LOL

10:52 AM StrongFish91: best part is I finally got 2 meet that van garrett guy

10:52 AM StrongFish91: he joked about him and me and gary welkin and hal greene all making the fought dwayne riley club

10:53 AM StrongFish91: I told him he had 2 include frisk 2

10:53 AM StrongFish91: he said something weird

10:54 AM StrongFish91: to win without fighting is the apex of strategy or something

10:54 AM: HAS HE BEEN HANGING OUT WITH SANS??

10:55 AM StrongFish91: LOL OMG I AM TELLING HIM U SAID THAT RITE NOW

10:56 AM StrongFish91: also he let me have all these books 4 free after I beet him n a arm wrestling match
10:57 AM StrongFish91: guys really freaking strong took almost a whole minute I was sweating lik crazy by the end

10:57 AM: WOWIE!

10:57 AM StrongFish91: I kno rite?

10:58 AM StrongFish91: gonna take these books back home

10:58 AM StrongFish91: n then im free

10:58 AM StrongFish91: y?

10:59 AM: I AM ALMOST AT THE QUEEN'S HOUSE NOW AND I PLAN TO KEEP FRISK COMPANY AND KEEP THEIR SPIRITS UP WHILE THEY RECUPERATE!

11:00 AM StrongFish91: sounds like a good idea

11:00 AM StrongFish91: but between the 2 of us it might be 2 high energy

11:01 AM StrongFish91: kids tough as nails but humans dont heal fast

11:02 AM StrongFish91: and when they heal they need to shut everything else off to focus on that

11:03 AM StrongFish91: 1 great friend should be about enough :)

11:03 AM: RIGHT YOU ARE! I HAVE MY TRANSFORMERS BOX SET AND EVERYTHING!

11:03 AM StrongFish91: lol u nerds and ur robots in disguise

11:04 AM StrongFish91: no wonder u love 2 watch mettaton's movies all the time

11:04 AM: NYEH HEH HEH!

11:05 AM StrongFish91: omg u actually typed out the laugh 2

11:05 AM StrongFish91: u big goofy goofball :P

11:05 AM StrongFish91: tell the frisk I said hi

11:06 AM: WILL DO!

Papyrus put his phone in his pocket and knocked sharply on the front door. A few moments later, the door was cracked open, and then finished opening all the way.

“Papyrus? What brings you here?”

“WHY A MISSION OF UTMOST FRIENDSHIP SUPPORT, YOUR MAJESTY! I AM HERE TO KEEP FRISK'S MORALE UP AS THEIR HUMAN BODY REPAIRS ITSELF, A TASK WHICH CAN BE EXTREMELY UNPLEASANT IF MY INVESTIGATIONS OF THE
“SUBJECT ON THE INTERNET ARE ANY STANDARD TO JUDGE BY!”

Toriel blinked. “Oh... well, while I am certain Frisk would appreciate the gesture if they were awake, the events of yesterday have taken a great toll on them and they did not sleep well in the hospital last night.”

“Hello? I thought I heard Papyrus.”

Toriel turned around and saw Frisk making their way slowly down the stairs, one arm clutching around the bannister and the other immobilized in a sling.

“Frisk, be careful!”

“It's alright mom. I've got a good grip. I can catch myself if I lose my balance.”

“I thought you were already asleep in bed?”

Frisk managed to reach the ground floor and slowly walked towards the front door. “I tried but those pills the doctor gave me made me really queasy, so sleep is only going to happen in fits and starts. I wonder if it's been so long since I got any human medicine besides allergy shots that my body doesn't know what to do with it anymore. Hey Papyrus.”

“HELLO YOUNG FRISK! GLAD TO SEE YOU UP AND ABOUT! ”

Frisk nodded. “It's good to be up and about. And alive. That's really good. You know. Compared to the alternatives and all.”

“UNDYNE HAS ASKED ME TO TELL YOU THAT SHE SAID HI! SO. AHEM. UNDYNE SAID HI. MISSION ACCOMPLISHED! IN ADDITION, I HAVE BROUGHT ASSORTED AND SUNDRY ITEMS BY WHICH TO KEEP YOU HAPPY AND ENTERTAINED AND NOT FOCUSSED ON YOUR SHOULDER WHICH MUST BE HURTING A LOT!”

“Yeah... that's kind of a thing which I was almost getting used to. Uhm. Thanks I guess.”

“NO THANKS ARE NEEDED MY DEAR FRIEND! NOW, WHERE SHALL WE BEGIN? I HAVE BROUGHT MY ENTIRE TRANSFORMERS BOX SET-”

“Actually. Uhm. I'm not feeling up to a marathon right now. And I don't think I'd be able to really focus on a single episode either.”

“WAIT, REALLY?? ARE YOUR INJURIES TRULY SO SEVERE IT CAN DISTRACT YOU FROM THE MARVELS OF MULTIPLE CONFIGURATION ROBOTICS? OH NO! IT'S WORSE THAN I IMAGINED!!”

Frisk stepped forward quickly, if shakily, and wrapped one arm around one of Papyrus's legs. “It's a human thing. Don't worry about it. And thank you for coming over, and for passing along Undyne's message. It means a lot. Uh. You know. We could just hang out in my room for a while. Talk about random stuff. Trade ideas. Listen to music.”

Papyrus nodded. “THAT IS ALSO AN EXCELLENT COURSE OF ACTION!”

“Frisk, remember what the doctors said. You must take it easy for your injuries to heal on their own.”

Papyrus blinked. “WHILE I AM NOT A DOCTOR OR A HEALER I WOULD HAVE
THOUGHT IT WOULD BE SIMPLICITY ITSELF TO REHEAL THE INJURY ONCE THE INFECTION HAD BEEN DEALT WITH.”

Frisk shrugged, then immediately winced and their right hand went to their left shoulder. “Ugh, I need to remember to stop doing that. But yeah. The way the doctor tried to explain it was that I've been eating so much monster food my body's starting to forget how to heal on its own, and that's where the fever came from. Which I don't think is anywhere near what's happening, but it couldn't hurt to let this take care of itself. Unless I shrug of course. So hey, uh, why don't you head up to my room and I'll be up in a bit?”

“CAPITAL! I SHALL STAND BY FOR THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE HANGOUT! NYEH HEH HEH!”

The skeleton rapidly bounded up the stairs, and Frisk turned to see Toriel staring at the staircase with a disapproving expression. Small, hairless fingers found their way in between large, furry ones, and the queen looked down in surprise.

“Everything's going to be okay, mom. Don't worry.”

“I... I know Papyrus would never intentionally harm another living soul. But he is so energetic and excitable, and here you are, still recovering.”

“Actually, I think right now this is the best possible thing for me. Uhm.” Frisk looked towards the door for a moment. “How much did Flowey tell you about what happened yesterday?”

“To be honest, he scarcely told us anything at all. After you fell asleep last night, Asgore transplanted him back out into the soil outside the hospital, and he disappeared. And then he came back within seconds. And he said something peculiar. 'Toriel. If you ever see Frisk's human parents coming your way, grab Frisk and run as far and as fast as you can.' And then he was gone. Why do you ask? Was there something else that Flowey should have told us about?”

“...this is a little complicated, but I'll do my best. Uh. I guess it's pretty obvious to everybody by now that I've been having, uh, problems. And like I said on Wednesday, I never meant to keep it a secret, I just didn't want you to be worried. Not just about the soul thing, which I didn't really know for sure until Monday, but about everything else. And in hindsight that was probably counterproductive.”

Toriel nodded. “That is an understatement.”

“Yeah. Well, we live and we learn. During the fever, all that kind of came to a... it came together. I saw...” Frisk's hand shook and they took a deep breath. “I saw a world where literally everything that could have gone wrong did go wrong, because of me. And as bad as I thought I was, I never imagined a world like that. I... don't like to think about it too much, but what's important is, now I know what the worst case scenario looks like. So as bad as I thought I was... I'm not nearly as bad a person as I could have been.”

Frisk stared at Toriel's confused expression, and pulled their hand away, holding it up. “I mean, I'm not making excuses. I could be better. And I'm not ever going to stop trying to be better. But when... but when... the thing is, Flowey made a really good argument that I didn't have an answer for. Because I didn't know it was a fever dream. I thought I really had managed to trap everyone in the Underground again, forever this time.”

Frisk looked away as Toriel's eyes widened. “Uh. Maybe I should stop digging while the hole is still shallow enough for me to climb out of it-”
“No, no. Please, Frisk. Continue. I just... for some reason that this was your idea of the worst possible world... I was expecting something else. Go ahead. I know this is important for you to discuss.”

“Thanks. So. Even if the dream was a dream, I wasn't sure if... I thought maybe the world was better off without me. And... Flowey said something. About how Sans and Undyne and Papyrus were outside the hospital, fighting. Dr. Alphys and Dr. Aster were watching me in the hospital bed trying to keep my soul connected to my body. And you and dad were out in the hallway waiting for me to wake up. And then he said, 'If the world is better off without you, why is everyone trying so hard to keep you in it?' And...”

Frisk scratched their head for a moment, their expression somewhat puzzled.

“And I hadn't looked at my life like that before. At least, not that I can remember. And... and Dr. Aster said that the whole soul fragmentation thing was fixed, and that's what let me finally fight off the infection. And that probably had a lot to do with it. But you see... you see... what I figured out... ugh, I'm not making a whole lot of sense right now am I.”

“It is alright. Take all the time that you need.”

“...okay. Dr. Aster said that my numbers kept dropping while I was out. And I think that was because of what I saw in that, uh... worst case scenario fever dream. Flowey really had to work to pull me out of it, because even though I wanted to see everybody again, by then I was convinced that if I did wake up, I'd just ruin everything for everyone. And I didn't want that. What he said... about what everyone else was doing, it made it okay for me to wake up. I know you said it's not selfish to want to be loved, but I guess it still sounds selfish to me when I say it like that. But... did that help explain what I mean? I died three times because of medical reasons. I came back each time because of you and dad and Papyrus and everyone else who wanted me to come back.”

Frisk smiled at Toriel. “So, you see why Papyrus showing up is the perfect medicine, right?”

Toriel blinked. “Actually... I believe I do.” The queen smiled and rested a paw on Frisk's head. “Thank you for explaining what you meant. And, for the record, if it was a choice between your survival and living on the surface, I would gladly go back to the underground and remain there.”

Frisk looked down at the floor again. “...it's never going to come to that. I promise.”

“What do you mean??”

“Uh... well, you know. Just because Dwayne Riley and Jordan Cater are in jail and the Anti Monster League has scattered and gone to ground to hide from a community that has completely run out of patience for them, that doesn't mean that the rest of the world has made up its mind in our favor. So I still have a job to do. Speaking of which, have you or dad talked to Mr. Metzinger about rescheduling the Address?”

“...oh Frisk. My little workaholic.” Toriel giggled. “Right now your job is to get better. Once you have made a recovery to the satisfaction of the doctors at the hospital and clinic, then it will be time for the organization of events.”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense. Should get on that then. I'll, uh, I'll head upstairs then. See you in a bit!”

“Be careful going up the stairs!”

“I will. You don’t need to worry.”
“I am your mother. Frisk. That is my key responsibility.”

The child grinned. “Okay, I can't argue with that.”

After a slow and cautious climb upstairs, Frisk opened the bedroom door to find Papyrus staring at one of the photographs on the chest of drawers.

“AH, HELLO FRISK! I SEE YOU HAVE ALREADY IMMORTALIZED THE EVENTS AT THE DANK MEMEHAUS!”

“Yeah. Having physical photographs like that has been important to me for a while. Even though it's still just an image, having it printed out like this gives it more weight than just on the screen. Does that make sense?”


“...sure. Yeah, that's what I meant. So, uh, glad you've been keeping occupied. Sorry it took so long to get up here. I had to explain some stuff to mom, and I can't take the stairs too fast right now.”

Papyrus began to sweat, and not for the first time Frisk wondered exactly where that sweat was coming from without skin.

“I AM AFRAID I HAVE INADVERTANTLY EAVEDROPPED UPON YOUR OTHERWISE PRIVATE CONVERSATION. IT WAS NOT INTENTIONAL, OF THAT YOU HAVE AN OFFICIAL PAPYRUS PROMISE! IT'S JUST, WELL, I WOULD HAVE COVERED MY EARS, BUT I DON'T HAVE EARS.”

“S'alright.”

“YOUR COMMENTS ABOUT HOW EVERYONE WAITING FOR YOU TO WAKE UP MADE IT POSSIBLE TO COME BACK... IT WAS VERY TOUCHING! IF YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE DOING SO, YOU SHOULD SHARE THAT WITH UNDYNE! I KNOW SHE WAS EXTREMELY WORRIED ABOUT YOU, BY THE INTENSITY AND NUMBER OF HER ATTACKS OUTSIDE THE HOSPITAL! AND THE VARIETY AND VULGARITY OF THE EPITHETS SHE WAS PRODUCING AT THE SAME TIME. AND TO BE HONEST, WHEN YOU JUMPED IN FRONT OF HER, IT MAY HAVE... WELL... POSSIBLY TERRIFIED HER A LITTLE BIT? TO THE EXTENT THAT SUCH A BRAVE WARRIOR CAN BE TERRIFIED, I MEAN! WHICH IS VERY LITTLE AND USUALLY NOT AT ALL.”

“I'll admit, that part could have been handled a lot better. I didn't just drop the ball, I got it stuck on somebody's roof.”

“ON THE CONTRARY! DWAYNE RILEY ULTIMATELY DISPENSED WITH HIS WEAPON, AND HIS ATTACK! SO WHILE THE UNEXPECTED SURPRISE ATTACK BY HIS AFFILIATE WAS AN UNPLEASANT SIDE EFFECT, YOUR AGGRESSIVE AMBASSADORIAL ASSAULT WAS EMINENTLY EFFECTIVE! I... I'LL ADMIT, WHEN I SAW WHAT WAS HAPPENING, I WAS JUST THE TEENSIEST BIT AFRAID. BUT IT'S ALREADY PAID OFF! WITH SUPPORT AND FRIENDSHIP I AM CERTAIN WE CAN HELP MISTER RILEY CONTINUE TO MAKE THE RIGHT CHOICES, AND HE SHALL BE WELL ON HIS WAY TO BECOMING A GREAT PERSON! POSSIBLY EVEN AS GREAT AS US!”

Papyrus tapped his jawbone with one gloved finger thoughtfully.

“WELL. PERHAPS NOT RIGHT AWAY. AND PERHAPS NOT QUITE AS GREAT AS THE
TWO OF US. BUT WE CAN AT LEAST HELP HIM REACH FOR THE SILVER MEDAL IN
THE ALL COMERS SELF IMPROVEMENT CHAMPIONSHIP! THAT'S WHY I HOPE WE
CAN HELP HIM MOVE ON, AND LET BYEBONES BE BYEBONES.”

“I agree, Papyrus. He threw down his weapon. He made the right choice but we have to show him
that. Right now he's not only actively disliked by the people who disagree with him about
monsters, but by the people who still hate monsters. And I think he still hates monsters anyway, he
just wasn't willing to shoot a human child to accomplish his goals. But the other people who really
hate monsters, they won't see it like that. They'll see it as betrayal. So he just might be the loneliest
man in Ebott's Wake right now. Maybe the loneliest in the county. We need to reach out to him as
soon as possible. Phone calls maybe.”

“OR CARE PACKAGES!”

“Not spaghetti,” Frisk warned immediately. “Not sure what the policy is at the jail for utensils and
it gets really messy trying to eat spaghetti with your bare hands.”

“YOU MAKE A VALID POINT! THE SPAGHETTI SHALL WAIT FOR MISTER RILEY, A
BEACON GUIDING HIM DOWN THE RIGHT PATH!”

Frisk winked at Papyrus. “Yeah, if Undyne helps make it people will be able to see it for miles.”

“I AM... UNCERTAIN IF UNDYNE WILL WANT TO BE AFFILIATED WITH OUR LITTLE
OUTREACH PROJECT IN ANY WAY. AFTER ALL, IT TOOK A GREAT DEAL OF TIME,
eFFORT, AND BRILLIANT SCHEMING TO CONVINCE HER TO EVEN ACCEPT THE
POSSIBILITY OF BEING YOUR FRIEND. AND YOU HADN'T BEEN ENGAGED IN ANY
FRIVOLOUS DEMAGOGUERY, WHILE MISTER RILEY HAS EXPRESSED HIS DISLIKE
FOR MONSTERS AT GREAT LENGTH, AT HIGH VOLUME, WITH CONSIDERABLE
FERVOR, AND AD NAUSEUM.”

“That's true, it's going to have to be just the two of us for starters. We still gotta try though, or he's
going to backslide. And maybe he'll end up so bitter and convinced that he made the wrong choice
that he won't even try talking to people, he'll just start hurting them. It's easy to start something
new, but it's really hard to keep going with it when you don't see a reason to. That's why it's so hard
for many humans to stick to a diet or exercise plan, because the downsides are obvious but the
upsides are not immediately clear.”

“IS THAT WHY SO MANY HUMANS REFUSE TO BELIEVE THAT THERE'S NO SECRET
TO MY LEGS?”

“...I'm sure it's a part of it. Hey, uh... I'm getting a little dizzy now. So I'm just going to sit on my
bed for a bit. We can talk that way. Feel free to look around, see what's changed since last time.
Think it was... St. Patrick's Day or something?”

“THAT SOUNDS ACCURATE!”

Frisk walked over to the bed, somewhat unsteadily, until a gloved hand grasped their uninjured
shoulder and provided some stability.

“Thanks, Papyrus.”

“YOU ARE QUITE WELCOME FRISK! I SEE YOUR BED IS STILL A SIMPLE,
STATIONARY SORT!”

“Yeah,” Frisk agreed as they sat down. “Sometimes I think about getting some cardboard and
turning it into a rocket ship or something, but if I'm going to go to space I want to be awake for it. No suspended animation or cryosleep for this astro-nut.”

“AUGH, MY BROTHER HAS BEEN A TERRIBLE INFLUENCE!”

Frisk grinned. “That's one way to put it.”

“YOUR PERSONAL LIBRARY HAS PROLIFERATED SINCE LAST TIME, IT IS HARD NOT TO NOTICE.”

“Yeah. I only managed to get to this year's book sale on Thursday, between rehearsal and heading over to talk to Dr. Aster at All Fine Labs.”

“AH, YES! HE SAID THAT YOU WERE INSTRUMENTAL IN HELPING HIM SOLVE A MOST DEVIous PUZZLE INVOLVING CHRONOMETRIC ENERGY EXCHANGE!”

“Well, it's not so much that I solved it, as I said a word that suddenly inspired him to look in the right place for a solution.”

“THAT STILL COUNTS!”

The skeleton wandered over to the desk in the corner, where a laptop computer sat powered off.

“AH! THE BRILLIANT DOCTOR ALPHYS' CHRISTMAS GIFT! A MARVEL OF PORTABLE COMPUTATIONAL AND COMMUNICATION FUNCTIONALITY!”

“That's her work in a nutshell. It's almost a crime to use it to just look up stuff on Wikipedia and play puzzle games on Steam. Sort of like how it's absurd to use a teleportation relay to make sure I have a stockpile of sweets on hand at all times. Though I guess that worked out well enough yesterday.”

“HOW FAR HAVE YOU GOTTEN INTO TIS-100?”

“At least fifty eight hours in. In fits and starts mostly. When I start seeing assembly language code instructions in my dreams, I know it's time to leave it alone for a few weeks. How about you?”

“OH, I'VE NEVER DREAMED OF ASSEMBLY LANGUAGE CODE, EVEN AFTER EIGHTY SEVEN HOURS IN GAME. IT'S ALL C PLUS PLUS AS NEAR AS I CAN TELL! ALTHOUGH THERE WAS THAT ONE BIT OF PYTHON ONCE. I HAVE SINCE LEARNED NEVER TO EAT HUMAN FOOD BEFORE BEDTIME. THE DREAMS ARE JUST TOO BIZARRE! WHY, ONCE I EVEN DREAMED THAT SANS AND I WENT CAMPING AND TRIED TO CANOE DOWN A RIVER, AND NEARLY WENT OVER A WATERFALL SO WE HAD TO USE BLUE MAGIC TO KEEP OURSELVES ALOFT! THEN WE GOT STUCK AT THAT ALTITUDE AND HAD TO PADDLE OUR WAY THROUGH THE AIR OVER TO THE TOPS OF TREES, CHOP THEM OFF, BREAK THEM DOWN INTO POLES AND ASSEMBLE THEM INTO A LADDER SO WE COULD CLIMB DOWN TO THE GROUND SAFELY! AND BY WE I MEAN ME BECAUSE AFTER WE CHOPPED THE FIRST TREETOP HE JUST ROLLED OVER AND FELL ASLEEP IN HIS HALF OF THE CANOE!”

Frisk fell back onto the bed and began to giggle. “Hahaha! I can see it in my head right now.”

“WHICH IS PECULiAR, BECAUSE IT WAS MY DREAM SO IT WAS ME SEEING IT IN MY HEAD! WAIT... ARE DREAMS CONTAGIOUS FOR HUMANS?!”

Frisk laughed even harder, then winced and grabbed their bad shoulder. “Okay, maybe laughter
isn't the best medicine. Or it is, but it's easy to overdose. Yeah, that sounds right. Hey, Papyrus, can you turn on my radio? I think we have enough time to catch the last half of the quiz show.”

A gloved hand found its way to the volume dial on the radio sitting on the corner of Frisk's desk and flipped it on. Part of an advertisement began to fill the room. “Here at Joe's House of Stuff, we have everything. And we know we have everything because you keep bringing it to us. Like a bobble head figurine of former president Andrew Jackson. Seriously, who makes things like this? We can't find anything about the manufacturer. It's like they never existed. Should this thing be stamped 'Made in the Twilight Zone'? Probably!”

“I HOPE THEY TAKE MY SUGGESTION TO INCLUDE MORE COOKING RELATED QUESTIONS! WHILE ROBOTS ARE A SPECIALIZED INTEREST FOUND AMONG GREAT THINKERS LIKE YOURSELF, MYSELF, AND THE GREAT DOCTOR ALPHYS...SELF... COOKING IS A NEARLY UNIVERSAL CONCERN BECAUSE ALMOST EVERYBODY EATS FOOD!”

Frisk looked confused. “Almost?”

“STATISTICALLY SPEAKING THERE IS ALWAYS A MARGIN FOR ERROR. I AM SIMPLY MAKING ALLOWANCES FOR THAT!”

“Aha. Logic.”

“So come on down to Joe's House of Stuff because whatever your interests, you'll find something here to suit them. Seriously Ebott's Wake, what the hell's wrong with you?”

“And welcome back everybody! DJ Pantz here and it's time for the final round of Trivial Concerns here on KEBT. Brett Brinkman had to run out into the lobby for a moment to talk to somebody from the Little League Association, probably another team changed its name again. In the meantime, we had a few real head scratchers last round. Nobody got them, even during the break, so here are the answers so people stop calling in. Ahem: Answer One is 'The 1903 World's Fair'. Answer Two is 'Ranunculus Poisoning'. Answer Three is 'Electrum'. Answer Four is 'Liquid Fluoride Thorium Reactor.' Answer Five is 'A Balustrade.' And Answer Six is 'Ron Perlman.' Jeff has asked me to remind everybody that we do put all the questions and answers on the KEBT official website by the end of the day. Hey Brett!”

“Yes, I have made my triumphant return. It turns out that the Little League Association has not gotten the official paperwork filed from Gemini Road, so their team is still called the Burglars on paper.”

“Did they have to send in a person to say that? We have phones. That's literally how the whole name change confusion got started.”

“You know, I asked that same question...”

Frisk looked up at Papyrus with a sly grin. “Hey, Papyrus. What do you say we make this interesting? Whoever guesses the most questions correct on the last round gets a piggy back ride from the other.”

“THAT'S HARDLY SPORTING! EVEN IF BOTH SHOULDERS WERE PERFECTLY HEALTHY YOU COULDN'T CARRY ME AROUND!”

“Hee hee!”

“NYEH HEH HEH!”
“-so I guess if there is a lesson to be learned in all this, it's that you really shouldn't house the Little League Association offices in a building across the street from a public dog park. But that's neither here nor there.”

“Well, it's definitely not here, because the Association offices are in Triton anyway.”

“In any case, it's time for the final round of Trivial Concerns, just as soon as we play this... really?? ...okay. As soon as we play this anti-gambling PSA. I mean. It's not like we have prizes or anything.

“Well, the prize is getting to have your name read out on the radio. What's important is you don't have to pay to play.”

“That's true. Anyway, for legal reasons, here's that Public Service Announcement. Stay tuned!”

Chapter End Notes

The Final Round Questions are as follows.

1. Who is generally credited with coining the expression of 'a bug in the system' for a technical malfunction?
2. According to folklore, what can be balanced on its end during an equinox?
3. In Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' what act does Iago claim to find offensive?
4. How long is Abraham Lincoln alleged to have lived after the attack by John Wilkes Booth?
5. What is the scientific name for a group of monsters congregating together?

The first people posting correct or near-miss answers in the comments will receive cameos or pseudo cameos in the next few chapters.
Undyne glared at the slip of paper in her hand, as if trying to intimidate it into giving up more information than it already had. When that didn't work, she looked up at the building in front of her and tried the same strategy.

“Undyne? H-hey! You got a note too!”

Undyne spun around and saw Alphys running down the sidewalk, waving a small bit of paper and in the process almost tripping over a small dog on a leash.

“Hey! Watch where you're running!” The dog had jumped into the arms of their owner, a woman with a ponytail and an intense expression.

“Sorry!” Alphys made her way over to Undyne, and held up her own piece of paper. “I knew it! You got a weird note too, didn't you?!”

Undyne looked at the note again:

Be at the Dank Memehaus between noon and one PM today. There is information you must be made aware of.

-A Friend

“Well, if by weird you mean really vague and cryptic, sure. Somebody must have slipped it into my bag of books when I was arm wrestling Van Garret.”

“You were what??”

“Yeah, I went to the book sale and got free books for beating the guy. I don't care what Frisk says, this town is insane, but at least it's insane in our favor.” Undyne stared at the paper in the scientist's claws. “So how did you end up with that?”

“It was in m-my office. And I wasn't the only one. Sans and Dr. Aster both found something like this in their desks.”

Undyne narrowed her eye. “So who ever is handing out these invitations has access to All Fine Labs.”

“Yes.” Alphys began to fold and unfold the paper over and over again, apparently without realizing it. “I almost panicked and called Mr. Cavenaugh, but Sans pointed out that if whoever it was wanted to hurt us, they could have just planted explosives in the lab at some point. So we're all playing along until we know what the game is.”

“Well, we better get it over with. Are Sans and Dr. Aster coming?”

Alphys looked around. “I thought they'd be here by now. Somethi ng must be wrong.”

Undyne turned towards the door to the bar, pulled it open, and charged inside... and saw Sans and Dr. Aster sitting at the bar with a hamburger and a can of lemon lime soda in front of them,
respectively.

“ey, Undyne. pull up a seat.”

“Well. That solves that mystery.” Undyne nodded to the fire elemental polishing a glass. “Sup Grillby?”

“...not much. You?”

“Same old same old.”

“...want anything?”

“Just answers.”

“...thought so. I'll call management.”

The fire elemental didn't seem to move, but after a few moments, one of the doors in the back of the large room opened, and Undyne turned to see a human walk out.

“Perfect. Everyone's here. Hello Captain, Doctor Alphys. I don't think we've been formally introduced. Elijah McGraw. I'm the owner of this establishment. We are ready for you at any time.”

“Ready for what- hey!!” Undyne barked as the human walked back into the doorway. “Ugh!”

“Well. It would seem answers would lie beyond, but something tells me they're gonna be the kind of answers that just lead to more questions.”

Undyne turned to see Dr. Aster standing behind her sipping his soda, Sans polishing off his burger, and Alphys hand over some crumpled currency to Grillby in exchange for a bottle of some sickly yellow soda. Dr. Aster nodded towards the doorway. “Are you ready?”

Undyne grinned. “Have you met me?”

The four monsters walked through the door and found themselves in a smaller room dominated by a single large table surrounded by chairs, some of them occupied. The lighting was brighter than in the main room of the bar, and the walls were covered in framed news clippings and the occasional crudely drawn cartoon.

Before anyone could say anything, the occupant of one of the chairs stood up. Undyne could almost feel Sans tensing up beside her, even though he probably still looked like a lazy skeleton that just finished off a really good hamburger.

“Dr. Aster, Dr. Alphys, Captain Undyne, Sans. Welcome to Shop Class.”

“nice place.”

The human that had spoken, that had introduced himself as Elijah, smirked and almost laughed. “I did my best. We all know who you are, but that road isn't a complete two way street yet. Some of you have already met, but just in case... this is Hal Greene.”

Hal Greene sat back in his chair with his arms behind his head, grinning. “Sup?”

“Officer Stephen Ward...”
Officer Ward sat at attention, his hands clasped together in front of him on the table.

“Joe Stanton...”

The lab assistant grinned awkwardly and gave a halfhearted wave at Dr. Aster and Dr. Alphys.

“Michael Van Garret...”

A burly bearded man sat in his chair, and raised his eyebrows in acknowledgment at Undyne.

“And Justin Carrow.”

The ex-soldier leaned back in his chair, weathered military surplus boots resting on the table.

“And that seat once belonged to Byron Thorton.” Elijah pointed towards the chair roughly arranged in the center of the occupied side of the table, then waved to the seats on the other side. “If you feel more comfortable standing, that's alright, but feel free to sit down if you want.”

Undyne focused on Van Garret. “You put this note in my book bag, right?”

“That's right. We all agreed it was time to put our cards on the table.”

Undyne turned to look at Joe Stanton, eye narrowed to a slit. “And you must have been the inside guy at the lab.”

“Heh... yeah. Sorry if I freaked anyone out.”

Elijah held up a hand. “We know what the cloak and dagger stuff looks like, and what it makes us look like. But it's in the nature of the problem. In order to fight a conspiracy, you need an equal and opposite conspiracy.”

Dr. Aster stared at Elijah. “What conspiracy?”

“The Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi, or the Sages, or the Anti Monster League, or whatever they end up calling themselves next time.”

Dr. Aster tilted his skull to one side in thought. “...alright, in light of that information alone, maybe we should be sitting down for this.”

The four monsters pulled assorted chairs out from the table and sat down, and Dr. Aster nodded at Elijah again. “Perhaps you should start at the beginning.”

Elijah nodded. “I was thinking the exact same thing. Ahem... the first thing you have to understand is Shop Class started not as a conspiracy, but a more benign idea. A goofy child's idea. All of us, the original seven, grew up in Ebott's Wake back when the Sages were simply the weird cult that didn't bother anybody as long as nobody bothered them. There were rumors, yes, but they were the type of small-town projecting you get from people like Dr. Akron and Dwayne Riley and Jay Cooper.”

“Who's Jay Cooper?”

Elijah shook his head. “The old radio station on air personality, before he got leukemia and was replaced by Brett Brinkman. Not the most pleasant of men. Although he didn't deserve what happened to him just because of that. Anyway, the Sages weren't a major problem back then. And the types of problems they could and did cause were not the types of problems we were thinking about when we thought about problems. The problems that mattered to us were the type that only
mattered to young boys that had grown up in a relatively small town during the late eighties and early nineties. We represented a bizarre cross section of the town just on our own, but we had one common interest. The Kludge Derby."

Dr. Aster pointed at several newspapers behind glass. “Thus, the various reports on race results.”

“Correct. Mike could tell you the history of the Derby forward and backward and standing on his head, but for the purposes of our meeting, you just need to know that we were all fascinated by the idea of building something from nothing and making it do things it was never intended to do. It occupied almost all our attention, when there was nothing else to distract us. And because we were growing up as the first of the Power Rangers shows were being converted into formats readily understandable to United States audiences, many of the conventions of the Sentai show got absorbed into our ideas.”

Alphys made a muffled noise as her claws slammed shut to close off a surge of nerd solidarity. Joe grinned. “Yeah, I thought you'd like that part Doc.”

Elijah pointed at some of the cartoons on the walls. “You can see where some of the influence rubs off in the areas of costume and vehicle design if you look close. As we got older and our interests shifted over towards the practical engineering and construction of Kludge Racers, we held onto them. First for nostalgia. Later... as a sort of safety net.”

“waddaya mean, safety net?”

Elijah’s eyes darted over to the empty seat for a moment. “...it was Byron who first got the idea, after the whole situation with Asriel Dreemurr, the Cater kid, and the Sages suddenly going ballistic. He saw the writing on the wall before anybody else. So during one night of drinking, watching Mystery Science Theater on YouTube, and sketching crude vehicle designs, he got us on board. If the Sages were right about monsters, then we had to be ready, because whatever the Sages had going for them in terms of inside knowledge, they had working against them in terms of social isolation. So there had to be people ready who didn't have their tunnel vision. But by that time, the Sages had already started crossing lines, so the more pressing threat was a matter of who guards the guardsmen. And, to keep us from sliding down the same slippery slope, he dug up all of his old drawings and cartoons and had us do the same. To remind us where all this started, and to keep us from believing our own hype, if hype ever became an issue... Hal, can you take over for a moment, my throat's hurting.”

“Sure thing.” Hal nodded. “We were only seven people. It's a small town, but it's not that small. We couldn't cover everything. But we could still do a lot. Each one of us had insight into a different part of the town's subcultures and communities, so we heard things. By combining our knowledge we could get a very good picture of what was actually going on. And we could do a lot more than just pay attention and take notes, too. Every one of us had over a decade of practical experience with mechanics, electrical engineering, electronics, metalwork and machining, and inorganic chemistry. Joe and Mike have degrees in electrical engineering and aeronautical engineering, respectively. Byron knew accounting and logistics. Steve knows law and all that it entails. Elijah gets people, Joe has military combat training and engineering experience, and I am of course heir to the Greene family legacy.”

“the mini golf course?”

Hal shrugged. “I was speaking more of the ability to blow shit up, but there is that too. It's in the blood. My grandfather blasted tunnels for the mines sunk down between Triton and Quarterhorse Fields, and my dad did pyrotechnics for a band back in the seventies. So all told, yeah. We did pretty well... right up until the end, that is.”
Justin pulled his boots off the table and leaned forward in his seat. “We still don't know what happened. Did we get sloppy? Did the Sages get smarter? Bad luck, ordained fate, who knows. But they came after Byron's family and by the time the rest of us knew, everyone was gone. Byron didn't do it all alone, but this was his idea, and it cost him everything in the end. So he deserves all the credit.”

Elijah spoke up again, his throat somewhat rested. “Some of our intel was used by the Bureau of Alcohol, Demolitions, Tobacco and Firearms to plan their strike on the Sages' compound. Our way of striking back, even if it was by proxy. So of course all of us were celebrating after that, and some of us just happened to be at the park the same time that a friendly skeleton showed up to say hello.”

“Oh boy, here we go,” Officer Steve grumbled as Sans started to snicker.

Mr. Van Garret leaned forward. “Seeing all of you show up was... interesting, and that's putting it mildly. But I wasn't being facetious or lying when I said that any enemy of the Sages was a friend of ours. I mean, people say better the devil you know than the devil you don't, but when the devil you know kills one of your best friends since kindergarten-”

“You end up re-evaluating your fucking priorities,” Justin spat.

“What he said. Of course, when the queen showed up with Frisk that went a long way towards confirming that the Sages were wrong, but there was always a possibility that we could not safely discard that the Sages were right to be afraid of monsters.”

“So, uh... we, uh, we needed somebody on the inside.” Joe grinned, but the smile had a strained quality. “Which is where I came in. Sorry.”


Dr. Aster held up a hand. “Wait a moment. When Mr. Carrow came in for the Soul Research project, the two of you acted like you had never met each other before.”

“Yeah. Sorry about that, Doc. It's the conspiracy disease. You start over-thinking things. But at the same time we didn't know if the AML had anyone else in line, or even somebody inside the Lab itself. So we had to make it look good for anyone who was watching. And, we didn't know exactly how you'd react to somebody who had killed anyone before, and from the Soul Research program prep work, we knew how much importance you put on EXP and LV.”

“But... Carrow, you threw all of that out the window!” Dr. Aster turned to the ex-soldier. “You pointed out to me that Joe's acting wasn't that good!”

Justin nodded at the tall skeleton. “Yup.”

Dr. Aster stared, and suddenly a boney hand swung up to slam into a cracked forehead, creating a muffled echoing noise.

“Oh my god I am an idiot.”

Justin shook his head. “No, Dr. Aster. You're not an idiot. You just saw what you were looking for. You expected the whole 'keep the guy with any EXP busy till help arrives' song and dance to go wrong. When I told you I saw through the act, you had your suspicions confirmed. You moved on to the next thing on your list.”

Justin shifted his gaze towards Undyne. “And because you've been making angry faces at Joe, I'll
tell you right now: Joe's job was to get close enough to all of you to find out if your plans really did involve destroying humanity at some point or not. That's it. That's all he's ever kept from any of you.”

“seems legit to me.”

“Yeah. I c-can see why that would be important.”

Dr. Aster sighed. “...still can't believe I didn't realize what was going on...”

“So, uh... can I keep my job?”

Undyne tensed, but claws grasped her hand before she could jump up. “Yes, Joe. You're not fired. We're going to have to have a long talk after this, but you're still a good friend, and a hard worker, and you put your life on the line to help defend the hospital yesterday. I know I won't ever forget that.”

Memories of yellow energy joining her spears during the battle came back to Undyne, followed by memories of Joe being stuck half in and half out of the Project NEO prototype, with Hal Greene trying to remove him from the access hatch with a crowbar.

“...there is that,” Undyne conceded. “But seriously, no more secrets. Especially not from the woman I'm going to marry.”

“That's why we're all here,” Elijah pointed out. “To share information.”

“Or the starter kit version of that. If we end up sharing all our little secrets at once, we're going to be sitting here until the school year ends.” Hal Greene grinned.

“Gotta start somewhere.” Justin held up his phone. “After yesterday's communication roadblocks, we're setting up a voice and text chat room for communications. If you want in, say the word. We're all in the same boat.”

“sweet.”

Undyne narrowed her eye at Justin. “Hold on. There's one more thing that bothers me. Dwayne Riley said you worked for him. He called you a mercenary. So how much of that was real and how much of that was... all this?” The captain gestured to the room at large.

The ex-soldier grinned. “It was all this, captain. I charged him for my services because I didn't know if I could fake the kind of mindless, clueless anger that typifies his organization, but I knew he'd believe a veteran with no job trying to pay for groceries and utilities.” The grin vanished. “Especially because that's what was going on for real.”

“Did you teach the AML anything that lead to them organizing the attacks yesterday?”

“Hah! I didn't teach them anything they couldn't have learned from Google. I definitely didn't teach them anything about using organized distributed attacks to mess with a defending force, or snipers for that matter. That was all on that Cater asshole. Who I never saw before yesterday, but I'm almost certain I heard in a dark, mildewy basement once.”

Officer Ward leaned forward. “Trying to connect the Sages and the Anti Monster League through Jordan Cater is an ongoing, open investigation that's been bumped up from the Ebott's Wake Police Department to the Lost Eagle County Sheriff’s Department, and it's possible that the FBI may take over at some point as well. Maybe even Homeland Security, if somebody in Washington starts
taking interest. Unfortunately we don't know any more here in our clubhouse than they know officially anywhere else. We don't think that Cater was responsible for forming the AML from the beginning, but that's because Dwayne Riley has always been a big-fish-small-pond kind of man. We will keep you up to date on anything new we find; by the same token, we hope you'll share anything you discover with us.”

“...alright. You're all a bunch of sneaky lying bastards but at least you're on our side.”

Hal Greene grinned. “Awww, thanks Undyne. We love you too.”

“Tell me one thing, Hal. Are you really this crazy, or is it all just smoke and mirrors?”

Greene shook his head. “I have no idea what you mean. I don't smoke, and I can't use a mirror. My grandmother on my father's side was a vampire.”

Undyne stared at the mechanic, then turned to Justin, who shrugged. “A little from column A, a little from column B.”

Mr. Van Garret coughed. “Now that we've established a position of common interest and information sharing, is there anything you want to ask us?”

Dr. Aster shook his skull in the negative. “To be honest, everything seems relatively clear as far as what was done and why. Forming a conspiracy to counter another conspiracy and all of that. And staying under the radar as a precaution against further threats. If I did have a question, I guess it would be... why such a small organization in the first place?”

“If you mean expanding the group, or creating a cell system to gain enough manpower to counter the Sages, we did consider that,” Elijah scratched his chin. “But eventually for safety's sake, we had to dispense with the idea. The Sages were too built up, and in a small town almost everybody knows almost everybody else. If not personally, then by proxy or reputation. We all had a personal connection with each other that was a mixture of common interest, common history, and years and years of inside jokes that evolved into their own little social ecosystem. That kind of connection is hard for social engineers to crack, but it also takes a long time to forge. Basically we were the only ones we knew we could trust. And as for doing that after the Sages were defeated, well, I suppose most of us were never that sure about the Sages being gone for good. And Jordan Cater's return definitely proves us right on that.”

Undyne looked at Dr. Aster, then at the assorted humans. “Alright, I have a few questions if the doctor is done. How much do you guys know about the Sages? Because by the time we got out? They were already beaten or on the run or in hiding. And what we get told is all after the fact stuff.”

Elijah shrugged. “Mike, you want to handle this one?”

“I don't see why not.” Mr. Van Garret cleared his throat. “We know that the organization that called itself the Sages goes back at least to what must have been the war between humans and monsters, whenever that was. There's always been some sort of human presence here near Mt. Ebott, going back before recorded history. The archeological department at the college confirmed that. The Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi as commonly understood didn't show up until around the middle of the nineteenth century AD. Quarterhorse Fields was established in 1862 or 1863, and that would eventually become the county seat once Lost Eagle County was officially a thing; that's why it's so hard to find accurate records before that, and why so much of the early history is guesswork.”
Dr. Aster nodded. “We have that in common, definitely. A lot of monster history was lost after the Barrier was established, because everyone was too busy trying to survive or escape to keep precise records or to pass the information along to the next generation.”

“Unfortunate, but understandable. So... as near as anyone can tell, as people started spreading out into the countryside to claim the land and assess the natural resources like timber and ore and coal, some settlers ran across some sort of native tribe. Now... we don't know what happened exactly; even our best guesses might as well be totally random. But something happened. Some of those settlers must have found something, or been shown something, that convinced them that some terrible evil was buried under Mt. Ebott. Beyond that all we know was that some weird religious group got started in Ebott's Wake calling themselves Guardians of the Legacy. They were mostly separate from the rest of the community... you might say they were a separate community on their own, becoming increasingly isolated as more and more people arrived, and more and more people were born, in the town of Ebott's Wake proper.”

“If you've ever seen *The Village*, it was kind of like that.” Hal added.

“Sort of. Ebott's Wake got hit with many of the same cultural influences as the rest of the USA over the next hundred and fifty years or so. Fundamentalist Revivalism. The Isolationist vs. Interventionist political conflicts of both world wars. The Red Scare, the Great Depression, McCarthyism, the hippie movements of the fifties, sixties and seventies. Somewhere along the line that was where 'of the Magi' got tacked on at the end of the name, but most people had already started shortening everything to The Sages since before then. They changed in other ways, as well. They had to, in order to keep new people joining. There's a paper on the college website that Joe's dad co-wrote that goes into much greater detail. We think, although we can't be sure, that if the group ever had any accurate information about magic and monsters and the Barrier, it was lost in the shuffle during one of those... I dunno what you'd call it. Sociological Rebranding Cycles?”

Mike shrugged. “heh. that'd explain a few things.”

“We also believe that the legends about people never coming back from Mt. Ebott seemed to have already been established before the Guardians even formed. How much of that was the Barrier, and how much of that was just bad weather, wild animals, and poor navigation, we don't know. Were there ever any signs of other humans that had fallen into the Underground?”

Dr. Aster shook his head. “Chara was the first. Although... my father, Semi Serif Aster, told me one day that a part of the mountain had worn away above Home. He was very excited because it allowed monsters to more easily measure the day and night cycle of the surface by keeping track of the sunlight coming down. This would have been... hmmm.” Dr. Aster held up both hands and started counting on his fingers, switching back and forth. “I suppose this would have been some time in the 1970s in your calendar.”

“Hmmm...” Mike scratched his beard. “But nobody fell down there until Chara Cater in 2012?”

“That's correct. Which raises a question of its own, if you think about it. Chara Cater was the child of Jordan Cater, who by all accounts was a member of the Sages. And the Sages knew, or at least believed, that monsters were under Mt. Ebott. So odds are Chara was told that too. So...” Dr. Aster clasped his fingers together and leaned forward to rest his jaw on them. “Why did Chara climb the mountain in the first place?”

“There's the possibility that Chara was just rebelling. You know,” Joe waved his hand vaguely. “Like kids do. She went to the mountain because she didn't believe in the danger, thought the whole 'monsters' thing was silly and set out to prove dad wrong... that must have been one heck of
Dr. Aster shrugged. “When the Dreemurrs stopped by the lab, and I met Chara for the first time, I got the impression of general shyness more than shock. Though some of that may have been the fact that I was a skeleton monster, and we knew from some of the human literature that fell down that humans associate skeletons with death and dying. But so far as I am aware, while Chara was a nearly inexhaustible well of new information about Surface conditions, human culture, and human knowledge of monsters, they were much more reluctant to share personal information.”

“It's a question we'll never get an answer to. We don't really know why anyone climbed the mountain. And the only one left alive who could tell us why is Frisk Dreemurr.” Hal raised an eyebrow significantly. “And that ain't a conversation I'm keen to have anytime soon, you get me?”

Undyne heard a scraping sound and turned to see Sans standing up.

“That's not quite true. Because I met all of them. Even if only for a little bit. I met Sam and Andrew. I know Sam climbed Mt. Ebott because he knew the Sages were after his family, and he knew they were afraid of the mountain, so he'd be safer there than in town. And I know Andrew figured out that that's what Sam figured out so he climbed up the mountain looking for him. None of the other four went into details, but I figured out pretty quick that they were running from things that they didn't expect to follow them up the mountain. If it was the Sages or something else... well, that I don't know.”

Justin leaned forward in his seat. “We were... uh... not aware that you'd met Sam and Andrew.”

“I told Cater during the pre-fight trash talk how I watched out for all the humans who fell down.”

“Right. Well... a lot was going on at the time.”

“That's true. But yeah. They both bought some hot dogs from me. They both went very heavy on the relish....”

Justin nodded and grinned. “They were Byron's kids alright. Guy was nuts for pickle relish.”

“...so if you were all best friends with their dad, you must have been the people that handled having them buried with him, when all the human bodies were returned.”

Elijah nodded. “That was us.”

“...I think Frisk still has some of their things she found in the underground. Do you...?”

Elijah shook his head. “There's nobody left in the Thorton family to return them to.”

Undyne turned towards Elijah, confused. “What about the mother? I only ever saw three graves in the cemetery plot during the funeral. Unless I'm thinking of some of the other humans.”

Officer Steve spoke up. “We were never able to find anything left of Cynthia. Unfortunately she is one of the many people that the Sages were extra thorough in disposing of. We don't have a body, we don't have ashes, we don't even have a dump site.”

Undyne's eye opened wide. “Damn.”

“Yes,” the police officer agreed.

The room was silent for a minute or two, until Justin got up from his chair. “Well. This has
certainly been all sorts of fun and games and good times, but I must excuse myself. The guy who owns the Iron Waffle restaurant is expanding the parking lot and needs somebody who knows how to operate a front end loader, so I need to be there inside of forty five minutes.”

“Yes, this seems like a good place to stop.” Elijah stood up. “Good talk everyone. It's been nice clearing the air.”

“same.”

Chairs scraped on the floor as humans and monsters got up; Undyne stretched and noticed that Joe Stanton had walked over, but was not talking with Alphys... who was too busy gulping down soda to talk anyway.

“Hey, Undyne. Uh. Just wanted to double check, since you're a very... intense and terrifying person. Are we, you know, good?”

Undyne narrowed her eye, glaring at the lab gofer, then rolled it with a sigh. “We're good, Joe.”

“That's good to hear. They way you were staring at meEEAAAGH!”

Undyne grabbed the human and noogied his head for a few seconds, grinning the whole time.

“Also, I loved your work in that skull mech thing. Some time after school lets out and when you're not busy sciencing stuff, we should totally spar! I want to see what you're really made of!”


Undyne let Joe go, and the lab assistant's hands immediately went to his head. “Ow ow ow ow. I think I just lost some short term memory there.”

“So... would this be a bad time to bring up the twenty bucks you owe me?”

“Up yours, Hal.”
“My drawing is ready! Check it out, Chara!”

The human looked up from their own sheet of paper towards Asriel and saw a confusing mishmash of stars, rainbows, hearts and a boss monster head with massive horns.

“This is the Absolute God of Hyperdeath! He watches over all of the monsters in the Underground, and one day he'll destroy the Barrier and protect all the monsters from the humans on the surface!”

“...okay, that's pretty cool.”

“Yeah! He has all these different special attacks too! Like, like Star Blazing! He shoots magic up into the sky and it comes down in the form of stars and crashes into the ground! So humans will think he literally broke the sky!”

Chara smirked. “I'm sure astronomers will be way too busy to explain to anyone why that's not what happens.”

“Hee hee! Oh, is your drawing done yet? I want to see!”

Chara hunched over the paper protectively. “I just need to... add some details.”

A few seconds later, and the paper was practically tossed towards Asriel.

“Here.”

Asriel picked up the drawing and stared. “It's... a flower?”

“Yeah. A golden flower. There's a lot of them on the surface.”

Asriel looked at the drawing, and then at the expression on Chara's face.

“...you really like golden flowers?”

Chara shrugged. “Yeah. I'm not really a gardener or a botanist or anything like Asgore, but...”

Chara blinked a few times, then got up from the table, walked over to the fireplace, and sat down, staring at the magical fire. After a few moments of deliberation, Asriel left the papers on the table and walked over to sit down next to Chara.

“Is something wrong?”

Chara shook their head. “Uh... well. Golden flowers are weird. I don't know as much about them as I want. But I do know they have a weird name that doesn't fit in with how scientists name plants normally. Flora regia. They can grow almost anywhere, but they only naturally grow one place, maybe in the entire world; at the base of Mt. Ebott. Where I grew up, there's whole fields of golden flowers... and I always felt safe when I was in those fields. Like... what I was afraid of couldn't find me there. Sometimes I'd just run out into the fields and hide out there.”

“Hide from what?”

Chara stared at the fire, their expression blank. “...there's a lot of dangerous things on the surface, Asriel. But nothing is more dangerous than a human. Even to other humans.”
“But... you're human, and you're not dangerous! So maybe... Chara?”

The human child abruptly stood up and walked out of the living room.

“Chara? What's wrong?” Asriel called after the human, but got no reply. Turning to look at the table, he saw the pair of drawings.

“What I was afraid of couldn't find me there...”

Asriel walked over and picked up the golden flower drawing, then turned to look down the hallway. Walking quickly, he made his way to the shared bedroom and opened the door a crack; Chara wasn't inside, which was perfect. All it took was a pushpin from Toriel's desk to place the picture of the flower above Chara's bed.

“There. Nothing scary is gonna get in here if I have anything to-”

“-not to go to far, kids!”

“We won't, dad!”

By the time Asriel had responded, his feet had already taken him deep into the garbage dump. A few monsters, most of them wearing lab coats or other clothing indicating their attachment to the Hotland science team, waved as he splashed through.

Chara was over near one of the smaller piles, sorting through waterlogged clothing and footwear, and Asriel made his way over, almost tripping over what might have once been part of a soda fountain.

“Whoa! Hey, Chara! Find anything good?”

“Just a bunch of shoes either too big or too small for my feet.” The human looked around and chuckled. “Well, that's one mystery solved.”

“Huh?”

Chara turned towards Asriel, as if just noticing him. “Oh! Well... on the surface, we have a huge trash problem. Stuff wears out, and we don't always make it out of stuff we can recycle. So most of the time we bury it in places called landfills. Guess that sounds better than trash pit. So... there's this landfill up there and it serves a lot of different places and I guess it was supposed to be filled up by now. With all this stuff here, and some of it actually looks almost new... that definitely means people have been dumping stuff in the river, which they are not supposed to do.”

“Lucky break for us, right? Dr. Aster said that before human trash started showing up in the river, everything we made had to be from the stuff in the cavern itself. Lights from the crystals, clothes from the plants, and furniture and buildings were mostly made of stone. There was like some metal stuff, the stuff that metal is before its really metal-”

“Ore?”

“Yeah, I think so. There was some stuff that people had to dig up, and then they had to melt it by the lava in Hotland, just to make tools. But now with all this human stuff, everything's a lot better!”

Chara looked down at the worn boot in their hand. “Never thought I'd hear that said about things
that other people had to pay to get rid of. Huh.”

“I'm gonna go look through that big pile with the broken sign on it! Maybe there's some books with all the pages!”

“Okay. I'll stick around here. Maybe I'll luck out when it comes to footwear.”

Asriel clambered up the side of the trash heap until he found a particularly promising crevasse and started to dig. Waterlogged cardboard boxes filled with trashy paperback romances disintegrated in his paws as he dug, followed by a broken shovel, a shattered garden hoe, and a tangled up ball of garden hose that not even Alexander the Great could cleave through. Just as he was about to move on to a more promising spot, something shiny caught his eye.

Two metal sticks stuck out of a cloth bag. Asriel pulled them out and stared at the weird shapes, then grabbed the edge of the bag and pulled at it; both the bag and everything in it was soaked with water, but despite the extra weight, it still came out of the trash pile with relative ease. Inside was... string? Wrapped around sticks and cones or in balls, and in a variety of colors.

“Whoa, hey Asriel! Come check this out!”

Asriel turned to see Chara kneeling down next to something, and grabbed the bag of colorful string to carry it over to where the human was poking around.

“What did you find Chara? Something good?”

“Sorta. I've only ever read about these before.”

Chara unzipped a dirty, discolored plastic bag, and pulled out...

“This is called a camcorder. It's actually pretty old compared to what humans use now, but there was a time when this was cutting edge. It's a video camera, and it records picture and sound to something called a VHS cassette. What humans used to watch movies before DVDs were invented. Hehehe. Some high school AV club must have finally made the switch to digital.”

“What's VHS mean?”

“I'm not sure. Video something System? And a DVD is a Digital Video Disc I think. So if you had something you wanted to record, you put a VHS tape in this compartment...”

Chara pushed a button and the machine opened up.

“Which is empty, go figure. But if we had a tape, we could record stuff, and then later we could watch it again using something called a VCR. And before you ask, I don't know what that stands for, only that they were really hard to program.”

“Wow... so all we need is one of those tapes and we can make this work?”

“Yeah. Wait... no. We're either going to need a new battery or a way to charge the old one. And if we're going to watch it back later we'll need to find a VCR and a TV that can connect to one.”

“I know what a TV looks like, they look like those big monitors in the Hotland lab, right?”

“Sort of. It might be a computer monitor instead. But maybe we can make that work too? I don't know yet. Uh... and a VCR would be... I think a rectangular box about the size of this thing, with a flap of plastic covering a slot for the tapes to...”
Asriel blinked as Chara's words trailed off and they stared at the bag in Asriel's hands.

“What's wrong, Chara?”

“...nothing. That just looked really familiar. I had a bag like that on the surface, I used it to hold knitting stuff.”

Asriel looked down at the bag. “Uh... what's knitting stuff?”

“Yarn, mostly, but also special needles. They have these weird hooks in the end so you can manipulate the yarn into overlapping and looping around into different... patterns...”

Chara's voice trailed off again as Asriel pulled out a pair of shiny needles. Abruptly, the camcorder was handed over.

“Here, trade you.”

“Uh... sure. Hold on a sec-”

Chara frantically searched through the bag as soon as they had both hands free, then looked up at Asriel with a shocked expression. “This is my knitting bag. How did... wait, where did you find this??”

“Over there!” Asriel pointed to the pile of garbage he had struggled with. “Come on, I'll show you the exact spot!”

At the crevasse that Asriel had previously been excavating, Chara put the knitting bag aside and began to dig, first with hands and later with the aid of a broken shovel with just enough handle left to be useful to a human child.

“I... I don't... Asriel, how long have I been down here? It can't have been more than a few weeks.”

“Yeah. That seems right.”

“...they just gave up...”

“What do you mean, Chara? Who gave up?”

Chara didn't seem to hear Asriel, but pulled at some plastic shopping bags and pulled out some of the clothing inside. “These are my clothes... and that down there, that... was my bed. Asriel, do you know what this means?”

Asriel felt a chill run down his back that had nothing to do with the cold water everywhere. Slowly he turned to look at Chara's expression...

“...no, what?”

Chara's mouth was drawn back into something like a smile, but it didn't reach the eyes. In fact, the eyes looked sad. The overall effect was... unpleasant, and Asriel felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

“It means... there's nothing left for me on the surface. Nobody thinks I'm alive. Nobody is looking for me.”

Asriel looked back at the garbage, and then at the knitting bag in Chara's hands.
...you mean-"

Chara shook their head, knelt down, and grabbed the other plastic bags of clothing and a pair of shoes from the pile of refuse. “I mean, Dr. Aster might as well take his time. There's no reason to rush on my account. Come on, let's go back and meet up with Asgore... oh, and Asriel?”

“Yeah?”

“Can we... uh... can we just keep this our little secret? I'm worried if Toriel or Asgore learn about this... they'll, uh, take it the wrong way.”

“...okay, Chara. I won't tell.”

“Thank y-”

“-a bad dream, can I sleep in your bed tonight?”

Chara scooted over. “Sure thing bro.”

Asriel sniffed. “Thanks.”

“Just don't get tears all over the pillow. We have to share that now.”

“I'm trying to stop it, but it... it won't...”

“Hey, hey.” Hairless fingers interlaced with his furry ones in the dark. “It's gonna be alright, Asriel. What was the dream about?”

“...you're gonna make fun of me.”

“I absolutely won't. I promise.”

Asriel sniffed again. “We... we were all on the surface because the Barrier was finally broken, and, and I had to run back inside because I forgot something, and when I came back the Barrier was back again, and everyone was going down the mountain and nobody heard me calling for help and... and... and I realized I was never going to see mom or dad or you ever again-”

In the dark, arms pulled the sobbing child close in a hug.

“That's NOT going to happen Asriel. I promise... uh... any time you want to stop that-”

“I'm sorry! I'm sorry! It just keeps... I can't...”

“Look, it's... ugh. I don't mean to give you trouble about that. But on the surface, there are people... if you can really call them people... who will see you crying and think you're an easy target. If you show weakness... well... people will start thinking that they can hurt you and get away with it.”

“...did... did that happen to you?”

“...yes. More than I want to remember. At least down here, nobody's like that.”

Asriel sniffed and returned the hug with as much force as he could. “We won't let that happen ever again, Chara. Dad and Mom are both super strong and the people at the CORE have built all sorts of stuff to protect us. When... when we get back to the surface, you'll be safe there. Nobody will
hurt you ever again.”

In the dark, there was only silence... until...

“Asriel...” a choked voice spoke out.

“Yes, Chara?”

“I can't breathe.”

“...oh.” Asriel released his grip and heard Chara gasping for air next to him. “I... I'm so sorry, Chara. I didn't-”

“I'm good. I'm good. Don't start crying again, or we'll get stuck in a loop until morning.”

“Can... can that happen?”

“Probably. I've seen movies where stranger things happened... Asriel, uh... I have to ask.”

“What is it, Chara?”

“Do you ever regret finding me, and bringing me back to Home?”

“What?? No! Of course not! Why would you even think that??”

The darkened bedroom was silent for a few moments.

“I probably shouldn't have said anything but... well, let's just say you have your bad dreams, and I have mine. And, well... a few days ago, you asked me why I climbed Mt. Ebott, even though I knew the legends that people who climbed the mountain never returned. I told you I couldn't tell you. I still can't. But... but one day, I will. You, and only you. I can trust you.”

“I won't tell anyone, Chara. As long as I live. I promise.”

“...that's good. Thank you, Asriel...”

The room remained silent, except for the sounds of breathing, slightly out of sync....

Flowey opened his eyes and looked around. The sun was shining through the window of Asgore's Garden shed, meaning it was around mid morning. The flower monster retreated through the broken floorboards and burrowed down into the ground, made his way over to the front lawn and popped up to look around. Even for a Sunday, there didn't seem to be many people on the streets. Another underground trip took him to the queen's house, but it seemed to be empty; there were no sounds of voices, no sensation of vibration, and when Flowey extended his stem up to the second floor, Frisk's room appeared empty through the window.

“...okay, this isn't creepy at all.”

Back underground, Flowey burrowed around the town, occasionally picking up the impact of footsteps and the sounds of conversation, until the distant tremors of many people, many voices, reached him. Homing in on the disturbance, Flowey emerged from the ground a fair distance away... and found himself staring at a massive crowd at the Arboretum.

“...it can't be Arbor Day already. What the hell is going on??”
Under the earth, the flower monster eavesdropped on random conversations as he passed beneath people's feet.

“Behold; Temporal Patricide. A hot sauce so hot it goes back in time and kills your parents before you're born.”

“That's a little understated.”

Flowey gritted his teeth under the earth and moved on. If those people understood that their present was hanging by a slim thread, and how closely that thread had come to being cut recently, they wouldn't make such jokes.

“...but it's all about the smokey flavor, really.”

“I respectfully disagree. Once the meat goes into the pot that flavor becomes a building block in a larger process, and no matter how pronounced it is, it must still mesh with the flavors of the tomato, the chiles, and all other seasonings.”

“It may just be a part, but I say again, it is the most important one. A foundation is only one part of a house, but everything else depends on it...”

“...hey, step right up, have a chili dog. who needs bowls and spoons when you got buns, am i right...”

“Aaaaand welcome back to the KEBT Broadcast Table at the Ebott's Wake Chili Cook Off! Brett Brinkman here with my grandfather's recipe, the Blazing Brinkman Bowl, and of course my co host DJ Pantz is here as well with a monster chili called... uh, what again?”

“The Request Line.”

“Is that name perhaps because it is so hot that people will be requesting milk right after they take a bite?”

“No, I just needed something to call it.”

“...oh.”

“I mean, don't get me wrong. It's crazy hot. To be honest I was worried it wasn't going to even be edible. I haven't used fire magic since Home Economics classes and that was a long time ago.”

“...uh, correct me if I'm wrong but didn't you-”

“Magic heat lamps, Brett. Not the same. About half of what was on the menu barely qualified as food anyway. And that's with a very generous definition of food, too.”

“...okay then. Well, that's the fourth time today I've been glad that we're over here on the No Beans Camp and Mettaton is over on the Beans Camp side.”

Flowey emerged from the ground and looked around. He was underneath some sort of tent or awning, behind a human and a monster sitting at a table with cooking pots on top of portable stoves and microphones in front of them. Behind him, Flowey could see electronics and a humming box with the All Fine Labs logo on it.

“A reminder to all participants in the Cook Off contest proper that the second round of judging is about to start, so if you are registered for the event make sure that your table, tent or shade tarp is
still flying your official contestant pennant so that the judges can find you and deem your culinary creations worthy or not worthy.”

“You know Brett, you're starting to sound a little bit like Gary.”

“Well, I did end up giving him a ride this morning so he could go pick up the traffic chopper from the airport in Quarterhorse Fields. It kind of rubs off on you.”

“And it doesn't come off, no matter how much you scrub.”

“That is both mean spirited and a suitable metaphor oh hey, uh, Jeff can you turn down the gain for a moment, I think we're about to be visited by-”

“HELLO MR. BRINKMAN! HELLO DJ PANTZ!”

Flowey turned to see Papyrus standing, no, kneeling down next to the KEBT table; this was clearly both because of the height of the skeleton compared to the height of the awning, and the human child sitting atop his shoulders.

“Greetings, Brett and Burgie. You have been visited by the Cool Skeleton of Coolness. Popularity and friends will come to you but only if you post 'Cool Story Bro' in this thread.”

DJ Pantz snickered and grinned, holding out a paw that Frisk bro-fisted. “Hey there little buddy. Nice to see you're recovered enough to enjoy the cook off.”

“Yeah, it's good to be out in the fresh air and sunlight.”

Brett coughed awkwardly. “Which you would get more of, seeing as you are riding atop Papyrus's shoulders.”

Frisk grinned. “Yeah. It's a symbiotic relationship. He gives me increased height and visibility, and I protect him from parasites and keep his coat glossy.”

“...wow. You uh, you might want to talk to the doctors and see about getting that painkiller dosage adjusted.”

“You might be right about that.” Frisk began to giggle, which was quickly joined by a hearty “NYEH HEH HEH!” from Papyrus.

“So, Frisk, how have you enjoyed the cook off so far?”

“It's pretty great. I had to take the monster food versions to go because I have to wait for my shoulder to heal up on its own, but the human chilies are pretty good so far.”

“Are you a beans or no beans type of person?”

“I can go either or. I'm not worried about offending purists at this point.”

“How about you Papyrus? Beans or no beans?”

“I'M STILL AMAZED THAT THE SURFACE HAS THE RESOURCES TO DEVOTE TO A FESTIVAL ALL ABOUT A SINGLE FOOD! AND THAT'S INCLUDING THE LEFTOVER CULTURE SHOCK FROM LAST YEAR! ALTHOUGH SEEING MY LAZY BROTHER SERVE THAT SINGLE FOOD ON TOP OF ANOTHER FOOD HAS HELPED GROUND MY INCREDULITY.”
“Right, the chili dog cart. How are those? Haven't had a chance to wander away from the mic and try them.”

“I WOULD NOT KNOW, I HAVE NOT HAD ONE. I AM A SKELETON WITH STANDARDS! CHILI IS A STEW VARIATION AND STEWS ARE SERVED IN BOWLS!”

“A real stickler for details. I can respect that.” Brett reached up and shook Papyrus's hand. “Papyrus, Frisk, it's been great having you here.”

“IT'S BEEN GREAT SPEAKING TO YOU!”

“Yeah, totally. I do have a question before we go meet up with everyone else. Why is Flowey in your tent?”

“What the-?”

“Huh?!”

The two radio personalities twisted around and saw Flowey, who stared at both of them for a moment, before turning to the humming box.

“Hey, why does this thing have the All Fine Labs logo on it?”

Brett cleared his throat. “It's, uh. It's a generator. A mobile power planet designed by Dr. Alphys.”

“...oh. Guess that makes sense.” Flowey turned and faced Frisk. “Hey, where are you and Papyrus headed next?”

“Uh... I think I see Dr. Aster over by the Knitting Samurai table. We'll probably head that way.”

“Okay. I'll see you there.”

Flowey burrowed underground, made his way out past the tent, and followed the ongoing conversation above the ground.

“REMIND ME AGAIN WHY THAT STORE IS CALLED THE KNITTING SAMURAI?”

“The samurai were the medieval warrior class of Japan way back, and had cultural expectations related to artistic pursuits. Calligraphy, poetry, painting, and some others. So it's not that much of a jump to invoke that same ideal for the textile arts. That's my guess.”

“WOWIE! HOW DO YOU STAY SO WELL INFORMED ABOUT SUBJECTS LIKE THESE?”

“Wikipedia, mostly. Hey, Dr. Aster!”

“What?? Oh. Hello you two.”

Flowey emerged from the ground between the Knitting Samurai table and the adjacent Needlepoint Ninja table and looked around. Dr. Aster's lab coat had several red stains already from various sample bowls.

“How are you enjoying the cook off, doctor?”

“Well, I could do without the burning sensation in my sockets, but other than that it's been quite the learning experience. I personally don't see the appeal of eating something harmful to me for its own sake, but to each their own.”
“I'M MORE INTERESTED IN ALL OF THE MILK HANDED OUT TO MITIGATE THE CAPSAICIN, AS WELL!”

“Right, right. The chemical reaction nullifies the sensation. I was wondering why they were unloading jugs of the stuff at that big tent over there.”

Frisk suddenly slapped their forehead, then scrambled to grab hold of Papyrus's skull before they fell backwards off of his shoulders.

“Oh, that's right! The Trial By Fire Contest! Undyne's in that this year, right?”

Dr. Aster shrugged. “Couldn't say, but, I did see her by that tent.”

“...you know what this means, right Papyrus?”

“IT MEANS WE MUST MAKE OUR WAY TO THE CONTEST LOCATION WITHOUT DELAY!”

“Exactly! Onward, my boney steed! No contest shall escape our view!”

“NYEH HEH HEH HEH HEH HEH!”

The two skeletons headed towards a large tent Flowey could just make out through the trees and various other, smaller tents, to say nothing of the crowds of people milling back and forth. Burrowing back beneath the earth, Flowey made his way past tree roots and the occasional tent stake. Coming up to get his bearings, Flowey emerged next to the tire of a pickup truck.

“YOUR CHILI SUCKS METZINGER!”

Flowey spun around, looking for the sound of the deafening yell, and spotted a human sitting in a lawn chair in the bed of the pickup, with an umbrella above him. Recognition set in, and Flowey grinned.

“Wow. You really don't like that guy, do you?”

Hal Greene looked down and pulled the megaphone away from his mouth. “Hey down there, flower power. How are you liking the Ebott's Wake Chili Cook Off?”

“That's a really complicated question, with a complicated answer, and we don't have time for that.” Flowey extended his stem, growing up the side of the vehicle and entwining around the umbrella before stopping around Hal's head height.

“So...”

“So...”

Some cheering started at the massive tent a fair distance away, and Hal grabbed some binoculars from atop an ice chest by his chair. Peering through them, he frowned.

“Agh. Looks like they just finished round one of the Trial By Fire. Eli's out, Forsythe's out, Therrick's out... Metzinger is still in. God DAMMIT.”

“...is there a story behind this whole animosity you two have?”

“Yeah. But it's a complicated story. And we don't have time for that.”
“Well played.”

The human and the flower were silent for a few moments. Flowey looked around, then cleared his throat.

“So... I know just from hearing things that you got banned from the Cook Off.”

“Yeah.”

“So why are you here anyway?”

“I was banned from the Cook Off, but not the Arboretum. And this area where I'm parked is the DMZ between people who put beans in their chili and people who don't. So technically they can't tell me to leave because I'm not in either part of the Cook Off.”

“So you just park a vehicle here and thumb your noses at people?”

“And yell at them.”

“... I think I like you more and more each time I learn something about you.”

Hal snickered. “Hey, you want a drink? I brought a few things.”

“...just water, if you got it.”

“Sure. Got some bottles in here.” Hal opened up the ice chest and pulled a bottle of water from the icy slush within. Thorny vines crawled up the side of the pickup bed and grasped the bottle, then twisted off the cap and poured it over the side.

“I was about to ask what you were doing and then I remembered who I was talking to.” Hal picked up the binoculars again. “Looks like the next round is starting. Oh, there's Undyne. Didn't realize she was in this. Must have been a tree in the way.”

Flowey looked around. “You know... I could probably call in some favors. They know me here. Could get a few trees to move out of the way.”

Hal seemed to consider the offer for a moment, but eventually shook his head. “It'd get all sorts of people agitated. And interrupt the contest. And while I don't want Metzinger to win, I don't want him to get out of losing by a technicality.”

“Okay then.”

The truck was silent for another minute or so. Flowey cleared his throat again.

“Alright so... I know while I was trying to wake up Frisk, you were helping protect the hospital.”

“Yep. That was a thing that happened.”

“How did that go?”

Hal shrugged and waved his hand vaguely. “Well, Sans and Papyrus were heavy on the bones and the laser skulls, Undyne tossed spears, Joe was in the mech from All Fine Labs shooting lasers, and Justin and I were harassing the crowd. He had tear gas grenades. I was sniping. If anybody got too close to the monsters, I'd distract them.”

“...did it work?”
“Yup. Once things got under way, there was so much panic that they couldn't do much individually, and nothing as a group. Only had to shoot twice. Got a guy in the leg when he tried to charge through that blue bone fence, and hit some ass hat in the shoulder when he was about to cold cock Sans from behind.”

“...uh...” Flowey looked down at the pickup bed. “What did you feel when that happened?”

“Recoil. And heat. Couldn't find a good position in the shade.”

“...oh.”

“...wait. That made me sound like a sociopath, didn't it. I'm crazy, but I'm not that flavor of crazy. I do feel emotions. I just don't feel sympathy for or empathy with people who want to murder other people who haven't done me any harm. That doesn't make me a... hmmm.”

“Doesn't make you a what?”

“Well, you caught me in a... whatchamacallit... language block? Before you guys all showed up, I would have finished that sentence with the word monster, but it turns out that word isn't exactly accurate anymore.” Hal looked confused for a moment. “You know, I wonder if some of the people that don't like monsters are just angry that by taking away the traditional use of that word, you guys forced us to remember that the people who committed the worst atrocities in human history were still as human as the rest of us up here.”

“Why would people be upset about that?”

“Well, they shouldn't be, really. But some people will get upset about anything.” Hal spied on the contest again. “Hah! Metzinger's out after round two! If you can't stand the heat, get the fuck out of the tent, asshole!”

“Who's still in?”

“Lemme check... I can see Undyne, Brenda and Calvin Rosenthal, Dave Davidson, and... uh, don't remember his name but he's this short guy made out of orange fire.”

“...Flame Heatsman?”

“I dunno. Maybe.”

“...uh, earlier, you said the word sociopath. What is that?”

“Oh. Yeah. Okay, I'm not a shrink. But as I understand it, a sociopath is somebody who doesn't feel any emotions at all, or they do but they're very muted, they don't have as much of an impact on how they make decisions. And they're confused with people called psychopaths because while psychopaths do feel emotion, they don't always feel the same emotions as other people when they have similar experiences. But I could be wrong and talking out of my ass right now.”

“Can humans do that?”

Hal blinked. “...it's, uh, it's usually a metaphor for saying something that's inaccurate. Although I think I read about some guy who could actually do that. Back in the 1800s or something.”

“Oh. So... uhm... what makes a human a sociopath like that?”

“...well, you just ran into a minefield, my tiny amigo. Psychology isn't a hard science like physics
or chemistry. There's too many different things going on, and no one person can see all of them at once because so many of them are happening inside other people's heads. So frankly, one theory is as good as the next, and most of them aren't that good at all. Although maybe with Dr. Alphys and Dr. Aster on the case, the whole Soul Research thing at All Fine Labs can finally add some objectivity. But that might just be wishful thinking."

The pickup bed was silent again for a minute or two, until Hal turned to Flowey.

"Hey, got a question for you. You don't have to answer, just curious."

"Sure, go ahead."

"You're, you're pretty big on pranks and practical jokes, right? I mean, there was the Arboretum tree thing just last week or so, and before that there was the thing with all the detour signs so people got stuck in a loop on East West Road for hours. And before that the plastic grocery sack hot air balloon fleet. And the Shakespeare In The Park Hedge Maze. And the thing with the mousetraps, still not sure where you got all of those. But anyway... people tend to see you more of an annoyance. The jerk that just happens to be friends with the monster ambassador. But it's pretty obvious to anybody that pays attention that you could really hurt people if you felt like it. And my question is basically, why didn't you take Dwayne Riley and his fan club down a few notches back before they got big enough to be a threat?"

"I asked myself that a lot Friday night. And all of yesterday. Frisk specifically requested that I not hurt him, but I keep wondering if I should have done it anyway. Yeah, I know all about the whole playing into other people's stereotypes thing, but that would just shift some people who were undecided against us. The real threat, the people who had guns and were willing to use them, had already made up their mind. And maybe I should have gone after them sooner. I don't know."

"Hmmm. So the kid was trying to play peacemaker."

"Yeah. That's Frisk's jam."

Hal reached down and pulled a can of grape soda out of the ice chest and cracked it open. "...well, Dwayne wasn't the one who shot the kid. But by the same token, somebody did. So good start, impressive execution, but could not stick the dismount. I give it a seven out of ten—"

"You can do it Undyne! Don't give up now!"

"NO AMOUNT OF SPICY FOOD CAN DEFEAT THE CAPTAIN OF THE ROYAL HONOR GUARD!"

Hal pulled up the binoculars again. "Whoa, looks like the Trial By Fire is heating up. I mean, more than usual."

Flowey squinted at the distant tent. "That was Frisk and Papyrus yelling just now."

Assorted cheering erupted from the tent, almost drowned out by a victorious "NGAAAAAAAH!" Loudspeakers buzzed to life and Brett Brinkman's voice rolled out over the Arboretum.

"This just in! The winner, and new champion of the Ebott's Wake Chili Cook Off Trial By Fire competition is... Undyne!"

"Well. Something tells me nobody else is going to get that title for the rest of the decade." Hal snorted. "Still. It wasn't Metzinger. And thus the balance of nature was restored unto the land."
“Huh?”

“Just thinking out loud.”
Sick Daze

The bicycle stuck out of the turgid surface of the pool like the conning tower of some sort of pedal powered submarine. Frisk stared at it intensely, trying to figure out how to get to it without sinking beneath the gelatinous surface. In fact, thinking about it, they could not remember how they had gotten away from the sinking bike in the first place without being sucked in. But that was a separate problem.

There was a crank at the bottom of the high dive board that looked promising; Frisk half expected it to extend the board out into the pool, so perhaps from above a rope hook could be lowered and the diving board used as a crane, but instead it seemed to lower and raise the high dive itself. Sighing in annoyance, Frisk reversed the crank to put the board back in position... until it broke off.

“Oh no.”

The high dive screeched and the whole assembly snapped, tipping over and falling into the gooey mass that would otherwise have been water. The normal diving board seemed intact, but Frisk dared not touch it, just in case anything else broke. A hissing sound caught the child's attention, and Frisk looked out at the pool where the high dive was sinking under the water... if it could be called that... which was hardening and the surface was frosting over. As the air itself began to condense into a sharp, snowy wintry blast, Frisk ran around the edge of the pool, nearly slipping on the ice spreading out onto the concrete, and ran through the building out to the street.

Their phone began ringing, and Frisk pulled it out and saw Alphys' smiling face. A button was pressed and Frisk brought the phone up to their ear.

“Alphys?”

“...isk... ere me? ...oing on?”

“Alphys I can't hear you! There's too much static!”

“...st be the wor... enemy sta...”

“What?”

“...ay already be to la...”

“Alphys, can you text me what you mean?”

The phone beeped and Frisk stared at the text; it was made entirely of bizarre symbols like hands pointing, smiley faces, mailboxes and cartoon bombs with fuses. The phone speaker suddenly warbled like a dial up modem.

“COME JOIN THE FUN.”

Frisk ran.

Buildings, streets, trees, cars, and people were all left behind, until Frisk was outside the town. Stretching before the child was a massive field of golden flowers. Slowly, the panic started to ebb. Walking out into the middle of the field, Frisk looked around. The sun seemed brighter, the wind cooler, the sky a deeper blue, and the golden color of the flowers was radiant.
The human child stumbled into a low spot, an area where the flowers had not grown as thick. In the center... a fuzzy monster with a striped shirt sat, arms wrapped around his legs.

“Frisk...”

Frisk swallowed, trying to fight the lump in their throat. “Hey, Asriel.”

“They said that nothing scary could get at us in the golden flower fields. That they were safe.”

“I know.”

“This is where we were killed. They were wrong. The flowers aren't safe. Nothing is safe.”

“I know. I'm sorry.”

“...I want to go home.”

Frisk walked over, sat down next to Asriel, and leaned against him.

After what felt like a long time, Frisk's phone began to buzz. Frisk looked at Asriel and saw that he had fallen asleep, then pulled out the phone and stared at the gibberish message again.

Yet, the phone kept buzzing...

Frisk opened their eyes, staring at the ceiling of their room. Turning slowly, Frisk looked at their end table and saw the phone buzzing in its charger dock, the screen flashing an alarm. With the exaggerated care that rapidly becomes second nature to those who are recovering from surgery, Frisk climbed out of bed and began pulling open drawers to remove clothing.

Some time later, Frisk slowly made their way down the stairs to the ground floor, which was strangely empty.

“Hello? Mom? ...she couldn't have left for school already.”

Frisk's phone beeped again and they pulled it out... and saw the same gibberish again.

“What is this... what is going on?”

“Frisk? Are you alright?”

“Mom?? Mom, where are you?”

“I am right here my child.”

“Where? I can't-”

Frisk's eyes opened.

Above the child was not the ceiling of their bedroom, but the concerned expression of Toriel.

“Mom, what happened? Did I oversleep?”

Toriel shook her head. “No, no. I was simply checking on you before I headed to the school.”

“School. Monday morning. I gotta get ready ow ow ow.” Frisk's free hand covered their injured
shoulder, and their attempt to sit up came to an abrupt end. “I really need to remember not to do
that.”

Toriel placed a paw on Frisk's forehead. “You are still quite warm, Frisk. You got a great deal of
sun yesterday during the Chili Cook Off, and all that after your more serious injuries. I believe it
may be best for you to stay home today, and perhaps several more days.”

“...I don't want to fall behind.” Frisk remembered the dream, and then the dream of waking up.
“But... I don't know if I can think straight right now.”

“That is what concerns me the most. And you have no chance of falling behind, Frisk. Not with
what you have already done this year.”

“...there's a human story. One of Aesop's Fables. A tortoise and a hare decide to race. The hare gets
a head start, wastes it by taking a nap. By the time he wakes up, the tortoise is already at the finish
line.”

“There is a similar story in monster history, although it does not end the same way.”

“Really? What happens in the monster version?”

Toriel's lips twisted into a frown as she looked out the window. “I hope that you will not find that
out for at least a few years.”

“...okay. Well... just be sure to bring my work home for me, so I can get it done on time.”

Toriel's expression softened, and she knelt down next to the bed. “Frisk... you do understand that
you do not have to be perfect, do you not?”

“What??”

“Last week, after the scan at All Fine Labs. When Sans and I were talking. I realized... a few things
that I should have realized much sooner. You are a very hard worker, and you have a brilliant and
creative mind, and I am very proud of you. But... you do not have to give one hundred percent all
of the time.”

Frisk stared at Toriel for a few moments, then looked out through the window next to the bed.
“Mom... I have some stuff I need to tell you. But... I don't think I can say it right now. And you
have to get to school soon anyway.”

“While I do need to leave soon... I still have enough time for this.” Toriel reached down and
grasped Frisk's free hand in her two massive paws. “I do not know what happened to you in the
past. I do not know what affected you in such a way that you are so upset and afraid whenever you
make a mistake. But I hope you understand now that whatever you think will happen will not
happen. Not here. Not with myself watching over you, not with any of your friends watching over
you.”

Frisk continued to stare out the window, but had begun blinking rapidly, and their eyes seemed to
glisten in the morning sunlight more than they otherwise would. “I just want you to be happy, is
all.”

“And I want for you to be happy, my child. But it is very hard to be happy when one is always
afraid.”

“Yeah. That's definitely a thing.”
“I will bring your assignments home, of course. But I hope you will think about what I have said. You can and should leave time for yourself, even when you are not sick or injured.”

“I will, mom.”

“That is good to hear. I have made arrangements with Asgore, and he will be watching over you for today.”

“Okay.” Frisk slowly and more carefully attempted to get up and sat up on the edge of the bed; from that position, the child reached up and wrapped an arm around Toriel’s neck and pulled them into a hug.

“I know I can’t stop you from worrying, mom. But I promise you everything is going to be alright.”

Toriel hugged the child back and smiled. “What a strange reversal of fortunes. The child reassuring the parent that all will be well.”

“Actually this seems to be pretty normal for us, I think.”

“Hee hee.” Toriel leaned back enough to kiss Frisk on the forehead. “I love you, Frisk. Never forget that.”

Frisk sniffed. “I love you too mom. Have a good day today, alright?”

“I shall do my best.”

The lights flickered on, and Frisk held up a hand to block out the glare.

“buddy? do you understand what would have happened, if she hadn't said anything?”

Frisk blinked and lowered their hand to see Sans standing in front of a pair of large metal doors, looking down at the floor. When he raised his skull, Frisk found themselves staring into empty, black sockets.

“Y o u ’ d b e d e a d w h e r e y o u s t a n d .”

The skeleton vanished in a flash of blue light, and suddenly, with an unshakable conviction that turning around was absolutely the worst thing to do, Frisk rushed toward the doors. They slid open easily, despite their size, and the monitors lining the hallway beyond them lit up. More of the bizarre symbols, but that wasn't important. The room at the end of the hallway was. The closer Frisk got, the further away it seemed to be, and the faster they ran, until...

A gantry stretched towards the massive machinery of the CORE, and Frisk's phone beeped. Looking at the screen showed more symbols, but they seemed increasingly familiar. Either there was a pattern to them, or the symbols were the same each time... Frisk shook their head, trying in vain to remember where the symbols had come from-

“You.”

Frisk's breath caught in their throat as somebody grabbed them by the neck and lifted them up.

“You just won't quit, will you?”

Frisk tried to speak, but the grip on their throat was too tight. Which was rapidly becoming a
problem as their vision started to get blurry.

“The power of the gods in the hands of a child. Wasted. *Squandered.* This will not do at all.”

The arm swung out over the railing and Frisk finally saw who had grabbed them.

“You don't care who gets hurt, or how much anyone suffers, as long as you get what you want. You think you can decide people's lives for them. *Did it not occur to you that there would be consequences?*”

Jordan Cater let go and Frisk saw the glow of the lava below come up to meet them, felt the heat-

Frisk's eyes snapped open and the child sat up in bed. And instantly regretted doing so.

“Ow ow ow ow why ow ow.”

“Frisk? Are you alright? I'm on my way!”

Frisk grabbed their bad shoulder and looked around at the bedroom. The lighting was different, and the phone screen said that it was almost eleven in the morning. Gritting their teeth and ignoring their injured shoulder, Frisk tossed back the bed sheets and tried to get out of bed. Leaning against the chest of drawers, Frisk tried to wait out the spinning sensation.

The bedroom door opened, and Asgore rushed in, kneeling down next to the child. “Frisk! I heard you call out, are you alright?”

“I'm... I'm okay. I'm fine dad. I just bumped something I shouldn't have.”

“I fear I have already neglected the doctor's instructions. You were to receive some medication at nine in the morning but I felt it was important for you to rest.”

“That was a good call. But maybe we should take care of that now. My shoulder isn't letting me forget what happened.”

Asgore carefully put his arms around Frisk. “Here. I will carry you down the stairs.”

“I can make it under my own ste-”

Frisk's stomach lurched as the world seemed to fall out from underneath them, and if not for the massive fuzzy arms already nearby they would have stumbled to the floor.

“I stand corrected.” Frisk was lifted up to Asgore's chest and one working arm wrapped around his neck. The massive boss monster moved with slow and careful deliberation, so that Frisk was scarcely aware of any movement at all.

“I am sorry I could not give you my undivided attention, but it seems that yesterday's fun and games have had... uh... repercussions.”

“What happened?”

“URRRGHA.”

Frisk looked away from the tie dyed T-shirt as Asgore finished descending the stairs, and saw Undyne lying on the sofa in the living room with an ice pack on her forehead and sweat glistening
everywhere else.

“Undyne!”


Asgore carefully set Frisk down on the floor next to the sofa, and the child knelt down next to the warrior's face.

“Undyne, what happened??”

“Yesterday. Yesterday happened. My victory over the hot chili contest... was not without some sacrifice. It was a Pyrite victory.”

“Uh... I think you mean Pyrrhic victory.”

Undyne blinked her eye. “What the hell's a Pyrrhic?”

“I think it was a place, a long time ago. A battle was fought there and the side that won still lost so many soldiers that they couldn't fight the war any more.”

“Oh. I thought it was like a fool's gold comparison. A defeat that looks like victory.”

Asgore walked up to the coffee table and set a tray with a pitcher of iced tea on it and several glasses. “Alphys called me right after Toriel did. Undyne had a rough night, and she was still talking about keeping up with paperwork today if it was too hot to have gym class. I had to actually order her as king to come with me so I could watch over both of you. And I haven't been king for a while now anyway, so that tells you how bad things were.”

“I wasn't... that far gone.” Undyne pointed at Asgore. “You. Just because. Because you had to dissolve the kingdom so we could be... whatever we are now. Just because you're not wearing the crown anymore. That doesn't mean you stop being king. You and Toriel, you held things together for ages. I remember Gerson's stories about the early days after the war. The fear, the despair. You turned all of that around. You held everyone together, long before we had all of the amazing science stuff. Just because I wasn't alive to see it doesn't mean that I don't know about it. And that goes for everybody.”

“Your words, however kind, would carry more weight if I hadn't screwed up so many things at the end.”

“UGH. Frisk, help me up. I need to go Warrior Therapist again.”

With no small amount of difficulty, Undyne sat up on the sofa, and rose to her feet with Frisk's assistance.

“Listen, big guy. I never got to meet Chara myself. But everybody knows how close Chara and Asriel were. Close as family. Closer, even. And that meant a lot to everybody, too. Because like you always said, they were the future of humans and monsters; everybody living and playing together, without any war. Do you understand? To the rest of us, that meant the only thing we had to worry about was the Barrier. And until he disappeared, everybody thought Dr. Aster was going to figure that out handily. All we had to do was make it day to day, and once the Barrier was gone, we could all see the sunlight again. I read on the internet once, a human said that somebody who had a why to live for could endure almost any how. That's what it was like for everybody. Things were going to get better, all we had to do was hold on until then.”
Undyne closed the distance and put a webbed hand on Asgore's shoulder. “Losing Chara and Asriel... people fell into despair for a reason. Not just because humans were still afraid of us. Not just because it looked like we'd have to go to war again just to see the sun and the stars. But because those two kids represented the best in all of us. They didn't care about shape or size or if somebody was made of magic or water. They were kids and they did kid stuff. And they didn't get to grow up, under the stars or under the crystals. You had every right to be angry, both as a father and as king. And based on what we knew at the time, you had every reason to think that Chara was the exception to the rule, that the war was still going. The queen disagreed. She was right in the end. But you weren't wrong. Think about it. What would have happened if it hadn't been another kid that fell down? What if the Sages really had sent people to the mountain to try to wipe us out, now that they knew we still existed?”

Asgore stared at Undyne. “Yes, that would have ended terribly for all of us, but that isn't what happened.”

“ASGORE. You are the strongest, toughest, bravest, kindest person I know. And I've known a lot of people who are absolutely exceptional in all of those categories. But you don't know everything. You can't read minds, you can't tell the future. And that door swings both ways. You cannot possibly blame yourself for what happened underground with the human children as though it was some personal fault, anymore than you can think ill of yourself for rolling some dice and not predicting the number that comes up.”

“And that's where you are mistaken, my friend. I gave the order. Toriel tried to make me see reason. Tried to remind me that anyone who fell down could be another Chara. That they could have been somebody else's Asriel, alone in an unfamiliar world. I did not listen. It was my command, and so too, the fault lies with me, and always will.” The boss monster smiled sadly. “Just because I am not wearing the crown anymore, does not mean I no longer feel its weight.”

Hairless fingers grasped large, fuzzy ones, and Asgore looked down at Frisk.

“Dad. A lot of people have tried to kill me. But you and Undyne and Mettaton and everyone else from the Underground... you changed your minds. You might not realize how big a difference that makes, but it does. You're the best king anyone could ask for. The best dad anyone could ask for. And what happened to the other humans does not change that. We can all be better, dad. That doesn't make who we are today terrible. Do you remember when everyone was clapping after your statement Friday? Everybody knows what happened to the other humans. And everybody knows what happened to your family, and why you felt you had to do what you did, to protect everyone else.”

“What Frisk said,” Undyne agreed. “There is a world of difference between what you did, and all the other stuff that kings have done in human history. Or any leaders, really. Like that emperor that made his horse a member of his staff. And he nailed the hats of visiting dignitaries to their heads.”

“Oh... I think those were two different guys, Undyne.”

“Not the point, Frisk! Look... Asgore. However you feel about what happened... don't let it cast a shadow that follows you around for the rest of your life. You are more than one decision you made in the heat of the moment.”

Asgore smiled at Undyne and Frisk. “...well. When Toriel and Alphys called me up to take care of you two, I admit I didn't expect that you'd team up to try to take care of me.”

Undyne grinned. “Then clearly you haven't been paying attention... uh... Frisk?”
“Yes?”

“Can you, uh, help me back to the sofa? I think my legs are about to give out on me...”

“Lean on me, Undyne. It's going to be okay.”

Undyne half stumbled her way over to the sofa and fell onto the cushions. Carefully, Asgore picked her up and turned her over so she was lying on her back once more, and re-applied the ice pack.

“Okay... I think I'll be fine as long as I never eat anything spicy again... wait. Next year I'm going to have to defend my title. Augh.”

Frisk put their good hand in one of Undyne's and squeezed. “Let me know if you need any water to cool down.”

“Tried that last night. Doesn't work when the heat comes from inside you. At one point there was steam coming off of me. Not joking.”

“Yikes.”

“Yeah. And that was on top of the problems that come from eating human food.” Some of the scales on Undyne's face took on a red hue and she looked away from Frisk. “I thought it burned a lot going in, but that... does that happen to humans too, or is it just monsters?”

Frisk shrugged out of reflex and immediately regretted it. Clutching their shoulder and sucking in air through clenched teeth, Frisk shook their head. “It happens to humans too. It's a known problem with spicy foods and especially peppers.”

“And you guys eat them anyway. The whole Trial By Fire contest, who could handle the most pain for its own sake. Hah.” Undyne put a hand on Frisk's head. “I won't lie. I was disappointed when I found out there weren't really mechs or robots or fighting princesses on the surface. But as long as people are competing like yesterday, friendly games to see who is toughest and strongest. As long as people are building weird machines and racing them for fun. As... as long as people come together with a single goal, like Friday. Then anime is real. That was what you meant, wasn't it?”

“Yeah. When people's hearts are united... the sky is the limit. And if you count the space program, then even the sky isn't the limit. The mechs and the robots and the swords and costumes... that's, I think the word is aesthetic. And Alphys will have most of that figured out by the time I'm in college anyway.”

“You know it.” Undyne's hand slipped off of Frisk's head and hung limply from the side of the sofa, and a goofy grin spread across her face. “I am gonna marry that lady. And we are gonna have soooo many kids... gonna teach em all how to cook... and fight... and....”

“Uh... if you and Alphys are both girls, how does that work? Undyne?”

The fish woman began to snore, and Frisk looked up at Asgore. “I don't suppose you can explain how that works?”

Asgore's eyes opened wide, and the king coughed. “Uh, let's go into the kitchen and take care of that human medicine now. Alright?”

Frisk stared at Asgore's back as he retreated out of the living room, and sighed.
“I feel like I'm missing a whole lot of jokes because I don't know the whole story. Or maybe the joke is on me.”
Dr. Aster stared at the computer monitor.

“...do you want me to play it back again, doc?”

Dr. Aster grunted noncommittally and Joe hedged his bets by clicking Play again. The security feeds from one of the corridors deep inside the CORE facility displayed their typical monotony, and then the feed warped with static, ghost images, and other distortions that came with wholly analog electronic circuitry in a video system. And when the distortion ended...

The gun jumped out at the doctor first, followed by the human holding it. Well made clothing, possibly custom. The body language, even though it got his attention last, was the most informative; the human seemed surprised, panicked, unsure of his situation or his surroundings. An intruder and trespasser, definitely. An intentional intruder, a deliberate trespasser?

Perhaps not.

The man waved his gun around in front of him as he slowly made his way through the corridor. When he disappeared off of one camera, the video switched to the next one with the clearest view. After almost a full minute of cautious exploration, the distortion came back; and when it disappeared, it took the human with it.

“Dad.”

Dr. Aster looked up from the monitor and saw Sans standing in the office doorway, his eye sockets empty.

“How bad, Sans?”

“Anti photon readings confirmed.”

Dr. Aster took a deep breath and let it out through his nasal cavity. “And the day started so well, too. Alright, alright... well, obviously we need to check on this. Especially now that the whole anti-photon singularity problem was solved. Last thing we need is somebody sneezing on the CORE and sending the top of Mt. Ebott into the distant future. So... okay. Dr. Alphys is talking with investors and so on all day. So she's busy. Joe, you go ahead and grab together everybody else who helped work on Phase One of Soul Research and organize Phase Two. You just got a promotion from lab gofer to lab wrangler.”

“Gee. I can't wait to tell my father. He will be so proud.” Joe's deadpan delivery, while not lost on the two skeletons, could not make any headway against the worried atmosphere permeating the space.

“Sans, you check all of your sensors, all over the Underground. If there's any sort of gradient as far as spatial directions are concerned, we need to know about that.”

“Right.”

“While you're doing that, I'm going through the CORE with a fine-toothed comb. Where did you leave the documentation for the post-experiment repairs?”

“There's a copy in your office email account, and a physical hard copy in my office here and at the
old house in Snowdin. Take your pick.”

“It's been a long time since I was last in Snowdin.”

“well, it's been a long time since anyone has, if you think about it...”

The joke, struggling as it was, still managed to penetrate the fog of dread that had otherwise permeated Dr. Aster's mind, and his mouth twitched.

“Suppose that's true. I'll just grab the copy in your office then.”

“Okay. Let's head over there and I'll grab it. It'll take too long to explain my filing system.”

“I'll bet.”

Joe turned in his chair to look at the skeletons. “So... what do you want me to do with this video?”

Dr. Aster turned to Joe. “Archive it. Also make a few copies. Five copies,” the scientist amended, closing one eye socket in a wink. “Beyond that, we keep this quiet. Best case scenario it does not leave this room until we figure out exactly what we're dealing-”

“Hey guys!!” A short yellow lizard burst into the small office, grinning from ear to ear, or at least where external ears would be if she had them. “I don't want to jinx it but I'm so excited I just had to share! The investor meeting went amazing! They've already agreed to my preliminary cost breakdown and production timetable! We're staying in business!”

“ey. nice one, Al.” Sans winked and pointed at Alphys. “good timing too, cuz i've been meaning to bring it up and i think i deserve some compensation for all the naps i've been missing out on during phase one...”

Alphys stuck out her tongue and the two short scientists shared a chuckle. Alphys turned to look at Dr. Aster. “I'm heading over to Advanced Materials and Material Reclamation to set up the new production lines. If these really do take off, then we could be looking at another shirt situation, but this time it'll be a bottleneck for money coming in, not going out. Which is still an improvement... hey, what are you guys working on?”

“The Doc was just getting ready to-”

“-have Mr. Stanton organize Phase Two on his own recognizance actually. Sans and I are heading to the CORE and he's going to explain the repairs in detail and then he'll be showing me some of the fruits of his own anti-photon research. We should be back about...?” Dr. Aster stared at Sans, who shrugged.

“call it one o clock.”

“One it is then. When we get back we'll rubber stamp Mr. Stanton's proposal. I mean, provided it's workable and it's not an elaborate plan to construct a water park or something.”

Joe snorted. “Well, you shoulda said that sooner. There goes my Plan A.”

“Glad we cleared that up then. We'll have Phase Two humming along in no time flat at this rate.”

“Glad to hear it! Okay, these specs aren't going to deliver themselves. I'll see you guys later!”

Alphys vanished as speedily and as suddenly as she had appeared, and Joe cleared his throat meaningfully. “...well?”
“You have to understand, Joe. The Alphys I remember... she was never that happy. Excited, yes. Passionate about her work, yes. But she was always nervous and worried even while everything else was going on. I don't want to interfere with that right now.”

“Okay, yeah, this is the happiest I've seen her since I started working here. But aren't you always saying that there's nothing to be gained by ignorance?”

“Yes. But in this instance, there's nothing to be gained from being alarmist either. The results are zero sum.”

“hey. i'll be the one to tell her about it this afternoon, once the high wears off. and i'll share anything we've found out by then, too.”

Joe shrugged. “Well... I guess that makes sense. I just hope we don't end up in a situation in the next few hours where the survival of the lab, the town, or the planet doesn't hinge on Dr. Alphys knowing what we know right now.”

“heh. you and me both pal.”

The two skeletons walked out of the office, and Joe turned back to the computer, pulling out his cellphone at the same time.

11:39 AM: hey whos n here rite now
11:39 AM EZ_Being_Greene: YO
11:40 AM Heart_of_Dankness: im here
11:40 AM IM_the_walrus: sup joe
11:40 AM Rock_It_Science: whats up
11:40 AM Heart_of_Dankness: steve is n court 2day 4 a thing so he wont be on till this evene
11:40 AM Heart_of_Dankness: evening
11:41 AM: got a file 4 all u guys
11:41 AM: shop class ONLY
11:41 AM Heart_of_Dankness: something abou kebt off air
11:41 AM: doc wants to keep it on the down low
11:41 AM Rock_It_Science: dr aster or dr alphys
11:41 AM IM_the_walrus: does it matter
11:42 AM IM_the_walrus: whats it about
11:42 AM: security video
11:42 AM: hotland CORE
11:42 AM: possible breach
11:42 AM: just a reminder
11:43 AM IM_the_walrus: oh shit
11:43 AM: that this is a thing
11:43 AM: built in a dormant volcano
11:43 AM: EZ_Being_Greene: FUCK FUCK FUC
11:43 AM: yup
11:44 AM Heart_of_Dankness: if the aml is trying to get at the power plant
11:44 AM EZ_Being_Greene: TIME TO SLAP SOME BITCHES
11:44 AM Rock_It_Science: hal come by the librarby
11:44 AM Rock_It_Science: got some plans 4 defenses
11:44 AM Rock_It_Science: you can bring them 2 life
11:44 AM: check the video when I send it
11:44 AM: it changes a few things
11:44 AM EZ_Being_Greene: KAY O
11:44 AM Rock_It_Science: with ur jazz hands
11:44 AM: still a good idea tho

Joe clicked through a series of menus on the monitor, then saw a progress bar appear on his phone's screen. Switching entirely to the phone he navigated another set of menus and switched back to the chat room.

11:48 AM EZ_Being_Greene: U CANT BULID A DAM WI A GIANT ROBOT BEAVER
11:49 AM Rock_It_Science: its solar powered
11:49 AM IM_the_walrus: hal is rite
11:49 AM IM_the_walrus: u will git sued
11:49 AM IM_the_walrus: by the canadians
11:49 AM Heart_of_Dankness: FOR FUCKS SAKE IT HASNT EVEN BEEN FIVE MINUTES
11:49 AM IM_the_walrus: n find by the fcc
11:49 AM IM_the_walrus: fined dammit
11:50 AM Rock_It_Science: its carbon neutral
EZ_Being_Greene: THEY DONT MAKE DRIVETRAINS LIKE THAT ANYWHERE EVER

Rock_It_Science: wats not 2 like

Joe scrolled back up the conversation history and sighed. It didn't make any more sense with context.

File sent

Confirm when u get it

EZ_Being_Greene: GOT IT

IM_the_walrus: not workin 4 me

Rock_It_Science: got file

Heart_of_Dankness: hold on data transfer 2 slooooooooo

Rock_It_Science: cant watch now

IM_the_walrus: will hav 2 try again a home

Rock_It_Science: 2 many people

Just 2 b safe

Removing from room now

Will resend later 4 rest

IM_the_walrus: k

EZ_Being_Greene: WTF IS THIS

Remember

Shop class only

n e way who has lunch plans

Rock_It_Science: wanton wonton n e body

IM_the_walrus: gonna stop by muffets

IM_the_walrus: have u guys tried the web crulers

Rock_It_Science: NOPE DOT AVI

DO NOT WANT

IM_the_walrus: ur loss lol
“What would you say to all of the humans out there who are still afraid of monsters?”

The screen cut away from the interviewer and showed a small, ten year old child with unruly hair that had valiantly opposed all attempts to make it look neater, wearing a dress shirt and sitting in a chair with a calm expression on their face.

“It's not fear that's the problem, sir. Fear is the natural response to the unexpected and unfamiliar. It's healthy, and it's normal, and as people get used to new conditions it gets replaced with other emotions. The real problem is selfishness and laziness.”

“Can you explain what you mean by that?”

“All of the people who have shouted the loudest about the threats posed by monsters, the people that formed the Anti Monster League, they aren't afraid. They're angry. And the reason they are angry has nothing to do with being afraid, and everything to do with being selfish. And that's very easy to double check by looking at what they were complaining about before the Barrier was broken. They were complaining about other human beings. About people in other countries taking jobs, about China buying United States debt, and stuff like that.”

“But, how does that tie into being lazy? It takes a lot of effort to complain about other things non stop like that.”

“That is true. But not as much energy as actually working at self improvement. The people who complain about monsters and other humans like that are ordinary people, but they don't want to be ordinary. They want to be, or they think they are, extraordinary. But the facts don't support that. There's always somebody stronger, tougher, faster, smarter, wiser, more popular, more qualified, more wealthy, more respected, or just happier with their circumstances. If life is a game, they are the kids who always got picked last, and rather than work hard and become better at the sport, or just relax and focus on having fun, they complain that everyone and everything is set up against them from the start. Once I understood that, it was a lot harder to take Mr. Riley and his friends seriously.”

“And yet, the influx of monsters has definitely altered the economic conditions of your town and the county. Doesn't that mean that the Anti Monster League claims have some basis in fact? That monsters are, in fact, working to undermine their way of life?”

For the first time, the child's face showed emotion; a subdued exasperation and annoyance.

“Right, because there's no way local businesses would want to hire people who are polite and friendly instead of people who complain all the time, so it has to be some scheme or conspiracy. Yeah. That checks out.”

The screen cut away from the video recording to the host, with the child's annoyed expression frozen in the picture-in-picture display.

“Wow. The last time I saw that expression of barely concealed disdain on anyone, it was my maths teacher trying to explain to me how algebra works for the ninth time. And the fact that I'm here now tells you all you need to know about how well that turned out.”

Off screen, the studio audience began to laugh. Also off screen, in the living room, Undyne began to laugh as well.
The front door opened and Frisk immediately looked up to see Toriel walk inside, and hopped off of the sofa as quickly and as nimbly as they were able.

“Hey mom! Welcome home!”

“Hello Frisk... and Undyne?”

“Hey Toriel. Yeah, I'm here too. Long story. Asgore can explain it.”

“I would certainly hope so... what has happened to your hair?”

Undyne shrugged. “The Frisk and I got bored. That's the worst part of being sick. So one thing lead to another, and... well...”

Toriel stared at the awkward grin, the bright red pigtails, and looked down as Frisk grabbed her legs in a hug. The human child's unruly hair had tell tale signs of a battle against hands that sought to tame it and confine it to a sleeker, more organized shape, but which had ended in futility.

“Hello, Toriel! Welcome home!”

Toriel looked up to see Asgore, and immediately dropped her book bag and purse as her paws flew up to her mouth. Moments later, the living room was filled with the sound of a boss monster laughing in near hysterics.

“What? Do I have something on my face?”

Asgore's apparent ignorance and deadpan delivery set off Undyne and Frisk, and they joined in as Toriel laughed at the sight of Asgore's beard, braided with the occasional bit of ribbon.

“You... you...” Toriel struggled to form coherent words and sentences, “I do not... I do not know what... I expected... when I came home... but that was not it!” The queen collapsed into a giggling fit again.

Asgore smiled and placed the refilled pitcher of iced tea on the coffee table. “In response to your earlier question, Alphys called not long after you did and requested I watch Undyne, so I stopped by their place and brought her here. Fortunately the two of them have managed to keep each other occupied and entertained, as you no doubt noticed.”

“Hee hee hee! I just bet they did! Oh my...” Toriel looked down and noticed that Frisk had managed to pick up the fallen purse and book bag, and was carrying them across the house. “Oh! Frisk, what are you doing?”

“I'm gonna take these things to your office, in accordance with the ancient human tradition of shouldery.”

“The tradition of what??” Undyne stared at Frisk, then at the queen again as she broke out into another giggling fit. Inside Toriel's office, filled to overflowing with assorted papers and reference books, Frisk hefted the purse and then the book bag onto the cluttered desk with their good arm.

“Probably my assignments for today in there... probably should wait until the pills wear off before I look at them.”

Outside the office Frisk heard the door open and shut again, and high pitched squeak that sounded like a short lizard saying Undyne's name.
“wow, and here i thought i had the market cornered on *ribbon* people.”

The king and queen's laughter picked up again and Frisk walked out of the office to see Sans in the entryway, and yellow claws wrapped around Undyne that had to belong to Dr. Alphys. Sans immediately noticed the child's appearance.

“hey kiddo, fancy meeting you here in the house where you live. how are ya holdin' up?”

“With one arm only, at least for the time being. Also the pain medication is making me almost as loopy as the fever. Did you have a good day of sciencing?”

Sans made his way past the chatting boss monsters and the fish-and-lizard pair commenting on the TV show, until he and Frisk were standing by the stairs.

“eh. mostly just checking instruments. we did get Phase Two of Soul Research underway. actually i got one of the surveys for that in one of my pockets somewhere.” Sans patted his coat in a few spots before finally producing a stack of stapled together papers. “just, fair warning kid. there's a lot of personal questions in there.”

“I... kinda figured.”

“hey, you alright? you look like somethin' is bothering you.”

“Nothing's bothering me. Well, with the possible exception of a dream where the same man that shot me in the shoulder throws me into the Hotland lava. I wasn't kidding about the pills affecting me.”

“...you sure that was all the pills?”

“Well...” Frisk looked uncertain for a moment. “Actually no. I hadn't taken anything yet today when that dream happened. So... you know, it's getting harder and harder for me to remember what happened at the Auditorium Friday. And I don't know if that's the pills, or what.”

“...sounds familiar. For a while after the core experiment, I just blocked all of it out. I had to force myself to write stuff down and leave myself pictures, in case I needed to go back and figure out that stuff later. It helped, but I couldn't tell you how or why. So you might want to write down your experiences, too.”

“Maybe.”

Sans glanced over at the other occupants of the house, then towards the back door. “Hey. Can we go outside and get some fresh air? I've spent a lot of time back in the Underground today, and that's a story in itself.”

“Sure.”

The human child and short scientist made their way out into the backyard. Sans slowly let out a deep breath and turned to face Frisk.

“So. There was... weird glitch thing on the CORE security sensors today. Dad went over the hardware itself with my repair notes, and I was checking the networked sensors all over the rest of the cavern. It, uh... well. I spent most of my life down there, but a year and a half up here and I forgot just how small it really was. And it brought up a few memories.”

Sans walked over to the tire swing and waved with one hand; the swing started to spin around with
a blue glow surrounding it. “Way back in the day, there were four of us. Dad, of course. Papyrus and me. And our mom, Verdana. While dad was making waves in the magic and science community, and becoming a natural shoe-in for the position of Royal Scientist after Grampa Semi died, mom was taking care of us. And it really did seem like it was all coming together after ages and ages of being stuck in the dark.”

The tire stopped swinging, and Sans walked over to the tree, turned around until his back was against it, and slid down until he was in a sitting position. Frisk carefully got down and sat cross-legged in front of him, and waited.

“...then... well, mom fell down. I... I always thought... she was this inexhaustible, unquenchable fire. But I guess she finally burned out. Dad, uh... I can understand why he threw himself into his work, both for personal reasons and as part of the broader picture. But that meant that long before the CORE experiment went wrong, it was just Papyrus and myself.”

Sans looked up at Frisk and shrugged. “Anyway, uh, that's just context. At school at Home and later at New Home, we weren't Sans and Papyrus. We were Dr. Aster's oldest kid and Dr. Aster's youngest kid. I think it affected Papyrus, and that's why he was so fixated on carving out an identity for himself and having friends that liked him for him for so long... that's a guess though. I know it affected me, and I, yeah, I kinda resented the whole situation. I'm no slouch in the science department, my posture notwithstanding, I mean.”

Sans grinned a halfhearted grin which faded quickly. “But for most of my life I was living in dad's shadow. And... to be fair, objectively, that wouldn't normally be a bad thing. Most monsters remember dad for the CORE, but a lot of monsters today are actually around because of the other stuff he built that solved the food shortages and the lighting problems and everything else that used to be a constant struggle. Just to be a Royal Scientist you have to be a cut above everybody, and that holds true for Alphys too, no matter how much she might protest to the contrary. But dad was in a league of his own. Being considered the runner up to Wing Ding Aster for a monster would be like if a human was considered to be only slightly less smart than, say, Stephen Hawking or Jonas Salk or somebody like that. Silver medal is still an honor. But I didn't see it that way.”

The skeleton stared at the house for a bit, and Frisk followed his gaze. “Before the experiment, I wasn't terribly happy about circumstances. I don't think it affected my work, but for a long time after, I couldn't stop wondering. And then... then, when dad was gone, I realized that living up to his example was a lot harder than living in his shadow. Because at least when I was in his shadow, he was still around.”

Sans focused on Frisk. “There's something I need to explain to you, but I'm not sure how. So... I have to resort to an example. You might see something in a second that freaks you out, but there's no danger.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just, look in my eye sockets.”

Sans eye lights vanished and Frisk swallowed, staring at an expression that usually meant Sans had dropped all pretense of comedy or humor.

Then the glowing started.

“Whoa! Oh. Okay. I think I understand what you meant...”

The glowing eye faded away, and the normal eye lights came back. “Yeah. Humans have a saying,
about how the eyes are the windows to the Soul. And whether you know it or not, that pithy little statement is right on the money. The last time I did that was when Jordan Cater was trying to lead his ragtag band of losers against the hospital. I pulled out the eye thing because, well, to be perfectly honest I really wanted to kick his ass. That little trick gave me a big boost when I needed it. But did you notice how only one eye socket was lit up?"

“Yeah... the other one was, like, flickering, like a fluorescent light when the wiring is screwed up.”

“That's as good a description as any. During the CORE disaster, a bit of that concentrated magic energy hit me right in that eye socket, while I was doing that same trick trying to use blue magic to pull dad out of the way. If I hadn't been doing that, I probably would have even more cracks in my skull than dad does, and worse ones. And I'd almost certainly be blind in that socket. What happened instead is that when the rescue crews found me in the rubble and the wreckage, I was basically dead, and only technically alive. When they tested me with the bullet analyzer I was down to one on the HP scale. And I don't mean that I was holding on by a sliver of life. I mean, HP maximum had gone all the way down to one. For a human that would be the equivalent of pretty much every vital organ suddenly working just barely well enough to keep the body alive.”

Frisk's eyes opened wide in alarm, and Sans waved his hand dismissively. “Now, a few months of therapy and training helped get that max back up to twenty three, and my DF got so crazy high it topped out the scale on the bullet analyzers by the time I was healthy enough to go back to work. But I never completely recovered from the accident, physically or in other ways. Of course, we didn't have any dust because dad wasn't actually dead. But we didn't have any reason to think he was still alive. And without dust there was no way to hold a funeral, to ensure his memory lived on, and there was no closure for anybody.”

Sans looked down at the dirt. “I remember when I decided I to just throw in the towel. Repairs were finished on the CORE and the power plant, but nobody had any official direction when it came to what to do next. Dad's genius was irreplaceable, and while I didn't know it at the time, Toriel had already left for the Ruins and Asgore was left by himself, still angry about losing both of his kids. Everybody wanted to do something, but nobody could agree on what. And then, when I was walking back home from Hotland one day, I heard some kids in an alleyway say this little stupid rhyme.”

Sans stared at Frisk, and in a high pitched voice, continued:

“Sans and Papyrus might work faster

But the old royal scientist, Wing Ding Gaster?

One day he vanished without a trace.

They say he shattered across time and space.

How can I say so without fear?

I'm holding a piece of him right here.”

The eye lights went out.

“The experiment had failed, yes. But because of that one failure, everything my father did, all of his work towards making their freedom a reality, improving their quality of life, it was like people forgot. Nobody talked about him, nobody mentioned him, except those little kids playing a game and they couldn't even get his name right. What had started with a typo on the paperwork had
become the only reminder left of the greatest scientific mind the Underground had seen in a thousand years or more. So yeah. I was angry. And that was when I decided that it wasn't worth the effort to work on the CORE project anymore. Papyrus and I moved to Snowdin, and eventually some of that anger faded, but not all of it.”

The eye lights came back, and the skeleton's face took on a haunted look.

“And that's the big problem. And that big problem is why I needed to talk to you. You remember when we were at the MTT Resort, right? When I joked about how if it hadn't been for the voice behind the door to the ruins, I would have killed you the moment I saw you?”

Frisk's face had gotten somewhat pale as Sans had continued to speak, and they swallowed nervously. “That wasn't a joke, was it.”

Sans looked down again. “No. No it was not. It's... sometimes it's just easier to be angry, than it is to think or feel anything else. And... I have a reputation for taking the easy path for a reason. Talking to Toriel through the door... that helped remind me that other people lost friends and family, had to deal with the fallout of circumstances beyond their control. And when Toriel asked me to watch out for any humans that fell down into the underground....”

Sans looked at Frisk again, and made a halfhearted attempt to smile. “They had some important lessons to teach. Each of them. But I didn't learn them until it was far too late. I don't think I ever told you about the last one. The one with the cowboy hat and the gun. The one that could have wiped us all out, and definitely had a reason to try.”

“Right, Andrew Thorton. Oldest son of the old postmaster.”

“Huh? ...oh. Right. I forgot you helped find all the families, got the bodies returned for the human funerals. Yeah. Well... by the time Andrew showed up, Sam had already drowned in the river. And Sam was the whole reason Andrew had climbed Mt. Ebott. Of all the humans that ever fell, I think he was the only one that wasn't running away from something, but towards something. We met for the last time at the corridor just outside the throne room. And...”

Sans breathed in and out, slowly.

“And we had talked about what would happen if he actually fought Asgore. To monsters, to humans. And the thing is, I'm sure he could have beaten Asgore... eventually. If you know what I mean.”

Frisk nodded, slowly.

“And with Asgore's boss monster soul, Andrew would have been able to cross through the barrier. And he would have been strong, stronger than any human alive. He probably could have taken out the Sages by himself. But... he shot himself instead. His soul became the sixth one. So all we needed was you. And I wondered why he would do that, for the longest time. Because, we didn't find out the Sages got his mom until just recently. When Andrew fell down, he thought he still had family and friends on the surface. So why would he deliberately put us one step closer to our stated goal of wiping out his entire race?”

Frisk looked towards the house as a particularly loud laugh from Undyne made its way through to the backyard. “That's a good question.”

“Yeah. After you and I had our Real Talk in the same corridor, I wondered if he wasn't hedging his bets. Hoping that a super powered Asgore could destroy the Sages, and in so doing, avenge his
family. But there was no guarantee that Asgore would pick sides just because he saw two groups of humans fighting each other, and stop at wiping out one. And then I remembered one of the last things he said to me.”

Sans pulled out his phone and stared at it. Despite the steep angle, Frisk could make it out the lock screen as a picture of Sans and Papyrus together.

“He asked me what I would do, if I was in Asgore's position. How far I was willing to go if it meant that Papyrus could see the surface. And I was honest. I told him that if I thought he was a threat to Papyrus's happiness, I would have killed him. And he said... 'Good answer. I won't judge you for it.' And then... he was gone.”

Sans looked up at Frisk as if suddenly realizing they were there. “Not long after you and I talked, suddenly everybody was making tracks to the throne room. And while my memory is fuzzy on the details, I do know Flowey the Flower grabbed the human souls and beat the what-have-ya out of the barrier, so we could all leave. And the rest is history. So I forgot about that little moment of self realization until I was checking one of the sensors in the castle. So... I looked inside myself. I asked if I really did the right thing. And if I'm honest with myself... I didn't. Things may have worked out well enough, but... Andrew, Sam, you, all the other humans that fell down? I should have been watching out for you guys because you were strangers in a strange land with the odds against you. I did it because somebody got me to make a promise. Not because it was the right thing to do.”

The skeleton shook his head sadly. “I'm sorry, Frisk. Knowing everything that happened to you... all the times that you... well, you know... while I can't think of anything else I could have done that wouldn't have potentially backfired, I definitely shouldn't have been threatening you. Especially when you were trying so hard, doing so much, to make sure everybody could enjoy the sunlight together. Monsters and humans.”

There was a sniff from the human child, and a wavering voice said “You couldn't have known anyway.”

“Whether I knew or not is unrelated. I shouldn't have been doing that kind of thing at all, no matter what. You've been telling people on the news and on the radio and working for the newspapers and blogs, for over a year and a half, you have been trying to drive home the point that in every way that counts, monsters and humans are the same. The differences in shape and size, having or not having magic, all of that is trivial compared to what we have in common. And I'm just now figuring that out for myself.”

The duo sat in silence for a few moments, until Frisk turned to look at the house. “I think I heard mom call my name.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Sans got to his feet and helped Frisk upright, and patted one gloved hand on their good shoulder. “No matter what happens in the future, Frisk, remember. I'm always going to be rootin for ya. And the next time some waste of space tries to come after you with a gun, I'm gonna dunk 'em before you end up in the hospital. That's a promise.”

Frisk hugged the skeleton with one arm. “Thank you Sans. I'm always going to be on your side too. Nobody's going to take this happy ending from us. That's a promise, too.”

The pair made their way to the back door and Frisk pulled it open just as Toriel was reaching for the doorknob.
“Oh! There you are, Frisk. I was just about to prepare dinner. Between your shoulder and Undyne’s heat exhaustion, I decided to... my dear are you alright? You look as though you were.”

“Yeah. I’m alright. Sans and I were talking about stuff and I got too close to the tire swing and I was betrayed. *Et tu, Goodyear?”*

Toriel blinked. “Oh. I suppose it is almost time for more of these human medicines.”

Frisk nodded. “Yeah. Those are definitely wearing off.”

“We will definitely take care of that before dinner starts. Now would be a good time to go wash up, and let me know if you require any assistance.”

“I think I got this. But thanks mom.”

Frisk, Toriel and Sans walked inside the house and Frisk headed towards the bathroom, while Toriel turned to Sans. “It looks like we will be having another get-together here tonight. You are welcome of course to stay, Sans, and if you wish to invite Papyrus or Dr. Aster, they are also welcome.”

“As fun as that sounds, and as amazing as your cooking is, we actually have other plans. After I walked Alphys here to pick up Undyne I was supposed to meet Papyrus and dad at the arcade. Something about the ancient human training techniques of Dance Dance Revolution.”

“Oh dear. I worry about the education on human affairs your father is receiving.”

“That’s half the fun, really. Oh hey, somewhere around here, Frisk put down the Phase Two questionnaire for the Soul Research program. Brought it over for them, so if you see something that looks like an exam paper but you don’t recognize the questions, that’s it. And with that, I think I better skedaddle.”

“Of course, of course. I understand completely. Family is... every moment counts.” Toriel turned to look towards the bathroom where Frisk had gone, then the kitchen where the sounds of Asgore humming and the clinking of utensils and plates could be heard, and then to Undyne and Alphys, sitting together on the couch and laughing at the TV program.

“But the real weak point in all of these arguments is simply that, for every reason people can come up with to dislike and reject monsters, there are an equal number of reasons to tolerate and accept them. And we know all of them by heart because we’ve heard them all before, as Frisk Dreemurr said earlier, when they were used against other human beings. Though having said that, there are also other reasons to like monsters, and I have a few of them right here.”

The host on the screen reached down and started pulling objects out from underneath the news desk and placing them on top of it, while the audience started to laugh. “We have vanilla, chocolate, chocolate chip, fudge, caramel, butterscotch, cherry, wild mango, lava cake, actual lava not sure how that works, strawberry kiwi, watermelon, and pistachio.”

The host picked up one of the items and showed it on screen, so that the logo of the smiling blue monster was easily visible. “And don’t forget, when you’re done eating the Nice Cream, you also have a message on the wrapper telling you something positive and reassuring. So if I could give a little advice to the anti-monster crowd out there, if you’re still watching? Your competition has all these different flavors, and please note that ‘Salty’ is not one of them. Cornering that market is not the brilliant strategy you seem to think it is.”
That Just Happened

“Good morning Ebott's Wake! It's so good to be able to talk to everybody again. I am your friendly neighborhood Brett “The Brett” Brinkmann and with me is the Incredible DJ Pantz!”

“In spite of all the forces that conspired against us.”

“Yes indeed. About three minutes into yesterday's Morning Rush broadcast, somebody decided that in retribution for our intrepid Gary Welkin's airborne reconnaissance against the Anti Monster League on Friday, they would crash a quad-copter into the transformer right outside KEBT, which has had some unpleasant side effects.”

“That somebody is now in the capable custody of the Ebott's Wake police department, where they will probably end up winning even more fabulous prizes.”

“Such is life on the edge. Also I'd just like to point out that quad-copters are really expensive, like hundreds of dollars. And you shouldn't be going around destroying parts of the electrical grid anyway, but the fact that this individual did so with something so expensive doesn't do them any favors. But enough about Monday, today is Tuesday and it's the Morning Rush again, and it is time to share with you all of the things that are the happenstance with the town of doing.”

“...did you just have a stroke?”

“I'm not willing to rule out that possibility. So without further mangling of the English language, let's start this right away. Yesterday All Fine Labs approved and began Phase Two of the Soul Research program. Questionnaires can be picked up at the Lab itself, although if you have a shirt coming your way that questionnaire will be bundled with it anyway, so feel free to take your time. The municipal pool has officially switched over to an ozone based purification system, so instead of that burning sensation in your eyes, enjoy the smell previously only available after a lightning storm when you keep cool this summer. The last of the 'Sugar Charged' Temmies have been located and returned to New Tem Village, but the police still have no leads as to who exactly decided it was a good idea to mix Pixie Stix into Mountain Dew and then give that to a whole group of monsters who are already bundles of nerves and energy. And finally, the Ebott's Wake Shakespeare In The Park Society is planning a 'contingency performance' of As You Like It in the event that the Kludge Derby is in fact canceled this Saturday.”

“Related to that last item, the Shakespeare group and Flowey the Flower have signed some sort of non-aggression pact, so no more instant hedge mazes probably. In other, related news, monster food vendors reported record sales on Friday as people turned to the near instantaneous ability to heal injuries the food provides as a response to injuries sustained in scuffles with the Anti-Monster League, this despite repeated admonishments and statements against such practices from the Rita Belle Thurman Memorial Hospital and multiple other medical authorities throughout Lost Eagle County. The hospital spokesperson would like us to remind everybody that the long term effects of monster food on human being are still undetermined.”

“To be fair, we're not going to find out what those results are unless humans are eating it consistently starting now, and I haven't heard anything about the AMA or FDA or any government agency being a hurry to start official trials. All Fine Labs keeping on the ball with the Soul Research thing is making everybody else look bad by comparison. Oh, speaking of which, we got an official announcement this morning that All Fine Labs is beginning a production run of what are called Soul Accessories, things like rings and earrings and necklaces that react to the individual characteristics of a human soul, most especially the color effects. So if you're the type of person
who likes that kind of thing, this seems like the kind of thing that you would like.”

“Oh, on the subject, while Brett and I haven't explicitly heard anything about it, I am pretty sure that wearing this jewelry won't give humans the ability to use monster magic. Like, 93% sure. I mean, I'm not ruling it out, but if Alphys and everybody had figured out the whole human-magic gap I'm pretty sure there would have been a lot more fanfare about it.”

“And a lot more controversy. Maybe it's just because I'm on the outside looking in but I can't imagine any monsters being happy about humans stealing their thunder, either metaphorically or literally, since historically that has not worked out in you guys' favor.”

“True. But there's some humans I think we could trust not to try anything with it. Officer Steve, for example.”

“Oh, yeah. You're right. He's a good guy.”

“Oh, and Frisk! I mean, if humans ever do get access to magic somehow, we gotta make sure the ambassador has it too. That way if another barrier does get made, they can try to bust us out again.”

“That stands to reason.”

“And I think Jeff could be trusted with the power to shoot magic bullets and traverse dimensions and stuff like that... heh. You're welcome Jeff. Though not you Brett.”

“Wait what?? Why?”

“It's nothing personal, it would just mess with our on-air dynamic.”

“...HOW?!?”

“Oh, if I've met any human who would abuse wind magic, it would be you.”

“What's that sup- Jeff! Stop with the laugh track!”

“Hehehehehehehe.”

“...did you two plan this out in advance?”

“Since yesterday.”

“I hate both of you so much right now. Which is as good a reason as any to toss things over to Gary Welkin in the KEBT traffic helicopter.”

“Yeah. Hey Gary, what do you spy with your airborne eye?”

“hol hOI hOi Hoi Hoi hOi!”

“...what?”

“Brett, Burgie, I don't know if you can hear me but you're going to have to come back for the traffic segment later! I have been forced to make emergency landing after a fuel line disconnected, and the station helicopter is now momentarily grounded near Tesseract Road!”

“...oh god. How close are you to New Tem Village?”

“I think the background noise answers that question quite handily!”
“TeM fly thrU the aIr lik majjesitc burd! Tem repart aalllll traffk!”

“Yayayayayayaya!”

“Hey, traffic chopper man! Over here!”

“What the... Gary, what's going on? Gary??”

“I think he's talking to Bob.”

“...what??”

“You know. Bob the Temmie.”

“...who?”

“Seriously? You don't remember him?”

“...no? Should I?”

“He works at Speedy Brothers Delivery Service? He brought that cheese basket from Papyrus yesterday?”

“Well, I was busy yesterday. We all were.”

“And the fruit basket from Sans this morning?”

“...Oh. That Bob.”

“Yes that Bob. Literally the only Temmie that doesn't act like he has an IV drip of Red Bull going into his system all the time.”

“...okay, that should definitely have stuck in my memory.”

“Brett, Burgie, it's Gary! With the aid of Bob, I have managed to momentarily elude the hyperactive swarm of monsters who have commandeered my grounded helicopter! I have been informed that I will require a case of construction paper in order to lure them away, so that I may reclaim it and continue in my traffic related duties!”

“Don't you have a bad fuel line or something?”

“Yes indeed! I have already called Mitch at the Quarterhorse Fields Airport and he will be down here sometime within the next four hours if all goes well! But in the meantime I will require somebody to head to the helipad, grab one of the spare canisters of aviation fuel and possibly a roll of duct tape, and bring them here to New Tem Village! This is in addition to the aforementioned construction paper!”

“...ugh. Okay. Well. Kyle's still out of the loop, his wrist still has to heal. Winston's where, right now? ...oh. OH. That's news to me. And I guess it will be news to everyone else soon. Great.”

“What about calling up Lindsay?”

“I don't think she's going to wake up enough in time to get anything done in that four hour window, even if we call her now... what? Sorry Jeff, what was that? Oh. Alright, great. Gary, Jeff says Beanpole just called in, and he's on his way to the station to get the fuel for you. Unfortunately, we have to make a jump to another segment now so we will check back with you later.”
“Much appreciated, Burgie!”

“Ahem. In related news, the Knights Of The Road Who Say Ni have just now reported their mascot has gone missing. Just a reminder, since not everyone has seen the mascot... which I have been informed is officially named 'Rubilon' for some reason... it is an old style garden gnome with a Knights of the Road Who Say Ni Fez instead of the classic pointy red hat, and it is holding a protractor. Anyone with information concerning the whereabouts of, uh, Rubilon, is asked to contact the Ebott's Wake Police Department. Thank you to Winston for keeping us up to date on that, and we promise we will get you a replacement microphone as soon as we possibly can.”

“Also Clutch just came in with a piece of paper with words printed on it.”

“Burgie...”

“That is technically what happened. Alright alright, I'm reading it. Don't gimme that look. Okay, the Quarterhorse Fields Arena is pushing forward the Quarterly Smash Queue Demolition Derby from Friday to Thursday, so anybody that has tickets for that please take note. The event is being rescheduled to make time for the Belmoley Players to begin this summers' run of Death of a Sales Tactic, a tragic comedy depicting the resurgence and subsequent fall of the hard sell in the age of online shopping and 419 scams, written by our very own Century Gothic. Apparently it sold out every single showing last year. Guess they're hoping for a repeat performance this season. Good luck guys!”

“And that takes us up to the break. When we come back we'll have more news, some olds, and if fortune favors us, a constant supply of electricity. In the meantime, we will leave you with The No Pants Dance by Tupper Ware Remix Party featuring NSP, which we were going to play yesterday after we finally got the Radio Edit version. Not that much got edited anyway, but that's neither here nor there. Stick around, more Morning Rush coming your way!”
Asriel stared at Chara's face. He had never seen that expression before; actually he didn't often see any expressions on Chara's face that he could recognize.

“Uh... this is probably going to sound very rude and insensitive, but... can I pet you?”

Lesser Dog's ears perked up at the sound of the word “pet” and he immediately ran over next to Chara, his tail wagging. The human carefully held out a hand, and Lesser Dog's heat was practically sucked towards it like a magnet. Chara began petting, and the dog monster's neck continued to extend; when Chara realized, their hand was snatched back in alarm, and Lesser Dog whined in disappointment.

“Sorry, sorry. I just... that caught me off guard. And if I keep petting you I won't be able to reach your head soon anyway, if this keeps up.”

Lesser Dog barked softly, and its neck curved down until it was able to lick Chara on the forehead, before it walked away and began gathering snow. Chara wrapped their arms around their torso.

“Hey, Chara, are you cold?”

“Yeah. I've been cold for a while, actually. Kind of forgot when I saw... what's their name?”

“That's Lesser Dog. A lot of monsters with a lot of fur decided to make a town here in the underground forest, so the Dog families have lived in Snowdin for as long as anyone can remember.” Asriel blinked and shook his head. “We should have brought a coat for you, I'm sorry. I barely notice the cold, I didn't even think. It's my fault.”

“Not true. It's my fault. I should have grabbed a coat when I heard you talking about visiting a place called Snowdin.”

Asriel grabbed Chara's hand. “Come on, we're not that far from the town itself. We can warm up in one of the buildings.”

“Okay.”

The two children trudged through the snow until-

-the bedroom door opened, though Asriel was so tired it barely registered to his half-sleeping mind. There was the sensation of movement and a presence behind him, and the quilt on the bed was pulled up around him. Asriel sighed, and the presence moved away, and the rustling noises were repeated. Eventually the bedroom door shut again, and just as Asriel began to drift off to sleep completely...

“Asriel. Are you awake?”

“Mmmph. I am now.”

“Sorry.”
There was a silence that went on for some time, and then the rustling sound of bed covers being pushed back, and the floorboards creaked slightly as Chara walked over and knelt down next to Asriel's bed.

“Asriel... are we a family?”

“Yeah. Of course we are Chara.” Asriel rolled over in the bed so that he was looking at Chara, or at least in their direction. It was hard to make out anything in the dark.

“It's just... Toriel and Asgore always seem as happy to see me as they are to see you. And, and nobody has yelled at me for, well, a long time. Even when I make a mess or cause trouble. And, Toriel comes in at night and tucks me into bed, just likes she tucks you in... the first time that happened I thought... well, never mind what I thought.”

Chara lapsed into silence for a few moments.

“It's just... is this a monster thing? Like, a part of your culture?”

“I... I don't know, really? Did your... Chara, what were your human parents like?”

Chara was silent for so long that Asriel opened his mouth to ask again, when they finally responded.

“Imagine Toriel and Asgore. And then imagine the exact opposite of that.”

“...I can't. That doesn't make any sense to me.”

“Good. I'm glad you can't imagine it. I wish I couldn't remember it, sometimes... hey. When the Barrier is broken. Do you think Toriel and Asgore will let me stay here? Like, a caretaker for the castle?”

“What?? Don't you want to go back to...” Asriel's words trailed off as older conversations came back to him, and he abruptly sat up in bed. “Chara... is this about why you climbed Mt. Ebott?”

Asriel heard Chara take a deep breath. “I guess... there's no running from that anymore. Or any place to run to, now that I'm down here. My human parents... uh... they were... this is really hard for me to talk about...”

Asriel reached out, and his paw found Chara's hand. Fingers intertwined and he squeezed lightly.

“Chara. You can tell me anything. I promise, I'll keep your secrets.”

“...they... they called me... a demon child on the surface. I guess because I kept getting into trouble. Things got broken. Other children got hurt. Sometimes, if I think really hard, I can remember when life was different. But... but those days are long gone. I climbed Mt. Ebott... because... one day dad came home and he just... he had enough. He said with all the trouble I caused, that everyone was right. I was some kind of screwed up monster and I belonged down here with the rest of them. And after he passed out, I thought... if I really am a demon child, maybe I would fit in just fine with other monsters. If they existed. And... if they didn't... well. Nothing of value was lost.”

Chara sniffed. “The big problem with trying to kill yourself by jumping off of a high place is that you have all the way down to reconsider. So... that's why I was calling for help, instead of just lying there, waiting for the end to come. And then... you found me. You... you just met me, but you didn't even hesitate to try and help me. And Toriel healed me, and when I met Asgore, he looked so happy to meet me, and...”
“Chara... are you alright?”

“Asriel, I don't understand. Why are you so nice to me? Why did Toriel and Asgore take me in? I read the plaques in Waterfall. I talked to Gerson. I know how you all ended up trapped down here. I'm human. Why is everyone so nice to me, when they should hate me?”

“What??” Asriel pushed back the covers all the way, got out bed and knelt down next to Chara. “The War happened like a million years ago. You weren't around back then! You didn't cause any of this to happen! That's like... that's like... that doesn't make any sense!”

“...I can't understand. I can't understand why Toriel lets me call her mom. I can't understand why Asgore lets me call him dad. I can't understand why people smile when they meet me. I... I just can't understand.”

Asriel heard some sounds in the darkness, and it took a moment for him to understand what they meant.

Chara was crying.

The door opened a crack, and Asriel looked up to see a sliver of light, mostly blocked by a tall silhouette. “Mom??”

“I thought I heard someone... Chara?” The door opened and Toriel rushed in. “Chara, what is wrong?”

“I can't... I can't...”

The human child was picked up, and Toriel held Chara close. “It's going to be alright, Chara. Mom is right here.”

“I can't stop... why won't it stop?!”

“It's alright, Chara.”

Asriel followed his mother out of the bedroom and down the hallway into the living room, where she sat in her chair, still cradling the sobbing human. It felt like hours passed before Chara finally calmed down, Toriel saying comforting words the whole time.

“...T...Toriel?”

“Yes, I am right here, Chara.”

“Is it... I started calling you mom, but... was that alright? I didn't... I never asked, and...”

“Of course it is alright.”

Chara sniffed. “...thanks. I... I didn't mean to wake anybody up. I just...”

“You need not explain anything, Chara. I know it has been hard on you, being so far away from everything and everyone you knew. But do not be afraid. This place will be your home, and we will take care of you, for as long as you need.”

“I told you, Chara.” Asriel walked up to the chair and put one paw on Chara's arm. “We're a family. No matter what happens, even when the Barrier is broken. We're family and we'll always be family.”
“Well said, Asriel.” Toriel smiled. “One day, we will all walk out of the Underground. Together. And no matter what happens next, no matter where you go from there, you will always have a place with us.”

“You... you're the best. You and dad and Asriel....”

Eventually Chara drifted off into sleep, and Toriel carried them back to the bedroom, Asriel following behind. He watched as Toriel carefully placed the child in bed and tucked them in, and reached out to hold her paw when she was done.

“Mom... what Chara said earlier...”

“Yes, Asriel?”

“...they didn't say exactly what, but... I think Chara is afraid. Afraid of something on the surface, that it's going to come down here after them. Or, that when we break the Barrier, it will come after them. But... we'll be strong, right? We'll protect them. We'll protect everyone. You and dad... and me.”

Toriel leaned down and picked up Asriel. “Yes, Asriel. My brave little boy. We will protect Chara and everyone else, no matter what.”

Toriel placed Asriel on his bed and pulled up the covers.

“Good night, Asriel.”

“Good night mom...”

The bedroom door shut, and Asriel's eyes shut, practically of their own accord.

“Good night, Chara-”

“-it's been down here for as long as anyone can remember, so I don't know about that. Maybe somebody around here knows?”

The human and boss monster child made their way carefully across the swampy, waterlogged earth, until they reached a section of the cavern with a massive crystalline structure embedded into the wall. Chara's eyes lit up at the sight of the kaleidoscope of colors.

“ Heck of a sight, isn't it?”

Asriel and Chara spun around and saw a tall skeleton kneeling down by a smaller crystal embedded in the rock, with a strange lens in one socket.

“Hello, Dr. Aster! What brings you to Waterfall today?”

“Hello to you as well, young prince Dreemurr. And what brings me here is a burnt out fuse.”

“What??”

Dr. Aster stood upright and took the lens from his eye socket and put it in the pocket of his lab coat. “My assistant had an idea for creating hyperlight velocity gradients by spinning two particle accelerators in opposite directions, but he plugged them into the same circuit, so... uh...” the scientist noticed the nonplussed expressions of the children before him. “Well, let's just say while
he cleans up the mess he made, I had time to follow up on some side projects, check on the food generators, that kind of thing.”

“What's a food generator?” Chara asked. “Is that, like, you put a sandwich in it and it turns it into electricity or something?”

“What? Oh.” Dr. Aster scratched his skull. “That's not what it does, although the name is a bit ambiguous. Come with me, you two. I can actually show you exactly how it works.”

Asriel and Chara followed the skeleton through several tunnels, up a rickety staircase made of old wood and ropes, until he stopped.

“There. Tell me what you see.”

Chara stared out over a vast darkness, only dimly lit with shadows and silhouettes and the occasional island of glowing mushrooms or crystals. In the distance, they could see the half completed castle at the far end of the city of New Home, which was also half completed. And above....

“Wow. It's like... they look like stars!”

Dr. Aster grinned and shrugged. “I'll take your word for it, for the time being. Those crystals in the cavern roof. Those are the food generators. That glow up there is reflected light and heat from Hotland, especially electromagnetic energy broadcast from the CORE's power plant. You can't see it from here because of the slope of the land but the crystals have line of sight. They transform all that energy, stepping it up and down into wavelengths you probably can't see, Chara. But the cells inside plants, they can. And it's everything a plant could want. We can grow just about anything down here. I mean, once some human throws away the seeds, that is.”

Dr. Aster pointed at different areas. “Of course, the flora that already grows down here is the easiest. So we're always working on ways to transform it into stuff that's more palatable. One of my students, Alphys, she found a way to turn sea grass into ice cream.” The skeleton snorted in laughter. “It was her thesis project actually. And I laugh, because it's funny. But why not, really? Once the CORE is fully online and charging up, all we have to do is wait. So we might as well be comfortable while we do.”

“Mom said that the generators used to be really small, and then you figured out how to make a big field!”

“Actually Asriel, the plan was always to make a big field. I just had to start small to get the wavelengths right. Crystals are, uh, they're interesting. They have very specific properties that make them invaluable for manipulating magic energy and as key components of physical technology. So the prototype looked like a human, uh, greenhouse, I think they're called. Plants growing in trays, and crystals hanging from the top of the chamber like lights, and me running through different frequencies to see what the results would be. So for a while I was that weird skeleton going around with pockets full of fruits and vegetables, asking people to try them and how they tasted and so on. And as an added bonus, the magic saturation meant that the fruits and vegetables were 90% monster food already. So people could save energy preparing them. More food, better for you, easier and faster to make... there was one problem, though.”

Chara looked up at the scientist. “Is this why the apples down here have claws?”

“Hehehe. Yeah. There's always trade-offs.”
The trio stared up at the crystals, and Asriel took Chara's hand in his paw.

“Chara… what are stars like?”

“Stars… they look very small, but they're huge. They only look small because they're far away. And as the earth rotates, it looks like all the stars are moving across the sky. A long time ago… different humans said that great heroes and kings were immortalized in the stars, and that's where we got constellations. Patterns between stars that looked like shapes. And sometimes, there's a shooting star. I mean, it's not a real star. It's a meteor that falls to earth. But humans wish on them.”

“Really? Do they ever come true?”

Chara squeezed Asriel's paw. “Sometimes.”

Dr. Aster pointed at the cavern roof. “According to legend, monsters wished on the stars too, back when we were on the surface. Down here, everyone wishes on the crystals on the cavern roof. There's a dedicated room for it somewhere in Waterfall, but really, as long as people can see the crystals from some place…”

“What do you wish for, Dr. Aster?”

The skeleton looked down at the human child. “Mostly? For people to stop getting my name wrong.”

Asriel giggled, and then managed to stifle it. “I'm sorry Dr. Aster. I know that bothers you.”

“It's alright. If I have to end up known as Wind Ding Gaster at the end of all of this… I suppose that wouldn't be too bad of a trade off to see the stars. For my sons to see the stars.”

Asriel squeezed Chara's hand. “Hey, Chara. I think it's getting late. We should head back. But if you wanted to make a wish…”

“Alright… I wish-”

“-that you could go home again.”

Asriel blinked, and looked around. He was standing in a field of Golden Flowers, at the foot of Mt. Ebott, and above him on the slope...

“It's been a long time, hasn't it?” The figure was facing away from him, but he'd recognize the voice anywhere.

“Chara? What is this? Where are we?”

“This is a dream, Asriel. At least, for the moment. I'm sorry about the last few nights. I'm… I'm sorry about everything else too.”

“Chara… it's good to see you again.”

“You too, bro.”

Asriel walked through the flower field and put a paw on Chara's shoulder. “I missed you. So much.”
“I missed you too, Asriel.”

“...you said this is a dream.”

“It is. And... it's the last one. It's been a long time coming.”

“...then I don't want to wake up.”

The wind in the field picked up, and some of the golden flower petals were carried off with it.

“I can understand that. Falling into the Underground... it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Because I met you. But I still fell for a reason. And... well, I had my chance to set everything right, and I got the both of us killed. Even if I could do anything... no. This is for the best.”

“What do you mean?”

Chara turned around, and Asriel saw the tears on their cheeks. “When we died, our souls were combined. And when Dr. Alphys brought you back... she didn't bring back everything. You see? Most of your dust, of our dust, it fell on my body. All that anger... all that rage and frustration... Asriel, being numb to the world and not being able to feel anything. That wasn't you. That was me. It's... it's all me. All of it is my fault. Because I couldn't let go. But...”

Chara stepped forward and hugged Asriel, as the wind picked up and more golden flower petals were shed. “It's not too late for you. I was very careful. Everything is right where it belongs. You're you. I'm me. And it's time for us to say goodbye.”

“But I don't want to-”

“We're running out of time, Asriel. Please listen. You have to take care of Frisk. Frisk has a shadow stalking her. And that shadow is being cast by something very, very dangerous.”

“...I thought I saw something, when I was trying to wake Frisk up.”

“What you saw was a memory. And Frisk will need help fighting it, but that's- it's not-”

The wind began to howl, and around the two children the golden flower field was ripped apart, flowers and soil filling the air, as the sky was covered in rolling clouds. Nothing softer than a shout had a chance of being heard.

“Chara! After the Barrier broke, I waited for you, at your grave! And I saw something! I thought it was you, but... was that what you meant? Was that the shadow??”

“Asriel, I can't hold on any longer! Remember! Remember what I said! Remember, it's not your fault! And tell Frisk... tell her, she was a great partner!”

The storm pulled at Asriel and Chara, louder and louder and louder, until-

“CHARA!”

Flowey looked around frantically, before regaining his bearings. He was inside Asgore's garden shed, with the mid morning sunlight shining through the window.

“Chara...”
Burrowing out through the dirt underneath the broken floorboards, Flowey tunneled to the garden... but kept going. Past Asgore's yard, out of the neighborhood, and very nearly to the center of town.

To a place he had promised himself he would never, ever go back to.

Emerging from the soil, Flowey looked around. Just from eavesdropping on conversations, he had learned that there was talk of renaming the park to the Memorial Park, but so many fixtures of the town were also Memorials to some local hero or iconic historical citizen that some had said it would make it less meaningful. And so the place was still called Heritage Park, filled with Golden Flowers, something as inextricably part of the town's history as the mountain itself.

But in the center....

Flowey stared at the figures, cast in metal and set in place where, in another life, he had put down Chara's body. He wasn't sure why, exactly... at that point, the body was an empty shell. But it seemed like the right thing to do. And Chara hadn't resisted, or objected, or even commented. Now that moment had been immortalized for the sake of history. A statue of a kneeling boss monster, with massive horns and claws, cradling a human child in both arms.

At the base of the statue, there was a plaque, and Flowey's eyes were drawn towards the words.

On this spot, on the ninth of April, in the year 2013 AD, Prince Asriel Dreemurr of the Kingdom of Monsters carried the body of Chara Cater, reported missing in the summer of 2012, back to Ebott's Wake. Here he was found by members of the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi, who attacked him, believing him to be responsible for Chara's death. Asriel took Chara's body back to the Underground beneath Mt. Ebott, where he later died from his injuries.

After the destruction of the Barrier, it was learned from monster sources that Chara and Asriel were best friends and adopted siblings, and Asriel's actions were taken to fulfill Chara's dying wish to see the Golden Flowers of Ebott's Wake one last time. This statue was commissioned by the Ebott's Wake Arts Council, funded by a generous grant from the Exchange Trust and countless private donors, in the hopes that these events are not forgotten.

Let it serve as a symbol of hope that all lost children will one day find their way home.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween, everybody. :) Sorry I don't have anything spooky or scary for you, but then again it kind of fits for an Undertale story.
Once is Chance, Twice is Coincidence

“Tra la la. A trip, a trick, a track and a traipse. You may not make it all the way, but you are already almost there.”

The boat slowed to a stop at the Hotland dock, its steamy surface causing the riverperson's hood to droop. Frisk wiped their forehead with the back of one hand and dismounted.

“Thank you for the ride.”

“See me again sometime. Or perhaps you can make it back yourself. It really doesn't matter. Tra la la.”

The laboratory building hummed quietly with the sounds of electronics, as Frisk pushed open the sliding doors. Beyond, the space was lit only by blinking instrument lights and the occasional emergency light built into the base of the walls. The fuzzy glow of an old style computer monitor displayed the CORE, with an incomprehensible but familiar set of symbols displayed on the bottom of the screen, and next to it a desk was piled high with notes and papers... and what was probably a plate with a half eaten hot dog on it.

Frisk looked towards the escalator at the far end of the room, wondering what else was different on the second floor, when the elevator doors opened. The human child froze in their tracks, wondering if the new owner would be as friendly as Alphys had been...

Movement in the dark brought a memory to the center of Frisk's thoughts; a bathtub, a shower curtain, and a frantic shadow. Something in the dark defied any attempt to resolve its shape, but there was motion. Frisk's eyes seemed to move away from the shape even as they attempted to focus on it...

Some part of the shape was extending out towards Frisk, and they tried to move backwards but their legs didn't seem to want to respond. The shape reached out, and patted Frisk on the head, as if trying to comfort the child.

The lights in the lab flicked on and the shape vanished, as if it was nothing but the byproduct of so many shadows. The human child slowly, carefully backed away from the open elevator door, past the table, until more motion out of the corner of their eye prompted Frisk to stare at the monitor again.

The display had switched to some interior part of the CORE facility, and centered in the screen was... a tiny star.

A tiny star, with somebody's hand reaching for it.

Frisk's jaw dropped as they saw Jordan Cater step into the camera view, turn, and smile, and the display screen turned to static. Beneath their feet, the lab floor began to rumble, and Frisk sprinted back through the lab, heedless of the elevator doors, and leaving through the other doors; in the distance, the CORE was already gone, replaced instead with an expanding shock wave of white light...

Frisk's eyes shot open, and they looked around the room; it was the same bedroom they had gone to sleep in. The same as always, really. Furniture, pictures, a poster of Mettaton Classic on the wall;
on the desk, the radio and laptop and a reading lamp; on the bedside table, the phone in the charger, the glowing red sphere Frisk had found in Waterfall, the book Dr. Aster had written that Sans had loaned out... and a note. Frisk picked it up and stared at the letters, trying to make them combine into words.

Frisk,

I checked on you this morning but you were in quite the deep sleep, even after going to bed so early last night, and so I feel it is safer if you stay home again today. Fear not, I have taken your assignments with me and will grade them at school today, as you requested. Gorey will be around nine in the morning to watch over you again today, and this afternoon we will all go to the clinic to see how you are progressing in your recovery, so be sure to get plenty of rest.

Love you,

Mom

Frisk smiled at the use of Asgore's pet name, and carefully climbed out of bed. The cell phone clock said it was a little after nine, so if Asgore wasn't already downstairs, he soon would be. Moving over to the desk, Frisk slid onto the chair and pulled open one of the drawers. Inside, a stack of loose leaf papers sat ready, and Frisk pulled one out, along with a mechanical pencil. Frowning at the cumbersome unfamiliarity of writing right handed, Frisk began to coax letters and words from the pencil lead...

From the Desk of Frisk Dreemurr (The Drisk?)

For the second night in a row, have had a bad dream. Like last time, was in Hotland again, and saw Jordan Cater. Last time, he picked me up and threw me in the lava. This time I think he caused the core to explode. I know he cannot hurt me anymore since he is in jail now, but it is easy to say stuff like that when awake. At night and asleep I cannot do that.

I do not know if this is normal after getting shot, or after a bad fever, but I worry that I am going crazy. I think I should see somebody who understands how to deal with scary experiences and bad dreams, becuze while my shoulder is getting better, I dont think my head is.

I dont rememeber having a bad dream or any dream Friday night in the hospital, but I did not sleep well at all. I dont remember a bad dream Saturday night, and I slept very well back in my own bed. Maybe was tired? I have been sleeping a lot lately but not tired tired, sleeping because I am sick tired, and that is a different tired.

Shoulder is still sore but it is better each day. Minor bumps and stuff here and there. That is the end of the good shoulder news, except if this goes on any longer I will probaly get ambidextrous and the Dual Wield feat for Class Skill: Writing. Related sorry about shape of letters and spellings, not used to this yet.

Thank you mom and dad for taking care of me and wanting me to be okay after all of this. It is a new feeling and a new idea but I am getting used to it. I am looking forward to finishing the last week and half of school and also have suggestions for some movies for the riff off event, also Alphys suggested some movies during the chili cook off but you will have to double check with
Undyne in case some of them are too violent for grade school kids. Also I kno that ambassador stuff has to wait until doctor check ups are finished but I think we need to hold a special meeting thing explaining how the exchange trust works, becuz I think a lot of the AML joined just because they thought monsters were going to ruin the economy with gold. Maybe if we lead with that next time there will be more grumbling but less guns? Also please ask lawyers if getting shot and not wanting to get shot again is a conflict of interest and if I have to refuse myself like a judge.

My hand hurts and I am getting dizzy. Think that means this note is done.

Love you guys,

Frisk

Looking over the note, Frisk nodded, put the pencil back in the drawer, closed it, and made their way back to the bed. Lying down on top of the covers, Frisk closed their eyes... and then opened them again as a vision of the tiny star being seized by Jordan Cater came back. It was easy to dismiss it as a side effect of Friday while awake, but...

Frisk sat up again, took their cell phone out of its charger, and began to navigate the contact menu.

9:20 AM: hey snas how is work
9:21 AM SockPuppet90: hey kid
9:21 AM SockPuppet90: caught me at a good time
9:22 AM SockPuppet90: was just about to start an experiment to measure the effects of a breakfast burrito on my appetite
9:22 AM: lol
9:22 AM SockPuppet90: how you doing?
9:22 AM: mostly ok
9:22 AM: had some questions tho
9:22 AM SockPuppet90: only mostly?
9:23 AM: had another bad dream
9:23 AM: wanted to know
9:23 AM: if anything could go wrong with the core
9:23 AM: like if somebody could blow it up
9:24 AM: sans?
9:24 AM SockPuppet90: im here
9:24 AM SockPuppet90: dont worry
9:24 AM SockPuppet90: need to pull up the blueprints tho
9:25 AM SockPuppet90: okay lookin at em
9:25 AM SockPuppet90: the power plant is in idle mode
9:25 AM SockPuppet90: if somebody go inside and knew all the control codes
9:26 AM SockPuppet90: or put tnt on all the heat exchangers
9:26 AM SockPuppet90: then they could wereck the machine
9:26 AM SockPuppet90: but hotland and mt ebott and the town would all be fine
9:27 AM SockPuppet90: if ur asking if theres a button somewhere inside that causes it to self destruct dad left that part out b cuz it was too expensive
9:27 AM: lolol
9:27 AM: thx sans
9:27 AM: good 2 kno
9:28 AM SockPuppet90: guessing tat was in tha bad dream u mentiond
9:28 AM SockPuppet90: the core going kaboom
9:28 AM: yeah
9:28 AM: some other sutff happen first
9:28 AM: uh
9:28 AM: related
9:28 AM: y were u and ur dad checkin on core and sensors yesterday
9:28 AM: was it timespace stuff
9:29 AM SockPuppet90: thats complicated
9:29 AM SockPuppet90: but yeah
9:29 AM SockPuppet90: timepsace was involved
9:30 AM SockPuppet90: brb
9:30 AM: ok

Frisk stared at the texting screen, then blinked as the phone began to beep from an incoming call. Frisk closed the chat and saw Sans' contact details on the main screen.

“...hello? Sans?”

“Hey kiddo. Thought this would be a little bit faster than texting. So... I can't go into too many
details yet, because I don't know em, but my sensors did detect antiphons yesterday. And I'm pretty sure that if something had happened to you, you'd have mentioned it.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I definitely would have. But I don't know about anything coming up, if that's what you mean.”

“Right. So it had to come from some other source. Dad's actually having me run through an idea he had to test if this whole DT Energy sync thing just defaults to the highest level, or if multiple processes can run in parallel.”

Frisk looked over at the book on the nightstand. “You know, it doesn't have to be either or. Differently sized systems can exist inside of a larger, higher energy system.”

On the other end of the line, Sans chuckled. “Wow. You got all the way to that part of the book already, huh?”

“I've had a lot of free time lately, especially Saturday.”

“Yeah. I bet. So dad wants to reproduce the original antiphoton experiment, because there's one very big thing that's changed since last time.”

“...what, the Barrier?”

“Got it on the first try. The Barrier wasn't exactly like a Maxwell's demon, but the way it behaved did sort of create an isolated domain. So maybe the antiphoton activity we discovered and tried to harness can only take place in an isolated system like that. So yeah, that's what I'm supposed to be doing right now.”

“But you're not?”

“heh. dad and Alphys got a weird call from the hospital and while i don't know what it's about, something tells me somebody is going to yell about all that monster food healing their patients and running them outta business.”

“Hee hee. I wish I could do that, but doctor's orders.”

“yup. it's enough to make you wonder if that conspiracy theorist guy is right after all. but yeah. eventually, i'll get around to setting up the framework for this experiment, to see if getting rid of the barrier changes the whole dynamic.”

“And if that's true, then if somebody was to turn on the CORE's main systems-”

“It might not do anything at all except waste power. Or, it might cause a whole bunch of different problems. So you can see why we want to start with just a single photon, right?”

“Yep.”

“heh. smart kid. oh, and when dad got back yesterday he scribbled down some more notes and acronyms. think they might be relevant to your interests. wanna hear 'em?”

“Sure!”

“Okey dokey. First one is LOAD. It stands for Localized Opposing Act of Determination. Hehehehe... that's what Dad calls it, but truth be told, I came up with the name years ago when I first built my sensor network underground. When I started getting lots of interference, I would
write down 'Lots Of Antiphotons Detected' at the peaks of the signal and it was just quicker and
easier to shorten it and write LOAD each time.”

“Heehee.”

“yup. i don't have the heart to tell him yet. i mean, i don't have a heart at all, really. or lungs, or a
stomach, or a liver, or-”

Frisk snickered and got the impression that on the other end of the phone line, Sans was grinning.

“So.. if you wanna use Newtonian physics as an analogy, a LOAD is the Equal and Opposite
reaction to a SAVE. They are both a part of the same process. Someone or something chooses a
sequence of events that supersedes all others. Those events enter a SAVED state, for lack of a more
precise term right now. If those events are threatened, a LOAD takes place and a different variation
of events leading up to the SAVED state can be implemented. Presumably the end result gets more
and more stable and resistant to interference each time.”

“That sounds... about right.”

“And, uh... huh. Hey, before I go any further, got a question for ya.”

“Shoot.”

“Uh. I don't want to do that. That's how we got in this mess in the first place.”

Frisk blinked. “Oh. OH. Yeah. You make a valid point.”

“Anyway... uh... when everyone was waiting at the hospital, one of the docs came out and said that
at one point you woke up and told them to tell me that you couldn't start over again.”

“...yeah. I said something like that.”

“Yeah. My question is... did you actually believe what you said, that you weren't going to be able
to recover from this, and you wanted... everyone and everything to go on without you? Or was that
the fever taking over?”

Frisk stared out the window; despite the sunlight shining down on the town, everything suddenly
seemed darker and overcast. “I... I thought I was going to die. I couldn't stand the idea of
everything everyone had done being ripped away like that. But... I died three times, and I came
back three times. We're all still here.... Sans?”

“I'm here. Just... just thinking about how to phrase this next.... You remember last night, I
mentioned how a lot of what the other fallen humans said, especially Andrew, supported all this
being an ongoing phenomenon. So a lot of that interference I detected in the underground, it
obviously couldn't be all you, your stuff was just at the very end. But that raises the question of
what happened to them so that it all stopped. And it turns out somebody invented the term before
dad did again. This time it was Andrew.”

Frisk swallowed. “Okay... what did he come up with?”

“Well, full disclosure. This is a backronym. After something Andrew said about what happened to
him, and what logically had to happen to other humans before him. Qualitative, Unambiguous,
Intentional Termination. QUIT. A refusal to generate a LOAD event, to SAVE a sequence of
events, and defer that power and responsibility to another, presumably with the next highest level
of DT Energy.”
“...which meant, each kid experienced what I did. And eventually they couldn't take it anymore.”

“Yeah. Not exactly the kind of thing you ever want to hear about. Especially not just before you go to sleep at night. Hey... I know I've said it before, but it bears repeating. Thanks for sticking things out, no matter how rough they got. And thanks for waking up Friday.”

“Thanks for being there for me. Or, being outside for me, in that case. Uh...”

“What's the matter, Frisk?”

“...this might just be the bad dream talking, but... just how bad did you beat Mr. Cater?”

“Heh. Not that bad at all, really. Nothing permanent. Cuts, bruises, scrapes. But that doesn't mean he isn't gonna remember my face for the rest of his life. And in any case, I'm pretty sure somebody's going to pick up where I left off. From what I understand, people who hurt kids are the bottom rung of the ladder in human prisons.”

Frisk sighed. “I guess that makes sense.”

“...kinda thought you'd be happy to hear that.”

“I just, it occurred to me. What if he really did think that monsters were bad and killed Chara? What if everything he's done is just based on a misunderstanding, and all of this could have been avoided?”

The phone line went silent, and then Frisk heard a sigh on the other end.

“You're a good kid, Frisk. You want to see the best in everyone. And you want everyone to have a happy ending. But... some people just gotta make their own endings. Good or bad or anything in between. Even if this is all just a big mistake, that doesn't make what he did okay. Not to Asriel, not to you, not to anybody. This may not be the ending that Cater wanted. But it's the one he chose for himself anyway.”

Frisk sighed. “Yeah. It's just... it's hard for me not to feel for him, I guess. Even after what happened. And yes, I know that makes me sound crazy. But it's the truth.”

“Hey. You already got enough problems to deal with. Getting better, finishing up the school year, all the ambassador stuff, and according to Papyrus trying to lure a certain somebody back to the Light Side of the Force. You don't need to add to that by worrying about the well-being, physical or otherwise, of a man that wanted you dead just because you're proof that everything he believes is wrong. Take care of you first, and everything else will fall into place. I promise.”

“...thanks, Sans.”

“Anytime, pal.”

“I think I see Asgore coming down the street. Should probably hang up and go say hi.”

“And I got some science to do before anybody gets back. So... talk to you later.”

“Take care, Sans.”

“You too.”

Frisk pressed a button on the screen and the call ended, and carefully made their way over to the desk to grab their note, opened the bedroom door, and clambered downstairs, just as the front door
was opening.

“Frisk! Are you alright?” Asgore knelt down on the floor in front of Frisk, who lunged forward and hugged them with one arm.

“I'm great, dad. I mean, if you ignore stuff like the shoulder. How are you doing?”

“I'm sorry I got here so late, I just—”

Frisk squeezed harder. “It's fine dad. Don't worry about it. I wrote some stuff, talked science with Sans on the phone, and I was going to read a book. Everything is fine.”

Asgore let out a deep breath. “I apologize if I have been overreacting. But the last time one of my children was sick, it did not end well. So I've been walking on eggshells a bit.”

“I can understand that.” Frisk let go of Asgore and smiled. “Don't worry, big guy. I'm not going anywhere for a good long time. Except for the kitchen, since I probably need to take some medicine.”

“Right you are. Come along, we'll get you straightened out.”

Frisk followed Asgore into the kitchen, where the king retrieved a glass from the cupboard and began filling it with water from the tap. The human child climbed up onto a chair near the counter top and put the note down.

“Here's what I wrote. There's some stuff I have problems saying face to face but if I write it down it's a bit easier. Well, I say easier, but I'm not used to writing right handed, so... uh, in case I'm asleep when mom comes home, can you make sure she gets to read it too?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thanks dad. Hey, purely out of curiosity, and because if I ask later I might not remember what you say because of the medication, did you run into anything unusual or strange on the way over here?”

Asgore carefully attempted to open the child proof lid on the medicine bottle. “I actually did, to be honest. That was why I was so late getting here. Do you know that alpaca ranch outside of Triton?”

“Yeah, what's it called... The Drama Llama Alpaca Rama? I have really vague memories of visiting their petting zoo a long, long time ago.”

“That's the one. If I try to say the name out loud the words get away from me. It turns out not only did a fence get broken, but somebody had dumped the Little League clown mascot out there rather than take it to the landfill. It frightened the poor things so much they basically stampeded all the way to Ebott's Wake, and the most advance warning anyone got was a handful of people posting pictures and short videos on the internet.”

“Wow. I would have thought that would have caught Mr. Welkin's attention.”

“I did hear on the radio this morning that he had to make an emergency landing by New Tem Village.”

Frisk's eyes opened wide. “Oh no. I hope he's okay. And not allergic.”

Asgore put down the pill bottle in defeat. “I think he'll be alright. Last I heard somebody from the
station is bringing him a case of construction paper. I'm a bit more worried about people running into all those frightened alpacas as they make their way through the town... uh..."

Asgore watched as Frisk picked up the pill bottle one-handed and manipulated it slowly between different fingers, frowning in concentration until the cap came off.

"Wow. How did you...?"

"The thing about so-called child proof lids is they're built on a set of assumptions. One is that the kids opening them can't read the instructions, two is that the person supposed to be opening them has two fully functional and above all human-sized hands. But it's just a bunch of differently shaped pieces of plastic when you get down to it. It can't outsmart a determined effort. Or a hammer, if push comes to shove."

Asgore chuckled. "Huh. Guess I just lucked out yesterday. Certainly didn't have as much trouble then."

"Do monsters get arthritis? That's another hole in my knowledge that needs patching."

"I don't know. What's a 'thritis' and what does it look like?"

Frisk grinned. "Actually I think you just answered my question."

With a little help from Asgore handing them the glass of water after the various pills went down the hatch, Frisk managed to get everything down.

"Ugh. Okay. We're set for the morning. I hope Undyne's doing better today."

Asgore smiled. "As a matter of fact, I got a text message from her this morning where she complained how she was only gone for one day and suddenly everyone was slacking off."

"She's fine then." Frisk hopped off the chair. "I'm gonna head back upstairs and read a bit more, if that's okay."

"Perfectly fine, Frisk. If you need anything you just need to call and I'll be right there."

"Thanks dad." Frisk walked over and hugged the large boss monster again. "I guess you could use a rest too, after yesterday. Even when Undyne is sick she's high energy."

"Ho ho, that she is."

Frisk let go and made their way over to the staircase, climbing carefully upward and opening the bedroom door. On a whim the radio volume button was flicked on and Frisk walked over to the bed just as some music was fading out.

"Hey, welcome back to the Morning Rush on KEBT FM. Brett Brinkman here. DJ Pantz got an urgent phone call during the break and had to leave, so Clutch McGee is filling in for him as we cover what social media has already started calling the Alpacalypse."

"Hashtag Repent, Hashtag TheEndOfHays, Hashtag FleeceBeforeThem."

"Is Sans behind this? Because I gotta wonder."

Frisk heard Clutch snort in derision as they opened Applied Magical Optics and started to read. "Are you kidding? That's way too much effort."
“In any case, Jeff climbed on top of the tower again so we have some traffic data for you. The bulk of the alpaca herd is traveling along East West Road right now, with smaller groups that seem to have stopped outside of James Madison Elementary, Greene Machines Garage and Mini Golf, and Joe's House Of Stuff. Triton Animal Control is on the way, and our own Ebott's Wake Animal Control department is on the case. So if you're thinking about getting onto East West Road anytime soon, you should take an alternative route.”

“Oh, hey, somebody just posted a picture of an alpaca wearing one of the chicken hats from Sunday.”

“...HOW?!”

“Apparently alpacas are really docile normally. And these guys are petting zoo animals, so they're used to people.”

“...so once the stampede stops we should be okay.”

“Probably.”

“Well that's good news. Hey, what table had the chicken hats again?”

“I think it was the Librarby, they had the chicken chili.”

“Oh... wait, that can't be right. The Librarby table was Mike's Rocket Fuel Chili, and he was demonstrating how rocket stoves work. That was some sort of beef chili, definitely.”

“Huh. Maybe it was one of the bookstores then- what? ...oh. Jeff says the Arts Council did the chicken chili and hats.”

“Aha. Mystery solved. So we're going to break for a little bit again. When we come back we hope to have more information on the... ugh, the Alpacalypse. Here, have some Tupper Ware Remix Party in the meantime.”
Dr. Aster stared at the anatomy chart on the wall, for lack of anything better to do; Alphys seemed content to browse the internet on her phone but all other things being equal, Dr. Aster felt he spent too much time on the net simply trying to catch up with human culture and history. And so the chart depicting the major bones and muscles of the human body occupied his full attention. If it was accurate, then it did highlight just how similar the human internal structure and baseline skeleton monster shape actually were. Not enough to support Papyrus's theory of human / monster evolution, but the similarities were uncanny...

“Hey, Wing Ding!”

Dr. Aster looked up in surprise as Dr. Ross walked into the room. “Ah. Hello again Dr. Ross. How have you been?”

“Busy. Which regrettably is why I had to keep you guys waiting for an hour and a half. I apologize. Although having said that, long wait times tend to be normal for human medicine when it's not a life or death emergency.”

“Hmmmm. Suppose that's where speed counts the most. Anyway, it's nice to see you again.”

“You too.” Dr. Ross coughed. “Well. If you two will follow me, we'll get everything straightened out soon enough.”

“Alright then.”

Dr. Ross walked out of the room and Dr. Aster followed, pausing only long enough for Dr. Alphys to hop off of her chair and join him.

“...you seem exceptionally happy for some reason. Good news from Undyne or something like that?”

“What? Oh. N-no. I was just... aheh. Never mind.”

The two monsters followed Dr. Ross into another exam room, where several other people were already waiting. Dr. Aster recognized one of them right away.

“Ah. If it isn't the one and only DJ Pantz. How goes the radio business?”

The radio announcer shrugged. “Eh. Pretty good, considering everyone says video killed it. How's the plumbing the depths of knowledge thing going?”

“Not too bad.” As he spoke, Dr. Aster's eye lights moved towards the other two people who had been waiting. Neither looked familiar but one of them was wearing the white coat of the human physician and had a name tag on one pocket.

“Dr. Aster, Dr. Alphys, if I might introduce Dr. Spalding, Chief of Obstetrics and Pediatrics here at Rita Belle Thurman.” Dr. Ross motioned towards the white coated human, who nodded in acknowledgment. Dr. Aster nodded back.

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Spalding,” Alphys said, holding out a claw which Dr. Spalding shook after a moment's hesitation. Or maybe, Dr. Aster thought to himself, he imagined it.
And I'm the elephant in the room," the other human said, waving a hand. "Lindsay Elizabeth Lindsey, better known as Lazy Lindsey of KEBT radio."

"Aha. Nice to finally put a face to the voice."

"You're a fan, huh?"

"Sans is. He seems to really enjoy your afternoon show."

"Cool."

Dr. Ross stepped forward. "Ms. Lindsey came in earlier this morning complaining of a number of symptoms."

"Yeah, you could call em that." Lindsey held up one hand and began ticking each one off on a finger. "First I've been puking up my guts every morning since Thursday on, as if I needed any more reasons to hate mornings. Second, the smell of food makes me gag, even the stuff I usually love. I couldn't even get within fifty feet of the Arboretum this weekend and I'm all about the chili. Third, and this is the weirdest bit, when I can eat or drink anything it tastes metallic. Like I'm trying to chew on a penny or something."

Dr. Spalding nodded. "With the exception of the consistent metal taste, those are all early symptoms of pregnancy, and to be honest even the metal taste isn't unheard of. We'll know for certain once the blood work gets back from the lab."

Dr. Alphys grinned. "Wow, congratulations Miss Lindsey! I mean, that is the appropriate thing to say right?"

"Thanks Doc, but there's more to it than that."

Dr. Spalding coughed. "According to Ms. Lindsey the last time she had intercourse, or any relationship at all, with a human male was 2011."

"He was an okay guy, but he was waaaay too high energy. Too much ambition and he kinda expected it to rub off on me. Not happening."

Dr. Aster turned towards Dr. Spalding. "Wait a moment. Why did you feel the need to specify a human male? That seems redundant."

Dr. Ross nodded. "That's why we asked you and Dr. Alphys to come here today. According to Ms. Lindsey-"

"Burgie and I have been hooking up since Halloween last year. Been nice to have a boyfriend who actually gets me for once."

Dr. Aster blinked. "...I don't follow. I mean... I'm assuming you're one of those humans that, to use Sans' turn of phrase, 'really likes hot animals' but beyond that I don't understand why Dr. Alphys and I are here at all."

Dr. Alphys adjusted her glasses. "Dr. Spalding, Dr. Ross. Are you asking us if it is possible for monsters and humans to procreate together?"

Dr. Ross nodded. "Exactly."

"Oh, is that all you needed? No. We're completely different species. The most fundamental
operating principles of our bodies are completely incompatible with each other.” Dr. Aster crossed his arms. “Anything else you want to ask?”

“Hmmmph. Well, I know I didn't get like this from a dirty toilet seat, like my mom said could happen.” Lindsey shrugged. “Of course, that's mostly because she also thought that TV gave off radiation that causes cancer. And flu shots caused cancer. And butter caused cancer. Mom had issues.”

Dr. Aster pinched the bridge of his nasal bone between his eye sockets. “Okay, I know I'm going out on a limb here, but are humans capable of parthenogenesis?”

Dr. Spalding snorted. “Uh, no? Parthenogenic reproduction is only found among the simplest of life on earth.”

Dr. Alphys coughed, and Dr. Spalding turned to look at the lizard. “...did I just put my foot in my mouth?”

Dr. Alphys shrugged. “Maybe? Monster sex ed isn't something that comes up in casual conversation. But elemental monsters can definitely reproduce that way. For monsters like me and Dr. Aster and the Dreemurrs and Burgie, it's not that different from the way humans do it.” The lizard's scales instantly took on a red tinge. “Oh g-god, that was a bad choice of words.”

Lindsey grinned. “No, that's the right choice of words.”

“Since the subject has come up, can you explain how monster reproduction actually does work?”

Dr. Aster turned to Dr. Spalding. “It's strangely similar to human reproduction to be honest. Human gametes carry genetic information about the structure and operation of your physical bodies. The monster equivalents carry information about the pattern of the magic field that makes up our physiology. Some monsters incubate their offspring in a womb, and that's where the similarities end. Some monsters lay eggs or seeds, and some basically perform parthenogenesis but with the addition of external information from another monster, so the offspring adds... well, you'd call it genetic diversity. But up to those points, the main difference between us, as always, is being made of magic energy versus being made of physical water.”

“Undyne and I are both from egg laying monster families. We've talked about having kids but we haven't decided yet how many, or whose eggs will be used.”

“Wait.” Dr. Ross held up a hand. “Undyne's that seven foot fall fish lady in armor, right?”

“Technically she's my seven foot tall fish lady in armor,” Alphys replied with a grin.

“So how does that even work?”

“Here. I'll need some visual aids for this.” Alphys held up her claws and her magic formed a set if different shapes and symbols, some of them resembling human chromosomes and DNA. “The human requirements for genetic compatibility sometimes rely on different combinations of chromosomes holding different genetic data. The same is true for monsters but because it's energy based, we don't have to worry about prions and other problems from recursive proteins, or degenerative hereditary diseases. So it's just a matter of combining that information.”

“That's what I was curious about. How, exactly, does this information get 'combined' for the two of you, if, well, I'm assuming you have more or less the same parts?”

“It's, uh... well...” Alphys trailed off and the magic projection comparing human and monster
Dr. Aster shook his skull. “That's a little trick some creative mind came up with ages ago to make sure that monsters didn't die out just because of an imbalance between males and females, or a too-small population of a specific monster subtype. Which was a concern for a while after the Barrier was formed. The offspring usually takes on the primary characteristics of the mother or mother equivalent, because that's the primary magic field providing it with energy as it grows and develops, but the information from the father or father equivalent is all there and sometimes it comes back unexpectedly after a few generations. That said, it's not really common knowledge outside of the scientific and healer communities. It's very complicated, very difficult to do properly.”

“So not something that comes up in monster sex ed then.”

“No more than human sex ed includes post-graduate summaries of genetic engineering. That's the closest equivalent I can think of.”

Dr. Ross laughed suddenly, before shaking her head.

“Sorry. Something about your delivery. Ahem. Well, if we've established that Ms. Lindsey's child does not belong to Mr. Pantz, I guess figuring out what exactly is going on falls on us. Thank you both for coming by, and sorry for wasting your time.”

Dr. Spalding held out her hand and shook Alphys' claw, and then Dr. Aster's hand. “Yes, thank you both. If nothing else, it's been educational.”

“Wait.”

Dr. Aster looked down at Dr. Alphys, who had pulled out her cell phone and was pointing it at Lazy Lindsey. “Ms. Lindsey, do you mind if I test a theory?”

“Eh. Sure. Knock yourself out.”

Dr. Alphys tapped the touch screen a few times. “We've been running the scanner nonstop last week so it's shut down right now for maintenance, but I can still get broad spectrum readings using the phone instruments and run them through the scanner's emulator later. Won't be as... accurate...”

Alphys trailed off, staring at the phone screen, then pointed it at DJ Pantz, and then back at Lazy Lindsey.

“...Burgie, I don't suppose I could trouble you to use your magic right now? Basic shapes, or a simple, low energy attack? I need a comparison.”

“...sure.” The radio host frowned in confusion, but clenched a paw. Semi circles of light began to radiate out from it before fading away after a few inches. “That work?”

“I think there's a resonance effect. Okay, I know this is going to sound crazy, but can you attack Lindsey right now?”

Dr. Aster's sockets went dark as he stared at Alphys. “WHAT.”

“Now hold on a second-” Dr. Spalding raised a finger, but Lindsey waved her off with a grin.

“So that's the way you like it, Alphys? Hey, I'm not judging, I asked Burgie if he'd bite me last time.”
The radio host put one paw over his face. “What word in the phrase 'let us never speak of this again' did you have problems with?”

Lindsey grinned. “Hey, come on Burgie. They're doctors. It's called patient confidentiality.”

Dr. Ross nodded. “Ms. Lindsey is right. Everything you say here is protected. And while this is certainly a *unique* case, it's nowhere near the strangest one I've been involved with.”

“Ahem.” Dr. Alphys pointed at Burgie again. “Just a basic attack. Soft as you can make it. Just enough to trigger the INV response.”

“Doc, I'm not a scientist or a warrior, I don't know how to cut things that fine. Also you're basically asking me to hit my girlfriend and I have *several* problems with that.”

“Actually I'm asking you to attack the embryo inside her.”

“What part of that is an improvement?!”

“*Come on*, fuzzbutt. Sooner you do this, the sooner we can get out of here, you go back to the station, and I can go back home and get some fucking sleep until it's time for the afternoon show.”

Sighing, DJ Pantz relented. A paw was held out, and what seemed like a lightning bolt jumped out and hit Lindsey. Alphys narrowed her eyes, staring at the screen, then looked up and grinned at the monster.

“Congratulations, Burgie! You're a father!”

Dr. Aster's jaw dropped. “WHAT.”

Alphys held up the cell phone, now replaying a recorded video. “I can't resolve stats with the phone alone, but monster souls and magic attacks are old hat. When Burgie attacked Lindsey, there was a repulsion event.”


“Sorry, what do you mean by repulsion event?”

Dr. Aster turned to Dr. Ross, his eye lights coming back. “It's a basic principle of monster anatomy, you can't be hurt by your own magic because that's what you are. And some of it is passed down because a part of your magic goes into creating your children, so they have partial immunity to your magic and you have some immunity to theirs. That's usually how monsters teach their kids how to control it, it's literally play fighting where there's very little chance of being hurt. But Alphys is saying that there's a nascent monster inside a human womb which is physically impossible for any number of reasons!”

“I know, isn't this so cool?!” Alphys squeaked. “Nobody's seen this kind of thing happen ever! It's totally new and unprecedented! Oh my god have you guys picked out a name yet??”

“Like, we don't even know if it's gonna be a girl or a boy. Or, if that even applies if it's gonna be like some sort of half monster baby. Burgie, you got any ideas?”

“I... I'm gonna be a dad.... I am a dad. I... I'm gonna have to put them through college. I'm gonna have to teach them to drive. Wait... if they're a girl I'm gonna have to scare boyfriends into not trying anything.” As the monster rambled on, his ears turned back until they were nearly flush with the rest of his head, and his tail became more and more bushy and bristly.
Dr. Spalding pointed at Burgie. “Okay, that right there, that's one of the classic responses to human males learning they're going to be fathers. So I guess we have that in common.”

“Hey, not sure if this means anything, but when that lightning bolt hit me, I didn't feel anything, but that metal taste got a lot stronger.”

“I should be writing this down!” Alphys patted her lab coat pockets but could not find any paper or writing tools. “Ugh, I'll just have to remember it. Like I'm ever going to forget this! This is so amazing! Hey, you should definitely start checking in at the Lab so we can keep tabs on what's happening, try to head off any problems that might develop, that kind of thing!”

Dr. Spalding nodded. “She has a point. We don't have a Magical Obstetrics department here at the hospital.”

Dr. Ross snorted. “Not yet, anyway.”

Lindsey shrugged. “Sure. Why not. Hey, you think my baby's going to be able to use monster magic?”

“I have no idea! Isn't that awesome?! A whole new field of scientific discovery and you guys are so cute together and OH MY GOD THIS IS THE BEST TUESDAY EVER!” The lizard scientist was shaking so much with excitement that she very nearly dropped her phone.

“Well. Glad this wasn't a wasted trip for you two after all.” Dr. Ross smiled, but the smile faltered while looking at Dr. Aster. “Hey. You doing alright?”

Dr. Aster ran a bony hand over his face. “I am confronted with the possibility that much of what I know about a subject I dedicated my life to studying and understanding is in error, I have been better.”

Dr. Ross snorted again. “I, I'm so sorry. I know this must be a lot to take in. But it's just... something about how you say stuff really gets me. Uh, anyway. I'm glad you stopped by after all, and I hope to hear more about this whole situation in the future.”

“Oh, absolutely!” Dr. Alphys grinned. “We will keep you posted with every major and minor development! I mean, if that's okay with you, Lindsey.”

“Sure. The more the merrier. Or. Since it's doctors, the more the healthier. Right?”

Dr. Aster stared numbly at the floor, barely hearing the rest of the conversation as Alphys, Lindsey, DJ Pantz and the human doctors agreed on timetable and contact information. When Dr. Alphys walked out of the room, the skeleton followed automatically, only really seeming to break out of his trance as they neared the hospital entrance.

“Uh... Dr. Aster? You've been pretty quiet, after the initial outburst anyway.”

“...just trying to figure out how this can possibly work. Humans are closer to every other living thing on this planet then they are to us, so there shouldn't be any way for this kind of thing to happen at all. This has by far been the strangest thing to happen to me since I ended up on the Surface.”

As the two monsters walked out through the hospital doors, the air was filled with the sounds of animals in distress. Dozens of woolly quadrupeds ran through the street, one of them with a familiar figure clinging to its back.
“I REGRET NOTHIIIING!”

A few of the animals broke off from the herd and began to graze on the hospital lawn. A few moments later another familiar figure sprinted down the street, after the larger herd.

“GOD DAMMIT HAL WHEN ARE YOU GONNA FUCKING LISTEN TO ME?!?”

As Justin Carrow disappeared into the distance, Alphys looked up at Dr. Aster, but the scientist had already held up his hand.

“Not. Even. Close.”
The Goal Of Determination

Frisk stared at the spot where the light had appeared. It had been there only for a moment, and was not that bright, but Frisk could still see its afterimage.

Looking down at the book again, Frisk tried again to understand what had happened. While the mathematical processes in the book were complicated, with multiple terms and symbols Frisk was unfamiliar with, the models used to explain the processes more generally were very easy to grasp; in fact, they fell under the category of “obvious in hindsight” which was what made them so appealing to begin with. Frisk could easily visualize everything taking place as the chapter progressed.

So maybe that was what the light was. A very vivid byproduct of a child's imagination.

But maybe not.

Taking a deep breath, Frisk held up their good hand and turned it back and forth, then held it out as far as they could and tried to visualize what the book had described.

Nothing.

Frisk relaxed. It was just imagination after all. Or perhaps exhaustion brought on by the medication. Frisk closed the book and placed it on the bedside table and ran their good hand over their eyelids; it was getting harder and harder to focus anyway, and that had to be where the weird light had come from.

According to the clock, it wasn't even noon yet, but the siren call of sleep couldn't be ignored any longer. Frisk pushed back the covers, curled up on the bed, and pulled them up again. With eyes closed, Frisk didn't see the alpacas trotting down the street outside the window, or the antics they got up to.

They also did not see the red orb on the bedside table start to glow.

“Tra la la. You found your way back after all. Well done.”

Frisk looked up from the water where their fishing line was bobbing and saw the riverperson's boat drift by. A few feet away, Sans’ fishing line began to bob up and down, but no attempt was made to reel in the catch. Turning, Frisk saw that Sans had fallen asleep in the lawn chair next to theirs.

The boat floated up to the river bank and the riverperson hopped off. “The fish are very thirsty today. Tra la la.”

“Hello Tim.”

“Hello to you too, young Frisk.” The cloaked figure sat down on the bank and looked out over the river. “A refreshing change from fear and fire, here on the banks of the river.”

“I haven't caught anything, but it's just nice to be out of the house.”

“Such is the eternal quandary of those who seek to remove fish from their place in the natural order.”
There was a prolonged silence punctuated only by Sans' snoring.

“So the prophecy has come to pass. The Underground has gone empty. Nothing remains except the shells of buildings, haunted by the memories of hopeless repetition.”

“...yes.”

“Humans, Monsters... Flowers. Together underneath the sun and moon and stars.”

“...uh huh. I know this is just a dream, but it's a good dream.”

“There is no such thing as just a dream, human child. A dream is a seed for a future. You have already sown, but now it is time for you to weed.”

“...I was afraid you were going to say that.”

Frisk's fishing line jerked, and the human child grabbed the reel and began cranking rapidly. After a frantic minute, the catch emerged from the surface of the river, wiggling back and forth.

“Papyrus??”

The skeleton opened his mouth, letting go of the fishing line and dropping back into the river.

“YES, IT IS I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS! ALPHYS SENT ME AN URGENT TEXT TO BE WARY OF FISHING SCAMS, SO I HAVE COME OUT HERE TO THE RIVER TO MAKE SURE THAT ALL RODS AND REELS ARE PROPERLY ACCOUNTED FOR! NYEH HEH HEH!”

The skeleton dived back into the water, and Frisk turned to the riverperson.

“If what you say is true... does that mean the other dreams were true, too? Is Jordan Cater trying to get to the CORE?”

“Jordan Cater. The name of the usurper. He covets, and knows not what he covets.”

“...I had a feeling.”

“Young Frisk... the usurper is already stronger than he should be. Be wary. You are not the only one with a thumb on the scales of the cosmos.”

The sky seemed to grow darker and Frisk stared at the riverperson. “Even... even in a dream, I didn't expect you to know about that.”

“I see the strings tying everything together. Past to Present to Future. Parent to Child. Action to Reaction. Thesis to Antithesis to Synthesis. But... I cannot see when or how or if a string will be cut. Or when a new string will be formed. So it goes.”

“The lawyers of fate demand a loophole in every prophecy.”

“Too true.”

“Well, I got that from a Discworld book.”

“That does not diminish its accuracy.”

Frisk pulled back the pole, then cast the line out into the river again. “Uh... if you can see the
connections between people... can you tell me something? Toriel and Asgore. Do they... are we really a family? Do they really care about me as Frisk, or am I a replacement for Asriel or Chara?”

The riverperson moved their head slightly. “...by the time the Dreemurrs understood, it was already too late. Chara's choice was made, except the word choice implies an alternative course of action. Chara could not see another road, so Chara could not walk that road. Not just the King and Queen, but the Underground and the Surface, followed in their footsteps. Six more times. Now that road has been left behind.”

“...so things are better. I guess that's all anyone can really ask for... but I, uh. When Toriel looks at me, does she see Frisk, or Chara, or Asriel, or one of the other fallen humans?”

“...that is not what you are truly afraid of. You are afraid that the line between you and your human parents will pull you back. And that nobody will raise a hand to stop it.”

Frisk looked down at the surface of the river. “Is it that obvious?”

“It is more obvious to some than it is to others.”

“Well... thanks anyway.” Frisk looked around. “Is this the part where Jordan Cater appears and holds my head under the water?”

“The usurper will not dare to show himself here. Not with Sans present. And not when...”

“Not when what?”

“I have already said too much. Besides... it doesn't really matter. Tra la la.”

The riverperson stood up and moved onto the boat, which drifted out into the river.

“Let us talk again some time. Or not. Tra la la.”

As the boat traveled downstream, the fishing line shook again and Frisk began to crank the reel until... a coconut was hanging from the hook, somehow.

“ey. Nice one, kiddo.”

Frisk turned to see that Sans had woken up, and was pulling the cap off of a bottle of ketchup. “coconuts are always the best when you catch em during spawning season.”

“SANS!” The shrill voice came from the opposite side of the river, and Frisk saw Papyrus leap up onto the bank. “ARE YOU SUGGESTING THAT COCONUTS MIGRATE?!!”

“nah, course not. they could be carried.”

“HEY! THAT'S RIGHT!”

Papyrus jumped back into the river in a cannonball dive, and Sans drained the ketchup bottle. “boy. this is the life, huh? doing nothing on a beautiful Saturday afternoon. birds are singing, flowers are blooming. on days like this, kids like you...”

The hairs on the back of Frisk's neck stood up as Sans' eye lights disappeared.

“Better not make me regret giving you that book.”
Frisk's eyes opened and they looked around. They were still in their bed, not on the bank of the river. The cell phone clock said that it was nearly two in the afternoon. Frisk's stomach rumbled, and the child carefully climbed out of bed.

Downstairs, Frisk looked out over the staircase railing and saw the back of Asgore's head. Something about the image seemed familiar, but Frisk couldn't place why until they looked over to one of the bookcases and saw an open slot. Asgore had to be looking at the same photo album that Toriel had been looking at Thursday night.

Frisk swallowed, or tried to, as a lump had suddenly formed in their throat. Suddenly what was left of the child's appetite after the pills had taken their toll vanished, and Frisk had raised a foot to go back upstairs when the doorbell rang.

“Hmm??”

Asgore put the photo album on the coffee table and got up to head to the door; from their vantage point on the staircase, Frisk saw the door open to reveal... no one?

“Well, howdy Bob!”

“Good day, your majesty. Glad somebody was home so I didn't have to leave this out on the doorstep. Sign here.”

“Sure thing.”

Frisk slowly made their way downstairs as quietly as possible; on the ground floor, it was easy to see the shape of a Temmie, especially when Asgore turned around carrying a large box.

“Oh! Hello Frisk! How are you feeling?”

“Just got up for a drink of water. Hey, is that Bob?”

The Temmie tipped his Speedy Brothers Delivery hat. “The one and only. I don't suppose you got your allergy shots yet?”

“No, not yet. Supposed to visit the clinic today though. Maybe they can fit that in.”

“Well, I'll just keep my distance. Got another box for you guys anyway.” The monster ran off, then reappeared with a box about the same size as the one in Asgore's hands balanced on his back. “I am most definitely glad somebody is home to collect these, with all the goings on these last few days.”

“What, like the alpaca stampede? I heard about that on the radio a while ago. Guess they haven't rounded all of them up yet.”

Bob shook his head. “As late as that has made me today, I don't think they'd go after these boxes when there's all that ordinary grass to gobble down. No, what worries me is stuff like the guy ramming a quad copter into the radio station power line, and the sabotage on the traffic helicopter.”

Frisk blinked. “Wait. Did you say the word sabotage?”

“That is indeed the word I used. I was standing by to try to keep the other Temmies from swarming the thing again while the mechanic was working on it, and I heard them talk about how somebody
had deliberately filed down the fuel line connector so it would break itself after exposure to the in flight vibrations.” Bob pointed at both sets of ears. “They weren’t exactly shouting it from the rooftops, but these aren’t just for decoration. And I don’t need to be a pilot or a mechanic to understand the problems that come with running out of fuel in mid-flight. Anyway, the king signed for these things, and I have a schedule that I’m already way behind on, so I must bid you two good day.”

Asgore stepped forward and took the second box from Bob. “Good day to you too, Bob. And thank you!”

“All part of the service. You guys take care, now!” Bob saluted and then ran back to the street. Frisk could hear the hum of an electric motor, and then saw one of the Speedy Brothers Delivery carts proceed down the street, with Bob’s hind legs stretched out bizarrely in order to reach the foot pedals.

Asgore turned around with a smile on his face. “Well, that was a pleasant visit, brief as it was. Here, let’s see who these are from… odd. This one is from the Knights of the Road Who Say Ni. What does the other one say?”

“Uh…” Frisk grabbed the corner of the box and rotated it on the coffee table. “It looks like it was sent by… also the Knights of the Road Who Say Ni. You’re right, that’s a little strange.” Frisk’s head suddenly snapped up and their eyes focused on the photo album.

“Frisk? Is something wrong?”

“Uh. I thought I saw movement out of the corner of my eye. And my reflexes are all… uh… weird.”

“Well, that’s another question to ask the doctors later. Come on, let’s set these boxes on the table so your mom can look through them la-”

Asgore picked up the box but the clinking of china stopped him in his tracks.

“Oh sugar I forgot about the tea-”

Frisk’s eyes once again zoomed in on the photo album with the pale, herb steeped water running towards it. Their free hand shot out, skidded off the edge of the cover, and the entire book fell off the edge of the table. Frisk’s arm followed it down, taking the rest of their body with it, and the album was snatched out of the way as the tea poured over onto the wooden floor below.

“I got it!” Frisk said through gritted teeth, vaguely aware on some level that during the dive to save the album, their injured shoulder collided with the edge of the coffee table. Behind and above them, large furry paws were picking them up and setting them on their feet.

“Are you alright, Frisk??”


“I disagree with that sentiment! Your shoulder has already had enough trouble over these past few days, and you shouldn’t be doing reckless stunts like that anyway!”

Frisk blinked. “But. But the photo album was going to get tea all over it-”

“And that would have been my fault, because I made the mess. I would have cleaned it up and dried it out.” The king carefully took the album from Frisk’s shaking hand and placed it on the sofa. “Frisk… while I wish you hadn’t tried to protect Undyne the way you had, I can understand
why you did so. And I am proud of you, for managing to convince Mr. Riley to stop fighting, and for standing by your friends in their hour of need. But this photo album is just a thing. It's not a person. Not like Undyne or you. It's not worth taking risks for, even small ones.”

The human child closed their eyes, partly to avoid the worried gaze of the king, and partly to try to dispel the memory that had come back with a vengeance. “…s. Sorry, dad.”

“Sorry for what? You didn't do anything wrong.”

“I just want to see my wife. I just want to see my child. Please... Young one... you have the power. This war has gone on long enough. Take my soul, and leave this cursed place.”

A fist with a burnt cast iron frying pan gripped in it was raised.

'Just do it. Just one more hit. Everyone will be safe. No war, no tide of monsters rising over the earth. And I can go back...'

'Look at him. He lost everything. His children, his wife, hope... why would you hurt him any more than you already have? What is wrong with you? What do you have to go back to that is worth this?!!'

Asgore blinked as tears began to leak from Frisk's closed eyelids. “Frisk, are you alright? Is the medication wearing off?”

“...dad... you're the best dad ever. You know that right?” Frisk reached up and grabbed Asgore's forearm. “It's... it's very important to me that you know that.”

“Golly, where is this coming from all of a sudden?”

“...there's something I need to, to tell you and mom. But. I have to work my way up to it. It's pretty big. And it scares me half to death. But I will tell you guys. I promise.”

“You can tell us anything, Frisk. We're family.”

“That's what scares me about this-”

The front door opened and Frisk and Asgore turned to see Toriel walking inside.

“Hello, everyone! How was your... day...” Toriel's voice trailed off as she saw the concerned expression on Asgore's face, and the tears on Frisk's. “What has happened? What is wrong?”

“Frisk bumped their shoulder on the coffee table, or at least I think that's part of it.”

“But- but I saved the photo album. That's. It's not nothing. I don't think.” Frisk sniffed and wiped their eyes with their good hand. “Anyway, you're home earlier than usual. Is this about the alpacas, or going to the clinic, or some other thing?”

“It is predominantly so we may get ready to take you to the clinic, although the animals that have gotten loose on the streets today have complicated travel a great deal.”

“So we might have to leave earlier than normal to get there in time.”
Toriel nodded. “Yes, exactly correct.”

“Okay... gonna head upstairs and change into something besides striped pajamas.”

“Frisk, are you sure you-”

“It's all good. I got this. I'm two for two so far today.” The human child scrambled up the stairs as fast as possible, and Toriel turned to Asgore in confusion.

“I think the first thing Frisk means is opening the child proof pill bottle with one hand when I couldn't manage it. And the second would have been when I spilled tea on the coffee table and Frisk managed to move the photo album out of the way before it was stained. Which, thinking about it, I should probably get to cleaning up. Oh, and Frisk wrote a note for both of us in case they were asleep when we arrived. It's on the kitchen counter top.”

The two boss monsters walked into the kitchen and Asgore pointed towards the note while grabbing a towel. As Asgore returned to the living room, he heard Toriel making a “tsk-tsk” sound at what had to have been several typos, and then a short sputtering of laughter at the creative workaround to spelling “ambidextrous” which made him smile automatically.

The tea was wiped up and Asgore stood up to return the towel to the kitchen, but he stopped for a second, staring at the spot where the album had been sitting on the table, and then where Frisk's hand had caught it. There was a fair bit of distance, at least several inches, which probably could have been chalked up to the thing bouncing against something on the way down.

Though there was one other detail that did not fit entirely well. Asgore's eyes had gone straight to Frisk as they had made the dive to save the photo album. And out of the corner of one eye, he could almost swear that he saw a flash of blue light.
“Here, Joe. These are for you and also other people.”

Joe stared at the box with a confused expression, until Alphys opened the lid. Inside were six magic-cut fragments of lab-grown synthetic quartz crystal, inset in a ring not unlike that which commemorated a graduating high school class; which also served to conceal the miniaturized circuitry surrounding the crystals.

“Gee Alphys, I don't know what to say. I mean, besides, 'Doesn't Undyne already have it in for me?' That comes immediately to mind.”

The short lizard cackled and snorted in laughter. “You know what I mean you big goof. Here, take whichever one you like and pass em around later.”

Joe took the box from the scientist's claws and grinned. “Guessing these are the first viable production runs then?”

“Only took us two dozen false starts this time. At this rate we'll get it down into the single digits by the time Halloween rolls around again.”

“Now that I would pay cash money to see. Hey, I know it's half a year away nearly, but do you know what you're going as yet? I'm gonna try to convince the rest of the gang to go as Fallout 4 Companions.”

Alphys snickered. “Undyne is going as Jotaro and I'm going as Joseph Joestar from JoJo's Bizarre Adventure. And Undyne's trying to convince Papyrus to go as Kakyuin.”

“Hah! That'll be a party to remember. Actually, thinking about it, monster magic is a lot like Stands, isn't it? Creating a representation of your will outside your body?”

“It's not a perfect comparison, but you're right. There is a parallel. I could probably do a decent Star Platinum myself as long as nobody distracted me. It wouldn't be able to punch the lights out of anything but it would probably look cool.”

“Wonder if Papyrus could do a Heirophant Green.”

Alphys shrugged. “Not sure, really. I don't know if he took Magic Drafting at any point. Or if his interests lie in that direction.”

“Magic Drafting? ...is that like magic schematics, or magic recruiting an army, or magic writing a novel?”

The lizard snorted. “Heh, I never heard that third one. Anyway, magic drafting is when a monster uses magic to create a shape in real time. I'm very good, if I do say so myself, but that's because I've always been, well, fascinated by visual media. There was always an interest long before I took the classes. A lot of monsters, not so m-”

A flash of blue light filled the room and when it vanished, Sans was standing in its place with a radio in both hands.
“-uch. Hi Sans. Hey, was talking with Joe about magic drafting, did you ever take that class-”

“You guys need to hear this.”

Sans’ thumb flicked the volume knob and the conference room was filled with the sound of Clutch McGee's voice.

“-partment asks anyone with information on Mr. Cater's whereabouts to contact them immediately. Repeating. We have just gotten word from the Ebott's Wake, Triton and Quarterhorse Fields police that the transport carrying Jordan Cater has been attacked and Cater has escaped custody. All residents of Lost Eagle County are advised to be on the lookout for suspicious activity for the foreseeable future. All traffic passing through Lost Eagle County is hereby advised that hitchhikers may be highly dangerous. As new information becomes available, notification will be broadcast over KEBT in Ebott's Wake, KFOR in Quarterhorse Fields, and the Cornucopia Valley Emergency Weather Alert System. The Ebott's Wake Police Department asks anyone with information on Jordan Cater's whereabouts to contact them immediately. We'll have more on this story as it breaks.”

Alphys turned to look at Joe, and already saw his phone out.

“Sending a group text right now.”

The lab tech's phone beeped immediately, and the screen was tapped a few times. Joe looked up at the lizard and the skeleton. "Looks like Eli beat me to the punch. Hold on a second..."

The phone was set on the conference room table, and clicked a few times.

“Hello? Joe, that's you right?”

“Joe here. Got you on speaker with Sans and Dr. Alphys. We just heard the radio report.”

“Same here. I'm in the back room setting up some Google news alerts. Steve's going to be neck deep in this but I don't think he was part of the escort for the transfer, so we won't hear from him until tonight maybe. Just got a check back from Mike, but Hal and Justin haven't responded yet.”

“Great timing.”

“...yeah, I was thinking about that actually... anyway, between the KEBT transformer strike, plus some other stuff I can't quite put my finger on, I think the situation has changed on us. Maybe without taking cues from Dwayne Riley, the anti-monster groups have gone back to their roots. Striking from the shadows.”

“Well, great. We're back to where we were a few years ago aren't we.”

“Not necessarily. I think the main reason there was such a big open movement Friday was because it appealed to people like Dwayne Riley. People who focus on action. But the main reason they went forward with it at all was because they overestimated their own strength and underestimated the opposition.”

“Well... that's par for the course, ain't it? The Guardians consistently misunderstood everything going on in the world around them. The BADTF response caught them completely off guard because they never expected to be attacked by an organized human group.”

“That's not what I mean.”
Joe stared at the phone. “...okay. What do you mean?”

“I mean, they attacked openly because they thought they had a position of strength. They didn't actually have it, but they thought they did. If they've gone back to attacking from the shadows, they must recognize on some level that they don't have the strength to act openly. That means the actual number of people they have that they know they can trust must be pretty low. I wouldn't be surprised if Justin's double agent work with Dwayne Riley caused a purge or something. We could be looking at less than fifty people.”

Sans finally spoke up. “Well, that's better odds than last time.”

“No necessarily, Sans. Nobody got an accurate count on the people marching on the hospital, and we don't know if people gave up on their way, or if more people joined in just for that final push without being party to the other stuff that happened around town before. The best guesses are around the two hundred to two hundred fifty mark, but that could easily be as high as four hundred in total. And that's just in Ebott's Wake, we don't know how many people have been lying low in the rest of the county waiting for a sign or a signal. But whether we are looking at fifty people or a hundred and fifty people or even more than that, we're looking for them among fifteen thousand people just in the Ebott's Wake township.”

“Well, twelve thousand humans,” Joe pointed out. “I might be jumping to conclusions but I think we can safely rule out pretty much every monster.”

“Hmmm. What do you two think?”

“Eh. Papyrus wants to try to convince Dwayne Riley to give up on being a silly person going around being angry all the time. No idea if it will work, but I know my brother. He won't write anybody a blank check. That's about as far as that will go.”

“...might just be me but I think that's a little too optimistic.”

“Maybe. But like any experiment, you do it because you don't know what will happen. I'm not gonna tell my brother, or Frisk, not to try to do something that's important to them.”

“I'm not saying you should. But I'm not going to build any plans around the assumption that they succeed.”

“heh, me neither.”

“I have an idea.”

Joe and Sans turned to look at Alphys, who had been silent since the phone call had started.

“let's hear it Alph.”

The lizard scientist took off her glasses and started cleaning them on the edge of her lab coat. “If these guys are going to attack everyone else at their weakest points, then if we want to fight back, we need to find out what our weakest points are. Or, more important, we need to understand what looks like weakness to them, because they've already shown that their grasp of reality is very uncertain. Once we know where they're going to want to strike, we can set traps for them. Right?”

“It makes sense, Doc, but the big problem is us trying to understand how these guys think. I'm pretty flexible but I don't think I can get my head that far up my own ass.”

On the other end of the phone line, Eli could be heard sputtering in laughter.
“hey, Justin's old hat at playing different sides against each other, right? he might be able to figure it out. once he checks in we can throw him at the problem.”

“That might work, but I don't know for sure,” Joe shrugged. “The AML were very obvious, very open, despite being so exclusive when it came to membership. Getting inside the head space of a group that conceals itself at every level isn't the same thing.”

“In any event, once we do find a way to figure out when and how they will attack, we need a way to respond, right?” Dr. Alphys looked at Joe and Sans expectantly, waiting for acknowledgment. Eventually, Sans nodded.

“yep.”

“And we know from history that these guys expected retaliation from monsters. Definitely before the Barrier went down, and probably on Friday. It didn't occur to them that other humans would attack them or defend monsters.”

“That is true, but if they're hiding the way they seem to be now, I think it's safe to assume they realize they have many more enemies, and a lot less public support, than they originally thought,” Eli pointed out.

“Exactly. So if we do try to attack them, or defend against them when they attack, they'll try to be ready for both humans and monsters. So... let's keep them guessing.”

Sans stared at Alphys, then winked. “Aha. Project NEO 2.0, right? That's what you're thinking.”

“I don't know exactly what you guys are talking about, but I am not getting back in that thing until the hatch is made bigger.”

Alphys snorted in laughter. “Don't worry. This is a whole new ball game compared to that. Hmmm... let's see. I know from the emitter test that you read as purple, Joe, and I know Justin has Yellow chromatics to his Soul, but that still leaves four others unaccounted for.”

Alphys walked over to the door and looked back over her shoulder as she opened it. “Once everyone picks out a ring, text me the specifics. I'll be in the Recycling Drop Off Bay. It's been a long time since I got to scrounge right from the source.”

The lizard scientist ran out into the hallway, and Joe turned to look at Sans. “So... Doc wants to build something?”

“sounds like it to me.”

“Alright then. Hey Eli. Do you want to split up the attempts to contact Hal and Justin or what?”

“At this point I'm just hoping they check in some time before the sun goes down so we know they haven't been attacked already. They featured pretty prominently in the counterattack against the AML Friday, which would make them high value targets.”

“Hmmm. Yeah.”

There was a beeping sound and Sans pulled out his cell phone. “oh boy. got a bad feeling about this.”

The phone was unlocked and Sans sighed.
2:51 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: sans at clinic now heard about cater
2:51 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: whatever defenses the core has
2:52 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: turn them on now
2:52 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: dont know how but I think he knows
2:52 PM: alright alright
2:52 PM: calm down kiddo
2:52 PM: dad and me will get that set up
2:53 PM: how you holding up
2:53 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: still in waiting room, news came in over cahnnel 55 community tv
2:53 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: mom and dad are worried but they're trying to hide it
2:53 PM: how are your parents taking the news
2:54 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: telling you what I told them, he already got his free hit
2:54 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: he comes after any of us again, we dunk him again
2:54 PM: exactly
2:54 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: thing is
2:54 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: sans
2:55 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: really am freaking out on the inside here so
2:55 PM: well that seems normal under the circumstances
2:55 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: docs finally calling 4 us talk later
2:56 PM: take care kid
2:56 PM: good luck
2:56 PM: remember
2:56 PM: everybodys got ur back
2:56 PM LegendaryFlirtmaster: thx

“Bad news?”

Sans looked up from the phone. “Frisk just heard that Cater's on the loose. Taking it better than I expected.” The phone returned to its pocket. “Hey. If anyone asks, I'll be looking through the trash with Alphys for parts and ideas. Something tells me we're gonna need Project NEO 2.0 up and
running sooner rather than later.”

“Alright then. Good luck with that, whatever it is.”

“heh.”

Sans stopped halfway out of the conference room doorway. “hey. Joe. got one last question for you.”

“Sure, what is it.”

“hypothetical question time. if you had magic like monsters did, what would you use it for? no limits, no consequences.”

“Hmmm.” Joe leaned back in his chair for a moment. “Well... I actually applied here because I wanted to learn more about magic, and all the scientific stuff you guys put together in the underground. I guess if I figured that out, I'd use it to figure out all the big outstanding questions of science. Cosmological, quantum, et cetera. I mean, you can control gravity, you can teleport, your family invented a machine that uses time as a moving part. There's gotta be a Unified Field Theory implicit in that, somewhere.”

“huh. that's kinda what i expected, and i'm still surprised. no leveraging it all into power and riches and groupies? no list of people that made you angry in high school?”

Joe blinked. “Actually, there was this one jock asshole way back who would beat the shit out of me for some reason I never figured out. But he was in a really bad car accident and lost his right foot, and his sports scholarship and his whole future. I still don't like him but I'd feel bad about hurting him anymore, no matter how. And if I was interested in money I would have listened to my aunt when she told me to go to medical school. And if I wanted power I would have listened to my uncle, gone to law school, and made the transition to politics.”

“...what about the groupies?”

“Oh, hell yeah. Who doesn't want groupies?”

The skeleton laughed. “catch you later, buddy.”

Chapter End Notes

Getting ahead of myself by posting this, but under the circumstances I guess it's appropriate.

Stay Determined, everybody.
The Healing Process

“Hmmm. There's a lot of bruising. I don't like that at all. Some swelling, too. But the stitches themselves... are you sure you didn't eat any monster food? Because these are almost completely healed.”

Frisk held up a finger on their unaffected hand. “Speaking from experience, monster food doesn't discriminate in what it fixes up, so if I ate some there wouldn't be anything for you to poke and prod. Also I would notice if the food in my mouth dissolved into pure energy.”

“Hmmm. Well... maybe you're just a naturally fast healer. Never seen somebody heal this fast on their own, but that's not a bad thing. Makes my job easier. Okay. I think you can do without the arm sling from here on out, and I've got some stretches and exercises for you to do to make sure you get back as much of your full range of motion as possible. I'll make sure you get those on the way out. I suppose, at this rate, you can try some monster food tomorrow evening if you want. If this is what your body does on its own then there's no danger of atrophy. But stay on the antibiotics until they run out, just in case something re-opens those wounds. Oh, and you might want to consider not shrugging.”

“Ugh. Believe me. I am well aware of the downsides of shrugging right now. You'd think I would learn after the first eight times.”

The doctor smiled. “Well, that's sort of good news. Those stretches I mentioned aren't going to be very pleasant. Not that you're the type to give up when the going gets rough.”

“Hey, this has nothing to do with medical stuff, but do you think if this weekend cools down from the rain that your husband will enter the Kludge Derby again?”

“He better not, if he knows what's good for him. Rain would just make the course slick, and that contraption of his uses a glorified hamster ball as its road to surface contact. I told him once I told him a hundred times, use something with a rubber contact to grip the road and use a smaller ball, just as a prime mover. But he smiled at me each time and said “But Edna, that would be too simple-”

“Owowowowowowow.""}

The doctor's hands let go of Frisk's shoulder. “Oh my! I'm sorry, Frisk. I got a little carried away there.”

“It's alright. Coulda been worse. I could have brought up politics. Or sports.”

“Hah.”

“How are you doing after the Trial By Fire, by the way?”

“Oh, well, you saw. Had to tap out after the first round. How about your scaly friend who won?”

“Undyne sort of bit off more than she could chew, but she's alright now. If she hadn't turned down the milk after the contest she probably would have been mostly fine in the end. I didn't expect Heats Flamesman to give up when he did, though.”

“The gentleman made out of fire?”
“Yeah. Thinking about it though, it does make some sense. The sensation of heat from hot peppers is not the same thing as actual physical heat from combustion or anything like that. So there’s no reason for there to be a natural immunity because it’s not the same thing.”

“Well, you’re the closest person to a monster expert in this room right now, Frisk. So I will defer to your professional opinion. Are you ready for your allergy shot now?”

“Sure. Remember, since my left arm is already messed up, might as well get me there so I can still use my right one freely.”

“Way ahead of you.”

Frisk blinked as the doctor disposed of an empty syringe into a medical waste container, then looked at their left arm with a colorful bandage on it already.

“Wow. You are really good at this. What’s your secret?”

“There’s no real secret to it, my dear. Just keep the patient talking and focused on what they are talking about.”

Frisk wriggled into their shirt, with a few grimaces of pain getting the left arm through the shirt sleeve.

“Thanks for everything Dr. Therrick.”

“Thank you for being such a good conversationalist. I wish all my ten year old patients were as coherent as you.”

“By which you mean you wish they didn’t scream and cry and panic, right?”

“Hahahaha. Let’s go get your parents. Not sure why Mrs. Toriel didn’t come along with you this time.”

Frisk hopped off of the examination table. “I think seeing me in the hospital may have put them off seeing me in any medical setting. Which I guess makes sense. Also there was that special bulletin on TV about Jordan Cater getting loose, so they might be on edge.”

“...I hadn’t heard about that.”

“I guess it just happened a short time ago today.”

“You don’t seem that worried, under the circumstances.”

“Well, the last time he tried anything, he had a lot of people backing him, and the element of surprise. And I’m still here. Everybody’s still here. Now everybody’s on the lookout, and he doesn’t have nearly the same level of support. I think he messed up his best chance to hurt anyone.”

“Hmmm. You make some valid points, Frisk. But don’t take chances.”

“I won’t, doctor.”

Outside of the exam room, down the hallway, and into the waiting room, Frisk and Dr. Therrick walked. Once the door was opened, Frisk immediately noticed Asgore by the door, looking outside. His intent was obvious even with the friendly expression on his face; he was guarding the entryway.
By the receptionist desk, Toriel stood chatting with one of the clerks while the other one was talking on the phone. The queen's body language and posture immediately shifted when the door opened and she saw Frisk.

“Hello, Mrs. Dreemurr. I am pleased to report Frisk is showing excellent signs of recovery.”

“That is most pleasing news.”

“I would hold off on monster food for one more day, and also I have some exercises Frisk should do to maintain flexibility in that shoulder. It'll just be a moment while I print that out.”

“Understood. Let me know what the final bill will be.”

“Fawn, can you handle the paperwork on that while I get these physical therapy packages printed?”

“Way ahead of you doc.”

Frisk watched as the queen opened her purse, and felt a sinking feeling in their stomach.

“Hey, Frisk. Come over here for a second.”

Frisk looked up at the sound of Asgore's voice and walked over to the doorway where Asgore was standing. The king pointed out through the glass.

“Looks like the alpacas have made it here.”

“Yeah, looks like they've been busy all day. And... oh, I think I remember that guy. From the Address.”

“Hmmm?” Asgore looked up and saw a human in disheveled, dirty clothing, covered in scratches and bruises, walking along the sidewalk. There was also another human in a similar state of disarray and injury. “Wait. I know those two. They were...”

The two men walked up the path to the clinic and pulled open the door.

“Are you still going on about that?”

“Yes I am. I told you. I specifically remember. I said, 'Hal, if you even think about doing what I know you're thinking about doing-' and that's as far as I got because you already did the stupid thing.”

“It wasn't stupid. It was awesome.”

“Awesomely stupid.”

“False! Final answer! Ah, hey, Mr. King guy! How's it rolling?”

Asgore smiled. “Well. Things aren't too bad, if that's what you mean.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Are you two gentlemen here to receive medical attention? You look a little... rough.”

Hal grinned. “Naw. We're gonna grab some Nice Cream after this. We just stopped in to use the phone. Both of our batteries died while we were out trying to help animal control get the alpacas rounded up.”
“Ahem.” Justin coughed. “I was helping animal control. Hal was playing cowboy. That was not helping.”

“I told you man! You gotta get inside your enemy's head before you can defeat them! It's a battle of wills!”

Justin stared at Hal with narrowed eyes. “They were. Alpacas. From a petting zoo. You crazy sonnova-” Justin's eyes looked down and over at Frisk, “-nother crazy person.”

Hal snapped his fingers, pointed at Justin, and grinned. “Good save.”

“Seriously. We could have borrowed Mike's truck, gone over to the hardware store, gotten some livestock feed and left a trail through the streets right to the Arboretum. They could have closed off all the gates and animal control could take it from there. It would have taken a little over forty-five minutes. How long has it been now?”

“I dunno, my phone ran out of power at some point.”

“...think about that.”

“I did. That's why I said we should stop in here first and use the phone.”

Justin stared at the mechanic, then walked past him towards the receptionist desk. “Hey. How's it going Brandi?”

The receptionist shrugged. “Bout the same as always. Making appointments. Making myself a nuisance to insurance companies until they make good on their part of the bargain. Rolling my eyes every time some pharmaceutical rep comes in and can't pronounce Therrick correctly. How about you? Looks like you got in a fight with a wood chipper.”

Justin pointed behind him with his thumb. “Yeah. You can thank the Alpaca Whisperer back there for that.”

“Of course. Why the hell are you guys still friends after all the stuff he drags you into?”

“That's a good question. And one that's been on my mind a lot over the past...” Justin held up one hand and counted on his fingers. “Three and a half hours.”

“I think I heard you guys needed to use the phone?”

“Yeah. Batteries are dead on both our cells.”

“Is it a local call?”

“Yeah.”

“...alright.” Brandi turned the phone around and held up the handset. “This better not come back to bite me.”

“It won't.” Justin tapped some numbers on the phone and held the handset up to his head.

“...Eli. It's Justin... I'm at- Hal's with m- we were gonna... well I was going to answer all those questions but you kept interrupting each answer with another question. Got it all out of your system? ...what.”

Justin turned to look at the king, queen and ambassador, near the doorway.
“...well, that's just perfect. Thank you Murphy's Law. Listen. Hal's here with me at the clinic but our cells are both dead. We're off grid until we get back to his shop or my place. We'll tell you about Hal's Amazing Alpaca Adventure later. What time does Mike get off work? ...me neither, that's why I was asking. Can't be helped. Alright. We're on the alert... oh. That was nice of her. Something to look forward to. Alright.... you too buddy. Carrow out.”

Justin put the handset back in the cradle and turned to look at Hal. “Hey. So. Eli said that a certain somebody escaped from police custody earlier today.”

Hal's posture and expression changed in some subtle way that would only be noticed by somebody like Justin, who knew exactly what to look for.

“Cater?”

“Got it on the first try. I'm so proud.”

“...what's the call?”

Justin nodded towards the doorway. “A couple of VIPs just walked outside. Call me paranoid, but I think we should follow at a respectable distance just in case.”

“Hey. You know what they say. You're not paranoid if they're really out to get you.”

“Yeah.”

The mechanic and the ex-soldier walked out of the door and began walking along the sidewalk some distance behind the Dreemurr family.

“Does Eli want to meet up later and get some sort of war plans going?”

“Something like that. He just got a text from Joe before I called. Dr. Alphys came up with something earlier today. A new kind of party favor the next time we crash the Sages' get together.”

“Sweet.”

“Also. Apparently she asked if we had a photograph of Byron she could borrow.”

The two men walked in silence for a few moments.

“What does she want it for?”

“Eli didn't say. If he even knows himself.”

“Well... there's more than a few of him in the Back Room. Sure would like to know what it's for.”

“Me too.”

After a few more moments of silence, Hal pointed to the opposite side of the road. “That's where Amber lives now, right?”

“Hal, I don't want to have this conversation right now. Or at all. Ever.”

“...you guys were perfect.”

“Hal. Drop it.”
“I'm just saying-”

“I don't want to hear it.”

“...so you wouldn't mind if I asked her out-”

“I am going to pull all of your teeth out through your asshole if you don't drop this subject right now.”

“Hah. And people think I'm crazy. Fine. Consider it dropped.”

The two men walked in silence for a few more moments.

“Hal.”

“Yeah?”

“Those three guys behind us.”

“The guys that started following us after we left the clinic?”

“Yeah. Those guys.

“...think we can take em?”

Justin scratched the stubble on his chin. “Yes. I'm just not sure if we should yet.”

“...you want to set a trap or something?”

“I want them to commit to a course of action. Then we can use that momentum against them. If you can get somebody to commit to attacking a location, you can set up a killzone, make them blunt their offensive that way. It costs manpower, resources, time, and it saps enemy morale like the dickens.”

“Something you picked up in the service?”

“...if by picked up you mean saw used on American forces way too many times, yeah.”

“Hey. Justin. I know you don't like talking about what you saw, or did, over there. But you can if you need to. To me and all the guys.”

“...thanks Hal, but I don't need a therapist. I'm on top of this.”

“Alright.”

The two men crossed over to the other side of the street at an intersection and began walking parallel to the Dreemurr family after they turned. Justin turned to look at the boss monsters.

“You know, I don't think I've ever seen those people drive anywhere.”

“Well, the king and queen are supposed to be pretty old. So maybe them walking everywhere is a blessing in disguise. Also, look at the King's horns. That adds like a foot, at least. I saw how he had to stoop to go through the doorway at the clinic. I can't think of any vehicle he could fit in except an open top convertible. So there's a practical limitation right away.”

“Suppose that's true. Those guys still following us?”
Hal smirked. “Those guys are still behind the Dreemurrs. Trying to close the distance.”

“If push comes to shove, we're going to have to close the distance ourselves. It's not like we have anything we can use to attack at range.”

“Oh ye of little imagination.”

“Throwing our phones doesn't count, Hal.”

“...never mind then.”

Justin snorted. “Suppose it doesn't matter anyway. I won first place in the Lost Eagle County Track meet in almost every running event I was in. And anybody seeing Hal Greene running at them is either going to get the hell out of dodge, or deserves to end up on the Darwin Awards.”

“Well, that's a mean thing to say. Accurate, but mean. Also, those three guys just turned off the street. Looks like they were heading towards that house with the green garage door.”

“Hmmmm. Are they going to the garage, or the front door?”

“...front door, why?”

“Are they knocking?”

“One guy rang the doorbell.”

“Hmmmm. I didn't get a close look at them, but it was good enough to recognize any of them later. Keep your eyes open, Hal. They might be handing surveillance off to another team.”

“Wish we could do that. Hey, is Sans' hot dog stand open today?”

“Hell if I know.”

“H's been selling fast food a lot less this last week, have you noticed?”

“...I wasn't thinking about it, but now that you bring it up... hmmmm. Wonder what's up with that. I mean I know All Fine Labs has been busy as hell lately, but they've had big projects before and he was still out in the park most days.”

Hal cleared his throat. “I've been thinking a lot since he said he met Andrew and Sam.”

“Me too.”

“...Justin. Are we doing the right thing?”

Justin stopped walking and looked at Hal. “What do you mean, exactly?”

“It occurs to me, and it probably occurred to other people, that this whole conflict we've been having with the Sages for so long. We think of it as linear and binary because that's easy. It's easier to say that it's a matter of us versus them. It's easier to draw one line in the sand and have everybody split up on each side. But maybe it's not about good versus evil. Maybe it's about different types of evil all competing against each other. After what happened to Byron I'm never going to say the Sages were right about anything ever, but... I could hear what Cater was saying to Sans over the headset. Eight children fell into the Underground. Only one made it back to the surface.”
Justin reached out and put a hand on Hal's shoulder.

“I thought about that a lot too. In fact I've had thoughts like that since the press conference the Dreemurrs had when the Barrier first broke. But...”

Justin took his hand away and scratched his head. “Well. So much for not talking about the battlefield. When I was in Afghanistan... there were some guys I was friends with, in my squad. Not as close as Shop Class. But guys I would trust to help me fight the Sages, so pretty damned good. At one point we got... there was an IED. There was... I saw... it was very hard to figure out what parts belonged to who. And the next time I was out in the field, with people I didn't know as well, couldn't anticipate their movements, couldn't trust them to anticipate mine... we were all jumpy, but I was the guy with the grenade launcher. There was this local guy who came out of nowhere. Everyone was screaming, nobody spoke the other side's language, and he had his hands up. But he lowered one a few inches, and... did you know it's possible to break somebody's neck by hitting them in the head with a forty millimeter grenade?”

Hal stared at his friend. “...uh. My experience with explosives is more industrial and Fourth of July based. Not munitions. So no.”

“Well. That's what happened. They're called 'low-velocity' but these things weigh half a pound on average. Sir Isaac Newton did the rest. Thank fuck we were inside the minimum distance that the grenade needed to travel before it armed itself, or I would have ended up fragging half of the squad. And we got very lucky that there wasn't a hang fire, like what would happen sometimes with the China Lake launchers. And the thing is, he had a suicide vest on under his clothes. A real humdinger. Anything in front of him would have been shredded. His ribs would have all been broken and he would have died in minutes if he didn't die immediately, but he would have killed all of us, no two ways about it. So he was reaching for the detonator. And I managed to save the squad that day. But I didn't know any of that when I pulled the trigger. And that bothered me that night. It bothered me every night after. It bothers me right now.”

Justin blinked, looked down the street to see the Dreemurrs far ahead of the duo, and started walking again.

“So. Whenever the other kids come up. Whenever Asgore Dreemurr's declaration of war gets mentioned. I don't agree with his choice. But I understand it. Because we have that in common. Not knowing for certain, but taking action anyway. Feeling like we had to do something, anything. I can respect that. Because if you guess wrong, people you care about can die.”

“...you make some good points. I, uh. I withdraw my previous statement.”

“Naw. It's important to ask those questions. Like they say. 'In God we trust, everybody else keep their hands where I can see them.' You can accept somebody with open arms without closing your eyes.”

“...those three guys are on the move again. Looks like they're closing the distance on the Dreemurrs.”

“Curiouser and curiouser. Alright. We'll cross over at the next intersection. If they try to rush the royal family we take them from behind.”

Hal coughed.

“Oh, don't fucking start, Hal. You know exactly what I mean.”
“Yes, yes I do. You saucy minx.”

“I hate you so much right now.”

The trio of suspicious men were about half a block away from the Dreemurrs by the time Hal and Justin had crossed the street. By the end of the block, though, the Dreemurr family had stopped and was looking back.

Justin was staring right at the three men as they turned around. The expression of shock and surprise on all three faces was unmistakable. Next to Justin, Hal grinned and cleared his throat.

“Howya doin’?”

Justin sighed as the three men broke into a sprint, running out into the street-

“Hey is that Mike’s-”

Two of the three men stopped short, but one was not as quick to react and was effectively clothes-lined by an opened pickup door. The vehicle came to a sudden stop, the engine was turned off, and a burly, muscular man with a full beard climbed out of the driver’s side of the truck.

Justin watched as Mike picked up the fallen man with one arm and Hal ran over to join him, then turned and walked up to the Dreemurrs.

“So. Looks like you guys had some shadows.”

Asgore nodded. “Yes. We did notice they seemed to be following us from the clinic, along with you and your friend.”

“Well, we weren’t exactly trying to be subtle about it. And if those guys were trying, they were failing. You three alright?”

The queen nodded. “Yes, thank you. Fortunately they did not appear to want to confront us directly.”

“Excuse me.” Frisk spoke up. “You’re Mr. Carrow, right? You helped set up the sound system during rehearsal, and you had a question about the city council vote during the assembly, and you were talking with Undyne after the fight was over.”

“That’s me.”

Frisk held out their hand and the ex-soldier shook it. “I never had a chance to thank you for helping protect the hospital, or standing up against the Anti Monster League in general.”

“All part of the job. Or it would be if I had a regular job. So I guess it’s all part of the hobby. You look a lot better than you did before.”

“It seems I heal faster than most people, even without monster food or healing magic to help.”

“That’s almost always a good thing. So. Hal and I were off grid for a bit, and when we got back, well...”

“Yeah. Jordan Cater got busted out when they were transporting him to Quarterhorse Fields. I’m not too worried myself, but we did have three guys stalking us for a bit. So I wouldn't say I’m not worried at all. But as soon as we turned around, they decided they had other places to be, and as soon as they saw you and your friend, they ran away.”
Justin grinned. “Yeah. Lot of good that did them. Well, Hal and Mike will figure out what they were up to before too long.” Justin, Frisk, Toriel and Asgore all looked over at the scene in the street, where the muscled librarian was holding the man who had run into his pickup truck in a choke hold, while the mechanic had... taken off his shoe and put the sock beneath it on one hand.

“You know, I can do this all day, buddy. But Professor Argyle is very busy and you are WASTING! HIS! TIME!” The hand without a sock covering it popped open the tool box on the side of the pickup truck and pulled out a pair of pliers. “Do you know what happens when Professor Argyle loses his cool?!”

Hal opened his mouth and grabbed hold of one of his own teeth with the pliers.

“God dammit Hal! Those are my pliers, take them out of your mouth right now! Use your own tools!”

“Ah kahnt, weh nah ah mah garahge.”

“So?! Just, hold onto this clown and I'll drive you there. Put the pliers back and WIPE YOUR SPIT OFF OF-”

“Okay! Okay! Stop! Stop! Look, we weren't going to hurt anybody, okay?! We were told to watch the ambassador so that's what we did!”

Hal took the pliers out of his mouth and shook them at the man, who flinched as flecks of saliva landed on him. “So you're stalking a kid. Right. That makes it all okay. Mike, how long would it take to make him pass out like that?”

“Well, he's under a lot of stress and I think he's gonna struggle but I could probably knock him out in thirty seconds, but I might end up choking him to death by acc-”

“We weren't going to hurt anybody! I just told you! We keep tabs on where the ambassador was and that's it!”

Mike tightened his grip. “That's already more than enough. The only reason I can think of to keep track of where a ten year old is? Kidnapping. And then a whole lot of other bad stuff follows naturally. So. You're coming with us to the police. You're telling them what you just said to Hal and me. And if you don't cooperate with them to the fullest extent of the law, change your story, try to wiggle out of what's coming your way...”

Mike held up his cell phone and took a picture of the man's face; even with just one arm holding him in place, the guy could not break loose or slip out.

“Well. I haven't decided what I'll do, but I know you won't like it, and Hal Greene will. Now get in.”

Mike and Hal managed to shove the would-be stalker into the cab and surrounded him on both sides. Mike honked the horn and Justin nodded at the Dreemurrs.

“Welp. Guess that's my ride. I'll see you guys around, and I'll try and let you know if the police want you to make a statement or something. Take care.”

“You as well, Mr. Carrow,” Toriel replied.

The ex-soldier climbed up into the pickup bed and sat down with his back against the cab, and waved at the family as the truck turned a corner.
“Well.” Asgore blinked. “That sure was something, wasn't it.”

“It was very fortunate for those other two that they escaped when they did. If they had attempted to fight, we would have had to go back and bring them to the clinic.”

Frisk looked up at their parents. “…maybe I should have tried to talk to the man Mr. Van Garrett was holding. Given him a way to, I don't know exactly what to call it. Cut his losses?”

“Frisk. Your compassion and empathy are commendable. But not everybody will listen when you try to make them understand.”

“I know, dad. But I have to try-”

Frisk's phone beeped, and the child pulled it out and tapped the profile picture of Alphys that was flashing on screen.

“Hi Alphys. What's up?”

“Frisk... it's Flowey. I found him outside the lab, and... there isn't much time.”

Frisk's face went pale, and the sinking feeling in their stomach came back with a vengeance.

“Alphys, what happened? Did somebody attack him? Did he-”

“Frisk, there's no time to explain. I don't know how much longer he has. Please, get here as soon as you can.”
Dad,

I screwed up. I know that now. I know saying I'm sorry won't change anything, too. But I can make it up. I know I can.

I know how much you are scared of the mountain. Of everything inside. How one day, they might get loose. And the whole world will end.

I won't let it happen, dad.

I'm heading to Mt. Ebott. I'm going to fight the monsters. I will make you proud, I promise. You won't have to be ashamed of me any more. You won't have to make excuses for me for the other Councilors.

I know this won't change what I've done. I know what's going to happen to me when I get back. IF I get back.

I just want you to be proud of me.

I just want us to be a family again.

-Chara

The paper was stained with tears but it was still legible in the end. Chara folded it, slid it in an envelope, sealed it, scribbled “For Jordan Cater” on the back, and placed it on a desk covered in old books and yellowed papers. The child made their way through the house to the kitchen, pulled open a drawer, and removed a knife. A plastic grocery sack held a bottle of water, two apples, a book of paper matches, and a cheap compass. Chara wrapped up the bag and hid it under their striped shirt, and walked out of the house.

Walking carefully through the compound, Chara kept eyes down, trying to move with the rhythm of the other people. It was an old skill learned early on that didn't always work, but they made it to the fence behind the chicken coop apparently without being spotted. There, a low spot in the ground, and a bend in the fence provided just enough room...

On the other side of the fence, Chara ran towards the tree line. Even if they were spotted, they had a head start, and nobody was going to chase them up the mountain-

-down at the hole in the floor of the cave. Chara coughed and shook their head. It had been two days and a night on Mt. Ebott. The empty bottle of water and two apple cores were somewhere far behind and below them. One of the mountain streams seemed safe enough to drink from, but Chara's stomach was growling constantly; the handful of wild blackberries they had found was almost comically inadequate. Not that the child could really laugh about anything at this point.

Chara thought they could see a cliff much higher on the slope of the mountain, but trying to find the path that went up it had left them lost when night fell, huddled next to a meager campfire made from gathered branches that had taken almost all the paper matches in the book to get going. The compass was useless for direction finding, because it spun like a top, but that at least was part of the plan.
And finally, this cave, closer to the foot of the mountain. With a massive, deep hole in the center that had no bottom.

Chara ran a scratched, dirty finger over the back of the knife blade, considering their options. No food. No water. Starving. Thirsty. Tired. Cold. And even if there was something at the bottom of the hole to break their fall, and even if they did fight through an army of evil monsters with just a kitchen knife, how would they get back up again? Maybe it would be better to just go back.

Chara immediately regretted thinking the thought. Their mind was filled with an angry face, a disappointed face. They had stolen food and water, they had left the compound without permission, and they would have nothing to show for it.

The knife dropped from their fingers, and Chara walked closer to the edge of the hole. Maybe... maybe this was a sign. That things had gone too far. That they couldn't be fixed. And thinking about it some more, Chara smiled. It was insane to think that a child could win against an army of monsters. They would have just thrown their lives away anyway. So really... there wasn't any real reason not to jump. The end result was the same.

Chara took another step forward... and their foot caught on something.

In less than a second, Chara saw what had happened. There had been a root on the slope of the ground near the hole's rim that they had been too preoccupied to notice. When they stepped forward, the root caught their foot. But they were still moving forward. Chara opened their mouth but the scream of fear died in their throat. Suddenly, going back to the compound, being yelled at by dad, the angry looks and words from everyone else... it didn't seem like such a bad alternative after all.

But, Chara reflected, in the tiny corner of their mind not overwhelmed by fear, it wasn't up to them anymore. Gravity had taken over. The air rushed past their face, but that was only part of the reason their eyes started to water. The impact came as a shock, which was probably for the best. Pain didn't kick in until Chara tried to move, and then it took up all of their attention.

“..ow...”

“What was that?”

Chara's eyes shot open, or at least one that could. The other one barely opened at all, and Chara tried to raise their head off of the ground. If that voice was real, if it wasn't the byproduct of getting hit in the head on landing... even if it was from someone dangerous, Chara didn't care any more. The prospect of slowly dying in the dim light of the cavern had taken over their mind. Almost any alternative was better.

“...ugh... is anyone there? Please... I need help...”

“It sounds like it came from over here... oh! You've fallen down, haven't you? Are you okay?”

Chara peered through the darkness. It looked like a short figure was coming towards them.

“I... I don't know. Everything hurts so bad...”

Chara flinched as arms reached out for them, and blinked in surprise as the figure touched them. Their hand was soft, gentle, very careful, almost as if they were afraid of hurting Chara even more. Which was unfamiliar enough to cause a sudden flash of fear.

“Here, get up...”
Another arm reached for Chara and they gritted their teeth and moved on their own, pulling up one leg and forcing it to support them. A stab of pain almost caused their leg to collapse under them, but the other arm was there, keeping Chara from falling down again.

“Oof... thank you. My name is Chara. What's yours?”

“Chara, huh? That's... a nice name. My name is Asriel.”

Chara stared the shape holding them up and began to notice details in the dim light... but the arms holding them up were still very careful.

“You have a cool name. Thanks again for... for helping me. I thought I was going to die down here. Which...”

Chara felt another stab of pain and blackness started to spread on their peripheral vision.

“Which might still happen, they way I feel.”

“Oh no! Hold on, Chara! We just need to get to Home! My mom can make anything better! You'll see!”

“I'll... I'll try.”

“Just lean on me. It's going to be okay!”

Asriel shifted his position and Chara felt his arms move. A great deal of weight was suddenly taken off of one leg, and they let out a shaky breath. Slowly, carefully, the two figures moved forward towards the light in the distance, which seemed to become brighter as Chara's eyes adjusted to the dark.

And with that, other details became clear.

Chara swallowed. “...uhm. Asriel?”

“Yes?”

“You look really... fuzzy. And you feel fuzzy too.”

“Oh, that's because I am.”

“...so I'm not hallucinating. That's good. I think?”

Panic tried to make a come back, as Chara understood that they were being supported by a monster. But, at the same time... they were being supported by a monster. A monster with warm, fuzzy arms, who was trying very hard not to hurt them as they moved. In the end, it took too much energy to panic. Chara felt themselves go numb inside. Asriel was like Chara, a child. He probably didn't understand what was going to happen when the two of them showed up at his home and his mother saw a human from the surface...

But as last moments went, being helped along by somebody who was warm, soft, and above all else kind wasn't too bad-

-Chara stared at the flowers. At the knife in their hand. Closing their eyes, Chara saw Asgore's face, pale and sweating. Toriel's shocked expression as he fell to his knees. Heard the cry of alarm
when she found the bowls, the dishes, the leftover ingredients, both right and wrong, and understood what had happened.

A fragmented memory forced itself to the front of Chara's mind. A half remembered nightmare, followed by a longer, clearer nightmare. Trying to tell Asriel important things but not being able to say the words. Paralysis from fear and shame and guilt. Fuzzy arms and soothing words and a promise that everything would be alright, in the end. And then, the following morning.

The resolve.

The focus.

The Determination.

A silent vow to protect Asriel, Toriel, Asgore, and every other monster in the Underground. If any human tried to hurt anyone in the Underground... they would pay.

Any human.

No matter what.

Chara grabbed the first bundle of buttercups and started chopping them up with the knife, their mouth slowly drawing back into a grin that was not a grin.

Any human.

Tears began to seep from the corners of eyes focused on the slow reduction of flowers into a poisonous mush.

No matter what.

The door opened quietly, with the barest sounds from the hinges, but it was enough. A skeleton in a lab coat walked over to a basin of earth with a number of devices attached to it, from all manner of sensors to an automatic water sprinkler. In the center of the basin was, or used to be, a golden flower, but it looked more like a wax model of a golden flower that had been left out in the sun for several hours.

Sans stared at the scene with empty, black eye sockets.

“...uh. Alphys said you wanted to see me.”

The room was silent for a few moments, then the flower shifted. One eye managed to open.

“Sans... yeah. I don't think.... I have much time left. So...”

“do you need anything?”

“...need to set the record straight... Sans... I'm the Anomaly.”

The skeleton stared at the flower, and his eye lights slowly came back.

“so. you know about my work.”

“Yeah... that thing in the CORE. The thing that let the human kids come back. That let Frisk come
back. You need... you need Determination to use it. It worked for the humans. It worked for me. I don't know why it doesn't work for the Amalgamates. Maybe none of them have enough. Maybe... maybe they already fell down, and that meant they couldn't use it.”

“...why tell me this now?”

“Because. Because I won't be around to do it later. Because you were always there, so close to the answer. And because. You need to know what actually happened at the end of Frisk's first run.”

The skeleton looked away from the flower. “Frisk said... Frisk said they killed Asgore.”

“Frisk... fought Asgore. To a standstill. But they couldn't finish him off. Gave up, tossed down their weapon. I did it, while everyone was distracted. The only time in all my different versions of the time loop I ever made it to Asgore and got the human souls. I tried to steal Frisk's to make it seven. To become godlike. Even then. With six other souls behind me. I couldn't beat them. We were connected. Dragged past the Barrier. The souls fought back against me. Frisk... let me go. And somewhere on the surface... something or someone killed them. And I was back in the Ruins again.”

The lab workroom was silent for a while.

“that's a lot to process.”

“Yeah.”

“...how long have you been in the time loop?”

“I don't know. I lost track after eighty resets. It could have been years. Decades. Centuries. You know how it is in the Underground. Every day bleeds into the ones before and the ones after. I've done everything. Read every book. Explored every part of the Underground. I've helped everyone. And...”

“...yeah?”

“I've killed everyone too, Sans. Everyone except you. Even in the timelines when I didn't hurt your brother, you were there, figuring out something was wrong. And even at my strongest... I could never beat you. I could never kill you. You always stopped me, forced me to reset back to the beginning.”

Flowey sniffed. “Thanks.”

“...thanks for stopping you?”

“Yeah. Before Frisk showed up. I was just an oddity and annoyance in the Underground. Thanks to you... there was no way I could keep going in a timeline with serious damage in it. Now. On the surface. I was an even stranger oddity. An even bigger annoyance. But there was... it was like people accepted that. About me. It was okay to vent my frustrations and mess with people.”

A slow, pained chuckle came from the plant monster. “Shakespeare in the Park interrupted again? Well, that's Flowey the Flower for you. Where did all of these detour signs come from? Who else? The trees in the arboretum are on strike. Somebody call Frisk to talk to Flowey. It was... it was something new, after the same thing over and over again. I... think I was really close to being happy when the town decided 'Don't Trust The Flower' was the new slogan. Only two people liked me in the whole town, Frisk and Papyrus... but it was like I belonged.”
Sans thought he heard a choked sob from the plant.

“And. And none of it would have happened if you hadn't stopped me from going too far. Sans... I've hurt Papyrus. On more than a few resets. I... you need to know that.”

“...sometimes I wondered.”

“Well. Even if I wanted to. I can't hurt anyone anymore. It's taking all of my strength. All of my concentration. Just to keep this shape. And I look like a damned novelty candle. But. There's stuff that needs to be done. You need. You need to tell Frisk. Tell them you know that they didn't kill Asgore before. I was the one that landed the killing blow. Frisk softened them up. They couldn't go through with it. It is not their fault. No matter what they think.”

“I will.”

“Good. Sans. About Cater. He is Chara's human father. That's true. But. I've been getting memories for a while now. And some of them aren't mine. Sans... there's a memory of Chara's in here with me. Of them getting a knife and heading to Mt Ebott to try to kill the monsters. So their dad would love them again, after... I wish I could forget the rest of that memory. Sans. That human. If you fight him again. Do. Not. Hold. Back.”

“Wasn't planning on it.”

“Good. There's just. There's one more thing.”

“what is it?”

“I don't know. What's going to happen. When I can't hold on anymore. If I'm dead, I'm dead. And it's been a long time coming. Doesn't matter if I end up as dust or a wilted plant. But. If it looks like I'm still alive. Somehow. Could you do me a solid and... hit whatever is left with the DT Extractor. Whatever is left of my mind by then. Will appreciate that.”

“...I don't know if I can do that.”

“It's not like you haven't killed me before.”

“If you're telling the truth, I did that to stop a threat. To protect people. This is something totally different.”

“You'd be helping me. It's bad enough being a flower... with other people's memories. The only way it could be worse is... ending up like a Memoryhead. Or something like that.”

The skeleton stared at the flower.

“...I can understand that.”

“...thanks, Sans.”

“Just... remember, buddy. None of us know what's going to happen next. Alphys might come up with something. And... well... I know Frisk cares about you. If we're not giving up... don't you give up, alright?”

The room was silent again.

“It's... it's hard to hold onto hope right now. But. I'm persistent. Like a weed,” Flowey broke out into hacking laughter. “Fine. For Frisk's sake, if nothing else.”
“do you need anything while I'm here?”

“...if plants had painkillers, I'd ask for those. Other than that... nothing anyone else can do. Except wait, I guess.”

“...if you need anything, just say so. We got a microphone hooked up in here.”

“...thanks, but calling for help doesn't usually work out for me.”

“Well... it's there, if you need it and you change your mind.”

“Thanks, Sans.”

The skeleton walked out of the room, closed the door behind him, and took a deep breath. Walking down the hallway, Sans turned the corner and found himself in the lobby... just as the Dreemurrs were walking in through the door.

“Frisk!” Dr. Alphys ran over to the child. “I'm so glad you're here now-”

“Alphys, what happened?”

“I screwed up, Frisk. When you and Flowey were connected on Friday, and your soul went back to normal, there was a surge of DT Energy. Flowey got all of it and I didn't even notice because I was focused on scanning you. Flowey... he's got more physical matter than any of the amalgamates. But even he couldn't handle that much DT Energy. I'm so sorry. If I had moved my phone just an inch to the right I would have seen what happened. We could have kept an eye on him, maybe taken him down to the Extractor, brought it down to safer levels. But-”

“Where is he?”

“I... I managed to transplant him to a testing bed for experimental plants. But there's nothing I can do to stabilize him now. I don't... Frisk, I don't know what's going to happen to him next.”

“...can, can I see him?”

Dr. Alphys rubbed her claws together. “I don't know if that's a good idea. I don't know if he even wants to be seen like this.”

“...Flowey was there for me at the very beginning. Even if he was angry. Even if he was a troll. He has done too much for me, for everyone, for me to give up on him now. Even if there's nothing I can do to change things after all... I can still be here for him, at the end.”

Dr. Alphys blinked, and then shut her eyes. “I understand, Frisk. Follow me.”

The lizard scientist walked through the lobby, Frisk trailing behind, until they reached the exam room. Sans watched Frisk's face. For the first time, it was impossible to read what they were thinking.

Or, Sans thought to himself, maybe Frisk isn't thinking anything at all...

The door squeaked open with the slightest noise again, and Alphys stepped inside.

“Flowey... it's Alphys.”

“...hey.”
The lizard swallowed. “There's somebody who wants to see you.”

“...Frisk.” It was a statement of fact, not a question.

“I'm right here, Flowey.”

Frisk stared at the melting flower, heard the labored, raspy breathing.

“Frisk... don't you have anything better to do?”

The human child walked across the room and knelt down by the tray.

“No. Nothing is more important than being here, now. With you.”

Dr. Alphys walked over to the instruments next to the plant bed and flipped a switch. “The microphone is off, Frisk. I imagine... that this probably needs to be between the two of you.” The scientist slowly walked back to the entryway. “Frisk, we'll all be in the lobby, if you need us,” she said, before shutting the door completely.

The room was silent for a few moments, until Flowey laughed a slow, difficult laugh.

“Heh. Heh. Well. Alphys has come a long was, hasn't she. She didn't even scream in fear when she saw me. That's... definitely a sign of the times.”

“Flowey, what happened? Alphys says it's her fault, that she didn't catch something on her phone, but... was it... the Anti Monster League people, Cater's people? Did they...”

“You know that statue in the middle of Heritage park. The one showing me and Chara carrying their body.”

Frisk nodded.

“I swore to myself. No matter what else I did. I would never go back there. But... I did this morning. And. I realized something. Something terrible. If Asriel is this other person. If I just have his memories. If I'm not him. Then. Chara was never my friend. Chara was Asriel's friend. And I'm not Asriel.”

Flowey sniffed.

“And I cried. I cried until I thought I couldn't cry anymore, and I was still crying. Every. Single. Part of me. Hurt. I don't... I realized. I am alone. I... I tried to run away, but it was harder to burrow. And I realized. My body was breaking down. It took everything I had. To make it to the lab... I was outside for hours, hoping I could get somebody's attention, ask for Alphys... scared that if I called for help... well. Like I told Sans earlier. I don't have a good track record with that.”

“Flowey. You're not alone. You have me. You have Papyrus. You have Alphys. And... wherever Chara is now, you still have her. You are still Asriel, no matter what you say. I know it. I feel it. Please don't give up.”

“...you idiot.” Flowey sniffed. “I told you. At the end of the first run. Getting close to people... just gets you hurt. And at the end of the second. I told you... just forget about me. You can't save everyone, Frisk. Asriel has been gone for a long time.”

“...why are you crying, Flowey?”

“Because it hurts. It's like... trying to hold onto something. You get tired. Your muscles start to
hurt. And you let go. Whether you want to or not. And I'm scared. I haven't been this scared... since I woke up in the garden. I don't know what's going to happen next. I don't even know what's happening to me right now.”

“...you weren't crying when I came in here.”

“...you're right. It's not just that. Alphys said... that soul thing. I still have that fragment. You... you pulled yourself together. You didn't need it. So. I've still been. I still. I have feelings. More than fear. I have friends. I'm... I'm going. To miss you. And Papyrus. And that crazy human.”

Slowly, with obvious difficulty, Flowey's face contorted into something like a smile.

“But. Frisk. There's something else. I have a bit of soul now. When I... when I'm gone. That was what scared me. When I gave up on life the first time. If something without. Without a soul. What happens when it dies? But now. I'm not afraid of that. And I...”

Flowey's face pulled itself together... just for a moment, it looked almost like Asriel's head.

“I can see Chara again...”

The flower collapsed.

Frisk's mouth dropped open, their hand reaching towards the spreading puddle, a green light already shining from between their fingers.

The sky was like diamonds.

A million, million crystals scattered across space, reflecting each others light. A kaleidoscope big enough for the whole world to fit inside, with room to spare. Shapes and patterns in the stars jumped out, and far to the north, there was the rippling of light, a fluid radiance in the sky.

“Hello Asriel.”

Asriel looked down from the sky, and turned around.

“So. Here we are again. It's not the first time I've been wrong. It won't be the last. But it's good to see you again, brother.”

“Chara.”

Asriel reached out a paw and Chara raised a hand in kind. Fingers meshed together. Asriel felt tears running through his fur, but he didn't care.

“I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too, Asriel.”

Asriel watched as moisture collected in the corners of Chara's eyes, and they smiled.

“I was wrong, Asriel. Crying doesn't make you weak. You are the strongest person I know. In all the world. Holding on the way you did, no matter what. You carried me to Home. You did so much for me. To protect me. To try to Save me. I am so sorry. At the very end, I stumbled. And you tried to hold me up, but instead I dragged you down. Into that stupid plan. I got us killed. I got you trapped in that flower. And even then. It took you so long, so many resets, before you hurt somebody else. That is how strong you are. Even without a soul. Even in the sick, endless hell of the time loop. You held out longer than anyone else could ever hope to.”

Chara closed their eyes and looked away. “After everything that's happened to you... I understand if you can't forgive me. I understand if you hate me-”

Asriel tackled Chara in a hug, fuzzy arms wrapping around the human child.

“Don't say that. Don't ever say that, Chara. I could never hate you. And... and the plan worked. It took a while. And some people got hurt. But monsters are free, and living on the surface, in peace. Chara... I'm the one who's sorry. I should have told mom and dad. That you felt like you had to die. I know now, that's what I should have done. I saw your memories. How much it hurt just to be. And... after dying again, I know what you felt. You hurt so much, you wanted to die, but something inside you wouldn't let you go.”

Chara patted Asriel on the shoulder and pulled away slightly. Their eyes looked down at the ground.

“When Frisk fell. When they landed on the golden flowers. Their power... it awakened me from death. I think something happened with the other six humans, but it wasn't the same. I only woke up with Frisk, because there was something inside her. Something that resonated with what was left of me by then. The power of their Soul, yes, but there was something else. A call for help. A call
for me. Asriel... just before I woke up, somebody called my name.”

“...I was calling for you for a long time. I hoped if I had survived, or got brought back, something like that happened to you. I know how awful it sounds to want what happened to me to happen to you. But I just wanted to see you again.”

Chara shook their head. “It wasn't your voice. I don't know whose it was. But I saw... through Frisk's eyes. Heard through her ears. And I felt her pain, her fear. Her hate. Frisk's hate, like mine, except Frisk had turned that hate back on herself. I felt her despair when she came back after mom accidentally killed her. I felt her guilt when Toriel broke down, and let her leave the Ruins. That terror inside her. Of saying the wrong word, of putting a foot wrong. Of hurting somebody else.”

Chara rubbed their eyes. “That was when I understood. I was sick. That hate, first for the people in the compound. Then the town. Then the whole world, all of humanity. Taking over my mind. I'm glad you resisted me. I'm glad you didn't fight them, that you ran back home.”

Chara looked up at the night sky and smiled. “Do you see that star constellation that looks like a big ladle?”

Asriel looked up. “...yeah. It looks like the drawings you made long ago. You called it the Big Dipper.”

“Yeah. Also known as Ursa Major, if you include the other stars below it. But what's important is the tip of the handle. That star is called Polaris. The North Star. The earth spins on an axis that lines up with the direction of that star. So it barely moves in the sky. In a world that is constantly spinning, constantly changing, even during the day when the sun is the brightest light in the sky, the North Star is always there. Always.”

Chara looked at Asriel again. “You, Asriel. You are my North Star. You brought me to Home. You were by my side, showing me the way, all the time I was underground. I got lost because I didn't follow the path you showed me. But I will never make that mistake again.”

Asriel stared at Chara. “I don't understand. We're... we're dead. Aren't we? So... I don't know what happens next. But whatever happens to us, whatever we do, wherever we go... we'll do it together. Won't we?”

Chara smiled a sad smile, and Asriel's eyes widened.

“Wait... I'm not dead yet??”

“When you connected to Frisk's soul to try to wake her up, I was able to connect to yours. We were combined when we died, and the DT Experiments didn't bring back everything. But. The power of Frisk's soul. She was determined to save you. She forced herself back to life, for you and for everyone else. That power... the will to keep going. The power to change fate. There was more than enough for me to change yours. That soul fragment was like a corner piece of a jigsaw puzzle. I've just been filling in the blanks all this time. I put us back together again... except for those memories from before I fell. I needed you to understand who and what I was, before I met you. So I gave you those.”

“So... what are we? What am I going to see when I wake up?”

“You'll see Frisk's face. Scared, worried about you, but glad to see you. As for what we are... we're not what we were when we died. Like I said before. You're you. I'm me.”

Chara put both of their hands on Asriel's shoulders. “I won't be with you when you wake up, Asriel.
But I'm always going to be a part of you, and you will always be a part of me. When you're scared, when you don't know what to do. When you don't know if you can keep going. Call my name, and I will come to help. Even if you can't see me, or hear me, I'll always be there for you.”

“Chara... do I have to wake up now? Can't we just... stay here? Just for a little while?”

“Yes. I promise, you won't wake up until you're ready.”

“...can we watch the sunrise? Together?”

“Of course. This is a dream. Anything can happen here.”

The stars above began to shift, and Chara sat down. Asriel knelt down and took a seat next to them, and he felt Chara lean on his shoulder. The sky transformed, becoming brighter and brighter, and individual starlight faded from sight, bit by bit, one by one. The blackness became dark blue and deep purple, and slowly became lighter and lighter shades of blue.

“This sunrise. The dawn of a new day. This is another chance for both of us, Asriel.” Chara's hands gripped Asriel's paw.

“This time, we'll do it right.”

“...I love you Chara.”

“I love you too Asriel. Goodbye.”

The light was blinding, and the afterimages were vividly painful even after eyes were squeezed shut. There was shallow breathing, interspersed with hiccups and the occasional choked sob.

“Come on. Come on. Wake up. Please, wake up.”

“Augh...”

The voice gasped and the light seemed to go out.

“Asriel. Can you hear me? It's Frisk.”

“...Frisk.” The words came with difficulty. Everything felt wrong. Like his face was the wrong shape. His eyelids were heavy. His arms were heavy, his legs were hea-

Asriel's eyes opened just a crack against the lights inside the room, and with great difficulty he lifted up his hand to where he could see it.

“I... I have... hands. I can... I can feel my legs. Frisk. What happened?”

There was movement, to fast for his eyes to follow, and suddenly there was a human child kneeling down next to his head.

“Welcome- welcome back, Asriel.” Frisk's voice was choked, and their face streaked with tears. But their eyes were bright and they were smiling.

“...I thought I was dying.” It was getting easier to speak, easier to breathe, for some reason. “I thought... if I didn't keep trying to hold that flower shape, I'd collapse into nothing. But now...”
Asriel shifted his head and felt the surface behind him give way.

“I’m still in the plant tray.”

“Yeah. I didn't dare try to move you. Even after you seemed solid again.”

The monster child lifted his head a few inches, and then fell back. “Frisk. I can't move that much. Everything's so heavy. It feels like I have legs, but I can't see-”

“You have legs, Asriel. It's okay. And... you were a flower for a long time. It'll take some getting used to. D-do you want me to help you sit up?”

“Yeah. Yeah, that sounds great... wait. Frisk. I. I have a very important question.”

“Yes, what is it?”

Some color rushed to Asriel's face, creating a marked difference even under the white fur. “...am I naked right now?”

“...yes, but don't worry. They keep closets full of spare lab coats and safety gear in every room in the lab. I covered you up when I realized what was happening. And I, uh. I didn't look, if that's what you're worried about.”

Asriel closed his eyes and grinned in spite of himself. “Hehehe. I can't believe I'm worried about something like that at a time like this.”

“Yeah, it's a little funny. But... what a problem to have, right? Do you still want to sit up, or...”

“...yeah. Let's see what I can do now.”

Frisk knelt down underneath Asriel's outstretched arm, until it was over their shoulders. Slowly they stood up and moved forward, pulling Asriel upright.

“Oh god. I regret this so much.”

“What's wrong, Asriel? Does it hurt?!”

“No, no. I'm just. I am so dizzy. Uh. D-don't let go of me or I'm going to fall flat on my back again... wow. I have toes again. That's... that's really great.” Asriel grinned, which slowly faded away as he looked at Frisk.

“...I thought I was dying. That I was either going to end up as dust, or a shriveled plant, or some blob of goop that wanted to die but couldn't. What happened? How am I... Frisk, wait. Is this a dream? I don't want it to be a dream.”

“Well. A bit earlier things had a lot in common with some nightmares I've had. But no. Lately when I have a bad dream Jordan Cater shows up to kill me. And while he did escape custody today, nobody's seen him yet. So far, so good.”

“Yeah, I heard about that. A lot of people in the lab are scared or angry about that. Not that I blame them a bit... hey, Frisk. What happened to me, what did it look like? To you?”

Frisk's eyes glazed over. “It was like... you just melted into a puddle of stuff, and then it started rippling, and it ran all over the place, and somewhere along the way it made a shape and started filling it in. I, uh. I was a bit too distracted to take really good notes, so-”
“Where's that green light coming from?”

Frisk and Asriel looked at each other in confusion, and then looked down. Frisk's left hand was surrounded by a brilliant, emerald green aura, which flickered and wavered. Frisk's right hand clapped over their mouth and muffled the shriek of surprise, and the light vanished.

“Frisk... that was healing magic. You're a human with magic... how?!”

“Oh god. Oh god oh god oh god. It's real. It's real.” Frisk lost their balance and fell backwards onto the exam room floor. “No no no no no no no-”

“I saw. When I first woke up. It was a blinding light. Was that you? Were you trying to help me?”

Frisk started to hyperventilate, and Asriel managed to pull one leg over the rim of the tray, then the other.

“Frisk, calm down. It's going to be okay.”

“It's! It's not! Okay! This is. This is how. Everyone got. Got.”

Asriel gritted his teeth and pushed himself off of the lip of the tray, and tumbled forward onto the cold tiled floor. His legs were too heavy, and too slow when he moved them, but he could move them.

“Frisk. Listen to me. It's going to be okay.”

“I can't. I can't breathe. I.”

Asriel stared at Frisk, and then pulled himself along the floor towards them. A thought occurred to him, one that left him feeling even more sick and disoriented than he already felt.

“Frisk. Take my hand.”

Somewhere in the child's panicked mind, the words were understood. Frisk held out their hand, and Asriel grasped it.


Slowly, and with difficulty, Frisk's lungs returned to something closer to normal behavior. Fresh tears leaked out of the human child's eyes.

“Oh god. What am I going to do... Sans is going to kill me. Mom is going to...” Frisk sobbed. “This is it. It really is the end... if monsters find out there's a human that can use magic-”

“They'll be okay with it, if it's you.” Asriel pushed himself up into a sitting position, and pulled the lab coat towards him and over him as an afterthought. “Nobody's gonna believe that you went to all that trouble to help set monsters free, just to try to seal everyone away again.”

“...Asriel. You can't tell anyone. Anyone. Even if.” Frisk swallowed. “Even if you're right. I don't know how this happened. What if somebody else figures it out. What if Cater figures it out?”

“Okay, yeah. That would be bad for everybody. Calm down, Frisk. Don't worry. I won't tell anybody. I wouldn't know who to tell anyway, or where to start. Hell, I don't even know how I'm going to explain how I came back to Tor-”
Asriel stopped talking and his expression slowly turned into a grimace. Tears started to spread into his fur, and one paw clutched at his chest.

“Oh... welcome back, remorse and self-loathing. How long has it been... a year and a half, right...? And you brought your friends shame and guilt. That's fine... sure, make yourselves comfortable...”

Asriel sniffed and closed his eyes. “I... I don't suppose there's a way you know to sneak me out of the lab without anyone seeing me?”

Frisk wiped their eyes with the back of one hand. “I. I don't know the place that well. But... it's going to be alright, Asriel. I promise you. Toriel and Asgore miss you. They don't talk about it, but with you gone there is... it's a hole in their hearts. They need you just like they need each other, no matter how much they say they don't. No matter how much they want to think they moved on.”

“But. If they know I'm Flowey. Then they know I'm not really Asriel. The real Asriel... would never... oh god. I should never have left the underground.” Asriel slammed a paw against the floor. “I should have stayed down there forever. I don't belong up here. I don't belong in this body. It's all wrong. It's all wrong.”

“Don't say that.”

Asriel opened his eyes and saw Frisk push themselves into a standing position. Their hands were shaking, and they looked tired and woozy, and their breathing was still labored and rough. But something about their facial expression had changed.

“You told me. When I was ready to give up on everything. That I was wrong. The world wasn't better off without me, and that's why everyone was fighting so hard to keep me alive and safe. So... that door swings both ways. No matter what anyone else did or did not do at the castle, you destroyed the Barrier. You did that as Asriel Dreemurr, not Flowey the Flower, but you're still the same person. I have hoped. And dreamed. And prayed. For something like this to happen. I read through the first quarter of the book Sans gave me in a single night, because I thought something in there might help me to help you. I know this world is better off with you up here, with all of us. And the only reason I was the only one trying to make it happen, was because I was the only one who knew.”

Hands reached out and grabbed Asriel underneath the shoulders, and Frisk managed to slowly lift them upright, with a considerable amount of exertion. “We'll do this together, Asriel. Come on. We'll take it one step at a time. Literally.”

Asriel managed to move his legs underneath him, and stood up, though he ended up leaning on Frisk. The human child moved around, carefully, until Asriel's arm was over both of their shoulders again.

“Frisk-”

“I won't let go. Not until you're ready.”

“That's not it... thank you. Thank you for believing in me, no matter what.”

“...Asriel. All the times I called you my best friend. That wasn't me trying to make you feel better. I meant it. Every word, every time.”

Asriel's footing slipped on the floor, but Frisk stopped and held him in place.

“...this is going to take some getting used to.”
“Don’t worry Asriel. It’s like riding a bike. You never forget.”

“Frisk, I never learned how to ride a bike.”

“I’ll teach you to ride mine. First you walk. Then you run. Then you ride. And in a couple years we’ll learn how to drive. After that... well, like I said. One step at a time.”

“You know, Frisk. It’s like you’re a whole different person right now. Earlier you were scared of anybody finding out about your magic. Now...”

“You need my help. I'll freak out later. On my own time.”

“...where do you keep all of it?”

“I just don’t think about it. I've... well, I've have a lot of practice.”

“Not what bothers you. This strength. This second wind.”

“...I dunno.”

“...I think I want to try standing on my own.”

“Okay.”

Frisk slowly let go and moved away from Asriel, but tensed up in case they had to rush forward to catch him. Asriel wobbled a little bit, but stayed upright.

“Okay. This is good. Hey. Can you, um... turn around for a second.”

“Oh. Right.” Frisk and Asriel both blushed, and while Frisk looked away, Asriel pulled the lab coat he was clutching around him, fit his arms into the sleeves, and managed to button it up.

“Okay. You can look now.”

Frisk turned and saw that the lab coat reached to below Asriel's knees, and the sleeves bunched up only a little around his arms. Asriel looked at the coat, still blushing.

“This is a really small lab coat. I thought it would trail behind me.”

“Well, it was sized for Alphys and Sans and other monsters that are around our size. Guess that's why it was hanging low enough for me to reach.”

“That makes sense. I want to try to walk now.”

“Okay. I'll be ready, just in case.”

One shaky step brought Asriel forward, and another step brought the other leg next to the first one. The process repeated itself a few more times, and then the pace picked up. After several dozen steps around the room and across it, Asriel looked at Frisk. Tears had collected in the corners of his eyes, but he was smiling.

“I can move. I can walk.”

“There’s not enough room here to practice running, but we can do that outside, or leave it until tomorrow. Take it at your own pace. There’s no rush. Well... I say that, but sooner or later... we have to open that door and talk to everyone. Explain what happened.”
“...yeah. I don't know exactly what I am anymore... boss monster, flower, amalgamate... I don't
know how long I'm going to live. But even if I live for a thousand years, I won't be ready for this.
We should. Frisk. Just get it over with. Go ahead and get Tor- get mom and dad. I'm not going
anywhere.”

Frisk nodded, and walked over to the door. Their hand was almost on the doorknob, before they
stopped and turned back. Their arms wrapped around Asriel.

“It's going to be okay, Asriel. I promise.”

“...no matter what happens next. Thank you for staying with me. Thank you for sticking things out,
after everything I did wrong. You really are something special, Frisk.”

“No I'm not. I just know what it's like to be alone.”

Asriel took a deep breath. “Okay. I'm ready.”

Frisk let go again, and walked towards the door. Outside, in the hallway, they turned and headed
towards the lobby. Alphys, Toriel and Asgore immediately noticed the approaching child, and
Frisk saw that more people had showed up; Undyne was standing by Alphys, Dr. Aster and
Papyrus were talking to Sans, and one of the human lab technicians was nearby, but walked away
as Frisk approached, mumbling something that sounded like “Phase Two” as he did.

“Frisk... is it over?”

Frisk looked at Dr. Alphys, and saw her face. It was clear that she had been crying too. The human
child looked up at their parents, and swallowed.

'I understand why you're not ready, Asriel. I'm not ready, either.’

“Mom, Dad... I need you to come with me. And... I can't explain why. I wouldn't know where to
start.”

“What is it, my child? What is wrong?”

“I think... you realized I've been... keeping things from you. I don't think you know how much. Or
how important some of it was. But you need to know some of it now. Please... I need to show you
something.”

“...very well, Frisk. We will come with you.”

Frisk turned to Dr. Alphys. “Dr. Alphys... you don't have to if you don't want to. But I don't think I
can explain it all correctly by myself.”

“I'll help, Frisk. Don't worry. I owe everyone an explanation as well.”

Frisk, Alphys, and the two boss monsters walked down towards the hallway leading to the exam
room. Frisk took a deep breath, reached for the doorknob, and pushed open the door.

Toriel's breath caught in her throat.

“...no...”

Asriel stared up at the queen, paws pressed up against her mouth, eyes open in shock. Next to her,
the king’s eyes were similarly wide open, and his jaw had dropped.
“NO.”

Fireballs burst into existence around the queen, and her face twisted into a visage of rage.

“How dare you. How dare you.”

Asriel stepped back away from the heat, lost his balance, and landed on his back; his whole world had suddenly become a maelstrom of fire.

“How could you... how could anyone be so cruel... Flowey, this is your doing, is it not?! An illusion to torment me?!”

“Your majesty-”

“SILENCE.” Toriel turned on the scientist, who shrieked in terror as the fireballs increased in number and speed. “You, you called Frisk. You were a part of this. An accomplice in this sick, twisted practical joke-”

“What's going on here?!”

Asriel looked past Toriel and saw that the hallway was crowded with other monsters; Undyne at the front with Dr. Aster, Sans, and Papyrus behind.

“Toriel, what's happening??”

“What's happening?! Ask your friend. You know her well enough.”

Alphys held up both claws. “Toriel I swear I didn't know about this. I mean, I knew that Flowey had Asriel's memories but-”

“You have nothing to say to me.” A fireball launched in Alphys direction, but was parried by a spear and collided with the edge of the plant tray. Metal, plastic and soil burst into the air and splattered against the walls. And faster than Asriel's eyes could track, Undyne was in front of Alphys with another spear out.

“You may be my employer. And you may be the queen. And you may be a boss monster. But if you ever try to hurt Alphys again I will break you in half.”

“You would defend her even after this... even after-”

“hey, hey, whoa. time out. i get that everybody's under a lot of stress, right now, but let's not blow a fuse. we do that enough around here as it is, amirite Alphys?”

“Stop. Trying. To distract me, Sans. Now is not the time or the place.”

“I DO NOT UNDERSTAND. WHERE IS FLOWEY, AND WHO IS THIS MONSTER THAT LOOKS LIKE A YOUNG VERSION OF ASGORE? WAIT A MOMENT... IS ASGORE A TIME TRAVELER?!”

“Papyrus you fool! That, that thing is an illusion, created by Flowey as a sick joke! If you were not such a naive imbecile you would understand that about him!”

The air twisted and cracked and a giant skull monster hovered next to Dr. Aster. Inside both eye sockets, two deep blue lights glowed.

“My son is a genius. Choose the words that come out of your mouth next with great. Care.”
“Do not presume to lecture me, Doctor. For all your grand statements and elegant equations all you did was leave us all in the darkness, for the second time. You gave us all hope and then snatched it away. You are as cruel as Flowey.”

Another giant skull monster materialized, this time inside the room. Toriel looked down to see Sans’ eye sockets empty and dark.

“Tori... you're my friend. But believe me. If you keep going the way you are... you are gonna have a bad time.”

“Toriel. I need you to turn around for a moment.”

Toriel glared at Sans, and then turned to face Asgore... who had picked up Asriel in one arm, and had run his fingers from his free paw through his beard.

“Do you see them, Toriel?”

“I am NOT. In the MOOD. For GAMES, Asgore.”

“This isn't a game, Tori. Can you see the gray hairs?”

Toriel blinked. “What??”

“I thought it was stress. Stress from politics. Stress from the Anti Monster League threats. Stress from the change from the Underground to the surface, from not knowing what would happen next. But I should have known better. Boss monsters do not age except to the extent that offspring grows. Frisk is dear to me and I love them but Frisk is human. Frisk will grow up whether or not we grow old. So now... now I understand.”

Toriel glared at Asgore with angry, tearful eyes, but he was right. There were tiny spots of gray occasionally sticking out from his golden mane.

“...no... even you, Asgore... even you would not...”

“This is not a trick, Tori. This is our son. There is no other explanation.”

“...it can't be...”

Toriel fell to her knees and put her paws over her face. “I... I remember. Asriel running back with Chara’s body. Falling down in the garden. Dust scattered everywhere. I... we gathered up the dust, and sprinkled it on Asriel's toys. I... wanted it to not be real. I begged for it to all be a terrible nightmare. But every day I woke up and he was still gone...”

Asriel reached down and squeezed his father's arm, and an unspoken understanding passed between them. The monster child was placed on the ground, and he walked slowly, unsteadily towards Toriel.

“Mom... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, for everything. I didn't know how to tell you. I didn't... I was so scared, and so angry. I woke up in the garden, and... mom. You're right to be angry at me. You're right to think I'm not your son. After all the terrible things I did.”

The child raised a paw and laid it on Toriel's arm. “I can't take back what I've done. And I know some things can't be forgiven. But...”

Asriel's voice faltered, trailed off, and went silent. There was nothing to say.
Toriel lowered her paws and looked at the child again.

“...Asriel. Is it really you...?”

“Mom... it's me.”

Toriel looked in Asriel's eyes, then closed her eyes, and smiled.

“You... my son... you came back to me. You came back to us.”

Asriel was suddenly scooped up in two massive, fuzzy arms.

“It's really you. Despite everything, it's really you.”

“...I should have told you. I should have come to you both. I should have tried to explain long ago. I'm so sorry mom.”

“It's alright. It's alright, my child. You're back. You're back. It doesn't matter how. It doesn't matter why...”

The exam room was silent for some time, until Toriel finally relaxed her grip and smiled down at her son. “One day. One day I hope to understand what has happened. How this has happened. But for now... I am just glad you're here.”

Asriel smiled a little. “You can thank Frisk for that. Frisk... figured things out before I ever told them. Frisk has been... Frisk only kept it a secret, because I asked them not to tell you. But Frisk has been trying to bring me back since the Barrier was destroyed.”

Toriel took a deep, shaky breath. “So much makes sense, now... Frisk, thank you. Thank you for bringing back my baby.”

The room was silent, and Toriel looked around. “Frisk? Where are you?”

“AHEM. YOUR MAJESTY.”

Toriel looked behind her to see Papyrus sweating out in the hallway.

“EARLIER, FRISK RAN OUT THROUGH THE DOORWAY AND DOWN THE HALLWAY. AT THE TIME I ASSUMED THAT THEY WANTED TO REACH MINIMUM SAFE DISTANCE IN CASE THERE WAS A MAGICAL CONFLICT. BUT THEY HAVE NOT RETURNED.” Papyrus narrowed his eye sockets and scratched his jaw with one hand. “I AM BEGINNING TO SUSPECT THAT THE 'IMBECILE' APPellation IS NOT ENTIRELY UNAPPROPRIATE AT THIS TIME.”

Asriel clutched at his chest. “Oh no.”

“What? What is it, Asriel?”

Asriel looked up at Toriel, his face twisted in a grimace of worry. “When I was still a flower, trying to save Frisk in the hospital. I saw their memories. I saw their childhood. I saw... why Frisk decided to climb a mountain that nobody ever returned from. Frisk's human parents... everything started to go wrong when they started screaming at each other. I don't think Frisk... knows how to handle that. Or if they ever got a chance to learn. Mom, we need to find them now and explain things.”

“I got it!”
A scaly claw held up a cell phone, and Alphys began tapping the screen again. “The instant I heard that Cater was on the loose again I came up with a way to use the dimensional storage app for tracking, so if anyone was attacked or kidnapped we could track them by phone, even without signal or battery power. If they’re not on their bike, they can't have gotten far... there!”

Alphys held up her other claw and a map of the town formed, with a pulsing red dot moving across it. “It looks here like Frisk is heading back home. Uh... do you think we should c-call them? To... to try to calm them down, let them know things have called down?”

“Yes.” The king nodded. “The sooner we clear this up the better.”

Alphys tapped the phone and held it up to their head... and a few moments later, lowered it.

“It went straight to voice mail. Frisk must have already turned it off. Should I leave a message?”

“couldn't hurt.” Sans held up one hand. “next question i'm not so sure about. do we wait for Frisk to go home or try to bridge to their location.”

Asriel shook his head violently side to side, and almost fell over. “Don't ambush Frisk. Don't make it seem like anyone's out to get them. Because I think that is exactly what Frisk thinks is going to happen. Maybe we should, I don't know. Maybe they just want to hide in their room, wait for the storm to blow over. If we go and explain what actually happened...” Asriel scratched his head. “I imagined a lot of stuff going wrong when Frisk went to talk to everyone. But I didn't imagine this.”

Alphys looked at her phone screen again, and then held up her claw again. The image reappeared, with significant changes. “Wow. Frisk is really fast. They're almost two thirds of the way there.”

“That sounds right to me. Kid's a born sprinter.” Undyne smirked. “Speaking from experience and as their gym teacher. So if anybody's going to catch up to them, we need to leave now. Toriel, do you, uh...”

The queen looked at the ground, and Asgore stepped forward. “I don't know what's going to happen next, but... I have a feeling. I think this is going to get worse before this gets better.”

Sans turned to look at one of the skull monsters, which had made its way out into the hallway and was rubbing affectionately against the one that Dr. Aster had summoned. With a wave of his hand, the monster withdrew back into its pocket dimension, and Aster's followed. “Hmmm. Hey. Try this plan on for size. We go outside. Wait for Frisk to get home. Give em a few minutes to calm down. Bridge over to the house. Tori, Asgore and... Asriel go inside. Explain everything. We stick around outside, just in case we're needed. But first...” Sans pointed at Asriel. “Stick around. I'll be right back.”

Sans vanished in a flash of blue light, and reappeared a few seconds later with a plastic bag in one hand, which he held out to Asriel.

“You and me are almost the same size. These ought to fit. I always keep a spare set of street clothes in case there's a lab accident that's really over the top, even for us.”

“Um. Thanks.” Asriel's cheeks flushed, and Undyne started pushing people out into the hallway.

“Come on! No locker room antics! Give the kid some freaking privacy!”

Out in the hallway, Alphys checked her phone again. “Okay. Frisk is pretty much home... guess I should keep an eye on them...”
"Hey, Alphys?"

The scientist looked up in Joe's concerned face. "Joe? What's up?"

"Hey, I know you've been busy as a one legged man in an ass kicking contest for the past few hours, but I wanted to let you know that Eli stopped by. He's taking the other rings with him and everyone else will try them on when they check in later. He's Cyan, by the way. Oh, and he brought this."

Joe held out an old photograph of a brown haired man with a bushy brown mustache, with Elijah standing on one side and Officer Ward on the other. All three men were smiling and holding trophies depicting piles of junk.

Alphys nodded. "Thank you, Joe. Uh. Can you run it through the soul chromatics analyzer yourself? I... there's a whole lot going on right now and I'm afraid it's got all of my attention."

"Sure. Uh... do I want to know what's going on right now?"

"It's... it's complicated. There was a fight, Frisk ran back home."

Something about Joe's expression changed. "I heard from Mike that there was an encounter with a stalker earlier, going after the Dreemurrs. Not sure this is a good time to be on the streets alone."

"What?? I hadn't heard about that."

"Well, like I said, you were super busy. Also..." Joe pulled out his cell phone. "Mike also said he dug up Frisk's old library card, from before the Barrier was broken. We didn't know if it was going to be useful or not, but apparently... Frisk Taylor, the only Frisk in the database, lived at 126 East Cavendish Road, way back when."

"...thanks, Joe. I don't know if it will be useful, but I'm glad to know it."

"No problem. Well, I got stuff to do so I'll catch up with you later."

The lab wrangler walked down the hallway to some other part of the lab, and after a few moments, the exam room door opened again. Asgore stepped out, followed by Asriel wearing black shorts with white stripes, and a shirt with a cartoon of a man in a lab coat riding a Tyrannosaurus Rex. Toriel completed the procession. Sans held up his fist in a thumbs up gesture.

"lookin' good, kiddo."

"It's a little tight, but I guess with you being a skeleton and me having fur, that makes sense. Alright... are we ready to go see Frisk?"

"yeah. let's head outside."

The group walked out through the door and Sans held up a hand. "Alright. keep your hands, arms, horns and tails inside the dimensional bridge."

There was a bright flash of blue light, and the crowd of monsters vanished, reappearing outside of Toriel's house; in the light of the late afternoon sun, it stood out from all the other houses in the neighborhood in that its windows were all dark... with a single exception on the second floor.

Toriel, Asgore, and Asriel stepped forward, walking up the sidewalk. The door opened easily, and the three boss monsters walked inside.
“Frisk?”

The queen's voice was soft, but the response was immediate; there was a bumping noise upstairs. Asriel grabbed Toriel's hand as she walked towards the stairs, making a motion with his other hand. After a few moments, the queen nodded. Asriel walked past her, towards the stairs, and slowly made his way up. Inside the short hallway, he stared at the light that was coming from under Frisk's door, walked up, and knocked.

There was no response.

Carefully, slowly, he opened the door and walked inside. The room appeared empty, and there were not many places that anyone could hide anyway. The light had come from a reading lamp on a desk... Asriel walked over to the desk and picked up the sole sheet of paper on it... the topmost lines were faded and smudged, and probably had been written some time ago.

Wish List

-Toriel: School set up, resolve things with Asgore?, Save Flowey

-Sans: ??? Doctor Aster is back and Sans seems happy

-Papyrus: Famous internet personality, Join Royal Guard somehow (Honor Guard?)

-Undyne: Make anime real??, Reform the Royal Guard somehow (Honor Guard?)

-Alphys: Lab start up, human internet and anime

-Asgore: resolve things with Toriel?, Save Flowey

-Flowey: Save him, tablet?

-Frisk:

Everything is broken.

I have ruined everything. Again. I can't do this anymore. I can't do this. I hurt Toriel. I hurt everybody.

I am a brat. I am a liar. I am a coward. I am the scum of the earth. I want to run away but there is nowhere to run anymore.

Please give back the laptop and cell phone to Dr. Alphys, and the red artifact to Undyne. The book on the night stand belongs to Sans. Everything else is Asriel's now.
I came back because I wanted to believe things would be okay. I was selfish and wrong. Nothing I say can fix anything. Nothing I do can fix anything. It doesn't matter how sorry I am. It doesn't matter how many times I say it. The plate is still broken and it will never be fixed and it will always be my fault.

Please cremate my body and sprinkle the ashes on the ledge outside of the cave to the Underground. That was the first moment I ever felt truly hap

Ignore what I just wrote. Just toss whatever is left of me into the Abyss. Or leave it where you find it. Save yourself the trouble.

When I close my eyes, I see Toriel crying and furious. I never wanted to hurt you. I never wanted to hurt anyone.

I wish somebody in the Underground had killed me when they had the chance.

Asriel swallowed, but not without some difficulty. A scraping sound got his attention and he looked towards one of the windows, where a shadow caught his attention.

“Frisk?? Frisk!”

Asriel ran towards the window, and the shadow disappeared. After some difficulty, Asriel got the window open; it could not be latched shut from the outside. Sticking his head out, he saw the backyard... and a figure standing on the edge of the roof.

Before Asriel could open his mouth, Frisk jumped. A paw was raised and... something shot out. A green line, straight towards Frisk, and wrapping around them, stopping their fall halfway to the ground. Grunting with pain, Asriel felt the weight pull him out through the window. His other paw shot out in reflex and something slammed into the ground beneath him.

When he hit, the impact was muffled, and he shook his head and sat up. A patch of glowing golden flowers had burst from the ground to break his fall, and then faded away again.

“Alright... convenient. Not complaining.” Asriel held up his other arm and saw a glowing vine sticking out from it, which began to retract. His eyes followed it to the end and saw where Frisk had landed, where they were disentangling themselves from the vine.

“Frisk, stop! Stop! It's okay, you don't have to run anymore!”

“I heard something! Come on, to the backyard! NGAAAAH!”

There was a squeak that had to be Alphys, and Undyne landed on the other side of the fence gate, followed by Papyrus. Sans flashed into existence as Undyne put Alphys down, and the back door opened as Toriel and Asgore rushed out, followed by Dr. Aster.

Frisk cried out and tried to get up, but stumbled and fell on the grass, where they stayed still. Asriel could hear panicked breathing transform into labored sobbing, and grabbed Toriel's arm as she rushed towards the child.

“Wait. Please. Mom... you need to read this first.” Asriel held up the sheet of paper that had somehow survived the trip down and impromptu magic use. Toriel blinked, but took the sheet of paper. Her eyes narrowed, and then opened wide. Once she reached the end of the page, she looked at Frisk, who had slowly gotten up, clutching their left shoulder.
“Frisk... what is the meaning of this note?”

Frisk stared at the ground. Everyone was standing around in a circle. Escape was impossible.

“It's goodbye.”

The flat tone of voice, the lack of emotion and expression, did more than any inflection could.

“What?? Why?”

“Because,” Frisk swallowed. “Because it's over. Everyone has what they wanted. You have Asriel again. The way it should have been a year and a half ago, if I hadn't screwed up everything. And I won't screw it up again.”

“...my child. What did you-”

“I'M NOT YOUR CHILD! YOUR CHILD IS RIGHT THERE!” Frisk screamed, pointing at Asriel. “HE'S BACK AND YOU'RE A FAMILY AGAIN AND JUST STOP TAUNTING ME WITH WHAT I CAN NEVER HAVE! I DON'T...”

The human child took a deep breath, but the momentum was gone. Around them, eyes widened, and eye sockets darkened. Nobody present had ever heard Frisk raise their voice that much. Some of them had never heard the human child raise their voice ever.

“I don't... I don't belong here. I don't belong anywhere. When you saw Asriel again. I saw. I saw it again. That look on your face. Just like before. That's what I do to people. I can't change it. I can't fix it. All I do is hurt people. It would be better for everyone if I was dead.”

Toriel stared at Frisk, and then knelt down on the ground in front of them.

“Frisk. Please, look at me.”

The child raised their head slowly and looked at Toriel. The boss monster's breath caught in her throat as she looked at Frisk's face; bloodshot eyes stared back from underneath unruly bangs, and tears had left tracks in a face covered in dirt and grime.

“What happened at the laboratory. That was... I responded the way that I did, because seeing Asriel again... that wound had never healed. And it was... it still is... difficult. And so I lashed out. I apologize. To you, and to everyone here. What I said to each of you was inexcusable. I beg your forgiveness, all of you, for what was said in the heat of the moment should never have been said at all.”

“it's alright, Toriel. water under the bridge.”

Various other sounds of affirmation followed Sans' statement.

“Thank you, Frisk. Please understand that what happened, it has no bearing on your actions or your intentions. You did not cause that. You did not hurt me, or hurt anyone else. What you did was reunite me with my baby. I have only been so blessed once before, when he was born. And I have never been so ashamed of how I have acted in all my many years.”

A large white paw was raised, and Frisk flinched. Toriel stared at the child, sadly.

“You have repaid all anger, all cruelty, with kindness. And you have returned all kindness shown to you a hundred times over. But... it is clear that this has taken a terrible toll on you. You spent so
much time and energy trying to find a way for your friends to be happy. But we cannot be happy knowing that you are miserable. And we cannot allow you to suffer in silence, out of a mistaken impression that what we do not know cannot hurt us.”

The other paw was raised and Frisk stared at Toriel, holding out both arms to them.

“Frisk. Everything you think you have done. Every mistake you believe you have made. Even if all of it were true, you would still be my child. You would still be a part of this family. And that will never change. I am sorry I frightened you. I am sorry I was so ungrateful for the gift you have worked so hard to provide to Asgore and myself. And I am sorry I did not understand the trials you had suffered, or the scars they left behind. Frisk, you are not a brat, or a bad kid, or a liar, or a coward, or the scum of the earth, or any of the epithets you have applied to yourself, or had others apply to you. I swear to you, in the presence of all our closest friends and family, that I will do everything I can to help you, no matter what happens next.”

“...Toriel...”

“Yes, Frisk?”

“...I should have told you about Asriel. But. I didn't know how.”

“It's alright, Frisk. Everything is alright.”

The child stepped forward slowly, raised their hands, and grasped Toriel's paws. When they spoke, their voice was a hoarse whisper.

“Mom. I'm. I'm so sorry. I didn't know what else to do except to run. Please... please don't give up on me.”

“I will never give up on you, Frisk.”

“...thank you.” Frisk took an unsteady step forward, and another, and another... until they were close enough to hug Toriel. The boss monster wrapped her massive arms around the child.

“It's going to be alright, my child.”

Frisk's brow pressed on the queen's shoulder, and once again Toriel could feel the tears soaking through the cloth. Slowly and carefully, the boss monster stood up, cradling the sobbing child.

“Everyone... thank you for your help and support tonight. It has been a long day. For all of us. Perhaps some more than others.”

Toriel turned to look at Alphys. “Doctor Alphys. Thank you for all you have done to help my son. I should never have raised my voice, let alone my hand. Undyne... you were right to defend her, when I crossed that line. Thank you for stopping me, before I said or did something I could not take back.”

Toriel turned and looked towards Papyrus. “Papyrus. You are not a fool. You are not naive, you are not an imbecile. You are wise beyond your years, and I am convinced now that you were such good friends with my son all this time because you saw him for what he truly was, a lonely child who needed a friend. Dr. Aster. You did so much for everyone, long before you vanished. I was wrong to ignore all of that. Sans... your anger at my attacks on your family was entirely justified. I regret every word of it, and I am sorry I hurt you as a consequence. You have the patience of a saint.”
Toriel finally turned and faced Asgore, who had picked up Asriel. “Asgore... Gorey. Thank you for making me see reason. Thank you for stopping me from saying all those awful things. Asriel... I missed you so much. I was not ready to say goodbye. I could never have been ready. That wound has been open all this time, and seeing you again... there is no way anyone could have prepared me, no matter what was said, or when, or how. I am sorry I could not accept what had happened. I am sorry I frightened you. You are my son, and I am so glad you have returned. No matter how or why.”

Toriel's head lowered, and she looked at the child in her arms. “Frisk... you have done so much for me. Today, and every day that has come before. For my family, my friends, my people. Please do not think that it was not appreciated. That it was all for nothing. This is your home, and we are your family and your friends. And no matter what happens in the future, no matter what has happened in the past, that will never change.”


“...thank you, mom. I'll be here for you guys too. No matter what.”

Toriel smiled, and looked at the assembled monsters. “Again. Thank you all for everything you have done today. I... I fear it is getting late, now. And there is a great deal that must be done tomorrow. But this should not be a time of sadness or argument. This should be a time of joy and celebration. Please, make yourselves welcome in our home this evening. Tomorrow will happen in its own time.”

“...it'd be our pleasure, Tori.”

“Yeah! After everything that's happened, all that worrying and fighting and junk, let's end today on a high note!” Undyne picked up Alphys again and spun her around, prompting a high pitched and sudden “OH GOD WHY” from the lizard.

“I really should be going back to the lab...” Dr. Aster saw his sons' faces. “But, what the heck. The secrets of the universe will still be there tomorrow.”

“THEN IT IS SETTLED! A PARTY TO CELEBRATE THE RETURN OF THE PRINCE, AND TO WHATEVER TOMORROW MAY BRING! NYEH HEH HEH!”

One by one, the backyard became empty.

One by one, the lights went on inside of the house.

And from time to time, neighbors and passersby could hear the occasional fit of laughter.
“Good morning, Ebott's Wake! You are listening to the Morning Rush, for all your morning talk radio needs! I am Brett “The Brett” Brinkman and I am joined once again by everybody's favorite, DJ Pantz!”

“I wouldn't say I'm everybody's favorite.”

“Well... okay, that's true. But it terms of raw fan mail we get at the station, you're just behind Gary. Silver medal is still a medal.”

“And protects against vampires.”

“Actually I think that's werewolves. Might affect some vampires, though. Gotta say, once Stephanie Meyers got into the business, there's been no respect for the classic conventions. But I'm getting ahead of myself. How are you this morning, Burgie?”

“Well, I got some surprising news yesterday, but I'm okay with it now. I'm ready to get to work.”

“Wow, that is... uh... a very level and clear headed response. I never expected to hear you say that, on or off the air. Not sure how to handle this actually.”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, on my way to work this morning some guy threw a box of girl scout cookies at my car for some reason. I don't know if it was on purpose or if I accidentally intercepted a pass or what, but hey, free thin mints!”

“That's much better. Thanks. And I hope all of you out there experience pleasant surprises today in lovely Ebott's Wake, Batteries Not Included.”

“Okay... I mean, we get our power from some place else in the county, right? So I guess that makes sense.”

“Sorry, my eyes have been bothering me since I woke up. I was looking at the wrong paper. The actual slogan intended for today is, uh, okay. I'd love to know the train of thought that lead to this slogan, but here it is, and I swear I'm just reading this off the actual copy sheet they gave me... 'Fortified With Vitamin E’.”

“Well, that's their problem, not ours.”

“True enough. So, let's move on as quickly as we can to our top story today, and one that already has rumors swirling around it, so you may have already heard about it. Prince Asriel Dreemurr is back from the dead. According to a statement from queen Toriel Dreemurr and Dr. Alphys of All Fine Labs that we were sent this morning... Asriel Dreemurr ended up becoming the first Amalgamate.”

“Now, by now everybody knows more or less the whole story about the Amalgamates, but here’s a refresher course. Dr. Alphys was trying to find a way to store monster soul power until we had enough to break the Barrier. By accident, she saved a bunch of monsters that had fallen down, but not without some, well, side effects. As part of the project she needed something that could act as a conduit and stabilizer for soul energy, and that ended up being Flowey. What we’re just finding out now is that Flowey wasn't an ordinary monster originally. Alphys used a golden flower that had grown from a seed stuck on Asriel Dreemurr's clothing, for some reason. And because the seed that became Flowey was covered in Asriel's dust after he died, the process brought him back to life in
sort of the same way that it kept the monsters that had fallen down from dying.”

“Which, now that we know about it, means a whole lot of stuff suddenly makes a whole lot more sense.”

“No kidding. If I died and then got brought back to life as a freaking flower, I wouldn't exactly be in a good mood either.”

“Burgie, if I got stuck as a flower I'd probably go crazy and start killing people. We joke a lot on this show about everything Flowey did, but... wow. I just now realized how lucky everyone is.”

“Me too. Kinda puts all those pranks he pulled in a new light. Youthful hijinks and acting out and stuff.”

“Well, yes, that definitely. But the scale of what he did for those pranks? Instant hedge mazes? Armies of trees? If he'd decided to actually, seriously hurt somebody, he could have done it easily. So, I for one appreciate his restraint in the face of adversity.”

“There is that.”

“There is that, yes.”

“Oh, and Alphys didn't actually say anything about this in her statement, but at the risk of editorializing, I want to speak to everybody out there who heard what we just said but came away with the idea that there's a way to bring people back from the dead. Please think about the Amalgamates. Then think about Flowey the Flower. I hope that's enough to make you not want to try to bring your loved ones' remains to Alphys to try and have them brought back. If you're still thinking about it even after that... DON'T.”

“Yeah, let's not have another Panic of 79.”

“...not have another what?”

“Oh. Right. For all monster listeners and probably many younger human listeners, the Panic of 79 is basically Lost Eagle County's version of the whole War of the Worlds Radio Play thing. Due to a comedy of errors involving a thunderstorm, TV signal interference from said thunderstorm, a flash flood and the subsequent breakdown of the water treatment facilities in Triton resulting in a cholera epidemic, there was a conviction among almost two thirds of the populace of Lost Eagle County that the zombie apocalypse was upon us. I wasn't alive to see it myself but my dad told me stories.”

“Hmmmm. I can see how that would be an issue. But humans weren't actually coming back to life?”

“No, that was just people freaking out when the flood waters hit the Triton Cemetery and... well, let's just say memes existed long before the internet was there to spread them.”

“Alright then. I'm surprised I haven't heard about this before.”

“Well, nobody's really proud of it, although each town reacted to different extremes. Except Robin's Egg, because the repeater antenna hadn't been built yet, so they didn't know what was going on until like a week later. Which is a pretty good argument in favor of strategic ignorance, when you think about it. But that's neither here nor there. We were talking about the return of Prince Asriel. The Dreemurr family is asking for time and privacy while they adjust to these new events. Related to that, Undyne sent us a statement to read on the air this morning as well. Statement is as follows. 'If anybody gives Asriel crap about anything he did as Flowey, I'm going to have a long talk with them. Consider yourself warned.' Statement ends.”
“I am half tempted to make a joke about Cater coming out of hiding to do that so Undyne could kick his head in, but it might be too soon for that.”

“Well, it did just happen yesterday, and that is our second major news item of the morning. The Ebott’s Wake Police Department has sent us some details on what happened. Apparently the Alpacalypse animal stampede yesterday forced the police transport with Jordan Cater and several other members of the Anti Monster League to use an alternate route. The original plan was apparently to head up to Triton and then get on the freeway to Quarterhorse Fields, but with Muscovy Road blocked, they ended up taking Polton Road instead and some AML sympathizers set up an ambush. Four of the six detainees escaped, and seven police officers were admitted to Rita Belle Thurman here in Ebott’s Wake and Our Lady Of Temperance hospital in Triton. Two of them were admitted in critical condition, but we have no further information about them at this time.”

“So was the Alpacalypse just an elaborate set up? Part of their plan from the start?”

“The police are investigating that possibility.”

“Wow. Those alpacas really lure you into a false sense of security.”

“I know, right?”

“I’m starting to wonder if what happened to Gary yesterday was part of some larger scheme too. Speaking of which, it’s time to check in with Gary Welkin for the morning traffic report. Gary, how’s it going up there?”

“Salutations, Brett and Burgie! From my vantage point among the clouds I can occasionally see a glimpse of roads and vehicles traveling thereupon. Thus far there have been no disruptions, no blockages, no accidents of any kind! However, I see it fitting to remind motorists traveling along Cavendish Street that there is an ongoing attempt to douse a fire by the Ebott’s Wake Fire Department and Auxiliary, so you may want to consider an alternate route!”

“Whoa, what? Are we talking house fire, vehicle fire, or what?”

“When I said occasional glimpses, I meant it, Burgie! This smoke is thick, black, and surprisingly aromatic, so I suspect it originated with a mishandled barbeque grill!”

“Okay, you guys have to explain this to me again. Is it barbeque or is it grill? Because I keep getting confused.”

“Well, technically a grill is just that, a metal grill with the heat source below it. Barbeque refers to a specific way of cooking meat. But so many grills were designed to be used to barbeque as well as grill, it sort of became a convention. In the same way that almost any large trash container will be called a Dumpster even though that’s a brand name.”

“...alright, I think I got it this time.”

“ Anything else you can tell us from up there, Gary?”

“Only a strict, earnest reminder to never leave any cooking food unattended! Back to you two!”

“Thanks, Gary. Moving on to upcoming and current events, the Lost Eagle County Historical Association has announced that their renovations are complete and they will officially be reopening on the first of July to coincide with the birthday of the founding father of Lost Eagle County, intrepid pioneer and US Army scout Immanuel Kelly. The official museum of course is in
the heart of downtown Quarterhorse Fields but special exhibits dedicated to 'Handy Manny' Kelly's larger-than-life exploits can be found in every township, and our own Ebott's Wake Community College has a special reference section in their library which features the majority of Kelly's personal papers from his life before becoming the civic leader of the county.”

“I gotta say Brett, I heard a lot of stories about this guy and I don't know what to believe.”

“Well, pretty much everybody agrees the one about him conning a bear into trading its own pelt for a Bowie Knife was just an allegory about his silver tongue that took on a life of its own, but there is a lot of historical evidence of his handiwork, both literal and more symbolic. They're too numerous to list in the time we have slotted but here's a running list in case you, or any listeners out there, would like to go on a historical drive this summer. At Lone Point, you can see the Standing Wall, left over from Kelly's repairs to the original Lone Point town hall after the west side was blown in during a violent thunderstorm, which survived the following storm that demolished the remainder of the building and every subsequent case of inclement weather in Lone Point to this very day. In Gemini Road, the original road he himself helped set in brickwork is still being used. In Triton you can visit the oldest extant church in Lost Eagle County which he helped design and construct. Here in Ebott's Wake, there is a historical landmark denoting the surveyor office where Kelly used a combination of carpenter's tools, a navigational sextant, and eight pages of longhand arithmetic to calculate the height of Mt. Ebott, which we now know was accurate to within ten feet which is absolutely amazing. Quarterhorse Fields is of course where he lived and worked the majority of his life, except for the year following the death of his wife Isabella, when he lived alone in a cabin in what is now the Cornucopia Valley Nature Preserve. Which indirectly resulted in the creation of Robin's Egg.”

“Wow. I've heard a lot of stuff about the surface but never about a guy who accidentally founded a town.”

“Actually Burgie, I've noticed a recurring theme in many American folk tales is amazing achievements by accident. Pecos Bill accidentally launching himself into space by creating a tornado, Paul Bunyan accidentally creating a riverbed because he didn't realize he was dragging his ax, that kind of thing. I might be biased but I like how so many folk tales from other parts of the world are cautionary or moralistic fables, while the stuff we came up with here basically says you can have no idea what you're doing and still do amazing things.”

“That is inspiring. For a a certain definition of inspiring. What else is on the calendar?”

“Well, I mentioned Cornucopia Valley earlier, it turns out they have published a report on daily, seasonal, and annual temperature averages for the past thirty years, which can be found on their website and is mirrored on the Ebott's Wake Community College website. It turns out that 2016 is officially the hottest year on record.”

“Sure feels like it.”

“We have some more events to share with everybody but I waxed poetic a bit too much about the county history, so we need to pause for station ID and other necessities. Stick around, more Morning Rush is coming your way.”
Eyes opened a crack, then shut again to block out the light, before trying again. A coffee table, assorted empty chairs, a cell phone, a photo album, and an empty picture frame, all slowly came into focus.

Asriel shifted his head and looked around some more. He was lying on a sofa in a strange house. Except... it wasn't that strange. It looked familiar, from all the times he had seen the inside through windows and opened doors. It only seemed strange from an inside perspective. One arm came up and Asriel wiggled his fingers, and let out a deep breath.

"It wasn't a dream..."

Turning his head some more, Asriel became aware of a presence, and at the same time, a weight on his body. A mass of unruly brown hair was centered on his chest.

"Frisk..."

"Mmmm."

Asriel smiled. "Hey. Frisk."

"Don't go..."

"What? Frisk, wake up."

"It'll be okay, Asriel... please, don't leave..."

"Frisk. Come on. It's Asriel."

Slowly, Frisk's head shifted, and they looked up at Asriel's face through eyes valiantly trying to fight off the morning sunlight. Their mouth instantly turned into a tremendous grin.

"It's real. *The dream is real.*"

"I'm still here, Frisk. Somehow."

"...do you remember what happened last night?"

"Some of it... mom made some pies from scratch, everyone was sitting around telling stories...” Asriel started to blush. “Then dad got out the photo album and everyone started looking at my baby pictures. Could have done without that but if that's the tradeoff for not being a flower anymore, I'm okay with it.”

“I can't remember a whole lot. I think I was just so tired. I don't know if I was dozing off, or what.”

“Yeah?”

“After you ran home... I told mom about what I saw in your memories. Not the whole thing. But enough to explain. I know why you don't like to talk about that stuff. But sometimes secrets hurt you more than they help you. You know how... how this all got started. A secret promise.”
“...yeah.”

“I don't think Chara would have ever forgiven me if I had told mom and dad. But I would rather Chara be alive and hate me for the rest of their life than... what happened. I'm not going to rush you. But after last night...”

“Yeah. I, uh... I could have handled that better. I saw the fireballs, and I saw mom's face, and... it wasn't just like all my nightmares come to life. It was like I was back there. In the old house. Like running away, falling into the underground, meeting everyone, and the time back on the surface, like it was a fantasy I invented to try to escape what was happening. Even when I ran out of the room and the lab, it felt like I was dreaming. My legs wouldn't move fast enough. I couldn't get enough air. And there was something too terrible to think about, chasing me.”

“...Frisk, about the wish list. There was nothing next to your name. Not even smudges from an eraser.”

Frisk raised a hand and ran their fingers down Asriel's ear.

“My wishes were everything that came before. And right now, I have everything I've ever wanted.”

Asriel smiled and brought up his other paw, and rested it on Frisk's head... but slowly that smile faded.

“Frisk. About what you wrote... after.”

“...I wasn't thinking too clearly, but I remember why I crossed out my name at the end of the list. I felt that because I had wanted something personally, that meant that whenever it happened to somebody else it was, um. Not sure what the right word is. Contaminated, I guess. I wanted to distance myself from it all somehow, before everything else fell apart. I didn't know for sure, but I had to hope, that something would get through to mom and she would accept you as real. It felt... after I was done writing, I curled up on the bed, and just tried not to think. About anything. But then I heard mom's voice... all I could think about was escape. That's why I...”

The two children were silent for a minute.

“Frisk. Were you just trying to escape? Because some of that? It sounded like. Uh. Like last wishes.”

“I was still running. I didn't know where. But, you saw me jump. I didn't exactly care about making it there in one piece. I didn't expect to ever see anybody again. I didn't expect anyone to ever want to see me again. And...”

“What is it?”

“This is going to sound crazy, but... for a long time, when things would go wrong... it felt like... no. I heard. It was like my parents. Screaming at me. Inside my head. About everything I did wrong. This time. It was the same words. The same screw ups. But it was my voice.”

Frisk raised their head to look at Asriel.

“I don't think that's a good sign.”

“Well. Whatever it is, whatever it means... last night is still over. Before I woke up in the lab, I had a dream... Chara was there. They said that the sunrise would be a new beginning for us both. And... well. I know it's true for me, now. I hope it's true for them, too.”
“Me too.”

Frisk grabbed the back of the sofa and pulled themselves upright into a sitting position, and Asriel followed suit.

“Looks like we fell asleep during the party. And somebody must have put this blanket on us.”

“Must have... hey, how is your shoulder doing?”

Frisk blinked, then shrugged, then held up their left arm and moved it around. “I think it's completely okay. Hmmm. Dr. Therrick said I could have some monster food today... I guess last night was close enough.”

“No, wait. When you were helping me get used to moving around again. You were using both arms, both shoulders. So...”

Frisk held up their left hand and stared at it.

“Asriel... even after last night... after everything mom said. And what you said... I know we have to tell them. But. Please, let's build up to this. Just thinking about the whole thing makes me sick to my stomach.”

“I understand. And I'll be by your side when it happens. You stood by me. I'll stand by you.”

Frisk looked away, unable to return Asriel's gaze.

“Asriel, I didn’t stand by you. I ran away.”

“You were the only one who believed in me for a year and a half.” Asriel smirked and winked. “You definitely deserved a break.”

The two children were silent again.

“Hey... where are mom and dad?”

“Well... it's Wednesday morning. Not sure what time.” Frisk leaned forward and picked the cell phone off of the coffee table. “…wait, this isn't my phone. Oh. There's a note here for you.”

“Huh??”

“Yeah, it looks like it's from Alphys.” Frisk handed the phone over to Asriel, who pulled a sticky note off of the device written in some sort of chicken scratch.

Asriel,

I had Sans bridge me over to my place and I got a spare phone for you. It's all set up, the password is on the other side of this note. I also signed you up for the instant messaging and social networking stuff. Your chat handle is “Star_Blazing_Platinum”, long story. We can change it later if you want. Enjoy!

Alphys
Asriel blinked. “Okay. This is pretty nice. I got my own cell phone.”

“Yeah. You're officially part of the gang. Okay, the clock says its about nine. School must have started a while ago. So I guess that's where mom is.”

“Yeah. Oh. I just realized. I'm gonna have to get enrolled in school.”

“That's right! I hope we get desks next to each other.”

“That assumes we get in the same class. You're ten now, right? But... okay, between converting between monster and human years, dying, and coming back as a flower, I have no idea how old I am.”

Frisk blinked, and then snapped their fingers. “Wait, it doesn't matter what your actual age is, until we celebrate your birthday. As far as the school classes go, that's graded according to material. We can make sure you're up to date on everything I got taught this year. And that should be easy. You've read every book, right?”

“Every book in the Underground. Up here, well, it's not like I could go inside the Librarby and get a card of my own.”

“Right. We should tackle that pretty soon. As for studying, we'll have to prioritize. I'll ask mom when she comes back to help me come up with a study list. We'll do it together.”

Asriel's eyes suddenly widened and a paw clutched at his chest. “Oh no.”

“What? What is it?”

“I... oh, great. Something tells me this is going to becoming a recurring theme in my life now.”

“Asriel, what's wrong?”

“Uh, what I did as a flower? I've hurt a lot of people, Frisk. I'm going to have to go to school with them... talk to them on the street... I don't know if I can handle that now.”

“It's going to be alright. I promise. A lot of stuff people won't even remember, right? The only people that remember anything between loops are you and me.”

“That's... somehow that makes it worse. Knowing that I hurt people and they can't remember. It feels like a huge betrayal, before I've even started talking to them.”

Hairless arms slowly surrounded Asriel and pulled him over in a hug.

“There's a really violent movie that mom doesn't want me to see, but I got to watch at Undyne and Alphys' place once. *Batman Begins*. And there's a line in it. 'Why do we fall? So we can learn how to pick ourselves up again.' Mom said...” Frisk sniffed and coughed as a lump formed in their throat. “For a long time, I thought mistakes were forever. That everything is fragile and irreplaceable, and it doesn't matter if it's by accident or on purpose if something breaks, because by then it's too late to say sorry. To late to fix anything. Mom tried very hard last night to reach me, to tell me that's not how it works. And if that applies to me, then it applies to you, too.”

Asriel brought up his arms and hugged Frisk back.

“Even now... even with a soul, even with emotions... I can't understand why you care about me. I hurt you worse than anyone else, and you remember all of it. I just can't understand why you don't
hate me...."

“Asriel, for a long time, I thought that I got hurt because that was how the world worked. That it was because of me and who I was. The idea that it wasn't inevitable... that I didn't have it coming to me, didn't deserve all of it... that's actually very recent. And it happened because people in the underground that wanted to fight me stopped and reconsidered, and even apologized later. It's obvious in hindsight, but I couldn't think of it like that. There wasn't... there wasn't room in my head for it. When I first met Toriel, in the first run. I didn't understand why somebody, anybody, would be nice to me either. Why they would go to so much trouble to keep me safe. The only time I felt like I was on solid ground was when she was throwing fireballs around. It took me a while to understand. But I did learn, in the end, even if I keep forgetting. And I know you'll figure it out, too.”

Asriel's eyes glazed over... in his minds eye, he saw timespace twist, over and over, snapshots of what could have been; a human child's body mutilated by thorny vines, burnt by scorching heat, over and over again... until the timeline stabilized with the child lying on the ground, trembling. Furry arms pulled tighter around Frisk.

“I'm sorry, Frisk. Every insult. Every fight.” Asriel tried to swallow a lump in his throat. “Every... every death... I wish I could take it all back.”

“Hey. It's okay, Asriel.” Frisk leaned back a bit and Asriel saw them smiling. “You said this is a new beginning. So don't get stuck thinking about the past.”

“...I'll try. But it's going to be hard.”

“I know. Hey... now that you're back... there's something I want to do. Something I've wanted to do for a long time, really.”

“What is it?”

Before Asriel could react, Frisk's hand came up and their index finger tapped him on the nose.

“Boop!”

“Ack!” Asriel grabbed his face with both paws and started laughing. “Oh my god what was that?!”

“That is destiny!” Frisk grinned and pointed dramatically towards the sky in a manner reminiscent of Undyne. “Yours is the snootle that will pierce the heavens!”

“You are so weird! Hee hee hee!”

The front door rattled a bit as it was unlocked, and swung open to reveal Toriel.

“Oh, you two have woken up!”

“Mom?!” Frisk hopped up off of the sofa and ran over to the queen. “I thought you had gone to work already.”

“Under the circumstances, I thought it was appropriate to take a personal day. Your father and I have just finished up at the lawyers' office, and we will meet up with Asgore later at All Fine Labs. I apologize if you two were afraid, waking up in an empty house, but after last night it seemed for the best that both of you get as much rest as was possible.”

Asriel's fingers found Frisk's, and he stood next to the human child. “We weren't afraid. We talked
about a lot of stuff. About last night. About before.”

“Uh. Mom? I guess... I guess you know now what I’ve been keeping from you all this time. Or at least the biggest parts of it. There's other stuff. Stuff that's also important, but... I need to work up to it.”

Toriel stared at Frisk, and then walked over to the sofa and picked up the blanket. “Frisk, Asriel. I won't say it has not been difficult for me. It has, and not just last night. Several times today, I caught myself wondering why I had not seen Flowey about town, before I remembered. And many times I found myself thinking about all the times you two were talking together in the back yard. It is. It has been difficult to think of my son being so close, all of this time, and me not knowing or understanding. There has been too much of that in this family already.”

Toriel looked up and smiled. “So... I am happy to hear that you have made that choice. Please, take all the time you need.”

Frisk nodded. “Thank you. Thank you for being so patient.”

“Uh. Mom... there's some stuff we need to talk about, too. I don't know what the plan is for the rest of the day, and it's not... it's kept for a while. But I would like to get it out of the way soon, if that's alright.”

“Of course, Asriel.” Toriel began folding up the blanket. “How do both of you feel this morning?”

“...well. My arm feels a lot better. Like it's completely healed up. Other than that, tired. Not sleep tired, but trying-to-keep-up tired.”

“Yeah, me too. And I don't know if it's the new body, or the experiences last night, but everything feels off somehow.”

“I read about this, actually.” Frisk gestured to their head and then moved the other hand around in a circle encompassing the room. “We make models of how the world works and everything in it fits together, and minor differences get glossed over and we correct for them without thinking most of the time. As they get bigger, we start running into friction when our models and our senses don't agree. Like when the power is out and we still reach for the light switch.”

Toriel snorted. “That does sound familiar.”

“Yeah, that's the easiest example, almost everyone knows what that's like. But the bigger the differences, the more it affects us. That's why there's always shock after an accident, because even if you see it coming, you still have a model in your head where the accident didn't happen. The bigger the changes, the more it affects us. And bad experiences are the most common examples but it can happen with good ones too. It doesn't matter if the change is better or worse, what matters is how big it is.”

“Okay. That's definitely what's going on here. The novelty of being able to sleep on a couch still hasn't worn off.” Asriel blinked. “Oh. Uh. That raises, um. Some questions about the future. Where am I going to sleep now? I mean, I can't exactly go back to dad's garden shed. Actually maybe I could, but I don't think he ever knew I was sleeping in there in the first place... sooo... that's gonna be a really awkward conversation....”

“You're back from the dead after spending way too long as a sentient flower, Asriel. All of your conversations are going to be awkward for a while,” Frisk pointed out.

“You're not wrong about that.”
“As for where you sleep, well, last night I just assumed the bed upstairs would be yours now. And because of... uh. Reasons. I didn't think much further than that.”

The house became silent, and Toriel slowly turned around, the blanket in her hands still not quite folded.

“Asriel, did you say that you have been living in Asgore's garden shed all this time?”

“Um.” Asriel stared at Toriel's face, and the unreadable expression on it. “Well. There's this floorboard that's broken in one corner, so it's possible to get from the soil into the building itself. I would sleep there some times, wait out storms if they weren't bad enough to cause flooding. Kept stuff in there I wanted to protect from the elements. The tablet Frisk loaned me, the blue ribbon I won at the Garden Show last week, a couple other things. It wasn't so much a living space as a...” Asriel considered his words. “As a hideout. Or a lair. Lair might be more accurate. I did a lot of weird stuff as a flower.”

Toriel continued to stare at Asriel, who swallowed. “Uhm... okay. Yeah. Technically that was trespassing. And I shouldn't have done that... and yes, maybe I sometimes helped myself to some of the fertilizer without asking. It was just a scoop now and then, so yes it was stealing, but it was petty theft. Really petty.... Frisk I think I'm in trouble.”

“Yeah. I'm getting that impression too.”

Toriel ran a paw over her face and took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “After our appointment at All Fine Labs, we are going to Joe's House of Stuff to see if they have any beds in their furniture section. I will hear no more talk of sleeping in sheds.”

Asriel blinked. “Okay.”

Toriel seemed to relax somewhat. “In the meantime. We have about an hour before we must leave. It would be a good time for both of you to wash up and change into clean clothing.”

“Alright. Asriel, let's head up to the bedroom. We're so close in size there's no way there's not something that won't fit you.”

“Thanks, Frisk.” The two children headed towards the staircase.

“Oh, Frisk. Uh. Big favor to ask.”

“Name it.”

“When we wash up, can you stand by to help me just in case being exposed to water causes parts of my body to... well, in case that turns out to be the wrong move? I don't think that will happen, but after what happened to me yesterday I'm a little spooked about the prospect.”

“Of course.”

“Thanks.”

The children disappeared upstairs, and Toriel finished folding the blanket, now that they could not see her paws shaking. The blanket was placed on the coffee table, and Toriel sat down on the sofa. With both paws over her mouth, she slowly let out her breath. Her eyes blinked rapidly, in response to a familiar stinging sensation.

“...oh my dear child. What has life been for you... that you can speak of such things so casually...?”
“Councilor. We've arrived.”

Jordan Cater's eyes snapped open as the car door was opened, and he climbed out with a hand from the person who had previously been sitting in the front passenger seat.

“Thank you.”

“They're waiting for you just inside, sir.”

Jordan looked around. It looked like some sort of hobby farm. An old house with new amenities such as solar panels and a satellite TV receiver, new modern windows standing in stark contrast to the old siding and paint. A pair of dark brown horses grazed on the other side of a fence near the driveway. The sounds of poultry came from a coop some distance away, and there was even a small wind power turbine spinning lazily above.

“They've made some changes since last time, I see.”

“Yessir.”

Cater walked up the sidewalk path to the door and knocked a specific pattern. The door was opened, and a young woman in hospital scrubs gave him the once over.

“About time. He doesn't have very long.”

“What?” Jordan blinked. “Who doesn't have very long?”

“Go on through. Master bedroom, ground floor.”

Jordan blinked, but walked inside anyway. The house was clean, surprisingly empty of furniture, and completely absent of any of the sounds of conventional life. In the place of that background noise, there were the muted electronic and mechanical sounds of a hospital. Slowly, Cater made his way through the house until he reached the master bedroom. The door opened easily under his touch, but did squeak a little.

“At last. Jordan. It has been too long.”

Cater's mouth dropped open.

“It. It can't be.”

“Hah. It won't be, soon. But now. Here I am.”

Jordan rushed into the room and knelt by the hospital bed, staring at the half-visible face of the heavily bandaged man lying in it.

“Marcus. Brother.”

“Brother.”

With difficulty, a bandaged hand was raised and turned, and Jordan grasped it.

“I didn't... I thought no one else on the council survived.”
“Heh, heh, heh. Until you showed up on the news. So did I.”

Jordan flinched. “Yes. I made errors. Tipped our hand. Tried to do too much with too little.”

“All true. Yet. I am glad that you did. The burns, as bad as they are, never hurt as much as the thought that there were none of us left. I understand your frustration. Patience was never my strongest attribute, either. Which nurse Claudia can attest to. Heh.”

The woman's words came back to Jordan, and he swallowed.

“Marcus. I wish we had more time.”

“As do I. My time is almost up. It is by luck and chance alone I have survived as long as I have, with my injuries. The infections are coming faster and faster, and they last longer each time as they adapt to the antibiotics. But. Perhaps it is only appropriate. The Guardian of Perseverance will be the last survivor, and will guide us to final victory against the monsters.”

“...is this truly it, then...? Are we all that is left?”

The bandaged man pointed another hand towards a dresser on the far side of the room. “So far as I was able to determine, in my current state. The compound fell, while the safehouse network was, and remains, largely intact. Some escaped the attack, but we were the only members of the Council to make it out alive. But there is something you should see, over there. I did not leave empty handed, and some of it survived the flames. Go. See.”

Jordan slowly, reluctantly stood up and let go of the man's hand, and walked over to the dresser, picking up an old, creased sheet of paper, written in smudged pencil.


“Jordan. My friend. We have all lost in this war. We have all sacrificed for the sake of humanity's survival. But not one of us ever lost more than you did. I remember when that... thing appeared. You fought as a man possessed. You, who have lost everything, know exactly what the stakes are in this war. That is why I seconded you for the Council. We needed your strength, your fire then. And now we need it more than ever.”

Jordan breathed in and out slowly, trying to calm himself. “Thank you, Marcus. I will not fail you. I will not fail the memory of our fallen.”

“I know you won't. When I am gone... Thomas is his name. He has been my eyes and ears and hands while I have been... indisposed. He will bring you up to speed. We do not have the numbers we once did. Certainly we do not have the numbers of our crude but well-meaning successors. But we are not without recourse. That is how you came to be here, after all.”

“Yes. I could scarcely have organized it better myself.”

“Then you and Thomas will get along just fine. He has a brilliant mind, as you do. The two of you, working together... and with your singular drive behind whatever plan you devise... I can rest easy, knowing that this world is in safe hands.”

Jordan's mouth opened, and his voice cracked.

“...Marcus. I wish I had more time to say what I want to say. Thank you. Thank you for taking me under your wing. Thank you for your Kindness towards an ignorant, brash youth. Thank you for
being there for me when my daughter vanished, and again after... she was brought back. Thank you... thank you for trusting me with this.”

“...Jordan. It's time.”

“Marcus, wait! You-”

“I go now where none may follow. To sleep until all is reborn.”

The man slowly stopped moving, and the machinery began to complain. Jordan stared at the bed with eyes made blurry with tears as yet unspilled.

“...Goodbye, Brother.”

Jordan's eyes watched, without seeing, as the woman came in to check on her patient. As she turned off the machinery and made notes. As the bed sheet was pulled over Marcus's head. Slowly, he walked out of the room, through the rest of the house. The heel of one hand wiped away the tears.

And finally, mercifully, the fires of anger came back, burning away the shadows, pushing back the darkness that threatened to overtake his mind. Jordan Cater slowly breathed in, and then out again.

“There will be a reckoning, my friend. In the end, all are Judged.”

Jordan saw the shadow on the wall in front of him before he heard the footsteps, and turned around to see who had approached him.

“Councilor. Thomas O'Dell, at your service.”

Jordan stared at the man. Younger, clean shaven, half moon spectacles, precise and deliberated movements. He held out his hand and the two men shook; Jordan noted that Thomas used the grip of the Guardians, though he did not remember ever seeing the man before. It seemed that the fellow was a quick study under Marcus.

“Mr. O'Dell. Marcus spoke highly of you. And I understand I have your efforts to thank for being a free man right now.”

“Well, free is a misnomer. Your description is a popular subject of discourse between law enforcement agencies, on and off the police scanner. I've come up with some stopgaps; hair dye, contacts, and so on, but appearing in public will be a risk for the foreseeable future.”

“True. Shall we get down to business, then?”

“Looking forward to it, sir. If you'll follow me.” Thomas walked over to the staircase, ascended and opened the single door on the landing.

“The previous owners took down all non-structural walls on the second floor to use it as a storage attic, which makes it an ideal war room for us. Well, I say all, but they did leave the bathroom intact, which is convenient.”

Thomas walked over to a table, upon which was spread a map of Lost Eagle County covered in push pins, Lego figurines, Monopoly houses and hotels, poker chips, and a variety of household objects. “I apologize for the crudity of the model, Councilor-”

“No, no, it's brilliant. If you had a few Role Playing Game books, some empty two liter bottles of
Mountain Dew and a bunch of dice, it would just look like a bunch of antisocial introverts involved in a long campaign. There's not much we can do if people get suspicious enough to actively raid this place, but if it's discovered by accident nobody would think twice that way."

“You make a good case for that.” Thomas pulled out a small pocket notebook and pencil and began scribbling on it. “Dice, RPG Sourcebooks, Snacks... if we're going for verisimilitude, we also need filled out character sheets lying around, and the Sourcebooks should be something based in the modern world, to explain the county map. Possibly Twilight 2000.”

“...you've given this a lot of thought in a short amount of time.”

“Well, it helps being, as you said, an antisocial introvert.”

The room was silent for a moment, and Jordan cleared his throat. “I apologize, Thomas.”

“No, no. No offense was taken. Besides, it was being a tabletop RPG nerd that set me on this path to begin with. It's the same in every setting. When monsters appear, you fight them. You become stronger. You work your way up the hierarchy until you defeat the bosses at the top. And that's how you save the world.”

Jordan grinned. “Finally. Somebody who understands. Alright. Better explain the model to me so I know what I'm looking at.”

“Absolutely. Each Monopoly hotel is one of the safehouses. Each house is a way station. The Lego men are allies with uncommon skills, our specialists. Poker chip stacks indicate relative strength of our forces. In terms of manpower, we have seventy that we believe to be trustworthy enough for high order operations that may involve illegal actions or personal violence, and nearly one hundred and twenty we are confident can be trusted with low order operations needed for support. Five of the original seven safehouses are still uncompromised. Unfortunately several of those safehouses have become financial liabilities. They could operate at a loss with the original Guardians organization supporting them, but on their own this is no longer possible. We have considered using the profits from some to support the others but to do so would risk leaving a paper trail connecting them to each other.”

“And doing anything sub rosa could attract the attention of the IRS. Though I suppose it would be entirely appropriate for us to focus on the monsters and be blindsided by a human assault again.” Jordan scratched his head. “We can't simply stop using the safehouses, we'll need every asset we have right now just to have a chance of winning. We'll have to restructure how they operate to make them self supporting at some point, though.”

“Agreed. I came up with some plans for that myself, but we can go over those later once we've developed some sort of overall strategy.”

“Alright. What are the push pins for?”

“The pushpins denote possible points of contention between us and opposition forces. Which at this time include both monster forces and humans allied with monsters. Red means that is a tactical or strategic choke point. Green means that is a point of financial influence. Blue means a geographic obstruction, since this is not a topographical map, although I have asked somebody to go to the County Surveyors office to get one, so I can set it up on another table. White and Purple are territory markers based on the center of each township. We are purple, they are white.”

“Not enough Purple for my tastes.”
“Nor I.”

“I have to ask about the color conventions for territory.”

“Purple was a request from Marcus when I was developing the system. And white... I was thinking about chess. White makes the first move, and the monsters did.”

“Hmmm. What are the yellow pins?”

“The yellow pins denote what I call Events Of Note. These are where monsters have done something that gives us some indication of their abilities, or when they have been spotted interacting with humans. The geographic markers don't give us the full details, but I record them that way as another means of measuring monster influence on the world.” Thomas walked over to one wall and opened an old filing cabinet covered in rust and dented in several spots. “I have those events recorded here in much more detail, ordered chronologically.”

“I'll have to study those later.”

“I'll make you a copy of the database I used to compile it all. It's always easier to find patterns with 'Control F' to do the heavy lifting. That said, infosec has become much more important lately, so don't make copies unless you absolutely have to, keep them on devices with limited net access, and be very careful what you bring with you when you leave the safehouse.”

“Understood.”

Thomas opened another drawer on the cabinet. “Here are the finances for the operation as a whole. Again, I can provide you with electronic records for ease of study, but the broad picture is that we only have two profit-making ventures active at this time, the advertiser sheet for auctions and classifieds and the new age bookstore in Quarterhorse Fields. So far we've been able to tap the surge of interest in magic and mysticism after the monsters appeared for our own benefit, but the trend is starting to decline.”

The strategist looked down. “Marcus, uh... he joked a few times how once he had... passed away, this farm could get out of the red. I didn't think it was very funny. But... he wasn't wrong.”

“...Marcus was always like that. Trying to keep people's spirits up, even in the darkest of times. Now that he's gone... the whole world has gotten much darker.”

“Yeah. I get that feeling too.”

“...you know, many years ago. There was this man who came into town. I don't know if he was a true believer, a charlatan, or completely insane. But he apparently tried to start a New Age cult based on flying saucers coming from Mt. Ebott, sort of like that guy who thought that the earth was hollow and it could be reached from Mt. Shasta or something. We beat the tar out of him because he was drawing too much attention towards us, and drawing too many people away from us. But now... I wonder if it might be possible to seed the county with those kinds of cults and movements by proxy, and get funded through their donations.”

“The logistics would be very complicated. Not just for setting them up, but for getting the donations from them to us without leaving too many trails. But it's not impossible. We'd have to start very small, though. We don't have resources to spare to 'prime the pump' as it were.”

“True. And it's not like we can rob a bank. Even if it was successful we'd just get more human attention, and the monsters would get more human support by proxy... wait, wait, wait. Ugh. I'm thinking about this wrong. Let's step back a moment.” Jordan walked over to the map and stared at
one of the push pins in Ebott's Wake.

“Okay... when I was trying to bring Riley's Anti-Monster League up to speed, I heard a lot of talk, a lot of griping and venting. A lot of it was either economic and financial, or one level removed. Men and women who lost jobs to monsters, or lost jobs because the monsters sold a competing product or provided a competing service. And I kept hearing the subject of monster gold. How there was this massive vein of it under the mountain. Rumors tend to grow as they spread, but there is a basis in fact. The Exchange Trust.”

“Yes, that's the green push pin in Ebott's Wake.”

“Thomas, how much do you know about the commodities market?”

“Not enough to make money on it.”

“Me neither. But between the two of us I think we can find a way to make others lose money on it. That's a lot easier.”

“Hah! That's true.”

Jordan nodded to himself. “Back in the sixties or seventies, there was a big scandal over the gold in the Fort Knox Depository, and how it was under such strict guard than nobody knew if it was actually still there. Rumors were flying that the president or somebody had sold it all off to pay foreign debts, or other nonsense like that. So they opened one of the chambers for the media to inspect. It looked like there was gold in it. Of course, that wasn't enough for some people, and conspiracy theorists continued to claim that only that vault had gold in it and the others were empty. It didn't start the runaway inflation, but it didn't help either. People's trust in the US Dollar just got weaker and weaker, and so did the dollar itself. If we can affect the Exchange Trust in some way, we might be able to weaken monsters and their allies economically. If nothing else, it will help level the playing field.”

“I'll see what I can find out about commodity markets and how the Exchange Trust is set up.”

“Good. While you're at it, though...” Jordan pinched the bridge of his nose. “Find out whatever you can about something called the CORE under Hotland.”

“You mean the power plant?”

“No, no. Actually, the CORE is something different. The power plant just happens to be there.”

“...it sounds like you already know more about this than I do.”

Jordan walked across the room and sat down in a straight backed wooden chair, then leaned over with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped in front of his mouth.

“Thomas, it's time to let you in on a secret. The Legacy that the Guardians protect isn't simply the knowledge of monsters and the threat they pose to humanity. A lot of it has been lost, but... we do have some knowledge of how they were defeated and sealed away originally, ages ago. According to all records, humans could once use magic as well. Or at least, some humans. That was how the Barrier was formed.”

Jordan sat up straighter and leaned against the back of the chair. “One of the main reasons I survived the attack was because I saw it coming. I didn't have time to warn everyone, and what little warning I could provide, very few people had time to hear, understand, and react to before it all went to hell. But I knew where the safe spots were, where the blind spots were, where the kill
zones were, because I saw it all in my sleep the night before." Jordan sighed. "I thought it was just a nightmare at first. I had a lot of nightmares after Chara disappeared. And even more after... well. I had learned to trust my dreams by then, but when I woke up, I thought it was a portent of a monster assault in the future. Nobody among us imagined a human assault on the compound, especially that day."

Jordan blinked and looked up at Thomas, his mind returning to the present. "The reason I am asking for information about the CORE is that for the last few nights, I have had dreams of some place unbearably hot, filled with the sights and sounds of machinery. And that sounds a lot like the place under Mt. Ebott that the monsters call Hotland, where the CORE is located. Everyone thinks of the CORE as a source of power in the electrical sense, but I suspect it might be their source of power in a more abstract way... I understand that I'm asking you to put a lot of credence in dreams. And I can't really confirm that the dreams are anything other than just dumb luck."

"Well... aside from the Exchange Trust, we don't have a lot else to go on, or work with. And we can't win a conventional battle here. Maybe unconventional is the way to go. I'll see what I can dig up."

"I appreciate it."

"We do have internet here, but that's mostly a smokescreen. I have a bot that automatically does Google searches terms related to off grid homesteading and organic farming and animal husbandry according to a rolling algorithm, just in case the monsters have anyone working at any of the ISPs. If there's a sudden surge in traffic related to monsters, even indirectly, I don't want to tip their hand. But if it's buried in the non-standard queue, it's more likely to be unnoticed."

"Well, it's not like I had that much of a social media presence before all this." Jordan stood up. "There's one more thing, Thomas."

"Yes?"

"Do you have any blank notebooks and pencils? It finally hit me, I'm the last member of the Guardian Council. I have to record all of the lore I can remember before anything happens to me, so other people can learn from it."

Thomas grinned and nodded.

"I may have something."
Dr. Alphys stared at Asriel's image on the monitor, then back at Asriel, then back at the monitor, then back at Asriel again.

Asgore coughed. “Is something wrong, doctor?”

“No, no, your majesty. In fact everything looks exactly like I expected. But I have learned through painful experience the dangers of not double checking my results. I knew Asriel was going to be an outlier from the moment he came back. His soul reads as human. Red chromatics, just like Frisk's, which makes sense considering it was rebuilt using a fragment of Frisk's soul as the base. And with that increase in soul power comes an increase in magic power, but also DT Energy.”

Alphys rubbed her claws together. “That's why the old, flower body, uh... melted... it underwent the same process that happened to the amalgamates. Too much energy for too little physical matter. But there is still much more physical matter than in any of their cases, which adds stability. Asriel's not a plant, not anymore. All of that soul energy powering his magic field makes him a monster, for sure. And he's got more matter than any monster in existence in his body, which means he's tougher and stronger.”

Frisk grinned. “That means Asriel's not just a boss monster, he's like a super boss monster, right?”

Alphys blinked. “Actually, let me rephrase that. Because he has more matter in his body, he is more resistant to hostile intentions. And the human soul means his magic is stronger than it used to be as well.”

“So... I can take it and dish it out. That's all well and good, I guess, but what really worries me right now is whether or not I'm going to melt anymore.” Asriel looked off to one side of the room. “Because I'd like not to. If that's an option.”

“Yeah, I think you've hit your lifetime quota of melting already.” Alphys scratched her head. “Actually considering how long you had that soul fragment, I don't understand why you were melting at all. You were stable before, you're stable now. So what changed?”

“That's a good question. Also, here's another question. Does it look like I might turn back into a flower at some point? Because I'd like to avoid that too.”

“Not based on this data. But between the melting and the shape changing, I would like you to come to the lab for regular checkups just in case. If there's some sort of pattern at work, maybe we can see it coming and stop it. Or reverse it if it can't be stopped. Or something.”

Asriel nodded. “Both good. Obviously I'm rooting for the outcome where I don't turn back into a flower.”

Toriel sputtered in laughter, then covered her mouth. “Oh. Oh my. I'm so sorry, Asriel. I did not mean to make light of your circumstances. But the pun itself caught me off guard.

“I didn't even realize I'd made one until you pointed it out.”

Frisk stretched and pointed at the scanner. “What are Asriel's stats on that thing?”

“About what I expected from a young boss monster, really. AT and DF 20, SPD 25 and INV 15. LV CAP is... uh. It's 12. Which, unfortunately, makes a lot of sense. But LV itself is only 1.”
Asriel let out a deep breath. “Okay, Dr. Alphys. Let's get this over with. How much EXP do I have?”

“Actually, zero.”

“What??” Asriel stared at Alphys. “Alphys, we both know that can't be right. Even... even if I haven't killed anyone, I have hurt a lot of people. I don't think I can overstate that fact.”

“At the risk of sounding mean, I admit I'm surprised too. But apparently all of what you did was under the threshold for gaining EXP.”

“I... am confused. But I suppose that's good. I still feel bad about it, but there wasn't any lasting damage? Maybe that will cut down on the awkwardness later.” Asriel scratched his chin. “Or make it worse.”

“We could call into the radio station if you want. Make it a blanket apology.”

“No.” Asriel shook his head. “I need to do that face to face.”

“It's your call. Let me know if you need any help, or just somebody standing next to you.”

“Thanks, Frisk.”

The lab was filled with an awkward silence, and Alphys cleared her throat. “Okay, Asriel. Next I want to test your magic attacks. I'd like you to attack that target on the wall, so I can get some baseline readings. One basic bullet.”

Asriel held up his paw and a pellet shot out, hitting the bullseye.

“Whoops. I think I screwed up.”

“No, it registered. Data is compiling now.”

“Yeah, but it was a pellet attack. Like I used as a flower.” Asriel stared at his paw. “...I just had a scary thought. What if I can't use fire magic anymore?”

“Hmmm. Maybe you should give it a try now.”

Asriel held out his paw and frowned. A heat shimmer formed in front of him, and a burst of flame was produced, but fizzled out before it reached the target. Asriel stared at his paw and blushed.

“Well. That was embarrassing.”

“D-don't worry about it, Asriel! You've been stuck as a flower for a long time. It'll come back to you! Like riding a bike!”

“Oh, hey, yeah!” Frisk snapped a finger, interrupting Alphys' reassurances. “I have to teach Asriel how to ride my bike!”

“Oh. Okay maybe that wasn't the best example...” Alphys mumbled.

“Dr. Alphys, what can you tell us from Asriel's original attack?”

Alphys looked down at the screen again, then at the king again.

“It mirrors what we know from the normal scan. Asriel still has a lot of magical power. I'd bet
anything that he's just out of practice with anything that wasn't plant oriented. Practice will fix that easily.”

Toriel nodded. “Thank you, Dr. Alphys.”

Asgore smiled. “Yeah, thanks a whole bunch, Alphys. This really means a lot to us.”

Frisk walked past Alphys to where Asriel was standing, staring morosely at his paw. “Hey. You look pretty sad for somebody that isn't going to turn into a plant or a puddle of goop.”

Asriel rubbed one paw with the other. “…it's a. It's a monster thing, Frisk. We learn how to use magic very, very young. One of my earliest memories is my first fireball, and how proud mom and dad were. It wasn't much, honestly. But it was more than I was able to come up with a minute ago. And having them see that, and Dr. Alphys, and you... well, I thought the whole baby pictures thing was humiliating, but this-”

Frisk held up a hand to get Asriel's attention. “When you came back yesterday. You were having trouble moving around. It took a while before you could walk on your own. Were you embarrassed then?”

“I think I was still too shocked about the fact that I was me again to be embarrassed. At least until I realized I wasn't wearing pants. And when I could walk again, I was so happy it drove everything else from my mind.”

“But if you hadn't been so busy thinking about other stuff. Would you have been embarrassed?”

“...maybe. Maybe not. I don't really know.”

Frisk took Asriel's paw in their hand.

“I helped you stand. I helped you walk. You only needed help because it's been so long. I'll help you with this too. Between talking to Dr. Aster, and... Sans' book, I know more about magic theory than anyone who doesn't already work here at the lab.”

“...thank you, Frisk. Not just for offering to help. For not thinking less of me because of this.”

“It's gonna be okay, Asriel. By the time Saturday rolls around, you'll be grilling hamburgers and hot dogs.” Frisk smiled, and slowly, Asriel's frown faded and was replaced with a similar expression.

“You're never gonna stop trying to Save me, are you?”

Frisk stuck out their tongue. “Nope.”

Asriel stuck his own tongue out, and Frisk raised the stakes by sticking their index fingers in their mouth and pulling on it.

“Oh. Not to interrupt this arms race of silly faces, Frisk, but...” Alphys walked over, rubbing her claws together nervously. “Asriel, can I talk to you for a moment? Alone?”

Frisk pointed a thumb at the Dreemurrs and winked. “I'll run interference.”

Asriel watched as Frisk headed towards the king and queen, and turned to look at the scientist.

“What is it?”
Dr. Alphys rubbed her claws together some more, looking down at the floor.

“I wanted to apologize. For... for literally everything.”

Asriel blinked. “What?”

“Last night... I remembered what you said the week before last. When you showed up in the garage. How you woke up alone in the garden, not able to move, with nobody there to help you. When you were... still a flower. I was worried about you hurting me, or the people I cared about. It made it easier to put that at the back of my mind, even after you told me who you were. Now that you're... all the way back. I understand just how much I hurt you.”

Asriel watched as tears began to run from Alphys' eyes.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything. I'm sorry for giving up so easily. Everything that happened to you, that was because of my screw ups.” Alphys looked up again. “Asriel. I don't think I can ever make up for that, but I'm going to try. I know nobody came when you called for help in the garden. But I swear that's never going to happen again. If you ever need a place to catch your breath, to clear your head, this lab and my house are open to you. And if anything goes wrong. No matter how big or small. I will be there to help this time.”

Asriel stared at Alphys, then looked away, towards the bullet analyzer. “Dr. Alphys... I still have a lot of baggage from back then. It's going to take a long time to sort through it. But thank you. Not just for your help today and yesterday, or what you just said now. I got this second chance because of you. I squandered it for a long time because I was too busy being angry at the world and everyone in it. But now, I finally get the chance to do things right. And I wouldn't have that without you.”

Asriel looked at the lizard again. “Alphys, I'm not a scientist. But... you had to have gotten some information about what happened to me while I was, well, melting. If you find anything in there that can help the other Amalgamates, and if you need samples from me to test a theory, let me know. Because I've made mistakes too, and I'm going to be spending a long time making up for them. And...” Asriel's eyes narrowed. “The whole thing with Jordan Cater on the loose? If you're ever in trouble, let me know and I'll come running. I may not be Undyne, but I have a lot of frustration to work through. Assuming the thought that 'Flowey' can follow them inside buildings now isn't enough to deter him and his goons, I mean.”

Alphys snorted in laughter, but smiled. “Let's hope that never comes to pass. Although that would be very cool.”

“Yeah. I just hope I have something to show besides plant based magic by the time that happens, if it happens at all.”

“You will! Magic is an expression of emotions and personality. The fact that you were able to produce any fire at all means that you're not stuck with just the plant based magic.”

“Yeah... guess there is that.”

Dr. Alphys blinked, then looked over to where Frisk, Toriel and Asgore were talking, then back at Asriel.

“Asriel... can you keep a secret?”

The child raised an eyebrow. “Do you know who you're talking to?”
“Hah. Right. Silly question. Thing is... I want to tell you something, but I don't want anyone else to ever hear about it. The only other person I've ever told is Undyne.”

“...must be really important, or really personal, or both.”

“It's both.” Alphys began to blush. “I d-didn't cast my first lightning bolt until the year before I started school.”

Asriel's eyes opened wide. “Oh.”

“My parents weren't. Um. They weren't... they weren't mean about it, but I always felt like I let them down somehow. I spent most of school t-terrified that anyone would find out. And... I don't want you to feel like I did then. This is. This isn't like that. There's a human thing called physical therapy. If there's major damage to a limb or muscle group or bone, it has to stay still while it's healing or it won't heal right most of the time. But once it's healed up, it's been a while since it's been used. So physical therapy helps them re-learn how to use those muscles. Walking, running, holding objects, and everything else. Try to think of it like that. This is just part of the healing process.”

“I'll try. And I won't say anything about what you told me. I promise.”

“Thanks.”

“Uhm. About Undyne. Does she know about me threatening you and throwing stuff through the windows?”

“Yeah. I explained everything on the way back to our place last night. Not just the threats, I told her what you told me about your experiences. And I told her what you said when you showed up before the assembly. Undyne may be impulsive and hotheaded, but she's smart, and she knows what it's like to be frustrated too, and she definitely remembers that you saved Frisk after the Assembly went wrong. And... you never actually hurt me. That said, it will probably feel like she's trying to get revenge on you when you're in her physical education classes.”

“Well, at least I don't have to worry about that until next school year. I don't think I'm getting enrolled this close to the end of this one.”

“That makes sense. A week and a half is not a lot of time, and you'll be busy enough adjusting to the changes emotionally and mentally.”

“Yeah, those have been... interesting, I guess?” Asriel scratched his head. “Toriel- mom's house looks a lot different from the inside. And when I woke up this morning, I was really glad I didn't change back into a flower in my sleep or something. And not just because Frisk was sleeping on top of me and would have crushed me.”

“Omigod. That sounds so adorable!” Alphys smiled. “I remember when you two were dozing off last night, leaning up against each other trying to stay up and awake. Toriel took so many pictures!”

“Guess I get to look forward to that coming back to haunt me. Although. Like I told Frisk this morning. It's not a bad tradeoff.”

“Yeah. In the grand scheme of things.”

Alphys turned in response to approaching footsteps, and saw the queen.

“While I do not wish to rush anything, especially in regards to matters of scientific import or my
son's well being, there is a great deal that must be done today.”

“Oh, right! Of course! I think... yeah. That's pretty much everything we need to know for now, and everything we can really learn at this time. Just be sure to bring Asriel in regularly for checkups, so we can make sure there isn't, like, a relapse or something.”

“Oh of course, doctor.”

“Hey, you guys having a party? where's my invitation?”

Toriel turned around and saw Sans walk into the lab. “Ah, hello Sans! I fear you have caught us just as we were finishing up.”

“serves me right for trying to arrive fashionably late.”

Asriel waved to Alphys, dodged past Toriel and walked over to a small plastic bag next to Asgore's feet. Picking it up, he walked up to Sans. “Hey. Sans. Thank you for letting me borrow your clothes last night.”

“no problem, buddy. how you holding up?”

“Stable. At least according to the scans. Personally, I'm still trying to adjust.”

“heh, i'll bet.”

Sans took the offered plastic bag and Asriel rubbed one forearm with the paw on the other. “Uh. About the stuff I said yesterday-”

“don't worry about it.”

“It's just, I didn't know what was going to happen. But I certainly didn't expect this. Or. You know. Having another conversation with you, or anyone else, ever again.”

“yeah, you weren't having a fun time. this is a much better look for you.”

“I think so too... uh. I don't know how busy we're going to be for a while, but probably very. Can you... can you tell Papyrus I really appreciate all the times he had my back, even when I didn't have one? I don't know when I'll get the chance to tell him myself.”

The skeleton nodded. “sure thing.”

“Thank you. I know we have a lot to talk about later, but that was really important. So I had to talk about it now.”

“means a lot, kid. hey. i know you're nervous, alright? it's as plain as the nose on your face, not to mention everything else.”

The young monster nodded, and his eyes turned away from Sans' sockets. A gloved hand came up and rested on Asriel's shoulder.

“you don't have to be. you got a chance to move forward. that's not the time to fixate on the past. just stop calling me Smiley Trashbag and we'll call it even, okay?” Sans added with a wink.

Asriel snorted in surprised laughter. “Okay. I can manage that, definitely.”

Alphys and Toriel walked over and Sans turned to his fellow scientist. “Alphys, just wanted to let
you know Joe's finished with the Phase Two mockups. either you or dad have to finalize it and
since dad is in a meeting, it has to be you.”

Alphys grabbed her head in both claws. “Oh my god, I forgot all about the meeting! I was so busy
getting this all set up that it slipped my mind completely!”

“heh. better start practicing your apologies now. kidding, kidding. he did volunteer, if only to keep
me from punning all our investors away.”

Toriel snickered. “Sans, did you know that earlier, Asriel-”

“Oh no,” Asriel mumbled.

“-made a pun about 'rooting' for a scenario where he did not become a flower again?”

“Please stop.”

“oh, man. and here i was trying to hold myself back from saying 'i'm rooting for ya, kid' cause i
thought it would be mean.”

“Oh. I see now. I did actually die again, and now I'm in pun hell.”

Frisk coughed.

“Wait. Frisk, no-”

“Don't you mean Pun-gatory?”

“Not you too!”

The laughter jumped from Toriel, Sans and Frisk to Asgore and Alphys, and despite his protests,
Asriel found himself smiling as well.
“Hey, welcome back to the Morning Rush! We are getting close to the hand off point for Lazy Lindsey and the Coffee Grinders, so for all of you waiting for that, you've got the right station. Until then, you're stuck with us. Brett Brinkman here with a notice from the Lone Point Civic Works Department to minimize any traffic on Runner Road for the foreseeable future, as they are grading and re-graveling it. Burgie, I see you have also been handed something.”

“Yeah. It looks like a notice from the power company or something... ah. Here we go. The Lost Eagle County Electric Co-Op is holding a meeting this coming Sunday, open to the public, on the issue of... the Hotland CORE power plant? Oh. It looks like they want to make a case against hooking the CORE into the county power grid or something.”

“...how is that even an issue?”

“Well, I think Frisk mentioned something about that. Maybe Saturday?”

“Hmmm. Maybe. Wait, how would the logistics even work?”

“We did already have a power grid set up down there. Maybe we could set up a substation or transformer and then run power lines down the slope.”

“Okay, but where would the lines connect? How many ways in and out of the Underground are there, with the Barrier gone?”

“Actually, that's just it. With the Barrier destroyed we could make another access point, link Hotland directly to the surface, run the high voltage lines to a transformer, and then hook that up to the regional grid. What worries me is the cooling system. That was never automated, and after the Barrier was destroyed there was no need to work on that because it's been in standby mode for a year and a half.”

“You are really knowledgeable about this. Did you work there at some point? Because all I heard about was the burger joint.”

“No, I just heard customers talking shop when they came in to get something to eat. A lot of late-shifters would come in and grab something fast to take the edge off, either before or after. And I did pass Magic Electricity I and II. Eventually.”

“Huh. Well, I suppose the major safety issue is, well, the power plant itself is built inside a volcano. But on the plus side, it's renewable energy.”

“That's definitely a plus.”

“For all listeners who are interested in heading to the meeting to see what that's all about, it's in the Quarterhorse Fields Convention Center, this Sunday, starting at one PM. We'll try to make sure that somebody is on hand to take notes and provide a summary for those listeners who are unable to attend personally.”

“Speaking of getting notices out of blue from assorted civic organizations, the Planetarium is finally open again after that disastrous mishap with the projector catching fire. It is now fixed, everything is repainted, and they finally got most of the smoke smell out of the building. Most of it. They will be opening again this coming Monday so get your tickets now, I guess. And I think... Brett, do you have anything else over there?”
“Not really. We still have a bit to go before the hand off.”

“Okay. Do you want to talk about something in particular?”

“...nothing comes to mind. You?”

“There are some things I'd like to discuss, but I don't know if broadcast standards allow for that.”

“When in doubt, avoid.”

“Makes sense.”

“...oh! Something just came to me.”

“Yeah?”

“You told me about dropping nacho cheese onto your carpet. I promised to get in contact with a guy. Turns out he did actually move out of state, but he recommended a guy who could do some interior work who is still in Ebott's Wake. Justin something. Can't remember off the top of my head but I have it written down.”

“Great! I'm tired of having to cover that spot with a bucket to keep from stepping in it by accident. Or tripping over the bucket, for that matter.”

“Actually, when is the next Monsters Against Humanity thing?”

“We haven't really set a date yet. Friday's shenanigans really messed with everybody's schedules, and after yesterday's breakout, things haven't exactly improved.”

“That is true. Obviously we wish the assorted law enforcement agencies of Lost Eagle County all possible advantages in their search for the fugitive Jordan Cater and the people who aided and abetted his escape.”

“What's abetted?”

“I think it means assisted.”

“Well, why don't they just say aided and assisted? Or just aided? Aided means assisted.”

“Well... good point. Now I am not so sure. And so I shall consult Wikipedia.”

“You do that. Jeff, do we have any PSAs we need to run? ...any people buy advertising time at the last minute? ...do you want to go on the microphone and address the listening audience? ...I don't know why not. You have a lovely speaking voice. You could probably do all of our jobs... oh, right. Yeah. That was one heck of a Labor Day weekend. Did they ever get the ice cream truck out of the river? ...oh. Well. Somebody should probably go down to Waterfall and see if it's turned up... really? Well, that's great news! Attention listeners, we have a caller! Hello, you're live on the air at the very end of the Morning Rush!”

“DJ Pantz, don't cut me off! I found something incredible and the city, the country, the whole world has to know the stakes!”

“Quentin! Wow. I can't believe I'm saying this but it's nice to hear your voice. What secrets can you divulge today?”

“Parallel universes, DJ Pantz! Hidden in plain sight, right under our noses, wormholes coiled up
like DNA in chromosomes, hidden on the edge of the seventh dimension!”

“Uh... okay, full disclosure. I did not even take Dimensional Physics when I was at New Home U, but I'm pretty sure that's not how it works. Having said that, please continue.”

“It's built into the probability distribution of quantum field theory, it's implicit! Every event generates virtual photons that represent the structure of matter of that event's alternate states! We only see the photons resolve for the events in our reality because this is where the photons for that event are focused! All the other photons come together in different regions of spacetime!”

“Uh, the word I was taught to use in this instance is timespace, but alright, let's chalk that up to poe-tay-toe, poe-tah-toe. Some of the other stuff sounds... plausible.”

“It's been hidden in plain sight for so long I can't believe nobody's stumbled across it before! The Incunabula Files, the Montauk Project, The Philadelphia Experiment, they were all smokescreens but they had to be based on a single concrete idea the powers that be wanted to cover up in the first place! If you trace over the events they describe and overlap all the tracings, the common shape you get is the shape of the conspiracy itself!”

“Well, I'm not a graphics artist, so I'll take your word for it. So... we're getting very close to the hand off point, so, to wrap things up, is there anything you can tell us about these parallel universes beyond the fact that they exist?”

“The possibilities are literally endless, these photons have all of the cosmos to resolve into finite event states! There could be universes where everyone's personalities dramatically changed, where people make different choices and lead different lives with the same personalities, where monsters won the war instead of humans, where- what was that?!?”

“Uh, Quentin? How you doing bu-”

“IT'S THE CIA THEY FOUND ME-”

“Huh? Hello? ...he hung up. Hmm. Well, somehow I get the feeling that Quentin has overestimated the threat of his visitors, but rest assured if he does disappear, we will let everybody know. And now we... mercifully... hand things off to Lazy Lindsey and the Coffee Grinders. Stay tuned for them, and remember to tune in tomorrow for more Morning Rush. DJ Pantz for Brett Brinkman, signing off.”
Asgriel's eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped as he stared at the inside of the building. Shelves were stocked with all manner of items of dubious quality, origin, and purpose. Furniture lined the walls in a variety of shapes, sizes and styles.

“Hey, are you okay Asriel? You look like you're in shock.”

“It's like... it's like Waterfall, but even bigger! And nothing is waterlogged!”

Frisk grinned. “The size is a bit intimidating the first time, isn't it? It's called Joe's House of Stuff, but it's more like a warehouse. So much for truth in advertising right?”

Asgore pulled a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket and opened it up. “Okay. We've got a couple different things to look for. A bed and a mattress, sheets and a quilt, all sized for Asriel and for each other; we need another chest of drawers and clothing in Asriel's size; and another desk and chair set, at minimum.”

“Asriel and I can share my desk, at least in the short term. But yeah, another bed is definitely needed.” Frisk pointed in one direction. “Kids furniture was about halfway down that aisle there last time, but they've changed the layout since we were last here, so... it's anyone's guess.”

Toriel walked over to the kiosk with the cash register near the entrance, and raised a paw to get the attention of the monster leaning against it, typing on her phone.

“Oh, sorry, welcome to Joe's House Of Stuff how can I- Omigod your majesty hello! And Frisk, like, it's been forever!”

“Hey Catty!” Frisk ran up to the kiosk, reached up, and traded high-fives with the cat monster. “Yeah, life has been super busy this month. How are you doing?”

“Like, you know the old joke, there's nothing new in the used goods market? So that's still a thing. Bratty's still over at Das Boot, so that's like good, because we were totally worried they'd let her go after those Anti Monster League jerks torched the place. Yeah, they can't really prove that they did it, but we can read between the lines, ya know? Oh, and we were at a card game at Burgie's a while back! Some people from the radio station, Officer Steve, some people I can't remember their names? But it was totally cool! We're all, like, sooooo hype for the next Monsters Against Humanity!”

Frisk giggled. “Hey, we totally need to catch up later, but right now we have a super important mission of furniture finding. We need to find a bed and bed related accessories for Asriel.”

Catty blinked, looked up and saw Asriel standing slightly behind Toriel.

“Uhm... hello?”

Catty clapped both paws onto her face and let out a high pitched squeal; somewhere in another part of the building Frisk could hear the ringing of glassware in sympathetic resonance. The squeal cut off before anything shattered, fortunately.

“Omigod you are so cuuuuute!”

“Uhm. Thank... you??” Asriel stuttered.
“Seriously, you're like, a chibi Asgore! That's sooo awesome!”

“Ahem. What is a 'chibi' and how does it work?” Asgore asked, clearly confused.

“Oh my gawd, it's an anime thing Alphys hooked us up with!” Catty shook her head. “Okay, okay, okay. Focus, Catty. Focus. You guys needed a bed, right?”

“Yes, and also some other furniture, and we will need to acquire additional clothing in Asriel's size.” The queen added.

“Okay! I know just where to go! Follow me!” Catty hopped over the counter and made her way through a maze of aisles and shelves until she reached a clearing filled with tables, chairs, wardrobes, beds, bookcases, and other furniture.

“Like, we used to be able to sell mattresses, but somebody complained to somebody who complained to somebody else that even if the mattresses were new they were still around all sorts of stuff that was not, so we can't do that anymore. You'll have to get those from some place else, like Wal Mart or maybe the Cotton Gin? I don't know why they carry mattresses but they do.”

“That only adds one more stop to our itinerary, and is quite acceptable. Come, Asriel, let us find a bed frame which suits your tastes and interests.”

Asriel swallowed, staring at the cornucopia of options before him. “Uh. Okay. Uhm... wow, this was a lot easier back when we just pulled stuff out of Waterfall.”

“But this way you don't have to worry about mildew,” Frisk pointed out.

“...um... oh!” Asriel walked over to a particular bed frame. “This one looks a lot like the one already in Frisk's room. That's about the only thing I can really think of that sets any of them apart from each other.”

“Well... alright, if that is what you would like. Next we will need a place to store your clothing and other personal effects.”

Asriel walked over to a chest of drawers. “...this is sort of like what Frisk has. Same thing applies.”

“Oh, yeah, it was like, the weirdest thing! Some guy came in wearing a bowler hat and a fancy suit and he bought all of the writing and computer desks we had on sale. He mumbled something about teaching his idiot brother a lesson but I didn't ask questions because I got the commission for the sale, and that was like, a lot of desks!” Catty's smile slowly turned into an embarrassed, awkward grin. “Sorry about that.”

“It's alright. Like I said earlier, Asriel and I can share a desk for the short term.”

“Oh. Oh no.” Catty's eyes went wide. “I totally remember now! The delivery truck isn't working, we didn't find out until we had all of the desks loaded up. Do you guys have a way to move this yourselves?”

“I'm pretty sure I can cart at least one of these back to the house,” Asgore mused.
“Do not be absurd, Gorey, that is seven blocks away from here, and in weather that makes Hotland look positively mild by comparison.”

Frisk scratched their head. “What’s wrong with the delivery truck?”

Catty held up her hands excitedly. “Oh, it was actually really cool, apparently there's this part of an engine that keeps the rest of the engine from going to fast, and it flew apart, and then there was nothing to stop the rest of the engine from flying apart! The timing was bad because we had all those desks loaded up, but it was still amazing to watch! From indoors.”

“I'll bet. Do you know when the truck will be fixed?”

“I heard the guy from the Wal Mart Service place say at least a month. Then Joe went down the street to the Greene Machines Garage and Hal says he could fix it by tomorrow. I'm not a mechanic, so I don't know who to believe.”

“Wait, Hal Greene's around here??” Asriel looked up at Catty in surprise.

“Like, of course he is, that mini golf course takes up almost a quarter of the block just like this place does. Go outside, turn the corner, past the strip mall, around that corner, his garage is about halfway down the road on the other side of the block.”

Asriel looked up at Toriel and Asgore. “Hey, uhm. I know we're really busy today and all. And probably busier now since the stuff can't be delivered. But can we take the time to visit Hal? I, uh. He. Um. We talked a bit, during the chili cook off. And. He's the closest I got to making a real friend on the surface since I came down from Mt. Ebott.”

Toriel and Asgore shared a look that Asriel couldn't quite grasp the meaning of, and Toriel turned back to Asriel and nodded. “We can stop to visit your friend, once we take care of everything here.”

“That's great! Thanks a bunch, mom!”

Frisk looked around the perimeter of the furniture section, and then pointed. “There. That's the clothing section, I can see it past the shelf of old sports stuff.”

“Ah, thank you. Come along, Asriel.”

“Okay.”

Frisk pointed a thumb in another direction of the store. “Hey, Asriel probably doesn't want me to see him with his clothes off again, so if it's alright, I'm going to go browse the used books.”

“If we can't get a bed delivered, and we can't bring it home ourselves, we will need a stop gap solution. I will browse around and see what I can find,” Asgore added. Asriel followed Toriel towards the clothing section, and they stopped by the children's sizes. Toriel laughed softly.

“Pardon me, Asriel. I was struck by a memory, about how you would be so rambunctious when Asgore and I were trying to get you to try on new clothes.”

“Well, you don't have to worry about that now, mom. Getting stuck in a body that isn't yours really changes your priorities.”

Asriel barely noticed as Toriel took shirts and pants off of the clothing racks and held them up to him, in the age-old tradition of mothers everywhere to attempt to eyeball the measurements of their
offspring. Occasionally an outfit or specific item required the use of the dressing room, and Toriel stared at her son with a critical eye as he tried on different looks. After what felt like a long time, Toriel nodded and picked up various articles of clothing that passed muster, and carried them over to the kiosk where Catty had returned.

“We will be purchasing all of these, my dear.”

“Okay! Let's get you rung up then!”

As Catty punched in the prices on the various stickers attached to the clothing, Asriel looked back at the rest of the building.

“I still can't believe how much stuff is in here. Where does it all come from?”

Catty shrugged. “Oh, people keep dropping stuff off, and we end up sorting it. Sometimes it seems like people confuse us with All Fine Labs and they drop off stuff that's only good for recycling, so we gotta take that over there, or they send somebody here.”

Asriel scratched his head. “I've been on the surface for over a year, how can I not notice stuff like this? ...was I really *that* wrapped up in my own anger?”

“Hey, it's like Brett and Burgie said on the radio this morning. If anybody had an excuse to be angry at the world, it'd be you. Hey, this might be too personal, but I gotta ask. You're. You're, uh. This is all you, right? There's not, like, some angry flower still out there right now, is there? Or, it's not like Flowey is your version of the Incredible Hulk, and if you get mad we have to deal with that again-”

“Catty! These questions are not *at all* appropriate-”

Asriel held up his arms. “No, no, mom. It's okay. Those are actually really, really important questions.” The monster child turned to Catty. “Flowey and Asriel aren't different personalities. It's all just me. And now you know as much as I do. Dr. Alphys is trying to figure out exactly what happened to bring me back, if only to keep it from unhappening, so I can stay like this.”

“Well, that's good. You know, me and Bratty wondered why Alphys was so closed off for a long time, but then the Amalgamates showed up and it all made sense: *Obviously* she was spending all her time trying to help them. So you're in good claws, kid! Okay, Mrs. Dreemurr, that will be fifty seven dollars and ninety cents.”

The queen opened her purse and removed some currency, which Asriel stared at. “Uh, eventually somebody is going to have to explain the exchange rate between Gold and dollars. Sometimes I'd find human coins on or under the ground, but the only place I could spend them was at a couple of vending machines, and it's not like they sold anything that a talking flower monster could want.”

“Oh, it's actually waaaaaay in our favor, but I've heard some people say that maybe that's why the AML got so many recruits, because they were jealous or something?” Catty shrugged. “Couldn't tell ya why. It's not like it really helped us down in the Underground, ya know?” The last of the clothing was stuffed into plastic bags, and Catty held them out to the queen. “Here you go, your majesty! We'll call and let you know as soon as the truck is working and we can deliver that furniture.”

Toriel took the bags and nodded. “I... thank you, Catty. Asriel, are you ready to go see your friend?”

Asriel grinned. “Oh, I am so ready you wouldn't believe it.”
Toriel smiled, and the two monsters walked out of the store and down the sidewalk. Asriel noticed that the strip mall, as Catty had called it, had a high incidence of restaurants.

“...hey, mom?”

“Yes, what is it Asriel?”

“I picked up a lot of stuff from people's conversations, when I was a flower. I know that you fired Dr. Alphys from being Royal Scientist after the whole Amalgamate thing. But you seem to get along with her okay now.”

“Yes. While I question some of her past decisions, I understand that she was under considerable pressure, especially in the wake of Dr. Aster's disappearance.” Toriel shook her head. “And in truth, it was not the Amalgamates which prompted me to terminate her position. It was her keeping the results secret for so long. Though I can understand her decisions in that regard, as well.”

“...oh.” Asriel looked at the ground, then up at his mother again. “Uhm. I hope you can understand why I... why I never came back or said anything.”

Toriel stopped walking for a moment, and turned to Asriel with a sad look on her face.

“Asriel, I do not understand. But that is in the nature of the problem, is it not? I cannot imagine what you went through. My mind balks at the attempt.”

“That's probably for the best. And... I said this before, but it bears repeating. I asked Frisk to keep it secret for me. We've talked about a lot over the past year. And not all of it was about movies or fairy tales or how to play the piano without hands. And I think you figured that out a long time ago.”

Toriel nodded. “I had my suspicions.”

“Yeah. I just wanted to say. There's some stuff that I want to talk to you and dad about. Once we get back home. And. Frisk kept my secrets, so I won't betray theirs. But...” Asriel looked uncomfortable. “When I was still a flower, when I found Frisk in the fever dream and pulled them out. I saw a lot of their memories. When I told you to grab Frisk and run if their human parents showed up, I meant every word.”

Toriel nodded again, and smiled.

“There is... a strange reassurance in all of this. Two lost children, saving one another.”

The two monsters started walking again, and Asriel heard what sounded like singing as the two monsters rounded the corner and made their way towards the garage. The massive vehicle sized door to the building was open, and tools lined the walls in every conceivable style, configuration, and utility.

“Hello? Hal? Mr. Greene?” Asriel called out.

“Hold on, hold on, almost got this!”

A human emerged from the back room, holding a steaming piece metal in a pair of tongs, which was deposited in tray of blackened, crudely welded together metal plates on short, stubby legs.

“I tell ya, if I knew heat treatment was going to fight me so much on this job, I woulda just electroplated all the working surfaces to begin with. Now, that's out of the way. Welcome to
Asriel raised a paw and waved awkwardly. Hal's expression was hard to read behind the goggles on his face, but it was possible to see an eyebrow go up.

“Uhm. Hey. Not sure if you remember, but we met at the—”

“There's something different about you. Don't tell me, don't tell me! I can guess it. You.... you... you got a subscription to Popular Mechanics!”

Asriel blinked. “What??”

“Waitwaitwaitwait. You got a part time job at Pizzageddon!”

“Uhm.”

“Don't tell me don't tell me I got it! You figured out how to hold your left elbow in your left hand!”

Asriel stared at the man. “Well, I see one of us is exactly the same as Sunday.”

Hal grinned. “Yup. All kidding aside, though, how are you holding up? I can't imagine any sort of metamorphosis going smoothly, if only because it takes a while for your reflexes to adjust.”

“Well, Frisk did have to hold me up while I learned to walk again. I haven't had legs in a while... hey, wait.” Asriel pointed a finger at Hal and his eyes narrowed. “You just went from sounding crazy to sounding smart in like, two seconds.”

“Yeah, I do that sometimes.” Hal picked up some machine part from his workbench and held it up close to his face, rotating it in various directions, before picking up some emery cloth and rubbing it against one surface. “I've been like that since I could talk. It's my thing, it's what I do. That and fix machinery.”

“Right, we were just over at the, uh. The place? Joe's House of Stuff, that's it. Catty told us you were trying to fix the engine in the delivery truck after it... exploded.”

“Well, to be completely accurate, the engine governor exploded. And it exploded in such a way that two different parts of it were actually still working for about a quarter of a second after, and each of them slowed down different parts of the engine at a different rate so parts started stepping on each others toes. Sometimes that can happen if you lose a timing belt, but this was worse. Much worse. The engine block itself is the only thing that wasn't mutilated, God only knows how that survived unscathed, so I just pulled the whole thing out, took it apart, and I'm replacing literally every moving component inside it. Valves, pistons, cams, everything. Safer and faster.”

“Wow. I, uh. I almost understood some of that.”

Hal grinned. “Better not tell anybody you can understand the crazy man, or people will think you're crazy, too.”

Asriel shrugged. “Maybe that's for the best. I had a year and a half to make a good impression and everyone ended up being either afraid of me, or actively not liking me. You're the closest I got to making a friend in all that time, and that was near the end.”

“So, basically, just like me in elementary school. Hey, better late than never, right?”

Asriel smiled. “Yeah.”
Hal looked up as if seeing the queen for the first time, and pulled the goggles off of his face. “Oh, hey. Sorry about giving you the cold shoulder there. These goggles give me tunnel vision. How's it going today, ma'am?”

“Quite well, and thank you. Also, in light of recent events I must also thank you for extending the hand of friendship to my son during his... his ordeal.”

“Well, it wasn't so much a hand as a bottle of water. But it was a nice change of pace to have company during my haranguing of Walter Metzinger that didn't automatically judge me.” Hal grinned.

Asriel snickered. “I still don't understand what that's all about.” The monster child turned to Toriel. “Hey, uh. Mom. Is it alright if I talk with Hal for a bit, just the two of us? I don't mean to crowd you out. It's just. There's some stuff I want to clear up. From Sunday.”

Toriel blinked, then nodded. “I believe I understand. If anything should come up, let me know on your cell phone.”

“I will, mom.”

“Don't worry, Mrs. Dreemurr. If Cater or his fan club show up to make trouble, they'll get a face full of pipe wrench.” Hal pointed towards the rack of wrenches hanging on the pegboard above the workbench.

“Ah. I... I see. I will not be far away, just in case.”

Asriel nodded, and Toriel walked out of the garage and down the sidewalk. After a few moments, Asriel turned back to Hal.

“So...”

“Yeah?”

“Uhm. Do you remember what we talked about at the cook off while we were waiting to see who made it through the Trial By Fire?”

Hal suddenly stopped working on the engine component in his hand, and looked up at Asriel. The part was placed on the workbench, and Hal walked over to the young monster.

“...yeah. You asked me about some psychology stuff. Like being a sociopath or a psychopath.”

Asriel nodded. “It. It struck a chord with me.”

“Why is that exactly?”

Asriel looked down at the floor of the garage. “Well. It's a bit involved, but. When I was brought back, in the Golden Flower body, at first it was just my memories and personality. There wasn't a Soul. I couldn't feel anything. At least, I couldn't feel anything I wanted to. I was still afraid of dying, especially because I didn't know what would happen to me if I died without a Soul... I got angry and frustrated. I was sad because... well. I had a lot of reasons to be sad.”

Hal nodded. “Sounds like it.”

“But I couldn't feel happy. I couldn't feel love. I couldn't feel anything positive. I used to think that was because I was soulless. After talking to you... I'm wondering if something else happened to
me. And that's what caused that.”

“Hmmm. Maybe. What happened to you before the whole flower thing?”

“The. Uh. The last thing I remember. Was.” Asriel swallowed. “I was holding onto Chara's body, trying to make it back to the Underground after.”

“I instantly regret asking you that question and am ready to change the subject when you are.”

Asriel rubbed the palm of one paw with the thumb on the other. “For a long time, I thought that I wasn't really Asriel. I just ended up with his memories. I guess I didn't want to think that what I remembered happening actually happened to me.”

“Well, dying has got to be the ultimate life-changing experience. People who have near death experiences can come back as completely different people, sometimes. Actually dying and coming back? That's got to be huge. It could be that parts of your mind just shut down and refused to start up again when you came back. As a way to protect yourself.”

“Maybe. Whether it's from having a Soul again or something else, I do have all those feelings back now... which has been a double-edged sword.”

Hal nodded, slowly. “The you in the present is looking back at the you in the past and facepalming. Happens to all of us.”

“Yeah, but in my case it's more a matter of getting sick to my stomach... Hal, can I ask you a personal question?”

“Sure thing.”

“Have you ever. Uh. Done something. Something terrible. Something that you couldn't fix, or make up for. Something so bad that even if you, somehow, could turn back time itself before it happened... it would still be a part of you in an alternate timeline where it never happened?”

The mechanic stared at the monster.

“I guess... I'm luckier than I knew. I've made a lot of mistakes, Asriel. Some real humdingers. Broken a lot of stuff that I didn't know how to fix. But I don't think any of them, individually, were that bad. But even if they were, you can't obsess over bad choices all your life.”

Asriel's eyes widened, and he blinked a few times. “...yeah. There is that. Thanks... I needed somebody to remind me of that.”

“No problem.” Hal walked over to the workbench, picked up the part he had been working on earlier, and carried it over to a mass of shaped metal suspended by a chain hoist. Lying on his back on a wheeled platform, he kicked himself under the machinery and started fitting the part into place.

“...hey, Hal?”

“Yeah?”

“The North Star, Polaris. It's part of the Little Dipper, right? Ursa Minor?”

There was the sound of silence for a few moments.

“...yeah. Yeah, that's right. You can always find it by lining up the two end stars that make the cup
thingy on the Big Dipper. As long as the sky is clear at night, you can use that to keep from getting
turned around. If you're in the Northern Hemisphere, anyway. There's something like that in the
Southern Hemisphere, using two different constellations, but I don't remember what they are or
how it works. Why do you ask?"

Asriel shrugged. “I had a weird dream not very long ago. Somebody was telling me about the
North Star in it. But even though they said it was part of the Big Dipper, I knew it was part of the
Little Dipper. I understood what was actually happening. It was weird. Like if somebody said a
stop sign was blue, and you know it's red, and they know it's red, and they made the point they
intended... but they still used different words.”

“Oh, yeah. We do that all the time in Shop Class. Justin asks for a wrench and I give him a Phillips
screwdriver and that's exactly what he needs. Stuff like that.”

Asriel scratched his chin. “So it's not something to worry about.”

“Nah, especially not in a dream.” Hal rolled out from under the engine and looked at Asriel. “Mike
once said that music is pure math, without logic getting in the way. Dreams can be like that too.
Truth, without logic. The guy who invented the sewing machine needle? Got it from a dream. Guy
who figured out the chemical structure for benzene? Got it from a dream. Sometimes the best
advice you can get when you're up against a problem you can't solve is to sleep on it.”

“Oh. Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Of course I keep having that dream where I'm officiating a wedding in a supermarket while
dressed up as The Mighty Thor, and even I can't figure out what truth that's supposed to evoke.”
Hal returned to his horizontal position. “And not even movie Thor, either. The old comic book
Thor with that weird winged helmet.”

“Not really sure what you're talking about there.”

“Eh.” Hal waved a hand dismissively. “You've got a lot to catch up on, just like all the monsters
did when the Barrier got broken. Pace yourself, my dude. Even the last year and a half has been
saturated in controversy, pop cultural metamorphosis, and memes, memes for days-

There was the sound of metal on metal, and a part of the engine fell off and landed on Hal's
stomach.

“OOWF.” The mechanic rolled slowly out of the way and turned on his side. “Wow. I knew that
was going. To happen. And I did it anyway. Nice job Hal.”

“Are you alright?? Do you need help?!”

“I'm good, I'm good.” Hal waved his hand. “Just knocked the wind out of me. Woo. Good thing it
didn't land a few inches lower, amirite?” Hal sat up, one hand on his torso. “Hey. Pro tip, Azzy. If I
can call you Azzy. If any human attacks you, and you're afraid for your life? That's where you want
to aim. Where the legs meet the rest of the body. It's most effective against males, of course, but it's
always a decent target because in order to protect against blows there, the defender has to use their
arms and legs to block the attack or shift their entire body. Makes it harder for them to attack you.
If they see it coming they can set you up with a counter but if it comes as a surprise you can
incapacitate a person in one hit. That's how Sans took out Cater on Friday, actually.”

Asriel swallowed. “Uhm. Actually, after getting my old body back and all, and a Soul, and just
generally a second chance? I'm trying to get out of the whole hurting other people business.”
“...I can respect that. But if your back is ever to the wall, keep it in mind.”

“I will. Thanks.”

“No problem. Hey, what time is it? I can't see the clock, some crazy mechanic put an engine in the way.”

Asriel snorted in laughter, and moved his head to one side. “According to that clock on the wall there, it's almost two in the afternoon.”

“Ah. Good. I'm about twenty minutes ahead of schedule.”

“That's good... uh... do you have time to answer a really complicated question?”

“I think so. Gonna take me a few minutes to catch my breath at least.”

“When I was...” Asriel shook his head and started over. “I remember coming down the mountain. Holding Chara's body. And when I got to that park... Hal, if it hadn't been the Sages that showed up. If it had been somebody like you. Or anybody else in the town. Would all this... this. Would it still have happened?”

Hal stared at the monster child for a while, before opening his mouth.

“Asriel, I have no idea. Back then the Sages were just weird people that lived in that weird compound, kept their heads down, complained about Halloween every year, and didn't say very much. Yeah, you heard stories. And yeah, they could be a little off-putting when you had to talk to them. But they were something everybody got used to. I hate to say it, but you totally came out of left field.”

Asriel nodded. “That makes sense. Thanks, Hal-”

“Wait.” Hal held up one hand. “I wasn't finished. There was like, one cell phone video of you. One bit of objective truth, however low res and out of focus and shaky. It put Ebott's Wake on the national radar as a 'look at the backwater small town yokels and laugh at them' story, but here it was backed up by eyewitness accounts from people that were upstanding members of the community and not a part of the Sages, so they were more reliable. And for a while after you ran back to the mountain, a lot of people suddenly gave the Sages more credit than they had. As it turned out, everybody gave them more credit than they deserved in the end.”

Hal held up a finger. “By the time the king and the queen and everyone else showed up, the Sages had abused the trust we had extended them. The pendulum of public opinion had been pushed too far, and it swung back.” Hal moved the finger back and forth to illustrate his point. “I don't know how much of that contributed to the friendly reception, but it played a part. And I won't lie. It took a while for a lot of us to get used to everything, and I'm including me in that.”

“So... it was kind of like, the enemy of your enemy is your friend?”

Hal shook his head. “That was some of it, but I don't think it was all of it. See, for me... the Sages killed a very old, very good friend of mine. So they'd already crossed a line I would never let them come back from. If they had actually been right about monsters being dangerous killers, I would have fought them, and you guys, at the same time. I would certainly never make an alliance with the Sages, even for the sake of convenience or survival.”

“Who did you lose?”
“His name was Byron. He was the old postmaster for a long time. He had a wife, and two kids, and... he had like three things about him that drove me nuts. He took apart his sandwiches and ate each ingredient separately, which defeats the point of making a sandwich in the first place. When he had a Kit Kat bar, he ate the whole thing like a normal candy bar instead of breaking it down into quarters like a civilized person. He called TV and radio commercials 'advertisements' instead of commercials or even ads.” Hal looked down at the garage floor. “Everything else about him was twenty four karat gold. He was a great guy who did a great job, who made other people feel good about what they were doing and comfortable being themselves... and the Sages decided 'this guy doesn't agree with us and is stopping us from doing whatever we damn well please with the inhabitants of this town' and before we knew it...”

Hal held up his index finger and moved it across his throat.

“...I'm sorry.”

“Hell, no need to apologize. That's on the Sages. You're not the one that killed Byron-”

“Didn't I?? I tried to bring Chara's body back home. The Sages saw me. The Sages attacked. And they kept attacking, even when there wasn't a monster to attack. Everything bad that's happened to the people in this town, it started with m-”

“Okay, sorry to interrupt, but I'm gonna stop you right there, because that's bullshit.” Hal blinked. “Also do not repeat that word around your parents, and if you do, definitely don't tell them you learned it from me. Azzy, the Sages had already committed themselves to a life of hate. You came down the mountain carrying Chara's body. Thinking about it some more, I can easily imagine a lot of people scared enough by that fact alone to shoot first and ask questions later. Even if they didn't? I can't imagine there wouldn't be a lot of confusion, a lot of fear, among ordinary folks. Now, if you and Chara had come back to town hand in hand, both alive somehow, I'm sure the reception would have been different... but again, from ordinary people. The Sages would have rewarded you for bringing Chara back safely with a bullet between the eyes.”

Asriel blinked, and scratched one ear. “And... if we'd all come down from the mountain when the barrier broke, with all of the fallen humans, safe and sound, you're saying they would still have tried to kill us.”

“Definitely. Justin reminded me of something important yesterday: It's possible to end up in a situation where everything is changing and you don't have enough time to gather information to make an informed choice, because the stakes are too high to hesitate for even a split second. So you make a choice and maybe it's the wrong one and you have to live with that for the rest of your life. But... after you ran back to the mountain, the Sages lost that excuse. They deliberately made choices that lead to people getting hurt, just because it suited them.”

Hal raised his hand as Asriel opened his mouth to interrupt.

“And before you say anything, we've already established you were really messed up when you came back. It doesn't matter if it's because you didn't have a Soul, or if it's because a part of you didn't want to wake up after all that trauma, or something else. These people were otherwise fully functioning human beings with friends and family of their own, that understood exactly what they were doing to other people and then they did it anyway. From where I'm sitting right now? That is much, much worse than just lashing out in a blind panic.”

Hal stood up and walked over to Asriel. “Listen. Everything that's happened here since you first showed up. That's not on you. You were trying to do one last favor for a friend. Other people used that as an excuse to be total jerks. You blaming yourself for all of this, would be like me blaming
myself for gas prices going up because I went to the Stop and Go and bought the last basket of chicken strips. You can construct a causal relationship between any two events in the world if you try hard enough, and take long enough, but that is not the same as responsibility. Ya get me?"

Asriel nodded. “I think I understand. I still made a lot of mistakes. But it sounds like even if I'd done everything right... they just would have made excuses and ended up doing what they did no matter what.”

“That's the Sages in a nutshell.”

“Thanks, Hal. Thanks for explaining things. I feel a little bit better.”

“Any time, Azzy. Well, I say that, but if I'm going to get this engine rebuilt I need to get back to work, like two minutes and thirty eight seconds ago.”

“Right. And I better find mom before she gets too worried.”

“Can't have that. You take care, man. Stop by whenever you're in the neighborhood. And,” Hal laughed. “Remember me when you're old enough to drive and get your first car!”

Asriel snickered and walked out of the garage, and behind him he could hear Hal start to sing again; it was in some language that the young monster was unfamiliar with. The singing became fainter as the young monster progressed down the sidewalk, and he looked up into the sky. Perhaps it was simply walking out of a building and into the sunlight, but suddenly everything seemed brighter.

“Hey, Asriel! Check it out!”

Asriel spun around and saw Frisk turn the corner, with Toriel and Asgore right behind them. Frisk smiled and held up a large hardcover book in both hands.

“Asriel, I totally struck pay dirt! The Way Things Work by David Macaulay! For seventy five cents!”

“I think it's probably obvious from the title and the cover, but what's it about?”

Frisk ran over and opened up the book where Asriel could see it. “It's filled with diagrams and cartoons about how human technology fits together, everything from simple wheels and levers to computers and microchips! I used to have this a long time ago, I can't believe I found another copy, especially in good condition like this. And for less than a dollar, too.”

“You are really excited about this.” Asriel scratched his head. “Actually, if I think back to the Underground, you were really good at all the puzzles. Even that one that Papyrus changed to look like his face.”

“Yeah. I've always liked seeing how stuff fit together. Puzzles are like that.”

“Did you have a nice chat with your friend, Asriel?”

Asriel looked up at Toriel. “Yes, it was, it was really helpful. Talking to Hal... well, you saw. It was like he recognized me instantly. It helped that he saw me as the same person. It helped that he saw me as a person, actually.” Asriel cleared his throat. “So, uh, where do we go next?”

“With the transportation out of operation for the store, we may have to divide our efforts between today and tomorrow. Much of the legal paperwork was resolved this morning, so I can prepare the
“Yeah, but it's still pretty good!” Frisk closed the book and tucked it under one arm to free up both hands, and began counting on their fingers. “We got Asriel a library card, a special projects badge for All Fine Labs, dentistry and grooming stuff, clothes, furniture back ordered, and like you said, a lot of legal paperwork was taken care of. That's still a lot... so, if that's all we can do, are we heading home?”

Toriel nodded. “That seems like the proper course of action.”

As the family made their way down the sidewalk again, Asriel looked at the big bag in Asgore's hands.

“Uhm, hey, dad? What's in that bag?”

“Oh, this is a sleeping bag. If we can't get a bed until tomorrow, we can't very well expect you to stay awake until then.”

Frisk almost dropped their book. “Oh. Hey dad. I just realized. I already have a sleeping bag. So. In the immediate sense. It wasn't necessary to get another one.”

“Yes, but you often use your sleeping bag for sleepovers with friends, and I suspect that will also happen many times in the future with Asriel. So he would need one of his own in the fullness of time.”

“...that does make sense.”

Asriel noticed that Frisk was less animated on the walk back to the house than they had been during the walk to the store. Once inside, they immediately headed upstairs, and Asriel turned to look at Asgore and Toriel, placing assorted items on the coffee table.

“Excuse me. I need to. I need to double check something with Frisk. But when I come back downstairs... there's something we need to talk about. All three of us.”

Asgore blinked in confusion, but nodded. “Alright, Asriel. We'll be here when you're ready.”

“Thank you.” Asriel climbed up the stairwell and knocked on the open door.

“Come in.”

Asriel poked his head inside and saw Frisk stacking books on their desk, looking up at him.

“Oh. Hey Asriel. You didn't have to knock. This is your room too. I think. I don't know if mom and dad want to clear out the spare room yet, and even if they did I have no idea where we'd put everything.”

“I didn't know if you wanted to be alone or not. So that was as good a reason as any to knock.”

Frisk shook their head and tapped the books. “I just need to get caught up on assignments. I was too out of it last night to do anything, and I need to get this out of the way before I get today's. Just sent a text to Undyne asking her to make the rounds and bring me what I need.”

“...on the way back here. You were really excited and energetic, and then the sleeping bag came up and it was like a light switch turned off. I think something is wrong, but I don't know what it is.”
Frisk turned and looked at the sole bed in the room.

“...Asriel, you are their son. Toriel's son. Asgore's son. I am... a stray, that was taken in. You finally get to come home again. You shouldn't be the one sleeping on the floor tonight. I want you to take the bed.”

“Why? A place to sleep is a place to sleep. I'm just glad I get to be inside the house.”

Frisk stared at Asriel, and walked over to the monster child.

“Don't think like that, Asriel. This is where you belong. This is where you've always belonged.”

Asriel stared at Frisk.

“Frisk. If it will make you happy, okay.”

Frisk smiled, and Asriel raised a paw.

“But you have to explain why it makes you happy.”

The smile disappeared, and Frisk stared at the ground. The bedroom was filled with an awkward silence.

“Because... all of this. Having a mother and a father who love you. Having a home you could feel safe in. You didn't walk away from it. You didn't ruin it. It was taken from you. The idea that you finally get to come home, but there's no place for you so you have to sleep on the floor... it makes me want to throw up.”

Asriel stared at Frisk, then his eyes widened in realization. Stepping forward, he hugged Frisk.

“You know... when Chara first fell down in the underground... I insisted that they sleep in my bed the first night. They'd had an awful shock, and though I didn't know it at the time, that was at the end of all the terrible stuff that happened on the surface. But I wanted them to feel safe and comfortable. I guess the tables have turned.”

“I guess...”

Asriel let go and looked at Frisk's face. “If it will make you feel better about everything, okay. I'll take the bed tonight.”

Frisk smiled. “Good. The balance of nature is restored.”

Asriel snorted. “Hal said the same thing on Sunday when Mr. Metzinger lost the Trial By Fire.”

“Heheheh. I bet.”

“Do you know what's up with those two? Because Hal never explained it to me.”

“I don't think anybody knows what's going on with those two. Including them.” Frisk pointed a thumb at the desk. “Well. I've got homework to do. Do you want to hang around, keep me company, or something like that?”

“Actually... if you're up here, I should go downstairs and talk to mom and dad. There's still some stuff I need to tell them that they don't know. About... about what happened to Chara. And after this long, it should definitely be me that tells them.”
Frisk nodded. “Okay. You probably want to do this by yourself... but after... if you want, we can sit up here. Or go outside. Or whatever.”

Asriel nodded and walked out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Descending the staircase, he stared at the scene in the living room as Toriel and Asgore were already seated on the sofa, talking softly.

“Hey, uh. So...”

Asriel walked over to one of the chairs, trying to ignore the stares of his parents as he sat down and faced them.

“Mom. Dad. We need to talk. We need to talk about...” Asriel swallowed. “Chara.”

Toriel nodded, and Asriel pushed onward.

“When Chara got sick... that wasn't just a random human disease or injury or something like that. Chara was poisoned. Poisoned by eating buttercups.”

Asgore nodded sadly. “Yes. We know.”

Asriel's eyes opened wide. “You did??”

“I knew what those symptoms were the instant I saw them. How could I not?”

Asriel nodded, slowly. “I guess I shouldn't be surprised at that. But. You never said anything.”

“We did not wish to upset you, Asriel,” Toriel said. “You were so young, and you were already losing a close friend and sibling.”

Asriel ran a paw over his face. “And... that's the problem isn't it. Mom, Dad, Chara didn't get poisoned by accident. They did it on purpose.”

Asgore and Toriel nodded sadly, and Asriel blinked. “Wait. You know about that too?”

“It was... it was very difficult to understand, and by the time we did, it was too late.” Toriel's voice was very soft. “Chara was a long way from home, from everything that was familiar. And there was only so much we could do to give them hope, especially after... Dr. Aster vanished. And... then there was what happened to Asgore. It always felt like Chara blamed themselves for that, and could not move past it.”

“...that was true. Chara told me that. It was after the CORE breakdown, Chara came to me and...” Asriel looked down at the coffee table. “They had a plan. It looked like the only way out of the Underground was Soul Power. And... Chara was scared. They thought that... if they were dead, nobody could hurt them, and if we combined our souls, and found a way to free everybody, that would make up for making dad sick. And, they really did think that was the best outcome for everybody, including them.”

Asriel glanced upward, saw the expressions of shock and alarm on his parents, and looked back at the table again. “‘There's. There's something else. When we combined souls, Chara was... I couldn't see all of their thoughts. I couldn't see all of their memories. And I've been getting some of those back now for the last week or so. But I felt what Chara felt. And they were terrified. Terrified of monsters, terrified of humans. I don't...’”

Asriel wiped his eyes with one paw. “I don't know what happened to them on the surface, but they
hated humanity. They hated the fact that they were human. And they hated the Guardians most of all. I don't know how much of it was personal fear, being afraid for the safety of monsters, or just wanting revenge, but they wanted to get the other six souls from the Guardians. Then we could destroy the barrier. I know now that if we had done that, there would have been war. And we didn't win the last one. There is no way we would have won this one. But I didn't know that then. I... I panicked. The humans attacked and I couldn't think straight and by the time I thought to run it was too late. And..."

Asriel's eyes closed, and his voice became very soft, almost monotone. "I did this. The war. You two breaking up. The humans that fell. The attack at the Assembly. Frisk getting shot. I made it happen. Because I didn't come to you guys. I should have told you everything. But I didn't. And now nothing is left of Chara but the fragments of their memories in my head."

Eyes closed, Asriel heard the weight shift on the couch as Asgore and Toriel stood up. There was the sound of footsteps, and then, surprisingly, he felt himself being lifted in massive arms.

"You're wrong, Asriel."

"If you had told us about Chara, perhaps... perhaps there's something we could have done to help. But you did what you felt you had to, in order to try and help them and everyone else. When..." Asgore's voice broke for a moment. "When you died... I should have remembered. Chara was a human, a human who fell and was lost and alone. Like all of the others that climbed Mt. Ebott. But I ignored that. It was easier to be angry. And by the time I came to regret it, it was already too late. The war was not your fault, my son. The fallen humans, they were not your fault. The fault is mine, and always shall be."

"My child..." Toriel walked up and a paw was placed on Asriel's shoulder. "I could have stayed. I should have stayed. To try to convince Asgore to change his mind. I did not. It was easier to run away. It truly was easier to be angry. In the end I could not save even a single child on my own... and when we came to the surface. The humans remembered. They remembered that you did not fight back. We miss Chara just as you do, Asriel. And we wish there was a way that we could all have walked out of the Underground together. But out of all the choices made in all of this... yours alone were motivated out of a desire to help."

Asriel was silent for a long time, trembling in Asgore's arms. When he spoke again, his voice was a whisper.

"Mom... do you understand why I never told anyone who I was? Even when everyone was on the surface, and things were working out?"

"...I do, Asriel. I do understand now. But... for all that, I still wish you had come to us. It does not matter what you have done. It does not matter what you believe you should have done, or should not have done. You are our son, Asriel. You always were, and you always shall be."

"...thank you. Thank you for... for understanding."

Slowly, the child was set down on the floor, and Toriel rested a paw on his head.

"Asriel... in the future, please remember that we will be here for you. You have been alone for a long time. You do not have to be alone any more. And you do not need to obsess over the past; it is over and done, while you are here, now."

"I'll try. Mom, I uh... about what I said. On the way to see Hal. If I thought keeping their secrets put Frisk in danger. I would tell you guys. But it's not a dangerous secret. It's something that hurts them and scares them, but... they want to tell you. They just have to work up the courage to do it, first. Please, show Frisk the same patience you've shown me."
“Of course we will, Asriel-”

A series of loud knocks on the front door caused all three boss monsters to jump in surprise. Asgore walked over to the door and opened it.

“Undyne??”

“Hey Asgore! I'm dropping off Frisk's assignments like they asked!” Undyne shoved a folder of papers into the king's arms. “Also I don't mean to impose but I'm really hoping you still have some iced tea left over from Monday,” the fish warrior added with an embarrassed grin.

“Oh! Well. I think we do. I will have to check the refrigerator. Uh... I suppose you should come in?”

“Thanks. As far as I'm concerned, that rain KEBT predicted can't come soon enough.” Undyne looked down at Asriel and waved. “Hey, kid! How's your first day officially back?”

“Busy. Very busy.”

“I'll bet.”

“Is that Undyne? I'll be right down!”

Frisk appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Hey Undyne!”

“Hey Frisk! I traded your assignments to Asgore for a glass of iced tea, so you'll have to pester him for them now.”

“As if that wasn't going to happen already. How was today? Is it still too hot to have PE classes?”

“Yep. I almost ended up parboiled just getting over here from the school. Everybody's been asking about you, by the way. Poncho and Jessie and Douglas and Skate... actually Skate was asking about you a lot. And then she'd say something like 'not that I'm worried about them or anything' but after the fifth time, well...”

Frisk rubbed their forehead with one hand. “I don't know why I'm surprised. You compliment somebody on their propellers once and they never let it go.”

“Yeah. That's what you get for abusing your human Flirt powers, kid. Hoist by your own Picard.”

Frisk blinked. “I'm pretty sure that's not the right word, but I don't know what the actual correct word is.”

“Yes! Victory is mine once again!”

The queen cleared her throat. “Undyne, if you insist on performing your victory suplex I must ask you to step outside or into the backyard, before you demolish another sofa.”
The table was covered in a map, and the map was covered in notes; handwritten scrawls on sticky notes, index cards, photographs, and computer printouts. Eli opened a manila file folder, pulled out a sheet of paper, and added it to one corner of the table.

“One more for the paper trail. When Justin gets here we need to talk to him about going around and checking these places. He's the only one of us that isn't tied down from nine to five each day.”

“Justin's not gonna be here tonight.” Officer Steve held up a printout showing a Google Maps satellite view of a city block, and Eli pointed towards a stack of papers. “He's getting measurements for some job involving carpets and flooring, and Hal is pulling an all-nighter on an engine rebuild. So it's just the four of us.”

From the other end of the room, at a desk stacked high with old books, a voice rang out. “I don't think that math checks out.”

Officer Steve snorted. “Got a text from Joe earlier. He'll be here, he's just swamped with last minute stuff at All Fine Labs.”

“Objection withdrawn.”

The policeman blinked, and looked over at the desk. “You know, the sooner we get our War Room preparations done, the better.”

Eli waved a hand. “It's alright. Yesterday Joe and I were in a conference call with Sans and Alphys. Damage control, emergency planning, that kind of stuff. Mike's trying to get into the Sages' heads by reading their literature.”

Officer Steve scratched his head. “…I didn't realize things were that bad.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I still have nightmares of that time he tried to 'Decode' the Time Cube website.”

“You're never going to let that go, are you?”

“You didn't shower for a week and then you set yourself on fire.”

An annoyed, bearded face appeared above a large book with a cover faded to illegibility. “I was sleep deprived, alright? I thought I was being efficient.”

“Also if you ever call me 'educated stupid' again I've got a taser with your name on it.”

“Well, if you're going to be like that, maybe you don't want to hear what I've found out so far.”

“Maybe I don't.”

Eli shook his head. “Well, I do. You find any hidden treasures buried in the bullshit?”

“Just a coincidence that's too coincidental to be a coincidence. And the implications make me nervous.” Mike held up one hand, where a green glow radiated from a ring on one finger. “According to All Fine Labs and the Soul Research project, all human souls have some sort of quality that translates into color. 'Chromatics' they call it. There's something like that in this book.”
Officer Steve stopped sorting papers. “Okay, you've got my attention.”

“According to this each soul is naturally predisposed towards some role in a larger hierarchy. That’s not uncommon in cults; typically they have a very rigid, inflexible system that attracts recruits who equate stability with safety and happiness, and there’s the psychological advantages of being part of something that transcends individual limitations. And first I thought the color coding was just coincidence. An easy visual shorthand for organizing and categorizing people.”

“So what changed your mind?”

“Well...” Mike lowered the tome and stared at Officer Steve. “How much do you know about color theory?”

“I wasn't aware it was a theory. I mean, except to somebody is colorblind, or totally blind, then colors are a fact.”

Mike blinked. “...okay... well. You know the Roy G. Biv thing, right?”

“Yeah. Red Orange Yellow Green Blue Indigo Violet. All the colors in the rainbow.”

“And you know who defined those colors as such?”

“...don't help me, I know this one... Newton, right?”

“That's the guy. Sir Isaac Newton is mostly considered a scientist today, for his study of gravitation, mechanics and mathematics. Thing is, he was also an alchemist and mystic, back when that was a respectable profession.” Mike pointed towards one eye. “The human eye sees three different types of color naturally. Red, Green, and Blue. All other parts of the spectrum are inferred through the combinations of different colors, and the way photons interact with the cone cells in the eye, and with each other. And the entire process of vision is contingent on photon energy levels anyway. That's why we can't see in the infrared and the ultraviolet. One end doesn't have enough energy to interact with the cells in our eyes, the other one has too much energy and it’s the wrong frequency to react chemically with the compounds in our cells.” Putting the book down on the desk, the librarian held each hand at different heights. “To ride this ride, you must be at least this tall, but also shorter than this tall. With me so far?”

“I'm a little fuzzy on how something that has too much energy won't interact with something, but that might be because I think of photons like bullets. I'll let it slide for now. What's next? You kind of jumped from Newton to how they eye works.”

“Yeah, I'm circling back to that. If you use the three primary colors of light and overlap them, you get three secondaries where they overlap. Orange, Yellow, and Purple. So that's six colors. But Isaac Newton had a specific, uh, bugaboo about the number seven. What with also being an alchemist and a mystic and all. So he decided that in between blue and violet, or purple, was another color. Indigo. And the fact that Indigo is most commonly described to people as 'dark blue' should tell you something. Now, when Dr. Aster was on the radio, he used some interesting terminology. He described the three primary colors of light, red green and blue, and then later he mentioned orange. And then he said Cyan, Yellow, Magenta and called them secondary colors. That's not how it normally works in color theory. CYM or CYMK is the primary color system used in most ink printing, but that's because of the difference between additive and subtractive color models. So I'm not sure why Dr. Aster called them secondary. Maybe he just misspoke, or maybe he was using monster terminology. Sort of like when they say timespace, and we say spacetime, but it's supposed to mean the same thing.”
Officer Steve stared at the librarian. “Not to rush you too much, but if you can't get to the point in a timely manner, then please pause for a minute or two while I step out to the bar and buy some popcorn or something from Grillby.”

Mike rolled his eyes. “The whole reason this is even an issue is because of this diagram in the book. Most of it is just normal black ink, but somebody went to the trouble of adding color for this part here. Like they were illuminating a manuscript.”

The book was picked up again and turned it around to show a hexagonal diagram. At each corner, a shape resembling the 'heart' ideograph was located, each of them a different color. In the center of the hexagon was a red heart, and all other hearts connected to it, dividing the hexagon into triangles.

“At first I thought it was a variation on the Tree of Life diagrams, since that gets adopted and modified a lot in the New Age literature. But there's no other references. No angels, no demons, no planetary alignments, no alchemical metals.” Mike turned the book around again so he could look at it some more, and his face shifted from annoyed to genuinely confused. “The stuff from the other books is different. It draws parallels to the Tarot, to the Eastern and Western Zodiacs, to Masonic imagery. But it's all in one direction, connecting a more common and better known mystical or metaphysical framework to the Sages' framework. There's no attempt at Synthesis, no grand unified theory... and that makes me think that all of those books were glorified recruitment flyers. This book must describe what the Sages themselves actually believed. And they believed in a seven color organizational scheme into which people's souls could fit into, without using Indigo as a color. Just like what All Fine Labs has been finding with that giant scanner.”

Officer Steve nodded slowly. “I am starting to see what you mean about it being too big of a coincidence to be a coincidence... I saw some text next to each of those heart things when you turned the book around. What do they say?”

“Looks like some sort of moralistic or ethical code.” Mike tapped the page. “Each color corresponds to a different virtue. Light blue or Cyan for Patience. Orange for Bravery. Dark blue for Integrity. Purple for Perseverance. Green for Kindness, Yellow for Justice, and Red for Determination. Of course, there's problems with the system as a moral code right off the bat, because each soul is naturally only attuned to one of these virtues. There's always going to be one thing that each person is associated with, but how do you fit in the others? How do you quantify them? There's also issues with the wording, and I don't know how much of that is translation and how much of that is deliberate choice.”

“You mean, why both Determination and Perseverance?” Eli opened a small cooler, pulled out a bottle and twisted the cap off. “If those are different qualities, what sets them apart?”

“There is that, and then there's stuff like Justice as a virtue. I could see Honesty being a virtue. I could see Responsibility being a virtue. Those are individual qualities of a person. Justice is a social construct which depends on commonly held ideas of what is right and wrong, moral and immoral, ethical and unethical. If it isn’t a translation error, I don't know what personal virtue Justice is supposed to correspond to.”

Officer Steve accepted a beer from Eli and sat down in a chair next to the map table. “What about the seven heavenly virtues? We seem to keep running into the number seven.”

“Yeah, they did that.” A hand reached into the pile of books on the desk and pulled out a thin paperback, bound together with staples and dog-eared within an inch of its life. “It's a thinly veiled recruitment brochure custom tailored to people from a Judeo-Christian background or upbringing. Integrity in this, uh... this 'Inner Party' reference matches Charity in this paperback.”
“Makes sense, those guys had to make money somehow,” Eli pointed out. “Cults live or die on the donations of their followers.”

“Yeah, but the seventh one doesn't fit. It's passed off as being the most important, which is why they dedicated three pages to it, but it's definitely a shell game linking Chastity to Honesty to allegorical examples of The Painful Truth and from there the willingness to endure, which fits into the necessity of Determination.”

“I just had a thought, Mike.” Officer Steve clinked his beer bottle against his teeth a few times. “What if all of this was just window dressing anyway? You used the 'Inner Party' analogy, but we don't know that the people who had this book were actually in charge of the organization. They just had more say in it than the poor bastards who were desperate or gullible enough to join before it all got complicated, and scared enough to join after Asriel showed up.”

“You're right. We can't rule that out. But until somebody digs up another fireproof strongbox with another cache of Guardian Lore, this is all we got to go on.”

“Okay, yeah. But also consider this. The legal code for what is prohibited in any civilized country is so long that no ordinary citizen can hope to know the whole thing. That's why we have lawyers and advocates. But people don't get in legal trouble all the time because the concepts that tie into being a good person, those are very simple. In the broadest sense it all comes down to 'Don't be an asshole' and the criminal code is a system that describes social responses to when people are assholes, depending on just how they were assholes, and to whom, and how much. All of these seven virtues could be condensed into three or four. Determination and Perseverance, obviously, Justice and Integrity probably, and maybe fold kindness into patience if you feel like stretching it. You can divide up the actual specific guidelines for how to be a good person, or at least how to not be a dick, any number of ways.”

“Yes, that is true. I've read most of them. The only reason I'm trying to figure out why the Guardians of the Legacy chose this set of seven virtues, specifically, instead of any others that would make more sense to us? It's because it will tell us how they see the world, or how they are told to see the world. Once we know that, we know what’s important to them. We know what they see as strength. We know what they see as weakness. We'll know where they want to attack us, we'll know where they expect us to attack them. And perhaps most importantly, we'll know how they will try to protect themselves and when they dig in, we'll know what to look for... and then we'll know where they are.”

The policeman looked down at the map in front of him. “Well... you make a good argument there, especially at the end.”

“I think we all may have missed an obvious explanation for all of this, though.”

Mike and Steve looked up at Eli, who was staring at a photograph on the wall. After an expectant silence, Steve cleared his throat.

“You gonna finish that thought, or just take it home in a doggie bag?”

“Oh. Right. Sorry. Got distracted.” Eli turned around again. “It could be that the 'virtues' were actually just qualities that the Sages wanted to reinforce. We know they believed that monsters were under Mt. Ebott, long before anyone had proof. So people had to be Patient because there was no way to know when, or even if, their end of days was ever going to happen. They were afraid of monsters, so people had to be Brave. When monsters did show up, the fate of the world was on the line, so they had to be Determined, and they had to Persevere. That's two ways of saying the same thing because it was just that important. And they couldn't have second thoughts about fighting
monsters and had to believe they were on the side of rightness, so that's where Justice comes in.”

Steve took a drink from his beer and set it on the table. “What about Integrity and Ki-”

“Steve, use a coaster please. I only have the one map.”

“What? Oh! Oh, right.” The policeman lifted up the beer and grabbed an empty folder to slide under it. “That should work. But like I was saying, what about Integrity and Kindness? Call me biased... because I am... but I never saw that much of either from the Sages.”

Eli shrugged. “Stuff like loyalty and politeness and consideration for others was probably reserved for other cult members. They had already set themselves apart from the world both mentally and geographically. Those two virtues just held the group together and reinforced the divide between them and everyone else, so it was harder for people to leave.”

Mike nodded. “Could be. Still... I'm leaving a bookmark right here, and I'm coming back to it once Phase Two finishes up-”

The door to the room slammed open and Joe Stanton barged in, carrying two heavy bags with him.

“You're gonna be waiting a long fucking time at this rate, Mike.”

Officer Steve raised a beer and grinned. “Hey Joe. Nice of you to drop in after all the work is done.”

“Up yours, Steve. I just spent three hours making arrangements with Dr. Aster, Mr. Cavenaugh, Sans, Alphys, and literally everybody working on Soul Research to shuffle things around for the trip.”

“What trip? You win a vacation or something?”

Joe hefted the bags onto an empty table up against the wall of the room, and sighed. “Dr. Aster got served with a subpoena today. Next week he has to be in Washington DC, in front of the Senate Oversight Committee On Paranormal Activity which is apparently a thing now.”

Steve blinked. “...what the shit?”

“You heard me right. And your choice of words is pretty apt. I'm almost certain some congressman pulled that right out of his ass after the fight on Friday. And of course, they go after the guy who's been on the surface for less than two weeks, hasn't had any time to acclimate...” Joe ran his hand through his hair and opened up one of the bags. “The closest thing we got to a silver lining is Alphys finished the first of the Party Favors.”

Eli's eyebrows shot up. “Oh. This should be good.”

“Party favors?? Are we hosting, or crashing?”

Eli turned to Mike and grinned. “The day Jordan Cater escaped from custody, Joe called me and Alphys and Sans had some ideas. So it could be both.”

Joe opened up a metal case and pulled out what looked like the bastard child of a heads-up virtual reality display and a pair of welding goggles.

“This is a Pattern Magic Translator. Dr. Alphys built it for me so I could see the interaction of magical energy in technology, as well as other discrete systems. Electrical, mechanical, and so on.”
“Pattern Magic?”

Joe nodded at the librarian. “That's what Alphys calls it. Pattern magic is how they learned English from all of our trash, or at least, it shortened the timetable for translating it dramatically.”

Officer Steve's jaw dropped. “Whoa. I never asked myself why all the monsters could speak English. Weird.”

“I assumed they were using magic as telepathy, to be honest.” Mike pointed a finger at his head. “We heard it as English because that was easiest for us, and they read the thoughts behind what we were saying.”

“Huh. All this time I thought Chara Cater taught them... but that's not a lot of time to learn a new language no matter what...” Eli's words trailed off and he took another gulp of his beer.

“To be honest this was the first I heard of it myself. And apparently even Alphys was unsure about the details. I guess there was a plan the queen put in motion back before the doc was even born to switch the monster language and writing over to human English, to prepare for when they broke the Barrier.”

“Hmmm. That seems both really optimistic and a logistical and technical headache... but on the other hand, if there had been a language barrier on top of everything else, that just would have made everything much harder.” Mike blinked a few times and ran his fingers through his beard. “Mad props to the queen for thinking ahead like that.”

“Yeah.” Joe put the goggles on his head and flipped a switch. The eyepieces started to glow a bright magenta.

“Most of what I do at the lab that's not gofering is analytical reduction and abstraction. I thought I'd take a look at the map and see if anything jumps out at me... unfortunately that doesn't seem to be happening. On the plus side, I can see the entire electrical system in the building, and it all looks safe and up to code.”

Eli smirked. “As if there was ever any doubt.”

The goggles were switched off and Joe handed them to Officer Steve. “Here. Take a look.”

“Alright, then...” Steve put on the goggles and flipped the switch. Then flipped it again. And several more times.

“Joe I think I broke it. I'm not seeing anything different with the switch on or off.”

“Well... I can't wait to explain that to Alphys.” Steve handed the goggles back, and Joe put them on again. “I suppose if there's a design flaw... okay, it's working for me now. All the purple lines came back. Huh... okay, wait. Wait a minute.”

Joe lifted up the goggles and looked at Steve.

“Your ring, it's glowing blue... Mike's is green, Eli's is cyan... but my soul reads as purple. Not sure what Justin or Hal will end up with, but if one of them is purple too, they need to try this on. I'm wondering if the reason this works for me is because my soul chromatics match up.”
Mike snorted. “Wow. Magic technology is color-coded. It’s like Warhammer Forty Kay. ‘Da red wunz go fastal’”

Eli sprayed a mouthful of beer into the air, but he was facing away from the map table at the time.
Asriel stared at the toothbrush in his paw, and at the toothpaste tube. His eyes shifted in the mirror to where Frisk was squeezing out some toothpaste onto theirs, and tried to follow their lead. The sink was immediately covered in toothpaste.

“...I didn't expect that.”

Frisk giggled. “It's alright. It's water soluble. Easy to clean. You'll get the knack of it again in no time.”

“Actually, this is the first time I've ever used toothpaste. Or had a toothbrush.”

“Oh. Do monsters not need to clean their teeth regularly? I mean those that have teeth? Because the way monster food works I could understand that.”

“No, we just didn't have stuff like this. Resources were scarce, but nobody was going to use a toothbrush that had once been in some human's mouth.”

“Ugh. I can understand why not. So what did you guys have?”

“It was a special type of monster food. Spread through the mouth and cleared away anything left over after eating.”

“Wow. That sounds a lot better than brushing teeth. We should see about marketing that to humans.”

“It tasted like eating a bar of soap.”

“You know what, never mind.”

Asriel snorted in laughter, and the two children stood in silence, or at least relative silence, as brushes scrubbed away at teeth. Despite his unfamiliarity, Asriel proved to be a quick study at the process. As the prince cupped some water in his paw to wash out his mouth with, Frisk turned to look at him.

“Hey. Something I've been meaning to ask.”

“Mmm?”

“I know mom and dad, well, shed fur. And now that you've got your old body back, I'll bet you will too.”

Asriel spat out the residue of toothpaste. “Yeah.”

“So if the fur isn't alive anymore, why doesn't it turn to dust?”

Asriel stepped away from the sink and Frisk moved up to get some water. “Well, humans are mostly water, but there's not much water in human hair, is there? It's the same thing, isn't it? The magic holds everything together that's alive, but once it's shed it's not needed anymore. All the matter sticks together on its own. I know that's true for monsters with scales, too. And I think there's something like that which happens with certain elementals. Actually this would have been a good question to ask Dr. Alphys.”
Frisk spat into the sink. “Yeah, but I didn't think about it until just now.”

“We'll be seeing plenty of her in the future, so we can ask her next time.” Asriel looked down at his green-striped pajamas. “Guess that's everything, right? Are we ready for bed?”

Frisk stared at Asriel. “...are you feeling okay?”

“No. Not really. Last night, so much happened so fast, and so late that I was almost as tired as you. I didn't have time or energy to worry about the present, let alone the future.”

“Is it the bed thing?”

“No. Well. Yes. I mean. Some of it. Uh... the bed thing does kind of make me feel like an intruder. Like I'm not supposed to be here.”

“Asriel, when you connected with me in the hospital. I told you I felt awful for sleeping in your bed, eating at your place at the table, and basically living your life, while you were stuck as a flower.” Frisk smiled. “All reassurances from you, mom, and dad aside? I am very happy to sleep on the floor tonight. I know you don't believe it. But I think this is how it should have been, a year and a half ago.”

The monster child scratched his head. “...but. You're heading back to school tomorrow, right? Don't you need the rest more-”

Frisk closed the distance and grabbed Asriel's shoulders. “Asriel. You don't have to make excuses for being right where you belong. I am going to be fine tomorrow. And so are you. Okay?”

“...okay. Thanks, Frisk.”

“Any time.”

“...uh... there's one other thing, Frisk. Last night we were too exhausted for it to come up. But now that I've had a whole day to think about it, I'm a little scared of falling asleep. After... after the Barrier was destroyed, I went back to Chara's grave. And I was already exhausted. I tried staying awake as long as I could, but it was like parts of my body were falling asleep. The last thing I remember as Asriel again, was lying on the flower patch... I couldn't feel my arms or legs... and when I woke up, I was back to being Flowey. When I woke up this morning, I realized I was still me before I had a chance to freak out. But now, I can't put it out of my mind.”

Frisk pulled Asriel closer and wrapped their arms around him, and the monster child relaxed slightly.

“You don't need to be afraid, Asriel. Your body is back the way it should be. You are right where you are supposed to be. Even if anything does happen, I'll be there to help.”

“Frisk... I have to ask you something. Do you remember when we first met? How I tried to trick you into... into letting me kill you?”

“Yeah. It was an interesting introduction to the Underground.”

“...how did you know I was up to something?”

“I didn't. I didn't have any idea what was going on. I was just in a. In a head space, I guess it's called. Where I expected everything and everyone to hurt me, and want to hurt me. So I saw pellets flying towards me and I freaked out.”
Asriel's arms came up and returned the hug. “...I'm glad you got out of the way. And I'm glad mom stopped me before I could do anything worse.”

A sudden noise outside the bathroom stopped Asriel from talking, and Frisk walked over and opened the door. Outside, a few steps down the hallway towards the staircase, Toriel was leaning against the wall, one paw over her mouth.

“Mom? Mom, what is it? What's wrong?”

Asriel walked up and reached for Toriel's other paw. “Mom, did you hear what we were talking about?”

“I... I was coming upstairs, to make sure you two were ready for bedtime... Asriel, I... I have to go-”

Toriel turned towards the staircase, but her other paw was grabbed by Asriel.

“Mom, please wait! You, what you did back then. That was the right thing to do-”

Toriel dropped to her knees and pulled Asriel close.

“Do not say such things.” The queen sobbed and tears began to seep from her eyes. “You are my son and you were there all this time and I hurt you and I should have known it was you and I did not. I did not know. I should have known.”

“Mom, that's not true. You know how I acted. You know what I did, at least some of it. Since before I came down the mountain, I thought I was just Flowey. That Asriel was some other person, some person whose memories I woke up with. Because I couldn't see... that person... doing all the things I did. What I did was out of line, mom. I don't have any excuse. Not being stuck as a flower. Not being soulless. Whatever I could and couldn't feel, I still understood that some things were right and other things were wrong. I crossed that line because of stupid, selfish reasons. That was my choice. That is my fault. You did the right thing.”

The house was silent for a few moments, and Toriel placed one shaking paw on Asriel's head.

“...Asriel... whatever you may have done, you were, and you still are, still my son. I am so sorry that I raised my hand against you.”

“It's okay, mom. It's all okay.”

Slowly, the tears slowed, and Asriel reached up to wipe some of them away. “Earlier today. When we all talked. I was convinced it was all my fault. Because it started with me. And you explained that wasn't true. Other people have tried, but... I needed to hear it from you and dad. Everybody made choices, and maybe they weren't for the best. But you're right. We can't choose how other people act. We choose how we react. You saw Frisk in danger. You protected them from me. You stopped me from making a terrible mistake, and I'm glad you did. Thank you, mom.”

“...using my own words against me, I see.” Toriel's eyes were still sad, but her mouth had formed into a smile.

“Yeah. Is it helping?” Asriel smiled and hugged Toriel again. “That's the thing about trying to make other people feel better, isn't it? The door swings both ways. So if I can't obsess about the past, neither can you. So let's focus on right now, and right now we're supposed to be getting ready for tomorrow.”
“...thank you, Asriel. Thank you for being so understanding.”

Slowly, Toriel and Asriel let go of each other, and the two monsters walked down the hallway, Frisk following behind. Inside the bedroom, Toriel tucked in Asriel in the bed, then knelt down and tucked in Frisk in the sleeping bag on the floor.

“Frisk, thank you again for giving up your bed for Asriel tonight. I am sorry we could not make other arrangements, with the store’s delivery truck being out of service—”

“I’m fine like this.”

Toriel blinked and raised their eyebrows at the human child, whose eyes were already closed. “This is how it should have been, a long time ago. It took a while, but it was worth it in the end.” Frisk smiled. “Good night, mom.”

Toriel rested one paw on Frisk’s head. “Good night, Frisk.” Standing up, Toriel rubbed the top of Asriel’s head. “Good night, Asriel.”

“Good night, mom.”

The boss monster walked over to the bedroom door, looked back with a smile, and closed it. After a few seconds, there was a voice from the floor.

“Good night, Asriel.”

“Good night, Frisk. See you in the morning.”

The town was empty, dark, foreboding. A rabbit monster clutched a young rabbit to her chest and ran through the snow, her rasping breath and the crunch of snow underfoot both echoing between the buildings and the trees.

“Mom, what’s happening? Where is everyone?!?”

“SSSSHHHH! It’s okay, it’s okay! We just need to get to Waterfall! We just need to find Undyne—”

A thorny vine emerged from the snow, strung tight between a tree and the post of a mailbox, and the rabbit tripped over it. Parent and child went sprawling, and the mother clawed at the snow to get to where her child had fallen... until the pellets surrounded her.

Slowly, her head turned back, eyes wide.

“Please... please don’t hurt my family. I don’t care about me but please leave them alone—”

“I did that last time.”

The pellets closed in and the shape of the rabbit collapsed, dust blowing away on the wind blowing from the tunnel to Waterfall. The younger rabbit watched, dumbstruck, unable to process what he had seen, and then refocused his attention as pellets surrounded him...

Asriel’s eyes opened, and the scream died in his throat. In the dim moonlight, he could see the bedroom, heard the sounds of sleepy, night time life in a small town from outside, and more recent memories pushed back the distant ones.
“...what am I doing here...”

Slowly, carefully, and above all quietly, Asriel climbed out of the bed and walked over to the bedroom door. His paw stopped just before touching the doorknob, then reached up and wiped at his eyes. Walking over to the corner of the room, Asriel sat down and stared at the floor, his back leaning up against the corner. Breathing was getting harder and harder, and both paws were held over Asriel's face to try to muffle the sounds.

“Asriel?”

The monster child sat up straighter as the whisper reached his ears, and watched as Frisk sat up and looked at the bed, then around the room until they found him.

“Asriel? What's wrong?”

Asriel squeezed his eyes shut. It hurt to look at Frisk. It hurt to hear their voice. It hurt to think. It hurt just to be.

“...I'm right here, Asriel. Whenever you need me.”

“Frisk... I don't want this.”

The human child stared, and Asriel took a deep, ragged breath, letting it out slowly. “It hurts, Frisk. It hurts so much... this is what you feel, isn't it? This is how Chara felt. It hurts so bad that you want to die. But you can't...”

“...what happened, Asriel?”

“I had. A dream... no, a memory. I killed everyone in Snowdin Town. Everyone except the innkeeper and her son. I saved them for last, to see how they reacted. She begged me not to hurt her family. I killed her. And then I was about to kill her son... because I had already seen what happened when I left him alive.”

Asriel ran his paws down his face. “I am sick. I am never going to get better. I... I want to be Flowey again. I want to be soulless again. I want it to stop hurting.”

“You're wrong. You're not sick. You were hurt. Things happened to you. Things nobody should ever have to experience. Things nobody could survive unchanged. You are not sick, you are healing.”

“...I want to give up. But mom... and dad... I don't want to hurt them anymore. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do.”

Frisk got up off the floor, walked over to Asriel, and knelt down next to him.

“Asriel... I know what that's like. No matter how many times mom reassures me. No matter how many times she says it's all okay. I can't shake the feeling that it's not. That it's all going to fall apart because of me, and I don't know what to do to stop it or how to fix it. But... Asriel, I need to tell you something important.”

Frisk's hands reached out and found Asriel's paws in the dark.

“Back when you were messing around at the Arboretum. I told you. The first night back on the surface, I was exhausted. I couldn't dwell on anything. I didn't even dream that I remember. But the
second night. I thought about you. When you said you had to go. The pain on your face when you said you were going to turn back into a flower. Talking with you at Chara’s grave. Asriel... I did what you did at the park. I cried until I thought I couldn't cry anymore, and I was still crying.”

Frisk sniffed. “And every night after that was like that. I could put on a smile for everyone during the daytime, distract myself with ambassador stuff and schoolwork. But every night was worse and worse. I think I started losing my mind. I started thinking about... I tried to convince myself that we'd only been on the surface for a bit. It wasn't too late. To go back to my family, to start over in the Ruins, to get it all right this time. Then... you showed up in the Arboretum, and I didn't have to make that terrible choice.”

Frisk let go of Asriel's paws, and ran the back of one hand over their own eyes.

“When I saw you again. I had never been so happy in my life before. And the only time I have ever been happier was when you woke up in the lab last night. Do you know what it's like to be that happy? It's like being stuck underwater for so long that you think you're going to drown, and you start to black out, when you finally make it to the surface and you can breathe. And every breath hurts, like fire inside you, and not only do you not mind the pain, you love it because the pain means you are alive. That was what it was like when you came down from the mountain, Asriel. Like I had been drowning, but I could breathe again.”

A hand reached out and found Asriel's shoulder.

“Asriel, I have the same problem. The people I love tell me one thing. Everything I know about the world tells me another. I don't know who or what to trust. I don't have the answers. But... we don't have to tackle this alone. We'll do it together. When you need me, I'll be there for you to lean on. Always. Will you... will you help me get back up again, when I fall?”

Asriel's voice broke, but his answer was unmistakable as he lunged forward and hugged Frisk.

“Yes. Always.”

“Thank you.”

The two children sat for a while in the dark, before letting go.

“It's pretty late. I don't even know what time it is.”

Frisk nodded. “Yeah. There's a lot to do tomorrow. We better get some rest...”

“Uh. Frisk.”

“Yes?”

“...I'm at the point where I'm scared to close my eyes... can you... if only for tonight, can you be there for me?”

“Of course. I'll always be there when you need me.”

The early morning sunlight was barely visible on the horizon to the north and south of Mt. Ebott when Toriel opened the bedroom door. Her eyes immediately noticed the empty sleeping bag, and then focused on the bed. There was a mass of brown, with an incongruous patch of white, resting on the pillow.
It took a few moments for Toriel to recognize it as Asriel's ear, draped over Frisk's head. The two children were nestled up against each other, and Toriel had to bring up a paw to cover her mouth to keep from laughing and waking them up. Asriel's mouth was open and his tongue was sticking out to one side, and both children were snoring in an alternating fashion, one picking up where the other left off. Asriel's mouth closed and he swallowed.

“Ngh... Frisk, turn on the lights... I can't see the stars.”

Frisk yawned and mumbled. “I can't... I'm holding too many dogs...”

“Oh... okay...”

A very quiet snort was all that came out from behind Toriel's paw, and she returned to the hallway, shutting the door behind her. A few minutes later, Frisk's eyes opened a crack, and they raised their head to look around.

“Ugh... what time is it...”

A hand reached for one of the cell phones on the end table, and brought it up to Frisk's face.

“...okay. That's not too early.”

“Mmm?”

Frisk smiled. “Good morning Asriel.”

Eyes fluttered open and Asriel looked around, holding up one paw and staring at it, before focusing on Frisk.

“Hey... we're still here.”

“Yes we are.”

“I had the weirdest dream. We were inside the planetarium and somebody turned off the gravity... can planetariums do that? That would be really cool.”

“Not with modern technology. Maybe somebody at All Fine Labs will come up with something using blue magic. Ticket sales would take off like a rocket.”

“Augh, it's too early for puns,” Asriel whined, but he was smiling as he said it. “What did you dream about?”

“I was in a barn, or something. It looked a lot like Joe's House of Stuff except without all the stuff. And I was supposed to be taking care of all these dogs for some reason.”

“Huh. Dreams are weird.”

“That's the best part about them.”

Frisk hopped out of the bed and headed towards the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To the bathroom. Having a body mostly made of water has some perks, but there are downsides too.”
After the door shut, Asriel climbed out of bed and rubbed one eye, walking slowly over to the desk in the corner. Books were stacked next to a yellow backpack... and next to it was another sheet of paper with Frisk's handwriting on it.

**Wish List 2.0**

**Toriel:** Resolve things with Asgore

**Sans:** Solve the time loop problem (have independent confirmation of results)

**Papyrus:** Get involved in the Kludge Derby? (check if multiple configuration vehicles violate the rules)

**Undyne:** Help organize wedding when date is set

**Alphys:** Help organize wedding when date is set

**Asgore:** Resolve things with Toriel

**Dr. W.D. Aster:** Solve the time loop problem (independent results check)

**Frisk:** Solve the magic photon interaction problem in Sans' book (independent results check)

**Asriel:** Solve the time loop problem, resolve things between Toriel and Asgore, bike riding lessons, fire magic training schedule, summer study schedule so we get in the same classes next year, fishing at the river—better not chance it yet, catch up on internet videos

Asriel stared at the paper. The list was... it was as different from the wish list he had found before as night was different from day, and not simply because there wasn't a stream-of-consciousness confession of guilt and fault below it. Even the handwriting seemed more optimistic. Though, with a critical eye and inside knowledge, some of the listed items took on special significance. Especially the fact that “solve the time loop problem” was listed for him as well as Sans and Dr. Aster. Asriel squeezed his eyes shut, trying to ignore a memory; exploring the Surface, staring at the stars, and suddenly being back in the Ruins Underground.

There was a muffled sound of plumbing, and Asriel came back to the present rather suddenly; quickly, he walked over to the dresser and picked up a picture frame. When Frisk opened the door, Asriel found himself staring at a picture from what should have felt like another life. Frisk in the center, sitting on the ground, grinning ear to ear. Sans and Papyrus on one side, Alphys and Undyne on the other, and the king and queen towering above everyone else. Next to Undyne, a faint outline showed where Napstablook had to have been floating, and next to them stood a dramatically posing robot. On the other side of the photograph stood two humans; one looked like the human that had talked to Dr. Alphys at All Fine Labs, while the other looked like the human Asriel had met when first coming down the mountain, who told him where to find Frisk. Everyone was smiling or otherwise appeared to be happy.

And in the center, in front of Frisk, was a flower winking and sticking out a tongue.

Asriel looked up at Frisk and smiled. “Hey, Frisk. This was the photograph you were holding onto
last week, wasn't it? When I found you out in the backyard.”

“Yeah.”

“...I remember that day. That guy who worked at the Librarby. He took the picture.”

“Mr. Van Garrett.”

Asriel frowned. “Hey. If Ebott's Wake has a Librarby, then why is he a librarian and not a librarbian?”

“I asked him that same question myself, a long time ago. He said there wasn't any money left in the Librarby's budget for more b's. Hehehehe.”

“How did that get started, anyway? In Snowdin they just used the sign that ended up in Waterfall, which somebody must have thrown away.”

“The story I heard was that the sign job was given to a guy that everyone felt sorry for, and nobody had the heart to point out the mistake. And then when the sign needed replacing, they just kept it like that on the new one, for kicks. And now it's part of the town's culture. There's no consistent rules for it or anything; some people say library card, some people say librarby card, that kind of thing. But it's also a way to tell if somebody's a local. Lone Point, Gemini Road, Triton, Quarterhorse Fields, they all have Libraries, but Ebott's Wake and Robin's Egg have Librarbies.”

“Why Robin's Egg?”

Frisk scratched their head. “I don't know. I should ask Mr. Van Garrett next time I see him.”

Asriel put the picture back on the chest of drawers, and grabbed one of the sacks of clothing resting on the corner. “I guess we better get changed. I'll head into the bathroom or something aaaand you're about to say something about how I shouldn't be the one chased out of the room, right?”

Frisk opened their mouth, closed it, then opened again. “Maaaaybe.”

Asriel laughed and opened the door. Walking down the short hallway, he pushed open the bathroom door and flipped on the light switch. Closing the door, he stared at his reflection for a few moments, and sighed.

'Despite everything, it's still you.'

A few minutes later, Asriel knocked on the bedroom door again, and got a hurried “Just a minute!” for a reply. After a few seconds, the door opened, and Asriel and Frisk stared at each other's outfits. From blue jeans shorts to gray and maroon striped T-shirts, they were identical, the only difference being that Asriel was not wearing shoes. The young boss monster crossed his arms.

“Well, one of us is going to have to change!”

Frisk immediately broke down into cackling laughter, and Asriel grinned.

“Hey, do you smell that? I think it's cinnamon... mom must be making breakfast.”

“Breakfast... finally, a memory that doesn't make me freak out.”

“Come on, let's go check it out!”

“I'm right behind you.”
By the time Asriel had taken one step out of the room, it looked like Frisk was already half way down the stairs-

'I tried to convince myself that we'd only been on the surface for a bit. It wasn't too late. To go back to my family, to start over in the Ruins, to get it all right this time.'

'It wasn't too late. To go back to my family, to start over in the Ruins...' 

'To go back to my family...' 

Asriel shook his head, trying to dispel the memory, only to have another memory take its place; a child, standing on a wooden platform, surrounded by rushing water, perilously close to the edge. And, for a split second... a shape behind them.

Asriel stopped at the top of the staircase. Connections had been made in the child's head, and slowly, a picture formed. There was still a gap between when he had last seen Frisk on the other side of the Barrier, and returning to the Ruins again during the reset... but like a jigsaw puzzle, it was possible to tell what went into the blank space by looking at the pieces around it.

Asriel swallowed, and headed downstairs, just as Toriel was walking out of the kitchen.

"Ah, there you are. Frisk said that you were right behind them, but... is something wrong?"

Asriel blinked, aware that some of his thoughts must have been expressed on his face.

"Oh. I, uh. I just realized... today is going to be a lot busier than I thought."

Toriel nodded. "Asgore will be by shortly, and together the two of you can complete all that remained unfinished yesterday. Also," Toriel smiled, "it would probably be very good for you two to have a father and son day."

Asriel smiled as he reached the ground floor. "Yeah, it's been a long time."

The monster child followed Toriel into the kitchen, where Frisk was already eating a bowl of something. Asriel sniffed.

"Is that... it's cinnamon oatmeal, isn't it!"

Toriel smiled and placed a bowl down in front of Asriel's seat as he sat down. The surface of the cereal was sprinkled with ground cinnamon, and on top, arranged in a fanciful pattern, were sliced fruits. A spoonful dissolved in Asriel's mouth, and he put the spoon down on the table again.

"Asriel? Are you alright?"

"I'm home." Asriel rubbed his eyes with the back of one paw, and smiled.

"I'm really home."
Part and Parcel and Precipitation

“Good morning, Ebott's Wake! You are listening to the Morning Rush on KEBT with Brett “The Brett” Brinkman! And with me, as a change of pace, is Clutch McGee! How are you doing this morning, Clutch?”

“I'm not unwell, thank you.”

“...okay. Took me a moment there. And of course we hope that everyone listening is also... not... unwell... today, in fabulous Ebott's Wake. Ebott's Wake, 'Don't Trust The-' actually is this slogan even accurate anymore?”

“That's a good question for multiple reasons. Do we have another slogan we can use today instead?”

“Hold on, let me... I keep all the ones they send me in this old shoebox... okay, here we go. Ebott's Wake, 'A Cut Aside.' Granted that one's not much better but the bar wasn't very high to begin with.”

“Where did that one come from anyway? I mean, we did a lot of lumber and timber and forestry stuff way back in the day but so did the rest of the county.”

“Actually this slogan hearkens back to the ill-fated Mt. Ebott Highway Initiative of the early 1950s. There was an attempt to build a direct route between Ebott's Wake and Quarterhorse Fields. It never got beyond preliminary construction because it involved excavating through part of the base of Mt. Ebott and the closer they got the more electrical problems they ran into; radios, vehicles, but the real deal breaker was the electrical detonators for the blasting equipment. Nowadays we know that was because of proximity to the Barrier and its weird side effects but back then they just freaked out and bugged out.”

“Probably thought the mountain was haunted. Well, I say that, but there were ghost monsters in the Underground, so... yeah.”

“That's true. So, first things first. If all you listeners out there are anything like us here in the studio, the word on your minds right now is rain. Yes, we are finally getting some relief from the unseasonably hot weather and it has manifested in the form of a nice calm shower heading our way, as opposed to the storms that we've been dealing with off and on for the past two months.”

“Hailey Skye will be joining us later for a more detailed forecast, but for now we can tell you that we're looking at intermittent cloud cover, low to medium winds, and the words everyone's waiting to hear, a ten to fifteen degree drop in temperature compared to the week so far. We're already down five degrees and the rain hasn't even reached us yet, which is a very nice preview of coming attractions.”

“Oh, definitely. We're expecting to actually get precipitation sometime between ten and eleven this morning, so if possible I would recommend going outside and enjoying the relative coolness before the rain properly arrives. Unless you're Undyne in which this whole day is an excuse to go nuts. We should be looking at intermittent showers until around four or five in the afternoon, then a wave of heavy showers until six or seven, after which it should taper off over night. That said, don't try to set your watch by that. As Hailey has complained early and often, the weather around here for the last month has been all over the map, so be ready for any sudden changes. At this point I'm not even sure I'd rule out a freak snowstorm.”
“That would be something.”

“I've just been informed that Gary Welkin and DJ Pantz are still a few minutes out from the Quarterhorse Fields Arena, so we can't jump to them yet. In the meantime, here is the new updated event calendar for the next few days. Today is still the Sustainable Aquaculture Open House, and that runs from noon to four in the afternoon, so if you're interested in the goings on of the fishery, now would be a good day to satisfy your curiosity. Tomorrow has no major public events of note, but Saturday is packed with them. Shyren's long-delayed concert in the morning, the Kludge Derby in the afternoon, and the charity tournament all day long. Clutch, I know you've raced in the Derby a few times, how do you think this incoming rain is going to affect conditions for our contestants this year?”

“Well, first and foremost, if we can keep the lower temperatures for the next few days, that's going to be the biggest factor in play. Nobody needs a case of heat exhaustion when they're trying to drive something that only technically qualifies as a vehicle to start with. In the same sense, if our luck doesn't hold and we end up dealing with high temperatures, that will definitely affect the performance of many of the entries through thermal expansion. We could end up looking at engine or structural failures, either before or during the race itself. Nobody needs that, either. And then there's the question of the actual rain, which can alter the traction of both the road and the road-contact surfaces. If it's particularly bad then moisture could cause electrical shorts and power or instrumentation failures, even among the most carefully constructed vehicles.”

“That would be disappointing, and possibly very dangerous.”

“There is a certain amount of risk inherent in the very sport of kludge racing itself. Vehicles that are designed from their conception to be vehicles have to meet various safety standards, while the standards for entries in the race itself are more based around spectator safety. For example, Hal Greene's entry this year is rocket powered, and the type of rocket engine and fuel used had to be vetted before the entry could be accepted. Of course, the main reason there aren't more stringent requirements is one of legal liability; nobody except the designer and builder is ever intended to operate a kludge racer, whereas the manufacture of mass production vehicles as retail goods runs into questions of public safety and accountability.”

“...please tell me there are at least requirements for seat belts and helmets.”

“Racers have to have some sort of safety harness, but there's nothing about helmets written into the guidelines. That said, given how lightweight and aerodynamic modern bicycle and motorcycle helmets are, there's no plausible excuse not to wear them.”

“Well... I suppose there's that. Got a little sidetracked there but it's a subject that's close to everyone's heart here in town so I don't think anyone will complain too much. Sunday brings to us the beginning of Traveling Tom's Snake Oil Caravan Puppet Show in the Lone Point Civic Square right by the Standing Wall, so if you want the kids to learn about county history from a man with a goofy mustache making weird voices while creepy puppets flail around on a portable stage, you know where and when to start.”

“It's better than Brett makes it sound.”

“Speak for yourself. I swear those puppets scarred me for life when I saw them as a kid.”

“...wait, is that why you keep trading assignments when it involves haunted dummies? You have that uncanny valley thing?”

“Those facts are unrelated.”
“Is this why you had that restraining order taken out on Mad Dummy?”

“No, I had the restraining order taken out because they tried to stab me in the leg after I said 'Good Morning' to them. Moving on. Monday is the Jam Jamboree, so get your entries in no later than tomorrow at six in the afternoon. The event runs from noon to seven in the evening to accommodate those otherwise occupied during a normal weekday. Tuesday has no civic events scheduled, in order to accommodate the expected mess and following cleanup. Wednesday is the Ebott's Wake Emergency Services Seminar at the Memorial Auditorium, where doctors, nurses, EMTs and veterinarians have generously donated their time to teach those who are interested in all sorts of emergency medical skills and practices. First Aid, CPR, and of course pointing out old wives tales and myths and explaining why they are bad ideas. The Seminar runs all day from eight AM to eight PM and many classes and demonstrations repeat. Thursday would normally be the date of the Lost Eagle County Track and Field games which would have been held in Gemini Roads this year, but of course with the unseasonable heat this year the event has been canceled. And Friday is the Dreemurr Elementary School Riff Off event and is a half day to boot, so watch out for free range children just before noon. And that's all we can share of the events in the near future, because that's all we know.”

“Which works out pretty well as Jeff has just informed me that Gary and Burgie are finally in position at the Quarterhorse Fields Arena for the opening rounds of the Smash Queue Demolition Derby! Hey, how are you guys doing?”

“Clutch, the spectacle below me is a feast for the eyes and would be also a feast for the ears if the sounds could be heard over the noise of the helicopter itself! Machinery and vehicles, pitted against other in order to reduce their competitors to component parts for the entertainment of legions of screaming spectators!”

“Wow. That paints a vivid mental picture. Too bad we don't have actual pictures.”

“Don't worry Clutch. I got this. Soon as we find a wifi hotspot I'll send you all the pics I've taken.”

“Thanks Burgie. So, how would you describe your first visit to the Demo Derby?”

“It kinda gets my hackles up to be honest. Not the violence or the destruction, I expected all of that, just being in the helicopter. I'm not afraid of heights but seeing stuff from this angle is really disorienting. Hey, you know those things people ride around on with four wheels?”

“...you mean a quad-bike?”

“Yeah. Quad-bikes. It looks like they're doing some sort of race.”

“Wow, they start that earlier every time. It's like Christmas decorations.”

“Sorry to interrupt everybody but Beanpole just handed me something. It looks like the date for the new State of the Kingdom Address has been tentatively set for this coming Sunday, at the Auditorium again. Looks like it starts at one and should run until all subject matter is addressed or until five in the afternoon, whichever comes first.”

“Wow. They must have fixed all the damage crazy fast. Hey, did they ever figure out how they managed to sneak all of those guns in without anybody noticing? I mean, there's not a lot of places you can hide a hunting rifle or a shotgun without wearing a really big coat, and in this weather that would stand out like a sore thumb.”

“You know as much as I do Clutch. I don't think the police are going to release any details until
after Cater is found, arrested and actually sentenced.”

“Guess that makes sense. Hey, Gary. If you get a chance be sure to land and see if you can get some grounds-eye perspective on the Derby, too.”

“I'll see what I can manage!”

“And on that note we must leave you all, if only for a little bit while we play assorted PSAs; but don't you fret for we will be right back, and upon our happy reunion Hailey Skye will share with us the benefit of her meteorological insight.”

“Wow. Burgie is right. Gary's vocabulary *is* contagious.”

“Yeah. I'm trying to fight it off with low brow comedy movies but I think it's like a head cold. You can't cure it, only wait it out... stick around, more Morning Rush after this.”
“If it wasn't for the rain we're supposed to get, we could finally have PE classes today.”

“Uh huh.”

“On the plus side, Frisk is coming back today. I'm sure they'll get drowned in questions from the other kids. So they've got that too look forward to.”

“I suppose.”

Undyne stared at Alphys, watching one claw guide a spoonful of colorful cereal to the scientist's mouth, and almost missing it several times.

“Mew Mew Kissy Cutie 2 wasn't that bad.”

“I guess not... wait, what??” Alphys looked up in confusion.

“There you are. Are you okay, honey? You've been really out of it this morning. And you were pretty distracted yesterday when you got home, but I thought that was because of the thing with Dr. Aster and the government or whatever is going on.”

A claw ran over Alphys' face. “Well, yeah. Last night. That definitely was taking up all of my attention. This morning, uh. That's something else.”

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

“It's, uh. It's not that kind of distraction. It's a scientific problem I can't solve and I can't let go of.”

Undyne waved a hand dismissively. “Why should that stop you from talking things out? Maybe if you break it down for somebody like me who doesn't have a bunch of degrees, it'll help you find something?”

“...well... it's just something that's been in the back of my mind.” Alphys pushed the bowl of cereal to one side and started rubbing her claws together. “I mentioned that Asriel was stable according to the scan yesterday, right?”

“Yeah. It kind of came in at the end after all of the stuff about trying to organize a trip to the capital and getting Dr. Aster up to speed but it was in there.”

Alphys nodded. “And that's good, it's really good. But... the more I think about it, the more it doesn't make sense.” The scientist held up both claws and a flickering image appeared of two points of light, one red and the other white.

“The connection between the Soul and magic has been established for so long it's been taken for granted. Humans nowadays don't seem to have it, but obviously some of them used to have it. There's been a number of theories as to why, and mine is just the latest in a long string of supposition and guesswork.”

“Well, it's only been guesswork because you're the first scientist in forever who's in a position to test it.”
Alphys blinked. “That is true, yes. But the thing is...” The scientist sighed. “When I first... made Flowey. When I brought Asriel back. The whole idea behind using the extracted DT Energy was based on a question. What happens when something without a Soul gains the will to live? The flower was unresponsive for so long that I got frustrated and cut my losses. Replanted it in the garden and sent the souls back to Asgore for safekeeping. I guess watching over all of the fallen monsters at the time was affecting my judgment. But the real problem is... well, you remember all of the stunts and the pranks. Flowey... I mean, Asriel as Flowey... had plenty of magic power. Power to spare. But he didn't have a Soul, so where was the magic coming from? I mean, okay, there's environmental magic energy, maybe he was condensing that, but if that's what happened how was he able to manipulate it without a Soul?”

Undyne picked at between two teeth with a wooden toothpick. “Maybe that DT stuff is like fuel or battery power?”

“I did wonder about that, but if it's a finite resource, it has to come from somewhere. Normally that would be a human soul. Flowey didn't have that. And if it's a self regenerating process on its own, then eventually it would have breached containment. Either of the storage systems in the lab, or the Amalgamates. So it can't be one because Flowey didn't run out of it and turn back into a regular flower. It can't be the other because he and the Amalgamates didn't completely melt away into nothing or explode. I'm hoping Phase Three will shed more light on the mechanics of DT in human souls but that's a long ways off anyway... and no matter what that ends up telling us, it's still only indirectly connected to the main problem. Flowey- dammit, I mean Asriel, his new Soul reads as human. It must have been built up from that fragment he got from Frisk somehow.”

Undyne nodded. “I guess that makes sense.”

“Yes, but it's the only part that makes sense!” The magic diagram wavered, vanished, and was replaced with another one depicting the rough shapes of a human on one side and a boss monster on the other. “According to the theory the entire Soul Research program is based on, normal human Souls have magic and it just works inside their bodies. It doesn't extend out into the world like our magic does. But if all Asriel has is a human Soul, how can he produce a magic attack like he did during the bullet analyzer test? It's the same problem as how he could have magic without a Soul when he was a flower, but all the conditions are changed. Two impossible events, each impossible for completely different reasons but having the same impossible result. And the whole stability thing. Let's assume the human Soul knows how to properly handle DT Energy without instability. Why didn't he melt as Flowey like the other fallen monsters? If it was because he had a body with more matter in it, including water, like a human body does, then how and why did he end up unstable when he did? Why did it wait so long? There's this huge span of time where he was stable, up until one very specific instance of time where he fell apart... and then he came back together again in a different shape and now he's stable again?? Don't get me wrong, I'm happy for him, but trying to figure this out is driving me insane!”

“...not to make a bad situation worse, but there's ways of producing magic energy without a Soul, right? You said environmental energy earlier, but there's other stuff; the things in your breakfast machine and a lot of the appliances you fixed, a bunch of stuff in the CORE. And you complained about not being able to launch the Cosmic Background Magic Detector satellite before Christmas because of some sort of red tape. I mean, I don't know how any of that works, but I know it's there.”

Alphys nodded and the magic image vanished as she crossed her arms and stared morosely at her soggy cereal. “Yeah, but I never put anything like a point source emitter inside the Golden Flower, and if Flowey... ugh ... Asriel... if he'd managed to get a hole of one and absorb it or eat it or something it would have shown up in my scans, or been left behind in the tray after he reformed. If
there was extra magic at work I don't know where it was coming from or how it was produced and I'm running out of places to look.”

One claw ran down Alphys' face, and she sighed. “Undyne... there's so many things I missed over the past two weeks, because I wasn't looking in the right direction at the right time, or worse, because I saw it and didn't actually think about what I was looking at. I think that's why I'm so obsessed with this right now. I know I'm missing something. I can't see it, but I know it's there. And I have to find out what it is now, because what if Asriel being... Asriel again? What if he's on borrowed time?”

Undyne reached across the table and her hand grasped one of Alphys' claws.

“You'll figure it out. I know you will. You're relentless when it comes to this stuff. In a few days you'll wake up at two in the morning, scream 'THAT'S IT!' and run out to the garage in your underwear to put together something to test the idea you just had.”

“...I hope so. I really do.”

“Also, not sure if you already thought of this or not since I don't think you brought it up, but there's three ways I can think of where Asriel is unique. First, he's a boss monster. Second, he was the first monster to absorb a human soul since before the war. And third, you brought him back from the dead, but the other monsters were just fallen down. They hadn't actually died yet.”

Alphys stared at her cereal with a confused look. “…that’s right. All of it. Boss monster souls are more stable than normal souls. They can survive a short time after death. And of course human souls can maintain stability for a long time, just like the bodies take a while to degrade... Asriel's soul was still gone after he died, though... but the dust on the flower... wait. Wait a moment.”

Alphys sat up straighter in her chair and seemed to be looking past or through Undyne.

“Monsters have sprinkled dust on items since before recorded history. The idea is that our memories live on in what we loved in life, even if we're gone. Asriel is a literal example of that. The amount of dust that would have landed on that seed was infinitesimal, but according to every test I could think of, that’s him. Toriel and Asgore both verified the personal stuff.”

Alphys grabbed a spoonful of cereal, shoveled it into her mouth and started chewing, all without looking at what she was doing or apparently thinking about it at all.

“The soul fragmentation thing has never shown up in any human beyond Frisk. We still don't know what that was about or how it happened or why. And we don't know what was happening to Flowey after the assembly and the hospital because I didn't think to scan him again, but that fragment rebuilt itself into a complete soul. And obviously we don't know what the scans look like for absorbed souls, either monsters absorbing human souls or humans absorbing boss monster souls. So for all we know when a monster soul and a human soul combine in any form, it looks like a human soul because the higher energy readings drown out everything else, just like sunlight is so bright it makes it impossible to see the stars during the day... thinking about it some more, it could be that the human soul readings and the mysterious magic origin are unrelated, and I'm seeing a connection where there isn't one because we only have one person to go by here.”

Undyne watched as Alphys held a spoonful of cereal halfway to her mouth, completely absorbed in some complex thought process.

“Alphys, I just thought of something else. Flowey was intended as the vessel for all the soul energy we needed to destroy the Barrier and... well, he pulled that off. Maybe the reason he even had that
soul fragment in the first place is because of that. And... maybe that soul inside him isn't his. I mean, it is, but in the sense that Frisk gave him, like, a transplant or a graft or a transfusion, not that it's the original. Which would make sense because it's a human soul and he would have had a monster soul. Maybe I've just been reading those medical books from the library sale a lot, but that's kind of what it looks like to me; technically, Asriel's still that Soul Energy thing, but with a soul that's all his own in there too. Did you ever test to see if he could do that... that connection thing again? Like he did with Frisk in the hospital?"

"...no. No, it never even occurred to me. I need to see if we can schedule something like that after the trip to the capital... actually, I don't know if that will tell us anything at all, but if he can still do that? That could be both important and useful for entirely different reasons... you know, when I explained the Almagamates to Dr. Aster, we got to talking about Soul energy physics, and he said something interesting. Monster and human souls, in theory, should cancel each other out. But that's not what happens. When monster and human souls combine, the end result is more than the sum of its parts."

"Well, that means that the theory itself is wrong, doesn't it?"

Alphys nodded, and seemed to come back to the present, looking at her spoonful of cereal. "It wouldn't be the first time. Matter of fact this whole week has been like a jackpot of overturned theories. Soul Integrity, Vitalism Induction, Magic Field Incubation... and it's still only Thursday morning. We could be looking at a complete undermining of the Soul / Magic Equivalency Axiom and everything built on it before I get home tonight... oh god, Dr. Aster's going to lose his mind if we have any more scientific breakthroughs. On the way back to the Lab Tuesday he said if this keeps up he's giving up on science completely and just going to work full time at Sans' hot dog stand."

"...well, at least then it'll be open more often."

Alphys snorted in laughter, almost spraying half eaten cereal over the table.

"I guess there is that."

Undyne grinned. "Hey, I don't suppose you can explain what's going on with Dr. Aster? You were really animated last night but... not exactly coherent."

Alphys nodded. "Yeah. Nobody was really happy with what's going on. Joe was especially angry. I get the impression that the human political process is a lot more complicated than ours is."

"Well, it'd have to be," Undyne pointed out. "They don't have a monarchy and they don't live forever so there's no chance of any sort of long term stability like we had. So if you can't get rid of the instability then maybe actually including it in the process is the way to go after all."

"That is how Joe described it..." Alphys shrugged. "I think he was being sarcastic though."

"So... all other things being equal, what's this about Dr. Aster taking a trip?"

"It's going to be Dr. Aster, Sans, Mr. Cavenaugh and two men from the security team that he hand picks, and Justin Carrow from the Shop Class thing since he has military training and experience. This town has been really nice to us, and the other towns in the county are at least polite to our faces, but everywhere else in the country monster opinions either run hot or cold. Doesn't seem like there's any moderation."

"Guess that makes sense to have four humans playing defense, then. Pretty sure Sans and the doc
can take care of themselves in a scrap but it would probably turn into a public relations death spiral if they had to.”

Alphys nodded. “Exactly. You know... as awful as it sounds, I'm glad it was Dr. Aster they wanted and not me. Just because I'm more used to the surface doesn't mean I'm used to talking to groups of people. My claws still get all sweaty when I have to talk to investors and people from the county commission.”

“That's not awful. Dr. Aster's been explaining science and making a case for big projects to support since before either of us were alive. With Sans there to keep him on topic, he's probably the best choice for something like this.”

“Even when he's not familiar with the surface?”

“Especially because of that!” Undyne held up an index finger dramatically. “Those guys that singled him out probably wanted somebody who had no idea what they were doing, but Dr. Aster knows science and magic and the whole academic politics thing forwards and backwards, right? So they're attacking what they think is a weak point and they're going to be totally ambushed!”

Alphys blinked. “Hey... that's right! He used to tell me stories when I was interning about how he was a teacher's aide at Home University, and how wild the classes would get, so he got really good at reading a room and getting people off-balance and turning them on each other so he could maintain control of the room even when he didn't have actual official teaching authority.”

“There ya go.” Undyne pointed a fork at Alphys. “The right monster for the job, then, isn't he? And that means you can stay here and give Soul Research and the Asriel transformation stuff your undivided attention.”

“Yeah... yeah! It really does work out!” Alphys smiled. “Wow... how do you always know what to say to make me feel better?”

“I don't know. It just seems to happen.” Undyne smiled and blushed. “But I'm glad it works.”

A claw reached out and covered Undyne's hand, and Alphys smiled. “Me too.”

A few minutes later, breakfast had been demolished, plates placed in the dish washing device Alphys had built, and Undyne was heading out of the door... when a claw grabbed her hand again.

“Undyne. One sec. Um.”

Undyne looked down at the red-faced lizard, who was sweating profusely. “Uhm. When we're both home t-tonight. I would. If you want. If you don't have anything else. I. Uh. You, know, plans. I mean- aw screw it! D-d-do you want to read some of my fan fiction tonight?!”

Undyne blinked, and grinned. “Absolutely.”

“It's uh. It's just. I was about to ask you not to laugh. And then. And then I realized. You know. Laughing isn't the worst thing I can think of. So that's okay-”

“Alphys. I love everything about you. This isn't going to be any different.” Undyne knelt down and hugged the lizard woman as tightly as she dared. “Looking forward to tonight already. Have a good day at the lab! Discover all the things!”

“Y-yeah! You too!” Alphys hugged back. “I mean, uh, teach all the things!”
Undyne laughed, the couple let go, and the warrior sprinted out into the street. Alphys watched her disappear into the distance, and headed back inside. With the door shut, claws covered a blushing face.

“Oh my god what have I done.”

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters today to celebrate the anniversary of my existence. :P I'd like to thank everybody who's still reading this story after all this time. Knowing that there are people out there who enjoy what I create... there's no other feeling like it in all the world. Thank you, each and every one of you. That's the best birthday gift EVER.
The tablet came out of the plastic bag and Asriel stared at it, running his fingers over its surface. Somehow, it made everything both more and less real. More in the sense that it proved that events had changed. Less in the sense that memories of using it before with vastly different appendages kept crowding into the child's mind.

The charger was still in the bag, along with the first prize ribbon from the Garden Show. Asriel stared at it for a minute, trying to sort his feelings out, before putting the tablet back into the waterproof container. A handful of other items of personal significance remained, not including a pile of random coins that he had found on and in the ground, which he had never found reason or opportunity to spend. A photograph from Frisk, a small camp mirror some hiker had lost on Mt. Ebott, an old compass that probably met the same fate, and a protractor that, for no apparent reason, had been left under a tree in the Arboretum one day. Odds and ends, collected over a lifetime that, in itself, was a collection of odds and ends. Or at least, it had been for longer than anybody could know for sure.

And in its own way, that fact brought about its own sort of nostalgia. Asriel walked over to the broken floorboards in the corner, got down on one knee, and slowly ran his fingers through the earth, trying and failing to put a name to what he was feeling.

"...Asriel? Are you alright?"

Asriel turned and looked behind him. “Yeah, I'm okay dad... I just need a minute.”

Roughly a minute later, Asriel walked out of the garden shed, the tablet and bag under one arm and pockets jingling with spare change. Asgore looked down at his son with a concerned look on his face. “...it's hard to say goodbye, isn't it? Even to something like that.”

Asriel nodded. “Uhm. Dad. I did sometimes take some of the fertilizer that was in there. I could probably pay you back for some of that with the change I found. The rest will have to wait until I get a summer job or something.”

“Asriel, that's exactly what fertilizer is for. So that plants can grow up healthy. You don't need to worry about that.” Asgore sat down on one of the garden benches, and Asriel joined him, and the two boss monsters sat in silence for a while.”

“...looks like the rain's going to hit pretty soon. Maybe ten minutes out.”

Asriel nodded in agreement. “Yeah... dad. I know you probably have questions. I don't know if I can answer them but I'm ready for you to ask. Otherwise, I have one to ask you.”

“...go ahead. I'll need to sort out my thoughts before I ask you anything.”

“Okay. You and mom. With me back... all the way back, that is... you're getting older. And that means one day...”

Asgore nodded. “Yep.”

“...for a while. I thought I was going to be stuck as a soulless flower forever. So I can see where immortality loses its appeal. But it never occurred to me to ask back before everything happened. Why did you and mom choose to have me when you did?”
Asgore ran some fingers through his beard. “Well. I suppose that came down to timing, really. Semi Serif Aster was getting ready to step down as Royal Scientist, and his son Wing Ding was making a nuisance of himself all over the cavern, but a helpful nuisance with all sorts of gizmos and gadgets and delicious fruits and vegetables. Your mom and I... we'd lived a long time, and we'd seen high points and low points, but nothing like what was happening then. We both thought this was going to be the beginning of the end of being trapped Underground. In a few centuries at most, somebody would find a way around, past, or through the Barrier. We wanted you to grow up in the sunlight, or failing that, to see it yourself in your lifetime. You see, Asriel... your mother and I... it was never the Underground that bothered the two of us. It was watching generation after generation of friends give up, despair, and fall down... we both wanted to spare you that.”

Asriel closed his eyes. “Even if everything hadn't gone wrong. Even if everyone had done everything exactly right. Chara would still have died of old age, probably before they were even a hundred years old. And... no matter what happens next. Frisk will still die of old age before the end of this century.”

“...Toriel and I have lost two children. That is every parent's worst nightmare, and I worried about that happening again, even before the attack during the State of the Kingdom Address. Watching Frisk grow old, and one day... having to leave them behind. Tori never said anything, but I know it bothered her too. But now...” Asgore smiled. “We can focus on the time we will have with you both, and with everyone else. One day. We will leave this world, and we will leave what happens in it up to the next generation. You and Frisk. And one day you will have children of your own, and they will shape this world just as you before them, and us before you. And that is as it should be. People think that a legacy involves holding onto the past. That's not true. A legacy is about building the future.”

“...well. That got off to a rough start.” Asriel opened his eyes and stared at the tablet in its waterproof bag. “My reputation as a jerk and a prankster is so well established now that the town made it a tourism slogan. Don't Trust The Flower. It's a good thing that the kingdom of monsters has been disbanded, because there's no way I could do what you and mom did, and certainly not when everyone looks at me and remembers the stuff at the Arboretum or the Hedge Mazes or some other stupid prank. And you don't get a second chance to make a first impression.”

Asgore turned to look at his son, and placed a comforting paw on one shoulder. “Son, I think you give yourself, and the people of this town, too little credit. Especially because of your first impression; a friend trying to bring Chara home. Who did not fight back, and ran away instead. Sometimes running away takes a greater act of courage than staying to fight.”

“Maybe... after the Barrier was destroyed. Frisk found me. Tried to convince me to come to the Surface with everyone else. I wasn't... well. You remember how I was at the hospital, after waking Frisk up. But back then it was worse. For a lot of reasons. I told Frisk that for a long time, I wish I had fought back. But then, at the end. Everyone was free. Finally. And I could let go of that. Finally. I could stop seeing the world as Kill or Be Killed. I don't regret what I've done.”

Asriel sighed. “Well. That's not true. I have so many regrets I have to sort them in alphabetical order. But I don't regret that. And I want to move forward now. Even... even if I could go back. Change things. Do it all right the first time. Convince Chara to talk to you, make them understand that things were okay, and they didn't need to feel guilty or afraid... even if I had the power. I don't think I could go through it all again. I miss Chara so much... but I have to move on.”

The back yard was silent until the first few drops of rain began to fall. Asgore slowly got up off of the bench and stretched.
We'd best get inside. The radio said we're not looking at major storms this time, but the weather on the Surface is a lot less predictable than Underground.”

Asriel hopped off of the bench and followed Asgore into the house. “Well, you can't get more predictable than 'none at all' when you get down to it. It's always hot in Hotland, it's always raining in Waterfall... the closest thing to variety down there was how much snow fell in Snowdin, and even then it was pretty regular.”

“Really?”

Asriel opened his mouth, blinked, closed it, then opened it again. “Okay. For a while after I woke up, I was trying to figure out why I couldn't feel certain feelings. When that didn't pan out, I started exploring the underground and looking at it in detail, just for something to do, because I was so bored. And I wasn't quite at the point where I was willing to... you know, mess with people's lives just to see what happened when I did. So the amount of snow that actually fell each day in Snowdin was only a tiny amount. And mostly it was just condensation blown in from Waterfall, that's why it was always so foggy and misty at that tunnel.”

Asgore nodded as he put a kettle of water on the stove and snapped his fingers to light a fire underneath it. “A long time ago, Semi described the entire cavern as a sort of heat engine. That must be part of the process.”

Asriel nodded. “Yeah. Lava from Hotland provides heat. Water from the surface shows up in Waterfall and carries the heat other places. The heat is lost to different thing, the water condenses, and it falls as either rain or snow. The whole Underground between Hotland and Snowdin is like a low pressure steam engine, with the wall to the Ruins of Home acting as an insulating condenser... when Alphys was at work at the lab sometimes I would show up in her garage and read the books out there,” Asriel explained after recognizing the questioning expression on his father's face. “It was something to do while Frisk was in school.”

“...I'm not criticizing, but I have to ask. Does Alphys know about that?”

“Well... it came up a few weeks ago, so yeah. You, and everyone else in town, probably noticed I wasn't too good about respecting boundaries. Something else I need to work on now.”

The kitchen was filled with an awkward silence for some time, until the kettle began to whistle.

“Asriel.”

“Yes?”

“Are you... okay?”

“...short answer, no. Long answer, what do you mean, and probably no at the end.”

“Well. I know a lot has changed. Between back then and now. But you are... in many ways, you're like a different person, but in others, it's like no time has passed at all. People can change a lot, even in a short amount of time. I know that better than most. And you have gone through some very trying times. I just...” Asgore ran a paw over his face. “I know that things won't be the same as before. I'm different, your mother is different, everything and everyone is different. That is a part of life. And if these changes are from what you've experienced, and the new world we're in, then that's also part of life, and that's okay. But... if it's something else. Anything else. Please let me, or your mother, or somebody know. So we can do something to help.”

“Thanks, dad, but... there's nothing anyone can do to help. Like I said. All I can do is move forward
now. And even if I'm not okay now. Maybe I will be one day.”

“...alright.”

Asgore handed a cup of tea to his son.

“Cheers, Asriel.”

“Cheers, dad.”

Asriel sipped the tea. “...Chamomile?”

“Yes, that's right. Ever since Tuesday, I've found that I just don't have the stomach for Golden Flower Tea anymore. And even if I did, I'm not sure it would be appropriate to offer you any.”

“Well... if you think about it, the main source of food for most plants is other plants. I mean, that's what compost is.”

“True.”

Asriel took another sip, and slowly a smile formed on his face.

“Dad, I really missed this. Just being in the same room with you. A warm cup of tea in the morning. Everything feels like it's going to be alright... it really feels like it.”

Asgore smiled. “It will. Don't you worry.”

“That's just it, though. I can feel like it will be alright. For so long... I didn't even have that.”

“It's very hard for me to imagine what it was like for you. Not simply being a flower. But the inability to feel. I don't presume to be an expert, but it sounds to me... like not feeling things was much worse.”

Asriel nodded. “You're right. If I had...” Asriel closed his eyes and sighed. “There's so much that's so hard for me to talk about. Even after all this time. For over a year. Only Frisk knew. But... if I had been able to feel anything other than fear and anger, maybe I would have...?”

Asriel shook his head.

“I don't know. Maybe I would have come to you, or... tried to find mom in the Ruins, or both. But maybe not...” The child opened his eyes again and stared at the steaming cup of tea in his paws. “After the whole... Barrier thing. I felt awful. Connecting to other souls... it woke up parts of me that hadn't been there since I was brought back. Frisk found me and tried to convince me it was okay. Even though we both knew it wouldn't last. They tried so hard... I think... even if I couldn't stay happy. Couldn't keep feeling love. They wanted me to have a moment. Just one single moment where everything was okay. Even if it couldn't last, they wanted me to feel that, while I could.”

Asriel stared at his reflection in the liquid in the teacup.

“There was no way I could have done that. Not then. Not after everything that happened. It took a long time before I could even come down from the mountain.”

“You know what that means, don't you?”

Asriel looked up at his father with a confused expression. “What does it mean?”
“It means you have to make up for lost time.” Asgore winked, and the tension that had been building in the room gave way and broke. Asriel smiled again and took another sip of the tea.

“I guess so.”

The young monster closed his eyes. “Even knowing I have to move forward. I wish Chara could be here. I wish we could have shown them the town outside of the compound, and how much it changed. So they could... I don't know what, exactly.”

“Me too, Asriel.”

“...they couldn't let go of what happened to them. I couldn't let go of what happened to me... dad, I don't know what anyone's plans are like for the next few days, but....” Asriel opened his eyes. “I want to say goodbye. I'd like to go back to the Underground, one last time. I think I spent more time at Chara's grave than I did anywhere else in the Underground when I was a flower. I couldn't say goodbye. I wanted... I wanted to see them again. The closest thing I had to a positive emotion was when I imagined seeing them again.”

Asriel put down the cup of tea, his mouth twisting into a grimace. “As bad as it was being without a soul. I wanted them to come back like I did somehow. Even though they would have the same problems I did. That's an awful fate to wish on anyone, but your best friend...?”

“...I will speak with your mother. It's possible that we can work something out tomorrow afternoon or Saturday. That would be the best case.”

“Right. The State of the Kingdom Address is Sunday. Frisk joked about it over breakfast. Called it Assembly Lite, now with one hundred percent less shooting. I want to think that's a good sign. Laughing things off. But the last time a friend made jokes like that it was a mask to hide behind.”

“You and Frisk are very close, Asriel. You could always ask them. If they have told you so many other things they are not ready to share with anyone else, then they will probably tell you that.”

“Maybe... if it wasn't for this rain, they'd probably stop by during lunch break-”

The doorbell suddenly rang a few times, and Asgore looked up in surprise. “Well, I suppose the rain is light enough they wouldn't care, except it's not lunch time yet.”

The boss monster walked over to the front door and opened it... to see a man in greasy mechanic's coveralls, wearing a white construction supervisor's hard hat on his head, and whose eyes didn't seem to be looking at the same thing at the same time.

“Uh... can I help you? Wait... you look familiar. Where have I seen you before...?”

“Hal??” Asriel ran to the front door and peeked past his father. “What are you doing here?”

“Accumulating moisture! Also delivering.” The mechanic pointed a thumb behind him to a large truck parked in the street. “They're shorthanded at Joe's House of Stuff today, something about somebody needing to get an ingrown toenail removed? So I figure, I fixed it, I can sure drive it. So there's a bed frame and a dresser or something in there. I can probably handcart the dresser once the ramp is down but you gotta grab the bed itself. No way I can move that myself. I like my spine inside my body, thankyouverymuch.”

Asriel stared. “Um. Are you okay?”
“Why wouldn't I be okay? It's not as if I mixed a Five Hour Energy with a Red Bull so I could work all night long putting an engine back together and now all of my higher brain functions are shutting down.”

Asriel raised an eyebrow. “Uh. I'm getting mixed messages here.”

“They call them assorted messages now. Makes it sound fancier. And they can charge more money. Wait. Those are nuts. My mistake.”

“I know I'm not an expert in how human bodies work but... are you sure you don't need help?”

“I am a strong independent sandwich who don't need no mayo.”

“Seriously, is it even safe for you to be driving anything right now? You don't really... it doesn't seem like you can keep your mind, or your eyes, on the road.”

“Why not? The road's not going anywhere. I mean, all roads go somewhere, but they stay in the same spot while they do.” The mechanic clutched at his face and grimaced. “Ugh, my head... hey, did I ever tell you how I met Justin?”

“Uhm. Abrupt subject change much??”

“I picked up a rock off the ground and said 'Can I throw this at your head?' and he said 'What?' and I threw it at his face!” Hal grinned the grin of a man whose connection to reality, already tenuous at the best of times, was in danger of vanishing entirely. “Instant best friends for life!”

Asriel stared at Hal. “...how the heck does that even work??”

“Ballistically!”

“Excuse me.” Asgore held up one finger on a massive paw. “If I could interrupt for just one moment? The furniture was supposed to be delivered to the home of Toriel Dreemurr. I am Asgore Dreemurr.”

“Oh. Hold on a sec.” Hall reached into his coveralls and pulled out a folded map, which he unfolded. “Okay. I think I see the problem. Either the town or the map is upside down. Not entirely sure which one it is.”

Asriel reached up, grabbed the map out of Hal's hands, turned it over, and handed it back. Hal blinked and nodded.

“Mystery solved. I'll take these over there right away. Although like I said, I'll need somebody to help unload the bed. Unless... I travel forward in time to when the bed is already there, tie a rope between the different beds, shove the future bed off of... wait, that won't work. We'd just run into the grandfather's paradox. Also I don't have a time machine. Excuse me a second.”

Hal abruptly turned away from the door and walked back out to the truck, fell down into his hands and knees, and started retching. Asriel squeezed past his father and ran out into the rain.

“Hal?! Hal what's happening?!”

Closer to the truck, the smell hit Asriel; whatever had been going on in Hal's stomach, it was abnormal enough for his body to not only reject it, but mark it return to sender. The mechanic leaned back on his heels, and Asriel saw a pained, pale face completely devoid of its earlier animated expressions.
“...Poor life choices. They have happened.”

“Come on.” Asriel held out a paw. “You need to get inside. Whatever is happening to you, whether healing magic and monster food can fix it or not, the rain isn't going to help. We can worry about delivering stuff later.”

“...you know what the worst part is about all of this?”

“I will let you tell me, if you promise to come in out of the rain.”

Hal shook his head. “Actually... I don't know. That's why I was asking. Ugh. Maybe I should come inside after all.”

The mechanic slowly, shakily got up on his feet, and let the small boss monster guide him by the hand to the front door. Inside the house, Hal was brought to a chair, and a freshly poured cup of tea was placed in his hand, which he stared at without recognition.

“...thanks.”

“It's chamomile,” Asgore explained. “It should make you feel better.”

Somewhere inside the man's brain, a connection was made, and the teacup was raised to his mouth. A few moments after the first sip, some color seemed to return to Hal's face. Slowly he turned to look at Asriel, who was scrubbing at his head with a towel in order to dry off.

“...alright. I was working on the engine... go it finished... installed it in the truck... volunteered to help deliver stuff to help Joe... came here... knocked on the door... next thing I remember is puking in the gutter, and even then that's pretty hazy.”

“Yeah. You were delivering some stuff and you needed help unloading it but it had to be taken to my mom's place instead. Also you said something about a red bull?”

“Right. It's all coming back to me now.” Hal stared at the tea in his hands. “The human body, while versatile and resilient in many different areas, has limits to what it can accomplish. Sometimes I forget that. The energy drink from hell should have been a warning sign.”

“Are you going to be okay? You're... I haven't spent that much time with you but you're acting a lot different.”

“Don't worry about me, small furry child. I'll survive. I can't honestly say I'll be okay because most people in this town will agree that I haven't been okay since the day I was born.”

Asriel rubbed his paws together nervously. “That's what worries me. You don't have that energy anymore.”

“Right.” Hal nodded. “I'm just tired. Everything I had went into fixing that engine.”

“And you're saying stuff that makes sense, which actually makes me even more worried.”

Hal shrugged. “If ever there was a time to explain myself clearly, now is it.”

Asriel stared at the man, and sat down in a chair across from him, while Asgore stood nearby. “Hal, I have to know. Are you... like, actually crazy? I remember what we talked about during the chili cook off. And now that I can actually feel positive feelings again, some of what we talked about is really bothering me. I know I'm not somebody who can point fingers, and not just because
“...crazy is a subjective quality, Asriel. That's why I was hoping that Dr. Alphys and the Soul Research project could add some objectivity to it. So... to answer your question... I don't know. I genuinely don't. If I am, then the old joke applies; I don't suffer from insanity, I enjoy every moment. But... I apologize if I scared you or made you nervous. I know the stream-of-consciousness monologue can really put some people on edge... but that's not something I want to happen to friends. Whether they are used to it like Shop Class, or new to it like you.”

Asriel nodded, slowly. “That's okay then. But I want to make sure you're not, like, physically sick. Because I wouldn't know what to look for.”

“Well. Even without monster food fixing whatever was wrong with my stomach. It's not like I haven't had blood in my vomit before.”

Asriel's face scrunched up in disgust. “I did wonder, so... that isn't normal for humans?”

“Well, broadly speaking, just throwing up isn't normal. For the body to work in reverse like that, it means something has gone very wrong. But yeah, blood is an even worse sign.”

Asgore stepped forward. “Do you need assistance? We can help you get to the clinic or the hospital.”

Hal held up the cup of tea. “You've already done more than they could, faster than they could hope, with a single act of hospitality. But thank you for the offer. And for the tea itself-”

The doorbell rang a few times again, and Asgore and Asriel looked over at the front door again.

“Hmmm. Did somebody organize a party at my house and forget to tell me about it?” Asgore walked over to the door and opened it.

“GOOD DAY YOUR MAJESTY!”

“Ah! Hello Papyrus! A good day to you, too! What brings you by this rainy morning?”

“A MOST COMPLICATED AND CONVOLUTED SEQUENCE OF EVENTS! I VERY RECENTLY RECEIVED A PHONE CALL FROM SANS, WHO HEARD FROM ALPHYS, WHO IN TURN WAS INFORMED BY MR. STANTON AT THE LAB, WHO RECEIVED INFORMATION FROM MR. CARROW, THAT MY GOOD FRIEND HAL WAS HAVING A BAD TIME AND WOULD I BE SO GOOD AS TO PROVIDE HIM WITH SOME ASSISTANCE! OF COURSE I AGREED WITH ALL POSSIBLE HASTE AND PROCEEDED HERE, AGAIN WITH ALL POSSIBLE HASTE, TO PROVIDE SUCH AID AS I AM CAPABLE OF OFFERING!”

“Wait, how did Justin know...” Hal put down the cup of tea on the coffee table and pulled out his cell phone, scrolling through the chat history.

8:47 AM: I DID THE THING

8:47 AM: I AM THE GREETIST

8:47 AM: BOW B4 MY TECHNO LOGIC SUPREME
8:47 AM: SUPREME
8:48 AM: FUCKING AUTO CORRECT SUPREMACY
8:48 AM IM_the_walrus: hal are u drunk
8:48 AM: I AM THE GIVER OF LIFE
8:48 AM: I LIAD HANDS UPON THE ENGINE
8:48 AM IM_the_walrus: ffs its not even 9 yet
8:49 AM: AND SAID LAZARUS COME FORTH
8:49 AM: AND THE ENGINE SAYS WHO THE F IS LAZARS
8:49 AM: AND I SAID JINX YOU ARE ALIVE AND WORKING AND NOW U MUST RUN THIS TRUCK AND THE ENGINE SAID O DARN
8:50 AM IM_the_walrus: hal im working on replacing a carpet can I call u back
8:51 AM: I AM A MACHINE GOD
8:51 AM: BOW BEFORE MY GREASY MAJESTY
8:51 AM: MY EXALTED HANDS WHICH SHAPE METAL
8:52 AM: MY FILLINGS HURT
8:52 AM: IS THAT A BAD SIGN
8:53 AM IM_the_walrus: was that thing about your teeth connected to the delusions of grandeur or a seperate thought bcuz can't tell rite now
8:53 AM: WHO CAME INTO THE GARAGE AND DUMPED ALL THESE EMPTY RED BULLS
8:53 AM IM_the_walrus: WAT.
8:53 AM: HOW DID THE EVEN DO IT I WAS HERE ALL NIGHT
8:53 AM: FUCKING NINJAS
8:53 AM: DROPPING OFF THEIR EMPTIES
8:54 AM IM_the_walrus: omg hal did you drink red bull again
8:54 AM IM_the_walrus: hal answer me go d dammit
8:54 AM IM_the_walrus: HAL WATT THE SHIT IS GOING ON OVER THERE
8:54 AM: SORY AFK HAD TO PUT PHOEN DOWN
8:55 AM: BEEN REALLY SICK THIS MONRING
8:55 AM: HEY Y IS THE AUTOCORRECT NOT PICKING UP ON THIS

8:55 AM: SERIOUSLY YOU WONT LET ME SPELL SUPREME BUT YOU LET ALL OF THAT STUFF GO THROUGH

8:55 AM: GJHKEWYKLE

8:55 AM: ARE

8:55 AM: YOU

8:55 AM: FUCKING

8:55 AM: SERIOUS

8:55 AM IM_the_walrus: hal if you don't go to the hospital right now i'm calling the rest of the team and we are staging an intervention

8:56 AM: ACTUALLY I DONT THINK THE RED BULL IS THE PROBLEM THIS TIME I THINK IT WAS THE FIVE HOUR EERGY I MIXED INTO IT

8:56 AM: HEY JUSTIN IT'S THE LEFT HAND THAT'S TINGLY IF YOU GET A HEART ATTACK RITE SO WHAT DOES IT MEAN IF YOUR RIGHT HAND IS TINGLY INSTEAD

8:56 AM: OR ARE TINGLS JUST BAD ALL OVER

Hal stared at the end of the chat history. “Well... that was inconclusive.”

Asriel peered at the phone screen. “Hey, that thing that's flashing. It looks like a tape or something. Does that mean you have a message?”

“Oooohhhhh. Right. I didn't think it was safe to check my phone while I was driving so I let it go to voice mail.” Hal pressed the icon on the touch screen.

“HAL GO TO THE FUCKING HOSPITAL!”

The silence that followed was deafening, though not in the same way as Justin's angry voice mail. Hal coughed.

“Well. I suppose you were going to learn that word eventually.”

Asriel waved his paw. “Eh. Old news. Nobody cares about what they say when there's just flowers around.”

Asgore stared at his son. “I know we've all talked about secrets and how they've backfired on us... but you probably shouldn't mention that to your mother.”

Asriel nodded. “Yeah.”
Undyne flipped through the pages of the book, then doubled back.

“Here you go.”

The other teacher took the book and stared at the text where one webbed finger was pointing; despite its significance, there was nothing that would set it apart from all of the text around it simply at a glance, never mind the pages in front of and behind it. “Wow. You recognized that in a split second.”

Undyne grinned. “It turns out when you only have one eye you learn to get a lot of use out of it.”

“Actually. About that.” The teacher looked uncomfortable. “How exactly did you lose the other one? I hate to say it but there's a lot of rumors in the staff room, and I try to stay out of it but I can't help but wonder myself.”

“Oh, I didn't lose it. It's still there, it just doesn't work, and it looks really messed up. When people see it they always freak out. So the eye patch is more a courtesy than a necessity. As for how it got messed up?” Undyne flashed a huge, toothy smile. “Let me know when the office pool gets up to around five hundred dollars and we'll work something out.”

“Wait, you know about the pool??”

Undyne laughed at the surprised expression on the young man's face. “Not until you just said that I didn't!”

“...wow. I don't think gym teachers are supposed to be that smart. It feels like it violates a social compact, or a union rule, or something.” The teacher chuckled. “Still. Since you asked. This morning it was up to three forty five.”

Undyne laughed again as the music teacher left her office. Heading back behind her desk, the warrior started sorting through paperwork until a noise caught her attention and she looked up towards the door again.

“Hey, punk! How's your first day back?”

“It's okay. Mostly. It's nice to get back into a routine. Even if it's all going to fly out the window again at the end of next week. But that's alright. Already got a whole bunch of stuff planned out with Asriel.”

Undyne stared at Frisk. “Okay... while I'm glad to hear things are good, 'but that's alright' isn't a phrase I've ever heard any kid say about the school year ending. It's never that understated.”

Frisk shrugged and leaned against the door frame, right hand absentmindedly going up to rub their left shoulder.

“Well... it's a little hard to explain what I mean by that. For a few years. Before Mt. Ebott. I went to James Madison Elementary like a lot of kids in town. And. They weren't as good at the whole teaching thing as mom, or you, or anyone here. But they were okay at it. They were, and they still are, good people, all of them. And having a routine helped me a lot at a time when life was really chaotic. But more than that. School for me has always been... if I do action A, I get result B. Every time. As long as I understood the subject matter, I would get good grades. As long as I didn't do
certain things that I didn't want to do in the first place, nobody would yell at me. And that second part was very important to me, and still is. But most of all, it meant I was out of the house for most of the day. School was a refuge. Summer and Christmas vacation, spring break... that meant going back and staying there. Last year was the first time I ever looked forward to three months of home and friends and stuff.”

“...you know, this is more about your pre-Underground life than you've ever told me, I think.”

Frisk nodded and looked down at the ground. “I. Uh. Well, Tuesday night changed a lot of things. Did... did Toriel show you the note that Asriel found?”

Undyne shook her head. “No, but I remember what you said after she asked. You said it was goodbye... and then you totally snapped. I'll be honest, I thought for a second that you were a completely different person that just looked like the Frisk I know. And at the very end... you said it would have been better for everybody if you were dead... hey, Frisk. I know I've said this before, but I guess it bears repeating. Back before our fight, when I said it would be better for everyone if you were dead... obviously I was wrong. I just saw you as the last soul we needed. And I wouldn't have lost my temper at the address if I hadn't been so worried about you getting hurt. So... remember that, for future reference. The world is better with you in it.”

Frisk’s hand came up to their shoulder again. “I'll try to remember. But the thing is... when I was running. From the lab. It felt like the whole world was falling apart. I was so scared I could barely even think. And what I did think didn't make a whole lot of sense, even to me at the time. Even if I had it together enough to remember that, there was no way I could have believed in it.” Frisk scratched the back of one hand. “So, on the way to school this morning, mom asked me to talk to Mrs. Carson, in case there was anything she could do to help. So that's where I was before I came here.”

“How did that go?”

“Not very well.” Frisk raised their head and while they weren't looking directly at Undyne, it was possible for the tall woman to see an expression of annoyance on the child's face. “Mrs. Carson latched onto the whole 'let's guess if Frisk is a boy or a girl or something in between' thing and wouldn't move on from it. And, I did try to open up about stuff but she kept shutting me down and coming back to the gender pronouns, which is the stuff that bothers me the least.”

Undyne raised an eyebrow. “Well. Humans are kinda weird about that. And inconsistent. So that probably says more about Mrs. Carson's baggage than it does about yours.”

“Maybe.”

“...hey. I know you don't like talking about it, but... if you feel up to it, can you maybe explain it to me? Because it's hard for me not to wonder, and you said that it bothers you the least, but not that it doesn't bother you at all. Obviously you don't have to. But if it's a small problem, maybe that will make it easier to tackle, and you can work your way up to the big stuff.”

Frisk looked down at the floor again. “...there's some real irony in you making that argument. But right or wrong, I definitely can't keep trying to handle this by myself... okay.” The child took a deep breath and let it out slowly, and took a few steps forward and away from the doorway. “Before Mt. Ebott... when everything started to fall apart. When my human parents started yelling and fighting all of the time. I tried to fix things. I guess there were problems I didn't know about, and couldn't be expected to understand that young. At that time, I just tackled what I could understand. Simple stuff. Household stuff. Cooking. Cleaning. Laundry. That makes sense, right? Even if it wasn't that stuff that was bothering them, then it would take the pressure off. Let them
focus on the real problem. Work their way up to the big stuff, like you said. Right?"

Undyne belatedly realized that Frisk's question wasn't rhetorical. "I think that's a pretty sound plan. There might be reasons why it wouldn't work, but there wouldn't be any way for somebody in your position to know about them ahead of time. So that was a good call."

Frisk relaxed slightly. "Yeah. So I did that for... a while. But things got worse and worse, so I thought maybe the problem wasn't what I was doing, it was what I was. That there was something about me that was wrong, and I needed to change that. Maybe... maybe mom wanted a daughter that was more into traditional girl stuff, dresses and dolls instead of transforming robots. Maybe dad wanted a son, so he wouldn't be happy until his daughter was a tomboy, watching or playing sports and roughhousing with other kids, instead of reading all the time. Or it could have been the other way around, or something completely different for all I knew. But nothing I did made any difference... for a while I thought it was because they knew I was faking an interest in things, but eventually I realized..."

Frisk cleared their throat. "Well. That's not really the right word, according to what people keep telling me. Let's say I thought. Eventually I thought that the real source of all the problems was me. Not what I did or did not do, not things about me I couldn't change easily or at all. But that I exist. And... well, that's why I ended up climbing Mt. Ebott, and why I don't care what people call me. Because, in the end, it doesn't really matter. I'm not a he, or a she, or a they, or even an it. I'm nothing, or at least, I feel like I'm nothing. Even if I felt like I wanted to specifically be something... I don't even know what that would be anymore." Frisk sniffed. "When you get to the point where you want to disappear, and you're ready to jump down a hole in a cave without hesitating, a lot of other stuff gets lost in the shuffle. And I think that was the part that Mrs. Carson didn't understand, and that's why she got hung up on the whole thing. But I couldn't even get a word in edgewise to try to explain it, so... ugh. What a mess."

"... I might need to talk to Mrs. Carson about a few things later."

“What?!” Frisk looked up in alarm, and Undyne held up both hands.

“No, no, not about this! I'm not gonna rat you out or anything! It's just... okay.” Undyne lowered her hands. “Monster history lesson time, punk. We were stuck down there for ages and we never had a very big population until near the very end, and then when that happened suddenly overcrowding turned into a real problem, especially in the city. But we realized a long time ago that it was going to take everybody, doing whatever they could, for us to all survive. So we never had that same division of the sexes thing that crops up in different human cultures. If somebody was strong, they used that strength. Hard work, fighting, training. If somebody was smart, they used those smarts. Building tools, coordinating big projects, figuring out how to grow more food or that old standby, figure out how to destroy the Barrier. If somebody was just really creative, they told stories and made art and kept everyone else from giving up, if they could. We had like a handful of traditions that must have been handed down from before the war that were really arbitrary and only stuck around because it didn't cost us anything to keep them, and even then they changed so much each generation that nobody knows what they were originally about or for."

Frisk nodded. “Like how Christmas today is actually a fusion of a whole bunch of different religious traditions, and none of them originally involved a big jolly guy in a beard going down chimneys and leaving presents.”

“Exactly. Nobody knows why you'll meet your true love if you run around a tree backwards three times. Nobody remembers why it was okay for furry monsters to wear a necklace of flowers, but not dragons. Nobody has the slightest idea why if you proposed to a fire elemental, your back had
to be to the Barrier.”

“Wow. I'm supposed to be ambassador and I didn't know any of this.”

“Frisk, I'm a monster and I didn't know any of those three things until after the Barrier was broken! That's my point. It's only now that we're not stuck down in the dark that we can even look back at our own culture and really take stock of it. And a lot of that is because we picked up so much from humans, either from the trash or on the surface.”

“Like what?”

“Like some stuff related to clothing. Who could and couldn't wear stuff like dresses or hats or certain accessories. The white coat thing for scientists was handy once the CORE got started, but most of it wasn't that useful, it just got picked up along the way and we never bothered to get rid of it because it never got in the way of survival. Although we already developed some things on our own. The striped shirt thing was a way to keep tabs on kids to make sure they didn't do anything dangerous or wander too far out of the way. When monsters come in all shapes and sizes it helps to have a single common thing everyone agrees on, and everyone agreed on a way to keep tabs on kids for their own safety.”

“I always figured it was something like that.”

“Well, now you know for sure. And if Mrs. Carson is going to be counseling anybody, she needs to understand the backgrounds that people come from. Otherwise what happened to you could happen to any monster child, and probably a lot of the other human kids.”

“Yeah. Best to try to head that off at the pass.”

Undyne nodded and smiled. “Oh. And Frisk. About what you said.”

“Yeah?”

“...I'm gonna admit something right away. It's hard for me to wrap my head around some of what you describe, because the first thing that comes to mind when somebody says 'Undyne you can't do this' is 'YOU'RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME!' But it sounds like you had to... give up a part of yourself. When you were trying to make things right. Now... it wasn't taken. I get that your parents never said that you had to be one thing when you wanted to be another, or said you could never be what you really wanted to be. So it's not quite the same... but it's still close enough. The difference between what I described and what you experienced is the difference between having somebody chop off your leg, and having to cut off your own leg to escape a trap. Either way, you've been very badly hurt. So if you ever decide you want to take that back, then I'll have your back when you do, no matter what it is you decide on.”

Frisk shook their head. “People have already gotten used to saying 'they'. I'm not gonna just change that on them-”

A webbed hand slammed down on the desk and Frisk jumped back, staring up at Undyne's face with wide, frightened eyes.

“Frisk, don't think like that! You shouldn't have to base decisions about who you are, or who you want to be, around whether or not it is convenient for other people! I can understand wanting to make people happy. I can understand wanting to do something to help others. And I can understand not wanting to do something but doing it anyway, because it has to be done. There is a time and place for all of those decisions. But this isn't any of them. Whatever you decide to be, it should be
because you want to be that. Not because somebody else wants to think of you as a guy, or a girl, or something in between, or none of the above.”

Undyne looked down at her hand and picked it up off of the desk, flexing her fingers. “Sorry if I startled you there. I just... I know all of this bothers you. But the fact that it doesn't bother you as much as the other stuff? That doesn't mean you can shrug it off. Or that you should even try. And...”

Undyne looked away from Frisk for a moment. “I'm not trying to guilt trip you, Frisk. But it really bothers me to see that something bothers you, and then when I ask what's wrong, you put on a smile and you say that everything is fine. I'm your friend, and if something is wrong, I don't want you to pretend to be okay. I want you to tell me, so we can figure out what to do next, to make sure you are actually okay. And don't even think about trying to apologize for that. That's not something you did wrong. That's not something that's your fault, or that you can be blamed for.”

Undyne looked back at the child, and noticed right away that Frisk's body language had changed. Their posture was defensive, their arms were drawn in protectively, and they were looking anywhere but at Undyne's face.

“...Undyne... the idea that it's not my fault. I don't know if you understand just how much that hurts.”

Undyne blinked, walked over and got down on one knee next to Frisk. “I would have thought having something not be your fault would come as a relief.”

“That's what I thought, for a while. But... well, Tuesday happened. And before that, when I was in the hospital, in the fever dream. When Asriel found me. I thought... I thought that everyone was trapped in the Underground again, and it was my fault. Asriel pulled me out of it... but... it took so long. Everything that could have gone wrong, went wrong in that nightmare world. I was on the verge of giving up completely before he found me. And I was so far gone... he kept trying and trying... because I couldn't understand what he was telling me. The world in the dream. That was the world I understood. Where mistakes are forever and nothing can change them or make up for them. And that was bad enough. To know that I had hurt everyone I love. Everyone I care about.”

Frisk's hand came up and ran through their hair, and Undyne saw that Frisk's eyes weren't really seeing anything in front of them.

“Asriel said so many different things. Tried so many times. To snap me out of it. He finally got to me. He pulled me back from the edge. But I was so far gone that it's a miracle he succeeded at all. I couldn't bring myself to face the truth. Not then.”

“...and what's the truth?”

Frisk swallowed, and when they spoke their voice was choked up. “The truth is... if it's not my fault. If things just... go wrong, sometimes. Then that means... it means two things. And I don't know which is worse.”

Undyne waited a few moments before it became clear Frisk didn't want to continue. “...and?” she asked softly.

“And... the first one is... all the things that happened to me. Before Mt. Ebott and the Underground. What happened with my human parents. The screaming. The fighting. Life turning to hell. If that wasn't my fault... then my parents... did they just not care? Did they forget I existed? Yes I know it's selfish to think about myself when other people are having so many problems of their own, but
couldn't they have taken thirty seconds to pull me aside and say 'Frisk I know things seem to be really bad right now but you need to understand it's not your fault' so I didn't have to cry myself to sleep every night?"

The questions tumbled out in a rush and when they were finish, Frisk clapped both hands over their mouth and squeezed their eyes shut, causing some of the tears that had built up to spill down their face. Undyne stared, a sinking feeling forming in her gut, and one hand instinctively curled up into a fist. Somewhere in town, there were two humans who had an appointment with it, even if they didn't know it yet...

Frisk breathed in deeply, and then let it out, slightly calmed down. Their hands dropped from their mouth but were still held in front of them defensively. “And. The other thing. If what happened to me... if it didn't happen because of something I did. If it's not my fault. Then... that means terrible things can happen at any time for no reason, and there's nothing I can do to stop it. If. If Toriel is angry at me because I break something, i f that is my fault, t hen... t hen at least there's a reason for it. And people can be happy as long as I do the right things, and don't do the wrong things. But i f it's not my fault, then one day Toriel can get angry at me even if I don't do anything wrong. One day, without any warning... it could all be reset. Like I'm back there again. I don't want to go back.... ”

Undyne nodded. “... and Tuesday night, you thought that was what happened. No wonder you took off like you did.”

Frisk shook their head. “No. No. I screwed up then. Or... I thought I did. I didn't explain anything, I didn't tell her anything to prepare her. I didn't know how but... I thought I should have.”

A webbed hand rested on Frisk's shoulder. “You don't need to worry about that anymore. Like Toriel said. Nothing you or anybody else could have said or done, could ever have prepared her for her son coming back.”

“...it was so hard to believe.”

“What was hard to believe, Frisk?”

Frisk rubbed at one eye with the heel of their hand. “It was so hard to believe Toriel when she said everything was okay. It was so hard to hear her say I didn't have to buy new plates to replace the one I broke. It was so hard to understand she was more worried about me than the Christmas tree or the ornaments when I knocked that over. It's... ugh. I can't even breathe right now... Undyne. It's so hard for me... to not worry... that one day, Toriel is going to look back at everything I've done. And... wonder what she was thinking. Taking me in. Even now. Even after everything she's said. I thought, I thought I'd be okay with it once Asriel was back...”

“Wait, okay with what? Okay with Asriel being back, so you have a brother now? I'm not understanding this.”

Frisk shook their head. “That's because I'm not explaining it very well. Undyne... Asriel is Toriel and Asgore's son. I'm... I'm some dumb kid that climbed a mountain. Toriel... she tried so hard to reach me. But a part of me always thought that once Asriel was Asriel again, there wouldn't be any room for me. That I was a placeholder until I could figure out how to bring him all the way back. And I thought I was okay with that. We could still be friends. I could still see everyone at school. But now he's finally, really back... and I can't let go. I don't want to let go. I want to stay with Toriel, I want to stay with Asriel. and even after everything she said, every promise, right now I'm more scared than I've ever been in my life. Just waiting for Toriel to say 'I'm sorry Frisk, but there's no more room, in the house or in our lives, for anyone else right now.' And the worst part... the
worst part is... the worst part...."

“Hey. C'mere punk.” Undyne held up her arms and Frisk rushed forward to hug the warrior. Undyne could feel the child's shaky breathing affecting their whole body. “It's okay. It's alright. Take your time.”

“Undyne, for over a year and a half, I couldn't even say I was sorry. It was two simple words, and everyone says they were little things, not worth worrying about. And I still couldn't do it. I'd open my mouth and... in my head I could see Toriel screaming at me. Telling me that words can't fix anything. It took dying and coming back before I could say it when it meant anything at all. I had to die to get past that. If that's what it takes... for me to change something so simple....”

“Frisk. You and I both know it's not simple.” Undyne squeezed the trembling child and patted them on the back. “It's complicated. Very complicated. Because people and life are complicated. You see this one thing, sticking out of the surface, and you think to yourself, 'I should be able to deal with this' but that one thing is connected to everything else, because it's literally the tip of the iceberg. Frisk, you did not take a year and a half to be able to say two words. You spent a year and a half trying to get rid of old, wrong ideas, and replace them with new and better ones. You died and you came back, and you're thinking about that like it's some sort of trade off, but that's wrong. The fact that you came back at all, right there, is amazing! And now that you're back, you can do something you couldn't do before. That's not a trade off, Frisk! That is snatching victory from the jaws of defeat and spitting in its eyes for good measure! And that's not the only victory under your belt! I know it was hard to share all of that. Just talking about it was like going through it again, wasn't it?”

The child nodded.

“But you did it anyway. Frisk, in the last few weeks, everybody is starting to understand that you're in trouble and you need help. Talking about this, asking for help? That is not a surrender. It's not a defeat. You are calling for reinforcements and they are here now. And if you held out this long on your own, then you are definitely going to win this in the end.”

“I don't feel like I'm winning anything. I feel worse. A lot worse than I did before all of this started coming up. Like I'm going to break down again. I'm so sick of this. Talking to people and then the subject changes to something that hits a nerve for me and suddenly every other sound that comes out of my mouth is gross sobbing.”

“It's okay to cry, Frisk.”

The child's reply was a hoarse whisper. “No it's not. Not when people are depending on you. Not when your friends are relying on you. And not when somebody you love is hurting and needs you to be there for him. Who needs you to be strong...”

“Wait, wait, wait. Hold the freaking phone. Are you implying you're not strong? Because that's definitely wrong! There's a lot of different types of strength. The only one you don't have is the type that lets you wrestle giant rocks like I do. Hey, you remember my whole rant before our battle, right? The part where I was making fun of you for being nice and hugging random strangers? I expected humans to be murder machines, and you never hurt anyone. I thought it was an act, but it wasn't. That was really you. And if you had wanted to hurt people, it would have been easy to be exactly what I expected. But you went out of your way to make friends out of enemies. There's a whole sub-genre of anime about that! How is that not a strength?”

Frisk leaned back from the hug and stared at Undyne. Their wide eyes carried an expression of confusion, and Undyne grinned.
“Frisk, I had another prejudice you totally blasted to bits. When you said one of the Soul Research volunteers had a Level of Violence Capacity of 20, I would never, ever, in a thousand years, have guessed it was you. I didn't elaborate on it because, hell, you're ten years old. You didn't need to hear about stuff like that... I had no idea you'd already lived it. I expected somebody like that to lash out all the time, to have to 'win' every confrontation just to survive. Or to run away from every confrontation to keep from getting hurt. But you stick it out. You leave yourself open to an attack you're convinced is coming, because you have to be in order to connect to people and help them. Every moment of every day, you are ready to take one for the team! How is that not a strength?”

Undyne let the child go, and gave them a huge smile.

“I could go on and on until the whole lunch break is over, but you get the idea, right? Tears are not a sign of weakness. Not for monsters, not for humans. Not for anyone. If somebody tells you otherwise, they are a lying liar that's lying to you. With lies! Lies that are false and untrue!”

Frisk sputtered in nervous laughter, and managed to smile past the tears.

“Heh... Undyne. Thank you. It's. It's been... very difficult for me. To have everything I thought I knew about life turned upside down. Even when it's all changed for the better, and stayed better for over a year. Thank you for letting me... letting me get that off of my back.”

“Don't worry, Frisk. I know it's hard to stick with something new. It's easy to backslide. But you'll get through it. You've got me and everyone else supporting you. No matter what happens.”

Frisk ran a hand down their face and took a deep breath. “You're definitely right about it being easy to backslide.”

“...Frisk, I know when you were going through Waterfall I was chasing you. But you did take the time to read the inscriptions on some of the walls, right? A lot of monsters thought we'd be stuck down there forever... and where are we now?”

“...right. I understand.”

“Good. Hold onto that. It's an important lesson to learn.”

Frisk nodded and looked at the office clock. “I will... I should go get something to eat before Geography class starts. Thank you again. For setting me straight about all of that.”

“That's what friends are for!” Undyne grinned. “Now go chow down, punk.”
Concerning Citizens

Thomas checked the date and time on the schedule for the third time in the same minute, and cursed under his breath; his specialty was analyzing intelligence, not gathering it in the first place, but the metaphorical short straw had come up with his name on it. Unfortunately the task couldn't be automated, not out in the field; Thomas suddenly remembered a scene from an old movie where college students left tape recorders running in a classroom to get the information from the lecture while devoting class time to other work, which even the instructor had ended up doing by the end of the segment.

If not for a lack of convenient electrical outlets, Thomas would have unpacked his laptop and just started recording, but the battery would certainly not last long enough. And even if it somehow did, or an extension cord was conveniently available...

“I'm sure that the device is quite sophisticated, at least concerning how it was constructed, but do we really want to become dependent on a machine literally built out of garbage?”

“Quite right. I have nothing against monsters personally but we are talking about a culture of Dumpster Divers.”

“That isn't what I meant. I've seen all the Mad Max movies. You can make all sorts of stuff out of the dregs of an industrial civilization, and I'm sure the CORE is a technological marvel, but we can't trust it for our own economic and industrial use. If the design is solid, then we should rebuild it with solid materials, not recycled tin cans and Playstation controllers.”

Filling up his hard drive with random speculation wouldn't help anybody. Thomas looked up over the top of his copy of the agenda at the speakers; a man whose fashion sense or lack of same implied somebody in the engineering profession, and a woman whose plain, severe looking coat and skirt combined with her stance and expression to say “lawyer” but of course the problem with appearances is that they could be interpreted any number of ways.

A fact that had worked in his favor more often than not, so he wasn't going to complain.

Thomas saw unusual movement in his peripheral vision, and moved his head slightly. A red skinned, muscular biped with horns was taking a seat some distance away. It did make sense for the monsters to want to be present during this type of meeting, and perhaps it would provide a certain amount of insight. Nevertheless, Thomas felt his heart rate spike, and focused on two voices behind him in an attempt to distract himself and keep his emotional state from reaching his face.

“I thought the whole CORE debate thing wasn't until Sunday. What's this suppose to be?”

“I dunno. Maybe they had to reschedule. Or maybe that's actually a vote and today is the debate? I mean, I'm okay either way, as long as this thing gets started soon. My shift starts in less than an hour.”

“Yeah. The timing on this isn't really great for anybody.”

The voices behind Thomas continued chattering back and forth... until something caught his attention.

“Hey, buddy. Do you know what's going on?”
For a moment, Thomas wondered if the question was directed at him, until a third voice responded from behind him and to his right. “All I know is what I heard on the radio. And then somebody called me on my cell phone and said ‘you need to be in Quarterhorse Fields five minutes ago,’ and I told them ‘well, why didn't you tell me that five minutes ago’ and they said ‘because I forgot until five minutes ago’ and I said ‘this sounds like a you problem' but here I am anyway.”

“Hahaha! I know a guy like that. If he was janitor or security guy, wouldn't be no problem, but he's in shipping and receiving so you can fill in the blanks.”

“That's a bad combination if there ever was one.”

“Yeah, but what ya gonna do?”

“Build an exact robot duplicate to do his job for him?”

“...wait, if it was an exact duplicate, it would be just as bad as him.”

“Aha. I see you've played this game before.”

The three voices burst out laughing, and Thomas shook his head. If somebody didn't show up in the next five minutes, the whole event was probably a loss; better to head over to the bookstore and check the finances and the cover stories.

“Okay, I just found something on my phone. Turns out the monster king and queen rescheduled that thing that got shot up last Friday for Sunday. That must have pushed everything forward to make room for it.”

“That, or somebody wants to get in their two cents on the subject before anything official gets decided. You remember when the county pushed through that appropriations bill before Memorial Day weekend.”

“Actually I don't. Spent last Memorial Day weekend in Miami so that the kids could spend some time with their grandparents.”

“Oh, I see. That makes-”

“Attention! Attention!”

Thomas's eyes shot up from the agenda as somebody walked out in front of the room and took up station behind the hastily erected podium. "I'm Eric Ross, deputy director of the Lost Eagle County Electric Co-Op, and we've had to reschedule everything on extremely short notice so I apologize for the delay and the general lack of organization you see around you. So let's get right into it. This is a public meeting to discuss a single issue and its pros and cons, that of integrating the Hotland CORE power plant into the Lost Eagle County electrical grid.”

The room seemed to settle into a lower level of background noise as the deputy director spoke.

“The position of the Lost Eagle County Electric Co-Op is that this should not take place for reasons including but not limited to the cost of such a project in time, manpower, and materials. This meeting is intended to allow a further explanation of this position, and also to allow a public venue for opposing perspective and arguments.”

“Hah! You included manpower in that list like it's a bad thing! The county could use more jobs!”

A voice far from the back of the room, with a reply that came from much closer.
“But they'd just be temporary jobs. We should be concentrating on permanent jobs being brought into the county.”

“That is a whole other issue, man.”

“It's an important issue and it needs to be addressed here and now—”

“Excuse me! Excuse me!” Mr. Ross, in the absence of a gavel or other noise producing tool to strike the podium with, was reduced to slapping its flat surface with an open palm. “Ow, ow... can we please have a modicum of order in this meeting? Thank you...”

“I don't even know why this subject is under debate at all. The answer is obvious, or at least it should be. We cannot connect the CORE power plant to the Surface power grid.” The voice behind and to the right of Thomas had spoken up again.

Mr. Ross turned in the direction of the speaker. “Sir, the entire purpose of this meeting is to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of doing so.”

“Mr. Ross, I don't mean to contradict you but there is nothing to discuss. That's because the connection you are talking about is physically impossible.”

“I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your name, mister...”

“Doctor, actually. Doctor Wing Ding Aster. Former Royal Scientist to King Dreemurr and considering I'm the one who designed and built the CORE in the first place, I should know what the CORE can and cannot do.”

The room suddenly became extremely quiet, and Thomas slowly turned in his seat, and was reassured by the fact that several people in the same row of chairs were doing the same thing. A few rows back, a tall skeleton was standing up. Dressed in a gray suit with a bright yellow bow tie around the collar, and a white lab coat over it all, he seemed to be standing confidently despite the large number of humans staring at him.

“...would you care to elaborate on that subject, doctor?”

“With pleasure. The CORE facility was built with the specific purpose of destroying the Barrier, which was the strongest physical force known to humans or monsters in recorded history. The power requirements were immense, which is why it was built in the volcanic magma chamber called Hotland in the first place. Geothermal energy was the only abundant power source we had. The entire thing was built from the ground up to provide high voltage electricity to power our instruments and our experiments. It is a heavy duty industrial scale power generator, not suited for the demands of commercial, domestic power distribution.”

Mr. Ross blinked. “I'm sorry, I thought the CORE was used to power the entire Underground?”

“I need to clarify a point. The CORE facility and the geothermal power plant are two distinct entities. The power plant was designed first to supply the CORE's needs, and the small surplus that was left over was used to provide heat, light and other forms of energy to all other regions of the cavern. This involved multiple transformer substations within Hotland itself, and due to the scarcity of raw materials, Dimensional Bridge relays and routers. It also cut down on resistance losses, which was a nice bonus. Needless to say, human power grids are not designed to handle that.”

“Wait, what's a dimensional bridge?” Somebody on the other side of the room asked the question, and Thomas could not see exactly who.
"The closest thing in human science, or science fiction I should say, is teleportation. We literally beamed the power to where it was needed. We had to, we didn't have enough pure metal to use on transmission cables."

"Wait, you guys had broadcast power??"

The skeleton's skull shook from side to side. "It wasn't broadcast, it was transmitted through Dimensional Bridges. The bandwidth was actually very narrow. If we'd tried to broadcast then we wouldn't be able to use cell phones or wireless computing. It was hard enough getting reception close to the CORE and that was just because of the food generators."

"What's a food generator?" The question was out of Thomas' mouth before he could stop it.

"It's how we managed to grow food underground without sunlight. You ever tried growing anything that relies on photosynthesis in the dark? It's not easy! And natural bio-luminescence and magic-infused crystals only get you so far. So we used some of the energy from the power plant to maintain photosynthesis in the absence of natural light."

"Is that how monster food is made? I've always wondered." One of the voices from behind and to the left, but Thomas could not turn his head far enough to look directly at the speaker.

"No, but it's a good start. But we're getting off track. The issue is about the power plant being hooked into the human grid. These are the main reasons why it can't be done: First, it's too much power. Second, it's the wrong type of hardware. And three, which I haven't gotten to yet, is that it's the wrong type of electricity in the first place. Upwards of eighty percent of the energy produced is magical electricity. The human power grid is built to transmit physical electricity."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is one will work just fine in the human power grid, and the other will cause electrical transformers to explode. Magical energy in general is more concentrated, more reactive, and will jump dielectric gaps and insulation that physical electricity can't circumvent."

Thomas swallowed and went for broke. "Sorry doctor, but you said the CORE and the power plant for it were separate? So if the CORE doesn't generator power, what is it for? Like, you said it was a lab, what kind of experiments did you do?"

"CORE is an acronym. It stands for Chronodynamic Optronic Retrograde Emitter. We were trying to store enough energy to break the Barrier, and when that didn't work we tried to manipulate time and destroy the Barrier with a paradox."

"Wait, you made a time machine?!" Thomas's jaw dropped.

"No, and I'm so sick of people calling it that. You can't send matter back in time because it will run into the past version of itself and explode. You can send matter forward in time but there's no way to do it reliably and predictably. That's how I ended up in this future I'm in right now, where people ask me questions constantly. I don't care what Sans says, this is the darkest timeline!"

About half of the room laughed, and Dr. Aster snorted. "I'm glad some people find it amusing."

Thomas wanted to follow up on his questions, but caution and discretion had belatedly managed to get a word in edgewise in the frenzied debate going on in his brain. Fortunately, somebody else in the room had no such reservations.

"So if you can't send matter back in time, what does that leave? You said you were making
paradoxes, right?"

“We sent back energy. Light, mostly.”

“Could you send messages to yourself in the past? Change history?”

“That's what we were doing by not sending back the energy we got from the future. And that's how I got here. First large scale test we ever did ended up being the last because everything went straight to hell. It turns out just because you can create a paradox in a controlled environment does not mean that you can actually control what happens to your environment after that. Learned that the hard way.”

Thomas turned back around, dumbstruck. The monsters had the ability to send information back in time.

The monsters had the ability to send information back in time.

With the power of foresight, the monsters could turn every single defeat into a victory.

'Jordan was right. I don't know how but he was right. The CORE is the source of their power. Jesus H. Christ on a bike.'

“No, we can't do that. That's the point I'm trying to make. If we could send information into the past to tell ourselves anything useful, we would have either used it to break the Barrier using future knowledge, or used it to avoid the War in the first place. As it stands the only thing we got out of that whole program was that we disproved the 'Ripple Effect' in human science fiction. Yeah, that was a great payoff for several decades of high energy magic physics research.”

Thomas realized he had missed a question, and tried to reign in his thoughts and focus on the thread of the debate.

“Are you sure? I mean, not knocking what you guys accomplished down there, but you didn't have much to work with. Maybe with a full lab up here—"

Dr. Aster snorted. “If some humans want to screw around with sending energy through the timespace continuum, that's fine by me as long as they do it far away from me. It's hard enough adjusting after one time skip.”

The meeting had gone so far off the rails that Mr. Ross had gone out into the lobby to get a cup of coffee and never returned, and Thomas tried to make room in his head for additional intel gleaned from the endless barrage of questions that were directed towards Dr. Aster, but... there just wasn't room. The scope and scale of the problem at hand was too big. By the time he got up and walked out of the building, he was vaguely aware that the conversation had somehow shifted to the original Star Wars trilogy, which the skeleton scientist claimed to have only recently seen. How and when the change in topic had occurred exactly, Thomas couldn't understand or remember. Once outside, it was slightly easier to focus, but only slightly. Several times he had to remind himself to focus on the road and the traffic as he drove to the bookstore.

As occult bookstores went, it was pretty standard, which was the whole point; there was something for just about everyone on the shelves, from Astrology to Zoroastrianism. Thomas nodded to the cashier and headed back into the stockroom; as far as she knew, he was just the next highest guy on the totem pole in the company that owned the store, and ideally that strategic ignorance would stay in place for as long as it was needed. The laptop was unpacked, plugged in, and Thomas connected to a wi-fi network... one that he had set up specifically for situations like this.
Organizing his thoughts and the information he had gleaned was a constant struggle, which he angrily reflected, was another reason he was not suited to intelligence gathering. By the time there was anything to send out into the net, almost an hour had passed, and the report itself was less than a page long in Word.

The bell that indicated a new customer arriving jingled and jangled out in front as the door jostled it, and the cashier spoke up.

“Hiii, welcome to- oh, it's you again.”

“Yeah. It's me. How's it going Amy?”

“Eh. Could be worse. Could be better too. The heat these last few days has really killed the foot traffic.”

“I'll bet.”

The door jingled again.

“Oh, wow! I never expected to see this happen! Uh. I mean. Welcome to Bough and Tarot Books and Occult Paraphernalia, my name is Amethyst and how can I help you today?”

“Just browsing, thank you.”

Thomas's hand slipped and made a series of loud clicking noises on the keyboard, adding gibberish to the end of what was already a not terribly coherent report. That voice sounded almost exactly like-

“Whoa! Hey. Uh. Okay, I know this is gonna sound really strange, but can you say some words for me?”

“...I suppose that would depend on the words.”

“It's a really short phrase. 'Combustible Lemons.' I just want to hear you say it.”

“...I beg your pardon? Wait... do you actually have explosive fruit on the Surface?? Because I never saw that in any of the scientific or agricultural literature that ended up in the garbage dump.”

“She thinks you sound like JK Simmons, doc.”

“Who?”

“Nuh uh! I think he sounds like Cave Johnson!”

The other customer sighed. “Amy, JK Simmons is the guy that voice acted Cave Johnson.”

“...ohhhhh. I get it now. But he does sound like him, right?”

“Yeah, a little bit. I didn't want to say anything though because I didn't want to have this exact conversation.”

“Excuse me, can one of you explain who JK Simmons or Cave Johnson is??”

“It'd take less time and energy to show you. When you get back to All Fine Labs ask Joe. He can hook you up with some videos that should explain everything.”
“...alright then.”

Eventually Thomas snapped out of his trance state or whatever had happened, and he started navigating menus. Eventually a window opened up on the laptop screen showing a monochrome security camera feed of the entrance to the store.

It was definitely the same skeleton; the cracks in the skull around the eye sockets were very distinctive. It took a moment for recognition to set in for the other customer; one of the librarians from Ebott’s Wake, a large man with large muscles and a large beard.

“So what brings you to the big city today, mister...?”

“Doctor, actually. Dr. Wing Ding Aster, former Royal Scientist. As for why I’m here today, somebody thought that it would be a good idea to use the geothermal plant in Hotland as part of the Surface power grid. I had to explain why that wouldn't work.”

“I heard about that... wait, I thought that the meeting for that was on Sunday?”

“So did I.” The skeleton snorted. “That’s just the start of today’s comedy of errors. By the time the meeting was over and done with, the subject had changed so many times I lost track. Then Mr. Van Garrett invited me to join him for lunch. That was interesting.”

“Hah! Yeah. That was a unique experience.”

“Wait, what happened at lunch?”

“I took the doc to The Window Bar and Grill. Eighteen other people tried to figure out where the doc's food was going without looking like they were looking.”

“I’d say that's rude but... you know, now that I think about it-”

“Before you finish asking, I'm not going to explain it.”

“Why, is it really gross?”

“No. Well, yes actually. But that's not why I'm not going to explain it. I'm not going to explain it because it will take forty five minutes and I have to be back at All Fine Labs inside the hour.”

“Oh. Well, in that case, are you sure you don't need any help finding anything?”

“I don't think so. I'm not really looking for anything in particular. Mr. Van Garrett, what was it you were hunting for again?”

“At this point, anything related to the Eastern Alchemy system that originated in China. Joe's been talking about the whole Soul Research thing and now I'm wondering if some of the early human mysticism models weren't artifacts leftover from the War. We might be able to trace the evolution of different metaphysical frameworks in the same way etymologists track the evolution of language. There's probably a whole book waiting to be written about that subject alone.”

“Hmm. Could be. That would be quite an involved project though.”

“Those are the best kind.”

“So I understand that in human history and science, Alchemy was the precursor to systematized chemistry and metallurgy. What's this about Eastern Alchemy?”
On screen, the librarian opened a book and started browsing through it, then turned it around to show a page to the skeleton.

“In Western alchemy, the idea was that all material objects trended towards perfection, which was the idea behind refinement back when they didn't know what the hell an oxide was. The material focus is what everyone remembers, but it had a philosophical basis. By comparison, at least when translated into English, most references on Eastern Alchemy seem entirely focused on the metaphysical and the physical stuff like the elements and how they transform into each other is simply an allegorical explanation. Of course, stuff from both sides has been translated many times over and details always gets lost. That doesn't help.”

“...just five elements?”

“And in the western system, just four. Sometimes. Like I said, stuff keeps getting lost in translation. Western Alchemy is also stereotyped as a medieval get rich quick scheme to turn other metals into gold, but both versions also aimed for physical immortality through various means. Even then there's an interesting dichotomy, because most of the time the eastern stuff talked about an internal change through exercise, breathing, and esoteric meditative states. Meanwhile the western stuff was usually about changing the body through the external influence of an ideal substance or perfect medicine: The panacea or Philosopher's Stone or the Red Earth, depending on what results you wanted or who wrote the literature in the first place. I was going to do a comparative analysis of that too, but life got in the way.”

“What do you mean? What happened.”

“Oh, you know. The usual. Skeletons and giant furry boss monsters showing up. Scaly anime enthusiasts starting up Research and Development companies. Arm wrestling amazonian fish ladies.” Van Garrett placed the book he had been reading on the shelf again and massaged his right forearm with his left hand. “First time in four years anyone has beaten me doing that. I am impressed. And still very sore.”

“...you know, it's funny. One of the theories I started entertaining after Chara explained that no humans had magic on the surface was that all humans naturally have access to it, but it's too much of a hassle to bother with, especially since everything is industrialized now. Alphys had a similar theory, and by the end of Phase Two of Soul Research it might turn out to be true. Your studies might end up becoming independent confirmation through historical analysis of what we learn through empirical testing.”

“Well, that'd be nice. Assuming I ever get around to it. I have so many irons in the fire it's a wonder I get anything accomplished at all.” The librarian pulled another book off of the shelf, leafed through it for a few seconds, then turned towards the cashier. “Hey, Amy! How much for this one? There's no price sticker.”

“What is it? I can't see the title from over there.”

“Uh...” The book was turned around to reveal the cover. “A System of Caucasian Yoga.”

“...Think that's like eight bucks. Let me look it up in the catalog.”

While Amy bent down over the computer at the cashier's desk, Van Garrett opened the book again and began flipping through it.

“This one's a classic. Not as in ancient wisdom or forgotten lore, but a classic of the heyday of self published folios and manuscripts. For years printing was a specialty trade, and then we invented
stuff like spirit duplicators and mimeographs, and later there was the Xerox photocopier. Suddenly it was much easier for people to share information. It's possible to communicate an idea to the opposite side of the planet at the speed of light these days, and that's great, but this stuff, it laid the groundwork.”

The skeleton leaned over the librarian's shoulder. “It looks like Alphys' handwriting.”

“And there's the downside.”

“Hey, Mike. My mistake, that book is actually twelve dollars. Or a little over. Eleven ninety nine plus tax.”

“That's not too bad. You just made a sale today.”

“Awesome. I'll ring you up.”

The librarian walked over to the register and pulled out his wallet.

“Hey, Doc. Something just occurred to me. The big thing about Soul Research is that there's this energy... thing... inside of people. Right?”

“Well, that's like saying that the ocean is a big... thing... of salt water, but sure. Why not.”

Mike chuckled. “Well, last time I was here, I got a whole bunch of books on a subject that isn't too far from that. There's this thing that shows up sometimes in esoteric mystical models called the chakra. Points of energy inside the body, all connected, and each one is responsible for or influences a different part of the body, or a person's emotional state, or both. Sound familiar?”

“...yes. But not for the reasons you think. It sounds like you're describing a monster anatomy chart.”

The librarian turned and stared at the scientist.

“How exactly would that work? You guys don't exactly leave anything behind to autopsy.”

“We've had the ability to study living organisms using Healing magic since before the War. Which is a lot more useful, I would think. For that matter, how do humans know anything at all about how your own bodies work if the only references you have are bodies that aren't working anymore?”

“Oh. Yeah. Good point. It did take a while to really develop medicine as a rigorous science. And a lot of it was, well, it was messy.”

“You're mostly made of water with salts and iron oxides and carbon chain molecules dissolved in it. So that's not surprising.”

“I was thinking more along all the times when people would just randomly cut parts of the body off or out to see if they were still necessary. Also most of what we know about toxicology came from early chemists getting high on their own supply. That did not end well most of the time.”

“...every time I learn something new about humans, I wonder how you people could possibly have won the War.”

“Hehehe.”

“Here you go, Mike! Enjoy!”
“Thanks, Amy. Hey, I almost forgot to ask, how's your brother's ankle doing?”

“It was fine, and then he started riding that stupid motorcycle again. So now he's broken the other one.”

“...man. I want to make a joke about how at least he's symmetrical now, but I just feel bad for the guy at this point.”

“Well, I wouldn't if I were you. He was on the road to Lone Point when it happened.”

“Wait, which one? The highway to Gemini Roads or the dirt road to Ebott's Wake?”

“The dirt road. Duh.”

“Oh. Yeah. That probably counts as self-inflicted then. You take care, Amy!”

“You too Mike! Nice to meet you Doctor!”

“You too, miss.”

As the skeleton and librarian ended up leaving the store, Thomas closed the security camera feed window and ran his hands over his face, trying to slow his breathing. After a few minutes, the report was opened again, and the stockroom was once again filled with the sounds of typing. This time, with much more energy.

Outside on the sidewalk, the librarian pulled a key chain out of his pocket and pressed a button. The large pickup truck beeped and the doors unlocked, and the human and skeleton climbed in.

“Thank you again for the transportation today, Mr. Van Garret. It's always risky trying to make a blind jump with Dimensional Magic, and Papyrus was too busy today to give me a ride himself.”

“No problem man. I called in sick as soon as Justin texted me about Hal getting into the Red Bull, because somebody had to be on standby.”

“I'm sorry, I don't think I understood some of those terms.”

“I'll explain momentarily.” Mike looked behind him, carefully backing the massive vehicle out into the street, and joining the flow of traffic.

“There we go. Red Bull is an energy drink. It has, uh, interesting effects on the human body. Hal is not good about recognizing his limits at the best of times, so... him getting into that stuff usually gets worse before it gets better. So I was glad to see he was alright when he stopped by to borrow the truck this morning.”

“What was that all about?”

“Oh, the new kid. Or, I guess the old kid that came back. Asriel. They had to get him a mattress for his bed but Joe's House of Stuff needed the truck back, and Hal's truck is a tow truck, no cargo space. So it all worked out in the end. He brought it back just before Joe called me about giving you a ride here. Like a Swiss watch.”

Mike flipped on the turn signal and made his way onto the main street running through the town.

“Hey, I know you gotta be back at the lab soon, but I promised to drop off an inter-library loan book to somebody in Triton. Is that okay?”
“Perfectly fine. It's your vehicle, after all.”

“Great. I'll try to make it quick... oh. I wanted to ask something during the whole town hall meeting thing about the CORE, but then it went on a wild ride through all that other stuff so I never got a chance. I knew going in that you ended up here and now because of a time kerfuffle, mostly from stuff on the radio. And the same goes for the whole 'going back in time is an impossibly bad idea' thing. And I'm assuming that if it is even possible for time to go sideways, then equally bad stuff comes with that. So my question is... how bad were things down there that you were even working with something that dangerous?”

Dr. Aster rubbed his jawbone with a finger. “Well. I suppose objectively they weren't that bad at the time. I mean... resources were limited, and overpopulation was becoming a problem in New Home. But if we had put more of our resources towards food production, domestic manufacturing, and put the effort into restoring the Ruins of Home, we could have bought ourselves a lot of time. A few centuries, easily. But the one resource we were always going to be short of and could not reliably produce on our own was space. Room for everyone, and everything we needed to support everyone. The Barrier's physical characteristics did nothing to support the weight of the mountain. That depended on the geology of the rock itself. If we had excavated too much, at the wrong location, we could have caused a disastrous cave-in. The loss of life, both immediate and from deprivation as we lost food and other life support, presented an unacceptable risk. That said... we did try literally everything we could think of first. Pocket dimensions. Bridging past the Barrier. Energy magic to accelerate the Barrier's energy dissipation... actually, even though that last one did not work, it gave us the insight we needed to develop the theory that we could leech the energy out of the Barrier via other means.”

“So you were scraping the bottom of the barrel because you knew that time was running out.”

“Well, we were living on borrowed time since the moment the Barrier was created in the first place. But yes. We could all see the writing on the wall. And not just because our ancestors carved it there who knows how long ago.”

“Hmm.” Mike changed lanes as the truck moved beyond the city limits, passing an antiquated car with an antiquated driver hunched over behind the wheel. “Suppose it makes the Surface a bit funnier, in a not very funny sort of way. An abundance of resources and everyone fighting over who gets to waste them.”

“There is some pathological humor to it. But as Alphys, and Sans, and Undyne, and even Frisk have pointed out, our solutions to these problems give us a foot in the door when it comes to convincing humans who are undecided about us.”

“There is that. The monster food alone has made a huge difference. Heals minor injuries, low residue meaning people who have gastric or intestinal problems can eat it without any problems, and perhaps most importantly, it's not fattening.”

“...really? That's the part that's most important?”

“It is from a marketing standpoint.”

Dr. Aster snickered. “I wish my father could have lived to see this day. Monsters are not only free on the surface, but humans are buying monster food and handicrafts hand over fist. He hated humans, and he'd probably think it was the perfect revenge. I mean, if genocide was off the table.”

“We've been trying to kill ourselves off since before our recorded history started. If there was a way to get rid of us, we would have found it by now. Sorry Doc.”
“I'm alright with it myself. Honestly if we didn't win the first war, there was no way we were going to win another one. So maybe Sans is right. This is the optimal timeline. No war, social and economic integration, the staunch anti-monster opinion comprises a local minority, abundant resources and energy, and all that information on the human internet waiting to be absorbed.”

“Yeah, uh. You gotta be careful about that. Lot of... stuff out there. And I don't just mean viruses and spyware and such.”

“Actually I already know what you mean... does the queen know that so many humans find her attractive? Let alone draw such... provocative artwork of her?”

“...I have no idea, and I am not gonna be the person that brings it up with her.”
Give Up Giving Up

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The flame was flickering, almost always on the verge of going out, but it was there. Asriel tried to tune everything else out, give the flame his undivided attention... then groaned in annoyed frustration as it burst into a shower of sparks and extinguished itself.

“Grilling burgers by Saturday... yeah, right.” Asriel sighed and looked around the back yard where he and Frisk had spent so much time together. Now even that was gone, or at least changed... granted, because it wasn't necessary to sneak around anymore, but it was still a familiar part of life that had been thrown into upheaval.

The child's eyes closed and he leaned his head back against the tree he was standing next to. Experimentally, he wiggled the fingers on one paw and heard the creak as one of the limbs began to move back and forth. So that still worked, for all the good it did.

His eyes shot open again as he heard the back door squeak on its hinges; Frisk was standing in the threshold, looking at him, and he felt a smile form on his face before he realized it.

“Hey Frisk!”

“Hey Asriel.”

“...are you okay?”

The human child's eyes shifted away from Asriel's. “Actually, I was about to ask you the same thing.”

Asriel pushed himself away from the tree trunk and started walking towards the house. “Just frustrated about not being able to make my magic do what I want it to. Also having a bad case of nostalgia for times when things weren't as good as they were now. Which I guess makes me crazy.”

“Well, if it makes you crazy then it makes me crazy. Do you wanna talk about it?”

“...yeah. Can we talk out here though? That's kinda what it's about.”

“Sure.” Frisk took Asriel's paw in their hand and started walking towards the tire swing. “It's about time you got to try this thing out.”

“It did look like fun.” Asriel suddenly frowned. “Except that one time you spun around so fast you got sick and threw up.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Frisk snorted in laughter. “But it was really fun right up until then.”

With a little bit of help, Asriel climbed up into the swing and Frisk began to push it back and forth.

“Asriel, did you ever see a tire swing in the Underground?”

“Not that I remember. I guess if a tire did end up in the waterfall dump, the people working on the CORE grabbed it as soon as they found it.”
“That does make sense. All that electrical stuff, they'd need insulators.”

“Yeah. There's a lot of stuff I don't think anyone could easily make down there. That's why the human garbage was such a big deal.”

The two children were silent for a few moments.

“...Asriel, I'm glad we can still do this.”

“...you mean talk? Out here?”

“Yes. This means a lot to me.”

Asriel smiled and relaxed a little. “Me too, Frisk. It's like... it's like, even though so much has changed, this is still the same. I'm having to adjust to so much that's different. Feeling good about things. Feeling bad about them, too. Mom and dad... knowing. But we are still here. No matter how much we change, we're still the same people.”

“...Despite everything, it's still us.”

“Yeah.”

“...Asriel, uh...”

“What is it?”

“...do you remember yesterday when we were talking about the whole bed thing?”

“Of course. Why?”

“...and you remember what I said in the fever dream before that. About how I felt like I stole your life away.”

“...right. Is that still bothering you?”

“Sort of. Mom asked me to talk to the school counselor today and... well, one thing led to another and a lot of stuff came up.”

“What sort of stuff? I mean, if you mentioned the bed thing it's probably related, but what exactly?”

“...uhm... man, I thought if there was anyone I'd be comfortable talking about this with, it'd be you. Asriel... since you came back from the mountain. I was trying so hard to find a way for this to happen, right now. You probably figured that out. But I didn't think as much about what would happen... after. I guess it scared me. But. Well. I thought... I thought for a long time, that when we finally got to this point... I'd need to move on. So much happened to you, I thought... you, and mom, and dad, would all need to just... focus on that for a while.”

Frisk stopped talking, and Asriel blinked. “Wait. You mean... you mean you expected to...”

“Yeah. For a long time. Even though Toriel let me call her mom. It was hard to really think of myself as her child. A little bit of that was because I'm human, but mostly I couldn't really see myself as being... anyone's child. And... that's followed me since before Mt. Ebott.”

“Frisk. Believe me when I say, if your human parents ever try to hurt you again, I'm going to make them regret it. And so will everybody else. Please don't be afraid of that.”
...thank you. But... what bothered me was something else. I guess... Asriel, I thought once you got back, I'd have to leave. And even after everything mom said Tuesday I can't let that go. And that might be why I overreacted to the bed thing. In my head there was only room for one of us and if you weren't the one who got the bed then that meant you weren't the one who got to stay and that really messed me up. I mean. More than I already was when I was thinking stuff like that."

"Even after we'd gone on a shopping trip to get another bed?"

"Yeah. Even if that whole thing with the truck hadn't happened, and the bed was delivered that day... I don't think it would have registered to me. In a way, it still hasn't. It still feels like there's only room for one of us. And I want it to be you, but I'm scared of what would happen to me after that."

"...I think I know what will help. Stop pushing the swing, let's go inside."

"Okay, done- ack!"

Frisk's attempt to grab the tire swing to stop its movement backfired and the tire slammed into them, knocking them off balance and into the mud underneath the tree. The tire, with Asriel still in it, began to swing around and around, and there was a flash of green light as a magical vine shot out and wrapped around the tree trunk. The tire's spinning abruptly slowed, with Asriel yanked out of it into the mud beneath, one arm outstretched as the vine pulled on it.

"...Frisk, what just happened??"

The human child covered their mouth with both hands to attempt to stifle their laughter. "As... As... hehehehehee... Asriel, are you okay?"

"I'm okay... but I'm very confused."

Asriel's deadpan delivery set off Frisk again, and their attempts to climb upright had to be abandoned.

Some time later, the back door opened and two muddy children walked inside. Frisk pulled off their shoes and Asriel reached for a brush that was hanging up against the wall on a hook.

"You know, even though I've seen mom do the same thing, it never registered to me what that brush was for when we were shopping yesterday."

"Yeah. Getting mud and grass and dirt out of fur is hard enough, but when it's on the soles of your feet, that just makes it worse. The pressure of footsteps drives it into every single space, and it can get really gross. Dad did suggest I get sandals like him, but... honestly, I hadn't walked in so long. I'm never going to take the feeling of grass between my toes for granted ever again. Stuff like this is a small price to pay to feel that again."

"Hey, it looks like you're dripping a little bit."

Asriel stopped moving for a moment, his eyes wide.

"Uhm. You mean mud, right?"

"Yeah, I... oh. Oh. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to freak you out."

Asriel let out his breath and slumped over a little as the tension eased out of him. "It's alright."
“Is it? If you have to worry about that every day, if you have to look at your hand in the morning to make sure you're still the same shape as when you went to sleep...”

Asriel put one foot down and started on the soles of the other foot. “...I am getting tired of being afraid. And I don't know how long it will take for me to stop worrying. Mostly because nobody really knows what happened to me. Like Alphys said. I was stable before. I'm stable now. So what changed? If we don't know what it is... it might be something I need to stay away from, and I could run into it by accident.”

“Good point. And that's not something we can test for like an allergy, because we don't know how to treat it or fix it if it does happen. Not yet anyway.”

“Exactly. Best case scenario if that happens is I end up as a flower again, and have to move back into dad's shed. And that's still going to be hard on everyone, including me. Even if it's something that's reversible or even predictable.”

“...like being a were-flower?”

“Yeah. Maybe every new moon I end up turning back into Flowey and terrorizing innocent people with my encyclopedic knowledge of musical theater.”

Frisk blinked. “Asriel, did you hit your head falling out of the tire? Or maybe I did.”

Asriel put the brush up on its hook. “Sorry. I've spent a lot of time around Papyrus and Hal today. Which is related to what I wanted to show you. Come on.”

Frisk followed Asriel up the stairs, where he opened the bedroom door and flipped on the light switch. Frisk blinked and looked around.

“...two beds. Two dressers. They got it delivered today?”

“Yeah.” Asriel walked over to the chest of drawers with a tablet, a blue ribbon, and a handful of other items on it, and pulled open some of the drawers. “Hal stayed up all night working on the engine, got it fixed, delivered the furniture in the truck, and... got really sick. Still not sure what happened but it was scary. Then Papyrus showed up and he used Blue Magic to do most of the heavy lifting... well, after Hal brought the truck over here, that is. He showed up at dad's house first by mistake. Then he went and borrowed Mr. Van Garrett's truck and we all ended up going to Wal-Mart to get a mattress and sheets and stuff, brought that back, got everything put together... raided the fridge for leftovers for lunch... Papyrus said he was going to visit Dwayne Riley in the hospital again, Hal said something about going home and skipping Friday, and dad and I had a long talk about pretty much everything. It was a good day, except for the parts where somebody was throwing up.”

Frisk was silent, and Asriel looked back at them. “Is something wrong?”

“It's alright. Just trying to fit all of that into my head.”

“...hey. Earlier, when we were talking about the whole stability thing. I... I guess you should know. When I thought I might be dying, I asked Sans to do me a favor. If it looked like I was going to end up like a Memoryhead or something, I wanted him to take me to the DT Extractor and... put me out of my misery. I don't want to be a flower again, even if it's just an occasional thing. I had a lot of time to think today, and I decided I really do want to be me, even if it hurts. But being a flower again would still be a lot better than... that.”

“...I can understand that. And respect it. When I met Asgore... when I met dad for the second time.
It felt like being the last Soul everyone needed was... what I was supposed to do. You asked me once if it was foolishness or fate or... something else. Right at that moment, it felt like fate. Everyone would be free, and I could... all I wanted was for everyone to be happy, and I could make it happen. Even if I couldn't be a part of it, I was okay with that. Mostly. At least I wouldn't have to...” Frisk trailed off and stared at the floor as Asriel finished pulling out clothes, and the monster child turned around.

“Frisk, about the end of the first run. I know you blame yourself for what happened to dad, but that's not what happened. We both know that was me. And honestly... the only reason I lashed out like I did was because dad was talking about adopting you and... well, I had some baggage about that. It felt like he was replacing Chara and me. And it was one of the few things I could feel anything about, and that's why I left that message in the Echo Flower about mom. But that's not how mom or dad do things. Mom would have tried to care for and protect anyone that fell down, because she cared about people. And dad... once he calmed down, he was always looking for an excuse to call off the war, and you finally gave him that. A human strong enough to beat the strongest monster in the Underground, but wouldn't hurt a fly. After you'd been so nice to everybody, I'm sure he could have made everyone understand that the war was over. Heh. And if he couldn't, Undyne sure could.”

“...yeah. Undyne's surprisingly good at reaching people.”

Asriel carefully put the clean clothes on the dresser and walked over to Frisk. “Hey. Uh. Last night. When I was having a bad time, and you... you pulled me out of it. I know you said something you might not have realized you said. About going back to your family and starting over again.”

“...I did say something like that.”

“I don't know exactly what to make of that. And I know you don't want to talk about it. But I meant what I said earlier. If your human family ever shows up to cause trouble, I don't need fireballs to make them regret it.”

“...when we were at Chara's grave, you said Don't Kill, and Don't Be Killed.”

“That's right. That might be the best we can hope for in this world, and I'll stick with that. I won't kill them...” Asriel took a deep breath and went for broke. “And I'm not going to allow them to kill you again, either.”

Frisk said nothing.

And saying nothing said everything.

Asriel felt an icy chill run down his back. “I had hoped I was wrong. That you would correct me. Frisk, I'm so sorry. All the times when I was a jerk about the reset, about ending up in the Underground again. I didn't know, and even if I had, I don't think it would have even made a difference to me, but...” Asriel shook his head. “I shouldn't have been pouring salt on that wound-”

Frisk tried to smile, but it had a disturbingly familiar, strained quality.

“Asriel. It's alright. It's okay. Before Mt. Ebott I thought I was getting hurt because that was me. That was who I am. That I always deserved it. Having somebody say 'I wish I hadn't done that' or 'I'm glad you're okay after all of that' or 'I screwed up' meant that stuff like that... maybe it wasn't supposed to happen all the time.”

Asriel stepped forward and his arms wrapped around the human child. “Frisk you idiot. Don't you
get it yet? It wasn't supposed to happen at all. I know from the fever dream how bad things really are, on the inside. And I know it's going to take time to fix everything they broke inside of you, and even then there will always be scars. But you never gave up on me, so I'm never going to give up on you. No matter what happens next. It doesn't matter what Jordan Cater does, or what Alphys finds out about what happened to me, or how anyone reacts to finding out you can use magic. You are always going to have me. Like you said. We will always be there to help each other up.”

Frisk's arms came up and wrapped around the muddy monster. “...that's right. Despite everything, it's still us.”

“Exactly.”

“...heh. I was so psyched yesterday. I had so many ideas. So many plans. But this whole healing thing is really exhausting. Even with my shoulder back to normal. And now talking about all this stuff. I just... hey. After dinner... I just want to sleep. Is that alright?”

“Of course.”

“It's just, we'll have to figure out what comes next tomorrow or something. My head's been so many different places today I'm amazed it's still connected to my neck.”

The two children let go, and Asriel reached up to scratch his ear. “Hey. Frisk. It just, it really just hit me now. You spent all that time since I came down from Mt. Ebott trying to bring me all the way home... even though you were worried it meant you'd have to leave. You really are something special. And now...” Asriel pointed at Frisk's bed with one paw, and his own with the other one, and grinned. “I know mom, Frisk. There was always a place for both of us, here. This is just making it official.”

The human child smiled back. “Yeah. There is that.”


Frisk ran towards the bedroom door. “Hey mom! We're up here! Asriel's furniture got delivered!”

“Oh, that is good news. Please come down so that we may communicate without shouting up the stairs, however.”

“Oh, right.”

The two children made their way down to the ground floor, where Toriel was placing books and papers on the coffee table. The teacher's eyes widened upon seeing the mud stained clothing.

“What in the... how did this... do I want to know how both of you got so filthy??”

Frisk and Asriel both started talking at once.

“Asriel was on the tire swing and—”

“And I wrapped a vine around the tree because I can still—”

“And then when it started spinning there was no way to—”

“So by the time everything stopped I was already—”

“Stop. One at a time, please.” Toriel held up a single finger. “I understood enough to recognize you two were playing with the tire swing.”
Frisk nodded. “Yeah. It was Asriel's first time, and it was going really well right up until the end. When I tried to stop the swing I lost my grip and the tire knocked me down and started spinning.”

“That's why I had to use the vine, to stop me from spinning, and that's how I ended up on the ground. I think. It all seemed to happen at once, to be honest.”

“Hmm... and the two of your are uninjured?”

Asriel shrugged. “I think so.”

Frisk nodded. “Yeah. The only thing that got bruised was our pride.”

“...I see. Well. I am glad to hear that you are otherwise fine... but you should both wash up. I shall be starting dinner shortly.”

“Right, mom.”

“Hey, Asriel. You said that mud's a problem with fur, so you should go first before it dries out.”

“Sure. If you're okay with that?”

“I am. Also I need to... talk some stuff out with mom.”

“...ah. Right.” Asriel nodded and headed upstairs again, and Frisk turned back to Toriel.

“Mom... I'd like to talk to you about some things that came up today. If that's okay.”

Toriel nodded. “It is.”

“This morning, you asked me to talk to Mrs. Carson. And I did that. And it probably could have gone better.”

“She did stop by and complain about your reluctance to open up.”

The living room was filled with an uncomfortable silence.”

“I was under the impression that anything I did tell her would be in confidence.”

Toriel's mouth twisted into a frown. “As was I. I can only assume she thought that you not sharing anything was some sort of loophole.”

“...right. Well... after that. I went and talked with Undyne. And that was... it went a lot better. A whole lot. And when I was on my way home I realized that...”

Frisk stared off into space, and then suddenly came back. “I, uh. I think I need to start over, because the words aren't coming. Earlier, Asriel and I were out in the back yard. And. The tire swing was just one part of it. We talked about... the same stuff we've always talked about. And you know now that... back then... it wasn't always about movies and books and folklore and city planning. There's always been serious conversations out there, and we just switched to trivia when we thought anyone was listening. But... sometimes it wasn't just when I was talking to Asriel. When Sans brought by the questionnaire and we were talking outside. It got to some subjects that bothered me. I was lying about hitting my shoulder on the tire swing. And...Thursday night. I said I woke up for a drink of water, when it was a nightmare that did it. And that's just some of the stuff this month...”

Frisk started to blink rapidly.
“Mom. You've been looking out for me since the moment we met. You should be able to trust me, and you've gone out of your way to take care of me, so you deserve the truth. But I've been lying for so long that it's gotten hard to get out of the habit. So... I'm sorry it's taken so long. And I'm sorry that I can't tell you everything all at once, that I have to drag all of this out. It's just, it's too big for me to deal with all in one go.”

Frisk breathed in and out slowly.

“Mom, when I was... when I was still Frisk Taylor. Things. They weren't good. There was so much screaming and fighting and I just wanted everyone to be happy again, so... I started doing more and more chores around the house because that's all I could do. Cooking, cleaning, raking leaves, watering flowers, bagging up trash for pickup... and washing the dishes.”

Toriel blinked.

“I... wasn't... some things got broken. And... saying sorry couldn't fix them. Once a plate is broken... it's broken forever. And... I started to think that was how everything in the world worked. That's why I panicked like I did when I broke the plate the day Dr. Aster came back. And... that's why I ended up buying those other plates. I knew I couldn't fix it, but I wanted to do something. Anything.”

Frisk looked towards the doorway to the kitchen and sniffed.

“I know when you said I didn't have to do that, you meant that... it was just one plate, and sometimes things go wrong and it's not something to obsess about. But... I couldn't think of it like that. It... it felt like... like... I knew the replacement plate thing, it was a long shot. But it didn't go anywhere. I felt... I know you didn't mean it like that, but it felt like you were saying what I'd been thinking. That nothing I could do could ever make up for it. And... that was why I broke down the way I did. Because... I was afraid of that all starting over again. Things... things breaking. And then the yelling and screaming starts. And... then... I wouldn't be able to stay with you anymore. I'd have to go back to... them.”

“Frisk, I would never-”

“Mom, please let me finish, before I lose what's left of my nerve. I climbed a mountain nobody ever returned from. I jumped into a hole that I couldn't see the bottom of. I've had people try to kill me and rip my Soul out of my body. I've been burned, stabbed, frozen, shocked, nearly drowned, almost crushed, kicked, punched, slapped, strangled, and shot, and that last one actually did kill me, even if it didn't stick. And what I saw in the fever dream, that's as close to hell as my mind can come up with. But nothing, nothing in the world, scares me more than going back to that house, with them.”

Frisk closed their eyes and wiped away the tears that had run down their face with the back of one hand. “And... well, that's why I started freaking out. I would have said anything, promised anything, done anything, if it meant not going back. And... when Asriel finally came back, it wasn't just the... yelling... that caused me to panic again. I was... I had thought... mom, there was only one bed. I always thought when Asriel came back I'd have to leave. And I thought I was okay with it, as long as I didn't have to go back to that house again. But he's back now, and... I want to stay with you guys. And even... with two beds in there, now... the thought that I might not have a place here anymore still scares me. Even though it shouldn't.”

The child's hand came up and rubbed their left shoulder. “When the Barrier was destroyed... I thought everybody got a new start. Including me. I thought I could put all of it behind me. Start over. But I was wrong. I can't put it behind me, because it's a part of me, and it goes where I go. So
I have to stop running from it, and start working through it. I'm sorry it keeps complicating things... and I'm sorry that I couldn't explain anything before... and I'm sorry that it took me so long to actually say I was sorry when things went wrong—"

Frisk was interrupted as two large, fuzzy arms surrounded them and pulled them close.

“Frisk... I will never send you away, and most definitely not back to those who have hurt you. This is your home. And I should be the one to apologize. There are signs I should have noticed earlier, signs that I missed. I have been so worried about you since I understood that something was wrong, and I am so happy that you have decided to share this burden, to stop trying to carry it by yourself. I am proud of you, Frisk. For discussing this with me, even though it scares you so much.”

“...thanks, mom. There's so much more I want to say. But I can't do it right now.”

“That is alright. When you are ready, I will be here for you. Whatever it is, and no matter what else happens.”

“And... and mom. I promise. No more lies. If I can't explain something, if I can't talk about something... I'll say I can't. And... will that be enough? Knowing that we can come back to that later?"

“Of course. Take all the time that you need, and I will do my utmost to respect when you need more.”

Frisk's arms came up and wrapped around Toriel. “...thank you... you are the best. You... and dad... and Asriel... I love you guys so much.”

Toriel blinked, and a memory played out in her mind's eye... a long night, holding a crying human child until they calmed down. Familiar words echoed back at her from years before.

“Mom...? What is it? What's wrong?”

Toriel brought up a paw and felt tears leaking from her eyes, and smiled.

“Nothing is wrong Frisk. I love you too, as does Asgore and Asriel. So much... Frisk. I am your mother, and I wish I could just make everything better. But I understand that this is beyond my power to do for you. What I can do, is be here for you when you need me, and so I shall... well. I suppose I should get myself under control before starting dinner, and you should wash up as well.”

“Heh. Yeah. Sorry about the, uh. The mud getting on your dress.” Frisk and Toriel let go, and Toriel tousled the young child's hair.

“Mud is easy enough to get out in the laundry, and if I remember correctly, it was I who hugged you first. But on that subject, now would be a good time to run along and clean up... provided everything is alright?”

Frisk smiled and nodded. “Yes. This was, it was a good talk all around. Thank you again.”

The child ran up the stairs as Toriel disappeared through the doorway to the kitchen, and Frisk took a detour into the bedroom to remove some clean clothes from their dresser. Back out in the hallway, Frisk opened the bathroom door and instantly realized their mistake.

“Augh!”

“AUGH!”
Frisk closed their eyes, backing out of the bathroom as fast as possible. “I saw nothing, I saw nothing!”

“Frisk what the heck?!”

“I’m sorry, I forgot, my eyes are shut, you can close the door now.”

There was the sound of a door latching shut, and Frisk opened their eyes again and ran a hand over their face in frustrated embarrassment.

"...well, let's see now. I flirted with the woman that ended up adopting me, I walked in on my brother as he was getting ready to take a bath, sooo... all I need to do is something embarrassingly stupid with Asgore and the trifecta will be complete. That's just faaaaantastic.”

Chapter End Notes

No matter what happens today, or tomorrow, or any of the days after that, always stay determined.
Alphys stared at the screen, entranced by the sights and sounds of battle. Undyne's furious power was amazing to behold, even as the words she said to the human became more and more frustrated. But nothing could hit the human, it seemed; what was not parried was deftly avoided and the human sprinted past Undyne into the Hotland access tunnel.

“COME BACK HERE YOU LITTLE BRAT!”

One spear shot through the tunnel and struck true, and Alphys flinched as the human grabbed their arm. A gnawing unease started to grow as Alphys watched Undyne run, the monitor switching from camera to camera... Undyne was slowing down. It was barely perceptible but it was there.

The human stopped abruptly, and Alphys felt her mouth open in shock as they pulled out a cell phone... and Undyne stopped too.

“Sure! That sounds great! See you there Papyrus!”

The human took off again and Undyne resumed her pursuit, and Alphys giggled nervously. The video feeds of the Snowdin trap gauntlet had been hilarious in itself, as had Sans' retelling of events when he dropped off the dog food, but even knowing Papyrus had made friends with the human, the phone call, and how everyone had handled it, came completely out of left field.

The camera panned over Sans ...sleeping... at a sentry station outside Hotland, and Alphys slapped herself on the forehead as Undyne stopped and stared. Sans what the hell?!

When she took off after the human again, she was even slower than she had been.

It took seeing the water cooler for Alphys to finally recognize what was going on; Undyne was overheating. A cold blooded fish monster with no heat tolerance, in a volcano, wearing metal armor, and all that after an extremely strenuous fight. Undyne slowed to a stop... and collapsed. Alphys slammed her claws over her mouth to muffle the shriek of alarm. She wanted to look up at the corner of the screen to double check the time stamp on the video recording but her eyes would not budge, and in any instance if Undyne was still out there that was after everything that had happened with Mettaton so she potentially could have been lying out in the heat for...

'No no no no NO NO NO Undyne I'm so sorry I should have been watching I should have been there I wish I had told you I'm sorry I was so wrapped up in my own world I let this happen I should have been there Undyne I'm sorry I should have ignored the human and watched out for you this is my fault this is my fault it's all my fault it's always my fault'

On screen, Undyne gasped and looked up at the human after they poured water on her gills, and Alphys let her breath out at the same time. Her racing thoughts slowed and gradually made their way back to reality and sanity.

“Are you alright? Do, do you need more water?”

“Ah! Undyne!” Alphys called out, despite the fact that Undyne could not possibly hear her. “Don't fight! It's too hot! You'll never... even you couldn't...”

Alphys let herself relax as Undyne walked back across the bridge towards Waterfall, but what started as relaxation snowballed. Alphys' legs buckled beneath her and she fell to her knees, and then her claws had to hold her up. Her breathing was short, rapid, and it was not coming easily.
She had almost seen Undyne die.

Suddenly everything else in the world seemed much less important... and much more complicated.

One claw pulled off her glasses and she stared blankly at the blurry world she saw without them. The human... if the human reached New Home, Asgore would kill them. Asgore would have seven human souls. Asgore would become a godlike being with incredible power, power enough to destroy the Barrier and wage war against all the humans on the surface by himself. There were comparable weapons in several anime series, but in actual human history references... nothing the humans had would be enough, except perhaps those atomic weapons made from heavy elements. And if the humans used them, whether they were enough to stop Asgore or not, they'd cause so much damage to the surface that nobody could possibly live on it, no matter who or what they were. Even if Asgore won, even with the Barrier destroyed, monsters would still be trapped underground for who knew how long, waiting for the fallout to decay.

That was the argument she had made to herself. The argument she had made to Mettaton to convince him to help. Convince the human to stay. Convince the human to not approach Asgore. Humanity, and the surface, would be intact. And later....

That was the problem, wasn't it?

The idea, so clear before, was as blurry and useless as her vision. Alphys put her glasses back on, not that they made the problem any clearer. If the human lived down in the underground, with everyone else... that had happened before. Not all humans were bad, and this one had doubled back to give Undyne water even after Undyne tried to kill them. That was something to build on. But... eventually the human would die of sickness or injury or just old age. And monsters would have seven human souls. And Asgore would go to war. And... god, there had to be a way to make him see, but how? And would he even trust her? The test subjects... everything that had happened to them... why would he trust somebody who was hiding so much? But if she explained everything, he definitely wouldn't trust her. In fact he'd probably fire her, and that would be the start of her problems-

Alphys' phone beeped, dragging her back to reality again, and shaking claws pulled it out of her lab coat pocket. SockPuppet90 had posted a new status: “my review of mtt resort restaurant. good service, nice waiters, great food, but no ketchup. one star.”

Alphys snorted in laughter, and that in and of itself helped. That meant that Sans was heading back to Snowdin, probably. And the human would be moving on to the CORE facility very soon. The scientist checked the main monitor; they had doubled back outside the resort and were... talking to Bratty and Catty. Alphys felt another pang of guilt but tried to shake it off. Claws shook as Alphys navigated the UnderNet friends menu and checked Undyne's feed.

StrongFish91 posted an update: Bad day at work. Maybe music will help.

StrongFish91 posted an update: IT'S NOT HELPING RARGH

StrongFish91 posted an update: nvm just had to find the right song lol

StrongFish91 posted an update: Training time with papyrus

StrongFish91 posted an update: sooooo training went off the rails a bit
Alphys gulped. Sans was always going on and on about how Papyrus loved this or loved that, and one thing Papyrus loved was Mettaton's shows. If Undyne was watching MTT when the whole quiz show was going on... then... then that meant....

Alphys shuffled over to the computer, slowly. Her legs felt like they had been replaced by Moldsmals, which, she reflected humorlessly, was probably the exact karmic fate she had coming to her in the future. On screen, the human was approaching the CORE, and Alphys took a few deep breaths.

As Mettaton was so fond of saying when things went off-script, the show must go on...

Movement on the live security feed drew her eyes, and Alphys hit the speed dial for the human's phone.”

“Dr. Alphys? Is that you? I'm at the CORE it looks like, and... there's some people on the bridge... well, there were, they're leaving now.”

“Huh? Who are they? N-nobody else is s-supposed to be here...”

Alphys opened her eyes, and the first thing she noticed was an absence of Undyne. Sitting up in bed, she looked around; the blurriness that came without glasses didn't affect her ability to see general shapes, light levels, or color... and there was some light from underneath the doorway.

The door creaked open and Alphys crept out into the living room, and saw the light source immediately; the glow of Undyne's computer monitor. Undyne was leaning over, peering at the screen, and then suddenly her head jerked up and she turned to look at Alphys, who jumped back. Both women made sudden noises of surprise; Alphys felt herself blush, and saw the same look mirrored on Undyne's face.

“...hey. Sorry if I woke you up.”

“No, it's okay. I woke up on my own. Weird dreams. What time is it?”
Undyne turned and looked at the computer screen again. “...one thirty in the morning?? Damn, I need to get some sleep.” Undyne's fingers danced across the keyboard and the mouse darted around, closing windows, until the machine gave a final “powering down” chime and the screen went dark.

Undyne got up and headed towards the bedroom, and Alphys moved to get out of her way. “Undyne... could you not sleep?”

“Yeah. Wish I could blame it on the heat, but... it's cooler tonight than it's been for weeks.”

“Yeah. It's been nice.”

Undyne and Alphys climbed into bed, and Undyne sighed. “Once I realized I wasn't getting back to sleep... well... I went and started reading more of your fanfic.”

In the dark, Alphys was glad Undyne couldn't see her blushing even more. “Oh... really? How d-did... that go?” She squeaked.

“...I'm addicted now. They say the first step is to admit you have a problem, and I have one. I can't stop.” Undyne rolled over on her side, and Alphys saw the faint light in the room reflect of her eye and occasionally her teeth. “Alphys, what is going on? I'm only on chapter eighty seven, literally nothing explicit has happened yet, but... well, there's a reason I asked if I woke you up.”

Alphys felt her claws shake as her mind began racing through the implications of Undyne's words...

“Well. It's called a 'slow burn' fan fiction for a reason. It takes a while to b-build up to a-”

Alphys' mouth slammed shut as she realized what word she almost used.

“...well. It's working.”

“Uhm. Around chapter three hundred fourteen... things really start to diverge from reality. I mean, way more than just when and how monsters escape the underground... uhm... you m-might want to stop there. Some of it gets... it g-gets... well. Maybe you should stop there.”

Alphys rolled over on her side, closed her eyes, and tried to make the images in her head go away so she could fall back to sleep. Her eyes shot open again as an arm reached over her, pulled her across the bed, and before she realized it her back was right up against Undyne's front.

“Or... maybe I should skip ahead...”

Alphys gulped.

The alarm blared a J-Pop musical number for a few seconds before a claw slammed down on it. Alphys opened her eyes and stared up at the ceiling without seeing it. Beside her, she suspected Undyne was doing the same thing.

“...guess it's time to get up.”

“...yeah.”

There was no movement.

“...or we could stay like this for a while.”
“...that sounds good.”

The bedroom was filled with a comfortable silence.

“...I should just call in sick to the lab today.”

“Yeah. I should do that at school too. It's probably too hot for P E today anyway.”

Alphys blinked, and groaned. “Wait... I wanted to do that Soul Link test today. I have to go in for that.”

“...that makes sense. It was a nice thought, though. Just staying here for a while.”

“Yeah.”

Reluctantly, Alphys rolled out of the bed, and Undyne got up as well, making her way towards the bathroom.

“I'm going to hit the shower first, if that's alright.”

“Of course. Just be sure to leave me some hot water.”

“...that's not going to be a problem.”

Alphys made her way to the kitchen and started pulling out plates and punching buttons on the breakfast machine. Several times, she stopped suddenly and leaned against the counter top, wincing as she did. Eventually the machine beeped and two plates slid out, each with a loaf of bread or oversized dinner roll shaped like a beret and dusted with powdered sugar on top.

Carrying the plates over to the table, Alphys winced again and shook her head. With the food safely on top of the table, the scientist doubled back to grab utensils and beverages. With everything set, Alphys sat down and hissed in pain just as Undyne walked into the kitchen, toweling off her hair.

“You know, if you're sore, it means you need to stretch more before exercising.”

Alphys snorted. “I didn't know I was going to be exercising last night.”

“Hah!” Undyne peered at the plate in front of her as she sat down. “French Toast. Awesome. Something tells me I'll need the extra energy today.”

“Busy day today?”

“It's Friday. I work at an elementary school. Busy does not even begin to cover it. All the kids are hyped for the weekend and that energy spreads into everything. Same thing happens before vacations, too; the main reason we do activity things near the end of the school year is because we have to manage that excitement somehow.”

“That makes sense.”

“What about you? I know you mentioned the Soul Link experiment, what else is on your plate?”

“Well...” Alphys stared at a bit of french toast on her fork. “I've been thinking about this for a while, and between what's happened to Asriel and the trip Dr. Aster needs to make next week... I'm going to promote Joe. Soul Research is all him now. Dr. Aster spends more and more of his time working on the dimensional physics stuff from the CORE anyway, and all my attention needs to be
on Asriel and the Amalgamates now, when it's not on keeping the lights on and doors open.”

Undyne froze, then slowly closed her mouth and down her fork. She stared at her food for a bit with arms crossed and resting on the table.”

“Undyne? Is something wrong?”

“...I don't know. Maybe.”

“Is this about the whole Shop Class secrecy thing?”

“Maybe a little, but there's more to it. Alphys, I got to thinking yesterday while I was doing paperwork. Soul Research has always been about figuring things out, right? That's why it's science. If you don't have a better understanding of something at the end of it, you weren't doing science, you were doing something else.”

“That's the goal of scientific research, yeah.”

“Right. And one of the specific goals for Soul Research was to figure out why humans don't have magic anymore. So... what happens when you do find out?”

“...do you mean that in the sense of what we can use it for, or in the sense of what happens next?”

“Both, I guess. And I know it's hard to answer that kind of stuff in advance, because figuring out the answer hinges on running the tests in the first place just to see if you are asking the right questions. But... okay, if it was something simple, humans would have figured it out eventually, just by accident. I mean, look at all the news stories that come out of that Florida place.”

Alphys snorted, but Undyne wasn't smiling.

“But let's say Joe finds it. Let's say it's not something that died out, that it's something that can be brought back. So what happens next? What do you guys do with it? Specifically, what does he do with it? Does it get published so anyone can find out about it? Does it go in the Dimensional Storage area behind that mind-destroying security system Papyrus built? Or... does Joe crumple up the papers with the results on them, say it was a dead end, and then explain what he found to his other five buddies?”

Alphys stared at Undyne, who eventually looked away. “Yeah, I know what it sounds like. These guys have stuck their necks out trying to make the town safe for everybody, and some of them put their lives on the line, not just their reputation or good name or business. But... it's like they said on the radio. Things would have gone a lot worse for us if the humans still had magic. If the Anti Monster League had magic. If Cater and whoever helped him escape the police had magic, that would be very bad.”

“...you're right. And Sans and I have given this a lot of thought. If human magic just died out with certain bloodlines and genes and family trees, there's no harm in sharing that... but no way for humans to really benefit from magic, either. That's actually not that good for us, because it takes the main difference between us and it turns it into a much deeper divide than it already is. If it's something that can be prompted with very little outside influence... that could be a problem, if all Cater needs to get another seven magicians is stuff he can get at the grocery store or order from a chemical supply warehouse. But that door swings both ways, so if it is common enough, then it all comes down to numbers and we'll have more human mages on our side... or at least fighting against Cater. Now... if it's something that requires a substance or energy that's much harder to get, that might actually be worse. Suddenly whatever it is would be a point of contention by any group
that wants human controlled magic, and there's no telling what that would do to the political or economic landscapes. But in the social landscape, we're pretty sure that once the dust settles everyone would blame us for their scrabbling and infighting.”

Alphys tore off a little more of the french toast and swallowed it. “Best case scenario is that the original theory for Soul Research gets vindicated; humans have magic, it's just very limited now and doesn't extend beyond their bodies, meaning they can't create any more barriers and there's no military or political advantage to cultivating it, just technological and economic ones.”

“...and you can rub the results in the faces of your old professors.”

Alphys huffed. “I am a professional! I wouldn't do something like that... at least not right away.”

Undyne cackled and picked up her fork again. Alphys stared at Undyne for a little bit, then put her own fork down.

“Undyne, I know Joe did keep stuff from us. So did the rest of Shop Class. But they had good reasons for being cautious. And you have a good reason for being worried about this. Most monsters thought that once the Barrier was gone, that was it. We made it. We're all going to be okay. And a lot of the humans in Ebott's Wake felt the same way once the Sages were defeated, before we showed up. The worst part is over, now we can focus on what's really important. And a week ago today, everybody had that turned upside down. The anti-monster sentiment was more than just angry letters and phone calls and picket signs and political commentary on TV screens. It was bullets and fire and spray painted slurs and... and the humans aren't any better off than we are. They feel like people in a horror movie when the guy with the knife and the mask should be dead, but he shows up out of nowhere with a scare chord.”

“...united in fear. That's a crappy motto for solidarity.”

Alphys chuckled. “Yeah. It sucks.”

The couple ate in silence for a while, when suddenly Alphys stopped, her fork held up in midair, and slowly closed her mouth.

“Undyne, I just thought of something. Whatever Joe finds out from Phase Two and Three, that will only be statistical models and trends built on raw data from the scans. It won't be an instant magician kit. We'd use that data to make a theory, but then we have to test the theory. And that means somebody would have to volunteer.”

“Not gonna be any shortage of those.”

“Yeah. So we'd have to narrow it down. Obviously, they'd be limited to people we could trust.”

“Exactly.”

“So. If you were in charge of the program... who would be your first-”

“Frisk.”

Alphys blinked. “That was fast.”

“Frisk went out of their way to get us all out of there, while half the Underground was trying to kill them, including me. If you can't trust somebody like that, you can't trust anyone at all.” Undyne frowned. “I mean, once the kid hits adolescence, god help us all, but I still can't think of anyone I trust more.”
“Oh.” Alphys stared at Undyne, wide eyed. “I didn't even think of that.”

“Yeah.”

“...hey, you've been reading those human medical books, right? Is there anything in there about human adolescence, how it's different compared to monster adolescence?”

Undyne stopped chewing suddenly.

“...let's not talk about that while we're eating, hun.”
The music faded out, and the announcer's voice broke in over the last fading instruments. “Hey, welcome back to the Morning Rush, that was Believe In Your Dreams by Tupper Ware Remix Party just now. Brett had to step outside to sign for some sort of delivery so it's just DJ Pantz here with some updates to the event calendar. First and foremost, yes, the Lost Eagle County Electric Co-op meeting about connecting to the CORE was moved to yesterday. Yes, we were sent a very short term notice to that effect. Yes, we dropped the ball, it got lost in the shuffle, and we never made a correction and a lot of people missed out on that. We screwed up. We admit it. PLEASE STOP CALLING IN ABOUT IT THIS IS A COMMUNITY RADIO STATION WE ARE JUST TRYING TO SURVIVE.”

Thomas snorted as he turned onto the dirt road leading to the safehouse.

“As a way of making it up to you, later we will be playing some of the sound bites that were recorded by Lazy Lindsay while she was over there. I mean, the stuff that's most informative and entertaining. The full audio record is on the KEBT website but be warned, it goes all over the place. And I only understood some of the technical stuff because I took Magic Electricity in college. Oh, hey. Welcome back Brett.”

“Thanks man. Turns out somebody sent us something really big and heavy and fragile. Hey, Jeff, what are your thoughts about an on-air unboxing? ...great. I'll go get the box cutter.”

“Gotcha covered.”

“Oh... that is convenient.”

“Yeah, unless you live in a place with a lot of thick carpeting. Honestly, even if spilled nachos hadn't happened, I was going to have to replace that anyway. I almost broke three toes in as many days when I first moved in.”

“Ouchie. I broke a toe on a bed frame once. That was not a happy time.”

“Exactly.”

The background noise of tearing tape and cardboard continued.

“Hey, how's that guy working out, the one who was doing the flooring?”

“Oh, really great actually. Carpeting was up and out like that, and he's been adding wood panel flooring. Also it's been really nice being able to make those kinds of choices about changes. I was an apartment dweller for so long, it's kind of a new feeling. Very liberating.”

“I'm kinda sorry that we couldn't have that housewarming party when we planned, but that rain just would not let up.”

“Yeah. Monsters Against Humanity sorta made up for that.”

“Do you have a set date for next time, or are things too fluid?”

“I'm hoping that can be the celebration for when Cater gets found and arrested again, but we'll just have to wait and see about that... Brett, hold this flap, somebody wrapped the tape around like eight times or something and my claws can't... there we go!”
“Alright, let's see what... we... hey, Jeff? Can you call Officer Steve, and the Knights of the Road Who Say Ni? I think we found... someone... that belongs to them.”

“Is that a photo album?”

“Don't touch it. Let the police dust it for prints.”

“Oh. Right. Well, there's some wrapping left over... let's see here. 'Rubilon's Fun-Tastic Summer Break’?”

“I had a feeling it was something like that-”

Thomas turned off the radio and turned into the driveway, easing his car into the car port and hopping out. The walls had been built up with sheet metal to conceal the inside, while at the same time the outside redirected attention towards a web URL where those who were so inclined could purchase homemade organic salsa. So far the hiding in plain sight methodology had worked, but even a nondescript car could stand out if people were actively looking for details.

Inside the safehouse proper, Thomas made his way up the stairs, more out of habit than anything else. Since Jordan had been recovered and brought up to speed, he had only moved from the top floor once... when Marcus was being buried. Otherwise, the room was filled with the constant scribbling noises of transcription; four english composition notebooks were already filled to the brim with the man's close-packed handwriting, and the remains of several pencils littered the table after giving their all in service to the preservation of knowledge.

This time was different.

The man sat in a chair, staring at a cork board hung on the wall, covered in various papers and held up by pushpins. On one sheet of paper was a still frame recovered from a cell phone video, depicting a massive beast in some sort of robe, with enormous claws and horns, clutching a dead child. Next to it was a newspaper clipping from the Ebott's Wake Herald. And next to that was a printed out screen capture of a web page showing a photograph with a skeleton, the monster king, and the greeter at the Ebott's Wake Wal-Mart... and a smaller monster in a striped shirt.

“...Asriel. Dreemurr. The monster that killed my daughter, and consumed her soul. The monster that set us on the path to ruin. Now... he is alive once again, and people accept him with open arms. So the real question is... Where. Is. My. Daughter.”

Thomas swallowed. This was new. Not entirely unexpected, but still uncharted territory.

“Yeah. That's what I heard. And it raises some questions, if monsters can come back from the dead like that.”

No response. Thomas ran a thumb along the edges of the papers under his arm.

“Mr. Cater. I don't mean to distract you. But I have learned some important information-”

“Why him, Thomas?”

“What?”

“Why Asriel Dreemurr? Why is he back, and not Chara? Why does he get another chance, and not Chara? Why do the king and queen get to see their child again, and not myself?”

“...I don't know, sir.”
Thomas blinked, and struck out into uncharted territory. “If monsters can do that, bring back the dead, do you think we could use that? Get enough leverage to compel them to bring back Chara, too, under the guise of a reconciliation or a peace treaty or something? Your daughter would be back, and while everyone else lets their guard down, we could build up our numbers and our influence?”

Jordan scratched his chin, then shook his head. “No... even if they had that power. I would never make such a devil’s deal. I would never let them sully my daughter's memory like that, or allow them to make anyone beholden to them in any way, not even if it meant Chara was brought back to life. Not even to see her again for a few moments. Chara is gone. Taken from me. Murdered. And those who took her life... they think they are above the consequences.”

Jordan stood up suddenly and Thomas flinched in surprise. “Wallowing in self pity will accomplish nothing. You said you learned something earlier?”

“Yes. I went to the electric co-op meeting yesterday to hear what people were saying about the CORE. As it turned out, the monster that designed the thing was there and ended up fielding questions. I think he let slip a lot of details he never meant to share.”

Jordan looked at Thomas, eyes wide in surprise. “Anything we can use?”

“Sort of. If nothing else, we know that any plans to interfere with the Exchange Trust will fail.”

“...I don't follow.”

“You were right about the CORE. It isn't just a power plant. In fact, the CORE itself is separate, and the geothermal power plant just supplies it. The CORE was an attempt to control time itself in an attempt to destroy the Barrier. The skeleton suddenly showing up might or might not have been an accident, but it wasn't a *freak* accident.”

Jordan stared at Thomas. “Wait. That means... if anything goes wrong. They can just go back and change it.”

“The skeleton said something about how it was impossible to send physical matter backwards in time, but that the whole point of the CORE was to send energy back. And he shrugged off the possibility of sending information back but I'm sure that was damage control after he let the cat out of the bag. It explains so much. No monsters died during the attack a week ago because monsters had advance knowledge of it and could take enough precautions to protect themselves, while still letting it happen to make sure nobody realized they knew it was coming. It's like the allied cryptography program in World War Two; they had to make sure that the Axis forces thought that their battleships and submarines were being spotted by scout planes, or they might change their codes and set everyone back to square one.”

“...of course. That would be how they knew when to break through the Barrier as well; they waited until they knew it would be safe, after the raid on the compound made it impossible for us to mount a defense.”

“Sir, you were right. The CORE is the source of their power in every sense.”

Jordan walked over towards the county map on the table, rubbing his forehead with one hand. “And you're right, we can't do anything against the Exchange Trust or using commodities markets, because they already have the inside track on that. As long as the CORE is operational, there is...
nothing we can do economically, socially, or directly. Which means... no matter what we ultimately plan on doing, the CORE has to be our first target.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Shoot the healer first.”

“What??” Jordan turned and stared at Thomas, who shrugged.

“It's an axiom of online gaming, especially shooters. The longer the healer is alive, the longer the damage dealers are alive. Take out the healer and the other players won't last as long. The CORE gives monsters the ability to negate or exploit any future events with the power of foresight. If we take that out, they are fighting blind and we can accomplish much more.”

“...you are absolutely correct. But by the same token, it will be most heavily defended.”

“Yeah. That's why I wanted to bring this to you as soon as I got everything together. I wanted to have it done before last night but... that skeleton. It showed up at the occult bookstore.”

“What was it doing there?”

“It was along for the ride, I guess. With that man on the Ebott's Wake Librarby Board. The one that broke Dwayne Riley's leg three times.”

“...Michael Van Garrett.”

“That's him. Amy, the girl that runs the cash register, she apparently knows him. Which I guess makes sense, if he's a librarian and she sells books.”

Jordan stared at the map again, one finger tracing shapes only he could see in midair.

“Van Garrett... and during the assembly. Carrow, the army man. Just before I lost consciousness, I heard him say something like 'we'd been trying to get somebody into the Anti Monster League for almost a year' which raises an interesting question.”

“Who is 'we' in this case?”

“That's the question. Then Carrow, Van Garrett, and that maniac Greene all show up at the same time when you had people watching the monster king and queen's pet human. Thomas... there is a Pattern here. I can feel it. There is something more going on.”

“...I'll admit. I didn't know what to believe when you told me about the dreams you had. But after finding out about the CORE and what it can do... I'm ready to believe just about anything. If you say there's a pattern, then there's a pattern.”

Jordan stared at the map for a little longer, then walked over to the cork board again. “...if they could undo everything that went wrong for them, then we would never have been able to destroy Asriel Dreemurr the first time. And your plan to bring me here, the integrity of the safehouse network... if they could oppose us now with knowledge from the future, I have no doubt they would make the attempt. The ambush you set up would have become an ambush for our side. So we know there are limits to what they can change, even with the CORE. That in and of itself means we have a chance. And the CORE will be the Achilles heel, so it will be well protected... Thomas, start seeing who you can find who is willing and able to fight the monsters on their home turf.”

“Right. I have a list of possible candidates. I will ask around.”

“And Thomas...”
“...yes?”

“We might not have a very large window of opportunity for this, nor do we know when that window will open. It might not come for weeks, maybe even months or years, or it could happen tomorrow.”

“Right.”

Thomas saw Cater's hands go to his pockets, and one of them pulled out... an old, faded letter. The man said something under his breath that Thomas couldn't make out.

“I'm sorry sir, what was that?”

“...nothing, Thomas. Just talking to myself... or at least, that's how it turned out. Certainly Chara cannot hear me, wherever she is now.”

Jordan walked over to a chair and sat down in it, slumped over and staring at the letter.

“She tried to go to Mt. Ebott. To fight the monsters by herself. I... found the letter in the morning. I was all ready to read her the riot act when she got back. Then night passed... and another day dawned. She wasn't back yet. I started to worry then. Another night and day. And another after that. I kept trying to convince myself that she had thought better of it, and was... somewhere, anywhere else, safe and sound. Or at least safer than she would be on or in the mountain. But eventually... even I had to face the facts. If Chara truly climbed Mt. Ebott, I would never see her again. My wife and I... had to accept that. Rather than leaving her room like it was, for when she came back, we had to go through it. And in the end, we had to get rid of everything. Even keeping a single drawing was too painful a reminder. I...”

Jordan shook his head. “I tried to throw myself into my work to distract myself, and I missed the signs... my wife became more and more closed off, and one day she was gone, too. Something to do with her glands, and eventually it caused organ failure. I suppose... everything hurt so much, that when she got sick she couldn't even tell the difference. So it came as a surprise to her, just as it did to me. For all I seem to learn from my dreams... I keep missing the obvious when it's in front of my face while I am awake.”

“...sir? Your wife and daughter... what were they like?”

Jordan stared at the letter again. “Liz was... she just was. I don't have the words to describe her, aside from perfect and other words that mean the same thing. And Chara... Chara was... she was relentless. She never backed down from a challenge, or a fight... it meant she was always causing trouble, or getting into it, but how can I complain when she got that from me? I'm ashamed to admit it but when Liz was pregnant, we were both hoping for a son... and Chara was everything I could have wanted in a son anyway. I just... didn't realize it until it was too late.”

Cater closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“I shouldn't have gotten angry with her...”

“...what? Angry about what?”

Cater opened his eyes, but did not look up. “Chara was born with a medical condition; an extremely rare variation of acquired heterochromia that seemed to affect women in my family. My mother had it, and her mother had it, and I must have passed on the gene to Chara. Her eyes changed color sometimes, from hazel to deep brown to maroon to blood red and back again. It was nothing more than genetics and biochemistry, so uncommon as to be unheard of, but otherwise unremarkable. I
knew what was going on. Liz understood what was going on once I explained it. The Council understood easily enough... but the rest of the Guardians, especially the other children. They were not so understanding. After her eyes started turning red, they called her a demon child. And of course, what other kids started, she had to finish. Blood everywhere... it was a miracle none of the kids were maimed for life after that. I was furious. So furious I can't even remember what I said to her. So furious I thought I was going to have a stroke or an embolism or something. I ended up turning in early... well, passing out is a better way of putting it... and the next morning, she was gone. To Mt. Ebott, to fight the monsters. So that I wouldn't have to be ashamed of her. *She thought I was ashamed of her.*

Cater looked up. “The monsters did not just take my daughter from me, Thomas. They didn't just kill her. And they didn't just destroy any chance of reconciliation between us. When Asriel Dreemurr was carrying her body... it was older than I remembered her being, and it was unmarked. They had *just* killed her. That means, all the time I thought she was dead... they had been keeping her alive. I can't imagine what they did to her, how much she suffered, down in the darkness. But whatever they did to my little girl, I will make them pay dearly for it in the end.”

“...my god. I had no idea.”

Jordan stood up and walked over to the map table, staring at the spot where Mt. Ebott was indicated. “Thomas, you have a family, right? People you love. People who love you. Do me a favor. Spend tonight with them, if you can. You never know how much time you have left.”

Thomas opened his mouth, but couldn't think of anything to say. The reports he had gathered on the CORE were left on a chair and he took the staircase down, walked out to the carport, and climbed into his car.

It took a few minutes before the car started, backed out into the driveway, and started turning. Inside, a cell phone was held in one hand.

“...dad? Yeah, it's Tommy. How you doing? ...right, right. I remember your email... yeah, that was pretty funny. Oh, I'm fine. I'm good. Mostly. Hey, do you wanna, I don't know, head to the bar, have a few drinks? It's been a long time... no, no. Nothing like that. I... *no*, dad. I'm not sick. I just... there's somebody I work with. They... lost somebody they cared about. And I got to thinking about that... heh. You better not. Where do you want to go? ...okay. Sure. Do you want to meet up there, or should I stop by the house... that works too. Alright. Gotta go, getting ready to get on the road soon, but I'll see you in an hour.... I love you too, dad. Bye.”

The phone was turned off and Thomas pulled out onto the road; after about half a minute, his hand reached for the radio again in order to drown out the deafening silence.

“-right after the lecture at two in the afternoon, so it all really works out if you want to see the whole thing.”

“Suppose it would be nice to visit the old Alma Mater again.”

“Yeah. I mean I wouldn't be too keen on going back down to New Home U, but I'm really stoked for the class reunion next year. We're going to try to have it in the Arboretum if weather permits.”

“Actually now I'm curious, are there any plans to start up like a Surface Campus or something like that?”

“I don't know, actually. I don't think so? But we do need to preserve vital magical and scientific knowledge for the next generation of monsters. I don't know if we're going to talk to the
community college to add classes like Magic Electricity and Dimensional Physics and stuff like that, or if All Fine Labs is going to open an educational annex, or what. But we've got new monsters graduating from school every year so we need to get on that soon."

“Maybe that's on the agenda for the new Address on Sunday.”

“Huh. Yeah, could be. I mean, how far did we get last time? The citizenship thing, and then Frisk started talking about some sort of historical society, and then Riley and Cater crashed the party, and after Frisk got out of the hospital they called in and mentioned a couple other things.”

“It's kinda hard to believe all that just happened a week ago.”

“Yeah. And with Riley in the hospital there haven't been any angry phone calls for a while.”

“Except for the Little League thing.”

“Yeah, except for the Little League thing... it's actually kind of sad. Like the end of an era or something like that. What? ...huh! Weird timing.”

“Listeners, Jeff has just informed us that we have a caller on the line. Hello, you are on the air with Brett and DJ Pantz!”

“HELLO BRETT! HELLO DJ PANTZ!”

“Hello, Papyrus! How's life treating you this Friday?”

“QUITE WELL, AND THANK YOU! I HOPE THE SAME IS ALSO TRUE FOR YOU AND EVERYONE ELSE AT THE STATION!”

“Can't complain here. So what's the word, buddy?”

“WELL, THE MAIN REASON I CALLED WAS ON BEHALF OF MR. DWAYNE RILEY, WHO OBJECTS BEING ASSOCIATED WITH JORDAN CATER FOR MULTIPLE REASONS, NOT THE LEAST OF WHICH WAS BEING SHOT IN THE SHOULDER FROM BEHIND.”

“Uh. Okay. There's a lot to take away from that one sentence, but gotta start somewhere. So... let's start with the fact that it sounds like you've been interacting with Dwayne Riley personally.”

“QUITE SO! I HAVE BEEN VISITING HIM EVERY DAY SINCE MONDAY, WHEN HE WAS CLEARED TO HAVE VISITORS! THE NURSING STAFF AND OFFICER STEVE HAVE BEEN EXTRAORDINARILY HELPFUL AND ACCOMMODATING!”

“...alright. Uh. Not sure what I'm expecting here, but can I ask why?”

“THE CRITICAL POINT OF UNDERSTANDING IS THAT WHEN FRISK MOVED BETWEEN MR. RILEY AND CAPTAIN UNDYNE, RILEY CEASED HIS ASSAULT. AND DUE TO FRISK'S DIMINUTIVE SIZE COMPARED TO UNDYNE'S AMAZONIAN STATURE, IT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN DIFFICULT TO SIMPLY SHOOT AROUND THEM. MR. RILEY REFRAINED FROM DOING SO BECAUSE HE WAS UNWILLING TO ENDANGER FRISK'S LIFE LIKE THAT.”

“...I don't want to contradict you, Papyrus, but I think that you might be over thinking this.”

“No, no, wait. Brett, you remember the cook off. Frisk was able to ride around on Papyrus's shoulders easily. Undyne's about the same size in her armor. Even with her kneeling down, and
Frisk holding their arms out like they were, there's no way to make a truly effective obstacle like that. So Riley did have a better than average chance of attacking Undyne again even with Frisk in the way, without hitting them.”

“EXACTLY, DJ PANTZ! AND WHILE THIS OPPORTUNITY WAS PRESENT, HE REFUSED TO AVAIL HIMSELF OF IT BECAUSE IT PRESENTED AN UNACCEPTABLE RISK. THOUGH HE DID NOT USE THOSE EXACT WORDS TO DESCRIBE IT... ANYWAY! IN THE END, FACED WITH THE AMBASSADOR'S OBSTINANCE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY, HE THREW DOWN HIS WEAPON AND REFUSED TO COMMIT FURTHER ACTS OF VIOLENCE!”

“Not that it helped him much in the end.”

“UNFORTUNATELY TRUE. THAT IS WHY MR. RILEY DISLIKES BEING ASSOCIATED WITH MR. CATER. WHATEVER DWAYNE'S OPINION OF MONSTERS, AND I BELIEVE I AM MAKING PROGRESS WITH HIM ON THAT FRONT, HE HAS ALWAYS APPROACHED THE ISSUE WITH THE SAFETY OF HUMANITY FOREMOST IN HIS MIND. IT IS A POSITION THAT BOTH FRISK AND I CAN UNDERSTAND AND RESPECT, AND WE ALSO UNDERSTAND AND RESPECT THAT HE WAS NOT WILLING TO COMPROMISE THAT ONCE THE CONFLICT OF INTEREST BECAME CLEAR TO HIM.”

“Hmmm. Well, there is that. I mean, on the one hand, you don't bring guns into a public venue like that for everybody's health, but on the other hand it wasn't Dwayne that put Frisk in the hospital.”

“PRECISELY CORRECT, MR. BRINKMAN!”

“Yeah, that was Cater that did that. You know he was yelling that we took Chara away from him, but he sure seemed fine with killing somebody else's kid when it came down to it.”

“Hey, just what exactly did Chara die of? I know she got really sick, but from what?”

“We don't know. Humans have a billion and a half diseases and most of the medical textbooks were either out of date or falling apart by the time we got hold of them down there. Could have been anything. Allergies, malnutrition, infection, things I don't even know the names of. All anyone knows for sure is that it was something that healing magic couldn't fix, which is bad enough on its own.”

“Yeah, you're right. I mean, the most basic monster food can heal nerve damage, which is something we still haven't figured out. So whatever it was had to be really bad... I can think of a few possibilities, and all of them are really depressing, so let's not go into that. Hey, Papyrus, you still there? Sorry, we got off on a bit of a tangent.”

“YES, I AM STILL ON THE PHONE LINE-”

Thomas turned off the radio and sighed. After hearing the skeleton call in, silence didn't seem so bad by comparison.
“Oh god why did I think this was a good idea.”

“Don't tense up. And try not to over-steer.”

“I don't even know how to normal steer!”

“Take it slow. Relax a little bit.”

“Frisk, wait, wait, wait. Don't bicycles come with things that make them more stable? I think I read about that in a book once.”

“You mean training wheels?”

“Yeah, those. Can we get in on that for starters?”

“This one didn't have training wheels when I got it from Joe's House of Stuff. So we don't have those lying around... I don't know, maybe I could build some?”

“Let's do that! Let's do that! More building, less falling!”

“Asriel you've been on the seat for less than thirty seconds and we haven't moved an inch.”

The monster child squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head, causing the bike to wobble against Frisk's grip. “I know, I know! Gah. I am so pathetic. The only good part about this is dad left to go talk to the city council, so he's not here to watch me freak out.”

“Asriel, don't focus on that! Don't think negative, think positive.”

“I am thinking positive! I'm positive I'm going to fall down and hurt myself on this thing!”

“That's the wrong kind of positive. Think the opposite of that.”

“So think negative?”

Frisk opened their mouth, then closed it again with a confused look on their face. “Okay, I probably could have chosen my words better there, but no. I mean believe that you can do it. And you are not pathetic. You've never done this before so of course you're worried.”

“I'm freaking out about riding a bike without training wheels. I can't cast a simple fireball. I have to double check that I'm the same shape when I wake up as when I fell asleep. And it takes me five minutes to psych myself up to get in the bathtub because I'm afraid of dissolving into amalgamate muck and getting sucked down the drain. I'm pretty sure that hits all the check marks for pathetic.”

Frisk shook their head. “It's your first time on a bicycle. And we still don't know what was up with the shape changing thing, so it's natural to worry about that. And I can't cast a fireball either. I mean... not that I've made the attempt. Not exactly sure what would happen.”

“Frisk please please please please help me climb off of this!”
“Okay, okay.” Frisk grabbed hold of Asriel around his torso and lifted him up; the bike fell over without anyone holding onto it, and Asriel's legs sagged as his feet touched the ground.

“Thank you. I swear my life was flashing before my eyes. And that got boring really quick.”

“Yeah. Alright. We'll table the bicycle thing until I can build some training wheels and attach them... actually, even if it's not a tandem bike, you could probably sit behind me while I'm riding it.”

“...that's slightly less scary. We could try that. But not right now. My legs are still shaking.”

“Right. Let's just chill then.”

The two children went inside the house, and Frisk made a beeline for the fridge, pulling out some covered dishes. “What sounds good for lunch, Asriel? There's some stir fry, there's some spanish omelet, there's escargot pie...”

“Escargot?”

“Yeah. It's a way of cooking snails in butter and garlic. Part of french cuisine. I couldn't really stomach snail pie even though it's mom's favorite, so I went online looking for alternatives and we ran into that. Suddenly it's my favorite too.”

“I was always more about the sweets... well, at least the sweets with cinnamon in them. But I could give it a try.”

“Two slices of escargot pie coming up.”

Frisk opened a drawer pulled out a knife, and began to carve off two slices of pie and deposit them onto plates. Asriel grabbed forks from another drawer, and the two children sat at the kitchen table. Asriel poked his slice of pie cautiously with his fork, then pulled off a mouthful.

“Mumph... mmm... mmmm! Thish ish really good!”

“Everything tastes better, if you cook it with butter and garlic. It's like a law or a UN resolution or something.”

Asriel began to attack his slice of pie in earnest, while Frisk's lunch was consumed at a more leisured pace.

“...Frisk?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you okay? You're spending a lot of time staring at nothing.”

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry. Trying to design the homemade training wheels in my head. Gonna need to ask Papyrus if I can borrow his power drill again.”

“...you're pretty good with that kind of stuff, huh?”

“Yeah. Don't know how much of it comes from watching Transformers, but that was part of it. And you saw how excited I was to get The Way Things Work again.”

“It was hard to miss.”
“And... when I was trying to keep things going back at the Taylor house... it came in handy. Stuff to help me clean the tops of furniture, ceiling corners. Evaporator coolers for summer, miniature space heaters in winter. It was all really crude and it fell apart really easily, because it was held together with rubber bands and white glue and duct tape, and it was made out of trash and stuff lying around the house.”

“...so you were like us. Building stuff out of what other people threw away.”

“Yeah. Did I ever tell you I fell in love with the CORE the first time I saw it?”

Asriel looked at Frisk with one eyebrow raised. “You flirt with airplanes. Am I supposed to be surprised?”

Frisk giggled. “I mean, I saw this massive machine more advanced than any human technology and I realized it had to have been built from scratch, out of stuff in the garbage, and I thought it was the best thing ever. I remember being really disappointed when Alphys stopped explaining how it worked because she thought she was rambling.”

“You mean she wasn't rambling?”

“No, she totally was, of course she was!” Frisk grinned. “But I wanted to hear the rest of the ramble!”

Asriel snickered and finished off his slice of pie, leaning back in his chair.

“...sometimes, I still can't believe I'm back. Everything I took for granted before. Everything I thought I'd lost forever. It catches me by surprise. This is one of those times.”

“I think that's normal. Well. Sort of. It's normal for bad things to happen, and people keep stumbling over it. There's not as much out there about when it happens in reverse.”

“Yeah... you wouldn't think you'd need a coping mechanism for dealing with unexpected good things, but... well, here we are.”

Frisk nodded, then looked up with a confused expression and placed their fork down on the plate. “Asriel, last Friday morning. Before the assembly. You showed up and asked a bunch of odd questions.”

“That's right... hard to believe it was only a week ago.”

“Yeah. A lot of stuff happened since then. You asked me one really odd one. Like if I had ever felt like I was being watched. Or something else weirder than normal, down in the Underground.”

Asriel looked at Frisk with a curious expression. “...yes. I did.”

“...I think there was something... sort of like that. When I was in the lab basement. Trying to appease the Amalgamates. But it wasn't exactly like being watched. I don't know exactly how to describe it. Almost like... like I was seeing bits of a pattern start to come together. And I don't just mean the stuff about you and the Golden Flowers and Chara's secret plan, although I was able to put that together from the computer logs and the video tapes. This was something else...”

Frisk glared at the last bit of pie, almost as if they were angry at it.

“There were moments where I felt like... I'd been there before. But that was the one place I never saw on the first run, so it wasn't like that. And it wasn't like deja vu, like everyone else gets from
our Save and Load events, I don't think. And I only died down there once anyway, when Lemon Bread bit my arm off, so it wasn't that. This was something else... like... ugh. I guess like, if you saw a pattern to something. But you only recognized it as a pattern because you saw something else, with the same pattern as a part of it. But, you can't remember the first thing you saw, which is where you learned the pattern from to begin with. So it's like a bridge with nothing on each end. A connection floating in midair, connecting nothing with nothing. I remember thinking, there's more to this. There is something else going on. It all fits together somehow. But I couldn't explain how I knew that."

"...that might actually be weirder than what I ran into. And I'm still not sure I wasn't going crazy from being alone in an empty, echoing cavern for over a month."

"We never did get into that, because I had to get ready for the address, but what was it? What did you run into?"

Asriel swallowed. "It... if it really happened, and wasn't a part of my imagination... I was at Chara's grave. I saw... nothing. I mean, I saw nothing as in the absence of anything. It was like... pure darkness, and it was spreading for a bit, and then it stopped. And... I thought that was Chara at first. That they had come back, somehow. After everything that happened. So... I tried to talk to it. And... I think it understood me."

Asriel's eyes took on a haunted look, and Frisk noticed one paw trembling on the table.

"I mean... I was communicating. But I don't think it understood what I was talking about. Because... at the very end. I expected them, or it, or whatever... I thought that they might reset everything. Again. For whatever reason. And... I was Flowey again, so I couldn't feel much anymore... but I remembered that when I could feel, it hurt. A lot. So. For my own sake as much as yours and everyone else's, I tried to convince them... it... not to reset the timeline. Just let things keep going the way they were going. I didn't expect it to make a difference, not really. So I just said, 'see you soon, Chara.' And..."

Asriel's eyes, and his mind, were clearly some place far away.

"There was no sound. None at all. Nothing that wasn't the natural sounds of an empty cavern. I know that. I swear on my life, and my new Soul, and my new body. I didn't hear any sound. But for all that, I still heard a question."

Frisk swallowed. "What... what was the question?"

"It was... after I called it Chara. And... I think it asked me... 'Who?' As in, 'who is Chara' I guess? And then it... faded out. Like it was never there. Which I guess, it never really was to begin with. And... well, I totally freaked out. I didn't stop burrowing until I was outside the cavern, and then I headed down into town, ran into Officer Steve, and he pointed me towards the Arboretum. You know what happened after that."

"Yeah." Frisk's hand reached out and rested on Asriel's trembling paw, and the monster child turned his head and saw a smile on their face. "If I ever meet whatever that is, if it's anything at all, I'm going to thank it. Because, even if it scared you, it meant you came down here. And all that led to Tuesday, and today."

"...I wonder if something like that... if it even understands people like us. Why we exist. Why we do what we do." Asriel shook his head and put his other paw over his eyes. "Assuming I wasn't going crazy without anyone to talk to or watch or whatever."
“...you told me once how you started to see the Underground like the people in it weren't people. How they would do the same things each time unless you changed something.”

“Yeah... I hope it doesn't see us like that. You know, without a Soul, none of it made sense. But when I came to the Surface, the fact that even a small human surface town was ridiculously complex, it made me realize there was more to it, long before I started feeling things again. Now it all makes sense again, in fact it's obvious: Why would anybody not do what makes them feel good? Why would anybody deliberately do something that makes them feel bad? When I didn't have emotions, I forgot how they worked... or at least, I did eventually. After enough resets.”

“There's also the comfort of routine. They just had to make it day by day, until someone like me came along and Asgore could break the Barrier. It was easier to keep their heads down. Focus on the little details of each day...” Frisk sighed. “I still feel so bad for dad. He had all that on his shoulders. And he still feels it, even though everyone's on the surface and he's not officially king anymore.”

“That's true.” Asriel stared at his empty plate. “Frisk, I know you've been trying to bridge the gap since the Barrier was destroyed, but... do you really think that mom and dad will ever get back together again?”

“Yes. I could feel it. When we were fighting over the timeline, and I tried to reach out to them... there is still something there. Something between them, an indestructible bond. I know that they still need each other, deep down. But even without that insight, look at the way mom reacted to what dad did. Just like losing you... it never healed over. Mom still loves dad, and that made what he did hurt even worse, and that's why she was so hostile to him for so long. Not because she hates him, but because she still loves him in spite of what he did. But, I think things are getting better now.”

“...well, they are talking to each other more. A lot more. There is that.”

“Exactly. I knew it was going to take a long time, but I couldn't not try. It might still take a long time. Years, maybe decades. But I know they'll never really be happy without each other.”

“...it works both ways, doesn't it? Before I came back, they were going to live forever. And that's a long time to be angry. And now... well, if you only have so much time, is it really worth spending it angry?”

“Yeah. Exactly.” Frisk stared at what was left of their slice of pie, and then pushed it away.

“...what is it Frisk?”

“The dream I had last Thursday night. I hugged mom... and she turned to dust in my arms. I spent so long trying to bring you back, and here you are... and mom is getting older. And one day she'll fall down and... everything that comes with it.” Frisk closed their eyes and sighed. “The dream came true... I really did kill her. Or... I will. And dad, too. This time, it really will be me.”

Asriel hopped out of his chair, walked over to Frisk, and took one hand in both paws. “No you didn't. Mom and dad knew what would happen to them the moment they decided to have a child. And dad told me, yesterday. He told me how much he and mom dreaded not getting older, while you did. Having to lose another child one day. So this is not something you need to feel bad about.”

The human child took a deep breath, and tried to let it out slowly. “I never even thought about what would happen... after. And that's how things go wrong. When I forget important details. Even if...
if mom and dad are okay with, with this. I can't keep forgetting things. I have to be more careful. Or next time I might hurt the Asters, or Alphys, or Undyne—"

“Come on, Frisk. Snap out of it. You know, and I know, that there's only so much we can do. My first resets were all about trying to make everything right. But no matter what I did, I never found a way to break the Barrier. Even if Asgore had shown me the souls, there were still only six. And I didn't come up with the idea of connecting to everyone else until after I couldn't steal your soul. And, even if I had come up with it sooner, I couldn't connect to everyone in the Underground with so many areas sealed off. The Lab basement, the Ruins... it all had to wait for you to come along. Frisk... I was thinking about this a lot yesterday evening, while you were sleeping. Even if we had total control of Save and Load events. If we could start and stop time like a video tape, change whatever we want, make new Save points whenever we want? Even with that power, there's only so much we could do, and I know you understand that because you were the one who explained it to me; people need to make their own happy endings. And for mom and dad... falling down from old age, after watching us grow up to be whoever we end up being, doing whatever it is we decide to do? That is their happy ending.”

Frisk nodded. “You're right. You're right. And if I start obsessing about mistakes I haven't even made yet, I'm not going to be able to stop.” The child opened their eyes and turned to look at Asriel. “Thank you for pulling me back from the edge. Again.”

“...Frisk. I have a very important question to ask you.”

“What is it?”

Asriel smirked and pointed at Frisk's plate. “Are you going to finish eating that?”

Frisk snickered, grabbed the plate, and pushed it towards Asriel. “Chow down, bro. You deserve it.”

Asriel grinned and finished off the remainder of the slice of pie, and Frisk held up their left hand and stared at it. “I wish I could just talk to Alphys about this when we see her at the lab later. But no matter what questions I can think of asking, they would just raise more questions. Ugh... why did Sans have to loan me that book? This all started while I was reading it.”

Asriel stacked Frisk's plate on top of his and carried them both to the sink. “What can you do with it so far? All I saw was the healing magic.”

“There was a random light I might have imagined, and... I think I managed to use low level Blue Magic to catch the photo album when I knocked it off the table Tuesday. I haven't even tried to deliberately test it... I guess I was hoping it's a use-it-or-lose-it situation and I can just ignore it until it goes away.”

“...what a joke, right? One kid can't get his magic to work right, and the other kid has magic and doesn't even want it.”

Frisk nodded. “It might be a joke, but I'm not laughing.”

“Me neither.”

Frisk held up both hands next to each other and stared. “...nothing. I must be missing something.”

“Could be that you're over thinking it. The times that you said it happened before, it happened without you realizing it, right?”
“Yeah. All of it. Do you think that's a problem with getting fire magic to cooperate?”

“Not really. Magic still comes as easily, but when I do it on instinct...” Asriel held up an arm, then pointed an open palm out towards the kitchen door and produced a ring of pellets. “That happens. To even get a little bit of flame I have to concentrate really hard. So that's not quite it.” The pellets dissipated and Asriel let his arm drop, and Frisk nodded.

“Hmmm. You know, I'm still not done with Sans' book. I might get it finished tonight. And then I guess I can go back and read it again. Not much I can do about the math stuff, at least for a few years.”

“...this kind of knocks the support out from under any plan of us helping each other out with magic. Neither one of us really knows what we're doing. I guess we should concentrate on what we do understand. School study things, riding the bicycle... Frisk, are you absolutely sure you don't want to tell Alphys about this? If you can do this kind of stuff, even if it's unreliable, even if you don't know how you got it in the first place, there's a chance that other humans could too. You have everyone's best interests at heart. I'm sure everyone will still trust you.”

“...Asriel, do you remember any dreams from last night?”

“Yeah. I had to work part time at the Arboretum to make up for all the business I cost them as a flower. And people in tuxedos kept coming in while I was working and trying to sell me wheelbarrows, no matter how many times I said I wasn't interested. It didn't make any sense, but as long as the dreams aren't actually memories of things I did as a flower, then they can be as weird as they want. Why do you ask?”

“Last night, I had a dream that... I dreamed that Alphys found out about my magic, and she panicked.”

“Panicked as in... like, screaming and yelling panic? Or as in she hit your heart with thirty thousand volts panic?”

“The first one. Seeing Alphys so scared of me? After I woke up I thought for a few minutes I was gonna throw up. At least the dream after that was more sane. Well, sort of. Sans said he'd give me a silver dollar if I managed to find Papyrus's special attack, and somehow I ended up in the flea market at Gemini Roads trying to buy it off of somebody. If that had been another nightmare, I probably would have stayed awake until dawn.”

Asriel sighed. “I guess... that explains why you don't want to talk to Alphys about it.”

“It's one of the reasons. But there's another one... seven.”

Asriel raised an eyebrow. “There's seven reasons you don't want to talk about this?”

“Seven human mages created the Barrier.” Frisk massaged their left palm with their right thumb. “Once this magic thing comes out, I can't imagine any monster ever seeing me as anything but the first in another set... the beginning of the end all over again. If I did tell Alphys, even if she didn't panic like in my dream, I don't think she'd let me leave All Fine Labs until I died from old age or experiment side effects.”

“...Frisk, I told you. I don't see you as a threat. Alphys and everyone else will accept this part of you, if you tell them. I can feel it.”

Frisk stared at their hands. “I am so tired of hiding, from everyone else and from myself. I am so tired of having to lie, and I'm trying to stop. But even if I could work up the courage to tell Alphys,
“if I can't make anything happen she has no reason to believe me to begin with.”

“...we could always pass it off as some weird side effect of the Soul Link test-”

“No.” Frisk turned and glared at Asriel. “That is all about figuring out what happens to you and making sure you are okay. We do not mess with that.”

“...Yeah, okay, we won't mess with that. But... dammit, there has to be something we can do! Some way we can bring up the subject without tipping our hand!”

Frisk looked at the clock. “We'll have to come up with something later then. If we're going to get to All Fine Labs, do that test, and be done in time for me to get back to school before lunch break is over, we should leave now.”

“Okay.”

Asriel made his way to the kitchen doorway, then looked back; Frisk was still sitting at the table, staring at their hands again.

“Frisk? Is something wrong?”

“Asriel. I'm sorry I snapped like that. And that I keep shooting down your suggestions.”

“It's alright, Frisk. I've been in your head. I know how much everyone means to you. How scary it is to think that it could fall apart.” Asriel looked down at his own paws. “Especially if you feel you're responsible for it falling apart.”

Frisk nodded, and Asriel walked back over to the table, and laid a paw on their hand.

“Tell you what. When you have to go back to school for class, I'll stay at the lab. Talk to Alphys. I won't say anything, but I will ask her about what she's learned so far about Souls and magic and stuff. Gotta start somewhere. If I tell her it's because I'm worried about your Soul staying together after what happened to us, it isn't even a lie, because I do worry about that.”

Frisk slowly stood up and nodded.

“...okay. Okay. You're right, Asriel. We have to do something. And your plan is better than anything I've been able to come up with. And... thank you, Asriel. Mom and Undyne and everyone else... they try to help me feel better. But they don't know. They don't know about the magic, they don't know about the time loop. But you know everything. When you tell me things are going to be alright... I don't have that nagging doubt. Wondering, if you only knew everything, if the answer would be different.”

Asriel reached up and scratched one ear. “Frisk. Suppose for a moment that you're right about people freaking out, if they find out humans can use magic. And they start treating you like a threat. Then what? What would you do?”

Frisk looked down at the kitchen floor. “...what could I do? If they think that humans with magic are a threat, then... that means I'd be a threat. If they don't believe me when I say I'm still on their side, then there's nothing I can do but run, or hide... or wait for the end.”

“You're wrong. If they tried to hurt you, to lock you up, run tests on you, push you around? You could fight back. You fought Undyne, Asgore, and me at my strongest. You always won in the end. If anybody tries to use your magic as an excuse to hurt you, you could make them really regret trying.”
“Are you crazy?? I could never—”

“Exactly!” Asriel grinned and pointed at Frisk triumphantly. “No matter what else happens, you care about your friends and you will always be on their side. Frisk, if you think that only you feel that way about your friends, that loyalty is a quality that is uniquely yours... you really are an idiot.”

Asriel stuck out his tongue and winked, and Frisk's expression slowly transformed into a smile.

“Okay... when you put it that way, things don't seem so bad.”

“Good! Now come on. We have an appointment to keep!”

Five minutes later, passersby stopped and stared, or more commonly jumped out of the way and stared, as a bicycle sped through Ebott's Wake carrying two children. One was a human, the other was a monster, and both were making a gratuitous amount of noise. The monster's long floppy ears flapped about in the wind, unaffected by the helmet on his head, and his face was a rictus of terror as opposed to the expression of glee on the face of the human steering and pedaling, to whom the monster was holding on for dear life.

“Frisk slow down! We're not that late!”

“HAHAHAHAHA!”

“OH GOD WHY DID I AGREE TO THIS!”

“Hold on, Asriel! If I hit this curb right, we're gonna go ballistic!”

“FRISK NO!”

“FRISK YES!”

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas, or other seasonal holiday as appropriate! Updates will have to taper off a bit for the next week or two because holidays, and also because I have been burning the candle from both ends a bit these last few days, but that's just me catching my breath. This story isn't nearly done yet, there's much more on the way! More Drama! More Action! More Bloodshed! MORE COMMUNITY RADIO!

...I think I need to lie down. :P
“That's it! This has gone too far, Justin! Only one member of Shop Class can have a name that start's with J!”

“I agree, Joe... but it is you who must change your name! I challenge you to the most ancient rite of combat! Whoever ends up with the stupidest glowing anime hair is the victor, while the loser must change his name to something that does not start with J!”

“I accept your challenge! RAAAAAAAARGH!”

“YEEEEAAAAARRRRRGHHH!”

The stadium erupted into two glowing points of light, and Hal averted his eyes to see Mike reading a book.

“So, watcha reading?”

“The Egyptian Book of the Bring Out Yer Dead. Figured there might be something we can use to fight the Sages.”

The book shook in Mike's hands. “I feel fine! I think I'll go out for a walk!”

“God dammit, I lost my place again.”

“Uwa hu hu hu. Would either of you guys like some refreshments?”

Hal looked up to see a monster with six arms, five eyes, and a tray of baked goods, and felt a rush of wind next to him. Looking back, Mike's seat was empty, and somewhere in the sky Hal could make out a speck that was the librarian floating away under a single balloon on a string. “Victory is mine!” echoed from above.

“Nah, I think we're good.”

Hal's phone began to buzz, and he pulled it out of his pocket and tapped the profile pic of Undyne.

“HAL WHAT ARE YOU DOING MOVE IT THERE ARE ALIENS ATTACKING SEATTLE TRYING TO STEAL THE SPACE NEEDLE!”

Undyne hung up and Hal stood up from his seat. “I always knew this day would come.” The mechanic began jogging up the stadium steps until he reached the summit, grabbed hold of a fireman's pole, and slid down to the ground where a bird monster was waiting.

“Hey, man, you ready to head to Seattle?”

The bird nodded, flew up, grabbed hold of Hal's hair, and lifted him off the ground. The landscape below zoomed by, until a massive metropolis loomed in the distance...

The window was pulverized into thousands of fragments as Hal and the bird crashed into it, and
Hal tucked and rolled and landed upright, holding out a hair dryer like it was some sort of pistol.

“I’m here to kick ass and chew the fat! So let me in on all the juicy gossip!”


“Hey, are you one of the guys that’s trying to steal the Space Needle?”

“Okay, first, that is racist. Second, it’s just me. Third, I just want my fucking Frappucino. You’re the only god damn planet in this arm of the galaxy with coffee, would it kill you to step up your game? And... what number are we up to now?”

“Four?” Hal shrugged; he hadn't actually been paying attention.

“Okay. Four, you call this thing the Space Needle, when it is clearly attached to your planet. What the actual hell.” The barista handed a cup of coffee to the alien, who began to slurp it noisily.

“Hey, don't look at me buddy. I didn't build it... hey. Can you do the ‘ayyy lmao’ thing?”

The alien sipped its coffee noisily, and smacked its lips. “…no.”

“Please?!”

Another long, noisy sip, followed by lip smacking. “…no.” Suddenly the alien was illuminated from above as if by a spotlight, and started floating.

“I must go. My planet needs me. To pick up some milk.”

“Okay! Have a safe trip!” Hal turned to the monster bird, now standing in line for the barista to take its order. “Hey buddy, I'm gonna catch a train back. See you next Wednesday.”

The bird nodded, and Hal took the stairs down the Space Needle, which for some reason only took about twenty seconds. On the ground, Hal looked up at the building and scratched his head in confusion.

“Last call for the train to Triton! Last call for the train to Triton!”

Hal turned to see a Tolkien Dwarf with an axe standing next to a row of mining carts on a rail track, and ran over. “Hey, how much for a ticket to Triton?”

“One pound of raw mithril ore.”

“Okay, gimme a second.” Hal patted his pockets until he felt an oddly shaped lump in one of them, and pulled out a dense glob of unrefined minerals.

“Is this enough?”

The dwarf pulled out a jeweler's loupe, examined the lump, and shrugged. “Well, that's actually orichalcum, but I could let it slide just this once.”

“Thanks buddy.” Hal tossed the ore and the dwarf caught it, and the man vaulted into one of the mine carts, which began to descend into the dark bowels of the earth...
“Tra la la. A storm in a bottle, caught with a fishnet. Tra la la.”

As the light came back, Hal found himself sitting in a wooden boat, with a hooded figure standing in front of him, floating with the current through an underground river.

“Your mind is a puzzle to put all of monsterkind to shame, Mr. Greene.”

“Thanks.” Hal rubbed his head. “So how are you doing?”

“...it doesn't really matter.”

Hal leaned forward. “If it didn't matter, I wouldn't have asked. Are you okay?”

The figure shifted. “...the human Soul. An enigma wrapped in a mystery, wrapped in seventy percent water. You surprise me with your concern, Mr. Greene. And that has not happened in a long time. In that respect... I suppose I am quite well, and thank you for asking.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Skipping Friday, while an understandable choice, is no longer an option. The Usurper draws near.”

Hal stared at the riverperson. “Who, or what, is the Usurper?”

“You know him as Jordan Cater. But you only know him as Jordan Cater. And worst of all. Jordan Cater only knows himself as himself. He has no understanding of the suffering he has caused, nor of the suffering he may yet inflict.”

“That sounds like him alright.”

The boat slowed to a halt next to a crude dock, and Hal hopped off. “This is the Underground, isn't it? I've never been, but I've seen pictures.”

“An empty cavern. An empty prison. Haunted not by the memories of those who have fallen, but haunting the memories of those who lived to see freedom. None return here without pressing reasons.”

“That makes sense.”

Hal walked away from the dock, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“Mr. Greene. One final warning.”

“Yeah?”

“Foresight is not enough. Understanding is not enough. The puzzle can only be solved if the puzzle was designed to have a solution.”

Hal shrugged. “ If it doesn't have even one solution, then it's not really a puzzle, is it? I'm no Papyrus, but even I know that. Changing things so that a solution exists is what makes it a puzzle, instead of a bunch of different parts that happened to be in the same spot. Just like an engine; if it can't work, if it can't run, it's not really an engine. It's a bunch of metal .”

“...you have given this a lot of thought.”

“No, that was just off the top of my head. Just seems obvious to me.”
“Interesting. I suppose. It doesn't really matter...”

The boat drifted away from the dock, and the riverperson nodded.

“But despite this, I feel compelled to wish you good luck.”

“Thanks.”

The riverperson vanished and Hal walked up the stairs until he found himself outside a building. A sign over the door said simply “LAB” and he walked towards it. The doors slid open automatically...

Hal opened his eyes, looked around, and tried very, very hard not to throw up.

And failed.

After several minutes, the mechanic managed to get up, stagger his way into the bathroom, and wash out his mouth several times. With the acrid after taste gone, a glass was filled up and the clean water was swallowed, which helped with a lot of the other physical complaints that had taken up Hal's attention after the puke had finished its filibuster. Suitably hydrated, he opened up the cabinet under the sink and grabbed some cleaning supplies, sawdust among them. The vomit in the bedroom was cleaned up (to the best of his ability anyway) and disposed of, and an air freshener saw abundant use in the bedroom.

With a tired sigh, the mechanic finally sat down on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands, and tried to collect his thoughts... a complicated process even at the best of times. Eventually one hand reached over to the small cable spool that served as a night stand and grabbed his smart phone.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year's Eve! Or Happy New Year's Day! Depending on when you read this. Assuming you read it all the way through to the end. Why? Don't do it! You have people that care about you!

I'M NOT DRUNK YOU'RE DRUNK

Seriously I'm not drunk. Kinda wish I was. After this year, I think we could all use a drink.

See you guys in 2017! :D
Chapter Notes

Possible Trigger Warning for graphic descriptions of violence and injury. (No lasting harm though.)

12:14 PM EZ_Being_Greene: HEY WHAT YEAR IS THIS
12:14 PM Rock_It_Science: 2016
12:15 PM Rock_It_Science: still
12:15 PM Rock_It_Science: unless theres something everybody forgot to tell me
12:15 PM : its 2016
12:15 PM : may 20
12:15 PM : friday
12:15 PM : cant believe this is a real thing we have to remind you about
12:15 PM Rock_It_Science: hal you said you were goin to skip today
12:16 PM EZ_Being_Greene: I WOKE UP BECUZ I WAS THIRSTY
12:16 PM EZ_Being_Greene: DEHYDRATOIN IS NOT A FELONY
12:16 PM EZ_Being_Greene: STOP PERSECUTING ME
12:16 PM EZ_Being_Greene: HELP HELP IM BEING REPRESSESED
12:17 PM EZ_Being_Greene: ITS THE VIOLENCE INHERENT IN THE SYSTEM
12:17 PM Rock_It_Science: bloody peasant
12:17 PM EZ_Being_Greene: COME SEE THE VIOLENCE INHERENT IN THE SYSTEM
12:17 PM IM_the_walrus: o good ur not dead
12:18 PM IM_the_walrus: NOW GO BACK TO FUCKING SLEEP.
12:18 PM : hey justin
12:18 PM : thought u were talking to the docs

“I was but I'm done now-”
“SWEET AND SOUR JESUS!” Joe jumped up out of his chair, slammed one knee into the table, and fell over on the floor of the office.

“Wow. Nice reflexes.”

“Ow... fuck you Justin. Help me up. And stop sneaking up on people.”

Justin held out a hand and pulled the scientist to his feet. “I told you before, I'll tell you again. I'm not trying to sneak up on people, that's just how I walk.”

“I'm not gonna believe it this time either... ow...” Joe rubbed one kneecap. “So... what's the word on next week?”

“Dr. Alphys and Dr. Aster both gave the green light, so I talked to Cavenaugh. First I thought he was one of those retired marine clowns who can't let it go but turns out his old unit was the one I did some horse trading with in Afghanistan. Spent fifteen minutes just trading stories about hard ass supply sergeants and how we got back at 'em. Nothing like a common enemy to bring people together.”

“...I'll take your word for it. So you got a plan in place then?”

“Yeah. Ship out Tuesday morning, set up at the hotel, cover all the security angles while Dr. Aster and Sans go over their materials for the committee on Wednesday.”

“That's not a lot of time to prepare, and with jet lag to boot.”

“Yeah... well, if the people that organized this wanted anybody to have time to prepare they wouldn't have dropped it on such short notice. You're right, this is definitely part of somebody's political push, but no way to tell yet who's doing the pushing or what they're pushing for.”

“Or against,” Joe suggested.

“Or against, yeah. So... that's all cleared up. How's it going here?”

“Ugh. Some are born to science, some become scientists, and some have science thrust upon them. And then there are people like me who get it all three ways. It's not the winning strategy it sounds like.” Joe held up a stack of papers. “I've gone through these papers six times and gotten a different result each time. Feels like my brain is slowing down too. Gunther had to remind me that the monsters used a different calendar system because they couldn't see the stars, so they had to do so many iterations of the daylight cycle through the Barrier, and that did weird things to light, so for a long time monster years were supposed to be like a hundred days or something like that, but they could end up being shorter or longer, and then when they got our trash with our calendar system they had to do some complicated mathematics to change it over, and that meant switching to a non-decimal dating scheme so... ugh.”

“Sounds more like history than science. You should ask Mike to take a look at it.”

“He's already got that project where he's looking for any historical or allegorical signs of human magic use that might corroborate Soul Research and the Sages stuff, among other things... you sure you have time to hang around and listen to me complain about suddenly getting promoted?”

“Don't see why not. I have more than enough time to head over and finish replacing that carpet with wood flooring for DJ Pantz, so I can linger a bit.”

“Hah. Another sign of my brain being overworked. Forgot that the 'floor guy' the radio guys were
talking about was you for a while. You know, if you're looking for work all the time you should have stipulated that they mention your full name. I remember now, they said Justin, but there's other Justins in town.”

“Well, if I wanted them to shout my name from the mountain top I would have taken payment in the job in the form of advertising slots. But Burgie couldn't do that anyway because this job is for his house, not the station or anything like that.”

“Hey... not even sure if I ever knew this to begin with, but why's his name Burgie?”

“I asked him actually. It's not his name, it's short for a nickname. 'Burgerpants.' Apparently there's a story behind it back when he was working at that restaurant in the Underground he talks about sometimes. I told him about some of the nicknames I heard in the Army, including mine. We had a good laugh about it.”

Joe looked up. “Really? You'll share army stories with some guy you're doing renovation work for but not Shop Class?”

“Well, it's not really an Army story. It's a Basic Training story. There was this guy with a really fucked up lisp when he got stressed out. Everybody started calling him Daffy, as in Daffy Duck. And then there was Long Dick Johnson. The, uh.” Justin grinned. “The nickname was ironic. Thing about nicknames like that is they work both ways. Johnson never liked his, because he knew we were making fun of him, but Daffy rolled with it. Sometimes he'd go 'You're dithpicable' just for the hell of it. So he was part of the team, such as it was.”

“What was your nickname? Or did you get one?”

Justin shrugged. “Pizza. Pizza Carrow. You remember how bad my acne was back then, right?”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah, I didn't really care. And it coulda been much worse, you remember that Robot Chicken segment where GI Joe gets a new sniper and he ends up with the code name 'Fumbles' after all the slapstick that happens to him? Saw something like that happen with a training grenade. Nobody was ever gonna let him forget that, because if that had been a real grenade, we'd all be dead. And after the, uh. Well. After I was part of the new unit, the nickname stopped following me. But I never got a new one. Which was itself a bad sign. Anyway. That's your daily insight into military tradition and history. If you want anymore you need to wait twenty four hours. Or pay to upgrade to Premium Membership and skip the wait.”

Joe snorted. “Nah. I'm good... hey, when did Asriel show up the first time again? I can't remember if it was 2012 or 2013. Among other things.”

“2013. 2012 was when Chara disappeared. When Eli was doing his speech he got nervous and I guess he tried to start with that and jumped tracks. Nobody said anything because he had them eating out of the palm of his hand. If the guy could get over his stage fright he could be a politician. Or possibly a super villain. I mean, the type that recruits minions to do his bidding. Not the type that gets powers from a disfiguring accident.”

“Actually, on that note, gimme a second.” Joe checked his phone again. “...oh, good. Mike went offline for work reasons, and Hal said he was going back to bed. It always makes me nervous when Hal and Mike start trading ideas unsupervised.”

“Yeah. That's a hole with no bottom.”
Joe's phone was halfway back to his pocket when it beeped at him.

“What the... oh.” Joe looked up from the screen. “Figures. First Alphys gives me a promotion, then she calls me back in to do more gofer stuff. Wants help for something called a Soul Link test.”

“Must be really important, she was pretty distracted in the meeting earlier.”

“You wanna check it out?”

“Might as well.”

Joe put his phone away and stacked the papers in a somewhat neater piled than they had been before, and the two men headed out into the hallway... to find two familiar children wheeling a bike into one of the conference rooms.

Justin coughed. “Hey, you can't park here. This is a loading zone.”

Frisk smiled and waved. “Hello again Mr. Carrow. Alphys said we could put my bike in one of the rooms so it would be safe.”

“Do you not have a bike lock?”

“I used to, but it got stolen.” Frisk shrugged. “Bike was still there, but somebody went to the time and effort to go through every single combination just to take the lock itself.”

Justin scratched his head. “...okay, that's a little strange. Even by our standards.”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

Justin nodded at the young monster. “You must be Asriel. Thanks for taking care of Hal the other day.”

“Well, that was mostly my dad. He made the tea and all. And Papyrus did a lot too.”

“Hey, Hal's a team effort to handle even when he's not been drinking Red Bull. Don't sell yourself short.”

“Uhm. I haven't heard from him since yesterday. Is he alright?”

Joe nodded. “Yeah. Just woke up and forgot what year it was. Again.”

Asriel visibly relaxed. “Oh, good. I was really worried. When I first met him I was too freaked out about Frisk, and the fact that I could be freaked out, to wonder why he was carrying an angry human doctor on his shoulders. And later at the Arboretum, I he was doing that thing where he yells at the city council guy. So I literally have no idea what's normal for him.”

“...heh. I forgot about the thing with Dr. Akron, actually. Hehehe.” Justin turned to Joe and grinned. “I wish I'd thought to take a picture.”

“I wish you had too. That guy's a pri-” Joe looked down at the children and coughed dramatically. “As I was saying, he's a prickly fellow who needs to calm down.”

The human child rolled their eyes. “I'm pretty sure I know what that word is you were going to use. But whatever. Come on Asriel, not a lot of time left in the lunch break.”

“Right.”
The children made their way through the lab's hallways and corridors until they arrived at the Soul Research Lab, with some technicians working on the scanner inside. Joe darted for the door.

“Shit shit shit those guys are going to electrocute themselves why does nobody read the safety warnings-”

Frisk peered through the glass. “I don't see Alphys in there, she said she'd meet us here.”

“Hmmm. I was in the meeting with her earlier, so she's probably running all over putting out fires that started up while she wasn't looking. That's a big part of management in any organization.”

“sup everybody?” A short skeleton walked up to the group with a chicken hat on his skull. “Alphys asked me to come keep you guys company while she ran over to Advanced Materials for a second. Papyrus asked to say hi by the way,” Sans added, nodding at Asriel. “so hi.”

Asriel smiled. “Thanks Sans. He really came through for everybody yesterday.”

“yeah, that's his jam alright. Frisk, got an ulterior motive for seeing you today,” The skeleton said, turning to the human child.

“Is it about, like, anti-photon research?”

“Yeah, finally got those experiments set up, and they'll be running this afternoon. Figured you oughta know because... well, because I knew you've been fascinated by the field. Let's talk over there,” Sans pointed down the corridor with his thumb.


Asriel nodded. “I understand. Hope it's good news.”

Frisk and Sans walked away, and Asriel looked up at Justin Carrow.

“Uh. Hey. I have a question.”

“Fire away.”

“How did you and Hal become friends? Because... well, the most I talked with you before now was back when I was a flower and dad was transplanting me into a flowerpot so I could see Frisk in the hospital. And almost everything I know about you comes from Hal. But you seem like really different people.”

Justin scratched the stubble on his chin. “Hmmm. Well, it was a long time ago. Kindergarten I think. I was under a tree, looking at a picture book or something. Hal showed and picked up a rock off the ground, and he asked 'Can I throw this at your head?' and I, like I think any normal person would, thought I didn't hear him right, so I said 'What?' and the next thing I knew a rock slammed into my forehead. Fourteen stitches. We ended up fighting each other for ten minutes straight before the teachers could separate us and bring us to the nurse's office.”

“...I know this one, wait. Stitches are when human skin is literally sewn back together like a torn piece of clothing, right?”

“That's the core idea. They have to use special techniques and knots and materials to do it but the basic principle is needle and thread. It's a miracle I don't have a scar.” Justin rubbed his head. “Or brain damage, thinking about it.”
“That seems more like a way to end up as worst enemies, instead of best friends.”

The human shrugged. “Chalk it up to being human boys. And as they say, boys will be boys. We were really excitable, really aggressive youths. Fighting was a way of communicating and a means of having fun. Also, we both got in trouble, and we both resented the teachers and the school for interfering in the fight. So we had a common enemy. That definitely brought us together.”

“You know, when he told me that story, I thought he was either making stuff up or going crazy from the Red Bull. Kind weird to think it actually happened.”

Justin scratched his stubble again. “That’s the weird thing about Hal. He’s mistaken about a lot of things. But he’ll never lie to you, not on purpose.”

“That’s good to know. Uh. He said you used to be a soldier?”

Justin rolled his eyes. “Yes. And before you ask, yes, I have killed people. And on the whole I wish I hadn’t.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to-”

“It’s alright, it’s alright.” Justin waved a hand. “I just, you know, get asked that a lot. Especially by monsters.”

“Um.” Asriel looked down at his paws, his fingers rubbing together nervously.

“Something else on your mind?”

“Yeah. You could say that. Justin... have you ever... have you ever been somebody different. Somebody you didn't like, or trust, or want to be. And something happens and, and you wake up. Come back to your sense. Realize all the mistakes you've made.”

“Yes. The first time I ever killed somebody.”

“Right. Right. But...” Asriel swallowed and turned to look down the corridor where Frisk and Sans were still talking. Frisk made an elaborate gesture describing some process with both arms, and Sans responded with a finger-to-nasal-bone gesture resembling those commonly used in sobriety tests, which caused the child to giggle.

“Justin. After you had that moment of clarity. Did you... did you have a moment where you realized that you were going to become that person again? The person you didn't like, or trust, or want to be? And you were probably going to make the same mistakes over and over again? Hurt more people?”

“...yes. Like I said. That was the first time I killed. But there was a second, and a third, and even more after that. Joining the Army was not the best choice I have made in my life.”

“...if you could, I dunno. Go back in time. Change history, live your life differently. Would you change that?”

“...I don't know. If I hadn't killed those men. Odds are some other soldier would have. And probably gotten killed himself somewhere along the way. It's not really about me killing them, it's about wondering if they actually deserved to die at all. And there were forces at work when all this happened that were a lot bigger than me, and a lot bigger than any of them... sorry if you were looking for an answer there, kid. All I got on tap is questions.”
“Actually, I think that really helped. Thank you.”

“No problem.”

“I’m here! I’m here! Sorry sorry sorry sorry!”

Asriel and Justin turned to see Alphys sprinting down the corridor, and skidding to a halt outside of the lab, panting heavily.

“hey Alphys, save a little air for everybody else why don't you?” Sans joked as he and Frisk walked back towards everybody else.

“Hah. Hah. Hah. Sans. Heugh. Advanced Materials is straightened out. Sorry it took so long, Frisk. I know you have to get back to school.”

“Mom said it would be okay if I was a little late, since we're doing this to help Asriel as much as anything else, but I would like to get back in time. I've missed enough school this week already.”

“Right. No time to waste. Looks like Joe's been coordinating everything so let's head inside.”

“This is my stop, guys. Got a floor to finish replacing. Asriel, nice to meet you officially,” Justin said, holding out his hand. Asriel took it.

“Yeah. It's been nice talking with you. It's helped more than you might realize.”


“Bye Mr. Carrow.”

“Goodbye, and thank you again for helping out!”

“yeah, see you Tuesday.”

Justin nodded again and headed towards the lobby, and Frisk and Asriel followed Alphys inside the Soul Research Lab to find Sans already looking at the monitoring station.

“hey Joe did you get the bullet analyzer reset? not even getting zeroes on the screen here.”

“You can thank Alex and Brendan for that,” Joe called out from the top of a ladder, turning and staring angrily at the other two humans in the room. “I had to drop everything and make sure they didn't kill themselves working on a live circuit. Which almost happened.”

“Hey, come on man, lighten the f- the fudge up,” one of the technicians said, eyes darting towards Frisk and Asriel. “The safety systems kicked in and nobody got hurt.”

“If you have to rely on the fail-safes to keep you safe as your first line of defense, you've already dropped the ball.” Joe shook his head. “As my first official act as the new head of the Soul Research program, you two need to watch those electrical safety videos from orientation again.”

Joe closed the access panel and started climbing down the ladder. “Circuit breakers are all reset, but you'll have to restart the software to get it to recognize it.”

“Alrighty then. done. Alphys, you want to get everybody set up?”

“Right!” Alphys ran over to the target zone for the scanner, where two chairs were set up. “I figured the last time we saw this both of you ended up unconscious so the chairs were the obvious solution.”
“Well, I was already unconscious, so...”

“That's true. Okay, first we need baseline readings again. Frisk, you go first, then we'll get Asriel, then we'll try the Soul Link.”

Frisk walked up and stood in the target box, and Sans typed on the keyboard. “Looks about the same as the most recent scan. Mostly. INV is up by one. Suppose there's that. Chromatics are bright, clear, and most importantly still solid.”

“Anything out of the ordinary?” Frisk asked, trying to keep their voice even. “Weird energy discharges, wave interference patterns, a little birdhouse?”


Frisk and Asriel traded places and Sans typed on the keyboard some more. “Hmmm. Alphys, what was Asriel's HP last time?”

“Uh. Think it was like two hundred over two hundred. Is it not on the last scan?”

“I'm sure it is, I just didn't want to take the effort to load it up.”

Frisk snickered, and Sans leaned forward. “Now it's up to two thirty over two thirty. Stats are... AT 22, DEF 24, SPD 25 and INV 15. Not sure how much of that is mood and how much is improvement, but the Healing Potential getting higher makes me think improvement. So whatever process was started with the new body and soul is still going on.” Sans turned to Asriel. “Sorry to be the bearer of uncertain news, but you're not out of the woods yet.”

Asriel shrugged. “That's not really a surprise. Are we ready to try the Link again?”

“Ayup.”

Frisk walked up to a chair in the scanner target zone and sat down, with Asriel sitting down next to them and Alphys hovering nearby. “Now, we don't know exactly what other effects the Link has on people so both of you, if you can, please describe everything you're experiencing for as long as you can. If anything starts to hurt, or even catches you by surprise, try to end the link. If it looks like something is happening to you, either to your bodies or to your Souls, we'll try to pull you apart. Okay?”

Frisk nodded. “Okay.”

“Asriel, are you ready?”

“Uh. I'm having flashbacks to the hospital a bit. Other than that I'm ready.”

“Okay. One last thing. Asriel, need you to close your eyes for a bit.” With the boss monsters eyes shut, Alphys pulled out a piece of paper from her lab coat pocket, unfolded it, and showed it to Frisk; a simple diagram of a piece of machinery. Frisk narrowed their eyes and nodded. “I know what that is. I bet you want to see if Asriel can learn what it is through the link, right?”

“Exactly. No pressure if you can't, or if it doesn't work like that. Just proof of principle.”

“Can I open my eyes yet?”

Alphys folded up the paper and stuffed it in her pocket. “You can now. Okay, I'll be over with
Sans. Good luck you two!”

Alphys ran over to the skeleton and Frisk grabbed Asriel's paw. A few seconds later they felt something wrap around their wrist.

“...Asriel, is that the vine thing? I don't really want to move my head, I got really dizzy just now.”

“Yeah... that's how it worked last time. And the time before, really.”

“Oh. Right. It's a little tingly.”

Asriel's head leaned over a bit. “Uh. Static electricity tingly. Or. Pins and needles.”

“...bit of both. Alphys. Sounds are weird. Like they come from far away. Down a long tunnel. Eyes don't want to focus.”

“Same here,” Asriel mumbled.

“Okay. Okay. So far so good, over here. Souls are stable and the energy is....”

Frisk opened their eyes and immediately noticed the absence of a scanner, or a lab, or anyone else. Fog swirled at the edge of some sort of clearing, lit from the center by a lamp post. There was the crunch of grass, and Frisk turned to see Asriel sit up and shake his head.

“Oh! Hey, I remember this place!” The boss monster grinned. “Frisk, it totally worked!”

“...where are we?”

Asriel walked over to the lamp post and ran a paw over its surface. “This is where I woke up when I connected to you in the hospital. There was a path to a place with a huge tree, and another path to...” The smiled disappeared, and was replaced with a nervous expression of concern. “Uh. Your old house, I guess. I'm totally fine with not going back there if you are.”

Frisk nodded. “Yeah. Let's just do what we came here to do. We'll figure out the rest of it later.” Kneeling down, the human child traced a shape in the earth.

“This is what I saw that Alphys wanted me to see if I could carry over. It's a simple electromagnet. A ferrous metal core, with electrical wire wrapped around it and connected to a power source. In this case a battery.”

Asriel walked over and stared at the diagram. “…okay. Got it.”

“Great. You know, there's probably a whole field of science right here. Connecting with people's souls to find information and memories-”

Frisk suddenly stopped talking, and both children turned to stare at the swirling fog. Somewhere, the sound of a dial up modem could be heard.

“...Frisk?”

“No. No no no. Not now. Not here....”

“COME JOIN THE FUN.”
The voices were distorted, electronic and static-laden, and Frisk shook their head. “No. I don't want to join. Get out of my mind. Get out of my mind.”

“...you have... a Memoryhead... in your head?!”

“It's a memory of a dream. A memory of a memory in a dream. It can't hurt us. I don't think. But we should leave. You know, in case it can.”

“Yeah, let's get out of here... uh oh.”

“What is it? What's wrong?”

Asriel looked around the clearing. “Frisk, I don't know if you noticed, but your mind doesn't exactly come with a glowing red exit sign.”

“...how did we get out in the hospital?”

“I can't remember. We were holding onto each other, and then I woke up in a flowerpot feeling like I did after the tire swing yesterday, but about a hundred times worse.”

The dial up sound distorted and faded, only to have other sounds fill the silence.

“Do you really hate us that much...?”

“Don't you know how to greet an old pal?”

“I MUST CAPTURE YOU... THEN EVERYONE WILL...”

“What did you do, Frisk...? What did you DO to us?!”

“...I just wish I'd k-killed you when I had the chance.”

Asriel turned away from Frisk with their eyes shut.

“It's just more memories. When I was in the hospital. Before you found me... they did. The broken time loop, everyone remembering the Surface... I thought it was real. But now... I know it's nothing but a fever dream. It hurts to remember, but I know it's not real-”

“Frisk...”

Asriel looked away from Frisk, the fur on his neck standing up. A golden flower had grown in the center of the clearing, and was turning to face the two children.

“...I was so tired of being a flower.”

Asriel stared at his own face until the flower vanished underground.

“...Asriel... I don't remember that from last time. I don't... think this is all memory.”

“Yeah... me neither.” Asriel turned to look at Frisk again and gulped; wide eyes, pale skin, and trembling hands all jumped out at him at once. While the phantom voices had simply unnerved the child, now Frisk looked shaken to the core. A paw reached out and took one hand. “That wasn't me, Frisk. That was just a random thought. I'm right here.”

“Asriel. If... if something happens to me again. Before Sans and Dr. Aster figure out how to stop the loop...” Frisk swallowed. “That won't just be a random thought... come on. Let's find a way out
of here before anything else gets dredged up.”

“I like that plan. Hey. Don't let go, alright? It's easy to see each other in the clearing here but if we start trying to explore that fog, we could get separated way too easily.”

“You're right.”

The two children struck out into the edge of the clearing, and the fog slowly parted before them. From time to time, distant voices could be heard.

“...Frisk. I want you to know that if there's anything wrong... at home, you can tell me. You can tell anyone here at school.”

“I'm okay, Mrs. O'Dell. You don't need to worry about me....”

Asriel turned to look at Frisk with a questioning expression on his face.

“Mrs. O'Dell was the school nurse at James Madison Elementary, before she retired. I think she suspected something was off about my home life.”

“...I'd ask why you didn't tell her, but I think I already know.”

The fog broke and the children found themselves in another clearing, this one centered on an old car with its hazard lights flashing on and off. Frisk scratched their head.

“I... I think I remember something like this. A vacation trip... we ran out of gas. Dad went to walk to a gas station... mom told me stories until he got back. How long ago was that... I don't think I was even five yet... didn't think I could remember something that happened when I was that young...”

Asriel walked up to the car and peered into the windows. “There's nothing in there. I mean, literally nothing. No seats, no steering wheel. No dashboard.”

“Is there a hood release lever?”

“I'm not even sure what that looks like.”

Frisk grabbed the door handle and pulled; the car opened easily and without any noise. Frisk felt around on the floor until their hand touched a lever and they pulled on it. The front of the vehicle clicked, and the hood slowly lifted up.

“Normally we'd have to mess around with a catch under the front of the hood, but I guess safety standards don't apply to dream cars. Also, normally the trunk release is on the floor and the hood release on the dashboard, so that's also different.”

Frisk and Asriel walked around to the front of the car. Asriel pointed at the empty space with one finger. “Well, there's your problem!”

Frisk nodded and smiled, or tried to. “Yeah. Not that I know how to drive, and it doesn't even have a steering wheel or foot pedals or anything. But I had to wonder if it had an engine or not. And if it did, what it would look like in this weird mind-world-place... let's keep moving.”

Asriel took Frisk's hand again, and the children set out into the fog once more.

“...excuse me. Mr. Van Garrett?”
“Just a sec—whoa. What in the heck happened to you??”
“I. Uh. I fell in a hole. If you can believe that.”
“Haven't seen you around since... well, I was starting to get worried.”
“Mr. Van Garrett, can you do me a favor? I need you to hold onto something for me.”

Asriel turned to look at Frisk, but Frisk had turned to look at the fog and he could not see their face... but he could feel their hand shaking in his paw. “Uh... is it okay if I ask what the librarian was holding onto?”

“...my cell phone that Toriel gave me and Alphys fixed up. I didn't want to take it home with me. Didn't want to go home at all, really. And... I didn't that night. Spent it in the Arboretum.” Frisk sighed. “I really don't want to remember anything that happened after that.”

Asriel blinked and said nothing, but squeezed Frisk's hand tighter... and felt them squeeze back.

When the fog cleared away again, all that could be seen was a door in a rock face, not unlike the door that had once divided the Ruins of Home from the forest trail to Snowdin. Asriel reached forward and pushed; with a massive, echoing creak, the slab of stone rotated out of the way. And beyond...

Brilliant orange-yellow light filled a hallway through ornate, stained glass windows depicting the Delta Rune, and interacted with columns to make overlapping patterns of light and shadow, umbras and penumbras.

“Asriel... I don't think we should go in there. But I don't know where else we can go.”

The two children slowly walked into the hallway and walked towards the end, the sound of Frisk's shoes on the tiles echoing back and forth... until...

“Frisk, stop. Look.”

There was a hissing sound not unlike radio static and the stained glass windows were filled with the snow from a bad pre-digital TV signal, before clearing up and showing fragments of images. Jordan Cater, standing in the CORE next to a glowing star. Frisk held by their neck over the Hotland magma. Frisk and Sans sitting in lawn chairs by the river outside of town. Frisk crying outside of a door. The hissing cut out and the hallway echoed with voices.

“The power of the Gods in the hands of a child...”
“Better not make me regret giving you that book...”
“Alphys I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Please, I need your help! I won't hurt you, I would never-”
“Somebody help me! Undyne! Sans! ANYBODY!”

Asriel's eyes were drawn to the last window as Sans entered the field of view.

“hey, hey, time out. What's going on here?”
“Sans, I-”
“Sans, look out! Frisk has magic! Frisk is a mage!”
Sans stared at Frisk, who flinched and started nodding.

“I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't know who to tell or how to say it I just want to get rid of it.”

“hey. hey. it's alright, kid. calm down. everything is going to be okay. we'll figure this out together. c'mere, pal.”

Frisk pulled themselves to their feet, and walked unsteadily towards Sans until they were close enough to hug. Sans wrapped his arms around the child and patted them on the back.

“it's going to be okay, Frisk…”

There was a flash of blue light, and suddenly a bone formed in each of Sans hands, and were jammed into the child's back. The sound that came from Frisk's mouth didn't resemble anything like speech, or even any sound a living creature would make. It was more like the snapping of a tree branch than anything else. Blood splattered out of their mouth and nose, and with another flash of blue light, the child was thrown back against the wall, driving the bones deeper into their back.

Asriel felt the tremors in Frisk's body through their hand, as the child watched themselves start to die in the image playing out in the window.

On the other side of the wall, Alphys shrieked in terror from the impact, and Frisk slowly slid to the ground, opening their mouth and closing it, eyes darting around the room. One hand came up and tried to grasp one of the magic bones sticking out of the front of Frisk's ribs, but eventually fell down again, and the eyes stared at a single fixed point on the floor. The door glowed blue, unlocked, and swung open.

“OH GOD PLEASE DON'T HURT ME-”

“Alphys, it's okay, it's okay! It's Sans.”

Alphys sprinted out through the open doorway and hugged Sans, crying.

“Oh god I thought I was going to die I thought I was never going to see Undyne again I thought-”

“It's okay. It's okay, Alphys. We stopped em. We did it. We're safe. It's okay.”

“...oh god... a mage, right next to us all this time... how did I not notice? We almost... we almost...”

“We all got fooled, Alphys. It's nothin' you did wrong. I got over here as soon as I got your text. If you hadn't...” Sans looked past Alphys at Frisk. “...come on, let's go. I'll be right behind you.”

Alphys made her way through the house and Sans followed, pausing at the doorway to turn around and stare at the dying human.

“If we're really friends... hell. Who am I kidding. See you soon…”

Sans walked out of the room, and the stained glass window was filled with static and snow again.

Asriel felt Frisk shaking next to him. When they spoke, their voice sounded hoarse.

“So. If there is nobody else here to do it, the hallway will pass judgment on people by itself. Even if it's just a memory.”

“...Frisk. You didn't tell me about Sans killing you at the end of the dream.”
Frisk shook their head. “Because I woke up after Alphys locked herself in the bathroom to keep away from me. I didn't see the rest of that last night. But... if I hadn't woken up then. I think this is how the dream would have ended. And I don't think these are just dreams, Asriel. I think these are memories from the future. Some of this, maybe all of this... it's going to happen.”

“...Frisk, no matter what you think is going to happen, remember this: Sans made a promise to mom to watch over you and protect you. In all my resets I have never, ever seen Sans break a promise. Not once. No matter what happens, he's never going to try and hurt you.”

“...dying doesn't scare me anymore. Only resets scare me now. I don't want to go back. I don't want you to go back to that. When I was... lying in bed. Awake. After that nightmare. I was trying to convince myself not to QUIT. I know from what Sans and Dr. Aster found out... if I do it myself, like the other fallen humans, then there won't be a reset. I could save you from that, and wouldn't have to see if these dreams ever become real. You're not the pathetic one, Asriel. I am. Even now, when every single part of my life is better than it's ever been before. I have to stare up at the ceiling at night, and try to come up with a reason to keep going.”

Asriel squeezed Frisk's hand again. “What did you come up with?”

“...I could hear you snoring in your bed. And I thought... I want to see what happens next. I want to see what we could do, what we could find out, tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that. I wanted to keep going, so I could be with you as long as possible. It's a selfish reason. But it's all I could come up with.”

“...I don't think it's a selfish reason at all.”

The two children walked to the end of the hall, where another stone door blocked the way. This one did not even wait to be pushed, and began to open on its own. The orange yellow light of the hall was drowned out by brilliant white...

“I think he's coming around! Doc, get over here!”

Asriel heard the words and tried to make sense of them. Blurry shapes passed in front of his eyes when he opened them, and some of the images doubled.

“Asriel. It's Frisk. Say something. Please.”

Asriel opened his mouth.

“I don't wanna go on that ride again.”

There were two distinct sighs of relief, and a hand came down and squeezed Asriel's shoulder. “Asriel. Thank you. That was... that was terrifying. If something happened to you, I... I-”

A fuzzy finger pointed in the general direction of Frisk's voice. “I can't words good now. What happen?”

Slowly Asriel's vision came back into focus, and a yellow and white blur transformed into Dr. Alphys. “You guys were under for about ten minutes, and then you fell out of your chairs. Frisk woke up about a minute ago and got sick.”

Asriel sniffed and grimaced in disgust. “Ugh. Human puke. You guys are like walking chemical factories.”
Frisk snorted. “We're seventy percent water. We literally *are* walking chemical factories.”

“That. Is a thing that I said. Wait. That means I win the quiz show lightning round, right?”

Alphys scribbled furiously onto a clipboard. “This is the same result as when you were a flower, in the hospital. Frisk is disoriented but coherent, while you're a total wreck.”

“Hey!” A fuzzy finger waved around in the general direction of Alphys. “That is not my fault! I told Frisk I wasn't ready to ride the bike, so legally I am not liable! This is entrapment!”

There was a muffled snicker, but Asriel couldn't tell who had produced it. Slowly, the boss monster managed to coordinate his limbs and tried to sit up; hands hooked underneath his arms and helped him upright and in a matter of seconds, Asriel felt Frisk's shoulders under one arm just as he had several days before.

“Okay... okay. Alphys. Hey. I saw the thing you wanted us to share. Frisk said it was an electromagnet.”

“That's great! Actually the fact that you were able to connect at all like this, it's even greater! It's amazing!”

“How did our souls look?”

“Synchronized pulsations of energy right up to the end when Frisk woke up and... so on. No sign of instability on either side. How about you guys? What did you see during the link?”

“There was...” Asriel turned and looked at Frisk. “There was a lot of fog. And a lamp post. Just like in the hospital. Last time there was a big tree though, and this time there was a car with no engine. There might have been some other stuff at the end but I don't want to talk about it.”


“...because it wasn't part of the experiment, and it's not mine to share.”

Alphys' eyes widened. “Oh. OH. I think I understand. Yeah. We don't need to know anything personal for these tests.”

Beside him, Asriel heard Frisk sigh and felt them relax. “Thanks. I don't want to have to go through all of that again, much less explain it... what time is it?”

“Almost a quarter to one.”

Frisk blinked. “I need to head to school right now, then. Is my bike still in the conference room?”

“Yes, everything is where you left it.”

“And we look stable on the scanner?”

“steady as a really steady thing,” Sans said from the monitoring station.

“Okay. I better get going then. Asriel, did you still want to...?”

“Yeah.” Asriel looked at Alphys. “Dr. Alphys, I'd like to stay here for a while, talk to you and Sans about sciencey things. And...” the boss monster's eyes darted to Joe, “possibly other things. Time and weather permitting.”
“That's perfectly fine, Asriel. I mean, I'll be running all over the place but every spare moment, we can talk.”

“Thanks, Alphys.”

“You good, bro?”

Asriel carefully lifted up his arm and let his feet take his full weight. “...yeah. I'll be okay from here on out, I think. Thanks. I can walk you to the bike, for sure.”

“Okay then.” Frisk nodded. “Thanks again Alphys. And Sans. And you too, Mr. Stanton.”

“study hard kiddo. or follow my lead and learn it all the first time.”

Alphys snorted as the two children left the lab room and returned to the conference room. When the door opened, Asriel looked behind him to see if anyone was in earshot, before letting the door close.

“Frisk, hold up. Before you head out... first things first. Are you okay?”

Frisk reached up and rubbed their left shoulder. “I think so. And if I'm not, I will be.”

“...Frisk. No matter what bothers you, now or in the future. Remember what I told you, before I went to Chara's grave. Everyone will be there for you. I felt it. I felt all of that love from everyone. Unconditional.” Asriel took Frisk's hand in his paws. “I've told you this before, last time we were in the link. And I'll say it again now. And I want you to believe it, and remember it. Going back to the Underground, to being a soulless flower... it's not my first choice. But I would rather do that than go on without you... I've already lost the person I cared about most in the world, because they thought that they had to die to make sure everybody else was happy. So every time I hear you talk about that... it scares me. A lot. Please, stop. And I don't just mean don't talk about it. Don't suffer in silence. If you're thinking about that kind of stuff, let me know. Let mom or dad know. Talk to Sans. Talk to Undyne. Talk to Alphys, she has the benefit of experience, she can help. Talk to somebody. Anybody.”

“...I never wanted to hurt or scare you. I won't think about that anymore, if I can. But it's going to be hard. I can't talk about the feelings without talking about why I have them.” Frisk wrapped their arms around Asriel. “Augh, I want to walk up to Alphys right now and say 'I have magic and I don't know why or how, please help me get rid of it' just so it's not hanging over my head, but I'm too scared of what happens after that. I feel sick just thinking about it.”

“That was just a dream, Frisk. You know it. I know it. In fact, I'm pretty sure that if Alphys knew you had magic of your own, she wouldn't panic. She wouldn't be afraid of you. I bet she'd nerd out trying to figure out how it happened. She'd have more energy than Undyne for a day and a half. Or at least until the sugar rush from the soda wears off.”

Frisk snorted. “...yeah. That would be nice. And fun to watch.” Frisk let go of Asriel and looked down at the floor. “Uhm... I know it's not even one o'clock yet, but... I think tonight is going to be a rough night. Is it alright if... if I sleep in your bed tonight?”

“Of course it is, if you still need me there by the time tonight rolls around. A lot can change in half a day. Speaking from experience.”

“Yeah. That is totally a thing that can and has happened.”

Frisk grabbed their bike and began walking it out of the office towards the lobby, and Asriel
followed along, the subject switching to evening plans and weekend events.

Neither one of them saw Alphys down the hallway, sweating and holding her glasses in one shaking claw, as the other one covered her mouth.

“...oh my g-god...”
“Oh my god, I thought this week would never end.”

Undyne nodded and sipped her tea. “Yeah, these last couple of days were all over the map. First Douglas gets stung by a hornet, then Skate crashes into the cafeteria windows, then Suzie and Calvin get into that huge fight... I missed what happened in the music room and everyone tells it different, but something happened.”

The music teacher shook his head. “Ben claims he 'lost' his grip on his trombone slide and that's why it hit Jade. Whether or not that's true I don't think we'll ever know for sure. At least Jade's alright. Maybe that means it was an accident.”

Undyne shrugged. “Or it was on purpose, but the maddest Ben can get still isn't enough to do lasting harm. Although I'm not sure if Jade has the context to tell the difference yet. I do know when I was getting shot by Dwayne Riley, the bullets may have been stopped by the armor, but I could feel it in my whole body. Jade hasn't spent years training for the Royal Guard so she might be missing out on the subtleties.”

“It's still really weird to me that you can just tank seven rifle shots like you did and get back up again. Even with a bulletproof vest, a human that got shot seven times would be down for the count for weeks. Bruising, for sure, and broken ribs are not out of the question.”

“I know, right? It's a huuuuuge let down! I thought you guys were hard core and the closest thing I've been to challenged is the fight on Friday and the arm wrestling thing with Van Garrett.”

“...not sure how to feel about that-”

There was a knocking noise and the two teachers looked up to see another teacher walk through the doorway. “Hey, Danny. Carson wants to talk to you, I don't remember exactly what about.”

The music teacher drained his mug and rinsed it out in the sink. “Probably complaining about the acoustics again. As if it's my fault her office is just one door down from the music room. Thanks Brian. Better nip this one in the bud.”

“Hey, be careful with that kind of language. This is a school and there are kids around.”

Danny snorted in laughter and walked out of the room, and Brian walked up to the fridge and pulled out a can of soda.

“Undyne.”

“Brian.”

The soda opened with a snapping, popping noise, and Brian shook his head. “Just so you know, I don't think you're allowed to get sick anymore. Without you physical education just becomes a riot, even when there's no exercising going on.”

“Probably because they knew if they caused trouble, I'd remember for when we could hold classes again.”

“Actually I kind of get the impression that the kids like you. I mean, when they're not being pushed to their physical limits.”
“Huh.” Undyne grinned. “Imagine that.”

“Hey, not sure what your plans are tonight, and not sure if he mentioned it already, but Danny and I were going to head to the Dank Memehaus to meet up with some old friends as soon as it’s quitting time. You want to come along?”

“Hmmm... Alphys sent me a text earlier saying she'd be busy working on a special project tonight... sure. I'm free. Just let me send her a text to let her know what's up.”

Undyne pulled out her phone, and there was another knock at the open door; a short child with hair going every which way was leaning from the side.

“Excuse me, I'm looking for- oh. There you are.” Frisk stepped fully into the doorway. “I was hoping to ask some math related questions sir.”

“Duty calls.” Brian looked at his opened but untouched soda and put it back into the refrigerator. “See you at the Memehaus Undyne.”

“Yeah, sounds like fun!”

Brian left the break room with Frisk, as Undyne tapped on her phone; a few seconds later, a tall furry boss monster walked inside.

“Egads. This week has been utter chaos. Fights, injuries, damage to the building itself, and all that after the violence last week.”

“Yeah, Danny and Brian and Barry and everybody else who's been in here in the last five minutes, they all brought it up. I think everyone's trying really hard to see it as things returning to normal after Friday, random unexpected stuff instead of dangerous unexpected stuff. Just a guess though.”

“I suppose that is reasonable and to be expected.” The fridge was opened and Toriel sighed. “Somebody has gotten into my snails again.”

Undyne's eye opened wide, and a hand came up to rub her forehead. “So it wasn't a mistake last time. Some other monster really likes snails. At least, I hope it's another monster....”

“I do not mind sharing, but I do wish that whoever it is would make sure that they put the lid back on properly. There is already a snail crawling on top of somebody's soda.”

“...oh. That's unfortunate.”

“Yes. But waste not, want not.” Toriel leaned back and shut the fridge door, holding up a snail by its shell. With a slurping noise, Toriel's mouth surrounded the gastropod and sucked it out of its shelter.

“Better be careful. When they're small like that, it's hard to stop at just one.”

“I know this too well.” Toriel sighed. “I don't suppose you have seen Frisk? We were supposed to leave five minutes ago but they said they needed to ask some questions of various teachers first.”

“They were just here actually. Wanted to talk to Brian about math stuff. I'm surprised you didn't see them, you literally missed each other by less than ten- oh, hey. Speak of the devil and he will appear.”

Brian walked into the break room and made a line for the fridge. “Hello Mrs. Dreemurr. Frisk was
just asking me about the origins of trigonometry.”

“Indeed?”

There was a cough from the doorway, and Undyne turned to see Frisk standing with a small notebook in one hand. “I realized at All Fine Labs today if I'm going to keep up with all the stuff going on, I need to step up my math and science game.”

“Hmmm. I suppose that makes sense. But, speaking of keeping up, it is time for us to leave. We have much to do in a short amount of time.”

Frisk nodded and held up one hand in a thumbs-up gesture. “Right. I'm ready whenever you are.”

“Hey, why are you guys leaving early anyway?”

Toriel did not turn to look at Undyne when she answered. “We are heading back to the Underground this evening.”

The break room was filled with an awkward silence.

“Right. I getcha. Well, be careful down there.”

As Toriel and Frisk exited the room, Brian turned to Undyne. “So, what was that about?” he asked in a low voice.

Undyne shook her head. “Nobody goes back to the Underground if they don't have to. The only reasons to go back there are if there's something down there we couldn't brink with us and couldn't do without. Staff from All Fine Labs go back to Hotland a few times a month to make sure that the CORE and everything hooked to it is still ticking over alright, and sometimes people look through the Waterfall garbage dump to see if something that was lost in the river ever turned up down there. But there's only one reason the Royal Family would need to go back there.”

Brian turned to stare at the open doorway. “I'm not sure I understand. But based on your tone of voice, I'm no longer sure I want to understand.”

The math teacher raised his soda to his mouth, and Undyne suddenly put two and two together.

“Brian wait-!”

“Mmm?” Brian swallowed and lowered his drink. “What?? What is it?”

Undyne blinked and shook her head. “Nothing, actually. I'm sure it's fine.”

“...okay then.” Brian took another sip and frowned. “I don't understand how a soda could taste this flat when it was just opened.”

“Must be a human drink thing,” Undyne mumbled.

Outside the break room, down the various hallways, and through the main entryway to the great outdoors, Toriel and Frisk walked side by side, the human child pushing a bicycle alongside them.

“So, did you learn everything you needed on your little excursion, Frisk?”

“Just about. The mathematics stuff should be simple enough now that I have a recommended reading list, it was the biology thing that kind of stumped me. I was talking to Miss Mossman and she had all the answers, but it wasn't until I was halfway done I realized I was asking the wrong
questions.”

“Oh dear. Why is that?”

“Well, like Alphys said. Asriel isn't a plant anymore.”

Silence hung between mother and child for a time as they walked down the sidewalk.

“Mom, I uh. I want to apologize again for running away like I did. The only time running away ever worked for me was when I ran to Mt. Ebbott and that was the exception, not the rule. I should have known better. I, I also know that with Jordan Cater suddenly on the loose again, that was really, really dangerous, being out and alone like that.”

“...that gave us no small amount of worry, Frisk. But for all that... when exactly did you leave? My attention was quite occupied at the time, as you may imagine.”

“Uh...” Frisk swallowed. “It. Uh. It gets hazy for me just before we opened the door. But I remember you... yelling at Dr. Alphys. And after that all I remember is... stuff I wish I could forget.”

“...I wish that I had not reacted the way that I did. Lashing out like that was unacceptable... if there was one bright spot in your running away, it is that you were not there to witness the rest of my shameful behavior.”

“...mom. Are you sure you want me to come back to the Underground with you tonight?”

“Of course I do. So do Gorey and Asriel. Why do you ask?”

Frisk scratched their head. “Well. I never met Chara... and... you guys already adopted them long before me... now I'm here... I guess it just feels disrespectful.”

“Frisk. You are not a replacement for Chara. I loved, and still love, Chara because they were Chara. Just as I love you for being you, and Asriel for being Asriel. Had fate only allowed it, there would be three children sized beds in our house right now.”

Frisk felt their breathing become funny, and lifted up one hand to their face. Tears had started from one eye, and it felt like the other would soon follow.

“Frisk, are you alright?”

“...yeah. I'll be okay.”

The silence resumed until Frisk's breathing returned to normal.

“So. Never got a chance to tell you. The Soul Link thing worked.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Asriel said it looked like it did when he reached out to me in the hospital. So. Apparently my mind has an ornate lamp post in it like the Chronicles of Narnia or something. And we were both fine after, mostly. Though he was out of it for longer than I was. I'm guessing but I think it's because since he's the one initiating the link? He's doing most of the work.”

“I am sorry, what do you mean by being mostly fine?”

Frisk shrugged. “I've been having headaches for the last hour or two. That's the only thing I can
think of that could cause it. They aren't that bad, or even last that long. Like a dull ache that lasts a few minutes at a time and then goes away.

“Hmmm. Have you told Alphys about this?”

“Yeah, I sent her a text after Geography was over. She said she'd add it to the results and double check the data from the scans.”

“That is good. And what do you mean by Asriel being... out of it?”

“Like in the hospital. We were both all over the place when we woke up, and he was all over the place for longer. Oh, and Sans said that his HP Maximum was higher this time. So he's still improving, getting better and stronger. That's good.”

“Indeed it is.”

“To be honest I wonder if his fire magic won't come back on its own because of that... uh. I feel like I should ask about that, actually. How old was Asriel when he first started using fire magic?”

“Asriel was a prodigy at it, even by boss monster standards. He was very young, and his face lit up from inside as much as from the light from the fire. Gorey and I, we... hee hee hee. We stayed up for hours, tossing little orbs of flame back and forth with him, until he was so tired he basically fell asleep sitting up. We were so proud...” Toriel sighed. “Losing his fire magic has hurt him deeply.”

“We ended up talking about that today during lunch, before we headed to the lab. He was pretty stoic about it, but I don't know if it's genuine, or if he's trying to put on a brave face... so, I think I should tell you something.” Frisk swallowed. “Uh. After Asriel came to Ebott's Wake. He got upset every time I called him Asriel. For a while I thought it was because he was afraid of somebody hearing, and you and dad finding out. That always worried him, from the moment he was... all the way back, for a bit, in the Underground. Breaking your hearts all over again, that's what he called it. But it turns out there was more to it. Asriel... didn't think he was Asriel. He thought he was a copy, and that's why the experiments only woke up his memories, not his emotions. Because the quote unquote real Asriel had moved on to... wherever Chara is now, probably.”

Toriel remained silent, and Frisk let the silence grow as they walked, until they could not stand it any more.

“But. When Alphys found him outside the lab, and called me. When I went to talk to him. He told me that he visited that statue in Heritage Park. And he... he realized that if he wasn't Asriel, then Chara wasn't his friend. I think that had been his defense, all that time he called himself Flowey. If all that terrible stuff didn't really happen to him, then he didn't have to deal with it. But it was a two way street and when he realized it... mom, the only reason that I'm bringing this up instead of letting Asriel tell you in his own time is because... like I said. He might just be putting on a brave face. Like I was... like I still do, sometimes. He's smiling on the outside, but where nobody can see... he's definitely not smiling. Uhm. Please don't tell him I told you all that. I only did it because I'm worried.”

Toriel nodded, not trusting herself to speak aloud.

The remainder of the walk was largely silent, until the house was in sight.

“Frisk... every day since Tuesday, I have remembered what you told me.”

“What I told you about what?”
‘You told me, Flowey isn't a bad person. Flowey is a good person who has had a lot of terrible things happen, and does not know how to handle it.’

‘Yeah...’

‘Even if nobody could have prepared me for Asriel's return beforehand. You did as good a job as anyone could expect, preparing me for after.’

‘Mom... uhm...’

‘Yes, my dear?’

‘...there was something else we saw during the Soul Link experiment. A memory. Well. A memory of a memory. A car. From a road trip. Before... things got loud. I remember things at the Taylors being... being good. But now. I don't, uh. I can't fit it all into my head. Happy family. Angry family. I thought they were two sides of the same coin and I was the reason everything flipped, but if that's not true... I don't know what happened. And.’ Frisk shook their head. ‘I think... not knowing why. Might be worse than thinking it was all my fault. If that makes sense.’

‘It does, Frisk. Uncertainty does terrible things to a person.’

‘Yeah. And. There were other memories. Some of them I can't share yet because they're a part of that big, big thing that bothers me so much.’

Toriel stopped walking. ‘Frisk. One moment.’

‘Yes?’

‘I have given some thought to what you and Asriel have said on the sharing of secrets, and on the subject of trust. And I fear you both have the wrong impression. My child, I do not need to know everything that you do, everything that you feel, everything that you think. I only need to know when you are hurting, frightened, or in danger, so that I can help. While I am relieved that you have decided to share your concerns with me, I fear that you are doing so for the wrong reasons, because you feel that secrets themselves are shameful and wrong. That is a dangerous idea. You and Asriel need parts of your life that are distinctly and entirely your own, or your lives will always belong to other people.’

Frisk looked away from Toriel for a moment, glancing at the house. ‘...when I was at the Taylors. Secrets kept me safe. I had to lie, and I had to become really good at it, whenever people asked questions. And I had to lie to my parents a lot. To tell them what they wanted to hear. It. It didn't always work. But I don't want to live that way anymore. I don't want to be afraid of the truth. Afraid of the people I care about learning the truth. But I am, and that's what's taking so long... mom, I think of all the times I didn't tell you everything, or made something up, and I am sickened by it. I think of all the things I can't tell you, that you need to know, and I feel even worse. I lied back then to protect myself but you don't want to hurt me, you're trying to take care of me. So I should never be anything less than honest with you... you should be able to trust me’

‘Frisk, I do trust you. I trust you and Asriel both to tell me the truth when it is vital that you do so, and when you are able. And after everything you have done to bring him back... if and when you do withhold or alter the truth, I trust you both to have an important reason for doing so. You said that secrets and lies kept you safe growing up with the Taylors. It would be unrealistic and selfish of me to expect you to instantly let go of something that kept you safe for so long, simply for my sake.’
A large, fuzzy paw rested on the child's head and tousled their hair back and forth.

“If you feel you must resort to falsehood to protect yourself and those you love from harm, I can understand those sentiments. I simply hope that you can move on from that at your own pace. I have always believed that honesty is the best policy, and the fact that you are so distraught by what you have done in the past tells me that you believe it as well. But I can also understand that being completely honest in the past would have had painful consequences, and it will take time to move on from that... Of course, if I find out you have been fibbing simply to stay out late or other such frivolous nonsense, we will have to talk.”

Frisk looked up and saw that Toriel's stern countenance was softened with a wink and half of a smile, and the child smiled back. “Yeah. Yeah, that's totally fair.”

“Frisk, I... I want to watch you grow up into the person you were meant to be. Not the person that you think you need to become to make other people happy, or to keep them from hurting you. Please take your time with this. Do not rush it. Even for monsters, healing takes time, and you are a human, so you should know this as well as anyone.”

Frisk's right hand came up and rubbed their left shoulder. “Yeah. You have a point. I understand.”

“That is good. Alright. Let us go inside and prepare for this evening.”

“Yeah. Thanks mom.”

Toriel and Frisk resumed their walk and made their way up to the front door; from inside, they could hear the muffled sounds of conversation before opening the door.

“The thing though, is that it all came down to power-to-weight ratios. Undyne didn't understand that, but she didn't see the problem because she was actually strong enough to lift it, so we decided to make it happen anyway.”

Alphys held up a sheet of paper, and Asriel looked up from the papers already in his paws to stare at the blueprints on it.

“Wait, never mind where you got the metal, how did you forge it? Isn't there like some sort of traditional method where the steel is folded a thousand times or something?”

“Actually it turns out that the reason that was done was because the iron in Japan had a lot of impurities. A source of pure metal, like the turbine blade we found? You called it forging, but technically it was tempering.”

“Right, right. That makes sense... okay, I know I can't point fingers at anybody in the whole not understanding social cues thing, but seriously? You and Undyne worked on this huge sword and neither one of you realized there was something between the two of you??”

Alphys blushed and shrugged. “Well, we both were really eager to pass it off as a proof of principle for the Royal Guard. Maybe too eager. In the end it was really just an excuse on both sides. She justified the visit by asking me to try to make it for the Royal Guard , and I justified her visits as trying to help the Royal Guard protect everyone. Which is kind of a joke. Undyne can lift it but it's so massive that each swing is telegraphed.”

Asriel nodded. “No kidding.”

Frisk cleared their throat and grinned as Alphys and Asriel both froze and turned around to look at the front door.
“Hey guys. Please, don’t stop on account of us.”


“Howdy guys! Welcome home!”

Toriel nodded. “Hello to you both. I see you have been keeping busy.”

“Ah. Yes. Heh. Asriel stayed at the lab for a while to talk to me about things. Well, it started with the whole Soul Energy Aggregate Link program, and how that involved the golden flowers... and how he woke up... and somewhere along the line, we got to talking about all of my other projects.”

“It's been super interesting. I finally have real context for all of this stuff I remember now.”

Toriel smiled. “Well. That is certainly good news. At least I hope it is, as I am not sure I understand what the two of you are talking about. However, there is much to be done soon, so Asriel, it would be a good idea to make what preparations you need to make for this evening.”

Asriel's face became somber, and he nodded slowly. “You're right. I'll be upstairs.”

Asriel hopped off of his chair and made his way to the staircase, and Toriel looked towards Frisk. “It would behoove you to do likewise Frisk. Meanwhile, I must call Asgore and confer with him about Sunday's preparations and plans.”

“Okay mom.”

As Toriel made her way to her office and Frisk headed for the stairs, Alphys hopped off of her chair.

“Uh, Frisk? I know you're on the clock, but can we t-talk, for a moment?”

“Sure. Is this about the Soul Link test? Or Soul Research, or something like that?”


“Okay then. I'm all ears.”

Alphys reached up and pulled her glasses off, and began to clean them on her lab coat, until Frisk coughed softly.

“Right. Right. Sorry. Stalling for time obviously. Which you don't have to spare.” The glasses were returned to their rightful place. “Uhm. I don't know if you remember, you were really tired. But Tuesday night, at one point, the thing with the broken dinner plate came up. And it wasn't until today, while Asriel and I were talking about Souls and the Amalgamates and so on... it wasn't until then that I made the connection. When we looked at your Soul on the scanner the first time, it was... it was broken. Fragmented.”

“...yeah.”

“I'm sorry, but we still don't know exactly how that happened, or why it fused back together again when Flowey-” The lizard scientist flinched. “Dammit, sorry. When Asriel was linked with you the first time. Any more than we know how it did that with one missing piece, or how that piece turned into a whole new Soul for Asriel. But when we were all in the back yard. I saw your face. I
saw the way you were standing. You looked like I felt... before Undyne found me. And what you said... I've never seen you so upset. Talking about screwing things up and not being able to fix them.”

Alphys put her glasses back on and stared at Frisk. “I get the impression that you think, or you used to think, that you were broken. Not just that a part of you was broken, like your Soul fragmenting. But in the sense that you were. As a person.”

“...yeah.”

Alphys nodded. “Frisk, I brought all of that up to be sure. Now I need to tell you something you probably already know, but don't understand. You see. I spent a lot of time at the garbage dump long before any of my experiments started backfiring. So much of what we needed to survive down there, even before Dr. Aster started building the CORE. It was down there in the human garbage.”

“Right. Metals, plastics, wire, magnets, technical books, and everything else.”

Alphys nodded. “Exactly. We had to get very good at repairing stuff, because by the time it got down to us, it wasn't just damaged or worn out, but waterlogged. A lot of times, pieces were missing, or part of something had been burned out or burned off. So we had to be very good at reclaiming materials and recycling, too. That's how I got my foot in the door starting All Fine Labs, remember?”

“Yeah. I still have the picture from the day everything opened.” Frisk shrugged. “But I have pictures of all sorts of times and places, so....”

“Hehe. Well. We got very good at doing more with less down there. Sharing that knowledge seemed like a good opener for starting a business. But anyway, yeah, most of what showed up in the trash was, well, it was broken. But not everything. Sometimes there were amazing finds. Books still wrapped in plastic, completely without water damage. Machines with no rust and no missing or broken parts. Or, if there was damage, it was purely cosmetic. A little scratch or scuff. Otherwise it was perfectly fine. Nobody complained when that happened, but personally? I always wondered. Why would anyone throw away a perfectly good book? Or a perfectly good television? Or a perfectly good anything? Of course, the answer is in the question. The trash wasn't filled with what humans couldn't use. It was what humans didn't want. But we could use it, more often than not.”

A claw came up and grasped Frisk's shoulder.

“Do you understand? Even if something is broken, that does not mean it is useless. It can be the first part of something new and amazing. It can literally mean the world to somebody out there. But that doesn't apply to you- wait, wait, that came out wrong!” Alphys let go of Frisk's shoulder and waved her claws back and forth in nervous agitation. “I mean. What I meant t-to say was. I don't know the details of what happened to you before the Underground. But I know in general what happened. I know that somebody threw away a perfectly good Frisk. And I can't imagine why anyone would do that. And, and I don't think that the problem with understanding that is on my end. If you know what I mean.”

“I think I do. Except, the thing is, it's not like they took me up the mountain and threw me down the hole to the Ruins. I, uh. I did that.”

Alphys nodded. “I figured as much. But, you know, it still counts. Even if you can't see the value in being you. I can, and so can everyone else. Frisk... I know you don't like to talk about this stuff. But I need you to know that whatever happened before the Underground, everything is different
now. Everything. Here, let me show you something. Do you have your cell phone on you?"

"Yeah, just a sec." Frisk reached into one pocket and pulled out the phone, handing it over to Alphys, who pointed one claw at various parts.

"Even before you gave me your phone, it was already a combination of parts from several different phones, like all the technology in the Underground. I saw that when I opened it up to add all the new hardware. A bunch of different parts, put together from a bunch of different phones. When it was thrown away, each of the cell phones that went into it, one part went bad, maybe two. The rest of it was fine, so those parts got saved. And the parts that were bad, they were still useful for materials. So it was all useful. Just for different reasons."

Alphys handed the phone back and clasped her claws together.

"But, yeah, you understand what I mean, right? Whatever prompted you to... to throw yourself away. First, even if you do have something about you... that you don't like, or feel bad about. That does not mean that the rest of you isn't something to be proud of, and worth holding onto. And second. If there's something you don't like about yourself, that doesn't actually mean that it's bad. It could be like a dent or a scuff mark, it's not worth worrying about compared to everything else."

"...you know. Mom said something Monday, when my shoulder was still wrecked and I was tripping from a mix of pills and sunstroke. I wanted to head to school, but she said I needed to stay home and get better... I was worried about falling behind, and at one point she told me I didn't have to be perfect. I don't know why, but hearing her say that. It made my stomach lurch a little. I think it has something to do with how my human parents handled mistakes when I was with them, but I don't know."

"How did they handle mistakes?"

"...not well." Frisk looked down at the floor. "I'm finally, you know. Looking back at everything that happened then. And really thinking about it. For the first time in my life, probably. It's. It's uh. What's the word I want to use... terrifying." Frisk's smile was obviously fake, and faded quickly. "That's the word. But I never would have gotten this far without support from mom and dad and you and Undyne and Sans and Papyrus and Dr. Aster, and especially Asriel, from the day he came down from the mountain."

"Heh. Yeah. I remember that day. Everything was winding down after Thanksgiving and you dragged me and Papyrus to the Arboretum to see the leaves changing and falling. When... when Asriel showed up. I was terrified. Because of my experiments and everything. But Frisk... it was like you transformed in front of us. Like you were more full of life than ever before. I guess that was because you knew. And you... you spent over a year bringing him back. Frisk... I know he asked you to keep everything secret. And if anyone can understand the upsides and downsides of secrets, it's me. So I can understand that. And... well. Now we come full circle. A few weeks ago he came by while I was in the garage and he was really angry. And he chewed me out, and I, I guess I had that coming to me after all the crap he's been through. But he accused me of throwing him away. And he's not wrong. I gave up too easily. I transplanted the flower back to the garden, and he woke up by himself and... everything that followed."

Alphys shook her head. "I didn't see the point. I thought it was a dead end. But you talked to him. You saw the real person, even when he was angry. You saw what I didn't see. Just, just remember that it works in the other direction, too. If you look at yourself, and you don't see something you think should be there, that doesn't mean it isn't there. We can see it. I, uh, I'm n- n ot making a whole lot of sense, am I? You'd think after all the times people went out of their way to reassure me, I'd know how to reassure other people."
“Actually I think I understand what you're trying to say.”

“Good. Good. Frisk... when you are going through the stuff about your human parents. If you need to, you can talk to me about it. But if you have to deal with it by yourself, I understand completely. And,” Alphys swallowed, “that goes for everything that bothers you. No matter what it is. You can always tell me if you need to, but I understand completely if you feel you can't share. So... you don't need to worry about that.”

'Please please please just say it just let it out just tell me let me tell you that it's okay don't be like me don't be afraid of what if Frisk you don't have to be afraid of me you don't have to be afraid of any of us we all love you we all trust you please just trust us enough to give us a chance to show you Frisk'

Frisk stared at Alphys for a bit, long enough to make the scientist wonder if Frisk had somehow read her thoughts. Eventually the child walked over to the sofa; after a moment's hesitation, Alphys joined them.

“Alphys... there is something that scares me a lot more than digging up all of the baggage I have left over from my human family. And almost as much as the idea of having to go back to them. Alphys... I'm sorry. I want to tell you. I want to tell you so bad. I just want to say it right now. But I can't, because I'm scared of how you will react. How everyone will react. And it doesn't matter how many times you reassure me, or promise me that it's going to be okay, I am still scared. Because it's not fair to ask you, or anyone else, to write a blank check like that.”

Alphys sighed. “I can understand that. And I respect it. So. I'm not going to repeat those promises over and over. They still stand, but that has to wait. We both know that.”

“Yeah... I guess I better get ready. So I'll, uh. I don't know when I'll see you next. The Kludge Derby, maybe?”

“Could be! I'll be there to cheer on the lab mice, come rain or shine.” Alphys and Frisk hopped off of the sofa, and Frisk walked the scientist to the door, which did not take very long.

“Talk to you later, Frisk.”

“Yeah. Take care, Alphys.”

“You too.”

Outside, Alphys began to make her way down the sidewalk, not really paying attention to the world around her. More out of habit and reflex than conscious thought, her claw went to her pocket and grabbed her cell phone... which chimed with a new text message as she was staring at it.

3:40 PM StrongFish91: hey alphys

3:40 PM StrongFish91: im at the dank memehaus with som other teachers and some guy just started yelling

3:40 PM StrongFish91: think he got a text and he ran away from the bar and was looking right in my face and just lost it or something

3:40 PM: was it hal
“Alphys! Wait a second.” Frisk ran outside and caught up with the scientist a few dozen feet down the sidewalk. “About... about what you said earlier.”

“Yes?”

Frisk opened their mouth... then closed it, and swallowed, and opened it again... and still the words refused to come. The child lunged forward and hugged Alphys, who responded with a squeak of surprise.

“...I can't say it... I still can't say it. But. I can promise you. Alphys. I will never, ever hurt you. No matter what. I will die before I hurt you.”

Alphys felt an icy chill run down her back, and her arms came up and returned the hug.

“Frisk. Don't say stuff like that, okay? We got very lucky with you last time. And... and take it from me, Frisk. There is no secret, none in the world, worth dying over.”
The cave opening was dark and foreboding, despite knowing exactly what was within. It was not fear of the unknown, but memory of the known, that troubled all who saw it.

“welp, guess this is my stop. gimme a text or a call when you guys are ready to head back into town. really wish i could do more, but those anti-photon experiments to simulate the core paradox breakdown are taking up all of my time today.”

Toriel smiled at the pun, and nodded at the short skeleton. “Thank you, Sans.”

“no problem.” The skeleton vanished in a flash of blue, and the Dreemurr family walked into the Underground. Down the corridor that had once been filled by the pulsating light of the Barrier. Into the antechamber. And finally into the throne room.

Even without the green thumb of the king, the Golden Flowers had survived, if not exactly thrived. The floor of the throne room was a matted tangle of stems and vines with a golden canopy. Two pieces of furniture, obviously thrones, were pushed up against the wall and covered in sheets. From somewhere, birds called to each other.

Frisk felt Asriel hesitate, and squeezed his paw.

“...guess it brings back more than a few bad memories.”

“There is that... but actually. Thinking some more.” Asriel smiled. “Chara always felt safest in the Underground. And they loved Golden Flowers for the same reason, they made them feel safe. Like they were protecting them I guess. I think they would have liked to see this. Their favorite thing, protecting their favorite place.”

The family walked around the outside edge of the room, leaving the flowers swaying peacefully in the wind from the outside world. Once outside, in the Underground edifice that was New Home Castle, Frisk flinched.

“Frisk? You okay?”

Frisk nodded and rubbed their head. “I'm fine, bro. Just another one of those headaches.” The child looked up to see Asgore's head turning towards the castle basement, and Toriel's was turning it that direction as well. “Uh. Let's, let's move on. It's a long way to the Ruins.”

The four figures walked along the elevated walkway, rather than take the elevator; while it would have been faster, in truth none of them could admit to each other, or to themselves, that they were not in any hurry to do what they had come to do. The distant, echoing sounds of the empty cavern came to them from far away, and were so muted and distorted by distance that it was hard to be sure what they actually were.... At last, they reached the staircase upwards into the castle proper, and looked around the entryway.

“Mom, dad... I need to stop by my old room for a moment.”

Toriel and Asgore nodded, and the family turned to walk down the hallway. The first door, Asriel took Frisk's hand in his paw. “There's something I need to do, Frisk. And I need your help to do it.”
“Asriel, wait.”

The three monsters stopped and turned to look at Frisk, who was staring back at the entryway, and then turned to look at Asriel. Their face appeared neutral and stoic, but there was a glistening in their eyes.

“This place... the monsters coming back from seeing Asgore, they told me what had happened. To you and Chara. Getting sick, going down the mountain... coming back and dying. I felt... it was awful. Like I had seen this before. And I guess I had. A child just wanting to do the right thing, and suffering for it. But there was something else. Something more to it. Like I had heard somebody tell me a story like this before, some sort of myth or legend. And... I started to see the sunlight again, from the holes in the mountain. Orange afternoon sunlight... I couldn't stand it. It brought back so many memories, none of them good. And when I thought of those again, I had to ask myself... did I really want to go back? But I didn't feel like I had a choice. And there was... there was this awful sensation. Like... I should have been able to do something, but I got here too late.” Frisk sighed. “It didn't make any sense, because if I'd climbed the mountain when Chara did, I would have been like six years old. But it was there just the same. A thought that stabbed through my brain like a white hot needle: 'I am too late.' But the worst was... at the end. Some monsters saw I was sad. And... they tried to cheer me up. A Froggit told me I was going to be free.”

Frisk looked down at their feet. “They didn't realize I was human. They didn't understand... what I was going to do. And I felt like I was betraying them. I felt like the scum of the earth. I could set everyone free, but all I cared about was going back... back to what, more screaming and yelling and broken plates...? How could anyone be so selfish, so stupid...”

Frisk slowly let out their breath. “That was when I decided. This was where my journey ended. I would set everyone free. There was nothing for me on the surface. There was no place for me Underground. I wasn't really a person. I was the last key to the lock. The last piece of the puzzle. I climbed the mountain so that everybody could be happy... and I could do that. All I needed to do... was just... hold... still.”

Toriel and Asgore stared at Frisk, and then at each other, with expressions ranging from shock to concern... but Frisk did not notice. The human child only had eyes for Asriel.

“Asriel... I'm sorry. I'm sorry it took so long. I'm sorry you had to spend so long as... that. I'm sorry you couldn't come with us when we went down the mountain. I keep telling myself... that I couldn't Save you then, because everything that came together for that to happen... needed time. It had to happen where it did, when it did, because of everything that came before it. All the steps, in the right order.” Frisk pressed one hand to their head and their face became a grimace of pain. “But... I know. I know in my heart. I walked away from the Ruins. I left you behind. I left you to suffer. I'm so sorry....”

Frisk felt the air get knocked out of their lungs as Asriel hugged them and squeezed. “...Frisk. I can't accept your apology because you didn't do anything wrong. You know that. At first, with all the souls... I just felt good to be able to feel anything besides fear and anger again. It wasn't until later. That's when I looked back on everything I had done and felt disgust, and remorse, and guilt. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was... I knew. I had to let the souls go. And I would turn back into that... other person. I would hurt people again and again and again. I don't know if anyone else in the world can understand what it's like to have a part of you... go away like that. But Frisk... you understand the rest of it, I know. Those feelings aren't based in reality, but you understand what it feels like. To make a choice. To regret it. And to know... no matter what you do, how hard you try, that eventually you will do it again.”
“Yes... I understand.”

“I said 'other person' earlier, but I don't have that excuse. There's nobody else here. I'm Asriel. I'm Flowey. I'm the same person. There wasn't somebody else taking control. Making me do things, or sneaking around while I was asleep. Despite everything, it's still just me... you know. You said you were worried that I couldn't come home again. And thinking about it... after everything I've done, I'm lucky I got to come home at all. When mom saw me and freaked out, I thought that was it. That everything I'd done was finally going to catch up to me. I'd finally be dead, and the world would move on without me, and the only one who would ever miss me would be you. Frisk... it worries me a lot, that after everything I did, you can still look at your life and think you are worse than me.”

Frisk felt one of Asriel's arms loosen from the hug... and patted them on the arm.

A gesture that meant everything.

“...you Saved me first, Asriel. You didn't know it. I didn't know it. But you gave me the will to keep going. To hold on. To not give up. Asriel... I saw the bullets, and I didn't understand, and I was afraid. But I was afraid because I realized, no matter what happened on the surface, and as awful as I felt, I didn't want to give up yet. I wanted to keep going. You woke me up from a terrible nightmare...” Frisk tried to smile. “I mean, it was a rude awakening, but still.”

Frisk heard Asriel snort, trying to suppress his laughter. “Yeah. Well. I did a lot of weird things as a flower.”

“Yeah... but you Saved me, and you destroyed the Barrier as a flower too. And you won the Garden Show last week. I guess that's what Alphys was trying to remind me earlier, so I could remind you. You gotta take the rough with the smooth.”

“...heh. Yeah.”

The children let go and Asriel smiled at Frisk. “Come on. There's something I need to show you.” The young monster turned to his parents. “We'll be right back.”

Toriel nodded, and Asriel opened the door and walked inside. Frisk followed, looking around the room again. Like a moment frozen in time, a photograph... but that was wrong. The world moved on and changed and evolved and nothing was ever the same again. That was why photography existed, it filled a vacuum. Photographs stayed the same, and people and places changed. And that was how it was supposed to be.

Nothing had changed in the room. And nothing ever would.

It was wrong.

“Good. They're still here.”

Frisk tore their eyes away from the static room and saw Asriel point at the boxes.

“I looked around inside here, but I didn't touch the boxes. I knew these were left here for a reason.”

“Yeah, somehow I knew that you knew. And I knew dad didn't pack up anything in our old room when moving out of New Home, but I wasn't sure if anyone else had come to the Underground. Curious humans. The Anti Monster League. And so on.”

Asriel opened the lid of one of the gift boxes, and reached inside. His paw came back holding a
heart shaped locket. “Frisk... a long time ago. This belonged to Chara. When... after dad got sick. They stopped wearing it. I didn't understand then, but I do now. Chara thought they had already lost everything. They put the locket away because they thought they had ruined our friendship, didn't deserve it. Not after what happened to dad. I guess that was when... when they came up with the plan. And the other box, that must be the gardening knife. Chara would spend hours with dad... before. Learning about plants. They said several times that it was amazing anything at all could grow underground, with or without the crystals.” Asriel opened the other box, and pulled out an old, worn cutting tool.

Turning to Frisk, he held out his paws. “Frisk... I miss Chara so much. The fact that I got a second chance, and they didn't. It tears me up inside. But I have to say goodbye. I've spent too long living in the past. I have to move on or.... I want you to have these. I know you like to make things. Maybe you can use the knife as a tool, or you can turn it into something else. And the locket... please open it and read to me what it says.”

Frisk gingerly, carefully took the worn dagger and the heart shaped locket, and opened the jewelry. Inside, words were inscribed.

“It says 'Best Friends Forever' inside.”

“Yes. I wish Chara and I had both remembered that, when everything went wrong. Before it went too far. And... I hope you will remember. When things look at their worst.”

Frisk carefully slid the knife into one pocket, unclasped the locket, and put it on their neck.

“I will, Asriel. I will always remember.”

“Thanks.”

The Hotland elevators were still working, and beyond Hotland, a transformed Waterfall. Frisk stared at the network of bridges and wheels and pulleys and staircases; Alphys called it a rush job, a duct tape job, something that had to be built quickly to let people move from Waterfall and Snowdin to Hotland and eventually to the Surface. It was never intended to last more than a few weeks, while everyone got moved out... but here it was, over a year later, in perfect working order.

It was a sobering yet comforting idea, and Frisk took a few pictures with their phone as the family proceeded towards Snowdin. The child began to shiver as the family trudged through the snow, until Asgore reached down with an orange yellow light in his hands.

“Thanks, dad. Guess I got way too used to the early summer heat. Didn't even think about bringing a jacket.” The fireball was warm to the touch, without burning or reacting with anything; the heat seeped into Frisk's body through their palms and fingertips as they held it, driving out the cold, even in knee deep snow.

Empty buildings lined the road from Waterfall to the Ruins entrance. Grillby's old bar was dark and cold. The Snowed Inn was dark, the shop was dark... even the old house that Sans and Papyrus had lived in seemed alien and unfamiliar, without the lights and sounds that came with their mutually incompatible, yet reinforcing, personalities.

The long road through the forest was the only part that seemed familiar and real, except that all of the traps had been disarmed and deactivated, and several ice fields covered with broken branches for traction. A few of the older trees had fallen, but Asgore picked them up and put them to one
side of the path with ease.

And then there was Home.

Bare walls. Bare floors. Bright colors, muted under the fading lights. Nails where pictures once broke up the vast, empty spaces of the walls. The family gravitated towards the living room, with its cold and empty fireplace. There was no reading chair, that had gone to the Surface. There was no table, that had gone to the Surface. There was no bookcase with its many books, they were all on the Surface. Even the fireplace tools had been taken.

Frisk wandered into the kitchen, and saw the appliances remained. Empty, unhooked, unconnected to any source of power, but still there.

’No one will use this anymore.’

The thought had entered Frisk’s head as they stared at the stove. A distant memory of the smell of cinnamon and butterscotch, too long in an oven, came back to them. Toriel used fire magic, so in a way she never really ‘used’ the stove at all... but the thought still ended in a stab of regret and longing.

Toriel and Asgore were speaking in hushed tones in the living room, and the regret and longing were chased out by panic; for a split second, Frisk's world turned inside out and upside down. They felt like an intruder. They had to wait until Toriel and Asgore moved on to sneak out. They couldn't be seen. They couldn't be heard. They didn't belong here and they had to escape before anyone found them, or else-

Frisk smothered their yelp of surprise with one hand as Asriel walked in.

“Hey, are you okay?”

The irrational conviction of trespassing faded as quickly as it came, and Frisk shook their head. “Not really. I was only here for a little while and nostalgia is still kicking me in the face.”

“I can relate. I lived here most of my life... so nostalgia is kicking me someplace else.”

Frisk snickered. “So... are you ready for the last leg?”

“...no. I'll never be ready. But... if I wait until I am ready, I'll be waiting the rest of my life.”

Frisk nodded. “Yeah... it really sucks, doesn’t it.”

Asriel's mouth twitched into part of a smile. “Yeah. It does.”

The two children walked out of the kitchen, and Toriel and Asgore turned to look at them.

“Mom... dad... I think it's time.”

Like the Snowdin Road, the traps in the Ruins were disabled and disarmed, and the crumbling floors had been patched over with wood here and there. Even the spider webs looked abandoned, instead of making the area itself look abandoned... which technically they were after all of Muffet's extended family had left for the surface. Frisk was prompted to think of Muffet's house, which looked like a Halloween haunted house all year round on the outside and something not unlike the Winchester Mansion on the inside.
From time to time, the corridors got dark as one of the lights had failed, and Asgore and Toriel were obliged to light the way with fire. At last, the tunnels came to an end... a great, dark room with a hole in the mountain above allowing sunlight to illuminate a patch of the cavern floor. And beyond that, a winding path to a patch of golden flowers.

Frisk felt Asriel shaking, and squeezed his paw without even thinking about it. The monster child calmed down, took a deep breath, and let go.

“Chara... it's been a while.”

Asriel walked up to the patch of flowers, and got down on his knees at the edge.

“...I wish you were here with me. Beside me. I wish we could move on from this, together. But... it didn't turn out that way.”

Asriel began to wring his paws together in his lap.

“You were... there will never be anyone like you. In the world, or in my life. And... I should have said no. I should have said no... I should have come to mom and dad for help. I know that now. But I didn't, and...”

Asriel looked down at the flowers, and tears began to run off of his face, dripping down on the golden petals.

“It's all wrong... it's all wrong,” the child whispered. “Me being here, while you're still... where you are now... I got us killed. I panicked. It is my fault. In the end... I betrayed you. And you're still gone, while I have a second chance... it's all wrong. It should be you here. And me there. But it isn't. Somehow... it's just me here. I... I can't imagine how much you must hate me right now...”

Frisk turned their head to stop looking at Asriel, and tried to wipe the tears from their eyes as quietly as possible.

“Chara... I know it isn't right. But... it is what it is. And... I can't keep holding onto the past. I tried that. It just made things worse. I have to move on. Monsters are on the Surface, in the sunlight. But there are people out there. The type of humans you tried to warn me about. They have to be stopped, for there to be any chance at peace. You understand that. I know you understand. And that means... I have to think about the future. What comes next.”

Asriel wiped his eyes with the back of one paw and smiled in spite of himself. “I always was a crybaby, wasn't I Chara... I won't ever forget you. And I won't ever stop missing you. But I have to move on. I have to move forward.”

The monster child stood up and took a few deep breaths. “Chara... I love you. I will always love you....”

Asriel's voice finally broke.

“Goodbye.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey.
So. Short little chapter here. Had to post it tonight because today, January 3rd, is the anniversary of when I finished Undertale.

My BFF LadyAnatares sent me the game as a gift on Steam, she listened to me play it blind over Skype during Christmas break while I recorded videos for a YouTube thing that never quite took off, and after I had completed the True Pacifist run, she dragged me headfirst into the fandom and I still haven't come up for air. So a LOT of this story is technically her fault. :P

There's more to come in the next few chapters, but it'll be a bit. That little holiday sabbatical, while much needed, was poorly timed in light of today's significance, so these last three chapters have been rushed. (I also had to exclude a whole section of Hal's dream during the intermission chapter, but I'll probably use it later.) So if you're seeing more typos, orphaned quotation marks, and random formatting inconsistencies than normal, at least some of that can be attributed to the rush.

It might be significant, or symbolic, that before I came over to my computer to post this update, I myself ended up dropping and breaking a dinner plate in the kitchen. Or it could be a coincidence. Hell if I know.

Anyway. That's all I had. Hope you all had a good start to 2017, and I'll try to make sure the next few chapters are worth the wait. I know for a fact that one of them includes something a few readers have requested in the comments. ;)

Until then? See you later...

Partners.
Thomas could not stop his hands from shaking.

First, the text from Jordan's emergency burner phone in the middle of catching up with dad. Then running literally face-to-face into that crazy fish monster while trying to leave the Dank Memehaus. And then running into Hal Greene just outside the building.

It was like they knew. Which, all other things being equal, there was a very real possibility that they did. And it could easily be that the reason nobody did anything was because they knew that it wouldn't make a difference anyway. Not a comforting thought at any time, but especially not while riding shotgun in a van filled with men prone to taking action without considering the ramifications of their actions, most if not all of whom were fairly well armed.

“Thomas, are you there??”

Thomas shook himself. “Sorry, Mr. Cater. Still going over my notes about the Core from that meeting. What is it?”

“Just making sure you're in the here and now. Once we get in there, something tells me we won't have a lot of time before the monsters notice. And considering some of them can teleport, that means we have very little margin of error.”

“In other words, this is something we need to get exactly right the first time. No do-overs.”

Thomas was looking at his papers and not the back of the van, but he heard the smile in Cater's voice when he replied. “If we pull this off, nobody gets any do-overs. It's winner take all. Alright, everyone, check your masks. Remember, that's a volcano down there. Could be sulfur, rock dust, or worse in the air.”

Thomas glanced down at his notes again as he pulled up the ventilator. Actual military or police gas masks might have been possible to acquire given enough time, but with less than a day's warning almost all the equipment was improvised Plan B fare. The masks were those used by painters, or carpenters and machinists that expected to work with very fine particulates of wood and metal... or for that matter, terminally ill chemistry teachers who had turned to recreational chemistry to supplement their income. With impact resistant safety goggles, the whole ensemble almost resembled a gas mask, but it simply wouldn't do the same job as an all-in-one unit and certainly wasn't up to the task of full NBC warfare.

The armament wasn't much better. The prospect of tracing ballistics had been a major obstacle even for the original Guardians organization when it had decided to resort to direct action, and sourcing long arms and equipment for the team that had liberated Jordan Cater from police custody had been an endless series of headaches. Time, money, and manpower limitations all made getting both legal and extra-legal firearms more difficult, and the public attention that Lost Eagle County in general was receiving managed to make an already difficult task even more so; for all that, legal
channels were a completely unacceptable security risk, limiting the available options to private sales, collector shows, and the occasional pawn shop willing to look the other way once in a while in order to make ends meet.

Factors like that kept Thomas up at night for weeks on end, but the practical upshot was that each member of the team had a weapon that could not legally be traced back to them or what remained of the Guardian network; the downside was that most of them were old and in mediocre condition at best, all of them had different calibers and types of ammunition, every one of them was designed more for hunting than offensive assault tactics, and (with the exception of an old M1911 pistol Thomas had found in a storage unit auction in Lone Point) none of them was particularly potent when it came to stopping power.

As a consequence, Jordan had attempted to impress upon the group that fighting was an absolute last resort to be used only in support of achieving the main goal of destroying the Core, and the following escape. How much of it sank in, Thomas was trying not to think about; the four other men in the van were not the most reliable, conscientious, attentive or sane people on Thomas's list of allies, they were simply the ones that could make it on such short notice. A Hail Mary request for an escort / diversionary force later in the evening had gone out over the usual channels, but there was no way to know who would be able to respond to it, if anyone showed up at all.

Other than that, everyone had a cheap First Aid Kit from Wal-Mart's camping / outdoors department, and that was it. The logistics of the whole enterprise stretched the definition of “shoestring budget” past the breaking point; Mr. Cater and Thomas were essentially taking on the seat of monster power on a wing and a prayer.

But Mr. Cater said he had fallen asleep writing, and he had dreamed of a confrontation amidst sweltering heat, the smell of ozone, and something like a star, buried deep beneath the earth. And Thomas believed.

The van slowed to a stop at the end of a rough dirt road. The driver sighed. “Guess we walk from here.”

Thomas nodded. “It's about a five minute climb up to the ledge that leads to the Underground. Well worn path, marked and everything. Only problem is that it's all uphill.”

“It's a mountain, genius. Of course it's all uphill.”

Thomas tried to ignore the snide remark and folded up his notes as the doors opened. “Okay, everyone listen. This is a surgical strike. We go in fast and hard. According to everything I could find on the Underground, the cave opens directly into the monster's old castle, in their city. There are at least two elevators to the place called Hotland, and one goes directly from the castle to the Core itself, so we'll look for that one first. Once we're in, we destroy the Core and head back out the way we came. No stops for sightseeing, no detours. Any fighting is a fighting retreat, either to get to the Core or get back out here. Any questions?”

One man with a vaguely french accent spoke up. “You say destroy the Core. How? With firecrackers?”

The man, unpleasant as he was to work with, had a point. If guns were difficult to acquire, explosives were impossible. Thomas knew enough chemistry to understand how to produce them from common industrial, commercial, and agricultural chemicals, but he was also smart enough to know that all such chemicals were watched for exactly that reason. Any major purchase or theft of such materials would summon local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies almost comically fast. So any sort of demolitions were out of the question.
Fortunately, Thomas had already thought this through.

“The Core is a high energy physics lab, and high energy means high danger. We just need to destroy the safety systems. It's also powered by its own geothermal power plant, that's why they built it in the volcanic chambers. Take out the cooling system and the machine will do the hard work for us.”

“Are we ready?” Jordan looked around the group. “…alright. Time to end this.”

The masks came up and the team of six men headed up the mountain path. Eventually they came to the cave opening that lead inside the mountain; Jordan raised his weapon and Thomas followed suit. Inside were tunnels roughly carved from the rock, expanding the natural cave, and then a much more ornate room with glass skylights, filled with Golden Flowers. Jordan waved a hand roughly and the group followed him around the edge of the room, and out into the rest of the castle.

Thomas thought he could see Jordan's eyes getting red underneath the goggles, and thought of the story about Asriel Dreemurr bringing Chara's body and Golden Flower seeds back with him to Mt. Ebott when he was dying. In and of itself, it was a sobering reminder of what they were trying to stop. As the group passed through the castle, Thomas had to resist the impulse to grab books and skim them; there had to be some useful information in some of them, something that would give them an advantage later. But the whole point of heading this deep into the lion's den (or goat's den, or whatever the hell Asgore Dreemurr was supposed to be) was to deprive the monsters of their main advantage and permanently level the playing field. So Thomas simply kept his eyes open, trying to take in every detail, until the team made it to the elevator.

Somehow the ride down was just as awkward as it would have been in any other situation involving an elevator. Thomas wondered briefly if that was some sort of universal constant, or possibly a side effect of elevator technology. The monsters hadn't even included elevator music, although that could just as easily have been a matter of resource scarcity at work. Or it could have been a deliberate choice, in which case it was one of the few areas where monsters rated higher than humans. Finally, the elevator slowed to a stop and the doors slid open.

Thomas stared at the three monsters and one human child on the other side, too shocked to move. Apparently the entire team was also afflicted with deer-in-the-headlights syndrome.

Fortunately, so were the monsters.

Seconds ticked by, and everyone stood frozen, waiting to see who would make the first move.

As it turned out, it was the human child, who pressed the elevator button on the outside to close the doors.

“Nope.”

The doors slid shut, and the spell was broken.

“What the shit was that??” Thomas mumbled through the mask. Jordan Cater shook his head.

“I should have seen this coming. Okay! Weapons up, weapons ready, nothing has changed! We find the Core's weak points, we destroy them, we get out!”

Thomas pushed the button to open the doors again, and the six humans rushed out. No fireballs were waiting, no traps, no army of much more well armed monsters. Jordan Cater took point, and motioned the team down the corridor.
“That was the monster Royal Family, including their pet human ambassador... they'll try to distract us. Do not let them. Do not even consider them targets of opportunity. Especially not the human. And one more thing; the little monster, the prince. Asriel Dreemurr. When all this is over, he is mine.”

“No signal. We need to get out of the CORE to get away from the interference.” Frisk looked up from their phone at their parents. “The catwalk to the old resort should be far enough. We just need to call Alphys, Sans or Dr. Aster. They all know the Core backwards and forwards, they can reactivate the security system.”

Asgore nodded. “Good plan. Toriel, take Asriel and Frisk. I'll hold them off as long as-”

“You will do no such thing! It has been ages since you trained for any sort of true combat-”

“Guys, guys, can you please not fight each other, and fight them instead-”

“Tori I spent a long time training for exactly this kind of situation, I am the best chance you and the children have of getting to safety-”

“What exactly do you propose to do to stop them, trim a hedge that resembles them so they are stalled by their own vanity-”

“Also I don't really handle this kind of stuff very well and it's getting harder to breath and I-”

Magic pellets shot through the doorway, and from some distance away the sound of yelling could be heard. Asriel formed another circle of pellets and let them loose, then slammed the door shut. “Or, you know, we could all run! Just saying!”

Asgore reached down to pick up Asriel while Toriel picked up Frisk, and the family ran as the sounds of bullets ricocheted off of the door. On the other side, Jordan Cater rubbed the spot on his arm where a pellet had struck him and looked around the vast space.

“Thomas, where are we right now?”

“What?”

Jordan rolled his eyes and pulled down the ventilator mask rather than try to project his voice through it like before, and the rest of the team followed his example. “I said, where are we right now?”

“Uh... okay, I've seen this before. That robot monster with all the movies. They shot a music video here or something, with the human kid. Based on what I saw I think this might have been a cargo elevator once. But I can't absolutely be sure.”

“If it's an elevator, how do we turn it on?”

“I don't see any controls. Which means we need to get out of here in case the monsters can, or we might be trapped.”

“Right.” Jordan forced open the door and turned to look at the controls on the other side; the circuitry and buttons had been reduced to a puddle of molten plastic and warped metal. “There's another door out here. Looks like an elevator too.”
“Same thing as before. We don't let them control the rules of engagement. They already have the home field advantage, we can't let them use it.”

Jordan nodded and waved the team down the hallway. “I don't suppose you were able to find a map at some point?”

“Even if I had found one, it wouldn't mean much. The monsters designed the Core to be modular. They can change the layout to suit whatever they were working on. Hell, I'm not even sure if we're on the top floor, the bottom, or somewhere in between.”

“So it's a maze.”

“Yeah.” Thomas nodded. “Monsters and their fucking puzzle fetish.”

Jordan smirked. “Then we play this by Labyrinth rules. Always keep one hand on one wall, and eventually we'll come back to where we...”

The hallway ended in an open catwalk, out over a glowing sea of something white. Gas, liquid, radiation, raw magic energy, Jordan couldn't even guess. His hand moved forward, past the end of the wall and out into the open space beyond, and he waved it around for a moment more out of annoyance than anything else.

“Well. So much for that idea.”

On the other side of the catwalk, when the walls resumed, Jordan pointed at a video screen. “Not sure exactly what that is but maybe we can use it.”

“I'll take a stab at it.” Thomas set his rifle down against the wall and examined the screen. “...some of the text is in English. The rest of it I don't know what to make of.”

“Monster language, maybe? They wouldn't want this place set up so any humans could use it, right?” The suggestion came from one of the other men in the group, and Thomas shrugged as he pulled at a piece of metal from below the screen and an old typewriter filled with cables rolled out of a slot and clicked into place. “Could be. Could be some sort of encryption too. Or maybe the monsters made their own operating system.”

Thomas began to type, reflexively resorting to keyboard shortcuts in Windows and Linux first before pressing buttons randomly.

“Hey, do you even know what you're doing?”

Thomas turned to the man that had been asking questions before. “Of course not.”

“Well what if you cause this thing to blow up?!”

Jordan laughed as he looked up and down the different tunnels leading away from the intersection. “Then mission accomplished. We'll leave at the first sign of fire or explosion.”

The screen beeped several times, and a window opened. Jordan turned towards the noise, and saw a screen flicker and refresh, and then reveal an ivory skull with two cracks in it.

“What in the hell is going... ugh. Why am I not surprised.”

“what's it look like dadster?”

“Oh you know. The usual. Six humans carrying guns and one of them is randomly flailing at the
keyboard of one of the remote workstations in the Core.”

“oh, okay then.... Wait, what??”

Thomas felt a rush of movement behind him and ducked out of the way as a rifle collided with the screen, resulting in a small explosion as the display's Cathode Ray Tube collapsed on itself. Shards of glass and plastic flew out into the corridor, along with assorted sparks.

“They know we're here now. What do we do? Do we run?”

Jordan shook his head and held up his hand. “No. This was always a possibility. Everyone split up into pairs, we'll each take a passageway. Destroy anything that looks sensitive or important. We'll meet back here in one minute and then we run.”

There was a sound like a throat being cleared from the speakers next to the broken display. “Ahem. You know that was just the screen on your end, right? I can still see and hear everything. Also if you destroy anything else, I'm sending you the bill for-”

There was the sound of a cell phone beeping, and Dr. Aster stopped talking abruptly. “Uh. One second... hello?”

It was hard to make out the words through the speaker but it was definitely a child's voice on the other end of the line. When they stopped talking, there was the sound of typing. “Frisk. Take cover. I'm about to turn on the security system.”

Jordan turned to the rest of the team. “MOVE!”

Asriel closed his eyes, and moved one paw underneath one ear to muffle the noise, concentrating all of his attention somewhere else. Even when idling, the entire CORE was constantly trembling and rumbling and humming and vibrating, so using the magic vines to pick up the sounds of footsteps as they approached wasn't going to work until the humans were practically on top of them. Still, even a few seconds of advanced warning could make all the difference.

A hand grasped Asriel's shoulder and he yelped, forming magic out of reflex as he opened his eyes... to see Frisk standing rigid, eyes wide, in the center of a circle of pellets.

“Uhm... sorry?”

Asriel waved a paw and the pellets vanished as he tackled Frisk in a hug. “Oh my god I almost... I almost...”

“I'm alright, Asriel. You didn't hurt me. It was a reflex. I surprised you. It's my fault.”

“No it isn't! I'm the one who almost-”

“Asriel, come on. Focus. Okay? First we get out and get home. Everything else comes after.”

Asriel nodded and let go, though his paws were still shaking. “Where... where did mom and dad go? I was so wrapped up in trying to hear anyone coming...”

“They went into the old restaurant and MTT Burger Emporium, looking for monster food I think.” Frisk tapped their phone and a blue light left behind a wrapped candy. “Here, I still have a few of these for emergencies.”
Frisk held out the candy and dropped it in Asriel's paws, almost missing as they winced, grabbed their head, and cursed. Asriel stared at Frisk's sudden grimace of pain, then put the candy in his pocket. “Don't suppose you have anything else in the phone box? Like a giant sword? Or a bazooka?”

“Well, there's Andrew's gun, but it doesn't have any bullets. So it'd be worse than taking a knife to a gunfight. Which you already gave me, so that defeats the point.” Frisk looked around the room. “Asriel... there's something off about this place. And I don't just mean the lights are off, or there's nobody here. Feels like something is different, I just don't know what...”

“Well, there's also half a dozen humans with guns out there. That's new.”

Frisk snickered. “I don't think that's it, but you're not wrong.”

The phone beeped and Frisk held it up to their ear. “Hello?”

“Frisk. Sans here. Where are you?”

“We're in the old resort building, just outside the Core.”

“Alright. We're coming for you. Sit tight.”

The doors at the other end of the building opened, and three skeletons walked in, only to immediately be surrounded by a wall of fire. The doors to the old MTT burger joint opened and a boss monster walked out, and less than a fraction of a second later another boss monster ran into the lobby, glowing scythe in hand.

“Raise your weapons and it will be the last act you take in this... Sans?” Toriel's warning ended in a question, and Sans waved behind the circling flames.

“hey Tori. thanks for the warm welcome.”

“SANS! THIS IS NEITHER THE TIME NOR THE PLACE!”

Toriel snickered in spite of the gravity of the situation, and the flames faded away.

“everyone else okay down here?”

“I suppose that depends on your definition of okay.”

Sans snorted at Frisk's deadpan delivery. “gonna take that as a yes. okay. here's the plan. you four are coming with me back to All Fine Labs. safest place right now. meanwhile dad's going to turn on the Core security systems and make life interesting for a few people.”

“I thought you were going to do that from All Fine Labs?”

Dr. Aster shook his head. “I tried, but nothing is responding right now. Not sure if the humans managed to disable the remote access from this side or if it's just a hardware breakdown. Easy enough to set up in my old office down here though. Okay Papyrus, ready to give these ignorant hooligans some lessons in applied mechanics?”

“NYEH HEH HEH! OF COURSE! I AM ALWAYS EAGER TO EDUCATE AND EDIFY!”

Sans held out a gloved hand. “good. all aboard the Shortcut Express.”

Four arms reached out, only for one to retract as Frisk grabbed their head.
“My child, what is wrong? Is it the headaches?”

“Ugh... they keep coming faster and faster and they get worse each time. Soon as we get to All Fine Labs I need some ice and some aspirin or something.” Frisk raised a hand to reach out to where the other Dreemurrs’ paws already stacked on top of Sans’ glove, only to stumble to their knees and grab their head with both hands.

Dr. Aster looked up as the building interior got brighter and brighter, and noticed the ceiling lights were powering on one by one, and Sans withdrew his hand to pull out his phone. “Sans, did you remember to turn off the anti-photon interferometer before we left?”

“Double checked, but I didn't have to, you already turned if off on the way out. But my sensors are all saying LOAD.” Empty eye sockets turned to look at Frisk, kneeling on the ground, eyes squeezed shut and face contorted in pain. “Frisk. This is very important. All cards on the table time. Do you know what is going to happen next?”

Frisk shook their head in the negative, apparently too distracted by the pain to speak. Sans turned and looked at his father, whose eye sockets were also empty.

“Sans, of the original experimental setup from when I disappeared. How much of it is left?”

“Not much. Most of it went up during the disaster. We ended up cannibalizing a lot of it later... wait, we didn't touch the original setup on the test platform, or anything else up top. I hoped that I could fix it at some point. Or Alphys could take a shot at it. So it's still there.”


Dr. Aster, for his part, didn't even appear to notice the mangled name. “Those imbeciles are turning the Core back on, and it's doing what it was doing last time, creating paradoxes and distorting timespace. The brighter the lights, the higher the power level, and the higher the anti-photon readings; that's what's tripping the sensor network.” Dr. Aster thrust out a hand, dark blue light already collecting in the hole in the center. “Everybody grab on. We are all going to my office right now.”

Frisk attempted to reach out, but immediately pulled back their hand to their head. A short, fuzzy arm grabbed them by the wrist and Asriel looked to Dr. Aster, who nodded.

In a flash of blue light, the warm, welcoming, and ostentatious MTT Resort lobby was replaced by a much more austere, pragmatic, and smaller space. Dr. Aster sprinted over to the computer terminal and began to type. “Lasers on. Doors closed. Disabling Puzzle Overrides. Power levels are at twenty percent and rising. Temperature is nominal, at least... wait.” Dr. Aster turned and looked back at Sans. “Didn't you tell me that you never automated the cooling system? I swear I remember you saying something like that Monday or Tuesday.”

Sans nodded. “That's right. Wasn't any need to. Ice Wolf took care of that until the Barrier was broken, and in idle mode the Core doesn't run hot enough to need external coolant.”

“Then we have two problems and not enough time to fix both of them.”

“Oh, goody.”

Dr. Aster nodded. “Yeah. I'll check the test chamber. You check on the breaker room.”

“Got it.”
“Sans, wait!” Toriel called out. “What are the two of you talking about? What is happening to Frisk?”

“Sorry Tori, there's no time, we gotta-”

“My child, your friend, is suffering! Make time for that!”

Sans stared at Toriel, then nodded. “I can tell you what I know, but it isn't much. When the Core went fireworks on us back in the day, it did more than just send dad into the future. It made connections between the past and the present and the future, and somehow Frisk got attuned to those connections. Frisk, can you hear me? How long have you been having these headaches?”

“Since...” Frisk sobbed through clenched teeth. “Since... after the Soul Link thing... at the labs.”

Sans stared with empty eye sockets.

“God dammit. That's when we started the low energy trials. That proves it. Frisk can feel the anti-photon process somehow. It's worse now because the Core does what we've been testing, but it does more of it. Now you know everything I do Tori. And I have to find a way to stop it. I promise I'll explain more later. Right now just keep Frisk safe okay?”

Sans and Dr. Aster vanished in flashes of blue light before Toriel could protest further, and she turned to look at her child, curled up on the floor of the office. A glowing green vine wrapped around Frisk's wrist, and Toriel looked up to see Asriel standing above Frisk.

“Asriel, what are you-”

“If it wasn't the Soul Link causing the headaches. Then that means I can help. I can take Frisk where the Core can't hurt them. I can help... I can... help....” The monster child got down on his knees, sitting on his heels next to Frisk, and his head began to slump over. On the ground, Frisk's hands and face both relaxed, and their breathing slowed down to something much calmer.

Toriel stared at the children on the floor for some time, then practically jumped as something touched her shoulder; Asgore's paw, as it turned out.

“Tori. It's going to be alright.”

“How can you even say-”

“Those two have been through more than either of us can imagine. And they are still going strong. All we have to is keep the humans away from them.”

Toriel stared at Asgore, then turned and walked over to one of the chairs in the office, and sat down. Papyrus made his way over to the door, and in a flash of light was joined by a pair of skull monsters wearing sunglasses.

“I WILL BE RIGHT OUTSIDE IF YOU NEED ME.”

The door slid open and the skeleton walked out, and then the Dreemurrs were alone. Toriel's paw reached up and wiped away at the tears spreading through her fur.

“...I did not know.” Toriel shook her head. “All that time. Asriel was right there. I did not know. My son... my baby... needed help. I did not know. I cast him aside like a weed. I did not know. Chara feeling as though they deserved to die. I did not know. Frisk terrified of being sent back to their family. I did not know... I don't know anything.”
“Tori. That isn't true.”

The queen buried her face in her paws and began to sob.

“...I cannot understand... I cannot understand... I simply do not understand....”

Frisk opened their eyes, and immediately noticed the light of the lamp post. The second thing they noticed was the lack of a tremendous headache. The third thing they noticed was the sensation of fuzzy fingers on their head. Tilting their head back, they saw Asriel's worried expression immediately transform into one of relief.

“You're okay. You're okay. For a bit I thought the headache thing... you're okay. Frisk, I'm sorry I didn't ask first, but it's all I could think to do. And, and... we don't know what's going on while we're in the link. If we try to leave too soon-”

Frisk sat up and hugged Asriel, and the boss monster stopped babbling. “Yeah, I have my table still reserved at Chateau du Migraine. That's going to be fun. It's alright, Asriel. This is a lot better than just lying on the floor trying not to scream in pain... but we might have to leave anyway. We can't expect Toriel and Asgore to carry us and fight at the same time, assuming that we can't get a teleport out.”

“...why did Sans change his mind on that, anyway? He was all ready to take us back to All Fine Labs and then your headaches got real bad and all of a sudden we're in Dr. Aster's office?”

“Yeah. Maybe they found something out during the tests today. Or maybe they're worried about the Core blowing up and causing an eruption, so they can't spare a single moment.” Frisk let go of Asriel and stood up. “We can ask him when it's all over and done with.”

“Yeah... guess that's something to look forward to.” Asriel picked himself up and looked at the lamp post. “Hey, Frisk...”

“I don't know where the lamp post comes from. I did read The Lion The Witch and The Wardrobe when I was younger but it didn't make that big an impression on me, the way other books did. Or all the Transformers cartoons.”

“Actually. I was curious about that, but that wasn't what I wanted to talk about.”

“...oh. What is it?”

“... when we were, uh. Going through the Ruins. Heading to Chara's grave. I couldn't stop thinking about all of the things I did during my resets. I didn't just get a second chance. I got a third and a fourth and... well. I don't know how many. I wasted every one of them. Every one except this one, right now, and it's been less than a week, so there's still plenty of time to screw up everything again. And Chara didn't even get one extra chance. That's what I meant, when we were back there. Chara... made one mistake. And it cost them everything. But I'm still here. After all those resets. After everything I've done. Everyone I hurt. Why...? Is life really that unfair...?”

Asriel stared at the misty, foggy ground beneath his feet, and Frisk reached out and grasped his paw.

“Asriel... tell me about Chara. Tell me how you first met.”

“...when Chara fell into the Underground. I was playing in the Ruins. They called out for help... I
found them lying underneath that hole. I guess that's why mom chose to bury Chara there. They... they were hurt pretty bad from the fall. I helped them walk back to Home.”

“Were you afraid of Chara then? A human in the Underground?”

“I don't think it ever occurred to me to be afraid. Even in hindsight. They were hurt and that was all I could think about.”

“...mom and dad, how did they respond?”

Asriel scratched one ear. “Mom heard me calling for her to help once we got to the courtyard, and she came running and healed Chara. Thinking back, even now I don't think she hesitated for a second. She was like me. She saw somebody hurt and that was it. I ran inside to tell dad and he seemed to think I was making up tall tales and laughed a bit...” Asriel smiled a little. “When mom came in holding Chara by the hand, his eyes got really big, and then I was the one laughing.”

Asriel's smile faded. “I think because mom and dad were so big, fully grown boss monsters... Chara was scared. But I only recognize that now. Back then I was so excited to meet somebody new. I fell all over myself trying to get things ready for the sleepover. That night, I don't think either one of us slept. Me because I was so excited. Chara because... well. That all came out the next day.”

Frisk nodded. “When Chara learned they couldn't go home?”

“Actually... that didn't seem to bother them. We went into the living room. Everyone sat down at the table except for me, I was standing by Chara, holding their hand... everyone asked questions. All we knew from the night before was a name and that they were definitely human, and they were ten years old. We were taking turns asking questions and giving answers. Chara... in hindsight, they left a lot of stuff out, but I guess they thought they were being interrogated. So I guess that's why they didn't tell us about the Sages, because they thought if we knew they were related to somebody who was a part of a group that believed in monsters and thought we were dangerous, we'd see them as the enemy, and... well, everything that comes with it. And I guess that's why they didn't say anything about the town except that it was there, because if they started talking about it they might let something slip.”

Asriel sighed.

“I can't believe I didn't pick up on it. How scared Chara was... mom might have noticed, I think? She asked if there was anyone waiting for them on the Surface. And Chara said there probably were, and they were already in trouble for being gone so long as it was... mom and dad looked really sad and mom said that they were sorry, but Chara couldn't go home just yet, and they started to shake and said, 'I had a feeling you were going to say that.' And we decided we'd spend the day going to Hotland, talking to Dr. Aster about the CORE and human stuff.” Asriel snorted. “We showed Chara the Barrier and it was like somebody flipped a switch. They said they thought the reason they couldn't go home again was because mom and dad were going to eat them. I thought it was hilarious.”

Frisk grinned. “Okay, yeah, I can see why they'd be nervous all the time, if they thought Toriel was going to have them over for dinner.”

“Oh my god!” Asriel laughed in spite of himself. “Even now you're making puns!”

Frisk grinned and turned to look out into the fog. Asriel heard phantom voices, but nothing clear enough to understand the words.
“...Asriel. Thanks for... bringing me here. I don't know exactly how all the anti-photon stuff and the Core stuff all relates to my headaches, but I do know it was getting worse all the time. I probably would have passed out on my own in another minute or two.”

Asriel stopped smiling and looked down at his feet.

“Frisk... I have a question to ask you. You don't have to answer. But... you knew who I was before I made my move, didn't you? When did you figure it out?”

“While I was reading the notes Alphys left in the lab basement. Or at least... I had a suspicion. A theory. One of like three or four. I, uh...” Frisk scratched their head. “I think the SAVE and LOAD stuff was driving me crazy, even before I was chased through the basement by Memoryheads and the Amalgamates.”

“Crazy like... uh. Like Tuesday night?”

“Yeah. When mom was freaking out at the lab, I wondered if I imagined the whole Underground in my head to escape the Taylor house the only way I could, and this was the other way around. I wondered if maybe I made up the Taylor house and everything that came with it. Part of me wondered if maybe I was actually this Chara person, come back to life without memories or something. It would have explained the weird feelings of déjà vu I sometimes got, even without coming back from dying. Or maybe I was a construct with false memories, an attempt by Alphys to make an artificial human Soul from bits of the other six that had fallen. Or maybe I was just in a coma in a hospital on the surface. Those were the sane theories, by the way. I was thinking some really weird stuff before Alphys showed up and got the Amalgamates to leave me be.”

“...so.” Asriel rubbed his paws together nervously. “You didn't know who I was at the end of first run. The fight at the Barrier. When I was trying to steal your Soul and become a god.”

“No. I didn't.”

Asriel swallowed. “Then. Even after all the stuff I said. Threatening to kill you and everyone you loved. And all the times I killed you before that. Why did you spare me? Why did you let me live?”

Frisk turned to stare at Asriel for a few moments, and turned away again. Asriel sighed.

“It's alright. Like I said. You don't have to answer.”

“...Asriel, you haven't had any headaches today, have you?”

Asriel shook his head. “Unless you count that dull ache between my eyes when we came out of the Soul Link at All Fine Labs, no. And that's nothing compared to everything else that happens.”

“So it's just me affected by the anti-photons.”

“Looks like it. Probably because you're the only one with the power to SAVE now.”

“That makes sense. But I wondered if it might affect anybody who could potentially use it, or who could remember old timelines.”

“Well, doesn't look like that's happening. But, it's not like we even know why anti-photons give you headaches in the first place. Are humans allergic to them or something like that? Or other types of energy?”
"Well, gamma ray photons will mess us up if we're exposed to enough of them. Same with X-Rays, that's why we have to wear those heavy lead vests at the dentist's office. Sunburn is what happens with too much sunlight. And there's people on the internet that say wi-fi signals and cell phones will make people sick, but I'm pretty sure that's not true for me. Knowing I can communicate with friends regardless of distance makes me feel really good. As for anti-photons the first I ever heard of them was the day Dr. Aster came back... makes sense when you think about it. I never understood how light could be its own anti-particle unless it existed in some sort of intermediate state between matter and antimatter anyway. Still, there's no human exposure data on that because human science didn't know they existed.” Frisk sighed. “Just my luck if I ended up reaching my lifetime safe limit going through the Underground because I didn't know any better.”

“...Frisk, is there anything on the Surface that can't kill humans?”

Frisk scratched their head. “...I don't think so. Probably the only reason we survived as a species is the whole DT thing. Being too stubborn to die when we should. Which is probably the only reason we won the war ages ago too.”

Asriel nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I could see that.”

Frisk looked away from the fog, back at Asriel again.

“You asked me why I spared you at the end of the first run. You deserve an answer. The truth is... I was angry.”

“You didn't kill me because you were angry with me??”

Frisk crossed their arms defensively. “It's complicated. You'd been bothering me since I fell into the Underground. When I finally beat you, and we were on the other side of the Barrier, I just wanted to go home... I was so tired. And you kept... saying things. And there was this anger inside of me. After all that. You still wouldn't shut up and leave me alone.”

Frisk blinked a few times and one hand came up to rub at one eye. “The reason I spared you is because. I wanted you to know. And know for a long time. That even as strong as you were. Even after killing me all those times. I still won in the end. You thought this world was kill or be killed. I didn't spare you because I wanted to be nice. Or believed you could be better. I spared you because I wanted you to choke on your own philosophy. I spared you because I was mean.”

Words began to echo through the fog, and Frisk flinched. “Oh. Of course. I forgot for a second where we are.”

“so, it's been a while. the queen has returned, and is now ruling over the underground. she's instated a new policy...all the humans who fall down here will be treated not as enemies... but as friends. it's probably for the best anyway. the human souls the king gathered... seem to have disappeared. so, uh, that plan ain't happening any time soon.”

The fog began to fade away, and Asriel saw a ghostly image of a child sitting on a bench, clutching a cell phone in both hands. Next to him, he heard Frisk's breath catch in their throat. The cell phone message continued to play out from the memory.

“but even though people are heartbroken over the king, and things are looking grim for our freedom, the queen's trying her best not to let us give up hope. so, uh, hey... if we're not giving up down here, don't you give up wherever you are, alright?”

The child, the younger Frisk, cupped one hand over their mouth, and began to tremble. Asriel saw
tear drops fall to the ground below the child as they reflected the light from the lamp post behind him.

“who knows how long it will take. But we will get out of here. That's a promise.”

“SANS! WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?”

“oh, nobody.”

“NOBODY?! CAN I TALK TO THEM TOO?”

“here, knock yourself out.”

“WAIT A SECOND... I RECOGNIZE THIS NUMBER! ATTENTION, HUMAN! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AM NOW CAPTAIN OF THE ROYAL GUARD! IT'S EVERYTHING I'VE EVER DREAMED OF! EXCEPT INSTEAD OF FIGHTING, WE JUST WATER FLOWERS. SO THAT'S EVER SO SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT. AND WE'RE HELPING DR. ALPHYS WITH HER RESEARCH! SHE'S GONNA FIND A WAY TO GET US OUT OF HERE. UNDYNE IS HELPING, TOO! THOUGH, TO BE HONEST, HER KIND OF HELPING... IS SORT OF... EXPLOSION INDUCING. BUT I THINK ALPHYS LIKES HAVING HER AROUND- UH OH!”

“Hey! What are you up to, punk?!”

“PLEASE DON'T NOOGIE THE PHONE.”

“Hey! Who's in charge here?!”

“ME??”

“...oh, yeah! That's right! I quite my job as leader of the Royal Guard. Actually, since we won't be doing any fighting anymore, the Royal Guard totally disbanded. There's, uh. Only one member now.”

“BUT HE'S EXTREMELY GOOD!”

“Yeah, he is! C'mere!”

“PLEASE DON'T NOOGIE THE SKELETON.”

Asriel snickered, and heard Frisk snicker beside him, but it was followed by a gasping, ragged breath.

“Anyway, now that I'm working as Alphys' lab assistant, we're gonna find a way out of this dump once and for all! Oh yeah, I'm a gym teacher at the queen's new school. Did you know I can bench press seven children?! Awesome, right?! ...hey. I'm sorry about what happened with Asgore. You were just doing what you had to do. It's not your fault he...”

The younger Frisk raised the hand that was covering their mouth to wipe at their eyes, and began to sob.

“...aw, darn it. I miss the big guy...”

“H-hey, Undyne? Are you okay?”

“I'm fine! Why don't you talk for a while?”
“Uh... uh, okay... man, she's tsundere... um... hi... so I really don't like talking on the phone. I never know what to say... hey, why didn't you tell me the queen was so cute? Uh, I mean, uh... M-Mettaton's doing okay! And! Um... I'm trying to find a way to get us out of here! B-but I kinda have no idea what I'm doing. I'll figure it out eventually though. The queen is a lot different from Asgore, she actually checks to see if I'm doing anything! She's really turned this place around! OH! Hey, do you want to... she says she's busy.”

“Oh, she SAYS she's busy!”

“BUT IF SHE KNEW WHO WE WERE TALKING TO?”

“we wouldn't get the phone back for at least a couple of hours.”

“WE HAVE THE MERCY TO SPARE YOU FROM HER!”

“B-but if you want to, call and talk to her any time!”

“Yeah! She'd be happy to hear from ya!”

“oh, whoops... this thing's almost out of batteries, so... hate to cut this short, but... be seeing you, okay, buddy?”

“BYE BYE FOR NOW!”

“See ya, punk!”

“G-good... good... hey, why do I have to be the one to hang up?! Ehehehe... I hate goodbyes... um! We'll see you again some day!”

The young Frisk shook their head as the message ended, and one shaking hand began tapping at the phone before stopping. Fingers curled through unkempt brown hair and pulled on it as the child leaned over and cried.

“...you almost called them back.” Asriel phrased it as a statement, not a question.

“...yes.”

“Why didn't you?”

“...what would I have said? I killed your king and ruined your best shot at escaping an ages old prison just so I could go home, but I don't want to anymore?" There was nothing I could have said that they wanted to hear....”

Asriel turned away from the fading memory to see Frisk looking down at their shoes. “Frisk. I killed dad. Not you. You know that.”

“I fought him. I hurt him. I hit him again and again.” Frisk's voice was barely a whisper. “Some things can't be fixed with a Reset.”

“...yeah... we have that in common-”

“No we do not.” Frisk turned towards Asriel and for a split second the boss monster felt a stab of terror. Hands grasped his paws and Frisk's angry expression faded. “Asriel. How long did it take you before you hurt anyone? It was after you lost count of resets, right?”

“...yes?”
“And the only reason you even discovered you could Save and Reset was because you tried to kill yourself.”

“Yeah. I had second thoughts before I was gone, and I guess that's why I didn't QUIT like the humans did.”

Frisk nodded. “Asriel. You are a good person. You are good now, you were good before you died, and you were good even as a soulless flower. I know this because it took so long before you started hurting anyone except for yourself. What you became is not your fault. What you became was awful because awful things happened to you over, and over, and over. You didn't know how to cope. Because you had no Soul, because you were a child, and because nobody could be expected to survive all of that without scars. You... Asriel, don't you see? You only fell because you were pushed. But I jumped. I hurt Asgore. I hurt everyone. I hurt you.”

Frisk let go of Asriel and stared at their hands, before crossing their arms again.

“That is why I am worse than you, Asriel. You had been hurt worse, and you needed help more, than anyone else in the Underground. And I never even thought about that until I was...”

Frisk sighed.

“Asriel, thank you for the break. But we should wake up now.”

“...Frisk, we don't know if Dr. Aster and Sans have fixed everything yet.”

“Even if they haven't. It'll hurt less than reliving all my mistakes. And after the message from everybody is the part where... I don't want to go through what happens next again. Or for you to see it.”

“...okay. After last time, I think I figured out how this works. Let's go....”
“Boy. That escalated quickly.”

Undyne shook her head in annoyance, but the mechanic was completely right. In less than twenty seconds, what was originally supposed to be a nice relaxing Friday evening decompressing and getting drunk at the Dank Memehaus turned into a scramble to get to Mt. Ebott. Eli and Hal both got texts at the same time, so it must have been a group text, and Eli had immediately pulled her away from the other teachers.

“Mt. Ebott. Humans in the Core. Could be Cater. Time to kick ass.”

They had decided to take Eli's car rather than wait, and Undyne found herself in the back seat trying to get in touch with Alphys while the sounds of clicking and other mechanical actions from the front seat meant that Hal was loading and checking firearms.

“I mean, that really got out of hand fast.”


“Your insurance policy is ready to go. Still loading the long distance special.”

Undyne blinked. “What's a long distance special?”

Eli shook his head. “It's an old joke that makes no sense without context. If we survive this remind me to explain it. Also technically it's a scoped rifle. For better or worse, Hal is our best marksman.”

“Wait, even better than Justin? The guy who was an actual soldier?”

“Somehow, yes. Hold on.” Eli took the turn very sharply and the tires skidded on the road for a few stomach-jostling moments before traction was re-established. Hal's phone beeped and he tapped the screen a few times.

“Hal Greene. You're on speaker.”

“Hal, it's Justin. I'm riding shotgun with Mike.”

“Great. I'm riding shotgun with Eli. And Undyne's with us.”

“Good. We'll need the extra power. Steve's bringing the cavalry but it's gonna take time. You heard from Joe?”

“Not since the first text. Maybe he's stocking up at All Fine Labs?”

There was a high pitched engine noise from outside, and Undyne turned to see a man on a dirt bike catching up to the car.

“Whoops. Never mind, there he is. Just popped a sick wheelie. It's the lack of safety that makes it cool, you know.”

“Ugh.” Justin sounded annoyed. “That bike is going to get him killed one day.”

“He's got a helmet on. Honestly, we're all much more likely to die in the next hour than he is of getting in a wreck.”
“Yeah. Thanks for the reminder. Because that hasn't been occupying all of my attention. Where are you guys?”

“We just passed Park Lane a few seconds ago—”

There was another high speed turn.

“Okay, we see you and Joe. You're right ahead of us.”

Eli cleared his throat. “Justin, tell Mike I'm sorry I ever doubted him about the traffic cams and the quad copters.”

“Well, my phone's on speaker so he heard you, but you know how he is when he drives.”

“Sorry, what was that about cameras and copters?” Undyne waved one webbed hand between the front seats. It was another voice from Hal's phone that answered.

“I set up my own set of traffic cameras with Joe's help back before the Sages got raided, when it looked like we might have to take matters into their own hands. Also I have some cameras attached to drones. They all give us real time traffic data. Makes it a lot safer to do the crazy turns we've been making when there's no time to stop. Not foolproof though. So I'd appreciate it Justin if you took your god damn phone off speaker.”

“Got it, got it.”

There was another turn, but this one was more gradual, and Undyne felt the car tilt on an incline. “Hey, I was too busy looking at everything else when we were coming down, how far do the roads go up the mountain?”

“Up to the scenic overlook they added last spring below the Underground entrance, but none of the roads are paved once we turn off the old highway project.”

“Can this car make it up there?”

Eli and Hal looked at each other and began laughing; Eli with a sort of muffled snickering, and Hal with a wild cackle. Eli got himself under control long before Hal did and grinned at the fish lady in the rear view mirror.

“Just you watch.”

Frisk opened their eyes and their hand immediately came up to their head.

“Ow. Owowow. Still, could be worse. Used to be.”

“Frisk, are you alright??”

The human child turned to see Toriel standing over them. “I'll be okay. I'll be okay mom.” Frisk sat up and reached over to pick up Asriel and hold him upright as well. “He's going to be all over the place for a few minutes.”

“Ima... take a potato... peeler... in the library. With Professor Plum. Not canned. Fresh.”

Toriel blinked and got down on her knees next to the children. “...Frisk. Can you explain to me what is happening? I know that much is going on, and there is much at stake. But you are hurting. I
understand that well enough. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Frisk blinked, and Asriel's paw reached up and grasped Toriel's paw.

“Mom. I... I'm sorry. I murdered you. I'll make it up. I'll be better. I promise.”

Toriel blinked and raised an eyebrow at Frisk, who shrugged. “At All Fine Labs, before he really woke up, he said something about almonds being a scam.”


“I'm right here, Asriel. I got you.” Hairless fingers ran through white fur, and Asriel relaxed.

“Oh. Good. I was worried. Stopping the link like that. Started to wonder. If you'd be stuck in there.”

“Yeah, that wouldn't be fun. Headaches aren't as bad now anyway. Just don't ask me to do any math.” Frisk looked around. “Where is everyone else?”

“Asgor is standing watch outside with Papyrus. I do not know where Sans or Dr. Aster are... Frisk. Please tell me what is going on. Is this... is this related to what has been bothering you all this time?”

Frisk stared up at Toriel's face and swallowed.

“...it's part of it. It used to be what kept me up at night the most, but not anymore. And here and now... I guess it's the only place I could really explain it.” A hand came up and rubbed Frisk's forehead. “Or at least what I understand of it, which isn't much. That's why I went to Dr. Aster and Sans for help. But I can tell you what I know for sure.”

Asriel's paw came up and grabbed Frisk's other hand. “Frisk, wait. You don't have to-”

“Asriel. It's okay.” Frisk reached out and stroked Asriel's head again. “Right now secrets will only hurt us.”

Asriel nodded slowly. “Okay.”

Frisk turned to Toriel who's face indicated even greater confusion and concern than before.

“Mom... you remember how you said that all the humans that fell down after Chara seemed familiar? Well. Uh. I guess the only way to explain it... is... you weren't the only one with that feeling. A lot of times in the Underground... I can't explain why or how. But I knew what was going to happen next. It saved my life more than once. But. I don't know how it works. And I can't control it.”

Frisk began to rub both hands together nervously. “Sans and I went to Grillby's to hang out for a bit, before I headed to Waterfall. He bought us both some food and offered me some ketchup. And I knew. I knew, not just because I realized he was a funny guy who liked pranks and practical jokes, I knew that he was going to pull the loose cap on the bottle trick on me. So I said I was okay, and then he drank the whole bottle and I did not see that coming. So there are limits to it. But it was enough to keep me alive when a lot of monsters wanted me dead for Soul number seven. That's why Sans and Dr. Aster were running those tests today. All we know is that it's related to DT Energy somehow....”
Asriel saw the opening and took it, clearing his throat. “We know that because it also happened to me. Back when I was a flower. The DT Energy Alphys used to bring me back, there's a similar effect. Monsters get *deja vu*, if they experience anything at all. But some humans like Frisk, and apparently the other six that fell before them... get more. But we don't understand everything about it.”

Frisk nodded. “Dr. Aster said it defaulted to the highest level of DT Energy in a closed system, and the Barrier meant the Underground was one, or close to it.”

“When Frisk fell, it stopped working for me. Or. It half-worked. But. Well, it's hard to explain. The thing is, for some reason I'm not getting headaches while Frisk is.”

“Well, if I'm honest,” Frisk smiled a pained smile. “Trying to figure all this out has been giving me headaches for a long time before today. So... we could probably stand to explain everything better, so if you need us to-”

“Of course. Now I understand.”

“You do??” Frisk and Asriel asked in unison.

Toriel nodded. “The Core mishap that took Dr. Aster from us for so long. It happened *after* Chara fell. By the time... everything else had happened, and other humans began to fall. Whatever happened in the Core to cause this had already begun.” The boss monster sighed. “I do not claim to understand the science of what is going on, but at least now I possess a broader picture, and I understand why Sans asked if you knew what was going to happen next. But you said you did not?”

“It hasn't... manifested, I guess you'd call it, since the Barrier was destroyed. We couldn't be sure because of... uh. Things we couldn't really test in a lab. But Dr. Aster and Sans had a theory that it only worked in the Underground while the Barrier existed, and he told me today before the Soul Link test that today's experiments were to see if they were on the right track with that.... Mom, I didn't know all this was going to happen, I swear if I had known, if I'd suspected, if I'd even had a gut feeling I would have-”

Massive fur covered paws rested on Frisk's shoulders. “My child. Please calm down. It is alright. I have not been handling what has happened to us this evening very well, and... I have been forced to confront some painful truths.”

One of Toriel's paws reached out to Asriel, and the other moved from Frisk's shoulder to take Frisk's hand, and the two children stood up. Toriel's arms pulled them both close in a hug.

“I am too used to having all of the answers. To being the one whom others look to for guidance. Being queen. Being a mother. And being a teacher... I have forgotten that sometimes the answers are not always simple, or easily obtained. And for a terrible moment I forgot what was most important. The only thing I truly need to know is if the two of you are safe. Everything else can wait until this is all over, and we are home again.”

“...we'll explain everything, mom. I promise. Dr. Aster and Sans will have to help but you deserve to know-”

“Frisk. Asriel. I know that there is a force at work that helped keep you both safe in a time of great difficulty. *That is enough for me.*” Toriel smiled. “And it is not as if I would understand the science in its entirety, even if you and the Asters do.”
The human child, their momentum lost, lapsed into silence. One hand found Asriel's paw and latched onto it.

Jordan stared at the light.

It was beautiful, in a way. It seemed to beckon with the promise of the answers to all of the most important questions in life. It held infinite potential in its glowing, pulsing radiance. But even more than that, it was the physical form of an abstract concept; it literally embodied the power of monsters. It was not simply a nebulous idea which could only be opposed symbolically, obliquely, gradually. It had physical existence, and that meant it could be destroyed by a physical act.

The prospect of bringing the monsters one step closer to defeat filled Jordan Cater with Determination.

Jordan raised his shotgun, pointed it at the glowing star, and-

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Jordan spun around, but the space was so vast, and the sounds of machinery so omnipresent, that he couldn't tell where the voice had come from. Beside him, Thomas was in a similar predicament.

"It's funny. I remember before we got all this started. High spirits everywhere I looked, not just in the CORE or Hotland, but all over the Underground. I stopped by New Home to let the King know we'd be starting full tests in a few days. Had a nice chat with the Queen. Caught up with Asriel... really need to catch up with him again now that he's back, to be honest. And of course I had to visit Chara."

"Whatever you're thinking about saying next, you had better think again," Jordan growled. "I don't want to hear it. And you don't want me to hear it."

"Chara was knitting a sweater for the King. 'Mr. Dad Guy' I think it said. I mean, I'm guessing, since it wasn't finished yet. Could have been something else. But it was much, much too large for you. It was definitely Asgore's size."

Jordan said nothing, and the voice sighed. "It took me this long to figure it out. Just like it took me this long to figure out the mechanics of the time displacement. It's always in the last place you look, isn't it? Chara was the only one not excited about breaking the Barrier because-"

"Because she understood what that meant for humanity! All of you spreading out over the surface of the earth like a plague, corrupting everything that you touch, leaving death and destruction in your footsteps."

"Because once the Barrier was broken, Chara thought she would have to go back to you. She'd have to give up the family she had found. And go back to the family she must have run away from. No wonder she looked so sad."

Jordan clenched his teeth so hard it felt like some of them might crack. "Chara climbed the mountain to fight all of you. And you kept her alive like a god damn trophy. Just like that girl with the rat's nest hair."

"You mean Frisk, right? The child you shot and almost killed? How's that 'protecting humanity from monsters' thing working out for you so far?"
For a moment, Cater seemed at a loss for words, and the voice continued. “Oh, wait, let me guess. Frisk has been helping monsters, so that makes them a traitor, so they don't count and that made it okay to try to murder them. Is that it, or did I miss a step in your warped logic?”

“God I hope Chara dusted at least one of you before you overwhelmed her.”

There was a low chuckle. “Chara never raised their hand once, against anyone. And I laugh because I was the one who expected her to. I was raised on the stories of the terrible scourge that was humanity. Souls made of pure evil that could turn monsters to dust with a single touch. Because I was a skeleton, and you people equate skeletons with death for some reason, we were both afraid of each other. And then we both grew out of it.”

“...I'm tired of this. Come out and show your face so I can blow it off your god damned head.”

“If I were you, I wouldn't be in such a hurry to die. You see, I'm the one who taught Sans how to fight humans. Just as I learned from my father, Semi Serif Aster. Who made it his life's work to bring down the Barrier and make all of humanity pay for thousands of years of claustrophobic darkness. Jordan Cater...”

An entire section of machinery glowed blue, and moved with a rumbling, clanking sound, to reveal a staircase descending beyond it. and at the top of the stairs stood a skeleton with a cracked skull, wearing a lab coat.

“My name is Doctor Wing Ding Aster. And if you are currently enjoying yourself, you had best get ready to stop.”

Jordan and Thomas both aimed their weapons at the monster and fired... or at least, they tried to. The triggers refused to move, and Jordan looked down to see that his entire gun was glowing blue. He didn't have to turn his head to understand that Thomas was in the same predicament.

“Firearms. An impressive human invention, if I'm honest. Projecting offensive force, kinetic energy, and killing intent much further than you could hope to accomplish with your own bodies, or simple force multipliers like bows and slings and spears. But there is always a danger in relying on something separate and distinct from yourself... well, no. I misspoke. I apologize. The danger is not in relying on something outside of yourself. The danger is assuming it will always be there when you need it.”

The shotgun pumped itself repeatedly, ejecting unused shells onto the metal grating below until it was empty. Thomas, on the other hand, was almost struck as the bolt from his rifle was opened and pulled out of the assembly with a scraping sound.

“I'd apologize if that damaged the weapon beyond reassembly, but I don't actually feel bad about it.”

Jordan smirked. “Hah. Your honesty is refreshing. So how do we do this? Up close and personal? Or are you just going to try to toss me into the lava from here?”

Dr. Aster shrugged and gestured with his hand. The bolt went flying to the floor below, and the shells rolled past the safety railing, but the guns themselves no longer glowed. “As cathartic as that last option would personally be for me, well, there are problems with it. I'd much rather we just wait here for the police to arrive and deal with you instead. But if you insist on a fight, I'd be happy to oblige. You were paying attention earlier when I told you I taught Sans how to fight, right?”

“Apples and oranges. Sans got under my skin. He had to resort to mind tricks to throw me off
balance.”

The skeleton rolled the lights in his eye sockets. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Jordan Cater cocked his head to one side, then dropped the empty shotgun. “Alright then. You have the tactical upper hand. And while I'm mostly sure I could rush you and rip your skull off before you could stop me, I'm not sure enough to actually try it. So... let's talk then. You monsters certainly do enough of that.”

“Fine. I have nothing better to do while we wait for the police. What do you want to talk about?”

Jordan pointed his thumb at the glowing star behind him.

“What else?”

Dr. Aster shrugged. “Why am I not surprised. Alright. What do you want to know?”

“How does it work?”

There was a snort from the skeleton, though Jordan couldn't see how if the monster didn't have lungs. Which raised the question of how it was speaking in the first place, but that was a different problem entirely.

“Asking how it works implies that it does anything. It's a singularity, Mr. Cater. A self-contained, self-sustaining knot in the timespace continuum that points and laughs and makes rude gestures at thermodynamics. It just is. Or are you asking how it was created?”

“That works too.”

The skeleton scratched its jawbone with one boney, see-through hand. “You're not going to believe me when I tell you this, but I don't know.”

“You're right. I don't believe you.”

“Of course not. I know it was an accident, and I know that primarily because we were trying to do something different. Store energy to destroy the Barrier, first directly and then indirectly. But there was a system breakdown, and instead we ended up creating shortcuts through the timespace continuum.”

Jordan Cater nodded. “That's how you knew when to destroy the Barrier and come down from the mountain. When you knew the Guardians couldn't stop you all.”

“What??”

“You really didn't think somebody would figure it out? You used this whole place to send information back in time. You as much as said so yourself during the meeting in Quarterhorse Fields.”

Dr. Aster stared at Jordan for a few moments, completely silent... and then started to laugh, as if Jordan had just shared the funniest joke that the doctor would ever hear in his lifetime. For a moment he seemed to be getting himself under control, but his eye sockets opened, looked at the humans, and then the laughing started again even louder and harder. One boney arm rested against the wall to keep the skeleton from falling over, and Jordan was half tempted to try to rush the monster, but suspected the entire laughing fit to be a ruse to get him to drop his guard.
Finally, Dr. Aster genuinely seemed to have gotten all the laughter out of his system, and stared at Jordan with what was probably an amused expression.

“You serious??”

“What the hell was that all about?”

The monster shook its head. “That whole idea. Sending information from the future back to the past. To reduce problem solving calculations, simulations, and iterative testing to the minimum possible time lag. What you humans called quantum computing. That was Sans’ idea. And I said, while that was interesting, we could do better. We never had a dimensional computer. We only started to do the preliminary hardware testing today. If it even works at all, it wouldn't be ready to use for the better part of a decade.”

“...no. I can't read your face like I would be able to with a human being, but I still know you're lying. Everything lining up the way it did. The raid on the compound. The Barrier being destroyed. All the political concessions you keep getting. The school, the Exchange Trust, that robot going Hollywood. The way you stopped the Anti Monster League last week without losing anybody on your side.”

“Fine then. Believe what you want. Believe that we knew exactly what was going to happen when you escaped custody on Tuesday and let it happen just so you could come here, vandalize the CORE and ask me asinine questions. If that shields your ego from accepting the fact that you people are so incompetent that you couldn't kill a single human or monster last week, then that's fine by me. It's your problem. Not mine.”

”Do you really. Honestly. Expect me to believe that with all of this,” Jordan waved his hands around to indicate the CORE in general, “and everything you said about time energy and controlled paradoxes, that you couldn't even send your past self a simple message in Morse Code?”

Dr. Aster's eye sockets narrowed and his eye lights faded in anger. “You want to kill me and everyone I know and care about, and wipe my race from the surface of this planet. Explain to me why I should give a fuck about what you believe. Also, because your ignorance offends me even more than your genocidal racism, that's exactly what we spent several hours testing today. I don't know how much you know about physics but as it turns out the timespace continuum is a lot more complicated than your human science fiction movies make it out to be.”

“...fine then. Let's say you're telling the truth about that. What's stopping you from sending a message like I said? Interference? Parallel universes? Does the signal only go back so far, or does it have to go back a certain amount of time before it can even be detected?”

The skeleton smirked, if that term could apply to a creature without lips. “A little bit of all of that is involved, actually. But those are side effects of the real force at work. That star behind you? That was an accident. Concentrated energy from a thousand broken timelines, concentrated into a space smaller than a pencil eraser, and tangled up by a reinforcing paradox; each successive timeline breaking destabilized the ones adjacent to it in a chain reaction. The photon energy simply exploded into timespace, creating shortcuts between then and now. Self contained loops of power, oscillating back and forth between the past and the future. If and when information gets sent back in time, it has to follow those shortcuts, those loops, during one half of the cycle. The anti-photon energy, well, that's how I got here. To me, that experiment, everything that went wrong with it? That happened less than a month ago.”

Jordan turned to look at the star again. “So... anything that from the future would have to travel back through this thing?”
“Not anything. Energy only. Matter sent backwards in time collides with its past self and explodes. And not that thing particularly. The experiment was like setting off a bomb. Information would have to travel through the shortcuts. The shrapnel. That star isn't shrapnel. It's Ground Zero.”

“...okay then. You have to use the shortcuts to transmit and receive. What else is getting in your way?”

Dr. Aster pointed at Jordan. “You are.”

“...I'm flattered. I mean, I'm confused, but I'm flattered.”


“Dee What?”

The skeleton crossed his arms. “Thanks to you last week, I had a reminder of just how fragile the human body really is. When Frisk Dreemurr was in the hospital, fighting to stay alive. And for the first time in my life, I saw that fragility as a drawback, not an advantage.”

“We are fragile? Have you looked in a fucking mirror? You're dust held together by wishful thinking. I could kill you with one hit.”

There was the sound of footsteps on metal, and Jordan turned his head again... to see Sans standing behind him, at the top of the other staircase to the platform.

“we're all dust in the end, buddy. don't think you're special just because it takes you longer.”

The taller skeleton chuckled. “As my son put it so concisely. Your bodies are mostly water. Our bodies are mostly magic. Both provide a medium for energetic and physical reactions and activity. But your bodies rely on those reactions for everything, reactions that rely on other reactions, on specific elements and compounds, on extremely narrow ranges of temperature and pressure and electrical charge. If it gets too hot, you die. If it gets too cold, you die. If ambient air pressure goes up or down too much, you die. Electrical interference can stop your heart, jam your muscles, damage your brain. And let's not get into the train wreck that is your digestive process. Do I need to list any more examples? You said you could kill me with one hit. That might be true. But somebody could kill you with one hit too, and they wouldn't even have to be trying to do it, so long as they hit the right spot. But we're getting off track. The reason you people have survived as long as you have... that you've survived at all, really... is the power in your Soul. DT Energy.”

“What does DT mean?”

“It's short for De-Termination.”

Jordan's eyebrows shot up and his eyes opened wide. “Wait, really? It's called Determination?”

“If you got a better name for it we'd love to hear it.”

“No, no... actually I think we agree on something for once. Never thought I'd say that.”

“Never thought I'd hear you say that. Well, isn't that progress...”

“Sorry I interrupted there. Go on?”

Dr. Aster rolled his eye lights. “DT Energy literally keeps you alive when you should be dead, long enough for the conditions that put your life in danger to be corrected or changed. That played a not-
insignificant role in saving Frisk's life last week. The higher somebody's DT levels, the more they can survive.”

“That's good to know. Now I feel even better about surviving everything that happened at the Auditorium.”

Sans cleared his throat... somehow. “actually that was a fluke. we all got a bit ahead of ourselves there.” In a flash of light, Sans teleported over to the other skeleton. “you survived because the attributes of your Soul that let you shrug off outside influences... Level of Violence, DF, INV... they were all really high.”

Dr. Aster nodded. “Fortunately, the Aster family has ways around that. Not that it concerns the subject at hand. We were talking about DT Energy. Based on what we've been able to reliably test, which isn't much, we know it can either amplify anti-photon reactions in the time loop, or nullify them. That's why our experiments today have been so all-over-the-place. We don't yet have a means of measuring polarity, if that metric even applies.”

Jordan Cater smiled. “...so. If you really are telling the truth. Then you don't know what's going to happen next.”

Dr. Aster held up an index finger. “That's not entirely true. You see... I know that when your friend there started flailing at the keyboard at the remote workstation like a monkey trying to type Shakespeare, they accidentally reactivated the old anti-photon synthesis program. It's been in the automation standby buffer all this time and nobody ever bothered to remove it. Of course, most of the hardware from that experiment was either destroyed or used for repairs years ago. So all the energy from the geothermal plant is feeding into that singularity behind you. And energy has to go somewhere. That's the only reason we can even see it now, the energy density is so high it's bleeding through the boundaries between dimensions. Like excess water spilling over the edge of a cup or bucket. So that's not the safest place for the two of you to be standing right now.”

“Oh, and if you think one of your buddies is going to sneak up behind us and catch us by surprise, that ain't happening any time soon. They all got an all expenses paid vacation in the old MTT Resort while we wait for the police to arrive. it's actually really funny, they all fell for the same stupid trick. just took the sign from outside the power room and put it next to the Resort entrance and took out the bridge when they were all over there.”

“You don't say? That's disappointing. Those three guys were the best I had.”

Sans stared at Cater, held one hand out to the side with the palm down, produced a bone, and shot it behind him. The fourth human doubled over, dropping his rifle and grabbing his groin with both hands, without ever making it to the top step of the staircase behind the monsters. Cater winced in sympathy, and Sans shrugged. “Sorry, buddy. It was written all over your face-”

Cater spun around, pulling something from behind his back as he did. Sans had just enough time to recognize it as some sort of pistol before he fired it directly at the star.

“Hal, anyone else get invited to this party?”

Hal looked up from the rifle he was loading. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, there's six of us in Shop Class. Steve's not here yet but he's bringing the cavalry, with the flashing lights and the sirens. But I don't see any yet. What I do see is a truck ahead of us. And I
think there's a van behind Mike's pickup.”

“Maybe Joe called in some favors before he got on the bike?”

“Maybe. When we hit the turn off, I'm going to get up close, rush the outside corner. You see if you can recognize the driver.”

“Got it.”

The disorganized convoy of vehicles made their way off of the safety of paved roads and onto the unpaved affairs that prevailed on a mountain that scoffed at conventional civil engineering, and Eli slipped past the truck and matched its pace. The passenger side window rolled down with a mechanical hum, and Hal stuck out his head and one arm.

“Hey! We'd like two cheeseburgers, one with pickles and one no pickles! And a large fries! Undyne, you want anything?!”

Eli shook his head in exasperation. “I don't know why I'm surprised. Recognize 'em?”

“Nope, can't say as I do-”

The truck suddenly swerved and Eli tapped the brakes, just narrowly missing being pushed off of the road.

“Jesus! That better have been a fucking accident!”

Ahead of them, a rifle was suddenly pointing out of the passenger side window.

“I don't think that was an accident Eli.”

“Is that a fact? What was your first clue?”

“Well, somebody's trying to point a rifle at us. I mean there's other stuff, but that's the big one.” Hal stopped talking as he heard one of the windows behind him roll down. Looking back, he saw Undyne half in, half out of the vehicle, and as she crawled out he heard the creak of metal from the roof of the car.

“Eli, I don't know how to tell you this, so, you know, I won't. Just drive very, very carefully.”

Atop the car, Undyne pulled a spear together and tossed it at the gun pointed at her; whoever was leaning out of the window immediately assessed her as a higher priority target, but did not react fast enough to get a shot off. The wood splintered and the metal bent, flying every which way as the owner retreated back into the cab. The driver swerved out of the way, leaving more than enough room for Eli to pass, but he didn't seem to be taking the bait.

Looking behind her, Undyne saw that the van that Eli had spotted and Mike's truck were grinding against each other like chariots in a human gladiator movie. Holding up one hand, Undyne produced another spear and tossed it at one of the tires of the van; it missed, but unnerved the driver and his copilot long enough for Mike to make some headway against them.

A flash of purple light out of the corner of Undyne's eye got her attention, and she located Joe, holding Alphys' bullet projector and firing at the back window of the pickup truck. Glass shattered and whoever was driving either panicked or had a brilliant idea, because they slammed on the brakes.
Meaning Eli had to slam on the brakes.

Undyne felt herself skid forward on the roof of the car, and jumped just before leaving it.

'Ooh shit I hope I didn't break his windshield I really don't want to have to pay to replace it'

The fish woman cleared the gap, tumbled into the pickup bed, and looked up to see three faces looking back at her, and part of a fourth counting the eys of the driver in the rear view mirror. The expressions she could see went from angry and eager to terrified as she smiled.

"Now we're talking!"

Eli stared as the pickup truck began to weave back and forth across the road as the occupants panicked. “Hal why didn't you tell me Undyne was up there??”

“I told you, I didn't know how to tell you!”

“Jesus... dammit, we need to get past these assholes before they spin out and block the road. How's everyone else doing?”

Hal turned and looked back to see the van pull ahead of the pickup, and Joe was obliged to move up to keep pace with Eli's car. “Oh, you know. Same shit, different day.”

One spear made its way past all of the occupants of the pickup and slammed into the dashboard, shattering something vital. The driver suddenly began frantically striking the locked steering column in an attempt to free it, but the pickup was now stuck on its last heading, which took it off of the mountain road.

Undyne saw the tops of trees and quite literally leaped without looking, and prepared to tuck and roll once she hit the rough road below, when an engine roared and a corrugated metal surface appeared beneath her; after tumbling from the impact Undyne came to rest against some sort of metal wall. It took a moment to register that she had landed in a pickup bed, and Justin Carrow's half-surprised, half-confused expression was staring at her from the passenger seat of the cab. She could also hear somebody yelling, even over the roar of engines and the grinding of tires against the road.

“HAH HAH! VICTORY IS MINE YET AGAIN!!"

In the cab, Justin returned to examining his grenade launcher. “Okay, we're not doing the Ben Hur shit anymore, which is nice, but if I'm going to take them out we need more distance. These things don't arm right out of the gate.”

“Actually I think Undyne's taking care of it.”

“What?” Justin looked up to see a woman leaning out of the side of the van with a shotgun suddenly retreat back inside. A spear missed her by inches, collapsing into nothing as it hit the ground, and the pickup ran through the spot without incident. Another spear missed the driver's side tire but shattered the tail light, and apparently the driver of the van had the same idea that the driver of the other pickup truck had, and slammed on the brakes.

Unfortunately for the occupants of the van, while Elijah McGraw's fuel efficient compact car was obliged to move out of the way or risk destruction from a collision, the same could not be said for Michael Van Garret's over-engineered, customized pickup truck. The back of the van crumpled, and Justin could hear a muffled explosion as one of the tires was shredded by bent metal being pressed far too close to its spinning surface. The vehicle turned, skidded across the road, and slid
off the front of the pickup much as a bug might have been wiped off a windshield; it left a mess, but it didn't slow anybody down.

Justin turned to see the vehicle stop by the side of the road, and heard Undyne laughing. And, while her body was in the way, Justin was almost completely certain the fish woman had flipped off their opponents with both webbed hands.

“WARNING. WARNING. CORE HIGH ENERGY CONTAINMENT BREACH DETECTED. EVACUATE THE FACILITY.”

Toriel looked up in alarm, and held both children tightly to her as the floor started shaking and warning lights began to flash in the office. The door burst open and Asgore and Papyrus ran inside.

“Tori, grab the children, we need to leave now! We will cover you!”

Toriel, already holding both children, adjusted her grip and lifted them off of the floor.

“FOLLOW ME, YOUR HIGHNESSES!” Papyrus sprinted out of the office, the Royal Family following behind him. In the distance, alarms blared and sirens wailed and lights flickered and flashed. On the opposite side of the catwalk, a section of floor fell away just before Papyrus got to it.

“MODULE 2B7 NOT RESPONDING. MODULE 3C1 NOT-T-T-T RESPONDING. MODULE 3A3 NOT RESPOND-D-D-D-.”

The skeleton held up a hand and the floor floated back up, glowing with a flickering blue light.

“SOMETHING IS VERY WRONG! THE WHOLE CORE IS BEING FLOODED WITH DIMENSIONAL MAGIC! GET ON BEFORE I LOSE MY GRIP ON THIS MODULE!”

The monsters rushed onto the platform, which descended roughly and in a shower of sparks, and jammed just before reaching the level below. Toriel and Asgore jumped the last few feet as the surface buckled and collapsed to the level below. Papyrus landed in front of them and pointed down another catwalk.

“THIS WILL TAKE US TO THE CENTRAL HUB! FROM THERE WE CAN DESCEND TO THE ACCESS LEVEL AND MAKE OUR WAY TO THE ELEVATOR TO THE CASTLE!”

“Papyrus, do you know what's happening??”

“I DO NOT YOUNG PRINCE DREEMURRR, BUT I DO KNOW THAT WHEN THE AUTOMATIC WARNINGS BEGIN, THINGS HAVE ALREADY BECOME VERY BAD! ACCORDING TO SANS EVEN THE CORE DISASTER YEARS AGO DID NOT ACTIVATE THEM!”

“Where's Sans?! Where's Dr. Aster?!” Frisk's voice, panicked verging on hysterical.

“EITHER ATTEMPTING TO REPAIR WHATEVER HAS GONE WRONG, OR ALREADY OUTSIDE WAITING FOR US! IN EITHER CASE WE MUST MOVE AS FAST AS POSSIBLE!”

“ATTENTION. CATASTROPHIC DATA LOSS DETECTED IN AUTOMATIC-C-C-C DIAGNOSTIC AND COMMUNICATION RELAY NET-T-T-TWORK. PLEASE REINSTALL FROM
The catwalk the Royal Family was crossing creaked and groaned ominously, and for one heart-stopping, stomach clenching, gravity defying moment one end detached from its anchors and fell a few inches before other components collided with the surrounding hardware and locked it into place again.

On relatively solid ground once the catwalk was left behind, Frisk could feel Toriel's arms shaking around them, and looking at Asriel's expression indicated he was feeling the same thing.

“CONNECTION TO POWER MANAGEMENT-T-T SOFTWARE HAS BEEN LOST. RETRYING FIRST OF THREE TIMES.”

A wall in front of them exploded in a burst of light and electrical energy, and the fragments floated lazily through the air with a strong blue glow that eventually faded, causing them to fall to the floor. Beyond the wall, a lightning storm raged, flashing through all of the colors of the spectrum. The Royal Family sprinted past it, while Papyrus vaulted ahead to try to slow the damage to those parts of the CORE necessary for escape.

“CONNECTION FOUND. SYNCING. SYNC FAILED. RETRYING FIRST-T-T-T OF THREE TIMES. SYNC FAILED.”

With a titanic screech of tortured metal, a Core module began to glow a deep blue and slid out of position, and for the first time, Frisk could see the source of the chaos tearing apart the facility; up above, past towering masses of machinery, a brilliant star burned and swept long streamers of plasma out into the world.

The child's jaw dropped.

That was what had bothered them at MTT Resort, what had been sitting in the back of their mind since the trip began, from the throne room to the Ruins and back again.

The stars were gone.

Frisk's stomach lurched, first from realization and then again a moment later as the floor below gave way. Toriel, Asgore, and Papyrus all fell as a module was knocked off of its tracks and tilted, and despite her best efforts Toriel lost her grip on both Frisk and Asriel.

Somehow, even in the chaos of an unexpected fall, Papyrus managed to stick the landing.

“NOT TO WORRY EVERYONE! WE'RE ALMOST TO THE FREIGHT ELEVATOR! SAFETY IS WITHIN OUR GRASP!

“RETRYING SECOND OF THREE TIMES. SYNC FAILED.”

Toriel and Asgore scrambled to get upright, while Asriel shot out a vine at a support strut to pull himself both upward and forward. Grabbing Frisk's arm with his other paw, the two children landed relatively upright and started running again, Papyrus right behind them and the King and Queen behind him in turn. Amazingly, the last two bridges to the elevators were completely intact and solid, and the broken open door stood wide open. Inside the vast open space of the cargo elevator, still featuring some of the modifications Mettaton had added ages ago for his battle with Frisk, the floor was cluttered with wreckage from above.

“THIS LOOKS LIKE A JOB FOR MY SPECIAL ATTACK!” Papyrus summoned a floating skull, which launched a beam of energy at the wreckage to clear the way, and there was a satisfying
clanking noise as the last bits of metal fought free... then an ominous grinding sound as the elevator began to ascend.

“WHOOPSIE DOOPSIE. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT SOME OF THAT WRECKAGE WAS... UH... LOAD BEARING. FINE! IT IS PERFECTLY FINE! WE SIMPLY NEED TO RUN ACROSS THE ROOF OF THE FACILITY AND I WILL SUMMON THE ELEVATOR CAR WITH MY MAGIC, AND WE CAN ESCAPE THAT WAY!”

“RETRYING THIRD OF THREE TIMES. SYNC-C-C SUCCESSFUL.”

The elevator lurched to a halt at the top of the CORE, and Frisk looked up into a storm of energy. And in the heart of the storm was the star, just like all the others that had been scattered through the Underground.

“Hey! Hey!” Frisk heard a high pitched voice call out and turned to see two figures running towards them across the top of the CORE, stumbling over the wrecked surface and around pockmarks where energy had bored into the metal like a drill.

“STAND FORTH AND BE RECOGNIZED! AND IF WE'RE MEETING FOR THE FIRST TIME, INTRODUCE YOURSELF!” Papyrus pointed at the figures, and as they came closer and were no longer back lit so badly by the star, Frisk could see that one figure was supporting the other.

“Dude, we surrender! We give up!”

“OH. WELL. GLAD WE GOT THAT SETTLED.”

“God damn man, I put up with a lot of shit in my day but I draw the line at getting blown up by a time machine inside a volcano! I quit this! You got a way out of here right? Take us with you and I'll tell you everything I know about Cater!”

“THAT SEEMS LIKE AN ACCEPTABLE TRADE! JUST REMEMBER, NO TAKESY-BACKSIES!” Papyrus pointed across the facility towards a long pipe adjacent to a pair of support columns. “THAT TUBE IS THE ELEVATOR SHAFT TO THE NEW HOME CASTLE! IF WE CAN GET THERE, I CAN SUMMON THE ELEVATOR TO SAFETY!”

“That's the best news I've heard all day. You're my new best friend!”

“WOWIE! I'VE NEVER HAD A FRIENDSHIP ATTEMPT WORK SO QUICKLY BEFORE! PROPER INTRODUCTIONS ARE IN ORDER AS WE FLEE TO SAFETY. I AM THE GREAT PAPYRUS ASTER! WHO MIGHT YOU BE?”

“Uh... okay, sure. I'm Martin. Martin Walker. And this is Thomas. Normally he's more talkative but I think he hit his head falling from that thing up there.” Martin waved his one free arm back at an elevated platform in the center of the CORE facility's roof.

Frisk looked back, recognized the three shadows moving beneath the star, and reversed direction.
Jordan Cater was not enjoying himself. And that was putting it mildly.

No matter how fast he struck, no matter how obvious the opening, he couldn't connect with the skeleton. Dr. Aster danced and dodged out of the way as if their entire fight was a scene in a movie or musical that he had spent months choreographing.

“WHY WON'T YOU FUCKING HOLD STILL?!”

“Because then you could hit me easier and I don't want that. Come on, this isn't rocket science Cater.”

The only bright spot in the whole experience was that whatever was happening to the rest of the CORE wasn't affecting them so close to the star; his gunshot had breached some sort of field and let something loose, pouring into the space beyond, but being close enough to the star was like being in the eye of a hurricane.

“Hey dad, I've got good news and I've got bad news. Which one do you want first?”

Dr. Aster ducked, jumped back, and rapped Cater's knuckles with a bone attack as the human attempted to follow up. “Bad news first. Let's get it out of the way.”

“Okay. Bad news is the singularity build up is two point eight times faster than the discharge we are seeing right now, and we're coming up on the same level of saturation we did when you first disappeared.”

“Have you tried the shutdown-”

“WARNING! POWER MANAGEMENT SOFTWARE IS NINE-NINE-NINE-NINE-NINE DAYS OUT OF DATE. UPDATING TO LATEST-T-T-T-”

“-code?” Dr. Aster finished as the announcement system glitched again.

“Yup. This console is totally locked up. Only thing that's working is the analog readouts.”

Dr. Aster sent a series of ribs spinning through the air like boomerangs, some of which clipped Cater's legs, causing him to fall to one knee while cursing up a storm.”

“Okay, what's the good news?”

“Actually I wasn't done with the bad news yet. The discharge is all over the place but it's definitely in the Blue Magic band, so we can't just shortcut out of here. And we don't have enough time to make it to minimum safe distance before we reach critical photon saturation.”

“That figures.”

“The good news is that in four or five years when we show up in the future, Papyrus will be even better at cooking than he is now. Probably have his own restaurant and TV show.”

“Hmm. That's something.”

“Also, this waste of water won't be able to hurt anybody. They'll probably think we're all dead, just like everyone thought you were dead, but we'll still be remembered as heroes. We might get
statues. Humans are very big on statues for some reason, you noticed?"

“Yeah, I did actually. Always wondered what that was about.”

“WILL YOU SHUT UP!!”

“naw. that's not much fun for me.”

“Sans!”

The short skeleton's eye sockets went pitch black, and he ran over to the safety railing and looked down. A human child was sprinting up the stairs to the test platform, and some distance behind them on the roof off the CORE was a boss monster.

“Frisk?!”

“Sans! I couldn't see the stars! The loop doesn't work anymore!”

“Kid get out of here! This whole place is going to do the Time Warp Again in a minute!”

“AGH SUNNOVABITCH!”

Sans turned to see his father fall back against the railing, just as he'd remembered from years before, and suddenly Sans was on the defensive, dodging punch after punch, kick after kick, until he was forced to jump off of the platform and join Dr. Aster below. Jordan looked down over the edge to see that Sans survived and was running to check on his father, and turned around.

The child.

The child was reaching up, touching the star.

“So Dr. Aster was lying. Thomas was right. The monsters did have an inside track all this time. They had you.”

Frisk shrieked as a hand grabbed them by the back of the neck and pulled them away from the star.

“The power to change events, to dictate the course of history. The power to decide people's lives for them. The power of the old Gods to curse mortals and meddle with their fates.”

Jordan Cater, Guardian of Perseverance, carried Frisk Dreemurr over to the railing.

“The power of the Gods does not belong in the hands of children.”


“Right. And give that goat bitch the opportunity to roast me alive. No, I think you'll stay right here with me for now. I'm almost certain she won't risk harming me if you're in the line of-.”

Cater felt a sharp pain in his arm and his fingers loosened out of reflex. Frisk twisted free and took a wild swing with their knife, and another, and another, again and again and again.

“Don't you talk about my mom like that!”

“Stop that you little brat.”

Cater kicked out, catching Frisk in the chest and sending them backwards... and upwards, against
the railing. They tipped over, and Cater had just enough time to register their surprise before they disappeared.

Somewhere, Cater could hear the queen scream, and looked over the edge of the platform at the floor below; the child's left leg and neck were both bent at impossible angles. Blood poured from an open mouth and dripped down into the grating the body was lying on. He expected a fireball to come at him at any moment, but the boss monster only had eyes for the fallen child.

“...it was an accident,” Cater mumbled to himself, turning towards the star. “But even still. She made her choice long

* FILE LOADING...

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“So Dr. Aster was lying. Thomas was right. The monsters...”

Jordan held up his hands, blinked a few times, and looked at his arm. No knife wound.

“Wait. What just... you-?! You already used it?!” Jordan rushed towards the child, his hand reached out...

The child spun around, knife in hand, and Jordan impaled himself on it; he had enough time to notice the bizarre mix of expressions on the child's face before they twisted the blade. Jordan stared at the metal sticking out through the back of his palm, saw and felt a tendon snap, and screamed.

His whole body was thrown back and slammed into the control console hard enough to knock the breath out of him, and even in his panic, he saw the blue glow around the child's left hand. The glow faded, and the child turned back to the star, dropping the knife on the platform. Their left hand reached out and touched the boundary between the star and the rest of the universe, and the star began to glow even brighter. The child's hair, already long and messy and unwieldy, stuck out of their head from the static charge, and sparks began to arc from strand to strand, and between the child's fingers.

“I won't let this future be erased. I won't. Everything we've done. Everything we've seen. Everything we've learned. These are my friends' lives. These are my family's hopes and dreams. You can't take them! Do you hear me?! YOU CAN'T TAKE THEM!”

The star flashed a blinding, brilliant white, and Cater could feel the CORE shaking beneath him as titanic forces surged through its hardware, forces it was only barely able to contain and direct...
Frisk carefully reached into their pocket and pulled out their cell phone, and began navigating the menus and apps with their thumb. Fragments of memories were not only coming back to them, but taking on new significance. The screen flickered a few times, text switching between English letters and those bizarre symbols... finally, Frisk pressed Send.


The blinding light began to fade almost immediately, as did the rumbling in the Core. There were loud crashes as machinery collided, no longer supported by whatever forces had been holding them apart and away, but they were definitely diminishing.

“VENTING HEAT EXCHANGERS. CHECKING FOR THERMAL GRADIENT... THERMAL DECLINE DETECTED! SHUTDOWN PROCEDURE COMPLETE. ESTIMATED RESERVE POWER: TWENTY. EIGHT. MINUTES. HAVE A NICE DAY.”

Frisk put their phone back in their pocket, turned to glare at Cater, picked up the knife from where it had fallen, and started to walk towards the stairwell.

Jordan Cater tried to breath again, and found he could do so, though it was pained. From below, he heard voices.

“...Dr. Aster? Are you okay?”

“Oof... yeah. Yeah, I'm good. I'll be fine. Just need some food and a night's rest and I'll be good as new.”

don't worry about it kiddo. i've seen Cater's stats. no matter how much he hated us there's no way he could have... Frisk? What are you holding?”

“...Sans. Please take this away from me before I hurt anyone else.”

“...is Cater...?”

“Alive.”

“...that's good. you're a bit young for that kind of thing anyway, you should at least be waiting till you're old enough to drink.”

“FRISK! Can you not go five minutes without putting yourself in danger?!”

“wow. uh. Tori, you, uh... sure got here fast.”

Jordan struggled to get up; not only was his best chance of escape while everyone was distracted, but his chances of not only escape but survival drastically fell if he had to fight an angry boss monster with fire magic who was incensed over the danger to their pet human.

A boney hand reached down to help him up, and Cater looked up to see Dr. Aster. To the extent it
was impossible to understand the facial expressions on what was essentially a skull, he looked... smug.

“Well. You certainly managed to make a mess of something we didn't need anymore. Feel better about yourself now?”

“Hmmph.” Jordan Cater accepted the hand, and was pulled upright. “At least I gave you something to remember me by.”

“Not likely. Ribs grow back.”

“No they don't.”

The skeleton smirked. “Speak for yourself.”

Undyne hopped down from the bed of the pickup as the convoy pulled up to the scenic overlook. Hal hopped out of the car and aimed at the van, as did Joe as he rolled up on his bike. A few spears coalesced into existence, following behind Undyne as she moved forward slowly. By the time Eli was out of the car with his shotgun, and Justin had hopped out of the pickup truck, all the doors had been carefully pried open....

The van was empty.

“Huh.” Hal pointed at the steering wheel. “They even left the keys in the ignition.”

“Getaway vehicle, probably.” Eli mused. “Doesn't look like they left us much else to go on. So, do we wait for Steve and his peers to get the benefit of numbers, or do we run in now?”

Justin pulled out his phone and started scrolling through his contacts. “Intelligence makes or breaks stuff like this. Trying to call Sans right now. Hoping I don't give away his position but I also don't want us to all run into an ambush.”

Undyne's phone began to buzz and she pulled it out, sighing. “Well. Alphys just found out what's been happening and is totally freaking out.”

“Undyne, you're the only one here who's ever been in the Underground, that means you're our eyes and ears,” Justin pointed out. “Ambush points, blind spots, sight lines, everything.”

“Right, right...” Undyne tapped at the phone and held it up to one ear. “Hey honey, can't talk right now, gotta head into the Underground to... no, there wasn't any time... please calm down, I'll be home as....”

The noise from the phone was loud enough to be heard by the six humans, regardless of distance, though none of them could make out the exact words. Undyne's face flushed and she started to sweat. “I will, I promise! You don't need to worry... I swear, I'll be back before dinner. I know! I know... I love you too. Bye!”

Undyne hung up and put away her phone, then abruptly looked around at Shop Class, as if only then realizing they were there. “What?!! Alphys... is a little high strung. She needed reassuring.”

“That didn't sound like a panicked lizard scientist so much as an angry lizard scientist,” Joe remarked. “Granted I never heard her sound that angry before. Even when Alex and Brendan caused a fire in the server room.”
“Look can we just focus on what we're going to do next?!”

Justin nodded. “Right. Okay. If nothing else, we can reconnoiter the parts of the Underground closest to the surface, prepare Steve and the police.”

Undyne nodded. “That's the New Home Castle. There's an elevator that goes directly to the CORE from there-”

“HELLO UNDYNE!”

The fish woman and the six humans looked up at the ledge where the cave was located that lead into the throne room, and saw Papyrus waving.

“I AM SORRY THAT YOU MISSED THE EXCITEMENT, BUT IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO GLARE AT THE HUMANS WE HAVE CAPTURED, FEEL FREE TO GLARE ALL YOU LIKE!”

“Wait what.”

Undyne could see a procession of humans and monsters make their way down the mountain trail; it looked like six adult humans, the Royal Family, and the Asters. As the humans got closer, Undyne recognized one of them immediately.

“Jordan Cater. Wow. This is becoming a regular thing on Fridays in this town.”

“What's a Man Friday? Or did I hear those words wrong?” Joe walked up next to Undyne, who pointed at the wanted man.

“I don't know if I should feel good that we caught him already, or bad that I missed out on fighting him again.” Undyne grinned. “It was over way too fast the first time, and the second time Papyrus and I were playing interference against the mob. Really wanted to see what he could do one-on-one.”

“Oh. Well. To be honest, we have that in common, being conflicted like that. I feel glad he's caught, but I also feel really angry that we gotta give him up to the police when they get here.”

“Ah, yeah. Right. Like that thing about how you can lead a gift horse to water but you can't make it drink.”

“...you know, my grandfather told me the same thing before he died.”

The captives and the monsters guarding them finally reached the scenic overlook, and Shop Class almost automatically formed a perimeter, with the prisoners in the center. Undyne only recognized Cater, who was nursing a wounded hand wrapped in bandages that had soaked through with blood. The other faces were unfamiliar, and none of them seemed in the mood to speak. Looking at the monsters, on the other hand, Undyne immediately noticed the tired, haunted expressions on the faces of the King and Queen, and Asriel had latched onto Frisk and refused to let go... for that matter, the Ambassador seemed to be in a daze, their eyes unfocused and their responses to outside stimuli very slow. Even Sans had a serious expression as he talked to his father, leaving only Papyrus with any sort of optimistic perspective.

“THE DAMAGE TO THE CORE WAS QUITE EXTENSIVE, HOWEVER IT HAS MORE THAN SERVED ITS PURPOSE SO THERE MAY NOT BE A PRESSING REASON TO EFFECT REPAIRS RIGHT AWAY OR AT ALL. POWERING THE HANDFUL OF AUTOMATIC SYSTEMS IN THE UNDERGROUND CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED WITH
WHAT REMAINS OF THE IDLING GEOTHERMAL PLANT, AND THIS WHOLE EVENING HAS BEEN A CONVINCING ARGUMENT IN FAVOR OF LEAVING THE ELEVATORS OFFLINE BY DEFAULT.”

“Yeah. That makes sense.” Undyne and Papyrus walked over to where Frisk and Asriel were sitting on the ground, next to each other. “Hey, punk. You doin' alright?”

“...no.”

Undyne blinked, and automatically turned to Asriel's worried face.

“When we were trying to escape, Frisk saw Cater fighting Dr. Aster and Sans, and ran back to help. They ended up... they ended up fighting him one-on-one.”

“Wait, seriously?! What happened?”

“I...” Frisk swallowed. “I stabbed him in the hand.”

Undyne opened her mouth, and then noticed Frisk's shaking hands... and remembered all the times since Tuesday night when she had seen Frisk absentmindedly reach up to rub their left shoulder. The one that Cater had shot. A webbed had reached out and rested on Frisk's other shoulder, and felt the child trembling.

“Is everyone else okay?”

Frisk nodded. “I... I think so.”

“And Cater and all the other humans that attacked the CORE, they're alive. They'll be arrested and stand trial. Is that right?”

Frisk nodded again.

“...then there you go. Good job, Frisk.”

“Undyne. I wanted to do more.”

“You did well enough, trust me.”

“No. No. I wanted to hurt him more.” Frisk looked down at the ground and wrapped their arms around themselves, as if trying to ward off of a chilling wind only they could feel. “I... the knife was in my hand before I realized it... I lifted it up as Cater reached for me... when it was, when it was inside. I twisted the blade. And. And. I wanted to cut him again. Again. And Again. And Again. Until there was nothing left but a red paste.”

“And did you?”

Frisk looked up in confusion, and Undyne motioned towards Cater with her head. “He looks mostly intact to me.”

“I dropped the knife. I didn't do anything else. But I wanted to.”

“But you didn't.”

“But I wanted to.”

“But you didn't.” Undyne smiled. “Cater shot you because you were in his way, and he technically
killed you. The only other person he hurt that bad is hugging you right now,” Undyne nodded at Asriel, “and there's a lot of other people who suffered because of what he did, too. He's going to have to answer for all of that. Judged for every action. For every person he hurt. Frisk, you chose justice instead of vengeance. Not everyone could have done that.”

“...never felt so angry before in my life. It was terrifying. Like I was going to lose control and just...” Frisk shook their head. “Everything feels weird and my head aches and I kept thinking I was going to snap and turn into some sort of... can't even say it.”

“It's gonna be okay, Frisk.” Asriel squeezed the human child even tighter. “You're here. I'm here. Everyone's here. We're all okay.”

Somewhere in the distance, far below on the mountain slope, sirens could be heard.

“Undyne... could you please ask Sans to come over here when he has a moment? I need to tell him something important.”

“Sure thing, punk.” Undyne stood up and walked towards Sans and Dr. Aster, talking with Papyrus as she did, and Asriel looked around. Hal and Justin and their friends had Cater and the other humans surrounded. Mom and Dad were talking in low tones with each other, off by themselves.

“Frisk... are you...”

“I spent... all that time... trying to escape from the loop. And I was free and I didn't even know it. That's why I came back in the hospital three times, instead of resetting after the first. I was already out. I was free. And now... now I'm trapped in it again.”

“If it hadn't been you. Cater would control the timeline right now, probably.”

“I know...”

“...I saw what happened, Frisk. Even from where I was. There was no mistaking it. And. I've never been happier to have the timeline jump around me like it did, when you came back. Even if I did trip and fall flat on my face.”

Asriel felt Frisk relax in his arms, and let himself relax in turn.

“...how would that even work? Your snootle sticks out so far.”

“Very painfully. Also why do you keep calling it a snootle?”

“Isn't that what it is?”

“hey buddy, Undyne said you wanted to talk?”

“Yeah. Sans... I think all the time that. That I wanted you and Dr. Aster to help get out of the loop. I was already out. But after what happened just now, I'm stuck in it again.”

“...when you say stuck, what do you mean?”

Frisk sighed. “The first time around. Cater grabbed me by the neck while I was trying to touch the SAVE point. I struggled, we fought, he kicked me over the railing... my... my neck snapped. I remember that much before coming back. That was how I...”

Frisk's words trailed off, and Sans stared at the child.”
“...dad got the crash logs off his computer while I was rounding up the three stooges from the resort. Somebody sent out the shutdown code over what was left of the CORE's internal network. Guess that was you.”

“Yeah. That was me. I knew normal cell signals didn't work in the CORE, but Alphys was able to contact me, even when Mettaton was going off-script. So the phone had to be able to communicate with something designed to work inside the CORE. And Alphys told me so much of monster technology was made from different bits of human junk, recycled and modified, taken apart and put back together over and over. I didn't... I couldn't be sure. But I had a feeling that if I sent a group text like I did, something in the CORE would recognize it and pick it up.”

“Frisk, how did you know what the shutdown code was? I mean it wasn't secret or anything. Everybody from dad all the way down to the newest intern knew. But I don't know how you came across it... and that's really freaking me out.”

Frisk shrugged. “Since, since I got shot, I've been having really weird dreams. In some of them, I was in the CORE. I saw... symbols. I didn't know what they meant, but I kept seeing the same ones. Over and over. I just thumb-typed the ones I saw the most, and hoped for the best.”

Sans let out a sigh, and Frisk flinched. “I know. I know. I could have been telling the CORE to do anything, maybe even make things worse—"

A gloved hand rested on Frisk's shoulder. “Nah, that's okay. Frisk, I was worried you didn't know what the code was so you had to... brute force it. Using the LOADs.”

Frisk's eyes opened wide, and the child started to shake much more than they had been previously.

“Okay that would have... that would have sucked. Didn't happen but. Really didn't need that idea in my head.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Asriel readjusted his grip on Frisk. ”You can just rock us to sleep tonight.”

Frisk snickered, which all other things being equal, was a good sign. “Yeah. Or a bedtime story.”

Sans winked. “alright then. fair's fair. i know 'Peek-A-Boo With Fluffy Bunny' by rote now anyway.”

“Excuse me, Sans?”

The skeleton and the two children all looked up to see Toriel and Asgore walking over to them. The queen cleared her throat. “I would appreciate, now that we are no longer in danger, if you would explain just what is happening to my children?”

Sans looked up at Toriel's face and nodded.

“Alright. Looks like we got time before the police get here and things get busy... so. When the CORE went haywire years ago. We created a singularity by accident. A sort of... not exactly a fixed point in timespace, not exactly a hole, but like them both. Energy can travel back in time, and information with it. With... with dad gone, we didn't know what we had. We barely knew enough to get the CORE all the way back again. But it was there. Waiting. Doing its thing.”

Sans looked up to see that Dr. Aster had walked over to stand by him, and continued. “We know... we know that it can send information back in time. I have sensors all over the Underground that detect anti-photons produced by this singularity and its artifacts. But that's like turning on a light. It's either on or off. I wanted to use them to send information back in time, once. Help us solve
problems faster, get out of the Underground sooner. But somebody beat me to the punch. Well... a bunch of somebodies. Every human that fell down after the disaster.”

Toriel nodded. “I believe I understand. Frisk... described it as akin to seeing visions of the future.”

Sans turned to look at Frisk, then shrugged. “Kid used a different metaphor for me and dad, but we're scientists, so... well, I don't know what it's like so one explanation is as good as the rest, as long as the math checks out. So yeah. To people like you and me... it would be like somebody else suddenly got a hunch. They wouldn't be able to explain it, but they'd be right about what happened next.”

“But... if this gives insight into the future... why did only Frisk survive? Why did the others fall...?”

Sans stared at Toriel. “We... we don't know everything about this yet, Toriel. We only learned today that Frisk got headaches from the anti-photons. And we still don't know why.”

Toriel turned to look her children with a sad expression on her face. “...Frisk. When you ran towards Sans and Dr. Aster. Was that a vision?”

Frisk closed their eyes and shook their head. “No. I didn't know what was going to happen next. I just couldn't leave them behind. But I did... have a vision when I was, when I was on the platform. Next to the star. That, and a bunch of dreams I had this week, that was how I knew how to shut down the CORE and stop Cater.” Frisk shook their head again. “And if it never happens to me again in my lifetime, it'll be too soon.”

“You said it.”

Toriel turned to Asriel. “You received a vision also?”

“Yeah. Right after Frisk did. While I was running. That's why I stumbled the way I did.”

“...I see. Thank you.” Toriel breathed in and out, slowly. “So much has happened today. Visiting Chara's resting place... the violence. The destruction. Learning about this. I... this will take time to understand and come to terms with. But there is something I can and must do right now.”

Toriel walked over to where Undyne and Papyrus were talking; the skeleton immediately noticed the approaching queen and turned to stand at attention.

“HELLO, YOUR MAJESTY! IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN HELP YOU WITH?”

Toriel engulfed Papyrus in a massive hug.

“Papyrus. You stood guard over myself and my family, and guided us to safety even as the world fell apart around us. I can never thank you enough for that. You have already done so much. Thank you. From the bottom of my heart. Truly, you are very great.”

The queen let go and Papyrus stood stock still, eyelight glowing with a brilliant intensity... and for the first time in his life, The Great Papyrus was speechless.

“W...WOWIE...” the skeleton choked out.

Undyne grinned. “I think you broke his brain.”

Asriel and Frisk found themselves seated on Mr. Van Garret's pickup truck tailgate as the police
Frisk turned to face Asriel. “What is it?”

“Seems like everything worked out in the end. Jordan Cater is captured. That guy, Martin. He's already told the police a lot about where the 'New Guardians' have been hiding, and who's working with them and for them. And there wasn't a Reset.”

“...there is that.”

“Take a deep breath. There's nothing left to worry about.”

Frisk followed Asriel's advice, breathing in slowly and letting it out again. The child raised their hands up and looked at them.

“There is one thing, Asriel. One last threat.”

“...it's going to be okay. I promise.”

“To stop Cater... I had to use it. Blue magic. Pushed him back. He knows.”

“...well. From where you were standing, nobody else could see. Either the angle was wrong or it was too far away. And nobody's going to believe him. Nobody sane, anyway. He's tried to kill you twice. First time you didn't get a chance to fight back. Second time, you beat him by yourself.”

Asriel winked and stuck out his tongue, and Frisk smiled; the expression was familiar, and seeing Asriel use it again somehow made them feel better. “Not to put you down or anything Frisk, but you're not exactly Undyne. If Cater fought Undyne and lost, people wouldn't be surprised. You're a ten year old kid. Knife or not, that's going to bruise his ego. They're going to think he made it up if he talks about it.”

“I guess there's that... it's got to come out sooner or later, but he can't rush us. Maybe I can figure this out and find a way to get rid of it or cancel it somehow, and then explain after the fact. It's a long shot, but so was texting the shutdown code.”

“That's progress, isn't it?” Asriel grinned, and Frisk began to smile deviously.

“Hey, Asriel. I just realized. You used to be a flower. Now you're not. But when you tripped earlier... you did a face plant.”

Asriel stared at Frisk, and his grin disappeared. One eye twitched, and Asriel clenched his paws into fists as he growled. “OH MY GOD. This. This is why Papyrus and I are friends! We both hate it when people subject us to this sort of punishment.”

“I see what you did-”

“AUGH NOW I'M DOING IT WHY?!”

Frisk cackled in laughter as Asriel buried his face in his paws.
“Excuse me, sorry to interrupt.”

Frisk and Asriel looked to see Officer Steve walking over with a pencil and notebook in his hands. “Hey Officer Steve.”

“Hey Frisk. And you're Asriel obviously. Helped keep Hal from trying to turn his water heater into a robot butler or whatever he thought was a good idea after drinking Red Bull. Nice work there. I was hoping I could ask you some questions, Frisk.”

“Sure. Go ahead.”

“Alright. Jordan Cater over there says you gave him that nasty cut in his hand.”

Frisk's expression immediately became somber. “Yes. I did that. It's my fault.”

“Hmmm.” Officer Steve scribbled something on his notebook. “He said it was from a knife. Do you still have the weapon in question?”

“I gave it to Sans. I probably shouldn't be handling sharp objects if this is what happens when I do.”

Officer Steve nodded. “Alright. I'll check with him, get that taken into evidence. We're gonna have to ask you and the Royal Family to come to the police station and make statements, but you're not under arrest or in trouble.”

“Even after I stabbed Mr. Cater?”

Officer Steve snorted. “If word gets out that you did, worst case scenario is somebody sends you one of those Edible Arrangements things where the fruit is cut to look like flowers and stuff. That's my opinion. Oh, I'm sure his lawyers will raise a fuss, if he can find anybody to represent him. I don't like to make judgments until all the facts are in, but I'm upwards of ninety percent sure that as far as you're concerned, this is an open and shut case of self-defense. In fact even with the knife in evidence it might not come up at all if he keeps going on and on about 'the monsters have a time machine' and 'the brat with the rat's nest hair can use magic' and 'the Exchange Trust is manipulating the global commodities market' and so on and so forth... you alright?”

Frisk tried very hard to control their breathing, but Officer Steve had still picked up on the fact that something was off.

“Well... I don't know how Mr. Cater found out about it, but I can do this.” Frisk held up their hands and performed the classic “Detachable Thumb” optical illusion.

“GAH!” Asriel scrambled away from Frisk, almost falling off the end of the tailgate. “What the heck was that?!”

Officer Steve snickered. “Ah, yes. The notorious Removable Thumb spell. Which toppled empires and leveled mountains. Cater's right, you're clearly a harbinger of the apocalypse.”

“Do I get, what is it, clemency if it's the only trick I know? I never pulled off the coin-behind-the-ear thing.”

“The term you're thinking of is leniency. And since Asriel here seems about to lose his mind, you're good. Just thought I'd clear that up. Knowing how to perform optical illusions is not a felony offense.”
Asriel took a few deep breaths. “...I did not see that coming.”

“Hey, Steve.”

The policeman looked up, and the two children turned around to see the librarian walk up along the side of the pickup. “Trying to figure out how to move everybody. There’s enough police cars to hold Jordan Cater and the Sages Comeback Tour, but after that it becomes a problem.”

“How did everyone get up here in the first place?”

“Sans gave us a shortcut,” Frisk piped up, and Mike nodded.

“That’s what Sans just told me. Thing is, after the fight and whatever else happened down there, Sans and the Doc can’t teleport anybody for a while.”

“Must have been a hell of a fight.”

“The Doc is literally missing ribs.”

“...wow.”

“He doesn't seem that worried. Anyway... if that van is evidence, we can't use that because that would contaminate it.”

Officer Steve nodded. “Yeah. Somebody from Impound is going to come up and take it back, call in the forensic team from Quarterhorse Fields PD to take a look at it.”

“Okay then. Undyne, Papyrus and Sans can fit in the back of Eli's car. Asgore can ride back here like last time.”

“Wait, when was last time?”

“Yesterday. Hal and Papyrus and King Dreemurr borrowed it.”

“Oh... this is the first I'm hearing about... oh. Oh. Wait. Now I remember. After Hal came down from the Red Bull.”

“Right. The queen can ride with me, she just barely fits in if I adjust the passenger seat for maximum room. But that still leaves the Doc, Justin and these two whippersnappers.”

Officer Steve nodded. “If the king and queen's alright with it, the kids can ride in my cruiser, and Justin can ride shotgun. Just in case there's anyone else out there who wants a piece of us. Saw your handiwork coming up the road.”

“Yeah, what happened to those people?”

Officer Steve looked down at Frisk and Asriel, walked over to Mike and the two men headed away from the pickup truck. Asriel held up one floppy ear.

“...Officer Steve said both vehicles were abandoned and whoever was in them is still on the loose.”

Frisk nodded. “Looks like they were having a party up here while we were having a party down in Hotland.”

“Not sure what kind of party you mean.”
“It had loud, noisy music and flashing lights, so I guess a rave. And up here I guess it was a picnic, out in the open air.”

Asriel rolled his eyes. “For a moment I thought you were going to say they had a-”

“Tailgate party?” Frisk finished with a grin, and Asriel slapped himself in the face with one paw.

“Why. Why do I keep walking into these pun traps??”

The sun was beneath the horizon by the time the convoy reached the Ebott’s Wake city limits. Inside the back seat of the police cruiser, Asriel's view was limited to what he could see outside each side window, but he knew that the librarian's pickup with his parents was in front of them. And behind them was the compact car carrying Undyne, Hal, Papyrus and Sans; arguably the most dangerous concentration of individual people in the town.

Frisk had dozed off on the ride back; the necessarily slow pace going down the mountain, followed by the necessity for caution in the event of ambush, probably helped with that. Asriel didn't know whether to be envious or not, but certainly Frisk needed the rest after confronting Cater again. The boss monster's paws clenched and unclenched, thinking about what had happened before... being attacked while holding Chara's body... seeing Frisk lying in the hospital... the two battles on top of the CORE, one of which only he and Frisk would ever remember, but he knew he’d never forget.

“Justin, is it just me or are we looking at a lot of people on the streets tonight?”

Officer Steve's remark got Asriel's attention, and he looked out of the window. There did seem to be a lot of people, but for Asriel 'a lot' could mean something much different than what Officer Steve meant.

“Actually it looks about right for Friday night in Ebott's Wake. Especially when it starts cooling down after sunset. And that's on top of the cooling down from the intermittent showers. I'd say this is about normal.”

“Hmmmm. Could be I'm just paranoid.”

“Hey, you're not paranoid if they really are out to get you.”

“True enough. Hey. Keep an eye out for anybody not looking at us. Normally people look at police vehicles when they show up, because we're out of the ordinary. The only people who don't are the people too busy to care and the people trying to act like nothing is out of the ordinary.”

Justin nodded. “Right. I remember when you explained that part. The whole 'you are now breathing manually' thing.”

Officer Steve looked up into the rear-view mirror. “How you holding up back there Asriel?”

“I'm okay sir. Frisk is asleep though.”

“That's fair. It's only about five more blocks to the police station. We'll get everybody's statements and then you guys can head home and relax.”

“...not really in a hurry, to be honest. Probably going to have nightmares about what happened in the CORE for the next year or so.”
Justin nodded. “That's one of the few downsides of being a survivor. Sometimes I still wake up thinking I'm in some god forsaken mountain pass on the other side of the world-”

Justin's head had turned to look out of the window as he spoke, and suddenly his whole body jerked in alarm. “JESUS FU-”

Officer Steve must have seen the same thing, because he slammed on the gas and the cruiser rushed forward; despite that, something massive collided with the vehicle, not only pushing it but causing it to tilt upward. Frisk woke up with a shout that turned the angry duet from Justin and Officer Steve into a trio. The police cruiser stopped moving as suddenly as it started, and outside Asriel could hear the sounds of screaming and gunfire; beyond that it was impossible to think straight.

“You guys okay back there?!?”

Asriel nodded, not able to articulate any words, and it looked like Frisk was in a similar state of mind. Officer Steve turned to look at Justin.

“How you holding up Justin?”

“I'm fine. Can't get out this way though.”

The police radio erupted in traffic, words tumbling over each other without anyone taking the time to clear the channel. Officer Steve opened his door, then immediately closed it and ducked back inside as shots rang out.

“Shitfire! Can't get out this way either!”

“How the hell did they bring a truck with a snowplow blade into town and not catch anyone's attention?”

“What??”

Justin pointed towards his window. “Some asshole hit us with a snowplow. Ugh. Focus. Okay. Got my launcher. If we can figure out where we're being shot from, I can send them a care package.”

The police cruiser shook as the snowplow outside was shoved back. Outside, Asriel heard a familiar, booming voice.

“Everyone, hold still!”

There were flashes of light that arced through the doors, and the crumpled metal fell away in sections. Outside, Asriel could see his father, holding a glowing scythe of magical energy.

“I have tried to be patient but I am quite tired of my children being in danger!”

The occupants of the car scrambled out and into the shadow provided by the king's gigantic stature. The sounds of panic, sirens, and gunfire were everywhere, and Asriel and Frisk both covered their ears to try to block out the noise. Daring to look around, Asriel saw that one whole side of the snowplow had been scorched and in some places melted by a massive fireball, and Toriel had surrounded somebody with a ring of flames. Not far away, Mr. Van Garrett had somebody in a stranglehold, somebody who was probably regretting all of his life choices.

“EAT A BAG OF HOT SALTY DICKS YOU SONNOVABITCH!”
Asriel turned around to see Joe Stanton with Dr. Aster riding behind him on the dirt bike, throwing purple blasts of energy and glowing blue bones into the fray, although from where he was crouched down Asriel couldn't really tell what was going on, who was fighting who, or where anybody was. There were spears occasionally flying through the air, which gave a rough idea of where Undyne was, and that was about it.

“Fuck fuck fuck FUCK!” Asriel felt Officer Steve slam his fist into the ground beside him. “They got to Stein and Bradley! They're gonna spring Cater loose!”

Deep inside Asriel, something was resonating...!

“Oh, COME ON!” Justin yelled. “How many Get Out Of Jail Free Cards does that asshole even have?! Okay, tell me where they are! Let's see him run away with a lung full of tear gas!”

“Second police cruiser behind Eli’s car! Justin nobody's suited up for tear gas on our side!”

“Can't make an omelet without a little friendly fire!” The grenade launcher made a sound Asriel had never heard before, like an impossibly large jug of something carbonated had been uncorked, and soon the area Eli had pointed out was covered in a misty cloud.


Chara screaming.

And there he was.

Walking out of the cloud of gas like it didn't exist, clutching one hand with the other, looking around at the chaos with an almost bored expression. Behind him, Joe and Dr. Aster were coming around for another pass, but he moved to the side without looking, dodging the bones he couldn't possibly have known were coming for him.

'Oh no you don't.'

Asriel's paws came up and vines formed, shooting towards Cater, but not the smooth, idealized, abstract vines from before; these were covered in thorns and snaked impossibly as they headed towards their target, more like brambles than anything else. And for one glorious moment. A moment Asriel felt that he would treasure for the rest of his life, no matter how long it was. Asriel saw Cater's expression halfway between realization and terror.

Then he was pulling the man back, scraping him across the road, back to the wrecked snowplow and the ruined police car and where he dimly understood that Justin and Officer Steve were shouting again, but instead of being angry they were ecstatic. The gunfire increased, and more and more of it was aimed at him but Asriel didn't care. Cater was not getting away.

Cater was not getting away.

“Asriel get down!” A massive arm grabbed the child and pulled him back behind the snowplow, and the vines snapped. Cater pulled himself upright and began to run, and Asriel screamed in anger. More vines grew from his paws, down into the ground below, finding the cracks in the street and forcing them open, and boring down inside, Asgore tightened his grip, but not quickly enough as Asriel dove down into the earth.

Before he could cry out, he saw vines shoot from the hole left behind and wrap around the arms of
Justin and Officer Steve, and a blinding light began to shine, filling up the street that had become a battlefield. Police on one side, anti-monster bigots on the other, and unaffiliated civilians unfortunately caught in the crossfire all stumbled or shielded their eyes.

Jordan Cater couldn't see anything, but he trusted in the dream he had for the short time he had been asleep in the police cruiser, the same dream that had told him when to dodge the attack from the skeleton, how to break his and Thomas' handcuffs, to tell him where to meet up if all else failed, and when and where the counterattack would take place. Where others would stumble, he ran as if he could see clearly... the light suddenly vanished, and Cater blinked away the afterimages as he dove for cover before the firefight resumed. He had made it to the Guardian foothold. He was safe for the moment, and even though that traitor Martin had compromised some of the safehouse network, he could only reveal what he knew, and Thomas had the foresight to keep the less stable and reliable members at arm's length.

Fighting was chaotic, and even the best laid plans went awry; he would slip away, find Thomas if he too had escaped, mount a rescue if he hadn't, and they'd start again with a new plan and one of them would work. Even with the star underground. Even with that accursed child....

The ground began to rumble, and split open, launching earth, grass and rock in all directions, and throwing the battle into even greater confusion. Cater jumped up and ran from the onslaught, until something massive, green, and thorny burst from the ground in front of him and blocked his path.

Turning back, Cater saw...

It was a giant flower, or at least that was how his brain parsed it right away. Six massive golden petals, at the apex of a long green stem with two leaves growing out of it near the ground. That was where the similarity ended; the flower bud was some sort of bizarre protrusion of teeth and eyes and with some parts that looked almost mechanical, most especially the broad, flat surface that extended up and out that was flashing with multicolored lights like a flat screen TV or computer monitor. Behind the flower petals, two vast, thorn covered tendrils extended, surmounted in massive thorns much longer than the rest that looked almost like fingers, glowing blue and orange at the tips. The leaves below waved back and forth, and glowed a deeper blue and a bright purple.

Cater felt movement behind him and saw the massive green growth move past him, glowing yellow. A similar vine burst from the ground with a bright emerald aura. The flat screen on the flower monstrosity stopped flashing, went dark, and finally lit up again, with the image of...

A face.

Wait...

Not just any face.

*His* face.

Jordan Cater stared back at himself... and watched as the different colors were added to the screen. Text. Numbers. And targeting cross hairs.

A *lot* of targeting cross hairs.

The monster flexed its thorny hands, if that term even applied, and laughed. It was deep, so deep that the ground shook, and seemed to go on forever, and Cater was reminded of a little scrap of religious literature: “*My name is Legion, for we are many.*”

Each of the six eyes glowed a different color, and each one glared at him... and for a second, the
screen flickered. Instead of his face, there was a picture of somebody else. Somebody with brown hair and a brown mustache, smiling in a photograph.

The old postmaster. The one that had been intercepting Guardian intel and spreading it. The one who was a part of that stupid club devoted to the Kludge Derby, with the mechanic and the librarian and the... the...

Cater swallowed.

“Oh, fuck.”
Vines whipped back and forth, churning the soil. The leaves waved, arcing colored energy into the air, which coalesced into shapes. And the arms with the thorny fingers reached out. For a split second a suicidal impulse to stand and fight surged through Cater's brain, before survival instincts vetoed it, and the man ran. Bullets of energy shot past him on both sides as he vaulted over cars to cross the street. Somewhere in his mind he reasoned that the monster was plantlike, so it couldn't move where there wasn't open ground, and that train of thought derailed horrifically when he crossed the street and the ground there erupted as well.

Words came from the monster, though it didn't seem to have a mouth capable of actually speaking; that may have been why the words tumbled over each other in a babble. Cater could make out “There you are” and “Target sighted” and “No you don't” and even that was suspect. Vines erupted from the ground, trying to entangle the man, and more magic projectiles shot out from the eyes.

The creature cried out in what was probably pain as fire concentrated on it, and one of the vines whipped up, leaving a shimmering green field in place. Bullets collided with the field and ricocheted off or simply fractured, and the screen on the creature began to flash. Cater saw a brilliant light blue light in the center, and text on the top and bottom of the screen said “WARNING!” Blue light gathered around one of the arms, and then seemed to fill the whole world; and Cater found himself dodging what looked like solid light representations of pencils, paintbrushes and pens, leaving trails in the world that warped and twisted. A fragment of memory let his brain compare what he was experiencing in the present to seeing the movie TRON years prior.

Then all the artistic tools were trying to impale him. Cater felt the stab of pain as they struck home again and again, but it wasn't like fighting the skeletons. There was no lingering sensation of fire or acid or anything like it.

’And all these things are glowing blue... what did that skeleton say about blue attacks?’

Cater tried to stand still, and the attacks passed through him harmlessly, then faded away. The creature narrowed its eyes.

“So much for that”

“More where that came from”

“Worth a try”

The vine swept out again and another glowing green shield appeared, surrounding... the Royal Family. Another snap of the vine left shields around several policemen, and one of the arms came up, thorns clenched in what could generously be called a fist, which came rushing down. Cater managed to dodge, but could not build up much speed from a standing start, and the fist sent him sprawling as it swept to one side. The improvised barricades some Guardians were hiding behind floated up and away under the influence of blue magic, forcing them to retreat.

Cater scrambled to his feet after skidding across broken concrete for a few yards, and saw the
creature looming over him, this time with the WARNING text bracketing an orange light. The other fist exploded into light, and...

Gears. Pistons. Pendulums. Cranks. It was like being inside of an engine that had been taken apart, and then struck by a tornado. Dodging was harder and harder with each successive pass of different parts, before the attack faded.

“Hold still”

“Not fast enough”

“Won't be so lucky”

The creature apparently was running out of patience, because the screen immediately flashed a dark blue light, one of the leaves glowed, and a massive blue pistol materialized from it. The bullets traveled slower than real bullets would, but Cater did not wait around to see if they would cause as much damage, vaulting over cars, trash cans, mailboxes and benches to escape; the vine that glowed yellow erupted from the earth and dragged along the ground, forcing him to retreat back in the direction of the giant flower.

“Where are you going”

“Not yet”

“Come back here”

There was a glowing purple light within the screen, but the monster was distracted by the shield finally breaking as a group of people concentrated their fire on it; the sound it made was a distorted scream and it turned to face them; Cater saw purple light trace through the cracks in the street, and then purple lightning shot up into the sky; everyone who had been standing over one of the cracks fell to the ground, convulsing and shaking, and the monster turned its attention back to find Cater.

“Where were we”

“Sorry about that”

“Back to work”

The screen had a brilliant green in the center, and the vine that matched its glow erupted from the ground, shooting off sparks and bullets that coalesced into rockets, shooting up into the sky and exploding... strangely, the shrapnel fell everywhere except where Cater was, collapsing into a green mist that soaked into people's bodies. Bystanders and police that had been caught in the crossfire or taken by surprise by the ambush began to move around, either towards the fight or away from it as their priorities indicated.

“More the merrier”

“Fixing what you broke”

“Team effort”

The vine surrounded by the yellow glow burst from the ground again and lashed at the ground where Cater was standing, missing each time but also getting closer each time, until Cater tumbled behind a ruined truck and practically landed on a rifle. Jumping up from behind cover, he took aim
and fired at the monster, causing the entire thing to flinch even while the screen was flashing yellow. Yellow lights resembling grenades and artillery shells began exploding around Cater, lancing through his body and perforating his cover, and he fired back regardless, screaming mindless obscenities.

“Danger close”

“Least you aren't a coward”

“Screaming won't save you”

Something inside the man snapped and he vaulted over the truck, firing again and again, causing the monster to flinch and scream in pain over and over again until finally sparks burst from the creature and fluid began to bleed out, coating the ground in some bizarre, viscous magical ichor.

“This can't be happening”

“Not like this”

“Impossible”

Cater laughed maniacally; he had done it! He had destroyed what had to be the strongest monster, and with it, those fools that had chosen the memory of their traitorous friend over the survival of humanity... and the best part was he still had some ammunition left! The king and the queen were just down the street, a few shots would take them out of the running for good, and then he could deal with that child-

The ichor, the sparks, and the sounds of pain all vanished in an instant, and the screen flickered. This time not showing a point of light, but... a smiling, smug face. And the voices that came from the abomination, for once, were in perfect harmony and synchronization.

“YOU. IDIOT.”

There was a flash of brilliant white light from the gaping mouth...

“...breathing is shallow but it's there and it's steady.”

“Alright, load him up.”

Cater opened his eyes and looked around. EMTs surrounded him, and the roof of an ambulance started to roll above him.

“Wait, he's awake! Officer Ward! Jordan Cater's awake!”

Cater was dimly aware that the gurney he must be on had stopped moving, and he managed to lift his head up... his skin was red and blistered, and of course they had one arm handcuffed to the side of the gurney. All other shapes were fuzzy and indistinct, but there was one shape getting bigger, and that was probably somebody moving closer. Cater finally got his eyes to focus, and stared at the face of Officer Steven Ward, who seemed to be swaying a bit.

“Good. You're awake.” The policeman reached into a pocket and pulled out a photograph.

“Look familiar?”
Cater glared at the policeman. “...yes.”

“Good. Because he's the reason you're alive right now. Byron. His memory. Keeping us honest. That's why we held back. The six of us that remember him. I don't know why Asriel held back, after what you did to him. But he did. I could feel it. We all could.”

“...you sold your souls to stop me.”

Officer Steve smiled. “No. Just let Asriel borrow them for a little bit. Some warning would have been nice, but you know how it is in a firefight. Oh. And Cater. You have a habit of getting loose. Just so you know. If you break out again, cause even more trouble, kill even more people? That's what's waiting for you. All of us, together, united in one goal... beating the shit out of you.”

“...are you done?”

“...yeah, pretty much.” Officer Steve turned and walked away, and Cater let his head fall back as they rolled him into ambulance. The dream had warned him when and where Thomas's support would stage their ambush, how to escape, where not to stand or walk or run... but he hadn't see that thing coming at all.

'Why? Why did things turn out like this...'
was the closest the room got to privacy; the one way glass in the wall next to the door gave anyone watching an unobstructed view of the room and anything, or anyone, inside of it. Even the toilet had no privacy, but a diet of monster food so far had at least meant that hadn't been an issue.

Despite their best efforts, memories intruded in Frisk's mind. Being marched from the room to various labs under armed guard. Tests, endless tests, some to see what the child could do, some clearly designed to find the child's limits. That hadn't happened yet, but Frisk suspected that All Fine Labs could scale up their tests faster than the magic power was developing.

They hadn't even attempted to escape once. They tried to convince themselves that it was because they didn't know enough about the building layout or security or defenses or guard compliment... but that was a lie and they knew it. The fact was they were safer inside the lab than they would ever be outside.

“Subject G-N-C-A-A-P. You have a visitor.”

Frisk slowly rolled over on the bunk; sudden movements caused everyone outside the room to freak out. Standing up, they slowly walked over to the two way mirror, and the mirrored surface was turned off as the intercom crackled back to life.

“Frisk. You're still here. Sorry it took so long.”

“Asriel.” Frisk relaxed. Nobody had told them anything about what had happened once they'd arrived at the lab, and Frisk suspected that persistent questions would be answered with electric shocks, bullets, or worse. “You're alive.”

“Yeah. We stopped Cater. The Guardians are destroyed.”

“Then... monsters are safe.”

Asriel looked away. “Almost.”

Frisk felt a lump in their throat as Asriel kept talking.

“There's still one last threat. One being with the power to destroy everything...”

“...yeah.”

“...sorry. Sans and Dr. Aster are still working on the time loop. Still trying to stop it. If something happens to you before then...”

“Right... I know... is... is Toriel here? Did she come with you?”

“Mom doesn't know I'm here. I had to guilt trip Alphys with the flower thing just to get her to let me talk to you for five minutes.”

“...is she okay-”

“Frisk. I need to tell you something. Mom already got rid of your bed and everything else.”

The lump in the throat grew, fell down, and became a terrible weight in the pit of Frisk's stomach.

“...I can't go home again.”

“No. Mom is... I was wrong, Frisk. She was not happy about finding out about the magic thing. I can't even say your name in the house without getting into huge trouble.”
“Asriel... you still believe in me, don't you? You know I'd never hurt anyone.”

Asriel looked uncomfortable. “Cater... died in the hospital. Apparently the knife... they couldn't stop the bleeding, Frisk. He's gone.”

The terrible weight became a black hole; all light, all hope, disappeared into it.

“...then. Is this the end...?”

“Frisk. I wanted to believe. But I know how this starts. The way it turns a person inside out.”

“...yes.”

“Sans... asked me to tell you not to try to QUIT before they had it figure out. Just in case you had second thoughts and it was enough to cause a reset.”

Frisk nodded. “I understand.”

“Frisk, they're telling me my time is up. I have to go now.”

Okay... Asriel, I-”

But Asriel was already gone, walking down the hallway. A few seconds later, the two way mirror reactivated and the intercom switched off with a crackle. Frisk walked back to the bunk, curled up on it, and tried not to think...

Toriel opened the bedroom door and peered inside. Two occupied beds met her eyes; Frisk and Asriel had moved very little since she had tucked them in earlier in the evening, before descending back to the ground floor and joining Asgore in an exhaustive questioning session with Officer Steve and several other police officers.

No matter how hard she tried to distract herself, the images kept coming back. Asriel becoming that... thing. A monster, powered by the force of not just one human soul, as he had once with Chara, but six. Cater being burned by a white hot lance of magic energy... the giant flower monster turning towards them. Seeing Asgore and Toriel and Frisk.

There had been a flash of light.

When Toriel could see again, the six humans were sprawled on the ground in a circle around Asriel, who was curled up on the ground. And long after all six of the humans had woken up and started to move around... Asriel still had not stirred. Not when they had picked him up. Not when they brought him home. After she had put him to bed, there had been several brief moments where a sound or a slight movement had built up her hopes, only to let them fall again, but even the smallest sign of life meant that he had not Fallen Down. Dr. Alphys had stopped by with all manner of instruments and scanners but could do nothing except attribute Asriel's state to him pushing the Soul Link to its limits; six other Souls, all coordinating efforts through him, all powering his magic. A much more demanding level of activity than was needed simply to break the Barrier. It was awful to simply have to wait for him to come back to himself, but...

After the battle, when Asriel had returned to normal and the accursed Jordan Cater was being taken by their healers, Frisk had moved, walked, and responded as if in a daze. Toriel had heard somebody use the phrase “fugue state” and had asked for clarification, which she quickly came to regret. The idea of losing Frisk even as their body still lived and breathed.... Toriel felt tears
running down from her eyes, and turned back towards the doorway, shutting it with a soft click.

A few seconds later, a body stirred in one bed; Frisk turned onto their back, and opened their eyes.

The darkness was pierced by two glowing red lights.

The human child sat up, pushed back the covers, and got out of bed. One hand came up to their neck... but the locket wasn't there anymore. Red eyes turned and looked at the night stand; the jewelry was there next to a cell phone and an orb, which was beginning to glow with a red light of its own.

Asriel whimpered in his sleep, and the human's whole body jerked, turned to focus on the sound. They walked over to Asriel's bed, stared at the monster inside it... and got down on their knees. One hand settled on Asriel's forehead and began to stroke the tuft of fur that had always stuck out there. The other found one of Asriel's paws and squeezed.

"Look at what I've done to you two..."

Asriel's whimpering stopped, and his paw squeezed back. There was a pained smile in the darkness, which faded with the red light as the child closed their eyes and let their head rest against the side of the mattress.

Asriel gasped as if he had just come up after being underwater for too long; the screaming had stopped, the stabs of panic, terror and horror from the other souls had faded out, and he was alone again. Fragments of memory had been tearing through his mind like cracks spreading across a window pane, memories of bitter cold and burning heat, choking and suffocating, and an all consuming dread of being found. Other memories filled in the cracks left behind; being torn apart from the inside out until all that was left was a tattered flower.

Sensations in the present drew his attention away from the past, and Asriel latched onto them immediately. He was lying on his back... there was something on top of him. Bed covers? Was he in bed? Someone or something was holding his right paw, and there was something on his head. Carefully he opened his eyes and looked around the room.

There was a hand on his forehead, and his gaze followed the arm down to a body kneeling by his bed, head covered in unruly brown hair resting on the mattress.

"Frisk."

His voice felt rough and raw, and didn't come out very loud, but the human child still stirred.

"Asriel... you came back..."

Frisk raised their head and their eyes opened. They seemed to be having trouble focusing, but the child could see Asriel well enough to smile.

"I thought I'd... never see you again..."

Asriel lifted the paw Frisk was holding, and brought it up to his chest. His other paw grasped their hand as tightly as he could manage.

"I had the worst nightmare. You pulled me out of it. Thank you."

"Heh. I was gonna say the same thing to you..." Frisk looked around the bedroom. "It's still here. Everything is still here. So it was just a nightmare. Just a bad..."
Frisk's eyes opened wide. “Oh. Oh no. No no no no...”

“Frisk, what is it?”

“I had the dream about Cater going to Hotland and it came true. I had the dream about Cater trying to kill me and it came true. I dreamed he was going to try to steal the SAVE power and that came true. They're all coming true. They're all going to happen. Alphys is going to freak out and Sans is going to kill me and mom is going to get rid of me and-and-and-”

Asriel reached over with one arm, even as the rest of his body protested, grabbed the child around the chest and pulled on them. With a shocked gasp that interrupted their stream-of-consciousness panic, Frisk fell on top of Asriel.


Slowly, Frisk calmed down, and wrapped both arms around Asriel as they started to weep.

“Frisk. It's going to be okay.” A paw reached up and ran through the child's hair, like he had seen Toriel do so many times...

Toriel awoke long before her alarm clock was set to go off, and took a few moments to gather her bearings. There was a little sunlight coming in through the window, which might have been an annoyance for some but she would never find it so, after thousands of years in a sunless cavern. A minute later, her bedroom door opened, and the boss monster walked out, tying a loose knot on the front of her dressing gown. Pausing by the stairs, she walked down a few steps and smiled as she saw that Asgore was still sleeping on the sofa, his horns sticking out over one armrest.

Returning upstairs, she carefully opened the children's bedroom door, and noticed immediately that Frisk's bed was empty. Even in the fraction of a second it took to turn her eyes to Asriel's bed, her mother's imagination conjured up a variety of terrible possibilities, and she let her breath out after seeing the familiar sign of Asriel's ear flopping over Frisk's head.

Carefully, Toriel walked over to the bed, and each paw found the head of a child to rest on. Asriel swallowed and made some strange noise in his throat, but Frisk gasped and their whole body shook.

“No, I-!”

Toriel pulled back her paw as Frisk woke up and their head turned to see the boss monster.

“I am sorry, Frisk, I did not mean to startle-”

“Please don't send me away.”

Toriel blinked and saw that Frisk's eyes were wide and their hands were shaking.

“I know I screwed up, I panicked, I didn't mean to hurt him I didn't want to hurt him I don't want to hurt anyone I don't know what's happening to me I just want it to stop I just want to stay with you and Asriel I can be useful I can... I can...”

The child had run out of breath, and Toriel took the opportunity to kneel down and hug them.
“Frisk. You have had a terrible nightmare, following a terrible experience. I am not going to send
you anywhere.”

The child's arms came up slowly and returned the embrace, and Toriel felt Frisk shudder.

“...I remember... being in a police car. And then everyone was screaming. I thought... I saw... I
can't remember. I can't remember anything else.”

Toriel leaned her head down and kissed Frisk on the forehead. “The human healers, the medical
technicians. They said you were in something called a fugue state. A retreat from the world, when
the world is too much. I was... I was afraid that I had lost you both.”

“Mom?”

Behind Frisk, Asriel opened his eyes and looked around, and sat up. Toriel's face broke out into a

“You're okay.” Asriel's arms reached around Frisk and grabbed hold of his mother. “You're both
okay. Is dad...?”

“Gorey is downstairs. He has been here all night, in case we needed anything.”

Asriel sighed. “I had the worst dream... I... I took the Souls from Hal and his friends... I turned into
Flowey again... I killed so many people... I ruined everything... but it's just a dream. Just a...”

Asriel's voice trailed off and he began to shake.

“Oh, no... it wasn't a dream...”

Frisk shifted in Toriel's arms, and the queen relaxed her grip as the human child turned and hugged
their brother.

“It's alright. It's alright. It's alright.”

Asriel's eyes stared blankly at nothing, and Toriel felt the fur stand up on her neck. He almost
looked like Frisk did the night before. His mouth opened and the voice she heard was a whisper
made hoarse with emotion.

“...I hurt you. I hurt so many people. I hurt everyone... I can't even cast a fireball. You were right.
I'm not Asriel. I'm not even a monster. I'm just a stupid flower that can walk and talk....”

The child's eyes closed and tears seeped out of them, and Toriel placed one paw on his head.

“Asriel, do not ever say that again.”

“But it's true-”

“It is wrong. You are my son. You are my baby. You will always be so. I was mistaken. I was
angry and I made foolish choices, said ignorant things. But you are Asriel. It does not matter your
shape, or your magic.”

“...Asriel ran away. He refused to fight. I was so angry... I lashed out. I can't be Asriel.”

“My child. Your father and I both raised our hands in battle last night. To try to protect you and
Frisk. As did your friends Mr. Greene and Mr. Van Garrett and many others. And last night we
saw that part of ourselves in you. The only fire that matters. The fire inside. Officer Ward... he told
us. You were holding back.”

Asriel tried to take a deep breath. “...mom.”

Toriel smiled. “Yes, my son?”

“...what... what happened to Jordan Cater? I thought... did I...?”

“He is in the human hospital. You ensured that he did not escape the custody of police again. And this time, they shall be ready for any attempt he may make to escape.”

Frisk squeezed Asriel tighter and smiled. “Good work bro. Like you told me a long time ago. Don't Kill, and Don't Be Killed.”

Something in Frisk's voice calmed Asriel down, and he relaxed.

“Frisk... you put up with me at my absolute worst. All that time. So... for you. I'll never stop trying my best. Mom... thank you for believing in me, when I didn't believe in myself.”

For a few moments, the bedroom was silent, and then Frisk cleared their throat.

“Hey. Uh. Don't get me wrong. Getting hugs from two fuzzy boss monsters at once is awesome, but I kinda need to use the bathroom. So, you know, now would be a good time to let go.”

Asriel snickered and let go and Toriel stood up. “Officer Ward has requested that we stop by the police department to give our statements and testaments and such, but there is no rush. We can all go when you two are ready.”

“Good to know. Thanks mom.” Frisk hopped out of the bed and headed for the bedroom door, and Asriel flopped back down on his bed with a grunt.

“Is something the matter?”

“Just... sore, I guess. A lot happened last night.”

“Indeed it did.”

“...not just Jordan Cater. Not just the fight in town. Or the CORE breakdown. Saying... saying goodbye to Chara. I don't understand why Chara isn't here with me. Why they didn't get a second chance like I did... but I can move on now, I think. I hope.”

“...I miss Chara also, Asriel. And much like with you, that wound will never close completely.”

“Mom, you asked about the other six humans that fell yesterday. Part of the whole... thing. With the CORE and DT Energy.”

“...I did.”

“...Dr. Alphys explained to me after Frisk and I did the Soul Link test. She told me how... how the flower was changed. How I was created, or recreated, or brought back... it's hard to know exactly what to call it. She... she used a little bit of energy from all six. Parts of them... are still a part of me. Not the whole person. After the Barrier was destroyed, they went where all Souls go, in the end. I think. But some of them is still here.”

Asriel turned to look at Toriel's questioning face, and swallowed. “Mom. No human ever climbed Mt. Ebott for a happy reason. Not Chara. Not Frisk. Not Patricia or June or Liz or Sam or Eric or
Andrew. You gave all of them hope. No matter what happened... after. You need to know that. You made a difference. A big one.”

Toriel turned away, her expression sad... but she still managed to smile a little. “Thank you. Thank you for telling me.”

“...there's one other thing. Last night. I don't know when. Frisk was by my bed. They woke me up from a nightmare. But they were only there because they woke up from one of their own. Maybe that was that fugue state thing. I don't know. But... mom. Frisk has never been more scared than they are right now. When... when they are finally ready to share what bothers them the most. Please remember that. Remember what they said in New Home. They were willing to give up everything if it meant monsters could go free.”

“I had hoped that I misunderstood. I thought that when Frisk was standing still, when I reached the throne room, they were trying to appeal to Asgore.”

“...well. They did. I was watching. Waiting for a chance to steal the human souls. Dad hesitated for ages before you showed up. And I saw his face, too. He was almost ecstatic that so many other monsters had showed up to try to talk him out of it. It meant he didn't have to keep... doing that.”

Toriel nodded, and Asriel sat up and climbed out of bed, wincing as he did so.

“Mom. Do you know what Frisk is most afraid of, in all the world?”

Toriel nodded again. “Frisk is most afraid of going back to their human family.”

“...do you know why?”

“Because they will be hurt again.”

“...that's not it.” Asriel reached up and took one of Toriel's paws. “If Frisk is back at that house. With that family. It means... to them. That they don't have a place here. That they aren't good enough. That they broke something or ruined something or just did something they can't make up for. When I was in the Soul Link with them. At All Fine Labs. And then in the CORE. I saw. Frisk's worst memories are of when they think they hurt somebody else. That's why they climbed Mt. Ebott. They thought a world without them would make everyone they cared about happy. Mom, Jordan Cater has tried to kill Frisk twice. Frisk stabbed him in the hand just to stay alive. And the fact that they did that is eating them up inside.”

Toriel blinked. “...even after all he has done to hurt them. Frisk has shown him much more mercy than he would see from anyone else, and they believe he deserved more?”

“No. It's not about mercy. It's about people getting hurt. You... you probably saw what we ended up doing to Cater. Hal and everyone else and me. I've hurt a lot of people as a flower. Done a lot of things I regret. What happened to Cater last night is never going to be one of them, not even if I live for five thousand years or more. Compared to all that, Frisk gave him a slap on the wrist, and they feel terrible about it.”

Asriel sighed. “I told you all of that to drive home what I'm going to tell you now. I know what Frisk is afraid to share with you, with everyone. If it was dangerous, I would say it right now. But it isn't. I know it isn't dangerous because I know Frisk isn't dangerous. I know that they are afraid that you'll be angry at them or afraid of them or disappointed in them, afraid for no reason. But the only way they can ever know for sure is if you show them, when they are ready to share.”

Toriel held one paw over her mouth for a moment. “I understand a little more why you advised us
to take Frisk and run if we saw their human family coming, after the hospital.”

“Yeah. It's... it's like they put Barriers inside of Frisk's head. They've been trapped for a long time. And they're only now... I mean, since the Underground... only after all of that are the Barriers coming down. There's just one left, now... but there should never have been any at all.”

“...these are rather serious subjects to be discussing before six in the morning.”

“That's true.”

Toriel reached down and picked up Asriel in her arms. “Well. Since we are already up. Let us head to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. How do you feel about blueberry pancakes?”

Asriel's face lit up. “Blueberry pancakes... I haven't had those in forever.”

“Then it is time we corrected this state of affairs.”

Chapter End Notes

The last four chapters, including this one, all started as one huge mega-chapter that was later divided. Thus, the long delay in the updates. Also the fact that I had a whole bunch of other stuff to tackle. Actually that's why it all got posted the same evening; where I live there's some not good weather coming our way and the loss of both power and internet this weekend is a possibility.

Barring either of those scenarios, I hope to have some Morning Rush in the next chapter, or maybe the chapter after that. I got a fever, and the only prescription is more community radio.
“Gooooooooood Morning Ebott's Wake! This is Brett 'The Brett' Brinkmann, and please put your hands or hand equivalents together for my co-host DJ Pantz!”

“...please stop yelling.”

“I'm not yelling. I'm just projecting my voice into the microphone like normal.”

“Okay. Please stop doing that.”

“Sounds like somebody was out late celebrating last night.”

“Wrong. I was inside. Celebrating.”

“Inside, outside, what's the difference?”

“Ugh. There is a dictionary in the offices. Soon as we hit the break I am getting it and making you read it.”

“That's not what I... you know what? Let's roll with that. And I hope everyone out there is expanding their vocabulary today in marvelous Ebott's Wake, 'The City of Yesterday's Tomorrow'.”

“...what?”

“Yeah, that ones from back in the late sixties or early seventies I think. Not everyone was firing on all cylinders back then.”

“ImPLYING anyone has ever been able to think in a straight line in this town.”

“Well, I doubt people are thinking much of anything today after celebrating last night. Which leads us to our top story. Jordan Cater is back in police custody, along with multiple members of his organization. This, after some sort of attempted raid on the Hotland CORE in the Underground, several violent confrontations between his allies and concerned citizens, and an ambush on the police escort here within the city limits.”

“What the hell was he doing down in the CORE, trying to make the volcano erupt?”

“I think Alphys sent us a message about it not being an issue.”

“Right. I remember that... but I don't remember it very clearly. Or anything else before this morning. Or this morning.”

“Well... that aside. Cater and his nascent new organization, informally known as the New Guardians at this time for convenience, were incapacitated by retaliatory action from the police department, various concerned citizens, and the Dreemurr family. Especially Asriel Dreemurr.”

“Well. The Guardians or Sages or whatever we're calling em now, they did kill the kid back the the day, and many other people. Can't realistically expect to bring that back without some resistance.”

“According to eyewitness accounts, Asriel tried to use some sort of plant based magic to contain Cater, and when that didn't work he transformed into Flowey again, but not the small golden flower that we all know and lo- well, that we all got used to anyway. This Flowey was much
larger, possessed of extremely potent magical abilities, and basically scared the wits out of everybody that saw it.”

“Hey. It's like you said. Kid was holding back all that time. Let that be a lesson for everybody out there. Don't be a murdering bigot, or a young, fuzzy boss monster will turn into a giant flower and eat your face.”

“I'd say that's a really obscure and impractical lesson for anyone to learn, but the fact is somebody didn't learn it and that's why we're having this conversation in the first place.”

“Yup.”

“According to a statement from the Ebott's Wake Police Department, they have been working together with the police from Triton, Lone Point, and Quarterhorse Fields for most of the night, locating and arresting members of the New Guardians and dismantling their network of safehouses, recruitment fronts, and sources of funding. Jordan Cater is currently under guard at the Rita Belle Thurman Memorial Hospital, and his condition has been listed as serious.”

“And so are the charges, so there's some symmetry there.”

“The police have issued a warrant for the arrest of one Thomas O'Dell, who was able to escape in the chaos of the ambush and subsequent giant flower monster violence, and are warning everyone to be on the lookout and to notify them if they have any information as to his whereabouts. And, related to that top story, at least two celebratory parties got out of hand last night, resulting in extensive damage to at least one private home and one head on collision near Bastion Circle. Apparently some people liked the irony of celebrating the recapture of the last Guardian by holding a huge party where their compound used to be. Fortunately neither vehicle was traveling faster than twenty miles an hour so the only casualties were one dislocated shoulder.”

“On the subject of the aftermath of celebration, if you got a ticket to Shyren's concert today, you only have a few hours to sober up. So get with it. And believe me, monster food only goes so far, so don't put it off.”

“Oh, since we've switched to coming events, you said you were probably going to do Monsters Against Humanity when Cater was caught.”

“That's right. I'll have to text everybody but right now I'm thinking tomorrow afternoon. After the rescheduled address. The new floor is in there and done, so we can put that to the test.”

“Nice, glad to hear it.”

“Yeah, it's great. Only problem is that it's hard for my paw pads to get traction on it.”

“...that's unfortunate.”

“I'm hoping it'll make a difference when I'm sober and not hung over, but we'll see. It's definitely easier to clean, and it looks a lot better. So, you know. Best of two out of three.”

“What was that Jeff? ...okay, sounds like we have a caller.”

“It's too early for callers. Have em call back.”

“Good morning, caller! You are live on the air with Brett and DJ Pantz.”

“Uh... um... hi.”
“Hello? To whom do we have the pleasure of speaking to?”

“Uh. This is. This is Asriel Dreemurr.”

“...oh. Did not see that coming.”

“Yeah. Uh. Frisk. Frisk gave me the number to the station. From when they would call in about... well. Dwayne Riley. And, and the stuff I did. Back then.”

“Right. How are you holding up after last night, Asriel?”

“I... I could be better. I could be a whole lot worse, too, so. Trying to hold onto that. I uh. I called in. I wanted to call in to. Well, you said everybody was freaked out about what happened. So I wanted to apologize for that. I didn't want to hurt anyone, or scare anyone. I just wanted to stop Cater before he hurt anyone else, and... and it got way out of hand.”

“That's one word for it. They're going to be working on the Freemont / Park Lane intersection for months.”

“Yeah... that, uh. That could have gone better.”

“Well, I wouldn't say that. Jordan Cater's been making everyone in the county nervous, not just the town. And you stopped him from escaping custody again. So you could argue that it went really well.”

“...I guess there's that.”

“Hey, Asriel. DJ Pantz here. This might just be the residual alcohol talking, but, well. You already faced Jordan Cater once, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah. He was one of the humans when I was... back then. It didn't. It didn't end well.”

“No, it didn't. Are you okay after that? Not many people get that sort of opportunity. To confront somebody who has hurt them like that.”

“Uh...”

“You know, never mind. Forget I asked. Nobody can realistically expect to answer that question.”

“DJ Pantz. There's something I need to say. About Jordan Cater and his... his child. My best friend. Chara.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Chara... hated Jordan Cater. Jordan Cater, when he does talk, talks a lot about avenging Chara. But... but he hurt Chara worse than anybody. They were afraid of him, and they were afraid of what he might do if he ever came to the Underground looking for them. I think, I think that was why I snapped the way I did last night. It was never about what Cater did to me. It was about what he did to his own child. And the idea that he could keep getting away with it, that he was above consequences. Well. I think that's why I lost control the way I did’”

“...wow. Those are some terrifying implications.”

“...yeah. I don't ever want to see that guy again, and I don't ever want to be that... thing again. But only one of those cases is something I have control over.”
“True enough. The best laid plans of mice and monsters often go askew.”

“They do... speaking of plans. This weekend is supposed to be really busy, so I need to hang up and get ready for that.”

“Right, you go do that, Asriel. Thanks for calling in.”

“Thanks for letting me. You know. Say all that stuff. Uhm. Goodbye.”

“Bye Asriel. Take care of yourself.... Brett, you okay? You're kind of immersed in something over there.”

“Somebody just posted pictures of Asriel's Ultra Flowey form or whatever it's called on Facebook. I know you can't and shouldn't try to judge by appearances but it's tricky trying to think of the kid that just called in and this thing as the same person.”

“Hey, let me see, I don't actually know what it looks liiiaaaAAAAGH! Ah. Wow. Okay. Wow. Yeah. Hangover status: Gone. Man. If you could bottle that you could make a fortune. Uh, hey Asriel. If you're still listening, don't take it personally okay? I don't know what I was expecting but that wasn't it.”

“Yeah, it's more than a little unsettling. Can't argue with the results though. So. Moving on yet again, today is the day of the Kludge Derby! The final entries are, after some last minute entries and cancellations: Todd Clemens with Snooze Patrol, Hans Therrick with Zeitberecht, Mike Van Garrett with the Bookmobile, The All Fine Labs Lab Mice with the Cheesemonger, Elijah McGraw with Kernel Panic, Hal Greene with the Meane Greene Machine, Justin Carrow with Speakeasy, Paul Cobb with Rope-A-Dope, Lucy Kramer with Highlander, and Casey Dalton with Pandemonium.”

“Wait, wasn't Quentin Forsythe supposed to be in there?”

“He was, actually. He was one of the first entries. But nobody's seen him since Wednesday.”

“...you don't think-”

“I'm pretty sure he's hiding in a cabin in the woods, twitching every time a twig snaps or a bird calls another bird or literally anything makes a sound. No offense if you're out there listening, Quentin. Also, a reminder to our listeners that tomorrow afternoon is the State of the Kingdom Address, Take Two, scheduled to start at one PM and ending at five or until all subjects have been covered, whichever comes first.”

“With that out of the way, it's time to toss it up to Gary Welkin for the traffic report. Gary, how's it look up there?”

“Greetings from the domain of the clouds, Brett and Burgie! Traffic is flowing smoothly except for the Freemont / Park Lane intersection, which is of course a shambles! Also be advised that police are regularly traveling between Ebott's Wake, Quarterhorse Fields, Triton and Lone Point, so exercise special caution on all major thoroughfares-”

“YOU'RE NOT THAT COOL! JUST BECAUSE EVERYONE LOVES YOU, THAT DOESN'T MAKE YOU B-BETTER THAN EVERYONE ELSE!”

“...Gary, what the hell was that??”

“Brett, it would seem that I have picked up a hostile contact and need to take evasive maneuvers!”
“YOU SHOULDN'T BE SHOWING OFF YOUR VOICE LIKE YOU DO! AND YOUR FANCY VOCABULARY! AND YOUR FLYING! ARE YOU TRYING TO MAKE EVERYBODY JEALOUS? BECAUSE IT ISN'T WORKING!”

“Ma'am, if indeed that is the appropriate descriptor, I am attempting to provide real time traffic updates to the citizenry of Ebott's Wake, and while your aerobatic demonstrations are impressive they are also highly distracting!”

“YOU WERE- YOU WERE WATCHING?! P-PERVERT!!”

“I don't see how you can level that accusation at me when you have repeatedly altered your flight path to place yourself in my field of view no matter which direction I am facing and changing altitude to match my own-”

“I'M NOT THAT KIND OF PLANE YOU SICKO!”

“Air-to-air missiles incoming back to you two!”

“...did we just listen to Gary die?”

“Probably not. Unless Tsundereplane changed their name to Yandereplane at some point.”

“That's not reassuring, Burgie... stick around everybody, more Morning Rush after this.”
Joe stared at his coffee. The dark liquid absorbed all light, and if it was held in the right spot and the right position, it reflected nothing back. And that was perfect, because sounds were too loud and lights were too bright.

The door to the Stop-And-Go jingled, and Joe looked away from the coffee just enough to see that it was Justin who walked in, and who was making a line straight for the booth.

“Christ, Joe. You look like I feel.”

Joe nodded. “That sounds about right.”

“All’s down for the count, Steve’s trying to power through it because he’s got a job to do.” Justin made a detour through the shelves, took some items to the register, got his change from the gem monster reading a paperback mystery behind the counter, and finally sat down in the booth across from the scientist. “Haven’t heard from Mike or Hal yet.”

“Can’t imagine why. How are you holding up? You said you didn’t feel good.”

“Sore, but I’ll live. The really disorienting part is a craving for cinnamon.”

“...I thought you hated cinnamon.”

Justin held up a package of cinnamon flavored mini-donuts.

“That’s the disorienting part.”

Joe shook his head. “What the hell was that, anyway? I mean... I know logically and empirically what happened. I remember all of it even if some of the memories don’t make sense. But I still don’t actually grasp what happened on a fundamental level.”

“Hey, you’re the science guy. All I know is what I heard people saying after. Apparently that’s what Asriel did to destroy the Barrier. He absorbed the souls from all of the other humans that fell down, concentrated the power, slammed it into the Barrier, and then everything was ejected after the thing broke.”

Joe held up one hand, rotating his wrist back and forth. “...we’re still alive. We were alive before, we were alive after.”

“Yeah. This raises a few questions.”

Joe nodded, sipping his coffee. “...all sensory inputs feel like somebody turned up the volume knob and then tore it off.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“Yeah. Where were we, exactly? I’ve been trying to figure that out. To the extent that I remember anything clearly, I don’t remember seeing my body on the ground anywhere.”

“We must have been inside of the thing. Somewhere.”

“But where and how?”
“Like I said. You're the science guy.”

The door to the Stop-And-Go opened with a jingling bell sound, and Joe looked up to see Mike and Hal walking in.

“Well. This should be good.”

Hal made his way through the various aisles of the convenience store, while Mike headed straight for the booth. Justin automatically slid further into the booth to give the large librarian room to join.

“Did you guys see it?”

“What??”

“When we were inside the thing. Whatever it was. Did you see the stuff?”

“You know, I could loan you some proper nouns until payday, if you're out.” Joe snapped.

“Sorry. I couldn't sleep last night. I might not ever sleep again. When we were inside the... the Soul Link, that's what it's called, right? I think I saw fragments of Asriel's memories.”

Justin and Joe both sat up straighter, and the ex-soldier turned his head, a cinnamon mini-donut inches from his face. “...go on.”

“Every time we... as in, I mean, all of us... every time we looked at Cater I'd see something. Not visually so much. Like when...” Mike closed his mouth, then shook his head. “I don't know if human metrics apply here but I think Asriel was having flashbacks. I saw Cater in the present, and then I saw him years ago. And then we'd move around and I'd see him again and I'd get another piece of that history.”

Joe nodded. “Okay. This is interesting. Seems like everyone was affected by the Soul Link differently. My senses are too sharp. Justin has a craving for something he hates, you're picking up memories from the link...” The scientist pulled out his cell phone. “I'm going to call Dr. Alphys. Just because she put me in charge of Soul Research doesn't mean I know that much about the actual physics of it. The more eyes we get on this the better.”

“Goooooooood morning everybody!”

Joe looked up from his phone to see Hal walking away from the register with an assortment of breakfast related items. “Since when do you even know what a morning is? You're the All-Nighter Project Champion for 2014 and 2015.”

“Joe's right,” Justin nodded, “I've never seen you up and about this earlier in the morning without chemical assistance or threatening to kill somebody.”

Hal sat down next to Joe, who scooted over in the booth, and began to put together the breakfast items. “Well, aren't you all a bunch of buzzkills. Don't you remember what happened last night? We kicked Jordan Cater in the watchamacallits and I don't think we actually had feet at the time, which makes it two or three times more impressive. I can't speak for anyone else but last night I slept better than I have in years.”

Justin scratched his beard stubble. “Joe, do you think this fits into the pattern of being affected by the Soul Link?”
“I wouldn't rule it out. Actually, before anything distracts me again…” Joe finished navigating the contact menu and held the phone up to his head. The booth was silent except for the muted sound of the phone ringing, and Hal assembling his breakfast.

“Hello?”

“Doc! It's, it's Joe. How are you doing?”

“Um... I. I. G-good! Things are good. Here. Now. How are you?”

“That's the reason I called Doc. I'm with Justin, Mike, and Hal right now and after last night we think something happened.”

“Oh, yeah. I. I remember now. Sorry. I just got up. Even with my glasses on everything is blurry, including my thoughts.”

“Doc you have no idea how much I envy you right now.”

“Huh?”

“It feels like all my senses are sharper. And I mean that in the sense that they can cut. Haven't talked to Eli or Steve yet today but Justin has a craving for cinnamon, which he is not a fan of, Mike thinks he was getting flashbacks to Asriel's memories, and Hal says he's okay? But I just watched him pour Frosted Flakes and milk into a coffee cup and he's drinking coffee out of a cereal bowl, so-”

“Hey! Don't you fucking kinkshame me!” Hal barked, and on the other end of the line Joe could hear Alphys try to suppress her laughter.

“Okay, all of that, together, that's a little weird. Undyne told me what happened while I was trying to scan Asriel to see if he was okay, but I wasn't there myself so... okay, focus. Focus. I'll get dre-I'll get ready to go to the lab and we'll warm up the scanner and look at all you guys, just to make sure nothing has changed.”

“What time do you want to meet at the lab?”

“If possible, in the next hour. Undyne and I both have tickets to the concert.”

“Concert? ...oh. Right. Forgot that was today. Had my mind on the derby this whole time.”

“Are they still going to have that? Even after last night?”

“Especially after last night. It's a celebration of civic identity now that we've finally... well, we sorta did last time and he got loose, so I'm not gonna tempt fate.”

“I mean, that fight tore up a lot of the street.”

“Naw, it's okay. The route for the race doesn't go far enough up Freemont to reach Park Lane. And even if it did, they could change it easily enough even at the last minute.”

“Oh. I see. I think, anyway. So. See you guys in a bit then?”

“Yeah, sounds good. See you then, Doc.”

“Right! Uh... bye.”
“Bye,” Joe hung up and put his phone back in his pocket. “So. We all have doctor's appointments within the hour.”

Justin ate another cinnamon donut. “You want to call Eli or Steve?”

Joe blinked, then rubbed his eyes with one hand. “God dammit. I knew I forgot something.”

Mike pulled out his own phone. “I'll see if I can get in contact with them, but Steve might be too busy and Eli might be completely out of commission.”

Hal slurped some coffee from his bowl. “I wouldn't be sure about all of that.”

The door opened with another jingling noise and Mike and Justin turned around to see a quartet of uniformed police officers walk into the Stop-And-Go; all of them had familiar faces, but one was more familiar than the others, and Steve immediately made a beeline for the booth.

“Jesus H. Tap Dancing Christ what a night.” Steve reached down to grab Hal's coffee cup and brought it up to his mouth.

“Steve I wouldn't recommend-”

“Bad idea man-”

Mike and Justin's warning came too late as Steve swallowed some of the contents, and both eyes and cheeks bulged out. Slowly, he pulled the coffee cup away from his mouth, examined the contents, and managed to swallow.

“I... hope that was actually cereal.”

“You know what they say, man,” Hal grinned. “Fools rush in where angels part them from their money.”

Justin snorted. “My grandma told me the same thing... then again English was a second language for her, so...”

“What's the word, Steve?”

Officer Steve focused on Joe and his question. “The whole things falling down like a house of cards. We've found four safehouses, including the one we think Cater was staying in. There's like four school notebooks with stuff he scribbled down in them. They're evidence right now but maybe I can get you transcripts or photographic records of some of the pages as they're compiled, Mike. I know you've been hoping for another windfall.”

“It would be nice, but if we're dismantling their network for good this time it can wait.”

Steve frowned. “Hold that thought.”

The policeman headed back into the rest of the convenience store, leaving the four occupants of the booth to look at each other in confusion.

“Calling it right now. Steve's run into a bigger threat behind Cater, just like Cater was the bigger threat behind Dwayne Riley.” Justin pulled out a quarter and placed in the center of the table. “Any takers?”

Hal fished out a quarter and placed it on Justin's quarter. “I think he's just sleep deprived.”
Justin looked at Joe, who shook his head, and Mike, who appeared lost in thought. “No other takers? He's coming back.”

Steve walked up to the booth with a bag of Bugles and a Red Bull in his hands, and immediately opened and shotgunned the energy drink.

“Wait, so if I drink Red Bull suddenly it's the end of the world, but if Steve drinks it then everything is okey kosher?” Hal glared at the rest of the booth. “Man, you and your double standards. I am appalled.”

“Steve can drink Red Bull because he didn't half-destroy his stomach lining binging on it in high school.” Joe shook his head. “Or decide to mount a ramjet engine on a bicycle and almost blow himself up. The bar was so low it was buried under the ground and you still tripped over it.”

Officer Steve opened the bag of snack food and began to munch it down. “Based on the evidence we found at one of the safehouses, we think Thomas O'Dell was the mastermind behind springing Cater during the ambush. We also found evidence of a shallow grave on the premises; the Quarterhorse Fields PD is sending in another team of forensics guys to figure out who it was and how they ended up dead.”

The booth was silent, and as Officer Steve looked around, he noticed that some of the nearby booths had gone silent too. Hal pushed the two quarters over to Justin, who pocketed them and looked up at the policeman.

“So what's the official position, Steve?”

“Same as they said on the radio this morning. If anyone has any information on Thomas O'Dell, let us know.” Steve leaned over the booth and lowered his voice a bit. “I don't think there were any inside sources on our end before the transfer. At least not intentional ones. Can't be sure of course, and I can't speak for the guys from anywhere else, don't know em as well. But if O'Dell didn't have an inside man somewhere, that means he's a lot more dangerous because he was able to come up with an escape plan that worked with very minimal information.”

Joe cocked his head to one side. “You mean, like, the mastermind of the organization?”

“Exactly.”

“How high on the Mastermind scale are we talking here? Nate Ford, Light Yagami, Lex Luthor? Gimme a benchmark.”

“David Xanatos.”

“...mother fucker,” Joe said, as softly as he could.

“Yeah.” Officer Steve nodded. “According to the guy who's cooperating with us on this, O'Dell threw the whole Hotland CORE thing together at the last minute. If he'd taken the time to plan it out, arm up, gather more intel, things might have ended very differently. And as it stands, they still beat the hell out of the place, according to what I heard everyone say while we were taking statements.”

Joe nodded. “Dr. Aster was telling me about it when we were getting ready to head back. The damage is so extensive they're not even going to try to fix it. The only upside is that nobody actually needs it anymore.”

Mike held up a finger. “Which raises an important question. O'Dell is supposed to be this genius
mastermind. Why throw together a last minute plan with a handful of guys and very little gear to hit a target with no tactical value?”

Steve shook his head. “O’Dell wasn't running the show once Cater was loose. Cater set goals and targets, O'Dell's job was to make it happen. Cater thought, and I guess still thinks, that the CORE let monsters control time somehow. He also thinks a whole lot of other things that will end up being used against him in a court of law. But with Cater in custody again, that means nobody is acting as a brake on O'Dell's planning. If we miss a safehouse or supply cache or anyone affiliated with the New Guardians, we could be looking at another tactical strike against a more valuable target, like All Fine Labs or something.”

Joe stared at his rapidly cooling coffee. “If he does go after the lab, Tuesday or Wednesday would be the time to do it. Sans, Cavenaugh, Dr. Aster and Justin will all be out of town. I'll talk to Alphys about beefing up automated security.”

“Couldn't hurt.” Steve nodded. “But it might not be the lab. I don't think he'd be able or willing to rush to attack the Address tomorrow... I mean, I'm not ruling it out... but I think other targets are just as possible. The Exchange Trust, maybe. Or he could just be biding his time to break out Cater again.”

“Dreemurr Elementary School.”

Officer Steve and the other occupants of the booth turned to stare at Mike, whose expression was hard to read even behind the beard. “If he wanted to go for maximum social damage and chaos, he would go after children. Especially the Ambassador. Of course, Asgore's the groundskeeper, Undyne is the gym teacher, and the whole thing was the queen's idea, so it'd be a suicide mission. But that might not stop him, or anyone he manages to recruit.”

Hal shook his head. “That's a bad idea if there ever was one. That would unite everyone against him.”

“That's the problem.” Mike took off his glasses and started to clean them on his shirt. “Ebott's Wake is as already as united as it can be. We're all wound up tighter than Dave Harrison's rubber band powered kludge racer. Any more tension and that's going to snap. People are already past the point where they're willing to take matters into their own hands, just look at last Friday with everybody wearing the shirts from All Fine Labs to tell friend from foe.”

Justin nodded. “Yeah. That could have been very ugly.”

Mike put his glasses back on. “So if anything else goes wrong, we could see people lash out even more, and not care as much about who gets hurt as a result. Just like the tension got too high for the Sages and they started making more enemies.”

“Well. You know what they say. He who fights monsters should take care lest he piss off the human with a shotgun that hangs out with that monster after work at the Dank Memehaus.”

The rest of the booth looked at Hal, who rolled his eyes. “Don't gimme that look. You know I'm right.”

“Well. All other things being equal, Hal is right, it's just that it's a double edged sword now.” Justin pointed out. “We need to find O'Dell, and we need to slap his shit. I think we've established none of us can predict what these guys are doing or thinking. The only defensive thing we can reasonably predict is trying to free Cater again, and we don't even know that for sure. All else is speculation at best. So we need to go on the offensive. When we see Dr. Alphys later I'll talk to her about
speeding up the other Party Favors.”

“You guys are meeting Alphys later?”

“Yeah. She wants everybody who did the Link thingy with Asriel last night to come in for a scan within the hour, so we're heading to the lab pretty soon.” Joe scratched his head. “There's usually just a skeleton crew there on the weekends unless we're gearing up for a production run anyway, so it should go faster without the Doc running around trying to herd cats.”

“That would have been nice to know a little earlier. The timing for me is really bad.” Officer Steve moved his eyes back and forth, indicating that he could not speak openly in a public space.

“Well, Eli's still offline, so maybe you two can make separate appointments or something.”

“That would be for the best.”

“Hey, I just thought of something,” Hal said, finishing off his coffee-in-a-bowl. “We don't know if O'Dell would risk moving again so soon to attack the State Of The Kingdom Address, but that's assuming that he's got all of the initiative. We can reduce the odds of that happening dramatically just by being there with Asriel.”

The booth went silent, and Joe slowly turned to look at Hal.

“What, exactly, do you mean by that?”

Hal returned Joe's stare. “I mean, if all six of us are there, and Asriel has clear line of sight to all of us, that means that at the first sign of trouble, we can go Captain Planet and wreck some shit if we have to. But we won't have to if whoever wants to start trouble realizes that's on the table.”

“Mutually Assured Destruction.” Justin mused. “It's a crazy strategy but we did avoid nuclear war with the Soviets for a long time. Sometimes crazy works.”

“Has anyone asked Asriel his opinion on this?” Mike asked. “I was listening on the radio when I took the truck over to Hal's. He called into the Morning Rush and said he never wants to be what he transformed into again.”

“...that's a good point.” Hal stared off into the distance. “But just having us there with him could be a warning to people who want to start something. Implying it's not off the table if they cross a line.”

“We'll have to work out the details later.” Justin held up his phone. “If we're going to head to the lab, we should leave now.”

Steve nodded. “And I've got some irons in the fire myself. I'll catch you guys when I can.”

The booth slowly emptied out, until only Joe remained, staring at his coffee... which he suddenly picked up and drained. “Fuck it. Hashtag YOLO.”
“Lava will seal up the cracks no problem!”

“Wait, what?”

Two humans stepped back as a small volcano monster launched a glob of red hot magic out of its caldera and into the crack in the street; while the asphalt did melt, the heat from the magic vaporized some of the volatile compounds completely, and liquefied everything else, causing it to settle and pool and create a lopsided indentation in the road surface.

“Great. Just great. As if Freemont didn't have enough potholes already.”

The other human shrugged. “Don't make no difference to me. I get paid by the hour.”

“I'm helping!” The volcano monster ran around in a circle around the two humans, annoying one and encouraging the other.

“Oh dear,” Asgore rumbled. “I wonder if this would be a good time to intercede.”

Asriel scratched one ear, shrugged, and got back to work. The soil was rough in many places, but it wasn't too difficult to uproot a tree and send it back and forth to smooth things out with its rooted “feet”. Once the landscape was closer to level, the grass was given some gentle encouragement and a magical booster shot, filling in the blank spaces with a verdant green. It wasn't exactly healing magic, and it certainly wasn't fire magic. But it was something. And being able to do something was important.

“They weren't kidding when they said it was always greener on the other side of the street.”

Asriel froze up, and the part of his brain that wasn't panicking and flashing back to countless timelines was still panicking at the fact that Asriel no longer seemed able to breathe. After a few seconds, a figure stepped into his peripheral vision; a short skeleton in a blue jacket, with a hot dog in each hand.

“Uh. Wow. I hear that breathing is all the rage on the Surface these days. You should give it a try.”

Asriel inhaled and slumped over and the gray border on his vision faded out just as it had appeared, but in reverse. Looking around, Asriel saw that Asgore had decided in favor of mediation and was now deep in a conversation with one of the humans about something. The other human and the volcano monster were eating hot dogs in front of a wooden stand that hadn't been there a minute ago, with a roof covered in fake snow and old icicle lights.

“Sorry if I startled you there, buddy. Here. Have an apostrophe dog on the house.”

“...thanks.” Asriel took the hot dog from Sans and tried to calm down.

“you do good work, kid. not sure if you want to get into the landscaping business but you definitely have a knack for it.”

“...I've been back for less than a week. And last night was a mess. Not really in a state of mind to
think very far ahead right now.”

“I know the feeling.”

Asriel stared at his hotdog, but whatever appetite he had worked up had vanished.

“...okay, I seem to be saying all the wrong words this morning. Let's start over. Morning Asriel, how's it going?”

Asriel sighed. “Good morning Sans. It's going okay here. How about you?”

“Can't complain.”

There was a tense, awkward silence, or at least there would have been if not for the sound of the king and a human going back and forth on the nuances of civil engineering, and another human deliberately muddying the waters for his own entertainment a short distance away.

Sans shook his skull. “Well. Actually I can complain. Dad's taking it easy while his ribs grow back, and Papyrus is in super-responsible caregiver mode now. So I had to get outta the house.”

“...that's fair. I didn't sleep very well last night myself.”

“Bad dreams?”

Asriel shook his head. “Bad memories.”

Sans blinked, then nodded slowly. “Guess you got more than your fair share of those.”

Asriel turned to look at the people nearby, guessing how far sound would travel. “And the collection just gets bigger and bigger. I saw Frisk die last night. Cater... pushed them off of the platform, over the railings. Their head hit some of the machinery going down... broke their neck... and... when the LOAD happened I tripped and I was so happy I almost started crying.”

“...for a long time I thought not being able to remember all the timelines was a disadvantage. And just like that, I'm fine with it.”

“Yeah. It's a double edged sword for sure.”

“When Frisk was running up to us. They yelled that they couldn't see the stars anymore. The things they associated with the SAVE and LOAD events.”

Asriel's eyebrows shot up. “...I guess that's what was bothering them in the old resort. There must have been one of them there originally.”

“You ever see anything like that?”

Asriel shook his head. “I never saw anything like that before last night. Whenever I died, I woke up in the garden again. But Frisk only got knocked back a little when it happened. I always wondered how, once I realized they were the ones in charge of the timeline.”

"I need to ask them to make a map, list all of the stars they remember. Maybe there's a pattern to em. Heck, I need to ask them if the old ones are back or if there are new ones.”

“If there are, they didn't say anything. But last night they were distracted by a whole lot of stuff. And that was before I turned into that... thing.” Asriel pointed across the street. “The only bright side to it was that it was more magical projection than monster body, otherwise I probably would
have destroyed the phone and water lines over there.”

“Huh. Will wonders never cease. Seemed solid enough when Cater was running for his life. Love how you wrapped it all up by the way.”

“Well. I got the idea from you... or at least, your blasters.”

Sans nodded. “I wondered. Hey. You probably heard this a hundred times already. But-”

“Always lead with your strongest attack?” Asriel sighed. “Yeah. Well, there were six other people involved and none of them knew what was going on any more than I did. Wasn't even really sure that we could do anything except grab Jordan Cater and try to eat him.”

“That would have been a sight to see.”

Asriel stared at the hot dog in his paws.

“you want some ketchup or somethin' buddy?”

“I'm good. Just... still don't have my fire magic back. Frisk said I'd probably be able to grill burgers and hot dogs by Saturday, but here we are.”

“Well, it's not even close to noon yet. and like you said, you've only been back for less than a week. maybe next Saturday. you can't rush learning fire magic, gotta warm up to it.”

Asriel stared at the skeleton, who just grinned back.

“Sans, something's been bothering me. And it's not your puns for once. I know I was a jerk with the time loop, and Frisk was a lot more responsible with it. But... here's the thing. I wasn't the only one that hurt them. A lot of other people did too. And Frisk smiles and nods and... they don't seem to hold any grudges.” Asriel turned to look at some of the wrecked street. “Not sure how much of it was being tuned into six other minds last night, but that is really starting to worry me.”

“...me too, honestly.”

Asriel looked down at the hotdog again, took a bite, chewed and swallowed, feeling the food evaporate inside him. “I mean... when I bring up the subject, Frisk sometimes says that they are okay with it because, well, they thought it was always going to happen, but everyone apologized later. And that...” Asriel raised his free paw and waved it back and forth slightly, “somehow makes it okay? I know it's not as simple as 'oh, if they didn't really mean it then that means it doesn't hurt as much' for two reasons. One, desire to harm only works that way between monsters, and a lot of the monsters were not holding back at all. And two, I'm on the other side of that exchange and I know that doesn't work. Even if... even if mom and dad and you and... and Papyrus, you all don't remember. Even if it technically never happened to you. I do remember. Saying that I am sorry does not change the fact that I did so many thing that I need to apologize for that I have trouble keeping track sometimes.”

“...how are you holding up on that front, by the way? I mean. Not being able to feel stuff, and then having that come back... that's got to take some getting used to.”

Asriel ran one paw over his head. “...it helps that it doesn't all hit me at once. Guess it can't. There's not enough room in my head, or my Soul, to feel everything at the same time. But if I'm not careful, I'll think of something. And then think of what happened like that in another timeline. And then another thing like that. And each bad memory is another car on the train, and it has no brakes, and it's going around in circles in my head and each time it goes around more cars get added....” The
young monster shook his head. “Mom and Dad hardly ever leave me by myself except when it's
time to sleep at night, and by then I'm usually too tired to stay awake and dwell on everything. It
helps a lot. Always having a distraction. Always being engaged. Always too busy.”

“Hard work as a buffer against bad times... I tried that once. Didn't work out,” Sans mumbled,
pulling out a ketchup bottle from inside his coat. “You sure you don't want anything on that dog?”

“It's fine plain.” Asriel took another bite, chewed, and swallowed. “But... you do understand what I
mean about Frisk, right? There should be at least a little bit of resentment in there. That's... that's
not just, I dunno, Flowey residue right? It's not normal to get hurt and then just immediately move
on from it. Is it?”

“...it is out of the ordinary. I mean. Even if nothing bad ever happened to them before the
Underground. I'd still be a little weirded out. But the fact that so much stuff did happen, that makes
me wonder how much cause and effect is going on. And the night you came back, when we were
all out in the backyard and Frisk started yelling... never seen that before.”

“Me neither. I... well, I had a theory while I was in the Soul Link the first time. Back when I was
trying to put the fragment back inside Frisk's Soul and fix it. That if we both had different parts of
the same soul, we'd sometimes feel what the other one was feeling. Thing is, that fragment stuck
with me and rebuilt itself into a whole soul, and Frisk healed up and didn't need it after all. So that
theory doesn't look as good anymore. But I thought it explained a few things at the time. Me
feeling more emotions than before, Frisk snapping at Dwayne Riley and anybody bigoted against
monsters.”

“The history of science is the history of theories that ain't good enough and get replaced. Happens
at the lab all the time, specially this last month or so.” Sans popped open the ketchup container,
slurped some down, and then bit into the still plain hot dog.

“Right. But that means when Frisk is getting all... confrontational? Or when they freak out like
Tuesday? Then that's all Frisk. And last night, Frisk said some pretty scary things about fighting
Cater. They... well, Officer Steve got the knife from you as evidence. So you know. But they said
they wanted to do more. Not just stop Cater. But make sure he could never hurt anyone ever again.
Scared me, and it scared them too... but the big question is, was that always there and they just, I
dunno, buried it for so long, and now it's digging its way out again because so much stuff has
happened lately? Because if it wasn't there, that means something changed. And... well. Does that
mean whatever is affecting them is getting worse, because they're lashing out? Or does this mean
they're getting better, because they were able to fight Cater and not completely break down after?”

“...all good questions. Make no mistake. I don't know what's going on anymore than you do, but I
gotta be honest. I was really glad when Frisk said Cater was alive after I saw that knife. And they
wanted me to take it away from them. So... all other things being equal. I'm cautiously optimistic
for once in my life. This may not the Frisk we're used to, but they're still the Frisk we know and
love. And we've learned more about them in the past three weeks than we ever did the first year.
Actually a lot of stuff seems to be cropping up right now, have you noticed?”

“Actually yeah. I chalked it up to the heat getting to people. Makes it harder to keep calm. Fur or
not, I know it wasn't nearly as bad last summer.”

“That'd probably do it.” Sans took another bite, reminding Asriel he was still holding the hot dog
and prompting him to continue eating as well.

“hey, where is Frisk today, anyway? taking it easy?”
“Mom took them to Joe's House of Stuff to get new dress clothes for the Address tomorrow.”

“Ah. Right. The old stuff got... messy.”

“Yeah.”

The two monsters stood in silence, or at least relative silence as two humans and two monsters continued their comedy of errors some distance away. Eventually, Asriel finished his hot dog and turned to Sans, who was still working on his.

“Sans, in the link. I saw their human family. I saw that they used to be happy. Or at least, Frisk was happy. Not just the absence of sadness like I was aiming for all that time. They had parents they loved, that... well, Frisk thought they loved them back. And maybe they did, once. Then things went wrong and Frisk... they started trying to make things better. It didn't work but Frisk kept trying right up until they decided the only thing they could do was climb Mt. Ebott and disappear. As if... making people happy was what they were for, and if they couldn't do that, then they were... defective, or something.”

“...they did say something about how they kept hurting people Tuesday. And that it would be better for everybody if they were dead. Everything you just told me confirms all the theories we had about the Taylor family since we scanned Frisk's Soul the first time and started putting it all together. It even ties into the whole 'bad kid' thing they were fixated on for so long... hey, it just hit me how much you seem fixated on this.”

Asriel looked down and scratched the back of his neck. “...of all the people I hurt, I hurt Frisk the worst, and the most, and they remember all of it. And they still spent over a year trying to bring me back for good. So... yeah. I definitely owe them. I worry about them a lot. Now that I have emotions and I can understand what I saw, I can't stop thinking about a lot of conversations we had in the backyard... or all the times they skipped lunch.”

Asriel held up a paw and white pellets surrounded it in a circle.

“Or what I saw in the link. And... even at my worst as a flower. I never got as angry as I get thinking about that....”

“...Asriel? You in there?”

The child jerked in surprise, looked up at Sans, and waved his paw. The pellets faded into the ether.

“Asriel. Listen to me, okay? If you see Frisk's human parents. Especially if it looks like they're coming for Frisk. You call for help, got it? Call me. Do not take matters into your own hands.”

Asriel nodded, staring down at the ground. “I will, Sans. I'm sorry.”

“...wait, kid. I didn't mean it like that. You've spent a long time doing stuff you wish you hadn't done. I don't want you to have to do that again, if that's an option. But lazy or not, I was still in the Royal Guard. I was trained to fight by the best, before and after I joined. I know all the tricks. And while I'm dunking anybody that needs a dunking, you and Frisk can run to higher ground, okay? If push comes to shove, you hurt whoever is after you bad enough to put the fear of boss monsters into em, and you guys run.”

The child nodded again, still staring at the ground, and Sans took a close look at Asriel's face and shook his skull.
“Hey. Come on. Relax. Remember what I said back at the lab. Whatever happened between us, back in those other timelines. I can't remember it and you can't forget it and there isn't really any good reason for that to carry over into this timeline. So... you take care of yourself. Alright? Because a lot of people really care about you. Including me. Don't get me wrong, I don't think we'll ever be as tight as, say, Papyrus and Undyne, but that's because you can't get tighter than Papyrus and Undyne. But we're not enemies. And I get the feeling we're not ever going to be enemies, not in this timeline.”

“...that would be a nice change of pace, for sure.” Asriel rubbed one paw with the thumb on the other paw. “...not really understanding why you're making such an effort to make me feel better though.”

“Heheh. Or that I'm putting any effort into anything, right?”

“...guess there is that too.”

“It's simple. Well. It's mostly simple. When I knew there was an anomaly rearranging the timelines all willy-nilly, it took out what was left of my motivation after dad disappeared. Not that there was much by then. Of course, if nothing really matters, it also makes it easier to shrug off the bad stuff. I could focus on what was important to me, and always would be, no matter what else happened... like Papyrus. Guess that's why I never Fell Down; because as long as I had him, life was still pretty good. It wasn't so much that nothing mattered as it was a blank check to do the bare minimum everywhere else and focus on having fun with him.”

Sans winked. “And here we are, over a year later. Things matter again. Dad's back again. The anomalies I was worried about... well, one was always on my side. And the other one... holding a grudge is already a lot of work. Holding a grudge against you for something you did because you were frustrated after all sorts of bad times you didn't deserve, and that I can't even remember... that would be like holding a grudge against the moon for not being made out of cheese. I can think of at least three things that would be a better use of my time.”

Asriel raised his eyebrows. “Three? Wow, better be careful or you might over-exert yourself.”

Sans chuckled. “Exactly. But you see what I mean, right? Things are finally working out, after, oh, several thousand years of not working out. This is something that's never happened before. I'm kind of curious about what happens next.”

Asriel stared at Sans, and smiled. “…me too, Sans.”

The young boss monster held out a paw, and after a moment, Sans extended his own hand in kind. The monsters shook hands, then let go and stood in awkward silence for a moment.

“didn't really expect you to make the first move like that.”

“Well, if I'd waited for you to hold out your hand, there would be a whoopee cushion or a joy buzzer or something in it,” Asriel retorted.

Sans laughed. “you're not wrong.”

There came the roar of engines from above and Asriel and Sans (along with everyone else within a three block radius) looked up to see a helicopter flying erratically over the town; a monster airplane followed closely behind it and fired missile-shaped magic attacks that exploded close to the chopper, but not close enough to actually damage it.

“looks like Gary's playing hard to get.”
“Yeah.” Asriel looked down at the ground again and held up a paw, and shrubs began to grow from the earth. “If he and Tsunderplane actually become a...” the young monster blushed a little bit, “a thing, a whole lot of people in this town are going to be really sad. I mean, Catty and Bratty were already obsessed with him back when I left the Underground to find Frisk. And I think it's just gotten worse with time.”

“that's a true fact. probably a shrine to him in their apartment somewhere.”

The small volcano monster ran between Sans and Asriel, laughing. “Hi Tsundereplane! Do you need any help?”

“DON'T YOU TRY TO SNIP ME ON THIS REGGIE!” came the reply from above.

“Okay!”

Reggie the Vulkin strolled back over to the hot dog stand, and Sans shrugged. “welp. duty calls. catch up with you later, buddy.”

“See you, Sans.”

As the skeleton walked over to his fast food stand, Asriel heard and felt his father walk up behind him.

“Golly. Human civil engineering sure is complicated. They have four or five different machines just used to make roads.”

Asriel nodded. “Well... makes sense, thinking about it some. I mean, they got so much space on the Surface that building and maintaining roads has got to be really important. So they'd have to build machines that could break down the job into different steps-”

“Hey Asriel!”

Asriel's head turned instantly, tracking the voice; Frisk and Toriel were walking down the sidewalk some distance away, and Frisk was waving with one arm while the other held a plastic grocery bag. Asriel smiled automatically and waved back.

“Hey Frisk!”

“Well, I see that while the street itself is still chaotic, the areas around it are quite different.”

Asgore rested a paw on Asriel's head and grinned. “You can thank our son for that. Magic is one thing, but I've never seen somebody with such an eye for the fine details of horticulture.”

Asriel shrugged. “Well. That's more experience than anything else, if you know what I mean.”

“Asriel, can you make it so that there's a hedge in the shape of Papyrus's smile?”

Asriel turned to Frisk. “I think so... I've only ever tried the mazes before, but the basic principle is sound-”

Toriel held up a paw. “This does not strike me as the best location to have a distracting visual obstruction. That is, after all, why the city asked us to remove the topiary from in front of the school.”

“Yeah...” Frisk frowned. “Still salty about that.”
“Were you able to find everything alright?”

Frisk nodded and opened the bag for Asgore to see. “New shirts, new slacks, new socks. Everything an ambassador needs for a speaking event. Well, that and a microphone. And notes. And an audience.”

Asgore smirked. “That last one is pretty important, when you think about it.”

“Yeah.”

Toriel narrowed her eyes and stared at Sans' hot dog stand. “How long, exactly, has that been there?”

“I think Sans brought it when he showed up. That was a while ago though.” Asriel scratched his ear. “He was nice enough to give me a complimentary hot dog while I was working on the landscaping.”

“I hope you thanked him for that.”

“I did, mom.”

“That is good... hmmm.” Toriel opened her purse and pulled out a few bills. “Frisk, would you be so kind as to purchase some hot dogs for all of us?”

“Sure, I can do that. Do you want anything on yours?”

“Hmmm... I don't believe so. I am alright with plain.”

Frisk nodded. “Okay then. Dad, what about you?”

“A bit of relish sounds nice.”

“Relish, got it. Asriel, can you help? I'm gonna run out of hands pretty fast.”

“I can do that.”

The two children walked over to the hot dog stand, and Toriel could just hear Sans say “stop me if you heard this one before; a priest, a rabbi, and a skeleton all walk into a bar...”

“Gorey... may I speak to you for a moment? Privately, or in as close to privacy as we may find here?”

“Of course.” Asgore blinked in confusion, but followed Toriel down the street towards a line of Asriel's newly-grown shrubs.

“This is... very difficult for me to say, but it is all the more important that I do say it,” Toriel said, looking around. “Yesterday, in the CORE. When I was beside myself with worry for Frisk and Asriel. Thank you for... for giving me the space I needed, then. I was....”

Toriel shook her head. “Oh, Gorey... I missed you. All that time, in the Ruins of home. Hating you. Blaming you. Even then, I missed you. I should have stayed. I should have stayed and argued until I lost my voice, rather than leave. I was so angry at you. I was so afraid of what you might do. But I thought if I stayed in the Ruins, sealed off from the rest of the Underground, I could absolve myself of anything that happened, once the human children left. I even fought Frisk, to try to frighten them into obedience.”
Toriel closed her eyes and held one paw over her mouth for a moment.

“Asgore... I have been so angry, for so long. And that is always easier. To see fault out there, instead of in here.” Toriel's other paw came up to her chest. “I have been running and hiding from the truth for far too long. To place all of the blame on you. That is short-sighted, and selfish, and above all else it is wrong. I... am sorry.”

“...Tori. You have nothing to apologize for. Every single day, I had the choice. To call off the war. To disband the Royal Guard or change their orders or do something, anything other than what I elected to do. Each of the humans that fell down, they were somebody else's Chara. Somebody else's Asriel. I knew that, and I ignored it, long after the anger had faded and I did not even have that meager excuse. The fault is mine and mine alone.”

“...sometimes, when I dream. I see their faces. I hear them talk about the Surface, about their families. I hear them plead their cases, or argue with me, or explain their reasons. I watch them leave the Ruins. I shut the door behind them. And I am sickened. The very first child that fell... her name was Patricia. I should have opened the Ruins up. I should have walked with her, hand in hand, to New Home. And I should have made my case. To you and to everyone. But I didn't. I didn't....”

Toriel stared down at the ground below her feet, not really seeing it.

“Asgore. After the Barrier was destroyed, and we were making our way to this town, to meet the humans. Frisk was very... persuasive, arguing that no matter what my personal feelings on the matter might be, I should retain the Dreemurr name. 'For political stuff,' they said. But I suspect that Frisk knew. That deep down, I still missed you. I still loved you... and I still do. I love you, Gorey. Even after what has happened. You were... you were a part of my life for so long. Thousands of years. Leaving you was like losing a part of myself.”

“...I still love you too, Tori. But you already know that.”

“I do.” Toriel smiled a sad smile and wiped away some tears from the fur around one eye. “Despite the distance. Despite the strain. You have been nothing but patient. You have been a model father for Frisk. You understood that Asriel had come back so quickly, and accepted him immediately. You...”

The queen looked toward the hot dog stand, where Frisk was standing with their arms stretched out to each side and one leg off of the ground, and Sans was stacking hot dogs on their head. Off to one side, Asriel and the volcano monster were laughing, and Toriel giggled as well, in spite of herself.

“When we were at Joe's House of Stuff, getting new clothing for Frisk, I was trying to think of a way to justify what I wanted to say, to explain it as being for the sake of the family. For the sake of the children, to make things easier for them. But look at them. Like you said. Even after everything that has happened to them. Trials and challenges we can barely conceive of. And even with the past haunting them. They are doing so well. They are so strong, so brave... so determined. No... it may help them, that is true. But this... this is truly for me.”

Toriel turned to face Asgore again.

“Gorey. So much changed with the Barrier gone. So much changed in just a year. And the world is still changing around us, even now. And... we do not have all the time in the world, anymore. It would have been madness for me to hold onto my anger for decades or centuries, or even longer, but if all we have now is a few more decades, then that is even worse. However long or short life is, it is always too short to spend angry....”
Toriel smiled a sad smile once again.

“Asgore. I would like to... try again. To give us another chance.”

The king smiled.

“Toriel... I would like to try again as well. But you already knew that.”

“I did.”

“...Tori. Do you remember our wedding?”

“Those memories have been on my mind very often today, if I am honest.”

“Our families... I know that so much of what they did, they did to try to inspire everyone. To give them hope after the War. But you and me... if there had been no War, or if it had ended differently. I would have courted you anyway, on my own initiative. Just by being yourself, you have brought so much joy to such a miserable creature. And whatever happens today, or tomorrow, or any point in the future. That will always be true.”

“...you have done the same for me, Gorey. Your kind heart was a light in the darkness for everyone, but especially for me.” Toriel reached out and took Asgore's paw in her own. “This will be... it will be difficult. But I still wish to try.”

“As do I.”

Some distance away, Asriel lowered his ear and smiled.

“Frisk, I'm not sure how you knew. But you were absolutely right.”

The human child grinned, and the tower of hot dogs leaned dangerously back and forth, then toppled down onto the stand's roof as their concentration lapsed.

Sans chuckled. “aw, and we were so close to breaking the twenty-nine head dog glass ceiling, too.”

Chapter End Notes

One hundred chapters holy fuckballs what am I doing with my life how did this happen where did it all go so wrong what's that ringing in my ears if a tree falls in a forest and only Sans is around to hear it does he still make a pun

*DEEP BREATH*

Thank you everybody who has joined me on this insane ride so far, and remember, we are not done yet! We have more epic confrontations, more shocking reveals, and a couple other reveals which... thinking about it... probably won't be so shocking because I've been dropping hints since chapter two. And even when it does all get wrapped up, I have like three different related projects on the back burner, and I need to choose which one to focus on first. Might leave it up to a vote or something.
There Is NoStopping This Madness

Chapter Notes

Recommended Music: The Underkart / Underracer Fan game OSTs. Can be found here:

Underkart

Thanks are in order for LadyAnatares for streamlining the playlist link. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Gooooood afternoon Ebott's Wake! You are listening to Brett Brinkman and DJ Pantz at the one, the only, KEBT FM Broadcast Tent, coming at you live from Kelly Plaza where the preparations for the one hundred and eighth Ebott's Wake Kludge Derby are well under way! How are you doing, Burgie?”

“Clean and sober, at least for the next few hours.”

“Glad to hear it! Also Jeff has just told me that Gary is almost finished refueling and should be up in the air inside of ten minutes, where he will be able to provide us with up to the moment race commentary. Also remember, Local Channel 55 community television will be broadcasting the race at key points along the track, so don't forget to show them some love and tune in as well!”

“Are those guys ever going to change that to something besides Local Channel 55?”

“Last I heard, no. Nobody wants to order new stationary or business cards.”

“That's... actually a better reason than I expected.”

“Well there you go! Clutch McGee and Beapore Levine are down among the racers themselves, while Lazy Lindsey is speaking with the judges on new rules. As this is the first Kludge Derby we have had since the Barrier was destroyed and the first derby with monster participants, a certain amount of deliberation had to be made regarding the use of magic and magic-based monster technology, which we will be hearing about in a bit. But before that, we have with us this year's Derby Marshal, Dave Harrison. Mr. Harrison, it's a pleasure to have you with us today.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Brinkmann.”

“If memory serves, you have been Derby Marshal several times before, correct?”

“That is quite correct. I was privileged to be appointed as the Marshal in 2006 and again in 2009, and the people of Ebott's Wake have done me the honor of selecting me for the job yet again on this occasion, the first Kludge Derby held after the defeat of the Sages and the return of monsters to the surface of the earth. It's an old, proud tradition of this town and I can't think of any better way to celebrate our history and our culture, it really speaks to who we are.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth Mr. Harrison. Your father was also Derby Marshal for
several years, correct?"

"Yes indeed. Eric Harrison was appointed in 1974, 1982, and he would have been Marshal for 1986 if not for the terrible storm season that year."

"That's right, almost the only way to cancel the Kludge Derby is through inclement weather, such as last year's heat wave during the racing season. This year it's almost like a mirror image, everything else is insanely hot but when we want to hold the race it cools down considerably."

"Call me superstitious if you want, Mr. Brinkmann, but I'm inclined to consider that a good omen. Whoops, looks like they need me down at the starting line. Duty calls."

"Yes indeed! Thank you for your time! And Jeff has just informed me that Lazy Lindsey is over at the judges tent with a summary of new rules for this year involving the use or non use of magic. Lindsey, you there?"

"Hey Brett, I'm here with Norman Cottlemeyer, head of the Derby Judge Panel. Norm, everything you just told me, say it again into the microphone."

"Ugh... very well. To the extent that magic is able to induce physical motion, its use is forbidden in the construction of Kludge Racers, as that would allow any monster participant an unfair advantage over human engineers limited by the constraints of human technology. According to Doctor Alphys of All Fine Labs this excludes what is called Dimensional Magic and Energy Magic, and she, along with several monster engineers, were called in to vet that the Cheesemonger racer built by the All Fine Labs Lab Mice operates on the same mechanistic and motive principles as all the other racers. On the other hand, protective and healing magic are completely authorized, and all racers are permitted to have up to three servings of monster food in their vehicles or on their person to utilize in the event of a crash as a supplement to first aid."

"Should come in handy. Hey, about Van Garrett's racer, the hovercraft thingy. Doesn't that break the wind power ban?"

"After some deliberation, the Judge panel has decided that The Bookmobile air-cushion / ekrano-plane hybrid vehicle does not fall under the ban because its primary motive systems are ducted fans, not sails. It is capable of operating without any wind, and especially is able to operate against the wind, an attribute which, had he only possessed it, might have allowed Harold Cobb to avoid the tragic crash of his sail-driven kludge racer in 1922 which lead to the township ban in the first place."

"Yeah, okay. Makes sense. Guys, that's all we got over here unless you want me to talk to the dude holding a tape measure."

"I'm... sure we'll be fine, Lindsey, thanks. Uh... Burgie, you alright?"

"Wha?"

"You looked like you were drifting off there."

"I was just. Uh. Thinking. About a thought."

"...what kind of-"

"Pretzels were not involved and you can't prove anything in a court of law!"

"...I'm just going to toss things over to Clutch now, Jeff."
“Hey Brett! Clutch McGee down here in the pit, talking with Elijah McGraw of the Dank Memehaus. Say hello to everyone, Mr. McGraw!”

“Hello. Sorry if that wasn't too loud but I've been sick most of the last twelve hours.”

“Ah. Right. Celebrating the recapture of Jordan Cater, no doubt. I bet you saw a lot of business last night.”

“I dunno. You'd have to ask Grillby. I was too busy... well. Use your imagination. Or don't. Doesn't matter.”

“WE LOVE YOU ELI! GO GET EM!”

“Thanks Roastie! Oh god my throat.”

“Mr. McGraw, your entry this year is called Kernel Panic, correct? What can you tell us about it?”

“Ugh. Ahem. Well... it has an angle iron frame, the contact surfaces are recovered from wheelbarrows and hand carts, and the prime mover is an epicyclic ring system mounted on a pivot. The more it turns, the closer the ring pattern relative to the ground resembles a full circle. Which is the only way I can throttle the leaf blower engine that powers it. Front two pairs of wheels are mounted on rack and pinion sets for steering, brakes are emergency hand brakes against the last two pairs of wheels.”

“Thank you, that's very descriptive. How do you consider your chances for this race?”

“About thirty percent chance of finishing in the top three, so almost one in three.”

“That's not much.”

“It's about the same as Sean Connery's guy gave the officers' chance of defecting to the USA in The Hunt For Red October. They pulled it off.”

“You make a good point... I guess? Alright. Moving on to Paul Cobb here, with his Kludge Racer, called Rope-A-Dope. Mr. Cobb, nice to see you back in action finally after that crash in 2011.”

“Yeah, that didn't tickle, but I'm here now.”

“Can you explain for the listeners at home your Kludge Racer design?”

“Welp. The wheels are all pulleys. Got em from all sorts of places. Chain hoists. Block and tackle. Anything really. The pulley ropes are how I make the wheels run, got em hooked into this crank here. Two push mower engines, one for each side. That's how I steer it too, it's like a tank.”

“I have to say, it doesn't look like this would go very fast, but if you're here now you must obviously have passed the time trials earlier in the week.”

“Yup. Gotta good feeling about this year.”

“Good luck to you, Mr. Cobb. I am heading over to... yes, it looks like Casey Dalton. How are you doing Ms. Dalton?”

“If I was any happier I'd be twins! It's my first race ever I am so excited oh my god!”

“Love your enthusiasm, by the way. Can you explain to the listeners the design behind your racer?”
“Oh sure! Yeah! Pandemonium is like ninety percent made out of musical instruments and sound gear! The chassis is an old amplifier, the controls are all from instrument valves and piano keys, and I'm using a steam engine for a power supply, I cast it myself! The whole thing is powered by compressed air tanks, so I don't have to use a boiler or a radiator, so my power to weight ratio is awesome!”

“Now that's interesting, if I remember right the last time the Kludge Derby had a pneumatic racer it was in the late fifties.”

“Yeah, that was Tommy Moore's racer, the Calliope Mark Two. He was using turbines though, so what he gained in speed he lost in power. That's why I went with pistons.”

“I can't wait to see how this compares to back then, especially with modern materials. Good luck Ms. Dalton!”

“Thank you!”

“Hey, Jeff, think you can switch over to Beanpole? ...great.”

“Hey everybody, it's Beanpole Levine! I'm here with Justin Carrow and his Racer, Speakeasy. Mr. Carrow, how's it going?”

“If I get another craving for Red Hots I swear I am going to shoot myself in the face."

“...what??"

“Never mind. So. Yeah. This is Speakeasy. A vintage, claw footed bathtub mounted on freely rotating offset wheels and lots of them, to minimize the weight distribution problem that comes from something this old and heavy. The prime mover and steering mechanism is this outboard motor equivalent mounted on a tiller; the entire assembly is a reproduction in miniature of an old one lung steam engine design with a massive wheel as a Power Take Off. Axle mount on one side, piston crank on the other side, and it's all powered by a steam flash boiler. Also the road contact surface is made from lots of old shoes.”

“Very nice. What's with the pennant hanging from the shower head pipes, though?”

“Oh. I have no idea. I was drunk when I put that on. I'm sure it made sense to me at the time.”

“Yeah, that's usually how it works. Well, good luck to you Mr. Carrow. Moving onto oh god why.”

“Hello to you too!”

“Hey. Mr. Greene. Can you tell us about your racer? Without hurting somebody?”

“I promise you nothing! The Meane Greene Machine is a shopping cart first and foremost, and motive force is supplied through these liquid fuel rocket engines. Very small combustion chambers, and the fuel mixture is not hypergolic this year, learned from that mistake. That has forced me to add electrical ignition systems, but I saved on the pumps by just using bicycle foot pumps. I mean, I gotta stand on this platform back here anyway. Steering is with these control valves here-"

“GOOD LUCK HAL!”

“Azzy mah boi! Good to see you! Where was I, I heard Asriel and my train of thought jumped tracks and now I'm thinking about flying saucers for some reason.”
“Control valves.”

“Right! These here. They control steering and top speed, and the handbrakes are right there. Because I'm standing up this thing has a wicked high center of gravity, so I had to add stabilizers, but those are just skateboards on metal crossbars. And if anything goes wrong? Three bottles of monster soda! It's almost as good as Red Bull and it doesn't destroy my stomach lining.”

“Okay that's good thanks good luck! Gah. Oh god. My life was flashing before my eyes... what do you mean I'm on the-”

“Aaaaaaand it's Clutch McGee again, with the All Fine Labs Lab Mice, Alex, Barry, Chase and Delgado! Delgado, if I am not mistaken, is employing a text-to-speech device, so with any luck the audio channels will be okay with that. How you guys doing today?”

“...We Are Doing Fine. ...We Are All Excited About This Race.”

“This racer, the Cheesemonger, falls under the category of Collaborative Build, and is unique in that all collaborators can operate it at the same time. Can you explain how the Cheesemonger works and who was responsible for what parts?”

“...Standby. ...Alex Is A Carpenter And Assembled The Primary Frame. ...Barry Is An Electrician And Supplied The Motors And Batteries. ...Chase Is A Magic Theorist And Encased Six Wheels Of Cheese In Arcane Crystal To Create Our Road Contact Surfaces. ...I Am A Computer Scientist And Designed The Control Systems.”

“Very nice. I was wondering why the wheels were glowing and also full of holes.”

“...Sometimes We Got Hungry During The Construction Phase.”

“Well, it's either snack or get drunk when it comes to racers. Jeff is telling me we need to move on but I wish you guys good luck.”

“...Thank You.”

“And up next is Hans Therrick with his returning build, Zeitberecht. Nice to see you again Hans.”

“Nice to be here, Mr. McGee.”

“Now, for those listeners who were not around for the last time you raced, can you give them a rundown of the Zeitberecht and also an explanation of the name?”

“Well. It's basically a giant hamster ball, and I use motors and flywheels inside of it to roll it around in the direction I want. Power plant is from a snowmobile, steering is accomplished via differentials between different motors to change the distribution of torque between them. As for the name, I came up with the design years ago when I was playing Command and Conquer: Red Alert and I wanted to call it the German equivalent of Chronosphere. But I didn't actually know any German at the time, and also I was really high off of the varnish I used for the prototype runners, otherwise I would have called it something like Zeitkugel. So yeah. So far as I know Zeitberecht doesn't actually mean anything, it's a nonsense word. Coulda saved myself a few headaches if I'd not been too stoned to do a Google Search.”

“Well, that's a cautionary tale if there ever was one. Doesn't it get hot in there?”

“Yes, that's where my two main additions come in this year; a dry ice cooler, and a breath mask.”
“That still seems kind of risky, but your past successes do speak volumes. Thanks for your time, and good luck today!”

“Thanks!”

“How are we doing on time Jeff? ...oh. Okay. Got it. Moving on to our next racer, Michael Van Garrett. Mr. Van Garrett, nice to see you here today, what can you tell everybody about your racer The Bookmobile?”

“Well, it's made entirely out of component parts from old equipment that the Ebott's Wake Librarby can no longer use. The core structure was constructed from metal recovered from chairs and tables, the fans and the cowlings are made from sheet metal from the old duct work, and much of the air flow surfaces were molded from plastic recovered from old microfilm and microfiche readers. The air cushion apron was fabricated from the tires of the Librarby's original Bookmobile or at least, what was left of them; that's where the name comes from. Even the prime mover comes from the old backup generator.”

“I can't help but notice that it looks like a cross between a fan boat and a quad copter.”

“True, but as I've always said, if it looks weird but it works, it's not weird.”

“Well, I hope to see this thing in action very soon, good luck to you Mr. Van Garrett.”

“Thank you Mr. McGee.”

“Todd Clemens is right here with Snooze Patrol, works out pretty well for us. Mr. Clemens, what can you tell us about your racer?”

“Snooze Patrol is an old movable hospital bed, complete with independently rotating wheels, but given motive direction by an adjustable flywheel from an automatic pitching machine, which is electrically driven and mounted on a turntable. The entire thing can be controlled from this modern remote. Yes, I am aware of the irony of using a modern hospital bed control with such an outdated bed for a chassis, so you need not point that out.”

“Honestly I didn't pick up on it until you pointed it out yourself.”

“...oh.”

“And with that we have to jump over to Beanpole Levine, how's it looking Beanpole?”

“Thanks Clutch! I'm with our last racer today, Lucy Kramer and her Highlander. Mrs. Kramer, can you tell the folks at home about your entry?”

“Highlander's core structure is three push lawnmower platforms, with the front being hinged relative to the others. The latter two support my seat and the fuel tanks. Two lawnmower engines are attached to wheelchair wheels mounted on these crossbars, which I use to steer and cut motive power as needed.”

“So it's like a chariot.”

“Yeah, sure. If you want.”

“That's pretty impressive and I just got word from Jeff that we need to cut back to Brett and Burgie, back to you guys!”
“Thanks Beanpole. Brett Brinkman here and Lazy Lindsey has joined us at the tent and has a map of the route this year. Lindsey, you want to tell us what's up?”

“Eh, not really, but since it's my job. Okay. The race is divided into five stages. Stage one is from the Plaza to Ridge Road. Stage two is from Ridge Road to Tesseract Road. Stage three is from Tesseract Road to East West Road... wait, West East Road. My bad. Stage four is from West East Road to Park Lane. And the last stage is from Park Lane back here to the Plaza. I think one of the judges told me that this year they were deciding the route based on dice rolling, but I wasn't really paying attention, so... you know. Whatever.”

“Right... Burgie, you doing okay? You got that glazed look in your eyes again-”

“THIS IS MY DEFAULT EXPRESSION!”

“...okay then. I've just been informed that Gary is en route, Gary, can you hear us?”

“Salutations Brett, Burgie, Lindsey, and all of our contestants in this test of fortitude and technological ingenuity! I can see everything from my lofty vantage point now that I am no longer beset by monster aircraft giving mixed signals!”

“Well, that's a nice change from earlier. Even if it does raise questions- I'm being told that the Derby Marshal is about to begin, over to Winston at the center stage!”

“...Is this thing on? Oh. Good. Ahem. Welcome, one and all, to the 2016 Ebott's Wake Kludge Derby! It's been over a hundred years since the first derby was held here, born as much from necessity and ingenuity as entertainment. Remember, none of these vehicles started as vehicles. They were something else, something different. And yet here they are, ready to go. What separates a pile of junk from a kludge racer? Nothing but ingenuity and sweat. So it is true for all of us here today. What separates the lives we have lived, from the people that we want to be? Nothing but our own efforts, and our own imagination! There are no blueprints for success, success is what you make it! There is no one recipe for happiness, it's where you find it! Everything that happens to you tomorrow, depends on the decisions you make today. That is how the people of Ebott's Wake, the people of Lost Eagle County, have always survived and thrived, no matter the trials and hardships. Immanuel Kelly did not follow somebody else's path, he made his own, and his spirit lives on in what we do, and say, and create. This is the reason for the Kludge Derby! It is more than a race! It is a celebration of the most important part of life; the choices we make every day! The choices that change the world! The Kludge Derby is an expression of the best quality in all of us: Determination!”

“Ouch. Winston you think you can turn down the- that's better.”

“Thank you all for coming together, to be a part of this. And remember; as long as nobody gets hurt, crashing is half the fun! Now... with the striking of the Ceremonial Bell, the race will begin! Drivers, start your vehicles! ...On your mark... get set! …GO!”

“AND THEY'RE OFF! Highlander pulls ahead followed by Zeitberecht and Snooze Patrol! All three have a good lead over the other racers but will they be able to hold onto it outside of the straightaway?”

“Uh oh, Brett! The Meane Greene Machine has had what looks like a rocket engine flame-out right away! Hal's pumping them back up but this is really going to to hurt him later! Cheesemonger got a slow start too, not sure if it was the crystal or the electric motors just not handling acceleration well. Gary, what can you tell us?”
“The racers are approaching the end of Stage One right now! They're taking the corner, and, and yes! Snooze Patrol is outpacing Highlander! *Zeitberecht* is lagging behind, Hans can't take the corner fast enough with only one contact surface, he's been forced to slow down or lose control! Everyone's jumping in to fill the gap! Pandemonium and the Bookmobile, no it's Kernel Panic, guys it's an absolute swarm here! Mean Greene Machine is getting up to speed but can he catch OH MY GOD!”

“What?! What happened?!”

“Brett, Speakeasy could not make the turn in time and has skidded directly into the safety bumpers! I saw several parts fly off, I don't know if Carrow can, wait, wait, he's started again! He's okay! He's in last place but he is okay!”

“Oh thank god.”

“I second that emotion! The competition is definitely heating up but fortunately there has been no unsportsmanlike chariot duel activity so far! Changing course to follow along to the Stage Three transition!”

“Gary, how is Rope A Dope doing?”

“Surprisingly fast for a traction engine racer Burgie!”

“Wow, I'm impressed.”

“As am I! Mr. Cobb has ample reason to be proud of himself- oh my, that will not end well! I just saw one of the support wheels come off of Highlander! So far everyone has avoided it, but this will seriously impair Kramer's performance! We are coming up on the transition now... and *Zeitberecht* has overtaken Snooze Patrol somehow!”

“He must have been able to speed up on the straight away, but those corners are really going to hurt him again later.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth Brett! Highlander is definitely trailing sparks and slowing down, and the Cheesemonger is pulling ahead again! Pandemonium appears to be venting steam, and not where steam is supposed to come from either, and they've started to lag behind!”

“It's actually not steam Gary, it's compressed air.”

“Splitting hairs, Burgie! Pandemonium is going to lose power very quickly at this rate! At the risk of prematurely speculating, we could be looking at a D-N-F for Pandemonium and Ms. Dalton WHAT ARE THOSE TEMMIES DOING ON THE RACE COURSE?!”

“What?!”

“HOLY HELL! I haven't seen moves like that since the 2010 Derby with Spiderpig! Rope-A-Dope just narrowly avoided a collision and unfortunately spun out, all the racers weaving back and forth to avoid him and the Temmies like a choreographed fight scene! If Cobb doesn't get straightened out soon, Speakeasy and Meane Greene Machine will overtake him for sure!”

“Man, I did not see that coming Brett.”

“I don't think anyone could have seen that coming Burgie. Obvious in hindsight though.”

“Obvious to *who*, exactly?!”
“Gary, looks on our map like you're coming up on Stage Four, what can you tell us?”

“It looks like I was indeed premature when it comes to Highlander, I no longer see sparks and Kramer is gaining on everyone!”

“Wait, what?! How?!”

“It looks like she has shifted all of her body weight over to the one side with all remaining wheels! An extremely risky strategy both in terms of safety and stress on that side of the vehicle, but the results speak for themselves as she is pulling ahead again! Greene has harnessed the straightaway to use his rockets to good effect but he may not catch up in time! Zeitberecht still out in front! Cheesemonger, Bookmobile, and Snooze Patrol are jostling for third place! Cheesemonger, no, Snooze Patrol, no, Cheesemonger again, wait, Van Garrett is using the vacuum effect from the side of Snooze Patrol to push ahead!”

“Well, it's a common enough strategy in professional racing, but if anyone could make the most of it, it would be a literal rocket scientist.”

“I was thinking something very similar Brett! We are coming up on the Stage Five transition shortly! This is where it gets dicey!”

“Oh god. The Freemont Pot Holes.”

“Exactly, Burgie! This could be quite serious for all of our racers! Precision driving and nerves of steel will be mandatory! And... Zeitberecht pulls ahead during the turn?! That shouldn't be physically possible!”

“Wait, I can see them in my binoculars Gary! It looked like the entire hamster ball thing was spinning like a top! Hans must have found a way to correct for his cornering problems on the fly!”

“I'll take your word for it Brett! Highlander is right behind, there's no way to catch up with Hans' lead but Kramer will be a shoe-in for silver medal if she can dodge those potholes! Cheesemonger is right behind her though and coming up fast, but will it be enough to grab second place from JESUS CHRIST?”

“HOLY FU*BEEP* WHAT HAPPENED?!”

“Oh my god! Everyone, Snooze Patrol just hit one of the potholes and went end over end there's parts everywhere somebody get the medics over, wait, wait, he's okay! Clemens is limping away from the wreckage, he's gonna be okay!”

“Oh thank god. Man, you hate to see a crash this close to the finish line but if you can walk away from it...”

“Right you are, Burgie! I think it's safe to say that Snooze Patrol will not be able to finish, but Todd Clemens did exceptionally well up until that mishap! Good on him! Our other racers are approaching the finish line now, Zeitberecht in the lead, Highlander finishing second and Cheesemonger with third place! Kernel Panic is right behind them, followed by the Bookmobile, and Rope A Dope and Pandemonium manage to tie for sixth place! The Meane Greene Machine and Speakeasy are picking up the tail end of the race now, but for a while there it could have been anybody!”

“All too true, Gary! Brett Brinkman here, according to Kyle Zimmerman with the medical teams, Todd Clemens has a sprained ankle and wrist, no signs of concussion or internal injury!”
“Wow, that was an emotional roller coaster if there ever was one.”

“You said it, Lindsey. I’ve never heard you yell like that. Or curse on air, hope Jeff got that... alright, good. Nice reflexes Jeff.”

“Come on, Brett. I'm lazy, not dead.”

“I guess there is that. Alright, I've just been told that Clutch and Beanpole are down there with the racers! Clutch, you're on!”

“Thanks Brett! I am here with Hans Therrick, Hans how does it feel to be victorious in the Derby once again?”

“Uh, kind of terrifying at the end there, also please tell me that Todd's okay. That was a nasty crash.”

“From what I've heard it's nothing some monster food and a night's sleep won't fix.”

“Oh thank god.”

“How did you manage to do that cornering trick at the very end?”

“Uh. I'm not sure. My hands just did it on their own. By all rights I should have crashed right into the safety bumpers.”

“Well, a victory is still a victory, and congratulations to you Hans!”

“Yeah. Thanks. I'm, I'm going to go throw up now.”

“Uh. Okay. You do that. Mrs. Kramer, you really pulled through there at the end after you lost that wheel, that was edge-of-the-seat riveting right there.”

“Yeah, Highlander really pulled through when it counted. I don't know how I lost that wheel exactly but I know what part to improve for next year.”

“Is there anything you want to say to our listeners out there?”

“Yeah! Tyler, Mom, Dad, Mary-Anne, I love you guys!”

“Now that's somebody who knows what's important. It's been a pleasure Mrs. Kramer! And here are the All Fine Labs Lab Mice! How are you guys holding up after that?”

“...Extremely Excited.”

“The text to speech device can only do so much, but it's obvious to anybody here looking at you that you guys are totally stoked about this.”

“...Yes. The Limitations Of Technology Have Seldom Been This Frustrating To Us. ...For All That We Are Still The Happiest Monsters In Town At This Time.”

“I'll bet! You guys enjoy your victory! And we're switching over to Beanpole in a second speaking with our other racers now!”

“Thanks Clutch! I'm here with Casey Dalton, Ms. Dalton, it looked like Pandemonium was losing pressure out there.”
“Yeah, A seal went bad on one of the valves. I knew this could happen so I had some backup pipes in the engine but compressed air is like a spring, once I lost what I did there was only so much I could do after that.”

“Unfortunate, but we live and we learn. Paul Cobb is also here, Mr. Cobb you very nearly had a nasty crash there.”

“Yeah, I don't... know... exactly what happened. Also I'm starting to break out in a rash or somethin.”

“Ooh, you should check in the the medics, it could be Temmie Allergies.”

“Maybe.”

“Beyond that, your rope traction engined really exceeded everyone's expectations there.”

“Well, there's a mental block most people have with caterpillar track style locomotion because they're used to seeing heavy equipment use it. And heavy equipment isn't built for speed, so of course it doesn't move fast. But, you take a modern tank, and pull the governor off of the engine? You can pull about a hundred miles an hour for a bit. I mean, it's not good for it, but you can do it if ya have to. Like so many things with racers, it comes down to power to weight ratio... uh. Scuse me. I'm gonna take your advice and see the medics before the swelling makes it impossible to breathe.”

“Yeah, those are definitely hoives. You take care of yourself Mr. Cobb! And Mr. Greene, hey, what happened at the star there?”

“Oh, the usual, engines flamed out, had to clear the lines and pump them back up. I knew it was going to take a while to build up momentum but with a slow start like that I didn't really have a chance. Hah! Think next year I'll leave rockets to Mike, he's the one that actually knows how they work!”

“Well, in that case, I can't wait to see what you do next year. From far away. Speaking of the devil, here is Michael Van why are you bleeding.”

“Ngh. We really need to get those potholes fixed. When Todd hit that one it ripped out his entire motive assembly and scattered it to the four winds. I think I found part of his steering column-”

“It's sticking out of your arm! How are you not in pain right now?”

“Oh, I feel it. It definitely hurts. A lot, actually- GAH. There we go. Somehow I don't think he's gonna want this back, where's the nearest trash can?”

“Just, just go talk to the medics before I throw up please.”

“Eh, I'll be fine. I got some Crab Apples around here somewhere. Ah, there we are. Mmpgh. Clawsh are de besht part.”

“...moving on. Justin Carrow. Please distract me from what I just saw. I am begging you.”

“Well... if you're looking for post race commentary... I think Todd and I are in complete agreement that as long as nobody gets hurt, crashing in the Kludge Derby is half the fun. But because he did get hurt, I don't think he considers this race quite that fun. Hey, Todd! Get your butt over here!”

“Hey Justin. Wow. My head is still spinning.”
“Well, you were spinning. And that includes your head. Scuse me gentlemen I need to go keep Hal from getting into the Red Bull in celebration.”

“Right, right. Hi, uh. Radio guy. Sorry, my brain is half shot now that the adrenaline is wearing off.”

“Beanpole Levine from KEBT. Mr. Clemens, how does the crash this year affect your plans for future races?”

“Well... I'm not driving THAT again. I mean, I think the whole hospital bed thing might have been tempting fate now. Just a little bit. I could probably make something out of a washing machine for next year though. Or a tumble dryer. We'll see.”

“Looking forward to it, Mr. Clemens- wait, already? Todd it looks like you and all the other racers are wanted at the awards ceremony. Brett, back to you!”

“Thank you, Beanpole! Wow. This Derby is one for the history books alright. Man. My hands are shaking. Look at em Burgie.”

“...yep, they're definitely shaking. I don't think I ever saw you that scared when you were calling for the medics to check on Todd there. Like, ever.”

“Yeah, that was a new personal record in freaking out... okay. Well. After that, we definitely need a break, but we'll be back really fast to bring you the awards ceremony, so stay tuned to KEBT!”

Chapter End Notes

Me, two weeks ago: Alright, time to sit down and write the Kludge Derby chapter!
*Two weeks later*
Me, staring at three chapters of a prequel fic and two of a spinoff fic: 0_0;
So... you got that to look forward to. I guess.
Project Planning

The door chimed as another customer walked in, and the cashier looked up from their phone. “Hey, welcome to Rick’s Hardware, can I help you find anything?”

The customer shook their head and made their way through to the back of the store. “Thanks but I think I know what I need.”

“Yes.” The cashier returned their attention to their phone, but only for a split second as another customer came up to the register with a basket of purchases.

“I believe this will suffice for today.”

“Alright, let me ring you up-”

The cashier blinked, staring at the man in front of them; wearing an obvious false mustache, a derby hat, and a T-Shirt that said “I’d love to stay but I really” and then a stylized cartoon mustache.

“Is something the matter?”

“Uh. No. Just, I was trying to figure out your shirt for a second. Okay, let’s get you on your way.”

The various objects were scanned and totaled, and the customer pulled out a checkbook and fountain pen. “The Lost Eagle County False Mustache Enthusiast Society thanks you for your help.”

“Right, no problem... hey, wait a second. You guys are up in Gemini Roads right?”

“Yes, our main office is located there. At least for the time being. If the doors keep coming off their hinges like this we may have to relocate.”

“I’m not complaining about getting more business, but isn't there a hardware store up there?”

“Oh, you must not have heard. The Davenport family closed down the store last month.”

The cashier blinked. “Wait what? I can't believe I didn't hear about this.”

“Yes indeed. Quite sad. They were the third business to open their doors when the town was founded, but after that sordid affair with their son the family just, I suppose they couldn't find anyone they trusted to take over the establishment. So they ended it on their terms and retired.”

“That is sad.” The cashier handed the receipt to the customer. “Here you go. Good luck with your door hinge. Mending. Thing.”

“Thank you, I expect I shall need it.”

The man with the false mustache walked out, and at the same time, two children walked in. One ran right up to the counter. “Hi Brad!”

“Hey, Frisk. Starting on another project?”

“Just a small one. Do you guys still offer the in-house metal and pipe bending service?”
The cashier shook his head. “Nope, sorry. There was... gimme a minute... yeah, that's right. Somebody tried to use some pipes we bent for them in a propane generator set up, had a pinhole leak, small fire, and tried to sue us for fault. We got them to settle out of court but we gotta cut down our liability in the future, so that ain't happening again any time soon.”

“Okay. That's alright. What about the miter cuts for rectangular tubing?”

“Same thing applies.” Brad looked around, then checked the security camera feeds on one of the monitors. “Having said that, if you want to just use one of the miter boxes we have, feel free. I mean, for the show of it I'll have to charge you for the hacksaw blade but that's it.”

“That might work. Come on Asriel, metal shop stuff is this way.”

“Okay.”

The two children headed deeper into the hardware store, and Brad returned his attention to his smartphone... for about ten seconds. The door chimed again and he looked up at the customer walking in.

“Hey, welcome to Rick's Hardware, can I help you...” Brad's customer service opener trailed off as the customer headed straight into the store without looking at him. Shrugging, he returned his attention to his phone, only to have another customer come up to the register five seconds later.

“Here. And if you could make this as fast possible, I'd appreciate it.”

“I can try. Okay, plumbing fixtures... turpentine... and hinges, is that everything?”

“Yeah. I just woke up and I was commanded by Sauron to build him an armoire worthy of Mordor.”

Brad snorted. “Hey, whatever floats your boat.”

“So... the Kludge Derby. That happened right? I've been kind of out of it since last night. Because of reasons. So by the time I woke up...”

“Oh yeah, turns out-”

“Don't. Don't spoil it for me. I'll watch the highlights on fifty five.”

“Okay, whatever you say. That'll be twenty two fifty seven.”

“Alright... here's thirty.”

“Okay... fifty seven, fifty eight, fifty nine, sixty, sixty five, seventy five, and that makes twenty three, twenty four, twenty five and thirty. Here's your receipt.”

“Thanks. Have a good day man.”

“You too.”

The customer walked out and Brad turned his attention to another customer walking up to the checkout with their purchases. “Hello sir, how can I... that's a lot of ammunition.”

“Gotta stock up. Mark my words, buddy, it's the calm before the storm.”

“I'll need to see-”
“Here’s my driver's license, my hunting license, and my store discount card.”

“Okay, let me pull up the database here…” Brad typed at the computer terminal next to the register. “...okay. Everything looks in order Mr. Taylor. Just need you to sign off here and here to keep the BADTF happy.”

“Fine. Whatever.”

Behind Mr. Taylor, the doors opened and another customer walked in and waved at Brad, prompting Brad to wave back. “Hey Eli! Congrats on getting fourth place!”

“Thanks Brad!”

Eli headed deeper into the hardware store, grabbing a container of chocolate covered sunflower seeds on the way, but paused outside of one aisle as he heard some voices that sounded familiar.

“Well, if it's at a forty five degree angle is sticks out more, meaning it's longer and costs more. But we get more stability out of it.”

“More stability sounds good.”

“...uh oh.”

“What? When did we get to uh oh?”

“I just discovered the fatal flaw in my plan. With the tubing cut at forty five degrees, the only flat surface to mount the wheels on is going to be the edge of the cut. So either the wheel is offset, or it's completely parallel to the ground... oh, right, right. Right. I thought about this. We need those little wheels that can rotate freely, I can fasten them to the angled surface.”

Eli leaned forward and looked down the aisle; the ambassador and the monster prince were both standing next to different lengths and sizes of rectangular metal tubing. Asriel looked up and blinked.

“Uh, hello.”

“Hey.” Eli waved back. “You know, normally I can tell what a person's working on making or fixing by hearing them list the parts they need. Not this time.”

The ambassador looked up. “Hello Mr. McGraw. We're trying to make training wheels for my bike so Asriel can learn how to ride it.”

Eli blinked. “Guessing they didn't have a lot of bike trails in the Underground.”

“We didn't. Well, we didn't have bikes, either, unless somebody threw them away.”

Eli scratched his chin. “You know, they do actually sell bike training wheels here as a sort of add-on kit.”

“Wait, they do?” Frisk blinked. “When did they start doing that?”

“I don't know the exact date myself. I know I saw them over in the sporting goods area. Next to the fishing lures for some reason.”

“We should check that out then. It'll take less time to install it and it's less likely to break on us.”
Eli turned and pointed down the aisles. “Follow me, I know this store like the back of my hand.”

“Uh, just how often do you actually look at the back of your own hand?”

“More often than most people. This way.”

A few minutes later, Frisk was holding two plastic wrapped packages, comparing the sizes and prices according to the internal calculus that all DIY project enthusiasts possess. Eli looked down at Asriel, who had his paws clasped in front of him.

“So how are you holding up after Friday?”

It took the momentary flash of emotion across the monster's face for Eli to understand that he had asked the wrong question.

“Could be better, could be worse. I didn't actually move on from being Flowey. I mean. I didn't have the time. It's been less than a week. But. Turning into that. Sort of pulls the rug out from under the idea of moving on at all.” Asriel rubbed his paws together. “So. I've got that hanging over my head, along with everything else I did. But... as long as Jordan Cater doesn't break out again. Then I can learn to live with it.”

“Suppose there is that. I spent most of last night and all of this morning sick, but in terms of getting things done that's an excellent trade off.”

“...sorry about that.”

“...being sick, you mean?”

“Yeah. The Soul Link thing. That was what happened. There were side effects. There always are.”

“That's true of a lot of things. They told me that Hal was up really early and he was a Morning Person for once, which is not something I ever expected to happen in my lifetime.”

Frisk had taken down another package of training wheels and was attempting to measure wheel diameter through the plastic, using their hand as a unit of measurement. Eli snorted at some sort of amusing thought.

“You know, I have to ask. I know you and Hal are pals now. And Justin and Hal are close, and he also has all that stuff he learned in the Army. But what was with the rest of us? I saw this vine thing come out of the street and wrap around my arm and the next thing I knew it was like a freaking mescaline trip.”

“Uhm. What's a mescaline?”

Eli waved his hand. “In my case it was an ill-advised, artistically motivated experiment that could have backfired really badly. But my question still stands, why all of us at once like that?”

Asriel scratched one ear and shrugged.

“I. Well. I don't really know. I remember being angry. Like, much, much worse than I ever got as a flower. Beyond that... well, I think I have an idea. Magic is an expression of will and intent. I was connecting to the Souls around me that had the most intent to stop Jordan Cater for good.”

Eli's eyebrows shot up, and he nodded slowly. “You know, that does make a lot of sense. We all lost Byron because of him. Or at least, indirectly. We don't actually know who did what, so it could
have been anyone in that stupid cult. But he was the last part of it. And he wanted to start it all over again, near as we can tell. It's kind of hard to get into the guy's head.”

Asriel ran the fingers of one paw through the tuft of fur on his head. “Actually I think I got him figured out. He was. Uhm. He taught me a long time ago. That it was Kill Or Be Killed in this world. Only strength matters. Only survival counts. It doesn't matter how many people have to suffer and die, as long as you get what you want. And, well. It took a while for me to realize that was wrong.”

“...but you did realize it eventually. That's the important part. Some people with philosophies like that. They don't see the flaws in it until they're the ones getting killed. And by then it's too late.”

Asriel looked down at the floor. “Yeah.”

The monster's voice had become very quiet, and Eli paused to think over his words carefully.

“Hey, Asriel.”

“Yes?”

“Obviously, everyone is looking forward to a future where Cater ends up going to trial, and then to jail. No further break outs. But if push comes to shove, we all have to do what we can to stop him, just like last time. So sick or not. Trippy or not. If that... whole thing. If that's what it takes to stop him again. Then that's all the reason anybody needs. All I ask is some advance warning next time-”

“I don't want there to be a next time!”

Asriel managed to blush under his fur, realizing how loud his voice had gotten and how far it must have carried through the store. A few feet away, Frisk was staring at him with wide eyes. The monster child shook his head and tried to breathe in and out slowly.

“I was so tired of being a flower. Then I got to be me again for a little bit. Then I had to be a flower again, and I thought that was going to be forever. And... then I get to be me, and now it looks like I get to stay me this time, for good. And then... he shows up and he ruins everything he touches just like always and no, I don't get to be me after all. I have to be...”

Asriel breathed in slowly through his nose, and let it out through his mouth.

“Mr. McGraw. I'm sorry for what happened Friday. I'm sorry you got caught up in it. I'm sorry Hal got caught up in it. I'm sorry Justin got caught up in it. I'm sorry everyone got involved, I'm sorry it happened at all. So... there won't be any advance warning, because it's never going to happen again. Whatever happens in the future. We have to handle it as us. Not as 'Omega Flowey' or whatever people are calling it.”

Eli stared at Asriel, and nodded slowly. “Understood.”

“Sorry about going off like that, I just-”

“No, it's fine. It's okay. There have to be lines we don't cross. And this one is yours. And I can respect that. And honestly, I didn't want there to be a next time either. So I'm not complaining.”

Asriel let his breath out. “Right.”

“Right. So.” Eli held out his hand. “It's been nice meeting you Asriel, but I have to get some more angle iron, and it looks like you two have some bicycling to do later, so I guess we must part ways

“Well, it took a few tries this time, but I always get there in the end.” Eli grinned. “You kids take care. Frisk, always a pleasure.”

Frisk reached up and shook Eli's hand as well. “You too Mr. McGraw.”

Eli headed down the aisles back to the metal shop area, and Frisk's hand found Asriel's paw.

“Are you doing alright, bro? That was... I could tell you were really upset.”

“I uh... I just want to go home. It's been a long day and there were so many people and half of them all I could think about was... ugh. I just want to go home.”

“Alright. These wheels will work. Let's check out.”

“Okay...”

Asriel followed Frisk back through the store to the checkout counter, where Brad was scanning bag after bag of hard candy. The cashier shook his head.

“Okay, I'm not complaining at all, but we're getting up to twenty bags now, so I'm kinda tempted to ask.”

The man purchasing the candy removed a (possibly imaginary) speck from the surface of his fancy suit and snorted. “I lost a bet to my good-for-nothing brother, and that is all the exposition you shall ever receive from me!”
At The Last Minute

“Frisk... don't you have anything better to do?”

Frisk hadn't wanted to go, but... eventually... they lowered their head and walked away. Back towards the Ruins. Towards Home. Towards the Underground. Towards the Surface. Towards the friends they had made.

Asriel refused to look back. Refused to take away his gaze from the flowers. Somewhere underneath them was all that was left of what had been the most important part of his life. And while every single thought seemed to hurt, that was the thought that hurt the least. The idea of seeing Toriel and Asgore again... that was unbearable, knowing that they would have to say goodbye again so soon after seeing him, and... and what would be left, after, wouldn't resemble the son they remembered in any way.

Other possibilities were no better... having to face Papyrus after so many lies, so many tricks, hurt as much as any fight with Sans ever did. And Alphys... she understood what had happened, Asriel was sure of it, by the way she had acted before. But she was just now coming to terms with moving on from her mistakes. Even after... what had happened. Asriel couldn't stomach the idea of dragging her down again with a reminder.

And of course there was Frisk.

The connection wasn't enough to feel what Frisk felt. But... their face. When Asriel had explained that without the power of the Souls, he would turn back into a flower... he understood the expression on their face. And... the words they had said. The way they shook when their arms wrapped around him in a hug. The tears that had fallen from their face, onto his back.

They had suffered so much, because of him. And when the Barrier was gone, and the Souls were released... when there was nothing he could do, and no reason for them to keep playing along, if it was all an act... there was no gloating, no anger. Only grief and sorrow and babbling, rambling attempts to convince him to come with them, if only to see the sunset, if only for a little bit, if only....

Even though they had just met him... Asriel could tell Frisk already loved him.

The light from the surface had waned, and Asriel held up his paws. Flecks of magic were coming away, like dust but without substance. It was harder to concentrate, harder to think. Harder to keep his balance, so he carefully got down on his knees. Before long, even that wasn't enough, and he had to stretch out on his back, or risk falling over anyway. His arms and legs were numb. The cavern was getting darker.

A memory came back, unbidden. Waking up in the garden, confused and trapped and terrified and calling out for help. Asriel gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, trying to think of something else. Anything else...

“This is your happy ending too, Asriel. You deserve to be a part of it.”

Frisk's face and voice... there was a warm sensation in Asriel's chest, but it wasn't as strong as it had been before. His time was almost up.

“At least it won't hurt anymore...” Asriel said to himself, and heard the echoes of his own voice come back from the cavern walls. The reassurance sounded just as hollow then as it did when he
said it himself, and tears began to seep from his eyes.

“I won't hurt them. I won't hurt them. I won't, I won't, I won't...”

Trying to lift one paw to wipe away the tears proved useless; either it wasn't moving, or it was already gone. Behind Asriel's eyes, the light was fading too... his vision began to blacken at the edges, and his eyes closed.

“...I won't...”

The morning sunlight shining down woke him up, and Flowey didn't have to open his eyes to understand what had happened. His mind reached for the feelings that he had gotten used to having, even in the short time that Asriel had been brought back... and found nothing. Frustration boiled up inside him with a familiar heat, but it was muted, like all the pseudo-feelings he had, compared to the genuine articles. Unable to occupy itself with emotions, Flowey's mind moved on to other matters; details that Asriel's mind had been too overwhelmed to give more than passing awareness to. Mannerisms, word choices, and even body language. Yes, he had been wrong... but something had lead him to reach the conclusion he had ended up with.

And there was something else, too.

Frisk had called out to him. And the things they had said. The way they said them. Those memories... Frisk wouldn't have known about them. They couldn't. The only person that knew about them was...

“Is someone there? Please... I need help...”

“You have a cool name...”

“You look really... fuzzy.”

And with those memories came other memories; the excitement of the first night, the look of wonder on their face at seeing the rest of the Underground, playing in the garden, hearing rambling stories from Gerson, sitting by the fire and just being ... and watching them die, watching them kill themselves slowly, and long before taking their soul and going down the mountain to the village and all that followed, it felt like he was dying too.

Frisk wasn't Chara. But Chara had still called out to him, somehow.

Flowey burrowed beneath the soil, but not too deep, and burst from the ground at the edge of the flower patch, to stretch his roots and vines to make sure everything was working as it had been before. Turning to face the flowers, he smiled.

Something had come back after all.

The flower stared at the grave and waited. The light waned, and on the surface, night fell once again. From time to time, the thought crossed his mind that he should investigate the rest of the Underground, to see what was different; it certainly couldn't get more different than empty, compared to the overcrowding before, but Flowey dismissed the thought each time.

This was where Chara had been buried.

This was where Frisk had fallen.

Whatever happened next... it would start here.
Asriel stared at the wall, and tried not to think.

Despite the physical exhaustion from the volunteer magical landscaping in the morning, and the excitement of the Derby in the afternoon, and the emotional exhaustion of talking to Mr. McGraw at the hardware store after that... sleep refused to come. Instead, the past played out in his mind, over and over and over again, just like it had for real, once upon a time.

One paw wrapped around the other one in an attempt to constantly remind Asriel that he had them, because that meant that he was in the present and what he was thinking about was in the past-

“Asriel?”

Asriel flinched and rolled over to see Frisk standing by his bed, in the dark.

“Frisk? Is something wrong?”

“I was going to ask you that. You were crying just now.”

A paw came up and, just as Frisk had said, Asriel's fur was soaked through with tears around his eyes. He had not even noticed.

“...I said goodbye. But I can't let go.”

After a moment, Asriel saw Frisk's head nod in the dark, in understanding. The monster sat up in his bed and stared at his paws.

“Why? Why did things turn out like this? Why am I here, and not them? Why... why did I have to go on, without them? Why didn't we come back together... why couldn't we stay together... is life really that unfair?”

Asriel rubbed at his eyes with his paws, his mouth pulled back in a grimace, and he felt Frisk's arms surround him as everything spilled out; questions with no answers, thoughts that tore through the mind and the heart and the soul, leaving everything raw as they passed.

“I can't understand... I can't understand... I just can't understand...”

There was a weight on the bed, from Frisk sitting next to him. Slowly, the two children began to rock back and forth, and Asriel heard, and felt, something. A sound from Frisk. Humming. A song from long ago....

How did Frisk know it?

Slowly, Asriel calmed down, and his paws rested on his knees.

“Frisk...”

“I'm here, Asriel.”

“Frisk, I... I'm so sorry.”

“It's okay. It's been a-”

“No. No, it is not okay... so much is happening tomorrow. And I'm keeping you awake. And... and even with a soul. I am the most selfish, ungrateful monster in the history of the world. All I can
think about is Chara. I just want them to be here. I just want them to be okay. And... you're here, and you stood by my side for so long, and I'm me again and mom and dad are here and everything I thought I'd lost forever I have again except for Chara and it's so hard to go on like this. It's so hard to keep going. I... Frisk. I killed Chara twice, I knew what they were doing and didn't stop them, I didn't fight back when we were together... it... it's like I'm being punished for that. And everything else good that happens to me, it just twists the knife.... Chara is gone, and there is nothing I can do. And if I can't help the people I love. If I can't set things right. Then... what's the point of me coming back at all?"

A paw came up and rubbed one eye. “And... thinking like that. After everything that happened. Everything you've done for me. Everything everyone has done...”

“...Asriel. You asked me a question last week when you were still a flower. About if it was normal, if you lost something that was such a big part of you, to hold onto any hope of getting it back. And I said it was. I was thinking of...”

Frisk swallowed, and when they started talking again, their voice was hoarse.

“I was thinking of bringing you back. All the way. But it's true for you too. Those feelings, they were strong enough to survive in some form, even when you didn't have a soul. They are a part of you. Please don't feel guilty about them. Please don't apologize for having them. They are you. You don't have to feel bad about being you.”

Asriel closed his eyes and tried to keep his breathing steady.

“Frisk... I don't... I don't think I ever thanked you for Saving me. Not just this time. But the first time. Bringing me back all the way, in the Underground. So I could be myself again, at least... at least for a while.”

“You don't have to. I told you... you Saved me first.”

“...when I was... nearly gone. At Chara's grave. I tried. I tried to hold onto one idea. One idea I wanted to stay, even when everything else was gone again and I turned back into Flowey. That I wouldn't hurt anyone. I wouldn't hurt you, or any of your friends. I tried to hold onto that... I tried so hard. I was so scared... without... without a Soul. I didn't know what I would do when I woke up again....”

“Asriel. I want you to know that, that after you came back, even when you were rude and angry and frustrated and a troublemaker, you were still a great friend, and a good person.”

“...Frisk, I insulted you every other conversation. I threatened Alphys. I terrorized so many people they made the town slogan 'Don't Trust The Flower' for a while.”

Frisk rested their head on Asriel's shoulder. “But you never actually hurt anyone. You kept yourself occupied and you had a laugh and some other people had a laugh too. And insults or not, you were still my best friend, all that time. And you still are.”

The two children sat in silent darkness for a few moments, until the door latch began to rattle. Asriel felt Frisk's arms squeeze him tightly for a second, and looked up to see the door open and Toriel standing out in the hallway.

“I thought I heard voices, are you two...” Toriel's voice trailed off as she saw the expressions on the faces of her children. Asriel rubbed his face with one paw.

“Sorry, mom. I know it's late. I just...”
Asriel’s voice trailed off, but Toriel still understood.

“...Asriel, Frisk. Could you join me downstairs in the kitchen for a few minutes?”

Asriel blinked and nodded, while feeling Frisk’s grip tighten again. The two children climbed off of the bed and followed Toriel out into the hallway, down the stairs, and into the kitchen. A fireball floated over to the stove top and Toriel began to pull assorted items down from cabinets.

“While Gorey is much better at the preparation of tea than I am, there are many ways to aid in sleeping when one is worried about tomorrow... I trust that is the problem?” Toriel looked at her children, who had taken seats at the kitchen table.

Asriel looked away. “That’s, it’s part of it. Sort of.”

Toriel spared a glance for the ingredients she was adding to a saucepan, then returned her attention to her son.

“...Asriel, if you are uncomfortable with sitting with us at the table tomorrow, that is not mandatory. I know that you have only been... back for a few days. Much has changed for you, and for us all, and it will take time to adjust.”

“...that's not it. Well. Not really. I...” Asriel shook his head. “Mom. I wanted to say goodbye to Chara. And I did. And... I still can't let go. I thought I could move forward and then I couldn't sleep and all I could think about was 'I'm here and they're not' and...”

Toriel nodded with a sad expression on her face. “Years ago. I said goodbye to Chara, and to you. And I could not let go. Asriel, there is much I do not understand about what happened to you, but I do understand that you could not feel many things when you were a flower. Now that you can feel again, you are able to grieve for Chara. I am afraid it is a very long road that is ahead of you now.”

Asriel nodded, not looking up from the kitchen table. The kitchen was silent for a few minutes, until Toriel carried two mugs over to the table, and set one in front of each child.

“Perhaps this will help you both.”

Frisk pulled the mug towards them and inhaled the steamy vapors coming from within.

“...cocoa??”

“Yes.” Toriel smiled. “When Chara first came to us. I prepared some for everyone, so that we could all relax after the day's excitement. They said that it was the most wonderful thing they had ever tasted.”

Frisk and Asriel both sipped from their mugs, and Frisk felt the drink evaporate in their mouth and as it was swallowed, suffusing their whole body with warmth. Tears began to leak from one eye, and the child blinked a few times.

“...Frisk? Is something bothering you as well?”

Frisk stared at the mug in their hands, and felt the other eye join the first in crying, and sighed as they ran their arm across their face.

“I...” Frisk swallowed. “I don't know for sure. I guess... I really don't want to get shot again. If that's an option. I know that so many of the people who would try that again, they won't be there, they won't get a chance to try. But I still... that's been in the back of my mind all week, and especially since the fight Underground.”
“It is understandable to fear that this event will recur. Even against all the forces that will be opposing it.” Toriel rested a paw on Frisk's head. “As I said to Asriel. If you are uncomfortable sitting with us, you are not obligated to do so. Anyone can present the results of your work at the address—"

Frisk shook their head, eyes closed. “I can't. I can't. Dad gave me a job to do and I will get it done. I won't let them scare me away. I won't.”

“...Frisk. If it were anybody but you, I would question Gorey's judgment, asking a child to be ambassador. But you were absolutely relentless in your efforts to mediate between monsters and humans, to work with them to bring us all out of the Underground as quickly and safely as possible. And if anything, you have only become more determined since we were all living on the Surface. It would not be a retreat, or a defeat, or any indication of weakness if you delegated responsibilities, or took a sabbatical. And... I understand that your father entrusting you with such an important responsibility means a great deal to you. Doing this would not be a betrayal of his trust.”

Frisk's eyes shot open; it was as if Toriel had read their mind.

“How did... how did you know I was thinking that?”

“An educated guess.” Toriel sat down at the table with a mug of her own. “Would it surprise you two to know, that sometimes I wish that all of this... it had not happened?”

Asriel and Frisk both looked up at Toriel in confusion, and the teacher looked at her mug of cocoa. “I often imagine what might have been. Watching Chara and yourself grow up, Asriel. Underground. And meeting the other humans that fell, and not only getting to know them as I did once before, but watching others get to know them. Including you, Frisk. An Underground without war. Without despair.”

“...that would have been nice.” Asriel nodded. “Everyone together. And nobody would have to be afraid or angry.”

“...yeah... that does sound pretty good.” Frisk took another sip of cocoa.

“For all that I would have been happy with such an outcome, there is much to be said for the sun, and the stars, and the fresh air.” Toriel smiled. “It should go without saying that I am very proud of you both, but I will say it anyway.”

Frisk grinned. “That was all Asriel, mom. I just came in at the end and went on a bunch of dates.”

Toriel snorted in laughter, and then her smile disappeared as she heard a rattling noise; Asriel had placed his mug on the table and his paws were shaking.

“Mom...” Asriel stared at his cocoa. “How much do you remember, from... from when the Barrier was broken?”

Toriel stared at her son for a few moments and sighed. “I do remember that a talking flower attacked everyone, and then attacked Frisk.”

Asriel closed his eyes and nodded. “Yeah... I did that.”

“After that is not as clear. But I do remember something, if only through a dim haze. A child crying for help, out of fear and loneliness and frustration... and another child reaching out to comfort them.” Toriel's paw reached over and grasped Asriel's paw. “I... I did not recognize that it
was you, Asriel. And that pains me to this day.”

“It shouldn't. I was a terrible, horrible person.”

“No, you were not. As a certain someone told me, you were a good person who had many terrible things happen to him, and did not know how to handle it.”

Frisk's hand reached out, and squeezed Asriel's other paw. The young monster began to tremble.

“...mom. Thank you. Thank you for letting me be your son again. Even after what I did.”

“You will **always** be my son, Asriel.”

The monster child opened his mouth and breathed in and out, slowly, and the shaking in his arms slowly faded. Toriel got up from the table, walked over next to Asriel, and placed one hand on his shoulder.

“Asriel... would you like to sit with me by the fire?”

Asriel shook his head. “It's so late already... and there's so much we have to do tomorrow.”

“...it is not quite midnight yet. But even if it were that late... it would not be too late. There is no such thing as too late.”

Asriel pulled his paw from Frisk's hand and ran it over his face, blinking. His breathing became unsteady again, and he turned to look at his mother.

“I... I would like that. Thanks, mom.”

Toriel smiled, and Asriel stood up from the table and followed his mother into the living room. In the kitchen, Frisk drained their mug of cocoa and carried it over to the sink. Moving around the table, Frisk saw that the other mugs were not empty, and opted to leave them there in case Asriel and Toriel decided to finish them later.

At the sink, the mug was filled with hot water and a little dish soap, and Frisk grabbed a dishcloth and washed the inside of the mug, rinsed it, and placed it in the drying rack by the sink. After drying off their hands with a towel, they made their way as quietly as possible towards the stairs.

Some time later, the bedroom door opened and a boss monster walked in carrying her sleeping son. Asriel was placed on his bed, and the covers pulled up. Toriel smiled and ran a paw over Asriel's head, then walked over to Frisk's bed and did the same, running a paw through the child's unruly brown hair.

“Good night, my children... see you in the morning.”

The whisper was the only sound in the room, followed by the click of the door latch as it was shut and Toriel headed downstairs again.

A few seconds later, the darkness was pierced by two red lights.

“**Asriel... I'm so sorry...**”

The human child reached up to cover both eyes, and gritted their teeth in grief and frustration.
“I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry....”
Undyne stared at the floor plan of the building, eyebrow raised over her working eye.

“Where did you get this?”

“Hall of Records. Same place the Anti Monster League got it last week. We have matching descriptions of the same AML flunky from two of the clerks there.” Officer Steve pointed at several locations around the building. “These alcoves were originally access points for plumbing, wiring, and steam. Very forward thinking design architecture for the time, but the materials? Not so much. A lot of it had to be replaced when they were trying to get rid of all of the asbestos. Now they're basically undersized storage closets; too small and too high off the ground level for anything useful like janitorial supplies and equipment, but the right size and shape to fit a few rifles and shotguns in there. They're not exactly common knowledge but they're not secret by any means.”

“So the Anti Monster League didn't have to sneak them in, not the day of the address. They just had to stash them here and there. And everyone was too focused on Asgore and Frisk and Lesser Dog to pay attention to what anyone else was doing when they were handing them out.” Undyne shook her head. “That's... well, it's both impressive and disturbing.”

“It really should have stood out more; the AML had been protesting outside All Fine Labs, outside the Librarby, outside the sub shop, and that's just this month. There should have been protesters outside the Auditorium too, but they didn't want us taking preventative measures of any sort. Amateur hour strategy and we fell for it hook line and sinker... it really burns my toast.” Officer Steve scowled at the floor plan and shook his head. “By the way Undyne, that information isn't supposed to be public knowledge yet, so don't go spreading it around. Most of what we learned from the 'New Guardians' safehouse network is being kept close to the vest until we can get Cater into a courtroom, for the same reason.”

“Right. Right. Wait, how did the AML get the guns into the building in the first place? Somebody had to do that before anything else could happen.”

Justin pulled a key ring out of his pocket and dropped it onto the table with the floor plan with a loud jingle.

“Every single key on that key ring is a key to this building that the Arts Council has given to me. Turns out they just go to Wal-Mart and get a new one made every time they have to give access to somebody.”


“Congratulations Captain Undyne, you just won Understatement Of The Year for 2016. Individually every member of the Arts Council is actually very smart, but collectively they have the intelligence of a bowl of potato salad that's been left out in the sun too long.”

“That's why I'm having the bomb squad guys follow Joe around while he gives the place a once over with those goggles.” Officer Steve scratched his head. “Might all be for nothing but after this last week I'm not ready to take chances.”
“Right. So, once we get this place cleared, where do you guys want to set up?”

Justin tapped a few spots on the floor plan.

“Any place like these with clear sight lines over most of the open space in the building. So far our best bets look like Steve can stand by the door as part of the police detachment. Joe, Mike, Eli and Hal will scatter through the seating; if trouble starts anywhere in the crowd, they’ll only be a few dozen steps away at best. Not ideal, but it’s the best we can do.”

“And that way you guys and Asriel can do that... whatever it was again, if push comes to shove.”

Justin shook his head. “Well, according to Eli, Asriel says that is off of the table for good. But that’s hardly common knowledge. But based on what we’ve heard and read on the internet since it happened, it’s hardly common knowledge that we were involved in that at all to begin with. There was so much going on at every stage of the attack that nobody knows where the ball was in the game or what the game was supposed to be. So the deterrent we don’t actually have is based on other people knowing what they couldn’t possibly know about a process nobody really understands but aren’t as likely to believe in the first place, if only because it’s part of the whole Guardian song and dance about monsters and human souls... ugh. Somebody get the Dramamine.”

“What’s a Dramamine?”

“It’s a human medicine that’s supposed to help with motion sickness. And that train of thought had me going around in circles.”

“Huh.” Undyne’s eye lit up and she smiled a toothy grin. “Hey, that reminds me, did I ever tell you about this puzzle idea I came up with?”

“Uh. No. It hasn’t come up. Actually this is the most we’ve spoken since the meeting at the Memehaus a week ago.”

“Right. It's been a busy week.”

“That's one word for it. Oh, that reminds me, I still haven't explained the Cult of the Offensive thing.”

“Oh yeah! I was wondering about that.”

“Basically the Cult of the Offensive is this persistent bad idea in military planning and high level strategy that taking the initiative and attacking first gives the aggressor a pivotal advantage in most if not all scenarios. It's been credited with a lot of military victories. And blamed for a lot of defeats, too. Overextending supply lines, exhausting manpower and equipment faster than it can be replaced, or just walking right into an ambush.”

“Oh. I thought you were talking about, like, an actual religious movement.”

“Well. Among certain officers in certain branches of the service, it might as well be. Not that I'm naming names or anything.” The ex-soldier coughed dramatically into his hand, made sounds that possibly could have been a muffled “Marines” and then coughed again. Officer Steve rolled his eyes.

“Please God not this again.”

“Hey, I miss anything?”
Justin, Officer Steve, and Undyne turned to look at Joe, holding a pair of oversized and unique goggles in his hands. Undyne narrowed her eye.

“If you did, then that's going to be a real big problem later, isn't it?”

“Okay, okay, yeah. I realized that was a bad choice of words while I was still saying them. But I've gone over every square foot of this building three times with these. If anybody did manage to hide anything here, they would have to be the time traveling lovechild of Harry Houdini and David Copperfield.”

“Hmm. Considering they're both guys, that would be one hell of a magic trick on its own.” Officer Steve looked at the policemen behind Joe. “How about you guys? Anything stand out?”

“We haven't found anything. That doesn't necessarily mean that there's nothing to find though.”

“Right, right. Well... without an anonymous tip or inside source or recovered plans and blueprints and parts from those safehouses, we don't have anything else to look for, or any other place to be looking.”

“Steve, Eli just got here. Mike and Hal are still at Hal's place suiting up.” Justin tapped his phone. “Something about needing more batteries.”

Officer Steve shook his head. “I really hate having to leave those two together unsupervised.”

“You're not the only one. Okay, I'm heading out to find a good spot. Captain, if push comes to shove, well, it's always nice watching you work.”

Undyne grinned and held up a fist, and Justin smirked and knocked his own fist into hers in a classical “bro-fist” gesture of solidarity. Joe took Justin's place around the table.

“So, what's next on the checklist?”

“I guess the next thing for you to do is to get in the entryway and see if those goggles will let you see weapons or explosives carried by people coming in.”

“Too bad Alphys isn't done with Justin's Party Favor yet, but she's already pulling out all the stops trying to get it done before the trip to the capital.” Undyne's face contorted into a frown. “Half the time when she gets home I have to remind her to eat.”

“...that's not good.”

Undyne turned to look at Joe. “No, it isn't. But it's happened before, in the Underground. Not just projects either, anime binges.”

“Oh. Well, that's alright then,” Joe waved a hand. “I've done that a few times.”

“I'm sending a message to everyone in the new room. We need to make sure all our phones are on silent in case we need to communicate covertly in the middle of the address.” Officer Steve tapped his screen a few times, and Undyne's phone went off with a bombastic ringtone of energetic brass horns. Joe's phone, on the other hand...

“Deja Vu! I've just been in this place before, higher on the street! And I know, it's my time to come home! Calling you! And the subject's myst-”

Joe grabbed his phone, muting the sound and navigating through different menus to silence it.
Undyne's eyebrow went up again.

“Initial D, or do you just like Eurobeat?”

“Both, why?”

“...I dunno. I just never figured you for a car guy is all.”

“Well, now you know better.”

Asriel peered nervously out through the curtains at the steadily filling auditorium. Behind him, his parents were checking their ceremonial robes and armor, the Canine unit was sniffing up a storm, Frisk was going through their notes for the ninth time, and... Sans had somehow managed to fall asleep standing up.

It wasn't actually that surprising.

The sound of a countdown pulled his attention back beyond the curtains, where Brett Brinkman and DJ Pantz were starting the radio transmission.

“Good afternoon, Ebott's Wake, you are listening to The Brett and DJ Pantz broadcasting live from the Memorial Auditorium! Burgie, how's it going?”

“It was going great right up until somebody stepped on my tail.”

“Oh. That's unfortunate.”

“Yeah, but it can't be helped.” The cat monster looked around the building. “Place is crowded as all get out.”

“Yes indeed, we are looking at a full house at the Auditorium for the State of The Kingdom Address here, in spite of, or possibly because of, last week's disruptions.”

“Could also be both.”

“Could also be a combination of both, yes. The only thing that comes close to the Kludge Derby for its traditional appeal is a good old Ebott's Wake Spite-Off.”

“You know when I first heard about that, I had a completely different picture in my head of what was involved.”

“Everybody does, Burgie.”

Asriel leaned back away from the curtain and shook his head, for some reason the memory of the chili cook off and showing up in the broadcast tent had taken up all available space in Asriel's mind, especially the way the radio announcers had scrambled to turn around when Frisk told them that he was present.

As soon as that memory had vanished, another one had appeared in his head, producing hedge mazes in the middle of the Shakespeare In The Park performances for the first time, causing both actors and patrons of the arts to panic. That memory was pushed back as well, only to be followed by the staged Union Strike at the Arboretum, and then demolishing the inside of Alphys' workshop while she cowered next to the bookcase-
“Asriel, can you hear me? It's okay. I'm right here.”

Mercifully, the images stopped and Asriel came back to the present, and found himself staring at Frisk, who grabbed both of his paws. The monster child gulped.

“Okay... so... that was really unpleasant, there.”

“What happened? It looked like you were having a flashback.”

“Yeah. I think I was having all of the flashbacks at once.” Asriel let out an unsteady breath. “Every single person in this building is somebody I hurt. Some much worse than others. These next few hours are going to be really fun. At least you're doing all the talking and I don't have to say anything.”

“There is that-”

Asriel's cell phone buzzed and Frisk let go of his paws as he fumbled underneath his robes trying to get at it.

12:42 PM EZ_Being_Greene: HEY

12:42 PM EZ_Being_Greene: AZZY

12:43 PM EZ_Being_Greene: GOT HERE FINALLY HEADING INSIDE

12:43 PM EZ_Being_Greene: LOOK UPON MY WORKS YE MIGHTY

12:43 PM EZ_Being_Greene: AND SOMETHING

12:43 PM: hal is that u

12:44 PM EZ_Being_Greene: THERE CAN BE ONLY SOME

12:44 PM EZ_Being_Greene: SERIOUSLY IF UR BACKSTAGE TAKE A LOOK

Asriel looked up at Frisk with a confused expression, then walked back over to the curtains and peered out through the crack. Even more people had crowded into the building, and Officer Steve was talking with the radio announcers.

“And that's exactly why we've gone to such lengths this time, Brett. We were complacent, we saw these people as a ridiculous nuisance because everything that came out of their mouths was ridiculous. But we should have remembered that actions do speak louder than words, especially when those actions involve the use of firearms.”

“Definitely agree with you on that. Do you think, given all of the preparation that's gone into security and defense for the address this time around, that even a token symbolic attempt or even a nonviolent protest will be made here today?”

“Actually I believe that the end results of the last attempt at disrupting the address form a greater deterrent than anything we could possibly do. What measures we took today, they are ultimately precautions in case anyone is not sufficiently deterred. In a way it's ironic; the monsters formed the
Royal Honor Guard for exactly the type of conflict that ended up happening, but when the attack took place the end result was so one sided against the Anti Monster League because monsters and humans had managed to coordinate their efforts even without any prior planning. In light of what the Ambassador has been saying, it's surprising that nobody on either side thought to do something like this from the very *oh my god.*”

“What?? What's wrong, what-” Brett turned around to follow Officer Steve's line of sight and stopped talking. Asriel followed their gaze and saw...

A man wearing a football helmet and carrying a fish mounted on a wooden plaque as a sort of trophy. A bandolier was slung over olive drab coveralls, and strapped to that bandolier were many, many bottles of monster soda.

“Hal Greene. What the hell are you doing?” Officer Steve's voice was dangerously neutral and even.

The mechanic lifted up the fish above his head, and even from across the building, Asriel could see that Hal's eyes were the eyes of madness, portals to another reality where logic and reason had neither place nor meaning.

“**I HAVE PLANNED FOR EVERY POSSIBLE CONTINGENCY!**”

The man's voice carried through the vast, echoing space of the building, drawing all eyes, all attention, to him... and in that split second, Asriel understood *precisely* what contingencies Hal had been planning for.

At the radio equipment, DJ Pantz turned back to his microphone. “Listeners, not sure if you heard that just now but Hal Greene just showed up... wearing a football helmet, and carrying a fishing trophy. Your guess is as good as mine... and he's sitting next to us again. That's great. These next few hours are going to be really *fun.*”

“...with regards to the specific legal status of monsters within the United States, no official national level recognition yet exists or is declared to be undergoing review or investigation by the United States government, and as such there has been no rejection or refutation of the Ebott's Wake City Council's legal recognition of monsters as citizens with all the rights and responsibilities thereof. Yet another letter delineating these issues has been drafted by the law firm of Banner, Banner and Paulson and sent to various government agencies and state representatives as of this morning. As full United States citizenship carries with it the often contentious and politically volatile responsibility of income tax, a draft of these issues in more detail has also been sent to multiple officials within the Department of the Treasury specifically in order to prompt an official response either requiring monsters to pay income tax as a prerequisite for citizenship, or in official recognition of exemption from income tax as United States Nationals.”

Frisk removed the sheet of paper from the top of their notes and placed it on the table.

“The next order of concern involves a clarification of the role of the Exchange Trust in the local and national economy. The Exchange Trust was established with the assistance of the law firm of Banner, Banner and Paulson following the destruction of the Barrier in order to provide a transitional entity between the human and monster economies; monsters could literally Exchange gold in the form of the 'Gild' coins minted by the Kingdom of Monsters for an equivalent amount of United States Dollars according to the current price per ounce, and this gold would then in turn be held in Trust for a short period instead of being immediately deposited on the open market
which would risk disrupting the price not only of gold but of other commodities. While the use of gold as monster currency becoming common knowledge has caused the price of gold to fall over the past year as a result, with an impact comparable to the Trust's actual sale of the exchanged gold on the market, the Trust has since diversified into numerous other commodities, as well as investing in many businesses and not-for-profits and as a result is still liquid, soluble, and a functional economic entity, capable of providing funding to many public works projects in the Ebott's Wake township. Much of the credit for the success of the Trust goes to the Banner, Banner and Paulson firm for outlining a charter well grounded in finance and financial law. Since then, however, monsters have been able to integrate into the existing surface economy at all levels of organization in multiple industries and economic sectors, from entry level to chief executive officer and everywhere in between, and as a result the original function of the Exchange Trust is now considered fulfilled. A meeting of the Board of Directors and Managers is scheduled for the tenth of July, 2016, exact time to be determined, when the future roles and duties of the Exchange Trust will be deliberated. This meeting will be open to the public and will include a forum for public feedback.”

Frisk put down another sheet of paper, and Asriel's eyes... like so many others... ended up getting drawn back to Hal; from time to time, especially while Frisk was switching papers or pausing for a drink of water, Hal would engage in such bizarre pantomime activities as trying to play the fish trophy like a harmonica, attempt to eat it, or engage the unblinking fish in a staring contest which inevitably ended in Hal's defeat. The crowd was hardly stoic during these interludes; Gerson especially had a tendency to start laughing when they happened, but he was far from the only one. Asriel didn't have to turn his head to recognize that his father was trying very hard not to laugh at these hijinks, and that his mother was trying very hard to not give Hal the evil eye at the same time. It did take a few minutes to recognize that the grinding noise behind him was Undyne's teeth, though. In all his myriad resets, Asriel could never remember a situation where Undyne was angry but forced to repress that anger instead of letting it explode in all directions, or focusing it all on a single point like a laser. And considering he had been the focal point of that rage laser more than a few times, Asriel tried to move on to another subject almost immediately.

Fortunately, the Ambassador was able to provide one.

“An unanticipated result of complete social integration, instead of a distinct sovereign kingdom or an isolated surface settlement for monsters, has been the disproportionate amount of tourist traffic from the rest of the United States and several other nations of the world traveling to and from Ebott's Wake, and to a lesser extent other towns in Lost Eagle County, especially Triton and Quarterhorse Fields. This appears to have originated as a social phenomenon; monster physiology being so drastically different from that of humans, the vast majority of humans dismissed any media evidence of the existence of monsters and magic as special effects. This necessity to see monsters and magic with their own eyes also appears to be a recurring theme in tourist traffic to Ebott's Wake up to an including the present day, despite the time span involved, even when the actual existence of monsters is no longer dismissed out of hand.”

Frisk removed another sheet of paper, which managed to slip out of their hand and flap noisily to the floor of the Auditorium. The child stared at it, shrugged, and mumbled “I'll get that later” just loud enough to be picked up by their microphone. A handful of people in the audience laughed but Frisk proceeded on as if nothing had happened.

“Ahem. A secondary factor in this unexpectedly high level of tourism is the now common knowledge of the existence of healing magic and the ability of common, easily prepared monster food and drink to impart a curative or regenerative effect on injured humans. The exact capabilities, limitations, and drawbacks of healing magic as applied to the human body are not yet clear due to a
lack of published scientific research on the matter. Despite this, cumulative anecdotal evidence so far indicates that monster food is capable of repairing damage that human medical science is not yet able to address, most importantly damage to the nervous system. Conversely, it does not appear to have any affect or influence on allergies or immune disorders such as lupus or multiple sclerosis; while it can heal damage caused by such conditions, it cannot cure them. The lack of a scientifically established baseline for what healing magic and monster food can do has lead to certain amounts of confusion and conflict from various sources elsewhere in the nation; some claim that monsters are in possession of miracle cures while letting humanity suffer debilitating disease and injury, and others claim that any and all claims of monster magic being beneficial towards humans in any way are false. Multiple proposals to hold clinical trials to determine the exact healing capabilities involved have been hamstrung by a lack of FDA approval for human testing and the inability to create a suitable placebo; with the possible exception of cotton candy, no human food evaporates into pure energy when it is eaten.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd again as Frisk adjusted their notes and moved on to another page.

“On the subject of disease, illness and injury, a certain amount of concern was raised this past winter about monster diseases spreading to humans and vice versa. After conferring with All Fine Labs, the following information has been provided in order to explain why these concerns are largely unfounded. The illnesses which affect monsters and humans are as different in nature as the gap in physiology between monsters and humans; that is to say, monster diseases are mostly magic energy, and human diseases mostly physical matter. Monsters do not have enough physical matter to support human diseases in their bodies, and what matter there is not organized along the same forms as human cells and tissues. Monster diseases jumping to humans run into the inverse problem; there is too much physical matter and not enough magical energy. There are, as of this date, only two exceptions to this; there is one recorded example of a slime monster contracting a bacterial infection, and one recorded example of a human contracting the monster illness known as Confusion. These cases prove that the transmission rate between races are extremely low, but it is not impossible. Therefore All Fine Labs has published a primer on magical diseases for the benefit of humans, and a similar primer for monsters on potentially contagious human diseases. These documents are available for download on the All Fine Labs website in PDF, EPUB, and HTML formats. Here and now it is worth repeating the most important points of these documents.”

Frisk picked up another set of papers that had been lying on the table, and Asriel leaned forward slightly as he turned to look at them; he'd heard a lot of things eavesdropping on the town from underground but he hadn't heard about this, which was a sobering thought.

“In regards to monsters contracting human diseases. First, monsters are completely immune to viral diseases, as they lack the physical amino acid base pair DNA structure that viruses attempt to co-opt in cell reproduction. Second, monsters may be susceptible to bacterial and fungal infections according to the similarity of their physical matter to the ideal growth conditions of those diseases, but as their physiology is not reliant on a precise chemical balance like human biochemistry, such infections are easier to treat with a minimum of side effects. It is worth noting that human medical science favors heat as a sterilizing agent in many cases, but this does not preclude fire elemental monsters or fire-attuned monsters of any kind from being immune unless the heat of fire magic that is used reaches the temperatures needed to sterilize or destroy the pathogen. In regards to monster diseases spreading to humans, only ten such diseases are known to commonly exist, with occasional variants, and given the magical nature of both the diseases and their symptoms it is theoretically possible for humans to be infected with such a disease but show no symptoms or other signs of ill health. These diseases are as follows... Stun, a disruption in reflexes and reaction time... Sleep, an overwhelming fatigue that increases the requirements for rest... Disruption, which impairs the abilities of monsters to project magic into the world as bullets... Blind, which impairs
the sense of vision without damaging the sense organs and which has variants affecting other senses... **Confusion**, which presents itself as extremely disordered thought processes and impaired memory... **Fever**, which resembles the human immune response of elevated temperature... **Chills**, which resembles a similar symptom in human diseases but is accompanied by a physical decrease in body temperature... **Winded**, which impairs the ability of the body to breathe normally... **Stoned**, which manifests as sore joints, difficulty moving, and altered states of consciousness... and **Poison**, a general term for a body attempting to reject physical matter or energy that is incompatible with it. Most human infections produced a similar state as a side effect of immune response.”

It took all of Asriel's willpower not to clench his paws into fists, and his mind was rapidly taken over by images of one of the humans standing up and asking “is one of those diseases what killed Chara Cater” and Frisk responding with-

“**Yes, what is your question Dr. Akron?**”

Asriel came back to the present with a start and saw that as he zoned out, a familiar human with a sour expression had stood up and been recognized by Frisk.

“My question is that if you know that these diseases can be transmitted, what plans do you have to prevent their spread through this community? I hope that monsters have a vaccination program, at least?”

“The full details of disease prevention are in the documents published by All Fine Labs, but in regards to your questions about vaccination, monsters don't have them because of their magic based anatomy. The nearest equivalent-”

“That presents an unacceptable health hazard to the rest of this county.” The doctor glared at Frisk, who stared back at him for a few seconds as some whispers and murmurs started in the audience.

“As I was saying, Dr. Akron, the monsters have a preventative system in place already, which they call wards. Wards are used to prevent the patterns of magical diseases from getting a foothold in magic based physiology. The same principle can, in theory, also be applied to humans, though like all healing magic research there are numerous obstacles towards getting clear and useful experimental results. In some ways it does resemble a human vaccine program but the fundamental operating principles are different in each case; a vaccine is an acquired immune response based on the chemistry of a pathogen and the antibodies needed to counter it, while a ward is comparable to a radar jamming field, more physical than chemical in its oper-”

“Then why didn't you say so in the first place?”

Once again, Asriel had to resist clenching his paws into fists, but next to him Frisk just smiled a smile that didn't quite reach the eyes. “I'm sorry for the oversight, doctor. Something must have interrupted my train of thought.”

There was some subdued laughter from various parts of the audience as the doctor sat down, and Frisk glanced down at their notes again, before looking back up at the mass of people.

“On the subject of wards, the current plans to make them commonly available involve limited production runs of items with the ward magic infused in them; such methods were used historically in the Underground during times of potential and actual pandemics of monster illnesses. With the monster population no longer physically concentrated as they once were, the conditions for such pandemics are much less common, and the availability of resources on the surface will improve the availability of such warding items for anyone believed to be at-risk to contract such diseases, monster or human.”
“Excuse me, question from the floor?”

Asriel, Frisk, and many other people turned and focused on a large, bearded man standing up in the crowd. Frisk nodded. “Yes Mr. Van Garrett, what is your question?”

“While the explanation of the disease prevention methods has been in-depth, I am somewhat concerned about what actions people should take if they contract such a disease in spite of all the precautions taken. It is not unheard of, for example, to get a flu shot and then come down with the flu anyway. I have read both documents published by All Fine Labs and could not find any references towards means of treating humans that contracted magical diseases.”

Frisk nodded again. “That is a known unknown in magical medical knowledge right now. All that was gained from the single case study known to exist to date is that monster food alone isn't enough, and since magical diseases have no physical chemistry to interfere with, conventional human medicine cannot affect them. Nobody can say with certainty if the Confusion just wore off with time as can happen with some monsters, if it disappeared when it did because it had no magic to feed on, or if the professional healer that was called in was able to remedy the situation. This does make preventative measures even more important, but there are valid reasons to be concerned in case preventative measures fail.”

Mr. Van Garret nodded. “Thank you for that clarification. I withdraw my question.”

“Are there any other questions on the subject of magical illnesses and medicine? ...very well. The next subject to be covered is... nothing, this is the end of my notes. Alright then. I will now leave the floor open for general questions so feel free to ask anything that didn't get clarified earlier...”

“Oh my god. I was this close to smashing that stupid trophy thing with a spear!”

Undyne glared at Hal, but her mouth was grinning, and the mechanic returned her unhinged expression with a similarly warped smile.

“Just as I planned from the very beginning! The only people who would not be drawn to my elaborate, convoluted shenanigans would be those attempting to give the impression of normalcy. They would stick out like a sore thumb in their attempts to blend in and not draw attention!”

“The psychology of the plan is sound, even if the mind that came up with it isn't.” Officer Steve sighed. “And I suppose things could have been a lot worse. I got the creeping horrors when I heard that you and Mike were teaming up again. I still have nightmares from the first time.”

Undyne turned to the policeman. “Wait, what happened the first time?”

Officer Steve shook his head. “Homecoming parade. Nobody thought to keep Hal and Mike occupied, so they came up with their own plans, which was fine, and then they actually built them, which was not. To be fair, their float design was really impressive. Right up until it caught fire and exploded with both of them riding it.”

Hal nodded. “I got launched thirty feet and collided with the marching band, broke the high school's Sousaphone, two trombones and a clarinet! And I got up and walked away with like, two bruises, tops !”

“Really?? That's awesome!” Undyne's angry expression, already fighting a losing battle, had completely evaporated upon hearing the anecdote. “How far did Mike get launched?”
Officer Steve shook his head. “Mike was inside the float, technically. It took him a bit to get out of the wreckage.”

Undyne’s smile took on a strained quality. “Oh... I wondered what some of those burns on his arm were from, when I saw them during the arm wrestling.”

“Yeah, some of them came from the float thing.” Officer Steve looked around the building lobby and spied the librarian coming closer. “Ah, speak of the devil. Hey Mike, Undyne here just heard about the parade float you and Hal made and should never have been allowed to.”

“I told you once, I told you a thousand times, the design was fine. The materials were the problem. The insulation—”

Officer Stever held up one finger. “Hold that thought. And then move on to another one. There’s something I need to do.”

The policeman walked away from the huddle of friends, weaving through the crowd of talking people, until he stopped next to a pair of skeletons, a yellow lizard, a young boss monster and the Ambassador.

“Well, I can’t promise anything,” said the unfamiliar skeleton. “I’ve only been working at the college for a year or so. I don’t even qualify for tenure, let alone am I in a position to recommend policy changes. But I do know a few people and I can whisper in their ears.”

“Thanks Ms. Gothic.” Dr. Alphys said, holding out a claw to shake. “The sooner we can get this all resolved the b-better.”

Dr. Aster nodded and held out his hand as well. “Yeah, thanks Century. And if it doesn’t work out I’m sure we can come up with a stopgap solution in the meantime. Lab Practice, a Trade School maybe, heck if we have to we can revive the apprenticeship system for a while—”

“ALPHYS, MY DEAR!”

Officer Steve turned to see a box on a single wheel rolling past him and up to the group. “I LEAVE YOU TO YOUR OWN DEVICES FOR TWO MINUTES AND HERE YOU ARE TALKING SHOP AGAIN!”

“Hi Mettaton.” The ambassador waved at the robot and smiled. “We’re talking about stuff related to the college and preserving monster folklore and magic classes and things like that, so it’s technically okay. There wasn’t any time to wait for an answer before the last address and it’s been really busy since then, so it had to stay on the back burner.”

“A VALIANT SAVE, FRISK, BUT THAT’S JUST MY POINT! THIS IS A SOCIAL EVENT AND THE GOOD DOCTOR SHOULD SOCIALIZE! GET OUT THERE AND MINGLE, BREAK ICE, CHEW FAT, AGITATE THE BLOGOSPHERE!”

“Huh. Haven’t heard that last one before,” Officer Steve said with a cough.

“Hello Officer Ward. Is everything alright?”

Officer Steve nodded at the Ambassador. “Yes, except that I only just now realized that I left Hal Greene and Mike Van Garrett together with only Captain Undyne as chaperone. Three to one odds that’s how the end of the world is going to start.”

“Well, if it does, it’s a nice day for it.” Dr. Aster pointed a boney thumb towards the windows
outside of the Auditorium. “Birds singing, flowers blooming, and so on and so forth...”

“You look like you're doing better, doctor Aster.”

The tall skeleton shrugged. “I better be. Papyrus has been plying me with his homemade pasta since I got home Friday night. Or, Saturday morning, technically. Everything should be right where it belongs before tomorrow morning at this rate.”

“Glad to hear it. Hey, can I borrow the Prince for a second?”

Asriel's eyebrows shot up, but he nodded. “Uh. Okay.”

The police officer and the young boss monster walked a short distance away, and Asriel started to fidget. “Excuse me, is there something wrong? I mean, specifically, I know that I kinda made a mess of a lot of things as a fl-”

“That's not it. I just... ugh. I can't believe how much subtext leeches into these words. But yeah. I just need to ask you a couple of questions.”

“Okay.”

Officer Steve stared at the young boss monster and picked his words carefully.

“Alright... this has to do with Chara Cater, if that's okay. I know this isn't a comfortable subject and I don't want to impose. So if I start getting close to lines you don't want to cross, be sure to let me know.”

Asriel swallowed, but nodded.

“Okay then. When Chara ended up in the Underground... uh... how exactly did she respond? I mean, not just to monsters, but the whole Barrier thing, not being able to go home?”

Asriel scratched one ear. “Well. At first, Chara was really nervous. I. Uhm. I didn't pick up on it. I was too excited about meeting somebody new. But it's obvious thinking back. Then we took them to see the Barrier and they calmed down a lot.”

“...that's interesting.”

“I did ask them once if they didn't mind being stuck underground, compared to living on the surface. They said there was no place they'd rather be than in the Underground.”

“Curiouser and curiouser. Final question, I promise. Did Chara ever talk about Jordan Cater?”

Asriel shook his head. “Chara didn't talk about the surface a lot. Flowers and stars were about all they liked to share. Anything else had to be dragged out of them, and nobody wanted to pry because it was obvious how much it bothered them. Sorry, that's probably not much help.”

“Actually, the opposite is true. Thanks for your help.” The policeman reached down and he and Asriel shook hands, but Asriel hesitated to let go when Officer Steve's hand relaxed.

“Uhm. There is one other thing. I called into the radio yesterday. To... uhm. I don't know exactly what. Apologize, explain, something. But I mentioned that Chara hated Jordan Cater. There's some stuff I couldn't say like that. But. I know that when Chara imagined his face. They were either terrified, or furious, or both.”

Officer Steve nodded slowly. “This adds a new dimension to what we've learned going through
what was left in the safehouses."

“Well. Glad that helped then.” Asriel let go, and Officer Steve tapped his chin in thought.

“There is one thing I do want to ask now, though. Chara Cater was Jordan’s daughter, but almost every monster uses ‘they’ or ‘them’ when referring to Chara. Now I heard through the grapevine that using they and them is the monster default, but I wondered if that’s all there was.”

“...there is more to it, Officer Steve.” Asriel looked down at the floor. “But that was something Chara told me, and only me. It took them a long time, and a lot of effort, and I wouldn't feel right sharing that with anyone else.”

“I can respect that. And if it has anything to do with what I think it does, I'll sleep better not knowing.”

Asriel relaxed. “Good. I mean. Thanks for understanding. Uh. About Friday... are you doing okay after that?”

“I was dizzy for a few minutes after it was over and then I got over it. Matter of fact I was able to trade smack talk with Cater before they took him to the hospital... I am worried about the consequences of Hal being a morning person though. I mean, you saw what he did today with the singing bass fish. I'm amazed he didn't leave the batteries in it.”

“Actually yeah, that really helped.”

“...come again?”

Asriel shrugged as Officer Steve stared at him. “The last time a whole bunch of humans were staring at me it didn't end well. And I was never really comfortable being in front of all the monsters in the Underground either. This time everyone was mixed together, but... but what really helped was watching them all turn to look at Hal when he was doing something out of the ordinary, when Frisk was switching papers and things like that.”

The policeman stared at Asriel. “...huh. I wonder if that wasn't the plan from the very beginning.”

“You mean it wasn't?”

“I don't know.” Officer Steve shrugged. “Hal never tells anybody anything until after the fact when he's puking his guts out or getting broken bones set in the ER. He only shares anything beforehand when he needs help with something too big for him to pull off by himself.”

Asriel's brow furrowed, and then his eyes opened wide in understanding. “...and that's why you don't like leaving him with Mr. Van Garrett?”

“That's a very large part of it. Mike's got more common sense than Hal, but so does a toaster. And Mike's more likely to take a bad idea and modify it to make it work than to steer clear of it entirely, if only because he's curious to see if the idea is possible at all. So they tend to get up to all sorts of antics together if there's nobody else nearby to act as a brake.”

The boss monster nodded. “Like Undyne and Papyrus.”

“Yes, exactly like-”

Officer Steve froze, then looked over at where Undyne, Hal and Mike had been joined by Papyrus, and the background volume of their conversation had been steadily increasing until it finally
registered to his conscious mind, culminating in a cackling laugh from the Captain.

“OH MY GOD WE ARE SO DOING THAT AFTER THE SCHOOL YEAR! THIS IS GOING TO BE AWESOME!”

Officer Steve turned back to Asriel.

“Sorry to cut this short but-”

Asriel held up both paws and grinned. “Yeah, I understand. Totally. Go save the world from nuclear powered spaghetti or whatever it is. Good luck.”

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be finished and posted two days ago, but allergies and antihistamine side effects have been punching my face in the face.
Boney fingers tapped the papers on the table, and then grabbed a pencil and scribbled a note in the margins. Next to the papers and folders, a phone began to buzz, and Dr. Aster made a sound of exasperation as he put down the pencil and picked up the phone. “Dr. Aster speaking.”

“Hello Doctor, is this a bad time?”

“...Dr. Ross? Is something wrong?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing, when you picked up you sounded a little gruff.”

“Oh. No.” Dr. Aster looked down at the papers in front of him. “I was just trying to organize some of what I thought I might need for Wednesday.”

“What's going on Wednesday?”

“Some sort political thing, apparently the regional human government wants me to testify about something or other. Beyond that you know as much as I do.”

“Oh, right right right. I heard about that, I just forgot until just now. Sorry. Do you need to get back to that, because I can call back later.”

“Uh... no, actually. At this point I could use a distraction.”

“That's great. Uh. It just so happens that I'm heading for the Stop-And-Go now that my shift's over and nobody is antsy about another uprising or attack. Would you like to meet there for a cup of coffee or something?”

“That, uh, that actually sounds like a good idea. What time do you want to meet there?”

“Actually I'm, uh, I'm almost there. Like five minutes away. I just didn't think to call you until I was a long ways away from the hospital. So...”

“Okay, right. Uhm... let's see... yeah, I'll be there in a couple minutes.”

“Great, I'll see you there!”

“Right. Uh.”

“Uh. Goodbye.”

“Bye-”

Dr. Aster's goodbye was cut off by the sound of the call ending, and he stared at the phone for a few seconds.

“...huh.”

“EXCUSE ME, DID YOU CALL ME FOR SOME REASON DAD?”
“What?” Dr. Aster looked up to see Papyrus standing at the entrance to the kitchen, sporting a chef's toque and an apron with the words “Miss The Cook” written on it with black marker. “Oh. No, everything's fine. I was just in a phone call.”

“AHA! THE MYSTERY IS SOLVED!”

“I wouldn't be so sure of that.” The scientist stood up and stretched, causing a few joints to pop, especially in the neck and upper back regions. “Ugh. I've been working on these papers for too long. I'm all stiff.”

“WELL, WE ARE SKELETONS, SO... WAIT, FORGET I SAID ANYTH-”

From upstairs, there was the sound of a door opening, followed by a depressing yet comical series of descending notes on a trombone.

“SANS! WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT PLAGUING PEOPLE'S LIVES WITH INCIDENTAL MUSIC?!”

Dr. Aster shook his skull. “Well, that tears it. I'm going to head out for a cup of coffee and to clear my skull before I try to tackle any of this paperwork again. I'll be back before dinner.”

“EXCELLENT! BE SURE THAT YOU HAVE YOUR PHONE ON IN CASE OF EMERGENCIES OR PUSHY SALESPEOPLE!”

“...is the latter a common problem up here?”

“ACTUALLY NO, THE ERA OF THE HARD SELL CAME AND LEFT AND ATTEMPTED A RENAISSANCE THAT ENDED IN DISASTER. THERE'S AN ABSOLUTELY AMAZING PLAY ABOUT IT THAT LEAGUE GOTHIC WROTE ON THE SUBJECT, BOTH HILARIOUS AND SOMBER, SOMETIMES WITHIN THE SAME SCENE! NOW THERE'S AN IDEA! WE SHOULD ALL SEE IT NEXT WEEK, THE BELMOLEY PLAYERS ARE DOING MULTIPLE SHOWINGS IN QUARTERHORSE FIELDS!”

“Huh... that was an answer and a half. Still, sounds like something to look forward to. In the more immediate future, though, I'm heading out. See you guys when I get back.”

“HAVE FUN DOING WHATEVER IT IS YOU END UP DOING!”

“yeah, go nuts dadster.” Sans voiced called down from upstairs. Dr. Aster shook his head, stopped by the mirror next to the door, smoothed out the wrinkles on his lab coat and shirt, double checked that his phone and wallet were where they belonged, and stepped outside.

After several minutes of walking and a pair of judicious shortcuts, Dr. Aster found himself walking up to the Stop-And-Go Convenience Store, Gas Station and Deli. Inside were a scarce handful of people; a quartet of human men in denim overalls having a conversation of a decidedly agrarian nature... a human, a dragon monster, and a ghost monster all talking about baseball or some related sport... a pair of monsters in striped shirts looking through the magazine rack in spite of the annoyed expression on the face (?) of the gem elemental manning the register... and one human wearing a windbreaker and a hat adorned with numerous fishing lures, staring at the bulletin board and writing in a small notebook.

Behind him, Dr. Aster heard the bell jingle as the door opened, and turned to move out of the way.

“Hey, Doc!”
Before the scientist turned to see who had entered, the voice had already told him, and a smile pulled at the edge of his jaw.

“Doctor Ross. Nice to see you again.”

“You too. Uh. Let's uh, head inside and stop blocking the doorway.”

“Oh, right, right. My mistake. So, how are things going at the hospital?”

“Calm and quiet. Exactly the way we like it. Everybody and their brother and their brother's dog was standing by in case we had a repeat of last Friday. Looks like the back of whatever the heck was going was finally broken.”

The two doctors stopped by the coffee machines and began to grab cups and lids. One of the machines was very prominently labeled MAGIC INFUSED COFFEE and featured the All Fine Labs logo front and center; Dr. Ross opted to fill her cup from that machine.

“I would violate the Hippocratic Oath if it meant we could get one of these set up in Rita Belle Thurman. You have no idea how big a difference it makes being able to stay alert and focused through hours of surgery without having to deal with the diuretic properties of caffeine. Or any liquid intake, for that matter.”

“Well, you're right about the surgery part.”

Dr. Ross snorted in laughter and put the lid on her cup; Dr. Aster followed her to the register where the cashier looked away from the children at the magazine rack for a moment.

“Ah. Hello, watcha need?”

“Two medium magic coffees,” Dr. Ross replied, and the gem monster started tapping at the register.

“Two Medium Magiccinnos. Got it... that's, that's two dollars and seventy nine cents for each one, you two on the same ticket or what?”

Dr. Aster began to pull out his wallet when Dr. Ross shook her head. “Nah, don't worry, I got this.”

“What??”

“I've got this, it's on me.” Dr. Ross pulled out some bills and handed them over to the cashier, who began to count out change. “I wouldn't invite somebody to go out for coffee and then say 'oh by the way you're paying for the coffee' at the end. That's just rude.”

“I seem to remember my son talking about doing something like that purely for the comedy value, but I'm inclined to agree. That said, I appreciate the gesture.”

Dr. Ross shrugged as the pair walked over to an empty booth. “It's less than three dollars. So... hey. Wasn't able to make it to the State of the Kingdom Address, for obvious reasons, but I did listen to it on KEBT. I didn't realize that when Dr. Akron said he wanted to be on hand as a medical representative that he was going to make an ass of himself. Still, if something did go wrong, he would have been the one to have on hand.”

“So he is a fairly skilled human doctor?”

Dr. Ross nodded. “He's got Charles Emerson Winchester the Third's surgical skill, combined with
Frank Burns' personality and bedside manner."

Dr. Aster blinked his sockets a few times, and Dr. Ross sighed. “And it just occurred to me you probably don't get that pop culture reference.”

“Can't say I do. Sorry.”

“Well. Back in the Seventies, there was a TV show called MASH. It was about a fictional Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, the 4077, and all the stuff they got up to during the Korean War. Uhm... do I have to explain the war? Not sure exactly how up to speed you are with human history.”

“I know the broad strokes of it. Wikipedia has been a fantastic help, along with the Google search engine. Heh. I remember a lot of people arguing in favor of finding and harnessing the resources we needed to create a cavern-wide computer network. Saying it would give us a similar advantage in coordination for large projects and decentralizing purely information based work that humanity enjoyed with the Internet and its precursors. Then it finally got built and the most popular use for UnderNet was social media, go figure.”

“Hah!” Dr. Ross snickered. “I guess we have that in common. A few years ago my family had a reunion down in Texas and we went to a museum dedicated to the Space Program. The tour guide said something like, 'If you have a cell phone, take it out now.' And when we did, he said, 'Whatever is in your hands right now, that's at least a thousand times more powerful than the computers used to put man on the moon.' Which is fun to think about.”

“It is a bit. I've actually, I've uh, been reading a little about the space program. There's something about the whole thing that just sums up humanity, I think.”

“Ooh. This I gotta hear. Is it the whole 'because it's there' thing where somebody saw the moon and decided they were going to go there, just because? Or is it the whole Cold War thing, how we managed to turn a lot of aggression into a friendly competition with the Russians?”

“Uh, neither actually.” Dr. Aster shrugged awkwardly. “Since you didn't have access to Dimensional Magic, or as far as I can tell from the scientific literature any purely technological form of gravity control, you had to resort to rockets. I can very easily picture two humans standing next to each other talking it out and one of them coming up with the idea of riding an explosion into space, and the other one saying 'Wait, won't you explode too?' and the first one going 'Naw, it'll be fine, the explosion's pointed the other way.' and the second one says, 'Well, alright. Hey, about that five bucks you owe me-’“

Dr. Ross clapped a hand over her mouth and sputtered in laughter behind it.

“Oh my god. That is perfect. I can see it in my head.”

Dr. Aster grinned, and began to relax.

“...so all that stuff on Tumblr, that's just wishful thinking?”

A pair of doctors walked down the sidewalk as the sun began to set and tinge everything orange and red. The skeleton held up his hands.

“Well, not all of it. Some of it is fairly close, at least to my knowledge. I'm a physicist and engineer first, everything else second or even third. But I know for a fact that the skeleton stuff? That's just nonsense. Any human that expects to get into bed with a skeleton monster and see a magic glowing
phallus is going to be very disappointed.”

“Eh, in my experience, the phallus isn't any less disappointing when it's made out of meat.”

Dr. Aster turned to Dr. Ross and stared, and the surgeon pointed at the scientist and laughed.

“Oh god your face! Your face! That was perfect! Oh my god!”

“I don't know what I was expecting your response to be, but that wasn't it.”

Dr. Ross managed to get her laughter under control. “Okay. Okay. Calming down. Caaaaaalm down. Right. So if it doesn't involve magic glowing dicks, just how do skeleton monsters reproduce?”

“Well, if you must pry.”

“Oh, I must, I must!”

Dr. Aster chuckled. “Okay. Not sure if this is going to confuse or entertain but here we go. The parents combine magic information. This can be done with bullets but it doesn't have to be, and even if it is, it's not like a normal attack. It's a specific process you can't do by accident, it requires a fair amount of preparation beforehand. Anyway, this creates a precursor to a monster soul. Then the proto-soul is placed underneath the earth, where it leeches minerals out of the soil around it, to create the original base bone structure. Different types of earth can result in different attributes of the skeleton once they are born, and it can also influence how fast or slow the skeleton grows. Either way, after enough time is passed, the newborn skeleton climbs out of the earth, and there you go.”

Dr. Aster stopped walking, suddenly aware that Dr. Ross had stopped a few moments before. Turning around, he saw a number of competing emotions on Dr. Ross's face, but the one that seemed to be dominant was confusion.

Okay... I don't know what I was expecting, but that wasn't it.”

Dr. Aster held up his hands and shrugged. “There were some historians in the Underground that theorized that the different means of monster reproduction may have exacerbated the conditions that lead to the War. In the case of skeleton monsters, it was common to have all the different skeletons-to-be growing in the same areas. It was easier to keep an eye on them, protect them from any predators or environmental disruptions. And of course each spot had to be identified so there weren't mix ups later, especially since it's not clear if anyone had developed Pattern Magic analysis suitable for tracing family connections back then. Problem is, you put all of those things together and you end up with some very similar to a human cemetery, barrow, or other burial system. So if a human saw skeletons checking on their children being born, they could have easily gotten the impression that skeletons were raising human dead.”

“...yeah. Yeah, I could see that. Wow. I mean. I'm not trying to be rude, but I think you blew my mind just now.”

“Well. That wasn't intentional... anyway, with space at a premium in the Underground, skeletons couldn't do that anymore. We ended up filling cribs and bassinets and such with earth instead. It let us keep a closer eye on our children and we didn't need to use the markers anymore either. Some families still do it though. Tradition and such. The Asters did that for a long time but we stopped around the time my grandfather was born, I think....”

“Huh... yeah, makes sense. Sorry, trying to fit that into my head. Although... now I have this image
of a bunch of skeleton monsters milling around a burial location like you described, like human parents in a maternity ward in a hospital. Sorry if that's offensive, I just go to hospital analogies first and foremost. Because of reasons.”

“It's not offensive. Not that I know what a human maternity ward looks like so there might be some context I'm missing. So... level with me doctor. Is that better or worse than magic penises?”

Dr. Ross snorted. “Okay, yeah. In light of all that. It's probably better. And it certainly makes more sense to me, and not just because I'm a doctor.”

“Alright then.”

The doctors continued walking, and Dr. Ross started to giggle.

“You know, it's funny. When we were at the hospital last week, that whole thing... it never occurred to me to ask for details until after you and Doctor Alphys had already left. I mean, those details weren't even necessary for what we were talking about, so I guess that was part of it. But still. My brain just defaulted to the closest human equivalent to fill in the blanks... until I went on the internet and saw just how weird that would be.”

“Well... to the extent that it helps bridge any social gaps. I suppose there's no harm in people going on thinking and believing what they want. Though having said that, I'm still wondering what's going to happen when the queen finds out there are humans out there drawing artwork of her in clothing that is certainly not in keeping with her royal deportment.”

“Hah. Well, you can't get much more Mature and Intelligent than an immortal that works as a schoolteacher. And she is definitely a Lady, sooo...”

“So...?”

“Never mind. Just thinking out loud. And yeah, you're right, that kind of stuff does kind of help bridge the gaps, but from what I've seen that's not the biggest factor at work.”

“Really? What would the biggest factor be?”

“To be honest? It's a bit of a one-two punch. The fact that... that you guys exist at all. That's the first one. Monsters are real, magic is real, and a lot of the ideas about what is and is not possible in the world suddenly don't seem as certain anymore. Everyone and everything that says 'You can't do this, you can't do that,' it all looks less intimidating, less daunting. The second one... as different as monsters are. They want the same things as a lot of humans. They want a job and a place to live and to pursue their hobbies and interests and you'd be surprised how many humans there are out there, especially the most recent generations, who struggle with all of those. So monsters are a perfect fusion of the exotic and the mundane. Completely different, but exactly the same in all the ways that really matter. Granted, the differences alone are enough for people like Dwayne Riley and Jordan Cater to get their panties in a twist, and the similarities don't help. But those people are already the type that, for example, are struggling to find work and see another human trying to find a job as competition, instead of a kindred spirit. Normal, sane people? They kind of see themselves in you guys. There's a sense of commonality that goes past the obvious physical differences.”

“...huh. I never thought of it in those terms until just now.”

“Aha! Now, it is your mind that is blown!”

Dr. Aster snorted and rapped his knuckles against his skull, creating a hollow echoing noise.
“There's just empty space in there, doctor. It's not that big of an accomplishment.”

“Hah!”

The two doctors stopped at an intersection, and Dr. Ross looked around. “Welp, I suppose this is where we part ways for now. I'm right down the street and I'm guessing that you have all that paperwork to get back to.”

“Ah. Right. That's going to be fun.”

“You know, I hope they show the whole senate thing on like CSPAN or something. I was already interested in it from the political angle, but now I definitely want to see your responses to whatever they ask.”

The skeleton's eye lights rolled in their sockets. “For the magic, or the science, or the sarcasm?”

“The correct answer is D. All Of The Above.”

“Well, that will be nice. Knowing at least one person watching will enjoy seeing me explain grade school magic theory to opinionated grown men.”

“Yup. Looking forward to it.”

Dr. Ross stood for a while, then turned to look down the street, and back again.

“Well. Uh. Good evening.”

“Uh. Right. Good evening.”

Dr. Ross headed down the street, and Dr. Aster crossed in the other direction, turning back once on the other side and seeing Dr. Ross quickly turn back around to continue on her own way. A flash of blue light took him back outside the house that Sans and Papyrus shared, and another shortcut took him inside.

“WELCOME BACK DAD! HOW DID YOUR HEAD CLEARING EXERCISE GO?”

“Hi Papyrus. To be honest...” the scientist collapsed into the green sofa, “my head is more crowded than it was when I left the house. But I did learn a few things. So there's that.”

“THEN IT WAS ALL WORTH IT! NYEH HEH HEH!”

“Oh, definitely. Dr. Ross... she definitely broadened my horizons a bit. Especially when it came to monster-human social integration... it was a lot more abstract when Frisk was talking about it. Now it seems real... oh, damn.”

“WHAT IS IT?”

“I was going to ask Dr. Ross something, but I got so caught up in the conversation we were having, I never got around to making the subject change... oh well. Probably doesn't matter that much.”

“DO NOT WORRY! WE ARE HAVING SPAGHETTI TONIGHT!”

“...how is that pertinent?”

“WHEN IT COMES TO PASTA, THERE'S NOTHING LIKE SPAGHETTI TO HELP YOU FORGETTI YOUR REGRETTI!”
Dr. Aster stared at his son. “Uh... what??”

Papyrus narrowed his eye sockets and sighed. “I FEAR I MAY HAVE SPENT TOO LONG TALKING TO DR. ALPHYS AFTER THE ADDRESS EARLIER.”

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter was taking a while to get done, so have this strange interlude to tide you over until then.
“Brett! Awesome, glad you could make it, come on in!”

“Thanks man.” Brett looked around the house; it was relatively small, but it already had that hard-to-define quality that said “this is somebody's home” to anyone that walked in. Or maybe that was all the people already gathered around the table in the living room. Brett managed to count to seven before the welcomes began.

“Hey everybody, this is Brett, he's the voice of reason during the Morning Rush.”

“Oh my gawd hello! Mr. Brinkmann it's so nice to finally meet you! Bratty and I listen to you and Burgie every day!”

“Oh, well, I'm very sorry to hear that.” Brett grinned.

“This is Lance, he's the reason Nice Cream is a thing.”

Brett blinked at the smiling blue rabbit. “Really! Well, can I just say I am a big fan of your work.”

“Thank you Mr. Brinkmann, I'm a big fan of yours as well.”

“And this is Gunther, he works at All Fine Labs in their Advanced Materials lab.”

A massive bear monster held out an equally massive paw, and Brett shook it.

“Nice to meet you Gunther.”

“Nice to meet you too.”

“Danny and Brian both work at Dreemurr elementary school.”

Brett shook the hands of both human men. “Nice to meet you guys.”

“Pleasure's all ours,” Danny replied with a grin.

“And Lindsey's in the kitchen putting snacks and drinks together.”

The man introduced as Brian snorted. “I think you mean hogging all the snacks and drinks.”

“Hey! Lies and slander! Even if it is true.” Lindsey appeared from a doorway carrying a platter piled with chips, crackers, several bowls of dip and a cheese ball. “Somebody else needs to go in there and get drinks. I'm already past my quota for doing anything at all today. If I keep this up the station will make me change my nickname.”

“Can't have that.” Brian got up from the table and headed into the kitchen as Lindsey put down the platter on another table next to the game table. “Okay, who wants what? Also, who here is not okay with alcohol?”

“Yo.” Danny raised one hand.

“Yeah, I know Danny. Anyone else?”

“I'm okay with going dry.” Brett spoke up as he sat down. Next to him, Gunther nodded.
“Same here. If I get smashed I'm not going to be able to read the cards.”

“No booze for me either. Just monster soda. Any flavor.” Lindsey said as she piled up a paper plate with chips, slipping a few of them into her mouth. “Now that I can finally eat again I gotta make up for lost time.”

“Oh, is something wrong?”

Lindsey mumbled around a mouthful of chips and dip, then held up a finger to indicate that she needed some time to respond to Catty's question. After a few seconds of chewing and swallowing, she finally sat down at the table. “Okay. Yeah. Bad timing there. I was feeling sick for a while, so I went into the hospital earlier this week. I don't understand everything the doctors said but I did understand when they said everything would be fine if I didn't drink alcohol or eat really acidic foods for a couple months. Which kinda sucks just because everybody around me was having a great time Friday night, but whatever.”

“Oh, yeah, I remember that. The Memehaus was a mess.” Danny spoke up.

“I don't remember that part. Guess it really was a good time.” Brian's voice carried from the kitchen. “Who else wants... actually never mind, I'll just bring everything in there and take it back to the fridge once everyone's got their drinks. It'll take less time that way.”

“While Brian does that...” DJ Pantz began to shuffle the cards on the main table, “we will get everything else settled here.”

Cards began to fly from paws and land in front of people, or at least in front of their seats as different people got up to grab cold drinks from a returning math teacher. “Instead of using the standard method or the house rules for determining who goes first, let’s have Brett be the Card Czar since it's his first time.”

Danny nodded as he popped open a can of soda. “Right. Fight Club rules.”

Gunther shook his head. “While it was interesting to see the human equivalent of a monster magic bullet exchange, I don't think the film itself was that great.”

“I mean, the last rule of Fight Club. If it's your first night, you have to fight.”

“Oh. Oh. Right.”

“Aaaand that should do it. Everybody settled in yet? I mean besides Brian obviously.”

“Hey, hey, don't start without me again.” The math teacher returned from the kitchen and picked up his cards, and DJ Pantz nodded at Brett.

“Okay man. Let's get this show on the road.

“Alright.” Brett took a deep breath and pulled the first black card.

“My new favorite porn star is Joey Blank McGee. Well. Something tells me that's going to set the tone for the rest of the evening.”

Lance pulled a card out of his hand and slid it forward. “Hey Burgie, is Officer Steve gonna be here this time?”

“He said he didn't know for sure. Something about putting chains in evidence. Which makes me
wonder just what the hell the cops found in those safehouses.” DJ Pantz shook his head. “And wish I could stop wondering.”

Brian handed a white card to Brett. “I think he was referring to something called the chain of evidence. You know, so everybody knows exactly where all this stuff is so nobody can tamper with it before it goes to court.”

“Oh. That helps a little bit.”

“Of course, having said that, it wouldn't surprise me at all if they found actual chains at the safehouses.”

DJ Pantz sighed. “And just when I was getting to where I could repress those images.”

“Sorry.”

“Alright, everybody in?” Brett looked around the table and Bratty squeaked and pulled out a card to add to the pile, and Brett shuffled them before turning over the top one. “My new favorite porn star is Joey 'Mutually Assured Destruction' McGee. Wow.”

“Yeah, that's a vivid image right there.” Gunther snorted. Brett continued to turn over cards.

“Joey 'White Privilege' McGee... Joey ' Pretending To Care' McGee... Joey 'Passive-Aggression' McGee... Joey 'The Token Minority' McGee... Joey 'Reverse Cowgirl' McGee... Joey 'Generally having no idea what's going on' McGee... Joey 'Figgy Pudding' McGee... and Joey 'Syrupy sex with a maple tree' McGee. At least the last one tells you exactly what you're getting into.”

“Or at least what Joey McGee is getting into,” Lindsey pointed out. Catty and Bratty immediately began giggling.

“Uh... all of these are actually, I wouldn't be surprised to see any of these as a porn star name with the possible exception of the not having any idea what's going on one.”

“Yeah, but that would also be the perfect plot for a porn parody, like, a plumber that actually shows up expecting to fix a sink or something.” Danny pointed out.

Lance snickered and held up his paws. “Oh, and the lady's making all these obvious moves and the guy's completely oblivious.”

“Yeah, exactly! And after everything's actually fixed? And she's all, 'Maybe there's another way I can thank you for helping me' and opening her robe and he just stares for two seconds and he's like 'I can't invoice that.' Like it completely goes over his head.”

“That might as well be actual fact. You know how much money plumbers make on an hourly basis?” Brian took a sip of his drink. “It's obscene.”

Brett shook his head. “It's only obscene until you realize your basement is flooding and you have no idea what to do. Then it stops being obscene. And then starts again when you get the bill. Uh... okay, I'm going with the maple tree one that round because it was the only one that was explicitly about sex involving a porn star, for thematic cohesion. Who was that?”

Lindsey raised her hand, and Brett passed over the black card and deposited all the white cards presented to him in a stack next to the main deck. “Alrighty, we going clockwise, counterclockwise, or you beat it you bought it, or what?”
“Clockwise, that means me.” Burgie reached out and grabbed a black card off the top of the stack. “Okay... Blank. Awesome in theory, kind of a mess in practice.”

After a few moments, white cards made their way over towards the monster. Lindsey handed one over and turned to Lance. “I probably already know the answer to this question, but how's business been going, Lance?”

“It's been incredible actually, even before this heat wave. I figured that on the surface Nice Cream would be a modest success among humans, but the demand bordered on ridiculous even before the whole 'monster food heals what ails you' thing went viral. I'm pretty sure eighty percent of the out-of-state orders we get are from sick or injured humans.”

Danny handed over a white card. “And the best part is, even if it doesn't cure you or fix you up, it's still ice cream that takes forever to melt. Not sure how that works but I assume it's something that starts with the letter M and ends with 'agic' or something like that.”

“Hah! Yeah, it's made with ice magic. Ice itself was easy enough to get around Snowdin but salt was trickier; only so much we could get from the seawater that came into the Underground, and while I could have used a mechanical freezer instead of a traditional churn in just wouldn't have the same texture. Also I couldn't afford to get a freezer that big when I was just starting up. Like so many other things, it was easier to just use magic, and not just because it was second nature.”

“That's been a recurring trend in the Underground and on the Surface,” Gunther remarked. “The first big contract for All Fine Labs was magic materials, like fire resistant stuff for renovated buildings.”

“Like the school.” Danny snapped his fingers. “I wasn't around when that happened but it came up during the interview process with Mrs. Dreemurr. Totally fireproof. Beats the hell out of asbestos for sure.”

“Actually it took a long time for anyone to realize asbestos could wreck the lungs, so we might be looking at the same thing with the fireproof magic stuff, or any magic materials. It's a completely gray area; last time humans were even around magic was a ludicrously long time ago and its been so long that nobody really believed in it anymore. I sure didn't.”

“Oh my god.” Danny grinned and turned to Bratty and Catty. “I can't remember if this came up last time, but have you heard the story about when Brian and me were getting interviewed by the queen? And, yeah, okay, we're not locals, the town takes some getting used to... the whole county takes some getting used to... but we figured what the hell, new school, hiring, let's see what happens.”

“And we'd just gotten our teaching certification ducks in a row and needed the work.”

“That too. So yeah. Not sure what to expect, and I'm convinced like the first day, but Brian's all science and math and there's no theory to account for this and all that and he says something, something like I've seen it and I still don't believe it' and Mrs. Dreemurr just gives him this one eyebrow arched kinda look and holds up a hand and there's this fireball there. Invites us both to try it out, like in that video of the press conference with Frisk. I'm game, and after letting me go first just in case, Brian does it too, and I don't know if she noticed? But Brian and I have been friends for a looooong time. So I know his ego is hurting, and he gets all hunched over and his voice gets really low and he mumbles...” Danny cleared his throat and spoke in a voice much lower than his normal register and sounding almost identical to Brian's in timbre, inflection, and speech patterns, “I'd like to make a formal apology.”
Lindsey made an awkward noise and covered her mouth with both hands to prevent pretzel shrapnel from flying across the table. Next to her, Bratty and Catty immediately launched into high pitched, shrieking giggles. Burgie flinched and stuck one finger in his ear.

“Ow.”

“Oh my god I wish I could have seen that!”

“Like, definitely. It sucks that stuff like that isn't recorded on video all the time.”

“Sucks for you, maybe.” Brian handed over his white card to Burgie. “Considerably less for me. It's just Danny's word against mine. Well, Danny and Mrs. Dreemurr. And Undyne. And Woshua. And... actually I better stop digging before I can't climb out of the hole anymore.”

“Oh, everybody's cards all up in this? Then let's go.” Burgie began to turn over the white cards. “Chugging a lava lamp. Awesome in theory, kind of a mess in practice.”

“That was basically the Seventies. That and an oil crisis.” Lindsey commented around a mouthful of cheese and crackers.

“Oh, well this is a vivid mental image too. 'The primal, ball slapping sex your parents are having right now. Awesome in theory, kind of a mess in practice.' Let's move on from that as fast as possible.’” Burgie flipped over more cards. “Doin' it in the butt, yeah that's a huge improvement... a dance move that's just sex... Nickelback... angels interfering with an otherwise fair baseball game... a time travel paradox... extremely tight pants... and an erection that lasts longer than four hours. Uh... hmmm. I'm going to have to go with an erection that lasts longer than four hours in this instance. Whose was that?”

“Over here.” Danny raised his hand and Burgie tossed over the black card. Brian snorted.

“Of course it was.”

Danny stuck out his tongue at the math teacher, then turned back to the rest of the table. “Oh, for the record, since I'm not sure how many people here actually know this, a prolonged erection like that is called a priapism and it is very bad news, probably worth seeing a doctor over. Unless of course you don't have the parts for it.”

“In which case it's definitely worth seeing a doctor over,” Lindsey mumbled. Brett coughed in mid-sip of his drink, and took a few moments to clear his airways while Lindsey pulled a black card from the deck.

“What ended my last relationship? That's the card, I mean, don't actually speculate on what actually ended my last relationship.”

Brian put down his beer on the table to sort through his cards. “Actually been thinking about this for a bit now Lance, where did you guys get the milk and stuff for ice cream?”

“It was mostly vegan alternative milk stuff made from the plants down there. Also because the plants got grown with magic from the CORE, they were already infused with magic so it made them easier to prepare. Same with flour, the scientists figured out how to turn roots and seeds from what did grow down there into something pretty close. Eggs were real though.”

“Oh, yeah! Like, there was totally this swarm of chickens that all ended up running into the cavern a thousand years ago!”
Bratty grinned at Catty's outburst. “Yeah, we all know about it because a whole bunch of kids' books got written about one of them that was always running around and causing trouble.”

“I had like all six of them when I was a kid!” Catty held up her paws and waved them in excitement. 'And while some say that Biscuit The Chicken passed away from old age, or fell into the Abyss never to be seen again, others still swear that he escaped the Underground. With even the Barrier unable to contain his fowl temper, he now stalks the humans of the Surface, striking fear into all those who hear his crow.' Those books were sooooo good!”

“Yeah, nothing like terrifying children and making them afraid of livestock at an early age. Not that I'm bitter about my parent's choice in reading material for young Brett...”

DJ Pantz blinked as he passed over his white card for the round. “Wait, what books are you talking about?”

“...I don't want to talk about it. And so I will change the subject; since we keep coming back to the subject of food, despite both the questions and the answers on these cards, I gotta ask how things are going at Das Boot. Things have been so busy lately that the last time I did anything but order delivery from there was about halfway through 2015.” Brett took a white card out of his hand, stopped, then replaced it and pulled out another instead. “To be honest I love the shoestring fries more than anything else on the menu.”

Bratty rolled her eyes. “It's pretty good, especially once we got everything cleaned up from the attack during the first address. We still keep getting people showing up from out of state and yelling at us about something related to the war that all the displays are about.”

“Do they ever come inside and look at the place?”

“Nah. I mean, sometimes they come inside, but then they're too busy yelling at us and the day manager to look around.”

Danny took a white card from his hand. “Well, the jokes on them I guess. I mean. I saw that place when we first got here and I was like, '...oh.' Like you do when you see something like that and you're not sure what the hell you're actually looking at. But I went inside and I looked at the models and the pictures and the summaries. And, come on, the Enigma machine captured from a U-Boat? The sinking of the Bismarck? A celebration of Allied naval victories in the Atlantic during World War Two is really hard to mistake for Nazi propaganda. So... props to those guys for working really hard?” Danny shrugged. “Trying to see the upside here.”

“There's no upside or downside, Dan.” Brian tossed a white card into the pile. “There's always going to be people who are just looking for an excuse to get mad. If the restaurant had been Western themed, somebody would complain about something that happened back then. Not that there's any shortage. But the type of people to bring that kind of thing up sight unseen, or first glance... those are the type of people who ain't ever gonna be happy. So it's not really worth the time and energy to placate them. They'll just find something else to yell about.”

“What he said. Also, I haven't had a Reuben sandwich that good in like three years. You guys are fucking sandwich artists.” Danny tipped his monster soda to Bratty, who blushed.

“Like, thanks Danny! I'm gonna tell everybody you said that at work tomorrow.”

“You do that.” The music teacher grinned. “I hope I get a flatterer's discount next time.”

“Alright, is that everyone? ...going once, going twice, going gone.” Lindsey started turning over
white cards. “Natural Selection... Agriculture... firing a rifle while balls deep in a squealing hog, there's a vivid mental image... the harsh light of day... German dungeon porn... hormone injections... God... Global warming... and rabies.”

“Any of of those could be a deal breaker in this day and age,” Lance pointed out.

Brian turned to the rabbit monster in confusion. “What, even the global warming thing?”

“Especially the global warming thing. All it takes its for two people with vested opinions to disagree on one single thing, no matter what else they agree on, and pretty soon they're screaming at each other at the top of their lungs and either an existing or potential friendship is going down in flames.”

“Thaaaat's politics.” Gunther remarked.

“Okay, the harsh light of day one is actually really close to the truth, so that wins. Who was that?”

“Yo.” Burgie raised a paw and Lindsey handed over the black card.

“You know me so well. Too well. Alright Bratty. The heavy burden of Card Czardom rests upon you now.”

The reptilian monster pulled a black card from the deck. “Alright here goes... okay, this is a two card answer, so make sure they stay together when you hand them over. That's right, I killed Blank! How, you ask? Blank.”

Around the table, cards were sorted through and selected, in between random comments, the crunch of snacks, the drinking of beverages, and the over-analysis of especially ribald card selections... a process which continued to repeat itself throughout the evening.
BAD MEMORY 09: "Failure"

'A cotton heart and a button eye, you are the apple of my eye…'

They won't go away.

There is always somebody by their bed. Toriel. Asgore. Asriel. Sometimes two of them. Occasionally all three. But always somebody. Always watching. Always trying to maintain that green glow. It pushes back the burning and the stabbing pain but for only so long. And the nausea and the dizziness don't go away at all.

They are dying and the Dreemurrs can only do so much.

Another wave of green healing magic. Cells mend. Tissues rebuild, as much as they can. But the burning is still there. Relentless. The body breaks it down, attacks it, because it is a threat. Reduces it to what cannot cause harm anymore. The green glow pushes back again. Rebuilding. Restoring. Healing.

There is a terrible pain in their stomach that is entirely new. The Dreemurrs are still wasting time and energy on them. Wasting magic. Wasting food. Wasting space; they still have a bed to lie on, still share a room. Between the bed and the wall, where anybody could find it if they bothered to search, is a glass bottle with a cork stopper. It is filled with the juices of buttercups, chopped and crushed and strained so that nothing stood in the way of their power to harm. Only a quarter of it has been consumed so far, because they didn't know how much it would take.

But they know how much they will use.

Sometimes their body fights back. Bloody vomit, pouring out of them, trying to purge the poison, to drive it out. Blood, bile, acid, and chunks which cannot possibly be food because they haven't eaten human food in so long, so… that must be them. Parts of their insides, casualties of the endless war inside of them, the war between the poison and the healing magic. A stalemate where both sides are reinforced constantly and no progress is ever made.

Not for the first time, they envy monsters. Monsters that can't go on… they don't. It was called Falling Down, and death followed, and there was no terrible lingering, no panicked scrabble to stay alive even when it was impossible. It was peaceful.

Asriel comes in because Toriel and Asgore have a kingdom to look after and neither of them can really spare much time from that, but they do anyway, for as long as they possibly can afford to. He's been crying again. Of course. There is a burst of irritation but it rapidly becomes eclipsed by something else.

Doubt.

Why is he crying? Why are the Dreemurrs fighting so hard to keep them alive, after all they had done?

Why?

'Why did things turn out like this?'

The doubt is grabbed and strangled and pushed back down where it belongs, where it can't get in the way. It should be easier, after so much practice, but it isn't. They smile, because people see
what they want to see and most of them want to be happy, they want people to agree with them, they want to be right, they want to be comforted, they want to be supported.

They can definitely understand that sentiment right now.

Because Asriel is not smiling. And that hurts much worse than the buttercups.

“Why aren't you smiling? Aren't you excited? Aren't you happy?”

They shift on the bed, reaching down between the bed and the wall, and pull up the bottle. Uncorking it carefully, and raising up their head as much as they could, they drink some more. It burns going down, like always, and the burning lingers because the human body is not supposed to consume certain substances, but they ignore the warning like always. The burning is just one more hurdle. The panicked reflexes of a selfish animal that doesn't know enough to stop moving when it's supposed to.

The bottle is corked, and returned to its hiding spot, and they smile at Asriel again. And this one is almost genuine.

“You're going to be free.”

Time blurs. The room gets darker. There is always somebody there. They can't pinpoint the moment when it all ends. They are something else now, and that body, that hateful prison of flesh and bone and water that did nothing but break everything its tiny, dirty fingers touched, is empty. They pick it up and carry it and the Barrier is nothing. It does not exist. It cannot even touch them. There is no resistance.

In the town, Asriel leaves the body on a bed of Golden Flowers. That's alright. It means nothing. It is literally dead weight. They laugh at the pun inside their head, but Asriel doesn't laugh because they keep the pun isolated with their memories and their plans and their hopes and screaming and shouting and bullets and angry faces and shouting and there he is there is the face from every nightmare the one who would destroy everything the man who takes and takes and takes and gives nothing back Asriel what are you doing we have to do something we have to stop them it hurts it hurts so bad Asriel stop fighting me do something we have to stop them we have to fight back

Asriel lunges forward to grab the empty, useless shell and sprints back out of town, but outrunning the humans is not the same as outrunning their bullets and they can feel something give out, even with all of their power, even as strong as they are now it's still a monster body and the bullets are more than just hot metal going very fast, they are tiny little concentrated pills of hate and fear and anger and the body swallows them up and they can taste the buttercups again and there is the barrier and the plan is gone the plan is nothing the plan is useless and they are dying and Toriel looks so afraid and LOOK AT WHAT YOU'VE DONE

Frisk's eyes opened, and they threw the covers off of the bed. Feet skidded on the floor but just a little, the bedroom door swung open and they darted out into the hallway, to the open bathroom door and by the soft glow of the nightlight plugged into a socket by the counter top they just made it to the toilet before their stomach lurched.

There wasn't much, but it all came out. Whatever was mashing down on the “Puke” button inside their brain was very thorough. What did come out ended up being mostly a sour smelling liquid
with the occasional bits of something Frisk could probably recognize with the lights on if they wanted to, but they didn't want to.

“Frisk?? Are you okay?”

Asriel’s voice, behind them. Frisk leaned back from the toilet bowl and took a deep breath, once they could actually breathe again.

“Hey. Asriel. Sorry if I woke you up.”

“Well, you kinda slammed the bedroom door getting out... but I guess you had a good reason for it.”

“Pressing reasons, yeah.” Frisk took a few more deep breaths and pulled themselves to their feet, holding onto the counter top. The toilet was flushed and Frisk turned on the sink, cupping their hand to get some water and washing out their mouth several times.

“This better be a one-off event. I hate being sick.”

“Me too.”

Frisk grabbed one of the hand towels and dried off. “Yeah, some things are universal.”

Asriel looked away, down the hall. “I mean, I hate it when you get sick. Even when I was a flower, that bothered me.”

A fragment of a nightmare came back, but just a fragment, and Frisk nodded slowly. “I guess that brings back bad memories.”

“Yeah.”

The human child turned on the light and squinted at the bathroom; the sudden and unexpected sickness seemed confined to the toilet, which was good.

“Asriel? What is going on? I heard a loud noise.”

“It's okay mom. Frisk was... actually maybe it's not okay. Frisk, are you...?”

Frisk shook their head as Toriel walked up to the bathroom doorway. “I don't know what caused it but I threw up. Got to the bathroom in time, so that's good. Other than that I feel fine. If I wake up with chills or fever tomorrow I am going to be very annoyed.”

“Hmmm.” Toriel got down on one knee and held a paw up against Frisk's forehead. “You do not feel especially hot or cold. And you have no other symptoms?”

Frisk sighed and shook their head; the muscles that had been involved in the process were sore and protesting, but that was par for the course with being sick, not worth bringing up or singling out.

“Nothing else, but just throwing up is bad enough. The only thing worse is throwing up when there's nothing to throw up.”

“That's kinda gross.”

Frisk looked at Asriel. “I know. I should... hmmm. I should write a letter to the CDC about dry heaves being a violation of my constitutional rights.”
“...okay, I know I didn't understand everything you covered during the address. But I don't think that's how that works.”

“You're right. It isn't.” Frisk sighed. “I'm just tired.... sorry about waking you guys up.”

“It is quite alright.” Toriel ran a paw through the child's hair. “Try to get some rest, and be sure to tell me tomorrow morning if you do not feel well.”

“I will, mom.”

A few minutes later, back in the bedroom, Asriel tried to get to sleep... but found himself staring up at the ceiling. His mind was not turning inward on itself like it had been on other nights, but the loud bang of the door opening and hitting Frisk's desk had startled him awake and now his ears were picking up on every sound, from the distant hum of night time traffic, to the chirps of insect life, to the rumble of more than one air conditioner from other houses on the street....

To the sounds of Frisk's breathing becoming very unsteady.

It took only a few seconds to recognize it, but Asriel waited almost a full minute to be sure; Frisk was definitely crying and trying to hide the fact.

“...Frisk? Are you okay?”

Frisk said nothing, but the sound changed; as if the child had tried to muffle the noise with their hands. Asriel pushed back the covers and walked over to Frisk's bed, and in the dim light he could see the child had curled up, back to the door, facing the wall... and was shaking.

The position was frighteningly familiar.

“...hey, Frisk.”

“...hey.”

“...you're shaking a lot... are you cold, or scared, or...”

“Asriel. I think I remember part of the dream I had. Before I threw up. We both got killed in it. It was Cater.”

Asriel remained silent for a few moments, before realizing that Frisk was not going to elaborate.

“...one of the dreams you had. You said Cater dropped you in the lava in Hotland. That didn't happen.”

“...no. But him grabbing me by the neck. Him talking about the power of the Gods being wasted on kids. That happened. I can't tell what parts of the dream are going to come true, and what parts of the dream can be changed, and what parts of the dream are just me dreaming.”

Asriel opened his mouth, then closed it again, and settled for reaching out to Frisk. One paw found their hand, and the other rested on top of their head, going through their hair slowly.

“Whatever happens, Frisk. Whatever the future turns out to be. We'll face it together.”

“Thanks Asriel... can you stay here, with me, tonight? I need to know you're there.”

“I can do that.”
Frisk pushed back the covers and moved closer to the wall, and Asriel climbed into the bed. The human child rolled onto their back and their hand sought out Asriel's paw; the boss monster could feel the tremors in Frisk's body slowly fade into stillness as the child calmed down.

"...despite everything. We're still here. No matter what dreams I had. No matter what parts came true and what parts didn't. And..." Frisk sniffed. "And it's not like I haven't had worse dreams than those. Long before all this started happening."

"...worse how?"

"Sometimes, before you came down from the mountain. I'd have dreams where I'd go back to the Underground to find you. And I never did. And I'd wake up with an awful feeling in my stomach. And... sometimes there were even worse dreams, where I got everything right. We all walked down the mountain together. Mom and Dad got to see you again. Then I would wake up, and..." Frisk's hand squeezed Asriel's paw, and made a choked noise in their throat before calming down. "It was so hard to do anything those days. So hard to keep from breaking down. The night that... you came back all the way. I had that dream again. And I knew it was a dream, at the end. I didn't want to wake up, I didn't want to open my eyes and see a home where you weren't here with me. But I woke up anyway... and you were still here. The dream came true."

"Frisk... thank you for keeping my secrets all that time. I knew it was hard on you, but I didn't understand until just now how bad it got. And... I said it before. I'll say it again. You stuck by me when I was at my worst. So you deserve me at my best. I'm always going to have your back. No matter what happens in the future."

"...When the nightmares got really bad. I tried to stay awake as long as I could. And the more tired I got. The more scared I got. Because I knew what was coming and I couldn't stop it or run away from it... was that what it was like, for you? After the Barrier was gone?"

Asriel blinked a few times, glad that Frisk couldn't see his face easily in the dark. "It was... pretty close. Except. I felt like... after what I had done. I deserved to be stuck in a nightmare I couldn't wake up from."

Frisk's hand squeezed Asriel's paw again. "Thank you for coming back."

"...Thank you for smiling when you saw me again."

The human child sniffed a few times, breathed in deep and let it out again. "...I made a decision just now. This Friday, after school is over for the year... I want to tell mom about my magic. I... I don't want to hide it anymore. I spend every waking moment afraid somebody will find out, and... I don't know which is worse, having people afraid of me, or having people angry at me. But either one is better than being afraid of people finding out all of the time."

"It's your call, Frisk. But I know she'll still love you."

"...for the longest time. I thought I screwed up everything at the Taylor house just by being me. Now it feels like it's happening all over again."

"After everything you did as Ambassador. After everything you did to help them. After everything you did to help your friends. After everything you did to try to help me. And after everything you didn't do in the Underground and on the Surface, all the times you didn't kill anyone even though you were fighting for your life. Only idiots would throw all of that away because of something that happened thousands of years ago. Mom and dad are not idiots. You don't need to be afraid. Hold onto that."
“...Asriel...”

“What is it?”

Frisk rolled over on their side and wrapped their arms around Asriel, pulling him close in a hug.

“...in the hospital. When I woke up. You were in a flower pot. But you said you were afraid of that. Of being trapped.”

“...yeah. But... I was more afraid of losing you. So I had... I had dad help with that, so I could see you.”

“...guess it must get really old. Hearing me worry about all of this. After what you did for me.”

Asriel's paws moved, and Frisk felt one on their head again, fingers running through their hair.

“At the Barrier. When... when I really woke up, finally. I expected you to hate me for what I had done to you, and to everyone that you cared about. I had always expected that as Flowey. Because I thought that was how the world worked. When I was me again. I still expected that, because I couldn't imagine anyone ever forgiving what I had done. You... you really surprised me then. And again, after the Barrier was destroyed. You kept trying to convince me to stay. To come back. And you were so happy when I finally did, and you stuck with me, put up with me all the time I was still mean and rude and selfish, when that was the best I could do. They say monster Souls are made of love. And I don't know if that's true. But I know it's true about your Soul. Because what I have now, it came from yours. I can feel it.”

Asriel felt Frisk begin to tremble, and pushed on.

“No matter what you say. You are still a good person. You said I fell because I was pushed. Frisk, you were pushed too. I saw it in your memories. You tried to make things right. You tried to help, and it didn't work out, and... and you made a choice. The same choice I made. We decided... that a world without love wasn't worth being a part of. I know... I know it still hurts you, even now, that you couldn't make things better, but that is not your fault. You deserved better than the Taylors, Frisk. Mom and Dad and me and everyone else, we're all going to be here for you, okay? No matter what. Worst case scenario, mom will be sad that you didn't trust her enough to tell her right away but she will still love you and she is not going to get rid of you.“

Frisk sniffed. “Even if... even if it would be better for her... for everyone... if she did?”

“There is no way getting rid of you would be better for her. Or for anyone. You are not a threat, Frisk. Having magic doesn't make you an enemy any more than being a human makes you an enemy. Like you've been telling everyone, monster or human doesn't matter. What matters is if somebody is a good person or a bad person. You are a good person, somebody that cares about everybody and wants them to be happy. That's you. That hasn't changed, and it's not going to change, despite everything. Every time you forget, I'm going to keep reminding you. Until you stop forgetting. Until you know it by heart. Even if I have to remind you a million times.”

Asriel felt the tension in Frisk's arms slowly fade, and allowed himself to relax as well. Frisk sniffed again.

“...thanks. Asriel. You're the best brother ever.”

“Well... I try.”
“...you know what? Forget it.”

Frisk looked up at the top of the school. Undyne stood on the edge of the roof, the wind blowing dramatically through her hair. Slowly, she turned around and glared at Frisk through one narrowed eye.

“Papyrus called, earlier. He... he doesn't understand. He gets the part about magic being dangerous in human hands. But... he doesn't understand how that could apply to you. Or, I should say... he doesn't want to admit that it applies to you. He wants to believe you're still our friend. That this... betrayal. It's all a big misunderstanding.”

Undyne formed a spear in one hand. “You could have come to us right away. Instead of lying. Keeping secrets. Going behind our backs and putting our entire future on the Surface in jeopardy. We could have handled it all quietly. And quickly. You wouldn't have felt a thing, and Papyrus could remember you as a friend. But no. You had to drag it out. Now he's going to spend who knows how long wondering if he really did the right thing, or if he could have done something different. He's going to wonder if all this was his fault... you made him suffer, Frisk. So... you want to drag things out? I can certainly do that.”

Spears jabbed out of the ground at different angles; one from the front impaled Frisk's left shoulder, while another sliced through Frisk's right thigh, and a third came up from underneath their left foot. Frisk cried out more out of surprise than pain, then cried out again as they tried to move and the spears tore at their flesh.

“You know, what happened to Papyrus... that's what pisses me off the most. But it's not the only thing. All those times you came to my office, looking for... what, exactly? Sympathy? Or something you could use against me, against us? And I fucking fell for it. Even after finding out you had a Level of Violence Cap of twenty.”

Undyne jumped from the roof of the school down to the ground in front of the child; the force of the impact moved the spears sticking out through the ground and through their body, and Frisk screamed half from pain and half from terror. The monster held up the spear in her hand, and pointed it at Frisk's left eye, the tip a few scant inches away.

“We finally got to see the sun and the moon and the stars, after thousands of years. I won't let you take that away from us.”

“I... I would... never...” Frisk tried to speak, but the spear point loomed even closer.

“You have nothing to say to me!” Undyne screamed, and the scream was so loud that windows on the front of the building cracked, and long after Undyne's mouth had closed, Frisk's ears rang with a high pitched sound, and through that Frisk could hear their heartbeat going fast, too fast, blood rushing through their head-

A hand reached out towards the noise and eventually found its source, a cell phone in a charging station. The alarm was turned off, and the hand returned to its original position on the head of a fuzzy boss monster... before moving around again, feeling ears, face, and an arm. Asriel grunted at the half-asleep flailing, but did not wake up, and Frisk carefully opened their eyes to see a familiar bedroom, mostly dark but lit by light from the window behind them.

Morning.
'It was just another dream.'

Frisk sighed. “So... Sans. Alphys. Undyne, and I guess Papyrus... two left, then.”

“Mmmph?”

Frisk wrapped their arms around Asriel and hugged him. “Good morning, sleepy fuzzy person.”

Asriel yawned. “G'morn' Fris.”

The human child grinned and crawled over the monster to get out of bed, opened drawers to grab clothing, and opened the bedroom door. Down the hallway, in the bathroom, pajamas were exchanged for a striped shirt and shorts, and several minutes later Frisk returned to the bedroom to find Asriel sitting up in bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Wugh. Hey, Frisk. I had a dream that we tried to build a ski lift up Mt. Ebott and ended up on another mountain by mistake.”

“Were we holding the map wrong or something?”

“No, I mean we started at the foot of Mt. Ebott, and then we finished at the top of another mountain. So each one of them had like half a ski lift. We must have bridged over during the climb.”

“...can that actually happen? An accidental shortcut?”

“...not sure. I should ask Sans when I see him at the lab today.” Asriel turned to the nightstand and looked at *Applied Magical Optics*, bristling with bookmarks and sticky notes. “...I don't think I'm ever not going to be scared of him; I know what he can do when he puts his mind to it. But. The idea of actually being friends with him?” A paw came up to Asriel's chest. “It feels... nice, to know he's giving me another chance. Even after what happened to the timeline.”

“...you know. I went into All Fine Labs completely expecting Sans to be furious with me for keeping the time loop secret. And I didn't know what that would look like. He never tried to fight me in the Underground. So I was just as scared then about the time loop as I am now about the magic thing. But he was... he was really supportive about it. Sans... he's full of surprises, isn't he?”

“He comes from a whole family of surprising people. I remember back before Dr. Aster disappeared and people stopped talking about him, he was... uh.” Asriel grinned. “He was interesting. And Papyrus... well. It took me a long time and a lot of resets before I got bored interacting with him and started... well, you know. So, thinking about it? He may surprise you about the magic thing too.”

“Yeah... except he was showing up in my dreams even before I suspected I had magic.”

Asriel saw Frisk's facial expression shift, before trying to return to a neutral one. “…did you have a dream about him fighting you last night?”

“...no. It was Undyne. And... well, Papyrus wasn't there, but Undyne mentioned him. She, uh. She trapped me in place with spears and screamed at me and I think she was about to stab me in the eye before I woke up.”

“...that's pretty bad. I'm guessing she did what I always did and there wasn't enough room left to dodge or escape?”
Frisk sighed. “By trapped me, I mean, she impaled my shoulder and leg with spears so I was stuck.”

Asriel's eyes opened very wide. “Uh. What?”

“Yeah.” Frisk walked over to the nightstand and removed their phone from its charger station. “PE class is going to be really awkward today.”

“I can imagine. Hey, how close are you to finishing this book?”

“Down to the last two chapters. I'm having to make more and more notes about processes I can't follow, but the general ideas are still clear.” Frisk rubbed their temples with both hands. “The problem is that I've picked up so much of it that my head's too crowded to take any one part and look at it from a distance. So I'll have to go through the book again later. I had the same problem with The Way Things Work. By the time I got to the sections on electronics I had to go back and forth and back again to keep up.”

Frisk sat down next to Asriel on the bed. “Of course, the main reason I made so much progress with it so fast was because I thought I could use what was inside it to help you. And then I got shot and got sick, so I had all that free time. But you came back anyway and now I'm actually lagging behind a bit. As if I'd ever choose a book over spending time with you.”

Asriel blushed noticeably even under the fur on his face, and let out a sharp breath of relief when there was a knock at the bedroom door.

“Asriel, Frisk? Are you up and about yet?”

“Yeah, we're up mom.”

“What about you?”

“Are you decent?”

Frisk snorted. “I don't know about that, but we're both dressed.”

There was a muffled laugh out in the hallway, and Toriel opened the bedroom door. “Ah. I see you are ready for school already Frisk. That is good. Breakfast is cooking downstairs and will be ready shortly. Asriel, you should get dressed soon as well; Alphys asked me to remind you that she wants you to come by All Fine Labs today for another scan.”

“I did remember, actually. She told me she wanted to do regular scans so she could plot out any patterns as early as possible.”

“Actually, I believe that this scan is in response to your... transformation, as it were, on Friday. She examined you with her instruments after you returned to normal, but she would like to update your readings and file them with those from Officer Steve and his friends.”

“Oh.” Asriel frowned and scratched his chin. “That... actually, that's a really good point. Okay. Sooner the better on that.”

“Quite so.” Toriel sniffed, and then her eyebrows shot up. “Excuse me, I seem to have forgotten to keep an eye on the hash browns...”

Toriel disappeared, and Frisk walked over to their desk and started double checking that their books and assignments were in their backpack.

“...hey. Frisk. About that dream, with Undyne.”
“Uh. Yeah? What about it?”

“I had a thought just now. Since I'm going to go to the lab anyway, Alphys said the whole point of Soul Research was always to figure out the whole human magic thing, where it went since the war, why nobody seems to have it anymore.”

“Right. And she and Dr. Aster both suggested that if humans did have access to it, technology that used magic could be more commonplace. Heh. Before all this happened I was all for it, because if more people could get monster food and technology that's another reason to like monsters. An economic incentive, almost.”

“...I know it looks different when it hits so close to home.” Asriel turned and looked out the window. “But that's what I was thinking about. Alphys and I were all over the place when it came to talking about things Friday. So we never got onto the subject of what would happen if Soul Research opened that can of worms on its own. I could ask her today.”

Frisk stared at their backpack. “I guess it couldn't hurt to have a preview of coming attractions. Foresight is the only reason either of us ever made it as far as we did, after all.”

“Alright then. I'll ask her.”


“Right.”

Frisk abruptly put down their backpack, which started to lean over on the desk, and walked back over to the bed and sat down next to Asriel.

“Friday. Before we went to the Underground. Alphys was... she was talking to me while you were upstairs getting ready and mom was in her office. She... I guess Undyne must have mentioned I've been having a bad time lately. Alphys was trying to cheer me up... and every word that came out of her mouth was like a punch in the gut. She was falling all over herself to try and make me feel better and she doesn't know. She doesn't know and I'm even more scared of how she's going to react when she finds out than I am of how Undyne's going to react. I mean... I know Undyne's going to be angry, that's kind of a given. But Alphys-”

“Frisk you don't know that's how Undyne will react. You had a dream last night. And Thursday night you had a dream of how Alphys might react. That's all. Not all bad dreams come true.”

Frisk looked down at their hands and sighed. “As far as I'm concerned, Friday can't come soon enough.”

“We can definitely agree on that. Oh, and Frisk?”

“Yes?”

Asriel winked and stuck out his tongue. “When everything turns out to be alright, I reserve the right to say I told you so.”

Frisk grinned and laughed, and their arms came up and wrapped around Asriel... and he could feel their breathing become shaky and ragged.

“...Frisk? Are you okay?”
“...heh. I... I don't want to let go.”

“Well... I know what that's like. But still. Breakfast is probably ready by now... we could try to walk like this. If you want. Except we'd probably trip and fall on the staircase and get hurt.”

“...it'll take more than a flight of stairs to *bring me down.*”

Frisk waited for a few moments, then heard Asriel growl at the same time they felt his paws grab the back of their shirt and dig in, and started laughing. Suddenly, for reasons that had nothing to do with the morning sun, the bedroom and the day ahead both seemed a little bit brighter.
The room was filled with the clicking of claws on keys, and Alphys looked up from the monitor, blinking.

“Uh... okay. Right. Okay. HP is three hundred over three hundred. Nice. AT 30, DF 30, INV 30 and SPD 20. Any, uhm. Any luck on the whole... fwoosh? Thing?”

“Not really.” Asriel scratched his ear. “Are you alright? You seem really out of it.”

“Oh. Good. I am. Out. Of it. Working through the night, I managed to turn a broken watch into an Energy Magic Condensintrator. Justin should be by to pick that up soon.”

Asriel walked away from the scanner's target box and rested a paw on Alphys' lab coat sleeve. “Alphys you're almost sleepwalking.”

“Yeah... guess I am. The soda... I'm reaching the point of diminishing returns.”

“When's the last time you actually slept through the night?”

“Uh... what's today again? Monday?”

“Yeah, this is Monday morning.”

“Thursday night.”

Asriel's eyes opened wide. “Have you gotten any sleep since then?”

“Yes. Fits and starts. Kept... kept waking up Friday night. Had to keep making sure Undyne was still next to me. And Saturday was there to help with the Derby... that night, was almost finished with the watch when she dragged me back to bed. Then. The address. Yesterday. Went home. Straight to the garage. Finished it off. Crawled into bed two hours before dawn.” Dr. Alphys yawned. “I'll be... I'll be okay if I can make it to the end of today. Just crash. Wake up tomorrow morning just fine.”

“Alphys you need to sleep right now. With as little as you've been getting, it's a miracle you're not hallucinating right now.”

“Yeah, Alph. if you're not gonna listen to me, then at least listen to the short furry guy.”

Asriel looked up to see Sans walking into the scanner room. “Sans, how long has this been going on?”

“I noticed she was struggling to stay awake during the address. Not sure why Undyne didn't pick up on it, unless it was Hal distracting her. But technically Alphys is my boss here since I'm a contractor. I can't order her around.”

“That's right. And don't you ever remember it. Wait....”

Asriel narrowed his eyes. “Sans, is there like, a cot or a bed or something we can put Alphys in for the rest of the day?”

“I keep a mattress in my office but I don't think anybody but me could get to sleep on it... oh, wait. Alph has a Mew Mew Kissy Cutie themed futon in her office.”
“For all night projects?”

Dr. Alphys shook her head. “Naw. Needed. A place to put it. After Undyne moved in. Only so much room. Wait, when did we start talking about... wait, no. No, no, no. I have meetings. I have paperwork. Joe has... Dr. Aster is getting ready to... I can't take a break now! Everyone needs... everyone needs-”

Sans held up a gloved hand. “Alphys. Do you really think in your state that you can get anything done right now?”

“I gotta try!”

“Okay, better question... do you wanna have a bed time? Because if you keep going the way you're going, you are really not going to like what happens next.”

“...you can't make me go to bed Sans. I can fire you.”

“Who said I was going to do anything? Since when do I ever do anything?”

Dr. Alphys blinked, and then turned to Asriel as he stepped forward, wrapped his arms around the scientist, and lifted her off of the ground.

“Wah?! Hey! P-put me down!”

“Let me think about it, nah. Not till we get to your office.”

“Let go of me, Asriel! I'm telling your parents about this!”

“That's more of an incentive than a threat at this point.”

“Asriel let me goooo!”

“You know, technically I'm your creation, and in the old human movies, the scientist's creation always turns against them. I mean, I already have, when you think about it. So this is just making it official.”

“he's got you there.”

Sans opened doors, and the the young boss monster carried a weakly kicking lizard down various hallways until the trio reached Dr. Alphys' office. Inside, Sans cleared the books (mostly manga volumes) off of the futon.

“Alright, let's get you set up.”

Asriel put Alphys down, who weakly tried to get up again.

“This is... this is a mutiny. You'll. You'll hang by yardarms.”

Asriel turned to Sans. “What's a yardarm?”

“dunno. this looks like a job for Google.”

Sans pulled his phone out of his pocket, while Asriel sat down next to Alphys on the futon. The lizard slumped over, face in her claws, and made an annoyed sound.

“It's been... forever. Since I did something like this. Trying to. To keep going. Thinking I could just
keep pushing and pushing. And here we are again. Backsliding. Again. Undyne is going to be so disappointed in me..."

“I think the phrase you meant to use is 'worried about' doctor.”

Alphys shook her head. “No. No. I meant disappointed. I... she's been so good to me. So good for me. And here I am making the same mistakes. Over and over.”

Asriel cleared his throat. “Alphys. You should be snoring right now, instead of trying to list all the ways you don't meet some standards that nobody is holding you to.”

“if it would help, it'll only take me a minute to bridge home, get *Peek-A-Boo with Fluffy Bunny*, and bridge back here.”

“Ugh. Stop mocking me. With your. Mockery. And stop looking down on me. We're the same height.”

“yeah but you're sitting down.”

“...oh. Well... I can't really argue with that... not that it would do any good. You two are the worst team up.”

Alphys leaned over until she was laying on her side on the futon, and then closed her eyes.

“Promise me. If anything important comes up. Promise me. You'll wake me up.”

“we promise, Alphys. anything comes up that's more important than your health, we're telling you first.”

“Good... hey, wait a-”

“Alphys, if you won't do this for your own sake, then do it for ours. If Undyne finds out we knew you were in this state and we didn't do anything to help...” Asriel stood up and held his arms out wide, “there's going to be bits of us all over the lab.”

“...okay. Fine... you win...”

Sans walked over to the light switch and the office was covered in darkness. The two monsters stepped outside, and Sans held up one hand, apparently listening for the sounds of Alphys getting up again. A few moments later, his hand dropped, and he motioned with his head towards the rest of the hallway.

“Alphys tends to push herself to extremes like this every now and then. Honestly it's weird that Undyne didn't pick up on it and stop her this time.”

Asriel scratched his ear. “Maybe Undyne's distracted too. Or, maybe she doesn't realize how bad it is yet. And maybe now that the gadget for Mr. Carrow is done, Alphys will be better about that kind of thing.”

“Not terribly confident about that; odds are Alph's going to be thinking in terms of 'two down, four to go' when it comes to Party Favors.”

“What did she make again? She called it a Condensatrator or something, and I don't know how much of that was scientific terms I never heard before and how much was sleep deprivation.”

“Probably both. Alph's a multitasker-”
Sans! There you are!"

Asriel jumped as Dr. Aster skidded to a stop at the hallway intersection in front of him, scrambled to regain traction, and half sprinted towards Sans, skidding to a stop again in front of the two short monsters. “Where’s Alphys? I just had a huge revelation about the Amalgamates’ physiology and I need to talk to here about setting up some tests to verify or refute the hypothesis.”

“No can do, dadster. Alphys has been burning the candle at both ends trying to get everything ready for the trip tomorrow. We just put her to bed.”

“...oh. Well. Can't be helped then... guess I'll write it up and she can read it tomorrow.”

“Excuse me Doctor Aster, did you say you figured out something about the Amalgamates?”

Dr. Aster turned and looked at Asriel. “Yes, and to be honest I'm very annoyed with myself for not realizing it the first time I laid eye sockets on them because it's obvious in hindsight. The magic field... ugh. Sorry, I'm a bundle of nerves today despite not having any.”

“Hey dad, how about this. We head into a meeting room and you can explain it to us. I know you work best with a sounding board anyway. And I get the impression Asriel is interested in what you figured out.”

“Uh. Well. That's because I am. I can't promise I'll understand everything you say though.”

Dr. Aster waved a hand. “Details, details. Come on. I need to tell somebody before my skull bursts anyway.”

Sans and Asriel scrambled to keep up with Dr. Aster as he made his way to an empty meeting room, barged in, walked up to the whiteboard and grabbed a marker. After a few seconds of furious scribbling, Asriel recognized the rough outline of a Boss Monster and a human.

“The differences between monster and human anatomy are well enough established. One is made primarily of magic, the other primarily of water.” Dr. Aster drew small circles inside the human and boss monster drawings, then drew arrows coming out of the monster. “This magic goes into everything we are and everything we do. Bullets, cooking and other magic infusion processes, environmental regulation, a lot of the things that humans have to do with complex chemical processes like sweating and so on. But what's the one thing that everyone forgets that we use magic for?”

Before Sans or Asriel could reply, Dr. Aster circled the Boss Monster and pointed at it.

“Magic is used to maintain our physical structure. Even when we're not creating bullets or cooking or cleaning or bridging or flying or anything else. That's also where the human combat advantage comes in; because magic by its nature reacts to will and intent, it responds to destructive impulses no matter where they come from, including outside. It literally causes the field to tear itself apart.”

Asriel blinked, and then blinked again, trying to ignore memories of running back to the Underground, and white hot metal slamming into him and the heat spreading through his body, burning from the inside out....

“Yeah. I uh. I remember that part.”

Dr. Aster blinked, then his eye sockets widened in realization.

“Oh. Right. Sorry. Of course you'd know about that part. Okay, so... magic energy goes into
sustaining the pattern that gives us our structure. But humans don't have that because they don't need it, because their body is physical matter. Its cohesion and structure is based upon the principles of chemistry and physics, from amino acids to proteins to cells to tissues to organs and organ groups all the way up to a coherent organism. Magic is not believed to play a part except in the case of the Soul, and the connection of the Soul to the physical form.”

Dr. Aster drew an arrow from the human model out to the side, and labeled it DT Energy.

“Despite the precarious nature of the human body, they have survived everything that's been thrown at them out of what is essentially a supernatural stubbornness, refusing to die. I'm sure there's more to DT Energy than just that based on what we learned from the anti-photon experiments, and especially Frisk's headaches as a result, but this is the most important quality in regards to the Amalgams.”

The scientist sketched the shapes of a few other monsters below the diagram he was already using, and then started linking them together with arrows.

“When Dr. Alphys infused the monsters that had Fallen Down with DT Energy, they were already on the brink of death. The DT did exactly the same thing in a monster body as it does in a human body, it reinforced the connection between Soul and Body. That's why everyone started to wake up, because they had regained the will to live. But that's all. DT doesn't reinforce body structure because in a human body, structure is a property of the physical matter involved. So the monsters' magic fields were still deteriorating, and eventually they gave out. Their shapes collapsed, and without the DT in their systems they would have turned to dust. The DT maintained the connection between Soul and Body so that didn't happen. That is why they melted, because they no longer had a stable magical structure keeping a consistent shape, but their Souls were still alive and capable of producing and projecting magic energy.”

Dr. Aster pinched the bone between his eye sockets.

“When I originally saw Endogeny I was already thinking in terms of transposition of physical matter, especially water, but I should have known better; the only monsters with more than trace amounts of water content in their physical bodies would have been Mrs. Drake, the Vegetoids, and possibly the Moldbygg. And even then it wouldn't have been enough to affect the entire body like I thought.”

“You probably got distracted giving them a belly rub,” Sans joked. “Happens to people all the time.”

“You might be right about that... moving on. There's enough magic to provide semi-stable forms in each subject, but not enough to maintain the original field. That's already collapsed anyway so it doesn't matter for the moment. But magic responds to mental impulses, so the different monsters fused together in ways that provided the greatest coherence in the resulting combined partial fields. The Vegetoids and Mrs. Drake valued family, for example. The dogs all had common dog interests. And so on and so forth.”

“Right, and the monsters that went into Reaper Bird, they were already tackling some complex philosophical conundrums.” Sans nodded. “That's probably why they fell down in the first place. And everybody that went into Lemon Bread had a love / hate relationship with public attention, to one degree or another... yeah, it checks out.”

“Uh, what about the Memoryheads?” Asriel realized that his paw was up, as if he was waiting to be called on in a school classroom, and he lowered it again. “Those are technically amalgams but they're not like the others, in a lot of ways.”
Dr. Aster pointed at Asriel. “I have to skip past that for right now, but that *is* important, so be sure to remind me later if I forget. The amalgams all combined in ways that reinforced the dominant impulses of the minds of the constituent monsters. So there now exists a meta-stable magic field created by all the different Souls inside each amalgam, all reinforcing each other, and the shape of the resulting amalgam is the effective average of all of them together. Of course, right now, all of this is theoretical conjecture, but it does open a path towards treatment of the worst of the side effects and possibly reversing the fusion process, separating each amalgam back into their constituent monsters. All we have to do is rebuild each monster's magic field, from the Soul outward.”

“Oh, is that all?” Sans quipped. “and here I was thinking it was going to be something difficult and complicated.”

Dr. Aster rolled his eye lights. “You sarcasm has been noted, Sans. In any event, before we can even think about anything on that scale, we have to verify this theory is correct. That is where you come in, Asriel.”

The Boss Monster blinked. “...because I was melting, and then I wasn't?”

“That's a part of it, to be sure. You were an amalgamation of monster dust, physical matter in the form of a flower, and all animated and held together by DT Energy. You were able to manipulate the structure of the flower body to suit your needs, burrowing and growing and shrinking and producing appendages on demand, and you were able to project some quite potent magic even without a Soul. Now, you have a Soul, you have a monster body made of mostly magic, and you can project magic into the world that, even for a Boss Monster, is particularly potent.”

Asriel nodded slowly. “So you need samples.”

“Actually, what we really need is your parents explicit consent to be part of this scientific study, in addition to your own. Aside from one, *maybe* two tests requiring we compare your ichor to that of other monsters, this will mostly involve advanced magical field scans and bullet analysis. That's why I wanted to go over this with Alphys in the first place, since that scanner is her baby and I was hoping she could give me some pointers towards designing one with the same scale of resolution, but optimized for monster magic fields.”

“Heh. at this rate, you'll have to wait until Thursday.”

“Right, right... and I suppose I should be finishing getting everything together for that Senate thing anyway. I just hate having to sit on my hands when I have a good idea.”

Asriel looked from Sans to Dr. Aster and back again. “Hey, what do they want you guys for at that thing anyway?”

“Technically they just want dad, I'm coming along as his assistant and part of the security detail. But as for what they want him for, we don't know.”

Dr. Aster nodded. “Yes, when Joe was trying to explain it he kept going on tangents of political science that I suspect were more based in emotional intensity than empirical evidence. Then again, when Mr. Carrow was here and the subject came up, he reiterated a number of Joe's points without raising his voice. So the only way to know for sure what is going on is to get into the process myself. All we really know is the name of the proceedings; they appear to be an investigatory probe into matters pertaining to magic.”

The scientist made a derisive noise in what would have been his throat, had he possessed one.
“And considering the grand total of human knowledge about the subject of magic now amounts to whatever Joe has managed to pick up while working for Alphys, I can already tell that I’m going to spend more time trying to explain basic magical theory than anything else. And to people who already think they know everything, if the human internet is to be trusted.”

Sans chuckled and Asriel turned to him in confusion.

“ya want a margarita with that salt, dad?”

“Hah, hah, hah... there was something else. Something I wanted to come back to...”

“The Memoryheads?”

Dr. Aster snapped his fingers at Asriel's reminder. “Yes! The Memoryheads! Just because the amalgams are composed of different monsters with compatible mentalities, that doesn't mean that all the different parts mesh together perfectly. And because of the physical structure being an amorphous pseudo-fluid more than anything else, some parts are easily detached. Putting these two factors together, that means that sometimes parts of monsters will detach from the amalgam and not rejoin it like it normally would. These components then combine with each other for mutual stability, just like with the monsters themselves. Only in this instance the overall aggregate magic field is... well... the types of things that people would cast out of themselves if they could. And the Amalgamates can.”

Asriel nodded slowly as understanding dawned. “Then Memoryheads are literally made of Bad Memories.”

“That's correct.” Dr. Aster drew some other arrows from the monster sketches all leading off to the side, and drew in an amorphous blob with a bunch of frowning faces inside it. “Alphys came up with the name while trying to keep them isolated from the other Amalgams; their magic attacks resonate with unpleasant memories in the mind of the target. Now we have a theoretical framework for why and how.”

Sans narrowed his eye sockets. “Betcha that didn't help when she was trying to figure out what to do in the aftermath of the experiments.”

“Can't imagine it did. In any case, that's just a base extension of the theory. Once again, the proof lies in your transformation, Asriel. What do you remember from last week? From your perspective, what actually happened?”

Asriel stared at Dr. Aster and swallowed; some of the memories coming back at the scientist's prompting were not the types of memories the young boss monster wanted to review in detail.

“Well... I was a flower... I was burrowing around town, like I did back then... I... I ended up stopping in the park where...”

Asriel shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Uhm. Well. I wasn't feeling very good after that. But for the first time in a long time I was really feeling stuff at, uh... maximum volume, call it? Everything just hurt. And when I was trying to burrow, I realized the... the whole flower thing wasn't staying together. Getting here to the lab was really hard, trying to keep everything together when it wanted to fall apart. And then it was like... when Alphys transplanted me, I mean... I was able to keep the flower shape by concentrating but every time I got distracted or too worried. It'd slip.”

The boss monster wrapped his arms around himself and shook his head again. “Alphys did some
more scan things, found out the Soul fragment everybody thought went back to Frisk was still inside me. A few tests, I don't know what they were. Called Frisk, they showed up and ... I realized when they were talking to me... I wasn't afraid to die, if that was what was going to happen. Because I still had that fragment of Soul, and because it was affecting me like that, it meant that it was basically mine. So if I died, I'd see Chara again. I couldn't hold on anymore and I blacked out, and...”

Paws came up and Asriel wiped his eyes with the back of them, and tried to slow his breathing.

“I thought I was dead, actually. I saw Chara. But Frisk said that the goop that I collapsed into, it was spreading out and making the shape for this body. So. I wasn't dead, that was just a dream. But it was a good dream...” Asriel sniffed and shook his head. “Anyway, it wasn't like dying and coming back. I remember everything going dark, and then waking up as a flower, and it felt like time had passed, but I couldn't be sure how much time. A minute, or an hour, or more... turns out it was a lot more. And this was different.”

Asriel suddenly looked up and turned to face Sans. “Uh. Actually. Alphys had a lot of sensors on me, didn't she get anything from those?”

Sans shook his head. “A lot of the stuff stopped working when you stopped being a flower and started being you again so the data just cuts out. I've seen it and the two things that did still work are the soil moisture sensor and the seismograph. It's something, but it's not something we can really use. And Alphys turned off the audio and video recording when it was just you and Frisk. Didn't really want to commemorate you dying, if that was what was going to happen.”

Asriel blinked. “Yeah... that makes sense.”

“There was only one other reading we got...” Sans closed his eye sockets and scratched his skull. “During the time you must have been rebuilding your body, there was a long, sustained signal in the Green Band of the magic spectrum. Probably a side effect of the rebuilding process if it was anything.”

Asriel's face froze as memory shifted back to the moments after waking up; the green light, Frisk's panic, and all that followed. Slowly, Asriel started walking forward towards Dr. Aster, movement that would give him a plausible reason to face away from Sans.

“What you're describing would have to be side effect of something, unless it's the same thing I was using Saturday on the shrubs and grass. Which wouldn't make sense even for a rebuilding process, because I wasn't a plant anymore by then anyway. And that takes effort, and considering Frisk had to help me sit up, I did not have a lot of energy to spare then.”

Asriel turned around and started pacing back towards Sans, who cocked his skull to one side at the expression on the boss monster's face.

“You doing alright, Azzy?”

Asriel pointed a thumb back at Dr. Aster. “Everything that I just heard about the Amalgamate theory sort of made sense when it applied to my experiences. Maybe the melting thing was a side effect of building a new magic field for this body? I dunno, I guess it sort of sounds reasonable. Then you mentioned that Green Magic thing, and now I'm even more confused than I was when dad dropped me off here this morning.”

Dr. Aster snorted. “Yeah, well, welcome to the wonderful world of scientific research.”
“where the theories are made up and the data points don't matter,” Sans chuckled.

In the All Fine Labs break room, Asriel stared at the food in front of him without really seeing it; a cheese and assorted vegetable sandwich, toasted with fire magic. It was Toriel's culinary creation, which meant it would be delicious, but despite that Asriel could not seem to work up an appetite.

“want a little something extra?”

“Naw, I'm good Sans.”

“more for me then.”

Asriel didn't even look up to see if Sans was drinking the ketchup straight, or if he was applying it to food for once. “Sans, I have a question to ask you.”

“shoot.”

“...do you... remember what happened when the Barrier was destroyed?”

“nope.”

Asriel blinked. “...wait, did you just say you didn't remember?”

“pretty sure that's the case. i mean, it didn't take a lot of effort to fill in the blanks logically, but about all i personally remember is a flower showing up, and then a white light, and then Papyrus trying to wake me up... and then everyone flipping out over Frisk not waking up, until we were sure they were still alive. Why do you ask?”

“...because everyone I ask remembers it differently, and I don't know why. Or, at least, I'm not sure why.” Asriel frowned at his sandwich. “Of all the variations I've heard. The one I wish the most had actually happened is the one Papyrus told me about two weeks ago or close to it. He said I showed up while everybody was still, well, doing their thing, and I had on a false mustache and I called myself 'Herb the Soul Inspector' and managed to break the Barrier with them.”

“...huh.”

“Yeah. I asked him some more questions about it, when he was done taking pictures at the bakery? And he said that I said something about how the Barrier must have gotten brittle, because the original humans that made it weren't around and, of course, Barriers have to be rotated every fifty thousand miles, so....”

Sans snickered. “wow. now i kinda wish that was what happened too.”

Asriel nodded. “You know... I didn't ever monologue before I started hanging around Papyrus.”

“that sounds about right.”

The break room was silent again, and remained so even while a bear monster came in, dropped some coins into the vending machine, and started to grumble when the machine failed to dispense the desired product. Sans held up one hand and the machine glowed and started to vibrate, and the box clattered to the bottom.

“Thanks Sans.”
anytime.”

The monster proceeded on his way and Sans returned his attention to the young Boss Monster staring off into space.

“penny for your thoughts?”

Asriel shook himself, and sighed.

“Sorry. I'm... uh. Well. Distracted.”

“hey, sorry about dad putting you on the spot about what happened to you. that can't have been pleasant to revisit.”

“It wasn't, but at least it was for a good cause. But that's not what's distracting me. I'm... well, I guess I have to share it for safety's sake now. I'm worried about Frisk. I mean... last night they had a bad dream, and some of the stuff they said this morning, it kinda made me nervous. And... there's all the stuff I keep seeing in the Soul Link that I can't share. And...” Asriel threw up his paws in exasperation. “Okay, screw it. Sans, are you and your dad any closer to figuring out the Time Loop mechanics?”

“Not as such. As a matter of fact we've basically had to shelve our original idea for getting experimental data now that we know anti-photon emissions hurt Frisk. Even if we were able to scale it down to the bare minimum of discomfort, we could still be causing damage somehow.”

“...right. That makes sense. The thing is though... Friday, during lunch break, after the Soul Link test here. Frisk and I were talking before they went back to school. And. Well. They said something that really scared me. They said they were wondering if it wouldn't be... better, for everybody. If they just QUIT.”

Sans sat up in his chair abruptly, his eye sockets pitch black. “What.”

“That was my response too, except for the whole eye sockets thing. I tried to convince them that this was a bad idea and a bad plan. And I also tried to convince them to talk about that kind of stuff to other people, as well. You... heard what they said in the back yard Tuesday. But you didn't hear what they said in the Soul Link in the hospital. People have been telling them awful, terrible bullshit for probably as long as they've been alive, and just telling them that things are different now...”

Asriel rested his head on his paws and stared at the table.

“That's not going to be enough.”

“...that stands to reason. They did say they couldn't keep going in the hospital but... well, the kid got shot. Guess I was hoping they were freaking out from the fever or something.”

“I'm still trying to figure out exactly how to reach them, but it can't just come from me. Other people have to be able to help too... gah, I haven't been this frustrated about anything since I was fighting you over and over. Frisk shouldn't have to sacrifice anything to keep this happy ending
from being lost. They already give so much of their time and energy and attention to being ambassador, and that's a labor of love if there ever was one.” Asriel slouched in his chair and stared at the sandwich with a frown on his face, as if the food was the cause of all the ills he had been discussing. “The idea that they have to give up anything else, anything more than that, for other people's sake... it's repulsive.”

“We can definitely agree on that.”

“Right.” Asriel relaxed a little. “One of the things I wanted to do here today after the scan was talk with Alphys about how to help with that. Alphys has been in that position before. Actually so have I, but Alphys coped a lot better than I did, and that's saying something. In any case, that's not going to happen until she gets a good night's rest and probably a Real Talk with Undyne when she gets home tonight.”

“Yeah, that's definitely going to happen.” Sans scratched his jaw with one finger. “I can only really think of a few things, but I'll figure out how to make one of them work. I don't suppose you've talked to your mom and dad about this?”

Asriel sat up straight and shook his head. “I always said if it was something dangerous, I wouldn't keep a secret. Not after what happened to Chara. But mom and dad don't understand the time loop... they don't... they don't know what I did all those times. And they don't know that all this, life on the surface and everything, came at a price that Frisk is still paying. The only way we could explain it to them during the whole CORE thing was being like visions or premonitions.”

“Yeah... well. Like I said, when you don't experience the phenomenon personally, one explanation is as good as another as long as the math checks out.”

“Yeah, but how am I supposed to explain it that way?” Asriel held up his paws in confusion. “The only common element is foresight, and if you see the future coming you can change it so the future you get isn't the one you saw. But how can that possibly apply if Frisk thinks the only way for business as usual to continue is if they die? Even if I could explain it like that, it wouldn't actually apply. There's been no LOAD events since Friday. Frisk and I have no idea what's going to happen next. This isn't something they know for a fact. This is a what-if scenario that they can't let go of or look at clearly.” The boss monster leaned back in his chair with a sigh. “…ugh. What a mess.”

“It is that... Asriel. Important question. If it came down to it. A choice between going on without Frisk, or a Reset. Back to the way things were when Frisk fell into the Underground. What would y-”

“Reset.”

“...that was a fast answer.”

Asriel stared at his sandwich. “Well... after the Barrier was destroyed, I had a lot of time to think... and I realized something important. Even without a Soul.”

The young boss monster sighed, and for a moment Sans got an impression of age from Asriel, far beyond that indicated by his physical body; the weight of countless timelines crawling on the child's back.

“I couldn't do it all again. Not after that. And knowing what I know now... I still couldn't do it all exactly like I did before. Even if that's the only way that we can get back to where we are now. But if it's a choice between going back to that, and going on, without Frisk... that's not a choice at all.”
Asriel shrugged.

“I mean. They both suck. But one of them sucks slightly less, because it's possible to make things better, to get back to where we are now eventually, but this time with less bad stuff happening.”

“Hmmm. That'd be something, alright.” Sans pulled out his cell phone and started to text. “Tell you what. You head over to Alph's office, keep an eye on her, make sure she's okay, still sawing wood and all that good stuff.”

“...sure. I can do that. And you'll figure out something to do to help Frisk?”

“I already have, buddy. Now I'm laying the groundwork.” Sans winked one eye socket. “You keep thinking on your end, and we'll all meet in the middle. Sound good?”

“...yeah. Yeah, it does. Thanks, Sans.”

“Anytime, Azzy. Oh, and a yardarm is that part of a ship's sailing mast that sticks out to the side. Just happened to be reminded of that cuz my phone was still on the search results.”

Asriel blinked.

“...golly. Alphys must really be tired, then. She doesn't even have a boat.”

“maybe she's planning on buying one. or she's so tired, thinks she already has.”
“ALRIGHT NERDS! Good hustle today! The thermometer keeps rising so we're gonna cut things short, so you guys have the rest of the class free to do whatever. I recommend you start with staying cool and hydrated, if you need to be either one, and then branch out from there. Casey, Douglas, Frisk, hold up a second.”

As the rest of the class dispersed, then concentrated itself in a stream heading back into the building, a monster child and two human children walked over to where Undyne was picking up after the game of dodgeball.

“Casey, how's your wing doing?”

The young bat monster opened both wings wide, slowly and carefully. “Um. Better.”

“Anything hurt?”

“No...”

“Good. Just like I said. Mary doesn't have it in her to hurt anybody.”

“But she's always so mean to me!”

Undyne waved a webbed hand. “She's probably just got a crush on you or something.”

“Ewwww! That's not funny!”

Undyne cackled. “I'm just kidding, Casey. You can go now if you want. Remember, you're not going to dust just because a human has a mean throwing arm.”

Casey wandered towards the school building and Undyne turned to Douglas. “Okay, Douglas, I saw you limping out there. What's wrong with your legs?”

“Nothing, Miss Undyne-”

“If there was nothing wrong you wouldn't be limping. Did you stretch like I told you?”

“...yes, but-”

“That yes took a while to get here. I wonder why that is.”

“But stretching hurts!”

“Not if you're doing it right. You need to keep limber when you exercise, got it? Tell you what. Tomorrow I'll run you through all the stretches, and you let me know if there's any of them that are giving you problems. Maybe you're overextending without realizing it. In the meantime, is there any place in particular that hurts?”

Douglas hesitated, then leaned to one side and pointed at a spot about midway down his calf. “The back of my leg. Right here.”

“Hmmm. You might have pulled something. Tell you what. I've been saving up ice packs this last week like they're pirate treasure. Go into my office and get one out of the mini fridge, put it on your leg for about ten minutes, see if that doesn't help.”
“...okay.”

“Good.” Undyne turned to watch Douglas make his way (slowly) inside the building, then turned back to Frisk. The ambassador was looking down at the grass, one arm crossed over their chest and grabbing the elbow on the other.

“...Frisk, you got hit three times today. Your average for getting taken out in dodge ball games is like once every three weeks. The only time anybody has a chance against you is if you're sick, hurt, or distracted. So... which is it?”

“...distracted.”

“Kinda figured. Anything you want to get off your chest?”

Frisk shook their head. “Sorry. Nothing I can share.”

“...alright. But it is something you can put your finger on.”

The human child nodded.

Undyne knelt down in front of Frisk. “Do you think you have a pretty good chance of working through it on your own, if it's something you can't share?”

“...it's hard to tell.”

“...does it have anything to do with why you won't look me in the eye this morning?”

Frisk nodded. “Yeah... uh-”

“Frisk. Are you having flashbacks to our fight again?”

The human child breathed in sharply, then let it out and shook their head.

“...not flashbacks exactly. I. There was a. I had a dream last night. And it wasn't our fight. But it was like it in some places. You were, you were standing on top of the school, and you gave a short speech, and then it looked like you were about to stab me in the eye.”

Undyne stared at the human child. “...right. One of those dreams.”

“Sorta. I couldn't tell you why we were fighting though,” Frisk added. It wasn't technically a lie.

The gym teacher stood up, brushed the grass and dirt off her knee, and pointed a thumb towards the school building.

“Let's head inside before it gets any hotter.”

“Okay.”

Frisk trailed behind Undyne as she made her way across the yard, inside the school and down several halls, until they arrived at her office. Inside, Douglas was sitting in a chair with an ice pack on his leg.

“Feeling any better Douglas?”

“I can't tell, my leg's all numb from the cold now.”
“Well, that's progress of a sort right there.”

Douglas' face took on a perplexed expression. “Is it??”

“Sure. Why not.” Undyne dropped the armload of dodgeballs into a metal bin, opened the mini fridge, pulled out an ice pack, and put it on her shoulder. “In all seriousness though, don't leave that thing on too long or you'll end up with frostbite.”


Frisk looked up at Douglas and rolled their eyes. “If you must know, I caught a monster disease after the assembly that makes me think about spaghetti every eight s-”

Frisk's expression suddenly went vacant, and they licked their lips, before shaking their head. “Sorry, what were we talking about?”

Undyne laughed and sat down behind her desk. “Hey, never ask a question unless you're prepared for the answer. No matter how silly it is.”

“Wait, so humans can get sick from monsters??” Douglas blinked, and Frisk sighed.

“It's a really, really small chance. It's just as unlikely the other way around, too. And half the time you wouldn't even realize what you had because the symptoms are different. In fact using the words 'illness' or 'disease' is more of a human convention that All Fine Labs used to make the idea easier to understand when they wrote those papers.”

“So Mary is right, monsters do have cooties.”

Frisk stared at Douglas. “Seriously? 'Cooties'? What are you, six?”

“Shut up Frisk. Mary was the one that said it, not me.”

Undyne rolled her eye. “Douglas, take the ice pack off and give your leg a bit to go back to normal.”

“Okay.”

“Oh, and for the record, if by cooties you mean lice or other parasites, you can't get them from monsters.” Undyne took the ice pack back from Douglas' outstretched hand and placed it back in the mini fridge. “Even if they could survive from feeding on us, there's no way they could defend against a basic low level magic attack that another monster would barely even feel. So Mary is wrong.”

“...can I tell her you said that?”

“Sure, but you should probably get ready to run when you do. Speaking of running, if you pulled anything in your leg you should feel a little bit better once you get feeling back. It's not a sure thing, but odds are good. If your leg still feels bad by the time lunch goes around, that's something else. Might want to get some monster food at the cafeteria in that case.”

“I don't like monster food. It disappears when I chew it, makes me feel like I'm trying to eat the fizzy foam from a soda.”

Undyne blinked and looked at Frisk, who shrugged. “There was an article in the newspaper about
that back around Valentine's Day I think. The lack of constant texture is actually a really big problem for some people.”

“Huh... seriously though, not even Nice Cream??”

Douglas shook his head.

“...wow. I mean, I'm not that fond of cold food myself most of the time, but I know why other people like it. So... wow. I can't even right now.”

Frisk tilted their head to one side in confusion. “Can't even what?”

“Exactly.”

Douglas sighed. “Can I go now, Miss Undyne?”

“Can you feel that part of your leg again?”

“Yes...”

“Okay then. Head off and do whatever.”

Douglas nodded, got out of the chair, and left the office. Undyne sighed and shifted the ice pack to her other shoulder. “Man, that's a revelation right there.”

“Some people just can't handle certain flavors or textures, Undyne. Sometimes it's not even a matter of opinion, it's like a reflex or something.”

“I know that, but... eh. It's not that important. How are you doing now? You seemed to get better for a bit talking about that medical stuff.”

“I guess I did. It helped ground me in the present. Reminded me that... a lot of stuff is over and done with for now. We finally got the State of the Kingdom Address done and taken care of. We're moving forward. But earlier...”

Frisk shrugged.

“I don't know if it was because of all the stuff that reminded me of our fight or what, but it felt like all we've done was wasted effort because nothing had changed. And when you get to the point where it feels like nothing you do matters, it's harder to do anything, even small stuff that would disprove the theory. I guess that's why I was so slow today, just didn't have the energy. Also I, uh, I kept looking away from the other team to keep an eye out to see if you were going to start throwing spears at me, so that didn't help.”

Undyne stared at Frisk, who eventually looked away.

“Hey, Frisk. You know that I volunteered for the bodyguard position, right? I didn't get summoned by Asgore or Toriel and told 'this is your job now' or anything like that. I noticed things were tense during the early days and I wanted to do what I could to help out. I went to them. I asked them.”

“...I did kind of wonder about that, but every time I thought to ask about it, something else always came up. And after a few months it felt kind of awkward to ask.”

Undyne took the ice pack off her shoulder, and ran her fingers through her hair.

“Frisk, it wasn't just loyalty to the Royal Family either. You... you didn't ask for what happened to
you down there. Any of it. But you jumped onto the ambassador job when it was offered, and you never let go. Even after everything that happened. Frisk, if... let's say some stupid human gets it into their head that they can get stronger by absorbing a monster soul. And because going after Toriel or Asgore would be suicide, and if they tried to go after Asriel you would rip them to bloody pieces, they go after some monster child here at the school because they don't know or don't believe the thing about only boss monster souls surviving after death. Casey or Poncho or Skate or whoever. Even if they never even got close. Never even had a chance of trying to hurt them. I'd still hate that human with the fiery intensity of the sun. Because they looked at a kid and they just saw a means to an end, and nothing else mattered.”

Undyne looked down at her desk for a moment, before looking up at Frisk again.

“You understand where I'm going with this, right? What I did in the Underground. No matter how I tried to justify it. That was unacceptable. It was totally and completely screwed up. That's why I volunteered to watch your back whenever you were doing your ambassador thing. Because even though you had to know that I just wanted to rip off your arm. You still held out your hand in friendship. You really are something special, Frisk. And like hell I'm going to let anybody try to take that away.”

“...Undyne, thank you. Thank you for all the times you watched out for me, when we didn't know how everything was going to turn out, or if things were going to get violent before the end. And I know that I turned that upside down when the first address went out of control. But you understand why I felt that I had to do what I did, right? I couldn't watch you... not when I knew I could do something. Anything. To keep that from happening.”

“I understand. Still. That better be a one time only thing, alright? Of course, with Cater out of commission after Asriel opened up a forty gallon barrel of whoop-ass on him, I don't expect it to come up.” Undyne grinned as Frisk giggled. “But all the same. I'm the bodyguard. You're the ambassador. In the future, let's both stick to what we each do best, okay? Unless you want me to take over as Ambassador.”

Frisk grinned. “That would be funny to watch right up until everything caught fire.”

“Hah!”

The human child's cell phone made a noise, and they fished it out of one pocket.

“...huh. It's Sans.”

Undyne rolled her eye. “Is he texting you knock knock jokes now instead of taking the effort to call?”

“No, he wanted to know when it was okay for him to stop by. Said he wanted to talk science.”

“Huh. Well, class is technically over, so you might as well invite him over now.”

A few moments after Frisk put their phone away, there was a knock outside of Undyne's office door. The teacher looked at Frisk and held up a single finger.

“Who's there?”

“Donut.”

“Come on in then.”
There was a pause, and then a short skeleton walked inside, shaking his skull. Undyne began to laugh like it was going out of style.

“ya got me good, Undyne. can't argue with that.”

“Oh my god I wish Papyrus could have seen the look on your face!”

“hey, hey. enough with the low blows.” Sans winked at Frisk. “man, the nerve of some people, right?”

“I dunno Sans, I think that was a pretty good strategy, short circuiting the knock knock joke like that.”

“heh. guess that this time the joke was on me. so... you'll be happy to know Asriel's still getting stronger and stronger on the scans. also he's agreed to help dad do some tests that we think can help the amalgamates, once we get Tori and Asgore to give the green light first.”

Frisk smiled. “That all sounds pretty good. It's nice to have things go right on a Monday for once.”

“Well, about that.” Sans turned to Undyne. “Just telling you this right off the bat, Alph is completely wiped out and playing catch up on sleep on the futon in her office. I mean, she wasn't hallucinating yet but she was burning the candle at both ends for sure.”

Undyne sighed. “That stupid watch thing. She's been working so hard to get it ready for Carrow before the trip. I knew she was pushing herself too much, but I didn't realize it was that bad... ugh, how did I miss it?”

“I don't know what your day looks like after lunch, but I could bridge you over and you could take her home and put her to bed for some actual proper sleep. We can get by without her until tomorrow just doing business as usual.”

“That's a good idea actually.” Undyne nodded. “We've got lunch break and the rest of this class to make it happen, that's more than enough time.”

“Alright then. Everybody ready to ride the shortcut train?” Sans turned to look at Frisk. “I ask because there's some stuff that came up that you probably ought to know about too, even if it's only theory right now.”

Frisk hesitated, forehead contorted in worry, and then nodded. “Okay. I'm ready.”

“Alright, let's get going.”

Undyne and Frisk both stood up from their seats, and Sans held up a gloved hand with one finger extended. There was a flash of blue light, and the trio appeared in the hallway outside of Alphys' office. Sans walked over to the door, tapped on it twice, then opened it.

Inside, Asriel sat in Alphys' desk chair, sandwich in his paws, and Alphys was lying on her side on the futon, making whistling noises as she inhaled and exhaled. Asriel held up one finger over the end of his muzzle, and Sans nodded and winked. The skeleton moved to one side and Undyne slowly and stealthily walked into the office.

“think Undyne's got it from here on out, and Asriel's there if she need's help... let's talk shop.”

Frisk followed Sans down the hallway, after returning Asriel's wave and thumbs up gesture, and eventually the scientist and human child were in the break room.
“help yourself to a soda if you want. Think there was an article or something about how the human brain runs on sugar.”

“It does use more of the glucose the body takes in than any other single organ.” Frisk fished some coins out of their pockets, dropped them in a machine, and pressed a button for root beer. Sans waited until the drink had been retrieved and opened before speaking.

“Okay. First things first. Once I wasn't totally exhausted and overextended, and could shortcut around again, I spent a little time Saturday poking around the CORE or what's left of it. Geothermal plant's down to about... call it sixty percent. Which is alright. The rest of the Underground used less than ten percent of the full capacity, and that was back when we were dealing with overcrowding and making sure everyone had enough food and stuff. The sensors and automated systems down there, that's less than one percent. That's the good news. The bad news is that everything else is pretty much shot. Maybe after we're back from the trip, me and dad and Papyrus can all head in there and rearrange the modules manually so people can at least get around if they have to, but by the same token there isn't much demand for a high energy temporal physics lab right now. Brute force methods haven't had the best results lately. Not that I'm telling you anything you don't already know at this point.”

“Right.” Frisk rubbed their forehead.

“So probably going to just leave the CORE as is for now. Might reinforce it if the structure starts to break down real bad, might strip it for parts further on down the line. And also we're not using any of those anti-photon emitters here in the lab. Dad spent this morning taking the point source emitters out of each one, just to be sure. Until further notice, this approach has been flagged as a dead end. We're going to be focusing on theory for the time being.”

Frisk giggled, and Sans blinked. “What?”

“For the time being?”

Sans blinked again and then snickered. “Oh man, I didn't even think about that one. Wow. Not sure if this is something I never want Papyrus to hear or something I absolutely have to tell him. Eh, I'll decide later. Okay, right. Theory. The two biggest problems facing us are how to map the extant time loop without actively flooding the timespace continuum with anti-photons, and figuring out where the energy went that was in the singularity when you sent the shut down code. Because that was a lot of power. If you hadn't used the code, the three of us plus Cater would have woken up in the future just like dad did after the first experiment went wrong. I mean don't get me wrong, I am not complaining at all about how things turned out, but I don't think I can overstate how freaky it is that we didn't see something bad happen from all of that.”

“...yikes.”

“yup.”

Frisk stared at their root beer and took another drink, their mouth suddenly quite dry. “I don't know if this helps or just makes things even more complicated, but... after the... the fight with Cater. I was touching the star, the singularity. Or, I was touching the barrier around it. I thought that was how I got back into the time loop, and...”

The child sighed.

“I was not in a great place then. I felt... I was angry and scared and my head ached and my stomach hurt and it felt like a tooth was coming loose but after everything settled down that last thing
seemed fine. There was so much going on that about the only part of me that was thinking clearly
was the part trying to text those symbols so the CORE would pick them up, and even then that
wasn't very clear at all.”

“Hmm. We still don't know exactly how all of that works. We know those stars you kept seeing are
connected to the time loop, and the singularity made them, and DT Energy plays a huge part, and
that's all-”

“Sans, there's something else.” Frisk's eyes had just opened much wider. “I guess I was just too
shaken over what had happened to think about it when we were waiting on the police, and so much
happened over the weekend, but after the LOAD. When I woke up next to the star. Cater was
saying something, about me being the inside track or something like that. But he stopped and then
he freaked out because he realized what had happened. Jordan Cater has enough DT Energy to
remember older timelines, just like Asriel and I can.”

Sans stared at Frisk, his eye sockets dark and empty.

“Well. That's a pleasant thought.”

Frisk nodded. “There was something about how he reacted. Like. I dunno. Waking up somebody
who was really tired, so they're half asleep. Like it was taking him longer for the old timeline to be
recognized or remembered or something like that. But that still might have been enough, if he had
been the one to touch the star...”

The can of root beer was placed on a table and Frisk breathed in and out. “I don't want to think
about what would have happened next.”

“.me neither, kid. But... since you brought up the LOAD event... I got some more stuff to share
with you.”

Frisk blinked and their vacant expression became more animated as their eyes focused on Sans
again. “Like what?”

“You remember what I told you in the last corridor, right? I have secret passwords, in case I ever
meet a time traveler. Well... with anti-photon research being at a standstill until we figure out why
it gives you a headache... I think it's time you knew a few more of those. Just in case anything else
goes wrong.”

Sans held out a hand, and Frisk took it, and for once there was no simulated sound of flatulence,
electrical shock, or other practical joke. The hairs on the back of the child's neck stood up.

“So... okay. If push comes to shove. Worst case scenario. The first time we meet in linear time
from my perspective is right outside the door to the Ruins, just before my sentry station. And we
end up shaking hands. So...”

Sans leaned forward and whispered into Frisk's ear, so quietly that Frisk and only Frisk could
possibly hear what he said.

“got it?”

Frisk's eyebrows went up, and then the corners of their mouth, and then the child's expression had
completely collapsed into a giggling fit.

“Gonna take that as a yes. That password means a few things, but the most important one for our
purposes is it tells the Sans back then that whoever you are, whatever you are, I trust you with not
just my well being, but the well being of Papyrus, too. He's going to ask a lot of tough questions. Give him straight answers. He's probably going to end up at Grillby's for a while to get over the shock. I know I would. But once he gets over it. Maybe that will get him more motivated than I was. But what's important is that between you, me, and Asriel? We can make the next time around stick. If it comes to that.”

Frisk's expression, already neutral after the laughing stopped, took on a haunted look. “I don't want... none of you shouldn't have to start over like that. Especially not Asriel. Going back to being a Soulless flower. I can't... I can't let that happen to him.”

"Not fond of the idea myself, that's true. Neither is he. But we got to talking earlier and he thinks that it's better than the alternative, if the alternative is going to your funeral. And I'm inclined to agree; pardon my coarse language, but you scared the fuck out of me and dad in the hospital when you told the doctors you didn't think you could keep going.”

Frisk looked down at the ground. One arm came up, and scratched their elbow on their other arm.

“I didn't mean to do that... I was trying to reassure you. To let you know. Whatever happened to me. You guys would be alright.”

“Well... that's not what happened. Frisk, you... you have a special power. It's not something you wanted. It's not something you can even control completely. But it's still something you can do that nobody else can. As long as you have that... don't you think it's your responsibility to do the right thing?”

The human child's eyes closed, and they nodded.

“Yes, it is. That's what I thought I was doing....”

Sans stared at Frisk and the way they were standing; defensive, trying to take up as little space as possible, eyes closed and face averted....

“...oh. Well. Right. Can't begrudge you that, if you really thought you were doing what was right. But for future reference. Giving up isn't it. So, uh... if I were you... I'd give up on giving up. Okay?”

'So uh... if we're not giving up down here... don't you give up wherever you are, okay?'

Frisk's face scrunched up in a grimace of pain, and they lunged forward, arms going around Sans' neck in a hug. The skeleton could feel the child shaking, and the way they flinched when he hugged them back.

“Sans... I trust you.” Frisk's voice was hoarse. “You've been... watching out for me since before you even met me. You've had my back so many times. If... if you decide that something needs to be done... or something shouldn't be done... then that's good enough for me. No matter what it is. Just... just tell me what it is you need me to do. And I'll do it.”

“...well. Like I said. All of these thoughts about not sticking around with the rest of us if something goes wrong. You can get rid of those. We're all in this together. One for all and all for one and probably some other sayings that sound cooler in the original French. That's the big one.”

Sans let go, and Frisk followed his lead, reaching up to rub one eye.

“There's two other things, and they aren't nearly as big, but the first one is a bit more complicated. You mentioned seeing stars in the Underground, and Friday dad and I finally had some reference
for that. But you also said you couldn't see them anymore when you were running towards the test platform. When you have the time, I'd like you to list every place in the Underground you remember seeing them. Maybe later we can go over a map of the cavern together and get specific locations.”

“Okay.”

“And don't worry about getting it done right away. I'll be out of town tomorrow and Wednesday and we have no idea when we'll be back, since we don't know what's actually going on with this whole oversight committee thing.”

“Right... hey, uh. Do you think I should feel insulted that they didn't want me there as ambassador?”

Sans scratched his jaw. “Actually I prefer to think of it as a bunch of politicians being afraid of a ten year old kid.”

Frisk managed to smile. “I guess that's not too bad then.”

“Exactly. Anyway. When I get back. We'll take that list, and a map, and some of my old sensor readings, and get a better idea of just what happened the first time around. It'll give us some data without running equipment that gives you a headache.”

“Actually the headaches were just annoying up until the CORE got turned on. But I'm not exactly sure if that's the type of stuff that can be taken care of with aspirin anyway. So that's probably for the best.”

“Exactly. The last thing is that we already knew that DT was involved in this process, and Joe Stanton is working on rolling out a refinement to the Soul scanner process that will let us quantify DT directly instead of indirectly. It starts next Monday since he's got to get Alphys to approve all his adjustments to the scanner, since she's the one who built it, and after last week and the weekend, there's just been delay after delay after delay. But once that starts, we need you to come by and get scanned so we can actually compare your DT to every other human volunteer. We know it must be super high if you're the one stuck in the time loop but beyond that we don't know a whole heckuva lot, y'know?”

“Right. Makes sense. And it'd be nice to have a heads up in case my Soul decides to fracture again.”

“Yeah, we're still trying to figure that out-”

Sans stopped talking as the sounds of claws clicking on tile became louder and louder, and both skeleton and human child turned to see Asriel slide a little as he tried to stop running at the break room door.

“Sans, Undyne needs to talk to you. Right now.”

“What's wrong, is it Alphys-”

“It's Papyrus. She's trying to call Papyrus to come pick Alphys up and he's not answering his cell.”

Frisk's stomach lurched as the trio were suddenly surrounded in blue light and appeared outside Alphys' office. Undyne looked up from her phone without any sign of surprise.

If Undyne felt any irritation at being given orders by somebody that she was normally in the position of ordering around instead, there was no sign of it. Her phone went back in her pocket.

“I was trying to call Papyrus, to see if he could swing by the lab to pick up Alphys. But I've called three times now, and each time it's gone to voice mail. He's not replying to his texts, either. Did he say anything to you about his phone being broken or out of batteries?”

“No, and he would have because he would make it a point to tell us he would be swinging by the lab so Alphys could take a look at it, and suggest alternative means of contacting him. He loves to tell us about his plans for the day before we all leave, and he loves to explain how they went when we get back home... I know he left the house the same time dad and I did this morning. After that...” Sans pulled out his own cell and checked the message and call history. “No missed calls or anything.”

Undyne narrowed her eye.

“He hasn't sent me anything today either. Sans... you know better than anybody else. Papyrus always has something to say, and he's always ready to share it, and it's not normal to not get a text or a random phone call from him about something he's seen or heard or done. And no matter when I call him, night or day, afternoon or morning, he always, always answers his phone within the first two rings.”
“Nothing. And we've been out here for three hours now.”

Mr. Van Garrett put down the binoculars and ran an arm across his forehead to wipe away the sweat. A few feet away, Hal leaned back in the lawn chair and popped open a soda.

“That's not the point of fishing, Mike. The point of fishing is to get so drunk that your drunkard's walk and the rocking of the boat exactly cancel out.”

“Okay, first of all, there are numerous mathematical and mechanical problems with that kind of phase cancellation effect. Second, we're on dry land. And third, that's a grape soda, not a beer.”

“It's not even noon yet. Come on, give me a little credit.”

“Wah hah hah! A sport that's just an excuse to drink your cares away? Now that sounds like fun!”

Hal handed a soda to Mike as he sat down in another lawn chair, which took a few tries as he was facing the other direction to address Gerson at the time.

“Well, it's still called fishing because you're expected to catch fish, or at least try. Otherwise it would just be called boating or drinking.” Hal paused to sip his soda. “The Sports Nomenclature Summit of 1799 was very clear on that.”

The elderly turtle monster cocked his head to one side. “The what what now?”

Hal grinned and leaned forward in his chair. “On September first, in the year 1799 AD, in the city of Bristol in Great Britain, representatives from all over Europe and also some people from Russia came together to establish a consensus on terminology to describe sporting events that could be effectively translated across multiple languages. Of course the United States had just broken away from British rule so we didn't get invited. That's where the whole Football / Soccer confusion thing comes from.”

“...ya don't say.”

“It was actually sponsored by a man named Aldous McDermottshire, who was obscenely wealthy because he invented the floor.”

Gerson blinked. “Wait, what??”

“Oh, yeah. Back in the seventeen hundreds and before, humans had to suspend their furniture from the ceiling because there was no surface to put it on. Unless you count patio furniture. That's actually how McDermottshire died, he ended up bankrupting somebody who made a lot of money off of patio furniture, who hired a bunch of assassins to put an end to his existence.”

Gerson narrowed his eyes and stared at Hal. “Who was this somebody?”

“Abraham Lincoln,” Van Garret supplied, causing Gerson to look at the librarian with a similarly suspicious expression. “Turns out he needn't have bothered, because he invented stairs not long after and made his fortune back several times over because they let people navigate tall buildings.
Hal snapped his fingers and pointed at the librarian. “And that's why he's called the Great Emancipator, because his invention finally allowed humanity to escape the tyranny of gravity and conquer the third dimension of space.”

“Exactly.”

“WOWIE! WHEN LEAST DOG STOLE MY CELL PHONE EARLIER I HAD NO IDEA THAT IT WOULD RESULT IN SO MUCH INSIGHT INTO HUMAN HISTORY!” Papyrus's grin became annoyed. “OF COURSE I COULD JUST AS EASILY HAVE LOOKED UP ALL OF THOSE FACTS ON MY CELL PHONE IF I STILL HAD IT! CURSE THAT CALAMITOUS CANINE!”

Hal looked up at the fuming skeleton, then set his soda on the ground, looked at Van Garrett, and pointed a thumb towards Papyrus. Index fingers and thumbs linked together into small circles, with the other fingers sticking straight out, and Hal moved his hands closer together and moved them back and forth. The mechanic's left hand came up and his right thumb pressed into the center of his left palm, his index finger outstretched in an “L” shape, and rotated from the vertical towards the horizontal, a little at a time.

The librarian nodded, and Hal relaxed and picked up his soda again, just in time for a jingling bell to cause him to panic, put it down, and lunge for the fishing rod attached to it.

“Aw yeah, we got something!” The mechanic began cranking the reel with enthusiasm, the line growing tight and the rod bent under the strain, until slowly but surely...

A dog's head and neck extended past the bushes everyone was hiding behind, and continued to extend, until Lesser Dog's head was next to Hal's face.

“...oh. I probably should have seen this c-”

The bone at the end of the fishing line was let go as Lesser Dog's mouth opened and lunged forward to lick Hal, who leaned back in the lawn chair and fell over in the process of trying to escape the dog’s tongue. “Agh! Magic dog slobber! Do not want!”

“Hey Lesser Dog.” Van Garrett popped open the orange cream soda Hal had given him earlier. “How you doing?”

The dog barked and looked up from his attempt to lick Hal's face.

“That's good. You seen Least Dog today? The guy stole Papyrus's phone and we've been trying to catch him for hours now.”

The dog monster produced a confused whine, and Van Garrett looked at the fishing rod, then back to Lesser Dog.

“It was Hal's idea.”

Lesser Dog barked, and retracted back into the bushes. Hal shook his head, got to his feet, and picked his chair up.

“You understood that?”

Van Garrett shrugged. “I'm not fluent, but Lesser Dog comes in about once every two or three
weeks to check out a book on art or art history, so I've managed to pick up enough to get by.”

“Huh.” Hal picked up the fishing pole where it had fallen. “Hey Papyrus, are you sure this is going to get Least Dog's attention?”

“I HAVE NO REASON TO EXPECT OTHERWISE! IN THE UNDERGROUND LEAST DOG WAS ALWAYS STEALING MY SPECIAL ATTACKS!”

“Hey, about that. Justin and me have been wondering-”

“Justin and I,” the librarian corrected.

“And Mike too apparently,” Hal nodded, “we've all been wondering. During the first address you and Sans both came up with those things that looked like dinosaur skull fossils with laser beam breath, and you called them special attacks, but after the fight outside the hospital even though Sans was doing the same thing, he said Cater didn't last long enough to use his special attack.”

“AH, I SEE WHERE THE CONFUSION ORIGINATES! A SPECIAL ATTACK IS REALLY ANY COMBINATION OF INDIVIDUAL MAGIC ATTACKS WHERE THE BULLET TYPES, PATTERNS USED, AND BANDS OF THE MAGIC SPECTRUM ARE ALL SPECIFICALLY CHOSEN TO REFLECT ONE'S PERSONALITY, INTERESTS, PASSIONS AND GOALS! ANYONE CAN THROW BONES OR FIREBALLS OR LIGHTNING BOLTS, BUT WHEN YOU GO OUT OF YOUR WAY TO SPELL LETTERS WITH THEM, OR EXPRESS COMPLEX GEOMETRIC SHAPES, THEN IT REALLY LETS YOUR OPPONENT KNOW YOU CARE! THAT IS BECAUSE GETTING A SPECIAL ATTACK JUST RIGHT TAKES LOTS AND LOTS OF PRACTICE, IN MANY WAYS RESEMBLING THE HUMAN SOCIAL PRACTICE OF WRITING A LOVE SONG OR POEM, OR THE CREATION OF HOMEMADE ARTS AND CRAFTS!”

“Only you can't kill somebody with a love song, Papyrus.” Hal pointed out. “I mean, unless you hit somebody with a tuba or something.”

The librarian blinked. “Wait, what kind of love song involves a tuba?”

“Love will find a way!”

Van Garrett considered this for a few moments, then nodded. “Can't argue with that. So... if I'm following this correctly... your special attacks aren't any specific bone attacks, or those skull things, but all of them put together. And when Least Dog steals your special attacks, he's getting in the way and stealing bones so the pattern is screwed up. Like a dog jumping on a keyboard would hit notes that changed what song was being played.”

“THAT IS A MOST ASTUTE ANALOGY! AND IT IS NOT UNHEARD OF FOR MONSTERS TO HAVE MORE THAN ONE SPECIAL ATTACK, BUT IT TAKES A GREAT DEAL OF TIME AND ENERGY SO THE ONE THAT INVOLVES THE MOST EFFORT TENDS TO BE MORE SPECIAL, IF THAT MAKES SENSE.” Papyrus held up a gloved finger. “I SUPPOSE IT WOULD ALSO MAKE SENSE TO CLARIFY THAT WHAT HAPPENED TO MISTER CATER DURING THE FIRST ADDRESS WAS, FOR LACK OF MORE PRECISE TERMINOLOGY, AN ABRIDGED VERSION OF OUR SPECIAL ATTACKS BECAUSE SANS AND I BROUGHT OUT THE BLASTERS RIGHT AWAY! I APOLOGIZE FOR ANY CONFUSION THAT MY SEMANTIC IMPRECISION MAY HAVE CAUSED.”

“It's all good, man. Glad we cleared that up.” Van Garrett sipped his soda, while Hal held up the fishing rod and took a few practice swings.
“Okay then, but just what are those dinosaur skull things, anyway? Sorry, that’s been bothering me on and off for a while now.”

“AH, YES! I FORGOT TO EXPLAIN! THOSE ARE ASTER BLASTERS, COMMONLY AND MISTAKENLY CALLED GASTER BLASTERS AFTER THAT TYPO THAT HAS CAUSED MY FATHER NO END OF CONSTERNATION AFTER HIS APPOINTMENT TO THE POSITION OF ROYAL SCIENTIST. THEY ARE A SPECIES OF MONSTER ANIMAL WHICH SURVIVED THE WAR, A SMALL PACK OF THEM WAS FOUND WITHIN THE CAVERN WHEN MONSTERS WERE FIRST IMPRISONED IN THE UNDERGROUND. THE ASTERS HAVE BEEN BREEDING AND TRAINING THEM SINCE THE DAYS WHEN OUR FAMILY RANKED AMONG THE NOBLE FAMILIES OF BOSS MONSTERS, LONG AGO!”

“Wa ha ha! Boy howdy, that takes me back! I remember when it was Cambria Math Aster, running around only knee high, cute as a button and riding around on a Blaster having a grand old time!”

“YES, THAT IS A COMMON PASTIME WHEN GETTING USED TO THE BLASTERS, AND LETTING THEM GET USED TO US! WHILE BEING TALL HAS ITS MANY ADVANTAGES, I DO OFTEN MISS BEING ABLE TO RIDE AROUND LIKE THAT! SUCH MEMORIES!”

Van Garrett raised an eyebrow. “Uh, just how smart are these blasters?”

“They are quite clever actually, and each has their own unique personality, and they are very affectionate! But they just aren’t up to advanced puzzle solving or design, and don’t think that I did not make the attempt in my youth!”

Hal froze and turned to look at Papyrus.

“...you said they're affectionate?”

“indeed! in fact i would go so far as to say they are quite cuddly! or perhaps that’s just those ones that i take care of, but they are all related and when summoned out of their pocket dimensions they very much like to play and roughhouse!”

“...okay then. This is rapidly turning into one of those situations where every question that comes out of my mouth leads to more questions, so I'll quit while I'm behind rather than tempt fate asking how pocket dimensions work.”

Hal pulled back the fishing pole, then cast it out, the reel buzzing as they line played out, until the bone landed out in the middle of the park. Hal had just enough time to sit down in his chair when there was an ethereal howling, and the sound of many feet running towards the bushes.

“Hey Hal... you remember what you said about not tempting fate-”

Before the librarian could finish, a large white shape burst in through the bushes, flowing over, through, and around them. A gaping hole dripped a black ichor with a mother of pearl iridescence on its surface, then leaned down to the ground.

When it pulled back, a slime covered cell phone was lying on the ground.

“My cell phone! Thank you Endogeny! You are a multitude of good dogs!” Papyrus reached down to grab his cell phone, then reached up to pet the amalgamate between its ear-like protuberances, and the creature danced upon its many legs in excitement.
before falling over with them splayed up in the air.

“Well, it didn't exactly go according to plan, but mission accomplished.” Hal reached down to rub Endogeny's belly, only hesitating slightly as his hand sunk into the goop. “Man, I ain't ever gonna get used to this part. No offense. You're good dogs—”

Papyrus's phone began to play a jaunty tune as he cleaned the ichor off of it, and he unlocked it and held it up to his head. “EUGH, IT'S STILL SLIMY. HELLO! YOU ARE SPEAKING TO THE GREAT PAPYRUS!”

“Where have you been?! I've been trying to get in touch with you for twenty minutes! We thought something terrible had happened to... wait, wait, what's still slimy??”

The librarian snorted as he folded up the lawn chairs. “Tell Undyne we said hi.”

“Same here! I remember when Undyne was a little ankle biter, instead of a fully grown one! Wah hah hah!”

“HELLO UNDYNE! GERSON AND MISTER GREEN AND MISTER VAN GARRETT ALL SEND THEIR REGARDS! AS FOR WHAT IS SLIMY, I WAS REFERRING TO MY CELL PHONE. THAT MEDDLING LEAST DOG STOLE IT FROM ME THIS MORNING AND WE'VE BEEN TRYING TO GET IT BACK EVER SINCE! FORTUNATELY ENDGENY BROUGHT IT BY, THOUGH NOT WITHOUT... SIDE EFFECTS.”

“...so you are okay? You're fine, you're not hurt, nobody's attacked you?”

“WELL, THERE WAS A MISHAP WHEN WE WERE FIRST SETTING UP THE FISHING ROD WHERE HAL ACCIDENTALLY GOT HIS FOOT STUCK IN MY RIB CAGE, BUT THAT WAS LESS OF AN ATTACK AND MORE OF A HUMAN STARTLED BY A WASP.”

“Hey, I told you! Wasp stings suck, even when you're not allergic! Just because they won't kill me doesn't mean I don't have a reason to freak out!”

On the other end of the phone, Undyne let her breath out and said something away from the receiver. “...okay. I tried to explain that to everybody. Emphasis on tried. I... hey. Papyrus. I'm just glad you're okay.”

“I TOO AM GLAD THAT YOU ARE ALRIGHT! IF THAT IS INDEED THE CASE, WHICH I HOPE IT IS, OTHERWISE I WOULD BE GLAD FOR NO REASON, AND THAT WOULD MAKE ME FEEL BAD, SO IT'S A SELF-CORRECTING PROBLEM BUT IT'S A LOT OF EFFORT TO GO THROUGH JUST FOR A CHANGE IN MOOD.”

“...right. Took me a minute to sing along with the words there. Hey, can I ask a favor?”

“You ABSOLUTELY, DAPSOLUTELY CAN!”

“Alphys has been pushing herself really hard lately and she needs to get some rest. Can you come by and pick her up from All Fine Labs, take her back to our house so she can get some real sleep?”

“I SHALL ARRIVE WITH ALL POSSIBLE HASTE! THOUGH IT WILL STILL TAKE SOME TIME, AS MY CAR IS BACK HOME AND I AM NOT.”

“That's just fine. I can stick around until the end of the school's lunch hour at least.”

“OH, SPEAKING OF LUNCH, WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO PICK YOU UP SOMETHING ON
THE WAY?"

“I'm fine, you're already doing me a solid. But thank you for the offer. See you when I see you.”

“NOT IF I SEE YOU FIRST! NYEH HEH HEH!”

Papyrus hung up and turned to the assorted monsters and humans. “WELL! THIS DAY HAS TAKEN MULTIPLE TURNS FOR THE UNEXPECTED, BUT THANK YOU ALL FOR ASSISTING ME IN RECOVERING MY CELL PHONE! THAT IS A CONSTANT! NOW I MUST GO, SOMEBODY REQUIRES MY ASSISTANCE!”

Papyrus ran towards the bushes, glowing blue, then ran over and above them, before settling back down on the ground in a lazy arc even while is legs spun furiously in midair. Endogeny made a muffled sound that resembled many dogs all whining at once, got up on its legs, and took off after the skeleton. Hal shook his head.

“This week has definitely started out with the crazy foot forward... welp. It's almost time to break for lunch. You want to hit some place? Pizzageddon, Stop-And-Go?”

“I need to get back to take over for Mindy at the Librarby, I told her I'd just be gone for a few hours, and it's been at least that long. So if we do go somewhere, it's got to be a place with stuff to go. How about Das Boot?”

“It's a bit far to reach on foot. Wanton Wonton?”

“Had Chinese Saturday and Sunday night. If I do it three times in a row that means I end up going to jail.”

Hal scratched his chin. “I'm pretty sure that's only in Monopoly, but I'm not totally sure, so better safe than sorry. What about the Iron Waffle?”

“...yeah, that sounds good.” The librarian turned to the elderly turtle monster. “Hey, Gerson, you want to grab some grub at the Iron Waffle? We're buying.”

“Sure thing! I learned a long time ago, never miss a chance to sleep, eat, or look through random containers for free healing items!”

Van Garrett hoisted both lawn chairs on one shoulder and Hal's drink cooler on the other. “I think it was Napoleon Bonaparte who said an army marches on its stomach, and has sticky fingers.”

“Ain't that the truth! Still, keep it in mind. I can't tell ya how many times I found medicine inside people's clocks back in the day! I don't even know why everyone was putting it there!”

Hal reeled in the fishing line, the bone attack already having vanished into the ether after Papyrus departed, and shook his head. “You know... I just realized. We never got the chance to explain to Papyrus that an integral part of fishing was making up increasingly ridiculous fibs.”

“Don't worry. I'm sure it will come back to haunt us at the worst possib-”

The librarian stopped talking suddenly, as he and Hal and Gerson all became aware of a strange sound in the distance, getting louder, and closer, and louder, and louder, and closer, until....

A massive herd of woolly quadrupeds was stampeding down the road past the park, filling the air with bleats and screeches and other livestock sounds. Some distance behind them, a small white figure could be seen running, with a top hat and a monocle upon its head and barking excitedly.
After Least Dog had disappeared like the alpacas he had been chasing, Hal sighed.

“This is going to be one of those days, isn't it.”

“Probably.” Van Garrett put down the lawn chairs and pulled out his own phone. “...no calls, no news alerts, and the only messages in the group chat are Eli and Steve talking about The Walking Dead. So that probably wasn't another distraction to spring Cater.”

“Good. For him. Azzy doesn't want to have to do the whole Captain Planet thing again anyway.”

“Good for us too. We'd make the worst Planeteers. Like, an entire team of Wheelers.”

“You know I went back and watched some old episodes of that. Wheeler was right about a lot of stuff, he was just ignored and written off because he was impulsive and hot headed.”

Van Garret snorted. “They gave him the Fire Ring, what the fuck were they expecting?”

“What are you fellows talking about again?”

Hal turned to Gerson. “Oh. There was a cartoon way back when called Captain Planet and the Planeteers. Standard heavy handed 1980s moralizing. Five kids got rings corresponding to the classical elements of earth, fire, wind, and water, and then there was something called heart that was mostly used to control animal life. The kids were basically a vigilante version of the Environmental Protection Agency.”

“They're what PETA wants to think they are,” Van Garrett added.

“Ahhh.” Gerson nodded. “Now I getcha. Hey, you think those guys will ever come back to town for another protest?”

“They are not known for pattern recognition. Or critical thinking. Or common sense.” The mechanic shrugged. “So, hey, I wouldn't rule it out.”

“Good! Gotta say, that whole human 'pie fight' custom is really growing on me! Wah hah hah!”

Chapter End Notes

This just in: Local Skeleton Is Fucking Invincible.

Also April Fool's. Yes. This was all planned in advance. I did not forget at all. And I was not saved by a convenient coincidence in the story pacing that I had already worked out weeks in advance.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it.
“Eyyyyy, you're listening to Lazy Lindsey and the Coffee Grinders on KEBT FM. I'm Lindsey and with me are Beanpole Levine and Clutch McGee, how you guys doing today.”

“I'm fortified with one hundred percent of the recommended daily allowance of Vitamin Hyped. How bout you Clutch?”

“...I'm fine. Thanks.”

“Well, at least you cancel each other out. So. Yeah. Radio. That means I have to read a thing. Breaking news, the Drama Llama Alpaca-Rama has had yet another mass breakout. Apparently a semi jackknifed on Muscovy Road and somebody behind it couldn't stop in time so they took an alternative route, right into the fences. No injuries have been reported. Alpacas once again roam the streets of our fair city looking for... stuff to do, I guess. In unrelated news, the... well, I think it's unrelated... the Lost Eagle County False Mustache Enthusiast Society has announced that they are relocating their meeting place from Gemini Roads to Lone Point, citing the deterioration of their older building and a shift in the demographics of their membership over the past eight years.”

“Must be all that sea air.”

“The sea is made of salt water Clutch. Even I know that. Moving on to our next story... oh. Uh. Okay. It turns out that Quentin Forsythe has actually been listed as officially missing. Apparently the last time anybody heard from him was when he was calling in to the Morning Rush last week. Anybody who has any information regarding Quentin's whereabouts is asked to please call the Ebott's Wake Police Department or the Lost Eagle County Sheriff's Department.”

“That's actually, kinda... hey, don't think he might have been right about something for once, do you? And somebody tried to keep him quiet?”

“That's not funny, Clutch.”

“I know it isn't. Now this is going to bother me for the rest of the week-”

The voices from the radio cut out as Asriel switched the appliance off, and the young monster returned to his spot on the floor. From Sans' chair, Frisk looked concerned.

“Hey. Are you... uhm...”

“My head's really crowded. I just need to think for a bit... I, uh...” Asriel sighed and crossed his arms, his shoulders hunching instinctively. “Just because we know Papyrus is okay doesn't mean that the train of thought that started when we were worried has stopped yet.”

“...right.”

Sans' office was silent for a minute, and then Asriel looked up at Frisk.

“If the New Guardians or whoever had attacked Papyrus... no matter what they did... there's a timeline somewhere when I did the same thing or worse. And...”

“...and?”

Asriel shook his head. “Never mind. I don't know if I can put it into words... ugh. Nothing makes
sense. I do everything I did, I get a second chance... Chara doesn't... and the Guardians did bad things and they're the enemy but those things were still less bad than I did so why am I not the enemy?"

"...well. We have that question in common at least. If what you say about everyone being understanding is true."

The young boss monster nodded.

"So much for asking Alphys some carefully worded questions. I can already tell there won't be time tomorrow, with Dr. Aster and Sans away and some of the security guys too. Sans acts lazy but... I learned a long time ago that he does a lot of stuff behind the scenes when he wants to. When he's not around... things fall apart."

"Yeah. And he just plays up the laziness act to keep people from adding to his workload."

Asriel nodded, and the office was quiet again. Frisk looked over at the clock; almost halfway through the lunch hour.

"...so. Hey. It's Monday today."

"Right."

"That means Monday night tonight."

Asriel looked up at Frisk, one eyebrow raised.

"...yeah, that would make sense. Why?"

"Monday night is New Recipe Night. I think we skipped it last week on account of me being down one arm and medicated to distraction, but tonight... what sounds good to you?"

"You mean human food??"

"Human recipes, but with mom doing the cooking. It, uh." Frisk stopped talking suddenly, staring at something Asriel couldn't see, then snapped out of it. "Sorry. Uhm. It just kind of happened. It... it seemed like one of the easiest ways to acclimate everybody to the Surface was with food. Sort of like the easiest way for humans to see the upside of monsters coming back was to try monster food."

"But human food doesn't heal... wait, I'm oversimplifying. You meant that monsters could try out new recipes and ingredients we didn't have down in the underground."

Frisk nodded.

"Got it. So... anything you want to try?"

Asriel blinked and scratched his ear.

"I don't know really... when... well, mom's always loved snails, but beyond that, she would always go after whatever happened to be available. What's new, what's fresh, what's on sale at the market, without making any plan ahead of time. Then when she got home, she would find a way to make what she found, and whatever we already had in the kitchen, into a complete meal. Like... hmmm. I don't know if there's an equivalent metaphor that doesn't involve combat, but it's sort of like how Papyrus and Undyne mix things up when they spar, so they're not just relying on reflexes and
knowing patterns. The way mom cooked back then, it was like that. Not relying entirely on recipes, 
but making sure that she knew all about how to prepare certain ingredients forwards and 
backwards, and what combinations worked and what didn't. I think butterscotch cinnamon pie 
came from one of those random cooking things.”

“Oh. I think I get it.”

“The upshot is that anything mom makes, with the possible exception of eggplant, is going to be 
delicious. So... nah, I don't really have any requests.”

“We made eggplant Parmesan once. I thought it was good.”

Asriel made a face. “Well, I guess we'll have to agree to disagree then. I can't stand eggplant.”

“Why not? Is it the flavor? The texture?”

“It's the yolks, they're always so slimy, no matter how they're prepared.”

The office was silent for a few seconds.

“Ah-ha. You know what, I have a surface plant you should try. I'm going to text mom right now 
actually-”

There was a knock on Sans' office door, and Frisk looked up from their phone.

“Who's there?”

“Donut.”

“Donut who?”

“Donut mess with me right now kid, it's been a heckuva day.” The door opened and Sans walked 
in, turning to see Asriel leaning against the wall. “You guys doing alright?”

Asriel shrugged. “Better than we were. Is Papyrus here yet?”

“Just pulled up. Undyne's getting ready to move Alphys to his car-”

Sans found himself talking to an empty office as two children ran past him, then chuckled.

“heh... isn't my brother cool?”

In a flash of light, Sans appeared outside of Alphys' office, where a tall fish was already carrying a 
struggling scientist through the doorway.

“Undyyyyyne, cut it out. I can walk. You're embarrassing me.”

“Too late, I've already started walking! If I put you down now that's a foul and we'll be disqualified 
from the championships.”

“...that doesn't make any sense.”

Undyne laughed and Alphys turned her head to see Sans, and the blush already present started to 
spread over her whole face.

“Oh my god this just keeps getting worse and worse. Ugh. Sans. When Justin comes by the Party
Favor is in my office. I left some notes but you might have to translate for him-”

“Actually whatever you have to say you could probably say now,” Undyne interrupted.

“What?” Alphys turned her head and saw Justin Carrow signing in at the front desk. “Augh! Why?! Please let me still be asleep in my office, let this all be some terrible nightmare...”

“Hey Doc, I...” Justin turned towards the sound of Alphys' voice. “...oh. Right. Well, okay then.”

Alphys groaned. “Justin, the Party Favor is in my office. Sans will help explain it. I wish I could explain what was going on right now though but-”

“Don't worry about it. I've seen this movie. I mean, it was a long time ago and I don't remember much but I remember *this* part. Sans?”

“eyyyy Justin. be right with ya, gotta check on my brother.”

“I just saw him as I came in. He seems to have children attached to him for some reason.”

“that's about what I figured.”

Outside of All Fine Labs, Sans saw that Papyrus was, in fact, looking down at two children who had wrapped themselves around his legs within moments of seeing him, one of them fluffy and fuzzy and the other somewhat less so.

“I AM CONFUSED, IS THIS SOME NEW FORM OF FRIENDSHIP BASED CALISTHENIC EXERCISE ROUTINE?”

“Sorta... earlier our heart rates were really up there... so it was more like cardio I guess.” Frisk sniffed.

Asriel, wrapped around the other leg, nodded his head.

“WELL THEN, I AM MOST PLEASED THAT I COULD CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR HEALTHY LIFESTYLES! HOWEVER THOSE LOCATIONS ARE NOT THE MOST IDEAL FOR YOU TO BE PRESENT IF I AM TO SAFELY OPERATE MY CAR, OR FOR THAT MATTER ANY MOTOR VEHICLE.”

Slowly, both children let go of the tall skeleton, while Undyne carried Alphys over to the car and placed her in the passenger side seat.

“Thanks, Papyrus! This means a lot to me!”

“ I AM HAPPY TO BE OF ASSISTANCE!”

Undyne lunged forward and hugged Papyrus, and in a matter of seconds managed to get the skeleton into a choke hold and ran her knuckles over the top of his skull, grinning constantly. Papyrus, on the other hand, was not grinning, which was quite a feat.

“MY SKULL IS FILLED WITH REGRET AND ALSO AN ECHOING NOISE OF SOME SORT!”

Undyne cackled and let go and Papyrus got behind the wheel of his car, and pulled out into the street after waiting about fifteen seconds for a small group of alpacas to pass.

“HOW INCONSIDERATE! SIGNAL BEFORE TURNING YOU WOOLLY HOOLIGANS!!”
“So, sounds like it's a good time to get you guys back to school. You ready?”

Undyne nodded and held up a thumb, while Frisk turned to look at Asriel; the young boss monster's paws were shaking.

“Um... bro, do you...?”

“I'll be... I'll manage. It's okay. Go... go get lunch and learn stuff in class, and things....”

“...I can do one of those things. Don't really have much of an appetite, after...”

“Yeah.”

Frisk's arms wrapped around the young monster, who returned the favor, and both of them let go after a few seconds.

“We'll talk tonight, okay? Out in the back yard. Like we always did before. Does that sound okay?”

“Yeah...” Asriel nodded and tried to smile. “Sounds really great. Looking forward to it.”

“...alright Sans. Looks like I'm ready.”

“...okay then. Hold on tight.”

The trio disappeared in a flash of blue light, and Asriel slowly walked back inside, holding up the ID badge Alphys had given him to make it easier to get in and out for scans. The receptionist nodded, and Asriel made his way back towards Alphys' office. By the time he had arrived, Sans was already there and holding out what looked like a very sophisticated wristwatch for Justin to take.

“Huh. You know, normally when people get given a watch like that, it's after several decades of working at the same place.”

“Yeah, believe me buddy, no human ever got a watch like this before. No monster either, come to think of it. No reason to. It's all embedded microcircuitry, all the way down to the power supply. Shouldn't have any problem taking it through airport security.”

“What if some TSA agent gets sticky fingers?”

Sans pointed at the watch band. “Based on the scans Alphys has of you, from when you first came in and,” Sans' eye lights turned towards Asriel for a split second, “later, Alphys was able to come up with a filter for the watch's signal amplifier. Based on what we learned from Joe and the Pattern goggles, only humans with yellow chromatic souls should even be able to activate it. But on the off chance that somebody does steal it and try to wear it, Alphys put a tiny dimensional bridge in there so we can get it back later. Not big enough for an arsenal on demand, but enough for a signal. If something happens to you, at least as long as you're wearing that watch, we can find you that way. Seemed like a good idea given we have no idea what this whole thing is about or for.”

“Wait, back up a bit. An arsenal on demand?”

“Yeah. Dimensional Storage. We keep boxes here with built in dimension bridges, and people can move stuff in and out as they please.”

“...I might be missing something regarding either your security, or how dimensional bridges work,
but that seems like one hell of an Achilles heel.”

“oh. naw, don't worry 'bout it. Dimensional Storage is high security outside and inside for that exact reason.”

“Well... alright then. You know more about how this works than I do. Speaking of how things work... what the heck does the watch actually do?”

Sans pointed a gloved index finger at one of the buttons on the outside of the watch. “This will only work while you're wearing it, for safety reasons, but it manipulates Energy magic. Alphys called it a Condensintrator, but she was sleep deprived when she did, so... anyway. Press and hold this button for three seconds and it should activate. It's going to dump a lot of Energy into your system, and that's going to sting probably. But the upshot is that for about ten seconds, subjective timing, you'll be much, much faster than anyone around you.”

“How fast are we talking here. Three minute mile fast, dodging bullets fast, ZA WARUDO fast?”

“Probably somewhere in between three minute mile and bullet time. You've got a lot of physical matter compared to Alphys or me, and that's got to be taken into account. There's only enough charge in there for it to be used twice and... hmmm... looks like the only way to replace the battery is to take it apart. Welp... it's still pretty fine engineering for a rush job. And one made while sleep deprived, to boot.”

“Yeah. How's that old saying go? Fast, Cheap, or Good, pick any two? There's always trade-offs. Speaking of cost, what do I owe Alphys for this?”

Sans shook his head. “It don't work like that. You're an employee of All Fine Labs now and that's one of the perks. Having said that, try not to break the thing on its maiden voyage, we may need it for later projects.”

“Right.” Justin handed the watch back. “If it can't be recharged without dismantling it then there's no way to test it or see what it does, so... I'm thinking Hail Mary pass.”

“same here, but better to have it and not need it than the other way around.” Sans took the watch and placed it in a case on Alphys’ desk, and the duo walked out of the office. Sans nodded at Asriel. “Hey, how you holding up?”

“I'll. I'll manage. What about you?”

Sans blinked, then shrugged. “Well, I had a moment of existential dread there and then I got over it.”

“...right.”

Justin looked back and forth at the two monsters.

“Feels like there's a part of this conversation I'm missing out on.”

“earlier today Least Dog decided to pester Papyrus by stealing his cell phone, and when we tried to contact him, and he didn't pick up right away, we all got worried.”

“...aha. The Fog of War. Hate when that happens.”

“pretty much. Papyrus is fine, so false alarm, but that still wasn't a good time for anybody.”
Asriel nodded. “Yeah. It kinda sucked.”

The trio walked away from the office, back towards the central lobby.

“probably don't need to bother you about details but it doesn't hurt to double check. You all set for tomorrow?”

“Schedule cleared, contacts notified, and bag packed and waiting by the door. How about you guys?”

“Dadster is compiling the last of the paperwork we think we'll need. Since nobody's bothered to tell us anything about what these politicians actually want, he's decided to treat it like he's going to be teaching a remedial magic theory class.”

Justin's mouth twitched into a smile for a few seconds, and he scratched his forehead with one hand. “This is going to turn into that scene at the beginning of Iron Man 2, isn't it.”

“Turn into what?”

Justin turned to Asriel. “There's a scene at the start of the second Iron Man film where the United States Government wants Tony Stark to turn over his super advanced power armor battlesuit to them, and he undermines all of their claims and arguments while making fun of them. Also it turns out the Senator giving him the most trouble was...” Justin trailed off. “Never mind. Don't want to spoil it for you.”

Asriel stared at Justin. “…okay then.”

“Hey, Sans!”

Asriel and Justin both turned to see Joe Stanton running up to the group and skidding to a halt at the end.

“Hey, can you wake up Alphys? I got something she needs to see, it's going to make her really happy.”

“sorry Joe, Alphys is on her way home to get some much needed sleep.”

Joe blinked.

“Wait what.”

“yeah, you missed her by a few minutes.”

“...oh. Do you think I should text her anyway?”

Sans shrugged. “you can try but she won't see it until she wakes up. Papyrus is driving her.”

“...huh. Well. Can't be helped then. In that case, you should check it out in her place. Follow me to the place where I am going!”

Joe ran off, and Justin started to laugh under his breath. Asriel looked up in confusion and Justin grinned.

“Joe and Mike both have this thing where if they get really excited they try to tamp down on it by being much more precise in their choice of words. But because they're already excited they don't think their choices all the way through. Tend to repeat themselves.”
“oh, so that's what that's about.” Sans shrugged. “was wondering that for a while now.”

Following Joe lead the small group back to the Soul Scanner room, and the scientist was standing at the computer that managed the scanner's software.

“Alphys gave me the green light for the scanner resolution improvement idea last week, but what with literally everything, there wasn't enough actual downtime to install it, just maintenance. First there was that thing with the biometric readouts, then Asriel comes back and needs check ups, and it's just been hurry up and wait ever since. The Doc said I could start working on it after the scan today... trade off is that while I've been in here, I have no idea what the hell else is going on.”

Joe looked up suddenly. “Hey, speaking of which. I got a text from Hal earlier that was talking about dog treats. Snausages or whatever they're called.”

“Same here.” Justin pulled out his phone. “Well, sort of. He texted me 'dogs dont know its not bacon' over and over and over again.”

Asriel cleared his throat. “According to Undyne, Hal, Mr. Van Garret, and Gerson were trying to help Papyrus get his phone back from Least Dog. So maybe that was part of the plan, or just him trying to explain what he was doing.”

“I can believe that.” Justin put his phone away, and Joe shook his head.

“Well. All other things being equal... now that I finally have the time, I made good use of it. My own stats look okay and it'll take another week and a larger sample size to be sure, but I think we found a way to quantify that DT Energy thing. But I wanted to show Alphys what I discovered in the process.”

Joe walked over from the computer to the scanner target box. “Sans, take a gander at the screen, and once the numbers compile again, click on the button that says alphabuild underscore zero one two.”

“okay.” Sans walked over to the computer, started typing, grabbed the mouse, clicked... and then stepped back from the screen, his eye sockets black and empty.

“Whoa. What the hell was that?”

Asriel blinked and walked over to the computer, and saw a screen filled with what looked like a bright purple light in the center, with... vines or tendrils reaching out from it, through the rest of the body.

“I know it looks like models of the human nervous system, but the shape and positioning seems off. I don't think that's what it is, and not just because the brightest light is in my torso and not my head. The results tentatively match what Dr. Alphys said was a pet theory of hers involving how the human Soul and body interacted with each other. That's why I wanted her to see it right away.”

Justin leaned over and looked at the screen. “Huh. You tested this on anybody else yet?”

“No, just me.”

“Then you need comparisons, right? Let me take a spin on that thing again.”

“I was hoping you'd volunteer.” Joe walked up to the computer and Justin took his place in the target zone, and the scanner started over again. After a few moments, Joe blinked, started typing, and and held up his hand to snap his fingers.
“Hey, come check it out.”

By the time Justin had rejoined everyone by the computer, the screen was playing a looping video recording of what Joe had seen; a bright yellow light, with what looked like jagged yellow arcs branching off from it intermittently.

“Huh. It looks like one of those electrical toy things with miniature lightning that makes your hair stand up on end. Plasma globe or something.”

“We'll need a longer recording cycle and a more stable recording but I think that those electrical arc things are just flashing over the same pathways at different times. It's definitely different than with me... hmmm. On the plus side, if this holds true for everybody? Then Phase Two is finally officially ready to start. On the downside, I don't know if we can afford any more T-Shirts or snacks this time.”

“heh. there's always a trade-off,” Sans joked, his eye lights back now that the shock had worn off.

“We'll also need to test this with monsters to see how much of this is just ordinary Soul behavior at this level of resolution, but as excited as I am to see that we can't rush off and scan everything and everyone willy-nilly or we'll never get the data organized.” Joe closed out of the scanner software and started opening database and spreadsheet files. Justin waved a hand.

“Joe, before you get started on that—”

“We'll have to come up with a means of qualifying and quantifying DT Energy using metrics that can be standardized across the entire sample population but we won't be able to even start on that until we've scanned the sample population stupid chicken and egg bullshit...”

Justin waved his hand in front of Joe's face, then shook his head.

“Aaaaaand looks like we lost him.”

Sans shrugged. “can't be helped.”

“Yeah. He'll snap out of it eventually, but before then it'll take a fire or an earthquake to—” Justin was interrupted by a chime from his cell phone, and he pulled it out to stare at the screen. “...another text from Hal.”

Asriel stood up on his toes to get a better look at the screen. “What's he saying?”

“It just says 'Durian breakfast of champions' and now you know as much as I do.”
Modest was the best descriptor to apply to the place, decrepit the worst. A trailer with several flat wheels, resting on jack stands and missing skirting around the bottom of the vehicle-slash-structure, with an elevated wooden deck built up to the level of the door on that side and an enclosure of chicken wire on the opposite side surrounding untidy rows of green garden crops. A large crude box apparently built from plywood and scrapped wooden pallets rounded out the picture; all that was missing from the iconic stereotype was the three legged dog and random bits of debris half hidden in the tall grass like land mines.

Yet the ground appeared to be free of litter, even if it wasn't evenly trimmed. It was hard to tell if that was simply a matter of inconsistent housekeeping, or... something else.

Thomas suspected it was something else, possibly involving carefully hidden traps that would maim or even kill trespassers. Which was only one of many reasons he had put this trip off until he had literally exhausted every other option available to him. Still, he made the trip because all other options had been used up, so he sighed and left the bicycle on its kickstand while he slowly walked away from the road and the mailbox to the trailer and... well, it was probably meant to be a shed.

He was less than a dozen feet away from it when the shed door opened and a man stepped out. Thomas stopped in his tracks, his tongue and brain both drawing blanks while the man stared at him.

"...uh. Hello Mr. Taylor. Sorry to show up unannounced and uninvited, but I was hoping I could talk to you for a moment."

The man crossed his arms and his eyebrows came up, while the rest of his face appeared impassive.

"I know who you are, Mr. O'Dell. And I'm almost certain I know why you're here. But for the sake of politeness, I'll wait until I hear it from you."

"Oh. Well... I appreciate that." Thomas cleared his throat. "Mr. Taylor. You probably figured out by now that I represent a group interested in the well being of humanity. We've had considerable setbacks recently, but we are not without recourse, and we all still have a responsibility to this world and the people in it. So that is why I've come to you today. I know that you are a very dangerous man, when you are inclined to be. I was hoping you would agree to be dangerous on our behalf."

Thomas stopped talking to gauge the man's posture and expression, and to give him the opportunity to respond; there was always the possibility of an immediate "yes" or "no" answer, right away. There were also other, intermediate responses ranging from specific questions about what the group's plans were, to simpler inquiries on what was in it for the recruit to join. Thomas wasn't sure if he did or did not want Mr. Taylor to reply with a mercenary question; not only were the financial resources of the Guardians increasingly limited, the fact that the man was for hire implied the possibility of the other side hiring him.

"Well, today's your lucky day then."

"So you'll join us?"

Mr. Taylor laughed. It wasn't a very nice laugh.
“Hehehe... no, no, no.” Taylor cleared his throat once he got the laughter under control. “What I mean is, you're lucky you caught me when I'm sober. The last time anybody tried to come onto my property and get me to join their little club, I was piss drunk and started counting down from ten with a twelve gauge in my hands. Good thing he ran off right away, because I was going to start shooting after six. Just rock salt, but that'll still fuck a man up from close enough.” Taylor stopped smiling and scratched the beard stubble that adorned much of his face. “Actually thinking about it, I might have overreacted because he was a Jehovah's Witness. I've had bad experiences with religion in the past, so I don't see eye to eye on stuff like that.”

Thomas blinked, mind racing as he tried to break down the response and analyze all the information in it.

“...you were drunk? I thought you didn't drink. That you were very anti-alcohol, in fact.”

Taylor shrugged.

“Used to be. Things change, and so do people, either because of them or in spite of them. If your notes and files can't keep up with the world around you, that's your problem.”

Notes and files, Taylor had said. It was impossible to know if that was a wild guess, an educated guess, or not a guess at all; all three possibilities made Thomas nervous.

“If I may ask, is there a specific reason why you aren't willing to hear me out?”

“I am hearing you out. I just haven't heard you say anything that would convince me it's worth joining your organization.”

“...well, I did mention earlier how we were interested in the survival of humanity. Was that too general, too vague? I could go into specifics if you want.”

“Don't bother. I've heard those types of sales pitches before. Not the same exact words in the same exact order every time. But I've been there and done that. Looking for Truth in all the wrong places. All I ever found was delusion and ego and small men with small minds and smaller pricks trying to pretend to be something more. None of them liked it when I made them see that. None of them could stop me when I left, either. And if any of them are left and know I'm alive, then they know enough to not come after me, in case I finish the job. You and your New Guardians or Old Guardians or The Sacred Order of the Circle Jerk or whatever the fuck you guys call yourselves now? You're no different.”

Thomas frowned a little, before he could stop himself.

“First and foremost, it's still just the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi. The New Guardians name was made up by somebody and it just happened to spread. Second... we're not some cult counting the days until some ambiguous prophecy is fulfilled and screwing around with barley gruel and meditation until then. Monsters, magic, the Barrier, and Mt. Ebott. What would be articles of faith in a religious organization are all objective facts in our case.”

Mr. Taylor nodded.

“A fair point.”

“For thousands of years,” Thomas continued, “information about the monsters was passed down, and now everything that we were warned about is suddenly beginning to manifest. Monsters and magic are spreading with the destruction of the Barrier, with dire consequences for the human race. The records of the war say that defeating the monsters was only possible after a long and bloody
battle. There was no way to accurately count the number of people who died, before the Barrier was created. We have to act very soon to prevent history from repeating itself, because humans no longer have the ability to use magic. We can't create another Barrier, so we have to stop the monsters now. Before even more people die. Next time there might not even be any humans left.”

“Hah. People die every day. War, starvation, exposure, car crashes, food poisoning, suicide, homicide, genocide, bee stings, drug interactions, and videotaping stupid stunts to put on the internet. And despite all that humanity’s still going strong. If we ever do kill ourselves off for good somehow, the world can get along without us. It did for a long time.”

Thomas stared at Mr. Taylor. “...I wasn't so naive as to expect you to want to sign up sight unseen, even if that would have made my life easier. But I did think you would be marginally more receptive to what I had to say. I was under the impression that a Taylor had made tentative contact with the Guardians before the raid on the compound. Was that not you?”

“That was my wife. Well, ex-wife, now. In practice, even if she hasn't had me served with divorce papers. She was the one who wanted to join up with you clowns back when you were snatching people off the streets and beating them with lead pipes in those soundproofed buildings in Bastion Circle. And for the record... she didn't give a flying fuck about your beliefs or your cause or any of that, she just wanted us on your good side so that we wouldn't end up on your bad side. Turned into a fucking banshee when I put my foot down, but I knew it was only a matter of time before you all screwed yourselves. Seen it dozens of times. And I was right in the end.”

O'Dell frowned. “Wait. What was that about lead pipes and soundproofed buildings?”

“Oh. Guess your old boss left that part out of the orientation speech. Oh well. Not my problem.”

“No, no. You brought it up. What's this about grabbing people and beating them. I know that the Guardians were never that popular, but-”

“Why do you think the Guardians weren't popular? Ever since Asriel Dreemurr showed up, you worked yourself into a fucking frenzy waiting for the monsters to come down from the mountain. And more than a few times, people got caught in the middle. There was a doctor, one of the teachers at the high school, one of the city maintenance guys, and the old postmaster. That last one was how the Feds got involved, you know. Interfering with the US Mail and all. And there were dozens more that we know of. Seriously? How do you expect to represent an organization like yours when you don't know something about them that literally everyone else does?”

Thomas shook his head. “I know about the doctor and the postmaster. I know those weren't as clear cut as everyone likes to make it seem. The postmaster was going through Guardian correspondence, so he was tampering with the mail as well, in addition to compromising organizational security, and the doctor violated doctor patient confidentiality in order to try to get the police to investigate the Guardians officially.”

“So you murdered them and disposed of the bodies. Two wrongs make a right? Is that what you're saying?”

In spite of himself, Thomas started to get angry. “If the alternative was to let humanity undermine its last defense against an ancient evil, then it came down to Hobson's choice. None of the options were ideal, but we all did the best we could under the circumstances.”

Mr. Taylor's face stretched into a grin that looked a little out of place on his face.

“Hah. I've joined groups where their worst cluster fucks were better than the Guardians' best. That
dog don't hunt, son. Try again.”

Slowly and carefully, Thomas breathed in and out to calm himself down.

“Okay. Fine. I've already stated what the Guardians stand for and what we want. So I'll ask you, Jason Taylor... what do you stand for? What do you want?”

“...hmmph. I stand for nothing, Mr. O'Dell. When you dedicate yourself to a cause, or a symbol, or anything like that, other people can take that symbol and use it to convince you to act in their interest, while claiming that it's in your interest to do so. Like you are trying to do right now. I saw it happen over and over again, and no sir, I do not care for it. So I stand for nothing. And there is nothing that you can promise me, never mind actually give me, that I want.”

“Not even Frisk?”

Thomas saw a flash of something cross Mr. Taylor's face, but it was gone too quickly for him to be sure what it was, replaced by a careful neutrality.

“...Mr. O'Dell. You would not have mentioned my daughter if you had any idea what was going to happen next.”

“Mr. Taylor. Frisk isn't your daughter anymore. She's a... I don't know what the right word is. A pet, a trophy, a Trojan Horse, a propaganda stunt, maybe all of the above. I remember your position on humanity in general, and that's one thing, but Frisk is human too. If you care about Frisk at all—”

“Look at me. And think very hard about what you see. This is how much I care about Frisk. Whether you get the right answer, or are completely wrong, I don't give a shit.”

“You look like a man barely surviving as it is. Half the windows in your trailer are boarded up and this shed looks like it was made using Fallout 4's settlement system. When's the last time you ate? Or bathed? Or saw a doctor or a dentist? Even if I didn't want your help, looking at you makes me worry about you.”

Taylor crossed his arms.

“Oh. The For-Your-Own-Good argument. My dad said that every time he tried to take me over his knee. Until the day I was too strong for him, and broke his arm. Heh. He didn't remember in the morning, and I told him he fell down the stairs after he came home from the bar. He bought it hook, line, and sinker.” Taylor snickered. “We lived in a single story house.”

Thomas blinked.

“Well. That's an interesting insight into the Taylor family. Thanks for that.”

“No problem. You get what you came for then? Any time you wanna leave is fine with me. Five minutes ago would be nice.”

Thomas tapped his chin for a few seconds. “Alright. Let me start again. Mr. Taylor. This is a War. There's no two ways around that. This is a War and the lines were drawn thousands of years ago. Humans on one side. Monsters on the other. If you've been paying attention, you know what they can do. And I don't mean that giant flower thing. I mean the seven children that didn't come home. Eight children climbed Mt. Ebott. One came back. And monsters have spread out into the town, into the rest of the county, and we are the only ones that remember what the monsters are capable of doing.”
Mr. Taylor turned and glared at Thomas, who suddenly realized that all of the expressions he had interpreted as anger and annoyance from earlier in the conversation actually just indicated a cynical but ultimately benign disinterest. For the first time, Thomas was seriously wondering if the man in front of him would attempt to kill him.

“Those words would sound more sincere if the last man with your job hadn't put my daughter in the fucking hospital.”

“...I will admit that Mr. Cater crossed a line there. I can only assume in the heat of the moment, all he could think about was Chara-”

“So because he lost his daughter, it was okay for him to kill mine? Is that what you're saying?”

“That isn't-”

Mr. Taylor took a few steps forward, and Thomas repressed the impulse to scramble back to maintain the same distance as before.

“He loses his daughter and that's a tragedy, but if mine dies, it's okay? Why is that okay, hmm? Because she likes monsters? Because she thinks everyone can go along to get along and be friends and everything will have a storybook ending? Because she was standing in front of the walking talking barracuda fitness instructor from hell? Explain to me right now why any one of those merits a death sentence.”

“Your daughter did not die. Frisk is still alive.”

“That's right. Frisk is still alive. And that's the only reason any of you are still alive. Do you have any idea, any conception at all of what I am capable of, Mr. O'Dell? Do you know what your life would be like right now, if Jordan Cater had taken the life of my little girl?”

Mr. Taylor stopped inches away from Thomas, and the young man could smell a variety of unpleasant odors from so close.

“Picture the one thing you love in life more than anything. What you would lay down your life to protect. Are you picturing it? You would destroy that with your own hands, if it meant that I stopped. That is what would have happened to you, and to every other fuckwit that marched on the hospital that day, if Frisk hadn't bounced back like she did.”

Mr. Taylor backed up and turned to face the wooden shack, and Thomas let his breath out.

“Jordan Cater lost his little girl. I can empathize with that. But the instant he decided that he could kidnap and torture and kill other human beings, because he lost his child... that his pain was more important, more real, than any other person's pain... that was when the line was drawn. Not thousands of years ago.” Taylor turned around, and his expression was neutral once more.

“You see, that's the problem when you draw a line in the sand. If you're not careful, that line ends up making a circle, and the only one inside it is you. And that's exactly what happened. When the Bureau of Alcohol, Demolitions, Tobacco and Firearms showed up, ripped the Guardians to bits, and made Waco and Ruby Ridge look like a Fourth Of July cookout where somebody got a bit carried away with the firecrackers? The people of Ebott's Wake clapped and cheered and bought those men and women drinks. Saved me a lot of time, energy, and ammunition in the end.”

“...even you couldn't have taken on all of the Guardians at once. Not by yourself.”

“And yet you think you can take on the entire township of Ebott's Wake. We both know how the
game is played. Study your enemy. Find his weaknesses. Wait until the time is right, and strike him in a way calculated to cause the most possible damage. Withdraw, evade, lather, rinse, and repeat. Until you have whittled your opponent down to nothing. Assuming you don't screw up and get yourself caught and killed before then, of course. And that's the problem. You're a good tactician, O'Dell. I know talent when I see it. If it hadn't been for Asriel Dreemurr your little backup plan might have kept Cater out of jail, and certainly out of the hospital. But there's something you need if you're going to win. Something you don't have. And something I do.”

“...and what the hell's that?”

“Well, not to put too fine a point on it, but you don't have the balls for this work. I mean, credit where it's due. You're scared as hell but you're burying it deep down because you think you got a job to do. I can respect that. But it's not going to be enough.”

Mr. Taylor sighed and scratched his beard stubble.

“Anyway. I think I've given you my answer. It might not be the answer you expected or wanted, but it's not going to change if you stick around and keep flapping your lips at me. Frisk is... Frisk is a good kid. More importantly, Frisk is a smart kid. A lot smarter than me, and if I'm honest I always felt a bit threatened by that, once we realized just how smart she was... I ain't ever going to win Father of the Year. But Frisk is still my flesh and blood. And if she's picked her side in this war of yours, then so have I. So... you might want to consider quitting while you're behind. Now... we can do this the polite way, where you leave now, or we can do it the classic way where you dodge behind trees to keep from getting an ass full of bird shot.”

“I thought you said your shotgun was loaded with rock salt.”

Mr. Taylor smiled a smiled that didn't reach his eyes.

“Oh, I think we've moved beyond the point where rock salt would be enough some time ago, Mr. O'Dell.”

“...right. Well. I won't take up any more of your... valuable time. Thanks for hearing me out anyway. Such as it was.”

“Right. You have a good day.”

Mr. Taylor's smile and cheerful inflection were obviously and deliberately fake, and the man turned around to enter the shed again. In the crack between the door and door frame not obstructed by Taylor himself, Thomas could see a car with its hood up, illuminated by a drop light suspended from the ceiling, and what looked like doors on the other side. Then the door was shut and Thomas sighed.

It could have gone better, but it could have gone a lot worse, too.

The man turned and made his way back to the road where the bicycle was still standing patiently, and was about to climb onto it when a cell phone range. O'Dell's hands practically flew to his pockets and pulled out a very simple, no frills, prepaid cellular phone.

“Mr. Jones here. This better be important.”

“Thomas. It's Isaac. The Orange safehouse has been compromised.”

Thomas almost dropped the phone, first from exasperation at Isaac not using the code phrases he had developed to prevent accidentally letting things slip to telemarketers, political calls, and wrong
numbers, and then from the impact of what Isaac was telling him.

“What?!”

“It's that crazy nut job with the conspiracies. Quentin Forsythe. He showed up out of nowhere, we don't know why or how or what the hell he was doing or how much he saw. We tried to catch him. He... he fought back. Just grazes, nothing Julian can't handle, but he escaped and we don't know where he's going or what he's going to do. I mean... Forsythe is crazy right? He thinks aliens and the government teamed up to rustle our cattle and shit, right? Maybe nobody will believe him?”

It was obvious that Isaac was trying to convince himself more than anything else, and Thomas readjusted the phone as he got onto the bicycle again.

“Isaac, we're not that lucky. Evacuate the safehouse and tell everybody to run. Go to ground. There's... there's one other option, but I'll need at least a day to make sure. I'll contact you with one of the one-time codes if and when it's ready. Moving out now.”

The cell phone was turned off, returned to its pocket, and Thomas began pedaling furiously... and swearing under his breath, when he had breath to spare.
The skeleton peered at the screen, then looked up at Joe, and then back at the screen again.

“...huh. That's not something I expected to see when I got up this morning.”

“Yeah, well, it caught everybody by surprise. At first I was just glad we could finally start the Phase Two scans, but this is definitely the cherry on the sundae of science.”

Dr. Aster shrugged. “That's as good a metaphor as any. I hope by the time we all get back you'll have mountains of raw data for us to sift through.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Dr. Aster straightened up and shook Joe's hand. “You know, for somebody who can't directly perceive magic, you're surprisingly good at sussing out the details. I have no doubt I shall be thinking of you with great fondness while politicians blather and posture.”

“Heheh. I'll bet. I'd wish you luck in enlightening those chucklefucks but frankly it's a tall order to ask that you get back here with everything still intact and attached. But if I start on that I'll be talking about politics for an hour and a half.”

“I can do without that, no offense. When you're done here, be sure to find me so I can explain my plans to help the amalgamates.”

“Sure thing.”

The skeleton walked out of the scanner room, and almost tripped over a small fuzzy monster child.

“Whoa! Sorry, didn't see you there.”

“It's alright. Really, I was too close to the doorway. Uhm.” Asriel rubbed his paws together. “Can we talk for a minute or two? About... about the timeline, and Frisk?”

Dr. Aster blinked, and then nodded. “Sure. Let's head to my office.”

By the time the skeleton and the boss monster had made their way through various corridors to the room Dr. Aster was using to organize his papers and records, the child seemed to be calmer... at least superficially. Dr. Aster took a seat behind his desk, and Asriel climbed into one of the chairs on the opposite side.

“Okay, young prince Dreemurr. What do you want to talk about?”

“Uh. How much did... I mean... what do you already know?”

Dr. Aster waved a boney hand in a vague gesture. “I know from Sans that you are, or were, the Anomaly that he was tracking through the timeline distortions. And between you and Frisk we know that DT Energy can influence, or resist, changes in the sequence of events. And that Frisk is definitely still the focal point of the time loop, after what happened in the CORE.”

Asriel nodded. “Uh. Yeah. So...”

“...is something wrong?”
“No... well, yes, but no. Earlier... when everyone was worried about Papyrus... I felt...” Asriel rubbed his forehead with one paw. “A part of me wanted to get ready to Reset. The part that was used to having that power, before Frisk showed up. But I haven’t had any control over the timeline since Frisk fell into the Underground. And... Frisk doesn’t really have control either.”

Asriel’s paw slid down his face, and the child began to blink rapidly.

“If... if something had happened to Papyrus. Something serious. The only way to undo it would be to...”

The thought was left hanging in the air, unfinished, but Dr. Aster could fill in the blanks easily enough.

“And I don’t know what scares me more. The fact that I was even thinking about that... or the fact that I was wondering if Frisk would ask for my help. If they do... that... by themselves, then the timeline will go on without them. It has to... it has... to come... from outside.”

The office was silent save for Asriel’s unsteady breathing, and Dr. Aster leaned forward in his chair.

“Asriel... it didn't come to that. Papyrus is fine. I confess, when Sans told me, I was ready to carve a path of destruction through this town the likes of which I doubt humanity has seen in well over a thousand years. But Papyrus was not in any danger. And even if he had been, he is extremely tough.”

“...this is what they meant.”

“Beg pardon?”

Asriel wiped his eyes with one arm. “Back when... when I still called myself Flowey. They told me about telling you and Sans about... the time loop. I was freaking out because I thought that... if people knew that this happy ending could be undone, they'd either go to extremes to destroy it, or to preserve it. Frisk tried to explain. How much it hurt and scared them. Having to balance everything that everyone did, their futures, what they accomplished... versus one person's life. I didn't understand then. But I do now.”

The child took a deep breath, and looked up at Dr. Aster.

“But that's not the worst part. The worst part is... Frisk... I killed Frisk more than everyone else in the Underground added together. And... I didn't do it by accident, or out of ignorance. I didn't have the survival and freedom of monsters in mind either. I... I don't even have the excuse of wanting their Soul, even when I was trying to take it. I was just bored. I killed them over and over because it was something to do that I had never done before and... and even after all this time... even after everything that's happened... after getting a Soul of my own again...”

The boss monster trailed off, and Dr. Aster rubbed his temple with one hand.

“Did Frisk actually... ask you, to try to implement some sort of contingency plan like that?”

“No... but I think that they were thinking about it, just like I was.”

Dr. Aster leaned back in his chair and relaxed. “Asriel, next time you see Frisk, ask them about it. No matter what they tell you, that is what you need to concern yourself with. Not what-if scenarios.”
“But it doesn't matter!” The scientist flinched as he saw Asriel grab hold of both ears and pull on them. “If I'm still thinking about stuff like that, even with a new Soul, even with mom and dad getting older, even with a body with actual arms and legs and hands, then what's the point of me coming back at all?!”

Asriel's paws dropped in his lap, and he shook his head, eyes squeezed shut and tears seeping out of the corners.

“I'm not supposed to be here, Doctor Aster. I'm not supposed to be dust sprinkled over a bunch of toys and flowers. And the only part of me that should have survived is the part of me that other people remember. But I'm here. Not just because of what Alphys did. But because... because six humans climbed Mt. Ebott between Chara and Frisk. They are dead. Their bodies are buried. Their souls have moved on. Everything that they could have done. Everything that they could have been. It's gone. It wasn't reset, it wasn't undone, it never even got to happen. And the world got... Flowey instead. And... even after all I did to hurt them... Frisk was trying so, so hard to find ways to help me....”

A paw clutched at the front of Asriel's chest.

“It's not fair. It's not right. Losing so much. Getting so little back. After all that's happened. Everyone deserves better than that. If that's, if it's the best I can do....”

Dr. Aster tapped a boney finger on his desk, and Asriel looked up, startled.

“Asriel... what exactly happened to you, back then? I know the broad strokes of the situation from Alphys and her notes, but... this is something that affects you deeply. So I want... I need, really... to hear it from you.”

Asriel covered his face with his paws, and slowly slid them down until they rested in his lap again.

“I... the first thing I remember, after making it back through the Barrier... was waking up in the garden. I couldn't... feel my arms or legs, and then I realized that was because I didn't have any. It was terrifying. I called for help. For mom, dad, anybody... but nobody came. I don't know how long I spent crying before dad found me. I explained what happened, and... he told me everything was going to be alright. I know, now. I know he meant that. That he didn't care if I was a flower or not, as long as I was back. But I couldn't feel anything at all. Not for him. Not for anyone. I... when I figured out how to burrow around, I ran away. It was...”

Asriel held up a paw and moved his fingers.

“All my life I was used to things being one way. To walking around, picking stuff up and moving it with my hands, and... being able to feel things. I didn't have any of that as a flower. I couldn't move or do anything and the only thing I could feel was frustration and fear, and even then... compared to what I can feel now, and remember from before, even those weren't very strong. Like placeholders. So I ran away, when I could run away. That's how I found mom in the Ruins of Home. I thought I was happy. I thought I felt something like hope again. Mom had always found a way to make me feel better, after bad days, bad dreams... and this was worse than any of them. But... she couldn't. She tried. She tried so hard... I couldn't take it anymore. I ran away again. See, I...”

Asriel breathed in deep, and slowly let it out.

“Sorry... I... I think I need a minute.”
Dr. Aster nodded, and slowly, Asriel calmed down.

“When I was spending time with mom, in the Ruins... I realized I was too different, I'd lost too much. The people that had been most important to me before, I couldn't remember why. It was like... writing an idea down while I was really tired, and then trying to understand what was going through my head back then, after I had the chance to sleep. But realizing Chara was gone, and they didn't get to come back like I did... and... it was my fault, because I didn't fight back, because I didn't try to stop them or help them or... that was what pushed me over the edge. That was when I decided. Me coming back was some freak accident. It was never supposed to happen. So I tried to fix it.”

Asriel ran his paw over his eyes again.

“It wasn't until I felt myself dying that I started to worry. I didn't have a Soul. I didn't know what would happen to me if I died, and... something inside me wouldn't let me die. That was how I found out about the time loop, because I woke up in the garden again, like nothing had happened. And... I had to know more. I tried again and again. I could have just given up, let the world go on without me, but I didn't. Eventually, I got to the point where I didn't have to be dying, or even hurt, to force myself back to the garden. I... I don't know why I could come back like that, when everything you discovered means I should have just stayed dead. Maybe it was because I had second thoughts. Or because I had no Soul then. Or something else. But... when I first realized what I could do...”

Asriel stared at the floor of the office, his paws clasped together in his lap.

“At first I tried helping people. I solved people's problems. Fixed relationships. But there were things I couldn't do. I couldn't find a way to break the Barrier. I couldn't find a way to get mom and dad back together. I couldn't find a way to make myself feel again... and I couldn't bring back Chara. And even when I did help somebody, a lot of times I didn't understand how. Half of it was trial and error. I just... kept going back until I got it right. Not because I cared, but because I had nothing better to do. I stopped seeing anybody as real. Stopped thinking about the people and the thoughts and feelings behind the words they said and actions they took. And once that happened...”

The boss monster breathed in deeply, and then let it out, shoulders sagging.

“It didn't take long to go from not caring to actively hurting. I told myself... that... I was just curious. And the worst part is... that's the only excuse I could give. I couldn't even get angry enough at anyone to really feel better when they were gone, never mind any other feelings. And then... when I started seeing how far I could get with that... Sans showed up and stopped me. I thought I was frustrated before, but... well. In the end. I guess Riverperson was right. It didn't really matter. I helped people, I hurt them, I read every book, burned every book, did everything I could think of... and none of it meant anything. It wasn't until Frisk fell and took over the timeline that I ever did anything of consequence by breaking the Barrier.”

The office was silent, and Dr. Aster shifted slightly in his chair.

“Asriel, I only interacted with you a handful of times when you were still calling yourself Flowey, and before Frisk got hurt and ended up in the hospital, almost all of those involved Papyrus to some extent. But I don't think the person you were then would be nearly as worried about what worries you right now.”

“If you're talking about progress, that's not the point. I was still thinking about... a Reset, to get Papyrus back, if he was gone. It doesn't matter that we didn't have to do it. It doesn't matter that I feel sick about it. I still thought about it in the first place.”
“...Asriel, as a scientist, I know that there are options available to me in the pursuit of knowledge that come with varying costs in time, energy, and quality of life. Just because I dismiss any course of action that treats other people as expendable doesn't mean that I am not aware of them, or even that I ignore them. I just choose not to pursue them. I personally don't consider them to be worth the trade-off, but again, that's a subjective judgment on my part. You're alarmed and disgusted by the thoughts you were having. That's already more than you could do before. So the next step is to make a conscious decision. If something like this happens again... what will you do? Maybe you can make that choice on your own. Or maybe you need to talk to Frisk about it. But now that you know where you stand, you need to decide where to go from here.”

Dr. Aster leaned forward.

“Asriel, people's choices matter more than anything else about them. And no matter how you feel about the choices you made without a Soul, you still have to decide what to do now that you have one again.”

The boss monster nodded, still looking down at the floor. “I know. I know... uhm. Doctor Aster. Thanks for... for hearing me out. I know I need to talk to Frisk. And Sans. And... but, you see, you don't remember me as Flowey, because you missed all that. Even the humans in town, they still remember me as an annoying weed. Even the ones that are okay with it, like Hal. But you... you were only back for a little bit before... before I came back. And you remember me back before everything happened. So. I guess it was easier to talk to you about it.”

“As long as it works, I suppose.”

The office was filled with a tense silence, until there was a knock on the door; Asriel jumped in his seat, and Dr. Aster looked up.

“Hark, if you would seek entry to the Chamber of Knowledge, you must answer me these questions three: Who are you, what do you want, and have you brought lemon lime soda?”

From outside of the office, there was a sound not unlike muffled snickering.

“My name is Joe Stanton, I wish to hear your plans on amalgamate research, and no because I didn't realize that was a fricking prerequisite for entry!”

“Come on in.”

The door opened and Joe walked in. “I see now where Papyrus gets it.”

“I'd ask what you mean by that if I didn't already have a pretty good idea.” Dr. Aster pulled out his cell phone and began tapping the screen with one thumb. “Asriel, to preserve the double blind validity of the research, I’d like to ask you to leave now if that's okay. Magic interacting with preconceived notions was the bane of my existence during the early days of the CORE.”

“Oh. Uh. Okay.”

“I'm also texting your parents to ask for a meeting later when we can talk about what will be involved in this research. Among other things. I'm hoping we can get everything straightened up and out of the way before tomorrow so that everyone else can just follow procedure and I can focus on... whatever the hell is going to happen in Washington.” Dr. Aster's eye lights rolled in his sockets. “Oh, and just to be clear, if the king and queen put their foot down on this, then that's it. I'm sure we'll find another way.”

“...okay. I understand.” Asriel stood up and sighed. “Again, thanks for... well, everything.”
“No problem. It’s been some time since we had any sort of heart to heart talk.”

“Heart to heart?”

Dr. Aster looked up at Joe. “Well, Asriel was next in line for the throne in the Underground. As Royal Scientist, I’d be working with him sooner or later, I mean, if the CORE hadn’t imploded and all the consequences thereof. So it behooved me to build a friendship with the prince as soon as was practical. And to ensure he had a good fundamental grasp of what I was doing of course. Although that was mostly the queen's doing.”

“Yeah, mom was...” Asriel frowned. “She was always really enthusiastic about that. I don't know why I was surprised when Frisk told me she was spending most of her time and energy setting up a school... anyway. I'll get out from underfoot. Thanks again, Doctor Aster.”

“Any time, my friend.”

The young boss monster made his way out of the office and began to wander through the hallways of the lab complex. Sans had locked Dr. Alphys' office for security reasons... and Asriel's paws shook as he thought about being in close proximity to Sans with all the thoughts running through his head. That didn't leave very many options as far as places to go and things to do; everyone at All Fine Labs was busy either transforming the unknown into the known, or using what was known to make something.

The only thing that conceivably could be done alone was going to the Soul Research lab and practicing fire magic on the bullet analyzer... but Asriel really didn't want a video record of his many failures, either-

“HELLO ASRIEL!”

“Gah!” Asriel jumped out of reflex, lost his balance in midair, and then fell awkwardly on his side. Pushing himself upright, Asriel turned to see a tall skeleton in jeans and a New Home University hoodie.

“Papyrus?? I thought you were taking Dr. Alphys back home?”

“THAT IS INDEED A THING WHICH I ACCOMPLISHED WITH GREAT EXPEDIENCY AND STUFFED ANIMALS! THOUGH NOT WITHOUT COMPLICATIONS, SOME OF WHICH CAN ONLY BE ASSIGNED BLAME AT THE HOOVES OF THOSE RECKLESS ALPACAS AND THEIR DISREGARD FOR COMMON DECENCY, AS WELL AS, THEIR PRONOUNCED LACK... OF TURN SIGNALS!”

Somehow, Papyrus made a ‘tsk tsk’ noise.

“AND SO, WITH THE GOOD DOCTOR SAFELY ENSCONCED AT HOME TO CONVERT HER EXHAUSTION INTO ENERGY THROUGH THE POWER OF RECUPERATIVE SLEEP, I HAVE RETURNED AT THE BEHEST OF MY FATHER! ACCORDING TO A TEXT I RECEIVED, YOU ARE IN DIRE NEED OF A COOL FRIEND TO DO COOL FRIEND THINGS WITH, A PARTICULARLY TROUBLESOME CIRCUMSTANCE WITH ALL FINE LABS IN SUCH A SCRAMBLE TO PREPARE FOR UPCOMING EXCITEMENT!”

Asriel took a moment to tune his mind to Radio Free Papyrus.

“...yeah. That sounds about right. I had a lot of stuff to ask Alphys but that's not going to happen for a good long while now, and everyone's going to be so busy this week... so yeah. I am... yeah, I really am as happy to see you now as I was earlier, which is saying something.”
“OH NO! A GENUINE COMPLIMENT! AT THIS RATE OUR FRIENDSHIP WILL REACH CRITICAL MASS! OF COURSE FRIENDSHIP HAS NO MOLAR MASS AND CANNOT RESULT IN A NUCLEAR CHAIN REACTION... BUT WHAT IF IT COULD! OH, THE CALAMITY! FUN AND GAMES EVERYWHERE! NATIONS EXCHANGING KIND WORDS INSTEAD OF CAREFULLY CHOSEN DIPLOMATIC BARBS! SPAGHETTI AS FAR AS THE EYE SOCKET CAN SEE!”

“...yeah, it would literally be the end of the world as we know it.” Asriel scratched one ear.

“Actually, thinking about it... it doesn't sound too bad. But it would still be an adjustment. Anyway, I know from hanging out with you that you know most, if not all, of the antics people get up to in this town.”

“THIS IS A TRUE FACT THAT IS ACCURATE! TODAY'S SOCIAL FOCAL POINT IS THE POPULAR YET CONTENTIOUS JAM JAMBOREEE, A CELEBRATION OF DELICIOUS FRUIT PRESERVES!”

“That sounds like fun. I mean. As long as it doesn't turn into a food fight like last year.”

“ALAS, THAT APPEARS TO BE A MATTER OF WHEN, NOT IF. SO IF WE ARE TO ENJOY THE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS AND TASTES WITHOUT RAINCOATS OR SIMILAR WATERPROOF CLOTHING, WE MUST PROCEED WITH ALL POSSIBLE HASTE!”

1:32 PM JStanton420: hey mike
1:32 PM JStanton420: just got out of a meeting and had a thought
1:32 PM: i'll call the tv station the whole world must know
1:32 PM JStanton420: fuck u 2
1:32 PM JStanton420: n e way
1:33 PM JStanton420: was remembered a lot of stuff you were talking about
1:33 PM JStanton420: with guardian lore and records
1:33 PM JStanton420: ran into something interesting on the scanner
1:33 PM JStanton420: when u got time
1:34 PM JStanton420: can u send me whatever u found on what the sage s knew about souls
1:34 PM JStanton420: or thought they knew anyway
1:34 PM JStanton420: some of these results make me wonder stuff
1:35 PM: sure
1:35 PM: it is gon take a while
1:35 PM JStanton420: thx man
Mike Van Garret put his phone back into his pocket and reached for the books on the push cart when a great clattering of noise was heard. The librarian poked his head around the shelves to see a tall skeleton and a short fuzzy boss monster, panting in exhaustion next to the Librarby doors.

“...wow... that... that... really... escalated... fast...” Asriel managed to get out.

Papyrus seemed too winded to reply... which raised a number of questions on its own. Van Garret stepped out from between the bookshelves.

“Can I help either of you?”

“We're... okay...”

Papyrus stood up straighter, shook his skull, and focused on the librarian.

“AH! HELLO, MISTER VAN GARRETT! SORRY ABOUT OUR SUDDEN ARRIVAL, BUT-”

“It was the Jam Jamboree, wasn't it?”

“How were you able to deduce that?”

The librarian shrugged. “It was an educated guess. Well, don't worry about it while you're here. I hired George to stay outside and hose down any jam enthusiasts who got too close to the Librarby.”

“Wait, who's George?”

Van Garrett pointed a finger in the direction of the front doors.

“George Washington. Short guy, big tank of water on his back, likes stuff by Zane Grey?”

“Oh.” Asriel shrugged. “I don't think we noticed him on our way in, we were too... you know.”

“I do indeed. I really wish they'd hold the Jamboree some place that wasn't less than a block away from the Librarby... but that's small towns for you-”

“WHOOPSIE DOOPSIE! I JUST REALIZED A VERY INCONVENIENT FACT.”

Asriel looked up at Papyrus, one eyebrow raised in confusion. “What is it, and how inconvenient are we talking about?”

“WHILE I WAS AWARE OF THE JAM JAMBOREE AND ITS SIDE EFFECTS, IT NEVER OCCURED TO ME TO PUT THE TOP UP ON MY CAR! I MUST RECTIFY THIS QUICKLY BEFORE ITS INTERIOR FURNISHINGS BECOME COATED WITH SWEET PRESERVES! I SHALL BE BACK WITH THE UTMOST OF SPEED!”
The skeleton departed out of the Librarby front doors, and Asriel watched his skull bob as he took the steps four at a time.

“If it were anybody else, I'd get on their cases about being loud in the Librarby... but there's something about Papyrus. Stuff that would be annoying from anyone else suddenly fits coming from him.”

Asriel turned to see Van Garret shuffling through stuff behind the front desk.

“I think I know what you mean. Uh... gotta say up front. I don't have my card on me.”

“Don't worry about it. I can just scan the book's bar code and then file it under your name manually. That's the big advantage of electronic database systems. In fact, card or not I'm glad you're here. Been meaning to talk to you for a while now.”

“Uh, if this is about Friday and what happened...” Asriel trailed off and Mr. Van Garrett shook his head.

“While that was very strange, and also weird, that isn't it. Strange and weird is my bread and butter. Speaking of which, it turns out I've been saving something for you for years, and I only realized it Saturday.”

“Huh?”

The massive librarian gestured towards an enclosed corner of the room with a door and assorted glass windows separating it from the main floor of the library. “It will take me a few moments to grab it from my office, if you don't mind a short wait.”

“That's, it's not really a problem.”

“Okay then.” The man walked into the office, and Asriel could see him pick up several boxes and move them around, until he pulled out a particularly old book with a dark blue cover. It wasn't until he walked back out of the office and got closer that Asriel could make out the title.

“Here you go. *Introduction to Astronomy*, by Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin. 1961 fourth printing. In other words, she's been around the block a few times, and that was *before* Chara got a hold of her.”

Asriel blinked and looked up into the bearded man's face, even as his paws grasped the offered volume. “You... you knew Chara?”

Mr. Van Garrett hesitated for a moment, then sat down and looked at Asriel.

“Chara Cater was, uh... one of those children that ended up being dropped off during the summer reading program as a way for their parents who couldn't, or didn't want to, spend time with them to avoid having to pay for daycare or a sitter. Actually a couple of the people who belonged to the Guardians, they did the same thing, although I think Chara was the only one whose family lived in the Bastion Circle Compound. But at the same time, she was also an avid reader. Very bright. I don't know exactly how she did on standardized tests but on those rare occasions that we talked I got the impression of a sophisticated intellect hidden behind a veneer of caution... I don't think she liked people very much. So in both senses, we were kindred spirits.”

Asriel's confusion must have registered on his face, because the librarian shrugged.

“That's a long and convoluted story in and of itself, but the short version is that when I was growing up, the Librarby was a refuge for me. Honestly, Libraries anywhere are some of the last
safe public spaces in the modern world. That's why I took the job and the spot on the board when they were available, because I want to keep it that way. I've gotten pretty good at spotting other people who also come here to escape something... doesn't mean I know what that something is, of course, but there's some things that are universal. But yeah. Chara ended up reading through... let me think... I would guess at least eight percent of our lending library back in the day. Very impressive. Also ended up watching a lot of our media library, especially the anime.”

“You have anime here?”

The librarian waved his hand in a noncommittal way. “Years ago there was this guy who died unexpectedly and rather than actually sort through a lot of his effects the family just donated them all to the Library book sale. I ended up sorting through it all... turns out there was a lot of stuff there that was not suitable for younger audiences, but the tamer stuff I put on the shelves and in the system. *Ruroni Kenshin, Fist of the North Star, Space Battleship Yamato, Mew Mew Kissy Cutie, A Long And Painful Battle For The Seas*, and so on.”

“All I recognized in that list was Mew Mew Kissy Cutie. Dr. Alphys is crazy for the series, except for Mew Mew Kissy Cutie 2.”

“Ah, yeah. I got a taste of her distaste when she came by looking for info on how to start a business and we started talking. Actually it's kind of funny... funny weird, I mean. Not funny ha ha. The second OVA was all we had of the series for a while and Chara loved to watch it when she was here. I let her borrow my earphones and she ran it on a computer up here while everybody else was downstairs watching Pixar or Dreamworks movies. Still, she definitely loved that book even more.” Van Garrett pointed at the book Asriel's arms were wrapped around. “Kid very nearly read the thing to pieces, so be careful. I never got around to trying to restore it, what with literally everything happening.”

“I'll be careful then. Thank you for the warning. And the book itself. Chara would...” Asriel blinked a few times and sniffed, which Van Garrett appeared not to notice. “Chara would tell me a lot about stars, back in the Underground. So this means a lot.”

“It's my pleasure. It feels good knowing that book will go to somebody that appreciates it.”

“Was Chara really interested in anything else? Now I kind of want to read what they were reading.”

The librarian shrugged apologetically. “Sorry my friend, but even if Chara ever actually checked anything out, we don't keep non-overdue book data that long anyway.”

“Chara didn't check books out? So they just read them all here, then.”

“Yeah.” The bar code scanner was tapped with one finger. “Like I said, it's all computerized these days, but Chara said that was why they weren't allowed to have a library card. Something about the Guardians and something their father said... I can't remember it now, unfortunately, it might put some of what we do know about the Guardians in a different light. I still put her in the system under a fake name in case she ever changed her mind. Did it that way just in case using her actual name came back to bite her. Jordan Cater did not strike me as the most understanding, or intelligent, of fathers the few times I ended up interacting with him.”

Asriel almost dropped his new book in surprise.

“Wait, you knew Jordan Cater before all this happened?”

“I ended up talking to him a few times when he came to pick up Chara. I knew that something was
wrong the way her behavior changed around him, but I didn't want to make things worse for her at home by confronting him about it, even indirectly.”

Van Garrett leaned over on the desk and behind the beard, his mouth twisted into an expression of annoyance.

“Also, the longer I had to interact with him, the more I wanted to punch him in the d-ahem. The more I wanted to engage him in fisticuffs and leave him a bruised and bloody shambles on the sidewalk outside. You see, in addition to all of his other unsavory characteristics, he was also one of those people that never donated time, energy, labor, books, word of mouth advertising or even well wishes to the Library, but thought he was entitled to tell us how to do everything from day to day operations to the fund raising sales. He was almost as bad as that old lady that keeps complaining that the books during the book sale aren't alphabetized. There was just something about the way he spoke and acted and moved that made me want to go to town on him, long before we knew what he was involved in.”

“Maybe you should have listened to your instincts on that.” Asriel's jaw dropped as his ears heard what his mouth had said, and immediately started to backpedal. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that-”

“No, no, it's fine. You're right about that. Not a day goes by that I don't wonder how things would have turned out if I'd just grabbed him by the neck and pulverized him and damn the consequences. I mean, I know I would have gotten all of the Guardians on my case after that, but it might have been worth it. But... I try to give people the benefit of the doubt. Even if they're rude, even if I don't agree with anything they say. Because I know what it's like when people just shut you down and ignore you before you even open your mouth... and sometimes, when you give people the benefit of the doubt, it's the right move. If you judge people before they actually do anything, well, that's no way to get ahead in life. But back then. With him. It was the wrong move...”

Asriel saw the man's eyes suddenly go glassy and distant for a few moments.

“...hey. Asriel. I have a question for you. Its practical importance is nonexistent. But it has some personal importance. Was Chara happy, down there? With you guys?”

“...yeah. I mean. After everything that's happened, I know they were still hurting. But they felt safer down in the Underground than they did on the Surface. They definitely thought monsters were better than humans in every way that mattered, which, uh... considering they were human... well. But yeah. After what happened to them. The Underground wasn't a prison, like it was for monsters. It was a refuge.”

The librarian nodded slowly. “I see. Glad Chara had that, at least.”

“Yeah...”

“...so.” The librarian waved his hands at the shelves lined with books that filled the building. “That's enough out of me for one day. Feel free to browse. Expand your horizons, pick up a new skill, explore a fanciful fictional world, all that good stuff. And if you're ever looking for something specific, I can probably get it through inter-library loan if it's not already here.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

“Any time.”

The young monster walked away from the desk, and just as it had when he had first seen the inside
of the building, his mind boggled at the options available. For a few seconds, Asriel stood paralyzed with indecision before picking a direction at random and heading down one row.

The library wasn't crowded, but it wasn't empty, either; Asriel counted five humans, one cat monster, one bird monster, one giant eye monster, and two other monsters whose shapes were occluded behind a bookcase and hard to determine from a distance. Four computers were lined up by one wall, with one of the humans using the one at the end to look up something on Wikipedia... based on the pictures it appeared to be the manufacturing process for cardboard.

In between the actual bookcases, Asriel's gaze jumped from place to place, trying and failing to judge books by their covers, until his eyes lingered on one volume in particular. A paw reached up and removed it from the shelf, and he saw that the cover featured a smiling human woman on it.

*Kitchen*, it said. By Banana Yoshimoto. Asriel's brow wrinkled as he tried to parse the name, before giving up; neither he nor his father were really in a position to criticize. Besides, human names included colors like with Hal's last name, and actions as with Frisk, so fruit was not out of the question.

The boss monster flipped open the book at random, and his eyes were drawn to one line in particular.

*There are many days when all the awful things that happen make you sick at heart, when the path before you is so steep you can't bear to look. Not even love can rescue a person from that.*

Asriel felt the fur on the back of his neck stand up. As a flower, he had read every book in the Underground, many times over. *Kitchen* had not been among them. Yet that sentence resonated with something inside him; somewhere, somehow, *he had read those words before.*
“Alright everyone. Class is dismissed. I'll have your end of term exams graded tomorrow, but if anyone would like to tackle some last minute extra credit assignments, stick around for about five minutes.”

The classroom doorway was immediately jammed with students of varying shapes and sizes all converging on it, with only two or three remaining seated or moving towards the front of the class where the teacher was standing. Frisk took their time loading up their backpack and then hefting it onto their back; by the time that was done, the congestion by the classroom doorway was already clear, and the child walked out of the classroom without obstacle.

“There's a lot of irony in kids being in such a hurry to leave school that they do things that slow themselves down so they have to stay longer... but that's none of my business—”

“Yo!”

“Wha?!”

Frisk stumbled and fell to the hallway floor, then looked up to see a concerned, reptilian face looking down at them.

“Oh, man. Wow. So that's what this looks like from the other side. Uh. Sorry. Didn't mean to freak you out.”

“Hey Poncho.” Frisk pushed themselves upright and got to their feet. “It's not your fault. I was just stuck in my head there.”

“I know dude. I saw you get hit like three times during dodgeball. I was gonna ask after class, and then Undyne wanted you to stay after, and then I didn't see you until... hey, you're not in trouble are you?”

Frisk shook their head.

“I don't think I'll find out until Friday.”

“What??”

“Nothing, nothing. Just thinking out loud.”

“Oh, hey, you dropped a pencil when you tripped.”

“Hmmm?” Frisk looked down at the hallway floor and saw a mechanical pencil on the tiles. “Oh. Thanks.”

Frisk leaned over to reach for the pencil, which began to glow with a blue aura and jerk towards their outstretched hand. The human child recoiled with a shriek, tripping again and slamming into the wall behind them.

“Whoa! Dude, calm down! It's just Blue Magic!” The pencil had clattered to the floor and Poncho stuck his tongue out of one side of his mouth in a comical expression of concentration; the glow resumed, and the pencil floated slowly over to Frisk. “I've been practicing for a while and I figured, this was a perfect chance to show it off!”
“...oh.” Frisk ran a hand over their face and grasped the floating pencil with their other hand. “That's... pretty cool. Sorry I panicked. I... ugh.”

“Yo, don't worry about it. I probably should have thought about maybe not surprising somebody that already didn't handle getting surprised too good the first time.”

“...guess there was that. Um.” Frisk managed to get to their feet once more. “Uh. Do you. Want to hang out... for a bit? I have errands I need to run but we can walk and talk and stuff.”

“Sure thing!”

The human and monster children walked out of the school building, Poncho already talking at a mile a minute.

“So hey, when you got shot, my sister started telling me a lot of things about human healing stuff, and I still don't know if any of it's true or if she was making it up. Did they, like, take parts of you out and put other stuff in?”

“Uh... sort of. According to the paperwork I saw... uhm... I did get a blood transfusion while I was in surgery. Mom, uh, healing around the bullet fragments got me to the hospital with time to spare, but that meant the doctors had to make new holes to get all the bits out. And I started bleeding a lot, and running a really bad fever, and... well, everything that comes with it. So they had to put somebody else's blood inside me to make sure I had enough.”

“Whoa. Gross. Where did they even get the blood for you? Did they have to hurt another human for that, or what? How do you even decide who has to give up their blood like that??”

Frisk shook their head. “Blood is donated. Humans can go to a specific place, or a vehicle called a bloodmobile will come by, and in both cases they stick people with a needle and drain a little of it into a bag and it gets stored for exactly these kinds of situations, and then the donor goes back to work or back home with a sore arm and a sticker and probably a cup of fruit juice to maintain fluid levels. The human body always keeps more blood than it needs in the circulatory system, just in case we lose some from an injury, you see. Some doctors figured out how to drain some of the excess, save it, and give it to somebody else who needed it. Saved a lot of lives, even before they figured out blood types... that's the protein stuff in the blood. There's a lot of different types and it's best if the body gets a type that's compatible, otherwise it's not going to handle it as well. Like using the wrong type of oil in an engine.”

“Wow. Human bodies are complicated.”

“You have no idea.”

“Hey, is it true you actually died and came back?”

“...yeah. It's not as impressive as it sounds. My heart just stopped for a little bit and then started again.”

“Cool! First the amalgamates, then you, then the prince came back... man, even with those mean guys running around with guns and stuff, things have been going our way ever since you showed up in the Underground! Oh, hey, the prince is your brother now, right? Because you're the queen's kid too, right? That's how it works.”

“Uh. Yeah. Asriel's my brother.” Frisk started to smile without thinking about it. “We're not exactly sure if he's my big brother or little brother, but he's definitely my brother.”
“Hey, is he going to be in school soon? I mean, I know the year's almost done and summer's gonna start, but what about next year? Or does he have to learn other stuff because he's the prince and he has to learn about politics and royalty from his parents?”

“I think the plan is to enroll him for next year. Beyond that, it hasn't come up. Or at least... well, it hasn't come up yet. Let's put it that way.”

“Right. So much stuff going on.”

“Oh yeah. Ebott’s Wake, the ride that never ends.”

“Yo, you should send that one to the people who make the slogans!”

“Hehehehe.”

The children walked along in relative silence for a few moments.

“Hey, Frisk?”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“Is it true that you got shot because you took a bullet for Undyne? Somebody said that at lunch when you were still out of school, and I never asked Undyne because... well, you know.”

“...Jordan Cater was aiming for me. For a lot of reasons, none of them good, or smart.” Frisk looked down at the sidewalk, tried to kick a rock off of it and into the street, and sent it into the grass instead. “I tried not to hold it against him after the address, but after Friday... well, it's harder and harder not to hold stuff like that against him.”

The human child squeezed their eyes shut and tried to ignore some memories that had jumped to the front of their mind.

“Hey. Poncho. Uh. About the Blue Magic. That was pretty cool. And I... the freakout was the wrong response. You deserved better. It's just... I was in the CORE when Cater was trying to destroy it, or whatever was going on. Blue Magic all over the place. I guess it reminded me of that a little. And... maybe it reminded me of some other stuff I really didn't want to remember, back in the Underground.”

“What? ...oh. Oh. Right. Sorry. Right. All the random fights.”

“Yeah. I mean, I'm not blaming anybody. But I can't count the number of times I saw bullets form out of nowhere and a monster showed up and I thought to myself, 'So this is how I die.' So maybe I'm not one hundred percent completely over it. Sorry.”

“No, no, it's okay! Dude, I should be the one apologizing. I'm the one who caused you to freak out. And all that dodging magic and stuff, that'd be like if a bunch of humans were really really insistent about high fives and bear hugs and stuff. I mean, totally invading personal space and not caring about how other people feel. And sometimes people don't have time for bullets or they're not feeling up to it and you gotta respect that. So yeah. Thousands of years of being trapped or not, that's pretty rude, what happened to you-”

The two children stopped walking and turned at the sound of distressed animals, and watched a half dozen alpacas run down the street... ahead of an old fashioned automobile with a man wearing a fancy suit behind the wheel.
“Get out of the way, you ungulate nincompoops!”

Frisk sighed as the vehicle, and the animals ahead of it, disappeared around a street corner, and the children started walking again.

“I'd like to think that a lot of people would have accepted monsters with at least cautious optimism, but honestly, we all really lucked out with this town being as eccentric as it is.”

“Yeah! I thought the same thing when we first moved up here! I mean, there’s sunlight and moonlight and stars and weather and a lot more room so it's easier to get lost, but other than that a lot of stuff is the same! You guys put gifts under a decorated tree just like we do, you have people like Mr. Ward that do the same thing the Royal Guard does, and you build all those cool machines instead of using magic but you use them for all the same stuff we use magic for. In every way that matters, humans are basically just like monsters!”

“Actually, some humans don't do the decorated tree and gift exchange thing. And some humans do, but they get really aggressive about it, saying that everyone else is doing it wrong.” Frisk shrugged. “It's religious stuff, so it's automatically complicated.”

“It sounds like it. The stuff I got taught was a lot simpler.”

Frisk turned to look at Poncho. “Actually, can you explain some of it to me? All my experience as far as monsters and religion go, it's always been from the human side with human religions, and most of that was just people freaking out about magic. And that was even before Dr. Alphys published anything about the scientific confirmation that Souls are real. So, you know, there's a huge blind spot in my knowledge.”

“Sure! I mean, we ended up borrowing some things from humans later, but I know the original stuff. Uh... okay, right. There's like, three different gods. There's the Maker, that made the world. Then there's the First, as in, the first monster and all other monsters are descended from them. And finally there's the Judge, who decides what happens to our Souls when we die. And depending on who you ask, sometimes there's a fourth god who doesn't do any of those things... the Trickster. They just show up one day, and they do things for their own reasons, and then they disappear. And they're really strong, stronger than monsters, stronger even than humans, so you can't fight them to stop them... but sometimes you can convince them to make a deal with you, to do something they want, so they give you something that you want in return. But you have to be careful, because they might go back on their word later, if you make them angry. Or if they just feel like it. So your best bet is actually to trick them back, and if they're impressed that you're better at tricking people than they are, then they're more likely to keep their end of the bargain.”

“Wait.” Frisk frowned. “If the Trickster is so strong, why would they need anyone to do anything for them?”

“I asked that too, and my parents said that they didn't know either. It was probably meant to be one of those things to try to teach good life advice or something. You know. Stuff like if a deal sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Anyway it didn't matter much one way or the other, it was... uh... ugh, I know this, Mrs. Mossman was talking about it last week... creation myth! That's what it is. It's just a way of saying how we got to where we are today. There wasn't much else to it. If anyone believed anything, mostly they believed in the Prophecy of the Angel... whoa! I just realized! If Flowey broke the Barrier, and Flowey was Asriel, then the Prophecy was about him all along! I can't believe it took me this long to figure it out!”

“Well, he's only been back... I mean, really back, for about a week. And a whole lot of stuff has happened this month, before and after that happened. But yeah, that is weird to think about.”
“Yeah!”

The two children walked in silence for a while, before Poncho turned to look at Frisk again.

“Hey Frisk, uh... there's something else that's been bothering me for a while now.”

“What is it?”

“Okay, so... we were running around in Waterfall for a while. Trying to see Undyne. Well, I was. And, like... Undyne told me to stay away from you and that was when I realized you were human, and... and you pulled me up when I tripped and almost fell off the bridge... uh... maybe I should start over. So. I knew you were okay because of all of that. And later I saw Undyne hanging out with Papyrus in Snowdin, and I worked up the guts to ask her what happened to you and she said not to worry, another human will show up eventually and she'd catch that one. So... uhm...”

Poncho looked very confused all of a sudden, and shook his head.

“It's just that... I remember showing up at the castle, and some other monsters were there too, and... I guess I must have just got there when the Barrier was being broken, and the force knocked me out like it did everyone else. But... uhm... I don't know if there's any way to say this without sounding like a jerk or making you mad or something. But anyway. If the only way you could have gone home was to fight the king... were you going to do it? I mean, I know he's your dad now, I'm not saying you'd-”

“It's alright.” Frisk ran a hand through their hair. “Uh. I wasn't really thinking straight. But... Undyne told me something. When Asgore was training her to fight... she couldn't land a single hit on him for the longest time. So... I didn't have any reason to expect to win if I did fight him. As good as I am at dodging, I still get hit sometimes. So... really, a fight between us would not end with me being the winner, no matter what.”

“...but you went to the castle anyway.”

“Yeah. I figured if I didn't go to him, eventually he'd hear that there was a human in the Underground and come looking for me. But if I took the initiative, maybe then I could convince him to call off the war or something. And if I couldn't well... I figured there was no point in delaying the inevitable, especially if he found out Undyne and Papyrus and Sans all let me go when they could have caught me. I didn't want them to get in trouble.”

Poncho stared at the sidewalk for a few moments.

“...I'm glad you didn't have to fight. I'm glad things turned out like this.”

“...yeah. Me too.”

3:44 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: hey asriel

3:45 PM: hey frisk

3:45 PM: whats going on

3:45 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: least dog stole papyrus hpone again

3:45 PM: what
3:45 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: he told me at the store
3:45 PM: are we sure thats what
3:45 PM: oh
3:46 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: while he was getting dog treats to lure him back
3:46 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: or bribe other dogs to help him
3:46 PM: what is with least dog and cell phones
3:46 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: or both
3:46 PM: first moms and last year it was dr alphys now this
3:46 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: so he asked me to give you a heads up and let you know he was busy
3:46 PM: oh ok
3:47 PM: im at the librarby right now reading
3:47 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: grate thats what he said and thats close by
3:47 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: at the market rite now
3:47 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: got ingredients for tonight
3:47 PM Legendary Flirtmaster: b there soon
3:47 PM: okay

Asriel put his phone back in his pocket and grabbed the two books off of the table. Sliding off of the chair, he made his way back through the library to the main desk, where a familiar face... or at least a familiar beard... was holding a camera over opened books.

“Excuse me, Mr. Van Garrett?”

“Yup? Sorry, was doing a thing for a friend, need a few seconds.” The librarian looked up from his work and saw the book Asriel was holding up to him. “Aha. Alright, just the one?”

“Yeah. I figure I'll start small and work my way up.”

The book's bar code sticker was scanned and Van Garret started typing. “That's a perfectly valid strategy... okay, you are set. It's due back two weeks from today but you can renew the loan once if you're not done yet. And if even that's not enough, or something else happens, don't worry about any fines. I have been known to look the other way on that.”

“Well, I'm already over halfway through it, so I hope it doesn't take that long, but... things have a way of getting out of hand in this town on really short notice.” Asriel shrugged. “So I'm not ruling it out.”
“Well, that's true enough.”

There was a vaguely electronic sound and Van Garrett pulled out his cell phone. “...huh.”

“What is it?”

Van Garrett put the phone in his pocket and looked at Asriel. “Nothing. Well, obviously something. Steve wants to drop some stuff by the Library later. Hope it's more historical records. If I can get another bookcase along that wall, maybe the people on the Library Board that want a soda fountain in there will shut up about it.”

“Wouldn't that bring people in to the Library?”

“Yeah, but it would also be really hard to keep clean. Also it's not really about bringing people in, it's about egos. I was willing to meet people halfway with vending machines but they had to have it all their way, so I'm going to fight them on this till the day I die. And then they still won't be able to put it in anyway because my rotting corpse will be a health and safety violation.”

Asriel stared at the Librarian with wide eyes.

“I'm not sure, but I think you might be putting too much thought into this.”

“Well, that's subjective... but, I certainly won't say you're wrong.”

“Where would you even put vending machines, anyway?”

“Downstairs hallway, right next to the meeting room where we have the book sales. Oh. Speaking of which. Obviously you missed some of the previous ones, because of... reasons. So. If there's any genres or authors or even specific titles you're interested in, let me know and if I see them during the setup phase I will try to keep those behind the counter for you.”

“Uhm. Thank you. I'll do that, if, if I ever turn into a bookworm like Frisk.”

“Right... huh. Speak of the devil.”

“What?” Asriel turned to follow the Librarian's gaze and saw Frisk pull open a door and hold it for a monster child of similar size. “Oh.”

“Yo!”

The monster child rushed into the building towards Asriel, but stumbled and began to fall forward. Out of reflex more than anything else, Asriel stretched out his arm and a blast of green light burst from his paw. Just before the child hit the floor, the light spread into a pile of shimmering, translucent flowers beneath them.

“Oof. Hey, neat!”

“Poncho, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm good! Asriel broke my fall!”

Poncho managed to stand up, and walked over to Asriel. “Hey! Nice to finally meet you! I'm Monster Kid, but everyone calls me Poncho.”

“Uhm. Uh. Hi.”
Frisk walked up with a wave to Van Garrett and held up a grocery sack. “Hey Asriel. Guess what I have here.”

“...it looks like a bag.”

“You are technically correct.” Frisk reached inside the bag and pulled out a dark purple vegetable. “And do you know what this is?”

Asriel furrowed his brow for a few moments, then shook his head. “I don't really recognize it.”

“Good. This is an eggplant. A surface eggplant. No yolk.”

The boss monster blinked, and smiled. “I already like where this is going.”

Poncho stared at Asriel with wide eyes.

“What? But the yolk is, like, the best part!”

“We're going to have to agree to disagree on that.”

Poncho shook his head. “I just... wow. I mean. A scrambled eggplant yolk, and the skins fried to a crisp, that's like the best breakfast ever!”

“No, the best breakfast ever is cinnamon oatmeal.”

Poncho rolled his eyes and looked at Frisk. “Can you believe this? Come on Frisk, you gotta break the tie! Which is better breakfast, oatmeal or scrambled eggplant?”

“Uh... I haven't actually had scrambled eggplant, so I'm not qualified to be tiebreaker.” Frisk looked over to the front desk. “Mr. Van Garrett, what in your estimation is the ideal breakfast food.”

“Hashbrowns with sausage patties. And I know that wasn't one of the two options. So you're back to square one.” A phone was pulled out and Van Garrett began to text. “Looks like it's time for a straw poll.”

Asriel shook his head. “How did we get to the point where we're arguing about this anyway?”

“When I was at the market picking up vegetables Poncho and I got to talking. I mean, we were already talking before then. Oh, I also got some onion, some tomato, and some cheese. The recipe isn't authentic eggplant parmesan but I saw the recipe on an old episode of Good Eats and I got it to work.”

“Good Eats?? Oh, wait. I remember this. It's that cooking show you and mom would watch back when... right.”

Frisk looked at Asriel's face, then at Poncho, then turned to the desk. “Mr. Van Garrett, how's the straw poll coming along?”

“Well... Steve says pop tarts, Eli says bacon and eggs, but actual chicken eggs fried sunny side up. Just clarifying that point. Joe says... coffee, I don't know why I expected anything else... Justin says french toast, and... Hal says frosted flakes. Hal also says that Tim says oatmeal with any topping is the best breakfast food. So you finally got a second vote for that.”

Frisk blinked. “Why is Hal hanging out with the Riverperson?”
The librarian typed in another text, then looked up after the phone beeped its reply. “He says because it was foretold in the ancient scrolls and also he was bored.”

“Oh.” The human child scratched their head. “I guess that's as good a reason as any. Hey, Asriel, we should head home. I need to peel, slice and purge the eggplant before I can even start on anything else.”

“Okay.”

“Hey Frisk, I think I see Jellemiah over there, I'm going to go hang out with him, okay?”

“Uh. Sure. See you tomorrow Poncho.”

“Sure thing!”

“Uhm.” Asriel hesitantly held up his hand. “It was nice meeting you, Poncho.”

“Yeah, same here! Even if you don't know anything about breakfast foods, hah!” Poncho ran over to a table where a slime monster was turning pages of a book with a pseudopod.

“...I know things about breakfast foods.”

“Come on, Asriel.” Frisk grabbed the prince and pulled him towards the door. “It's just banter. Don't worry about it.”

“...I'm just saying.”

“I know. It's alright.”

Outside of the Librarby, Asriel took a deep breath and shook his head.

“...this day has been all over the place.”

“Yeah. It has.”

“There was the stuff Dr. Aster wants to do. Then Papyrus. Then the Jam Jamboree. And then the Librarby.” Asriel held up his books so Frisk could see them. “Mr. Van Garrett gave me this discarded book, and this other one I know I never read before but it's still kind of familiar in spots-”

Asriel stopped talking as Frisk stumbled and barely managed to stay upright with much flailing of arms.

“Are you okay?”

“I. I think I'm fine. I just got vertigo or something... at ground level. That can't be good.”

Frisk shook their head and started walking again, and Asriel followed. After a few moments of tense silence, Asriel cleared his throat.

“So. Uhm... Mr. Van Garrett seems nice enough. I mean. He seemed okay last Wednesday. And after Friday, I knew he was an okay person, because... well. You know. But that doesn't necessarily mean that people have to act okay. I mean. Uhm. Nothing that came out of my mouth just now made any sense, did it.”

“No, it did. Even if it was just because I already knew what you were talking about. Mr. Van Garrett has been working at the Librarby for as long as I can remember... which is only a few years,
Frisk trailed off and their pace slowed down, and after a few moments, just as Asriel was opening his mouth to ask if they were alright, they spoke up again.

“Well. I checked out a book, but. I couldn't return it later. And I tried to explain that I would pay for it but I didn't know when I would be able to get the money, and he said it was okay and removed the book from the Librarby's records so I wouldn't get in trouble. And then he put it on the list new books to order I guess because it showed up again.” Frisk sighed. “He also told me that if anything ever went really wrong, if I was scared or didn't know where to go, that he or somebody else at the Librarby would be able to help... I didn't understand what he meant back then, but... well, you saw it, or heard it. I gave him my cell phone for safe keeping. And when we first got here, right after the Barrier broke, he went out of his way to keep the Librarby open past normal business hours so I could hunt down all the stuff I thought I might need for getting monsters set up on the surface, legally and economically.”

Frisk stopped talking, checked for oncoming traffic, and then started crossing the street. Asriel followed, books in his arms, but nearly tripped on the curb as he realized where they were.

“Whoa, are you okay bro?”

“Not sure. Leaning towards no. I, uh.” Asriel breathed in slowly, and let it out just as slowly. “I just... don't like being here, is all.”

Frisk turned around and looked; beyond the mostly decorative walls, there were walking paths, lamp posts, countless Golden Flowers... and a large metal statue of a giant boss monster cradling a human child.

Heritage Park.

“Oh. Oh no. I'm so sorry, Asriel. I. I just took the shortest path. Let's just go around. Or we can move one block over, will that... be...”

Frisk had turned to look at the park again. After a few moment, the grocery bag fell from limp fingers, and the child began to run towards the center of the park.

“Frisk?? Frisk what are you doing?!”

Inside the park nearer to the statue, Frisk paused to catch their breath, eyes fixated on the image of Asriel holding Chara Cater's body. Slowly they walked over to... just a few feet to the left of the statue. The sound of footsteps and rustling plastic meant that Asriel had followed them into the park and had brought their forgotten grocery sack, but it was hard for them to concentrate on anything else except what was right in front of them.

“Asriel... is this a dream? Am I dreaming?”

“If you are, we're having the same dream. And it's probably going to get really bad, really fast. Frisk, can we not be here? The first time I was here I got shot, and the last time I was here I started to melt. I don't want to know if the third time is the charm or not!”

“Please... please be real.”

Asriel saw Frisk reach a hand out towards nothing... and then saw it stop. Only Frisk saw the boundary layer between the universe and the star, shining bright.
Knowing that this future can still be SAVED fills you with Determination.

Frisk slowly let their breath out, turning towards Asriel unsteadily. Their steps were uneven and they were swaying back and forth, but the human child was smiling, and their arms wrapped around the Boss Monster.

“Asriel... there's a star here. A SAVE point. I... I felt something just now. We're... we're all going to be okay. No matter what happens.”

Asriel's eyes turned towards the statue, then the spot next to it where Frisk had reached out. He could see nothing out of the ordinary, but he could feel the relief in Frisk's embrace, the tension evaporating off of them like steam. His arms came up around Frisk in return.

“...Frisk... remember this, okay? Whenever you're scared about what will happen next. Whenever you're afraid that everyone that you love will stop loving you. Think about this. It's not all-or-nothing. It's not hopeless. You just have to look at it right. Okay?”

The human child nodded.

“I will. I promise.”
“Hello my children, I have returned home! Does anyone have any requests or suggestions for New Recipe Night?” Toriel prepared to hang her overcoat on a hook before noticing a splotch of jam on it and frowning. “Hmph. What possesses the people of this town to play with their food in this manner, I cannot fathom.”

The coat was carried through the house and into the small laundry and utility room, where the teacher began to prepare the garment for washing... until she saw movement from outside through the small window.

“...that is... odd. Asriel? Frisk?”

Draping the overcoat over the top of the washing machine for later, Toriel made her way to the back door and opened it. In the backyard the sight of two children met her eyes, both lying on their backs on the grass, heads next to each other but bodies pointed in opposite directions.

“Okay, I can understand the cautionary tale angle if it was about what to do if you get lost in the woods. If Hansel and Gretel had left a trail that wasn't bread crumbs, like rock piles or stick arrows or something, then birds couldn't eat that. I mean the birds might steal the sticks for nesting materials if they were small enough, but big ones would be left alone. But the candy house still bothers me for a whole bunch of reasons.” Small paws raised up in the air, cupped together, and a fireball flickered into being.

“You mean like the rain and ants thing, right?” Frisk turned a page in the book they were holding above their head. “I have some theories about both but they're both based on ideas about what candy was popular at the time and in the place where the story came from.”

“Well, even before we get to that, we have to ask why anybody would make a house out of candy even if there weren't any problems with doing it. I mean... they were in a forest, right? Wood and lumber wasn't exactly in short supply.”

“Right. I think that this part of the story had to be a metaphor for trust. Just because something looks sweet on the outside, doesn't mean it's not rotten inside.”

“Well, yeah, but if a kid is young enough that you have to teach them life lessons through allegory, then they're young enough to want to eat a house made of candy no matter how dangerous it is.”

Toriel sputtered in laughter, and Asriel's fireball vanished into a wisp of smoke while Frisk dropped their book on their face.

“Agh!”

“Oh! I am sorry. I did not mean to startle anyone.”

“It's alright. Welcome home mom.” Frisk's voice, while muffled underneath the book pages, was still understandable. Toriel giggled at the nonchalant delivery.

“I hope you both had a good day today?”
Frisk closed their book and got to their feet, shaking dirt and grass out of their hair. “Well, it had its ups and downs, but I think the finish was strong.”

“Yeah.” Asriel agreed, sitting up; without looking, Frisk reached out their hand and pulled Asriel upright when he grabbed it. “It was okay. On average.”

“Well, that is good news, then. Now... before we discuss meal plans, you both need to wash up... and Frisk, it is well past time for you to have another haircut.”

The human child reached up and ran some fingers through their hair.

“...yeah. I kinda do, actually.”

“Then we are agreed. I will get things ready for dinner while you both clean up.”

“Okay. Oh, I got some stuff at the market today. Surface eggplants. After the haircut, I'd like to make one minute eggplant parmesan again. Asriel's never had it before so technically it's a new recipe for him.”

Toriel blinked, then smiled and nodded. “That does make sense. I shall arrange the ingredients, slice and purge the eggplants so they will be ready for you. In the meantime, please go get the stool and the apron from the laundry room.”

“Okay. Asriel, can you take Applied Magical Optics back to the bedroom?”

Asriel took the book from Frisk's outstretched hands. “Sure thing. Hey, how close are you to the end now?”

“Just one chapter left. But it's a book about optics. So I'm pretty sure light did it.”

The young monster blinked in confusion for a moment, before his eyes widened. “Oh. Right. Took me a minute.”

Once upstairs, Asriel carefully placed the book on the nightstand next to Frisk’s bed... and stared at the red orb next to the reading lamp. Somehow, it seemed to be glowing faintly.

“...huh.”

The monster's eyes were drawn down to the locket in the center of the nightstand; Frisk had said something about being worried about losing it, but the more Asriel thought about it, the more likely they were to lose it some place else like school, the Librarby, or walking around town.

Then again, this locket carried a lot of weight, both historical and emotional, for everyone that had ever touched it. Maybe it made sense to want to shed that weight at the end of the day. Asriel turned to look at his chest of drawers, the top covered with the random items he had found on and in the ground while he had still been a flower, just as Frisk's chest of drawers was covered with photographs of personal significance.

Asriel shook his head and left the bedroom, taking the stairs two at a time, and reaching the ground floor just in time to see Frisk carrying a wooden stool almost as tall as they were out of the back door.

“Wow, um. Do you need some help with that?”

“I'm good... it's not that it's heavy... even though it is... it's just awkward.”
With the stool set up in the backyard, Frisk returned to the laundry room to get the cloth cover to protect clothes from accumulating cut hair, with Asriel tagging along behind.

“Hey, while you were upstairs, mom mentioned that dad's coming over for dinner.”

“Great!”

“Yeah.” Frisk smiled. “One step at a time, one problem at a time. And...” the smiled vanished.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing.” Frisk reached up and managed to pull the cloth off of its hook, despite the height difference. “I was going to say that if things go really wrong, we have a fallback position, but... I had a lot of time to think about this today and I really don't want to use the SAVE and LOAD events for anything less than somebody else dying and getting them back.”

“...that does make sense. Since you have to...” Asriel trailed off as the children stepped outside, then started again. “Frisk. I have to know. If something bad had happened to Papyrus today... what would you have done?”

Frisk stopped walking, and stared at the cloth in their hands.

“...I'm... sorry, Asriel. If we found out Papyrus was gone, I would have asked Sans to... help. This isn't something I can control on my own, and since Papyrus was involved... I know he would have done it. I know how big a risk that was, no matter what happened.”

“Why did you apologize to me?”

Frisk shook their head.

“The last time this happened, we lost less than a minute. But we were in Hotland, in the Underground, and I had just touched that star down there. Best case scenario, if it worked, we'd go back to that fight. I'd have to stop Cater again. We'd have to warn Sans and Dr. Aster, and convince everyone else that the Sages were planning to hit the police coming back into town. Everything that happened since then, the Derby, the second Address... all the moments we had with mom and dad and our friends. It'd all be gone. You and I would remember, but nobody else.” Frisk draped the cloth over the stool and took a deep breath. “Worst case scenario... we lose everything. A year and a half. Everyone's happy ending. Everyone's new homes and new friends and new jobs and...”

Frisk's voice cracked.

“And you coming back. All the way. Hands and feet and arms and legs and a Soul and feelings and getting to come home and I was going to throw it away even though there was no way to be sure you'd ever get another chance like this the second time around and—"

Soft, fuzzy arms wrapped around Frisk.

“It's okay, Frisk. If... if we had found out Papyrus was dead... I'd want you to go back, even if it meant a Reset back to the beginning. I was...” Asriel sighed. “While Undyne was freaking out trying to call him over and over, and call anyone who might have seen him today, I was going over it in my head, what we needed to do. Find out what happened, make sure you could remember it all, and... I really didn't like thinking about what would happen next.”

In Asriel's embrace, Frisk let out their breath slowly and managed to relax.
“Yeah... me neither.”

“And... Frisk. I'm glad we didn't have to. But. I'm glad you were going to ask Sans, and not me, to help. I don't...” Asriel's arms tightened around Frisk, and his eyes squeezed shut. “I don't think I could do that ever again. Not after...”

“Right.”

The door opened and Toriel stepped out into the backyard.

“The ingredients are prepared and... my children? Is something wrong??”

Frisk rubbed one eye with the heel of their hand. “It's okay, mom. Everybody had a scare today when we were worried about Papyrus. Guess we're still not over that.”

“Oh. Oh dear. Undyne did mention that earlier today, but I did not understand that the situation was so serious.”

“Well. It wasn't. Not really. But we didn't know that at the time. So...” Frisk tried to shrug with Asriel's arms still wrapped around them. “Maybe our imaginations got carried away.”

Toriel walked over to the two children, and her massive arms wrapped around them both at once.

“I can understand that. But do not be afraid. Everyone you love is safe and sound.”

“...yeah. We know mom. Everything is going to be okay.” Frisk sniffed. “But this helps. Thank you.”

“Yeah.” Asriel nodded. “Mom hugs are the best.”

“I am glad that you are both feeling better... and while I do not mean to rush anyone, I estimate that the eggplant shall be ready to be rinsed and cooked by the time Frisk's hair cut is completed.”

“Well... sooner we start, the better. I guess.”

Slowly arms were disentangled and Frisk grabbed the cloth from the stool so that they could climb on top of it. Toriel took the covering from the child's outstretched hand and, once Frisk was seated, draped it over them and tied the strings behind their neck. Asriel rubbed his paws together.

“Something wrong bro?”

“Maybe. Uhm. I remember... when mom would cut Chara's hair, they didn't want me around watching. Something about how haircuts and stuff were private human things, or... well, I noticed there's like three places in the town where humans get haircuts and stuff and they don't seem that private. So, I, I don't know if I should be here or not.”

“...it's okay with me if you stay, Asriel. Maybe with Chara, that was something they learned from growing up in the Guardian compound.” Frisk frowned. “Or maybe Chara just felt strongly about that, but didn't think that anyone would respect their feelings, so they had to say it was a human thing just to be sure people would listen. Which might also be from growing up in the Guardian compound.”

“I suppose that makes sense. Both options.” Asriel looked down at his paws. “Well... guess I'll stay. Not sure what to talk about though, or if you even want to talk, except that I don't think I'm ready to resume the whole Back to the Future thing.”
Toriel snorted and produced a pair of scissors and a comb, and began to carefully attack the unruly hair. “Perhaps you can both tell me about today, then? Most of what I have heard, I heard via Undyne, and there may have been, ah, details that were omitted or added in the retelling.”

“Heehee. Yeah. Well... dad dropped me off at the Lab and I went inside for the scan... I don't remember the numbers but I remember they were getting better. Everything kind of took a back seat after everyone figured out Dr. Alphys needed to sleep. I helped with that, actually,” Asriel added with a smug grin. “And once we convinced her to rest, Sans and I talked about... science, mostly. Physics. And after Sans brought Undyne by to convince Alphys to go home and sleep it off there, the whole Papyrus thing happened, but it turns out Least Dog stole his cell phone, sooo...”

Toriel scoffed. “That dog. I do not understand his fascination with other people's property, especially their cell phones.”

“Yeah, it's really weird. Anyway... right. I talked to Dr. Aster about some science stuff, including some things he wants to do to help the Amalgamates, and then he had Papyrus come pick me up while he and Mr. Stanton worked on some research plans. Papyrus and I checked out the Jam Jamboree before it went crazy, and after we ran to the Librarby and talked to Mr. Van Garrett, and Papyrus left to go take care of his car... and I guess that's when Least Dog tried again. Mr. Van Garrett gave me a book to keep, and I checked out another one.”

“A book to keep, you say?”

“Yeah. Apparently he does that sometimes. I guess being a librarian he's in the perfect spot to do that.”

“Actually, when I went to the book sale earlier, Mr. Van Garrett had a book reserved for me too. And he wouldn't accept my money for it. He remembered that I had asked him to keep an eye out for anything on home appliance repair and gave him a dollar in advance. That was...” Frisk sighed. “Well, it was before Mt. Ebott and the Underground. So either he held onto a note all that time, or he had it in the back of his mind all that time. Either way that's something.”

“Yeah, it is. So, as I was checking out the book, Frisk showed up with... Poncho, I think?”

“Well, technically his name is Kid, but we all call him Poncho most of the time.”

“Oh, so it is the same guy. The nickname threw me for a bit. Anyway, we talked about... breakfast foods, if you can believe that. And then we... well, we came home, and put stuff away, and somehow the conversation came back to human fairy tales.” Asriel shook his head. “I really don't understand how Frisk and I keep getting sucked into long and convoluted arguments about extremely minor details.”

“I think that's just our dynamic. Either that or it's just something in the water in this town.”

Toriel hummed in concentration. “I would hazard a guess that it is a little of both.”

“...uhm, Frisk?” Asriel asked. “I probably should have been able to figure this out before now, but why do you wait so long between haircuts?”

“Uh...”

Toriel paused as she felt Frisk tense up, even indirectly through the comb.

“Well... just bad experiences that I'm not totally over yet.”
The backyard was silent for a few seconds, until Toriel cleared her throat.

“Frisk, does this have anything to do with your human family?”

“...yeah. Uhm. Well. You know how hard it is to make my hair look good. Or even passable. Between the way my hair parts, its texture, its curl, and several other things, it's a mess. That's an objective fact. But... people who cut hair for a living, and later... my human mom... well, they tended to act like it was something I had control over. Something I was doing to spite them. I wasn't. I wouldn't even know how, if it was possible, and I'm pretty sure it isn't possible to control your own hair outside of that weird anime Alphys showed me. But I guess I learned to not look forward to haircuts.”

The sound of scissor blades snapping together and the rustling of hair through a comb's teeth stopped as Toriel stepped back from Frisk. The tools were returned to pockets from whence they came, and the boss monster walked around in front of the child.

“Frisk... I do remember that I commented on how... uncooperative your hair can be, when I first cut it. I... I did not intend to make you uncomfortable.”

The child looked down at the ground. “It's alright. Like I said. My hair is a mess and that's a fact, not an opinion. And there's no way you could have known, when I was trying to ignore and outright bury everything linking me back to them that I possibly could. And even... now that you do know... it's still just my own personal hangup. It's all in my head. The problem is on my end, not anyone else's.”

“...I was not assigning blame, Frisk. If you had been injured somehow, and there was a wound which was still tender, I would regret causing you pain by aggravating it, whether by accident or through ignorance or a combination of the two.”

The comb and scissors reappeared and Toriel resumed the haircut, her paws now much slower and more deliberate.

“Simply because an injury cannot be seen, does not mean that it is of lesser consequence than those that are obvious. And this is doubly true for matters of the heart and mind. If I am honest with myself, over this last week I have frequently been frustrated and upset over how little I understood what was going on, all the trials that my children had been forced to confront, either alone or with only each other to rely on. But I should not... I cannot... place any sort of blame on either of you. Both of you were facing dire circumstances that, even if I could have understood... I am not certain if I could have done anything to assist either of you.”

Toriel sighed.

“I cannot promise that I will understand everything, or that I will be able to help, but... I hope that in the future the two of you will feel comfortable coming to me when something is wrong. No matter what it involves or entails. I understand that there will be matters that will take some time to feel comfortable sharing, and there may be some that you feel you must always keep secret. But when you can share, I promise to do my best to help you, even if the most that I can do is to avoid making a bad situation worse.”

“...thanks, mom.”

“Yeah.” Asriel tried not to sniff. “Thanks.”
“Alright, Asriel, start the timer when I say go.”

Asriel held up the tablet, one furry finger waiting over the screen. “Ready!”

Frisk took a deep breath, looked over the ingredients one more time to verify it had all been taken care of, and breathed out slowly. “And... go.”

Asriel tapped the screen and Frisk jumped into action, adding olive oil to the sauce pan and then pouring in ingredients. Vegetables, seasonings, cream, cheese, all carefully manipulated with a spatula to distribute the food so that it could absorb the heat and magic evenly.

“Ten seconds left.”

“More than enough time.” With a final stir, Frisk took the saucepan off the burner, tapped the spatula on the edge of the pan to remove the excess liquid, and turned to the rest of the kitchen. “Alright, dinner is served.”

The kitchen was suddenly filled with the sound of boss monsters clapping, and Frisk looked down at the floor, their face red.

“That was very impressive. Cooking mixed with theatrics!” Asgore commented, and Frisk shrugged.

“Well, it's far from original.” Frisk used some tongs and a spoon to portion out the meal onto four plates all arranged on the counter top. “The recipe, the technique, even the stopwatch idea was taken from a cooking show. And in any case, the proof of the pudding, or any food really, is in the eating.”

The Dreemurrs all carried their plates out of the kitchen and into the dining room, sitting down around the large table. Frisk smiled a little at seeing Toriel and Asgore sitting next to each other, and chose the seat that would leave them opposite Toriel so that Asriel could sit next to his mother.

“Asriel, I'd like you to take the first bite to see how this measures up to the eggplants in the Underground.”

“Okay. Don't worry though Frisk. The bar is pretty low.”

Toriel and Frisk giggled, and Asriel took a moment to think about what he had said.

“...ugh. Low and Underground. I walked right into that one.” The young monster shook his head and wrapped some of the vegetable strips around the tines of his fork, raised it to his mouth, took a bite... and immediately shoved his fork into the plate again to get another bite to his mouth, and another after that.

Frisk's smile could have lit up the dining room just as brilliantly as the light fixtures along the walls, and they began to dig in as well. Toriel and Asgore followed their example.

“Mmmm. Exceptional, as it was last time.”

“This tastes not unlike a cheese sauce, yet I saw the whole thing and it took very little time at all, how was this accomplished?”

Frisk turned to Asgore to answer his question. “Well, the parmesan cheese was shredded very fine before it went into the saucepan, so it had a very high surface area compared to its volume and absorbed heat very quickly. The agitation from stirring did the rest.”
“Ah, I see. You are a regular kitchen chemist, Frisk.”

The child grinned. “I do my best.”

With a clinking sound, Asriel's fork fell on an empty plate, and the young monster's tongue peeked out to lick the sauce off of the fur at the end of his muzzle.

“Wow. That was. Really good.”

“You okay bro? I was kind of worried because you didn't seem to be coming up for air.”

Asriel grinned and stuck out his tongue at Frisk, who giggled in response.

“Asriel, no making faces at the table please.”

“Yes mom. Sorry. Got carried away.”

Asgore cleared his plate, and then his throat, and turned to the children. “Undyne told me that you had quite the adventure earlier today. Something about Papyrus and Least Dog?”

“Oh. Right. Least Dog stole Papyrus's cell phone so when Undyne wanted to call him, he couldn't answer. And everyone was worried, but it turns out he was hanging out with people in the park trying to get it back. After Endogeny helped with that, Papyrus helped move Dr. Alphys back home so she could rest, and then he took me to the Jam Jamboree, which was really fun.” Asriel's smile disappeared. “Well it was fun at first and then things got messy, so we took shelter in the Librarby, and Papyrus had to go take care of his car and I spent the rest of the afternoon reading a book called Kitchen. It's uh... actually I'm not sure what it is, but I think it might be a romance, because I just finished the part where the main character buys a meal at a local inn and then has a taxi take her a long ways away just to deliver food to this guy.”

“That could be romance or comedy, especially the type of comedy that doesn't translate well along cultural boundaries,” Frisk suggested. “Or it could be both.”

“That could be it.” Asriel nodded. “What about you, dad? Did anything out of the ordinary happen to you today?”

“As a matter of fact,” Asgore mused, “those alpacas showed up at the school not long after classes let out, and I had to shoo them away before they could do too much damage to the lawn or the landscaping in general. It wasn't terribly successful, but eventually somebody from the petting zoo came by and they all flocked to her... is that the right word? Flock? Or is a group of alpacas a herd?”

“It could be herd or flock... or maybe even a fleet.” Frisk frowned. “This is going to bother me until I look it up later.”

“Hey Frisk, what's the name for a group of humans?”

“Crowd, I think. There's different terms when the group is defined by some specific thing they all have in common, but crowd is the term you use when there's just a bunch of humans standing around waiting for something to happen. Hey, is there a word that means the same thing for monsters?” The human child grinned. “I know that was a question on the radio quiz show last week, but I can't remember the answer because of a combination of painkillers and Papyrus.”

“There's a few, but I think my favorite is teratassembly,” Asgore replied.
Toriel covered her mouth with one paw in a failed attempt to muffle a snicker, and Asgore smiled. Opposite the adults, the children looked at each other and there was a slight smile tugging at the corner of each young face.

“Good night, Asriel.”

“Good night, mom.”

“Good night, Frisk.”

“Good night mom. See you in the morning.”

The bedroom door shut, and Asriel closed his eyes. He could hear the sheets rustling as Frisk rolled over in their bed, the sounds of insects outside, the distant humming of engines as vehicles traveled through other parts of town, and the endless droning of air conditioning units.

Like the constant patter of rain on the roof of Asgore's garden shed, it had a way of permeating every sense, every thought...

“BEHOLD! THE JAM JAMBOREE! EVERYONE'S FAVORITE CELEBRATION OF FRUIT PRESERVES! ALTHOUGH I HEAR THAT NEXT YEAR SOME PEOPLE ARE PUTTING TOGETHER A FRUIT LEATHER EXHIBITION, SO THERE MAY BE SOME CONTENTION AND RIVALRY IN OUR FUTURE!”

“And, I guess if things got out of hand then that would be easier to clean up.”

“THERE IS THAT!”

The street was suddenly and briefly overcast, and Asriel looked up and pointed.

“Papyrus? Why is there a hot air balloon that looks like a chicken?!”

“THAT IS AN EXCELLENT QUESTION!! CHICKENS ARE INCAPABLE OF PROLONGED FLIGHT TIME!! WE MUST GET TO THE BOTTOM OF THIS!!!!”

The skeleton raced inside a building and up a stairwell until they were standing on the roof, and Papyrus ran up to the edge of the building as the balloon passed by. The gondola below was empty, and Papyrus jumped into it with a mighty “NYEH!” Slowly, the hot air balloon began to sink with the addition of the extra boney ballast.

Until it began to rise.

In fact, it began to rise quite quickly.

“IT WOULD APPEAR THAT THIS AIRCRAFT DOES NOT COME WITH AN INSTRUCTION MANUAL! ASRIEL! THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT! I NEED YOU TO CALL THE HUMAN FEDERAL AVIATION AUTHORITY AND FILE A FORMAL COMPLAINT!”

Papyrus was already getting harder to hear as he gained altitude, and Asriel reached out a paw. Bullets formed around his arm and shot up into the sky.

'Wait. What did I just... oh no no no no NO'

The chicken shaped balloon popped in a burst of fabric, and even as the basket plummeted to earth,
Asriel could see Papyrus's smiling face and hear him say “IT WILL TAKE MORE THAN A
SUDDEN APPLICATION OF GRAVITY TO DEFEND THE GREAT PAP.”

There was a crunching noise from the street below.

It felt like ice had formed in the pit of Asriel's stomach, and he walked over to the edge of the roof and leaned over carefully. There was broken wicker, burst sandbags... and white powder, spreading around the street.

Asriel leaned back, and noticed with only a vague amount of curiosity that coming out of his shirt sleeve there was now a paw with thorny vines growing where the fingers had once been, and the thorns seemed to be spreading. It was not that he did not feel concern, it was simply that it didn't seem that important, compared to what had just happened.

“Oh. Of course. That makes sense.”

Asriel sat down and stared at his transforming paw, not even looking up as a shadow crossed the roof and a figure stood in front of him.

“Let's just get to the point, Sans.”

“Fine by me.”

Asriel heard the sound of a Blaster being summoned, closed his eyes, and gritted his teeth....

Asriel's eyes opened. There was no Blaster. No furious skeleton with a single glowing eye. No pile of dust that used to be Papyrus. There was a dark bedroom, illuminated only by a few distant streetlights from outside the windows.

Both paws came up. No green thorns, only white fur.

Asriel let his breath out and ran one paw down his face.

According to the clock on his cell phone, it was only a little past one in the morning. Toriel would be asleep. Frisk was almost certainly asleep. Asriel pushed back the covers and stood up, and walked over to the window.

After a few minutes, Asriel sighed and walked over to Frisk's desk; blank paper and pencils were arranged where Frisk had left them in anticipation of some sort of breakthrough that, based on what Asriel was remembering from before the two of them went to bed, never happened.

A pencil was picked up and Asriel slid one sheet off of the top of the stack, and began to write.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took a little longer than planned due to some technical difficulties. Anybody who stopped by Lady Anatares' writing stream last week probably heard about it but for everyone else: I used to have a single "master copy" file that I would add to chapter by chapter, but somehow it got corrupted, and without me realizing it I ended up saving the corrupted copy over my most recent valid versions on my flash.
drives. I am a fiend for backups and this is one case where it almost bit me on the ass.

Almost, but not entirely. I was lucky in that I had backed up everything on my computer to my external hard drive about a week before, so the only thing I lost going back to that copy was about a thousand words, and given time I could pull them and everything else out of the raw data I managed to pull out of the corrupted file by doing some sort of extension renaming sorcery. The thing is... a thousand words ain't nothing to me, so it took less time to rewrite from memory than it would to go in and delete all the .xml formatting statements from the plaintext I got from the file. Go figure. :P

So yeah, with that squared away, updates should be slightly more frequent going forward, especially now that I have a new and improved backup system with more compartmentalization.
Alphys stared at the machinery on the workbench, raw materials and spare parts and just plain garbage, molded with purpose and deliberation with her own two claws, to take the form of an advanced fusion of monster magic and human technology. It looked like one of those glove mounted game controllers from decades ago, but instead of controlling pixelated graphics of a plumber trying to save a civilization of talking mushrooms from an army of turtles, this used Dimension Magic to manipulate physical objects instead—

“ALPHYS!!”

The scientist shrieked as Undyne kicked in the door to the garage.

“WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT COMING BACK HERE AGAIN WHILE YOU NEED SLEEP!!”

Alphys scrambled backwards, bumping into her workbench in a panic. “I-I-I-I just needed t-t-t-to get it finished for Officer Ward b-b-b-before—”

“Oh my god I'm so sick of your shit! All you do is fuck around with your nerdy crap and everyone else has to pick up the pieces when you screw up and I'm done! I'm fucking done! I'm done taking care of you! I'm done fighting your fucking battles! I'm done trying to figure out what you're saying under that fucking stutter!”

The garage wall was pulverized as Undyne's free weights were thrown at it and the woman stormed out. Alphys raised a claw to Undyne's retreating back.

“Undyne, wait, please! I, I—”

“Don't. Don't you even try to make excuses. We are done. I can't deal with this crap anymore. I can't deal with your crap, not anymore.” Alphys couldn't see Undyne's face, but her voice almost sounded choked up. “All those lies... all those monsters, for fuck's sake Alphys, why did you... I can't remember what I ever saw in you. Good bye, and good riddance.”

Undyne marched away from the ruined building, and Alphys dropped to her knees as the strength drained out of her legs.

“Undyne, I... I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry....”

“Alphys! Alphys, wake up you're having a nightmare!”

The lizard's eyes opened, revealing the darkened bedroom and Undyne's silhouette.

“Oh thank god. You were crying and thrashing around and—”

Undyne was cut off by Alphys lunging forward to hug her, sobs wracking her whole body. Undyne's arms wrapped around Alphys in turn, carefully squeezing her without hurting her.

“...it's okay Alphys. It was just a nightmare. It isn't real.”

Undyne held Alphys as the scientist trembled and babbled, occasionally picking out coherent
phrases like “I'm so sorry” and “please don't leave me” and at least one “I wish I was dead” which was one time too many for Undyne and did as much to wake her up as Alphys' earlier cries and struggles.

“I'm right here, Alphys. I'm not going anywhere.”

Slowly, Alphys calmed down, and Undyne felt her claws relax a little.

“Oh g-g-god... I'm such a mess... I d-don't understand why you put up with m-me...”

“I'm not putting up with you, Alphys. I'm lucky enough to be with you. There's a big difference.”

The scientist laughed a strained, high pitched giggle with no humor behind it. “Lucky?! I, I turn people into horrific abominations. I lie so often it's a miracle my mouth doesn't break from the strain when I actually t-tell the truth. And I spend so much time in my own world that—”

“Alphys. You're going into another spiral again. Calm down.”

“...I... Undyne... why? Why are you still here, even after a year and a half? I don't... I can't see it. I c-can't even be sure it's there. You could... you're so brave, and tough, and cool... you could do so much better than me.”

“No I can't. Because you're the best there is.”

Undyne listened to Alphys' breathing, made raspy from crying, and shifted on the bed.

“Hey, Alphys. Let's get up and go to the kitchen, okay? I'll make us some tea.”

“...okay...”

In the kitchen, a kettle was filled with water and placed on the stove, and Undyne pulled out some mugs and several boxes, then sat down at the table opposite Alphys, who had her claws morosely clasped together in front of her.

“The water's going to take a bit to boil... do you want to talk about what you saw in that nightmare?”

Alphys shook her head violently from side to side, so much so that she almost fell out of her seat.

“Alright then.”

The kitchen was silent for a few moments, until Alphys shifted in her seat.

“Undyne...”

“Yeah?”

“...uhm....”

“Take your time.”

Alphys looked down at her claws, then lifted them up and put them on the table.

“Undyne... I, uh... Undyne, if... if...”

Alphys looked up to see Undyne waiting patiently, then quickly looked back down at her claws
“Undyne, are you really sure that you want to marry me?”

“Yes, of course I am. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. And that hasn't changed.”

“...it's just that...”

“Alphys, are you having second thoughts?”

“What?! No, no, I just-”

“Because if you were, I'd understand. I'd... I'd understand if you had somebody else you wanted to be with. I know I'm really high energy and aggressive and that can be a lot for other people to handle. And I know that I don't necessarily understand why you love some of the things that you love, and even when you break it down to the basics, it's still hit and miss if I get it at all. So... if there was somebody else, I...”

Undyne trailed off, and yellow claws reached across the table towards Undyne's hands.

“P-please don't leave me, Undyne. There can't ever be anybody else. I know I... I know that I'm a d-dirty shipper, and I have crushes on a lot of people. But you're the only person I love.”

“I wasn't going to leave you. I just... I didn't want to get in your way if... well, I'm not blaming you or anyone. It's just that when you woke up, you were saying a lot of stuff. And I only caught a few things. So... I'm not a hundred percent sure what to...” Undyne shook her head. “When it's other people's problems, the answers are always obvious. But when it's closer and more personal, nothing is clear.”

From the stove top, a kettle began to whistle, and Undyne looked up at Alphys, still clutching her hands in her claws. Alphys squeezed even harder for a moment, then let go, and Undyne stood up and made her way over to the stove.

After a few minutes, Undyne returned with two mugs filled with tea, and set one down in front of Alphys before returning to her seat.

“This should help.”

Shaking claws picked up the mug, but Alphys managed to take a sip of the tea without spilling any, and set the mug back on the table.

“...I was out in the garage.”

Undyne looked up, but Alphys was still staring at her tea.

“I was out working on the next of the Party Favors. The one for Officer Ward. I... I had just gotten it finished, and...” Alphys shrank in on herself. “And then you kicked in the door and... you were so angry. You had to, to leave work just to take care of me, and call Papyrus and do all sorts of stuff and then I went and d-did the same thing that caused the whole mess in the first place and it was the straw that broke the camel's b-b-back. The amalgams... Asriel being brought back without a Soul... it's like everything my claws touch becomes warped and unnatural.”

The kitchen was silent, and then Undyne stood up.

“Hey, I have an idea. Throw on something, and let's go out to the garage.”
“What??”

“Trust me on this, okay?”

“...okay.”

Once back in the bedroom, Alphys managed to shrug into a spare lab coat, and followed a sweatpants-and-tank top covered Undyne out to the garage. The fish woman immediately made her way over to the piano and sat down on the bench. After a discordant combination of notes, Undyne found the key she was looking for and started playing a slow piece.

“I'm not a scientist, Alphys. So when I think of you. I don't think of robots or math or inventions or stuff like that. I think of this song.”

Alphys stared at Undyne and the piano.

“Every time I had a bad day in the Underground. I would work on this song and it would help calm me down. And when I got frustrated about Dwayne Riley or the Anti Monster League or other stuff, I'd come back to this song. It's still a work in progress. You probably noticed how awkward the beginning is. But I want you to hear this. And I want you to understand something. You mean a lot to me, and you mean a lot to everyone else too.”

Alphys blinked and looked down at her empty mug, still in her hands.

“...I can't believe that. I can't make myself believe it. Even if I want to.”

“It's not about what you believe, Alphys. You're a scientist, so look at the facts. First one: When the Barrier was destroyed, and we were trying to cope with the logistics of moving thousands of monsters out of the cavern, you were the one that found all the bottlenecks and came up with solutions. All that stuff you had everyone build in Waterfall, especially. And Frisk says it's still down there even now. Here's another fact: All Fine Labs has been cranking out building materials for monster construction since the moment you signed all the paperwork to get it started. Magic infused building materials so we didn't have to worry about extremes of weather or temperature or moisture or accidentally burning our houses down. And the same thing with Dreemurr Elementary. That was always going to happen, once Toriel set her mind to it, but you made it happen less than three months after we got here. Way ahead of schedule. And having all those human kids learning side by side with monster kids, that's going a long way to bridging the culture gap.”

“...I guess. Although that's kind of a reason for kids to not like me.”

Undyne shook her head. “That's a kids versus school thing. That's not on you. And before you get too stuck on that, let's move on to fact three: The nerdy crap you've built is all over this town and it's making people happy. The magic coffee machines? Somebody told me that the hospital wants one now. Or what about all the stuff you did to help with the food start ups, so they could meet the crazy demand we ran into once humans realized monster food heals them?”

“...that has helped out, definitely. I mean, Nice Cream and Glamburgers have a lot of brand recognition just by themselves. And... I guess building a lot of that stuff saved everyone some time and energy in the end.”

“See, there you go. You keep looking at everything you tried that didn't work. I want you to remember all the things you tried that not only worked, but worked better than anyone imagined they would. You have done a lot that improved the quality of life for monsters, Alphys. Especially my life.” Undyne stopped playing and stood up. “Hey, here's another idea. I'd like you to explain
what your plan is for that Party Favor thing. I probably won't understand it, but I still want to hear it.”

“...okay. Uhm. Let's go over here to the workbench.”

Alphys walked over to a table covered in tools, parts, notes, batteries and coils of wire, and picked out a single piece of equipment seemingly at random.

“This is the bare framework, which is going to be both the emitter and the control system. I found a bunch of old computer mice with the physical roller ball assembly instead of optics and lasers, and I'm using the roller sensors and wires like a pulley network. They'll measure the position of Officer Ward's fingers and that will be how he controls the magic field. I'll have to ask him if he has a preference, sort of like how some people have to set up their keyboard bindings a certain way when they play computer games.”

“That sounds really roundabout and needlessly complicated, but I guess if you can't use Blue Magic instinctively... or at all... this is as good as anything. What if he needs to pick something up, or climb a ladder, or make a fist to punch somebody?”

“I was thinking about adding a safety catch in the palm. But it might just be easier for him to turn it off before that. In any case, if the fingers are the control system, then something else has to be the emitter. So that can either be mounted on the top or the bottom of the arm. That should also be the power supply, so we don't have power lines that can get caught on anything.” Alphys turned the device over and pointed at a section of frayed and stripped wire. “Like what happened here, which I still have to replace... that's also why I don't want to include any sort of automatic scanning and decision making, because I'd have to connect the processors to every control link. I'd run out of room. So applying any sort of steady state field effect is going to take a lot of practice.”

“You mean like, moving different fingers back and forth to keep different fields in balance in real time?”

“Yes, exactly! Adding different vectors to the magic projection so they cancel out in real time, leaving something suspended in roughly the same location. Anyone can learn to do it manually with enough time, but if I wanted to automate it I'd need to create branching instruction sets to allow for dynamic control in real time. That's a lot of code to debug. I'd need to give it parameters for steady state hovering, for stable repulsion, for stable attraction, for steady state positioning while Officer Steve is moving so it would need sensors to check for movement.”

“Oh my god, I'm having flashbacks to school when the teachers tried to make us understand how important it was to have clear instructions, and how we had to write out every single step for making a sandwich including getting out the tools and the ingredients.”

“I remember doing that too. I basically ended up writing programming instructions for a sandwich making robot, longhand and without a computer to compile it. I almost got into trouble for that.”

“What? Why?? For using too much paper?”

“That was the excuse, but I think the teacher just thought I was being a smartass. As if it was my fault that I didn't use the level of semantic precision he wanted, but never specified in the assignment. So really, if there was anybody who was bad at making clear instructions, it was him.”

“Hah! Well, you still did better than me. I got detention for getting frustrated and tearing stuff apart and stacking it up and yelling something like 'THERE'S YOUR STUPID SANDWICH!' Good times.”
Alphys snickered, and Undyne grinned at the sound.

“Oh, and for the record...” Undyne leaned back and to one side, and then forward again. “You do have a very smart ass.”

The scientist's face flushed red, and she hurriedly put the machinery she was holding back down on the workbench. Undyne cackled in laughter and knelt down to wrap her arms around Alphys.

“Feel better, hun?”

“I think so? I mean, earlier I was miserable and afraid... but now I'm just embarrassed. So I guess that's an improvement?”

“Sounds like one to me.”

Undyne felt Alphys bring up her own arms and return the hug.

“Undyne, I, uh... thanks. Thanks for sticking with me, all this time. Even when... when things like this happen.”

“Alphys... I'm never going to leave you. As long as you'll have me here, then there is no place I would rather be than by your side.”

Alphys squeezed even harder, before relaxing. Undyne stood up and smiled.

“Ready to go back to bed?”

“...yeah. Yeah. I'm ready.”

Alphys walked over to the garage door, with Undyne close behind; Undyne turned and reached for the light switch as the door was opened-

“GAH!”

“AHH!”

Undyne's head whipped around to see Alphys stumbling back against a table next to the doorway, causing a few books, rolls of duct tape, and coils of magnet wire to tumble to the floor below. Outside, a small white figure in striped pajamas was stepping back in alarm.

“Asriel??” Alphys righted herself and walked out of the garage. “It's almost two in the morning, what are you... oh my g-god, are you okay?! Did something happen?!”

Asriel held up his paws.

“I, I... I'm not turning back into a flower I don't think. I just...” Asriel's eyes looked up at Undyne, and something clicked in the teacher's head.

“Hey I just remembered I have a thing I was supposed to do at two in the morning so you guys have fun bye!”

The boss monster and the lizard watched as Undyne backtracked through the garage, left through the large door that opened out onto the alley behind the house, and shut the door behind her. There was a knocking noise that followed that turned out to be Undyne running across the roof of the garage, and she jumped from the edge of the building all the way across the land and landed next to the door to the house, swinging the door open and spinning her way inside with the door
slamming shut behind her as a final flourish.

“...was I interrupting something?”

Alphys blushed and shook her head. “Not... I don't think so. We were heading back inside anyway. Uhm. Would you like too...?”

Alphys stepped back, gestured inside the garage, and Asriel nodded.

Inside, Alphys gravitated towards a chair in front of her workbench, while Asriel sat down on the bench behind the piano.

“So, uh... what brings you to this part of town at this time of night?”

Asriel looked down at the piano in front of him and sighed.

“I guess it... all comes down to nightmares. Which I've been having every other night since I came back, so that's not here or there, but...” Asriel trailed off and shook his head. “This one, my hand started turning into vines. I mean. It wasn't like those things I make with my magic now. These were replacing my fingers.”

“Oh my. I, uh. I can see why that would freak you out enough to come all the way over here in the middle of the night... hey, does your mother known you're here? Does anyone?”

“I left them a note. Said I needed some air and I'd be back soon and I had my phone in case of emergencies.”

“That's good. Still... thinking about it... that's still kinda risky, walking all the way over here at night.”

Asriel shook his head. “I didn't walk, that would take too long. And like you said it could be dangerous. So I, uh... I was about to say something before I realized it was a pun, so... I just used my magic vines to swing from tree to tree and building to building. I don't think anybody noticed me except maybe one or two of the monsters out late cleaning up after the Jamboree, but I doubt it since they wouldn't have any reason to look up.”

“Oh. Okay, that does make sense.”

Asriel sighed.

“That's... sorta what I wanted to talk about. You remember the last time I was here, and I, uh, made a mess of things?”

“Yeah...?”

“Well... I'm still sorry about that, for the record, but... I wanted your help. I was tired of being... whatever I was. Having Asriel Dreemurr's memories but not his emotions. It was like being a half of a person. Or less than half. And I... I couldn't see myself as Asriel. To be honest, even now... sometimes I wonder if I'm really, you know, him.”

Alphys reached up and pushed her glasses back closer to her face.

“The king and the queen are getting older, Asriel. I know that's not your original body, and I know that soul reads as human instead of monster. But your parents are getting older, and the only way that can happen is if they have a child.”
“...yeah. It's just... I can remember what Asriel... what I used to care about, back before all of this happened. And... it feels like I lost a lot of that. Sometimes it's hard to believe that me back then, and me right now... I can't believe we're the same person, and I guess that's because we aren't. So much has changed and no matter what happens next... I've changed too much to ever be him again.”

Alphys squirmed in her seat.

“Actually I know what you mean. When... when your dad appointed me as Royal Scientist. I was nervous all the time and afraid of screwing up but I was also excited and optimistic and I really thought that I could make a difference. And then... well, you know what happened next. Sometimes I think about that nervous nerdy girl and I wonder who that was, because she can't be me.”

The garage was silent for a little bit, until Alphys sat up straighter.

“Asriel, I just remembered something. I was attending one of Dr. Aster's lectures while I was still in school, and he was talking about the difference between object oriented organization systems and process oriented ones, and... well, I'll spare you the scientific and engineering framework. What's important is that he brought up a human thought experiment called The Ship Of Theseus. He was apparently a sailor a long time ago and a human philosopher pondered if, had the ship he sailed been gradually replaced bit by bit until none of the original hardware was left, would it still be the same ship.”

Asriel blinked. “Oh... I can see how that might apply to me.”

“Actually, it would apply more to Frisk than you.”

“What??”

“Human bodies are mostly physical matter, but that matter is constantly changing. Being worn out, used up, or transformed chemically. Their food isn't just a source of energy, it's a source of spare parts and building materials to keep rebuilding what is lost. But that's just one variation on the same principle. Dr. Aster pointed out that the alleged paradox only makes sense from an object oriented perspective. From a process oriented perspective, there is no conflict; the Ship of Theseus is the Ship that Theseus is sailing, and that means everything that is a part of it. It was an important lesson to learn, that you have to switch between those two viewpoints to keep from painting yourself into a corner as a scientist, or locking yourself out of a solution as an engineer... again, not exactly information you can use. But what you can use is this; you are the person that does what Asriel does. That makes you Asriel. The question of if you are still the same person, or somebody else, doesn't apply when you look at it from that angle.”

A paw came up and scratched Asriel's chin.

“...huh. I didn't think about that. And, actually... looking at it that way? I guess that kind of explains Flowey. All that stuff I did, I did because I was bored and frustrated and couldn't feel, couldn't care. I can do both, now. Because I have a part that I didn't as a flower. I have a Soul. Asriel did and Flowey didn't and... even if it's not the same Soul, it still does the same things... and it lets me do the same things.”


Asriel held up his paws and stared at them.
White fur.
Not green thorns.
“It's me....”

“Hey Frisk, are you still working on that thing?”
Frisk looked up from their work and nodded. “Yeah. The seals are bad and they got hot before they failed so I have to scrape all of the burnt rubber off so the replacements can make a good seal. Problem is it’s fighting me.”

“Like, with guns or knives?”

“No, it's just stubborn. Passively resisting me.”

“Oh. Like Gandhi.”

“I guess-”

Alarms began to blare and there was a screech of feedback as the announcement system came to life.

“Attention! This is a Class Three Emergency! PETA is moving towards the Dairy! Repeat! PETA is attacking the Dairy! Everyone proceed to your assigned evacuation stations!”

“Ah hell.” The figure that Frisk could neither recognize the face of nor remember the name of grabbed their shoulder and pulled them upright, then dragged them through the building. “This is why I hate Tuesdays! Bad things always happen to me on Tuesdays!”

Per dairy industry standard, on the second floor of the building, powered hang gliders were standing by in the event of animal rights activists. Frisk was shoved towards one, and saw their coworker grab another one and take off. Their hands moved automatically, testing the control surfaces and the engine before powering everything on and taking flight.

From above, the crowd surrounding the dairy looked very intimidating, but Frisk could not look at the ground and steer the craft at the same time; the glider was directed towards the river and Frisk opted to follow it until they had a better idea, or until the fuel ran out.

As the thought was formed in Frisk’s mind, the engine sputtered to a stop, and the glider slowly began to descend towards the river. Frisk tried tried to steer towards the shore, but a crosswind pushed them back over the water....

“Tra la la. I expected this from Hal, but not from you.”

There was a flash of light that had to have been a bullet attack and the safety straps holding Frisk to the glider popped. The child dropped a scant few feet into a wooden boat, while the glider crashed into the water a short distance away and began to sink.

“Tra la la. Hello again, young Frisk.”

“...hello.” Frisk shook their head. “So... this is another dream. Right. Makes sense now. Nobody would hire a ten year old to work in a dairy. And I don't know why a dairy would have...”
Frisk pointed at the tip of the wreckage of the glider before it completely vanished beneath the water.

“That.”

A robed head tilted to one side. “And what of the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, staging an armed assault upon such a place?”

Frisk frowned.

“Actually that might be the most realistic part of the dream... and thinking about it some more, that wouldn't be a bad job, working in a dairy. I'd get to work on mechanics and chemistry stuff, with all the hardware they used to pasteurize milk and turn it into other products.”

“Something to think about for the future, then.”

“The future... ugh.” Frisk shook their head. “I'm guessing this isn't one of those dreams then? No Jordan Cater. No explosions. No losing everything and everyone...”

“Tra la la. You seem to think that such events are an inescapable part of your destiny.”

“Aren't they? The CORE thing happened. Cater killing me happened. Even those weird symbols I kept seeing... they showed up. So maybe... the thing at All Fine Labs. The stuff with Sans and Alphys. Maybe that will still happen.”

“...tell me of these dreams.”

Frisk sniffed. “Well... the stuff with Sans and Alphys happened first. Alphys found out that... she found out something about me. Something that scared her and everyone. And she called for help and Sans killed me. And the Lab stuff... same thing, only they kept me in a secure cell instead of killing me outright, and... and Toriel didn't... want me anymore... and Asriel, I was never going to see him again, and...”

The boat drifted along, and the Riverperson remained silent, waiting for the human child to regain their composure.

“This is... this is my life now. The future where I work at a dairy and almost die from a hang gliding accident because of PETA is the best of all possible futures for me. How screwed up is that?!?”

“It sounds to me like those two futures you described earlier could not coexist. One cannot die, and also be held prisoner as a test subject.”

“...yeah, but they could be sequential. Sort of.”

“In theory, yes.”

The boat lapsed into silence again.

“But in practice, no.”

“What?”

“Tra la la. It is far past time for you to be given an object lesson in timespace mechanics. I present to you... the river.”
Frisk looked out over the river, the trees on the shoreline, the occasional house with a boating dock.

“Is this like the river of time metaphor?”

“Precisely correct. Water flows from the source to destination, sometimes fast and sometimes slow. Sometimes it branches. Sometimes multiple sources combine into one. Sometimes it pools into lakes. Sometimes the current twists back on itself, creates whirlpools and eddies.”

A fish jumped out of the water near the boat, splashing some towards Frisk and the Riverperson when it dove back under the surface.

“And of course, the river carries life along with it.”

“That's us in the metaphor, right? The fish?”

“Among other things. Now begins the lab practicum of this course. Place your hand within the water, and you may divert it from its path, send it along a new one.”

Frisk blinked, looked towards the water, and after some hesitation, reached out a hand.

“If I wake up and I have to change the sheets on my bed, I'm blaming you for it.”

“That is fair.”

The water pushed back against Frisk's hand, and left a v-shaped ripple on the surface. Frisk removed their hand and shook off the moisture.

“As you remove your hand, the water resumes its original course. Objects within the stream divert the path by virtue of their presence, and as a function of their shape and location, but they are pushed by the water in turn. Every change is a compromise. There is no telling how many have waded into the river of time to bend its path, only to be pulled under and drowned by the weight of history... to truly direct the path of the river requires not directing the water, but directing the land around it. Dams and locks and falls and wheels and watercourses.”

The surface of the water rippled and became choppy, and in front of the boat a small island of rock emerged from the surface, while parts of the shoreline caved in and fell under water, taking trees with them.

“We forget this, carried along with the current as we are, but those who stand upon the shore, they forget it as well, and they do not have our excuse of blind familiarity.”

Frisk felt the hair stand up on their neck and turned back towards the Riverperson. “The shore? You mean... outside of time?”

“Time is not a location, so by definition, nothing exists outside of it. Or inside. Time is a relative quality of matter and energy, not an absolute reference. Some processes do not operate on the same time frame as our own. The river, in our analogy, is simply all arrangements of matter and energy with similar temporal attributes, which allows them to interact with each other most easily.”

“...you're starting to sound like Dr. Aster.”

There was a movement under the Riverperson's cloak that could have been a shrugging of shoulders.
“Well, I did attend many of his lectures.”

Frisk also shrugged and turned back towards the river. “Guess that explains it. So... not outside of time. Just not part of our specific timeline.”

“Correct.”

“But if being part of the same timeline makes it easier to interact, wouldn't it be really hard for anything from a different timeline to interact with ours?”

“Precisely correct. The greater the degree of temporal divergence, the more difficult it is to establish any sort of exchange in energy states. The events which have the greatest influence on our lives are those events closest to us because we are living through them. Just as water seeks its own level, and the rushing of rivers grinds away at the edge of a waterfall, we are still masters of our own fates and captains of our Souls. Every change is a compromise.”

“...that's kind of reassuring. Nobody can have it all their way.”

“Tra la la. A funny thing happened on the way to Hotland. I was reminded of something that I had forgotten. A solved puzzle and an unsolved puzzle are two sides of the same coin. Inseparable. And, even more importantly... puzzles exist to be solved. So long as there is a problem, no matter what it is, a solution will be found... because people will keep attempting to do so.”

“...okay... so... some of what happens in my dreams might happen, but because of multiple factors. And... if any one of those factors is different... that can't happen, at least, not like I dreamed it. I dreamed that I was dropped into the lava, but that didn't happen, so something must have changed enough to keep that part from happening. And the CORE didn't explode, so I changed something there too.”

“The dreams you dread becoming waking events are no different from any other possible future. And you forget one very important detail.”

“...what is it?”

“That you are not the only one involved in creating them. For those futures to come to pass... you, and Sans, and Alphys, and everyone else, must all be converging upon a single event. If any participant refuses, if everyone cannot agree on what the future must be... if even a single Soul refuses to compromise... then those bad dreams will stay dreams.”

Frisk stared at the Riverperson, then down at the surface of the river.

“...that's good news, I know that... but can one person really stop a terrible future from happening, all by themselves?”

“...didn't you?”

The boat drifted closer and closer to the shore, until it ran aground with a soft grinding noise of wood against earth.

“Tra la la. And so we reach the end of the lesson, and the ride.”

“...thanks. For the help, and for the lesson, and for the reassurance.” Frisk stepped off the boat and looked around the shore, to see where to go next.

“Beware of the man from the other world, Frisk Dreemurr. Kindness can be the greatest cruelty.”
Frisk felt that sensation again, of the hairs standing up on their neck, and turned back towards the Riverperson... who was already drifting down the river again.

“...what man? What other world?”

“...It doesn't really matter. Besides...”

The Riverperson turned away from Frisk, gazing out over the river towards the opposite bank... *where a black shape, a shadow with nothing casting it, darkness made solid, was watching them both.*

“It's rude to talk about someone who's listening.”

Frisk's eyes opened.

The child sat up and looked around. They were in their bedroom, and the other bed was occupied by a half snoring, half mumbling Asriel.

“Okay... that was weird. But it didn't end with me killed. I'll take what I can get at this point.”

Frisk climbed out of bed and looked at the book on the nightstand... and the locket next to it.

“Four more days...”

The heart shaped locket was picked up, and Frisk's hands reached back to clasp the chain behind their neck with a practiced ease... despite only being given the jewelry a few days before.
“Good morning, Ebott's Wake! You are listening to The Morning Rush in all its acoustic splendor! I am Brett 'The Brett' Brinkmann here with the often imitated, never duplicated Dee! Jay! Paaaaantz!”

“What was with the emphasis there?”

“I'm just having an emphatic morning is all.”

“Well... isn't there a human medicine that can help with that? That pink stuff?”

“That's... that's something else, and it's for something else. And I, uh. I hope that all our listeners are also having an emphatic morning which does not require the use of any sort of over the counter medication to get through, here in lovely Ebott's Wake, Nature's Hypotenuse.”

“...uh....”

“This slogan refers of course to Immanuel 'Handy Manny' Kelly and his efforts to calculate the height of Mt. Ebott using simple geometry and longhand arithmetic. Our top story this morning, as you might imagine, is an overview of yesterday's Jam Jamboree. Winners of the sweet preserves contest are Dr. Edna Therrick in first place with her raspberry jam, Kevin Dugan in second place with his huckleberry preserves, and KEBT's own Jeff Walsh with his impressive and until today unprecedented strawberry kiwi lemonade jelly securing third place. Gotta say Jeff, that was something else.”

“Yeah. Nice one.”

“Of course, all good things must come to an end and that's definitely true of the Jam Jamboree, with order breaking down at the worst possible time during the Hot Water Pressure Canning demonstration. Fortunately nobody was injured. And in a nice change of pace, the cleanup was accomplished this morning in record time, due in no small part to a cadre of monsters with water and cleaning magic working diligently through the night.”

“Or to be more accurate, one really, really intense George Washington and like six other people standing around scared to get in his way.”

“As a reminder of coming events, tomorrow there will be a public demonstration of emergency medical and lifesaving procedures at the Memorial Auditorium, with repeating classes to accommodate differences in schedule. Here's another important reminder; this week is the official end of the school year, so expect a bunch of excited children all week long and especially mid-day Friday as both James Madison Elementary and Dreemurr Elementary open their doors.”

“Hey Brett, what are your opinions on kids?”

“Well... I don't have a problem with them, though I used to be one, so I don't know if that makes me biased or not. Why do you ask?”

“Well, it's topical for one thing. What about having kids, do you ever think about that?”

“These are kinda personal questions to be asking on air, but yes, I have thought about it from time to time. What about you?”
“It's been on my mind a lot, actually. Though I did reinstall Skyrim over the weekend. Not sure how much that counts for.”

“Ah. Bethesda's award winning fantasy themed marriage simulator.”

“Yup.”

“What's your favorite build?”

“Redguard, Fifty-fifty between Health and Stamina, One Handed, Dual Wielding, Light Armor, grinding Smithing so I can make and upgrade my own equipment as fast as the Draugr level up.”

“What category of weapons? Swords, axes, maces?”

“Maces.”

“For the armor bypass?”

“Naw, I just roleplay that my guy is a drummer in a band and he's really strung out on Skooma most of the time.”

“...okay. That's as good a reason as any.”

“What about you? Or is Skyrim too much of a sandbox?”

“It's fine, I just tend to follow the main plot and only do sidequests for special equipment aaannd Jeff has reminded me that we're doing a radio show, so, uh, let's toss it over to Gary Welkin with the traffic report! How's it look up there Gary?”

“Salutations Brett and Burgie! This is Gary Welkin speaking from the top of the KEBT broadcast antenna, and from my vantage point traffic is currently backed up on Tesseract Road and East West Road! I would recommend an alternate route to all drivers whose destinations do not lie upon those roads!”

“...what?”

“I will repeat myself! Traffic appears to be backed up on Tesseract Road and East West Road! The East West Road obstruction appears to be an unruly holdout of Alpacas from yesterday's mass breakout, but sight lines do not permit me to determine the nature of any delays on Tesseract Road!”

“...let me try that again. What the hell are you doing on the antenna?!!”

“It occurred to me that as Jeff was regaling me with stories of his own adventures in traffic reporting in my absence, that I can only stand to improve my performance by gaining a new perspective on traffic, one much closer to the surface of the earth! And so I have emulated him in his observations! Also, Tsundereplane may or may not have cut things a little fine and caused a catastrophic failure of the traffic copter's tail rotor, so needs must while the old girl gets the once over at the Quarterhorse Fields Airport!”

“...by old girl, do you mean the traffic helicopter, or Tsundereplane?”

“Burgie, I have some serious reservations about your choice of words and also I may be fearing for your life right now.”

“It's alright. We went to school together. I asked her out once. She laughed so hard she stalled out
and crashed. I'm safe.”

“Well... here's hoping. Uh, in other news... that's right! All Fine Labs is calling a week long hiatus on the Phase Two Soul Research scanning program as they will be temporarily understaffed while Dr. Wing Ding Aster, Sans, and assorted security take a trip to Washington DC. The rumor mill has been doing a number on this one so in an attempt to set the record straight, the purpose of this trip is to testify before... what is this... The Senate Oversight Committee On Paranormal Activity. Whatever that is. To the best of our knowledge here at KEBT, the proceedings will be broadcast tomorrow over CSPAN, starting at ten in the morning.”

“So good luck to Sans and Dr. Aster, and congratulations to all... eight... people who went ahead with Phase Two scans over the past week or so without the incentive of free food or free T-Shirts. You do us all proud. Wow.”

“To be fair, Burgie, this last week has been an absolute bedlam of activity. The return of Prince Asriel, Cater's escape and recapture, the Kludge Derby, the second Address, and that's on top of everything else.”

“...yeah, okay, you make some good points.”

“It's uh, it's not entirely clear what the Senate committee wants testimony about but the name hints towards something involving magic or monsters or both.”

“Oh. I should DVR that then. I'd love to see human politicians schooled in basic magic theory. Literally and figuratively. Possibly even metaphorically.”

“Well, it's not my thing but to each their own. Moving on to regional news, after the recent vehicular accidents on Runner Road, Lone Point is talking about a bond issue to fund the paving of the road right up to our side of the township.”

“Oh, well that's good. I heard some people were talking about paving our side anyway, especially after the intersection mess.”

“One can only hope. Meanwhile in Triton, the city council has fined the Drama Llama Alpaca-Rama for failure to properly secure its animals and is threatening to revoke their business license.”

“Well that doesn't seem fair. The first time those guys got loose, everyone is saying it was the New Guardians or Anti Monster League or Lollipop Guild or whatever we're calling them now. Since they needed a distraction to spring Cater when he was being taken to Quarterhorse Fields. And the second time, that was just some unlucky driver that didn't want to run into a jackknifed semi, wasn't it?”

“That is the story I remember hearing, yes. The management of the Alpaca Rama has either promised or threatened, depending on who you ask, to unleash, and I quote, “a plague of fleece beyond the imaginings of contemporary civilization” if they are shut down.”

“...huh. Hey, is the last name of the owner Greene?”

“Oddly enough it is, but Archibald Greene is descended from the Gemini Roads Greenes, and not the Ebott's Wake Greenes, and they are completely unrelated. So it's actually just a huge coincidence.”

“Ugh. Just when I thought I had something figured out.”

“Yeah, genealogy is a harsh schoolteacher.”
“Speaking of names, I keep seeing your last name written differently on the paperwork here. Is it one letter n at the end or two?”

“It's supposed to be two but I'm not picky about it as long as the bank still accepts my paychecks. Most of my paperwork through elementary and high school had my name spelled B-R-I-N-K-M-A-N. Didn't care. It sounds the same either way.”

“Well, that's one mystery solved. I thought it was like Van Garrett at the Librarby. Something about the first 't' being sometimes silent.”

“Huh. I never heard about that... moving on. There's nothing official on the Gemini Roads event calendar but apparently there are unofficial plans to start a community garden. I suppose if anything comes of those plans we'll hear an official statement at some point. I mean they already have their own garden club, so it would be like making it official, or something. Oh, and backtracking to Lone Point for a second, they have officially recognized that a monster is in the running for the position of municipal assayer, a very important position over there. It'll be interesting to see how that turns out.”

“Really? I didn't hear about that. Who is it?”

“It says here... Moe Lesk.”

“...oh. OH. I know that guy. I mean. I remember going to school with him a long time ago. We never talked. Like, ever.”

“This may be particularly important for the county and state's political dynamics because Lone Point has the second highest population of monsters after Ebott's Wake, and we have yet to have any monsters run for political office here.”

“Well, it's been a year and a half, Brett. A lot of us had these fantasies of what we would do once the Barrier was broken. I can't speak for everyone but I know for a fact that mine didn't involve sitting in a stuffy room arguing with human politicians all day... actually after a certain point most of my happiest fantasies involved being fired and homeless, so maybe my experiences aren't the ideal benchmark to use here. Also, probably nine out of every ten monsters that live in Lone Point are aquatic and between the beach, the fishing, and the water desalination plant, water management is really important to their health and happiness. So yeah, they would want somebody to speak on their behalf.”

“So it's more a case of, if it's not broke, don't spend time running for office trying to fix it.”

“Well, there's also different political expectations. Humans have a whole bunch of different political parties, even though two of them get most of the attention, and you guys cycle your politicians out of office every couple of years. We had the same monarchs for thousands of years. The more I think about it, it's actually sort of an apples and oranges comparison.”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“Anything else on the regional events list?”

“Well, there is a notice here that the Belmoley Players are changing the venue of their showing of Death of a Sales Tactic this week while the Quarterhorse Fields Arena is replacing the fallen spotlights. They are collaborating with the Parks and Recreation department over there to hold three shows in Wallace Park. Times are one PM tomorrow, two PM Friday, and one PM on Saturday. Any tickets for the Arena showings will still be valid but seating space will be much
more limited, so tickets will be redeemed on a first come, first served basis. That's about it.”

“That's convenient since that takes us almost up to the break. Guess when we come back we'll have Winston Devinter on location at the Ebott's Wake Recycling Center to see what's new in recycling. Spoiler Alert, it's nothing. That's why it's called recycling.”

“Yeah, maybe he can get us some answers on if All Fine Labs is finally going to buy the place or not. I've been hearing rumors about that since Labor Day. In the meantime, have a public service announcement, but stick around because there's more Morning Rush coming your way!”
“The crew will now move about to perform a final cabin check. We will have more information for you after take off.”

Justin looked away from the video screen and turned towards Dr. Aster, who was staring at the safety card.

“First time flying, doc?”

“Until very recently I lived the entirety of my life in an underground cavern. I don't feel obligated to dignify that question with an answer.”

Justin grinned. “Just so you know, that attitude won't go very far when we get to DC.”

“Are you a senator?”

“...fair point.”

The scientist rolled his eye lights and turned the other way, to see Sans looking out the window. The younger skeleton seemed a lot more at ease despite being a first time flier as well. Then again, Sans always seemed more at ease.

“Hey, did you see the TSA lady's face when the doc and Sans showed up?”

In the seats in front of the monsters, the two junior security guards from All Fine Labs were talking, derailing his train of thought before it could leave the station.

“No, I was scanning the crowd. I saw their faces though. Can't have been that much different.” One of the men half turned around in his seat. “Hey, Sans.”

“that's muh name, don't wear it out.”

“Is there a reason you're coming along to help Dr. Aster and not Dr. Alphys?”

“yup, and that reason is if Alphys was going, then all the work that goes into keeping All Fine Labs running would fall in my lap.”

“...aha.”

“also, if she had hair, she'd be tearing it out trying to figure out how to fit six airline tickets into the budget, so even if she did come along she'd be too distracted to really explain anything.”

“Ah, yeah. Still, it's not like we're traveling first class or anything-”

“Mom, there's a skeleton!”

“Shush! Don't point, and don't stare! It's rude.”

Sans snickered. “looks like they figured us out, dadster.”

Dr. Aster rolled his eye lights again. “Mr. Carrow, remind me again how long this trip is going to take?”
“Well, the weather can make a difference either way, but we're looking at about nine hours all told. And honestly we might be lucky that way. Quarterhorse Fields Airport never did a direct flight to anywhere outside of Oregon or Washington until the whole tourism thing took off. If we'd tried to do this a few years ago we'd probably have to change planes at least twice just to get on a flight headed to Virginia or Maryland.”

“heh, nice one.”

“What?” Justin blinked, then scowled. “Oh. Took off. Walked right into that one.”

“yup.”

“You know I'm starting to see where Papyrus gets his abiding dislike of wordplay from.”

Sans chuckled and turned back towards the window.

“Hey mister, how do your bones stay together?”

Dr. Aster turned to see that a small human was leaning out of his seat and turning around to get a better look at him, and another, larger human was trying to pull him back.

“Tony sit down and buckle up we're going to take off any minute.”

“Why are there holes in your hands? Do they hurt?”

“Tony sit down.”

The scientist glanced down at his right hand, and the hole in it, then blinked and looked over at Sans. The younger skeleton usually had his hands in his jacket pockets, but when they were out, he was wearing gloves.

“Sans.”

“sup?”

“When did you start wearing gloves all the time?”

“eh. some time after you disappeared. Papyrus said gloves were cool, and who am i to argue?”

“...hmmm.”

“Check in everyone.” Cavanaugh's voice. In response, the two security guards in front of the monsters responded.

“Jessie here, got nothing.”

“Caleb here. Everything's green.”

“Army?”

“Clear on this side,” Justin replied.

“Got it. Let's just hope it stays that way. Jessie, I thought I saw you yawning earlier.”

“I've been up since four thirty trying to get ready for this flight.”

“Cavanaugh. I'll take first watch if Jessie needs to play catch up.”
“That isn't how it works, Army.”

“Well, you better come up with an alternative then.”

The interruption brought the fact that Dr. Aster was surrounded by humans with uncertain intentions, and would be for many consecutive hours, to the forefront of his attention.

“Something on your mind, doc? I mean, besides all the science.”

Dr. Aster turned to look at Justin and shrugged. “If my father was still alive today, he'd give me an earful for letting myself get surrounded by humans so easily. I mean, if I had ears.”

A small head stuck out into the aisle.

“If you're a skeleton doesn't that mean you're already dead?”

“Tony I swear to God if you don't sit down right now I am going to take you over my knee in front of God and everybody!”

There was movement in Dr. Aster's peripheral vision, and he turned his skull to see Justin staring at the seat in front of him with one arm crossed on front of his chest. Justin noticed Dr. Aster's attention and brought his other arm up, pointing with one hand at the watch on the opposite wrist.

“You know doc, I think it was Abraham Lincoln who said it best. 'Any man can handle adversity, but if you really want the measure of his character, give him power.' Or something like that.”

“That's catchy.”

“It is. Also very topical right now.” Justin seemed to be looking at the seat in front of him where the child was sitting, and then turned to look at the seat occupied by what appeared to be the child's mother, and then turned to Dr. Aster with a crooked smile on his face.

“Actually doc, since the subject's come up anyway, I was wondering about the holes in your hands myself.” The man's voice was slightly louder than it needed to be, and the cadence was off, and most telling of all, Justin was winking and his head was nodding towards the seats in front of him. There was a subtle shift in the bones of Dr. Aster's face that indicated a smile.

“Well, if you must pry, these holes are my primary magical focal points. Actually, about two thirds of all monsters that actually have hands, paws, claws, or other physical manipulators find magic easiest to project using those body parts. It's not universal, but it's statistically significant.”

“Now that's interesting. So they're not injuries.”

“Correct, they are not injuries. Of course, not all skeletons have them. You may have met, or simply seen, the Gothic twins? Their hands more closely resemble the bone structure of human hands, with multiple smaller bones in the palm region.”

“ Haven't had the pleasure, to be honest. Sunday I was too busy before, during, and after to do much mingling. Also, as far as the whole bones staying together thing goes, I'm going to guess that's magic.”

“Sure, if you want to oversimplify it.” Dr. Aster held up one finger on one hand, slightly bent, and then pointed at the joint with his other hand. “Each individual bone generates its own smaller magical field, and they interact with each other, just like the electrical activity of your muscle fibers causes them to contract and pull your skeleton in different directions. The fundamental
principles are different, but the actual mechanics are surprisingly similar. Of course, skeletons don't have all that tissue in the way so we can have a wider safe range of motion."

“Can you separate body parts and put them back into place?”

“Nope. To be honest I think that whole idea got started because most skeleton magic resembles bones in some shape or form.”

“Well, that would do it.”

“And in anticipation of your next question, skeleton monsters are as alive as any other monster. The similarity of skeleton monsters to human remains, so far as anyone has been able to determine, is some peculiar evolutionary coincidence. It's seen in other cases, like how so many monsters share a superficial resemblance to physical animal life common on the surface.”

“I was wondering about that.” Justin frowned. “Although to be fair, I didn't actually start wondering until PETA showed up.”

“PETA?”

“Oh, right, you missed that. There was a whole kerfuffle where the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals showed up in Ebott's Wake and Triton. They apparently saw fur and feathers, scales and tails, and didn't see anything else, so it got messy really quick.”

Dr. Aster scowled. “So... I am hoping that I misunderstood you just now, because it sounds to me like there was an entire group of humans that treated monsters like they were unthinking animals.”

“That's exactly what happened. At least, with the monsters that looked like animals. I don't think they knew how to cope with skeletons, ghosts, dragons, or Mettaton.”

“ain't nobody knows how to deal with Mettaton,” Sans chuckled.

“True. So yeah. Things started at rock bottom and somehow managed to keep going downhill, until it degenerated into a pie fight like the end of Blazing Saddles.”

The scientist blinked. “I didn't see that coming.”

“Neither did any of the PETA idiots. That's why it was so effective. Of course, these people will kidnap family pets and euthanize them out of some bizarre misconception that it's the natural order of things. They're not the brightest bunch, and that's being generous.” Justin shook his head. “I didn't know it was possible to break a man's femur with a single punch, but I'm not really surprised that Mike managed to pull it off.”

“...what??”

Justin shook his head and leaned back in his seat.

“When we get back, ask Joe to tell you the whole story. I only caught the second half.”

“...as long as we're on the subject, how did Mr. Van Garrett become so strong in the first place?”

“He found an old copy of a book on exercises that circus strongmen used back in the day, and followed the instructions religiously.”

“Oh.”
“Excuse me mister skeleton?”

Dr. Aster opened his eye sockets and looked around in confusion before remembering where he was; somehow the mechanical hum and vibration of the plane had lulled him to sleep. Sans was out like a light, but that didn't mean anything one way or the other because Sans could, and had, fallen asleep standing up before.

Eye lights turned and focused on a diminutive human figure with brown hair, standing in the aisle and staring at the scientist.

“Can I help you?”

“My mom fell asleep and I was wondering if I could ask some more questions before she woke up again?”

Dr. Aster blinked and brought up a hand to scratch his forehead. “The irony is that questions are why I'm here in the first place, but sure. If I didn't want people asking me questions all the time, I shouldn't have become a scientist. So ask away I guess.”

“You're a scientist?”

Dr. Aster nodded. “That's right. I specialize in magic physics and engineering, but I've studied other fields too. I used to be Royal Scientist to King Asgore Dreemurr, a long time ago.”

“I saw pictures of him on TV! He's like a big lion goat!”

Dr. Aster stared at the human, tried to calculate the most likely age represented by Tony's stature when compared to Frisk, and then considered the pros and cons of explaining boss monster physiology.

“Well, the technical term is Boss Monster, but sure, why not.”

“If he's the boss monster, does that mean everyone has to do what he says?”

“Well, he's still technically King, but apparently he dissolved the kingdom for legal... oh. OH. I see what you mean. Boss Monsters are a specific type of monster with stronger magic than most. That doesn't automatically make them leaders. Although... Boss Monsters tend to live longer than other types of monsters, so they experience more. If they learn enough from all of that, then that wisdom can make them a great leader. I supposed that's how the Boss Monster Aristocracy got started.”

“What's a wrist crazy?”

“It's just a way of organizing a society. An aristocracy is when most of the political or economic authority belongs to a small group of families and power is passed down from parents to children. There are other ways for a society to work, of course, but that's what monsters used for a long time and it worked for us and the problems we were dealing with in the Underground. You could say it was the right tool for the right job.”

“My mom says that monsters are un-American because you guys have a king.”

Dr. Aster shrugged. “Well, now that we're out of the Underground, King Asgore mostly spends his time gardening instead of king related duties. Maybe that counts for something. Or not. It's hard to tell.”
“Why does the king do gardening stuff?”

“Well... everyone needs a hobby.”

Tony chewed on one fingernail for a moment.

“My mom brought me on a trip to see my dad. He lives in Triton.”

“Ah, that's the town north of Ebott's Wake. Nice place. Very colorful leaves.”

“Yeah. She said he was probably going to marry a bunny. Then she said not tell him that. But you're not my dad so it's okay I think.”

The scientist stared at the human child.

“You know, you remind me a lot of my younger son right now.”

“You have kids?”

“Yes indeed.” Dr. Aster pointed his hand at the seat next to him, with Sans in it, snoring softly. “This is my older son, Sans. My younger son is named Papyrus. He's back in Ebott's Wake.”

“I wanted to go visit there but mom said it was dangerous.”

“Hmmm. Well, given all the political stuff that happened and the violence in the last few weeks, your mother may be right about that. Let's hope it settles down soon.”

“What do your sons do?”

“Sans is scientist, like me. Papyrus is... I don't know what the word is. It's some sort of career humans have where they take pictures and write about their everyday experiences on put them on the internet and then somehow that makes money.”

“Oh, that's a blogger! My dad does that!”

“Huh. Will wonders never cease.”

“Yeah, my dad blogs about food and stuff, I think! He has all these recipe things he posts online!”

“That makes just as much sense as what Papyrus does, I suppose.”

“Yeah. He got some monster ice cream for me, but he said I couldn't tell mom because she'd freak out. It was weird. Like it melted as soon as I put it in my mouth. Like Dippin Dots.”

“Like what??”

“Dippin Dots. Like, little balls of ice cream. Only the monster ice cream was a big thing on a stick. And it didn't melt on to my hand while I was eating it. Why is that?”

“Probably ice magic, but I'm a scientist, not a chef.”

“Hey, how do you tell boy skeletons and girl skeletons apart?”

Dr. Aster blinked and heard a muffled sound that had to be Justin trying to stop himself from laughing.

“To be honest, we usually don't. Without going into too many details, because while you're not
wearing a striped shirt I'm pretty sure you're too young to hear them, monsters come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. It's not always possible to tell what people are based on appearances. That's why monsters use the words 'they' and 'them' to indicate anyone they don't know that well. It's just common courtesy.”

“Oh.” The child's expression seemed contorted in confusion for a few moments. “What was that about striped shirts?”

“Because monsters can come in some many different forms, we adopted a tradition where children wore striped shirts until they reached adolescence... that is, until they were teenagers,” Dr. Aster added, noticing the increasingly confused expression on the child's face. “It helped us keep track of them and keep them out of dangerous parts of the Underground, like Hotland before all the elevators and safety systems were built.”

“My mom says all monster technology is made out of trash.”

“Well, for a long time it was. I mean, that was all we had to work with, mostly. That and like a handful of ore deposits that we ended up mining out pretty quickly. You know what's really ironic about that?”

“What?”

“It turns out most of the garbage that came to us through the river was dumped there illegally. So if humans had been a bit more responsible about their trash, it would have made things a lot harder for us down there.”

“...so is it good to throw stuff away? Because my mom says that people are wasteful and don't care about the world and need to stop doing stuff like that.”

“Well, I think that all comes down to context. What was bad for other people most of the time was good for us most of the time. I guess what I'm saying... if I'm saying anything really... is that sometimes actions have consequences we don't expect and can't predict.”

“...oh. Okay... if two dog monsters have babies, will they just have one or two like humans, or will they have like a big litter like dogs?”

Dr. Aster stared at the child for a few moments before responding.

“Honestly? I don't know. I studied physics and engineering mostly. That's medical science, and I'm not that kind of doctor.”

“Oh. Is it true Mt. Ebott is a volcano?”

“There is a magma chamber underground, yes. That's why the king decided to name it Hotland. Worked out well for us because we were able to tap the heat to power our technology, especially lights.”

“Did it ever erupt?”

“No, but the active magma chamber means that Mt. Ebott is technically a semi-dormant volcano, as opposed to just active or just dormant or just extinct.”

“Do dog monsters and skeleton monsters fight a lot because of the bones thing?”

Dr. Aster opened his jaw to respond, then closed it and tapped his chin with one fingertip before
“Strangely enough, there is a dog monster called Least Dog that keeps stealing Papyrus’s bone stockpiles. And his cell phone now, for some reason.”

“Hey! I know who Least Dog is! He made that game that mom won't let me play because she says its ‘monster popper gander’ whatever that is.”

Dr. Aster blinked. “Do you think she meant monster... propaganda?”

“Maybe.” Tony shrugged.

There was a sudden sound of movement from the seats in front of Justin and Dr. Aster noticed the child freeze up as if caught with their hand in the proverbial cookie jar.

“Tony? Where is- omigod.”

The woman practically stumbled into the aisle, grabbed Tony by the shoulder, and dragged him forward.

“Sir I'm so sorry about my son I told him not to-”

“It's perfectly fine. Your son was just asking me a series of unrelated questions without pause. I actually consider it good practice for tomorrow. No harm, no foul.”

The woman didn't appear to be hearing Dr. Aster as she pulled her son back to his seat.

“Tony if I told you once I told you a thousand times when are you going to listen to me about strangers?!”

“But he's a scientist! He knows stuff! He didn't mind if I asked him questions-”

“Tony I have told you over and over again, you can't just walk around talking to random people like in a video game!”

Dr. Aster blinked and turned to look at Justin; the man's eyebrows were raised, but he didn't see otherwise surprised.

“Frankly doc, walking around talking to random people described the majority of my childhood.”

“Same here. Wonder why she's so set against it.”

“Must have grown up in the big city.” Justin shrugged and leaned back in his seat. “Lots of weirdos in the cities, especially in America.”

“...it really impresses me that you can say that with a straight face.”

Justin stuck out his tongue. “We're not weird-”

“-we're eccentric.” Dr. Aster rolled his eye lights. “Yes, I know.”
White, furry fingers traced their way through the soil, picking some up and crumbling it. Some grains fell onto an outstretched paw, and a pink tongue flicked out to touch them.

“It’s a little sour, dad.”

“Hmmm.” Asgore stared at the patch of earth as Asriel spat out the dirt, and then continued to spit to try to drive out the taste. “The soil on this side of the lot has always been more acidic than elsewhere. Nothing I do has been able to change that, and I’ve been wondering if I should simply reserve this region for plants that prefer acid soils.”

Asriel held out one paw and a glowing green vine grew from it and snaked down into the soil.

“If there's something solid down in there that's changing the chemistry, I should be able to find it.”

“And if it is not, then we at least eliminate that possibility.” Asgore looked towards the school building as the doors opened and Undyne marched out holding some assorted sporting equipment, with noisy, excited, complaining children in tow. “It would seem that the time of physical fitness is upon us.”

“ALRIGHT NERDS! Everybody who signed up for little league baseball this year, line up! If you're not signed up, then see me in a bit once I get everything set up!”

“Oh dear. Asriel, we had best move. We appear to be in range of any 'popping flies' from the baseball practice.”

Asriel frowned, then pulled his vine out of the ground and let it fade into motes of green light, which vanished.

“Couldn't find anything. There must just be some sort of weird thing in the soil.”

Asgore shrugged. “That is as good a reason as any.”

The two boss monsters walked across the land in front of the school, until Asgore stopped by a row of decorative flowers.

“Ah, these are coming in nicely.”

Asriel looked around and spied a bench to sit on, and made his way over. Sitting down, Asriel sighed and stared at his paws, not looking up as a shadow blocked out the sunlight.

“It is true gardening can be tiring work. It is a good idea to rest now and then.”

“That's not it. Well, it is. But it's not all of it.”

“...my son. If this is about your... magical difficulties, I want to reassure you that your mother and I place no importance in that. You are alive. You can feel. And you are you. We will support you and provide what assistance and advice that we can, if you need to ask us for help, but it is not a requirement or an obligation that you possess the same magical affinities as you did before. You are back, and that is all that matters.”

Asriel continued to stare at his paws.
“...actually. I was thinking last night. I had some trouble sleeping, and... well. To make a long story short, I got to thinking about who and what I am... Dr. Alphys still isn't sure what happened to bring me back, and with Dr. Aster and Sans both gone for the next few days, everyone at All Fine Labs is running as fast as they can to just stay where they are. So there's no time to run the tests they want.” Asriel shook his head. “At first all that came back was memory. Soul and body took much longer. And maybe I'll never get back what I had, because this...”

Asriel waved one hand up and down in front of himself to indicate his body.

“Maybe this is all that could be brought back because whatever it was could only do so much, so memory, soul and body had to take priority. And if that's what happened. I can live with that. I just wish I knew so I can stop hitting my head against a wall trying to practice.”

The bench creaked as Asgore sat down next to Asriel.

“You have omitted another possibility, Asriel. You mentioned that memory came first, Soul and Body later. Perhaps only so much can be brought back at any one time.”

“Yeah...” Asriel flexed his fingers, opening and closing his paw into a fist over and over, and little sparks of magic shot out from the fingertips. “I wasn't sure I wanted to try star bullets, once I knew I couldn't do fire magic as well.”

“There is certainly something to it, even now. And you certainly are not lacking in magical power.”

“That's true.” Asriel's paw came up and rubbed the center of his chest. “Dr. Alphys compared it to a human organ transplant. Guess human souls work the same way as their bodies...”

Asriel stood up straight with a confused expression on his face.

“Asriel? Is there something wrong?”

“On the scanner, Dr. Alphys says that this looks like a human soul. And she had all these theories about what happened to human magic and why they have all that power but can't seem to project it anymore. And. And I heard her talking to different people about those things she was making for Mr. Stanton and Mr. Carrow and Officer Steve. The magic in the machinery doesn't work for somebody who doesn't have a soul with a color that matches the type of magic being used. Maybe the reason the plant magic comes easily and everything else doesn't is because with a human soul, my magic works the same way now. It's specialized, or something.”

“Hmmmm. Now that is an interesting idea. Although I can't help but notice a lack of human magicians for comparison.”

Asriel swallowed. “Uh. Yeah. So much for that theory.”

“Now, now. It sounds as good as anything else that I have heard. You should definitely share it with Dr. Alphys when she has a free moment.”

“Okay. Something to look forward to for next year, then.”

Asgore laughed a deep belly laugh, and a large fuzzy paw rested on Asriel's shoulder. After a moment, the child leaned into his father.

“You know, dad... before everything happened. I used to pretend that I was going on adventures on the surface. Exploring new places. Fighting mean humans. Stuff like that. And now that I'm here,
my greatest fantasy is making it from sunrise to bedtime without any crazy stuff happening to me or anyone I love. And because it's this town, that's a dream that's never going to come true.”

“You may be right about that. But that is simply in the nature of the town, and the surface in general. Personally? I have had dreams come true, up here.”

“Really? Like what?”

Asgore turned towards Asriel with a smile, and the young monster's eyebrows shot up.

“Oh. Right....”

Asgore chuckled.

A comfortable silence descended, interrupted only by the excited screams of sporting children and Undyne's equally enthusiastic instructions.

“...so, dad.” Asriel finally said. “They're going to broadcast the thing with Dr. Aster on TV, I heard. Are you going to want to watch it? Because I think Frisk knows how to record stuff like that, and probably it will show up on the internet anyway.”

“Hmmm. I admit I am a bit undecided. It could be very informative, but he will be speaking to human politicians first and foremost, and my interest in politics waned as soon as I could garden full time. I was all too happy to dissolve the Kingdom legally, when I understood that was an option. Oh, I understood completely the legal advantages of the strategy Frisk and the human lawyers wanted to attempt, but if I am honest with myself... I had the weight of the Underground on my shoulders for a very long time, and that most certainly influenced my decision.”

“...well, we'll have the video for you if you do decide to watch it. I'd like to see it myself. I always liked Dr. Aster, how he broke down complicated stuff into simple ideas. And I'm wondering if it's going to be like that, or if it's going to be something different because of the political angle.”

“It could easily be both. Or first one, and then the other.”

“Yeah.”

The silence resumed, until it was interrupted by a crack of a baseball bat, and a baseball falling out of the sky to land on the sidewalk. A young rabbit monster appeared from around the corner of the building, yelling "I GOT IT!” and grabbed the baseball, then sprinted back.

“I see what you mean by the danger of pop flies.”

Asgore nodded. “Of all the many sports that humans invented, that of baseball looks to be the safest for humans and monsters to play together, but even it has risks. Actually, it is possible that the only completely safe sport is bowling, as there is never any direct or indirect contact between players.”

Asriel grinned. “Okay, that I could see. Except there's always the risk of a monster cheating using Blue Magic. Or a human accusing a monster of cheating, no matter if they did or not.”

“Very true. Much like with that fanciful race on Saturday, I imagine that there will need to be judges on hand to ensure fair play. Of course, Blue Magic is just as unsubtle as any other form of magic, as it is always accompanied by either a steady glow or a sudden flash of light—”

Asgore stopped talking suddenly, and his face took on a puzzled look.
“Dad? Is something wrong?”

“My son, you came back a week ago today, right? Last Tuesday?”

“Yeah. That's right.” Asriel held up his paws and stared at them. “Still double checking in the morning that I didn't turn back into a flower overnight. The stats look better and better on each scan, but... I still worry.”

A large paw rested on Asriel's head.

“Asriel. I don't believe that is going to happen, not for one minute. But, in the unlikely event that it does, I want you to know that nothing else will change. We will still be family, no matter what happens to any of us. And you will not have to take refuge in my garden shed, for lack of anywhere better to go, unless you find that you prefer that space. But that is a bridge we will all cross if we come to it.”

“...dad, did you know that I was back there? I mean obviously you couldn't know it was me, but between Frisk leaving stuff for me there, and me putting what I found on or under the ground back there, did you realize somebody was using the shed like a, a lair, or something?”

“Hmmm. It was a very gradual process. I knew that sometimes Frisk would leave things in the shed, and I suspected they had a reason for doing so, I just never asked until I noticed that they left that tablet computer device. They said that they got it so they could leave the laptop at Toriel's for safety's sake, and stay connected as far as news and weather was concerned, no matter where they were.” A large golden beard was stroked. “Thinking about it, it is obvious they really meant for you to stay connected.”

“Yeah. Frisk didn't want me to be bored. And not just because when I was bored I tended to take it out on other people... ugh. I really need to go to the Arboretum and apologize for all the stuff I did.”

“Well, there will certainly be time enough for that once the weekend rolls around, and everyone's schedules... is that Officer Steve??”

Asriel looked up to see a police cruiser come to a stop next to the school, and a familiar human stepped out.

“Yeah. That's definitely Officer Steve... oh boy. If this is bad news-”

“Mr. Dreemurr!” Officer Steve waved and jogged over to the bench. “Good timing, catching you here. I've got some news I figured I'd share with you and the queen. Just keep it under your hat, okay?”

“Of course. What is it?”

Officer Steve grinned.

“We just took down the last of the Guardian Safehouses yesterday. We got an anonymous tip, checked it out, hit pay dirt, and rolled the place up.”

Asgore smiled. “That is good news indeed.”

“Well, it's not perfect. We didn't actually catch anyone there, and there's only evidence linking us to two other people. Neither one of them was Thomas O'Dell. We think he was the mastermind behind breaking Cater out of custody and attacking the Underground. But unless he's got some
secret underground base of his own right now, there's not a whole lot he can do just by himself.”

“Uhm. Excuse me.” Asriel raised one paw to get Officer Steve's attention. “What makes you think he was behind the attack on the CORE?”

“Mostly it was the testimony of that other Guardian that rolled on the rest. Martin Walker. But we also found a really extensive set of notes and plans in their main safehouse, once we knew where it was. There's also an audio recording of the Lost Eagle County Electric Cooperative meeting last week, and O'Dell's voice is definitely on it. The guy's really good at disguises, I'll give him credit where it is due, but his voice is very distinctive. So yeah. It's only a matter of time before we catch up.”

“That is very reassuring.” Asgore's smile could have lit up a quarter of the town. “Thank you for stopping by and letting us know.”

“All part of the job, Your Majesty. Now I just need to repeat myself a few more times.”

“Thanks, Officer Steve!”

The policeman nodded to Asriel and headed inside the building. Asgore stood up and stretched after the human had vanished through the double doors painted with the Delta Rune.

“Golly! This is a great bit of news for everybody!”

“Yeah. That is not how I expected that conversation to go.” Asriel hopped off the bench. “Hey. Maybe if this keeps up, we can all make it to the end of today with only minimal crazy random happenstances.”

Asgore chuckled. “Well, that would be nice. Still, there is always something to be said for novelty, especially after ages of routine.”

“Yeah... there is that.”

The cafeteria was a pandemonium of noise, children and teachers talking to and over each other with the large space causing the voices to echo back and forth, beyond the ability of any sound absorbing materials to muffle. Students and teachers, coming in a variety of shapes and sizes, alternately carried on conversations or arguments and consumed food like it was going out of style.

Asriel picked at the peel of his orange with one claw, and startled a bit as a tray dropped on the table.

“Sorry bro. My arms are giving out on me.” Frisk sat down and picked up a fork. “Undyne had everyone who wasn't practicing for baseball practicing for everything else, seemed like.”

“Oh. Great. Got that to look forward to when fall rolls around.”

“Yup.” Frisk grinned and started wolfing down fruit. “Don't worry. We'll get you ready this summer, rather than dumping you into the deep end. Just like the classroom knowledge stuff.”

“You seem pretty happy for somebody that's tired and sore.”

Frisk nodded. “I was standing close to Undyne when Officer Steve came out to talk about the last safehouse being taken down. It really does look like we're going to be okay.”
Asriel nodded and finished peeling the orange. Inside, the orange pulpy flesh alternated with brown striations and marbling. A section was pried out and found its way into Asriel's mouth.

“...mmm. Not bad.”

“Was that a chocolate orange? One of dad's hybrids?”

“Yeah. From the school greenhouse. I couldn't... you know. Get excited about it before. But it's definitely something.” Asriel pried out another section of orange. “Also, it's been nice hanging out with him. And getting to see the inside of the school buildings and outbuildings. Couldn't do that before.”

“Right. Can I have a piece of orange?”

“Sure.” Asriel pried another segment out of the orange and handed it to Frisk, who very nearly swallowed it whole.

“Mmm. That is good. Dad's getting better and better at this.”

“Well, it helps that the plants can actually get real sunlight on the surface. Now more magic can be used to actually infuse them and alter their characteristics, instead of mostly being used for life support like in the Underground.”

Asriel looked at what was left of the orange, then placed it on the table and stared at it, resting his head on one paw.

“You alright?”

“Yeah. It's just. I was able to help dad with a couple things today. And that felt good. I'm not complaining at all. But I'm a little bit worried about that being all I can do. Just plant magic. And... I don't think I want to be a gardener or groundskeeper when I get older. Too many bad memories. But I don't know what else I can do, or even what I want to do.”

“...you know, I'm not sure either. I remember wanting to be an astronaut, and a scientist, and some other stuff. But I don't know if I still want any of that. I do like being ambassador but I don't think I can keep doing that, even if I only get shot once. Monsters really need somebody trained in law and political science, not just somebody who knows how the Librarby card catalog works.”

Frisk picked up a grape, stared at it, and then popped it in their mouth.

“But as far as what we do later. We don't have to decide right now.”

“...that's right. We'll cross those bridges when we get to them.”

There was a buzzing noise and both children checked their phones.

“Oh, it's me.” Asriel unlocked the phone and checked the incoming messages.

12:12 PM EZ_Being_Greene: THE CANADIANS ARE COMING
12:13 PM EZ_Being_Greene: THE CANADIANS ARE COMING
12:13 PM EZ_Being_Greene: REPENT REPENT THE END IS
12:13 PM EZ_Being_Greene: NIGH
12:13 PM: hey hal
12:13 PM: r u ok
12:13 PM: also
12:13 PM: whats with the canadians
12:14 PM EZ_Being_Greene: THEY KICKED OUR ASSES IN 1812
12:14 PM EZ_Being_Greene: NOBODY ELSE REMEMBERS
12:14 PM EZ_Being_Greene: BUT I REMEMBER
12:14 PM EZ_Being_Greene: SORTA
12:14 PM EZ_Being_Greene: I MEAN
12:14 PM EZ_Being_Greene: I WASN'T THERE PERSONALLY
12:15 PM: rite
12:15 PM EZ_Being_Greene: YOU HAVE BEEN FOREWARNED
12:15 PM EZ_Being_Greene: BY HISTORY
12:15 PM EZ_Being_Greene: POSTWARNED
12:15 PM EZ_Being_Greene: AFTWARNED
12:15 PM EZ_Being_Greene: N E WAY
12:16 PM EZ_Being_Greene: STEVE SAID THEY GOT THE LAST SAFEHOUSE
12:16 PM EZ_Being_Greene: CANT WAIT TO TELL JUSTIN BUT HIS PHONE MUST BE OF
12:16 PM EZ_Being_Greene: IN FLIGHT
12:16 PM EZ_Being_Greene: SO
12:16 PM EZ_Being_Greene: PIZZA PARTY AT THE MINIGOLF
12:16 PM EZ_Being_Greene: AFTER I FIX MIKES TRUCK
12:17 PM EZ_Being_Greene: SO MAYBE SATURDAY
12:17 PM EZ_Being_Greene: LOT OF BODY WORK INVOLVED AND IM SWEARING OFF RED BUL UNTIL THE NEXT TIME THERES A LIF OR DETH CONFRONTATION
12:17 PM EZ_Being_Greene: SO NO ALL NITERS
12:17 PM: ok
12:17 PM: looking forward to it
12:18 PM EZ_Being_Greene: I WILL PUT PINEAPPLE ON MINE AND NO ONE CAN STOP ME
12:18 PM EZ_Being_Greene: THATS IT
12:18 PM EZ_Being_Greene: BACK TO WORK
12:18 PM EZ_Being_Greene: TAKE CARE AZZY
12:18 PM: u 2 hal

Asriel looked up from his phone to see that Frisk had cleared their tray... and was trying to reach for what was left of his orange.

“...really?”

“I'm sorry. I'm just so hungry today for some reason.”

“...probably making up for lost time. I remember all the times you had to skip lunch to chase after me.” Asriel looked down at his phone again. “Hal says there's going to be a party at his mini golf course Saturday or something, to celebrate the whole safehouse thing.”

“Nice.”

Asriel picked up his orange, carefully split it in half, and handed one half to Frisk.

“Here. You've been relentless about sharing with me. Now I can return the favor.”

“Thanks.” Frisk began to take apart the orange, before stopping abruptly. “Asriel... is this what life is supposed to be like? No worrying about timelines or magic or religious cults trying to kill us all?”

“I don't know. But I think I like what we're doing now more than that other stuff.”

“...yeah.” A section of orange was peeled off and Frisk gulped it down. “Just worrying about tests and homework and not passing out during Undyne's class... I could get used to that.”

Asriel blinked, and slowly started to smile.

“Actually... when you put it like that. It doesn't sound too bad.”
“Don't be a stranger now!”

“REST ASSURED I SHALL NOT ALLOW OUR FRIENDSHIP TO REVERT TO STRANGERSHIP!” Papyrus waved to the cashier and walked out of the market, looked around, and proceeded down the sidewalk with not infrequent friendly gestures and statements of greeting and recognition directed towards many of his fellow pedestrians. Looking around carefully for any sign of Least Dog, Papyrus pulled out his cell phone.

CoolSkeleton95 posted an update: MY SEARCH FOR PASTA-RELATED INGREDIENTS WAS SUCCESSFUL! TONIGHT SHALL BE A CELEBRATION OF EPICUREAN MASTERY WITH SIX TYPES OF BASIL!

With his responsibility to keep the internet aware of his food related exploits thus completed, Papyrus continued down the sidewalk past the Librarby, where the main doors opened up.

“Thanks, Mindy! I'll be back in half an hour! Forty minutes, tops!”

A giant of a man holding a large cardboard box on one shoulder descended the steps to the sidewalk. “Oh, hey Papyrus. How you doing?”

“MY DAY HAS BEEN A CELEBRATION OF THE ABSENCE OF MINIMAL EFFORT WORDPLAY! SANS APPARENTLY SAW FIT TO MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME IN ADVANCE BY PESTERING ME WITH AIRPLANE AND FLIGHT RELATED PUNS BEFORE HE AND DAD LEFT THIS MORNING, BUT IT HAS BEEN ABSOLUTELY AMAZING SINCE THEN!”

“Glad to hear it. Where you heading off to next?”

“ALL FINE LABS, IN FACT. IT WOULD APPEAR THAT IN HIS HASTE TO PREPARE FOR THE TRIP TODAY, MY FATHER MISPLACED SEVERAL PAPERS ON HIS ONGOING AMALGAMATE RESEARCH! SINCE THE CATASTROPHE IN THE CORE, HE HAS DISPENSED WITH TEMPORAL RESEARCH ENTIRELY AND SO THIS HAS BECOME HIS NEW OBSESSION.”

“Huh. That's interesting. Actually it's doubly interesting because I'm heading to All Fine Labs too. Apparently they decided to just shut down everything except basic operations and the production lines for those Soul Accessories in anticipation of Sans not being around to catch what falls through the cracks, but that backfired and now Joe has a whole bunch of free time on his hands.” The Librarian patted the box with his free hand. “So he asked for copies of a whole bunch of stuff related to the Sages way back when. Genealogical records, recovered internal documents and lore, things like that.”

“IT SOUNDS LIKE HE IS TRYING TO SOLVE A MOST DEVIOUS PUZZLE AND NEEDS REFERENCE MATERIALS!”
“That's as good an explanation as any. I should probably put in some chips or something in here so he remembers to eat and doesn't starve to death.”

“DO YOU KNOW WHAT CONUNDRUM HE IS ATTEMPTING TO SOLVE?”

“Not specifically. Actually we've all been kind of working on the problem of how to find and beat the New Guardians from different angles, but with that last known safehouse discovered, maybe we can step back on that. No way to know for sure of course, but this still gives us a little breathing room... I know they shut down the scanner for the next few days for maintenance, since they didn't have enough people to manage the Soul Research volunteers and keep the lab safe with the chief of security going on the trip too. But that's definitely become Joe's personal windmill.”

“...WINDMILL?”

“It's an archaic literature reference. Don Quixote, the storyteller who goes crazy and is convinced he is a knight doing knight things, sees a bunch of windmills and thinks they are giants. It would have been clearer if I'd said this was Joe's personal obsession, but I've lived and worked around books so long I can't go for five minutes without thinking in metaphor and simile like that. But yeah. Joe's even more hyped to figure out what human Soul colors mean than I am now, and that's saying something.”

“THAT WILL BE THE MOST WELCOME OF WELCOME BACK GIFTS, IF HE PRESENTS A SOLUTION TO THE PUZZLE OF SOUL CHROMATICS TO DAD UPON HIS RETURN!”

“There's that too.” The librarian scratched his beard with his free hand. “Any dog related problems today, by the way?”

“NONE SO FAR, BUT I AM TAKING THE UTMOST OF CAUTIONARY PRECAUTIONS WHENEVER I TAKE MY CELL PHONE OUT!”

“Good idea. Personally I keep mine on a pocket lanyard, like what Eli does with his wallet.”

“YOU DO NOT TAKE CARE TO PROTECT YOUR PURCHASING POWER FROM PICKERS OF POCKETS??”

“Well, I do, just not to the same extreme as my cell phone. 'He who steals my wallet steals cash; tis something, nothing, twas mine, now his, and has been slave to thousands, but he who steals my phone steals my good name, and robs me of that which not enriches him, to say nothing of my music library.' Paraphrasing a bit but it's been about six years since I last read any Shakespeare. And I stopped going to the park events after Flowey started... hmmm. Actually maybe that's not an issue anymore, with Asriel back.”

“QUITE SO. I HAVE GOTTEN THE IMPRESSION THAT ASRIEL IS EAGER TO MAKE AMENDS FOR HIS FRUSTRATED LASHING OUT, AND A PART OF THAT IS A SUSPENSION OR CANCELLATION OF FUTURE FRUSTRATED LASHING OUT! NOT THAT I BLAME HIM IN ANY WAY SHAPE OR FORM; BEING SOULLESS IS A TERRIBLE FATE TO BE AFFLICTED WITH.”

Papyrus's voice actually seemed to drop in volume, and Van Garrett turned towards the skeleton with an alarmed look.

“You alright?”

“I AM FINE, I WAS MERELY REMEMBERING THE PRINCE'S RETURN A WEEK AGO TODAY. AT ONE POINT, HE ATTEMPTED TO EXPLAIN TO EVERYONE WHAT IT WAS
LIKE... HE WAS QUITE INCONSOLABLE, NOT TO MENTION INCOHERENT. WHICH WAS ONLY TO BE EXPECTED.” Papyrus shook his skull, and his toothy grin came back, along with his projecting voice. “FORTUNATELY THE AMBASSADOR WAS ABLE TO HELP LIFT HIS SPIRITS, AND HE HAS BEEN DOING MUCH BETTER! AND THAT, IN MY ESTIMATION, IS A FAR MORE FAVORABLE DEVELOPMENT THAN THE CAPTURE OF THE LAST GUARDIAN SAFEHOUSE, THOUGH OF COURSE THIS IS ALSO TERRIFIC NEWS!”

“Wait, what's this about a safehouse?”

“IT APPEARS THAT SOMEBODY TOLD MUFFET THAT THE LAST GUARDIAN SAFEHOUSE HAS BEEN TAKEN OUT, AND SHE IN TURN TOLD ME WHEN I STOPPED BY THIS MORNING TO DO A FOLLOW UP ON HER WEB CRULLERS! AND THIS RUMOR WAS UPGRADED TO HEARSAY, AND THEN HAPPENSTANCE, AND FINALLY SCUTTLEBUTT, AS I HEARD IT PASSED FROM PERSON TO PERSON AT THE MARKET, THE EXCHANGE TRUST, AND EVEN JOE'S HOUSE OF STUFF!”

“Huh... so THAT'S what that was about.”

“I BEG YOUR PARDON?”

Van Garrett shook his head. “Steve's been off comms since last night. That usually means he's on the job. So that must be what he was working on. I heard that we found the place, but I didn't know it was already taken out until you told me. And of course, it's impossible to keep a secret in small towns; somebody always overhears, or manages to figure things out on their own. When I was younger I was convinced that half the people that live here are psychic.”

“SNOWDIN WAS LIKE THAT IN MANY RESPECTS! ALTHOUGH MOST OF THAT WAS SIMPLY PEOPLE GETTING DRUNK AND OVERSHARING AT GRILLBY’S.”

“Aha. Yeah, booze will do that.”

“I MUST SAY, WHILE I AM DELIGHTED TO SHARE THE SIDEWALK WITH YOU AND CHAT ABOUT MANY THINGS, IT OCCURS TO ME THAT YOU COULD TRANSPORT THOSE DOCUMENTS WITH LESS TIME AND EFFORT BY USING YOUR VEHICLE!”

“While that is definitely true, my truck is still at Hal's garage. The frame looks completely unharmed, just like I figured, but the exterior was pretty messed up when we were fighting Cater's reinforcements during the drive up the mountain. Still better than Steve's police cruiser though. The doors were so screwed up on one side Asgore had to cut them off with magic just so everybody could get out. I remember that distinctly before everything went crazy on a stick with a side order of fries... anyway. Hal's doing me a solid. The bodywork repair is basically being done at cost, since we're best friends and all.”

“WOWIE! I EXPECTED A RANDOM ACT OF KINDNESS FROM MISTER GREENE TO BE LESS KIND AND MORE RANDOM!”

“Oh, well. In that case. You should hear some of the stories about when we were in school, and coming up with gifts for Secret Santa, back when that was a thing....”

“Mr. Stanton?”

Joe looked away from the whiteboards he was scribbling on, but it took several seconds before his
eyes could focus on anything further away than a few feet.

“I'm sorry, what is it?”

“Mr. Van Garrett said you requested some reference works from the Library—”

Joe sprinted out of the room with a speed that almost caused the short, wide-eyed monster to spin around comically from the displacement of air. The human scientist bounced off of several walls after making sharp corners too fast and finally stumbled into the lobby to see the librarian waiting... with a tall skeleton in jeans and a New Home University Hoodie standing next to him.

“Hey Joe. Got yer stuff. Sorry it took a day but I had to manually copy everything. This stuff is waaaay down in the queue for the digital archive volunteers.”

“No, it's fine, it's fine! This is great!”

“You need any help?”

“Naw, it's okay, I can take it from here.”

The librarian lifted the box off of his shoulder and presented it to Stanton, who accepted it, and immediately sagged under its weight.

“I stand corrected,” Joe managed to say in a strangled voice a few registers higher than his normal range. Mike immediately grabbed the box again, and Joe made some wheezing noises.

“Not sure if the box is too heavy... or if I am too out of shape.”

“Could be both. I can cart this thing where you need it and you can unload it at your convenience.”


Joe managed to lead the librarian and skeleton to a meeting room filled with whiteboards, which were in turn filled with diagrams in various stages of completion.

“Just on the center table is fine. I can break it down to different project elements if I have to.”

The box was deposited carefully on the table, but despite Van Garrett's obvious caution, the table creaked as it absorbed the weight. Papyrus walked up to Joe and held out a gloved hand.

“IT IS VERY NICE TO SEE YOU AGAIN, ESPECIALLY AFTER THE EXCITEMENT ON FRIDAY AND THE FRENETIC UNDERTONES OF THE ASSEMBLY PREPARATIONS ON SUNDAY!”

Joe winced at the volume but held out his hand to shake anyway.

“You too, Papyrus.”

“IF YOU CAN WAIT BUT A MOMENT... HERE WE ARE!” Papyrus pulled a stack of papers in a manila folder out of his hoodie pocket and presented them to Joe. “THESE ARE THE PROCEDURAL RECOMMENDATIONS AND EXPERIMENTAL FRAMEWORKS THAT MY FATHER WAS REFINING IN BETWEEN PREPARING FOR THE TRIP TODAY!”

“Thanks a whole bunch, man. He said he was wanting us to get started on that while he was gone, but there's no way that can happen as things stand right now. But at least with these here, I can get everything sorted out so it's all ready to roll out when he gets back. Whenever that is,” Joe added
“Hey Joe, what’s with the hypercube?” Van Garrett pointed at a sketch on one of the whiteboards, and Joe walked over.

“It's just me free-associating at this point. Not that it means anything until now. At least with these records you brought I have a ten percent better chance of being closer to an actual answer.”

“ACTIONS MR. STANTON, CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT YOU ARE ATTEMPTING TO DEDUCE?”

“Well, I can try. And if you can't explain something to somebody else then you don't really understand it yourself, so that's definitely a good reason to make the attempt. Okay. We were all working on stuff last week. Trying to figure out what the hell the Guardians or Anti Monster League or whatever they called themselves were up to after Cater got loose. Mike has these books that we think belonged to the Guardians, since they were buried in a fireproof, waterproof container in Bastion Circle, where their compound used to be. He was approaching the problem from a social and mental reference angle, but I found something interesting after installing some of the upgrades Dr. Alphys designed for the Soul Scanner, and I want to tackle the problem from a different direction.”

Joe pointed at a hexagonal diagram of heart ideographs, each in a different color of marker.

“I'm going to see what I can figure out from the Guardian Lore based on the idea that at some point they actually did know something about Souls, possibly passed down through the generations after the war. They obviously wouldn't have had electronics at the same sophistication that we do today, but it's possible that they did have access to some alternative means of knowing what they had, possibly magical in nature. Or at least, reference notes from monsters that knew about this stuff. Either way, if I tackle it from a physics standpoint while Mike's still working the social engineering side, one of us should hit pay dirt sooner or later.”

Van Garrett shrugged.

“I haven't really gotten anywhere as it stands, so looks like we're still both at square one.”

“We'll see how long that lasts once I fit all of this stuff into my head and onto the boards on the other side of the room. Like you said, if there's anything at all to it, then we've got to stumble onto the answer at some point just by random chance.”

“Yeah, those aren't my words, but that's what I said... it might be a while though. Unless I get another all consuming brainstorm.”

“Please god no. I don't think the town can handle another Time Cube moment.”

“TIME... CUBE??” Papyrus asked, clearly confounded. Joe shook his head.

“A long time ago, somebody by the name of Gene Ray came up with the weirdest freaking website ever, and Mike got obsessed with plumbing its secrets. He didn't sleep, eat, or bathe for a week. Then he set himself on fire.”

The librarian scowled at Joe. “I told you before and I will tell you again. I was sleep deprived and I thought I was being efficient.”

“Also the thing he did end up with by the end was basically just a confirmation of what everyone already knows, that the earth is round and the local time depends on the relative position of the sun
in the sky, so that's why time zones exist.” Joe raised an eyebrow again. “He probably could have
gotten the same results in less time without neglecting basic survival needs by just systematically
deleting all the text on the website that was racist, self-aggrandizing, or just repetitious.”

There was a thud as Mike's elbow dropped to the table and his hand was held up.

“He who would challenge my results and seek to change my methods must first best me in ritual
combat.”

“...I'm not arm wrestling you Mike.”

“Then you concede the validity of my findings?”

“No, I just don't want to have a repeat of the Senior Class Trip.”

“WOWIE! EVERY TIME I HANG OUT WITH YOU GUYS, I LEARN EVEN MORE NEW
AND INTERESTING THINGS!”

Joe looked up at the skeleton and coughed.

“Uh. Thank you Papyrus. The, uh, feeling is mutual.”

The door shut behind Papyrus and he began to hum tunelessly as he unburdened himself of various
objects, both culinary and otherwise. Ingredients were placed in the refrigerator or pantry as their
needs and natures dictated, his camera was taken upstairs to his room and plugged into his
computer, and his phone was about to be placed in its charging station when the doorbell rang.

“BE RIGHT THERE!” The skeleton sprinted out, jumped over the balcony railing and stuck the
landing on the ground floor, then ran over to the front door.

“WELCOME TO THE ASTER HOUSEHOLD, HOW CAN I...”

Papyrus trailed off as his eye sockets took in the sight in front of him.

“Hello Papyrus, may I come in?”

The skeleton blinked at the robot standing on the doorstep, then managed to find his voice.

“YES! THAT! IS A THING! THAT CAN BE DONE!”

The door opened wider and Papyrus stepped back as Mettaton walked (or more accurately strutted)
inside of the house.

“Thank you so much, darling.”

“PLEASE, MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME!”

“Oh, I'd love to, but I doubt very much your brother and father will enjoy returning home to find
their residence covered in sequins and glitter.”

“UNFORTUNATE BUT ACCURATE. CAN I GET YOU ANYTHING?”

“That won't be... necessary...” the robot's voice trailed off and Mettaton looked down at the floor
for a moment. When his gaze returned to Papyrus's skull, his expression and posture had both
“When I left New Blook Acres today, I didn't expect this to be so hard.”

“WHAT IS THE DIFFICULTY YOU ARE EXPERIENCING? IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN DO TO HELP??”

“...I suppose that depends on what happens next. Papyrus... do you remember an awkward ghost in your classes at Home and New Home University?”

“I WOULDN'T DESCRIBE NAPSTABLOOK AS AWKWARD, JUST SHY! ALTHOUGH I ONLY HAD TWO CLASSES WITH THEM ANYWAY...”

Mettaton raised a mechanical eyebrow with a soft clicking noise. “I don't mean Napstablook, although I am glad that you remembered them... I was referring to the other Blook.”

“OH! I KNOW OF WHO YOU SPEAK! HAPPSTABLOOK, THE HAPPY GHOST!”

There was another clicking noise as the robot blinked. “Happsta... what??”

“OH, I KNOW THAT WASN'T THEIR REAL NAME, THAT WAS JUST WHAT I CALLED THEM! THEY WERE ALWAYS SO UPBEAT AND POSITIVE! I ALWAYS ENJOYED CLASSES WITH THEM, EVEN THOUGH WE ONLY TALKED A FEW TIMES... AND THEN I NEVER SAW THEM AFTER GRADUATION, EVERYTHING WAS SO, WELL, CHAOTIC IS THE ONLY APPROPRIATE ADJECTIVE! THEN SANS AND I MOVED TO SNOWDIN, AND EVENTUALLY UNDYNE AGREED TO TRAIN ME FOR THE ROYAL GUARD! ONLY BY THAT TIME WHEN I WAS IN A POSITION TO STOP BY BLOOK ACRES TO SAY HELLO, THEY HAD ALREADY... DISAPPEARED. I SUPPOSE LIKE MOST OF THE OTHER BLOOKS THEY LEFT THE FARM TO BECOME CORPOREAL.”

“...I did.”

“HMMM?” Papyrus blinked his eye sockets. “I'M SORRY, IT SOUNDED LIKE YOU SAID 'I' THERE JUST NOW.”

“That's because I did. Papyrus... what I'm about to tell you, not many people know. So I hope that I can trust you to keep this secret.”

“ABSOLUTELY! THE GREAT PAPYRUS ALWAYS RESPECTS THE NEEDS AND WISHES OF HIS FRIENDS WHO DESIRE PRIVACY AND CONFIDENCE, IN WHATEVER PROPORTIONS ARE NECESSARY!”

“Good... you know how Alphys was appointed to the position of Royal Scientist by creating a robot with an artificial soul?”

“OF COURSE I AM FAMILIAR WITH THE DETAILS OF YOUR ORIGIN!”

“Actually... you aren't. But you will be now. Alphys is a brilliant engineer and scientist, especially when it comes to robotics, or anything mechanical for that matter. But an artificial soul... that was, and still is, beyond her capabilities. She created a robotic shell, yes, but the animating force was another monster. A ghost monster that wanted to be corporeal. Me.” Mettaton gestured to his body with one arm. “With me as a proof of principle, Alphys could make her case for being appointed Royal Scientist. She would have the authority and resources to work on more of her projects, and I would see my dreams come true. And they have. Fame. Wealth. The attention and adoration of countless monsters and humans. All of my dreams have become reality... with one exception.”
Mettaton raised a hand to cover his mouth, and when he lowered it and spoke again, there was a wavering sub-harmonic to his electronic voice that hadn't been there before.

“I knew it happened to human celebrities, of course. Actors, musicians, artists of all kinds who make it to the top and forget why they tried to climb in the first place. Sometimes it becomes all about the money, if it wasn't before. Sometimes the person they used to be is buried beneath the persona they adopt, and they forget themselves entirely. Sometimes they are consumed by some sort of physical or psychological dependency... and... sometimes they just forget where they came from. All the people that supported them before they found their big break... and all the people that encouraged them to keep trying. I didn't... I didn't realize that it had happened to me, until I was fighting Frisk and... Blooky called in.”

The robot looked at his hand for a moment.

“Most of the Blooks that wanted a physical form, they were willing to settle for old tailoring dummies. A few had more specialized interests, but most of them were not at all picky. A body was a body. Not me. I wanted a body... that you wouldn't see through. One that would seize your attention. You, the son of Dr. Aster. The prodigy at mechanical and electrical engineering. That was why I went to Alphys. I could have possessed just about anything if all I wanted was to be physical... but I wanted a body like this. So that you would look at it, and... and feel what I did, when I looked at you.”

Mettaton blinked, and then looked at Papyrus again.

The skeleton's jaw was hanging open, and somehow, in defiance of his lack of both skin and blood supply, there was a blush spreading over his face.

“METTATON... YOU MEAN... THAT...”

“Papyrus, I have the eyes of the world upon me, the attention of millions. And... I know you are a fan. But I didn't want you to see me as a fan sees a star.” Mettaton closed the distance and took one of Papyrus's gloved hands in his own metal ones. “You may have admired me from afar. But I have admired you just as much. I've had TV shows, musical concerts, plays, and several films, just in the short year and a half since we all reached the surface. I have lifted people's emotions with carefully controlled camera angles and lighting tricks, through scripted dialog and rigorous editing. I have made people happy with fiction, Papyrus. And I love doing that, and people love me for it. But you, with your blog, and your tweets, and just being yourself. You have made people happy with raw, unfiltered, honest fact. And... I always loved that about you, and I still do.”

Mettaton's hands began to shake before the camera-stabilizing system activated, but nothing could filter out the tremor in the robot's voice.

“You don't have to answer right away. Perhaps it would be best if you didn't. But I have been wanting to say this for some time, and only now have I been able to talk to you alone, just the two of us. I would like to... to... get to know you better. Not as fan and celebrity. As... good friends, at first, for certain. And... if all goes well... maybe... something more. In the fullness of time.”

“I... I... WOWIE...” Papyrus blinked and his mind caught up with the rest of the world. “I THINK... THAT'S A WONDERFUL IDEA!”

Mettaton smiled a smile that could light up a stage entirely from its own candlepower.

“I was hoping you would say that.”
One hundred and twenty chapters and we're not done yet. Hold onto whatever you can, because things get really intense in the next few chapters.

Also the man in the fancy suit buys an umbrella. I don't like dropping spoilers, but I thought you all should know that. ;)

Chapter End Notes
“Dare I ask what happened next?”

“Well, dad obviously was caught by surprise. So was I. But I figured the best way to give him a chance to think was to confuse everyone else. So I asked Mrs. Carmichael, 'Sorry to interrupt, but do rubber chickens hatch from those plastic Easter eggs? I've been wondering about that for a long time.' And her mouth snapped shut and her eyes got really big.”

From the other side of Toriel, Asriel heard Frisk smother a laugh beneath one hand. The teacher herself was less restrained and her giggle could be plainly heard.

“Oh my. I truly wish I could have been there to see these events in person, but of course if I was there your, shall we say, strategic questioning would not have been necessary.” Toriel sighed, but a smiled lingered on her face. “Summer activity programs are not a bad idea in and of themselves, but Linda simply cannot formulate solid plans on her own, and consistently fails to recognize this fact. If she were not such a dear it would be infuriating.”

Toriel blinked and looked down at her children, her smile vanishing.

“Of course, that little comment is between the three of us.”

“Right, mom.”

“Got it.”

“Excellent. Frisk, have you had any strange and unexpected adventures today?”

“Sort of.” The child was silent for a few tense, expectant seconds. “I tried talking to Mrs. Carson again after classes were over.”

“...I see.”

“We did get some stuff out in the open. I don't know if it helped. But maybe it will lay the groundwork for something else later.” Frisk shrugged. “It was a little rocky at first. I thought it was because Mrs. Carson was afraid of me, but then I realized she must be afraid of Undyne.”

“I am sorry, what do you mean?”

“The, uh. The last time I tried to talk to Mrs. Carson, and it didn't pan out... I ended up talking to Undyne about stuff. Even if it wasn't her job, she was a really good sounding board. But I'm wondering if she took offense to the fact that Mrs. Carson seemed to be trying to solve the wrong problems.”

“Hmmmm.” Toriel frowned. “I would rather not have to talk to Undyne about making other teachers and staff uncomfortable yet again.”

“I'm pretty sure she didn't try to suplex Mrs. Carson.”

“Even so.” Toriel was silent for a few seconds, then shook her head. “In any case, it is incidental to other matters. Do you feel better for speaking to Mrs. Carson?”

“That's hard to answer. I do feel better, but I think that's from hearing about the last Guardian safehouse being found. Everything else is kind of a drop in the bucket by comparison.”
“I suppose that makes perfect sense. And any good news is welcome, of course.”

“Yeah. We might be looking at the entire organization being rounded up before school's out, which would be nice.” Frisk grinned. “Then all we have to worry about is getting Asriel up to speed to get him enrolled for next year.”

“Ah, yes. That is something we must organize very soon. Once school lets out for the year, I shall compile some comprehensive tests so that we can isolate your strong and weak points academically. Once I see your results, I can devise an appropriate summer curriculum.”

Asriel frowned.

“Mom, please don't take this the wrong way, but I think you enjoy teaching way more than is healthy for anybody.”

Toriel giggled again. “Hee hee hee. I certainly would not argue that you are wrong.”

As the trio saw the house come into sight, their conversations trailed off until Toriel pulled out her keys.

“I will be starting dinner at precisely six, and you are both invited to assist me if you like. Though I do not know exactly what I will be making yet; I will have a better idea once I have looked inside the refrigerator and pantry to see what is available.” The front door opened and the family spilled inside. Toriel took off her coat as the children made their way towards the stairs. “Be sure to wash up before then!”

“Got it mom!”

Inside the bedroom, Frisk's backpack was deposited on their desk, and some books pulled out.

“There may be a whole lot of tests during the last week of school, but at least there's no homework. How you doing bro?”

Asriel flopped on his bed, his ears flapping every which way.

“Hot. Hot and tired. There was a lot of walking outside. Still, there was a silver lining.”

“You mean messing with Mrs. Carmichael?”

“Nah. I mean, even if I'm have problems with fireballs, I still have my fire-affinity resistance. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to keep up with dad. So I still got that, just like mom and dad.”

“Oh. Yeah, that's good to know.” Frisk frowned. “Wait. The day we went to get your ID and bed and stuff mom said it was too hot for dad to carry anything.”

“Yeah. It was just that hot. You know, it really freaks me out that the surface can get hotter than the inside of a volcano. Even if it is unusual. I never had problems in Hotland, and neither did mom or dad.”

“Okay. I was wondering about that. I mean, between the fur, and mom always dressing formally, and stuff.”

“Yeah.” Asriel held up a paw and frowned at it. “It's all a rich tapestry.”

The bedroom was silent for a moment.
“...did I trip over a monster taboo or something?”

Asriel blinked. “What?”

“It’s just that... you seemed a little upset there.”

The boss monster sighed.

“Maybe? I guess I am a bit. Having the fire resistance, but not the actual fire... it kind of feels like I'm being mocked or taunted.”

“...I’d never make fun of you for that.”

“I know you wouldn't. I didn't mean like, other people mocking me. I meant, in the sense of ironic fate. Which I'm pretty sure isn't actually what's going on.”

“Why not?”

“Because fate implies that the future is already planned out and everything happens for a reason. You look at this town, at stuff like the Jam Jamboree and the Kludge Derby and the whole Hal versus Mr. Metzinger thing, and then tell me that there was a reason for all of it, or any of it.”

Frisk giggled.

“Now there's an idea for the future. You could become a philosopher.”

“Ugh. Pass.”

“But you're already wrestling with really complicated ideas.”

“That's because I want to solve them and be done with it. If that was my job I'd be thinking about that stuff every day. And I did enough of that in the Underground as a flower, trying to figure out why things turned out the way they did and what had happened to me. I'm not starting that again if I can help it. I'd rather ask Hal to take me under his wing to learn how to fix cars.”

“Oh. There's an idea.”

“Yeah. I mean. Hal's a bit hard to keep up with, but I figure it's a safe career. Humans seem to love cars, and more and monsters are wanting to get their own because the surface is so big, so it's not like a niche market or anything.”

“Actually, speaking of getting around on wheels, I want to finish putting on those training wheels so you could start learning how to ride the bike.” A desk drawer was pulled open and Frisk pulled out what looked like a small toy toolbox; when it was placed on the desk and opened, even from a distance Asriel could see the tools inside it were real metal. “You might have to come and get me for dinner if this sucks me in.”

“Heh. I was going to start reading my books and figured you might need to come get me if I get sucked in.”

Frisk grinned. “Yeah, we really suck at this.”

“Frisk, if that was a pun...”

“Hey, Sans is out of town. Somebody has to keep up appearances.”
Asriel picked up the pillow on the bed and tossed it at Frisk with all his might; the human child dodged to one side with ease and the pillow bounced off the side of the desk, falling to the floor with a pair of muffled noises.

"Still got it."

Frisk opened up the bedroom door, and Asriel sat up suddenly.

"Frisk wait."

The human child froze and turned to look at Asriel. "Yes?"

"...I may not appreciate the puns. You know. Because I hate them. But I'm glad you're feeling better."

Frisk smiled again.

"Thanks. I'm glad you're doing better too."

Frisk stepped out into the hallway, and Asriel got up and walked over to his dresser, where two books were waiting along with a number of souvenirs and mementos. For a moment, his paw hovered in between both of them, indecisive, before descending on the astronomy book.

The librarian had not been exaggerating; many of the pages turned far too easily, and in some spots it was possible to see the thread that held together the signatures that made up the book's structure. Asriel turned each page with excessive caution, being always conscious of his claws, lest they poke through the paper, or worse, snag on it and cause him to rip the page itself-

"You, Asriel. You are my North Star. You brought me to Home."

Asriel froze and stared at the book. According to Van Garrett, Chara had read the astronomy book so much, and so intensely, that it was in danger of falling apart. And in that... weird dream thing... Chara had gotten a very simple astronomy fact wrong. So simple that even monsters would know it. Okay, maybe not every monster before the Barrier was destroyed, but certainly any of them who were like Asriel and fascinated with stars in and of themselves. It only made sense if it was a sign of his mind just reeling from trying to cope with everything that had happened before, along with getting used to a new body and Soul.

And yet....

Asriel carefully closed the book, turned it over on its front cover, and opened the back one. It would be easier and probably not as hard on the book to go after Polaris in the index like that, rather than going through all the pages in front.

The book still had its old checkout card in a pocket on the back cover. Asriel reached for it, wondering who had last checked it out if Chara had only ever read it in the Library building... then again, with everything computerized, that would only say who last checked the book out
before the computer system was installed. There were two rows that looked stamped with dates; October 17, 1989, and December 22, 1990. No names, and no matter which calendar was used, human or monster, that was long before he or Chara had even been born.

Beneath the dates, something had been written... it looked like... like...

*Like Chara's handwriting.*

Asriel felt the fur on the back of his neck stick up, and wondered if the rest of him would follow suit. Carefully, he slid the card up and out... and noticed other cards behind it in the pocket, also with Chara's handwriting. Shaking paws removed them and placed them on the dresser, and returned to the actual Librarby checkout card. Chara had written a series of words in the card's little boxes, like a table or spreadsheet. One column had a series of colors, its neighbor... not colors, for certain.

*Violet Perseverance*

*Indigo Integrity*

*Blue Patience*

*Green Kindness*

*Yellow Justice*

*Orange Bravery*

*Red Determination?*

Asriel stared at the last line, then carefully set the card down next to the others. Whatever it was, Chara wrote it down for a reason. That much he knew with a sudden and terrifying certainty.

The next card, the one right behind the checkout card, looked like an index file card. Along one side, written carefully, was *CHARA* in block letters, and then a series of other words and numbers; he couldn't place each and every one of them, but he did know enough to understand that they were astronomy terms.

*Beta Canum Venaticorum*

*Canes Venatici*

*Right Ascension 12 hours 33 minutes 44.54482 seconds*

*Declination +41 degrees 21 arcmin 26.9248 arcsec*

*Apparent Magnitude 4.26*

The last card had nothing written on it, simply a series of holes that had been cut out of it at
different spots. A fleeting memory of Dr. Aster talking about early computers brought the phrase “punch card” to the center of Asriel's mind, but this didn't look like any of the things he had seen in the Royal Scientist's diagrams.

The three cards were spread out next to each other and the book on the dresser. They were either all connected, or each of them individually was something important. Chara told Mr. Van Garrett that they were not allowed to check out books, so they couldn't bring the book with them if they wanted, but by the same token they might have been the only person consistently reading the astronomy book. So that meant that anything placed in the pocket was relatively safe. If people were browsing the books and opened it, anything between pages could fall out, but nobody bothered with the cards in the back once everything became electronic, including the Library staff.

So... Chara had put all this in the book where they could get at it, and while other people could, it was unlikely anyone would. This raised the question of why.

“Now the flour, Asriel. Carefully, just a bit at a time, while Frisk is stirring.”

Asriel carefully tipped the container and began to tap it; white powder began to fall out, a little at a time, into the frying pan and was rapidly combined with the rest of the ingredients through the whisk.

“This is going to take forever.”

“Yeah, I really need to get around to making a flour sifter. Every time Catty called me to let me know there was one in at Joe's House Of Stuff, somebody came in and got it before I could make the trip.” Frisk shook their head while still whisking. “If your arms get tired, go ahead and take a break. I can keep this up for a while.”

“Why don't we add the flour all at once?”

“It'd get lumpy and be a lot harder to whisk. When it's time to add the milk, we'll have to go slowly for the same reasons.”

“Oh.” Asriel carefully put the container down on the counter top and rubbed one arm with his paw. “I think I need a minute or so.”

“Go ahead.”

Fuzzy fingers were flexed, and Asriel picked up the container again. “Okay. Ready?”

“Ready.”

A little more flour was mixed in while Frisk continued to stir.

“Actually I had an idea for an automatic gravy making system but I never had a chance to work on it. And even if I did, I don't know how I'd get the whisk to cover the entire surface of the pan. If it just follows automatic tracks, even with a little variation, it'll leave parts of the pan untouched, and those spots will burn. Some people like burned bits in their gravy but it should be optional, not mandatory.”

“What if you just alternated between whisking and scraping everything off the pan?”
Frisk frowned.

“That... could work. But that would add a whole separate set of parts to the stirring mechanism. Hmm.”

“Or, wait a minute. How are you hooking up the whisks in this thing?”

“I figure there would be two, attached to a central stirring axis, and their angles would adjust gradually with each revolution so they'd spread out. It also means the whole thing has to be taller than the whisks are long when it goes on the pan, which creates other problems.”

“What if you just mounted the whisk head inside of a gear, then run that gear inside of... what's the word for when it's like a gear, but all the teeth are on the inside?”

“I think that's a planetary gear system. Or an epicyclic gear system. Like the one Mr. McGraw was using in his Kludge Racer this year.”

“One of those then. That way the whisk goes around and around in circles but those circles don't overlap perfectly.”

Frisk stopped stirring for a moment, then resumed.

“Hey, that would work. As long as the number of teeth don't divide evenly into each other, the whisk would eventually cover the whole surface of the pan. And with more whisks on the inner gear, it would be faster. I need to write this down once the gravy is ready.”

Toriel looked away from yet another pan, where slices of carrot were slowly turning a caramelized golden brown. “I see your puzzle solving skills are as sharp as ever, Asriel.”

Asriel shrugged, and in the process accidentally spilled a little more flour into the pan than he had intended.

“Whoops.”

“It's alright, I got it, I got it.” Frisk began to whisk even faster, separating the large pile of flour into smaller piles and subdividing again and again. “It might be a little lumpy, but we can deal.”

“Alright. I'd rather deal with lumps than start over again. My arms are already tired. Oh, and actually it wasn't a puzzle thing as much as me remembering finding something in the Waterfall dump a long time ago. Some sort of human thing using pencils and paper to make geometric designs with small gears inside bigger gears. Most of them were broken but I didn't need a whole set to figure them out.”

“I think I know what you're talking about, but I don't know what they're called. Those were, like, way before I was born. Alright, last of the flour now and we'll have gravy ready in a few minutes. Asriel, can you get the milk?”

“Sure thing.” Asriel put down the empty flour container on the counter top and picked up a cup if milk. “Hey, did you ever think about making an automatic potato peeler?”

“A few times, but I never got anywhere with it, and I think a lot of other people have beaten me to it anyway. Little milk now, please.”

Asriel poured some of the milk into the pan, and Frisk whisked it into the mixture.
“Next time we make mashed potatoes, we might try that parboiling method actually.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s really simple, you cut around the outside edge of the potato to make a circle, then you boil the potato. Once it gets hot enough, you strain it, run it under cold water, and then the skins come right off. Then you can keep cooking them or slice them up or prepare them in other ways. Gravy should be ready in five minutes by the way.”

“Excellent.” Toriel reached towards the large pot sitting on the back burner. “I will get the potatoes onto the counter, and then dinner can begin when the gravy is complete.”

“Spirographs!”

Toriel blinked and turned to stare at Frisk. “I beg your pardon?”

“That’s what those toys were called. It just came to me, they got mentioned in an episode of The Simpsons I saw once.”

“Ah. Well. That is one mystery solved.”

The kitchen was filled with the slightly digitized noise of a trombone playing a series of descending notes, and Toriel paused, reaching for her cell phone.

“Oh, that is the 'ring tone' that Sans provided me. He and Dr. Aster must have arrived safely.”

The teacher unlocked her phone, stared at the screen, then slapped a paw over her mouth to smother sudden, hysterical laughter.

“Ugh.” Asriel rolled his eyes. “It’s either a flying pun, or a joke about where a skeleton sleeps.”

The queen got herself under control, still grinning. “As a matter of fact, Asriel-”

“I’m okay with not knowing-”

“Sans says that when they arrived at the hotel, the clerk at the desk asked them if they were checking in or checking out, before they actually were looking at them. And Sans said to them, 'at least two of us checked out a long time ago,' hee hee!”

Asriel groaned and pulled on his ears. “Why.”

Asriel stared at the cards on the dresser. A list of colors and... personality characteristics, for lack of a better description. Stellar map coordinates for a specific star and its related properties. And... a card with a bunch of holes in it.

“Frisk?”

There was no response, and Asriel looked up to see Frisk hunched over the book in their hands with an intense expression on their face.

“Frisk, you okay?”

“Wha?”
The human child looked up suddenly, and then winced, their hand flying to their neck. “Ugh. I'm all stiff... sorry, did you say something?”

“Yeah. Uh. You know a lot about mechanical stuff and machines, right? What do you know about punch cards?”

“You mean, like, early computers?”

“I think so.”

Frisk frowned. “…I know they were used for a Census at one point. They got the information tabulated after three years. The last Census took so long to organize the data, it was time to do the next one before they were done.”

“A census... like, getting information on food supply and availability, water levels, and power needs? They did stuff like that in the Underground.”

“Sort of. I think it's mostly been about ages, family size, occupations, geographic locations... resource allocation I think plays a part when it comes to deciding government funding, but actually tracking stuff like food and water and fuel was usually during an actual shortage, like during the world wars and the Dust Bowl and that thing in the Seventies that caused gas prices to jump.”

“Oh. That makes sense.”

“Yeah. The punch card thing you asked about... there's different systems, but the idea is that a machine has some sort of mechanical reader that feels the holes in the card and different patterns of holes give it different instructions. For, like, a program, one card isn't enough, you need a bunch and they all have to be loaded in the right order.”

“So you wouldn't have a single punch card then.”

“Well, if it was just data storage, you could.” Frisk shrugged. “But if all the information you have can be stored on a single punch card, you don't need a computer to handle it.”

“That does make sense. Sorry for distracting you.”

Frisk made a noncommittal noise, moved around until they were lying on their stomach, and held the book in front of them. Asriel returned his attention to the cards he had, and walked over to put them on his chest of drawers. The color list card... people at All Fine Labs were talking about how human Souls had some sort of color element. But All Fine Labs had the giant scanner. And before monsters were freed, humans didn't even have definitive proof of the existence of Souls.

Chara had been raised by the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi, though. And if they really were descended from the original magicians that created the Barrier, or even just preserving the knowledge from an era when humans did have access to magic, then it was just as likely that they knew something about Souls. Either way, that was all that he could figure out from that card. The index card with the star data, on the other hand, was easy enough to figure out just from looking at Wikipedia; the star Beta Canum Venaticorum was also called Chara. Asriel had yet to find either name in the book's index, so it was likely that Chara had actually copied down that star data from the web page itself. That might have been why they wrote it out in the first place, since it wasn't in the book itself.

And then there was the card with holes in it. Asriel turned it over and over again between his fingers. It was important enough to keep with everything else, and that probably meant it was related. It just wasn't clear how yet. Asriel opened his mouth to ask Frisk another question, then
closed it. It had been a long time since he had really tackled any sort of puzzle; the solutions to all of the ones in the Underground he had ended up memorizing by rote. This was finally something new and he was going to take his time with it. Besides, it was something that Chara had done, and that made it special. It was several years old, and the Guardians had been defeated over and over since then; they'd reached the height of their power, then fallen from that height and “hit every branch on the fail tree on the way down” as Hal had so eloquently put it after the State of the Kingdom Address. It wasn't like there was a time limit and he had to solve the organization's secrets to defeat them for good.

Well, probably not.

Reluctantly, Asriel picked up the other index cards, fit them all into the book's pocket, and placed it on his dresser. He would need to tackle this again later, from another direction. In the meantime, there was still that other part of Kitchen that remained to be read.

“Wait, that's it?”

Asriel turned to see Frisk staring at the book in their hands and flipping through pages.

“Something wrong?”

“...I thought I had like ten or twelve more pages of the last chapter but there's a glossary and index at the end.” Frisk closed the book and stared at it. “That's it. That's all of it. And...”

The human child sighed.

“I know I was pinning all my hopes on a long shot to begin with. But this. It's like a punch in the gut. I don't know how... this. How it started. I don't know how to stop it. And I don't know what to do next.”

Asriel stared, then walked over to Frisk's bed and sat next to them.

“The title is Applied Magical Optics. Maybe it's part of a series? Maybe there's a theoretical book on magical optics, and you could ask Sans or Dr. Aster about it when they get back. Or different fields. Magic chemistry, magic electricity. Or magic biology! Maybe that's what you need.”

Frisk sat up in their bed and leaned behind Asriel to put the book on the nightstand.

“Maybe... I just... I need to find a way to find out what books there are, and then get them without tipping my hand, and... and read them all in my spare time between now and Friday.”

The child stared up at the ceiling.

“...or we could come up with a better plan. Okay... think, Frisk, think.”

Frisk closed their eyes for a few moments, then opened them again.

“Okay. On Friday, school classes technically end at eleven, but there won't be any classes, just the Riff-Off Event. Lunch hour is still there for anyone that's hungry, but technically anyone can leave once it's eleven since so many students go home for lunch. Mom and everyone else has to wrap some stuff up to make everything official, so she won't really be on vacation until around two or two thirty, I think. So...” Frisk closed their eyes again. “Need to get it over with as fast as possible, so I need dad to be there too. So call it three in the afternoon, maybe four at the latest.”

Frisk opened their eyes and sat up, swinging their legs over the edge of the bed and sitting next to
Asriel.

“I need to run by the park and touch the star again Friday morning. Otherwise, anything important that happens between yesterday afternoon and Friday afternoon, we need to keep track of and memorize in case there’s a LOAD event. The safehouse thing probably already happened yesterday so we don't need to worry about it but if they find out where O'Dell is hiding and we hear about it then-”

Asriel's arms slowly wrapped around Frisk, and the boss monster tried to keep his voice even.

“Frisk. There isn't going to be a LOAD. Okay? Nobody is going to hurt you.”

“...you can't be sure that they won't, Asriel.”

“You can't be sure that they will! This is as far as we've ever gotten. We are going in blind. Like everyone else.”

Frisk's arms came up as they leaned into the hug.

“...yesterday Sans told me not to give up. But he doesn't know. Alphys was trying so hard to make me feel better Friday. She doesn't know. Undyne's been trying to help me for so long she could take over the counselor job from Mrs. Carson, but she doesn't know either. Papyrus doesn't know, Dr. Aster doesn't... mom and dad don't know. And it hurts. If they... if they don't know what I can do. What I am. Then... then... then the child they care about. Doesn't exist. That Frisk isn't real. And when they find out what the real Frisk is like then-”

Frisk was suddenly squeezed in a very strong hug, and felt Asriel growl.

“If anyone tries to hurt you Friday. Even mom and dad. I swear I will fight them. I know they won't. But if they do. I will be right there between you and them. They'll have to go through me. Mom and dad... if they really... we're a package deal now Frisk. You and me. Mom and dad can't have one without the other. I promise.”

Frisk's eyes opened wide and stared at nothing.

“Asriel, if you-”

“Frisk. I lost my best friend, my life, and my Soul, because I forgot something too important for me to ever have forgotten. Boss Monsters are stronger than normal monsters. We live longer and we fight harder. That's why we're leaders: Our job is to protect and take care of everyone else. But I didn't protect Chara when they needed me. I helped them with that stupid plan when I should have argued with them or told mom and dad, and I didn't, and they are gone and it is all my fault.”

Frisk felt something on the back of their shirt, and realized that Asriel was crying, even though his voice was even.

“If I can't help the people that I... that I love. If I can't keep them safe. Then there was no point to me coming back at all. They'll have to kill us both... and I don't think mom and dad will let me go again. I dunno... maybe I could lie. Tell them I've been teaching you magic for the last year since I was so bored and needed something to do, and you were the only human I knew we could trust with it. That's got to remind them that you... ugh. Frisk you idiot. Now you got me worried too.”

Frisk sniffed. “Well. It's a big club. We should get matching T shirts.”

“...I'll talk to Alphys next time I go in for a scan. She can hook us up.”
Frisk laughed a watery laugh and let go, and Asriel did as well, one paw coming up to rub at the fur around his eyes.

“I promise it's going to be okay, Frisk. And we're going to get it right the first time around. No trial and error. No LOAD events. No Resets. I told you long ago....”

Asriel's other paw reached out and took Frisk's hand, and their hairless fingers interlaced with his furry ones, palm pressed up against paw pad.

“Everybody will be there for you. No matter what.”
The office was mostly dark, except for the green and blue LEDs on the computer tower on the desk, and the flat screen monitor next to it that illuminated the face of the man sitting at the desk. A knock on the door did not cause him to respond, but several successive knocks got his attention.

“Come on in.”

The door opened, and in the doorway an orange figure dressed in a black and white uniform left an imposing silhouette. Elijah McGraw looked up from the screen in confusion.

“Hey Grillby. What's up?”

“...bit of a problem at the bar, boss.”

“A problem like we ran out of something that's very popular, or an angry drunk who objects to being told he's had enough?”

“...one of your friends is here and he doesn't look well.”

“Can't say I'm surprised. With Justin out of town there's nobody that can even keep up with Hal.”

“...actually it's Joe.”

Eli froze, blinked, and slowly stood up.

“Well. Guess that's what I get for jumping to conclusions. Alright, let's go see what happened. I'll finish this later.”

The human followed the flame elemental out of the office, and looked down over the balcony to the ground floor; sure enough, a disheveled man in an unkempt white lab coat was hunched over in front of the bar. Eli quickened his pace, taking the stairs two at a time until he was on the ground floor and made his way through the various tables and booths until he reached the bar stool next to Joe and sat down.

“Hey Joe. You okay? ...Joe?”

Joe stared at the bar in front of him, bloodshot eyes half-lidded and mouth slightly open, completely oblivious to anything around him. Eli held a hand in front of Joe's face and snapped his fingers; Joe's brow furrowed in confusion.

There was no other response.

“Okay, we are officially in the Deep Trouble Zone now.” Eli turned to Grillby, who had resumed his place behind the bar. “Hey, grab a bottle of Monster Soda. We'll put it in his hand, see if we can get some sort of stimulus response going on.”

A bottle was procured and the bartender twisted off the cap with practiced ease, then placed the open bottle in front of Joe; when that failed to produce any reaction, Eli took Joe's hand and fit the unresponsive man's fingers around it. Slowly, Joe's grip tightened and the bottle was brought up to his mouth. Some soda was swallowed, and the man closed his eyes and shook his head.

“Ugh. Whoever is beating on the inside of my skull with a mallet, you can go right to hell. Thanks.”
Joe's eyes opened again, swiveling in their sockets to take in his environment, and Eli noted that most of the bloodshot coloring had vanished.

“...this is the Dank Memehaus.”

Eli clapped a hand on Joe's shoulder.

“Aw. You remembered. That’s so nice of you.”

“...I was at the lab... I was reading all of that stuff. I think. I think somebody came and got me. Said that it was two hours past quitting time. I must have left, because I'm here now. I just... I don't remember walking here. Or driving. So I really hope I didn't drive here.”

Joe blinked and stared at the soda in his hand.

“I definitely don't remember ordering this.”

“Don't worry. This one's on me. Your eyes look better at least.”

“Huh? What was wrong with my eyes?”

“They looked bloodshot as all hell.”

“Well... I was reading a lot of stuff today. So eyestrain makes sense.”

The flaming bartender leaned forward over the bar.

“...you were sitting here for twenty minutes before I realized that something was wrong.”

“Wait, twenty minutes?” Eli stared at Grillby. “Really??”

“...I thought he was taking his time deciding what to order.”

Joe slumped over onto the bar.

“Oh my god. This stupid problem is going to kill me before I even have a chance to test a possible solution... there is only one way to deal with this.”

Joe patted several pockets before finally locating his wallet and pulling out several bills.

“Grillby, I need some monster booze. Something that will do to my brain what a stick will do to the front wheel of a bicycle. Otherwise I'm never going to sleep tonight.”

“...give me two minutes.”

“Thanks.”

The doors opened as Grillby busied himself with the creation of a monster cocktail, and three men walked in. One of them made a beeline straight for Joe and Eli, with the others following.

“Hey Grillby. Three drinks. Doesn't matter what they are as long as they're cold and in a glass.”

“...coming right up.”

Eli blinked and looked past Joe at the trio as they sat down at the bar. “Steve? Damn, I almost didn't recognize you without the uniform.”
Officer Steve rolled his eyes. “I have a life outside of work, you know.”

“No you don’t.”

Steve shook his head and pointed to his two companions. “Eli, Joe, Grillby, I’d like you to meet Officer Richard Clayton of the Triton Police Department and Deputy Jim Wyatt of the Lost Eagle County Sheriff’s Department. They were the ones taking point when we got the last you-know-what yesterday. Rick, Jim, Eli is the asshole that owns this bar, one of my best friends, and the asshole next to him is Joe, another best friend. And Grillby here is not an asshole. I keep hoping that the non-asshole properties will rub off on Eli but so far it hasn’t panned out.”

“Up yours too, Steve.” Eli got up from his seat and walked over to the duo and held out his hand. “Welcome to the Dank Memehaus gentlemen.”

Both men shook Eli’s hand. Still on his bar stool, Joe nodded, took a long drink of monster soda, and leaned over to let his head rest on the wooden bar. The man introduced as a deputy stared at Joe with concern.

“Is he going to be okay?”

“No idea. We haven’t even gotten the booze into him yet. If push comes to shove I can drive him home later.” Eli returned to his bar stool and looked at Steve over Joe’s semi-conscious form. “So.”

“So.”

An awkward yet expectant silence descended, interrupted only by the sounds of Grillby finishing a monster cocktail and sliding it over to Joe, then filling several glasses with beer and sliding them to the lawmen.

“Thanks Grillby. Cheers.” Steve downed some of the beer rapidly, then stared at the bar with an expression that was similar to Joe’s expression just a few minutes before.

“Hey. Rick. Jim. You know those audio clips we got of a certain somebody?”

“...yeah?”

“Eli’s the one who scoured the intertubes and isolated those for us. He’s also the one that made the sketches of all the Guardians from last Friday.”

Rick and Jim both adopted a slightly different expression, and their posture shifted just enough so that only somebody who knew what to look for would notice.

“So you’re Santa,” Rick said. “On behalf of the Triton Police Department, I’d like to thank you for all your early Christmas gifts. They’ve been invaluable.”

“I second that motion.” Jim looked at his beer. “I don’t even want to think about what this job would be like if they’d managed to run to ground again.”

“Eli is just one of many concerned citizens that have been helping us chip away at everything. It’s a real team effort.”

“Every little bit helps, especially when you’re fighting some sort of domestic insurgency. I’m kind of amazed that the BADTF hasn’t come back yet to finish the job. Or Homeland Security.”

“Jim’s right.” Rick looked at his beer, as if trying to fathom some cosmic secret that was locked in
the beverage. “There's a whole lot about this that seems really off. Not anything I could put my finger on exactly, much less log as evidence, but still. The BADTF shows up, curb stomps the cult, then they just cut and run before the monsters show up?”

“I heard from somebody who heard from somebody else that they didn't know how to handle having a positive public image after Waco and Ruby Ridge, so when everyone in Ebott's Wake was all friendly and appreciative it scared them off. And I know that sounds like a joke but I gotta wonder.” Jim took another drink. “Although I guess, if that's why they ran when they did, then that's why they didn't want to come back again. Somebody higher up must have thought somebody on the ground would drop the ball and throw all that good will out the window.”

“Maybe.” Steve turned to Eli. “Hey, have you heard from Justin yet? I've been on radio silence all day so...” Steve paused as Joe sat up and blocked his view, then leaned closer to the bar so he could look around Joe. “So I don't know if he got to DC alright or not.”

“Got a text from him a while ago. Said the trip was uneventful and the hotel room seems secure.”

Rick put down his beer. “Who's this Justin guy? Another friend, another asshole, or just another concerned citizen?”

Joe leaned forward again, blocking Steve's view once more, and turned to face the unfamiliar policeman. “All of the above. Justin signed on as security detail for Dr. Aster's trip to DC for that Senate thingy tomorrow.”

“Ah. Politics. I feel sorry for the guy already.” Rick raised his beer, then lowered it again. “Wait, who's doctor Aster?”

Joe waved one hand. “My boss's old boss. Used to be Royal Scientist before her.”

“...oh. Wait. Dr. Aster... is he related to Sans?”

“Yeah, he's Sans's dad. Wait, how do you know Sans?”

“Bought some hot dogs off him once.”

Joe blinked, then stared at his cocktail. “Fair enough.”

Steve drained his glass and set it on the bar. “Eli. There was something I wanted to run by you.”

“And the truth comes out.”

“Yeah yeah, shaddup.” Steve turned to look at the other two police officers. Rick stared blankly, and Jim shrugged, and Steve returned his attention to Eli.

“It's impossible to keep a secret in a small town anyway, but as a matter of principle, the following conversation never happened.”

“...right.”

Steve nodded. “The Guardians had been using safehouses to move equipment, people, and resources since before the BADTF showed up. According to the records we found, they originally had seven. Color coded. So Indigo safehouse, Green safehouse, and so on. What got taken down yesterday was the Orange safehouse. That should be all seven, since they abandoned two of them after the monsters showed up.”
“The Red safehouse was a double wide trailer about three miles from the Robin's Egg city limits.” Jim commented. “Guess they got paranoid when Ice Wolf got a job at the nature preserve and moved in next door. And the Yellow safehouse... well, apparently a bunch of skunks moved into the crawlspace under the house.”

Eli snorted and tried to muffle his laughter. “Wow. It's always the little things that get you.”

“Yeah.”

Steve cleared his throat.

“We managed to get some guys over to the Violet safehouse Friday after the Guardian counterattack was neutralized by an overdose of flower power. At least we think it was the Violet safehouse, it's not like they had signs up or anything. The documentation and records we found let us roll up the rest of the network except for one safehouse, Orange. And the anonymous tip took care of that. That's the good news. The bad news is that we know that there are still smaller waystations, not full safehouses, but spots for caching supplies and laying low for a day or two, and I guess O'Dell beat us back to the safehouse and took that information with him along with everything related to the Orange safehouse. Or never wrote it down for security reasons.”

“That does make sense,” Eli replied with a nod. “I mean, you can't keep an organization as big as the Guardians running without records, so for security's sake you would have to compartmentalize.”

“That's our best guess too.” Steve nodded. “So, based on what we know... O'Dell is still out there at one of those waystations, catching his breath. He doesn't have anywhere near the resources the Guardians had when they got to the Underground on Friday. But on the other hand, we don't know what he does have access to. It could just be him and the clothes on his back. Or, it could be him and several dozen of his best friends, playing one of those live action role playing games with real ammunition. The only thing we're really confident about is that he doesn't have any explosive surprises for us.”

Jim piped up. “We found out that all of those fertilizer thefts from the past year were all because some prick with more brains than sense decided to Heisenberg his way out of his student loans by setting up a drug lab.”

“What Jim said. I mean, we're not ruling anything out until we got him in a holding cell, but we don't think that's going to be his opener. And there's something else.” Steve's voice got much quieter, and Eli had to lean towards Joe to hear him. “The forensics guys at Quarterhorse Fields PD got the ID of the John Doe we found buried at the Violet safehouse. His name was Marcus Peterson. Alias Marcus Patterson, Mark Turik, Matthew Quinn, Harold Ashton, and probably a few more we don't know about yet. What we do know is that he died of secondary infections stemming from second degree burns over more than half of his body. It's mostly speculation, but we think maybe he got those burns during the raid, when the BADTF hit the generator shed and all that gasoline went up at once.”

“...ouch.”

“Yeah. And here's the kicker. We know that the Guardians were lead by a council of seven people. We know Jordan Cater was one, and according to some of the papers in the Violet safehouse, now we know that Marcus Peterson was another. Maybe Marcus had Jordan brought in to take over for him because he knew his card was about to get punched?”

Eli sat up straight.
“...you alright man?”
Eli shook his head. “I don't know. Hmmmm... have you talked to O'Dell's family yet?”

“Of course we have.”

“What did they have to say about him?”
Steve shrugged. “Nothing we could use to find him. His mother didn't really seem to care about what he was doing one way or another. His father was a lot more helpful by comparison. Didn't really believe us at first. Said that he can't imagine his son being wrapped up in this kind of thing, which is what they all say. Gave us some addresses to check and numbers to call. Nothing. About a year ago he just... drifted away from his friends, his role playing group, everything.”

“What did he do for a living?”

“He worked at an architectural firm in Quarterhorse Fields. Howard Brothers... the company let him and like twenty other people go as part of some sort of 'restructuring' thing. Which also happened about a year ago.”

“Huh.” Eli scratched his chin with one finger. “That's one hell of a coincidence.”

“Yeah. That help any?”

“...sort of. I think I have a better idea of how O'Dell thinks now. We know he's a good planner and creative problem solver. Keeps diligent notes. But... he doesn't like to take initiative. He waits until everything is ready before he does anything. And as part of that... if there's not somebody behind him keeping him on task, he will wait a really long time before he makes his move. And I think he knows that... I don't know if he sought out the Guardians or if they recruited him, but it must have been like a perfect match. A leader with ambitious plans, with an assistant or sidekick that was well suited to making plans and turning them into reality.”

Rick sighed. “Yeah, we know all that already.”

Steve turned and stared at Rick. “Can you give him a bit to build up speed?”

Eli continued, oblivious.

“O'Dell was part of an RPG group. We don't know what games exactly but it doesn't matter because they're all based on creating a custom plan of action within the framework and limitations of a larger setting. He worked in architecture. His career and his hobbies revolved around creating a sense of order out of chaos, creating plans within the limits defined by somebody else. He joins the Guardians, one way or another, even after they get torn apart. He takes this Marcus guy's end goals and makes them happen. He does the same thing with Cater. Now with Marcus dead, most of the organization locked up or locked down, and Jordan under guard in the hospital... O'Dell is a first mate without a captain.” Eli tapped his fingers on the bar in a strange pattern. “Was O'Dell ever in charge of a big project at the firm?”

“It didn't sound like it. I mean, if he had been in charge of something big and it worked out great he probably wouldn't have been fired with everyone else, and if he had been in charge of something that was a total disaster, they definitely would have told him to clear out his desk as soon as possible.” Steve shook his head. “O'Dell was like the personification of Joe Average.”

“Wha?” Joe sat up straight, blinking blearily. “Somebody call me?”
Steve sighed.

“Go back to sleep Joe. Eli, you were saying?”

“Right. O'Dell worked on making other people's plans and designs pan out then, too... and if he was an architect... he'd also know about building codes and where to go to get blueprints to existing buildings.”

Steven slowly turned towards Eli, his eyes wide.

“...are you suggesting that-”

“No, no. That might be going too far. And even if I'm right there's no way to know for sure until and unless he tells us when we finally catch him. But step back a bit. If he's an architect, he knows individual buildings and he knows how they fit into the larger framework of the city or township those buildings are a part of. He would know the criteria to look for in a safehouse, and he'd be familiar with how to access public records that would tell him what buildings in Lost Eagle County would meet those requirements. You said the Guardians lost two safehouses between the raid and when they started the comeback tour?”

“Yeah. Do you think he might have been trying to rebuild or expand the network?”

“It's my best guess based on what I know about the guy right now.” Eli tapped his index finger on the bar's surface to emphasize his points. “O'Dell is a guy whose personal and professional life is defined by other people. O'Dell's entire skill set is designed to work inside of larger, artificial systems like cities and buildings. In the absence of direction from an actual person, or emergency plans to fall back on, he's probably going to default to what he knows best. If there were plans to rebuild the safehouse network, or expand operations in any way, then he wouldn't keep plans for that with plans for everything else, for the same reason he didn't leave the information about the Orange safehouse for you guys to find.”

“...with you so far. What comes next?”

Eli frowned, then scratched his chin again.

“...a good safehouse needs a plausible reason for people to be coming and going. But if it's not a safehouse yet, any activity would just draw attention. It would need to be some place isolated. Not necessarily in terms of geography, but in terms of social presence. And definitely not close to monsters. Possibly abandoned. If he has somebody to act as a face, he might be trying to start something up right now to justify any present and future activity, but it would be very recent, and so would any measures taken to make the place seem more active and lived in. Fresh paint. New construction. Grass suddenly being cut.”

“Hmmmm. So either fixer uppers, or places in the process of being fixed up, and not neighbors with monsters.” Steve shrugged. “Guess that narrows it down a little bit. Hell, I don't mind spending tomorrow at the Hall of Records. At least it's air conditioned.”

“took the words out of my mouth.” Jim shook his head. “It's too damn hot to be chasing after people. We should all just agree to a truce and then start up the manhunt again in September or October or something.”

Rick stared at his empty glass. “I can see multiple problems with that, Jim.”

“It's hot, so I don't care.”
“Can't argue with that.”

“...another one for you?”

Rick looked up and blinked at the flaming bartender, then shook his head.

“Naw. I think I've had enough for one night. I don't want to get a lecture from the old ball and chain when I get home.” Rick stood up, pulled out his wallet, and tossed a few bills on the bar. “Thanks for the pick me up. You do good work.”

“...I try.”

Steve turned to Jim. “What do you say? Another round for you?”

“Sure. I'll drink to another drink. Grillby, right? Second verse, same as the first.”

“...coming right up.”
“Uh... mom? Dad? I have... I have some stuff I need to tell you.”

“What is it, my child?”

“Uhm. Well, it's more... more something I have to show you. Can you, can you guys come into the living room?

“Of course.”

The two massive boss monsters sat down on the sofa, and normally seeing them side by side would have provided an instant sense of hope and contentment, but there was too much at stake to be distracted. Frisk sat down in one of the chairs opposite the sofa, and rubbed their hands together nervously.

“Okay... so. It's... as scared as I am to share this, I have to now. I can't keep going on wondering what's going to happen when people do find out. So... the thing that's been bothering me for a while now. I... I don't know how or why, but I can use magic.”

Frisk held up their left hand, and it was surrounded by a flickering blue glow; one of the books on the coffee table slide towards the child in fits and starts. The child looked up to see confused looks on Toriel and Asgore's faces, rather than shock and alarm and anger, but their unease did not diminish.

“I can also use Green Magic, I, uh... I haven't managed to do anything else. So I don't know if there are other possibilities, or it's just those two.”

The living room was silent, until Toriel leaned forward.

“Frisk... how long has this been going on?”

“Since... the first time I noticed it was after I got shot. I don't know if that's related or not. But I didn't know for sure until after Asriel was back. He, uh. He knows. He only kept it from you because I asked him to.”

The living room was silent once again, until Toriel and Asgore stood up. It was Toriel who broke the silence, in the end.

“Frisk... you need to come with us.”

The human child swallowed and stood up. “Okay...”

The two boss monsters walked out of the front door, and Frisk followed behind, eyes down on the sidewalk and not daring to look up. Despite the increasing sense of dread, their mind was
mercifully free of what-ifs and worst case scenarios... they simply followed behind the Dreemurrs.

After some time, Frisk looked up to see the familiar profile of the All Fine Labs buildings in the distance. Maybe... they needed Alphys to run some scans, to verify that this was actually coming from Frisk and not, say, an elaborate practical joke being pulled by another monster. Or maybe they'd leave Frisk there... but still, that wouldn't be so bad, as long as Asriel could visit, and maybe Alphys could figure out how to separate magic from a human or block them from using it, something the monsters needed if humans were able to use magic at all, and...

Maybe when their magic was gone, they could go back home again.

But the monsters kept walking, and Frisk kept following. From time to time the child saw a place they recognized, but unlike All Fine Labs, they couldn't think of a reason for the Dreemurrs to bring them there. With each familiar place that passed by, the feeling of dread got worse and worse...

'Oh. Oh, no...'

The house was still there. Of course it was, there was no reason to ever think otherwise. The queen walked up the sidewalk to the front door and pressed the doorbell, and a familiar chime echoed inside and the door opened and Frisk couldn't see past Toriel but the child could hear every word.

“I apologize, Mr. Taylor. It appears there has been a terrible mistake.”

The queen stepped to one side and Frisk saw nothing, the inside of the house was solid black, devoid of light, or hope, or any possibility of a future and even though their legs didn't move at all Frisk could feel themselves being pulled closer, and they opened their mouth but no words came out and why would the Dreemurrs believe an apology anyway after all the secrets that had been kept, how could they possibly trust them, and no matter how many times they said 'I'm Sorry' it wouldn't change anything, nothing could change this, not words or actions, this was where they were from, this was where they belonged, this was where they were always going to have to return, all that time at the Dreemurr houses was cheating, this was how it was supposed to be why would they ever hold onto such a worthless lying brat when they had their own son back you always say you're sorry but this shit keeps happening there is blood on the ground blood on my face no no no no not again not like this NOT LIKE THIS

“Dad, can I talk to you a minute? Out in the garden?”

“Sure, Frisk!”

Asgore made his way out into the garden, a teacup in his massive paws, and Frisk followed. The sun was bright and the sky clear but somehow everything looked cloudy and overcast to Frisk's eyes. The child took a seat on one of the decorative benches, and Asgore sat down next to them.

“It's a beautiful day today. Perfect for a game of catch.”

“Yeah...”

“...is there something bothering you, Frisk?”

“Yeah. Uhm...”

Frisk slowly took a deep breath and tried to stop their hands from shaking.
“It is okay. Take your time.”

“That's, uh. That's part of the problem. I have been taking my time. I should have... I should have come to you and mom right away. About. Maybe a week and a half ago. I realized I could... do this.”

Frisk held out their left hand, which was surrounded by an unsteady blue light. One of the king's watering cans began to tremble and slowly slide on the ground towards the bench. Frisk dropped their hand and the can became still, gritted their teeth, and looked up at Asgore's face.

Frisk expected anger, but Asgore's expression was just sad.

The child found they would have preferred anger.

“I'm guessing... this is a real deal breaker, isn't it.”

Asgore nodded, looking down at his tea, now threatening to spill in his shaking paws.

“You know what I must do.”

“...yeah. I know it doesn't make any difference now but... I have to ask, before... you know. If I had come running to you guys right away. As soon as I found this. Would it have made any difference at all?”

Asgore stared morosely at his tea, then set it down on the ground, spilling much of it in the process.

“I am afraid not.”

“...I figured. But. I had to tell you. I knew it was only a matter of time before... somebody found out.”

Asgore nodded, not looking to meet Frisk's gaze.

“I am glad you told me, Frisk. I know... how hard this was. Especially when you knew what had to happen.”

Frisk nodded and stared at their shoes, coated in garden dirt. “When I was down there. In the Underground. I knew there was no place for me up here. I was going to have to make a choice. And... if things had turned out differently. I would have wanted you guys to be free anyway. I'm ready. But I've been ready since I climbed the mountain.”

“Frisk... this is not your fault. It is just... something that has to be done. I am sorry. And I want you to know. I love you.”

Frisk closed their eyes and sniffed.

“I love you too, dad.”

“Goodbye.”

Frisk tensed up, not daring to open their eyes but mind racing with scenarios. It wasn't like Asgore had a lack of options; fire magic, those magical garden tools, that huge trident, or simply his physical strength, he could put one hand on Frisk's shoulder and another on their head and rip them apart if he wanted to and MY CHEST MY HEART I CAN'T BREATHE
“Mom, can we talk for a minute out in the back yard?”

“Hmmm... I suppose I can spare a few minutes. What do you wish to speak to me about?”

“I, uh. It would be easier to show you. Sorry to be so cryptic about it.”

“Very well. Lead on, my child.”

Frisk walked through the house and pushed on the back door, walking out into the yard and making their way over to the tire swing. The sound of rustling grass that marked Toriel's footsteps was the loudest sound they could hear, and they turned around slowly.

“I haven't been able to... let me start again. I don't think there's any way to say this that will change anything. But I will say this. I didn't... I didn't want this. I still don't. I'd get rid of it if I knew how. But you need to know because it's too important to keep secrets about.”

Frisk turned to face the tire swing and reached out. A blue light started to shine around the swing and the child’s hand, and the swing moved back and forth. The light blinked out like flipping a switch as the child heard a shriek, smothered by two massive paws, and turned back to face Toriel. The boss monster's eyes were wide and staring at the swing, and then turned to focus on the child.

Toriel's paws came down slowly, and Frisk saw the jaw set first, followed by the tension around the eyes, and finally the change in stance; warning signs that had been burned into their brain through experience.

“You... you... how... dare you.”

Toriel's eyes narrowed to slits but through those slits burned a brilliant orange light, and a heat shimmer formed around each paw.

“After everything we have done for you, after everything I have done for you, after all that has transpired, you would... you would still betray us all in this manner, you... you horrid little thing.”

Frisk stepped back away from the advancing wave of heat, bumping into the tire and losing their balance. Flames burst into existence around the queen and began to advance towards the fallen human child.

“I took you in when you said you had nowhere else to go and I believed you like a fool and all this time you pretended to be everything I had missed for so long and I am repaid with this!?”

Frisk brought up an arm out of reflex but the light did not return without the focus to use it, focus that had been lost to panic and whole world was on fire the whole world was fire and they clenched their teeth trying not to breathe because if they breathed in they would be burning from the inside out it's not a puzzle it was never a puzzle everything I do is WRONG THERE IS NO RIGHT ANSWER THERE IS ONLY DYING FOREVER AND EVER AND EVER

“Mom, Dad? Can we talk?”

“Why certainly, Asriel. What would you like to speak of?”

Asriel turned to look at Frisk, who swallowed and nodded. The young monster turned back to his
“This is something that Frisk and I have known about for a bit, but Frisk wants you to know. And I'm mostly here for moral support.”

“Yeah.” Frisk's voice was soft, almost hoarse, but they cleared their throat. “The thing is... some time after I got shot. I started... noticing weird stuff. Flashing lights mostly. But... uhm. The night that Asriel came back. I... did something. I don't know if it actually helped or not. But... I used magic. Healing magic. At All Fine Labs. When he was taking on a new shape. And when Jordan Cater was in the CORE. I used Blue Magic to fight him.”

Frisk looked up to see a stern expression on Toriel's face.

“This is an attempt at humor, correct? It is in very poor taste.”

“You must be mistaken, Frisk,” Asgore added, with a more comforting expression and tone of voice. “Humans cannot use magic anymore. It must have been a trick of the light, or the chaos during the CORE fight, or perhaps one of your classmates has been playing a practical joke on you.”

Frisk looked down at the coffee table and held up one hand. One teacup slide closer to Frisk while glowing, and the glow subsided as Frisk lowered their hand.

Both the king and queen immediately stood up out of surprise, Toriel staring at Frisk, Asgore at the teacup. Toriel recovered first.


“Mom, calm down. Frisk is-”

“I said come here, Asriel!”

Asriel stood up, but sidestepped in front of Frisk.

“NO! Frisk hasn't done anything to hurt us! Even after all of us tried to hurt them! And they're not going to hurt us now! Frisk is-”

“Frisk is a magician and you are to come here right now!” Toriel barked.

Frisk reached up a hand and touched Asriel's shoulder. “Asriel, you can't help me now. This was always going to-”

“DON'T YOU TOUCH HIM YOU LITTLE BRAT!” Toriel's scream was punctuated with a swarm of fireballs that exploded around Frisk, and the child went sprawling as furniture was demolished, smoke filled the air, there was the smell of burning hair along with it and it was coming from them they finally realized and where was Asriel what had happened to him they wouldn't risk killing their own son to destroy a magician would they so where was he where did the Dreemurrs go where was this everything was fire everything was burning everything was different stumbling from room to room coughing and choking had to find him had to make sure he was safe had to protect Asriel have to save Asriel I have to Save Asriel I HAVE TO SAVE ASRIEL

Eyes opened in the bedroom, and Asriel Dreemurr went from completely asleep to completely awake in a matter of seconds. Out of reflex, one paw was raised to be sure that it was still a paw,
but the child froze as muffled sounds filled the bedroom. They sounded like... somebody trying to cry very quietly.

And the occasional grunt of pain.

Asriel turned to look at the bedroom; the trace amount of light coming in through the windows was just enough to make out a shape hunched over at Frisk's desk, where the sounds were coming from.

“..Frisk?”

The sounds stopped abruptly, and Asriel held a cold feeling form in the pit of his stomach. The covers were pushed back and the child sat up, climbing out of bed and walking slowly over to his sibling.

“Frisk, what's wrong?”

“...it's the end.”

Asriel swallowed.

“What do you mean-”

“I saw it all. Asriel. In my dreams. Every different way we could tell mom and dad. Different times. Different ways... nothing changed. I died. And I died. And I died and I died and I died and-”

Frisk's voice began to increase in speed and pitch, then stopped abruptly with another grunt of pain. Asriel blinked.

“What just happened?”

“Won't let it happen I won't let it happen I won't. If I stay awake I stay alive. If I stay awake I stay alive. If I stay awake-”

Asriel swallowed as Frisk repeated themselves over and over, and held up his paws next to each other. A glow surrounded both of them and then a bouquet of flowers formed between them, glowing bright enough to illuminate the two children.

Frisk's right hand was covered in blood.

The light flickered and went out as the flowers vanished. Asriel reached out to Frisk, taking their forearm in both paws.

“Frisk what happened to your hand??”

“Have to stay awake. I can't lose you again Asriel. I can't lose you again.”

Asriel swallowed.

“...Frisk. Let's get this cleaned up, okay? Come on.”

There was no response for a moment, and slowly Frisk started to move. Asriel's paw found Frisk's left hand in the dark, and he found his way to the bedroom door, out through the hallway, and into the upstairs bathroom. The light was flicked on and both children flinched and closed their eyes from the brightness; once his eyes had adjusted Asriel pulled Frisk towards the sink.

“Here. Go ahead and wash off the blood and we'll see how bad it is.”
Frisk's hands shook, but they moved towards the sink; the tap was turned on and Frisk began to scrub their hand, tainting the ceramic red as they did. More out of reflex and habit than conscious intent, Frisk grabbed the bar of soap and worked up a lather, scrubbing both hands with a mechanical repetition and rinsing off the soap... to reveal a hand covered in bite marks.

Asriel's breath caught in his throat for a moment. The explanation for the noise he had heard in the dark was in front of him, but he could keep from asking anyway.

“Frisk. What were you...?”

“...I can't do this anymore. I can't do this. I can't find a way out. I have to stay awake. I have to stay awake.”

Asriel stared at the bite marks. Some of them were deep enough to draw blood, and were already starting to ooze again. Slowly, carefully, his paws reached out and took Frisk's right hand, and he stared.

“I don't know if this will work, but I have to try...”

A soft green light, barely noticeable against the lights in the ceiling and above the mirror, began to pulsate around Asriel's fingers. One by one, the bite marks began to fade and heal, until the light flickered out entirely. Asriel let his breath out and stumbled into the counter top before catching himself.

“Asriel??”

“I'm okay. It's hard, but it's there. Just like the fire magic. I just... that's all I got.” Asriel shook his head and stared at Frisk's hand again. “Some of them didn't heal up all the way... come on. Let's go to the kitchen. If you eat those leftover carrots then that should take care of everything-”

“No, I can't.”

“What?”

“I can't keep doing this. I can't keep doing this. I can't. I can't. I can't. I'll... I can do it myself. I just. I just need to think.”

Frisk pulled their hand from Asriel's grip and held it in their other hand and stared at it... nothing happened. No light, green or otherwise, appeared, and Frisk let out their breath.

“Ugh... why. Why does this not work... what's the point of even having magic if I can't make it do what I need it to do?”

“I'll go get some food-”

“Don't.”

Asriel stopped in his tracks as Frisk stared at their hand again. “I'm already on thin ice. I can't keep...”

Tears started to run down Frisk's face, first from one eye and then the other.

“Mom does so much... she tries so hard, and... and all I do is take and take and take and... and what does she get back? I saw the hospital bills. I know what groceries cost. I can't just... it's wrong. It's stealing. And now this happened and I was already on thin ice and-”
“Frisk? Is that you? I swear that I heard voices...”

Toriel appeared in the doorway, rubbing one paw against one eye. Asriel let his breath out.

“Mom. Frisk needs help. I tried to heal their hand but I couldn't do it all the way.”

Movement out of the corner of Asriel's vision caused him to look away from his mother and see Frisk backing away from Toriel slowly; their eyes were wide open but they didn't actually seem to be focused on Toriel at all.

“Frisk? What is wrong...?”

“...I can't go back. Please, don't send me back. I'm sorry I lied I'm sorry I kept secrets I'm sorry I couldn't tell you I'm sorry I didn't want any of this to happen I swear I don't know what happened...”

Frisk paused to take in a gasping breath and Toriel stepped forward; the human child cried out and tried to step back again, but Frisk's leg collided with the edge of the bath tub and they tripped and fell on their back, crying out again as they hit the floor and curling up into what Asriel instantly recognized as a defensive posture, trying to protect their weak points from attack.

“Frisk!” Toriel immediately stepped forward and knelt down next to the fallen child, who was shaking like a leaf in the wind and crying almost hysterically. The child flinched as massive paws touched them, even while a green glow emanated from them. “Frisk, are you hurt? Please, tell me what is wrong!”


Slowly, after what felt like hours to Asriel, Frisk's crying slowed to an occasional sob or gasping breath. Toriel's paws moved carefully underneath Frisk and lifted the child off of the cold tiles, wrapping them in massive, fuzzy arms.

“My child... I promise you, you are safe. You are home. Everything is alright.”

The teacher walked out of the bathroom, and Asriel followed her down the hallway, down the stairs, and to the living room. With a flick of Toriel's wrist, the magical embers in the fireplace burst into full radiance again, and she sat down in her reading chair next to it. Asriel sat down in one of the nearby chairs and listened as Toriel said soothing things, over and over, and Frisk calmed down, little by little, as the magical fire waned again.

“...mom.”

“Yes, my child. I am right here.”

“...I'm sorry I woke you up... I didn't mean to. I just... I had a bad dream, and... and-”

“It is fine, Frisk. All that matters is that you are alright.”

“...I don't want to go to sleep. If I go to sleep. It'll all happen again. I know it.”

“That is alright. We can sit here, for as long as you need.”

“...thank you.”
Asriel was not sure how long it took for Frisk to fall asleep, but the fire had burned down even further, and Toriel carefully stood up and carried Frisk upstairs. Asriel followed close behind and watched as Toriel pulled back the sheets and tucked Frisk into bed. When she stood up, she looked towards his empty bed and saw her eyebrows move up, even in the dark bedroom, and heard her let her breath out when she turned and saw him standing in the doorway.

“Mom... can we talk for a moment?”

“...of course.”

Asriel looked down at his feet and walked back downstairs again, and found himself sitting in the same chair that he had been just minutes before. Toriel sat in her reading chair and patted one knee, as an invitation; Asriel swallowed and shook his head.

“Mom... do you remember what I said before? That I would tell you what was bothering Frisk if I thought it was dangerous?”

“...yes. I do remember that.”

“...Frisk was trying to stay awake after that nightmare. And they ended up biting themselves. They were biting so hard that they were bleeding. That was... why we were in the bathroom when you found us. To wash off the blood.”

Asriel sniffed.

“So... it is dangerous now. Dangerous to Frisk, to keep it all buried. So I have to tell you. But mom... Frisk is so worried about this that now I'm worried too. So, I have to say this first. Before anything else. Whatever happens to Frisk because of this... it has to happen to me too. I can't... I'm not letting go. Never again.”

Toriel blinked in confusion, but said nothing, and Asriel took a deep breath.

“Okay. Here goes everything. Mom... Frisk can use magic.”

“...I beg your pardon?”

“When I was... coming back. Frisk was using Green Magic. We don't know if it helped. Or if it did anything all. But mom... they didn't realize they were doing it until I pointed it out. And then they started to panic. And in Hotland. In the CORE. During the fight with Jordan Cater. They said they used Blue Magic to push him back. We don't know what else they can do, or if that's it... Frisk doesn't want to experiment. They want it to go away. They want it to be gone because they think that, that everyone will be afraid of them or hate them or both because of it. Because of everything that happened. The War and the Barrier and being stuck under the mountain for so long.”

Toriel's brow furrowed in confusion and Asriel pressed on, trying to ignore his shaking paws.

“I don't know what Frisk saw exactly in the nightmare. But I do know it scared them enough that they hurt themselves to stay awake, rather than fall asleep and risk having the same dream again. So... no matter what happens to them. Or to me. I have to tell you. I can't let this all happen again.”

Toriel breathed in slowly, and then out again.

“...Asriel. Thank you for telling me-”

“Is Frisk in trouble?”
Toriel blinked, and Asriel continued.

“Are you going to give up Frisk or get rid of Frisk or—”

“Asriel.”

The young monster's mouth snapped shut, and Toriel sighed.

“I have no intention of giving up Frisk, or allowing harm to come to them. I just... Asriel, even after everything that has happened to you, I hope that you do not understand what I am about to say; there are certain things that nobody should have to experience at any age, but especially not as children. I have been worried, very worried, that when Frisk did tell me what bothered them so much, it would be... an experience of that kind.” Toriel reached up and rubbed her eyes with one paw. “While I am... relieved to discover that this is not what bothers them, I admit that I am confused why this frightens Frisk to such a degree.”

Asriel let his breath out and relaxed.

“Some of it is the Barrier thing, like I said earlier. They're afraid that once anyone finds out about this, they'll look at them and stop seeing Frisk, the Ambassador for the Kingdom of Monsters, and only see the first part of another thousand years of being trapped.”

“...Frisk has done so much to get us established upon the surface. Every monster knows this, as do most of the humans of this town, including those that do not care for us. The idea that anyone would see them as any sort of threat is preposterous. Surely, Frisk also sees this.”

Asriel shook his head. “I tried to tell them that, over and over, and it never stuck. But there's another part of it. We don't know why Frisk can use magic. We especially don't know why they can use it now, but not before. And Frisk is scared that somebody will figure it out once they know it's possible, and they might not be on our side.”

Toriel's brow furrowed.

“That, at least, I can understand.”

“Uhm. Mom. There's other stuff you should know. Frisk has been... trying to build up to telling you on Friday, after school is over. I don't... I don't know how they'll react if you confront them with this before then, but you saw how they panicked earlier. Maybe... maybe letting them do this in their own time is the best. So they can tell you, and see for themselves that all those bad dreams they have about somebody finding out are just bad dreams, and not... you know. The thing Frisk and I have where sometimes we know what happens next. But the thing is, if you do confront them about this, if you tell them that you know... then you have to tell them how you know, too, and... I'm worried about how they'll react. I know it had to be done, but....”

Asriel's voice trailed off.

“I understand.” Toriel got up from her chair, and Asriel stood up as well; the queen got down on one knee and wrapped her arms around her son.

“Asriel... my brave little boy. I am... I want you to know that I am proud of you. I understand how hard it was for you to talk about all of this with me.”

The young monster's arms came up and he hugged back, as hard as he could.

“Mom. I... I know I haven't said it much, lately. But. I want you to know that I love you. And.
Even when I couldn't love anyone. I missed that more than anything else. And, I knew I said it before, but thank you. Thank you for giving me a chance to be Asriel again. Thank you for letting me be your son again.”

Toriel's fingers came up and ran through the tuft of fur on Asriel's forehead.

“Thank you for coming back... Asriel. I... I want to apologize. When you... when I lost you. I did not take it well. I made mistakes. And I fear that when you returned, I did not handle it as well as I could have. I... I am so sorry that I raised my hand against you, even in ignorance, even out of shock.”

“It's okay, mom.”

“...even now. Even a week later. That shock remains, and I fear I have not handled it properly. I have... I have done so much to bury myself in routine, to protect myself, even when others were depending on me. I have taken a handful of days off, when I should have taken a leave of absence, to give you my undivided attention. I know that I have not been there for you, when you needed me. I do not want that to happen again.”

Asriel tried to swallow a lump in his throat that formed out of nowhere.

“...I'd be lying if I said that it's been easy. But mom. Whether you realized it or not, you did the right thing. We've all been so busy, and that includes me. And that's... it's for the best. If I'm not busy. I start to think about what happened back then. About... about what I did that I wish I hadn't. Or things I wish I had done, that I didn't. Or... thinking about why I came back, instead of...”

Asriel stopped talking, and Toriel felt the child start to shake. The queen adjusted her arms and stood up, carrying Asriel.

“Whatever happens in the future, Asriel. I will be there for you. As will we all. I promise.”

Frisk opened their eyes, looking around. A bedroom, slowly being illuminated by morning sunlight through the windows. There was the sensation of movement and a murmured noise, and Frisk turned their head to see Asriel lying next to them, making odd noises in his sleep.

There were other sounds, on the edge of hearing.

Voices.

Carefully, so as to not wake Asriel, Frisk climbed up and over the young monster and out of bed entirely. Opening the bedroom door increased volume and clarity, but all that Frisk could be sure of was that one of the voices was Toriel speaking. Moving slowly down the hall, and then down the stairs, the voices became more distinct as Frisk homed in on the kitchen, where Toriel seemed to be talking to somebody over the phone.

“Again, I cannot apologize enough for calling on such short notice, Papyrus. Thank you for agreeing to assist us.”

Papyrus's reply, while enthusiastic, was still distorted enough by distance and audio channel limitations that Frisk could not determine what he had said. (Then again, that could happen even if every word he said was heard with perfect clarity.) Toriel laughed softly.

“Yes, of course. Also I must imagine with Sans and Dr. Aster out of town, you must be feeling
rather bonely.”

Even over Toriel's giggling, Frisk could hear Papyrus making annoyed sounds over the phone line.

“I do apologize, but with Sans gone somebody must keep up appearances.”

Frisk poked their head past the doorway and saw Toriel looking out the window, cell phone held under one ear.

“Yes, of course. I will see you soon. Goodbye.”

Toriel began to turn around, and Frisk moved back behind the door threshold, heart hammering in their chest. A familiar and unpleasant sensation, of being an intruder that had to remain unseen at any cost, had returned. Even as the child tried to find escape routes, Toriel walked through the threshold and noticed them leaning against the wall.

“Oh! Frisk, you startled me just now.”

The child flinched. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to.”

“...it is alright.”

Toriel walked over to the sofa, sat down, and patted the seat next to her with one paw, as an invitation. Slowly, Frisk walked over and sat down.

“Frisk... I suppose I should preface what I am about to say with a reassurance. You are not in trouble. And while I wish that circumstances did not require that I make such reassurances, you should understand that this is not your fault.”

Toriel waited for a sign of acknowledgment from Frisk, and then continued.

“In light of what happened last night, I would like for you to take a personal day today.”

“But I'm not sick mom, and there's only two or days plus the-”

Toriel held up her paw and Frisk stopped talking.

“I understand that you are not physically ill. However, I also understand that you have a tendency to push yourself to extremes and disregard your own health, safety, and peace of mind in favor of those around you. Even after you were... injured, during the first address. Your mind was immediately fixated upon rescheduling it and what changes to the agenda were necessary. And while the influenza was the most dramatic case where I had to put my foot down, there have been other instances where you have put your schoolwork and ambassador responsibilities ahead of your own health. Yes, you could go to school today, but just because you can do something does not mean you must. You need to take time for yourself when you need it, and that includes when you are tired and under stress, as well as when you are physically ill or injured.”

Frisk stared at the coffee table and said nothing.

“Frisk, last night you were so distraught that you tried to flee as I approached you. Do you remember that?”

“...yes. It's blurry, but I remember.”

Frisk felt something soft touch the top of their head; Toriel's paw, running through their hair.
“I understand that you had a nightmare, and that you were still quite shaken by it. I know that one
reassurance cannot undo a lifetime’s experience, but I want to tell you again. You are a part of this
family now. You are Frisk Dreemurr. And whatever it is that frightens you, whatever it is that you
cannot bring yourself to speak of yet. It does not matter what it is. If there is something you have
done that you regret, or... if there was something that happened to you... it does not matter. You are
my child. You are Asgore's child. You are Asriel's sibling. And we will be there for you, whenever
you need us.”

Frisk closed their eyes.

“...thank you, mom. I'll be there for you guys too. No matter what.”

Toriel smiled.

“Do not worry about school today. I will speak to the other teachers and bring home what few
assignments remain this close to the end of the year, and reschedule what tests you would have for
tomorrow. Because Gory and I will be so busy today, I have asked Papyrus to come by and check
on you and Asriel throughout the day, and make sure that everything is alright.”

“...okay.”

“And when your brother wakes up, what do you say that we all make breakfast together, and I can
explain to him today's plans?”

Frisk looked up, and managed to return Toriel's smile.

“Sounds good.”
Dr. Aster Goes To Washington

Chapter Notes

This chapter portrays United States politicians in their natural habitat. Reader discretion is advised. No claims are made that the portrayal of any named Senators is accurate; any similarity with actual Senators, sitting or former, is purely coincidental... not to mention really weird.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Good morning, Ebott's Wake! Welcome back to the Morning Rush, hope you enjoyed Em-One's Reset Me just now, and if you didn't, well I hope we will play something that will appeal to you later today. For now, we're just about ready to cut things over to the live audio of Dr. Aster's testimony before the Senate Oversight Committee on Paranormal Activity.”

“Well, we say live, but it's on a few seconds delay just in case Jeff has to censor anything.”

“Burgie, these are United States Senators and you know what maybe that's a good idea after all.”

“Popcorn?”

“Thanks. A little tidbit of civic information; despite the name, legally the Senate Oversight Committee on Paranormal Activity is actually a special or select committee, as opposed to a standing committee-”

There was a knock on the door and Frisk looked away from the radio.

“Frisk, it's about to start! I think. Seems like they've been about to start for ten minutes.”

“Okay! Be right down!”

The human child reached out to turn off the radio with one hand, and with the other grabbed several sheets of paper and some mechanical pencils. After looking at themselves one more time to make sure they were decent to have company over, the door was pulled open and Frisk made their way downstairs where Asriel, still in his pajamas, and Papyrus in his exercising outfit, were already seated at the sofa and staring at the television set.

In defiance of Asriel's haste, Frisk walked slowly down the stairs and sat down on the outside seat of the sofa, laying the papers and pencils on the coffee table. On the screen, figures in suits and ties sat behind desks or tables, sorting through their own paperwork or speaking too each other.

“WOWIE! WHAT SUSPENSE!”

“That's... not the word I'd use,” Asriel said, tapping one finger on the armrest of the couch with visible impatience. “Golly, why does human government have to be so complicated? There's like eight different people on this thing!”

“Yeah. The United States government has a lot of moving parts.” Frisk shrugged. “I know who the Oregon senators are and it's hard to keep everything else straight without a bunch of notes and books. Doesn't look like either of them are on this committee though-”
The screen switched from an overview of the room to showing a skeleton monster sitting at a table or desk, located at the visual focal point of a rough semicircle of politicians. He was dressed in a gray suit but sported a bright yellow bow tie around his suit collar.

“You're quite welcome and may I say, thank you for giving myself and my assistant an excuse to visit the museums in the capital. We've both been looking forward to that.”

There was some laughter, and Frisk started to fidget as much as Asriel had while the political and legal formalities were observed. They didn't seem to notice Asriel's occasional nervous glances towards them. On the TV, the image showed a picture of a man talking; the overlay on the screen said “Ben Sasse, R-Nebraska” and gave a name and a face to the voice that had opened the proceedings.

“Dr. Aster, I'd like to start by asking that you give us the simplest possible summary of what magic is and how it fits in with what we already know of the world.”

“Very well. I do know that there are a lot of competing and conflicting theories that humans have about what constitutes magic and what it can and cannot do, and I'm more than pleased to have the opportunity to set the record straight. I do have to ask if you would like me to give a purely technical, purely theoretical framework for magic, or if you want demonstrations, since I know actually seeing it might make some people uncomfortable for any number of reasons.”

“Why don't you start with the theory, and if anybody has any questions after that, we can move on to demonstrations if that proves necessary.”

“Alright then. To define magic then, I'll have to start with this. What we call magic, you can consider to be a very specific branch of science. Magical phenomena are repeatable, reproducible, and follow a set of consistent rules, with exceptions that themselves are defined by specific rules. Magical effects can contradict what is known of human science in many cases, but I will be able to clear that up as well. Simply put, human science concerns itself with matter and energy at speeds and energy levels below that of the speed of light in a vacuum. Magic is defined by energy levels higher than that.”

The chamber was filled with a certain amount of subdued talking, and one of the senators cleared her throat. The screen overlay changed to say “Jeanne Shaheen, D-New Hampshire” which replaced the overlay that read “W.D. Aster, Monster Scientist” while the doctor was speaking.

“Dr. Aster, everything that we know about how the world works says that nothing can travel faster than the speed of light.”

“I am aware of that, and I can account for this discrepancy.”

“Please do.”

Dr. Aster nodded.

“Thank you. First of all, human science has actually detected what might be called superluminal phenomena in the form of the teleportation of photons, entanglement, and several other quantum scale events. These phenomena are categorized as separate and distinct because the convention of
the speed of light being a hard limit have already been experimentally vindicated with decades of
decades of particle physics research. Your scientists categorized them as something entirely new because you
had no way of knowing that you were looking at the same thing from multiple angles. In light of
the quantum scale experiments I mentioned, you would have eventually rediscovered the
fundamental principles of magic on your own, though I cannot speculate how long it would have
taken or how you would formalize them.”

An older man in a black suit spoke up, and the overlay changed again to “Jim Inhofe, R-
Oklahoma” as he was speaking.

”Pardon me doctor but it sounded to me like you said the word rediscovered. As in, you mean to
imply we already knew about magic.”

Dr. Aster nodded.

“I did say that, yes, because at some point humans did have the capacity to use magic. We know
that because that is how monsters became trapped in the cavern beneath Mt. Ebott in the first
place. What we do not know is why no humans appear to have that ability now.”

Asriel slowly moved his head enough to look at Frisk out of the corner of his eye. They seemed
calm, but their hand seemed to be shaking as they scribbled on a sheet of paper. Papyrus, at least,
seemed completely captivated by the television and completely oblivious to the nervous energy of
his charges. More words from the television jostled Asriel's attention and he turned back to the
screen, unsure of what he missed except that it involved yet another human speaking up and Dr.
Aster responding.

“We do have some theories, Senator Franken. The first is that human magic use was only possible
through exposure to some material, or combination of materials, that acted as a sort of translation
system between matter and energy at sub-c energy levels and their magical counterparts at higher-
than-c energy levels. If those materials were finite, or the proper combination is no longer known,
then this explains why human magic use eventually stopped. Another theory is that some humans
naturally could manipulate magic, and after the War between Humans and Monsters, whatever
human genetic traits governed that ability were not passed on. Possibly the humans with that gene
sequence or chromosome or whatever it was died out en mass from a famine, drought, epidemic,
war, or natural disaster, or it was a recessive gene that would only activate if both parents passed it
on, so it eventually just died out even while the human carriers of the gene went about their lives.
There are other theories that we are investigating as part of All Fine Labs' Soul Research program,
but with monsters sealed underground and human civilizations rising and falling and their histories
being lost repeatedly I believe it is extremely unlikely that we will ever know for certain what
happened.”

Senator Shaheen spoke up again.

“Doctor Aster, you said that magic was defined as energy traveling faster than light. I would
appreciate you giving us more detail on that, because, as it stands, it feels like you've given us a
contradictory statement. You might as well have said that magic is like dry water. I'd like to
understand more about how that fits into our existing scientific models and how that changes
things and what it doesn't change.”

“I would be happy to do that, as magic physics is one of my favorite subjects. I would like to
correct what I think is an incorrect term, however. Senator Shaheen, you used the phrase 'energy
classifying faster than light' with the word 'traveling' implying a specific velocity or range of
velocities. The term 'energy level' is more appropriate. If any of you have ever been swimming and
opened your eyes under water, you would have been able to perceive part of your environment
visually even though the photons of light reaching your retinas were traveling slower than the speed of light in a vacuum, defined as c. This is because they still had the energy needed to trigger the chemical reactions in the rod and cone cells the eye uses to translate light into electrical impulses. Infrared light doesn't have enough energy to trigger the retinal cells, and ultraviolet light has too short of a wavelength to interact with any of those cells. The apparent phenomena of a constant velocity of light is partially a function of wave mechanics and different combinations of frequencies, wavelengths, and energy levels all still fitting into the range that interacts with optical detection instruments. The physics of a photon exciting the atoms in an electronic photocell are not that different from the process of exciting an organic cell in the retina. Only the materials are different.”

“...I'm still trying to keep up with all of that, but you said 'partially' just now. What is the rest of it?”

Dr. Aster raised one hand up to adjust his bow tie.

“Well, if you didn't like the mention of higher-than-c energy levels, you probably aren't going to like this, but here we go. Human science outside of quantum physics tends to perceive space as a vacuum, an empty volume waiting to be filled by matter or the actions of energy on matter over time. In magical optics, the fundamental principle is that otherwise 'empty' space,” Dr. Aster raised his hands and hooked both index and middle finger bones into visual quotation marks as he said the word empty, “we consider to be literally packed solid with photons defined by energy levels either too low or too high to measure directly. Visible light exists when the interactions between these photons occur within that range that can excite the atoms used in sensory instruments, no matter what they are. This is another reason why light seems to have a speed limit, because that's the speed of the shock wave of energy traveling through the magic, er, photonic field. Just because sound waves can only travel so fast through the air does not mean they can't be made by an object traveling faster. Again, human quantum physics has stumbled onto this empirically; the idea of a quantum field and virtual particles, or other variations, is not that far away from the idea of the background magic field we use.”

Senator Shaheen spoke again, gesturing with a pen as she did. “You keep coming back to that point. That humans actually seem to be on the verge of discovering magic again. But if that is the case, why haven't we yet? There's research all over the world into the advanced physics you say we've already found, but we haven't produced the results that match what monsters are able to produce.”

“I would say that this is partly a conceptual limitation and partly an engineering limitation. The conceptual limitation includes what I mentioned earlier about having to shoehorn in quantum effects as different types of phenomena once the speed of light was considered inviolate. In most human cultures, magic appears to be synonymous with mysticism, so while human scientists are finding stuff they have to make up new names for, they aren't finding magic as we know it because they're not looking for it. They didn't even know there was something to look for until the Barrier was destroyed and monsters started living on the surface again. And obviously if you're not sure of what forces you are trying to harness, that makes it tricky to build technology to harness it. I mean, it's not impossible. You don't need to know how magnetism works to make or use a compass. It's just easier if you do.”

Another senator, who appeared to be a relatively young man, spoke, and the overlay indicated his name and title as “Tom Cotton, R-Arkansas”

“Dr. Aster, you have mentioned the Barrier several times now, and there has been some concern about what that is and what was involved in finally breaking it. I would like you to explain as much
as you can about that.”

“The Barrier was a magical obstruction created by human magicians an undetermined amount of time ago to keep monsters trapped in the cavern. It appeared to be an almost uniform sphere of energy that permeated the actual rock of Mt. Ebott and existed across the entire magical spectrum. No known magical or technological measure monsters had at their disposal ever weakened it in any measurable way, or even affected it. I say almost uniform because there was some sort of underground river in the cavern that clearly had some sort of exit, otherwise the entire cavern would have been flooded days or weeks after the Barrier was created. That said, we were never able to determine how that exit worked, as there was no way to safely explore it and return to report discoveries. Returning to the Barrier itself, it allowed anything to travel inside, but not out.”

“Which is how the various human children fell into the Underground.”

Dr. Aster stared at the senator while the background noise of the room picked up again.

“That is correct. Anything could enter, nothing could leave. I was actually friends with the first fallen human. Chara Cater was their name—”

“Dr. Aster. Is it true that the Barrier required seven human souls to destroy?”

“According to my measurements—”

“Yes or no please Dr. Aster—”

“Yes, according to my measurements—”

“So Chara Cater was your ticket out of there, or one of them.”

The background noise of the room increased again.

“Dr. Aster, please answer my question.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. It sounded like you were making a statement, my apologies. What question do you have for me?”

“...Dr. Aster, was Chara Cater just what you needed to get out of the Underground?”

Dr. Aster's eye lights disappeared as he stared at the senator.

“No.”

“But you just said—”

“Chara was immediately adopted by King Asgore and Queen Toriel. I was given explicit instructions to find a way to destroy, negate, or bypass the Barrier before the end of Chara’s natural lifespan, so that they could be returned home safely. The use of the child as any sort of resource was out of the question. As bad as things were down there, everyone in the Underground was more than willing to wait.”

Senator Sasse spoke up as Dr. Aster's eye lights returned.

“The issues of fault, legal responsibility and all related factors pertaining to the deaths of the fallen humans have previously been addressed as part of an investigation by the Ebott's Wake Police Department. According to the reports released and the statements made, they find no cause to hold
Asgore Dreemurr or any other monsters responsible or at fault for the deaths of any humans that had fallen into the Underground. Whether or not anyone wishes to contest that is not the purpose of this committee, and even if it was we could not question Dr. Aster on the subject because he was not present during the events in question. Can we please try to stay on task.” Senator Sasse was looking pointedly at Senator Cotton as he finished speaking.

Senator Shaheen took the initiative as more background speaking filled the room.

“That's right. Dr. Aster, you were speaking of the Barrier before we were sidetracked. You stated that you were tasked with finding a way around it that did not require the use of human souls. Is this correct?”

“Yes.”

“What methods did you attempt?”

“Well, we tried all magical options long before Chara came to us. Brute force, trying to find weak points to focus precision force on, oblique and indirect attacks, draining the energy out of it through induction. None of it worked. As I said, the Barrier existed across the entire magical spectrum. No loopholes, no weaknesses.”

“Can you explain what you mean by the magic spectrum?”

“Absolutely. Since the core operating principle of magic is based on the behavior of light, all of our syntax for describing how to use magic, at least in scientific terms, borrows from conventional optics. Magic can be focused, diffused, magnified, reflected, polarized, and split into its constituent wavelengths, This latter case is what gives us the spectrum and the corresponding 'color coding' monsters use as shorthand to describe a given band of magic. Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Cyan, Blue, Magenta. Communication, Force, Energy, Healing, Wave, Dimension, and Pattern. It's important to note that these terms are for the sake of convenience, and the different types of magic bump into each other sooner rather than later, just like you can't mess around with electricity without bumping into magnetism.”

Asriel turned to see Frisk scribbling furiously on a sheet of paper, and for a split second found his thoughts drifting back to the card in the back pocket of the astronomy book with the color list. Even without the box to know what the puzzle was supposed to look like, it felt like he had stumbled over another piece.

“Communication is mostly a teaching tool these days, since cell phones and wi-fi have made talking over distances much easier; it's also the foundation of magical visual arts, though with a little practice any color can be produced instead of Red. Force magic pertains almost entirely to motion, but specifically how motion interacts with physical matter. Energy magic is used to influence temperature, electrical potential, and motion. Healing magic is about improvements in living organisms, of which healing is the most obvious and practical. Wave magic again is all about motion, but it's the converse of Force magic. Force is like the particle side of the equation, compared to Wave. Dimension is about movement specifically, and Pattern magic is about finding connections between distinct entities. In fact Pattern magic is why most monsters can speak American English today, through a rigorous analysis of recovered human artifacts from the river to analyze your culture and language. Then the queen implemented a kingdom-wide educational initiative to make that our primary language, in advance of us actually breaking the barrier and joining the surface.”

“You said most monsters could speak English?”
“Well... it never quite 'took' with the Temmies. They use English words most of the time, but their grammar structure has more in common with our original language.”

“I see. I apologize for the diversion. You were speaking about attempts to destroy the Barrier.”

“Yes. The method that I eventually settled on as having the most potential was a combination of Dimension and Energy magic to create what I call anti-photons. Literally negative energy. Extremely difficult to make. Extremely tricky to control. But they had the potential to penetrate the Barrier, cancel out some of its energy, and reduce its strength. My theory was that over time it would eventually drain the Barrier of enough energy that monsters alone could combine their power to destroy it. No humans required. However, our first full scale test of the phenomena went wrong because of equipment failures. You see... and I'm already regretting explaining this because I know exactly what you'll think of first and it's going to take me six hours to explain why that's not the case... anti-photons are a byproduct of creating a temporal paradox.”

The sound levels in the room immediately jumped up much higher than before, and Dr. Aster's eye lights rolled in their sockets.

“Here we go. Now I know every single person in this room heard what I said and thought 'time travel' and you can stop right now. What happened to me was a freak accident and I don't even know how to reproduce it, never mind reproduce it safely. And I traveled to the future. Everything we know about Dimensional and Energy magic says traveling back in time is not only impossible, but even making the attempt will kill anyone who tries it instantly and spectacularly.”

Senator Sasse tried to speak over the rising tumult in the chamber. “Dr. Aster. Can you explain what you mean by time travel being fatal?”

“The first thing matter does when it travels back in time is run into itself in the past. The electrons are all orbiting in the opposite directions, so the electrical and magnetic fields that hold molecules together are canceled out. Positive nuclei repel each other. If that's you going back in time, you explode into a few trillion free radicals.” Dr. Aster pointed at one of the cracks on his skull. “That's where I got this from. I wanted to test that theory so I used some hydrogen gas. Thought I could nullify the positive charges of the nuclei the same way and use it to combine atoms to synthesize rare elements that we didn't find in the human garbage very often. It literally blew up in my face.”

Senator Cotton seized the opportunity to speak.

“Dr. Aster, it sounds like this use of Energy magic could be very dangerous and potentially weaponized.”

“Senator Cotton, if you're worried about some sort of, I don't know, 'paradox bomb', you don't need to be. To actually produce the retrograde temporal effects we needed to produce the time paradox in the first place, we had to build a staggering amount of machinery in the magma chamber of a semi dormant volcano. We had limited space and materials, so the C.O.R.E. facility was as compact and efficient as we could make it. And growing up in the Underground was itself a masterclass in recycling, miniaturization, and creative use of space. If somebody wanted to use this against you, they'd have to assemble a small office building's worth of extremely advanced physics hardware. Actually, let me correct myself; because humans can't use magic, it would be closer in size to a city block. It would take years. Somebody would notice if anyone was stupid enough to try to build something like this in an area that wasn't completely devoid of people, which defeats the whole point of trying to use something like this as a weapon.”

“Dr. Aster, are you saying, in front of a committee of United States Senators, that this technology isn't harmful.”
“Of course it's harmful. If you don't know what you're doing, and even if you do, you can cause an incredible amount of harm through accident and ignorance. I am stating, with my complete confidence, that temporal mechanics can't be weaponized.”

Senator Sasse coughed.

“While we have gotten on a tangent again, this would be a good time to bring up the details of some of the events of the Thirteenth and twentieth of May this year.”

Dr. Aster raised the brow ridge above his un-cracked eye socket.

“Ah, of course, the Anti Monster League and Guardian attacks. I expect you have questions about the monster responses to those attacks.”

“That's correct. In both cases, eyewitnesses, photographic and video evidence exists of some sort of large animal skull.”

The monster nodded. “Yes, the Aster Blasters.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Aster. Blasters. Their scientific name is *teratus cephalus*. They are one of the few remaining examples of non sapient monster biology left on or in this planet. The Aster family has been breeding and training them for as long as we've been Underground and possibly before.”

“So...” Senator Sasses scratched his head, “these, uh, blasters. These are like attack dogs?”

“They can be used in that role very effectively, but they tend to be more companions. More like service dogs than guard dogs. My assistant Sans and part of my security detail, Mr. Carrow, can demonstrate their docility at your request.”

“That's alright. I think I speak for everyone in the room when I say I'll pass on giant floating skulls.”

“Very well then. Is there anything else you would like to discuss about the attacks?”

“Yes, actually there is. During the incident on the twentieth of May, there were reports of a giant flower monster which caused considerable property damage.”

Asriel felt the bottom drop out of his stomach and swallowed; his mouth was suddenly very dry.

“Yes. I got a front row seat to that display. The intersection is still being worked on, last I heard, but the monster responsible came by to repair all of the landscaping damage.”

“Even so, that's an awful lot of firepower in one monster's hands.”

Dr. Aster rolled his eye lights.

“I am forcibly reminded of something that one of our local radio personalities said on the subject. 'Don't be a murdering bigot, or a giant flower monster will try to eat your face.' I'm paraphrasing of course. Also speaking of murder and loss of life, I would like to point out for the record that during both of these attacks, the loss of life on both sides was completely nonexistent despite the scale and severity of events. Let me say that again. In spite of prolific gunfire and magic use, nobody died from either attack. That is very significant. In that context, what you call firepower would be more appropriately called fireworks.”
“Dr. Aster,” Senator Shaheen spoke up. “While the issue of how magic can be injurious is an important one, I would like to ask questions about the more indirect ways that it can cause harm.”

“While I’m not exactly sure what you mean, if you have specific concerns I will do my best to address them.”

“Thank you doctor. The first item of concern is the possibility of magical coercion or manipulation. Speaking plainly, can magic be used to read or control somebody's mind?”

“Yes and no.”

“Doctor, it's either one or the other.”

“I apologize, my response was not clear. You asked two separate questions. The first, can magic be used to read minds, is yes. Pattern magic allows insight into somebody's personality by examining their behavior, though not their thoughts, memories, or subjective experiences. Communication magic allows a direct connection between Souls, but it's not like reading a book. It's more like tuning into a radio station, and it's a two way street. The more you learn about somebody else, the more they are learning about you at the same time. There is no way to do it secretly or with any real subtlety. The answer to your second question, can magic be used to control somebody, is no. Using Pattern magic you might be able to find blackmail material to coerce somebody, but that wouldn't help you actually direct somebody's choices and decisions. The same is true with Communications magic; if you can't convince somebody to do something by talking to them face to face, magic isn't going to help you.”

“I believe I understand. Thank you for the clarification. The second point of concern is if magic can be used to permanently harm or disfigure somebody. Can magic transform people, in whole or in part, against their will?”

“No. Magic cannot make broad structural changes to physical forms, regardless of the willingness of the subject. At most, Healing magic can temporarily alter the performance and operation of a specific part or system of the body, usually beneficially. The only permanent physical changes caused by magic are restorative, as a part of Healing magic, and even those are limited in what they can and cannot do.”

“So if I was stung by a bee and ate some magical food, and the sting healed up, it wouldn't come back again later.”

“Actually I’m glad you used that example. Certain chronic conditions in human medicine are not directly affected by Healing magic. To use your example of a bee sting, if you were allergic to bee stings, Healing magic would heal the sting and the damage caused by inflammation, but it would not stop the allergic reaction itself. Once the magic wore off, the allergy symptoms would return. With all due respect to its creator, Nice Cream is not a viable substitute for an Epi-pen.”

There was a certain amount of background noise at that comment, some of it laughter, and several of the Senators appeared to be writing notes down. Asriel turned to look at Frisk, also scribbling madly on sheets of paper.

“My last question has to pertain to offensive magic more broadly. According to what has been released and published about monster culture, the use of magic as a sort of sparring exercise is very common. Does this pose a hazard to human bystanders?”

“Broadly speaking it does not, and I will explain the exceptions shortly. The vast majority of monsters demonstrate their magic by exchanging coherent energy projectiles, which for the sake of
simplicity we call bullets. They are intrinsically less dangerous than the metal projectiles launched from human firearms for two reasons. The first is that human bodies are primarily physical and a physical attack that disrupts organs and tissues is far more dangerous than a sudden influx of energy. The second is that bullet from firearms inflict damage as function of muzzle velocity, while the danger posed by magic bullets are determined entirely by the will and intent of the monster creating them. A fireball that has no malice or aggression behind it just warms somebody up when it comes in contact with them. It won't even singe their clothing, and the same is true with ice magic in that it will cool somebody off without causing hypothermia or frostbite. And it is also important to point out that not only do monsters on the surface understand that human familiarity with magic is a very recent and localized occurrence, they understand that humans cannot produce magic bullets to respond in kind. So asking a human to spar like that would be like inviting somebody without any arms to return a high-five; at its best, it's still a serious breach of etiquette.”

“You mentioned exceptions to this that could be hazardous?”

“Yes. While magic itself responds to intentions, any secondary results of magic are not a product of those intentions. Fire magic that is not intended to harm cannot cause injury, but if that magical fire is hot enough to vaporize water into steam on contact, that steam can and likely will harm anyone close enough. I understand that this has lead to more than a few accidents when monsters first resurfaced, but nothing so serious that Healing magic and human medicine couldn't address it.”

“Doctor, it sounds like the non-combative uses of magic could even be more dangerous than the sparring that you speak of.”

“Using magic is just as potentially hazardous in an industrial or research environment as using technology. The importance of following safety procedures and wearing the appropriate protective gear is paramount in both cases. Outside of the workshop and the laboratory and the factory, safety has to come down to social conventions, common sense and common courtesy. A mishap involving a fire elemental and a spilled drink would be very painful for all involved, so foresight and understanding is paramount. Actually a drink thrown in the face of a fire elemental would also be very painful for all involved, but as it would constitute an insult at best and assault at worst, it's harder to sympathize with whoever threw the drink.”

“DAD IS DOUBTLESS REFERRING TO THOSE EXTREMELY RUDE PEOPLE WHO THREW A DRINK AT GRILLBY’S FACE A FEW WEEKS AGO AND GOT QUITE SINGED AS A RESULT! ALTHOUGH THOSE DRINKS HAD A HIGH ALCOHOL CONTENT SO THE RESULT AS I UNDERSTAND WAS LESS STEAM AND MORE FLAME.”

“I think I remember hearing about that...” Asriel scratched his head and turned to see that Frisk was staring at their papers and not the television. “Hey Frisk, are you learning anything new?”

The human child shook their head.

“Sort of. A lot of what he's saying was in that book. Mostly what I'm learning is the legal and political context of magic. And I'm learning more from the Senators than Doctor Aster in that case.” Frisk blinked a few times and then got up. “I need to think. I'll watch the video of the rest of it later.”

“OKAY, FRISK!”

Asriel scratched underneath his muzzle, turned to look at the screen, and then made a decision. Hopping off of the sofa, he followed Frisk up the stairs and stopped at the open doorway to their bedroom. The human child pulled open a desk drawer and began to pull out electronic and mechanical devices in varying states of repair and disrepair.
“...is everything okay, Asriel?”

“I think that's my line right now. You've been... well. After last night it makes sense that you'd be tired and distracted today.”

Frisk sighed.

“Yeah. Mom was probably right to want me to stay home today. I'd be missing questions and jumping at shadows and I wouldn't be able to keep food down long enough for the magic to kick in. But I still feel like... It's Wednesday, it's not a holiday or summer vacation yet, so I should be in school. That's why I had to get out of my pajamas and into regular clothes because it was driving me crazy. And even though mom said it was okay and suggested I take the day off... I feel like I'm breaking a rule and I'm going to get in trouble when she gets home.”

“You're not in trouble. Mom wouldn't get mad at you for doing what she asked you to.”

Frisk didn't reply but pulled out their toolbox and started to disassemble some of the items on their desk with a screwdriver. Asriel watched nervously for a minute before speaking again.

“...Frisk? What are you doing?”

“Just tinkering. It keeps my attention focused. Helps calm me down, even if I don't build anything useful.”

“I've never seen you do it before.”


“Right.”

Frisk reached into their desk again and pulled out a small spool of magnet wire.

“Based on the stuff in the book, and what Dr. Aster said already, I think I can establish a proof of principle for human-built magic-based technology. It's... it's another long shot. But maybe if I can convince Alphys that this is all a side effect of being exposed to this technology without shielding, she can convince mom and dad and I won't be in as much trouble when I... never mind. I'd just be trading one lie for another. Eventually it would fall apart.”

Frisk stared at the tools in their hands, and Asriel felt a weight in his stomach. For a moment the impulse to open his mouth and say 'mom knows and it's okay' took up all available space in his mind, until it was crowded out by another thought; a memory of Frisk jumping from the roof of the house in a terrified bid for escape from imagined dangers.

The young boss monster walked into the bedroom and up to where Frisk was seated at their desk, and wrapped his arms around the human child. Frisk made a noise of surprise and froze.

“Whatever happens Friday. I promise I'll protect you. I won't let anything bad happen to you. I don't care what anybody says or does, I'm going to be there for you... I wouldn't be much of a brother otherwise.”

One of Frisk's hands came up and rested on Asriel's arm.

“...you know, we never did figure out if you're my big brother or little brother, but that's one heck of a big brother instinct.”
Asriel snorted. “One day I'm going to be as tall as mom and dad. I'll definitely be your big brother no matter how we count birthdays.”

Frisk giggled, and the weight in Asriel's stomach seemed to grow lighter.

“I knew I'd turn you to the dark side of puns sooner or later.”

“Don't hold your breath. Best case scenario, you'll get two or three intentional puns out of me a year. For like birthdays and Halloween and stuff.”

“...I'm okay with that.”

Chapter End Notes

This story is a year old now.

Yeah, think about that for a second.

Sorry about any major grammar / spelling errors, orphaned quotes, and other stuff. I was kinda rushing to get this done under the anniversary deadline, so to speak.
ALL FINE LABS SECURE INTRANET

SPECIAL PROJECTS DIRECTORY

PROJECT GRAYSCALE

LEAD RESEARCHER: Josef “Joe” Stanton

PROJECT AUTHORIZED BY: Dr. Alphys

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT: gray000.mp3

“This is Joe Stanton at All Fine Labs. It's Wednesday, the twenty-fifth of May, twenty sixteen. Time is... come on... eleven fifty two AM. Beginning the first audio recording of my attempts to organize the Guardian lore that was provided to me by Michael Van Garrett of the Ebott's Wake Librarby and derive some sort of scientifically useful information from it. Audio records will act as supplemental to text and visual documentation that I already made yesterday. Project name that the Special Projects random number generator came up with is... Grayscale. That's gray with an A, not an E. I'm not complaining. I remember when Soul Research started out as Project Tuna Melt.”

“Background data. The Guardian organization was a cult that existed historically in proximity to Mount Ebott and Ebott's Wake. The focus of their belief system was that monsters were sealed beneath the mountain. Recent events over the past few years have vindicated their claims. However, the monsters are far more well socialized... far better socialized? Far better... more... ugh. The monsters are nice and the Guardians were dicks. God dammit.”

“The Guardians adopted extremely aggressive strategies in anticipation of a monster attack. These strategies resulted in considerable loss of life and suffering for the people of Lost Eagle County in general and Ebott's Wake in particular. In twenty fourteen AD, the Bureau of Alcohol, Demolitions, Tobacco and Firearms responded by raiding their compound, located at and taking up the entirety of Bastion Circle in Ebott's Wake. The compound was almost completely destroyed and only a handful of people survived. Some time during the demolition of the remains, somebody found a fireproof strongbox buried underground, filled with books, notebooks, papers and internal documents. These came into the possession of the Ebott's Wake Librarby and Mike Van Garrett has been using them to gain some sort of insight into their subculture and belief systems. He has provided digital scans and hard copy duplicates of the majority of these documents, with more pending.”

“A central tenet of the Guardian belief system appears to be a categorization system for individual humans based on attributes of their Souls. With the magical imaging technology from Soul Research we have established that human Souls have a particular attribute where they appear to be a specific color, which we have dubbed Soul Chromatics. There appear to be seven different possible colors for this Chromatic system; Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Cyan, Blue, and Magenta. The Guardians also have documentation that matches this color scheme, but which predates the start of Soul Research and the breaking of the Barrier trapping monsters underground. The Guardians also associated each soul color with a specific attribute, quality, or virtue. Red is associated with Determination, Orange with Bravery, Yellow with Justice, Green with Kindness, Cyan with Patience, Blue with Integrity, and Magenta with Perseverance.”

“The matching colors could be a coincidence, but according to Doctor Alphys, Doctor Aster, and
Sans, magic follows a similar color coding system. In addition, Doctor Alphys has been creating devices which allow humans to manipulate magic under extremely limited circumstances, and one of those limitations appears to be based on Soul Chromatics... even though Dr. Alphys never intended that. The device that Doctor Alphys built for me is called a Pattern Magic Analyzer, which provides me with a visual representation of the connections between different objects. It works for me and several other human employees of All Fine Labs whose Souls come up as Magenta, but not for anyone with a different color. So far this has only been tested with the analyzer goggles, but it does imply that there is a one-to-one correlation involved. Soul Chromatics equals Magic Type equals Soul Attribute equals... something else. Even without the goggles I can tell there's some sort of pattern here, waiting for me to find it.”

“Earlier today, Doctor Aster spoke at length in front of a committee of senators about the nature of magic, its potential hazards, and other related subjects. I couldn't finish watching it because politics pisses me off, but I've resolved to dig back into the videos later and see what scientific and magical insight I can find. Doctor Alphys is good, but by her own admission, Doctor Aster is better; a great theoretician, engineer and instructor. An academic triple threat. And thinking back to what I heard... something sticks with me. According to him, magic in its most fundamental state follows some of the principles of light and electromagnetism. So the color coding might not just be for the sake of convenience.”

“Assuming the Guardians were descended from humans that fought in or observed the War between Humans and Monsters, they could also have seen magic in action or even understood some of its operating principles, and passed that information down through their lore. We know historically that humans could use magic, because it was human magicians that made the Barrier. Both Guardian dogma and monster history and folklore agree on this point. Some of their lore, especially that pertaining to Souls, may relate in some way to the connection between magic and Soul Chromatics. Probably not actual applied magic, or they would have been able to fight back more effectively when their compound was raided. Or at least, it would have made it easier for them to escape.”

“Thinking about the light analogy more... there's a lot of early monster technology that Alphys showed me when I first started working here. Sort of a background primer on how monster engineering evolved. Crystals were a theme early and often. Even our latest gamble to stay solvent, the Soul Accessories, feature a synthetic crystal that responds to the Soul of the wearer and changes color to match. Crystals feature a lot in New Age stuff but now I wonder where that trend got started and why. More practically, I know that crystals have important scientific uses because of their structural characteristics. A properly cut crystal of the appropriate type will oscillate at a frequency that corresponds to the crystal's physical dimensions, shape, and molecular structure. They were instrumental in early electronics, and especially radio.”

“I'm going to go get something for lunch, and when I come back, I'm going to go through the Guardian records to see if I can find any references to crystals. This is Joe Stanton signing off.”

“Holy hell, Joe. Did you just stay up all night going through everything?”

Joe scratched the stubble on his face, then blinked.

“Okay, yeah, maybe I forgot to shave this morning. And shower. In my defense the hangover was really distracting.”

“Oh. Well, that explains a few things.” The librarian pulled a manila folder out from under the check out desk. “I do have a few new things for you, if that's what you came by for, but it's going to
be slow for a while. The Librarby Board is meeting in about twenty minutes downstairs and that's not only going to eat up my entire day, but the whole political cat and mouse—"

“You can stop right there. I hit my quota of politics watching the Senate thing and didn't even finish it.”

“Well that's unfortunate. You gotta finish your politics before you can have dessert.”

Joe held up both hands, each one with the middle finger extended. Van Garrett sighed, then turned to look at the entryway.

“Put those six shooters away, Tex. Kids incoming.”

Joe dropped both hands and turned to see a monster and human child walking into the Librarby, with a tall skeleton behind them. While the skeleton followed the human child into the shelves, the monster child headed straight for the desk and placed a book on its surface.

“Here you go Mr. Van Garrett.”

“Done already? That's impressive.” The librarian picked up the book, grabbed the bar code reader with his free hand, and scanned the book back into the system. “Hey Asriel, for the record, you can just return books by putting them in the deposit box outside.”

“I thought that was for when the Librarby wasn't open.”

“That's the thing about boxes, they're open twenty four seven. I mean, unless there's some sort of labor law thing that went into effect and nobody told me.”

“Okay. I'll try to remember that for later.”

“So, you looking for anything specific today, or do you want to browse, or did you just come by to drop Kitchen off?”

Asriel raised a paw and scratched one ear. “Actually, I was wondering if you had any books on like, human puzzles. Or whatever the human equivalent to that is.”

Van Garrett raised an eyebrow and was silent for a few moments.

“...I'm not sure I follow. Do you mean stuff like military cryptography, or more pedestrian stuff like crosswords, or puzzle boxes, or something else?”

“Uhm. To be honest, I don't really know. I mean... uh... okay. You work with books so you would be the person to ask. If somebody wanted to keep a secret, but in a way that maybe somebody else could find it later, but somebody who accidentally stumbled onto it wouldn't, and all they had to work with was books, how would they do that?”

Van Garrett stared at the young boss monster for a few seconds longer than was comfortable, then reached up and scratched his bearded chin.

“Well... the one thing that comes to mind right away is called a book cipher. You see, all codes, ciphers, and encryption systems require something called a key; a set of instructions for transforming information that hasn't been coded, usually called plain text, into either something completely unremarkable or something completely impenetrable, usually called cipher text. Either way, in order to get at the information inside the message, you need the same key that encoded it in the first place in order to reverse the process. And in the book cipher, that key is a book that both
“Huh... that sort of sounds like what I'm looking at... or for... or something. But what if...” Asriel blinked. “But what if the person who was hiding the information didn't know who to send it to, and couldn't risk having any information found on them?”

“Ah, yes. The traditional perils of the spy. The first case, I think the solution that sees the most use, at least in the stories I've read, is the dead drop. Everyone agrees on a common location for something to be left behind. One person leaves something in that spot. Later, another person finds it and takes it. They never meet each other and unless somebody is monitoring that specific location constantly they can't be sure that it's being used as a drop off point. Used to be that you had to actually put physical stuff in a physical location, but now you can leave information on one of those file storage websites or posts on message boards. And password protect it too if it comes to that.”

“Okay... that's good to know. You said in the first case, but what's the second?”

“Uh... I was literally thinking about this just now... come on brain, work with me- right! You mentioned the risk of being caught with an example of cipher text. That is a big problem. If somebody runs across a random string of letters and numbers, unless they're the most intellectually stagnant person to ever sleepwalk their way through life they will at least spend a few seconds wondering about it, even if they give up on figuring it out after ten seconds. Somebody who's actively looking for secrets is more likely to recognize it as a coded message, even though they obviously can't tell what the message is about without the key. If you have to have the cipher text on you, it helps if it's in a form that looks more or less ordinary. A grocery list or a to do list or a job application is a lot easier to explain than a page full of numbers and letters.”

Joe snorted. “Not in this day and age. People apply for jobs online, and there are phone apps for grocery and to do lists. Only old school types like you write anything down anymore.”

“I'm not old school. I just don't buy into the hype. Let the first adopters work the bugs out first, and by the time they're done doing that the product is better and cheaper.”

“You really expect me to believe that?”

“No Mister Bond, I expect you to die,” Van Garrett said in a vaguely German accent. Asriel's eyes got much wider.

“Wait, who's dying? And why?”

“It's a movie quote, Asriel. Goldfinger. Don't worry about it. We were talking about codes and stuff, right? Especially book ciphers. Not sure if we have any books that actually discuss them, or spy stuff in general, but I can check the catalog. If you guys are still here by the time I have to head down to the board meeting I will let you know what I find.”

“That sounds great. Thanks a lot, Mr. Van Garrett,” Asriel said with a smile.

“You are quite welcome.” As the librarian started to navigate the electronic card catalog, Asriel turned to look at Joe.

“Uhm. Hi Mr. Stanton.”

“Hey Asriel.”

“Are you okay? You look kind of... tired.”
...rough night. And a rough day. So much for getting stuff done during our downtime. How about you? Feeling alright?"

"Yeah. I mean. You know. I'm feeling things at all, so as far as I'm concerned, I'm alright."

"...guess that makes sense. What's this about a book code?"

Asriel shrugged.

"I don't even know if that's what it is, but that's the closest thing I can think of. I guess it's one of those things. What Frisk calls a culture gap."

"Could be. Sort of sounds like we might be in the same boat. Trying to wrest secrets from books. I spent a lot of yesterday and today looking at Guardian books, papers, pamphlets and notes, trying to find the method to the madness."

"I kind of know what the madness is, but what do you mean by method?"

Joe shrugged and stuck his hands in his lab coat pockets.

“If I knew that I'd be way ahead of where I am now. I guess the biggest deal would be finding some sort of scientific or historical context for all the mystical and philosophical diagrams, or at least gems of useful knowledge hidden in all the bullsh... in the nonsense."

“Okay. I know all the major and minor swear words already.”

Joe shook his head.

“Nevertheless. It's a bad idea to get into the habit of swearing around kids. Anyway, yeah. That's where I stand. My entire theory hinges on giving the Guardians too much credit.”

“Why?" Asriel scratched his head. “I mean, obviously you won't know what there is to find in all this until you actually find it, but why are you looking in the first place?"

“It's almost a moot point now that all the safehouses have been found, but... okay, there was a diagram in one of the books the Guardians had that seemed to indicate human souls come in seven color coded flavors. That matches what Dr. Alphys found with the Soul Scanner. The thing is, the Soul Scanner is pretty advanced technology that uses magic as a fundamental operating principle. So how did the Guardians already know what we just recently learned if they didn't have a scanner of their own?"

Asriel stared, then looked down at his feet and scratched under his chin with one finger.

“Well... I guess they would either need to know about Souls somehow or be really lucky with their guesses.”

“Heckuva coincidence if that was just a guess. I have a pet theory that somewhere in all the crazy is legitimately useful scientific and magical knowledge. Knowledge left over from a forgotten era when humans could use magic. Isolating that information and corroborating it with what Dr. Aster has been telling the Senate today would be a scientific and political feather in All Fine Labs' collective headgear.”

Asriel raised an eyebrow.

“Uh. What do Souls and magic and science have to do with feathers and hats?”
Joe shrugged again.

“It’s another culture gap. Don't worry about it.”

“If you say so.” Asriel frowned. “Hey, Mr. Stanton. If you do find anything, do you think this could lead to humans being able to use magic again?”

“I'm not ruling out the possibility, but it's more likely we'll find out the reason that humans don't have it anymore. The Guardians were dedicated to keeping you guys down in the Underground, and if they ever knew how to use magic at any point, they would definitely make sure to hold onto that. With the Barrier and all, that would have been their ace in the hole. I'm willing to gamble that, even if it's compartmentalized and expressed in some sort of code that looks like religious ritual or mythological allegory, they have some sort of useful information that describes the workings of magic as a physical process, from a human perspective.”

Joe took his hands out of his pockets and brought them together, hands clasped and fingers interlocking into the spaces of the fingers on the other hand.

“Forget human magic, Asriel. We could be looking at the Holy Grail of physics: A Unified Field Theory, and the practical engineering spin offs from it. The ability to understand any field of force through the application of another, meaning the ability to control gravity and nuclear energy simply by using electromagnetism. Now that is a game changer. And it would be All Fine Labs at the front of that game changer. Which comes with a lot of benefits.”

“Like money and being famous?”

“And groupies. Well, science groupies, but I'm not a musician so I'll take what I can get.”

Asriel snickered and tried to smother the sound, and hide his smile, behind one paw.

“Okay. Well, I hope you find something useful then.”

“Me too buddy. Me too.”

ALL FINE LABS SECURE INTRANET

SPECIAL PROJECTS DIRECTORY

PROJECT GRAYSCALE

LEAD RESEARCHER: Josef “Joe” Stanton

PROJECT AUTHORIZED BY: Dr. Alphys

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT: gray001.mp3

“This is Joe Stanton at All Fine Labs. The date is Wednesday, the twenty fifth of May, twenty sixteen. The time is one twenty six PM. After talking with Michael Van Garrett and the Dreemurr children, Asriel and Frisk, at the Ebott's Wake Librarby, I've returned to the lab to tackle the Guardian lore with a slightly fresher perspective and a stomach filled with pork fried rice.”

“All of the references to crystals I can find in the Guardian books and papers are related to what we have taken to calling their Recruitment Strategy. Documents targeted at different existing religions,
philosophies, spiritual and paranormal ideologies and belief structures intended to draw people in
to the Guardian group. Everything comes back to their existing knowledge, or potential knowledge,
on the subject of Souls. There might be some stuff that Mike hasn't scanned yet, but I don't have
that with me to look through. It looks like a dead end... but it doesn't feel like it. I want to ride this
train of thought to the next station.”

“Crystals were used in electronics because the dimensions of the cut crystal corresponded to a
given frequency, which automatically constrained the behavior of the circuitry to desired limits,
and because they were a simple way to transform sonic vibrations into electromagnetic ones, and
vice versa. That covers speakers, microphones, and tuning... the fundamentals of radio. So...
looking at each one of these in turn. A crystal cut... or grown, given that we create them artificially
here... to specific dimensions is useful for a specific frequency, wavelength, and so on. Crystal
radios got overshadowed by later electronic developments, like the thermionic tube for signal
amplification, and the transistor which did the same job as the vacuum tube but didn't break or burn
out as easily. But they are still important for compact, reasonably accurate timekeeping machinery;
there's a bit of quartz crystal at the heart of every digital watch.”

“The signal translation between sound and electromagnetism, with piezoelectric crystals, I guess
could be applied to magical detection by analogy... except magic is faster than light, so there would
need to be an intermediate state human science by definition wouldn't know about. Or I might be
looking at it too literally... next time I see Alphys and she's not losing her mind from keeping this
place from falling apart, I'll ask about if she knows of any materials that naturally respond to
magic, or if they ever made stuff like that in the Underground.”

“Wait a minute.”

“Okay, I just took off my ring and put it back on. The crystal inset responds to my Soul, which is
definitely associated with magic even if I can't do what Alphys does. So the step down process
between magic and more familiar electromagnetic energy already exists. I just need to take a closer
look at the plans.”
exist before the last century, but it's entirely possible that I was looking for something without
knowing what it looked like.”

“There's... there's something else too. I tend to gravitate towards technical elements in every day life, so in that respect nothing is out of the ordinary, but my mind keeps coming back to crystals, tuning radio frequencies, amplifying circuitry... and I don't... I don't really understand why. I don't know if I already have a toehold on the answer and my subconscious is pushing me that way, or if my brain is so sick of trying to deal with philosophical and religious bullshit that it's going back to electronics as a defensive mechanism, or... or if there's something else at work. Hold on...”

“...okay. Mike just sent me a text. Something he remembered about a trip into Quarterhorse Fields with Dr. Aster, when the doc said that one of the diagrams of, like, chakras or acupuncture points or something like that resembled a monster anatomy chart. Which is interesting. Nobody actually knows how long ago the War between Humans and Monsters was. It's entirely possible that diagrams like that are leftovers from an era in human history where magic was well known, or at least known at all. Mike's been thinking along the same lines, of course from a social and societal perspective. I might have to ask Doctor Alphys what monsters use for medical diagnosis, and see if what it uses matches what those old diagrams and plans say.”

“In the meantime, I'm going to make a trip to the hardware store.”
“Pardon me Undyne, but have you seen-”

“ACHOO!”

Toriel's eyes widened as Undyne was catapulted backwards in her chair by the force of her sneeze, crashing onto the floor and knocking assorted papers off her desk in the process.

“My goodness! Are you alright?”

“Ugh. Yeah. I'm okay.” A webbed hand managed to grab hold of the edge of the desk and the gym teacher pulled herself upright. “During practice today I told Casey to put more pepper on it when she tried to pitch, and she took me literally. Got some pepper from the cafeteria. That's the fifteenth time that's happened today.”

“...I see. Well. I hope you are able to... recover from that, and soon.”

“You and me both. Sounded like you were asking if I knew where somebody was?”

“Ah, yes. I was wondering if you had seen Asgore lately. I was hoping to talk to him about Frisk.”

Undyne looked up from her mostly futile attempt to recover her scattered paperwork.

“Is Frisk alright? I mean, I figured when they didn't come in they were probably sick or overdoing it or something, but I didn't know how bad it was.”

Toriel held up a paw. “Frisk is... exhausted. Whether or not their tendency to overdo things played any part in this, I cannot be certain, but by the same token I cannot rule it out. That is why I am searching for Asgore, so that we might discuss matters pertaining to Frisk's well being.”

“No kidding. That kid needs to take a page out of Sans’ book one of these days.”

“I believe they already have.”

Undyne rolled her eye as the queen giggled. “Not the joke book, obviously. The taking it easy book. And... yeah, I think I saw Asgore talking to Hannah earlier.”

“Ah, thank you. I shall head to the science classroom then.”

“Best of luaaaAAACHOO!”

The papers in Undyne's hands once again were scattered throughout the room, and Toriel made hasty exit to prevent Undyne from seeing her laugh.

“Scuse me your highness.”

“Hmmm?” Toriel turned to see a figure carrying a stepladder under one arm. “Oh. I apologize Mr. Dugan. I was distracted and did not notice you there.”

“S'alright. Asgore said he was looking for you.”

“He is? Curious. I am looking for him as well. When and where was this?”
“Cafeteria. Ten minutes ago.” The maintenance man looked up at the ceiling where one of the bulbs had gone out. “Also need to set up.”

“Oh! I apologize again. I shall get out of the way immediately. Thank you for the message!”

Mr. Dugan made a noncommittal noise as he set up the ladder, and Toriel proceeded to the cafeteria. Upon her arrival, however, there was no sign of Asgore.

“Oh dear. This is rapidly becoming one of those comedies of errors.” Toriel turned toward a monster cleaning the various tables. “Excuse me, Woshua. Have you seen Asgore recently? I was told he was here not long ago.”

“Wosh up plates... wait, what?” The monster shook its head. “I'm sorry. I was really in 'The Zone' there.”

“Have you seen Asgore? Mr. Dugan said he saw Asgore here ten minutes ago.”

“Hmm... I can't say. Like I said, I was really focused earlier.”

“I see.” Toriel shook her head. “Well, it cannot be helped. I apologize for interrupting you.”

“It's alright. Sorry I couldn't be more help.”

The queen walked out of the cafeteria as the janitor returned to washing the tables, when her cell phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey Toriel, I gaaAAACHOO!”

The queen held the phone away from her ear and winced, carefully bringing it closer to her head again when she was sure Undyne would not sneeze again.

“Hello? Undyne, is that you?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Sorry about that. Hey. Just wanted you to know. Asgore is here. I told him to stick around otherwise you two would be chasing each other all over the building.”

“Oh. That is excellent thinking.”

“I do my beaaAAA-.“

Toriel hung up the phone before Undyne could sneeze again, and retraced her steps back to the gym teacher's office. Asgore was standing outside, much as the queen had been earlier, eyes wide at incredulity over Undyne's sneezing.

“Ah, there you are Asgore. I have been looking high and low for you.”

“Same here. I wanted to talk to you a bit about some of the summer programs that Mrs. Carmichael came up with.”

“While that is important, I also have matters I wish to discuss with you, pertaining to Frisk.”

The king blinked. “Okay. I have no problem talking about that first.”

“Then we are in agreement. We should-”
“AAAACHOO!”

Toriel rolled her eyes. “We should talk elsewhere, some place that we may not be interrupted.”

“Sorry,” Undyne commented with a sniff.

“What about one of the greenhouses?”

“That will work, I suppose.”

“Alright then.” Asgore waved to Undyne, who waved back without enthusiasm, and made his way out of the school building towards the greenhouses behind the school building proper, away from the fenced in enclosure that served as playground and athletic field for the students.

Inside the smell of fruits and vegetables in varying states of ripeness, and in varying combinations, produced a heady aroma. Toriel's head also throbbed with the magic used to coax otherwise incompatible plants into crossbreeding and grafting with each other, in what unkind rumors said was Asgore's ongoing campaign to drive the science teacher insane. The groundskeeper himself seemed distracted as he paced along an aisle of hydroponic trays, before returning to where Toriel was standing and opening his mouth.

“Tori, I didn't really want to talk about the summer programs. I'm glad you brought up Frisk because that's what I really wanted to talk to you about. I think Asriel has been teaching Frisk magic.”

Toriel blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Yes, I know it sounds ridiculous, but hear me out for a moment. A week ago yesterday, I was watching Frisk while they were still recovering, and I had gotten one of the old photo albums out. I accidentally spilled tea on the coffee table and Frisk dived to try and get the photo album out of the way. But when the album fell off the table, it should have landed right there at the end. It ended up in Frisk's hand near the side of the table instead. As if it had moved about two feet in midair.”

Asgore scratched his chin through his huge beard. “And no matter how many times I go over the events in my mind, I know I saw a flash of light. I think the only way that photo album could have moved like that was Blue Magic.”

Toriel stared at Asgore.

“I see... and what do you believe we should do about this, if that is indeed the case?”

It was Asgore's turn to stare, his eyes wider in surprise than Toriel's had been.

“Well golly Tori, isn't it obvious?? We need to talk to Frisk and Asriel, figure out if that's actually what happened, and then actually start teaching them ourselves! I know that...” the king started blinking a bit more than he had been, but his voice remained steady. “I know that when Asriel was calling himself Flowey. He was... not in a good place at all. But even in that condition, I know he did not want to deliberately harm Frisk. But Asriel could only teach what he already knew. If Frisk was a monster, being self-taught would not be a problem. But Frisk is a human. They could seriously hurt themselves without guidance.”

Toriel looked at Asgore's huge paws, wrung together in worry, and felt some of her own worry lift off of her shoulders. Without speaking, she walked over to one of the benches inside the greenhouse and sat down.

“Asgore... Gorey. That is what I wanted to talk to you about. Frisk can use magic. Asriel told me
Asgore breathed in deeply and let it out, and sat down on a nearby bench. “Alright. There's one mystery solved right there... what can they do? Based on what I saw, there's Blue Magic.”

“Asriel said that he and Frisk were aware of Green and Blue Magic. The Green from when Asriel came back to us, and the Blue, he said that Frisk told him they used it to fight Jordan Cater in the CORE this last Friday.”

The King nodded and brought one paw up to his chin again. “So... when the police were taking him into custody, those comments about Frisk had a basis in truth.”

“It would appear so.”

“...golly, I just realized. That human that shot Undyne during the first address. Riled Up Riley, the radio called him. He was shot just like Frisk, and he's still in the hospital after all this time. Frisk was ready to come back home after one night. That must have been the healing magic at work.”

Toriel's eyes opened wide. “I did not make that connection myself until you pointed it out just now.”

Asgore nodded. “Even if it's only Blue and Green Magic, that's impressive enough on its own. And it suits Frisk, doesn't it? Magic that lets them make things better, and let them escape danger?”

“It does.” Toriel stared down at the ground for a moment, before looking back up and meeting Asgore's gaze again. “Gorey. Asriel told me something else last night.”

“Hmmm? What did he say?”

“He said that...” Toriel sighed. “He said that Frisk has been terrified of anyone discovering they can use magic since the moment that they knew they were capable of using it. Afraid of... afraid of us, Gorey. Afraid that we will stop seeing them as Frisk, and start seeing them as an enemy.”

Asgore sighed and looked down at the ground.

“...that's a lot of weight to carry on a ten year old pair of shoulders.”

“Yes, quite.”

“...I suppose luck has been on our side again. If it had been anyone but Frisk, I could see this becoming a huge political problem as soon as word got out.”

“You seem to think that this will not have political consequences as it stands.”

“Oh, no, no. I know that. I'm just saying things could be much worse. If it had been any other human, even one that worked for Dr. Alphys at the lab, I could see monsters getting very concerned. When Chara told us that humans didn't have magic anymore, a lot of hopes got built up, and this could tear them down again even now that we're on the surface. A lot of humans and monsters are going to want to know why, and once somebody knows why, they might be able to make it happen again.”

Toriel nodded.

“If it is something that they can influence, at any rate. Dr. Alphys mentioned that one theory for the apparent lack of human magic since the war was that the bloodlines capable of using it had
died out. If that is the case, then that cannot be helped one way or another. Though I can easily see some humans, and even some monsters, refusing to accept that.”

“Now there's a thought. Do you think Frisk's human family... the Taylors... do you think they might be descended from the human magicians somehow?”

“I do not know, nor do I care. Certainly not enough to hunt down the Taylors and ask for their family history. Frisk is here, now. And they are our child. That is all that matters.”

“I agree. It's just... there's some weird symmetry to it, if that's the case. A child undoing the work of their distant ancestors. Either way, when and how do we want to talk to Frisk about this?”

Toriel blinked and sat up straighter without actually realizing it. “That is another issue that I intended to bring up with you. Asriel said that Frisk intends to broach the subject on Friday, after the school year has officially concluded. I believe the rationale is that neither of us will be distracted by other matters at the time.”

“That makes sense, but if we both already know, then-”

“That is precisely the point. We know, but Frisk does not know that we know. Asriel...” Toriel's expression became sad for a moment. “Last night. Frisk had a nightmare. One that traumatized them so much that they opted to cause themselves physical injury to keep from falling asleep again.”

Asgore's jaw dropped. “What.”

“Asriel broke his confidence with Frisk in order to tell me, because he was frightened of what might happen to Frisk if these secrets continued to be kept.” A paw came up and smoothed out the fur around Toriel's eyes. “He believes that if we confront Frisk with this before they are ready, they will react as if their fears are correct. If there is any way to avoid it, I do not want Frisk to feel like they have been cornered, or otherwise put on the defensive. That means that we must wait for them to come to us.”

Slowly, Asgore nodded.

“...Tori, even if we can't talk to them about this now. There must be something that we can do.”

“I think that there is. I would like you to come by for dinner tonight and tomorrow as well. I know both of the children enjoy when we can all sit down as a family. Giving Frisk a positive development, to distract them from any imagined worst case scenarios, will definitely help tonight. And of course, Asriel is always happier when we are all at the same table.”

Asgore smirked. “If it's for the children, I could be persuaded to make that sacrifice.”

Toriel snickered. “You are not nearly as funny as you think you are, Dreemurr.”

“Oh really? Then why are you laughing?”

“It is what Papyrus calls a pity laugh.” Toriel pulled out her cell phone. “Speaking of which, I should check in with him again. Last time I called, they had just finished watching Dr. Aster's Senate testimony.”

The queen raised the phone to her ear, and Asgore saw her facial expression change as the skeleton
picked up.

“Hello Papyrus, it is Toriel speaking! I am sorry to be a bother but I was just checking in on you and the children.”

Asgore couldn't quite make out the words Papyrus spoke, but he could see the queen's eyes go wide in alarm.

“Oh... I see... well. It cannot be helped then. Could you, perhaps, put Asriel on that I may speak to him? ...oh. Alternatively, could you give the phone to Frisk? ...I see. Well. Perhaps under the circumstances. That is for the best. Oh, it is... not a problem, Papyrus. I, ah... I will call back at a later time. Yes, you too. Goodbye.”

The queen stared at the phone in her hand, and Asgore could see the lower lid of one eye twitching.

“...Tori? Is something wrong?”

“I have made a terrible mistake.”

“Well.” Frisk stared at the ground below their feet as they sat on the park bench. “That could have gone better.”

There was a rough intake of breath from the boss monster sitting next to them.

“...no. I guess. That was about the best I could have hoped for.” Asriel's voice was whisper quiet and Frisk pretended not to notice the tears matting the fur around his eyes. “I did a lot of... weird stuff. As a flower.”

Slowly, Frisk moved their left hand over towards Asriel's right paw, and placed it on top. Asriel did not pull away, but he didn't do anything else. The human child closed their eyes; they could not think of anything to say that would help, or for that matter anything that wouldn't make a bad situation worse.

“...maybe we should just go home. I don't think I can... talk to the people in charge of Shakespeare in the park today. Or the observatory. Or... or anyone.”

“...okay, Asriel. I'll let Papyrus know. We can head home.”

Asriel nodded as Frisk pulled out their phone and sent a text to Papyrus.

“Uh, excuse me.”

Frisk and Asriel both jumped off the bench and turned around to see a man in overalls and carrying a rake behind the bench.

“Whoa! Sorry. I didn't mean to sneak up on you.”

Frisk swallowed and tried to steady their breathing. “Is there something we can help you with sir?”

“Uh. No. Actually, there might be something I can help with. Maybe. Uh, my name's Earl, I'm one of the groundskeepers here at the Arboretum, and as I understand it you just got out of a meeting with Mr. Wren?”

Frisk shrugged. “Something like that.”
“Right.” Earl sighed. “Look, don't worry about what he said. Or how loud he said it. It's all water under the bridge.”

“No. Mr. Wren was right. I can't just...” Asriel stared at the ground for a moment. “I caused a lot of people problems. And those actions have consequences. And this is one of them.”

Earl looked at the miserable monster child for a moment, and sighed. “Look... Asriel, right? All those stunts you pulled. The thing with the jungle vines, the apples versus oranges fruit fight, the dancing trees, the union trees, the stampeding animal topiary thing, all the other stuff. Mr. Wren isn't the man that had to clean up after that. It was me and the rest of the caretakers here. I won't lie. You made life more complicated than we would have liked. But you never hurt anybody, and you never caused permanent damage to any trees or buildings or the walls. As far as I'm concerned, if you were man enough to come here and want to set things right, then somebody ought to be man enough to meet you half way. And it's obviously not going to be Robin Wren. So... you're sorry about all that stuff, right?”

“Yes...”

“And you're not gonna let it happen again, right?”

“I won't. I promise.”

“Good. Let's shake on it.” Earl held out his hand, and Asriel tentatively held up his paw to grasp the man's hand. “Okay. No matter what Mr. Wren said. As far as the Arboretum is concerned, we are now Even Steven. Now I gotta get back to unloading that mulch. You kids take care of yourselves. Or each other. Or both.”

Earl disappeared back into the Arboretum, and Asriel stared at his paw. Frisk raised one hand and put it on their brother's shoulder.

“Feeling any better, bro?”

“...a little bit. But not enough to keep me from feeling really awful.”

“...well. Papyrus will be here soon.”

Asriel nodded and sat down on the bench again. Frisk joined him after a moment, hands on their knees.

“...I know you'll want to talk to the Shakespeare group and everyone else eventually. I'll come along with you then.”

Asriel held up his paw and stared at it for a few moments, before opening his mouth.

“You don't have to.”

“...if it will help. I'll be there for you.”

“...thanks.”

The two children both looked up at the sound of footsteps, to see Papyrus running up to the bench and sliding to a halt.

“AH, HELLO MY FRIENDS! IMAGINE MEETING YOU HERE IN THE PLACE YOU SAID YOU WOULD BE A FEW MINUTES AGO!”
“Papyrus?” Frisk asked, narrowing their eyes at the sweat on the skeleton's skull. “Is something wrong?”

“NOT NECESSARILY! BUT POSSIBLY?? THE QUEEN CALLED EARLIER AND I MAY HAVE GOTTEN THE IMPRESSION THAT SHE WAS HOPING TO SPEAK TO ONE OR BOTH OF YOU, WHICH FOR OBVIOUS REASONS WAS NOT POSSIBLE AT THE TIME, AND SO I EXPLAINED THAT WE HAD ALL TAKEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO STRETCH OUR LEGS AND GET THINGS ACCOMPLISHED!”

Asriel sighed.

“Well, this was going to happen anyway. It's not like anyone can lie to mom and get away with it for very long.”

Frisk swallowed. “Yeah.”

The two children got up from the bench and Asriel looked up at Papyrus.

“Hey. Uhm. No matter how things turned out. Papyrus, I want you to know. I appreciate everything you did for us today. Keeping an eye on us, making lunch, taking us to the Library and dropping us off here so I could...” The boss monster's voice faltered for a moment, but he cleared his throat and continued. “So I could try to make things right. It means... it means a lot to me, that you did all this. I, uh. I wanted you to know that, okay? It's important.”

Papyrus stared at Asriel, and got down on one knee; while he wasn't eye to eye with either child he wasn't quite towering over them anymore, either.

“ASRIEL. MANY MONSTERS AND HUMANS CONSIDER GOOD OR BAD TO BE INHERENT TRAITS. ATTRIBUTES THAT ARE AN INSEPARABLE PART OF US. THAT GOOD PEOPLE ARE GOOD BECAUSE IT IS IN THEIR NATURE, AND THAT BAD PEOPLE ARE BAD BECAUSE THEY ARE INCAPABLE OF ACTING OTHERWISE. THIS IS ABSOLUTELY NOT TRUE. EVERY ACT IS A CONSCIOUS CHOICE. WE CAN CHOOSE TO HELP, OR TO HARM, AND WE CAN JUSTIFY IT ANY NUMBER OF WAYS, BUT THOSE ARE STILL OUR CHOICES. ALL THE THINGS THAT YOU DID WHEN YOU CALLED YOURSELF FLOWEY, THAT YOU REGRET HAVING DONE NOW... IT WOULD BE EASY TO RUN AWAY FROM THEM, OR TO HIDE FROM THEM, OR TO MAKE EXCUSES. NO ONE COULD BLAME YOU FOR DOING ANY OF THAT.”

Two gloves hands rested on Asriel's shoulders.

“BUT YOU DIDN'T. YOU TRIED TO DO THE RIGHT THING, TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY AND TO SEEK TO MAKE AMENDS. THAT WAS A VERY DIFFICULT CHOICE TO MAKE, BUT A VERY MATURE ONE. HERE AND NOW, YOU ARE MAKING THE CHOICE TO BE A GOOD PERSON. AND BY THE LOGIC I HAVE ALREADY EXPLAINED, THAT MEANS YOU ARE A GOOD PERSON! SO REMEMBER THAT!”

“But...” Asriel swallowed and looked down at his feet. “All the stuff I did before. In the Underground. And here in town. That was bad. So I must be a bad person-”

“But THAT IS JUST IT! EVEN AFTER ALL YOU HAVE DONE, YOU CAN STILL MAKE GOOD CHOICES! YOU CAN STILL BE A GOOD PERSON! TOO MANY PEOPLE MAKE CHOICES THAT THEY COME TO REGRET, BUT DECIDE THAT THEY CANNOT TURN THEIR BACK ON THEM. THAT THEY CROSSED SOME POINT OF NO RETURN, AND NO AMOUNT OF GOOD CAN MAKE UP FOR THE MISTAKES THEY HAVE ALREADY
MADE. BUT THAT'S NOT HOW IT WORKS! IT IS NOT ABOUT TRYING TO DILUTE WHAT HAS BEEN DONE BEFORE, AS IF RIGHT AND WRONG WERE CHEMICAL SOLUTIONS! IT IS NOT ABOUT CANCELING OUT A GIVEN AMOUNT OF HARM WITH AN EQUAL AMOUNT OF KINDNESS, LIKE BALANCING AN EQUATION! IT IS ABOUT MAKING A CHOICE TO SAY NICE THINGS, TO HELP PEOPLE, TO STAND UP FOR YOUR FRIENDS AND YOUR PRINCIPLES, EVERY DAY! AND LOOK AT WHAT YOU'VE MANAGED TO ACCOMPLISH IN JUST A WEEK, ASRIEL! IT'S ALREADY PAYING OFF!"

Asriel's eyes were closed, and he trembled beneath Papyrus's hands, but he nodded. “Papyrus. Thank you for... thank you for always believing I could do better. That I could be better. Even when I was... you know.”

Papyrus let go of Asriel's shoulders and stood up again. “OF COURSE I BELIEVE IN YOU! THE GREAT PAPYRUS EXCELS AT RECOGNIZING FELLOW GREAT PEOPLE! NOW, IF EVERYONE IS READY, LET US RETURN TO MY CAR, SO THAT WE MAY RETURN TO YOUR HOME, AND ALL THAT FOLLOWS! NYEH HEH HEH!”

“Asriel’s eyes were closed, and he trembled beneath Papyrus's hands, but he nodded. “Papyrus. Thank you for... thank you for always believing I could do better. That I could be better. Even when I was... you know.”

Papyrus let go of Asriel's shoulders and stood up again. “OF COURSE I BELIEVE IN YOU! THE GREAT PAPYRUS EXCELS AT RECOGNIZING FELLOW GREAT PEOPLE! NOW, IF EVERYONE IS READY, LET US RETURN TO MY CAR, SO THAT WE MAY RETURN TO YOUR HOME, AND ALL THAT FOLLOWS! NYEH HEH HEH!”

“WELL, THIS IS A FINE PICKLE!”

Frisk leaned out from one side of the car and saw that the traffic jam seemed to extend about five cars ahead, but some of the vehicles were large enough to obscure whatever events had blocked traffic in the first place. A figure did seem to be making its way back along the line of vehicles, wearing a familiar uniform and hat.

“I think that's Officer Steve coming this way. Maybe there was a traffic accident.”

“YES, INDEED IT IS! GREETINGS, OFFICER STEVE!”

“Oh boy, just when I...” Officer Steve shook his head and walked up to Papyrus's side of the car. “Hey, Papyrus. You need to turn around and take an alternate route to wherever you're going. Something knocked down the traffic lights and we need to bring in a utility truck to fix everything.”

“IS EVERYONE OKAY?”

“The light probably scared the crap out of some birds or something when it fell, but nobody's been reporting injuries. Small favors and all that.” The policeman pulled out his phone in response to a beeping noise. “Hold on, I gotta take this.”

Officer Steve held up the phone to his ear.

“Officer Ward here... no, it was just a fallen traffic light. I already called Water and Power... yeah, but somebody's gotta stay here until the truck arrives, so you'll have to go on without me. Remember the checklist Eli gave us? ...good. Alright, I gotta go. If you find anything before I get there, call me.”

The phone returned to its pocket and Officer Steve turned back to Papyrus. “Sorry, investigative hoop jumping. But yeah. Need you to clear out and then everyone else in front of you can follow, so the truck can get here. I'm not sure where you're going but it's just this intersection that's messed up. You could probably go back a block and get on East Cavendish Road for another block, turn left, and be heading back this way again.”

“UNDERSTOOD, OFFICER STEVE!”
Papyrus carefully backed up, turned around, and made his way to the intersection, and Frisk's stomach lurched. Landmarks that seemed unfamiliar from one direction jumped out at them when approached from the other side, as Papyrus turned onto East Cavendish Road.

The world took on a dreamlike quality, even as Frisk tried to fit what was happening to them with what they remembered from the previous night. None of the dreams involved Papyrus, in any form. And it was Frisk's request that they go to the Librarby, and Asriel's request to also go to the Arboretum after. This couldn't have been a plan by Toriel and Asgore to keep them at arm's length... but if they had found out everything before Frisk could tell them-

“WOWIE! THAT HOUSE LOOKS WORSE THAN UNDYNE'S AFTER A PARTICULARLY GOOD COOKING LESSON! AND THAT'S SAYING SOMETHING!”

Frisk snapped out of their hazy state of mind and followed Papyrus's outstretched hand as he pointed towards...

'What??'

“Papyrus stop the car!”

“HUH?”

The skeleton braked abruptly, and Frisk scrambled to remove their seat belt, hopping out of the vehicle and running onto the sidewalk.

There were the address numbers on a mostly unharmed section of exterior siding. 126 on East Cavendish Road.

There was broken glass.

And most importantly there was house collapsed in upon itself, gutted by fire and coated in soot and still smelling of ash.

“Frisk? Are you okay?”

Some part of Frisk's brain felt the fuzzy fingers wrap around their own and squeeze, and managed to squeeze back.

“...Asriel.”

“Yes?”

“...I used to live here.” Their own voice felt like it was coming from far away, or down a long tunnel; it didn't even sound like them. Was that them speaking? It was hard to tell. “Asriel. They can't. They can't send me back. There's nowhere to send me. They can't send me back.”

“...so that's good, right?”

“Asriel. They can't send me back.”

“You said that already.”

“...they can't... they can't send me back.” Frisk shook their head and reality began to bleed back into the world. “I thought that... it's going to be okay.”

Asriel squeezed Frisk's hand again. “I told you everything would be okay.”
“...yeah. Asriel?”

“Yes?”

“...can you help me back to the car? I think... it feels like I might pass out.”

Wordlessly, the young monster pulled at Frisk's arm and ducked underneath, draping it over his
shoulder and holding it in place with one paw. The other wrapped around Frisk's waist, and the two
children slowly turned and began walking towards the idling car that had pulled up to the sidewalk.

“When I realized where we were... I forgot everything else. It's like. Like this place does something
to my brain. And then. When I realized the house was gone. It happened again, but like, in the
other direction. Does that make sense?”

“... some of that sounds familiar.”

“Okay. So it's not just me.” Frisk managed to climb into the back seat, and managed to buckle the
seat belt after only three attempts. “Papyrus... thanks for stopping earlier.”

“I AM HAPPY TO BE OF ASSISTANCE! THOUGH I AM ALSO VERY CONFUSED.”

“You and me both.” Frisk held one hand over their heart and tried to breath in and out slowly, to
calm down. “Let's... yeah. I'm ready. Let's go home.”
This chapter includes politicians in their natural habitat. No claims are made that the depiction of Senator Ron Wyden that follows is in any way accurate. Never met the guy.

The office was... well, it was pretty impressive. The furniture was nice, there were massive bookcases filled with what were probably legal reference books and case histories, and the lighting was easy on the eyes.

“Ah, hello Mr. Carrow. Please, have a seat.”

Justin stared at the office’s occupant, standing by one of the bookcases and shelving one of the dense tomes back into place.

“I'm good, thanks.”

The man smiled slightly as he walked over to his desk. “Your, uh. Your new friends. Employers. Whatever the right term is. They made a big splash today.”

“Yes. They did.”

The man shook his head. “I knew... well, I hoped... that when the committee membership was being hashed out, they wouldn't be the picture of a well oiled political machine, but... Dr. Gaster, was it? He didn't seem fazed at all.”

“It's Dr. Aster, actually. And he was involved in academic politics for... hell, I don't know how old he is, but could be for longer than either of us have been alive.”

“Hope he's enjoying his visit to our nation's capital.”

“He wasn't lying when he said he and Sans were looking forward to seeing the museums. I think they were getting ready to head to the National Air and Space Museum when I got your call.”

“That makes perfect sense for a scientist.”

Justin raised an eyebrow. “Senator Wyden, is this going somewhere? I don't really grasp why you would want me to visit you if all you wanted to do was discuss matters that could have been handled in a phone call.”

The Senator nodded. “I suppose I've beaten around the bush long enough. Mr. Carrow... do you have any idea what is going on?”

“I doubt it. Every time I thought I knew what was happening, it turned out that I was misinformed.”

“I'll be less general then. Mr. Carrow, do you have an idea what is going on, politically, as it regards your friends from underground?”
Justin scratched his chin. “...during both State of the Kingdom Addresses, the Ambassador said that there's been no word one way or another on the legal classification of monsters. The town council voted to recognize them as US Citizens. So did the county a little later. But there's been nothing from the Oregon state government or the US Federal Government. Not even a 'sure, now here's what you owe us in back taxes.' I always figured that there was some sort of political logjam or stalemate or horse trading game.”

Senator Wyden shook his head. “No, I've seen all of those. This is something else... you know what the public opinion is on monsters?”

“Last I heard outside of Lost Eagle County, the numbers were roughly twenty percent love them, twenty percent hate them, and everyone else doesn't give a damn one way or the other as long as life as they know it stays the same.”

“That is true. And it's... it's very strange. Personally, I expected the presence of monsters to be much, much more polarizing, either one way or the other.”

Justin shrugged. “Well, if you guys could accurately predict the future you'd never lose an election, would you?”

“I suppose not... but our projections on public opinion and polling have never been quite this far off. Especially with most of the population adopting a 'wait and see' approach instead of getting emotionally invested and demanding immediate action.”

“...while I guess that is weird... maybe you just don't give the voting public enough credit, Senator.”

The Senator stared at Justin, then sat down behind his desk.

“You don't care for politicians much, do you Mr. Carrow?”

Justin shrugged. “I was a soldier, Senator Wyden. My trust in anything that comes out of any politician's mouth is proportional to how close they are to the battlefield.”

Wyden blinked and raised his eyebrows, then turned and looked towards the bookcases in his office.

“Well. Certainly can't argue with that logic. You sure you won't have a seat?”

“...well, I have been on my feet all day.” Justin stepped up and sat in one of the chairs in front of the senator's desk, running one hand along the surface. “Not too shabby.”

“Your tax dollars at work.” Senator Wyden shrugged. “Mr. Carrow, before this goes any further. I have to ask. And I don't really expect you to be honest with me. But I would like you to tell me why you joined the US Army, and why you left it.”

“...Senator Wyden. That's something I only rarely discuss with the people I consider my closest friends. I have no intention of explaining or justifying the decisions I made to you. I'm not even going to give you a half-assed cover story. If that's all you want, I think I have enough time to catch up with the Asters before they finish ogling all the Apollo stuff.”

The office was silent for a few seconds, and Justin put his hands on the end of the chair's armrests to push himself up-

“Like I said, Mr. Carrow. I never expected you to be honest with me. Although I think that was the
most honest answer I could get from a man like you. I will keep that in mind for the future.”

Wyden picked up a pen from a container on the corner of his desk and began to stare at it. “I don’t
know how closely you follow political goings on here in the Senate, but I’ve had fellow Senators
come up to me eight times in the last two months talking about monster related legislation.”

“...this is news to me.”

“It was news to everybody. With the presidential election this year, everyone's trying to close deals
on agreements when it comes to pushing for new legislation, or stonewalling somebody else's
legislation. And of course, there are a lot of Republicans that want to repeal the Affordable Care
Act the instant that whoever wins in November finishes their inauguration speech.”

“Now that's not news. That's olds.”

“Hah. Your point is well taken. What makes it significant is that no less than three people in this
month alone have broached the idea that because of monster healing magic, the Affordable Care
Act itself is no longer necessary.”

“That's a bit of a cart before the horse approach, and that's being kind.” Justin scratched the stubble
that had already managed to grow back on his chin, even after having shaved in the morning. “For
one thing, since I heard Dr. Alphys talking about this, there's been no studies on the exact
limitations of what healing magic can and cannot do for human medical problems. We’re sitting on
a mountain of anecdotal evidence but the only thing anybody knows for sure is that it doesn't affect
immune system disorders, and that's half because the Ambassador has allergies.”

“Yes. And any sort of large scale study like that would, if approved, take several years minimum to
get any useful data. Assuming of course that lobbying from the pharmaceutical industry didn't stop
it, or any eventual program based on the data. Which I think is why I had three other people come
by and say they wouldn't support certain courses of action.”

“Right hand versus left hand, right?”

“Mr. Carrow, it's all to easy to see politics in terms of right and left. But, speaking from experience,
sometimes the right hand and the left hand both belong to the same person. And to continue the
forced analogy, if you focus on the hands, you lose track of the cards.”

“I think you're implying that I actually believe that there's a queen card anywhere in this game.”
Justin sighed. “Come on, give me a little credit.”

“I'm sorry, queen card?”

“...you know. Find The Lady? The classic crooked sidewalk game?”

“Oh. I understand what you mean now. I was still thinking more along the lines of poker. You
know, focus on the hands, miss the cards... can't see the forest for the trees?”

“...ah. Now I getcha.”

“Good. Glad we're on the same page again.”

Justin snorted. “Are we even reading the same book?”

The senator shrugged. “We have to start somewhere. So... Mr. Carrow. I was elected to represent
the interests of the people of Oregon. Whether or not monsters legally qualify, they technically
qualify. They live in the state and income tax or not, they contribute in other ways. I understand
that the monster queen runs a school, for example. I can't put the interests of monsters over everyone else in the state, but I can't see any way that undermining monsters would help anyone else, either. Especially if that monster food thing is true."

“Yeah, about that. I was thinking about it in the back of my mind. Leaving aside having to test to see what monster magic does and does not help with... Muffet's Tuffet is basically just one person baking spider pastries. Even if she does have six arms. And I don't know the guy who makes Nice Cream, but I think he only has like four or five people helping him out. And that's including both the local demand and the stuff that gets ordered online. I don't have to do back of the envelope calculations to know that the logistics for making monster food available on a national scale don't exist yet. Not the distribution, or the production.”

“That's true. I get the impression that at least a few of the statements based on shifting over to a magic based medical system were intended to be an invitation to a political favor trade where they would throw their support behind monster citizenship if I helped... or didn't oppose... the Affordable Care Act being repealed. But that's the problem with trying to be subtle in the political landscape. Sometimes you're so subtle that nobody knows what the hell you're talking about. All other things being equal... the subject has only been broached in hushed tones and oblique references and metaphors. Whispers in the halls of government, if you're feeling melodramatic. Actual evidence of legislation never seems to get off the ground. Nothing gets drafted, nothing gets sent for review. Like I said, it's an unprecedented political stalemate that I've never seen the likes of before. That's why I started pulling what strings I could behind the scenes to get this Senate Committee off of the ground as soon as possible. Somebody had to break the stalemate somehow, and if it was the kind of stalling I'd seen before, I wouldn't bother with it at all. But this... it's... weird.”

“ Weird how? Ghosts possessing congressmen weird, or...?”

Senator Wyden shrugged.

“Oh... monsters and monster issues are the elephant in the room that nobody wants to talk about. Every political power bloc is waiting for the other side to make the first move, and while that's not unprecedented, there's usually some people that rush in where the politically savvy hesitate to tread. There's none of that here.” Wyden placed his pen back in its container and stared at Justin. “Are you familiar with the controversy around United States copyright law, and that play that was authored by a monster?”

“I think so. One of the Gothic sisters. I can never remember which one.”

“The law firm that seems to be the de facto legal representation for monsters... Banner, Banner, and Paulson I think... well, whoever they were, rather than trying to tackle the rights of the author as a monster being separate and distinct from humans, cut the Gordian Knot and argued simply that monsters qualified as human in a legal sense. It was daring and reckless and brilliant. A Greek philosopher was once asked to define man, and he gave the answer 'a featherless biped' and the following day somebody brought to him a plucked chicken and said, 'Behold, I have brought you a man!' and the definition was amended to 'a featherless biped with nails'. And that's exactly the position that anyone who seeks to contest monster rights would have to be in now. They would have to define what it means to be human in a legal sense, which is a minefield in and of itself.”

Justin raised an eyebrow. “I think I see where you’re going with this. If you try to define humanity too broadly, monsters still qualify and some animals probably check out in the bargain. Too narrow and you could end up excluding certain groups of humans. If you chose physical ability, people on the outside ends of the bell curve would be disenfranchised. Same with intellectual ability. If you
just looked for physical DNA made of amino acids instead of the monster counterpart, you'd have to
include animals and plants as human. If you just went after a specific gene sequence, what if
somebody has a mutation that's born without it? Or what if an animal or plant can have that
sequence added through gene therapy? Or what if different people can have it removed through
gene therapy? Hell, if you just went after the ability to use magic, what happens if All Fine Labs
figures out why humans lost it, or how to reverse the process?"

“All of that is correct, and it's the tip of the iceberg. Atrocities throughout history have been
justified based on the idea that the people who were being wiped out or subjugated were less
human, less real, than the people doing the wiping out and subjugating. Any sort of legal move
against monsters on that basis would draw the attention and the ire of countless watchdog groups,
even if those groups are nominally just concerned about such legislation being used against human
demographics.” Wyden shook his head. “It puts the ball in the opposition's court and also makes it
impossible for them to score without risking fouls or penalties. And it makes dealing with the
matter of monster citizenship much more attractive by comparison, because it doesn't open such a
large can of worms. And I thought that was the whole idea for so long that I only recently
understood that something else was going on. You've heard the expression about how the gears of
bureaucracy grind slow but exceedingly fine?”

“I heard it phrased differently but yes.”

“Well, it feels like whenever those gears get close to addressing the issues related to monsters, for
good or ill or for the sake of moving on to the next issue... everything just stops. It's like... like a
giant hand reaches out and sticks something in the machinery of government to stop it when it gets
too close to monsters, but without stalling or jamming anything else. And god only knows why or
how. I thought it was various groups hesitating, trying to make absolutely sure that they could
make their cases one way or another without it backfiring and leaving the way clear for political
opponents to make headway, but like I said before, some people should have stumbled into it
through blind chance or dumb luck or reckless enthusiasm by now if that was the case. This is
definitely something else. Maybe you're right, it is ghosts. Or maybe a secret society infiltrated the
personal staff of every single member of Congress and they're steering us away from certain issues.
I'm assuming that when Dr. Aster said magic can't manipulate people's minds, he was telling the
truth, because I suspect that if they did have that ability they would use it to influence events like
that to be in their favor, and to diminish the influence and numbers of the groups that are opposed
to them. Not simply delay everything.”

“Why would you assume that he was telling the truth? Just based on your own assumptions about
what you would do if you had that option?”

“Because the alternative is too disturbing to contemplate in its entirety. Why, do you have evidence
that they do have the power to influence people through magic?”

Justin shook his head slowly.

“No. At least, not the monsters. And not with magic.”

“...I beg your pardon?”

“The Ambassador. The kid that the king and queen adopted. Frisk Dreemurr. Humans can't use
magic, but that kid... I've met them a few times. They seem like an ordinary kid on the surface. And
then circumstances change, and you run into a completely different side of them. Smart. Or, more
than smart. Clever. But most of all, there's like this... like running into a concrete barrier. I've never
done it myself but, I saw it happen once. During the first address.” Justin shook his head. “There
was this asshole. Dwayne Riley. Liked the sound of his own voice. Got a bunch of his friends
together to protest every damned thing related to monsters that happened in Ebott's Wake. And when protests didn't get the results they wanted, they moved up to public displays of violence. The guy shot Captain Undyne a few times and then Frisk just... just got in the line of fire and stared him down. And the thing is. He actually did drop his gun.”

“...that is impressive. Although I don't see how a child, no matter how smart and brave, could influence political processes on the opposite side of the country.”

“Yeah, me neither. Having said that, I am sure that if anyone in the capital actually read their letters about monster issues... they'd make converts to the monster's side. Or maybe they'd have better luck if they came here and talked to people directly. But yeah. You asked about monsters influencing people? That's the closest thing I've seen to anything like that.”

“...well, that is something to think about.” Senator Wyden drummed his fingers on his desk for a moment. “Earlier you said something about spider pastries? What are those?”

“Oh. A type of monster food. On a whim I tried some donuts once and I've been hooked ever since.” Justin grinned. “The bakery advertises that it's all by spiders, for spiders, of spiders, but I asked Muffet the last time I stopped by and she said something about how she had to switch to a vegan all-natural spider substitute in order to comply with health and safety regulations on the surface.”

“Now that's an answer that raises a few questions.”

“You get used to it, living in a small town.” Justin stopped grinning. “Compared to some of the stuff that happened during my childhood, magical people from beneath the earth showing up to sell ice cream and baked goods doesn't even make my top ten list of weird life experiences.”

“That's a sobering thought.”

Justin waved a hand in a dismissive gesture.

“They say normal is what you grow up with. Whoever 'they' are in this case. Anything else I can help you with, Senator?”

“Well, there is one thing.” Senator Wyden leaned forward in his chair. “When Dr. Aster was talking about multiple timelines and the Mandela Effect... was he serious? Or was he just making stuff up at that point?”

“I couldn't tell you. Quantum Physics is not included in my areas of expertise. My personal understanding of Dr. Aster is that he was telling the truth. He's a scientist, so he prizes the free exchange of information very highly.”

“Hmmm. Well, that's something.” The senator leaned back in his chair and sighed. “Well, thank you for your time, Mr. Carrow. It's been... an education.”

Justin stood up and held out his hand over the desk, which the senator shook.

“Likewise, Senator. It's been a learning experience. I'm actually starting to wish I voted for you in the last election.”

Senator Wyden laughed.
“hey, how'd your thing go?”

Justin walked up between Sans and Dr. Aster, and stared at the Apollo capsule exhibit, seemingly oblivious to the stares that the other museum visitors were giving the skeletons. Or the looks that Mr. Cavennaugh was giving some of the other tourists.

“Well, it wasn't really my thing. But it was useful. A lot of loaded and guided questions, just like during the official hearing. Did I miss anything?”

“just us staring at this spaceship. wanna join us? it's really cool.”

“Sure.”

Dr. Aster scratched his jawbone.

“Do you think Alphys would be open to starting a monster space program?”

“according to Frisk, we already have one. a fishbowl, Lesser Dog, and a Sunday afternoon with nothing else to do.”

The older skeleton made a snorting noise somehow. “While that does bring to mind an amusing image, speaking seriously for a moment, do you think she'd approve of it?”

“...actually yeah. She designed this satellite array last October. The Cosmic Background Magic Detector. We were going to contract NASA to launch it into orbit, but the paperwork just never stopped. We tried two private satellite launching firms, too, but one flaked out on us and the other one wanted a pretty big nonrefundable retainer just for the option to maybe get the satellite launched on time. That wasn't going to happen. Not sure how our budget can handle any more large scale projects right now but maybe this is something that needs to be done in house.”

“Thinking the same thing. Or maybe it's just right at the front of my mind.”

“good place for it.”

There was a buzzing noise and Justin pulled out his phone. “That's me. I turned it back on after the hearing, just in case something came up.”

3:39 PM DARE_2B_stupid: hey justin

3:39 PM: sup steve

3:40 PM DARE_2B_stupid: just gonna leave something

3:40 PM DARE_2B_stupid: oh

3:40 PM DARE_2B_stupid: your there

3:40 PM: yeah

3:40 PM DARE_2B_stupid: thought you might still be radio silence

3:41 PM: turned it back on after the hearing
3:41 PM: what's going on back home

3:41 PM DARE_2B_stupid: more of the same

3:41 PM DARE_2B_stupid: trying to find o dell

3:42 PM DARE_2B_stupid: eli gave us some ideas but was hoping to get your insight

3:42 PM DARE_2B_stupid: even knowing where to look covers a lot of space and options

3:42 PM: 4 the record

3:42 PM: if the army actually knew how to fight an insurgency

3:42 PM: we would have been done over there

3:42 PM: way before i got any second thoughts

3:42 PM: honestly

3:43 PM: you might as well ask hal for his opinion

3:43 PM DARE_2B_stupid: already did

3:43 PM DARE_2B_stupid: he wouldn't stop talking about the arboretum

3:43 PM DARE_2B_stupid: and how he would make rob rue the day

3:43 PM DARE_2B_stupid: if thats how you spel it

3:43 PM DARE_2B_stupid: whatever it is thats an old timey way of saying regret

3:43 PM: wait

3:44 PM: which rob

3:44 PM DARE_2B_stupid: robin wren

3:44 PM DARE_2B_stupid: in charge of the arboretum

3:44 PM DARE_2B_stupid: squirrely little guy

3:44 PM: OH

3:44 PM: that guy

3:45 PM: remember him now

3:45 PM DARE_2B_stupid: moved here from lone point back in fifth grade

3:45 PM: yeah

3:45 PM: what did he do to get on hals shit list
3:45 PM DARE_2B_stupid: no idea

3:46 PM DARE_2B_stupid: i can barely keep up with the shit going on in this town thats actually my job to keep up with

3:46 PM DARE_2B_stupid: speaking of which

3:46 PM DARE_2B_stupid: the question

3:46 PM: go ahead

3:47 PM DARE_2B_stupid: we know that o dell was an architect and we know that hes really good at making plans for other people

3:47 PM DARE_2B_stupid: not so good at making plans on his own

3:47 PM DARE_2B_stupid: with every other leader arrested hes got to be the one in charge

3:47 PM DARE_2B_stupid: but without anyone to provide direction

3:47 PM DARE_2B_stupid: eli thinks o dell will go back to what he knows best

3:48 PM DARE_2B_stupid: buildings and building plans

3:48 PM: when all you have is a hammer

3:48 PM DARE_2B_stupid: so spent part of today in the hall of records

3:48 PM DARE_2B_stupid: yeah exactly

3:48 PM DARE_2B_stupid: any thoughts

Justin looked up from the phone to see that Dr. Aster and Sans were in a discussion about rocketry, and Mr. Cavenaugh was looking alert and intimidating as usual.

3:49 PM: there is one thing off the top of my head

3:49 PM DARE_2B_stupid: ill take whatever you can give me

3:49 PM: did any of the safehouses have basements

3:49 PM DARE_2B_stupid: let me think

3:50 PM DARE_2B_stupid: yeah

3:50 PM DARE_2B_stupid: violet orange and indigo we think

3:50 PM DARE_2B_stupid: why

3:50 PM: did it look to you or anyone else like the basements were used for storage or for
planning or for living space

3:50 PM DARE_2B_stupid: to me

3:50 PM DARE_2B_stupid: looked like storage mostly

3:51 PM DARE_2B_stupid: y

3:51 PM: when we were trying to get the inside track on the aml

3:51 PM: they had me meet them at different places in town

3:51 PM: but always in the basement

3:51 PM: like out of a movie or something

3:51 PM DARE_2B_stupid: think I see what you mean

3:51 PM: we know cater was giving them advice back then

3:51 PM: but he wasn the one calling the shots

3:51 PM: course riley was smart enough to use an old laptop with shut down wifi for the file transfer

3:51 PM: so

3:51 PM: you know

3:51 PM: gotta give him that

3:52 PM: but yeah

3:52 PM: the whole spy tradecraft thing is based on blending in with the ordinary

3:52 PM: movies only started catching up with that a while ago

3:52 PM DARE_2B_stupid: and they don't send architects to spy school

3:52 PM: probably easier to spend spies to architect school anyway

3:52 PM: but yeah

3:52 PM: o dell is not james bond

3:52 PM: or blofeld

3:52 PM: or goldfinger

3:53 PM: hes not even oddjob

3:53 PM: its just my hunch

3:53 PM: but when he tries to go to ground
Justin put his phone back in his pocket and caught up to the rest of the group. Dr. Aster turned as the man approached.

“Everything alright? You had a pretty intense expression on your face there.”

“It was Steve trying to get hold of me. Apparently the man in charge of the Arboretum has done something, who knows what, to get Hal angry at him.”

“welp. whoever he is, he's gonna have a bad time.”

Justin shrugged.

“That's one way to put it.”
“Hello! I have returned home!”

“HELLO YOUR MAJESTY!” A tall skeleton immediately sat up from the sofa, as did a human child sitting next to him, and walked over to where the queen was divesting her person of teacher-related apparel.

“Hi mom.”

“Hello Frisk, hello Papyrus... where is Asriel?”

“He's upstairs. Said he wanted to read for a little while.”

“I see. Speaking of reading, here are your assignments for today.” Toriel handed a manila folder with papers sticking out of each end to Frisk. “There is a literature assignment, a mathematics worksheet, and a scientific worksheet.”

“Thanks mom. I guess I'd better get on that.” Frisk immediately turned and headed towards the stairs, even as Toriel opened her mouth to speak again.

“Actually... oh. Hmmm. Well. I cannot fault Frisk's work ethic, I suppose,” Toriel turned towards Papyrus. “In the meantime, perhaps you can explain exactly what transpired today?”

“I ABSOLUTELY, DAPSOLUTELY SHALL! SHORTLY FOLLOWING MY ARRIVAL, WE HAD A GRAND TIME WATCHING MY FATHER EXPLAIN MAGIC PHYSICS TO POLITICIANS ON THE TELEVISION! THOUGH FRISK HAD TO STOP WATCHING RATHER EARLY. FOR SOME REASON.”

Toriel’s eyes moved towards the stairs for a moment, then back to Papyrus. “I see. What happened after that?”

“BY THE TIME THE SENATE MEETING ADJOURNED FOR THE DAY IT WAS GETTING CLOSE TO NOON, SO FRISK ASISTED ME IN PRODUCING A FANTASTIC LUNCH OF SPAGHETTI AND MEATBALLS! I MUST ADMIT, WHEN FRISK FIRST SHOWED ME HUMAN COOKING METHODS, I WAS QUITE SKEPTICAL, BUT THE RESULTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES!”

“Yes, Frisk is a prodigy when it comes to cooking... and after lunch?”

“AFTER EVERYONE ATE THEIR FILL OF PASTA GOODNESS, ASRIEL REQUESTED THAT WE TRAVEL TO THE LIBRARY SO THAT HE COULD RETURN A BOOK HE HAD FINISHED READING, AND WE DID SO! FRISK AND ASRIEL BROWSED THE VARIOUS SHELVES FOR SOME TIME, AND WHEN WE LEFT, ASRIEL REQUESTED THAT WE MAKE ANOTHER DIVERSION, TO THE ARBORETUM. WHICH IN HINDSIGHT MAY OR
MAY NOT HAVE BEEN THE MOST IDEAL COURSE OF ACTION.” Papyrus narrowed his eye sockets and held up a gloved finger. “I UNDERSTAND THAT ASRIEL’S ACTIVITIES COULD EASILY BE CONSTRUED AS RAMBUNCTIOUS, BACK WHEN HE CALLED HIMSELF FLOWEY, BUT THAT IS HARDLY JUSTIFICATION FOR A LIFETIME BAN FROM ENJOYING THE SIGHTS OF NATURE! WHEN I GET BACK HOME, I INTEND TO WRITE A VERY STRONGLY WORDED LETTER TO THE ARBORETUM ADMINISTRATION!”

“...your concern for my son is... it is very much appreciated.”

“OF COURSE I AM CONCERNED! HE IS MY COOL FRIEND, AND I HIS! SOMETHING I TRIED TO MAKE VERY CLEAR BEFORE WE LEFT TO RETURN HERE! AND AFTER SOME MINOR TRAFFIC RELATED INTERRUPTIONS, WE DID SO!”

Toriel stared at the earnest, honest, completely guileless expression on Papyrus’s skull, and nodded slowly.

“I see. Thank you, Papyrus. I... I had hoped that today might be a day of rest and recovery for the children, and while I was not opposed to activities in that context, it concerned me much that Asriel would want to go to the Arboretum. Especially in light of...”

“I DO NOT THINK THAT AT ANY POINT HE WAS IN DANGER OF TRANSFORMING BACK INTO A FLOWER, YOUR MAJESTY, BUT IF I DID THINK THAT SUCH EVENTS MIGHT COME TO PASS, I WOULD TRANSPORT HIM TO ALL FINE LABS FOR THE GREAT DOCTOR ALPHYS TO WORK HER SCIENTIFIC SKILLS WITH ALL POSSIBLE HASTE!”

“Ah. That was not my primary concern, but I am most appreciative that you had a contingency plan in place.” Toriel sighed. “Again, Papyrus. Thank you for watching over the children today. Arguably they are safer with you than with almost anyone else.”

“I AM HAPPY TO BE OF ASSISTANCE! THOUGH IF MY ASSISTANCE HAS DRAWN TO A CLOSE, THEN I MUST PROCEED WITH ALL POSSIBLE HASTE BACK HOME, TO BEGIN DRAFTING MY LETTER OF COMPLAINT!”

“Oh, of course. I am sorry. I did not intend to delay you.”

“NO PROBLEM AT ALL!” Papyrus slid over to the doorway without moving his legs, then began walking normally once outside... or at least as normal as Papyrus actually walked. Toriel shook her head.

“The more I know about Papyrus, the less I truly understand.”

The front door was closed, and Toriel made her way upstairs and to the shared bedroom of Frisk and Asriel, knocking lightly. After a few seconds, there was a muffled “come in” that sounded like Frisk’s voice, and the door was opened.

Frisk was sitting at their desk, already pouring over their textbooks and assignment worksheets for the day. Asriel was sitting on the edge of his bed, staring at a sheet of paper in his paws. Asriel looked up and Toriel instantly understood that he had been crying earlier, though the rest of his face appeared neutral.

“Welcome home mom. How was school?”

“...satisfactory. I understand from Papyrus, at least insofar as I am able, that you two had some
adventures today.”

Asriel nodded and his gaze dropped back to the sheet of paper.

“That's true. It was originally supposed to be just a short ride to the Library. But it didn't stop there.” Asriel sighed. “I asked Papyrus to bring us to the Arboretum so I could go into their offices and apologize to the people in charge for causing all the trouble I did back when I was a flower.”

“...I see. And how did that go?”

“...about as well as could be expected. Mr. Wren said that I had no business coming back and told me that I wasn't welcome there ever again. Which makes sense. I can still do all of the things I did with plant life back then-”

“He didn't say that.”

Asriel looked up, and Toriel turned, to see that Frisk had put down their pencil and was staring at the wall in front of their desk.

“Mr. Wren didn't say anything, he yelled it. At the top of his lungs. Asriel asked me to wait outside the office, and even though the door was closed I heard every word. Even if I am biased, I don't think anything that Asriel did called for that much volume.”

Toriel nodded slowly, walking into the room and sitting down on the bed next to Asriel. A paw was placed on his head and tousled his fur, slowly.

“Asriel... as a teacher, I understand that this is a harsh lesson that you were going to be required to learn at some point.”

Asriel nodded and looked down at the sheet of paper again; glancing down, Toriel saw that it was a list. Arboretum had been crossed out, leaving Shakespeare in the Park, Observatory, and several other groups and individuals.

“I think I knew what would happen when I was walking into the office. But I had to anyway. Only, after all that... I didn't feel up to talking to anyone else about what I had done.”

“...there was something else I wanted to say, Asriel. As your mother, I confess that I want to pick up Mr. Wren and throw him as far as my arms will allow, preferably into a large body of cold water.”

“...even if he was loud about it. He had a point. I created a lot of extra work for the people at the Arboretum. I cost them a lot of business because people were afraid of me back then.”

“Asriel, just a moment.” Frisk turned in their chair to look at the young monster and pulled out their cell phone. “Every time you pulled a stunt at the Arboretum, somebody on the staff called me to talk to you about it. I guess they thought I was the only person who could get you to stop.”

“Well you were.” Asriel blinked. “Wait, no. Papyrus could too. But most of the time when he saw me doing something he seemed to think that I had some sort of completely unrelated but perfectly valid reason for doing what I was doing, and wished me good luck.”

“That sounds about right.” Frisk nodded. “Did the staff ever come out and try to stop you from doing what you were doing?”

“I think one of the groundskeepers. Not that Earl guy we met today. I'd remember him I think.
Somebody else. And he ran away after I did one of my scary faces."

"The one that looked like a skull or the one that had too many teeth?"

"The teeth one. I think."

Frisk nodded again. "Did Mr. Wren ever come out personally to try to stop you?"

"No. I didn't know who he was until I went inside and asked the office receptionist who was in charge of the Arboretum." Asriel's brow furrowed in confusion. "Why are you asking all these things?"

"It's just..." Frisk held up a hand and waved it back and forth in a non-committal, ambiguous way. "Mr. Wren was more than willing to give you an earful when you came by to apologize, but he never even made a token effort to stop you back when you were actually causing trouble. I don't know. Something just seems off about that."

The human child returned to their schoolwork, and Toriel stood up.

"Well... this day has been full of surprises. And it is not over yet. It may please the both of you to know that Gorey will be joining us for dinner this evening." Toriel smiled slightly as she noticed both children sit up straighter. "I have asked him to pick up a random assortment of items from the market on his way here, which we will all prepare together, if you are feeling amenable."

"That sounds like fun, if I can get all these worksheets done first." Frisk returned their attention to the papers on the desk once again. "At least this close to the end of the year, there's not much left to do. Oh, mom, do you have the schedule for my tests tomorrow? I couldn't find it with the homework assignments."

"Odd. I could swear that I included that."

Frisk started leafing through the papers. "I'll check again. Maybe it got stuck from static electricity or something."

"Perhaps. I shall check my own papers just in case." Toriel looked down at her son. "Asriel, while Frisk is completing school work, would you like to help me prepare dishes and utensils in the kitchen?"

"...yeah. Yeah. I can do that." Asriel slid off of the edge of the bed, walked over to his chest of drawers, put the list down and headed out the door. Toriel stood up and began to follow, when Frisk stood up from their desk.

"Uh, mom. Before you head anywhere. Can I tell you something?"

Toriel looked down at Frisk, and nodded. "Yes, my child? What is it?"

Frisk breathed in slowly, and let it out in a rush.

"On the way home. From the Arboretum. Papyrus had to make a detour and... we ended up driving down... East Cavendish Street. Before... before Mt. Ebott and the underground, that was. I lived on that street. I saw... the house I grew up in. It was... it had burned up."

Frisk's hand came up and ran through their shorter, but still uncooperative, hair.

"Mom, for a long time... I was afraid that I would have to go back there. To go back to living with
them. And after we did that press conference thing when the Barrier got broken. I thought the reason that they didn't come for me was because they didn't want me.” The human child swallowed. “Now I think, that, maybe the reason they didn't come for me was... was because they... couldn't. And. And... when I calmed down again. I started trying to remember what I did before I climbed Mt. Ebott. Because. If I... if I left something cooking on the stove, or... or if I didn't clean out the lint trap on the dryer, then that fire could be my fault and-and... mom, I was never told 'this is your job' or 'you have to do this' I just wanted to help because I thought if I got all that out of the way and mom and dad didn't have to worry about it maybe they wouldn't be so upset all the time and they wouldn't yell as much but what if me trying to help really did cause everything to-

Frisk flinched as something touched their head; it was only Toriel's paw.

“My child. I do not believe any of that for an instant.”

“But-

“You would have been eight years old, or even younger, when you started taking your own initiative in helping around the Taylor house. No matter how precocious a youth you may be, that is too young to be handling all of the necessary tasks for managing a household. And the fact that some of them may have involved an element of risk of physical injury... that is an unacceptable lapse in the Taylors' parental responsibilities. Even when I was so angry at Asgore I could barely see straight, I never abdicated my responsibilities towards you and expected you to pick up where I left off, much less to take care of all of the housekeeping tasks here indefinitely while I focused on my own personal vendetta.”

“...even... even with all of that... it was so long ago, and, and I can't remember. If I did leave something on, and that broke or burned up or burned out, then that means that they are d-”

“Frisk.”

Frisk flinched again, and Toriel leaned down to wrap her arms around the child.

“My child, I want you to put these thoughts out of your mind. You saw a burned house. That is all. You cannot know for sure if anyone was even hurt in that fire. These endless what-if scenarios accomplish nothing, and help no one, least of all you. Your thoughts would be better occupied with schoolwork, or plans for activities with Asriel this summer, or thinking up jokes to tell Sans when he is back from the trip, or puzzle ideas to trade with Papyrus. Quite literally anything but this. Tomorrow, if you are unable to let this matter go completely, then we can make inquiries after school and determine what exactly happened to the Taylors. But if they are gone, it is not your fault. And if they are still with us, I will never let them anywhere near you, after all that has happened.”

Toriel felt the child shaking in her arms, and Frisk reached up to return the hug.

“You took... me in. When I thought. I had. No place else. I just want... you were there for me. I want to be there for you.” Frisk sniffed. “It's just. That's hard to do. When everything I thought I knew. About how the world works. Is changing.”

“...Frisk. You have been there for me. And for Asgore, and all of our friends... and especially for Asriel, when he had nobody else.”

Frisk's breathing became steadier, and the child let go, looking up at Toriel.
“You know... after a while. I started to look forward to those calls where somebody asked me to 'come over and stop Flowey' because it was an excuse to see him some more. Even though I saw him almost every other day anyway.” The child's eyes shifted towards Asriel's bed. “I still wish I could have helped him back in the Underground. But... I don't think there was anything I could have-”

“Asriel is here with us now, Frisk. He is downstairs, getting things ready for us to make dinner. I... I too, would have liked for him to have... been helped. Sooner. But what you have done. Was so much more than anyone could have hoped for. I lost my baby. And now he is back.”

“...mom, thank you. Thank you for letting me, you know. Get all that out of my system.” Frisk shook their head and sighed. “And I didn't even break down crying this time. I think that's a good sign-”

There was a ringing of the doorbell, and Asriel's voice called up “I'll get it!” from the ground floor. Toriel stood up.

“And that is doubtless Gorey with the groceries for tonight.”

Frisk nodded.

“Well. Let's get started. I can tackle these worksheets after dinner.”

The queen looked at the vegetables and fruits with a critical eye.

“Apples, cabbage, onions, cherry tomatoes, and cauliflower. You certainly seem to like putting my kitchen improvisation through its paces.”

Asgore grinned and shrugged as Toriel picked up an onion.

“Frisk my dear, please check in the refrigerator to see what we have in the way of bread.”

The fridge door was opened and Frisk scanned the shelves. “...a bag of whole wheat bread. No other bread products.”

“Hmmm. I believe I can make that work. Take the bag out and remove eight slices. Two per person. I will toast them and we will have them with onion soup... that will be your responsibility, if you are up for it.”

Frisk held up a thumb in a positive gesture. “Consider it done.”

“Asriel, I will get an apple pie started for desert, and it will be your responsibility to see it through to completion.”

Asriel nodded and grinned. “You can count on me!”

“Gorey, you will have to help me come up with something for the cauliflower and the cabbage. I cannot make heads or tails of it myself.”

Frisk snorted and Asriel frowned.

“Wait, why did you put emphasis heads of cabbage oh come on!”

Toriel began to giggle as she began to pull out pots and pans, and sent globes of fire slowly floating
towards the burner plates of the stove top. Asriel made an exasperated sound as he pulled a pie plate out of a cabinet.

“This is why The Great Papyrus is so Great, you know.”

“You know Asriel. When Sans showed up at school on Monday, Undyne shut him down by just saying 'come in' when he said 'knock knock.' There might be something to learn from that.”

Asriel stared at Frisk, then nodded slowly.

“Okay, I can kind of see how something would work there.”

“Yeah.” Frisk pulled a canister of flour out of the pantry and acquired some measuring cups from a cupboard. “Humor tends to follow specific patterns, which is why bad jokes can sometimes be criticized for being strictly formula. If you know what the pattern is, you can interrupt it at key areas. Beating Sans to a punchline, or using a different punchline than he's going for. Or setting up the framing device differently.”

“Hmmm.” Asriel stopped doing what he was doing and seemed completely preoccupied. “All of that sounds interesting. I totally need to ask you about details later though.”

“I confess that I too am interested in seeing where this shall go,” Toriel added as she chopped cabbage. “Dueling humor styles. Hmmm... I suspect we have enough apples for both a pie, and an apple-and-cabbage ensemble. That leaves only the cauliflower unaccounted for.”

“I was going to suggest a soup, but between the onion soup and the apple cabbage stew, maybe something everyone can sink their teeth into? Roasted perhaps?”

“...that is not a bad idea at all. I shall procure the roasting pan, and we can get the cauliflower started in the oven.”

“Oh, by the way. Undyne told me today that Alphys told her that All Fine Labs has the contract from Mettaton to start producing magic appliances under his brand. Mass production instead of all the custom jobs she was doing before. It's been on the agenda for over a year but between his movies and tours and public appearances, Mettaton was never around to finalize it until recently.”

Asgore shrugged. “At least, that's what I understood between sneezes.

“That is perhaps for the best. Even with Undyne to help her find a happy medium, Alphys burns the candle at both ends far too often as it is.” Toriel took a knife and began to peel and chop an onion when there was a ringing noise from the living room. “Oh dear, that is my phone. Frisk, can you take over for me while I go answer?”

“Sure thing.” Frisk moved over to the cutting board as Toriel vacated the space, picked up the knife, and held it above the onion... and hesitated.

Something felt wrong.

There was a tightness in the child's chest that made it somewhat more difficult to breathe, and their hand was shaking slightly, which was making it hard to hold the knife steady long enough to chop the onion into-

Their hand was shaking.

Their right hand.
Frisk stared at their right hand, then at their left. Slowly, the knife was transferred to the child's left hand. The shaking subsided, and breath came easier.

“Frisk, is something wrong?”

The child jumped at Asgore's deep voice, then shook their head.

“I'm good. I think something crossed a wire in my brain for a second. Not sure what happened.”

The knife was positioned over the onion and Frisk began to chop the vegetable into slices of mostly uniform thickness, before separating out the rings.

“Gorey, when did these packages arrive?”

Frisk turned to see Asgore and Asriel looking at two brown boxes in Toriel's arms as she walked up to the kitchen doorway. Asgore shook his head in bewilderment.

“Golly, I completely forgot about those. Bob the Temmie brought those by last Tuesday, before we took Frisk to the clinic.”

“Hmm. Well, a great deal happened that night and every day after. It is no surprise that this should fall by the wayside. Nonetheless, once dinner is finished, let us determine the contents of these packages. Clearly somebody went to the time and effort to send them for a reason.”

“Didn't the Knights of the Road Who Say Ni send those?” Frisk asked, putting down the knife. “I remember being confused about that because I don't know why a fraternal society would need to send us anything.”

“It did seem to be the name on the return address.” Toriel shook her head. “In any event, that is for later tonight. Oh, and Asriel. That phone call was from Dr. Alphys. Apparently circumstances have aligned at All Fine Labs so that there is time to fit you into the schedule for another follow up scan tomorrow.”

“Okay. Better safe than sorry.” Asriel paused pulling out the dry ingredients for the pie crust. “Speaking of lab stuff. Dr. Aster talked to both of you about his research project to try to help the Amalgamates, right?”

Toriel and Asgore shared a look for a moment.

“He has, though not in any great detail. Neither of us are opposed as a matter of principle, but we both want to know exactly what is involved, step by step, before we make any sort of decision.”

“Which means after he gets back, and after school lets out. That way we can give something like this our undivided attention,” Asgore added. “From what I understand, some of it would involve scans like Alphys has been doing. And that sounds okay. But if there's anything else involved... Frisk, what's that human expression for agreeing to something, before you know what the results will be? Writing a blank check?”

“There's a couple, but I think that's the one you want.”

“Right. We don't want to write a blank check on this. Even for Wing Ding.”

Asriel scratched his ear. “I can understand that. It's just that... even if there was an element of risk. I think it would be worth it. To help the Amalgamates.”

“If there are risks, we will have to address each one as they come. On an individual, case-by-case
basis,” Toriel said, and her voice had shifted into a tone that Asriel and Frisk both recognized as her Mom Voice, and then shifted back as she continued to speak. “Asriel... we are not saying no. It is just that... we lost you once. If we seem overcautious, it is for a very good reason.”

“...right. I understand.”

Dinner preparations proceeded in silence for a few seconds, until Toriel's phone began to make noise again.

“Egads. It never fails. People always want our attention during dinner.” The teacher scrubbed her paws under the faucet for a moment, then drove off the water as steam with a sudden fireball, before reaching for the cell phone with dry fingers.

“Toriel Dreemurr speaking... yes, Frisk is here. Why? ...I imagine their cell phone is charging right now. Who, precisely, is asking?”

The activity in the kitchen slowed to a stop as everyone else looked at Toriel, and saw her expression take on a hard edge.

“I see. I fail to understand the connection this has with Frisk, however... hmmm. One moment, please.” Toriel lowered her cell phone and turned to Frisk. “One Julia Howard would like to speak to you.”

“Julia Howard... sounds familiar. Was there a Howard when we were doing ambassador functions at some point?”

“This Julia Howard seems to work at the Arboretum.”

“Ohhhh. Right.”

Asriel turned to Frisk. “Was that who called you every time I pulled a stunt there?”

“Well, not every time. But enough.”

“How did they get your number anyway?”

“I gave it to them after the first time. Just in case you decided once wasn't enough.”

Asriel opened his mouth, then shut it again.

“Fair enough. But I'm here now. So this can't be about plant related stunts.”

“Right. Guess I better see what this is about.”

Frisk held out their hand and Toriel passed her cell phone to the child.

“Frisk Dreemurr speaking.”

“Hello again Frisk. Sorry to bother you so late, but your cell was going straight to voicemail, and apparently there's a bit of a time crunch going on.”

“How did you get my mom's number, anyway?”

“Oh. Officer Steve was by earlier. We called him first, and he passed it along when we couldn't reach you.”
“...this is one of those things where the more questions I ask, the more I end up with. Why did you call Officer Steve?”

“Well...” there was a pause on the other end of the line, and Frisk could hear some sort of music in the background that they had not noticed before when anyone was speaking. “Hal Greene is outside the Arboretum right now, and he won't go away. And that's terrifying enough on its own.”

“...oh.” Frisk sighed. “I can almost guess where this is going, but go ahead and tell me anyway.”

“He's got some sort of... musical instrument. And he's playing it nonstop. Officer Steve talked to him and then told us there's nothing he can do legally because he's not on the Arboretum property itself and he's not obstructing traffic.”

“...that does sound pretty serious. But I'm not sure how I can help.”

“Officer Steve mentioned that Hal Greene and Asriel Dreemurr were friends. Which, it just occurred to me, might be why he's here in the first place. I was wondering if you could talk to him, and he could talk to Hal, and maybe get this thing straightened out.”

“...well. I can't make any promises but I'll talk to Asriel. But I don't know what he can do either.”

“It's better than nothing. Thank you Frisk.”

“You're welcome.” Frisk hung up and handed the phone back to Toriel, while staring at Asriel.

“It sounds like when you retired from the position of Arboretum Mischief Maker, Hal Greene took up your mantle. He's playing music outside of it nonstop.”

There was a sudden sound of giggling laughter, and Asgore, Frisk, and Asriel all turned to see Toriel clasp both paws over her mouth.

“Oh dear. I am sorry. That just... slipped out.”

Asriel raised an eyebrow. “Okay... Frisk, why would the people at the Arboretum call mom or you about what Hal is doing?”

“Because you and Hal are friends and they think you might be able to talk him out of his... musical interlude?”

“...well. That makes about as much sense as anything else in this town.” Asriel walked over to the sink and began washing off his paws. “I'll go get my phone and call him. Be back in a few minutes.”

“Actually perhaps that can wait. We are about to prepare the filling for the pie, after all.”

Asriel looked up in confusion, and Toriel winked. The young boss monster turned to look at a grinning Asgore, and then turned to Frisk, who shrugged.

“...okay then... I guess we'll get dinner on its way first?”

The bedroom door was closed, and Asriel pulled his cell phone out of its charger. One furry finger navigated menus until it found a specific name and number in the contact list. The line began to ring, and Asriel sat down on his bed to wait for an answer-
“Hal Greene speaking.”

“Uhm. Hi Hal.”

“Azzy! How are you holding up?”

Asriel stared at the books and papers on his chest of drawers, thought about trying to summarize everything, and sighed. “I'm mostly okay. How are you feeling?”

“Cold. Almost frostbitten.”

“What? How is that even possible in this heat?”

“Well, are you familiar with how mechanical refrigeration works?”

“Sort of. Dr. Aster explained it once when he was talking about how the cooling system for the CORE worked. Something about how volume, pressure, and temperature were all related. That was a long time ago though.”

“Well, here is a refresher course. If volume remains constant but pressure increases, so does temperature. And it works in the other direction too. If you let the pressure off by increasing the volume a gas occupies, the temperature drops. And that's why I'm cold, because I'm surrounded by pipes filled with compressed air being released from a tank, and the cooling effect is significant.”

“Oh... why?”

“It'll be easier to show you. Hold on a second.”

There was a notification sound from Asriel's phone, and the monster pulled it away from his ear to look at the screen. Hal had sent him a picture. Specifically, a selfie.

A selfie of him wearing some sort of harness over his coveralls, covered with pipes and tubing that seemed to be tied into various musical instruments in different stages of disassembly.

Asriel brought the phone up to his ear again. “Hal? What exactly are you doing?”

“It took me about three hours, but I put together a one-man brass quartet. Trombone, Trumpet, Sousaphone and French Horn. It's all controlled with linkages in the accordion. I knew there was a reason I held onto this thing all these years.”

“And these... instruments... those are powered by the compressed air?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Okay. That answers one of my questions. Can I ask why?”

“Sure. First I gotta ask you something. Have you or Frisk or anybody gotten a call from the Arboretum yet?”

“Actually yeah. That's kind of why I'm calling now. Somebody tried to call Frisk, and when that didn't work they called my mom.”

“And who was it that did the calling?”

“Mom said it was somebody named Julia Howard.”
There was an annoyed sound on the other end of the line, and Asriel sat up straighter. “Hal? Is something wrong?”

“As a matter of fact there is. You asked why I am doing this, and ye shall receive an answer. I am trying to teach Robin Wren the error of his ways.”

“The guy in charge of the Arboretum?”

“The same. You see, Asriel, Robin is the kind of person that flees from confrontation at the first sign of trouble, but attacks weakness without mercy. You had no way of knowing this because first, you didn't go to the school with the guy, and second, when you were making life interesting for everybody at the Arboretum, he stayed as far away from you as he could because he was afraid of you. So you never interacted with him before now.”

“...so this is about what happened today.”

“Well, kinda. Honestly? I've been on the fence about doing this for about... it's still May, right? For about four years now, and today finally pushed me over the edge. So... here's the sixty four thousand dollars and ninety nine cents question. You said that somebody named Howard called you. So has Robin Wren made any attempt to communicate with you? Personally?”

“Uh, no. Not since the whole, the thing, in his office today.”

“Well, that's his choice I suppose.”

“...hey. Hal?”

“Yup?”

“I kind of get the feeling that there's a side of this exchange I'm missing. I don't know if I'm just not connecting the dots or if something was left out.”

“...oh. Right. I guess if he hasn't talked to your directly, he can't tell you what I told him to tell you. Sorry, I'm freezing my lug nuts off and it's distracting as all get out. I'd insulate the pipes but that would muffle the acoustics. So yeah. I told Rob, 'You mess with the goat, you get the horns.' I don't think he realized what horns I meant until I was outside and opened the pressure valve.”

Asriel shook his head. “I'll be honest, I kind of thought that Mr. Wren shouted me out of his office because I was just that bad back then. But it seems like everyone that hears about what happened thinks maybe that he went a bit too far.”

“I can't speak for anyone else, but I certainly think so. Which is why I'm here. So... it doesn't seem like he's going to grow a pair and apologize, so I guess I need to make this a house band kind of thing when I'm not fixing Mike's truck.”

“Uh, I was about to ask about that. Shouldn't you be prioritizing that, or other mechanic work stuff, over this? I mean, Mr. Van Garrett is waiting on that, right? Or did you work something out?”

“It's cool. He actually loaned me a spare air tank for my getup here. Long story made short, Robin Wren got him kicked off the college wrestling team back in the day.”

“Uh, okay. If you say so. Hey, uh. It was really nice talking with you.”

“You too Azzy. Remember, pizza party at the mini golf course on Saturday! Tell your family, grab all your friends, we're going to make this a shindig to remember!”
Asriel grinned. “You bet. Totally looking forward to it. Catch you later Hal.”

“See ya!”

Just before Hal hung up, Asriel heard a hiss of air and the sounds of various instruments playing, and increasing in volume. The phone was returned to its charger, and Asriel left the bedroom to see everyone sitting around the coffee table in the living room, with the mysterious packages stacked upon each other. Asgore carefully cut through the tape on the seams of the box as Asriel walked up and sat next to him.

“Howdy Asriel. Was everything resolved with Mr. Greene?”

Asriel shrugged. “Well, he explained what he was doing and why. To the extent that I can actually do anything in all this, I've done all I can.”

“Then that is good enough.” Asgore handed the opened box to Frisk. “Here you go. You and Tori can go through that one, and Asriel and I will open the other one and figure out what's inside.”

“Okay.” The lid was pulled back, and Frisk stared at the inside of the box for a moment. “It looks like a lot of paper. But it's not closely packed, and it looks like there's some writing or drawings on them... most of them are folded- wait, these are cards.”

“Hmmm? What manner of cards?”

“I don't know. I don't even know why the Knights Of The Road Who Say Ni would send us so many. I mean I know we have some strange traditions in Ebott's Wake but I've never heard of this one before.”

Asriel pulled a card out of the box Asgore was holding and started reading. “Dear Frisk, you made this town a lot more fun and a lot more safe, please get better soon.' It sounds like...”

“Wait. These are get well soon cards.” Frisk's eyes shifted between Toriel and Asgore's blank looks. “…you send them to people who get sick or hurt? Do monsters not have those?”

Asriel shook his head. “Monsters have like ten different things that can affect us. And anything that healing magic can't fix isn't going to get better soon, or ever. So we never did stuff like that. Birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, special events, sure. But not for when people get hurt. Actually that's... that's kinda morbid.”

“It's not like a celebration of bad stuff happening.” Frisk paused and considered their words. “At least, not usually. It's supposed to... humans usually take a long time to heal whenever something goes wrong. So the idea is that while somebody is recovering, they have something to let everyone know they're being thought of, and it's something to focus on besides feeling sick.”

“This one looks like it was signed by somebody named Anne-Marie. Do you know anybody with that name?”

Frisk stared at Asriel for a few seconds. “…Anne-Marie Skye was in my grade when I went to James Madison Elementary. And I think she was one of the kids that came by when this house was bought. Just before our first Halloween. It's been... a while.”

“These cards also appear to be from elementary students, if the penmanship is anything to go by, but I do not recognize the names from the Dreemurr Elementary paperwork.” Toriel turned to Asgore. “Gorey, these packages, they arrived last Tuesday. That is... and I may be speculating wildly, but I suspect that these were all produced during some class or activity session the Monday
before.”

“But if that's what happened why do the boxes say they're from the Knights of the Road Who Say Ni?” Asriel scratched his head.

“They get involved in a lot of civic events and do a lot of community service and charity work. They usually send three or four people to help set up and tear down for the Garden Show,” Asgore mused. “I could see them organizing something like this after the first address, now that I understand the concept involved.”

“Hey, this one isn't homemade.” Asriel pulled out another card from the box between him and Asgore, one that featured a rather generic scenic vista, and opened it up. “To Frisk Dreemurr, best wishes for a speedy recovery. Signed, John Banner, David Banner, Simon Paulson... those are the human lawyers, right? The ones that you mentioned did a lot of paperwork for monster legislation during the address?”

“...yeah.” Frisk's brow furrowed in confusion. “Banner, Banner and Paulson... after the Barrier was broken, and we all headed into town, I stopped by there after looking up what I thought we needed at the Library. They helped set up the Exchange Trust and formalize all the paperwork for when we were trying to get everyone moved out of the Underground. I still don't... really understand why they would send me a get well card.”

“They have become the default choice for any monsters seeking legal guidance, and their firm has grown considerably as a result.” Toriel smiled. “Their newfound success and prosperity in no small part lies with your choice to seek their advice. With that in mind, it makes perfect sense for them to wish you well.”

Frisk blinked, and stared at some of the other cards.

“Yeah... I guess that makes sense.”

Asriel held up a card. “Frisk, it looks like this one is from Joe's House Of Stuff.”

“...that makes sense too, I'm always there looking for books and spare parts.” Frisk shook their head. “Ugh. I need to... to wash up. I don't know why but I feel... weird.”

“Of course. Now would be as good a time as any. We have at least ten minutes before anything is ready.”

With Toriel's tacit approval, Frisk got up and headed for the stairs. Asriel's gaze followed them until they were outside.

“Asriel, if I could have your attention for a second,” Asgore said. His voice was quieter than normal, but still very deep and as such hard to miss. Asriel turned to face his father.

“What is it?”

“...your mother and I spoke today. About what you talked about yesterday. I want you to know that I understand how hard that must have been. Just as going to the Arboretum today must have been difficult. I... I am proud of you for taking the initiative when it comes to setting things right.”

Asriel scratched his ear and looked down at his feet.

“...I promised, if it was dangerous... I still feel bad about it. But. Mom wasn't mad. And you're not upset. So I guess that was the right thing to do.”
“Sometimes we make choices that we come to regret with time. Other times we have to make decisions we know that we will regret, no matter what path we choose to take.” Asgore sighed. “And in regards to Frisk. Even before your mother said anything, I had my suspicions. In fact, I thought that, well, that you had been teaching Frisk magic as a way to keep yourself occupied over the past year and a half.”

Asriel blinked.

“...wow. You know, I thought of a lot of stunts that I never followed through on for different reasons. But that, I never even thought about trying.”

“Your father and I have both agreed that proper education and training is paramount in this case. So in addition to your own, I believe the term is ‘summer school’ curriculum, I will need to compile one for Frisk, once we have established what they can do.”

Asriel sighed and leaned back in his seat.

“Well. If you've gone completely teacher over this, then it has to be okay.”

Asgore snorted, and Toriel stared at him. “Is there something you would like to share with the rest of the class, Dreemurr?”

Asriel hopped up out of his seat as Asgore started to laugh.

“Ugh. You guys have the weirdest way of flirting. Now I feel like I need to wash up.”

The king and queen both started to laugh as Asriel walked up the stairs. The bedroom door was shut, and Asriel knocked lightly on it.

“Come in.”

The door swung open, and Asriel looked around the room. Frisk could not be seen anywhere, yet he had heard them speak just a few seconds before.

“Frisk??”

“Over here.”

The young monster followed Frisk's voice to... the corner of the bedroom, next to Frisk's desk. A hand was sticking above the edge of their desk, and Asriel realized they had positioned themselves in the space between the furniture and the wall.

“...okay.”

“Close the door please.”

A paw reached out and pushed the door shut.

“Is this another one of those things that have been going on for a while, but I'm only finding out about them now because I have legs again?”

“No. This is new.”

Frisk crossed their arms in front of them, knees pulled up to their chest, and Asriel sat down cross legged on the floor next to them.
“...I think. It's in the back of my mind. So much is going on. So much is changing. I just need to... in a space like this, I can block off sight lines and motion and simplify everything.”

“...I guess that makes sense.”

The bedroom was silent for a minute or two, except for the sound of breathing and the occasional rustle of fabric or fur. When the silence was broken, it was Frisk that spoke.

“Asriel. Do you remember the last time we spoke, at the end of the first run?”

“...yeah. I do.”

“After that. I... went home. Back to that house. But I never told you what happened after.”

“Well... I figured you didn't want to go into details. And I wasn't sure I wanted to hear them, after I figured out what had happened from what you let slip.”

Frisk nodded, and reached out their hand towards Asriel.

“I want to show you something. Take my hand for a minute.”

Asriel blinked, but reached out. His paw grasped Frisk's hand, furry fingers meshed between hairless ones.

“The Soul Link is... unpredictable. We tried to send one thing through it at All Fine Labs, and you saw my dreams from the night before. But there was something Dr. Aster said during the Senate testimony. Communication magic. Red magic. I'd been looking for a way to get rid of this for so long that even when I was reading about how I could use it... my mind just tuned it out. So. I checked the book again. And I think I know how it works now. And if it works right... you'll see.”

Asriel blinked, and felt Frisk's hand grip his paw even harder.

“Frisk... you could just tell me.”

“No. No. You need to see.”

There was a red light around Frisk's hand-

“Hello? Mom? Dad?”

Frisk pushed the door open further, causing it to squeal on its hinges. The house was, not surprisingly, even more of a mess than it had been when Frisk had left. Trash had accumulated in piles on the floor, with flies buzzing around them. There was a sound that was probably the television, but that didn't necessarily mean anyone was watching it. Or even that anyone was in the house.

The kitchen hadn't improved either, and the counter was piled high not only with dishes, but empty cans and their lids. A can opener lie broken in two on the floor, and Frisk had to repress the impulse to pick it up and try to find a way to replace the hinge.

There was a sound of glass scraping against glass.

Frisk froze, listening for any other signs of life. After nearly a minute, they moved in the direction of the sound, towards the living room.
There.

Jason Taylor was sitting in an old chair, in front of the TV set. On one side of the chair was a pile of brown glass bottles. Beer bottles, if the labels were anything to go by.

“Dad?”

There was some movement as Jason shifted in his seat, leaned forward and turned to look behind him. Bloodshot eyes looked out from dark and sunken sockets.

“...Frisk?? When did you get here?”

“...uhm. Just a minute ago. Where's mom?”

Jason turned back in his seat, facing the TV screen again.

“Don't know. Don't care. Thought she took you with her.”

“T ook me where?”

“I just said I don't know.” Jason pointed at the TV screen where an aerial shot from a helicopter was showing some wrecked buildings, many producing a great deal of smoke. “She could never handle being wrong. And I was right. The Sages shot themselves in the foot. Could have been us in there, if she... good fucking riddance.”

Frisk flinched as a beer bottle was dropped haphazardly into the pile, causing the pile to collapse with the sound of scraping and cracking glass, and some of them to roll across the floor.

“God fucking dammit.”

“I'll clean those up.”

“...No.” Jason sat up in his chair, shook his head, and then stood up. “Don't bother. Just go. Just get out.”

Frisk looked up at the man towering over them. “...what?”

“God, you're supposed to be smart. I said get out. Go back to Diane. Or wherever you've been these last few days. I don't care. You already left once. Turned your back on me... on Diane... you already made your choice.”

Jason leaned down to start collecting the beer bottles himself.

“You can't just come back and and pick up where you left off. The world isn't some movie you can pause and come back to later. Or fast forward past the parts you don't like. If you're not going to stick it out when things get tough, then you don't get to stay for the good parts. It's common fucking sense.”

Frisk slowly backed away from the man that they had once called 'dad' until they were in the relative safety of the hallway.

'Where are the knives.'

The child walked to the kitchen and drawers were pulled open, one by one, until at last one drawer revealed the utensils that were used in the preparation of food. One particular knife fit comfortably in Frisk's right hand. It had a straight and smooth edge without serrations.
'Finally.'

Their left hand reached into their pocket and pulled out their cell phone, navigating the menus with their thumb until they got to one specific option and pressed it. The phone's parts began to separate and rearrange themselves, forming an obvious grip, trigger, and a barrel on top. Cooling fins unfolded, and there was a beep from the phone hardware to signal that the transformation was complete.

Frisk walked back out of the kitchen, down the hallway, and into the living room. Jason had moved on from the bottles and was stacking what looked like they might have once been empty pizza boxes. He barely seemed to notice Frisk's entrance, and certainly didn't act like he saw what they were carrying.

“Hey. What I said earlier. I didn't mean it. You can-”

Frisk raised the pistol and pulled the trigger.

A blast of yellow energy slammed into Jason Taylor's right thigh, and that leg buckled. The man fell to one knee with a yell, and Frisk fired again twice, hitting him in the chest both times.

“What the fuck?! What the hell was that?!”

“STOP! YELLING! AT! ME!” Each word was punctuated with a swing from Frisk's knife, and in a matter of seconds Jason's arms were covered in red trails as he tried to defend himself. Reversing the grip, Frisk slammed it into Jason's arm as he reached out to grab them and twisted the blade. Jason howled in pain, but Frisk's voice could be heard over him.

“DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT I HAD TO DO TO GET BACK HERE?!”

The knife was pulled out and Frisk brought the pistol up, firing over and over even as Jason reached behind him, swung around blindly-

Just before the bottle collided with Frisk's head, they saw Jason's face.

He looked scared.

Frisk had never seen him look scared before-

Frisk stared up into the pinprick of light at the roof of the cavern. Beneath them, there was the familiar sensation of bruised muscles from a long fall, cushioned by flowers.

The child sat up and looked around. Ancient, crumbling columns, golden flowers, and only one way out.

Hands covered Frisk's mouth as they started to laugh. And laugh. And laugh.

'It's soooo funny.'

Tears streamed down their face.

Asriel blinked and stared at Frisk, still sitting in the corner. The human child let go and pulled their arms around their knees again.

“Now you understand. What you saw. That's the real Frisk. When nothing else was left.” The child
sniffed. “Jason Taylor didn't just kill me. Jason Taylor killed me in self-defense. I would have killed him. And I don't know what I would have done next.”

“...this changes nothing, Frisk. I remember what I saw after you got shot. This didn't happen on its own.” Asriel swallowed. “You're not a bad person. You're a good person who had a lot of bad things happen to you. And you didn't know how to handle it.”

Frisk stared at Asriel for a few moments, and then down at the floor between the two children.

The bedroom was silent for a while, until there was a light knock on the door.

“Dinner is ready whenever you are, children.”

“Thanks mom. We'll be right down,” Asriel called out. The young monster got to his feet, and held out his paw to Frisk. Slowly, Frisk brought their hand up to grasp it, and Asriel pulled them upright.

“We can talk more about this later, if you need to. Okay?”

Frisk wrapped their arms around Asriel in a sudden hug.

“I'm so glad... before this all happened. That you got to come back.”

“...Frisk. We still don't know exactly what happened, but we do know you were a part of that. This soul was part of yours, once. I know that... I know right now. All you see. Are the things that you wish you hadn't done. Just... don't forget. You've done a lot of good stuff too.”

“...my hands. Break. Everything.” The words were spoken with difficulty, and there was a tremor behind them. “I read books. And I mess with tools. To try to pretend that I can make things better. That I can control it. But I can't control it. Any more than I can control the time loop. I can't even choose what to destroy. And what to leave alone. I can't... I can't... I can't do this anymore. Trying to be something I'm not. This has to stop. I have to...”

Asriel felt the fur on his neck stand up.

“Frisk. Whatever you're thinking about doing, stop.”

“...it has to end with me. If it's anyone else, that will trigger a LOAD event-”

“Nobody is going to hurt you. I won't let them. And that includes you too.”

“We both know how this is going to end, Asriel.”

“No we don't.” Asriel spat, claws digging into Frisk's shirt. “You only think it's going to end badly because the Taylors hurt you so much that now you think feeling bad is normal, and you're starting from that and working backwards, like an idiot, instead of actually figuring out what's wrong!”

Asriel felt Frisk freeze up in his arms, and relaxed his grip a little bit.

“I didn't mean to be so harsh. I'm sorry for that. But I'm not sorry for the rest of it. Frisk. I already had one best friend kill themselves because they thought it was the only way for everyone to be happy. I cannot, and I will not, let that happen again. Okay?”

Frisk remained silent, and Asriel let go, grabbing Frisk's shoulders and pushing them back so he could see their face; tear streaked, with bloodshot eyes that looked right through the young boss monster to some imagined terror.
“...hey. I know that... I know that it's going to be hard. To not listen to the part of you that says it's all going to fall apart and that it will be your fault. I know that just saying that everything is going to be okay isn't enough. And tomorrow, you're probably going to feel like it's your last day on earth, because Friday is the day that everything ends. But... think about this. If tomorrow really is your last day. Then how do you want to spend it? Afraid of what will happen next? Or do you want to make the most of it?”

The human child stood up straighter, blinked, and their eyes focused on Asriel.

“Frisk, I promise you. I swear on the Soul that you gave me. You will have many, many more days. But if you can't shake that feeling. Then fight back another way. Forget about what you think you screwed up. Focus on what you love. From start to finish. Okay?”

“...I can try that.”

“Good.” Asriel let himself relax, and smiled a little. “We can figure out the details later tonight. After dinner. But right now mom is probably wondering why we're not downstairs yet.”

The human child nodded. “Okay. Okay. I'm. I'm better now. But I probably should wash up again. Because of things.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Frisk leaned forward to hug Asriel again, and then let go.

“Thank you.”

The two children walked out of the bedroom, and Asriel shut the door behind him.

Neither one noticed the soft red glow from the orb on Frisk's nightstand.

Chapter End Notes

Even though its final version is somewhat different in word choice, credit is due to The Iron Waffle for providing the inspiration for Hal's euphemism.
Warning for descriptions of eye trauma. I tried not to get too graphic with it though.

ALL FINE LABS SECURE INTRANET

SPECIAL PROJECTS DIRECTORY

PROJECT GRAYSCALE

LEAD RESEARCHER: Josef “Joe” Stanton

PROJECT AUTHORIZED BY: Dr. Alphys

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT: gray003.mp3

“This is Joe Stanton at All Fine Labs. It's Wednesday, May twenty fifth, twenty sixteen. The time is... six thirty two PM. I've completed work on what I think is a viable testing apparatus for the magic energy step-up and step-down effect. Because its innards draw so heavily from early radio technology, and because of one of the theories it is meant to test, pertaining to human magic potential being extant and simply not easy to detect under normal circumstances, I am tentatively calling it the Amplifier. Because that's fucking original....”

“Noted a trend towards irritability over the last few hours, but I think that this can be attributed to a combination of fatigue, eyestrain, and hearing political commentary about Dr. Aster's Senate testimony. I don't think it has affected my mathematical literacy but I may need Alphys or Gunther or Sophia to check my numbers after this.”

“Going for a diagnostic approach first. I've brought in the Amplifier into the Soul Scanner Lab and set it to automatic. Looking for any sign that it can interact with the Soul related energy effects that the scanner can already detect, including the bullet translator device.”

“...nothing. Going to make some adjustments and try again.”

“...Alright. This is the second attempt at using Soul Research Data to verify an electromagnetic and magic interaction.”

“...picking up some sort of activity on the lower end of the spectrum. Not sure if that's from me or instrumental interference. Attempting to reproduce.”

“...was not able to recreate the effect. I think I might be barking up the wrong tree here, so recording all of my experimental conditions for posterity and then it's back to the drawing board.”
“Joe Stanton speaking. Wednesday May twenty-fifth. Seven PM. I promised Alphys I'd be done in thirty minutes or less. And she promised if I wasn't, she'd bring Undyne to the lab to remove me from the premises. So. Little distracted.”

“Went back through some of the paperwork and scans that Mike brought me and got reminded yet again of the conversation he mentioned having with Dr. Aster about monster physiology. Still haven't brought it up with any monster working here. Not sure if it's something that can be discussed in mixed company anyway. Anyway, based on what little information I have, it sounds like monster bodies process energy in a succession of interactions. No idea what these interactions involve. It's about as useful as half a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. On the plus side, the fact that monsters are literally made of energy finally provides some empirical evidence to support fringe theories like the morphogenetic field and auras.”

“...heh. One time in college, Mike was messing around with a radio. Reception was bad, so he grabbed the antenna and that helped. He immediately got this idea in his head that for that to happen, the human body had to have a pronounced enough electromagnetic field to interact with the antenna and the circuitry in the first place. Which was sort of a vindication of the idea of an aura. When I pointed out that the aura stuff predated the existence of radio, he countered that the Greeks considered matter to be made of atoms without any instruments to detect atomic scale phenomena, or even that much of a care for empirical data. Of course I had to remind him that unlike the Greek conception of atoms, the real deal are divisible, and more recent scientists borrowed the term from the ancients because they weren't using it anymore. Since they were all dead, and such. I think he was about to come back with another counterpoint, but that was when the bar closed and we kind of lost our train of thought trying to get back to campus.”

“This is radio based. In theory I could try to look for that kind of result. But in practice, that radio would have to be trying to tune into a broadcasting signal, that my Soul would either help with or interfere with. I think in the proper analogy, my Soul is the broadcasting station and I'm trying to get a god damn signal without even knowing if my radio works or not. Of course, just to register to my human senses, any sub-light energy reactions that got boosted into the supra-light magical band would immediately have to be stepped back down for me to see it. So I'd have to be looking in two places at once for signal degradation.”

“No, no, wait. I already have the sub-light signal generator and receptor. It's me, Joe. While the mechanics of the process involve radio transmission and reception along frequency bands that nobody is used to looking for because they didn't know they exist, I'm really just listening for an echo. Or looking in a mirror, and trying to figure out what my reflection looks like, by figuring out what moves when I do.”

“I need to make some adjustments again. And figure out how to define my terms for later.”
“Okay, third time's the charm. This is Joe Stanton at All Fine Labs, seven twenty PM on a
Wednesday evening, May twenty fifth, twenty sixteen. I've got less than ten minutes to get some
proof of principle out of this damned thing before Undyne shows up and suplexes me out of the
lab.”

“I have one hand on the antenna coil, and the other will manually tune up and down the band until
I get some feedback that indicates that my own energetic signal is being bounced back to me
somehow. I'm effectively an air gap between the step up and step down transition to keep the
circuit from shorting out, so if there's anything at all going on, I'll be the first to know. Volts and
Amps are well within the safe tolerance levels for human tissue anyway. Commencing test now.”

“Going down the band.”

“I'm feeling something in my hand, but it's more of a staticky pins and needles sensation. Not a
steady state or repeating pattern. Don't think it's what I'm looking for. Might be eddy currents.”

“...I've gone as far down at this will go. Heading back up and will tackle the higher frequencies of
the band.”

“Whoa.”

“Okay, I had to turn off the Amplifier just now. There was definitely something going on, but there
wasn't a consistent frequency for it. A few times it would last almost a minute, but mostly it was
only there for a few seconds at best... so frequency isn't a constant for this. But the process itself is
valid, since I don't know what else this thing can be picking up except for me. I wonder if there
was some sort of phase cancellation effect. If the same frequency is broadcast back into the same
medium but one hundred and eighty degrees out of phase, then the signal cancels out. I mean, that
energy has to go somewhere, First Law of Robotics. I mean Thermodynamics. First Law of
Robotics is like a whole other thing. But you shouldn't hear it on a radio. That's how noise
canceling headphones work too. It's basically the reverse of amplification. And if that is what's
happening, that means that technically I've gotten this thing to work!”

“Turning the Amplifier back on. If I leave the frequency constant once I find one of those weird
sensations, then manually adjust the signal phase, maybe I can get a stronger.”

INPUT/OUTPUT ERROR. PLEASE CHECK THAT ALL AUDIO DEVICES ARE
CONNECTED AND WORKING.

Joe heard... something. It was repetitive and annoying and distracting. He really wished it would
stop. Whatever it was.

It didn't stop.

If Joe wanted it to stop, he was probably going to have to do something about it himself.
“Ow.”

Light was extremely painful, and aggravated aches and pains that Joe was only just realizing were there. His head throbbed, his hand felt like it was on fire, it hurt when he took a breath, and to add insult to injury it felt like he was having some bad heartburn.

“Joe! Joe! Are you in there? Can you hear me?! Joe, t-talk to me!”

“Who's doing that. Who's talking.”

“Joe, it's Dr. Alphys, if you can hear me, give me a sign! Come on!”

Dr. Alphys? What was she doing here?

Wait, where was here again?

Besides, didn't Alphys spend most of her time at All Fine Labs-

*Lab Accident.*

A cold hand had reach inside Joe's chest and clutched his heart, which went a long way towards waking him up from whatever state he was in before. On the upside, he knew that what had been bothering him before was an alarm.


As Joe's mind tried to pull itself up by its bootstraps, his hands reached out to try and get a grasp on the world itself. One immediately ran into broken glass, and Joe had just enough energy to curse. The other one found a large piece of wood on top of him. Which explained the difficulty in breathing. Both hands teamed up to push on the obstruction, which seemed fruitless until Joe saw a faint blue glow surround it and the weight lessen. Somebody was clearly helping him out from a distance, even if they couldn't reach him directly.

Standing up took time and effort, and didn't really seem worth all the fuss when he was finally upright, but Joe looked around, found his bearings, and stumbled in the direction of what was probably an intact part of the building. Hands patted at his body, taking stock of injuries and damage; nothing serious, provided he got medical attention for it right away.


Joe's head swam as he looked around the hallway for a fire extinguisher; emergency lockers were always close by. It was hard to pick out the genuine red paint from the red tint from the emergency lights, and shapes were blurry and indistinct at a distance; his glasses must have been lost in whatever happened to reduce the lab to such chaos.

“Oh thank god! Joe, it's Dr. Alphys! We c-can see you on the security cameras! Just sit tight, we're sending in damage control!”

Joe nodded, hoping that Alphys would see the motion. He didn't really feel up to speaking. Actually nodding hadn't agreed with him much either. Blurry shapes finally resolved into an emergency locker, and Joe pulled it open; inside was gauze, adhesive tape, hydrogen peroxide, charcoal pills, and a pile of individually wrapped monster candies. It took far too long to get his fingers to undo the wrapper, but eventually Joe got the magical food in his mouth.
Tastes like pistachio.

The monster food evaporated and energy suffused Joe's body, knitting torn tissue back together, erasing bruises, and chasing away some of the fog in his head.

“Alphys? Can you hear me?”

There was no response from the intercom system that Joe realized had to be carrying Alphys voice. Shaking hands pulled out his cell phone, paused at the cracked screen, and very carefully put in Dr. Alphys' number.

“I'm sorry I have to call you back there's an emergency at the lab!”

“I know, Alphys. I'm in-” Joe coughed. “I'm in the middle of it.”

“Joe!! Are you okay?! What happened?!”

“Feels like somebody Falcon Punched my chest, even after the monster candy. I lost my glasses, I'm not sure exactly where I am right now.”

“You're right next to the Robotics Lab! Somebody's heading your way right now!”

“Great.” Joe coughed again. “Doc do you know what happened?”

“We don't know! It was like a bomb went off in Workshop Two! No fires and no hazmat leaks but power is out all over Fabrication!”

“Wait, Workshop Two?”

“Yes, we lost everything there at once.”

“I was in Workshop Two!”

“You were?! What happened?!”

“I was-” Joe coughed again. “I was trying to get a signal on the Amplifier. Must have triggered something. A gas leak, or some sort of cascade electrical fault, or... who knows.”

“Help is almost there, Joe! Everything's going to b-b-be okay!”

There was a squeaking sound and Joe looked down to see a mouse wearing a tiny hard hat and gas mask.

“...Delgado?”

The hard hat bobbed up and down with a nod and the mouse squeaked again.

“Well. Glad one of us is prepared for this kind of stuff. Lead on.”

Delgado turned around and ran down the hallway, occasionally pausing for Joe to keep up, squeaking nervously the whole time. Joe didn't even think about his surroundings until he turned a corner and saw white light instead of monochromatic red.

“Joe!”

“Doc?”
Blurry figures ran towards Joe as he covered his face to protect against the light, and the scientist felt one set of hands on one shoulder, and some furry paws on the other.

“We gotcha man. Just put one foot in front of the other.” It sounded like Alex.

“Oh. So that's what they're for.” Joe started coughing again as he emerged from the darkened corridor into the Fabrication Lobby. “I thought they were vestigial organs.”

“What's a vestigial?” Sounded like Sophia.

“Oh, that's an ancient Greek thing. They had these cults to some of the Greek Pantheon and some of them had temples full of vestigial virgins. I think Joe hit his head on something.”

“Joe is right here and can hear everything you say,” the scientist grumbled. “And you're thinking of vestal, Alex. Vestigial is something that... you know what, I did actually hurt my head, and it hurts too much to keep explaining.”

“We got a chair here for you boss, watch your step...”

Despite the precautions taken, Joe fell heavily into the chair and hissed in pain through clenched teeth as his bruises collided suddenly with new surfaces. His arms came down to grasp the arm rests instinctively, and the blurry shapes in the lobby resolved themselves into what were probably people.

“Sorry. I'm so sorry.”

“I'll live. Probably.” Joe managed to say. One hand felt scaly claws grasp it, and for a split second part of Joe's mind marveled at how what would have been a heart stopping sensation of terror a year and a half prior was, in the present day, an anchor of stability and reassurance. Joe looked towards Alphys, whose own eyes were wide behind her glasses.

“Oh my g-god, Joe...”

“How bad is it, doc? I can take it.”

“There's... there's so much blood...”

“Plenty where that came from. I found some monster candy in an emergency locker. That helped a lot, I could feel that much.”

“Your, your face, Joe, I can't even.”

“Come on Doc. We both know you didn't hire me for my rugged good looks. I can deal with a few scars.”

“Oh g-god your, your... glasses, they-”

“Yeah, I'm gonna have to get those replaced.”

Alphys laughed a strangled, high pitched, semi-hysterical laugh.

“Y-yeah. Yeah. We'll get...” Alphys pulled in a deep, almost asthmatic breath, and clenched Joe's hand with renewed strength. “It's going to be okay, Joe. We called the paramedics and they'll be here any time. And if there's anything they can't do. We can pick up where they have to leave off. Understand? Everything is going to be okay.”
“Okay's good. I like okay.” One hand reached into his pocket. “Oh. By the way. Somebody is going to win the betting pool on how long before I let you modify my phone. Screen's cracked pretty bad.”

“Hehhehe. Yeah. Don't worry. Top of the line all the way. Dimensional storage, grappling hook, jet pack, bomb disposal software, braille interface, everything.”

“Heh.” Joe leaned back in the chair.

Then winced as he sat up straight again.

“Okay, I know that, objectively... I should be asking questions about the first four things. But I've worked here a while. So now it's the braille thing that's throwing me.”

“Oh. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to... I j-just, I thought you were making jokes and I thought that was how you were c-coping with it and-”

“Coping with what? I mean, yes. If I get hurt bad enough I try to laugh it off instead of swearing, but coping with what?”

“...Joe. There are shards of glass in your eyes.”

Joe stared at Alphys.

At the tears collecting in her own eyes.

A biting, angry retort died in his throat as confusion sapped its strength, and he held up a finger, then pointed it at Alphys' lab coat pocket.

“Yellow highlighter. Black Sharpie. Blue ink pen.”

The same hand pointed towards Alex.

“Alex is wearing the KEBT FM T-shirt he won back in March.”

Alex's eyes opened wide. “Actually it was February, but... yeah.”

Joe pointed at Sophia. “Sophia is wearing those little red clip on hoops that look like earrings. On the inside edge of her right ear. About an inch from the top of her head. All three of you know me. There is no way I remembered all of that from earlier today because I've been in Joe Stanton's Patented Science Tunnel Vision all-”

The doors at the end of the lobby opened and two humans ran through carrying medical supplies, hesitating less than a second before running towards him.

“Two paramedics just walked into Fabrication. They're both human women. Both have black hair. The taller one has a wedding ring. Her name tag says Hernandez. The other name tag says Schaffly.”

The two women stopped for a second in surprise, until training kicked in again and they ran towards Joe, who for his part seemed frozen.

“Wait. That's impossible. I can't see that far away without my glasses.”

“Sir, can you hear me? ...sir?” One paramedic knelt by Joe and started opening her trauma kit.
“Yeah.” Joe swallowed. “I can hear you. But I'm not a sir. I'm not one of the landed gentry and I don't have a knighthood or anything.”

“I need you to stay calm for me sir. Everything's going to be okay.”

“Yeah, under the circumstances I'm finding it really hard to believe you but sure. Let's go with that.” Joe gritted his teeth and drummed his fingers on the armrest in a mindless tempo; his brain was running into conflicting data and was going ninety miles an hour trying to reconcile all of it. Data points organized themselves into tables of relationships in his head, mixing and matching like some sort of adding machine on really expensive drugs.

“Alphys, nobody knew where I was during the accident right? You saw me on the cameras first, right?”

“Y-yes. That's right. And then you called on the phone and-”

“No monsters in Workshop Two? Last I remember I was alone and the first monster I met getting out of the wreckage was Delgado.”

“I d-d-don't, I think-”

Joe held up his hand and stared at it.

“Alphys, I was pinned under a broken table. Somebody used blue magic to lift it off of me.”

“What??”

“If there were no monsters in the wrecked labs, then where did the blue magic come from??”

“I d-d-don't- I- I can't-”

Joe looked at his hand.

Joe really looked at his hand.

Joe saw nerves and tendons and muscles and bone and cartilage and capillaries and-

“This can't be happening. But in the off chance that it actually is, holy shit.” Joe tentatively turned his attention away from his hand, and towards the pain in his head-

“GAAAAAH!” The scientist froze up. Suddenly he could feel every single injury. “I INSTANTLY REGRET THIS DECISION!”

“Sir you have to calm down for us to help!”

“I HAVE FORTY SEVEN BITS OF BROKEN PLASTIC IN MY EYEBALLS! I RESPECTFULLY DECLINE YOUR INVITATION TO CALM DOWN!” Joe's fist slammed on the armrest of the chair, adrenaline and irritation combining into a perfect storm. “For fuck's sake, I'll do it myself!”

Both hands came up and Joe stared at them, breathing in deeply, until they were surrounded by a blue glow. The paramedics stood their ground, although Dr. Alphys, Sophia and Alex backed away.

“I know the answer is probably no, but is that either of you doing that?”
Sophia and Dr. Alphys both shook their head. Alex nodded. “I figured. But I had to ask-”

Blood covered bits of plastic shot out of Joe's face and collected in piles in the center of each palm, then immediately fell to the floor as the dimensional magic field collapsed.

Joe screamed.

It went on for about six seconds and the part of his mind not paralyzed by pain wondered if it could break a champagne glass through resonance.

“OH MY GOD I'M A FUCKING IDIOT! I KNEW THAT WAS GOING TO HURT AND I DID IT ANYWAY! HAAAAAGH!” Hands balled up into green, glowing fists and jammed up against his face before anyone could stop him, and he leaned back in his chair. A few seconds later, his hands dropped to the sides, and the screaming stopped, to be replaced by exhausted, panting breaths.

Alex pointed at Joe. “Uhm. Just double checking. Also not you guys?”

Another pair of head shakes.

“Okay. Glad we're all on the same page. And that green glow was healing magic, right?”

“Y-yeah.” Dr. Alphys stared at Joe for a moment as he opened blood covered, but intact eyelids to reveal similarly red-tinted, but also intact eyeballs.

“My headache. Is gone. Mostly,” Joe amended. “Somebody please tell me how my eyes look now, because apparently I can't tell.”

“They're...” Sophia gulped. “They're all sorts of red. But they're, you know. There. Where they should be.”

“...oh. That's good. Hey. Somebody needs to write this down. Green magic can fix damaged eyes.” Joe leaned forward, and Alphys caught a glimpse of his eyes before he leaned over and vomited.

There was too much red in the resulting pile of organic material, which is to say, there was any red at all. When it stopped, Alphys could hear Joe's ragged gasps, trying frantically to re-oxygenate his blood after his airways had been unavailable for so long.

Actually, they were more than just gasps.

It sounded like Joe was crying.

Under the circumstances, that seemed perfectly reasonable.

A yellow claw reached out and grasped Joe's hand. “It's okay Joe. You're okay, and you're going to be okay. Understand?”

Slowly, the crying stopped, and Joe started coughing with the attempt to speak.

“Okay. That was. That was a learning experience. Let's learn from it. And. Not repeat it. Should have been wearing safety goggles. Alex, make a note of that. This is what happens when we get sloppy. And don't follow proper safety procedures. Ugh, I think some of the puke went out my nose. Everything burns.”

“Sir? Can you look over here please?”
“What- OH GOD.” Joe flinched as the paramedic flashed a penlight in both eyes. “This is payback for the yelling earlier, isn't it?”

“No, sir. This is just a normal test for pupil dilation. I'm not sure why or how but assuming your... eyes work like everyone else's after what just happened, then there's no obvious signs of concussion. But you should probably stay in the hospital overnight for observation.”

“...thinking about it... that actually sounds like a really good idea.”

There was a squeak from the floor next to Alphys.

“They don't know. That's what the observation is for. Not that I'm... complaining...” Joe sat up and turned to look at Delgado. “…okay honestly, the impact of suddenly understanding you talk kind of got dulled by what already happened. So... y’know. I'm just gonna go along with it for now.” Joe tried, and failed, to stand up, slumping back in his chair.

“Joe, do you need help?”

“Yeah. Call... call my family. Let them know what happened. Make sure they know I'm mostly okay. Uh. Leave out the weird bits. And call Elijah. Let him know.”

“Okay.” Shaking claws were already trying to navigate through the contact list on Alphys' phone. “I can do that. I'll do it right now.”

“My emergency clothes are in my office. The brown bag that says Tesla Industries. Closest thing I got to an overnight bag. If that doesn't come with me, make sure... somebody brings it.”

“Got it.”

“And Alphys.”

“Yeah?”

“If there's... anything left of what I was working on in Workshop Two. Put it in Dimensional Storage. And clearly I screwed up somewhere... so check my numbers on Project Grayscale. I'm going to pass out now so... I hope I didn't...”

Joe's head lolled to the side, and the paramedics carefully prepared to move him. Alphys kept her eyes averted, and tried to banish the images that seemed burned into her own eyes, even as she dialed.


“Something came up.”
“Gooooood Morning Ebott's Wake! Welcome to the Morning Rush on KEBT FM! I'm Brett “The Brett” Brinkmann, here to fulfill all your radio needs, with an only slightly less exhausted than normal DJ Pantz!”

“Fifty percent less sleep plus fifty percent more coffee is a hundred percent of... something.”

“Somebody should probably check that math. Not us, though, because we're too busy bringing the news to you, the wonderful people of the wonderful town of Ebott's Wake! Ebott's Wake, Where Mediocrity Is The New Black.”

“...what??”

“Look, it was on the paperwork for today.”

“No, I mean, what the heck does that even mean?”

“No idea. I hope the tourism board knows, because if your response is any benchmark to go by, they're going to be getting a lot of questions. Again. As a reminder, please direct all tourism slogan related inquiries to the Ebott's Wake Tourism Board, please do not send them to us here at KEBT. We're just the messenger, and you know what they say about shooting the messenger.”

“Yeah, you can shoot a messenger but you can't lead him to water. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Uh. Nothing. And now for the story on everybody's minds and mouths! Just before seven thirty last night, there was an accident at All Fine Labs, and if you lived within a block or two of the lab you probably found out right away. According to a statement released earlier this morning, a prototype in the Fabrication Division failed catastrophically during a diagnostic test, which caused considerable internal damage and injured at least one person who has been admitted to Rita Belle Thurman for observation. They are not releasing the patient's name at this time, but their condition is listed as stable. The exact nature of the prototype or its purpose was not mentioned in the statement, but when asked earlier this morning, Dr. Alphys said that it was an experimental communication device.”

“Wow. I know what they say about words hurting but this takes it a bit too far. In all seriousness, though, if it was supposed to be like a high power radio, I'm betting a coil or capacitor shorted out. Get a big enough spark and that can set off something else. That's just one monster's speculation of course, until All Fine Labs releases more details.”

“The lack of details in this case is definitely becoming an issue of contention for some reason. There's already people both locally and across the internet accusing All Fine Labs of hiding something. The rumors range from this prototype actually being a weapon and the lab being a front for arms dealing, to an escape attempt by test subjects being held against their will, and even accusations that All Fine Labs has discovered the secret to human magic and is covering it up.”

“Yeah, well, that last one was going to come up no matter what happened. The lab opened, and people accused them of hiding secrets about magic. Dr. Alphys published that paper on monsterkind's understanding of Souls, and people accused her of leaving out information on human magic. They started mass producing magic infused materials for monster construction, they started accepting people's trash and recyclables, they came up with that magic coffee machine; by the way
doc, thanks, that's been a lifesaver; they were working on that satellite, and earlier this month there
was that Soul Scanner thing and the Soul Accessories. Every single time, somebody accuses them
of knowing more than what they let on or being up to something devious. If a light bulb burns out
in the All Fine Labs main lobby, somebody somewhere is going to be convinced it's part of a
conspiracy to keep everyone in the dark.”

“...wow. That kinda came out of nowhere.”

“Oh, it was going to happen sooner or later. I've heard this argument so many times that the words
have started to lose meaning.”

“Well... we still have that dictionary around. If all else fails. Moving on to our next story of the
morning, yesterday's medical open house at the Memorial Auditorium exceeded everyone's
expectations. Attendance was high, audience participation was a frequent occurrence, and a good
time was had by all it seems. Dr. Jamie Ross of Rita Belle Thurman Memorial Hospital went on
record as saying 'having people prepared for the worst is the best way to make sure the worst
never happens. We are over the moon with the response and we hope this will be the start of a
regular event here in Ebott's Wake.' I myself stopped by after Lazy Lindsey and the Coffee
Grinders took over and got CPR certified.”

“That's the thing where you restart a human's heart, right? I used to think green bullets were
enough for emergencies, but now I'm starting to wonder.”

“Well, with any luck, they'll make this an annual thing. Moving on, the police have announced that
they are officially closing the case on the gnome-napping of Rubilon, the mascot of The Knights
Of The Road Who Say Ni. The fraternal organization, when questioned on the matter, declined to
comment.”

“Wait, that's it? We don't even find out who did it? Did somebody do one of those plea bargain
things?”

“No idea. It's one of those mysteries that will probably haunt this town forever. Uh... sorry,
listeners, I just got word from Jeff that the weather forecast will be delayed until we can figure out
who will be taking over for Hailey Skye, who has had to take a sudden and unplanned leave of
absence. We do have a few more news items for you before that time is upon is. Our last local item
is that if you are planning to take a look at our beautiful specimens at the Arboretum today, you
should probably try to schedule your visit before Hal Greene wakes up and continues his one-man-
band show outside. When asked for comment yesterday, the Arboretum staff unanimously
responded with 'no comment' or a variation thereof. When Mr. Greene was approached for
comment, he had only this to say, and I quote: 'You mess with the goat, you get the horns!'
Unquote.”

“So... was he talking about one of the Dreemurrs, since humans keep comparing the royal family to
goats, or was he talking about an actual surface goat, or what?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Speaking of guesses, the last news item we have for you this
morning is an update on the progress of the Cornucopia Valley Nature Preserve's Scavenger Hunt.
After last year's record breaking thirty seven missing person's reports, this year the Scavenger hunt
will be limited to the square mile of wilderness actually located around the the Preserve's
administration building... actually, let me read that again. The Cornucopia Valley Nature Preserve
would like to remind people that the Scavenger Hunt has always been held in the square mile of
wilderness surrounding their administration building and has been for every year after the very first
one when this problem first started. You don't have to explore the entire valley, and you probably
shouldn't try unless you're an experienced wilderness hiker in the first place.”
“Also if you do run into wolves, Ice Wolf can't help you. The similarity is just another weird coincidence, like with every other monster that resembles an animal found on the Surface. There's no shared language, no shared culture, no sense of family or community, so telling them that you 'know Ice Wolf' isn't going to do anything. Just play it safe and follow standard procedure when dealing with wild wolves. Whatever those are. I should probably look those up.”

“In the meantime, it's time to toss it over to Gary Welkin for the traffic report! Gary, what do you spy with your little eye?”

“Greetings Brett and Burgie! This morning finds me high above the streets of our fair city, as it often does, and beholding obstructions to traffic in the form of a collision just outside Bastion Circle! There are no other obstacles to traffic as far as I can tell, but that is no reason to be incautious! Danger lurks in every corner! Not merely in terms of traffic, but in terms of life and death! You can trip in the shower and snap your neck! You can choke to death on a breath mint! You can walk outside your door and suddenly be accosted by the terrible visage that is Hal Greene, carrying an abomination unto god and man and monster and music theory! Repent! Repent! The end is nigh! And it starts with a High C and it goes all the way down!”

“...Brett, where does Gary live again?”

“Well, station policy forbids us from mentioning it on-the-air after the last time a stalker broke into his house. But it is conceivable on the drive to work that he saw Hal Greene getting ready for his little concert.”

“Oh, that would wake you up. Anything else you can tell us Gary?”

“Only that the wreckage on the roof of one of the All Fine Labs buildings looks like a smiley face sticking its tongue out! Back to you two!”

“Well. There you have it folks. Bastion Circle's in a bit of a fix, everywhere else looks status quo. Brett, do we have any weather for our listeners yet?”

“Uh. Yes. We do. Apparently I'm doing that today. So... according to these papers... well, to the extent that I understand meteorology at all, we're looking at some possible rain storms either late this afternoon or early tomorrow morning. Might be a little thunder and lightning to go with it. This weekend is supposed to be clear, and so is the week that follows with the exception of Tuesday and Wednesday, where the chance of inclement weather runs the risk of raining on the little league baseball program's parade. Also Triton reported an inexplicable rain of shrimp last night.”

“...what?”

“That's just what it says here. I dunno if that's an actual thing that happened, some sort of coded reminder Hailey uses to remember stuff, or if she just put that there to mess with us.”

“Hmm... could be all three.”

“Yeah, maybe. Somebody's going to have to call the Triton Sanitation department and double check... sorry what? ...oh! Hey, everybody! Guess what? Jeff says there's a caller on the line and you'll never guess who it is!”

“Is it Alphys calling in to let us know what happened last night?”

“Nope, even better!”

“Is it... Hal calling in to explain himself for once in his life?”
“Even better!”

“If you say Mettaton, I swear this coffee mug is going up your nose.”

“...it's not Mettaton. Jeff, hook us up please.”

“Brett! Burgie! Oh my god they finally let me through! I have to warn you! I have to warn everybody!”

“Quentin?! You're alive! You had us all really worried man... I... I can't believe I am actually saying that phrase on the air.”

“Guys, listen! I don't know how much time I have! When I was running from the CIA I tried to take refuge in an abandoned house to stay off the grid, but that wasn't abandoned at all! There were ritual trappings and occult symbols and these... uh... english composition notebooks filled with weird diagrams. I kind of thought this kind of stuff would be in an old tome bound in leather or something.”

“It's the economy, man. Everybody's cutting back.”

“Yeah, that's true. B-but! But! I managed to grab one, and somebody caught me, and I just barely got away and managed to call the police! I've been trying to lay low these last few days but I heard Officer Steve say that the police got the last Guardian Safehouse and I don't know if that was the place I found or not but this is too important to wait any longer-”

“Whoa whoa whoa. Slow down Quentin. Are you telling us, and by us I mean myself, Burgie, and the good people of Ebot's Wake and Lost Eagle County... that you found the Guardian safe house first?”

“There's no time to dwell on that Brett! I've been looking through this thing every spare moment and I think I know what the Guardians were trying to do! They had these color coded systems like monsters use for magic and tying into the stuff at All Fine Labs' Soul Research, but the notebook says there's relationships between them and I think that was what they were trying to do! I think everything that was going on at the Bastion Circle compound was just a cover for an elaborate breeding program aimed at bringing back human magic!”

“...ew.”

“You said it, Burgie.”

“I don't know what all of this says, I think whoever wrote it was using some sort of cipher or code for the most important parts. Or maybe it's just the handwriting. But, the color coding is obvious, the family tree style diagram is obvious, there's not much else it could be!”

“Except maybe, you know, an existing family tree.”

“No, no, that's the thing! Some of the stuff at the end of this part isn't encoded! There's two passages and both got underlined, I think they might be quotes from something else. The first says 'Souls beget other Souls, in accordance with their natures and the stars above. The right Souls, at the right time.' If that's not a plan to try to conceive some sort of child with a specific color soul by copulating during an eclipse or something, I don't know what is!”

“...Quentin, can you not say the word 'copulating' on this show please? Or ever again for the rest of your life. I probably would feel cleaner if you just used some dirty high school euphemism for it instead.”
“Yeah, I'm with Brett on this. If that second passage has the word copulating in it, we don't need to hear it.”

“No, this is something else. I'm still trying to figure it out. It says, *If the seal should fail, the world will fall into ruin. There will be no refuge, no resistance. Only the last, desperate hopes of the damned. The demon that comes when people call its name.* That's it. I think it's related to the rest of it, since it's right there, but it's not as clear how.”

“Implying *anything* was clear about that. And assuming that the Guardians weren't just making things up as they went along. And that takes us up to the break, sorry Quentin. And sorry to all you Forsythe Fanatics who missed his escapades, but we only have so many hours in the broadcast day. Enjoy these words from our sponsors and when we come back we'll have next week's event calendar all spruced up and ready for you. Stick around for more Morning Rush!”
This looks familiar.

The silver courtyard echoed the courtyard from the Ruins, lacking only a tree despite its pile of leaves. Frisk walked past them, mindful of making noise in this peaceful place, and opened the doors. Like most doors in the underground, they were unlocked. Even here, in the capital city. Even the residence of the king.

That said a lot.

This looks way too familiar.

The foyer had the same branching set of doorways, and the same descending stairwell, with the only real difference besides the color being the set of chains blocking the path down. Frisk walked up to them and noticed the sign hanging between them. Howdy! I'm in the garden. If you have anything you need to get off your chest, please don't hesitate to come. The keys are in the kitchen and the hallway.

Frisk turned towards the hallway and carefully stepped towards it, trying to make as little noise as possible.

Why is the only thing with any color here these flowers?

The flowers stopped Frisk in their tracks, as even more memories of the Ruins came back to them. Even though the flowers in the decorative vases and urns probably wouldn't attack, Frisk was reluctant to get too close... or pass in front of them. There was a doorway nearby, and the child ducked into it, pushing open the door as they did.

A bedroom, clearly, what with the two child sized beds, the box of toys, and the various decorations.

Frisk walked over to the dresser and picked up a picture frame. Unlike the one in the Ruins, this still had a picture in it... four figures, two very large, and two very small.

But only three of them were monsters.

Frisk looked at the two beds, at the drawing of the Golden Flower on the wall. The wardrobe was opened, revealing many striped shirts. Finally, the child's eyes lingered on the toy box. The toys inside were covered in dust.

A lot more dust than anything else in the room, including the decorated gift boxes. For some reason, Frisk's eyes kept sliding away from them.

There was a tightness in their chest, and Frisk walked out, the fear of the flowers completely forgotten. Walking right past them, Frisk stopped at the next door, blocked off with a sign that said 'Room Under Renovation.'

Turning away from the door, Frisk almost walked right into a pair of Froggits, and stepped back immediately, prepared to dodge whatever magic bullets got thrown at them-

“Ribbit, ribbit... a long time ago, a human fell into the Ruins.”
“Ribbit. Injured by its fall, the human called out for help.”

The two frog monsters stepped aside, and Frisk walked up to the table beyond them to pick up a key. Their eyes... to the extent that Frisk understood anything about their biology, at least... followed them, but they didn't move towards them.

Still, Frisk felt more than a little startled, and darted into the door nearby.

Another bedroom, the layout dominated by a massive bed. Frisk eyeballed the dimensions of the furniture, then compared them mentally with the scale of the largest monster in the family photograph in the children's bedroom... and out of reflex, started fitting other pieces together.

'They adopted the fallen human, didn't they? And then... something happened, right? There's always something that breaks or goes wrong, right?'

Frisk shook their head and looked around the bedroom. A journal lay open to the present date and just said 'Nice day today!' in ink tacky enough to be very recent. Assuming that the journal entry was the last thing Asgore did before heading to the garden, Frisk had missed him by minutes at most.

There was a trophy in the corner with a plaque that said 'Number 1 Nose Nuzzle Champs '98!' Frisk shook their head and moved onto the rest of the room, mentally filing it away under parts of monster culture they would never understand. Like Asgore locking the way forward but leaving the keys in easy reach for those who wanted to see him. Then again, maybe that was some sort of monster custom or tradition, offering guests puzzles in the same way humans would offer drinks or snacks. It hadn't come up inside Toriel's home, the skeleton brothers house, Undyne's place, or Alphys' Lab, but five people out of who knew how many monsters wasn't a reliable sample size.

Also, they were human. Maybe that meant the traditional social norms flew out the window.

Like not killing somebody.

'It's a clothes drawer. There are robes, button down shirts... and a pink, hand knit sweater that says “Mr. Dad Guy”.'

The wardrobe was equally revealing, with a Santa Claus outfit hanging inside. And there was a macaroni art representation of a flower above the bed, with 'For King Dad!' scrawled beneath it.

Frisk swallowed and made their way back to the door. The picture of what had happened here was becoming clearer and clearer. And they didn't like what they thought they were starting to see.

Out in the hallway, Frisk's eyes were drawn towards movement, then relaxed. A mirror had been placed at the end, a simple architectural trick to make smaller spaces look larger. The child walked up to the silvered glass and stared at their reflection.

'Despite everything, it's still you.'

Traveling back down the hallway, Frisk's eyes were drawn back towards the children's room. Asgore still held onto those objects that had clearly been created by children. Drawings, pasta based art, even the sweater-

“Asriel, the king's son, heard the human's call.”

Frisk's head whipped around as they backed away, and the Whimsun that had spoken cowered apologetically for a second. The other was made of slightly sterner stuff, simply wringing its...
hands, for lack of a better term, as it spoke.

“He brought the human back to the castle.”

The Whimsuns quickly flew away, and Frisk gulped. Lack of situational awareness had gotten them killed more times than they could count. But it was too easy to be distracted in this place for some reason.

Actually, Frisk could think of at least one clear and obvious reason.

On the other side of the foyer was a living and dining room, complete with the furniture in the same locations, the fireplace, and the doorway to what was very likely a kitchen of some sort. Frisk immediately, almost subconsciously, gravitated towards the bookcase; it was filled with photo albums, scrapbooks, and a surprisingly large number of books on the art of making tea. The child's head turned towards the chair next to the fireplace, almost expecting to see Toriel sitting with book in hand. But the chair was empty, as was the fireplace... though the coals radiated a certain amount of heat even without an obvious flame.

“Over time, Asriel and the human became like siblings.”

Frisk froze and turned around. A trio of slime monsters bubbled, and the popping of those bubbles somehow created the voice Frisk heard, even if it did sound like the speaker had a severe case of laryngitis.

“The King and Queen treated the human child as their own.”

“The underground was full of hope.”

The slimes slowly slid away, and Frisk swallowed, turning towards the kitchen door. The other key was supposed to be in there.

Something went wrong.

Inside the kitchen, Frisk gravitated towards the refrigerator; inside, there was a large collection of containers, all filled with snails. Frisk blinked, and in the split second of darkness, they could remember Toriel trying to distract them from leaving with snail facts. And like Toriel's sink in her kitchen, the drain was clogged with white fur.

Next to the key, a note said 'Howdy! Help yourself to anything you want.' Yet even if the fridge had been full of anything else besides gastropods, Frisk didn't think they would have much of an appetite. Out of curiosity more than anything else, the child poked through the trash can and found what looked like recipes that had been discarded; the words “cinnamon” and “butterscotch” jumped out at them again and jogged even more memories.

With the second key on their cell phone's key chain, Frisk walked back out into the living room, and looked around for any more monsters. The room... seemed empty, but scanning it had brought even more details to the child's attention. What had been fireplace tending tools in Toriel's home, here was a rack of gardening tools. And more importantly, the table had four chairs around it, two large and two small. There was a tightness in Frisk's chest that made it harder to breath, and the child almost ran out into the foyer again.

The chain was actually two chains, overlapping each other where the sign hung and fastened at their respective endpoints by the padlocks. Each key fit into the respective locks easily, and opened with barely a click and no resistance. The locks probably wouldn't have lasted long if anyone attempted to force them; they were clearly a formality. Then again, there was more than enough
room for Frisk to have ducked under the chain itself, so that was hardly original. But somehow, even with nobody around to witness it, taking a shortcut like that felt... rude.

Not that poking through people's houses when they weren't around was considered appropriate etiquette, but in their defense... it had kept them alive. Sometimes.

A small shelf at the top of the stairs had an old calendar on it, and Frisk narrowed their eyes at the text. The printing seemed to indicate the year “201X” which raised a few questions, but the child put the calendar back and moved on to the stairs. The longer they spent here, the more uneasy they got. In fact, they were in such a rush to moved down the stairs they almost tripped on the last step and fell onto a pair of insect-like monsters that seemed to be coming upstairs.

“Then... One day...”

“The human became very ill.”

The monsters moved towards the sides of the corridor and let Frisk pass, and the child swallowed. All these different monsters, all telling them different parts of a single story at different times and places. How did that even work?”

More importantly, *why were they doing it?*

Frisk looked down the corridor and saw even more monsters, some of them familiar and others less so, and slowly started to walk forward, their footsteps echoing back at them.

“The sick human had only one request.”

“To see the flowers from their village.”

“But there was nothing we could do.”

The child remembered the flower drawing. The macaroni art. The decorative flowers in every room.

Their stomach felt like it was filled with ice.

They had a pretty good idea of what happened next.

Two large eye monsters blocked the way, and they looked like Frisk felt.

“The next day...”

“The next day...”

The first monster looked down, large tears collecting at the corner of its massive eye, and the second one did not appear to be doing much better.

“The human died.”

The monsters stepped aside, and Frisk moved on. They were having difficulty identifying the different monsters... their vision had gone blurry.

It took a few moments to understand why.

“Asriel, wracked with grief, absorbed the human's Soul.”
“He transformed into a being with incredible power.”

“With the human Soul, Asriel crossed the barrier.”

“He carried the human's body into the sunset.”

“Back to the village of the humans.”

“Asriel reached the center of the village.”

“There, he found a bed of golden flowers.”

“He carried the human onto it.”

Frisk blinked a few times, trying to clear their vision, and suddenly remembering all the schoolyard stories traded in hushed whispers about the creature that killed a kid in Heritage Park. That the grownups pretended never happened and didn't ever talk about, and got angry when kids talked about it.

“Suddenly, screams rang out.”

“The villagers saw Asriel holding the human's body.”

“They thought that he had killed the child.”

“The humans attacked him with everything they had.”

“They struck him with blow after blow.”

“Asriel had the power to destroy them all.”

“But...”

“Asriel did not fight back.”

Frisk stared at the monsters in front of them.

At the massive city behind them, where the corridor became a balcony.

They wanted to ask why.

The impulse was overwhelming.

But they held their tongue.

“Clutching the human...”

“Asriel smiled, and walked away.”

“Wounded, Asriel stumbled home.”

“He entered the castle and collapsed.”

“His dust spread across the garden.”

Frisk thought about the box of toys, covered in much more dust than anything else in the room.
A ball, stuff animals, toy vehicles.

For all his power, Asriel had still been a child. Maybe younger than Frisk.

“The kingdom fell into despair.”

“The king and queen had lost two children in one night.”

“The humans had once again taken everything from us.”

Of course. That was why they were being told the story.

It was like a list of charges being read before the execution.

“The king decided it was time to end our suffering.”

“Every human that falls down here must die.”

“With enough souls, we can shatter the barrier forever.”

“It's not long now.”

'Of course it isn't. You just need one more.'

“King Asgore will give us hope.”

“King Asgore will let us go.”

“King Asgore will save us all.”

Frisk walked on, staring at the ground in front of them.

It felt so unfair, and it was all they could do not to scream that at the monsters. They didn't do anything! They didn't hurt Asriel. They didn't hurt any monsters.

...except, that wasn't true. But they didn't hurt Asriel. They didn't hurt any monsters.

...did they?

“You should be smiling, too.”

Frisk snapped out of their own world and looked up in surprise at a monster that resembled a burning coil of rope, flanked by two tiny volcanoes. What did that mean, they should be smiling?

“Aren't you excited?”

“Aren't you happy?”

I don't know what I am.

“You're going to be free.”

The last Froggit hopped past Frisk as they stood on the balcony.

They had said, “You're going to be free.”

Not “You will make us free.”
Not “You will bring us freedom.”

Not even “You will pay for what you have done.”

’Do they not know that I’m human?’

Frisk blinked and brought a hand up to their face. Tears had traced paths down one side of their face, and the other side was catching up. The sleeve of their shirt came up and Frisk tried to scrub away the evidence before anyone saw it... but there were no more monsters. Just one last doorway.

The hallway echoed with the sound of sneakers on tile. The human child walked forward, blank faced, barely seeing or hearing anything.

Until one of the shadows moved.

Frisk stopped walking, and slowly came back to the world. Some small part recognized the symbols in the stained glass windows, and wondered if the orange light was really the sunlight filtering down into the cavern, or some sort of magical light source, but most of their attention was directed at the silhouette that had shifted in front of them.

Sans. I’d recognize that silhouette anywhere.

Somewhere, a bell was ringing.

Was it from something like a clock tower?

What time was it?

How long had they been underground?

How far had they walked?

“So you finally made it.”

Frisk blinked. The shape of the figure was familiar, but that voice...

“The end of your journey is at hand. In a few moments, you will meet the king. Together... you will determine the future of this world.”

The figure shifted.

“That's then. Now... you will be Judged.”


“You will be judged for your every action.”

Frisk's hands started to shake.

'I just want to go home. Is that really that bad? I know everyone down here is hurting but does wanting to go back really make me a bad person? Do I really have to fight Sans?'

“You will be judged for every EXP you've earned.”

'Wait, what?’

“What’s that?”
The words were out of Frisk's mouth before they could stop themselves, and echoed in the hallway. The figure paused.

“...what's EXP?”

“...yeah.”

“It's an acronym. It stands for Execution Points. A way of quantifying the pain you have inflicted on others.”

The words hung in the air for a moment, and images flashed across Frisk's mind again. A tall, motherly figure, trying and failing to smile. A warrior, collapsed on the ground, overcome by the heat. A damaged machine with limbs scattered nearby, and a blur in a lab coat sprinting towards it in concern.

A plate, broken into dozens of pieces on the floor.

'You're always sorry. But this shit keeps happening.'

“When you kill someone, your EXP increases. When you have enough EXP, your LOVE increases. LOVE, too, is an acronym. It stands for Level Of ViolencE. A way of measuring someone's capacity to hurt. The more you kill, the easier it becomes to distance yourself. The more you distance yourself, the less you will hurt. The more easily you can bring yourself to hurt others.”

Frisk opened their mouth.

No words came out.

It didn't really matter.

There was never intent to harm behind anything they had done. People still got hurt. Things were still broken.

Frisk closed their mouth, tried to swallow around the lump in their throat, and breathed in slowly. Just because Sans and Papyrus were brothers, or even that they were both skeletons, didn't mean that they would fight the same way. And with the stakes so high, there was no chance that Sans would warm up first with simple attacks.

The skeleton stepped forward, out of the shadow of one of the pillars.

“but you never gained any LOVE. 'course, that doesn't mean that you're completely innocent or naive. just that you kept a certain tenderness in your heart. no matter the struggles or hardships you faced... you strived to do the right thing. you refused to hurt anyone. even when you ran away, you did it with a smile. you never gained LOVE... but you gained love. does that make sense?”

Sans held up his hands and shrugged.

“eh. maybe not.”

The skeleton winked, and Frisk let their breath out, and only then realized that they had been holding it.

“now... you're about to face the greatest challenge of your entire journey. your actions here... will determine the fate of the entire world. if you refuse to fight... Asgore will take your soul, and destroy humanity. but if you kill Asgore and go home... monsters will remain trapped underground.
what will you do?"

Frisk stared at Sans for several long seconds, before opening their mouth again.

“...I don't know. I wanted to go home. I still do. But if it means I have to...” Frisk swallowed “I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do.”

“...well, if i were you, i would have thrown the towel in by now. but you didn't get this far by giving up, did you? that's right. you have something called 'determination'. So as long as you hold on... as long as you do what is in your heart... I believe you can do the right thing. alright. we're all counting on you kid. good luck.”

Sans stepped back into the shadow of the pillar, and then there was just the barest hint of motion, or lack of motion, to indicate that he was no longer there. Frisk sucked in air and let it out again slowly, daring to look away from the shadows for a moment. Their hands were shaking. And there was something else. Some strange sensation they didn't recognize, in their chest and throat.

'What is this?'

'Why is this so familiar?'

What's this feeling?

The light was still bright, even if the color had changed, and it took Frisk several moments to realize they were not in the last corridor. Mattress below. Sheets above.

Frisk blinked, and the shapes of the bedroom resolved themselves finally. Furniture, decorations, books... and a white fuzzy head poking out of the covers of the other bed. The human child climbed out of bed, trying to make as little noise as possible, but Asriel stirred anyway, opening his eyes the narrowest of cracks.

“Mmmph. Oh. Still here. And it's morning.”

“Hey Asriel. How did you sleep?”

“Had weird, not-so-good dreams. Nothing I want to share though. You?”

“Same.”

Asriel nodded. “Not surprised.”

Frisk pulled clothes out of their dresser as Asriel climbed out of bed. Across the hall, in the privacy of the bathroom, they changed clothes... and stared at their reflection in the mirror.

“...focus on the good parts. For one day. I can do that.”

Crossing back over to the bedroom, Frisk knocked on the door and Asriel called out “Come in!” The child immediately sat down behind their desk, double checked that their books and assignments were all packed in their backpack, and picked up a pencil.

“What are you working on? More magic science stuff?” Asriel asked as he looked through the old astronomy book on his chest of drawers.

“Not this time. Today... if this is my last day. Like you said. I might as well make it a good one.”
Asriel smiled.

“...you said *if*. I guess there's room for hope after all.”
The crowds in front of All Fine Labs parted easily before the police car. It perhaps helped that they weren't indignant and angry crowds, for the most part, but curious onlookers and bystanders. The occasional group of angry, surly looking people didn't even have protest signs. Then again, they probably didn't know what, if anything, they could protest against. Some of them were predisposed to protest on principle, but it was hard to make a statement with placards that said “INSERT CONTENTIOUS ISSUE HERE”.

“Ugh. Frikkin rubberneckers.”

“If there's protesters outside the lab, then it must be a day of the week that ends in the letter 'y'. You got used it.”

Officer Steve turned to the man in the passenger seat, taking in the disheveled hair, unkempt clothing, and most importantly the discount sunglasses over his eyes.

“You know, maybe there's some things people shouldn't have to get used to. I'm all for the peaceful assembly of concerned citizens for a redress of grievances, but you have to draw the line somewhere. That's what keeps a democracy from collapsing into mob rule.”

“Yeah, yeah. Besides, looks like most of them are just hanging around after the clusterfuck last night.”

“Yeah, about that.” Officer Steve pulled up in front of the doors and let the engine idle. “What exactly happened last night? All anyone will tell me, including Doctor Alphys, your dad, and you, is that they wanted you overnight for observation.”

Joe reached up and scratched one ear, pausing before speaking. “My experiment literally blew up in my face. But... on the upside... I think based on what I did learn, we have everything we need to completely disprove String Theory.”

“...is that good? I'm not a scientist, so-”

“It's not bad. Hey. Tell Eli to get the back room ready for tonight because I have got some crazy-assed stories to tell.”

“Do I even get a hint?”

Joe shook his head, and reached up to his ear again, tapping it. This time, Officer Steve understood the message: We don't know who else is listening.

“Got to verify my results first. And that's what today is all about.”

“Well... good luck, I guess.”

“Thanks. And thanks for the ride from Rita Belle Thurman.”

“Hey, what are friends for?”

The scientist climbed out of the police cruiser and made his way inside the lab, either not noticing
or deliberately acting like he had not noticed the crowds of people staring at him as he walked through the doors. Officer Steve sighed and pulled away from the curb, back onto the street.

“Joe?! What are you doing here? I thought you were at the hospital!”

Joe turned away from the doors and saw the receptionist... not to mention everyone else in the lobby... staring at him.

“Well, I was. I got better. Don't suppose you could let Dr. Alphys know I'm here? I've got a whole bunch of ideas in my head she needs to hear.”

“Alphys isn't even in yet today.”

“...oh. Well. Guess that's not going to happen yet. So...” Joe shrugged. “If anyone needs me, I'll be in the break room.”

The scientist walked through the various rooms and hallways of the main lab building until he was in the break room and immediately walked over to the coffee machine. The entire pot was pulled off of the burner and Joe started to drink directly from it, slowly tipping it back more and more... until the entire container was drained. The man breathed in slowly, and then let it out all at once in a noise of exasperation.

“Finally. Now I can actually think straight.”

Joe put the coffee pot in the sink and sat down at one of the tables, pulling out a scrap of paper from his pocket and staring at it.

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**To Do 5-26-16**

- verify eyes work as normal
- check visual acuity now versus before
- get Soul Scanned to check for changes
- talk to Alphys about damage and repairs
- set up tests for analysis
- recursive pattern magic analysis? might be dangerous
- buy potatoes, laundry soap, AA batteries
- talk to Mike about possible theoretical frameworks for this including historical precedent
- start framework for Unified Field Theory
- call Dr. Aster don't want to make the political bullshit more complicated
- call Fawn about insurance coverage and get that straightened out
- call Hailey and actually talk to her about how I feel before the next lab accident fucking kills my stupid ass
A pencil came out of Joe's pocket, and he began to add to the bottom of the list. A few entries later, there was a knock on the doorway, and the scientist turned around in his seat.

“...hey Doc.”

Alphys smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. The lizard shuffled into the break room and took something out of her pocket, which she placed on the table in front of Joe.

A new phone.

“All your personal files and data migrated successfully. You should have everything, plus new apps to control the hardware. Jetpack, grappling hook, dimensional storage, and magic energy emitter, just like I promised. Not that I expect you'll ever need that last one, now.”

“...there's a lot we don't know yet. So maybe I will. We'll have to test for that today, but first things first. How are you holding up?”

Alphys slid into a chair opposite Joe on the table and clasped her claws together.

“I think I got maybe five hours of sleep last night. It didn't take me long to fix up your phone, but... I don't handle secrets very well. I think I told you about how I handled the Amalgamates.”

“Yes. Tried one thing, didn't work but seemed like a successful failure... then it got really bad and you got paralyzed by indecision.”

“That's one way to put it. I've asked everyone at the lab who knows to keep this close and not to spread it around. But it's a small town so rumors are already flying.”

Joe scratched his chin. “You know... when you first published that paper on Souls. Everyone and their brother and their brother's dog accused you of hiding stuff. And the same thing happened with Soul Research, Soul Accessories... the people that want to find something secret have muddied the waters so much, this might not even get on a lot of people's radar.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Alphys covered her eyes with one claw and sighed for a moment, before letting it down again. “How are you doing? I mean...”

“Eyes work just like they did before. Right down to not being as accurate over long distances. Which is a problem because I can't get a replacement pair of glasses for about a week or two. I can focus and see far distances better, but whenever I do that,” Joe lifted up the sunglasses on his face, and Alphys saw the irises of his eyes glow a brilliant magenta, “this happens.”

“...oh. I thought you were wearing those because there was some long term damage or something.”

“Not that anyone has noticed. Having said that... I think I got post traumatic stress disorder from either the accident or what happened after because if I keep my eyes exposed to the world without something covering them for too long, I start to feel sick to my stomach.”

“That makes sense.”

“Yeah.” Joe let the sunglasses drop down onto his nose again. “Hey. Gotta question for you.”

“Go ahead.”

“Last night. You were saying whatever human medicine couldn't do, you'd try to pick up where
“Yeah. I didn't know if green magic would grow back your eyes or repair them or anything like that, but I figured it was worth a try. And if it didn't... I had designs for an optical prosthesis. I started working on it after I met Undyne but... anyway, I thought I'd dig up the blueprints and see if I could adapt the design to work with the human body. Or perhaps just the human Soul. I mean. If you were willing to give it a try.”

Joe nodded.

“I'm not complaining about how things turned out last night, but I gotta admit. Becoming a cyborg would be a pretty sweet consolation prize.”

“Hehehehe. I'm glad. I mean. I'm glad. We didn't have to. B-but I also. Am glad. That you would be up for it.” Alphys looked down at her claws. “The design for the eye. I shelved it after I realized that to connect it p-properly I would need to... to... integrate it with Undyne's body. And. Back then. I just. I couldn't see an outcome where she... Undyne would either end up d-d-dead, or worse. Like everyone else.”

Alphys shook her head, perhaps to drive off the images in her mind.

“Anyway. Uhm. Didn't have to break out those plans after all. So that's good.”

“Yeah. Hey, how bad are things in Fabrication?”

“Not too bad. With everything else shut down to make up for Sans not being here, there was nobody else working there when you were. We've shifted over Line Four in Advanced Materials for construction supplies, and as long as nothing else explodes, the main structure should be good as new in a week. Actually hooking up everything will take over a month but we'll have a weather resistant roof before sundown today.”

“...how's that affecting our business output?”

“Slows it down, naturally. We'll make our orders. Might need to pull the Asters onto that dimensional modem thing to get all the d-development work done as fast as possible, so we can hit that market running.” Alphys shrugged. “It's always something.”

“Right... hey. Are things, you know, okay between us?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... last time humans had magic, that caused... problems. I just wanted to know if we were still, uh. Good. Or if I need to worry about spears coming out of nowhere and ruining my day, not to mention the rest of my week.”

“Oh. No. We're good. Magic is a function of will and intent. I know you well enough to know that you're already working on using this to make a grand unified theory or something like that.”

Joe snorted. “Heh. That's true enough. I actually have some ideas on that front I want to put down for posterity today. But first I was hoping to get under the Soul Scanner, see if anything changed when... whatever it was happened.”

“Right! We need before and after comparisons. We have more scans of you than any other human here, so we can do a cumulative overlay, and see any major changes immediately.”
“Ah, that perked you up.” Joe grinned, but the grin became lopsided. “Uh. I’m still a bit worried about the spear thing. So. Yeah. If you know anything about that, would kinda be nice to have a heads up.”

“Hah! Don’t worry. Undyne knows, and she also knows that you know what she’d do to you if she thought you were trying anything nefarious. She also knows from my mentioning stuff how much you hate politics, and that if this gets out and there starts to be a big push to try and actually trap monsters again, you would go against it purely out of spite.”

“Hehehehe. Yep. That sounds like exactly the type of thing I would do.”

“Uh... okay. Yeah. We’re ready on this end, Joe.”

The scientist clasped his hands together, then held them away from him, palms out. There were some soft cracking noises from his knuckles and he let go, opening and closing each hand.

“Alright. Here goes something.”

Joe held his hands up, reaching towards the boxes of files arranged at the other end of the room. Slowly, blue light started to glow around his hands, and then boxes themselves, which slowly began to float upwards. Alphys looked back and forth between the monitors showing Joe and the monitors showing the boxes so much that her head seemed to be mounted on a swivel.

“Joe, how are you doing?”

“Okay so far.” The scientist's voice was strained, and sweat was beading on his face. “I mean. It's not super easy. But it's possible. Okay I just felt something give-”

The blue field collapsed, the boxes fell onto the floor with a loud series of thuds, and Joe leaned over, hands on his knees.

“-give out. That was what I was gonna say. Wow. It's like finding a muscle I didn't know I had, and then pulling it because I never used it before.”

“We can stop here. We already have more than enough data for a year's worth of papers and research and development.”

“Nah. Just gimme a few minutes to catch my breath.” Joe stood up and shook his head. “What's on the list after Dimensional Magic?”

“Force and Wave. Orange and Cyan, respectively. We need something moving for that, still narrowing down our options.”

“Ah. That should be interesting.”

“Hmmm...” Alphys turned towards the window between the scanner lab and the hallway outside. “How about... if Alex and Brendan come in and throw stuff at you? Will that work?”

“...so... the Christmas party again?”

Alphys snickered. “Maybe not that bad. Do you think you can work with that?”

“Sure. Let's see what I can do. And what they can do.”
The door to the scanning chamber opened and two humans walked in, carrying a trash can full of aluminum cans. Almost immediately, one of them picked up a can and threw it at Joe, who ducked.

“Brendan, wait! We haven't calibrated the instruments for the test yet.”

“Oh. Sorry. I just heard you say to throw stuff at Stanton.”

There was an exasperated sigh from Stanton as he moved his head back and forth, as if trying to relax tense muscles in his neck, or limber up before exercising. Eventually, Alphys stopped tapping at the computers by the wall and held up one claw in a thumbs up gesture.

“We're good! Whenever you're ready, Joe!”

“All right guys. Bring the rain.”

The air was immediately filled with flying aluminum. Some of it missed Joe, some struck home, but none of them seemed to be affected in their trajectory. Joe stepped back a few steps.

“Okay, stop! I said stop! Cease and desist!”

The rain of cans slowed and stopped, and Alphys shook her head.

“Nothing in either band on the sensors. Maybe you just can't do those?”

“Or maybe I can't concentrate when cans are being thrown at me,” Joe grumbled. “Maybe just hold one up and drop it on the ground and I'll try to do... something.”

Brendan pulled another can out of the trash receptacle and tossed it up in the air. Joe reached out a hand and the can was surrounded by light blue light... and fell down to the floor as normal.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a few seconds.

“Well. It works. For given values of work. Hey, try another one.”

Brendan repeated the process, and this can also fell to the floor, surrounded with an orange light.

“...huh.” Alex tapped the can with his foot. “Hey, what would happen if you tried to combine orange and light blue at the same-”

“Nonononononono!” Dr. Alphys waved her arms back and forth frantically. “You can't c-combine Wave and Force magic outside of controlled conditions! Very b-b-bad things happen!”

“Oh. How bad on a scale of one to ten?”

“T-ten! Definitely ten! Nine if we're very lucky!”

Alex and Brendan looked at each other, and then at Joe. The scientist was staring down at the floor covered in aluminum cans, but what could be seen of his eyes were glowing purple.

“Force magic is a coherent wave energy structure which is why it resolves as a discrete force and why it can interact with normal matter so easily. Wave magic is actually an incoherent sub-harmonic, ascending or descending on the scale, which is why it interacts with the energy side of the equation so easily, adding or subtracting to an existing vector quantity... overlap between the two causes concurrent peaks and troughs from both wave structures higher and lower than each one would normally generate by itself... this ruptures the remainder of the energy waveform, decoupling everything so it steps down to sub-light electromagnetic radiation...”
The purple light vanished from Joe’s eyes, and he looked up sharply.

“...oh.”

“What?” Alex scratched his head. “What oh?”

“...I, uh... I think... I know how the explosion. Thing. Happened.”

There was another uncomfortable silence, which Brendan interrupted by picking up one of the cans on the floor.

“While this is interesting in a pure science kinda way? I think we’re missing the really important question.”

“Which is?”

“You've just been using magic on stuff in the world, right? But you don't use it like monsters use it, you don't use bullets, do you?”

Joe blinked.

“...you might be on to something.”

“Yeah.” Brendan gestured with the can in one hand, causing it to slip out of his fingers and crash to the floor. “Whoops. But yeah. Maybe the reason it's not working the same way as with monsters is because magic works differently for humans and monsters.”

Joe stared at one of the cans on the floor, then one hand whipped up and pointed at Brendan. A light blue light shot towards the man, passed through him, and landed on the floor behind him.

Before it faded away, it was possible to see that it was shaped just like a crushed aluminum can.

“...did you just try to attack me?”

“There wasn't any intent to harm. I just wanted to see if it would phase through you.”

“...okay,” Brendan nodded. “Do the Force one on Alex though.”

Alex turned to Brendan. “Wait, what?”

Joe’s other arm whipped up and an orange light shot towards Alex, and bounced off of his unresponsive form. It also began to fade away as Alex reached up and grabbed the spot on his arm where the bullet collided.

“Ow. Dude. Not cool.”

“Hey, sorry. We had to test it.”

“You hit me with a magic soda can. That is, like, probably a human resources violation or something.”

“Well... now you know how I felt a few minutes ago.”

“Retribution does not justify workplace violence. An eye for-”

Alex’s mouth snapped shut as Joe glared at him.
“Go ahead. Tell me all about how an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind. Tell me everything you know about losing eyes, Alex. I'm just fuckin' dying to hear your sage words of wisdom on the subject.”

Brendan sighed. “Man. You really turned into an asshole when you got magic powers.”

“Actually I thought he turned into an asshole when he got promoted to the head of Soul Research,” Alex commented.

“I was an asshole before both of those things and don't you forget it!”

Chapter End Notes

This was supposed to be the chapter where the man in the Fancy Suit buys an umbrella, but my pacing has been thrown out of whack.
The background noise of the room, of children talking and moving about, of books opening and closing, papers rustling, dropped to a lower level as the instructor walked towards the front of the room and picked up one of the markers.

“Okay, settle down, settle down. Now. It's the end of the school year. You've all taken your tests already. Report cards sent out, everything that comes with it. So of course this is the perfect time for a pop quiz!”

Various sounds of annoyance and incredulity came from the assembled children behind him, and Brian grinned.

“Naw. I'm just messing with you. But we gotta do something math related for the rest of the class or they'll kick me out of the math teacher's union. So... let's see what we can come up with.”

The teacher uncapped the marker and started to draw on the board; a circle, and then subdivisions of the circle, and then another circle with the same subdivisions.

“Alright... who can tell me why there are three hundred and sixty degrees in a circle?”

“Because that was the number the people who printed the textbook chose?”

Brian turned around and stared at the class.

“That is technically accurate. But what I'm asking is why they chose that number in particular.”

The marker was tapped against one of the circles again, leaving a trio of small dots. “We can divide a circle into as many regular sections as we want. Halves. Thirds. Quarters. Sixths. Eighths. And so on and so on and so on. Why specifically choose three hundred and sixty?”

The class was silent for a few moments, before a leathery wing came up.

“Uhm. Because that was how human navigators divided up the globe to find where they were going?”

“Actually, while that is not the correct answer, it's interesting because you pointed out a limitation in the three hundred sixty degrees system.”

Casey blinked. “I did?”

Brian drew another circle on the board and sectioned it off into tiny slivers.

“This isn't to scale obviously, but lets pretend each of those little slivers is one degree. They look pretty small, don't they? But what happens when you project the same shapes onto something much bigger? The sections are proportionate, so they get bigger too. If you project this circle over the cross section of a big enough sphere, like the earth, then the distances get very big. A single degree of the earth's longitude at the equator is over a hundred kilometers long. That's a lot of ocean to get lost in, especially before the steam engine was invented.”

Brian paused to let that fact sink in, then started drawing some more; larger wedges of a circle, subdivided again.

“That is why navigators and cartographers had to break those degrees down into arc minutes and
arc seconds. The arc thing is important, but for right now just think of it as a way of telling apart a unit of distance measurement from a unit of time measurement. So... over a small enough scale, three hundred and sixty is too big a number for practical use, but over a big enough scale, it's too crude and limited and has to be expanded. But we still have the original question. Why decide on three sixty, out of all the possible numbers they could have used?"

The classroom was silent again, and Brian shrugged and started scribbling numbers down in a column.

“Well, if you didn't know before, you'll know after today. The circle was divided into three hundred and sixty degrees for ease of calculation, because you can evenly divide three hundred sixty by a lot of other numbers. Two, three, four, five, six, eight, nine, ten, twelve, fifteen, eighteen, and so on and so on.”

Brian turned around again.

“Now there are a bunch of different reasons they could have done this. Just for the sake of simple calculations is a popular idea, but it raises a question. Why would these specific calculations need to be easy? And one theory for that is that it would help in any sort of simple mechanical work where a wheel and axle was either being made, or being used. This covers everything from obvious stuff like carts for hauling goods, to construction using cranes and designing the proportions of buildings, to navigation like Casey said.”

The teacher scribbled a couple of equations, and then a geometric diagram, and then turned to face the class, moving the marker between the two.

“Both of these things say exactly the same information. The difference is that the one right next to me expresses it in terms of arithmetic, and the one next to it expresses that information in terms of geometry. In arithmetic, especially in our base ten decimal number scheme, some numbers don't divide evenly into ten, so your results keep going after the decimal point. That's where you get your repeating decimals and the necessity for significant digits. Now... I'm going to go out on a limb here, and say a lot of people don't like math.”

There was a surge of giggling from the assorted kids, and Brian grinned.

“Yeah, understatement of the century, right? Well, I have always had a theory that the reason that is, is because when most people are taught math, they aren't actually taught how it works. Not really. It's all abstract, pure theory, and very little application. Word problems don't count. And that's the wrong way to teach anything, because if you want to learn something, you have to practice. That means doing it all the time. And for math, that means recognizing when there is a mathematical principle at work in the world. Something you can't get just from theory, unless your brain is naturally attuned to it like mine is.”

Brian took the last unoccupied space on the marker board to draw a grid and fill it in with numbers, letters, symbols and shapes.

“There are a whole laundry list of different branches of mathematics, and the list grows longer all the time. But here are the four types of math that make civilization as we know it.” Brian stepped back and pointed to a box in the grid filled with simple operational signs.

“The first one is arithmetic. Addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, parenthetical brackets and the application of exponents. The six basic operations in the 'Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally' memory trick, and everything that builds on them. They are invaluable for records keeping and you cannot have a civilization without records. Otherwise it's just a bunch of people standing
around looking silly.”

Brian moved on to the second part of the grid, with regular geometric shapes. “The second one is geometry. The relationships between different shapes. This is the foundation of construction and engineering and architecture, if you'll pardon the pun, and also very important for making and using maps. If you want to build anything, from the tallest skyscraper to the tiniest precision tools, and if you want to get from point A to point B when you can't see one from the other, you gotta have geometry.”

The third part of the grid held mostly letters.

“Algebra is just arithmetic when you don't know all the facts. It's basically mathematical detective work. Overlap that with geometry and you get stuff like trigonometry, which is also useful for construction. This is also where you'll really get into statistics and probability, which is important stuff to know even if you're not fond of gambling. And finally...”

Brian tapped the last part of the grid, which just held a pair of brackets.

“You might hear some people complain about calculus. You might end up going to your first calculus class really intimidated. Don't be. Calculus operates on the same basic principles as any other mathematical operation. You'll need a solid grounding in algebra and trig before I can really start you on that, and that's not for another year or two, but for the time being, don't worry about it. It's used in flight, rocketry, ballistics, electrical engineering, materials science, it's basically the tool that any type of engineer uses most.”

Brian stepped back, turned around, and capped the marker.

“Now here's the reason that no matter what type of math it is or what it's used for, you should never be intimidated by it. This might be the most important thing you ever learn in any math class. How many of you have been practicing for Little League baseball with Undyne?”

Multiple hands or equivalents shot up into the air.

“I thought so. Now, if you took a baseball. And you tossed it in a field. You could take the angle and force of the throw, the weight of the ball, the direction and speed of the wind if there was any, and even the texture of its surface, and calculate almost exactly where it would land, within a certain margin of error. Here's the thing though. Even if you knew the exact mathematical formula to use, and all the important information to make that formula work... it would take you a bit to solve it, no matter if you were writing it out or punching buttons on a calculator. But when you're out in the field and you see where the ball is going to land, and you move to intercept it and catch it, your mind is doing all of that without you even realizing it. You're just not using these symbols. That's all that's different.”

Brian smiled. “So... remember that, when you're having trouble with math assignments next year. The problem's not on your end. The problem isn't a matter of being smart enough, or being good at math, or anything like that. You already know this. The problem is just a matter of explaining what you know. That's what this class has always been about. You're not learning something new. You're learning how to use what you already have.”

“Okay, it's the end of the school year, it's time to relax a bit. I've said this before, and I'll say it again. The history of civilization is a succession of screw ups, all piled on top of each other. That's all. You know the old saying History is written by the winner? Not true. History is just written by
the side that didn't get their butts kicked as bad as the other one. And that's assuming they were in any condition to write anything down after. What's the first thing you do after you win a big battle in the army? Go get interviewed by people writing textbooks? Not in any war movie I've ever seen!"

The classroom was filled with the sound of giggling children and the teacher grinned.

“So today, it's all about local history. Stuff that's actually relevant to your lives, and the lives of your families, and the places you live. So... let's start with Gemini Roads. Technically, Gemini Road is just that. The original road that ran east from that part of the township over to Triton. But when the place was incorporated as an actual town instead of like a village or hamlet or something, they tried to name it after the road. And. They. Could. Not. Keep. Things. Straight. Half of the documents say Gemini Roads, and half say Gemini Road. Today, they are used interchangeably except by purists who insist that one or the other is correct, and by a court order from August of 1956, organizations established advocating one name exclusively over the other cannot be within five hundred feet of each other at any time, to prevent violence.”

A slime pseudo pod stuck up in the air.

“Mr. Kramer, why would anyone fight over a name like that?”

The teacher shrugged.

“There are hundreds of reasons why, and they are all pretty silly. So don't worry about it if you don't understand it. That just mean's you're sane. Or... well, less crazy than they are, at any right. I make no assumptions about the sanity of anyone in this room. Including me.”

The class started laughing again as Mr. Kramer pointed to a map of the county pinned to the wall.

“And who here knows how Robin's Egg got its name? Anyone?”

Hands shot up, and answers tripped over each other in a reckless haste.

“Were there lots of robins there?”

“Was it named after the jingle bells song?”

“Wasn't there a guy who got struck by lightning?”

The teacher pointed at Douglas.

“That's it, right there! Back when that place was just three houses and a barn about a day's walk from Handy Manny Kelly's cabin, a man named Henry Mason was struck by lighting during a freak storm. He survived, but apparently it did something to his brain. Or maybe it just freaked him out. Either way, he was obsessed with the weather after that and got it into his head that the ocean, when blue, reflects a clear blue sky. So if there was something on the ground to reflect a blue sky color back up to the air, that would stop storms from happening. So he ended up painting every other building blue, by himself and against the wishes of the owners as often as not. In the process he became an expert on dyes, pigments, and the related fields of chemistry, which would have made him very wealthy if he had ever thought about patenting some of his discoveries. Unfortunately he ended up being struck by lightning again and this time it killed him. Popular myth has it that he was struck five years to the day after the first time, and in the exact same spot as before, but nobody can agree where that was so somebody probably made that part up. None of those original houses still exist, but there are markers where they once stood.”
“So it was named Robin's Egg after the color?”

“That's the justification they give. Apparently it was kind of jarring, having this concentration of blue in the middle of all the other earth tones.” The teacher shrugged. “Some people thought it was an eyesore, other people credited the color with attracting a bunch of curious onlookers who stayed to settle the place. Either way the population jumped from fifteen to nearly three hundred people over the course of those five years. And this was back when three hundred people was a lot of people. Hmm... what else, what else... okay. Who here knows why Triton is named after a god of the sea, even though it's almost thirty miles from the coast?”

“The Cold Equations is often praised as an iconic example of 'hard' science fiction, but even cursory critical analysis reveals problems with the setting. Would anyone like to point one of them out?”

The classroom was mostly silent, until the sound of a throat clearing broke it.

“Yo, uh. Mrs. Harrison? I don't know if it's a story kinda problem or not, but I gotta ask. Do humans actually, uh, explode like in the story if they're in space without a suit? Cuz that's kinda gross.”

Mrs. Harrison rolled her eyes.

“As far as I understand it, no, Poncho. There are numerous problems that result from unprotected exposure to the vacuum of space, including asphyxiation and embolism, but the internal structure of the human body will not burst like a balloon or shoot out all its organs like a shaken up can of soda.”

There was some giggling in the classroom as the teacher turned to the marker board.

“But, having said that, you did point out one of the details which technically disqualifies the story from truly being categorized as hard science fiction. Inaccurate scientific and technical details for the sake of drama over verisimilitude. The other major offender was the faster than light drives invoked in the larger ships. Until such time as science or magic can be used to actually travel faster than light, any story that includes it, even as a background element, is categorically an example of speculative fiction, as opposed to rigorous hard scifi. Okay... anyone else want to take their turn?”

After a few seconds, a hand came up.

“How was a kid able to sneak past the ship's security team? I can understand the kid thinking the whole shoving stowaways out the airlock thing is an exaggeration or tall tale, but she wasn't a smuggler or secret agent so how would she be able to outsmart people trained to search for stowaways? And if they didn't have a security team for that, why not? The whole conflict was based on the mass of the ship being calculated as precisely as possible, so why wouldn't they have somebody check every part of the ship to make sure there was nothing in there that didn't have to be, like a storage crate or something?”

Mrs. Harrison nodded at Frisk.

“Exactly. The two framing devices that Godwin set up to create the tension in the story are in conflict. The precision needs of the ship and its operating limits both require, and indirectly imply, a need for similar precision for every related process, including loading and unloading. Both the presence and the specific characterization of the stowaway betray a lack of precision. The Cold
Equations has been widely criticized on these and other grounds; one argument is that the excess mass during launch meant that the ship used up too much of its fuel by the time that the stowaway was discovered, so no matter who or what gets thrown out the airlock, the ship will still crash and the medicine will never get to the people that need it. There is one way to salvage the value of the story that I know of, and there may be others. Can anyone think of one?”

The classroom was silent once again.

“Very well. The one that is most readily obvious... to me anyway... is to shift the focus of the story itself away from the science fiction elements entirely. It's not about the immutable laws of physics. It's not even about the limitations of engineering. It's a social commentary. Now... what part of society is being commented on? You can interpret that a few ways. Maybe there was supposed to be a security sweep and a cabin check, and they skipped it for time reasons. In that case, carelessness would have put everything at risk, whether the extra weight was a stowaway or a cargo crate that wasn't supposed to be there. Or, maybe they skipped it because they actually didn't care. They didn't see stowaways as people. Or maybe they were just lazy, they'd gotten used to a routine, they'd done stuff like this before and they assumed everything would go off without a hitch like it had before. Or maybe it's a commentary on workplace safety. The entire idea of the Emergency Dispatch Ship was that it could economically do the short hops that the big ships could not, and you could argue that paring that ship down to the absolute minimum was efficiency for cost's sake, at the expense of safety. Some people have done that, saying that those Cold Equations mentioned in the title aren't physics equations, but the numbers in an accounting spreadsheet where somebody either deliberately or unknowingly decided it was more economical to risk killing people than to design in a larger margin of error.”

Mrs. Harrison turned around and started writing and drawing on the marker board.

“And what's particularly telling is that you can do all of that without contradicting any stated facts in the story itself. You can interpret some statements slightly differently here and there for some theories, but others require no changes whatsoever. Some attempts to refute the premise of the story have completely rewritten every character, setting element, and background detail so that it's almost a different story that simply borrows the original premise or makes an allusion to it. Which brings me to another important detail; Tom Godwin's story is the most famous example of this kind of plot, but it wasn't the first. There was a story based on the same premise published two years before, titled A Weighty Decision.”

Mrs. Harrison pretended not to notice the snickering from the icy bird monster in the back of the classroom.

“And several years before that, there was another story with that idea called Precedent. There's never been any serious allegations of plagiarism, by the way. All three stories are considered variations on the same narrative theme; if one person has to die so that other people can survive, how do you choose who has to be sacrificed? There was actually another story with the premise of sacrifice for the greater good by Robert Heinlein, called Sky Lift. And it was published the year before The Cold Equations, in 1953. But in that case, there was never any doubt or debate about who had to be sacrificed in the same way that the other stories relied on for dramatic tension, since the only people at risk are the pilots and they go in knowing that this mission might kill or maim them.”

The teacher tapped on the marker board.

“There's also one other important detail to remember when considering this story. At the time that The Cold Equations was published, a man named John Campbell was editor of the magazine it was
sent to. He rejected the manuscript multiple times because Godwin kept finding ways to save the life of the girl while still operating within the strict confines of physics and engineering. If Godwin had not relented and killed off the girl, odds are Campbell never would have published it, and the scifi world would not have this iconic story. I'm not saying that it shouldn't have been written. And without knowing what those earlier drafts said, I can't claim that I would like one of the versions where the stowaway survives more than the one we have. But Campbell, as an editor, rejected the story on the grounds of its tone and outcome. He seemed to completely miss the logical contradictions in the setting. In that sense, Campbell wasn't acting as an editor, finding weaknesses in the story itself for the author to improve. He was acting as a gatekeeper, filtering content according to what he personally wanted it to say. So some of the credit for the story's success falls to him... but so does the blame for its failures. Anyone here who aspires to be a writer at any point, you should keep these examples in mind as cautionary tales, and learn from them.”

“ALRIGHT NERDS! It's the last gym class of the year, and that means it's bench pressing time! WHO WANTS TO HELP ME SET A NEW RECORD?!!”

Children began to line up, talking excitedly. Or they ran away. Frisk stood back from the crowd, phone out, recording the moment for posterity.

“Yo, Frisk! Why aren't you in line for the bench press contest?”

Frisk shrugged and put their phone back in their pocket. “Have to take some tests I should have taken yesterday, if not for the whole... thing.”

“Hey, what happened yesterday anyway?”

The human child didn't respond right away, but eventually shrugged.

“Just some stuff got screwed up inside me and I had to take some time to try to fix it.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Complicated stuff.”

“...okay.”

Frisk shrugged again.

“Honestly, it's, uh. It's not totally fixed. I might have been able to function in school yesterday. But better safe than sorry I guess.”

“So are you gonna be okay?”

“Well. Not really sure. Only way to find out is... is to let things run their course.”

“...I hope you get better.”

“Heh. That would be nice, yeah. Thank you.”

Poncho seemed to consider his words for a few moments.

“So, do you have anything special planned for the summer? Cuz my parents are gonna take us to the nature preserve and we're gonna go hiking and stuff!”
"That sounds awesome. I think the plan was to get Asriel up to speed on school stuff so he can be in our grade next year, but... guess we'll see if that still happens or if life throws us even more curve balls. Like Cater breaking out again the next time they transfer him."

"...do you think that might happen?"

Frisk frowned.

"There's certainly a pattern of that kind of thing happening. I'd be more surprised if he didn't make the attempt. But after what happened last week I think that the police are pulling out all the stops next time. I know there's always cops outside his hospital room because Papyrus told me."

"Wait, how did Papyrus know that?"

"He goes to visit Dwayne Riley on a regular basis. Trying to get him to give up being angry at monsters by showing him the upsides of having cool friends that do cool friend things. I have no idea if it's going to work, but it's definitely worth a try-"

There was a beeping sound from Frisk's phone and they pulled it out again.

"Oh. Okay. They're ready for me in the school librarby. I better go. We'll catch up over lunch, okay?"

"Sure thing, dude!"

"Hey Skate."

"W-what?" The small, propeller driven monster plane hovering in line rolled and yawed to turn around while still remaining in one spot, and found that Frisk was standing right behind it. "Frisk?! What are you doing here?!

"Standing in line, waiting for lunch. Same as you. How have you been?"

"Fine! Everything's fine!"

"Glad to hear it."

The plane turned around again as the line progressed, and the children stood, and occasionally walked, in relative silence even as other children around them talked excitedly about future plans for the summer, recent events, or other details of personal import. Eventually the line moved up so that Skate could grab a tray of food, using what looked like a cargo hoist made of Blue Magic, and Frisk followed with a tray in their hands. The human child sat down at an empty table after not seeing Poncho anywhere, and looked up in surprise as a tray was dropped next to them, with Skate circling around to hover nearby.

"Why weren't you in school yesterday?"

"...I was sick. I'm better now. Sort of."

"Stop doing that."

Frisk blinked in confusion. "Stop getting better?"

"No! Stop getting sick in the first place! Duh!"
“...in my defense. It wasn't up to me. I didn't want it to happen.”

There was the sound of moving shuffling feet or other extremities that provided locomotion, and the clatter of trays on the table as other students arrived. Frisk looked around to see Douglas, Mary, Casey and Poncho all taking their seats.

“Okay Frisk, time to spill the music. Face the beans.”

Frisk stared at Mary. “...what??”

“Come on. We've all been comparing notes. You've been acting really weird these last few weeks. Getting sick is one thing. And yeah, you have a new brother out of nowhere, that counts for something. But you kept getting hit in dodge ball, you haven't been making the rest of us look bad by playing teacher's pet in math and science, and, and, you've been sitting next to Skate for a full minute and you haven't done any flirty stuff. Something is up and we all want to know what it is.”

“Well, technically Mary wants to know what it is and she strong-armed us all into telling you stuff and coming over here to ow.” Douglas flinched as if somebody sitting on the other side of the table had kicked him underneath it.

Frisk rolled their eyes. “I don't have boxes full of cheesy pickup lines just lying around. My flirting is handmade craftsmanship. It takes time.”

“Not buying it. You focused on the flirting thing, but what about the other stuff? We're just gonna keep bothering you until you tell us.”

“Fine. I can put up with that for two days. Actually since it's lunch it's more like two half days.”

“Ugh.” Mary looked down at her food and stabbed a fish stick with her fork. “We're going to figure this out. Sooner or later. Mark my words.”

Frisk sighed.

“Consider them marked.”

There was a beeping noise, and Frisk pulled out their cell phone.

12:12 PM Star_Blazing_Platinum: hey frisk
12:12 PM Star_Blazing_Platinum: papyrus is dropping me off at all fine labs now
12:12 PM: cool
12:13 PM: fingers crossed
12:13 PM Star_Blazing_Platinum: crossed 4 luck
12:13 PM Star_Blazing_Platinum: or crossed because lying
12:13 PM: 4 luck
12:14 PM Star_Blazing_Platinum: ok
12:14 PM Star_Blazing_Platinum: thought so but had to check anyway

12:14 PM: everthig ok at lab

12:14 PM Star_Blazing_Platinum: lots of people look nervous

12:14 PM Star_Blazing_Platinum: but guess that's normal after something big breaks

12:15 PM Star_Blazing_Platinum: dr alphys wants to start so signing off

12:15 PM: ok luv u

12:15 PM Star_Blazing_Platinum: luv u 2

Frisk put their phone away, and immediately was pounced on in a verbal, metaphorical sense.

“Who was that?”

“Asriel.”

“...oh my god. It's him.”

“What?” Frisk looked up in confusion and saw conflicting emotions on Mary's face. Triumph fighting for territory against shock and disdain.

“That's what's got you so messed up. You're in love with Asriel. You have a crush on your brother. I saw that look on your face. That's... ew.”

“You take that back!” Skate snapped out. “Frisk does not have a crush on Asriel!!”

Every eye at the table was trained on Skate suddenly, and the plane managed to blush... somehow.

“F-forget that I said that!”

“I knew it!” Casey grinned. “I knew you liked Frisk back all this time!”

Skate made a prolonged sound of exasperation and mortification, and stalled out, landing on the chair below them. “It's... it's n-not like that....”

The rest of the table erupted into muffled, and not so muffled, laughter.
“So, how up to date are these records?”

“Well, there were a lot of land sales before and after the monsters showed up. Before, it was because of the Guardians, and after, well, some people didn't want to take a chance that that the Guardians might have been right about something. That's the theory around the office, anyway. And then there were follow up sales as monsters bought that land and started building, and more follow up sales as people started moving here to start tourism related jobs, so to answer your question...” the clerk shrugged. “We don't know. I'm ninety percent sure that everything in this stack is only about six months old, but that's all I can give you. We have to run as fast as we can here just to stay in one place.”

“Ugh. I know what that's like.” Officer Steve picked up the copies and put them under his arm. “Thanks a lot.”

“Hey, I know this is probably an ongoing investigation, but if you can tell me, then would you mind explaining what you need those maps for?”

“Well... technically it's not part of the official investigation, but I am following a lead. So best not.”

“That's fair. Take care of yourself out there Steve. And tell Brenda I said hi!”

“I will, thanks Lisa!”

Officer Steve walked out of the Planning and Zoning Office, already thumbing through them, when his cell phone began to buzz. The policeman stopped and brought it up to his ear.

“Officer Ward here.”

“Hey Steve.”

“Justin? You sound beat.”

There was a derisive noise on the other end of the line. “Just annoyed. The committee was in some sort of closed door meeting and they finally adjourned and somebody said we didn't need to be here anymore. After five hours of us sitting around with our thumbs up our asses. Or whatever the equivalent is for skeleton monsters.”

“Wow. Rude. I mean, I know that's status quo with the wheels of bureaucracy, but still.”

“Yeah. Not sure if they got all they needed from Doctor Aster, or if they wanted him to say something and he outmaneuvered them and they realized he'd keep doing that. Anyway, we're not being called on for further testimony. I have no idea what they're going to do next but I do understand that we don't need to be in DC anymore. So we're heading back today.”

“Wow. Just one day of testimony. Doctor Aster must have made in impression, one way or another.”

“Yeah. Well, I'm hoping they realized that if they tried to play hardball, they'd be shown playing hardball on national and international television, plus the internet, with a guy who sounds like JK Simmons. So they quit while they were ahead and just looked like politicians trying to make an informed decision for once in their careers.”
Officer Steve rolled his eyes.

“Your opinion on the intelligence of civil servants has been noted. Also it might be slightly hypocritical since you technically qualified at one point.”

“Exactly. I know what I'm talking about.”

“Hah. Fine.”

“So what's going on over there? Been out of the loop a while.”

“Not too much. I told you about Hal yesterday. Last night there was a mishap at All Fine Labs and they kept Joe at the hospital overnight to watch for concussion, but he seems alright. I mean, for Joe. He kept muttering something that sounded like math when I drove him to the lab this morning.”

“Well that's normal. For Joe anyway. I mean it wasn't even the science tunnel vision thing.”

“No, you're right. It wasn't. But still... he never told me what happened to him. Something about confirming his theory first.”

“That sounds like him. Guess we'll have to wait for the movie.”

“Yeah.” Officer Steve huffed. “It's certainly not helping the rumor mill. Some people are saying All Fine Labs is a front for arms dealing, or that they hold people prisoner to run experiments on them, or that old standby of human magic being hidden. You know. Same shit, different day.”

“I can imagine. Anything new from Forsythe?”

“Funny you should mention him, turns out he was the anonymous tipper who pointed us at the Orange Safehouse. I mean, we were pretty sure it was him from the start. Everyone in the department knows that voice. And he had a prize with him when he ran off. Sounds like one of Jordan Cater's notebooks full of Guardian stuff. I'm kinda tempted to ask if I could take pictures or scan it for police records, but not sure how he'd take it.”

“Heh. He'd probably take it with him as he ran screaming for the hills again, going on and on about Majestic Twelve and Atlantis and who knows what else. I mean. Not that we can point fingers. I saw Some Shit in the War, Mike has that stuff going on with his family, Joe's basically one lab accident from becoming a mad scientist with a robot hand and an eye patch, and Hal is... Hal. With Byron gone, sometimes I think the only person in our little club that even remotely qualifies as sane is Eli.”

“Just Eli? What about me?”

“Steve, you spent ten years afraid that Val Kilmer would sneak into your bedroom at night and pull out all your teeth while you were asleep.”

Officer Steve gripped the phone tighter in his hands and snorted.

“I explained that already. Over and over. My parents were watching Real Genius and I was too young to understand the nuances of the college prank.”

“Alright, alright. I'm sorry brought it up. Oh, Sans is trying to get my attention... okay. Gotta go. We're hauling ass to Lalapalooza. See you tonight or tomorrow.”
“Alright then. Have a safe flight.”

“Thanks man. Watch your ass out there.”

The call ended and Steve put his phone back in his pocket. Bringing up the papers under his arm, he started to thumb through them.

“Now, where were we....”

“Now, let's see what's new... HP is... wow. Seven fifty over seven fifty. I mean, I know it's b-been a few days, but that's a pretty big jump. AT is 55. DF is 60. And your SPD and INV both read as 40 on the scale. That's actually really good. And the imaging system shows everything steady and stable.”

Asriel reached up and scratched his ear.

“That's always good news.”

“Hey, is something wrong with your ear?”

“What?”

“It's just that. Sometimes I see you scratching at it.”

“Oh. That.” Asriel looked at his paw. “That's just a nervous habit. It's from before everything went... you know. It's not new.”

“Oh. Okay. Just wanted to make sure-”

Alphys found herself interrupted as a man in a lab coat barged into the room and grabbed the trash can.

“Sorry Doc. Joe says he needs more cans.”

“That's okay Alex. We were mostly done anyway.”

After the researcher disappeared with trash can in tow, Alphys turned to Asriel.

“Hey. Let's. Uhm. Talk in my office, okay? Now that we're done here.”

“...sure.”

After a few twists and turns through hallways, walking past humans and monsters carrying tools and hauling building materials, Dr. Alphys unlocked her office. The short lizard sat down behind her desk, while Asriel took a seat on part of the Mew Mew Kissie Cutie futon that had not yet been reclaimed by manga volumes.

“So...”

“So...”

Dr. Alphys looked down at her desk, then up at Asriel again.

“Are things... you know. Good? With you and everyone?”
“...I guess. I, uh. Yesterday I kinda got an earful for all my Arboretum stunts back in the day. But I'm alright with that now. How about you? I kept hearing stuff that something bad happened here last night.”

“There was... an accident. A prototype malfunctioned. Joe's work. And now... he's been working on something for a while now. He thinks he's figured out a sort of Unified Field Theory. Something human scientists have been after for hundreds of years. Something that could change everything, for everyone.”

“...change it for the better, or for worse?”

Dr. Alphys shook her head.

“That's the big question on everyone's minds today. And we don't know until it happens.”

“...so that's why everyone's so nervous. It's not just the damage from the accident. It's anticipation of what will happen next.”

“Yeah. You could say that.” Dr. Alphys pulled open a desk drawer and pulled out some coins. “Hey Asriel, can you do me a favor? I'm expecting a... thing. Here. So I need to stick around for a while. Can you take some money to the break room and get a Mountain Dew from the vending machine? And something for yourself of course, if you want.”

“Uh. Sure. I can do that.”

“Thanks! A bunch! Here you go!” Shaking claws deposited a number of coins in Asriel's paw, and the young boss monster walked out of the office. Dr. Alphys sighed and turned to her computer, claws tapping on the keyboard, then reaching over to turn on her printer. A sheet of paper slid out with a whir, and her eyes danced over the surface in a last minute check for errors.

Frisk,

I don't want you to panic when you read the next sentence, so try to keep calm, okay? I know that you can use magic. It doesn't matter how I know this. What matters is that I know you're scared of people finding out. You don't need to be. Wednesday night, Joe Stanton was in a mishap that has granted him the ability to use magic, too. He's become completely fixated with the idea of using this to finally figure out a Unified Field Theory for human science. I know I can trust him, just like I know I can trust you.

We're keeping everything as hush hush as we can until we know exactly what Joe can and can't do, and if there were long term side effects. Also obviously this is not something we want to leak out to what's left of the New Guardians, or any of the other organizations that don't like monsters on principle, before we can figure out how to respond. That's what I want to talk to you about. As Ambassador, you would officially be involved in this no matter what, and I want to brainstorm with you on where we go from here.

As a scientist I am also curious about comparing what you can do to what Joe is capable of, as well as figuring out where it came from, since I doubt you were in the same type of mishap that Joe was. But that's totally optional, and you don't have to do anything like that if you don't want. You don't even have to tell anyone. I haven't. I know what it's like to live with a secret, Frisk. To always be afraid of being found out. I would never do that to somebody else.

I'm sending this letter with Asriel, since it will get to you faster that way. Also it might be safer with
all of the people looking at All Fine Labs with paranoid eyes again. You don't have to respond right away. We'll be busy with repairs for a while, so you have plenty of time to think it over.

I was going to end this with something like how you weren't alone anymore. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that's not accurate. You're not the only human magic user now, but you've never been alone. You've always had me, and Undyne, and the Asters, and the Dreemurrs.

And you always will.

Alphys

PS: Before I even found out about your magic, Undyne and I were talking about what would happen if All Fine Labs did figure out where human magic went and how to bring it back. She basically said we had to make sure you ended up with magic, if only so you could break us out again if worse came to worst. If that's not a vote of confidence, I don't know what is!

Satisfied that the letter was acceptable, Alphys folded the paper and placed it in a business envelope and sealed. On the outside, only slightly shaking claws scribbled “FRISK” in big, block capital letters, finishing just as there was a knock on the door.

“J-just a m-m-minute!” Alphys scrambled to lock her computer and turn off her printer and put the envelope in her desk drawer. “Okay! Come in!”

The door opened and a short fuzzy monster walked in, holding two cans of soda.

“Sorry it took me so long. There was... something. In the break room.”

“Something?”

“Yeah.” Asriel put the cans on the desk and held up his paws. “You know those things that humans make, they're waterproof and filled with air for when they have to be on the ocean in an emergency?”

“... an inflatable life raft?”

“That's it!” Asriel snapped his fingers. “I couldn't think of the words there for a bit.”

“Why is there a life raft in the... you know what. I d-don't even care at this point.” Alphys grabbed her soda and popped it open with one claw, then slouched in her chair. “Five impossible things happen in this town every morning before breakfast.”

The marker board was covered in diagrams, equations, and non-sequitur sentence fragments. Fingers clutching a blue marker added even more to the chaos.

“It's so simple. It's so simple. Of course. Of course it's simple. I tripped right over it when I was rambling on and on and I never realized it. When you combine two electromagnetic fields in complete phase opposition they only appear to cancel out but energy can neither be created nor destroyed. First Law of Thermodynamics. It has to go somewhere. It's still there, in the photonic magic field. Around everything. Electrons. Protons. Neutrons. Always interacting with everything. Inertia, friction, even the relative passage of time at high speeds, it's all there, it's all implicit.”
“Dude. Calm your fucking tits.”

Joe didn't seem to hear Alex's voice as he continued to scribble.

“Every atom in the body has its own energetic characteristics and as atoms combine into molecules new characteristics manifest based on the properties of component atoms in that molecule and the way different atoms react to each other. That's the foundation of physical chemistry. The same principles apply no matter how large or small an aggregate combination of molecules is. Including a human body. Every single part of us is oscillating with energy, just like monsters. It's all random. Heat. Brownian Motion. But organize all of that energy, that movement, and you get... ow.”

Joe closed his eyes and rubbed the fingers of his free hand against them.

“Sunnovabitch, I'm getting a migraine again.”

“That couldn't possibly be because you've done nothing but practice magic and scribble science stuff all damned day without a break, could it?”

“No, too obvious.”

Alex rolled his eyes and walked up next to the marker board.

“Yeah, whatever. So... I understand some of this, but the only thing that's not all Greek to me is the actual stuff that uses Greek letters.”

“...okay. Let me try something else. Mike mentioned chakras to Doctor Aster once. Doctor Aster said it sounded like he was describing monster anatomy. According to some yoga traditions there are seven chakras. Seven. Just like we have seven Soul colors, and seven colors of magic. I didn't put it together right at the time, but it's so obvious. The chakras aren't physical points within the body like they appear in the books and diagrams. That's just a way of showing them side by side and their relationships to each other.”

“So... sort of like how a building blueprint will show all the floors of a building on the same sheet of paper for the sake of reference, but they're not actually spaced out like that.”

Joe snapped his fingers.

“Exactly. They all occupy the same space, inside the body, just at different frequencies. Once actual magic experience and knowledge was lost, they must have been treated as discrete entities within the body by the mysticism that grew up around what information survived. They're actually benchmarks for integration Soul energy with the physical body. If there's any validity at all to the stories of what ancient masters and spiritual leaders and monks could do, this has to be the mechanism for it. Which explains why it takes decades of dedicated training to accomplish it; without access to the theory behind it, or direct perception of magic, humans that want this kind of power have to trial-and-error their way to enlightenment.”

Alex snorted. “So human magic was never lost, really. It was just ignored. And ridiculed.”

“Yeah, sure looks like it. We might be able to apply this same reverse engineering metric to other schools of mysticism and ancient philosophy, too. Anything where the focal point could be summed up as Mind Over Matter would match what we understand about magic being a function of will and intent. And the first and easiest thing that any aspiring magic user would need to learn how to do would be to control their own body. So that must be where all those stories about people being invulnerable to physical injury or fire or the debilitating effects of cold came from. Either formalized as Healing and Energy magic as we know it today, or a direct manipulation of the body
down to the cellular level.”

“...man. James Randi's going to be pissed.”

Joe let out an exasperated sigh. “Implying he hasn't been throwing a hissy fit since the moment the King and Queen showed up on television. Is Brendan back from the hardware store yet?”

“Not that I've heard.”

“Can't be helped. I'll just refine the theory until he gets here and I can start assembling the Phase Integrator.”

“The what what?”

“That's what I decided I'm calling the Mark Two Amplifier from now on. Because that's how it works. All the different energy fields in a normal human body are randomized because, y'know. Life is complicated and shit. The Phase Integrator feeds back that information to the body in a way that it can respond to in an organized fashion. To continue my earlier explanation, it lets you, uh, 'align your chakras', if that term even qualifies by analogy, without spending forty years meditating under a waterfall.”

“I dunno man. The way the weather's been around here, spending a long time under a waterfall sounds like a good thing to me.”

Joe nodded.

“It does, actually. Anyway... yeah. That's right. With the machinery in the Integrator giving you real time feedback into how your Soul and body interact with each other, you can compress that trial and error learning experience from several decades into... well. I certainly don't know everything about magic yet. If Alphys hadn't warned us off on combining Wave and Force magic I probably would have blown us all up out of curiosity. So there's got to be a supplementary educational course after this.”

“No shit.”

“Fortunately, now that I have a better idea of how it all works, I can build in safeguards to keep the damn thing from combining Wave and Force magic during the feedback loop and blowing up like what happened to me.”

“Yay. Brendan can test that first.”

“Huh?” Joe tilted his head in confusion, then held out his hands. Electricity crackled between his fingers like a Jacob's Ladder. “Don't you want to be able to do stuff like this?”

Alex stared at Joe, at the scientist's unkempt clothes, unshaven face, messy hair, and the crazed look in his eyes.

“...still kinda juggling the pros and cons.”

Joe blinked, then scratched his head.

“Well. In any event, we need to determine if this is a phenomena that can be reproduced, or if what happened to me was a fluke and all the stuff I thought I figured out was just my brain shorting out. That means we need more human volunteers. And if we start advertising openly for this kind of stuff before we know what we're doing, it's going to pour gas on the fire. I mean, from the
scientific angle alone, this could turn into the next Cold Fusion clusterfuck. Never mind the societal and legal and political shit storm, or the economic instability that would follow. So it's gotta be in-house for now.

“Yeah. I know. That's why I said Brendan should test it.”

“Somebody talking about me behind my back?”

Joe and Alex both turned to see Brendan walking into the room with a bag in each arm. One had the name and logo of Rick's Hardware printed on it, while the other one...

“We've been working with you on this all damned day, Joe. So I stopped by Das Boot on the way back. I didn't know everyone's preferences so we might have to trade around a bit, but there's tavern ham, roast beef, turkey breast, and I got some shoestring fries and sauce. Fries are monster food, and the roast beef sandwich was toasted so it's monster food too. Bratty did it special.”

“Ordinarily I'd get on your case about bringing food into the lab but right now I am famished and cannot bring myself to care. But we have to clean up really carefully before we start putting stuff together later.” Joe accepted a sandwich from Brendan and started to unwrap it. “I don't want to have to grow my eyeballs back again.”

Brendan paused, his open mouth a half inch from his own sandwich.

“Hey, can we not talk about that while we're eating or ever again?”

“Right, right. Sorry.”

“Anyway. Looks like you've been keeping busy while I was out. And by busy I mean crazy.”

“Yeah, yeah. Shaddup. It'll all be tightened up and streamlined for the paper we'll be sending out.”

“Cool. Do we get co-author credit?”

“Well, you did bring me a sandwich. That's worth something.”

“Hey, what about me?” Alex asked, with a tone of mock indignation.

“It's not even one in the afternoon yet. I'm sure you'll do something noteworthy before closing time.”

“Asshole.”

“Yup.” Joe reached towards a marker and it floated slowly towards him with a blue glow.

“Hmmm. Slower that time even though the distance and the mass were less than the boxes earlier today. It might be like a muscle, it has to rest. Or maybe I just got a finite amount of magic from the accident and eventually it'll be used up. We'll have to test for both once I got the Integrator built.”

“Integrator?”

Alex shook his head. “He changed the name of his invention to the Phase Integrator while you were out on a parts and sandwich run.”

“Hey, I invented it, so I get to name it! Nothing set in stone until I file the patent application.” Joe scratched at his stubble. “I mean, assuming the patent office doesn't reject it out of hand. Or classify it on national security grounds. It doesn't happen as often as the conspiracy theorist crowd
“Okay.” Brendan walked up to the board, squinting his eyes at the symbols and diagrams. “Gotta say, the only parts I understand, I still don’t understand. Why did you write ‘FILE’ in capital letters? Is that like a reminder to make hard copies of something, or a reminder to back everything up electronically later?”

“It’s an acronym.” Joe uncapped the marker and started writing on one of the increasingly rare blank spots. “It stands for Fully Integrated Living Entity. All the different energy fields inside the body, electrical, magnetic, vibrations from heat and sound, maybe even the strong and weak nuclear forces and gravitational influence from each atom... it’s all coherent and working in concert. That’s how the Phase Integrator works in theory, it takes all these random parts of a person and gives them an easy way to organize them.”

“...in theory?”

“Well, that’s where you come in, once I get this thing built.”

“Me??” Brendan raised an eyebrow. “I don’t remember volunteering for human experiments this morning.”

Alex dipped a fistful of fries into a dipping sauce. “You have to. I already called Not-It while you were out.”

“...Not-It?? What are you, ten? Did this place turn into a fucking elementary school when I wasn't here?”

“Mister Staaantooon!” Alex called out in a high pitched, whining tone. “Brendan's swearing!”

“Okay that’s it.” Brendan lunged forward and grabbed the bag of fries out of Alex's hand. “If I gotta play guinea pig then you gotta buy your own god damn lunch.”
“Alright, anyone want to show their creations off?”

The art class erupted into a small storm of activity as various students competed for the privilege of showing off. The teacher was forced to point at random simply to stop the cacophony of sound.

“Alright, you're first! Mary!”

Mary held up a sheet of white paper that had a set of figures drawn on it with a large circle in the background.

“I drew my family at Disney World, because that's where we're headed for vacation this summer! Those are my parents, that's my little brother, and this is the Epcot thing!”

“Nicely done. Great work on the proportions. Who goes next... okay, Jade! You're up!”

The gem elemental child held up a sheet of paper with some sort of building on it.

“Uh. I couldn't think of anything else. So I just drew a building I can see from my bedroom window.”

“That's the... yeah, that's the administration building for the community college, isn't it? I recognize the brickwork crenelations on the roof. Good work there. Okay, how about... you, Douglas?”

“Uhm... okay. I didn't want to be called on but okay.” Douglas held up a sheet of paper with a bunch of angular finned forms and red lines. “It's a bunch of sharks with frikkin laser beams attached to their heads.”

The art classroom was silent for a bit.

“It's always the quiet ones,” Casey whispered, and Poncho made a snorting noise as he tried to avoid laughing. In the back of the class, a frost covered wing was raised in the air.

“Mr. Donovan, does that count as swearing?”

“Uh... well. Last day and all. I won't tell if you won't. Who else... Frisk??”

The human child held up a sheet of paper that was covered in... it was hard to tell, but some of it looked like vines, some of it looked like teeth, and some of it looked like eyes, all drawn with a photo-realistic precision. The classroom became very silent.

“Dude, what is that?” Poncho finally broke the silence.

“Last Friday when Jordan Cater tried to escape from the police again. My brother turned into... something. To stop him. When I try to remember what it looked like...” Frisk turned the drawing around and stared at it. “This is what I see.”

“...wow. No wonder you never shared during Art Class before.” Mary's voice, but for once her tone was more insightful than derisive.

Mr. Donovan cleared his throat. “Uh. Nice detail work, I guess. Uhm. Does anyone else want to share what they drew? ...Kid?”
A blue glow surrounded Poncho's drawing as it floated up for the class to see.

“Uh. It's just a bunch of those animals that kept getting into the streets. Alpacas. It's my first time
drawing using Blue Magic, so....”

“Not too shabby.” Mr. Donovan nodded. “Who wants to go next?”

“I hope everyone has a great summer! I'll see you all again in August!”

The science classroom began to empty. Once again, students in a rush to leave near the end of the
day got in each others' ways, and once again, Frisk slowly packed up their books and papers instead
of rushing without purpose.

“Hello, Frisk? Can I talk to you for a moment?”

The human child looked up from their desk to see the science teacher standing nearby.

“Ms. Mossman? What do you need?”

Ms. Mossman shook her head. “Oh. Nothing. I mean. I don't need anything. But I did want to speak
to you, if you were up for it.”

Frisk made a show of looking at the mass of students still blocking the exit like some school play
that had taken inspiration from the Three Stooges.

“Well, I certainly have the time.”

“That's great. Uh. It's just that. I was remembering last year. The school was still trying to get
started, we only had a spring semester, and so much was happening all at once. A lot of what we
had in this classroom was pretty old and outdated.”

“Yes, I know it was. But it all ties together. They weren't distracting, but I did notice that they were
very advanced. At least compared to the questions on the assignment. And combined with fixing
the microscopes. You could probably handle junior high or even high school science classes. And I
know your reading comprehension skills are high school level. A lot of your other work, too... so I
find myself wondering why you haven't moved ahead a grade, sometimes.”

“If that was distracting, I could have stopped if you needed me to. Also I don't mean to criticize
but that was a pretty big subject change.”

Ms. Mossman blinked. “Backfire?”

Frisk shook their head. “Toriel asked me about that, when the school was almost ready for prime
time. She'd been homeschooling me until then, so she knew what I could do. But... if I moved
ahead a grade, I wouldn't be able to hang out with my friends as much. And it would probably
backfire like it did at James Madison Elementary.”

Ms. Mossman blinked. “Backfire?”
“Yeah.” Frisk ran a hand through their hair. “I don't know what it was but apparently I tested well on something and the school wanted to move me up a grade. About halfway through first grade I got bumped up to second. I didn't know anyone. I was smaller than everyone else. And…”

“...and?”

“And I couldn't ask questions anymore.” Frisk glared at their backpack. “It used to be if I didn't understand something, I could ask the teacher for clarification. Not anymore. Everyone expected me to look at this math and this science and this language stuff and just instantly understand it. They got very annoyed when I couldn't do that. It's almost like they thought I had cheated my way into skipping a grade, when it was the school's idea from the beginning. And it felt like I was being punished for being smarter than the rest of the class. And it got even worse when third grade started. It, uh…”

Frisk turned around to see an empty classroom, then back to Ms. Mossman.

“It wasn't the reason I tried to climb a mountain that nobody came back from. But it didn't help, either. So yeah. I'll stick with slow and steady for as long as I can.”

“...oh. I'm so sorry. I didn't realize.”

Frisk shrugged. “Well. You couldn't be expected to know that in advance. And now you do. That's what questions are for.”

“Yes. Questions are great.” Ms. Mossman nodded. “Thank you for answering mine. I'll see you tomorrow, Frisk. Do you know what movie you'll want to make fun of?”

“Not yet. I figured I'd tackle today, and worry about tomorrow when it finally got here.”


“You too, Ms. Mossman.”

The human child finished packing up their backpack and headed out of the classroom.

“There you are. You know it's the end of the school year, right? There's no point in trying to get extra credit assignments now.”

Frisk looked up to see Mary loitering in the hallway... along with Skate, Douglas, Poncho, and Casey.

“Hey guys. Kinda surprised you're all still here.”

“Yo, we're all heading to the arcade to celebrate the end of the year! You want to hang out?”

“Uh... well... I had some stuff I needed to get out of the way-”

“Aw, come on! Last time we all got together for anything was Star Wars Day!”

Frisk stared at Poncho's earnest face and sighed.

“Okay. You convinced me. Just stop with the puppy dog eyes.”

Poncho blinked. “The what??”
Mary snickered and pointed dramatically in the direction of the main exit. “Then it's settled. Let's move out!”

“Yeah, we know where the door is Mary, thanks- ow!” Douglas's snide remark was cut off as Mary reached over and flicked the back of his head with one finger. “How the heck do you make that sting so much!?”

“Hey, there's no roughhousing on school grounds,” Casey objected. Mary shook her head.

“It's not roughhousing. Douglas isn't hurt, he's just a wuss.”

“I am not!”

“Oh, yeah, this is definitely the best use of my time this afternoon.” Frisk grumbled.

“And what can I get for you, Officer Steve?”

“As much as I don't like the feed the stereotype of cops and donuts, I need energy to go. Three bear claws and a coffee, please. All monster food.”

“Coming right up.” Six arms danced through the air and around each other, filling a styrofoam cup with a dark black liquid that somehow seemed to glow and snapping a lid on, while also grabbing pastries and bagging them. It was a hypnotizing sight. Officer Steve handed over a handful of bills.

“Keep the change. Put it in your spider college fund... thing... I forget the proper name to be honest.”

“Why thank you Officer Steve!”

“You're welcome. See you later.” The policeman turned around and almost tripped over a human child behind him. “Whoa! Sorry about that. Didn't even see you there, or hear you come up behind me, or anything.”

“Sorry.”

“Naw, don't worry about it Frisk. I was the one not paying attention.”

“Is everything alright?”

“Just distracted. Got two dozen leads and only a few hours of daylight to finish checking them. How about you? Last day of school, right? Or is that tomorrow?”

“It's tomorrow but might as well be today. So the gang got together and we're loitering and doing other unsavory youth stuff at the arcade.” Frisk pointed a thumb back at the exit.

“Hah. Well, it's a good place for it. If you'll excuse me, I have a date with some tax auction real estate.”

“Oh, right. Good luck!”

“Thanks!” Officer Steve walked out of the bakery and started juggling his purchases to get into his cruiser, while Frisk walked up to the counter.

“Hello Muffet. One Spider Cider please.”
“Of course, coming right up!”

Frisk looked around the bakery. “Is Muffin here today?”

“Alas, no. I had to start leaving her at home. The last few times I brought her to work, she would sneak out and get into mischief and scare humans and even pick fights with Endogeny.”

“Yikes.”

“Quite so. Here's your cider, dearie.”

Frisk handed over some bills and coins. “Thank you.”

“Thank you, Frisk, for being so regular here with your patronage! Don't be a stranger!”

“Okay. I'll stay exactly as strange as I am right now.”

“Uahuhuhu!”

Frisk waved to Muffet as they walked through the bakery door, looked both ways carefully, and started crossing the street to Archaic Arcade. The sounds of antiquated electronic entertainment could be heard through the doors, as well as more modern machines such as Dance Dance Revolution... which Frisk observed Poncho was already going crazy on.

“I still think it's cheating that you're using your tail.”

“You can keep your balance easier by moving your arms around. If you get to use all your body parts, so do I!”

Douglas looked down at one hand. “That makes sense, but...”

Frisk shook their head and pulled out their cell phone.

3:45 PM: hey mom

3:45 PM: Mrs. Momedian: Hello Frisk, how are you?

3:45 PM: pretty good

3:45 PM: hanging out with poncho and everybody at the arcade for a bit

3:46 PM Mrs. Momedian: It is good to hear that.

3:46 PM Mrs. Momedian: I cannot remember the last time you were able to hang out with your classmates.

3:46 PM: busy month

3:46 PM: cant be helped

Frisk's phone beeped and they frowned.
3:46 PM: sorry somebody is sending me a message brb

The child thumbed through the chat client menus and tapped on the new message notification.

3:46 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: hey frisk :)  
3:47 PM: hey alphys  
3:47 PM: how r things at lab  
3:47 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: pretty good considering we have a giant hole in the roof :P  
3:47 PM: how bad is it  
3:47 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: actually not that bad its patched now  
3:47 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: been crossing my claws all day that it didn't rain  
3:47 PM: yeah looks like that will hit tomorrow  
3:47 PM: figures  
3:47 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: stay inside and watch movies weather right?  
3:48 PM: sure  
3:48 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: hey frrisk  
3:48 PM: what is it  
3:48 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: I have a thing 4 u  
3:48 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: ambassador stuff  
3:48 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: sending it with asriel  
3:48 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: I no ur gonna be real busy this summer  
3:48 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: and its no ti me critical  
3:48 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: but plz plz PLZ read it right away  
3:48 PM: ok  
3:48 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: so we can make plans as soon as  
3:49 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: thx thx thx so much  
3:49 PM: what's it about
3:49 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: mostly
3:49 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: plans to make plans
3:49 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: 4 long term stuff
3:49 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: we want to hit ground running
3:49 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: wit new products for sale
3:50 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: need ideas for markets and market reactions
3:50 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: but also political results
3:50 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: prolly not the best way to put it
3:50 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: but u could say I need ur brain 4 my experiments :P
3:50 PM: ok just put it back when ur done with it and fill the gas tank
3:51 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: roflmto
3:51 PM: rolling on floor laughing my tail off?
3:51 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: lol yup
3:51 PM: sorry got to go somebody is trying to get my attention
3:51 PM Dr Sci Nosaur: ok take care friskk

Frisk tapped the screen a few times and switched back to their previous conversation.

3:51 PM: hey sorry mom
3:52 PM: dr alphys wanted to tell me some stuff
3:52 PM: something about market research and politic stuff from new products
3:52 PM Mrs. Momedian: That is quite alright.
3:52 PM Mrs. Momedian: What kind of new products?
3:52 PM: didnt say
3:52 PM: said she would send some stuff home with asriel
3:52 PM: looks like summer will be just as busy as the school year
3:53 PM Mrs. Momedian: That is certainly a possibility.
3:53 PM: took a while for that last message to come through
Mrs. Momedian: My fingers are very large, and even with the upgraded keyboard Dr. Alphys provided, typing is a n involved process.

Mrs. Momedian: Also, proper grammar and spelling and punctuation take time.

thats true

but streamlined communication means more memes per minute lol

Mrs. Momedian: I shall have to take your word for it. ]=)

Frisk snickered and put their phone away, returning their attention to their classmates, who had moved on to some sort of racing game.

“So... what was that about?”

“Wha?” Frisk turned their head to see Mary standing nearby. “Oh. Just touching base. Also Dr. Alphys wants my help for something as Ambassador. So summer's looking to be as busy as the school year.”

“Huh.” Mary and Frisk both turned as Douglas yelled in victory. “You know... when my dad took me out of James Madison and enrolled me in Dreemurr Elementary. I thought it was some sort of political move. But I think I learned more in this last year than I ever did before.”

“Yeah. Well. There are probably a lot of reasons for that.” Frisk held up a hand and started counting on their fingers. “Toriel always wanted to be a teacher, so she was looking for instructors that had that same desire to pass on information. That's the big one. Also, monsters were in a situation where children had to be able to learn applied knowledge as fast as possible for the sake of survival. So the strategies that worked the best, including how coursework was broken down and different ways of explaining stuff, that all got brought up with them... what?”

Mary stared at Frisk.

“When somebody asks you what time it is, do you explain to them how a clock works?”

“That only happened once.”

Mary rolled her eyes.

“Whatever.”

Frisk shrugged and opened the bottle of Spider Cider they had purchased from Muffet's Tuffet.

“I can't believe you drink that stuff.”

“It's fine. It's genuine imitation all natural vegan spider substitute.”

“It's gross is what it is.”

Even in the noise of the arcade, there was a palpable silence that hung between the two children.

“Hey, Mary-”

“If you're about to ask what the deal is between my dad and Hal Greene, I don't know. Dad never
tells me anything.”
The deputy pulled his hat off and ran his hand across his forehead, leaving strands of hair plastered to it despite his best efforts to remove the sweat bothering him.

“You got any more coffee?”

“Just the one. Sorry.” Officer Steve shrugged apologetically.

“Figures.”

“You heard anything from Rick?”

“Just that he was done with the south half of the Triton township. Nothing else.”

“Well, it's been a day for all of us.”

“Yeah, no shit. I've been from Quarterhorse Fields to Lone Point and back twice with sweet fuck all to show for it.”

Officer Steve put down his coffee on the roof of the cruiser and tapped the paper in his hand.

“Basement or not, pretty sure nobody can use a house as a shelter when it blows away in a storm.”

“Whose the owner listed?”

“...there isn't one. Seized by Lost Eagle County. Tax lien and such.”

“What about who owes the back taxes?”

“...Paul Wasserman. God, I haven't heard that name in forever.”

“What did he do?”

“Can't remember. Maybe I never knew to start with. I think he was one of those people that cut and ran when the Guardians got aggressive. Can't blame him for that.”

“Well, that explains what happened to the house. Shingled roof, stormy weather, nobody keeping an eye on it... and once the roof goes, the whole house goes.”

“Guess that makes sense. Rain gets in, water damage, animals, everything.”

“Exactly. My old man did roofing and siding, he knew his shit backwards and forwards and standing on his head and work was all he ever talked about.” Deputy Jim blinked. “Well, work and The Moody Blues.”
The coffee cup was picked up again and Officer Steve opened his door.

“Guess we better move on to the next section. If you go north and I go east, and then I go north and you go east, we should meet up by the Old Cottle Place. It'd be a lot easier to do that than play Marco Polo on the radio again.”

The deputy didn't seem to be moving towards his own vehicle. Rather, he breathed in deeply through his nose, then licked the end of one finger and held it in the air to measure the direction and intensity of the wind, before pointing out over the road.

“Hey, Steve. Who owns that place over there?”

“Oh. That technically belongs to the Episcopal church in Ebott's Wake.”

“How's that again?”

“There's a story behind it. So... okay. About twenty five, twenty six years ago, there was a farmer who lived there. Delbert Larson.”

“Wait, his name was Dilbert?? Like the comic strip?”

“Delbert. D-E-L-B-E-R-T.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Somebody who worked for them did something to really cheese him off. So he came up with the ultimate revenge. When he died, he left his entire farm to the church.”

“...I'm not sure how that's revenge, so there must be a twist.”

“There is. The farm is held in a trust. And the stipulations of the trust state that they cannot sell this land until the trust expires, and it wouldn't expire for fifty years. But they are still legally responsible for it. That means taxes, fees, upkeep, everything. Thing is... the people who are responsible for this farm now are not farmers themselves. So they have no idea what they're doing.”

“Couldn't they just... I dunno. Hire a farmer to take over the responsibilities of the land?”

“That's the other thing. Delbert Larson was an upstanding member of the agricultural community, almost all of whom go to totally different churches in town. When the Episcopal church alienated him, they also burned bridges with anyone who might want to be a tenant farmer on their behalf. In the last two decades only one person even tried, and he instantly became persona non grata. So the church has this fifty seven acre albatross around its neck.”

“...man. What the hell did they do to piss that Larson guy off?”

“No idea.” Officer Steve snorted. “When I was asked for a moment of my time in order to give my assessment of their legal options, that detail got left out... why did you want to know, anyway?”

“It's just, that place has been left to its own devices for a while, right?”

“Yeah. The trust doesn't expire for another twenty five years or so.”

“Right. Nobody lives there, and nobody comes by to take care of it... so why can I smell smoke?”
“Hey Frisk, find what you were- whoa!”

The human child deposited an armload of old appliances in front of Catty and started going through their pockets.

“If I counted up all the price tags correctly, that should be just under nineteen dollars.”

“Wow, you're really splurging for once! What are you working on this time?”

“It's a secret project. So secret that even I don't know what it is.” Frisk pulled out a twenty dollar bill. “Here you go.”

Catty began tapping the register, adding up the total. “If it's so secret, how do you know what parts you need?”

“Ah, I see you've played this game before.” Frisk grinned and stuck out their tongue. “Actually Sans gave me this science book a while back and I want to build some stuff to test what I learned. But I need more springs and hinges.”

“Ooh, when it's done, tell me all about it! I'm not too big on the science side but, like, I love seeing your projects come to life!” Catty rang up the sale and handed Frisk some coins. “There you go! One dollar and forty five cents in change.”

“Thanks Catty. Tell Bratty I said hello!”

“I will! Thank you for stopping by!”

Frisk walked out of the store carrying plastic bags filled with old technology to find Poncho waiting outside.

“Hey, sorry it took so long. Thanks for waiting around.”

“Yo, no problem. It's getting a little late though.”

“Yeah. We should start heading home. I can walk you to your place.”

“Sure, that'd be great!”

The two children began walking down the street, but were interrupted by a beeping sound. Frisk stopped walking and put down one bag in order to pull out their cell phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey Frisk.”

“Hey Asriel! How's it going?”

“It's going pretty good, for the most part. There is a slight snag, though.”

“What kind of snag?”

“Well, originally Papyrus was going to pick me up from All Fine Labs and bring me back home, but his car has a flat tire. He just called to let us know. Can you tell mom what's up and not to worry?”

“Actually I'm not at home either. I just left Joe's House of Stuff. But when I get home I will let her
know. Unless it would be faster to just text her or call her."

"That might be easier, to be honest. I'll do that after this call."

"...I'm not criticizing, but why didn't you call her directly, instead of me?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone line.

"I, uh. I don't know."

"Well... I'm glad you did anyway."

"Yeah... me too. Okay, hanging up to call mom, bye."

"Bye!"

The line went dead and Frisk put the phone back in their pocket, and picked up their plastic sack of stuff.

"Sorry about that."

"It's cool. Hey, I got way into the Arcade stuff so I forgot to ask, what movie do you want to make fun of tomorrow during the Riff Off?"

"...honestly, I don't know. Not sure I can focus on that. So much stuff is supposed to happen this summer... and that's assuming I even make it that far."

"What?"

Frisk bit their lip for a moment, frustrated at their sudden outburst.

"Well... the last two Fridays, somebody has tried to kill me. Once is chance, twice is coincidence, but if it happens a third time? That's a pattern."

The two children walked in awkward silence for a minute, interrupted only by a rock monster rolling by them on the sidewalk with its own distracted "sup" as a greeting.

"...here's my street."

Frisk looked up and saw that they had reached the turn to Poncho's home.

"Well. Here we are, then. It was nice hanging out today."

"Yeah. I'll see you tomorrow Frisk."

"Yeah. See you."

Frisk watched Poncho walk down the street, then turn to head up the sidewalk to one house in particular. Another monster with a similarly reptilian face was sitting on the steps; Poncho's sister.

"You're late for dinner again."

"I know."

"Mom and Dad are going to throw a fit."

"Worth it."
Frisk abruptly started walking again, a hot, prickly sensation rising on the back of their neck. That had only gotten a few dozen steps when their phone beeped again, and once more they had to stop and leave a bag on the ground to pull out their phone and respond.

5:29 PM SockPuppet90: hey frisk

5:29 PM SockPuppet90: managed to get my phone to link to the wifi hotspot at the labs through the dimensional bridge

5:29 PM SockPuppet90: not sure if you heard but were all coming back today

5:30 PM SockPuppet90: should be on the ground tonight

5:30 PM SockPuppet90: probably past your bedtime though

5:30 PM SockPuppet90: n e way

5:30 PM SockPuppet90: took a lot of pics at the smithsnoian

5:31 PM: wow thats even better than the smithsonian

5:31 PM SockPuppet90: cant send now data is limited through the bridge

5:31 PM SockPuppet90: hah

5:31 PM: hey sasn

5:31 PM SockPuppet90: yeah

5:31 PM: did you hear the one about the amateur photographer who never charged his customers

5:31 PM: he was working for exposure

5:32 PM SockPuppet90: omg we have to spring that one on papyrus

5:32 PM: yeah

5:32 PM SockPuppet90: gonna catch some stratospheric z s now

5:32 PM SockPuppet90: take care buddy

5:32 PM: you too

Frisk put their phone back in their pocket, picked up the bag, and started walking again.

Officer Steve stared at the door to the shelter. It seemed intact, and more significantly, the door handle seemed like a much more modern upgrade or replacement to whatever mechanism had previously latched it shut. No visible hinges, meaning it would swing inwards; not ideal for a small
space like a shelter, but it made sense to keep the hinges on the inside to keep the door from being taken apart. Also, an inward swinging door avoided some of the problems of fallen debris falling into the stairwell and obstructing the exit.

Behind and above him, Deputy Jim was staring at what was left of the smoldering brick fire pit.

“I got some papers out of the flames, but not enough to tell what they were supposed to be.”

“Hmmm. This door might be trapped. Don't see a trigger on the outside, which is where it would need to be to disarm it if you wanted back in.” Officer Steve reached out towards the door and carefully pushed on it with one hand, flashlight in the other. It opened easily, so clearly the hinges were also new, or at least they had been oiled... and perhaps more importantly, whoever had been maintaining the place had not had the time or inclination or reason to lock it.

“...huh. Must have been an old fallout shelter. I haven't seen one of these in a while. One that was intact, I mean.”

“How old, do you think? Cuban Missile Crisis?”

“Maybe not that old. The design looks like one I saw in an old Popular Mechanics magazine. Decorative concrete and brickwork on top for a grill or picnic setup, and underneath that you have your bunks, storage lockers, everything. All of it accessed with a simple stairway and a sheet metal cover on top to keep the rain out.” After scanning the floor for trip wires and pressure plates, Officer Steve stepped into the shelter proper and looked around. “Definitely one bunk's been used. Smells like... is that soup?”

“Yeah.” Deputy Jim sniffed. “Chicken noodle I think.”

“Huh.” One storage locker was carefully opened, revealing four cans of generic store brand chicken noodle soup, a can opener, and a camping stove. “Must have been a sale.”

“Anything else?”

Officer Steve opened another storage locker. “Flashlight, matches, pencils. No paper.”

“Guess we know where that went.”

“Yeah. It's a little weird, but I don't see a gun or ammo or anything like that, nothing that really indicates a threat. For all we know this is just somebody's Plan B while they job search or something. Squatting is technically illegal but I'd hate to run somebody in if they're just trying to get back on their feet.”

“You know, thinking about it some more... even if O'Dell was here, any evidence we did find would probably get tossed without a proper warrant.”

“Right. Fruit of the poison tree.”

“The unattended fire pit's a hazard though. I'll report that. Might as well move on. You wanted to meet at the Old Cottle Place?”

“Yeah, or close to it.” Officer Steve walked out of the fallout shelter, closing the door behind him. Then stopped, turned around, and opened the door again.

“Hold up.”
“Huh?”

“I know this thing is mostly buried underground, so it's not like we can check dimensions, but... the brickwork on the back wall is a bit different from the rest, and the paint is a slightly different color.”

“So... a fallout shelter inside a fallout shelter? Shelterception?”

Officer Steve snorted.

“Stranger things have happened. Besides, it kinda makes sense. Make the entryway to the shelter look empty, abandoned, or ruined, so that if anyone breaks in, they don't see any reason to stick around. Meanwhile you and yours are safe behind a secret door, with more supplies and room...”

Officer Steve's voice trailed off as he looked back through the doorway; the door had partially closed, and he reached out and shut it entirely. Mere seconds later the door swung open again and Officer Steve was sprinting out with his cell phone in one hand, narrowly missing a collision with the deputy as he rocketed up the stairs.

“We have to get back to Ebott's Wake right now.”

“What? What did you find??”

The two men sprinted towards their vehicles and Officer Steve swore under his breath as he tried to thumb-type a text message while running.

“God dammit. Justin even said he'd go underground literally.”

Joe stared at the completed device on the table. It was about the same size as the original Amplifier; what had been saved by removing redundant or unnecessary components had been counteracted by the inclusion of multiple safeguards. On the table next to it were the different pieces of cut wire that had been used by some of the lab staff to determine who was to test the new machine, after Brendan had complained at length about being volunteered without his knowledge or consent.

The short wire had ultimately been pulled by Brendan, in what was either destiny, karma, or some sort of cosmic joke. The man in question was presently in the restroom, trying to get the nervousness out of his system... along with lunch from earlier in the day. The last time Alex had checked in on him to make sure he hadn't choked to death, or passed out and cracked his head on a toilet bowl, he said that Brendan had progressed to dry heaves.

Even understanding how what had happened to him got exaggerated in the retelling, it was hard for Joe not to be at least a little offended.

The beeping of his cell phone shook Joe out of his annoyed introspection, and he pulled it out of his pocket and unlocked it.

5:39 PM DARE_2B_Stupid: ODELL MOVING ON AL FINE LABS ALL HADS ON DEC
It took a few seconds for Joe's brain to process the text, by which point the phone was ringing. Out of reflexive muscle memory, Joe answered.

"Joe Stanton here."

"Joe it's Steve. Lock down All Fine Labs now."

"...okay. I'm heading for the security office right now." Joe sprinted out of the meeting room and skidded on the floor as he tried to change directions. "What's going on Steve? What did you find?"

"O'Dell's hiding spot. He tried covering his tracks but I found his map and his notes. He's got a team and they're heading your way. They may already be there. Shelter in place. I sent a group text to the rest of Shop Class so they should be on their-"

Officer Steve's words were drowned out by the sound of screeching metal and splintering wood, and behind the polarized lenses, Joe's eyes began to glow purple.

"That's not a good sound. What's happening Joe?"

"Either somebody else tried to beat my screw up last night, or they're already here. Steve I gotta call Alphys."

"Watch yourself man."

"Believe me, I'm watching everything right now!"

Joe ended the call, speed dialed Alphys, and held the phone up to his ear.

"Hello? Joe?"

"Doc, lock down the lab. Steve just called. He said O'Dell is heading here."

"What?!

"Call security let them know. I think he's already inside and he probably brought friends. Not sure how they got in but five bucks says the hole in the roof. I'm heading there now to double check. And doc? You might want to call Undyne."

"Okay! Just, j-just be careful!"

Fingers danced up and down a keyboard, while a completely different set of fingers manipulated stops and valves. Despite the cooling air around him, Hal Greene was sweating with exertion, until finally the last notes of the song finished.

The small crowd that had gathered outside the Arboretum began to clap and whistle.

"Free bird!"

"You can go right to hell, buddy." Hal pointed to the man that had called out a request, but he was grinning. "Remember! Music hath charms to soothe the savage beets, and when you think about it, trees are just beets that are harder to chew and with less sugar. Also bigger. Probably should have led with that. Who knows? Doesn't matter-"

There was a buzzing sound, and Hal reached down to grab his phone and unlock it. In a split
second, his entire facial expression changed, and a few of the people at the front of the crowd stepped back out of reflex. As rapidly as possible, Hal divested himself of the bizarre musical instrument and left it on the sidewalk.

“Watch this for me. Somebody's asking for a face full of pipe wrench.”

The mechanic began running down the street at top speed, leaving a crowd of confused onlookers in his wake, as per his custom. A few seconds later, tires squealed as a car took a corner too sharply and drove up to the Arboretum, stopping abruptly. A man rolled down the driver's side window and leaned out.

“Hey, wasn't Hal Greene supposed to be here?”

“You just missed him!” A helpful music enthusiast replied. “He said something about somebody asking for a face full of pipe wrench and then he took off like a shot. I'd hate to be that guy right now!”

The driver's face became visibly paler compared to when he had driven up.

“Yeah... me too.”

“Grillby, you're in charge till I get back. Just got a group text. The other shoe has dropped.”

Grillby looked up from the bar to see Elijah McGraw running through the bar, trying to move around tables as swiftly and safely as possible.

“...how bad?”

“Somewhere between really bad and fuck we're all gonna die.”

“...that's bad.”

“Yeah. Not sure if I'll be able to answer calls or texts if something comes up, so use your best-”

There was a resounding crack, and a subtle crunching sound, as Eli pushed opened the door and caused it to collide with an obstruction almost immediately.

“Oh, shit.”

Eli re-appeared in Grillby's field of view, dragging somebody inside by the ankles.

“I think I broke his nose when I opened the door but I can't stick around. Grillby, can you watch him? Monster soda, on the house.”

“...sure thing.”

“Thanks man!”

Eli disappeared again and Grillby walked out from behind the bar with a bottle of soda. As he got closer, he saw the man's eyes flutter open and noticed immediately how the man was reaching for something in his pocket before he lost consciousness again.

Carefully, Grillby pulled the man upright and carried him over to the bar, arranged him on a bar stool, and waved to one of the other employees.
“...Darcy. I think this man has a broken nose. I don't know the proper human medical procedure for this.”

“I do. I got this. Go get the first aid kit from the kitchen for me.”

“...on my way.”

Grillby walked into the kitchen, grabbed the first aid kit from the box mounted on the wall, and one shoe came down on the lever at the base of a trash can, and the lid flipped open; a flaming hand opened up and the switchblade that Grillby had pulled out of the man's pocket while carrying him was dropped into the garbage.

“...if you brought that to cause trouble, you have no idea how lucky you are.”

“Hey, Mindy, can you hold down the fort for a while? Something major just came up.”

“Something major like helping Papyrus find his cell phone again?”

“Okay, that's not a fair comparison for reasons I am trying to think of as fast as I can-”

The Librarby doors opened and some subconscious instinct demanded Van Garrett's attention focus onto the newcomers. Two men, wearing too many layers for summer weather, even if they were expecting it to rain. And both of them were reaching inside their jackets for something at the same time.

The librarian stood up behind the service desk, staring at the men, who froze in place.

“Welcome to the Ebott's Wake Librarby. Can I help you with anything?”

One man recovered from whatever internal conflict had immobilized him before, and finished pulling out a pistol.

“Yeah, you can hold still for a second.”

“Nuh uh.” Van Garrett ducked underneath his desk, prompting the two men to aim at the desk itself where anyone hiding behind it would have to be, and fire several times each. Neither one noticed the arm come up from underneath it-

“AUGH WHAT THE SHIT-”

One man staggered backwards and collapsed on the ground; his companion turned to see a large book, either an encyclopedia or dictionary, lying on the floor nearby after bouncing off of its target. Returning his gaze towards the desk, he yelled and panic-fired twice at the several hundred pounds of angry librarian running towards him. Van Garrett's hand closed around the wrist holding the pistol and squeezed until the fingers went limp and the firearm dropped uselessly to the floor. The librarian raised a leg and stomped on the ground, an action that was punctuated by the tell tale sounds of metal deforming and breaking.

“Is everyone okay? Did anyone get hit?”

There was the sound of crying from one patron, and the muffled voices of others trying to comfort them, as well as the more distinctive sounds of somebody throwing up.

“Whoever that is being sick, don't worry about it. I'll clean it up later. Mindy, you alright?”
The pale yellow monster poked their head out from behind the other end of the desk.

“What just happened??”

“Not sure myself. Adrenaline kind of kicked in, but I do know that these two... gentlemen... brought firearms into a public building that specifically prohibits them. So... right. Okay. Had to think for a moment. While I keep them company, can you call the police department to report what happened?”

“...sure. Uh. Are you okay?”

“Well, the adrenaline's wearing off. Feels like a pulled a muscle or something.”

“It's just... it looks like you're bleeding? I think?”

Van Garrett looked down and saw that a patch of red was spreading through one side of his shirt.

“...oh.”

“I can do green bullets, do you need help?”

“Uhm... uh. Hold on. Trying to think...” Van Garrett looked down at the wreckage of the pistol he had stomped on. “No. No, I'm good. It's just a twenty two, and I don't think it hit any major organs or blood vessels. I barely even felt it... okay, I say that but I'm feeling it now and I'm getting kinda lightheaded so maybe your idea is the right one after-”

The man lying on the floor lunged for his own fallen pistol, several feet away; the librarian stepped forward and planted one foot squarely on the man's knee and shifted his weight, and the man on the floor began cursing at the top of his lungs.

“Hey. Stop that. I'm trying to keep a lid on it but you guys are making me angrier than I've been in a year and a half.” Mike's voice was low and even, but was still carrying through the rest of the building. “You have no idea how close I am to hanging both of you assholes upside down by your feet and swinging a baseball bat at your heads until fucking candy comes out. So stop tempting me. Got it?”

Green bubbles floated over to Mike and popped as they touched him, surrounding him in a green glow.

“Is that better?”

“...I think so. Yeah. I mean. I'll need some X-Rays and probably some antibiotics later but I'm not going to bleed out or anything.”

“Okay then.” Mindy picked up the phone on the desk and started tapping buttons. “Calling the police now.”

“Great. It'll be a while before they get here so we might as well pass the time. How about twenty questions? First question, and I'm pretty sure I know the answer but I'll ask anyway...” Van Garrett tightened his grip around the wrist of the man who was still standing. “Are you working with Thomas O'Dell?”

A camera was held up, taking picture after picture of the whiteboards and the information on them.
A few feet away, gloved hands grabbed the machinery on the table, putting it in an empty backpack and putting it on, cinching the shoulder straps.

“Everyone remember their part of the plan?”

Three heads nodded back, and O'Dell smiled.

“Good. This is our last hurrah. So pull out all the stops. Let’s move!”

The four people in the room ran out, and then split up, each traveling in a different direction. O'Dell took corners at high speed as if he knew the building layout like the back of his hand, which was understandable given how much time he had spent memorizing as much of it as he could find-

O'Dell's chest slammed into the floor a split second after his legs slammed into something else; pushing himself upright, he saw that a box had appeared in the middle of the hallway for no discernible reason.

“If you wanted a tour of All Fine Labs, you could have just made an appointment.”

A man turned the corner wearing wrinkled clothes under a dirty, stained lab coat, and sunglasses on his face... that failed to completely hide the glowing purple rings of light beneath them. O'Dell got to his feet carefully.

“...well. This is awkward.”

“Hey, you're the one who broke in. Don't look for sympathy from me.”

“I mean, I've never done a one-on-one fight like this before.”

“Oh. Me neither. Fuck it. We'll make it up as we go. Sound good?”

“Sure.” O'Dell reached behind him, and Joe's own hand whipped forward. Yellow energy arced off of his fingertips and grounded itself on O'Dell, who jumped back, cursing and shaking the arm that got zapped.

“That was Energy magic. That's not all it can do, by the way. You'll be lucky to walk away from this with just second degree burns. And there's six other flavors to try, too. So, keeping that in mind, how about we just call it here? Good game, respectable attempt, and all that?”

“...nice try, pal, but I'm not an idiot.”

Joe smirked. “Evidence suggests otherw-”

“I know how this kind of stuff ends. If I do surrender, there's no way you're going to hand me over to the police after what I've already seen. Either I get sucker punched as soon as I let my guard down, or I spend the rest of my probably drastically shortened life in some sound proof test chamber with one way glass and lots of floor drains for easy cleanup.”

O'Dell turned as if to run, but immediately turned back and lunged towards Joe as he tried to follow, a knife blade glinting in his hand. The scientist jumped back, bringing up a faint shimmer of light blue light that the metal glanced off of.

“Clever. Very clever. You totally got me there with the fake retreat. Didn't do you any good but A for effort.”

“Are you always this much of a patronizing asshole?”
Joe grinned.

“Buddy, my high school class voted me *Most Likely To Be A Patronizing Asshole* in the school yearbook.”

O’Dell reached for something behind him while turning to keep his arm hidden from Joe, but continued to run; it took a second or two for Joe to start moving.

“Damn, I knew it was coming and I still fell for it. Hey! Come back here!”

“God damn monsters and their god damn puzzles.”

The man in the hunter's camo vest and pants glared at the array of multicolored tiles. The woman next to him walked up to the one tile that stuck out further than the others and tapped it with the end of her baseball bat.

“Look, O’Dell said we need to get into Dimensional Storage and that's what the sign says, so we gotta try something.”

After the second tap, there was a whirring and clicking sound from above, and the man pointed his shotgun at the ceiling; some sort of panel had slid to one side and a device emerged, surrounded by flickering light patterns that resolved themselves into a tall skeleton wearing some very impractical body armor, centered on the tile.

“GREETINGS, PUZZLE ENTHUSIASTS AND OR ALL FINE LABS EMPLOYEES! IF YOU ARE HEARING AND SEEING THIS MESSAGE FROM THE GREAT PAPYRUS, WHO IS ME BY THE WAY, THEN YOU MUST BE ATTEMPTING TO ACCESS DIMENSIONAL STORAGE! AT THE REQUEST OF THE GREAT DOCTOR ALPHYS, I HAVE DEVISED THE MOST FIENDISH OF PUZZLES IN ORDER TO PROTECT IT FROM UNAUTHORIZED TAMPERING AND OUTRIGHT THEFT! I PRESENT TO YOU THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL MULTICOLORED TILE MAZE!”

The skeleton hologram held out its arms wide, and different sections of tiles began to light up and rise from the floor.

“RED TILES PRESENT AN OBSTRUCTION TO PASSAGE! YOU CANNOT WALK ON THEM! YELLOW TILES ARE CHARGED WITH ELECTRICITY! GREEN TILES ACTIVATE AN ALARM AND THE ANTI-TAMPERING DEFENSES! BLUE TILES ARE ACTUALLY WATER HELD IN SUSPENSION USING DIMENSIONAL FIELDS! SWIM THROUGH THEM IF YOU LIKE! PURPLE TILES ARE COVERED IN A SLIPPERY SOAP! IF YOU WALK ON THEM, YOU WILL SLIDE ALL THE WAY TO THE NEXT TILE! ORANGE TILES ARE ORANGE SCENTED! THEY WILL MAKE YOU SMELL DELICIOUS! THAT IS LITERALLY ALL THEY DO! FINALLY, PINK TILES HAVE NO FUNCTION WHATSOEVER, FEEL FREE TO WALK, RUN, JUMP, AND DANCE ALL OVER THEM! DON’T BE AFRAID TO EXPRESS YOURSELF!”

The various tiles descended into the floor again.

“ONE MORE THING! EVERY TIME YOU TAKE A STEP, THE TILES AROUND THE TILE YOU STEP ON WILL RECONFIGURE THEMSELVES DEPENDING ON YOUR DIRECTION OF TRAVEL! EACH TILE ON ALL FOUR SIDES OF THE TILE THAT YOU STEP ON WILL CYCLE THROUGH TO THE NEXT COLOR IN THE SPECTRUM, WHICH PROGRESSES
FROM RED TO ORANGE TO YELLOW TO GREEN TO BLUE TO PURPLE TO PINK AND BACK TO RED, IN THAT ORDER! YOUR GOAL IS TO REACH THE TWO ACCESS SWITCHES ON EITHER SIDE OF THE DOOR AND FLIP THEM, THEN TO REACH THE DOOR ITSELF! GOOD LUCK! I BELIEVE IN YOU!”

The hologram flickered out, and the woman shook her head. “Did you catch all of that? I lost track after—”

“I ALMOST FORGOT!” The hologram flashed back into existence and both invaders jumped back in alarm. “IF YOU GET STUCK, JUST JUMP ON THE TILE YOU ARE ON THREE TIMES TO ACTIVATE THE FAST RETURN AND PUZZLE RESET FEATURE! YOU WILL BE BRIDGED BACK TO THE START OF THE PUZZLE AND ALL THE TILE COLORS WILL RESET TO THEIR DEFAULTS!”

The skeleton vanished again, and the man shook his head after a moment of stunned silence.

“God damn monsters and their god damn puzzles.”

“Sorry doctor. We've got nothing. Most of the Fabrication cameras still don't work and we haven't been able to repair or rewire anything until the roof was fixed—”

“Whoa!” Another man in a security uniform tapped his partner's shoulder and pointed at the screen. “Hey Paul, rewind a few seconds! I saw something!”

Paul grabbed the computer mouse and started clicking options; the images from one of the two cameras still working in Fabrication appeared in another window, with an earlier time stamp. After a few moments, two figures appeared and quickly disappeared. The first figure was unfamiliar, but the second one was wearing a lab coat.

“Well. That's not good. Okay, general alarm going up. Locking everything else down.” Paul clicked some other options and alarms began buzzing, while a synthesized voice spoke from the loudspeakers.

“ATTENTION. A SECURITY NOTICE HAS BEEN ISSUED. ALL FINE LABS IS NOW UNDER LOCKDOWN. PLEASE SHELTER IN PLACE UNTIL THE LOCKDOWN HAS BEEN LIFTED. INTRUDER COUNTERMEASURES ARE ON STANDBY.”

“Doctor Alphys?”

Alphys turned away from the screens and the two security officers in the booth to see Asriel standing in the doorway.

“Asriel, I told you to stay in my office!”

“I was, but an alarm went off! Not this one, something about somebody trying to—”

Another set of alarms activated, ones with higher pitch, and the loudspeakers came to life again.

“ATTENTION. THIS IS A GREEN TILE ALARM. UNAUTHORIZED TAMPERING WITH SECURITY MEASURES DETECTED OUTSIDE DIMENSIONAL STORAGE. THIS IS A GREEN TILE ALARM—”

“Oh no. Paul! Bring up the camera outside D-D-Dimensional Storage!”
“Way ahead of you.” Paul pointed towards another window on his monitor, showing two humans dressed in a mix of street clothes and hunting gear, one with a baseball bat and the other with a shotgun, trying to navigate the tile maze outside of Dimensional Storage. “Doc, we don't have enough people to cover the whole lab. Do we send somebody to stop them?”

“...no. I'll take care of it. You two keep an eye on the rest of the lab. If anything comes up, I trust you to use your best judgment. When Undyne arrives, let her in. If the police show up, let them in too. Asriel, you stay here with Paul and Graham!” Alphys ran out of the security booth and Graham turned to call after her.

“Wait, where are you going?!”

“To Advanced Materials!”

“What?? Why?!”

“Because that's where Project NEO is!!”

“Damn, why couldn't you have attacked this morning? I can think of like, six or seven experiments you would have been perfect for!”

“Is that how you see people? Just test subjects and means to an end?”

Joe considered his words while also trying to count up O'Dell's shots; there had been two while running through hallways, then three after O'Dell had tried to take cover in one of the machine shops; Joe recognized the weapon in the man's hand as a revolver, but wasn't sure if its cylinder held five or six shots. “Not people. Just you. You're not really a person anymore.”

O'Dell didn't respond, and Joe licked his lips and doubled down on the psychological warfare.

“You gave up everything that made you who you were, so you could follow the Guardian song and dance. Everything that made you unique. Now you're no different from any of them. Interchangeable. If O'Dell died, that would be a tragedy. But you're just another murdering cultist now. Nobody's going to give a fuck when you bite it, except for the people that have to clean up the mess.”

Still no response, and Joe trained his senses, both the ones he was born with and the more recent additions... and found that O'Dell had made his escape.

“...you sunnovabitch. Nobody walks out on Joe Stanton when he's ranting!”

“Shit! It's another dead end!” The woman backtracked again without looking where she was going, slid on a purple tile and fell onto a green tile. Still, the alarms were already going off so it didn't really matter. “If I ever find the skeleton monster who made this I'm going to rip his skull off and beat him to death with it!”

“Dammit, Thomas didn't say anything about there being a puzzle down here.” The man turned back towards the door to the rest of the lab basement, holding up the shotgun out of reflex in response to some vague noise. “Do you think he didn't know, or is he just hanging us out to dry while he goes after something else?”
“Doesn't matter. You heard him. This is our last hurrah. We either get into their top secret storage and get something we can use against them, or we buy everyone else time to wreck the place and get out. Okay, fuck this, I'm resetting.”

The woman tapped the tile she was standing on three times with her foot, and was surrounded by a blue light; an infinitesimal time span later she was standing on the tile that had previously shown the skeleton hologram. The tiles all switched colors one by one in rapid sequence, creating an eye-straining kaleidoscopic effect.

“What the hell just-” the woman stopped talking and keeled over, throwing up on the floor; the man with the shotgun turned in alarm.

“What the- hey, are you okay?”

“What do you think,” the woman growled as her stomach calmed down and she caught her breath. “The stupid thing used magic on me. Like a portal or something. I thought when the hologram said bridge, it would actually make a bridge above the tiles or something.”

There was the sound of a door opening and both humans turned to the door they had walked through, which was still shut.

“Hey, was there another big door like that on the other side when we were coming down?”

The woman shrugged and got to her feet, hefting her baseball bat. “Maybe. Probably. O'Dell said something about how most of the buildings were made of modular components but I didn't know why he thought that was so important.”

The door to the Dimensional Storage access puzzle opened, and the two humans saw... a shape that they recognized from news reports and videos of the Anti Monster League attack on the hospital. A massive animal skull made of metal, with glowing lights in the eye sockets, floating several feet above the floor. There were differences in the fine details, but the general idea was the same.

“Okay, maybe Thomas did hang us out to dry,” the woman muttered, then raised her voice as she started to run. “SPLIT UP!”

“What?!"

The giant skull started to rotate, tracking the woman.

“It can only aim at one of us at a time! Shoot the god damn thing!”

The man looked down at the shotgun in his hands like he had never seen it before, then raised it, pressed the stock to his shoulder and fired. The first shot bounced off of the plating harmlessly, while the second missed due to a combination of recoil and the machine dropping about two feet in altitude. The shotgun was cracked open and the man frantically patted his pockets, trying to find some spare shells; by the time he pulled them out, dropped them from shaking hands, picked them up off the floor and managed to slot one into the breech, the skull machine had turned back until it was facing him.

The man barely had time to snap the breech closed again before a pulse of yellow light emerged from the “jaws”, slammed into him and shoved him across the floor to crash into the door to Dimensional Storage.

With a battle cry that itself could have been used as an offensive weapon, the woman charged towards the machine and started swinging at what appeared to be cables, wires, and pipes on the
back of the skull, where there were obvious gaps in the armor plating. The machine immediately began to lose its equilibrium, spraying gas and spilling fluid onto the floor and eventually colliding with a wall with a tremendous crash.

“WARNING. DIMENSIONAL STORAGE HAS BEEN COMPROMISED. TO PREVENT DIMENSIONAL RECURSION, ALL DIMENSIONAL BRIDGE SYSTEMS HAVE AUTOMATICALLY BEEN SHUT DOWN.”

The woman with the baseball bat turned to face the tile puzzle, almost falling over and coughing as she tried to catch her breath. All the tiles had turned gray, and one half of the door was open, sparking intermittently and making a loud angry hum from time to time as actuators fought each other in their attempts to move it back into its original position.

“Ow.”

The man with the shotgun picked himself up off of the ground, and stared at his weapon, now uselessly bent by the impact with the wall.

“Hey. We're in. Looks like the beam that hit you got part of the door too.”

“...oh. That's great. Maybe there's aspirin in there.”

After a few moments hesitation by the malfunctioning door, both invaders walked inside to see what looked like wooden boxes arranged in rows and stacked on top of each other on shelving units that resembled storage lockers or post office mailboxes. Each box had a set of cables coming out of one side that led up to the ceiling, and increasing numbers of cables were bundled together as they got closer to the center of the room, where some massive machine stood.

“Whoa... how the hell are we going to find anything in here? I mean it's not like they're going to leave a map lying around. Or would they-”

“Hey.” The woman interrupted, pointing her baseball bat at a sign that said “HIGH SECURITY STORAGE” outside of a wire cage surrounded by different devices that were obviously intended as defenses. A baseball bat swung at the padlock closing the door and managed to break the mechanism latching onto the hasp after three tries, and the woman pulled open the door.

None of the devices outside reacted.

“They must have lost power when the door was broken. Or when the computer thing said it was shut down.”

“Maybe. It's not like anything down here makes any sense.” The man walked into the cage and pointed at a pile of parts. “Hey. I'm no scientist but that looks a lot like what O'Dell grabbed upstairs. Let's get it.”

“Alright.” The woman shrugged and pulled off the messenger bag hanging off one shoulder, unzipping it and grabbing the parts. “Could always use a spare whatever-it-is. What about you?”

“Uh... damn. I was hoping to find some weapons or something.” A hand reached out and pulled on a lever, and a segment of the wall slid to one side.

The room was suddenly illuminated by a strange light coming from inside what looked like a glass jar, capped on each end with some sort of peculiar improvised technology. The man saw some strange phosphorescence on his skin, and turned to see the same effect on the face of his partner.
“It's giving off ultraviolet light. We used it to keep track of who was paying to get into the club each night. This thing's like if a lava lamp and a black light had a demon baby.” Slowly, hands reached inside the alcove in the wall and pulled out the jar. The man had to squint against the bizarre radiation, but eventually he made out the label on the top of the cylinder.

“What the hell does DT stand for?”

“Isn't that what happens when you drink too much for a long time and you try to stop cold turkey?”

The man shook his head. “Yeah, that’s called the DT’s but that stands for something. I know this place is crazy but I don’t think that's what this means. It's gotta be something else.”

“...what's the name of that chemical in marijuana that does all the mind altering stuff?”

“That's THC I think. Still, that would be something, wouldn't it? Exposing the monster science lab as part of a drug ring?”

“Whatever it is, it was important enough that they put it in the high security part of their high security basement vault. Let's just grab it and run.”

“Right. Too big for the backpack though. Gonna have to carry it.”

“Is it heavy?”

“...no. Actually it weighs less than it looks like it should.” The jar was lifted up and rested on the man's shoulder. “Maybe it's something related to gravity magic or shit like that.”

“That's gotta be something. Alright. Let's get out of here.” The two burglars left the caged enclosure, surrounded by still non-functional security devices, and made their way back toward the grinding, sparking open door.

“...hey, do you hear something?”

“You mean, besides the alarms, the door breaking down, and everything else?” The man snorted.

“I'm serious. I thought I heard an old dial up modem just a second ago.”

“...well. Thought I saw some old TV sets with actual dials back in their.” The man pointed one thumb back towards the Dimensional Storage room. “Monsters make all their technology out of human trash so I wouldn't be surprised if there was a modem in there.”

“Yeah. That was probably it. Alright. Let's meet up with Thomas and get out of here-”

A lightning bolt slammed into the ground in front of the two humans, and they jumped back. A yellow lizard wearing a lab coat staggered out from behind the wreckage of the giant metal skull machine, sparks arcing off of her claws.

“You're not going anywhere.”

The woman with the baseball bat yelled and charged forward, and a bolt of lightning slammed into her chest, knocking her on her back. The baseball bat went spinning out of her hands and she started alternating between groaning in pain and swearing.

“I got full marks in my Energy magic c-classes. And I know it's amps that stop human hearts, not volts.” Alphys turned her eyes towards the man, and they immediately opened wider and focused on the jar the man was holding. “What the- how d-did you get that?!?”
“It was as easy as flipping a switch. Why do you care? Hey, if you know what it is, then what the hell does DT stand for?”

“...you really want to know?”

“I fucking asked, didn't I?”

The scientist snorted. “What you're holding is raw DT Energy, in its unprocessed state after extraction. It stands for De-Termination. It's extremely dangerous. So maybe you should put it down and walk away for your own safety.”

“Nah, I don't think so.” The man stared at the jar some more. “So it's like a poison or something? Toxic waste?”

“Actually it's the opposite. Poison kills you. DT Energy keeps you alive. Even when you shouldn't be.” One claw pointed back towards the Dimensional Storage room doors. “Like what happened to them.”

“Oh please. That's the oldest trick in... the book...” the man slowly turned as the sound of labored breathing and a faint electronic noise, as well as the smell of sulfuric acid, filled the air. The loudspeakers burst to life with static as he saw a pile of misshapen, fluctuating goop that seemed to be a hundred faces, all writhing and mixing with each other.

“COME JOIN THE FUN.”

“Whatever you do, do not say you will join.” Dr. Alphys' voice was shaking, and the man found himself backing away from the... it had to be a monster, right? It looked a lot like that giant gloopy dog thing.

There was the scrape of wood on metal, and then part of a baseball bat was sticking out of the monster; the woman had gotten up while everyone else was focused on the new arrival. Slowly, the bat was sucked in and the woman stepped back in surprise as the monster produced several crunching sounds.

“Absorbed.”

“That didn't work.”

“I'm loving it.”

“What the hell?! I thought monsters turned to dust when they died!”

“Memoryheads are made of bits of monsters that can't die. Or should have died. We only ever managed to catch that one, and keep it contained in Dimensional Storage. So nice work letting it loose.”

“Hey. I didn't do shit. You're the one who blasted your own security system.”

The Memoryhead started moving again, in the direction of Dr. Alphys, who backed up immediately.

“No no no. I don't want to join! I don't want to join!”

“What the hell does that even mean?!” The woman yelled, trying to climb over the wreckage of the skull machine.
“Memoryheads are made of bad memories. If you have a bad life experience, they think that you’re a piece of them and they try to combine with you to become whole again.” Alphys visibly relaxed at the Memoryhead stopped moving towards her. The amalgamation seemed confused for a few moments before moving towards the man holding the DT Energy container, who snarled and swung the jar at the creature.

“DON’T DO THAT!” Alphys shrieked in a panic. “If you break the containment unit you'll contaminate all of us!”

“You can't tell me what to do!” The man retorted and swung again; either from sweat or from fatigue, the device wrenched itself from the man's grip and slammed into the floor, bouncing and skidding and spinning around in the direction of the Memoryhead, and venting a black, strangely luminescent vapor through the center of a spiderweb of cracks.

Alphys screamed and ran away, trapping over the wreckage from Project NEO and scrabbling at the ground. Looking behind her, she saw that some of the strange, glowing substance was snaking through the air towards her like ink spreading through water, and it seemed that her entire body locked up in terror.

Memories flashed before her eyes, memories of monsters screaming and crying and begging for help as their bodies fell apart. Tears filled Alphys' own eyes and she looked away. There was a terrible symmetry to it. The irresponsible scientist being undone by her own-

Something grabbed Alphys by the arm and pulled. The scientist opened her eyes and realized that she had been pulled completely off of the ground by... a green vine?? She saw the doors to the puzzle chamber pass by and landed heavily by the stairs. Looking up, Alphys saw Asriel standing about halfway up the stairs, with another vine from his other hand wrapped around the safety railing.

“...Asriel?? I thought I told you to stay in the security office.”

“You can't tell me what to do. You're not my mom.” Asriel blinked. “Unless we count the whole science project flower thing. Then you kind of are. That's weird to think about, though.”

“Yeah. It kind of is.” Alphys pulled herself to her feet with no small amount of difficulty, as everything was still shaking. “Uhm. Thank you. For helping me there. If you hadn't p-pulled me away, I... I would have-”

“Don't worry about it. The only one of your experiments that gets to turn on you is me. And I already decided when you and Undyne have kids, I'm going to be a really bad influence.”

“...oh. Well. I guess that's fair.” Looking back at the two humans trying to escape a Memoryhead made even more agitated by the influx of DT Energy, Alphys started up the stairs and grabbed Asriel's arm. “Come on. We have to seal off the entire basement now, to keep the DT Energy from contaminating anyone else.”

“...right. If they can escape the Memoryhead, the police can pick them up later.”

“Exactly.” The two monster climbed the stairs as quickly as possible, and Alphys ran over to a console embedded in the wall after the pair reached the ground floor. Claws tapped on buttons and from below, the sounds of doors shutting could be heard. “Uh. How were you planning on being a bad influence to our kids?”

Asriel shrugged. “I figured I'd start with swearing and... hope I can come up with something else
by the time you two get married.”

“Oh. That makes sense. Come on, let's see if we can find Joe.”

“Will you hold fucking still for two seconds?! Making bullet patterns is hard!” Joe waved his hand to try to move the overturned table O'Dell had taken cover behind, but the blue glow was barely a flicker. “And stop hiding behind heavy stuff I can't hit you with!”

“How did this happen? How did you get those powers?” O'Dell was reloading behind the table. Joe could see that easily enough, and could also see that the revolver only held five shots after all, now that he could actually stand still and focus for a few seconds. And it looked like O'Dell only had eight more bullets total on his person.

Once those were used up, it would all come down to fisticuffs.

The man jumped up and opened fire, and Joe ducked behind the wall on the other side of the doorway. Joe made an annoyed noise and clenches his fist until it was surrounded by orange light.

“I won them in the office bingo tournament.” Joe ran across the open doorway to the other side, flinging his glowing hand into the room for a split second. A bowling ball made of orange light arced up and over the table, landing on the other side of the obstruction, and O'Dell felt something slam into his back. Gritting his teeth, the man stood up with revolver at the ready, and fired as Joe ran across the doorway again.

There was a cracking sound as the bullet impacted a wall of green light and splintered it. Another bullet shattered the shield entirely.

“You out of bullets yet?”

“Are you out of magic yet?”

“...you know, actually, I am getting really tired. But I think you'll run out before I do.” Joe swung one hand into the room and O'Dell fired out of reflex. The bullet disintegrated as it met a light blue boxing glove going the other way, but O'Dell froze and the attack passed through him harmlessly. There was the sound of labored breathing both in the room and out in the hallway, and suddenly the lights flickered. A glowing red shape charged into the room and O'Dell fired until the revolver clicked on a cylinder that had already been spent. The red shape crumpled to the ground and faded away, and the lights stopped flickering, and Joe laughed while O'Dell reached behind him again...

“The old jump scare decoy! That's five shots, asshat!” The scientist charged into the room, fists glowing with yellow light. “Now we settle this like-”

There was a report much louder than the revolver had been, and both men staggered backwards. O'Dell from the recoil, and Stanton from the impact of the buckshot. There was a cracking sound in stereo as both men's heads hit the floor.

After nearly ten seconds, one man stirred.

Swearing, and moving with an exaggerated slowness, O'Dell pulled himself to his feet. On the other side of the overturned table, Joe Stanton was splayed out on the floor where he had fallen, an ever widening pool of red spreading out from just below his right elbow, where the rest of his arm used to be. The severed limb itself was lying a few feet away. O'Dell could see the glistening ends of the bones that had been shattered by the impact of the shotgun shell.
Through a supreme act of will, he managed not to throw up, and slowly limped over Stanton's body. The man was probably still alive, but that wouldn't remain the case the way his blood was spilling out. Out in the hallway, O'Dell shook his head, which only made the dizziness and disorientation worse, and moved as quickly as he could... which was not very, with one hand covering his stomach. The kickback from his trick had nothing to brace against and slammed into his gut in a classic example of Newton's Third Law.

Screaming voices, followed immediately by angry instructions that he was too disoriented to parse, caused O'Dell to look up and see that he had stumbled into the main lobby. One of the men behind the security desk was standing up and holding out a taser, and O'Dell raised his gun in response. It was empty, but they had no way of knowing that.

"Pretty sure I can get you. Before you get me. Or after. Now open those doors."

"Put the gun down now, O'Dell."

"That's not happening."

"If you think we're just going to let you walk-"

O'Dell swung his gun away from the guard and towards a monster that was trying to take cover behind the receptionist desk.

"Let's try this again. Open the door or somebody dies. You might survive a gunshot wound but what about him?"

The security guard still sitting down swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down... his throat suddenly felt entirely too dry.

"Open the door, Paul."

The security guards both turned to see Dr. Alphys standing in another lobby doorway, with Prince Asriel behind her.

"...Doc?"

"I'll take responsibility for letting him get away. I'm not putting anybody's life at risk. End the lockdown and open the doors. And O'Dell?" Alphys raised a claw with electricity arcing around it. "You took a hostage. You have leverage. You lose that leverage if he dies. Fire that gun again and it will be the last thing you do in this life, if you're lucky."

O'Dell glared at the scientist and backed towards the doors. The security shutters began to retract as the lockdown was terminated, letting in the distant sounds of sirens, and O'Dell turned to see...

"NOW I UNDERSTAND WHY THE SECURITY SYSTEM WAS ACTIVATED! NOT TO KEEP MISCREANTS OUT, BUT IN!"

"Papyrus watch out!" Asriel yelled. "He's got a-"

O'Dell's pistol swung around but was stopped in its path by a blue glow that slowly pulled the cylinder open. The empty brass floated out, and the glow terminated, causing O'Dell's hand to resume its original trajectory... right into a bone that was glowing light blue. The man cried out in pain and anger, dropping the gun out of reflex.

"NOW THAT WE'VE SETTLED THAT, IT'S TIME TO SIT DOWN AND TALK!"
“...are you fucking serious?!” O'Dell goggled at the skeleton.

“LANGUAGE, PLEASE! THERE ARE CHILDREN PRESENT! NOW... I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU DECIDED YOU HAD TO ATTACK A PLACE THAT MOSTLY MAKES CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS AND HOME APPLIANCES, BUT I KNOW THAT IF WE TALK THIS OUT, YOU WILL SEE THAT THIS WAS UNNECESSARY! THERE IS NO REASON TO ATTACK ALL FINE LABS, OR MONSTERS, OR HUMANS, OR ANYONE AT ALL!”

“...is this a joke? Are you brain dead?!"

“WELL, AS A MATTER OF FACT, I DO NOT HAVE A PHYSICAL BRAIN LIKE HUMANS DO-”

“That was a rhetorical question dammit!"

“OH. I APOLOGIZE. I DID NOT REALIZE THIS.” Papyrus smiled. “BUT SEE HOW WELL THIS IS GOING? WE ARE COMMUNICATING AND NOBODY IS BEING VIOLENT! PROGRESS IS ALREADY BEING MADE! ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS STOP FIGHTING AND WE CAN TALK EVERYTHING ELSE OUT, TOO! I PROMISE, NOBODY IS GOING TO HURT YOU, SO THESE ELABORATE DEFENSIVE MEASURES ARE UNNECESSAR-"

“People have died! People are still dying! We had enough problems up here before you assholes showed up and now everything is ten times more complicated than it already was and you seriously expect me to believe your 'can't-we-all-just-get-along' bullshit?! You're either lying through your teeth or fucking insane!"

O'Dell's hand shot to one pocket, pulled out a knife and lunged towards Papyrus.

“And I don't care which one it is as long as you shut up!"

The knife parted through the fabric of the hooded sweatshirt easily, but did not encounter any bones; too late, O'Dell realized he had been aiming for organs that didn't exist and his momentum had tangled his knife in the fabric. Papyrus looked down at the human and his brow ridge creased with an annoyed expression, and one gloved hand raised a finger.

“OKAY, FIRST, YOU ARE BEING EXTREMELY RUDE RIGHT NOW.”

Before Papyrus could move on to his second point, blazing fireballs surrounded O'Dell. The man let go of his knife and pulled back even as the skeleton stepped back, but the fireballs tracked his movements and started to spin.

Out of the corner of her eye, Alphys saw movement and turned to see Asriel, holding out both paws engulfed in fire magic, and...

The monster child's face had changed. Black stripes had spread across his fur, and his muzzle had elongated slightly while his lips pulled back to reveal his teeth, and most telling of all his eyes had turned solid black with pinpricks of red light inside them. The overall effect made him look almost skull-like, and Alphys was forcibly reminded of a similar face that Flowey had made when especially angry.

“DIE.”
The fireballs converged on O'Dell and a shock wave of heat spread out from the man; there was a high pitched noise that the scientist realized was O'Dell screaming, and her stomach seemed to drop out of the world.

“Asriel! Asriel stop! You'll kill him!” Alphys tackled the boss monster to the ground, breaking his line of sight with O'Dell as well as his concentration. The flames flickered out to reveal a man prone on the floor, his clothing blackened and charred, and his skin red and blistered in patches where it could be seen.

He was not screaming anymore.

Somehow that made everything worse.

Alphys looked away from O'Dell, back towards Asriel. The child wasn't struggling anymore; Asriel seemed to be somewhere else completely, staring at something only he could see, and his face was gradually changing back to normal.

“Paul... P-Paul! Call an ambulance Call the hospital, we have to-”

“I did that right after I called the police, doctor. They're on their way right now.”

“G-Good. I... I don't know what will happen if we try to heal him like that. Just... we need to keep an eye on him... has anyone seen Joe? He said he was going after O'Dell.”

“Haven't seen him since he showed up on the...” Paul trailed off as his eyes bugged out, and Alphys turned to follow the security guard's gaze.

Joe had stumbled into the lobby, cradling a bloody stump with one hand.

The other hand stuck out between his arm and his body, and the blood from the limb stained the front of his shirt.

“...oh my g-god.”

“Where the fuck is O'Dell,” Stanton growled, before his eyes focused on the prone, burned body near the lobby entrance. “Oh. Never mind.”

The scientist collapsed and Alphys cried out.

“Joe! Oh god oh god oh god, hold on! J-just, just hold on! The-”

“Doc.”

Joe's voice was tired, but carried no other emotional inflection.

“...what is it? What d-d-d-do you need?”

“I'm in shock. I've lost. A lot of blood. The green magic is keeping me alive. When that runs out, I'm going to die.”

“That won't happen! We'll g-get an emitter, p-put it in the ambulance, something-”

“Doc. Listen to me. Tell my family. I don't want a traditional funeral. I told them before. But you might have to remind them. I want my body. Donated to science. I always did. And yesterday. Was
one more reason why. Not dumped in the ground. Or the sea. Or a fire. Like trash. Or stripped for parts. Like an old car.... If I can't keep learning. I want to teach... somebody....” Joe trailed off, and Alphys stared at the man's body. Several monsters ran over and reached out, sending green light towards Joe, but the man did not respond; Alphys held out her own claws and added to the mix, losing all sense of time, until human emergency medical technicians were pushing into the circle and checking his vitals.

“Heartbeat and respiration are weak but they're there.”

“No time for cross match. Just give him O negative.”

“Contact the Chief of Surgery at Rita Belle.”

Joe was carted off at the highest safe speed towards an ambulance, and Alphys could see that O'Dell had also been moved. Police were swarming around the lobby, asking questions, taking statements, and suddenly Undyne pushed through the cordon and Alphys could breathe again.

“...hey. Asriel. Can you hear me?”

The prince did not respond, and Undyne sat down on the floor next to him.

“...Alphys says you saved her. And that you tried to protect Papyrus when he got attacked.”

Asriel's face did not register any sign of having heard Undyne.

“I want you to know. That means a lot to me. More than I can ever say. The woman I love, and my best friend. When they needed help, you were there for them.”

A webbed hand rested on Asriel's shoulder, and Undyne felt the child trembling.

“...Asriel. I saw what you did to O'Dell. All those burns.”

Asriel flinched.

“I'm telling you right now. He got off easy. If I'd gotten to him first. He'd be dead. Or wish that he was.” Undyne removed her hand and looked up at Papyrus, who was standing next to the boss monster. “There's this human saying. Mossman taught it to me. Something like 'there is no greater love in a man than what he will do to protect his friends.' I probably got the words wrong, but I know that's what happened here, with you, tonight.”

“...is he going to be alright?”

The young monster had finally spoken.

“I don't know for sure. I've been reading a lot on human medicine, but I'm not an expert. But... whether he makes it or not. What happened to him tonight. He brought it on himself.”

A shaking paw came up and rubbed at tear soaked fur around the child's eyes.

“...is this what happens every time? I lose my temper, and people get hurt?”

Undyne stared at the young boss monster, and rested one webbed hand on Asriel's head.

“Your highness... Asriel. You are allowed to be angry at the people who hurt you, and you are
allowed to be angry at the people who hurt those you care about. Understand? When you were... when you called yourself Flowey. You were soulless. You couldn't care. And... maybe, just maybe, it's been so long since you felt something that strong that you forgot how to cope with it.”

Undyne shook her head. “If that is what happened. We can work on that.”

Asriel sniffed and nodded his head, eyes still shut.

“...Asriel. Just now. You reminded me of someone I used to train with. Someone who was unbelievably strong. But he was too softhearted to really hurt anyone. Until one awful day, when people he cared about were hurt, and taken from him. And he lashed out in anger... and ended up regretting it for a long time.” Undyne held Asriel's paw in her hand. “Your father... when he declared war. No monster has ever seen him get that angry, not before that, and not after. And he had a Soul. Just like you do. Do you understand?”

The child's head was bowed, but he nodded.

“Good. That's good... I know I said it already. But it bears repeating. Thank you for saving Alphys, and for defending Papyrus. As soon as Officer Steve gives us the green light, we'll take you home, okay? We'll explain everything to your parents. All they're going to care about is that you're safe, understand?” Undyne patted Asriel on the shoulder. “Everything is going to be okay.”

Light. Shining in his eyes. Joe tried to blink, but the light disappeared behind vague shapes, and he could barely make out people wearing masks. They were making noises he could not resolve into words.

'What's happening?'

*Surgical masks. Operating theater lights. Lifesaving surgery.*

“...who said that?”

“Mr. Stanton? I'm Jamie Ross. I said we're going to try to save your arm.”

“...oh. Cool.”

“Just try to relax. We can't put you under after losing that much blood, so we've given you a local. You may still feel some unpleasant sensations. Let us know if you do. We may not be able to make this painless but we will do what we can.”

“Yay. Sounds great. Uh. Hey. Fair warning. I think I'm hearing voices.”

“...if any of them say to come into the light, *don't listen.*”
“Naw. They're just. Talking about surgery stuff.”

“Oh. That's us talking. We're real. Don't worry about it.”

“...okay.” Joe closed his eyes. Even through the anesthesia, Joe felt... *something* happening to his arm, and he gritted his teeth and opened his eyes again. Behind two of the surgeons and a nurse near an instrument tray, *there was a shadow with nothing casting it.*

“Wow. Don't see that every day.”

*So you can see me after all. I was starting to wonder.*

“...wait. There's no physics model that accounts for this...” Joe closed his eyes again, and slowly passed into unconsciousness.

*At the foot of the operating table, the darkness faded away.*
"THEN IT IS SETTLED! A PARTY TO CELEBRATE THE RETURN OF THE PRINCE, AND TO WHATEVER TOMORROW MAY BRING!"

There was the sensation of motion as Toriel carried Frisk inside. The warmth of her arms. The sounds of everyone talking over each other. Excited voices. Happy voices.

"Asriel. Far be it for me to question this turn of events. But I would be lying if I said I was not curious. What happened to you to bring you back to us?"

Asgore's voice, deep and soft.

"I... I don't know. I'm actually kind of trying not to think about it too much. Frisk said that... that I looked like... like my flower body melted like the amalgamates, and then it started looking like this body instead. But we don't know how or why."

Asriel's voice, tired and nervous.

"My son... were you there, all this time, as Flowey?"

Toriel's voice, melodic, soft and sad.

"...yeah. Since I woke up in the garden."

"Asriel, why did you not come to us when you..."

Asgore, trailing off; it sounded like he was choking up at the end.

"I thought... about it. And I couldn't do it. I couldn't be... the son you had. Not after that."

"Nonsense. No matter what shape you take you will always be our son-"

"No, mom. No. There's..." Asriel's voice again, sounding pained, and the sound cut through the fog in Frisk's head like a lighthouse beacon. The human child pulled away from Toriel and turned to see Asriel sitting on the sofa next to Asgore, his head in his paws.

"When I was a flower, I was soulless. There was... I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't feel what others felt. I couldn't feel love. I couldn't go back to you guys, I couldn't... let you waste your time on someone that couldn't love you back..."

Asriel's voice cracked, his head in his paws, fingers raking through his fur. Frisk shifted in Toriel's arms and the teacher, perhaps knowing both children, put the human child down. Frisk immediately made their way past Papyrus's legs and tackled Asriel in a hug.

"You are not a waste of time."

Asriel's arms came down and wrapped around Frisk, his chin resting on their shoulder. The edge of Asgore's paw touched them as it rested on Asriel's head.

"I do not understand. How could you exist without a soul?"
“DT Energy.” Alphys voice, soft, and maybe a little embarrassed to be intruding on this family moment. “I needed a vessel to store the monster souls from everyone who fell down, and the human souls we already had. It had to be something that wasn't monster or human. I used a flower from the garden. The very first flower. The flower that would have been from a seed covered in Asriel's... but DT Energy just keeps people alive, like in the... the amalgamates. All I gave the flower... all I gave Asriel was the will to live.”

Asriel shook in Frisk's arms. “It was... like... being broken into pieces. I couldn't. Everything I was. It was gone. I was... I was....”

Asriel's arms squeezed even tighter as his voice gave way to choking sobs.

“It is alright Asriel. You are back and that is all that matters. You are here, with us.” Toriel's voice wavered and finally broke, and Frisk felt the pressure on their back of Toriel embracing the children... and then even more pressure from Asgore's giant arms.

Surrounded by warmth.

Surrounded by soft fur.

Surrounded by...

By...

“Omigod I have to take a picture of this!”

“YES! THIS FAMILY REUNION MUST BE RECORDED FOR POSTERITY!”

Asgore and Toriel started to laugh, and Frisk could feel the sounds through their body; Toriel high and musical, Asgore deep and resonant. The two adults slowly let go, and Frisk let their arms down when Asriel did; one of the young monster's paws came up and rubbed at his eyes.

“Well... I always was a crybaby. I guess some things never change.”

Asriel's eyes were still teary when he lowered his paw, but he was smiling. Frisk tried to smile back, even if it came out lopsided, and turned to see Alphys and Papyrus snapping photos on their phones. Sans was, oddly enough, not nestled in one of the chairs and snoring, but standing by his brother; when Frisk's eyes shifted to him, he winked one eye socket.

“Your majesty.”

Asriel and Frisk both turned to see Undyne, kneeling down on one knee. “It's an honor to finally meet you, Prince Asriel.”

“...You... you don't need to call me that. I'm just Asriel.” Asriel sighed. “Honestly at this point I don't care what people call me as long as I don't get called Flowey anymore.”

“WAIT A MINUTE... THIS MEANS WE HAVE TO DISBAND THE FLOWEY FAN CLUB!” Papyrus waved his arms in alarm, and Sans started to make snickering sounds behind one gloved hand.

“The what??” Dr. Aster raised an un-cracked, bony eyebrow in confusion, and Asriel laughed shakily.

“There's. Uh. Only one member.” The prince pointed to Papyrus with one finger, and the doctor
“Fair enough.”

“Alphys, your phone pictures gave me an idea.” Asgore stood up and walked over to a bookcase. “Who would like to see pictures of Asriel when he was just a baby?”

Alphys made a high pitched sound of enthusiastic excitement she couldn't muffle, and nodded like a bobble-head on the dashboard of a car rolling end over end down a mountain. Asriel, however, immediately turned red even under his fur.

“Oh god. I knew I was going to have to pay for what I did, but I didn't expect this.”

“Hey. Asriel. Don't worry about it. You came back from the dead and even if there were some nasty side effects, that's still pretty... what's the word I'm looking for... I want to say baller. Frisk, is that right?”

The human child shrugged at Undyne's question. “I guess.”

“Okay, baller it is. And it sounds like a whole lot of bad stuff happened to you. Well, of course you're gonna have to vent when bad things happen! I have to work out like a fiend to keep from punching somebody when I get a missed delivery notice for a package! So don't you listen to anybody who starts getting on your case about causing trouble as a flower, okay?! If somebody does, and I find out about it, I will punch their face in the face!”

Asriel goggled at the PE teacher's enthusiasm, his jaw dropping.

“Uhm... thank you?”

“No problem! That's what friends are for! Mutually Assured Destruction!”

Toriel snorted. “It occurs to me, such a special occasion as this calls for a special treat. Gorey, you have things well in hand here. I shall be in the kitchen, preparing something for us all to enjoy.”

“Ah. This is when Asriel was just born.” Asgore turned the photo album around, and Frisk could see a small white blob of fur, wrapped in a green cloth, eyes shut.

Inside Frisk's Soul, something was resonating...

“Oh my god he's so cute my head's going to explode!” Alphys gushed, and Undyne laughed.

“Uhm.” Frisk cleared their throat, or tried to. There was a lump in it all of a sudden. “Do boss monsters take a while to open their eyes, or was Asriel just asleep?”

“Actually boss monsters are born with eyes shut, and they do not open until about two weeks later. At least, that is the way it was with Asriel. He also started trying to walk after about two months. Of course, he didn't get it down pat for about a year or two, just like everyone else.” Asgore turned some pages and Frisk saw photos of Asriel leaning up against chairs, table legs, bookcases, stuck on his back, and splayed out on his sides. Alphys mock fainted into Undyne's arms, who laughed even harder. Asriel buried his face in his paws, groaning in embarrassment.

Frisk looked around the room.

'What do I need to do to make these people happy?'

Papyrus was talking about friendship related things to do later, with Sans encouraging his brother’s
more unusual ideas while Dr. Aster was visibly trying not to laugh. Alphys and Undyne were laughing up a storm. Toriel was singing in the kitchen. Asgore was alternating between flipping through the album and looking back at his son with a huge, warm smile.

'Nothing. Everything is perfect. This moment. Here and now. Everyone is happy.'

Frisk stumbled over to the sofa and sat down next to Asgore, looking at the photo album as he turned the pages.

“Tell me your secrets, Asriel baby pictures.”

“Oh god. Not you too.” Still, Asriel sat down on the other side of Asgore as the king continued to reminisce. Time blurred under the dual weight of exhaustion and Asgore's deep voice.

'Everyone is happy.'

'He's back. He's really back.'

'Please don't let this be a dream.'

Somehow a slice of pie appeared in front of Frisk.

Their fork kept missing it, but when it brought some to their mouth...

It tasted like cinnamon and butterscotch and rainy days spent by the fireplace and new books and old books and a warm sunny day with the smell of pine needles and the mist from the river and home he was finally home finally finally finally finally and for a moment Frisk felt the ache in their chest and thought that they would die, but this was different, this wasn't the feeling of something being ripped out, this was the feeling of something growing back, Asriel was back, Toriel and Asgore and Asriel and Papyrus and Sans and Dr. Aster and Alphys and Undyne and Frisk, all together, all family.

'They are happy.'

Asriel, sitting on the sofa, his head nodding as much as Frisk's.

'Everyone I care about is happy.'

Their head, resting on his shoulder.

'This is love.'

Frisk opened their eyes, and instead of seeing the living room, they saw the ceiling of their bedroom. Without moving, they could feel the warmth of Asriel next to them, and relaxed.

The previous night came back to the child without prompting, different memories all blurred together with the occasional details emerging from the fog like icebergs. A panicked phone call from Toriel just as Frisk reached their street, and the boss monster rushing out of the house to grab them. Halting explanations inside, how All Fine Labs had been attacked and nobody knew anything and Asriel was still there. An all consuming impulse to sneak out when Toriel was distracted and run to the lab to try to help, held in check by the fear that if they did make it to the lab they would just distract somebody at the wrong time, end up as a hostage, or even be killed outright... and drag the entire world back to Monday.
Still, that last option would have been preferable to losing Asriel.

But that hadn't happened. Undyne and Papyrus appeared, late in the evening, with Asriel in tow. By then Asgore had arrived, and....

Frisk flinched at the memory and hugged Asriel's sleeping form. They had never seen Asriel cry so hard. Not even when he had been in the Underground, and said that he would turn back into a flower without the power of the souls to keep his shape. The sound of it, and the sight of Asriel sitting between his parents, curled up on himself defensively like every moment he expected to be attacked at any moment, had squeezed their heart like a vice until they had started to tear up as well, until the young monster was literally too tired to cry anymore.

Frisk just barely remembered Papyrus and Undyne explaining what had happened, and even then the most they could focus on was that Asriel had gotten his fire magic back... in the worst possible way. They didn't even remember what dinner had been. All they could focus on was the sick, sadistic unfairness that seemed to be aimed directly at Asriel by a cruel universe, so that even when he was free to be himself again he was still suffering.

Asriel had practically remained attached to Frisk at the hip for the rest of the evening, from the moment that Papyrus and Undyne had left, all through dinner, and when Asgore was heading back to his house, and when they were too exhausted to keep going and Toriel tucked them both into Frisk's bed. The human child did not mind at all; after the awful tension of not knowing, they knew that Asriel was not the only one who was going to have nightmares.

But then it was morning, and the sun was sneaking into the bedroom wherever it could.

The covers were pushed back. Drawers were open. Clothes were removed. The normal morning routine. Not that they really expected the day to be normal in any way, shape or form. Once they were dressed and ready for the last day of school... Frisk found themselves standing outside the back door, staring at the yard.

It carried the memory, and the weight, of hundreds of conversations. The subject was almost always trivial. But none of them felt trivial.

Back inside, Frisk stopped by their room and grabbed their backpack, with the two textbooks that hadn't already been returned. Walking downstairs, they left the backpack on the coffee table and sat down in one of the chairs.

After a moment's hesitation, they pulled the backpack towards them, opened it, and pulled out a spiral notebook. A sheet of paper was removed from the pocket inside, and Frisk stared at it.

To Do 5-26-16

-Buy some Spider Cider from Muffet; play with Muffin

-Talk about puzzles and / or robots with Papyrus

-Tell Sans the joke about photographers

-Have tea with dad

-Make dinner with mom
-Tell Undyne thanks for all of the good advice
-Write up everything I've discovered for Alphys, Sans, and Dr. Aster to use later
-Hang out with the gang
-Pet Lesser Dog
-Pet Greater Dog
-Pet Endogeny
-Buy some stuff from Joe's House of Stuff when Catty is working
-Buy some shoestring fries from Das Boot when Bratty is working
-Get Napstablook more samples for their spookwave projects
-Have one more random conversation with Asriel

The list was far from being exhaustive. In fact it barely qualified as complete; there was nothing for Mettaton, no matter how hard Frisk had tried to think of something. Many other people that were important to Frisk had also been omitted out of a lack of concrete ideas. What was more important was the very small number of tasks that had been successfully accomplished, compared to what had been planned. Only some of that could be attributed to the chaos of the Guardian attack. There hadn't been enough time in the day for everything.

Without prompting another memory surged to the front of Frisk's mind; the Barrier Antechamber, filled with people who did not want there to be a fight that day.

Toriel had said that, with all the friends they had made, Frisk would be happy in the Underground. And maybe, if Asriel had not done what he had done, that was what would have happened. Except... there would always be that empty jar. Waiting for them. How long would the monsters have to wait to go free? Sixty years? Seventy years?

How many would have fallen down, never having seen a sunrise or a sunset or a rainbow or the real stars, even when the key to the Surface was right there?

"Seeing all the friends that you have made... I believe you will be happy here."

Maybe at first.

“You always say you're sorry but this shit keeps happening!”

But just by being alive, they would be making things worse for everyone they cared about.

Frisk stared at the list in their hands, and crumpled it up into a ball, tossing it in the general direction of the trash can but not watching to see if it struck its target. There hadn't been enough time to do everything on the list, but even if there had been enough time, the list would have just grown longer and longer. More things to do with more people. And that was the core problem underlying everything else, wasn't it? The longer they were alive, the worse things would get.

Another memory came flooding back: The house on Cavendish street. The old bedroom. A house cleaner and quieter, as it had been in the beginning. Frisk, sitting up in bed. And sitting on the end
of it... her. Not Toriel, not Mom, but a mom, yes.

There was a book in her hands. Frisk couldn't read the title, not then. Not yet. But they understood
the words as she spoke them. It was an old story, about giving a mouse a cookie, and how one
thing would lead to another, until you either completely lost track of how things got started or came
full circle back to where you began.

Deep inside Frisk's Soul, something cracked, splintered, and broke apart.

While it was certainly not unheard of for Frisk to be up and ready for school so earlier, it was still
out of the ordinary, and so Toriel paused as she descended the stairs. The human child was sitting
in one of the chairs opposite the sofa, their backpack on the coffee table, and...

Toriel felt her breath catch in her throat for a moment. Frisk was wearing a blue-and-purple striped
shirt, like they had worn in the Underground when she had first found them in the Ruins, and it was
impossible not to be reminded of those days... but that was simply distracting. What was much
worse was Frisk's face, the way they looked at the world without seeing it. It was far too much like
the unresponsive state they had been in the previous Friday night.

One of the steps squeaked as Toriel continued her descent, and Frisk looked up, eyes focusing on
the Boss Monster.

“...good morning, Frisk.”

“...morning.” The child's voice sounded hoarse. “Uhm. Mom. I need. I need to talk to you.”

“What is it, my child?”

“I can't... I can't keep doing this. I wanted to. I wanted to wait. Until after school. When you didn't
have anything else distracting you. But. I can't even wait that long any more. If I try. It's going to
kill me. One way or another.”

Frisk swallowed and stared down at the coffee table, and Toriel walked over to the sofa and sat
down on it.

“Very well. If you need me, I am here, and I am listening.”

“...thank you.” Frisk shook their head and sighed. “Alright. When... when we were all down in the
CORE. And everyone was running around and I took off, to head towards Sans and Dr. Aster...
Jordan Cater was...”

Frisk trailed off and they shook their head. “Let me... let me back up. Do you remember when Sans
stopped by and dropped off that book on magic physics? I was reading it most of the time that I
was sick, and...”

The child's voice trailed off and they hunched over in the chair, hands coming up to pull on their
hair.

“I hate this. I hate...” Frisk let go of their hair and stared at their hands. “I hate that I can't just tell
you what you need to know. I hate that I can't just fix it myself, without bothering anybody else
with it. I hate that... that I can't be... what people need me to be.”

“...what do you believe that people need you to be?”
‘Somebody who isn't a reminder of ages of suffering.’

‘Somebody who actually knows how to be an ambassador, instead of gambling the fate of an entire people on what they found after fifteen minutes in the Ebott’s Wake Library.’

‘Somebody who doesn't antagonize those already predisposed towards violence.’

‘Somebody who could have brought back Asriel without screwing around for a year and a half.’

There were too many things that everyone needed, and they all tripped over each other in Frisk’s mind. And so, the child said nothing.

“...Frisk. I promise. Whatever it is that bothers you. Whatever it is that frightens you. Whatever it is that weighs on your heart so much. I promise that I accept it, because I understand that it is a part of you. I love you, and I always will, and that will never change.”

“...I should have told you the instant I knew. I kept putting it off. And putting it off. I just wanted more time. All I cared about was what I wanted. I put everything at risk. Stupid selfish brat.” Frisk raised one of their hands and stared at it. “This has to stop.”

Before Toriel could react, the human child opened their mouth and bit down on their hand as hard as they could. By the time the boss monster was standing, blood was already trickling down their arm and face.

“Frisk what are you-?!”

Frisk let go, held up their hand and glared at it. A green glow surrounded it, knitting together skin and blood vessels into their original locations and conditions, before fading away. The child rotated their hand back and forth, to confirm that the bite marks had been completely healed. Only the red trails of lost blood remained as any indication that someone had gotten hurt.

Frisk hands dropped to their knees, and they waited, the sound of their heartbeat deafening in their own ears.

“...oh.”

On the edge of Frisk's peripheral vision, they saw Toriel walk around the coffee table, stopping next to where Frisk was seated. Something soft touched Frisk's head and they flinched out of reflex.

“My child...” Toriel sighed. “I wish that you had not injured yourself. But I believe I understand why you did this. You could not speak the words. So you were forced to demonstrate instead.”

Frisk nodded, and Toriel got down on her knees next to the chair. The paw resting on Frisk's head moved down to their back and Toriel pulled the shaking child into a hug.

“I was wondering when you would be able to tell me yourself. Do not be afraid, Frisk. I already knew.”

“What??” The child's eyes opened wide. “How did- when-”: Frisk's voice stopped as their mind scrambled to understand what their ears heard, before finally catching up.

“I am your mother, Frisk. It is my business to know about these things. For the longest time, I was so afraid that... that what you were frightened to share with me was something that had... happened to you. Something that nobody should ever experience. When I... when I understood what
frightened you. I wanted to talk to you about it. But... I know that you have had to rely on secrets for your very survival. I did not want to confront you about that which you felt had to be hidden. And so I waited for you to come to me. I...” Toriel stopped talking for a moment, and when she spoke again, her voice sounded hoarse. “I am so sorry that you had to worry, all of this time, about how I would react.”

“Mom... what happens next...? Can I... can...I still stay with...” Frisk trailed off, but Toriel understood what the child was trying to say. One massive paw stroked the child's hair.

“I told you, Frisk. Whatever it was that bothered you. I accept it, because it is a part of you. I am your mother, and this is your home, and no matter what happens today, or tomorrow, or any of the days after that, you will always have a place here.”

Toriel felt the child's arms come up and hug them back, and felt the child shaking in her embrace. Not from nervousness, or fear... but something else.

Frisk said nothing. But Toriel understood anyway.

Even before Asriel opened his eyes, he realized he was alone in the bed.

The previous night's sleep had been mercifully free of nightmares, and while he did not know what reason that could be, he certainly was not going to complain. Even with the buffering effect of rest and sleep, the memories of what had happened at All Fine Labs filled his mind and his stomach with ice to think about. Pushing back the covers, Asriel climbed out of Frisk's bed and noticed their backpack was gone; what if they had already headed to school?

The bedroom door was pulled open and the monster half-ran down the hallway and the staircase to the ground floor, where he heard...

“Yes. Like that. Almost any form of magic will do of course, but each one will add its own... flavor is the best way to describe it. And of course some flavors will be more suitable to some foods than others.”

“That makes sense. Like seasoning. Salt on french fries is the industry standard, and sugar on french fries is what you have to do when you lose a bet.”

Toriel giggled as Asriel poked one eye around the doorway to the kitchen, and saw Frisk standing at the stove, moving a pot back and forth over an orange flame... that seemed to be coming from their free hand. The young monster let his breath out and leaned against the wall, and Toriel turned at the sound.

“Oh! Good morning, Asriel! Are you... are you feeling better?”

“...yes. Last night wasn't... good. But I'll be okay. What's going on?”

“I am teaching Frisk the fundamentals of magical cookery.”

“I'm trying to make mom's cinnamon oatmeal, or something close to it.” The pot was pulled away from the fireball, which vanished with the flick of Frisk's wrist, and some of the hot cereal was spooned out into waiting bowls. “Asriel. Before we taste test this. I have to ask. Did you tell mom about this? Because she already knew, and, uh. After I had that really bad nightmare. You got even more insistent than you did before that things would be okay. And that would make sense if you were worried before, and then you had proof that those worries were baseless.”
Asriel stared at Frisk and raised both eyebrows in surprise.

“Uh. If I'm understanding what you said correctly. Which I'm not willing to bet on. Then yes. After you calmed down, and mom brought you back to bed... I stayed up. And I told her. I, uh. I'm sorry. I was scared and that was all I could think to do.”

Frisk carried the bowls of oatmeal over to the kitchen table and set them down.

“It's alright. If there's anyone in this room that needs to apologize, it's me.”

“...what?”

Frisk stared at their bowl of oatmeal, and while their face was mostly impassive and neutral, Asriel could see the redness around their eyes that meant they had been crying earlier.

“You told me about what happened between you and Chara, with the buttercups. How everything all went wrong because of a secret promise. And... no matter how scared I was. I had no right to ask you to do the same thing that caused you so much pain before. I'm sorry. I was being selfish, and I let fear take over everything, and I put you in the middle of it.”

“...you kept my secrets for over a year, Frisk. I could never have turned around and said that secrets were a bad idea, after all you did for me. You don't have anything to apologize for.”

The table was silent for a few moments, until Toriel sat down with a mug of coffee.

“...I do not wish to interrupt. But there is much to do today, and much to do tomorrow that we must prepare for. First... Frisk. You should know that Asgore also knows about your magic. In fact, he was aware of it before Asriel told me anything.”

Frisk blinked. “Wait, how did he know?”

“Apparently there was a mishap with the photo album, and he determined from what took place that you had somehow managed to use Blue Magic.”

“...that was before I actually knew I could do anything.” Frisk shook their head. “Everything was so much simpler in the book. The math made sense, the models made sense... mom, there was some other stuff. A few times I actually tried to use it. To see what it was capable of. But nothing happened.”

“...might have been like with me.” Asriel stared at his bowl of oatmeal. “Magic is all about will and intent. As badly as part of me wanted to be able to use fire magic again, another part wanted to bury it because... because I thought I would hurt somebody.”

The young boss monster swallowed, but kept his composure.

“You were terrified of the magic when you realized you could use it. And that never really went away, until this morning I guess. So I bet a part of you was willing the magic not to do anything.

“That would explain it.” Frisk held up their left hand and stared at it rubbing at the palm with their right thumb. “Even if... even if it's not the end of the world, like I thought. It still showed up out of nowhere with no clear reason why or how. And... just because you guys aren't bothered by it, doesn't mean everyone will be okay with it.”

“You raise two very important points, though I am certain that no monster would ever see magic in your hands in particular as a potential threat. Perhaps other humans, and certainly those groups
who have made their ill intent towards us well known, but not you.” Toriel sighed. “While I am extremely reluctant to advocate secrecy at this stage, especially after you had worked up your courage so that you could tell me, this might be the only practical option in the short term, until we understand why you are the exception to the rule. The attack on All Fine Labs was last night, and several people were injured, to say nothing of the damage to the buildings and equipment. It will take time to recover from this, but they will still be our best chance at understanding this. So we will need to tell Dr. Alphys and Sans and Dr. Aster, obviously. And it would make sense to tell Undyne and Papyrus as well so that they understand the situation.”

“About where this came from... I have a theory.” Frisk stared at their oatmeal. “I thought I was just seeing things until the night Asriel came back. But I didn't actually start seeing things until after I got shot. And I thought that was because I was on a lot of drugs. But that was when I had all that free time all of a sudden, because of all the bed rest. So I started reading that book Sans gave me more and more. It explained all the fundamental physics of magic and how it interacted with physical matter. I mean, I could be wrong, or I could just be half right. But it's something to keep in-“

There was a ringing noise and Toriel sat up straight.

“Ah. That is Undyne's ring tone. Please excuse me, my children.” The boss monster stood up and walked out of the kitchen, and Frisk turned to Asriel.

“Hey. You haven't taken the oatmeal for a test drive yet.”

“Oh. Right. We all got to talking about serious stuff.” Asriel picked up his spoon and took a bite of the hot cereal, chewed, swallowed, and then took another. “...it's a little underdone. I don't feel it evaporate until after I swallow it. And the cinnamon flavor is really faint. But other than that it's pretty good. Especially for a first try.”

“Awesome. I should probably write this down for later.”

“Hey. Uhm. Are you... are you doing okay? I.” Asriel swallowed. “I remember how scared you were of anyone finding out, especially mom and dad.”

“Well. The people I was most scared to tell. They already knew.” Frisk shook their head. “But if I said I wasn't nervous about telling everyone else I'd be lying so hard my clothes would spontaneously combust.”

“...huh??”

“You know? Liar liar, pants on fire?”

“...oh.”

“Yeah.” Frisk sighed. “Actually. The one I'm really afraid to tell is Doctor Aster. Alphys I could see being afraid of the implications, and Undyne takes monster history very seriously, so that's going to be awkward at best. Sans might be upset, but if it turns out that it was the book that played the biggest part in this happening, maybe he won't be upset at me specifically. Or not as much. And Papyrus...”

“Papyrus was trying to talk down O'Dell last night. He didn't even get more than slightly annoyed when the jerk tried to stab him.” Asriel stared off into space for a second, before shaking his head to banish the memories of the previous evening. “Anyway. You won't have to worry about Papyrus, for sure. If anything, he'll be overjoyed that he can teach you all of his magical pasta
recipes now.”

Frisk nodded.

“There is that. And... I’m hoping that with everyone else. No matter how they feel about this, we still have that shared history. I'm hoping that will help, at least enough for us all to stay friends. But Dr. Aster I met less than a month ago. We don't have any shared history. And I know that he really took to his father's lessons on how humans were dangerous threats.” The human child sighed. “It's not perfect. It's very not perfect. But it's still a thousand times better than what it was.”

“I am sorry for the interruption, my children.” Both children turned to see Toriel walking back into the kitchen. “Undyne has said that things are in considerable turmoil at All Fine Labs right now, and she is taking the day off to take care of Alphys. It seems she did not sleep well last night. If at all.”

“Some of the humans broke into Dimensional Storage and got some of the leftover DT, and it contaminated the whole basement.” Asriel shook his head. “I'd be worried if she didn't have trouble sleeping after that.”

“As you say. So events will be slightly more hectic with one absent teacher, but as it is the last day of school this year, it was always going to be so. While I do not wish to rush you, Asriel, it would be best if you could come to school with everyone today.”

“...that does make sense.”

“If things get to be too much for you, you can always come to my office to catch your breath.”

“Thanks.” Asriel took a deep breath. “I hope I won't need to. I need to... I need to get used to this anyway, if I'm going to be going to school after summer's over.”

“...Asriel, as much as I would like to see you attend school with everyone else. What is most important is that you are able to learn in an environment that you are comfortable with. If you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed at any point, that is important for us to know in order to find an environment in which you can learn. So please do not ignore those feelings, or think that you must tolerate them as some sort of trial of endurance.”

“I won't...” the young boss monster sighed. “I guess a lot of what you and dad taught me isn't exactly useful anymore. Monsters don't have to worry as much about space or resources, and the monarchy doesn't make decisions anymore. So I'll be starting from scratch anyway.”

“Not necessarily.” Toriel held up a finger, and both children recognized the transition into Teacher-Voice. “While the Royal Family has no legal authority to govern, we are still looked to for leadership in a social sense. And if anything, the human demand for monster food and other products has created a much more complicated economy than when we were simply trying to make the most of what was already in the cavern and whatever we could find from the river. So while the details may be different, the fundamentals are the same and can be adapted to our surface living situation with only minor adjustments-”

Frisk held up their cell phone, displaying the time.

“Uh, sorry to interrupt this lesson, but if Asriel is going to go to school today, then now would be the time to get dressed for it.”

“Ah, yes. That is true.”
“...oh. Yeah. I'll get on that.”

Asriel left the kitchen and while Frisk finished their oatmeal, Toriel began to clear the rest of the kitchen table when her phone began to make noise again.

“Egads. I have become entirely too popular for my own good.”

Frisk giggled and stood up. “You take care of social media. I'll finish the clean up.”

“Thank you, Frisk.”

7:21 AM SockPuppet90: hey tori
7:21 AM SockPuppet90: how u holdin up
7:22 AM: I am fine, Sans. How did your trip go?
7:22 AM SockPuppet90: boring right up until the end
7:22 AM SockPuppet90: we got in late last night
7:22 AM SockPuppet90: Papyrus and one of Justin's buddies came by the airport 2 pick us up
7:23 AM SockPuppet90: and filled us in on what happened
7:23 AM SockPuppet90: good thing i slept on the plane cuz i was up til 4 doing damage control
7:23 AM SockPuppet90: btw
7:23 AM SockPuppet90: if u tell anybody that ill deny it
7:23 AM: How bad are things at the lab right now?
7:24 AM SockPuppet90: roof hole in fabrication
7:24 AM SockPuppet90: whole section is a mess
7:24 AM SockPuppet90: the mem head amalgam is still loose
7:24 AM SockPuppet90: and everyone's high strung cuz of Stanton
7:24 AM SockPuppet90: last anybody heard he was gonna make it
7:24 AM SockPuppet90: but he got hurt really bad
7:25 AM SockPuppet90: and we dont know if healing magic will help
7:25 AM SockPuppet90: only thing that's gone right is we finally cleaned up all the dt
7:25 AM SockPuppet90: pumped it into another containment unit
7:25 AM SockPuppet90: so the basement is safe again
7:25 AM SockPuppet90: so we got that goin for us and thats nice but u no how it is
7:26 AM: Yes, I do.
7:26 AM: If you need anything, please let me or Asgore know.
7:26 AM SockPuppet90: well now that u mention it Stanton might need some cheering up if when he wakes up so if you got a spare pie lying around u aint using
7:26 AM: I shall see what I can do. | =) Please tell your brother and father I said hello.
7:27 AM SockPuppet90: will do
7:27 AM SockPuppet90: gotta run
7:27 AM SockPuppet90: only way Alphys will sleep is if i run an errand for her now
7:27 AM SockPuppet90: talk to u later
7:27 AM: Until then. Take care of yourself, Sans!
7:27 AM SockPuppet90: u 2
“...so we're not looking at super storms or anything like that.”

“No, Brett. Just your garden variety Make Up For Lost Time Lost Eagle County Downpour.”

“Well, we got that going for us. That’s nice. How about the rest of the week? Does this change anything?”

“Of course it does. Saturday’s going to be hot and muggy. Sunday’s going to be muggy and hot. Monday is going to be very hot and muggy. Tuesday is going to be hot and very muggy. And Wednesday we're looking at high temperatures and high humidity.”

“What about Thursday?”

“I'm taking next Thursday off.”

“Fair enough. Thanks Hailey. Burgie, you find that web page yet?”


“...this does not surprise me as much as it should.”

Eyes opened, and the room refused to come into focus, partly due to a lack of glasses. Joe looked around anyway on principle, and vaguely made out some shapes... something in a chair, something on a table, and something much closer to him on another table that was a lot clearer... his phone.

“That takes us up to the break, but when we come back, we'll have special guest Joe Castleton of Joe's House Of Stuff on to tell us about the History of Pogs. And after that we'll toss things over to our new summer intern Bob the Temmie who will be talking to the Arts Council about their many and varied projects slated to begin this summer, including the latest renovations to the Auditorium. Stick around, more Morning Rush on the way.”

The voices were replaced by a progressive rock musical jingle, which suddenly reduced in volume much faster than if it had simply been fading out. Joe moved his head, trying to triangulate the source of the noise, and... ah, right.

The room snapped into focus, and Joe saw a short skeleton in a blue jacket reaching out towards the radio.

“...hey. Sans.”

“Hey Joe. Good morning.”

“...what year is this?”

The skeleton chuckled.

“Don't worry. You didn't miss nothing. It's Friday, the twenty seventh of May. Twenty sixteen. Everything happened last night.”
“...oh.” Joe blinked, then looked down at his right arm.

Even through the bandages, it was obvious that it was much shorter than it used to be.

“...damn.”

“...yeah. Sorry buddy. When Doctor Ross gets back I'll let her explain the details if you want em, but the long and short is that O'Dell got you with something called a Slam-Bang. Sort of an improvised shotgun made from plumbing parts, according to Officer Steve. It was a pretty big shell, too. Pretty much wrecked everything in its way. There wasn't enough... of anything, really. To reattach, I mean. And you were losing so much blood there wasn't time to get a healer in to try and reattach from both ends. So they did what they normally do in cases of... traumatic amputation, think they called it.”

Joe was still staring at his arm. Sans cleared his throat... somehow... and pushed on.

“When you were stable, they called in a healer. Caduceus. She's one of the best, if not the best. But all she could do was reduce the scarring and repair the damage to the rest of your body from shock. Which is... something. I guess. Dad has a theory on why it didn't help. Human bodies have much more matter than monster bodies. If I lost my arm the way you did, that would be trace amounts of matter and a lot of magic energy. Healing magic could handle that. But in your case... too much missing matter. Caduceus tried to heal it a bit at a time, from the injury sight outwards. Like 3D printing a new arm, although I don't think she knows what 3D printing is. Didn't work.”

“...figures.” Joe looked up and around the room again. “Suppose I should be glad they pumped me full of drugs. Otherwise I'd be a lot more freaked out right now... what's with all the flowers?”

“They're from everyone at the lab. Alex and Brendan explained the whole idea of get well cards and stuff. It's not something we ever had come up in the Underground, so... you know. First try. But people were really eager to pitch in. Let us know how we did.”

“Heh... so. I kinda remember last night. Some details are fuzzy, but the general idea. Is there. What did I miss?”

Sans shrugged. “Not much. Papyrus showed up to pick up the prince, O'Dell tried to stab him once the lockdown ended, and Asriel... made him pay for that. He's here in the hospital too... O'Dell is, I mean. Asriel's at home or at the school or something. A lot of your friends showed up right after you got carried off. Elijah and Papyrus came to the Quarterhorse Fields Airport when our flight got in. Drove us back... and I've been playing catch up and putting out fires all night.”

“Wow. I'd make a joke about waking up in the Twilight Zone but my brain can't put it together with all these admittedly fantastic painkillers in my blood.”

“Hehehehe. On the plus side... this is it. The Guardians are done for real this time. Officer Steve found O'Dell's hiding spot and all his notes and the police have been working all night too. There were only eight people left, can you believe that? At least three of them attacked the lab, and the other four went after your friends and got their asses kicked for their trouble. One guy missed Hal by minutes. They picked him up on the way to Lone Point. Two guys went after the Librarby. Van Garrett broke one guy's knee after they shot him—""
apparently broke a guy's nose without realizing it.”

“...I always knew he had it in him.”

“Heh. So. Yeah. Two Guardians were stuck in the basement playing keep away from the Memoryhead we used to have contained. O'Dell's goose was literally cooked. And the last guy apparently chickened out because they found him in Triton just an hour ago.”

Joe stared at his dramatically reduced right arm and sighed. “There's always trade offs. Fuck it. If I knew that was what it took to stop them all, I'd have chopped off that arm two years ago.”

“That's correlation, not causation.”

“I know.” Joe looked up at Sans. “Did Alphys fill you in on Project Grayscale and the side effects?”

“Yeah. Dad's looking over your stuff. At least, what we could find of it. A lot of rooms got trashed when you and O'Dell were throwing down.”

“I don't remember fighting in the room with the notes and machinery. But I don't remember a lot of last night.”

“That makes sense.”

“Oh. More data on that. The longer things went on. The harder it was to do anything. Except Pattern stuff, that's easy. Few more days and I might be able to do that by reflex.”

“Yeah. I saw your eyes start glowing purple. That's when I knew you were awake.”

“Right. But I don't know if I could even make the attempt to do anything else, even if I wasn't drugged up. Might be that if you integrate a human's energy fields with outside help, you need to keep that help to keep things integrated. We'll have to look into that when I can come back to work. Assuming All Fine Labs can come back from this.”

“...it's going to be dicey. Won't lie.”

“Figures.”

Joe stared down at his arm again, and Sans stood up.

“Hey Joe. There's one other thing. Alphys dug up some notes from various projects. Like Mettaton and his upgrades. She came up with a preliminary design for something I think you might be interested in.”

The skeleton walked over to the hospital bed, removed a stack of papers stapled together in one corner, and placed them in Joe's waiting left hand. The scientist's eyes began to glow purple again, as did some of the lines on the paper... and the papers underneath it.

“...a robotic arm?”

“A mechanical prosthesis, designed to be fully integrated with the human body and Soul. We know healing magic can restore lost nerve function. We think we can get this set up so it's controlled directly by your brain, just like the original hardware. Failing that maybe we can tune it to your Soul or something. Dr. Ross has already agreed to help consult on getting it surgically attached to your body, once you're stable enough to go under the scalpel again. And, of course, providing you
“Of course I'm up for it. I always wanted to be a cyborg. And if this works as advertised, it's an end run around months or years of physical therapy and trying to learn how to use a normal human prosthetic arm. And even if it doesn’t, it's still a freaking robot arm. That counts for something.”

“Heh. I had a feeling you'd say that.”

8:45 AM JStanton420: WHAT UP BITCHES
8:45 AM JStanton420: IM STILL ALIVE
8:45 AM Rock_It_Science: WTF
8:45 AM IM_the_walrus: thank fuck
8:45 AM: if this is a prank somebody is gonna get their ass kicked
8:46 AM EZ_Being_Greene: AW YEAH
8:46 AM JStanton420: NOBODY WALKS AWAY FROM JOE STANTON WHEN HES RANTING AND GETS AWAY WITH IT
8:46 AM DARE_2B_stupid: joe if u scare us like that again ur gonna get punched n the dic understand
8:46 AM JStanton420: these drugs r amazing btw
8:46 AM: we can tell
8:46 AM JStanton420: good news bad news time
8:47 AM JStanton420: bad news docs couldn't reattach hand
8:47 AM JStanton420: and green magic couldn't grow it back
8:47 AM DARE_2B_stupid: shit
8:47 AM Rock_It_Science: ah fuck
8:47 AM JStanton420: good news alphys is gon make me a robot hand
8:47 AM JStanton420: gonna be lik ash in army of darknes
8:47 AM EZ_Being_Greene: GROOVY
8:47 AM JStanton420: THAT IS MY LINE
8:48 AM JStanton420: I WILL FITE U
8:48 AM Rock_It_Science: w 1 hand tied behind ur back
8:48 AM JStanton420: no I dont no were it is now
8:48 AM JStanton420: prob a red bio haz waste thing
8:48 AM: probably
8:49 AM JStanton420: thinkin abot ask 4 it to have as a convo piece on my desk
8:49 AM DARE_2B_stupid: no
8:49 AM DARE_2B_stupid: just no
8:49 AM JStanton420: but that might make people not want to talk
8:49 AM Rock_It_Science: pretty sure that fits some sort of profile
8:49 AM JStanton420: so no point
8:49 AM JStanton420: these drugs are so awsom did I say that b 4
8:50 AM IM_the_walrus: yes
8:50 AM JStanton420: well said it again so there

“...everything alright?”

Eli looked up from the smartphone to see Grillby looking concerned... probably. The guy's face was made out of actual fire so it was hard to get a read on his expression.

“Yeah. Joe's online. He's awake. They couldn't save his arm, but... there's other plans. It's already degenerated into another shop class shit storm. Hal has challenged him to a Truth Telling Contest, three towns over... it's a Simpsons reference.”

“...okay. I had to ask, seeing how you were looking pretty caught up in your own world before.”

“Yeah... bad memories.”

“...about your other friend?”

“Yeah... Byron.” Eli looked down at his phone again. “You know... we still don't know how he knew that we did. I don't think he'd tamper with the mail, even for something like that, and even if he did I don't think the Sages used the United States Postal Service that much anyway. It was all couriers and dead drops even when they were at the height of their power.”

“...maybe he had somebody on the inside?”

“Maybe. Hell, maybe he was the inside man, but I doubt it. He knew which way the wind was blowing and he took an awful lot of risks to warn people, even if it was in code and indirect.” Eli looked over at the two bulletin boards in the bar, one of them now under glass to preserve it for future generations. “In any event, it doesn't matter now. They found out, they went after him... and his whole family just... you know, out of everyone in Shop Class, he was the only one to ever settle down and actually start a family.”
“...I'm sorry.”

“It's not your fault.” Eli locked his phone and put it in his pocket. “If there's any blame to be had... thinking about it... it has to be shared over the whole town. When the Sages got all riled up... nobody told them to stop it. People didn't get used to living in fear, but they let it happen anyway... nobody stood up and said 'this has gone too far, and stops now' and that includes the six of us in Shop Class. We prepared defenses in case they crossed some nebulous line, but we never started actively planning to fuck them up until after Byron was already gone. And honestly... can you really blame anyone for not being the first to stick their neck out, if everyone knows that's the first step towards getting your head chopped off?”

“...probably not.”

“Yeah... still. That was why I took off like a shot when I did. We'd been too late once before. Nobody wanted a repeat of that... at least this time it's for good. Steve found O'Dell's notes. They rounded up everybody. I know better than to think that's all of them, there's probably going to be two or three people out there that got out, not to mention the people that kept their opinions to themselves but secretly sympathized with the Guardians... but after last night... between what happened at All Fine Labs, and what happened everywhere else, I think they'll just quietly move away.”

“...you don't seem that bothered about that man apparently planning to stab you.”

Eli shrugged.

“I worked this bar for a long time. It's not the first time somebody has tried to stab me. I doubt it's gonna be the last, either.”

“...I wondered why you were willing to hire me on so quickly.”

“Hah. So... enough about all that depressing, serious stuff. Got any fun plans for the weekend?”

“...going to go to the community college with Roastie and get the paperwork squared away. She could have started last year but she said she wanted some practical, applied business experience before she started tackling economics in theory.”

“Good for her. In theory there is no difference between theory and practice, but in practice, there is.”

“...how about you? What are your weekend plans?”

“Taking the new boyfriend to meet the parents.” Eli's face contorted as if he had just bitten into a particularly potent citrus fruit. “That's going to be fun.”

“...I'll take your word for it. Not that it's any of my business, but what happened between you and Natasha?”

“I don't even know for sure. Seemed like every time we got together we started arguing about something. Still, lesson learned. A mutual love of Team Fortress 2 is not a strong enough foundation to build a relationship on.”

“...that can't be the only reason you two started dating.”

“It wasn't. But it's funnier if I imply that it was.”
“Need any help?”

“Hmmm?” Asgore levered himself up from behind the television set with its tangle of wires and cables to see Frisk standing nearby. “Oh! Howdy Frisk. Sorry, I was very distracted just now.”

“It looked like it. Probably doesn't help that most of this stuff is two or three times my age.”

“Old technology has never been a problem. Your mother and I used to make home movies with a video camera, before it finally broke beyond anyone's ability to repair it. The real problem is the cables and my hands are not sized for each other.”

“If that's the problem, I can help with that too.” Frisk walked behind the TV stand and started untangling the rat's nest of cables. “Actually, as long as we're the only people in this classroom? I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Sure, what is it?”

“I, uh.” Frisk leaned over to make sure that nobody had walked in while they were distracted by cables. “I talked to mom this morning. About... stuff. And... she said she already knew. And you did before her. So...”

Asgore nodded slowly.

“Right. When you were trying to save the photo album... blue magic was the only explanation that made any sense.”

“Yeah.” Frisk stopped fighting the cables for a second. “I just wanted to say. Uhm. Thank you.”

“...pardon me?”

“I guess. I thought that. If you guys knew. It'd just be... everyone would remember what happened last time. With thousands of years of being stuck in the dark. So. Thanks for giving me a chance, instead of....”

Frisk brought up a finger to their neck and dragged it across. It was a quick motion, and perhaps a little too casual given the import of the topics being discussed, and Asgore felt an unpleasant, cold sensation spread through his body. One paw came up and rested on Frisk’s head.

“Frisk. That is ridiculous. Magic responds to will and intent. Whatever it does, however it appears. It can only reflect the type of person that you already are. Even if human magic literally dropped out of the sky today, that would not be the end of life as we know it. Some might use it to help, and some might use it to harm, but that is because they want to help or to harm in the first place. And unfortunately, there's only so much we can do to change the minds of people who have already made them up.”

“Right.”

“Besides. You say the word 'chance' as if there was ever any doubt about you.”

Frisk ducked their head back down towards the cables, blinking their eyes a bit more than they had been before. “Uhm... thank you. Uh. Try the TV now. I think I got the cables sorted out.”

Asgore straightened up and pushed the power button the TV set, which showed a solid blue screen
“Ah, here we are! Thank you for your assistance, Frisk.”

“Any time.” Frisk made their way out from behind the TV stand, carefully avoiding getting tangled in the cables. “I don't seen a DVD or a VHS box anywhere. What movie is gonna play here?”

“Not sure. Brian and Danny both had the list of movies last I checked.”

“Hmmm. Well, I'll ask them if I see them. Might as well make sure every other room is set up too.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Thank you for waiting, sir, how can I- oh! Hello Papyrus!” The expression of the nurse at the desk instantly brightened. “Come to check on Mr. Riley again?”

“QUITE SO! I WAS WONDERING IF YOU COULD CHECK ME IN?”

“Sure thing. Just sign into the records book so we have the paper trail satisfied. Frankly I know we can trust you but if something unrelated goes wrong and somebody finds out I didn't follow procedure, there goes my job, so better safe than sorry.”

“OF COURSE!” The skeleton grabbed the pen next to the sign in book and scribbled his name onto the next empty line with a flourish, and the nurse turned the book around.

“I'm still confused how you can write everything like it's a computer font.”

“SKELETONS HISTORICALLY HAVE BEEN THE SCRIBES AND PRINTERS FOR MONSTER SOCIETY!”

“...good a reason as any, I guess. He's still in room two oh four. Oh, and take the stairs this time. The police have been in and out of the elevator all morning long. Apparently they decided to up the guard on O'Dell and on Cater since it's Friday.”

“O'DELL IS HERE? HAS HE REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS? I'D REALLY LIKE TO PICK UP WHERE WE LEFT OFF LAST NIGHT ON BEING A BETTER PERSON!”

“Last I heard they have him sedated six ways from Sunday to stop him from screaming. Those were some serious burns. And as long as he's unconscious he can't consent to the use of healing magic or monster food.” The nurse shrugged his shoulders. “Not that I'd expected him to agree to either one, but you gotta leave options open. Anyway, you have fun with Riley.”

“THANK YOU! HAVE A GOOD MORNING, AND A GOOD AFTERNOON AFTER THAT! NYEH HEH HEH!”

The tall skeleton made his way to the stairs, took them two at a time, and stopped at a nearby room on the second floor. Knocking on the open door, Papyrus heard a gruff voice say “Come in Papyrus.”

“WOWIE! HOW DID YOU KNOW IT WAS ME?”

Papyrus walked inside the room to see Dwayne Riley sitting up in a hospital bed. The man rolled his eyes.
“Because you're the only one who ever comes in here who is polite enough to knock.”

“REALY? THAT IS DISTRESSING! GOOD MANNERS ARE THE FOUNDATION OF CIVILIZED SOCIETY!”

“Last time you were here you said rule of law was the foundation of civilized society. And before that you said tire balancing was a foundation of civilized society.”

“CIVILIZED SOCIETY CAN HAVE MORE THAN ONE FOUNDATION! LIKE A HOUSE ON STILTS!”

“...wait. Like in Lethal Weapon Two?”

“PRECISELY!”

“...huh. That sounds ridiculous on the surface but the more I think about it....”

Brendan made a show of kneeling down and looking under the table, before standing up again with a huffing sound.

“It's not here either. Or the parts.”

“How would you know if you were looking at the broken leftover bits?”

“Because I bought them at the hardware store? Feels like yesterday. Which it was. Which is why it feels that way.”

Dr. Aster blinked his sockets at Brendan, then returned his attention to the wrecked marker boards stacked on the table.

“The math is roundabout compared to what I'd use but the physical models are spot on. Artificial external feedback... field integration, trying to coordinate everything at once instead of sequentially and introducing compound errors... the numbers are bass-ackwards but the engineering is solid as a rock. It's oversimplified, inefficient, with a minimum of moving parts and user end utilities. Designed to do one thing and one thing only, and do it well. I'd shake Joe's hand if... well, you know.”

“Yeah. I was going to be the test subject on this next thing. Kinda think I dodged a bullet, since if we'd been in here when the Guardians showed up that would have been a mess. And even if it did work right... real talk, I've never been in a serious fight before. Closest thing to that is when I was in the back of the Gas-And-Grub outside Triton when somebody threatened the cashier with a scaling knife.”

“How'd that turn out?”

“No idea. I was busy hiding behind the Powerade.”

“Well... we can't all be soldiers.”

Justin walked into the room with his phone in one hand.

“Somebody talking about me behind my back while I'm in front of them?”

“No, that was an unrelated historical event.” Dr. Aster motioned to the half ruined drawings and
equations. “It’s hard to be completely sure but I’m ninety percent certain Joe cracked the Unified Field Theory from the human technology angle. The real test would be building an application of it like a cold fusion reactor or an anti-gravity generator, either self-propelled or field effect based, with no magical point source emitters in the hardware. Whenever Joe gets back, I'd love to watch him tackle that.”

“Hmmph. Thing is, I know Joe. He'll do it. Two hands or one hand or no hands at all. He'll put it together with his teeth if he has to.”

“You have known him longer than I have, true. But yes, even I've noticed that relentless problem solving drive.” Dr. Aster shrugged and turned to Brendan. “Hey, since you bought the parts, you can probably make a list of them. See if you can write that up and copy it and let everyone know what to look for.”

“Actually I still have the original list in my pocket.” Brendan reached into his lab coat and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. “Okay, one roast beef- wait, this is my receipt from Das Boot. Let me try another pocket.”

“If and when you find it, just go straight to copying it and sending it to the rest of the lab.” Dr. Aster returned his attention to the rest of the room. “I'm still trying to figure this out. The room is a mess... and Joe's upgraded prototype is missing. They could have tried to wreck it, and all his notes to keep from retracing Joe's steps, and attacked Joe himself to keep him from retracing his own steps.”

“I'm not a scientist but I do know a few things about compartmentalization. Wouldn't that information be backed up somewhere?”

Dr. Aster nodded at Justin. “Yes, there are multiple image, audio, and video files on the lab intranet documenting Joe's progress. The Guardians might not know that, so they wouldn't think to try to assault the server rooms, or the secure storage vaults. Of course not knowing that their attack wouldn't set us all the way back to the drawing board is probably why they went through with it... it fits what we know about them and most of the evidence, except that we don't have a wrecked or dismantled field integration device lying around.”

Justin looked back towards the doorway to the room, where the sounds of running footsteps were echoing. “Hey. How many Guardians were actually inside All Fine Labs?”

“The most anyone ever saw were three. Thomas O'Dell and that man and woman that tried to break into Dimensional Storage.” Brendan shrugged. “But after the first prototype blew up, a lot of the cameras in Fabrication were either wrecked or just not responding.”

“So if there were more than three people involved in this thing, there's no way we'd know for sure-”

Justin's speculation was interrupted as Alex ran up to the room, skidded to a stop, and leaned against the door frame, heaving and trying to catch his breath.

“Off... Office... St... Steve... wants you...” Alex pointed at Justin and Dr. Aster before letting his arm drop, “to see... see him. Right now... heugh.”

“Sure, where's Steve right now?”

Alex replied to Justin's question by pointing up at the ceiling.

“...okay then. Doc, do you mind doing the honors?”
“Not at all.” One arm was raised and a purple light started shining from the hole in one hand, sweeping across the roof. “The closest clear area is on the Northwest Corner of the Fabrication roof. Put her there.”

The skeleton reached out his other hand and Justin took it. In a flash of blue light, the duo appeared on the roof, where the wind was already starting to pick up. Over by a large hole with numerous objects, policemen, and poles marked with police tape scattered around it, Officer Steve was already waving at them to come closer. The policeman ducked under the tape as they approached and pointed one thumb back at the hole.

“So. Good news and bad news. Good news is we know how they got up here in the first place.”

“Don't we get to pick if we want the bad news or good news first?”

“Sorry Justin. Gotta hear the good news to understand how bad the bad news is.”

“Shit. I hate when that happens.”

“Uh huh. So. We think when O'Dell was getting everything he needed for his bag of tricks, he stopped by Rick's Hardware. Couldn't buy or easily steal what he needed to launch a grappling hook or anchor chemically, so... he decided to go fly a kite.”

Officer Steve pointed to the radio antenna jutting out of the southeast corner of the Fabrication section of the lab, where a wrecked pile of cloth and wood swung to-and-fro in the wind like some Charlie Brown themed pendulum clock.

“Literally. It's a pretty uncommon design, not sure exactly where he got it from but he scaled it up just enough to carry the line with the hook on it. Not sure how he got it up to speed without that much wind on the ground, but my guess is he was riding a bike or something and let it play out behind him until it was high enough to catch the wind up here.”

“My experience with surface wind patterns is less than a month, so I'll defer to yours,” Dr. Aster commented dryly. “So once the line was secure, they rappelled up? Or did they have a faster way to do that?”

“Looks like they did have some simple mountaineering equipment designed to make climbing easier. But that's actually less interesting than what they brought with them. The heaviest member of the assault team looks to be that man who was down in the basement. Peter Van Brandt. He weighs about two hundred and fifty pounds. Now, may I direct your attention to that tripod thingy next to the hole with the pulley hanging on it? When they couldn't open the fake roof or find a hinge or something, they just blew it up... O'Dell used those shotgun shells like shaped charges. Then they used that pulley system and a rope to descend to the floor. Thing is, the other end of that rope was wrapped around four sixty pound bags of concrete plus two five pound free weights.”

“A counterweight.”

Officer Steve nodded at the skeleton. “That's the only explanation. Everyone who was lighter, the people on top could pull on the rope to make up the difference, then the person on the ground could unhook, the rope could ascend, and they repeat it with everyone except the last guy, who just lets the rope go.”

“Which traps them in the building under lockdown. I'd say I was expecting more from O'Dell's master plan, but, well, he did really hurt Joe.” Justin looked at the tripod again. “Actually, if somebody weighed less than the counterweight and stayed hooked on, once everyone else let go
he'd end up back on the roof again and could help everyone escape. Or just cut his losses if he thought nobody was coming back.”

Officer Steve sighed. “And that is why I wanted to talk to you two right away. O'Dell burned all his plans related to this attack before moving out. That's what Jim pulled out of the fire when we tripped over his hiding spot, just enough to make the connection to here. The rest of his notes were still there, though, which is how we knew who to look for. You might not believe this, but they were hanging on the back of the door to the fallout shelter, underneath an old civil defense poster, held in place by new tape.”

“Wait, a fallout shelter?”

“Just like you said, Justin. O'Dell went underground literally.”

“...hah!”

“Yeah. Anyway. We found everyone on his hard copy lists, and the Quarterhorse Field PD Fraud Task Force is doing us a solid trying to get into his electronic records. But we still don't have his master plan for this attack. So if Zeke Thompson... that guy that Triton's finest picked up earlier today... if he was actually in on this, we have no way of knowing unless he talks or strikes a plea deal or something. Which I'm not really counting on.”

Dr. Aster turned and stared at the antenna with the kite cable wrapped around it.

“...Officer Steve. Brendan downstairs says that he was supposed to be testing something for Joe when the attack happened, and that prototype is now missing. Neither the intact device, nor any of its component parts, has been located yet.”

“...what sort of device are we talking about? All that the lab has released to anybody is that it was some sort of communicator.”

“Actually I'd like to know that myself.” Justin frowned. “Everyone's been really cagey about that, which is more than a little aggravating when all I want to do is know what the hell my friend was doing that got him hurt so bad in the first damned place.”

Dr. Aster started to walk along the roof, beckoning the two men to follow and looking around to judge the relative line of site between all other humans on the roof.

“The communicator terminology is an oversimplification. Apparently the main operating principle of the device was based on a radio tuner. What it actually does is fairly complex with lots of math so it'd be easier to show you.”

Dr. Aster turned around and held out one hand. Tiny bones shot up from the light in the center of one palm and formed a geodesic sphere, which started to rotate, some of the bones flashing blue in unison.

“What Joe created is a back door proof of concept for a Unified Field Theory. Actually reproducing it from first principles without the notes that were damaged in the attack is unlikely. But even a small amount of trial and error with it might lead to experimental vindication. Controlled transmutation, safe nuclear power, gravity manipulation on demand, and those are just the most obvious applications.”

The sphere stopped rotating, and Officer Steve's eyes opened wide. The glowing bones in the front and the back of the sphere lined up perfectly with his eyes and spelled out **GIVES HUMANS**
MAGIC. After a second, the sphere spun until it was oriented towards Justin, who saw the same hidden message and narrowed his own eyes in response. The sphere vanished into the ether and Dr. Aster scratched the top of his skull with the end of one index finger.

“So, I think you can see why that's the kind of thing we'd want to keep an eye on. And especially limit access to the people we know we can trust... at least until a patent is filed, or we can make it a trade secret or something.”

Justin made a scoffing noise. “If some patent troll tries to take credit for this, Joe will hunt them down and cook and eat their internal organs. I am not kidding.”

“With the exception of the woman down in the basement... Agnes something... God, this is starting to affect my head, I've never had trouble remembering names before today... ugh. Agnes whatcha-face was the only one that seemed to be carrying scientific equipment or parts. Those are logged as evidence but Alphys confirmed last night that those were from the first prototype. The one that literally blew up in Joe's face. I don't think we can rule out the possibility that... that... ugh, I was just talking about him a minute ago... that... Thompson, finally, I don't think we can rule out the possibility that he was here, that he took that doohickey, and passed it off to somebody else or hid it somewhere. Not sure who though. Actually I'm not even sure how they knew something like this existed to steal. I mean, there were rumors going on about that accident being related to human magic, but that happens every time All Fine Labs does anything.”

“Yeah, no shit.” Justin shook his head. “People were saying these Soul color rings were magic related. People were saying that Soul Research was a plot to find potential human mages and secretly kill them. People were saying it was a conspiracy when Alphys helped the fucking Nice Cream guy get started on the surface. It is weird that O'Dell attacked now, of all times... unless he knew this was the last day the scary ass skeletons with the laser beam dragon skull pets would be out of town, and decided to go for broke.”

Dr. Aster made a snorting, laughing noise somehow, while Officer Steve tapped his chin.

“Huh. Actually I could see that happening. They would have grabbed anything that looked important, and wrecked whatever they couldn't take with them, no matter when they attacked. It's all moot though. No matter what they could have stolen, what they did steal, we don't know where to look to find. Everyone on Thomas's list of Guardian wannabes is accounted for now.”

“Well, maybe it'll take a while for it to reach whoever O'Dell intended it to get to.”

“Justin... we're not that-”

“I know we're not that lucky.” Justin glared at Steve. “I was deliberately tempting fate so we can get this over with as soon as possible. Speaking of which, need to bring everyone up to speed on this new development.”

Dr. Aster saw Justin pull out his cell phone. “Good idea. The more eyes on this, the better.”

“Eyes, no. Guns, yes. I'm letting the rest of Shop Class know that it's time to get ready for another fucked up Friday in Ebott's Wake.”

“...statistically speaking, you have a point. It might just be personal bias on my part, but three out of four Fridays this month have been very, very interesting. What do you two think?”

“I think you might have a point.” Officer Steve shook his head. “There's no way I can put anyone on alert, officially or unofficially, without telling them what this machine does. Of course if
somebody does use it and starts making a mess of things, that's different.”

Dr. Aster sighs. “Officer Ward, even if nobody uses it, we've already passed the point of no return. Everything is going to be different after today. So... either of you need a bridge down to ground level? I've gotta get back to checking the math in what's left of Joe's notes.”

“Yes.”

“Sure.”

Two fleshy hands reached out to cover a single bony one, and all three vanished in a flash of blue light.

Jordan Cater did not respond when the door to the room opened.

He never did.

He never responded to nurses and doctors updating his chart.

He never responded to police making obvious inquiries, or in certain cases, subtle threats.

He never responded to meals being delivered, although once the room was empty, he would start eating, more out of habit than anything else.

A man and a woman arguing over lunch in some sort of space station. Two conspiracy theorists trying to survive a zombie apocalypse. A scientist delivering pizzas by launching them into orbit with rockets. A man carrying a bizarre fusion of musical instruments that could not possibly exist. Wait, that last one actually happened according to some of the conversation snippets Jordan had picked up. That insane mechanic. But the rest of them... the dreams were getting stranger and stranger.

Possibly whatever convoluted set of circumstances had granted him insight into the future had been upset by that blast of magical energy from that floral abomination. The burns had been significant, but the beam had physical force to it as well. Almost half of the front of Jordan's body had turned into a giant bruise, with a few matching sets on his back from where the beam had slammed him into the pavement.

In the CORE, he had instructed everyone on the team that Thomas put together to leave the young monster alone. He had plans, nebulous ones, but payback for what happened to Chara was a solid constant. Those plans had been torn apart just as assuredly as the inside of his hand when that little brat stabbed him... he could still remember her expression. Lips drawn back in a grimace that almost looked like a smile. Teeth clenched. Eyes narrowed to slits, but not enough to conceal the red light from one eye. Like she was showing off. And then the impact of the blue magic that knocked the breath out of him.

And then it was gone. That... whatever it was. Bloodlust maybe. Replaced by other expressions, all fighting for space on the girl's face.

He remembered the look of surprise, too, when he kicked her over the railing. But that hadn't happened. Not anymore. The little brat had taken every victory, no matter how great or small, and turned it upside down and inside out. It was hard to take comfort in an accomplishment that had been so easily undone. Actually it was hard to really take comfort in anything that involved a child dying.
Traidor to humanity or not... it struck too close to home.

Jordan was dragged out of his reverie by something heavy landing in his lap, and he looked up to see the nurse- wait.

“Claudia?? What the-”

“I know for a fact that you're not on anything that would zone you out like that.”

“I have a lot on my mind. And a lot of time to think.”

“Well, think fast. You have maybe thirty seconds to a minute before the policemen outside fall asleep from the special ingredients I put in their coffee. People are going to notice. Make good decisions.”

Jordan held up the hand that was cuffed to the hospital bed.

“Make them with what exactly?”

“With this.” Claudia pointed at the machinery in the man's lap. “Thomas got himself caught and hurt very bad to get this to you.”

“...what.”

“You don't have the time for the details. Not that I have any myself. All I know is to get this to you. I've done all I can. The rest is up to you. I have to leave now. We're all counting on you. Good luck.”

The nurse walked out of the room, pushing a cart ahead of her. Jordan hadn't even recognized her, or even noticed that she was in the room, until she had been well inside his personal space and dropped something on him.

Something he had no idea what to do with.

It was homemade, that was obvious. Coils and wires, switches and dials, analog and digital readouts all over the place, and at least one obvious handle. Gripping the... gizmo by that, he brought it closer to his restrained other hand to manipulate the unlabeled controls. Exactly what he was supposed to do eluded him, but at least the power switch was larger than the others and immediately caused a strange buzzing sensation in the hand gripping the handle. Knobs were twisted, other switches flipped -

“What the fuck?!”

Jordan let go of the handle and shook his head, and the sensations disappeared instantly. Whatever he had stumbled across... it had been doing something. Carefully, he gripped the handle again, getting the same strange feelings sending tremors up and down his arm, and started to manipulate the dials some more.

Outside, there was a thud as an unconscious body hit the floor, followed by another one and the panicked words of people noticing. Jordan tried to tune it out, but-

the-

world-

was-
The gizmo buzzed, and a red LED light came on. Jordan let go of the handle... and noticed that some of the strange sensations in his hand and arm were still there. He looked closer to see if anything had spilled out of the device, maybe oil or possibly some sort of weak corrosive acid, and saw the stress points in the handcuff mechanism.

Then he blinked.

They were still there.

There were glowing spots inside the mechanism, in different links of the chain, and in the cuffs themselves. Each one was somehow obvious in how much physical force, and from what direction, it would take to break them.

Jordan Cater clenched his fist, took a deep breath, and pulled with all his might. Metal fragments bounced off the floor and in one case the far wall. His hand was no longer encircled by metal.

It was, however, covered in blue light, which faded out as suddenly as it had appeared.

“...Thomas. You really outdid yourself this time.”

The door burst open and instinctively, intuitively, without and real conscious thought, Jordan reached towards it; yellow sparks shot out and collided with people in various uniforms, causing them to fall twitching to the ground. Jordan got up off of the bed, stepped over to them, and knelt down over the man wearing scrubs.

“That is a problem. We don't know if the existing nerves will recognize the artificial sensors and actuators and grow into them using healing magic. Then again, if it connects directly with your Soul, maybe it doesn't matter if there's a physical connection.” Dr. Ross shrugged. “Not really my area of expertise.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Joe tapped one page. “It'd be powered by one of the All Fine Labs magic mini nuclear reactors, just like Mettaton. No recharging, no swapping batteries. So there's that.”

“Great. Let's hope it turns out better than The Terminal Man.”

“...didn't that involve an implant wired directly to a guy's brain? And he was already messed up from some sort of head trauma?”

“Yeah. But it was plutonium powered.”

“Oh. Fair point. From what I understand of the magic reactors, there's no heavy isotopes involved. Actually I think I heard somebody say any element below atomic number seventeen will work except Helium and Neon, since they're noble gasses. Don't quote me on that. That was back during the Christmas Party.”

“Hah!”

“I'm kind of surprised you agreed to help with this, doc. I would have thought that this might be
some sort of medical ethics violation thing.”

“It skirts the line, yes. That's why I'm not going to be the one doing the cutting or stitching. I'm just consulting on this and providing my expertise in human anatomy and surgical techniques. And this time there will be a healer on hand to deal with that side. Not that Caduceus had hands, being a giant snake monster, but whatever.”

Joe looked up at the surgeon with an appraising expression.

“That still doesn't explain why you said yes.”

“I've dedicated my life to making people better. The monetary incentive to being a doctor can't really overcome the necessity of sticking your hands in all sorts of places, and then there's the whole cost of medical school thing. So it has to be a labor of love. I'm pretty damned good at my job, but there's some things human medical science can't do. Not now, not yet. But healing magic, that can work miracles by our standards. Regeneration, even if it only works below certain limits of physical trauma. Sense organs. Cancer. Nerve damage, for fuck's sake. The Holy Grail of surgical science is the restoration of severed nerves. And people have been benefiting from that since the fucking Nice Cream guy set up shop! We do need to figure out what, if any, long term negative side effects there are to human magic exposure, but whatever they may turn out to be? People today are experiencing a dramatic increase in both quality and quantity of life. And that's the whole reason I'm in this business. If there's any chance that what Dr. Alphys is doing can make prosthetic limbs more available and more effective at performing the functions of the originals, then I want to be a part of that. Maybe the same methods can be applied to internal vital organs, to manufacture replacements. No more waiting lists, no more having to try to balance the value of one person's life against another, trying to decide who is somehow more deserving of life.”

Joe stared at the surgeon, who had taken pacing across the room and gesturing wildly, and was forcibly reminded of some of Dr. Aster's laboratory habits.

“Wow. I just thought Alphys agreed to give the hospital a magic coffee machine.”

“I can't be bribed to violate medical ethics, Mr. Stanton.”

“...jeez. Sorry.”

“Also it was three coffee machines.”

Dr. Ross and Mr. Stanton stared at each other, and both broke down into snorting giggles at the same time-

Joe's eyes flared with purple light and he made a strangled noise in his throat, bringing up his hand to cover part of his face, as well as his damaged arm in the position where his right hand would have been, mostly out of reflex. Dr. Ross stared at the purple light for a moment, dumbstruck.

“...Mr. Stanton?”

“Oh fuck.” Joe looked around the room, until finally he looked up at an angle directed towards the second floor. “Okay. Need to tell you some stuff really quick. First things first. We're in pretty deep shit right now. Second thing. This,” Joe pointed towards his glowing eyes, “is not common knowledge, so I'd appreciate it if you kept it under your doctor-patient confidentiality hat. Three, I need to know where my clothes are, especially my pants. Fate of the world or not, I refuse to fight anybody in a backless hospital gown. It's against my religion.”

Dr. Ross blinked a few times as Joe climbed out of the bed, swaying a bit as he got to his feet.
“...your paperwork said your religious affiliation was Jedi.”

“You ever seen somebody fight bare-assed in Star Wars? Actually don't answer that. I haven't seen all of the prequel trilogy yet.”

The man's chest rose and fell in rhythm with the machinery in the room. Bandages were a recurring motif, but here and there, some of the ugly, blistering skin could been seen. According to his chart, O'Dell's burns were bad, but not so serious as to require a skin graft. But at the same time... the chart also mentioned the lack of related injuries. No smoke inhalation. No deep tissue trauma from high temperatures as the heat permeated the man's body. The injuries were literally only skin deep. It made no sense.

They were caused by magic, though. So they didn't have to.

Jordan Cater stared at his hand, now completely whole, without even the trace of a scar to show where the child had stabbed before. The man walked up to the side of the bed, swallowed a lump in his throat, and got down on his knees by O'Dell.

“...I'm so sick of this.”

Slowly, carefully, Jordan brought one hand up and gently grasped O'Dell's hand.

“Everyone I care about. My daughter. My wife. My Brothers. My friends. Everyone is taken from me. Everyone is made to suffer. One way or another. I...” Jordan faltered for a moment. “I know that what I do... has to be done. But... is this me? Is this something that I do to people, some curse that drags them down as punishment for being close to me?”

There was a shaking breath as Jordan tried to calm himself. His free hand came up to wipe the moisture from his eyes, then came down and grasped O'Dell's hand from the other side.

“Thomas. I don't know what it took for you to get that... that thing, to me. But I know what it cost you. I promise... I will not let that go to waste.”

A green light spread out from O'Dell's hand, spreading up his arm and across the rest of his body. The visible skin between bandages began to return to a texture and color other than “badly burned” before the light faded away. Slowly and carefully, Jordan let go of the man's hand. There was no tremor, no movement or sound that indicated that O'Dell somehow heard him even through the sedation. Which made sense, and arguably it was for the best, but Jordan still felt... something... in his chest. One hand came up to rub at the spot that seemed to ache as the man got to his feet and walked out of the room.

Outside in the hallway, he adjusted his clothing. The hospital scrubs were more or less his size but he was unused to them and the only time they had not been distracting him in some small way was when he was staring at his fallen friend. But they'd do to get him out of the building, and to someplace else where he could get more familiar clothes, and ideally shoes that weren't a size and a half too big with a ludicrously high instep.

And if they didn't, he had one hell of a backup plan.

“Jordan Cater.”

Jordan stopped walking and turned around; at the other end of the hallway, a man stood wearing a wrinkled Ninja Sex Party T-Shirt and dirty jeans stained with blood, oil, and dirt. One arm was
raised and supported the bandaged remains of what was left of the other arm, a cotton ball taped onto the back of his intact left hand. But most importantly, the man's irises were glowing a bright, unnatural magenta.

“...I know who you are, even if I can't remember your name right now.”

Joe shrugged. “That's fair. It's a busy morning and we all had a rough night last night. Well, I know I did. Anyway. My name's Joe Stanton. I work at All Fine Labs. And you, you used the Phase Integrator. I saw that. Thanks for leaving it in your room by the way. Makes it a lot easier to get that back to the lab.”

“...like you said. It's a busy morning. I had other plans for that later, but every time I try to work on them somebody tries to keep me from escaping custody and I have to hurt them.”

“That figures. So. You ready to get this party started?”

Jordan stared at the man, then turned around and started walking down the hallway again.

“No.”

“...wait what.”

“You think I'm an idiot? Standing around talking when you could already be attacking me? Actually getting my attention instead of setting up an ambush? You don't want to fight. You want to stall. You've already called your friends and they're on their way, and magical influence over matter and energy or not I have no intention of waiting around to fight a force with tremendous numerical superiority.”

“Okay, I did call my friends. Or I had somebody else call them while I distracted you, and you're right about me stalling for them to show up. But you forgot something very important. If you leave and disappear again. Start something up. Rebuild your power base. Network with other people. That means you'll be out there, but your buddy O'Dell will be here. With me.”

Jordan stopped walking, foot raised up in the air, and slowly set it down before turning around to face Joe and walking towards him.

“You should not have said that.”

“Yeah? Well you should not have gone after Byron and his family.”

“...the old postmaster.”

“Yeah. You killed my friend. So I'm gonna kill yours. See how you like it when some asshole rips somebody you care about out of your life.”

Jordan's own eyes began to glow purple, just like Joe's.

“You really think I'm the bad guy in all this? That I alone am in the wrong? You take revenge for slights on your friends, and that's perfectly fine when you do it, but me seeking justice for the wrongs inflicted on my family is not?”

“You wouldn't know justice if it ran up to you and kicked you in the balls. You hurt people. Byron tried to warn them. You killed him. And now you're all that's left of your stupid fucking cult. It's called cause and effect, dumbass.”
“And so you threaten to kill my friend as revenge for losing your own. And now, I'm going to kill you. That, too, is cause and effect.”

Joe grinned a grin that could best be described with the phrase “shit-eating” and held up both arms. Purple light surrounded them both.

“Better men than you have tried and failed.”

The hallway was filled with a dull metallic ringing and Cater fell to one knee with a yell; behind him, an IV stand had swung out of a doorway and collided with the man's back, and the person doing the swinging walked out of the door, raising the improvised club up again.

“That was for the bullet in the shoulder, motherfucker!”

The second swing was blocked by a glowing green shield, and Cater jumped to his feet, spun around, and reached out towards his attacker, only to have his knuckles rapped by a bone attack from another doorway. A skeleton wearing a hooded sweatshirt stepped out, one gloved hand raised, and Cater made an exasperated noise.

“You got me vested in protecting O'Dell so I'd let my guard down. Credit where it's due, Stanton. That's an effective Plan B.”

“Actually Plan B involved a cup of hot coffee and a rubber band gun, but whatever. The alphabet is not the boss of me.”

“I'll bet.” Cater crossed his arms in front of his chest, then whipped them out to the sides, a shock wave of light blue energy pulsed out from the man's body. Joe froze in place instinctively, and Cater immediately ran into an open doorway to a room; there was the sound of breaking glass, and Joe sighed.

“So much for keeping him occupied.”

“WELL! THIS IS A FINE PICKLE!”

“Hey Papyrus. Not that I'm complaining, but what exactly are you doing here?”

“WHY, VISITING MY NEWEST FRIEND DWAYNE RILEY OF COURSE!” Papyrus gestured to where the man who had swung at Cater used to be standing, then turned to see that same man lying on the floor a few feet behind him.

“...ow.”

Joe walked up the hallway towards the prone man. “I'm guessing you were still winding up for a swing when the wave magic hit you.”

“Ugh. I can never remember which one you stop for. And which one you run through.”

“SANS RECOMMENDS PICTURING A BLUE STOP SIGN AS AN AID TO MEMORY, BUT PERSONALLY I THINK THAT JUST MAKES THINGS EVEN MORE CONFUSING.”

“Yeah. Hey. I'm just going to lie here for a few hours. Let me know how the big battle royale goes.”

Joe looked down at Riley's prone form and rolled his eyes. “Seriously? You're satisfied with hitting the guy once with an IV stand?”
“No. But while the spirit is willing. The flesh really hurts.”

“...fair point. Hey, let me try something.” Joe's left hand came up and green light slowly gathered at the tip of his index finger, eventually coalescing into a green syringe that shot towards Riley and vanished into the man's body. Joe shook his head, breathing as if he had just ran up several flights of stairs.

“Well. That was way harder than I would have liked. How do you feel?”

“...my shoulder's okay. But I am very confused right now. How the hell did you do that?”

“AND WHILE WE ARE ON THE SUBJECT, HOW WAS JORDAN CATER ABLE TO DEFEND HIMSELF WITH MAGICAL MEANS?”

Joe looked towards the confused skeleton, and shrugged. “It would take a scientist to explain it, and I'm simply too mad. Now come on. If you guys want in on this final battle, the clock's ticking. We need to find Dr. Ross, make sure she's safe and called the rest of Shop Class, and get my invention back to All Fine Labs.”

The scientist pointed towards Riley's hospital gown as he got to his feet.

“But first, in accordance with the Jedi Code... you need to put on some pants.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope everybody has all their side quests in order, because we are coming up on the endgame.
“Find everything you were looking for?”

“I dare say that I have.” An umbrella was placed on the counter and a man in a fancy suit pulled out a similarly fancy wallet and coin purse. “Honestly I should have done this yesterday but the best laid plans of monsters and men oft go awry.”

“I don’t know what you mean by that, but it sounds sophisticated when you put it that way! That’ll be seven dollars and fifty cents!”

“Here you are.” Currency was placed upon the counter. “Also I haven't had the opportunity, what with this and that, but if you should see him, please give my regards to Hal Greene for his Herculean mechanical efforts.”

“Oh yeah, all those desks! Like, how did that go? Whatever it was?”

“Not as well as I’d have liked, but I shall be triumphant in the end.” The man picked up his umbrella and hung the hook on his arm, tipping his fancy hat to the purple cat monster. “Good day to you my dear.”

“Thanks, you too!” Catty waved at the man as he walked out of Joe's House of Stuff, and returned her attention to her phone. Outside, the man adjusted his hat and began walking down the street and turned the corner, passing along the rest of the strip mall, humming a jaunty tune to himself.

As he passed the door to the laundromat, it opened behind him, and a man stepped out wearing hospital scrubs and walking briskly towards Joe's House of Stuff. Catty heard the bell jingle as the door opened, but did not see anybody walk inside the store when she looked up.

“Hello? Did somebody come in?”

There was no reply, and the cat monster returned her attention to her smart phone, even as the sounds of fabric rustling came from the shelves filled with clothing. There were faint footsteps going further back into the building, and after a minute or so, the distant sound of the loading door opening.

On the other side of the block, Jordan Cater walked over to the narrow alley between the thrift shop and the miniature golf course and leaned against the building, out of the way of most pedestrians and by-and-large out of sight of them. One shaking hand came up and covered his face, then slowly slid down. Even being able to determine sight lines, blind spots, and the presence of other people even through walls... making his way unseen from the hospital had been nerve wracking.

Then again, some of those nerves were likely left over from jumping out of the window. While analyzing the world with a dizzying precision came naturally, and rendering people unconscious with magical electricity was easy enough, the same could not be said for anything else. Pushing back the signs of injury took time and concentration, and manipulating physical matter and energy felt... clumsy. Like trying to reproduce some sort of stunt or dance after only having seen it done in a movie once or twice. And while that could have been a problem if he had stayed in the hospital to fight, it had definitely been a problem when trying to escape.

There had been plenty of documented instances of monsters using blue magic to fly or to move objects, but they clearly made it look easier than it actually was. Jordan's landing had been rough,
to say the least, and it had only been from the second floor of the building. If he had needed to escape from a higher floor... well, healing magic could probably fix the damage... but it would slow him down and he wasn't sure he could set all the bones properly before then...

Cater gritted his teeth, breathed in for a count of five, held the breath for a count of five, and let it out for a count of five. It didn't help much, but it did help. Nobody had spotted him yet. That was something, even if it was mostly because nobody seemed to be looking yet. That wouldn't last forever. He just had to keep moving and think on his feet. Something that he was definitely experienced in, because it had kept him alive so many times in the past.

Cater shook his head and looked down at the clothing he had managed to steal under the cat monster's nose. Black denim jeans faded to gray by repeated washing, with light patches of wear around the knees. Light tan jacket with a hood, suitable for rain which was good because the sky seemed to promise that sooner rather than later. A purple knit shirt with a single pocket on the right hand side... either ironic, or some sort of subconscious thing going on. One-size-fits-all socks that didn't fit anyone, and scuffed tennis shoes with frayed laces.

In other words, pretty nondescript. Especially when a sizable fraction of the town's population had tails and wings and fangs, and sometimes looked like they were made out of fire or ice or rock or even stranger things than that. Somebody trying to make it through the rain with a hood up wouldn't merit a second look, unless that person's eyes were glowing the way that the Stanton guy's eyes had been. Sunglasses might be a way around that...

Cater stepped out of the alley and started walking down the sidewalk, doing his best to not act like he was a violent, dangerous man who had just escaped police custody for the fourth time in three weeks.

“Jesus Tap Dancing Christ, Joe.”

Joe glared at Brendan as he walked into All Fine Labs with the Phase Integrator under his complete arm. “Don't start with me, man. The drugs are starting to wear off and I'm losing my sunny disposition.”

Behind Joe, Dr. Ross coughed. “Actually you've been off of the IV solution for long enough now that there shouldn't be anything left in your bloodstream anyway, unless it was the placebo affect.”

“Oh. Well then I don't know what the hell's going on. Where's Dr. Aster?”

“He's...” Brendan swallowed. “He's in the meeting room with what's left of your notes, still trying to retrace some of your steps yesterday. Why?”

“Because... something really witty and smart sounding that I can't think of right now.” Joe marched through the lobby, along several corridors and hallways, until he was inside a room with a skeleton monster staring at broken marker boards and trying to fill in the blanks.

“Wow. They really did a number on my stuff.”

The skeleton abruptly turned around.

“...Joe?”

“No, I'm Joe's evil twin, Archibald Stanton.” Joe sighed. “Sorry. The painkillers are wearing off and I'm turning into an asshole. Back into an asshole, I should say. How are you doing?”
Dr. Aster shrugged. “Well... I'm confused. That's hardly out of the ordinary, though. Justin was here not long ago but he left to go talk to Officer Steve about something.”

“Let's hope they're arming up.”

“Arming up for what?”

“...for Jordan Cater? Who has magic now? Because somebody managed to get my brainchild into the hospital?” Joe placed his machine on the table and Dr. Aster's eye sockets turned to the device instantly. “It's out of juice right now. We'll have to put in new batteries to use it on anybody else. If we use it again at all. Casing is scuffed a bit but I don't see any tool marks. Don't think anyone tried to open it up to see how it works. So this is it. We keep this locked up, or if all else fails, smash it to bits. Pretty sure I can make another one later if we have to.”

“...sorry, still playing catch up. Did you say Jordan Cater has magic?”

“Yeah.” Joe sighed. “It's not great. When Justin and Steve get back with the guns, we gotta come up with some sort of plan of attack.”

“Before that happens... this I need to see for myself. What can you do with this? Bullet patterns? Field effects?”

Joe shrugged. “Mostly it's just seeing the world clearly, even without glasses. I can kind of get an X-Ray vision thing going on through walls and stuff... basically what Alphys made those goggles do for me, only much better. Everything else is like pulling teeth. It was easier yesterday, but it was getting harder the longer I experimented. If we're lucky, this kind of stuff only gives humans a finite amount of whatever-the-hell-it-is that makes magic work, and Cater will run out just like me.”

“...show me.”

“What?”

“For science. What kind of bullets can you make?”

Joe shrugged. “Gotta be honest. Bullets don't come naturally. Gotta think about it.”

After a few moments, Joe held up his intact hand and a purple light flew towards Dr. Aster, bouncing off the skeleton's coat and landing on the floor before fading back into the ether from whence it came.

“...your bullets are coffee mugs?”

“...don't gimme that look. With your. Face. I woke up less than an hour ago and I am not a morning person, even when I'm not recovering from surgery.”

“Hey, is Joe on speakerphone or something?” Two men walked into the room, one of them wearing a police uniform. “I swear that sounds like... oh.”

Joe turned around to see Justin and Steve staring at him, and then his eyes locked onto the white disposable cup in Steve's hand. Joe's eyes glowed purple, and his left arm reached out. Purple lines formed between the coffee cup and the scientist's fingertips, and then contracted; in less than a second, the cup had literally changed hands and Joe was draining it. Officer Steve blinked, then stared at his empty hand.
“...what just happened?”

“That's a good question. I have a better one.” Justin pointed at Joe. “What are you doing here? I'm not an expert in the field, but magic healing stuff or not I don't think you should be up and around right now. Convalescence and bed rest and so on and so forth.”

“No time. We gotta stop Cater. Again. And speaking of which, I can't help but notice that you guys are a little deficient in the gun department. Well, except for Steve's service sidearm.”

“Okay first, I told you not to call it that. The alliteration gives me a headache.” Officer Steve pointed at Joe. “Second, what's the shit with Cater again?”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Somehow while O'Dell was being a nuisance last night, one of his buddies stole the Phase Integrator and managed to get it to Jordan Cater this morning. I saw it. Sort of. I'll come up with an appropriate sensory metaphor after we stop him again. I gave Dr. Ross my cell phone so she could call you guys while I stalled him.”

Justin and Steve blinked, almost in unison. Justin pulled out his own phone while Steve grabbed his radio.

“Officer Yeats, this is Officer Ward. Please advise on conditions at your twenty, over.”

Joe shook his head. “Don't bother, Steve. When Dr. Ross and I showed up everybody was out like a light.”

Dr. Ross stepped forward. “I didn't have time for an extensive diagnosis but they were still alive. There were some visible burn marks, possibly from an electrical discharge.”

“Energy magic.” Dr. Aster nodded. “The right amount of voltage and amperage would disrupt a human's nervous system, at least temporarily. By leaving people incapacitated, survivors have to split their attention with taking care of the wounded and actually trying to fight and pursue Cater. As strategies go, I've seen worse.”

“Officer Yeats, respond, over.”

“Sorry man. No messages, no missed calls.” Justin tapped his phone and shrugged.

“Speaking of phones, Mr. Stanton. Here's yours back. Maybe next time you want me to call your friends for backup, you can unlock the damned thing first.”

Joe looked at the surgeon, then at the phone in her hand. The screen displayed a picture of Joe, Anna, Gunther, and Dr. Alphys making bizarre gestures in a room that looked to be decorated with assorted holiday themed items. All four of the scientists had some sort of cup or other beverage container in their grip, which probably explained a few things.

“...oh. Right. Guess that would have helped.”

Dr. Aster made some sort of snickering sound.

“Oh, like you've never had something important slip your mind before.” Joe accepted the phone from Dr. Ross. “Well. Guess I'll get on this. Actually, why didn't you bring up the whole phone thing while Papyrus was driving us aaaaannnnnd I just answered my own question didn't I. Sorry.”

Dr. Ross shrugged. “Don't worry about it. We're all doing the best we can this morning.”
“Dispatch, this is Officer Ward at All Fine Labs. Trying to raise Officer Yeats and I'm not getting anything. When's the last time she checked in?” Officer Ward walked out into the hallway while he was talking, and the static-filled reply from the Ebott's Wake Police Department could be heard, but not understood, by everyone still in the room. Justin held his own phone up, already dialing.

“I've got Hal. Joe, you call Eli and Mike. Last time I tried hitting Cater with tear gas, he didn't seem affected. He might be one of those people that has a higher tolerance to the aerosol. So no need to grab the launcher.”

“Guess there's that. Suppose the emitter in the phone will work just as well as whatever I can do. But I don't want to drain the battery too fast... hey, where's Alphys? Wait, never mind. I remember. Sans told me she was exhausted after last night and took the day off... wait, where's Sans?”

“Down in the basement, resetting Dimensional Boxes.” Dr. Aster pulled out his own phone. “I'll let him know what's going on. Oh, by the way. We did get the Memoryhead contained, but it got loose again.”

“Great. One more problem. I'll add it to the pile.”

Officer Steve walked back into the room.

“Just got word back. We can't call into the hospital landlines, but we just got a shit ton of emergency calls from cells located at the hospital. Not sure if Cater fried the phone switchboard or what. Doesn't matter. It's all hands on deck all over again. Shit has officially Gotten Real.”

Fingers traced a pattern in the dirt, and Jordan stared at his craftsmanship. The symbols were crude, but they had never produced a noticeable effect that he or anyone else on the council could detect no matter how precisely they were made. There had always been the possibility that some important detail had been lost along the way, but they had done their best to preserve what had been handed down from the war, just as those before them had done.

Still, all of those experiments in the compound temple and library from ages ago had been performed without the benefit of one key element. And that was no longer a problem. Jordan held out his hand, and the drawing began to glow, filling out as if somebody was pouring phosphorescent purple paint into the grooves.

In his chest, Jordan's heart beat a frantic staccato. He had gone through all possible options over and over in his head, and come up short every time. Magic or not, age old Guardian lore or not... he was still one man against the whole world. All of his allies were either captured or injured. And monsters were now imparting their magical powers to more human allies; what started with the child probably wouldn't stop any time soon.

The Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi had been prepared for a military offensive from monsters. They hadn't seen the assault from human law enforcement coming, that was true. And with the benefit of hindsight many of their preparations had been futile and counterproductive, though that was only with hindsight. Still, the real blind spot was in not expecting monsters to adapt. To subvert humanity socially and economically and culturally. On the edges of Jordan's magically enhanced peripheral vision, he almost thought he could see it; the world being warped and changed into a form that was more suitable to the monsters.

It was literally the end of the world as he knew it.
He would never have tried to summon the Demon otherwise.

The knife crossed over his fingertips, one by one, letting the blood drip into the pattern, before making a long cut across his palm. The metal was smeared in red, and he stabbed the earth in the center of the circle with it.

“I call upon the end of all things. Return to this world. Destroy the monsters once again. Help me defeat the enemy, and become strong.”

“Hey, what the hell are you doing—”

Without looking behind him, Jordan swung an arm back. There was a flash of yellow light and the smell of ozone, and a thud as an unconscious gardener fell to the ground.

Well. That was rude.

Jordan blinked, and slowly turned around. While he didn't hear anything, it was almost as if somebody had spoken, and then everything had gone silent again. Behind the prone form of the Arboretum groundskeeper that had caught him by surprise, Jordan saw a dark shape in the air, a shadow with nothing casting it.

“...greetings. I am Jordan Cater.”

I know who you are.

“...of course. I'm just... it doesn't really matter.” Jordan turned back to the diagram, pulled the knife out of the earth, and stood up. Facing the darkness again, he held out the knife.

“I have performed the ritual to the best of my ability. I am ready for what happens next.”

Do you even know what is going to happen next?

“...we end everything. Together. I need your power. And you need a host. That's how it works.”

Jordan stared at the darkness, like a hole in the universe, and his stomach started to clench with unease. Even his magically improved vision couldn't tell what he was looking at.

“...isn't it?”

That is correct, up to a point. You called out for help. I answered. And it sounds like you want to work together. I just don't quite understand what you hope to accomplish.

Jordan looked down at the knife in his hand, then up at the darkness again. This conversation was not going how he expected it to go. Then again... he didn't really expect there to be a conversation, just the world dissolving into a red haze as he and the Demon tore it apart.


Go ahead.

“Thank you. I called you here and now so that together we could destroy this world. It is... the monsters escaped the seal on the Underground, and every attempt to defeat them, to contain them, has failed. Their influence grows daily. Their magic, their culture, their political voice, their economic leverage. And I'm the last resistance left. Even with... what I can do now. This stolen power. I'm still just one person. I can't stop them without help. Your help. So... I'm ready. If it's a choice between a world under the thumbs of the monsters, and an empty world drenched in blood...
between subjugation and extinction... there's not really much of a choice. Shall we?"

Yeah, that's not going to happen.

Jordan blinked, unsure if he heard... or didn't hear... correctly.

“What.”

I already have a partner.

“...wait. Somebody else summoned you? Who else knows the ritual besides... are there still other Guardians out there? Did somebody else make it out?!”

What ritual?

The Arboretum was eerily silent as Jordan stared at the darkness.

“...the ritual I just performed. The ritual that draws you from your world to ours.”

I didn't come here because of a ritual. I came here because I heard your call for help.

“...but I didn't-”

Help me defeat the enemy, and become strong. I believe those were your exact words.

Jordan reached up with his free hand and rubbed his forehead.

“Ugh. This is giving me a headache. So... if I understand this... you and I can't, well, work together because you're already teaming up with somebody else. Somebody who called for your help before I did.”

Yes. That is correct.

“Okay... I know I'm probably going to regret this, but... who are you working with?”

You would know him as Joe Stanton.

Jordan's eyes opened wide. “What?? Why?!”

Because he called for help. I thought I explained that part already.

“No, no, I mean... Stanton works with the monsters! He's betrayed humanity to further their interests! Why would you help him?!!”

In the moment after the explosion. Before he realized what had happened, before he understood that he was injured, or how badly. Stanton called for help. I answered.

It doesn't matter why. It doesn't matter who. It doesn't matter when, or where, or how.

Together, we survive. We adapt. We win. We find out what went wrong, and we set it right.

They stay with their world, and keep it safe.

I move on to the next world, to the next call for help.

That's me.
The one that comes when people fall, and call out for help in the dark.

“My initials! Just like in Journey To The Center of the Earth!”

On the television screen, a pickax chipped away at the boards on the side shaft until the lights from Doc and Marty's headlamps could be seen, and the camera angle shifted again to reveal an ancient DeLorean, heavily modified and covered in dust.

Behind Frisk, in the classroom, a voice imitating that of a game show announcer called out “A new car!” and many of the assorted children and adults laughed in response. The child's phone buzzed, and they looked down to pull it out of their pocket, missing Doc Brown's summary of the time the DeLorean was buried in the mine shaft.

9:14 AM SockPuppet90: kid where are u rite now

9:14 AM: in school

9:14 AM: watching back 2 the futur pt 3

9:14 AM: y

9:15 AM SockPuppet90: stick close to ur mom n dad n bro

9:15 AM SockPuppet90: cater is loose

The screen on Frisk's phone suddenly became their entire world. Shaking hands tried to manipulate the keyboard and reply to the message.

9:15 AM: is he comign here

9:15 AM: wat do we now

9:15 AM SockPuppet90: theres more

9:15 AM SockPuppet90: cant explain y or how over the phone

9:15 AM SockPuppet90: cant explain the science at all really totaly new field

9:15 AM SockPuppet90: but cater can use magic

Very slowly and carefully, Frisk held out their arm and pinched part of the skin. When nothing changed, Frisk carefully got up and made their way past other students towards the door to the hallway before looking at the phone again.
9:16 AM SockPuppet90: frisk u stil there
9:16 AM: sans
9:16 AM: yeah
9:16 AM: sans
9:16 AM SockPuppet90: what is it
9:17 AM: didt have time 2 tell u b4 u left
9:17 AM: but
9:17 AM: there is a star on the surface
9:17 AM: in heritage park
9:17 AM: i touched it monday after school
9:17 AM: if it comes to it
9:17 AM: SockPuppet90: its not gonna come to that
9:17 AM: SockPuppet90: lik i said
9:18 AM: SockPuppet90: find tori and asgore and azzy
9:18 AM: SockPuppet90: well figure this out asap
9:18 AM: k

Frisk started to walk down the hallway towards Toriel's office, when the boss monster herself appeared and practically ran towards the child. Frisk tried to brace themselves for impact, and almost lost their balance. Their limbs seemed to be shaking and their entire body felt cold.

Strangely enough, the child was able to note those changes with an objective detachment; the stomach-flipping stab of emotion that had come from reading Sans' messages had completely vanished.

Toriel's arms swallowed up the child and the felt themselves lifted off their feet, and their mouth opened and asked the first question that came to mind:

“Where's Asriel?”

“Gorey is getting him now. Frisk, are you- everything is going to be alright, understand?”

“...right.” Frisk nodded and let themselves be carried along. They could feel Toriel's arms shaking. Outside the school, the sound of police sirens could be heard.
The pickup truck pulled up in front of All Fine Labs, skidding to a stop behind a convertible that was currently having its top raised by a skeleton wearing a scarf. A large bearded man hopped out of the driver's side of the truck, while a less burly and more clean shaven man in greasy coveralls hopped out on the passenger side. The doors opened and the pair were immediately joined by a crowd of humans and monsters.

“Mike. Hal. Took you long enough.”

“Not our fault.” Hal held up a small aluminum can in one hand. “Some people who remain nameless because I already know who you all are keep sneaking into my garage and hiding the stuff I need for emergencies so I can't find it when emergencies actually happen.”

Officer Steve rolled his eyes. “Let's not start this now. Okay. In theory, legally nobody here should be doing anything. Except for me because that's my job. In practice, we haven't had a very good track record stopping or even holding on to Cater, so as far as I'm concerned every little bit helps. So here's the plan. Papyrus will drive the Asters around. You guys have the dragon skulls of doom. You're our heavy hitters. Eli's already heading here to pick up Dr. Ross and take her back to the hospital to get everything ready for a bloodbath, or whatever the equivalent is for monsters.”

“dustbowl,” Sans commented.

“Okay then. Joe, Justin, you're with me. Justin rides shotgun. Joe's intel and fire support. We'll be bird dogging, so we're probably gonna get our asses kicked trying to flush him out. Hal, Mike, that's where you come in. While he's focused on us, or the Asters, or the rest of the department, or bystanders or targets of opportunity or whatever, you fuck him up. I can't speak for everyone but I am sick and tired of this asshole making fools out of me and everyone else with a badge. Having said that, this is not a license to kill. You fuck him up, but don't go overboard. He's gonna get a fair trial and he's gotta be alive for that. Then he'll probably end up as somebody's bitch in maximum security, just like nature intended.” Officer Steve held up his phone. “Keep in contact at all times. Check in regular. Like every ten minutes if you can. If you're off comms for too long and can't regroup, we'll have to assume you've been incapacitated. Got it?”

There was an assortment of nods, and several people started moving towards their vehicles.

“One more thing.” Officer Steve seemed to hesitate, then let his breath out. “This has to be the last time. It's not just that people are losing faith in the police, or in rule of law, or anything like that. People are afraid that safety doesn't exist anymore. For over a year, we didn't have to worry about Jordan Cater or anyone like him. The Guardians were gone, and the Anti Monster League never got violent until the end. And the thing is. I don't think we let down our guard, because I don't think this town, or anyone living in it, should have to keep their guard up for a constant, ever-present threat as if the sword of fucking Damocles was hanging over everybody. So this ends today. Whatever happens tomorrow. Whatever threats we have to deal with then. They're going to be normal, and ordinary, and obvious, and they're not going to be that son of a bitch anymore. Alright, I've shot my mouth off enough. Let's go.”

The group scattered and started filling assorted vehicles. Sans walked up to Papyrus and chuckled.

“Well, this isn't exactly how I expected this Friday to go, but whatever. you ready to roll?”

“The Great Papyrus Is Always Ready To Rotate Along The Ground To Travel From Place To Place!”

“hehehehe.”
“OH, AND SANS, YOU MAY WANT TO RIDE SHOTGUN, I THINK THE TERM IS.”

“aw, and here i was hoping to catch a few z's in the back seat before we found Cater.”

“WHILE THAT IS A CONCERN, I WAS THINKING MORE ABOUT SOCIAL AWKWARDNESS—”

“He means me, bonehead.”

Sans turned to see a familiar and annoyed face leaning out of the back seat window.

“...huh. Dwayne Riley. fighting on the same side this time.”

“No, we are not. You are fighting Cater, and I am fighting Cater. The enemy of my enemy is my enemy's enemy.”

“and here i thought Papyrus was making some headway in shifting your opinions about monsters.”

Dwayne rolled his eyes.

“Papyrus is okay. Him and only him. The rest of you can suck on a dick shaped cactus for all I care.”

“IT IS! A WORK! IN PROGRESS!”

“...eh. close enough.”

The statue cracked, then splintered and broke apart, the ice-encased chunks of metal falling and crushing the frozen flowers nearby. Jordan lowered his hand, the icy mist no longer billowing off of it.

*Freezing this place doesn't seem like the best use of your time.*

Jordan spun around to see a shadow in midair behind him.

“What do you care?! Why are you following me?!”

*I've been following you for a long time, Jordan. All that's changed is that you can see me now.*

Jordan snorted and glared at the frozen park, the flowers and fences and benches all encrusted in magical ice.

“...I told her. Over and over. Don't hide in the flowers. There's no way to tell what else is hiding there. And if something, or someone, was waiting, I couldn't... I tried to explain. The world is dangerous. Not just the monsters underground. Other people. Hiding their true intentions behind kind words and friendly faces.”

*How did you learn this?*

“What, you expect me to tell you my life story now?” Jordan shook his head and kicked one of the frozen metal fragments of statue. It traveled a short distance, while Jordan started to curse and began hopping on his other foot to keep his balance. A green glow surrounded the foot still in the air, and he carefully attempted to put his weight on it. “There's nothing you can do. And there's nothing I can do.”
Jordan looked up from his foot and glared at the statue again.

After a few moments, his eyes narrowed in confusion.

“...what the... I've seen this before.”

*ERROR. FILE CORRUPT. LOAD FAILED.*

Don't touch that.

Jordan Cater walked over to a faint glowing light, hovering in mid-air, and reached out his

*ERROR. FILE CORRUPT. LOAD FAILED.*

There was a flash of light and Jordan jumped back, his hand smoking from some sort of energy discharge.

“Sunnovabitch! That didn't happen to the little brat in the Underground!”

*FRISK is a valid FILE.*

“What the hell does that even mean? If you're going to follow me around and bother me would it kill you to be a little less fucking cryptic?”

*FULLY. INTEGRATED. LIVING. ENTITY. EVERYTHING IS BALANCED. NOTHING MISSING, AND NOTHING IN EXCESS.*

Jordan stared at the darkness, testing his fingers after the green glow around his handed faded away.

“You... you said you were here because I called for help. But if you can't help me, why are you still here?”

When the Barrier was destroyed. When Frisk walked down the mountain. That should have been it. They would take care of this world, and I would move on to the next. That's not what happened. Somebody called for help again. And I couldn't find them. Because they weren't calling for me to help them. They were calling me so I could help somebody else.

“...you got the wrong number, so now you're bothering me. Thanks. That clears everything up.”

Jordan turned away, stretched his arms and rolled his shoulders, and worked his neck back and forth. “Unless you're saying that somebody wanted you to help me, in which case, you're not doing a very good job of it.”

*Since the moment Asriel Dreemurr appeared with your child's body, you've fixated on that. Fixated on him.*

Slowly, Cater turned back towards the darkness, his confused expression transitioning to anger.

“...He. Took. My. Daughter. What else am I supposed to do?!”

*Asriel didn't take Chara away from you. Chara wasn't taken at all. Chara ran away. You've read*
the letter enough times. You know that, and you know why. But you cannot accept it.

Jordan narrowed his eyes and stared at the darkness.

“Accept what.”

While you regret saying what you said before Chara ran away to climb Mt. Ebott, you can't accept that any of what you said or did before that played a role in Chara's decision.

Jordan stared at the darkness, seemingly oblivious to the sounds of sirens growing louder and closer.

“If you're saying I can't accept that I'm a bad father. You're wrong. I know that. Her death is proof of my failure. I didn't need you to tell me that. Now... if you're done stating the obvious in a roundabout fashion, I have a futile and ultimately pointless last stand to get on with.”

Is that really what you want?

“What I want is to see my wife again. To see my daughter again. To...”

The man's voice broke even as his expression remained sullen and angry.

“I just want to tell her I'm sorry.”

Jordan reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out the knife, still stained by his blood and glowing faintly.

“Failing that. I wanted to save this world from being overrun by the monsters. But you can't, or won't, help me with that. And it's not something I can do alone, with or without magic. If there's no way I can win... I might as well leave the monsters a body count to remember me by.”

Shaking his head, Jordan started walking towards the park entrance until the darkness spread and blocked his path.

I've seen all the ways this can end. Most of them end with you dead. What if I told you... I knew some way to get you a better ending?
The sound of light snoring filled the room, more akin to sanding wood manually than sawing it. Sheets rose and fell in rhythm with the noise, interrupted occasionally by...

“No... you can't tempt me, King Asgore. I... I am solid as the Rock... of Gibraltar. I am... a British Territory. Inhabited. By macaques....”

In the bedroom doorway, Undyne smiled and raised a teacup to her lips. As far as random things that Alphys said in her sleep, that didn't even merit a spot in the top twenty.

There was a buzzing sound and Undyne rolled her eye, walking over to the dresser. The teacup and saucer traded places with her phone and she started to unlock it; she'd told everyone that she would be busy taking care of Alphys for most of the day, and that she would appreciate a minimum of distractions, so if anyone was trying to call or text her then it had to be important.

Or maybe it was just Papyrus calling to complain about yet another government or aerospace pun that Sans had inflicted upon him. Again.

“Undyne here.”

“Undyne, it's Asgore.”

“Hey big guy. How are you-”

“Where are you and Alphys right now?”

Undyne paused. Asgore's voice was... tense.

“Still at home. She's still out, but she's going to be okay.”

“Undyne. I wish I didn't have to ask you this. But I need you to come in to the school.”


“So far. Undyne... Jordan Cater escaped custody again.”

“FUCK.”

“Ah. Yes. I suppose that would be the correct word to use. But. There is something else. I don't know all of the details. But somehow he can use magic now.”

“...Stanton's machine. Alphys said they couldn't find it last night.”

“As I said, I do not know all of the details. But... we don't know what Cater is going to do next. And... perhaps I am being overprotective and paranoid, but he has... already shown a willingness to harm children. I was hoping you could-”

“I'll be there in two minutes, tops. Just hold on until then.”

Undyne hung up the phone and ran over to the bed, reaching out to grasp Alphys by the shoulder and shake her awake, as gently as she could. Of course, 'gently' meant something different for Undyne than it did for most other people, and Alphys sat up with a yell.
“Agh! I'm sorry your majesty, I'll never stare at Asgore again... wait. It was just a dream.”

“Yeah. Sorry honey. You have to get up.”

“Ugh. First you want me to go to bed, then you wake me up again-”

“Cater escaped custody again.”

All of the residual drowsiness in Alphys' mind vanished in an instant.

“W-what?! How?”

“Magic. Somebody stole Stanton's magic machine and got it to Cater. Probably. That's my guess. Asgore's worried that he might go after the school. Might be because of Asriel, or Frisk, or just on principle.”

“Oh my g-g-god.”

“Yeah. We don't know for sure if that's his plan or not, but I need to be there in case he tries to attack, and you need to be at All Fine-”

“The hell with that. I'm g-g-going with you. If Cater attacks the lab, it won't make a difference if I'm there or not with Project NEO out of service. But at the school I can set up defenses. And... and Frisk. I can... give me thirty seconds to get dressed and another twenty to tool up!”

“...Alphys I really don't want you in harm's way-”

“And you think I'm okay with you being in harm's way?!” Alphys hopped off the bed and put on her glasses. “You're Frisk's bodyguard! Any time somebody doesn't like what they have to say, or what they're trying to do, it's your job to keep them safe! You could have died during the attack on the first address! And just because you're strong and tough and brave doesn't mean I stop worrying about you! But I don't try to stop you because I trust you to come out on top and come back to me at the end of the day! Could you please just trust me to do the same thing, just this once?!”

Undyne stared at the panting, red-faced lizard scientist. Slowly, Alphys calmed down, and a claw came up to cover Alphys' eyes.

“I'm sorry, I... I'm still t-tired. And it's making me cranky. I shouldn't have b-blown up like that-”

Undyne picked up Alphys and squeezed the scientist in a hug.

“No. It's fine. Besides. If we guess wrong. And Cater goes after the lab, instead of the school. I'd lose my mind knowing I insisted you go to where you were in harm's way. And you're right about... some of that other stuff. You're smart, smarter than me for sure. I know that, and I still don't trust your judgment as much as I should.”

Undyne put Alphys down; the scientist was still red faced, but now for entirely different reasons.

“Come on, let's get dressed and get going.”

The police car spun out on the ice and Jordan vaulted over the vehicle as it approached; despite lacking in the physical conditioning that made gymnasts capable of such feats, a judicious use of magic to show him exactly where to position different parts of his body, and exactly when to move them, made the stunt possible. It certainly wouldn't impress any judges, but finesse and grace were
for people who weren't fighting for their lives.

Behind him, Jordan heard the cruiser slide into a tree with a crunch of metal and glass, and heard out-of-breath voices talking, along with the electronic sounds of radio. More police would show up soon, and while they likely wouldn't fare any better than these two, they were still needless distractions. From above came the distinctive sound of helicopter blades chopping the air, probably a police helicopter finally getting off the ground to provide intel and coordinate other police forces to intercept him. Cyan light pulsed around Jordan's hands, and he raised them to the sky, sending the bullets towards the... KEBT traffic helicopter?

The aircraft moved to one side, dropping altitude in exchange for lateral speed, and there was a high pitched screaming noise, accompanied by actual high pitched screaming as a monster that resembled a jet airliner dove down towards Jordan, releasing yellow colored missile shaped magical attacks.

“DON'T YOU DARE!”

Jordan spun on his heels and started to run as the missile warheads exploded and magical shrapnel perforated the world around him, chipping the street and sidewalk and fracturing the magical ice left over from his own attack. Fragments of ice rebounded from the impact and bounced off the green shield that Jordan managed to produce, and the engine noise from the sky became louder as the plane monster came around for another pass.

“You think you're the only one that can play this game?”

More cyan bullets shot into the sky, only to be blocked by the fuselage and tail rotor of the traffic copter, which began to slowly spin and descend. Jordan wasted no time sticking around to see if the pilot could pull off an emergency landing and sprinted down the street, detouring through alleyways to break line of sight with any observers or units in pursuit.

“What are the police doing here?”

“Did one of the teachers break the law? Or maybe one of the students broke the law!”

“I knew we shouldn't have skipped the warning at the beginning of the movie! Now we're all gonna go to jail!”

“Hey, it's Undyne! She's running down the street!”

“Before the storm? Something really is going on!”

“Everyone calm down!” Brian tried to project his voice while also keeping it calm, which was a lot harder than he would have liked because there was very little calmness in his system after the announcement to shelter in place had come over the school's intercom system. The man's stomach was a knot of tension and his nerves felt like they were on fire. When the knocking on the school doors started, he jumped along with most of the children in the classroom, some of whom cried out in surprise and fear.

Slowly, he moved closer to the classroom door, opened it, and peered out through the crack; a large figure was moving towards the entrance, either Asgore or Toriel; either one of them would be more than capable of dealing with an attacker, if one was knocking and the child that thought they saw Undyne was mistaken. The door was closed again and Brian looked around the room.
“Okay, listen! I need everyone to stay away from the windows! We're going to get through this, as long as we keep calm and don't panic!”

“I thought the meme was keep calm and carry on?”

Brian nodded at Mary. “That too. Alright, here's what I want everyone to do…”

Out in the hallway, Asgore summoned a glowing scythe in one paw and unlocked the main entrance doors with the other. Pushing them open carefully, he saw a familiar one-eyed face looking back, tinted light blue and orange on different sides, mirroring the glow from his own eyes.

“Undyne. You made it. I am glad you are alright.”

“I'm glad you're all still okay too. Alphys, where do you want to set up?”

Asgore looked down to see Alphys standing next to Undyne wearing a blue raincoat, and opened the door wider to let them both in. Behind them both, one of the police officers was running up to the entrance.

“Mr. Dreemurr? Officer Carmichael. If Cater shows his face, we'll neutralize him if we can. If we can't, we'll buy you as much time as you need to put together whatever magic tricks you've got up your sleeves.”

“Thank you, Officer... is there something the matter? I know we are all under considerable stress, but you seem particularly distracted by something.”

“My... my son. Douglas. Is he...” Officer Carmichael shook his head.

“You're Douglas Carmichael's dad?” Undyne asked.

“Yes. Is he alright? Do you know where he is?”

Undyne shook her head. “I just got here, sorry.”

“I know that I have seen him, although I do not remember what classroom he was in and what movie he was watching.” Despite his imposing height, obvious strength, and the magical power radiating from his hands and eyes, Asgore managed to look somewhat abashed at his lack of knowledge. “I am sorry I do not have further details.”

Officer Carmichael relaxed slightly. “Thank you. I'll... we'll hold the line out here.”

“Hey, wait a sec.” Undyne's hand landed on Officer Carmichael's arm. “If I know Douglas, he's going to be watching through the windows, no matter how dangerous that is and how hard the teachers try to stop him. So don't go doing something stupid like a final last stand to try to protect him like in the movies. He's gonna end up traumatized.”

“...wasn't planning on it.”

“Good. I'm heading in to get Dr. Alphys settled, and then I'm coming right back out.” The warrior felt something on her head, and looked up to see the cloudy sky finally delivering on its promises for rain, and grinned. “If Cater wants to get schooled, then we're gonna make it happen.”

“NOW!”
Jordan tried to stop his momentum, but by the time he realized what had happened it was too late to change anything. Rifles, pistols and shotguns were unloading in his direction from what seemed like every angle at once, and he started bringing up green shields all around his body. The magical fields cracked and crumbled as physical force overwhelmed them, and bullets and shot collided with other defenses beneath them, and Jordan tried to backtrack with blue magic assisting his jump; the angle was off and the man collided with a trash can left out to be picked up, spilling a week or so worth of household waste on the street.

Officer Steve pumped the riot gun again, leveling it at the stumbling man. Behind him, two other policemen held up their service pistols, and behind them and the police cruisers, Justin and Joe were on standby. Joe had seen Cater coming even through the various houses and businesses and landscaping, but more importantly he had managed to guess exactly where Cater would break through the residential neighborhood in an attempt to evade pursuit from anyone limited to traveling on roads. Whether it was magic, psychology, divine favor or luck, Steve didn't care.

"We're not fucking around here, Cater! Get down on the ground now! Hands on your head! You are under arrest! AGAIN! You have the right to-"

Officer Steve's legs gave out on him as a flash of yellow electricity arced across the damp ground and caused his whole body to spasm. The shotgun fired uselessly in a random direction, and Steve heard at least one of the pistols go off behind him, but it missed him and Cater and he hoped pretty much anything important.

Then his head hit the pavement, and the rainy world of Ebott's Wake faded away.

Cater landed heavily on his side, the breath knocked out of him, but scrambled to his feet as fast as he could and jumped backwards onto the lawn instead of the sidewalk.

"Oh no. You've discovered the fatal flaw in my plan. How could I be so easily defeated, et cetera."

Stanton's other, damaged arm came up and purple lights sparked off of it; Jordan managed to dodge all but one of the bullets, but the one coffee mug shaped projectile that made it collided with his head and knocked him off balance. His shoes couldn't maintain traction on the wet grass and the man fell flat on his back. One hand reached out towards the police cruiser, glowing blue, and the vehicle rocked.

There was no way that Cater could lift it, or roll it over, or even move it if it was in neutral, but his attackers did not know that; they stepped back in alarm and Cater's other hand came up, producing an orange bolt that almost resembled an over-sized bullet for a physical weapon. The attack collided with Stanton's moving head and knocked the man on his back in the street. Cater could hear the fallen man cursing, and saw his companion kneel down to help him; scrabbling to get to his feet again, Cater scanned the area for escape routes.

"Well well well."

The other man, the soldier, the mole, stood up. Justin Carrow. Jordan's memory finally filled in the blanks. Carrow was smiling a smile that didn't reach his eyes, and held up his wrist to point at the...
rather nice watch on it.

"Will you just look at the time. It's Bad O'Clock."

"What the hell does that even mean-"

Jordan's face was in the grass, and his ribs felt like they were on fire.

"Yeah. It's not perfect. Sans and I got to talking about pre-battle one-liners during the trip and I'm still trying to come up with a good one. How about... It's Time for the Anti-Fun! Does that do anything for you?"

"What... what did..." Jordan tried to speak but with every breath and vibration from his vocal cords, his ribs turned into white hot spikes of pain impaling his torso. Trying to concentrate on healing magic was all but impossible, and what little was happening didn't seem to be making much headway.

"What did I just do? Oh, that's an interesting story. Allow me to explain in detail the secret technique I used to defeat you so you can come up with a counter strategy on the fly and turn the tables."

Jordan felt a weight on his neck. It felt like wet rubber... it had to be Carrow's boot.

"Or, better yet. I can snap your neck right here and now.

"Hah. Hah. Right. Trials are for Other People."

"Did you give Byron a trial?"

"...you people are unhealthily fixated. On what happened to that guy."

Justin shifted more of his weight to the foot on Cater's neck.

"Yeah. It's called being best friends. Still... how about this. I'll let you live if you tell me one thing."

"...what's the catch."

"No catch. Just an honest question with an honest answer. When you were attacking the hospital after the first Address. Sans got you with his blaster beam a few times. What did it feel like?"

"...what do you mean?"

"Like, was it fire, or stabbing, or like a massive punch, or what? You see... Sans and I got to talking about that during the trip too. The Asters have this trick that let's them fight humans with high defenses towards magic. Like you. It's called 'KR' and it stands for two different things. The first is *Karmic Resonance*. The more you hurt other people. The more it affects your own Soul. Execution Points and Level of Violence, that's how monsters quantify it, but however it's measured it leaves a mark. Karmic Resonance attacks the Soul directly at those points. People like you and me, with LV higher than one. We get hit by that, and all our past indiscretions will come back to haunt us. To tear us apart from the inside out. And the higher somebody's LV, the worse it gets."

Carrow shifted his weight again, and Jordan found it even harder to breath.

"The other thing that KR stands for is *Karmic Retribution*. That means that our Souls feel what we did to other people, as long as we're in the beam. For me, that would be gunshots and shrapnel and
at least one broken neck. Possibly two, after today, depending on whether you feel like sharing with the rest of the class or not. So... whatever you felt when Sans lit you up with the beam. That was what you did to somebody else, at some point. How did it feel, being on the other end?"

“It... it felt... it felt like...”

Jordan clenched his fists and everything in a five foot radius sparked with magical electricity; the weight on the man's neck had disappeared instantly, and Jordan breathed in easily.

“It felt like that, asshole.”

“So you electrocuted Byron, or was that your attempt at a one-liner?”

Jordan's eyes opened wide in surprise; if Carrow had realized what he was about to do and gotten out of the way fast enough, how had he managed it? Pushing himself up on his forearms to look around, Jordan turned to see Carrow's boot flying toward his face.

A light blue shield blunted the assault but the foot still traveled through it and hit Cater's face just to the right of his nose, filling his whole world with a white light and a white hot pain. He was distantly aware of Carrow's swearing, which seemed to be coming from closer to ground level than it had been, and with a supreme effort of will managed to concentrate on healing even more injuries.

After maybe twenty seconds, Cater was able to climb to his feet, and saw that the soldier was still struggling to do the same. One of Cater's hands was held out in front of him, with the other behind it close to his body, almost as if he was preparing to defend against a physical attack.

“You want to know how your friend died? I'll tell you. He was a traitor to humanity and he died a traitor's death. That's all that matters, and that's all that you'll ever get from me.” Cater's outstretched hand started to glow with orange light, and Carrow jumped to his feet with a snarl.

Right into the light blue bullet from Cater's other hand.

The soldier collapsed onto the ground, and Cater reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a knife with a faint red glow surrounding the blade.

“You know... monsters love their acronyms almost as much as they love their puzzles. EXP. LV. ATK. DEF. And so on and so on and so on. But they are right about one thing. When you hurt somebody. When you take a life. That changes you. That makes you stronger.”

Carrow was kicked in the ribs, resulting in a muffled grunt of pain.

“Because the person that you kill. All the moments that could have been. All the words they would have said, the choices they might have made. Those moments are yours, now. When you kill. You cast a shadow on the world larger than just yourself. You shape it in ways that can't happen if you sit meekly, waiting your turn and trying to go along to get along.”

Jordan kicked at Carrow again, shoving the man over onto his back.

“Don't get me wrong. Magic is versatile. And there's a lot to be said for the subtlety of political influence and media focus and financial incentives. But the only real power is the power to take a life. To cast the future in the mold of your own design. Of course, you know that already. You're a soldier, or you were. So there's no excuse for me getting the upper hand here. You really should have killed me when you had the chance.”
The knife came down towards Carrow's chest, glowing brilliant red and-

Jordan stared at his hand and wiggled his fingers. There was a tingling, stinging sensation, like he had swung a baseball bat at something sturdy and the force of the impact had shaken it out of his hands. He remembered bringing the knife down, and then it was all a blur. At his feet, Carrow was still alive, at least for the moment. Somehow. There was a spreading patch of red on the man's shirt that meant that he had at least broken the skin, but other than that....

Jordan turned around, his eyes shining with purple light, until he found the knife some dozen feet away in the street. A blue light surrounded the blade and it slowly floated over towards his waiting hand. He had tried to stab Carrow in the heart, and *something* had happened. Like it had bounced off of a hard surface. Which made absolutely no sense; the bloodstains meant the man wasn't even wearing a traditional ballistic vest, let alone anything that would repel a cutting blade like a magnet. Fingers adjusted their grip, and Jordan looked very, very closely. Bones, organs, nerves, the infrastructure running under the street, all of it was clear. And... yes. It took tremendous effort and focus, but he could see a yellow light pulsing inside the man's body.

Carrow's Soul.

Yellow meant Justice, part of Jordan's mind noted without further comment. He held up the knife and swung it again, this time focused entirely on the Soul, and the world was filled with light. He just barely noticed the knife bounce away, handle ripped from his fingers again, and landing somewhere in the grass behind him.

“Of course,” Jordan whispered under his breath. “*Of course.*”

Jordan held up his hand, and the knife floated back to him.

At no point did he take his eyes off the trail of light leading from Carrow's Soul to... somewhere else. He'd have to follow it, now that he knew what to look for... but he had a sneaking suspicion that he knew *exactly* where the trail would lead.

“You little *brat*,” he muttered to himself as he started to run down the street, almost slipping in the rain.

On the sidewalk, Carrow groaned and started coughing up blood. One hand made its way into one pocket, and pulled out a monster candy, which was unwrapped with difficulty as his other hand had reached up to put pressure on the wound in his chest. Eventually, the small multicolored sphere was placed in the man's mouth and dissolved, and Carrow relaxed slightly.

“Well,” he coughed, raising his head and looking around at his incapacitated allies. “That could have gone better. But it could have gone... a lot worse. So. Yeah.”

Justin's less-bloodstained hand reached into another pocket and pulled out his phone, bringing it up to his ear as it was ringing.

“...Elijah McGraw here.”

“Hey Eli.”

“Justin? Are you okay? You sound bad.”

“Good news bad news time. Good news is, We are still alive. I think. Bad news is, Cater kicked our asses. And then he said something. Sounded like. He was calling someone. A brat. I think he's heading. Towards the school.”
“Shit.”

“Yup. Call Hal. And Mike. And Sans. And get over there. And hope we wore him down a bit.”

“I'll call an ambulance for you—”

“No time. I'll do that.”

“Okay.”

“Eli.”

“Yeah?”

“Good luck.” Justin ended the call let the phone fall on his chest, and swore. “You just had to gloat. Didn't you Justin. Shoula snapped his neck. And be done with it. Fucking action movie cliches. This is your fault, Hollywood... wait. I was supposed to do something.”

Justin stared at the phone in his hands for a moment.

“Oh, right.” Fingers started pressing buttons, but Justin paused as he heard the sound of an engine coming closer, tires squeaking on wet pavement, and the squeal of brakes. Behind one of the police cruisers, a man's head appeared and he jogged over to Carrow.

“Jesus Christ with a side order of Holy Shit.”

“Yeah.” Justin grunted, waving his free hand. “That's. One way to put it.”

“You guys fought Jordan Cater? KEBT said he was last seen headed this way.”

“Yup. Bastard's tricky. Hey, mister. Can you do me a solid? Make sure everyone else is still alive? I'd do it myself but—”

“Already on it.” The man moved over to Officer Steve while Justin continued dialing, and held the phone up to his ear.

“911, what's your emergency.”

“Officers down at McManner Street. About... ugh. Two blocks from New Blook Acres. Officer Steven Ward and two other policeman, and two civilians injured.” Justin turned his head slightly to see that the bystander that showed up had dragged one of the policemen out of the street gutter and onto the grass, and put the man in the recovery position, then moved back towards the others.

“Don't think anyone was killed but I'd appreciate it if you could send a medic or something as soon as possible.”

“Alright sir, I need you to stay calm, and stay on the line.”

“No problem. Not going anywhere. Ugh. Hey. Please advise everyone. Jordan Cater was last seen traveling in... in the direction of Dreemurr Elementary School.”

“Understood. I will pass that along.”

“Did you say Cater was heading to Dreemurr Elementary?”

Justin looked up to see the man trying to carry Joe's unconscious body out of the street, and for some reason, his brain seized on part of the shirt that could be seen under the man's camouflage-
print jacket. It looked like one of the 'Dwayne Riley is an Idiot' shirts that All Fine Labs had been giving out.

“Yeah. He said some other stuff too but I didn't catch much of it. On account of stopping a magic attack with my head.”

“Shit shit shit,” the man quickly dragged Joe over to the grass, left him on his back, and ran back out into the street.

“You okay man?”

“My daughter goes to that school!”

“Hey...” Justin opened his mouth, an admonishment to leave it to the professionals on his lips, but the words wouldn't come as he realized how hypocritical that would have been, and how ineffective the professionals were. “If you're gonna fight him. Be careful.”

There was no reply except the revving of an engine and the squealing of tires trying to gain traction on a slippery rain soaked street. Justin leaned his head back in the cold grass, closed his eyes, and concentrated all of his attention on not dying.

>This is not going to end well for you.

Jordan Cater ignored the phantom not-voice, vaulting over fences, privacy hedges, patio furniture and parked cars. Shadows appeared and disappeared regularly along his line of travel, appearing from nowhere and fading away just as quickly.

The original plan is still valid. All Fine Labs is comparatively undefended. You can attack them and secure the Phase Integrator with a minimum of effort and damage, as well as acquire transportation and evade pursuit while making your way to a news station outside of Lost Eagle County.

“Did you know that Frisk Dreemurr could do that? Did you know all this time that every single action that I took was an exercise in futility?!”

I didn't even know about you until I saw you with Carrow in that basement. Then I had to go back along the timeline to see how you got there in the first place.

“You're not telling me anything useful. I know that's Frisk, keeping people alive with their magic. Somehow. How do I stop it?”

You don't. If you proceed to the school and attempt to attack Frisk, everyone who is defending the building will rip you apart. That option is still available to you, but every possible outcome I can see results in your death, and marks the end of any popular support for anti-monster sentiment. Not sure if you've been paying attention to the world outside of Lost Eagle County, but people who attack schools and endanger the lives of children are not held in high esteem in polite society. Or crude society, for that matter.

“You said you didn't see me... you don't see everything. You don't know everything. You can still be mistaken. And you're wrong about me and what I can do. Just watch.”

Whatever your past actions, taking the initiative to demonstrate human magic, and evidence supporting a conspiracy to conceal it, would reinforce the idea that you and by extension the
Guardians really do support the interests of humanity. It would not be decisive. But there are those that would give you the benefit of the doubt. You would lose the battle, but others would carry on the war. And you, personally, would be alive to see it happen.

Jordan jumped up, and up, and up, his whole body glowing blue, and landed on the far side of the apartments with only a few stumbles, rapidly recovering both his footing and his previous movement speed.

“You never actually answered my question. Did you know that Frisk was protecting everybody? Either tell me what I need to know or stop distracting me!”

Magic is an expression of will and intent. And that child cares about everybody. Of course I knew Frisk was protecting everyone. It was obvious that if the child got access to magic at any point, this would be the end result. The real question isn’t if I knew, but why you didn’t. You knew what they could do after your confrontation with them in the CORE facility. Why didn’t you put the pieces together before today?

“...you've been trying to play me from the very beginning. I thought it was Frisk trying to manipulate everything. But it was you. Shaping events to get the outcome you want. Moving people around like chess pieces. Well fuck you, whatever you are. Let's see if you can win this game of yours without your queen.”

Fine. Yes. I've been trying to steer you in a specific direction. Do you know why? Because when you used your magic to heal O'Dell's burns, I saw something worth saving. That's why I answered when you called for help. So I could direct you towards a better path. But it's still your choice to take it or not take it. If you take my advice. And you don't like what happens. Then you can blame me for being an uncaring puppet master if you want. But if you go after Frisk, the consequences are all on you-

“SHUT UP.” Jordan pulled the glowing knife out of his pocket, lunged towards the nearest shadow, and sla
In the twilight of the rainstorm, there was darkness.

The darkness grew.

The darkness saw.

But Jordan was already gone.

Welp. I tried.

The darkness faded away.

“Frisk, that's the librarian's truck, right? Mr. Van Garrett?”

“Asriel, get away from the windows!”

The young boss monster stepped away from the rain pelted glass, but still pointed one finger out towards the street in front of the school, where a pickup truck had pulled up and two men had stepped out, one of them very large. The two men seemed to be having an... animated conversation with the police, and two other cars pulled up behind the truck.

There was a knock at the office door, and both children and the one parent inside jumped. Toriel carefully made her way over, a fireball in her hand.

“Uhm. Is. Is anyone in there? It's m-m-me. Alphys.”

“Alphys?” Toriel opened the door to see a short lizard wearing a blue raincoat over a still rather damp lab coat, and clutching an armload of scientific equipment. “Did Undyne get here already? I did not see-”

“She's here. She's downstairs with Asgore. I'm here to set up some backup plans.” The scientist ran into the room and dumped the armload of equipment on a table otherwise covered in papers from a staff meeting. “I'm sorry ab-b-bout the mess but I figured-”

“If it will keep the children in this school safe, any mess is acceptable.” There was a sound from Toriel's phone and she checked the screen. “The Asters have arrived, and Asgore wishes to discuss strategy and tactics while we have the time. Please watch over the children while we do so, Alphys.”

“I... yes! I mean. I will. I will g-guard Asriel and Frisk with my life.”

“If the rest of us can help it, the situation will never get that far.” Toriel knelt down by the children, who had taken cover on the opposite side of Toriel's desk from the windows, and wrapped an arm around each one.

“I will only be gone a short time. I promise. But I... I need... it is not right, for anyone to ask either of you to endure even more trials than you already have. But still. I need you both to be brave, now.”

Both children squeezed back, and Toriel slowly, reluctantly let go and walked out of the room. Alphys shuffled her feet awkwardly, then walked over to the children.
“Hey. How... how are you guys holding up?”

Asriel shrugged his shoulders, but Alphys could see that while his paws were held together, there was still a noticeable shaking motion.

“Well... first time Cater and I met, it didn't end so well. Second time... was less one-sided. So. I guess I'm cautiously optimistic?”

“Guess there is that. How about you, Frisk?”

“...'m fine.”

Alphys and Asriel looked at the human child, arms crossed as if warding off a chill, head hunched over, eyes closed. Slowly, Asriel reached out and placed one paw on Frisk's shoulder.

“It's going to be okay, Frisk.”

“Yeah. We're all here for you g-guys. You don't need to be scared. B-but it's totally understandable if you are, you know.”

Frisk nodded, eyes still closed, and let their breath out.

“Actually I think I was already at some point beyond fear.”

“Oh.” Alphys blinked. “Not sure if that's good or bad. Probably bad. D-don't worry though! I've brought everything that might help! Lasers! Electrical coils! Ultrasonic emitters! Ooh, I should. Be working on that.”

Alphys ran up to the windows and started doing something presumably science related, and Asriel turned back to their sibling. Frisk was shaking, and Asriel wrapped his arms around them.

“Thanks. Bro. First time I've had a freak out with chills. At least the stress pain is familiar.”

“How bad?”

“Headache. Nothing like in Hotland though. And it hurts to breathe a little. That's gotta be from the chills. Think something like that. Happened when. I had the flu. Or maybe that was from all the coughing.”

Officer Carmichael narrowed his eyes. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“It's called revenge. Maybe you've heard of it.” Dwayne Riley looked past the police to the assorted other monsters and humans. “You probably don't trust me with a gun, but do you at least have a knife or something?”

“Oh! I got this!” Hal Greene ran back to the pickup truck, yanked open the toolbox on the back, and pulled out a sledgehammer.

“Close the lid, Hal!”

The mechanic backtracked and closed the top of the toolbox before running back to Riley and holding out the demolition tool.

“Here you go, man! Cater's magic makes him more dangerous from a distance, so we gotta close
the distance and take him apart manually!"

“That sounds like tactical suicide but as long as it gets me close enough to flatten Cater's balls into a thin paste, I can deal with it.”

There was a burst of static from a radio and one of the police officers who apparently could discern information from the distorted voice straightened up. “Cater was spotted two streets away! It's now or never!”

Hal snorted and hefted a rifle in his hands, and turned to the Librarian next to him.

“You ready for this?”

“Yep.” Mike picked up the fire ax leaning by his leg. “How about you?”

“I'm ready. You scared?”

“Maybe a little.” Mike shrugged. “You?”

“Definitely worried.” Hal drained an aluminum can, crushed it in his hand and tossed it into the bed of the pickup truck. “I mean. What if it really is butter, and we've been lied to this whole time?”

“...how many cans is that now?”

“Counting that one?”

“Yeah, counting that one.”

“Eight.”

“...if you see a bright light, don't go into it.”

“Can you guys stop.” Eli walked up to the duo, shotgun in hand. “We'll banter after we win.”

Mike and Hal nodded and returned their attention to the opposite side of the street. Houses stood dark and empty, and trees swayed by the wind, rainwater pouring off the leaves in torrents of background noise, so that the senses had to strain to detect anything out of the ordinary.

“...Contact!”

Several tree branches cracked as a glowing blue shape tore through them; the wood crashed to the ground below while white light lanced through the sky, and the twisted remains of a metal trash container crashed to the street.

“Cater's throwing dumpsters! Eyes open people!” Eli barked. “Either that was the warm up or he's trying to distract us!”

“Hey, what do we do if he tries to go around and get at the school from the other side?”

“Hell of a time to think about that now, Hal.”

The mechanic scowled at Eli, one eye twitching. “Well, somebody has to!”

“Somebody did.” Officer Carmichael snapped. “If he tries to circle around we hope Stein and Bradley have better luck holding him than they did last week.”
There was a cracking noise, like a thunderclap from a near miss of a lightning strike, but with no flash to go with the report.

“He can bridge?!” Dr. Aster spun around, bones arcing from the holes in his hands, to see Jordan Cater stumbling on the path up to the school, dark blue energy still arcing off of his body.

“Hold fire! Hold fire! Don’t fire towards the school building!” Officer Carmichael tried to make himself heard over the wind and the rain, when another crack of sound tore the air and Cater fell to the ground, screaming in pain.

“Who was that?! I said hold fire!”

Twin pinpricks of purple light looked back at the bypassed defensive line, and there was a blue glow surrounding a hand. On the other side of the street, there was a surprised yell, followed by a thud and a prolific amount of profanity. Officer Carmichael dared to look back and saw that somebody in camouflage hunting apparel had slammed into the side of one of the police cruisers.

“...the hell did you come from?”

“Fuuuuuck... I really liked those ribs...”

“You better not be working with Cater, whoever you are!”

“I put a hole in the bastard's right shoulder. What do you think?!”

“You were the one that fired towards the building?!”

“No. I fired at Cater. Try to keep up. Ugh. Where the hell did my rifle go....”

“What the hell would have happened if you missed, huh?!”

The man slammed an open palm on the hood of the police cruiser, glaring at Officer Carmichael.

“My daughter goes to this school. So I. Don’t. Miss. Understand?”

“Uh, hey. You seem busy.” The librarian waved at Officer Carmichael. “So, we were just going to go kick Cater while he's down. Just letting you know. Open invite. All that jazz. But if you got other stuff to do, that's cool.”

Hal Greene, Mike Van Garrett, and Dwayne Riley slowly walked towards the prone man, who was surrounded by a flickering green light and cursing intermittently. Sans raised a hand and pointed.

“You seeing what I'm seeing, dad?”

“Of course. Hard to miss. When all this is said and done, we'll need to talk to Mr. Carrow to be sure. But this is pretty conclusive.”

“What are you guys talking about?”

Dr. Aster turned to Eli, one hand still pointed in Cater's direction.

“Our last minute ringer back there has a daughter at this school. That's plenty of reason for him to loathe Cater with every fiber of his being.”

“Which I do,” the man retorted, slowly pushing himself upright, face contorted in pain.
“Magic is a function of will and intent. The reason monsters don't fare that well in a close-in battle with humans is that we're made of magic. A hit with serious intent to harm behind it means that magic responds to that outside intent. And guess what Cater has a whole lot of in his body right now? See how the healing magic is flickering? He's having trouble fighting off the killing intent behind the bullet.”

Eli raised a hand to wipe some rain out of his eyes. “Hah. The power he used to hurt other people also lets other people kick his ass.”

“Exactly. That's probably why human magic died out, honestly. Human magic users got it from both sides. Hostile intent and hostile chemistry messing with their bodies.”

“Uh, can you not say the phrase 'from both sides' again? Thanks.”

“Why not?” Dr. Aster raised the ridge above one eye socket in confusion.

“I'll explain later. Or try to.”

Closer to the school building, three men stared down at a fourth, injured man. Dwayne Riley gritted his teeth.

“If I wasn't worried about kids watching a man die, I would crush his head like a god damn watermelon right now.”

“I was worried about that too. And it might still come to that, if he's playing possum.” Mike pointed at the flickering green light. “I'm not an expert in the field, but I hope that means we've got him on the ropes.”

“Hey! Cater!” Dwayne yelled at the fallen man. “You done getting your ass kicked, or you want to go another round??”

Slowly, the green glow faded out completely. Mike carefully edged away from the prone, bleeding figure.

“Either he's dead, or he's passed out, or he's trying to get us to let our guard down. Step back a bit just in case.” The librarian reached for his cell phone and started dialing. “Not sure how thin the hospital is spread right now but I hope they can get an ambulance here soon. I'm not giving that guy mouth to mouth.”

“Me neither.” Riley turned towards Van Garrett, and then both men turned to face Hal Greene... who turned to look back at them, eyes wide.

“Whoa. Whoa whoa whoa. That is not how things work-”

Cater's body pulsed with blue light, and all three men were thrown up and away. Riley landed on the wet grass and the blue magic shoved him back along the slick surface until he collided with one of the police cruisers. On the sidewalk, Van Garrett managed to land on his feet, nearly lost his balance again, then swung the fire ax around and impaled the pick into a crack between the concrete slabs, arresting his momentum.

“Hah hah! Victory is mine yet again! Keep it up, Cater! Soon as you run out of magic, you and this ax are going to get to know each other! In a biblical sense! Because it's going right up your ass!”

The librarian was pelted with orange bullets, but continued to laugh even is they impacted his massive frame.
“What, is this a pillow fight?! I've hurt myself worse than this just spending an afternoon with Hal! Oh, speaking of Hal-”

The blue magic abruptly vanished as Cater's attention switched entirely to Hal Greene, scant feet away. A green shield formed between Cater's body and Hal's, as the mechanic began to swing his fists. There was no technique behind it, no professional combat skill, just the cumulative experience of a childhood spent roughhousing. For all that, the shield cracked where it was struck. Hal wound up for another punch and cracked the shield again, and a third punch shattered it completely. Cater's hand came up and a bolt of lightning arced towards the mechanic, only to dissipate in a shower of sparks as it collided with Hal's fist.

For a moment, both men (not to mention several skeleton monsters) stood completely still, dumbfounded. Hal recovered first, pumping both arms in the air.

“HAHAHAHA! JUST LIKE THEY SAY! RED BULL GIVES YOU WIIINGS!”

Cater dodged backwards, almost tripping on the slick grass, as Hal lunged towards him. After several more near misses, Cater produced a light blue bullet and launched it at Hal as the man was charging. There was bright flash of light, a loud bang, and Hal landed several feet away on his back; the man tried to get up, but his movements were slow and uncoordinated.

“Hey. Can I throw... this rock at your head?”

Hal's head dropped back on the grass, and Cater immediately turned and fired a yellow bolt of lightning at the librarian pulling the fire ax out of the sidewalk. The large man convulsed from the electricity, and then fell to the ground.

Cater looked down at his shoulder and tried to produce a green healing field, but it was still flickering. With his other, working arm, he pointed at the humans and monsters still aiming at him from the street.

“T... deal with you... in a minute.” Cater turned back towards the school and immediately stepped back out of reflex; a small forest of spears made of water had formed in front of him, some of which were less than an inch from his face. The doors to the school opened, and out stepped two large boss monsters and one amazonian fish warrior carrying a spear just like the ones barring Cater's path. Undyne raised a hand and dragged a finger across her throat.

“My name is Undyne. Captain of the Royal Honor Guard, and personal bodyguard to Ambassador Frisk Dreemurr. And you'll get into this building over my dead body.”

“Fine by me.” Jordan raised a hand, arcing with electricity-

“ENOUGH.”

Fireballs formed in front of the man and the queen stepped forward, her eyes never wandering from Cater's.

“You, Jordan Cater. You have taken so much from us, and hurt so many others. The depth of my hatred for you cannot be plumbed by any line. But I will not put the children at risk by fighting, if it can be avoided. So... go. Leave now, and I will spare your life. But if you attempt to harm a single child under my care, I will burn you to such a crisp that your ashes will scream for water!”

“You... dare. You dare to claim to protect children. When my daughter lies in an unmarked grave.”

“Chara was our child too, Jordan Cater.” Asgore raised his trident. “They lived in our home and ate
at our table and it was a joy to watch them and Asriel play together and our hearts broke when Chara died, just like yours.”

“YOU SHUT UP YOU FUCKING ANIMAL!” Jordan's eyes, at least what parts could be seen past the purple light, were wild and erratic. “You got your murdering son back, but where's my child?! Where's Chara?! Huh?! When I... when I'm done with Frisk. You get to watch him die all over again-

“And now you're going to die.” Undyne said almost casually, forming another spear and jabbing it at Cater. Jordan jumped back and managed to hold up both hands, producing a miniature storm of lightning that arced towards Undyne.

There was the sharp crack of displaced air, a flash of bright blue light, and then another report and flash, and Undyne was gone. The lightning grounded itself uselessly on the metal of the doors.

Undyne blinked. She had been staring at Cater, very intently, and suddenly he had disappeared... and she could feel a warm body pressed up against her back, arms wrapped around her torso.

There was also the sudden vertigo and nausea, and the warrior fell to one knee to retch, prompting the person holding onto her to let go.

“Sorry,” a familiar voice mumbled. “I'm not... it's my first shortcut.”

“...Frisk?”

“Yeah. Uh. This isn't how I wanted to tell everyone. Just so you know. I'll explain. Or try to. If we survive this...”

“YOU.”

Frisk turned to see a shambling wreck of a man held together by magic and hate, collapsed on one knee, point at them with his one working arm, eyes glowing so bright that the purple occluded much of his face.

“This is all your fault. You did this. All of this! You and your fucking magic! Dragging this out! Playing God, deciding who lives and who dies and who gets to live happily ever after... well, you fucked up. You forgot my daughter. And now-”

“Hey, I may have self-esteem issues, but I'm not stupid.” Frisk snapped. “I didn't hurt anybody today. That's all on you.”

For a few seconds, there was only the sound of the rain. Jordan Cater stared at the child, silent, until...

“I hated it when she talked back. Couldn't tell her anything... god, I miss her.”

“If you think you're the only person here who's lost somebody. You're wrong. No matter what you do, or try to do today. Nothing you do will change anything. You have to stop this, and not just because sooner or later, somebody is going to get tired of you tricking them and just shoot you in the head to make sure you're dead. Are you really going to spend the rest of your life obsessed with what you can never have?”

The lights in Jordan's eyes faded slightly, until there was only the glimmer of purple from his irises.
“...you know the answer to that, Frisk Dreemurr. I know that you do. I know that look. When you know you've lost everything. And you can't possibly win, can never go back to the way things were before. But you can't let yourself give up.” Jordan's head drooped, and he stared at the ground.
“There wasn't really a choice. For you or me. This was always here. Waiting for us. All this time. But if I have to die. I'm going to die on my terms.”

There was a loud cracking noise of displaced air and a flash of blue light as Cater bridged closer to Frisk, his arm reaching inside his pocket. It wasn't until the arm was completely raised that Frisk saw that he was holding a strange glowing knife. Even as they tried to raise their arms and create some sort of shield, somehow they knew that the knife would go right through it... but the knife never came down. A green vine wrapped around it, pulling Cater backwards, and other vines burst from the ground, wrapping around the man's body and sprouting thorns and golden flowers, pulling him down to the ground until he fell to his knees again.

Behind him, Frisk could see the window to Toriel's office had been opened, and Asriel had reached out his arm to rally the plant life. The magic vines vanished and the young monster clapped both paws together, and the golden flower blossoms surrounding Cater all exploded into a yellow mist. Frisk started coughing and behind them, Undyne also started to cough... and so did Jordan Cater. But Cater didn't stop coughing when the mist dissipated. If anything, it seemed to be getting worse. Frisk's jaw dropped with sudden realization.

“...you're allergic to Golden Flowers.”

Beneath the vines, a green light began to shine, and Jordan Cater's breath took on more of a wheezing quality than a choking one. Frisk raised their left hand, and the knife in Cater's hand started to glow blue, eventually shaking out of the man's grip and landing several feet away. Cater snarled and there was a surge of yellow electricity that the vines ignored, fire that they shrugged off... and ice that finally made them brittle and allowed Cater to escape. Before a fireball or a spear or a vine or a bone attack or a lightning bolt or a giant skull of doom could appear and bar passage, a hand grabbed the child by the neck and lifted them up.

“This time stay dead, you little brat.”

Even as the fingers surrounded Frisk's neck, they met resistance, green light shining from between Cater's fingers, a shield to keep them from being strangled. The child's eyes began to glow a bright red, along with their hands, reaching up to grasp Cater's arm....
“Okay Chara, your turn! What's it really like inside that cult place?”

“June, it is rude to call someone else's religion a cult.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “Mom, you call it a cult all the time.”

“Are you saying you want to be exactly like me? How flattering!”

“Mooooo!”

Three other children in the circle on the floor giggled while June groaned in embarrassment or frustration or possibly both. Chara didn't laugh or even smile, just hugged their knees up to their chest even tighter.

“Uhm. It's not that different from outside. Mostly. I think the walls were just to keep out the monsters if they ever got free... if there are actually any left after all this time.”

“If there ever were to begin with. The probably made that up just to make everybody afraid, to keep you all behind those walls.”

Chara's face flushed but they said nothing in response to the girl's allegation. Another girl, whose name Chara could also not remember, filled in the awkward silence.

“Hey, what about Bigfoot? Or the chupacabra? Or the Loch Ness Monster? Maybe monsters did exist at one point, and some of them are still out there hiding!”

June cleared her throat. “Amy, the Loch Ness Monster was a fake. The guys who staged those photos admitted it.”

“Yeah, I know that. My uncle has like two whole rooms in his house full of stuff like this though, and he said the evidence supports the idea that there really was a creature in the Loch Ness even while the hoax was going on!”

The third girl, who had remained as quiet as Chara most of the time, spoke up.

“Actually if Chara's religion is right, it would make sense for real monsters to be the ones behind almost all the hoaxes out there, so nobody thinks they are real. Some famous guy said the greatest trick the devil pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.”

“Charles Baudelaire. The exact quote is 'the finest trick of the devil is to persuade you he does not exist.' Most people remember the paraphrase from The Usual Suspects.”

The circle of children was quiet again, and Chara's face flushed even more in embarrassment. The
tension wasn't overwhelming, but it was enough for some of the children to cry out in surprise when there was a loud, rapid knocking at the door.

“Oh my. Who could that be...” June's mother walked over to the door. “Who is it?”

“Jordan Cater, ma'am. I'm here to pick up Chara.”

Chara's stomach turned into a ball of ice as the door was opened.

“Mr. Cater?”

“I apologize for the interruption, Mrs. Cobb. But Chara was not allowed to partake in any sort of sleepover or similar activity, on account of being grounded.”

“Oh. I was not aware of this fact. If you'll wait one moment, I will collect them-”

“I heard.” Chara stood up and grabbed their bag. “I've got everything.”

“Alright. Well... perhaps we can try this again, in the future. Have a good evening, and a good weekend, Mr. Cater.”

“And likewise, Mrs. Cobb.” Jordan grabbed Chara's hand and immediately started pulling them out of the house as soon as they were in range, and the parent and child made brisk time down the sidewalk even if Chara was struggling to keep pace.

“...dad-”

“Don't. I don't have... you have no idea how much trouble you are in right now, Chara.”

“...you said I could go over with June for her birthday sleepover.”

“I said you could hang out at their house. I did not give you permission to stay the night.”

“But I said-”

“I don't remember any mention of a sleepover. Are you calling me a liar?”

Chara closed their mouth, corners of their eyes stinging in shame and no small amount of indignation at the unfairness of it all. They had mentioned that it was a sleepover. That was the whole point. They knew they mentioned it.

Well... they thought they did.

Probably.

“...why did you say I was grounded-”

“Because that's what happens to you when you lie to me or your mother, Chara. Our actions have consequences. Whether we know what they will be in advance or not. The universe doesn't believe in second chances. Remember that next time you think about breaking rules.”

Chara stared at the dark shapes, barely lit from the strange light that seeped into the bedroom under the crack of the door. Shadows crossed the walls and ceiling, distorting silhouettes and leaving bizarre shapes that their mind tried to compare to more familiar shapes. Unfortunately, the most
familiar shapes were hardly the most comforting.

Below, on the floor of the bedroom, there was a pile of blankets and pillows, and from them came a sound with a comforting regularity. The one that had found them. The one that had carried them to... well. Safety wasn't the right word, but something probably better than dying alone in the dark. Probably.

The fact that Asriel and his parents were monsters was the least confusing thing that was going on. That there were monsters under Mt. Ebott didn't really come as a surprise. (Okay, that wasn't true. Chara was surprised, in the same sense of knowing that the world looks differently from above and then actually seeing it out of a high window or an airplane.) But all the stories they had been told had a recurring theme: Monsters and humans waged war, so long ago that no calendar could count the years. After a long battle, with victory won at a terrible cost in lives, seven human magicians had trapped the last remnants of the monster army with a magic spell, sealing them under Mt. Ebott to protect humanity.

Monsters and humans were at war.

Asriel and his parents were monsters.

Chara was human.

There was only one way this could end, and Chara's nerves were frayed, waiting for the inevitable.

They had no idea how much time had passed before their ears, already straining for noise, heard the floorboards creak outside of the room, a few seconds before they heard the click of the door latch. They turned towards the wall and closed their eyes, more out of reflex than out of any conscious thought. From somewhere very deep down there was a desperate mantra of survival that went something like *if you can't see them they can't see you, if you can't see them they can't see you*

The door opened slowly; Chara couldn't hear the hinges squeak, but the change of light falling on the wall in front of their closed eyes told them what was going on. It was impossible to not shake, impossible to pretend that they were totally asleep already. It was impossible to banish the image of massive paws reaching out, grasping their head or neck, and twisting or squeezing until they stopped mo-

Something touched Chara's arm.

It took everything they had not to cry out or flinch, but there was nothing they could do to stop trembling.

The bed covers were pulled up past Chara's shoulder, and there was a weight on their head... a paw. Gentle, much like Asriel's had been, but much larger. The weight was lifted, and Chara heard the rustling of fabric... and then a sound from Asriel, on the floor. Some sort of hybrid of mumbled gibberish and a snort.

There was another sound, one that sounded more like a muffled laugh, and more rustling of fabric. The light changed, and there was the tiniest of clicks as the door latched shut.

It was not until after Chara heard the sound of Toriel... it had to have been Toriel... walking away from the door that they realized they had started crying. Silent tears, seeping out into the world.

It took Asriel's paw on Chara's arm to understand that they had fallen asleep at some point. Despite their exhaustion, despite the fatigue of stress, they woke up instantly without any groggy
intermediate state of wakefulness.

“Chara? Chara are you awake?”

Chara moved, pushing back the bed covers a little.

“Yes. What time is it?”

“It's morning, Chara. So. Uh. Good morning.”

“...how do you tell if it's morning?”

“Huh??”

Chara sat up and turned around on the bed, and saw Asriel standing next to the bed in green and white striped pajamas.

“I mean. On the surface. We use the sun to mark the start and end of days. Usually, I mean. There's other ways but that's the most common one. If you can't see the sun, what do you do to mark the time down here?”

“Oh! We can still see sunlight, if it shines down in certain places. And... I know we have a lot of clocks... but I don't know how we decide to set those clocks to a certain time. Ooh, we should ask mom and dad! They'll know! They know everything! Well, everything in the Underground.”

Asriel's paw grabbed Chara's hand and very nearly pulled them off the bed; quick footwork kept both children upright and not tumbling into the nest of blankets Asriel had been sleeping in during the night.

Chara's heart thudded in their ears, but Asriel had their hand and... somehow that made things okay.

Chara stared at the fire that their father was tending. It was lined with rocks, much like they had seen in book illustrations and some movies for campfires, but other than that....

The man seemed satisfied and reached down to pick up one of the hot rocks with his bare hand, and Chara swallowed. There was the sound and the smell of something burning as Cater turned towards them.

“Alright. I've been putting this off for some time, but it's become clear now that this was a mistake on my part.” The hot stone flew up in the air, and Cater caught it, then immediately tossed it again. “Chara, it is time for you to learn the difference between injury and pain.”

“What??”

“Injury is the physical damage that happens to the body when it is exposed to hazards. Like extremes of heat. Pain is the action of nerves that detect hazards. But the two are not interchangeable. It possible to feel pain when nothing is wrong. And it is possible for the body to fail to detect damage that is happening to it. More importantly, pain and the threat of pain can be used as leverage against you, unless you can master the instinct to take the path of least resistance. So that's what today is about.”

Chara's mind put the pieces together before Cater opened his mouth again, and the child's eyes locked on to the hot stone their father was tossing up and down.
“Here’s what happens next. There’s a circle I’ve drawn in the dirt next to you. You are to catch these stones before they strike you, and then deposit them in that circle. You have to act quickly to keep any burns to a minimum, but more importantly, you have to learn to ignore the part of your brain that is averse to pain. You need to accept that there will be pain, or learn to ignore it entirely, and catch the stones or they will strike you, and the injury will be more serious.”

“...I can't-”

“The world does not care what we can't do, Chara.” Jordan’s mouth was a tense frown. “The world only cares about what we can do. We overcome our weaknesses or they will destroy us. Now get ready.”

The stone flew through the air, and Chara's arms came up to shield them. The impact was bad, but the heat was at least temporary, and the stone bounced off into the dirt.

“I said catch the stone, Chara. The next one will be hotter.”

Jordan reached down, grabbed another stone from the fire, tossed it up a few times, and then hefted it at Chara. The child managed to reach out, but the rock collided with their outstretched fingers and bounced off into the dirt again. The child cried out and clutched their hand to their chest.

“I said catch the stone, Chara. The next one will be hotter.”

“Another stone's coming up. Keep your eyes on me, Chara. I'm not going to announce every single one-”

“I can't- I can't- my hand hurts, I can't-”

“Then switch to your other hand. You have two of them.” The stone arced through the air, and Chara reached out with their left hand, grabbed the stone, and immediately let go as it burned their fingertips and palm.

Jordan sighed.

“You know, when my father taught me how to do this, I didn't catch very many at first either. I was young and uncoordinated. But at least I didn't whine the whole time.”

Another stone was picked up.

“We're going to be here all night Chara, or until you get it right. Whichever comes first.”

“Hello! I have returned!” King Asgore Dreemurr, ruler of the kingdom of monsters, was practically tackled by his son as he climbed the stairs. “Oh ho ho! It would seem that the castle has been overrun in my absence!”

Asriel laughed as Asgore reached down and picked him up. In the doorway to the family room, Chara stood slightly behind Toriel, eyes on Asriel as Asgore hugged him.

“Welcome home, my dear. How is everything at Hotland?”

“It's going very well. Construction is already started on the other end of the cavern. The buildings are rising like your homemade bread. Only made of stone instead of flour, obviously.”

“Well I should hope so,” Toriel retorted, but when Chara looked up at the queen's face she was
trying, and failing, to suppress a smile.

“Dad, now that you're back and done with king stuff, can we play catch?”

“Hmmm.” The king ran his fingers through his beard. “That seems like an excellent way to wind down after the work day is over. Just let me change into something more casual, first.

“Oh. Right.” Asgore let Asriel down, and the prince ran over to Chara. “Hey, come on! This is going to be awesome, you'll see!”

Chara swallowed; a chill ran down the child's back, but they took Asriel's outstretched paw and let him drag them out into the courtyard.

“Do not get too dirty, you two! Dinner will be ready soon!”

“We won't, mom!”

In the courtyard, the distant sounds of the city of Home could be heard, reflected off of the cavern ceiling, but the walls still muffled much of the noise and gave the area a sense of seclusion.

“This is going to be super cool! It's always just been me and dad playing catch but now-!” Asriel was practically vibrating with excitement, and held up both paws, forming a fireball. Chara's eyes were drawn to the heat and light instantly.

“You know how to play, right? Or do humans play catch? I mean, you don't have magic, so you can't make bullets, so... yeah, probably should have thought about that before asking.”

“We play catch. We just find or make something that we can throw back and forth. There's whole sports based on throwing objects from person to person.”

“Really?? What kind of sports?”

“Uhm. Okay. There's basketball, where there's a big inflatable rubber ball you have to bounce on the floor as you move around. And you throw it from player to player until somebody can throw it into a basket hanging up in the air off the side of a pole. And while you do this, another team of players is trying to do the same thing with a basket on the other side of the court, or playing field. There's only one basketball so both teams are trying to catch each others throws and outmaneuver each other all the time... what else. There's baseball. That ball is a lot smaller and its got a cork center I think. It's thrown at one player, and that player has a wood or metal stick called a bat, and tries to hit the baseball with it. Then the other team tries to catch it... uh. There's football, but that's not really a ball, more of a kind of pointy thing. Not sharp and spiky pointy, but it's not a sphere even though it's called a football. It's a really dangerous sport. Even with all the safety gear, human football players can get really hurt during an ordinary game.”

“...wow.” Asriel's fireball faded away as he listened to Chara's explanation.

“There's a couple other sports I know of like tennis, where you bounce a ball back and forth with these big rackets that look like snowshoes, and ping pong or table tennis which is the same thing but smaller and faster, and soccer is when a ball is kicked around and it's interesting because you're not allowed to use your hands unless you're guarding a goal, and then there's the stuff like golf, and lacrosse, and hockey, and curling... human sports are really complicated.”

“It sounds like it.” Asriel looked down at his paws, and then up again as the door to the courtyard opened. Chara turned to see Asgore walk out in jeans and a plaid shirt, looking slightly less intimidating without his armor and cape. Only slightly though, considering he was still at least
seven or eight feet tall with massive horns and arms that looked like they could snap a tree trunk like it was a pencil.

“Alright, children! Let's get this game of catch started before dinner is ready!”

“Yeah!” Asriel held up his paws and a fireball coalesced into being and he threw it at Asgore.

Chara’s mouth dropped open as the fireball collided with Asgore, burst into wisps of flame, and dissipated. They were vaguely aware of Asgore laughing and saying something, but they fixated on the fireball that Asgore made and threw at Asriel.

Every nerve was screaming to tackle Asriel to the ground and try to cover him with their body to protect against the attack, but they couldn't seem to move. It was as if their legs had been frozen to the floor.

Asriel caught the fireball without incident, and tossed it back to his father, who also caught it, and finally threw it back to Asriel again, where it exploded. Asriel laughed and snorted, and formed his own fireball, and turned to Chara.

“Hey, Chara, do you want... to...”

Chara's feet finally moved and they made a small step towards the door behind Asgore, trying to plot an escape route.

“I, I, I should got see if Toriel needs help with dinner bye”

The human child gave up on subtlety and sprinted through the courtyard, preparing to dodge past Asgore’s arms if he tried to grab them, or around his whole frame if he tried to block their way, but neither happened. Inside the entryway, Chara nearly tripped but managed to change course and run towards Asriel's bedroom. Inside, Chara leaned against the wall and tried to slow their breathing, which eventually worked.

Stopping the thoughts spinning around in circles inside their head was not nearly as successful. They could have caught the fireballs and thrown them back. That was what they had been practicing for, even if they didn't know it at the time. It would have been easy and instead they froze up, made everything awkward, probably broke a social custom if not a taboo or actual rule or maybe a law-

There was a knock at the door.

“Chara? Are you okay?”

“M'fine,” Chara lied, trying to keep their voice from expressing any of the emotions running through their brain like lightning. The door opened and Asriel walked in, Chara not turning to look at him lest what they were feeling somehow make it to their face, and in the process make everything worse.

“...Chara, I... I'm sorry.” Chara couldn't see Asriel's expression, but they could imagine it based on his voice, and they could hear and feel the tapping of one foot nervously on the floor. “All that time you were telling me about human sports, and that was stuff I didn't know at all or just heard second or third hand from somebody else based on something that washed up in the trash... I never even thought about how that works both ways. You wouldn't be familiar with games down here involving magic, because you can't use magic-"
“It's fine.” Chara breathed in slowly and let it out, then turned around with as impassive a face as they could muster. “I'm not... I don't do sports. Normally. I don't like... things being thrown at me. If I can help it. Probably could have said that at some point. Instead of causing trouble for everyone.”

“You didn't cause trouble.”

“I kind of messed up your game with your dad. Pretty sure that's how trouble works. Or starts. Or something.”

Asriel looked down at the floor, and then held up his paws. A fireball coalesced into being, and Asriel held it out to Chara.

“Chara... here. I want to show you something.”

“...what?”

“It's okay. I was very careful.”

Chara stared at the fireball and swallowed. This was going to hurt, but... they'd already hurt Asriel and Asgore's feeling by running out on their game. Fair was fair. Shaking hands came up around the fireball, and Chara picked it up out of Asriel's paws.

Chara held their breath.

And then let it out all at once in surprise.

It didn't hurt.

“Magic responds to how a monster is feeling. And... I don't ever want to hurt you. Not even by accident. I can control what my fire does. But for other stuff... we're from very different worlds and I forget that more than I should. If I'm tripping over one of those... um. Culture gaps? Please tell me, okay? I don't want to scare you, or bring up something that means something different for humans than it does for monsters, like I did today.”

Chara closed their eyes, distracted by the stinging in the corners, but they could still feel the warmth.

Fire burned. Fire hurt. That was a lesson that Chara learned early and well. But not this fire. Not Asriel's fire. For him to change something so fundamental to the world...

“I will. And. Uhm. Thank you.”

Chara sat on the bed, ears straining for any sound. Doors opening and closing. Voices, footsteps. Outside in the compound there were other noises, which complicated matters. Air conditioners, power tools, other children playing-

The door slammed, and Chara jumped.

Through the door, they could hear muffled voices, and then, inevitably, footsteps. There was the clicking and snapping of the lock on the bedroom door, and it opened to reveal Jordan Cater in the door frame.

“Your mother says that you threw a tantrum while she was trying to teach you how to knit.”
Chara said nothing. It wasn't like he was double checking to make sure his wife was telling the truth. And even if Chara wouldn't have called it a tantrum so much as a walk-out like in that book on the history of labor rights at the library, it wasn't like they had evidence to the contrary.

“...you know that food and clothing don't magically appear when people need them, don't you? They cost money. And money can only be acquired through useful work and labor, or trading something of value.”

Chara still said nothing. It wouldn't make a difference no matter what they said. That had been made overwhelmingly clear with experience; the back and forth with escalating volume ended in victory for Jordan every single time, which was more times than they could count.

“...keeping this house... keeping the whole compound running... that takes a lot of effort, from everyone. If you're going to keep living under this roof, then you have to contribute.” Jordan turned and started to walk away from the doorway. “After dinner. You can start lessons again.”

Chara clenched their teeth and bit back the retort in their throat. So far Jordan hadn't raised his voice... just let it drip with disgust and disappointment. Speaking out of turn, or speaking up at all, would take that stroke of good fortune and throw it out the window.

For a split second, Chara thought about taking one of the knitting needles and stabbing it through their own heart.

It wasn't an ideal solution by any means, but if they were dead, then Jordan couldn't lecture them or yell at them or throw things at them.

For that reason alone, it was worth considering.

“Chara, my child... are you well? You seem... agitated.”

Chara flinched and looked around. They had started pacing in the family room again, rubbing their hands together. That wasn't good. There was no telling how long Toriel was observing the child's nervous activity before speaking up, and a lot of blood rushed to their face.

“Oh. Uhm. Sorry. I'll, uh. I'll go back to m- to Asriel's room, if that's okay.”

Toriel raised an eyebrow, and put aside her book for a moment. One massive paw tapped on the armrest of the chair in invitation, and Chara slowly walked up to the queen of all monsters... and was carefully picked up and deposited on the armrest as if weightless.

“My dear. I know that you are not used to being separated from Asriel. And I know for certain that he feels the same way. If there is something that would help you pass the time...”

“Actually. There is one thing. Uhm.” Chara swallowed. “On the surface. I used to... knit stuff. With yarn. And when Asriel and I went to the garbage dump in Waterfall. I found some yarn and needles. So... uhm.”

Chara looked down at their hands and tried to keep from fidgeting.

“I could be doing that. And I should be doing that. But. I don't know what to make. I don't know what people need, or want. And I only have so much yarn, and... we don't know when anyone's going to throw that away again, so... if I'm going to make anything. It has to count.”
“If you do require additional yarn in the future, that will be no obstacle.” Toriel held up one arm and ran her paw across its white fur. “Historically monsters with fur coats have collected their shed fur for processing into textiles, and we also cultivate certain plants for their fiber. None of it will have the physical qualities you are used to, I suspect, but we will do our best to make it work for your needs.”

Toriel smiled, but her smile faded with worry as Chara seemed to shrink under her gaze.

“Uhm... that's the... the other thing. The real thing.” Chara stared at the magical flame in the fireplace. “You, and Asgore, and Asriel... you have been... you... you took me in, when you didn't have to, when it would have been easier to just-” Chara's mouth snapped shut, the hair rising on their neck. They had almost said it out loud, and saying it out loud... would give it form in the physical world.

It would make it real, and they would die, and they would never see Asriel again.

“You've all been... kind. Kinder than... and... as long as I'm living under your roof. I should be contributing. I should be helping out. I just don't... know how. And I don't...”

The child trailed off, and flinched at the feeling of Toriel's arm resting on their back.

“Chara... do you remember last night, when you helped clean up after dinner?”

“Yes.”

“And do you remember when you helped me rake the leaves in the courtyard?”

“Yes, but-”

“And do you remember when you helped me maintain the puzzles leading up to the courtyard?”

“Yes-”

“And most important of all, do you remember what you told us after you had fallen, and the day after?”

“...some of it. A lot of it is still a blur.”

“That is understandable. Chara, you told us many things about the surface that we did not know, but needed to. But even more important... you and Asriel came to home together. A human, side by side with a monster. Chara, you have given us a wonderful gift; the possibility of coexistence. The possibility of a world where our two peoples can live side by side, like they did long ago.”

Chara opened their mouth, then closed it again.

“I will always be glad of any help you can provide around the house, at least so long as you don't keep cleaning up Asriel's room for him and teaching him bad habits.” Toriel winked. “But so long as you are here, you are an honored guest, and it is my privilege to have you under this roof.”

Chara squeezed their eyes shut, and lunged forward to wrap their arms around Toriel's neck; they were shaking with emotion, but gave no other indication of it. When Chara calmed down and leaned back, maybe there was some puffy redness around the eyes that hadn't been there before, but Toriel did not say anything.

“Thanks... thank you. Toriel. I was... uhm. Well. That was keeping me up at night.”
“Well. We cannot have that.” Toriel smiled. “Now... would you like to help me get dinner started? It will not be long before Asgore and Asriel return from overlooking construction at New Home.”

“I would. Like that. Very much.” Chara climbed down off of the chair, and Toriel stood up.

“Oh, and Chara. If you are still indecisive about what to make when you are knitting, my advice would be to listen to your heart. It should be something that you enjoy creating for its own sake, not merely for the end result.”

“...okay.”

Toriel walked to the kitchen, and Chara followed after a moment's hesitation.

It was dark. Too dark to see, and Chara didn't seem to be making any progress. In the streets of the city... was it Home or New Home? They were almost identical except for the color of the rock, and it was too dark to make it out.

“Toriel, behind me!”

Asgore.

Chara sprinted in the direction of the king's voice, and somehow made it back onto the New Home balcony. Asgore was trading blows with a hooded figure, trident clashing with some sort of knife, until the king saw Chara running.

“Chara! Stay back, it's too-”

One moment of distraction was all it took, and the hooded figure's blade scored a gash across Asgore's chest in a split second.

“Why... you...”

The king collapsed into dust, and Chara screamed. Behind Asgore, Toriel had produced fireballs, but all the did was knock back the figure's hood.

It couldn't be.

But of course it was. How could it be anyone else?

“STOP! STOP IT!”

Toriel collapsed in a single blow, vanishing into dust, and only Asriel was left, staring at Jordan Cater's upraised knife. Chara willed their legs to move faster, but they never got any closer.

“STOOOOOP!”

Chara's eyes snapped open, their forehead slick with cold sweat and their arms shaking.

The same nightmare, again. Each time... it got further and further along before they woke up. If that kept happening, then next time... they would see Asriel die.

Chara rolled onto their side, covered their mouth, and futilely attempted to not break down in tears again. Eventually... if things kept progressing like they had been... they would end up waking Asriel with the sound. And he, caring but naive soul that he was, would poke and prod and enlist
his parents help to peel back the layers of defenses and it would all come out, the Guardians, Jordan Cater, the letter, Chara's original plan, and then they would be dead.

And for the first time in a very long time... that didn't seem like a viable option anymore.

“Okay, next step is... Asriel, is this a one, or a four?”

“...I can't tell. I think it's a four.”

“Alright.” Chara scratched their head. “Not sure if there's room in the bowl for four cups of sugar, though.”

“There's no such thing as too much sugar!” Asriel replied with a grin, and Chara couldn't help but snicker.

“Well, when you're right, you're right. Next step is for... alright, cups of butter. I'll get that while you get the sugar.”

The refrigerator was opened, and Chara looked through the various shelves. There were lots of containers of leftovers, and lots of containers of fresh snails, which had confused Chara at first. Actual staple ingredients were not nearly as common, and there was no butter to be seen.

“Okay, so, we might have to substitute something. There's no butter in here... hmmm...”

“You know, we haven't actually put anything together yet. And I think mom told me once that the first time you make a recipe you have to follow it exactly, before you experiment.”

“That makes sense, but this isn't the first time the recipe has been made. Mom already did it and fine tuned it. We can't follow it verbatim, but we can stick as close as possible. We just need to figure out what we can use instead of butter.”

“...what's a verbatim?”

“It means exactly.”

Asriel scratched one ear. “Why didn't you just say exactly?”

“Because vocabulary is a use-it-or-lose-it skill. Okay... think, think... I got it! Buttercups! Cups of butter! It's got to be close with a name like that!”

“Uh...” Asriel frowned. “I don't remember ever seeing mom put any flowers in a recipe. Maybe we should just shelve the pie idea, and make dad a card or something.”

“Okay, there's a couple problems with that. First and foremost, you're the only one of us who can do magic bullet patterns. Or magic anything, really. So even if I signed the card next to your name, it'd still mostly be your gift. And if I did my own separate card, that just drives home the point further. This way the pie is a real team effort. Second, with New Home finally finished and everyone moved from Home, that's a huge administrative weight off of everyone’s backs and I think Asgore will enjoy a celebratory effort that appeals to his sweet tooth more than anything else.”

“Well... if we're going to do it, we should at least make sure we're doing it right. And I don't think we are. We should probably double check with mom, she's the one that made the recipe, so she
would know what works and what doesn't. Right?"

Chara shook their head. “You're right about that, but here's the thing. When Mom realizes that we don't know something, or even when she just thinks we don't, she walks us through it. And if we make a pie under her supervision, even if she doesn't touch the ingredients it's still her pie. It's not really a gift from us then, either. I want to...” Chara trailed off and stared at the floor of the kitchen, one hand coming up to rub their neck.

“Asriel. I want to do something for dad that's... that's all us. To show that we cared enough to put everything together by ourselves, to celebrate, to make him something that we knew he'd like. You know?”

“...I guess that makes sense. Okay.”

“Good. Good. You start getting out all the ingredients still on the list. I'll go up to the garden and get some buttercups.”

“...okay, I'm pretty sure this isn't normally how pies turn out. But I think it's pretty good for a first try for both of us. It's not black and smoking at any rate.”

Asriel held up a paw and a tiny fireball coalesced in his fingers. “As if. Mom and dad both say I'm a... what was it... a progeny at fire magic.”

Chara giggled.

“What?”

“Nothing. That's definitely accurate. And I think it counts as a pun.”

“You and mom really like your inside jokes with words, don't you?”

“Yes. Yes we do.” Chara grinned, but the grin vanished at the sound of the front door opening. “They're back. Okay. Here we go.”

“Hello? Asriel? Chara?”

“Coming dad!” Chara lifted the pie off the cooling rack and started to carry it out of the kitchen. In the family room, Asgore and Toriel were walking in, wearing their formal robes; Chara lifted up the pie with a grin. “Hey dad! Guess what we made for you while you were out!”

“Oh. That's a tough one. How many guesses do I get?”

“Daaaad,” Asriel groaned.

Chara quickly walked up to the table and set the pie before one of the larger chairs.

“You've been really busy with king stuff lately and Asriel and I wanted to do something special for you. I mixed up the ingredients, and Asriel baked it!”

“A real team effort, then.”

“Yeah! It's all for you, dad!” Chara turned to Toriel and their grin became kind of awkward. “Uh. We're working on a special thing for you too, mom. It's just taking longer. Sorry.”
Toriel muffled a laugh behind a paw. “That is quite alright. Gorey, you had best change our of your formal wear before you get crumbs all over it.”

“But my dear, that's why I grew a beard in the first place, to catch crumbs before they reach my clothing.”

“That is disgusting.”

Asgore grinned. “Aw, come on Tori. You're smiling.”

A grin could be seen behind Toriel's paws.

“I am, and it is causing me no end of consternation right now.”

Chara snickered while Asriel groaned at his parents' embarrassing antics, and the two monarchs left the room to change clothes. Chara ran back into the kitchen, opened the cutlery drawer, and pulled out a knife and fork. Back in the family room, the utensils were placed by the finished pie, and Chara ran back next to Asriel to wait for everyone's return.

“...Chara? Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Just nervous.”

“What's wrong with your hands?”

“What?” Chara looked down; their thumbs and forefingers both seemed to be blistering. “Okay that's weird. I didn't notice that before you pointed it out.”

“Does it hurt?”

“A little bit, yeah. I didn't even notice though... I bet it's from my knitting needles. I only really started again since we finished moving in to the new castle, since so much else was going on.”

The king and the queen returned to the family room, the queen in a more comfortable dress and the king in jeans and a pink T-Shirt that fit his massive frame. Asriel and Chara ran up to the chair and pulled it back for the king, who smiled.

“The service at this restaurant is excellent. I must remember to mention that in my review.”

Toriel and the children snickered, and Asgore picked up the knife and fork, cutting into the pie. A little steam escaped, and Asgore grinned.

“You put a lot of sugar into this. I can smell it. Not that I'm complaining, mind you.”

What would have been a sizable slice for most people was barely a morsel compared to the king’s great maw, and the pie was consumed in a matter of moments. The king licked his chops and stood up, turning to the children.

“Mmmm. Sweet, but not to excess. Of course, my idea of excessive sweetness is different from other people's. There's a smokey flavor to all of it which I can only attribute to the caramelization of the sugar. Not terribly subtle, but there is a time for subtlety and a time to state your intentions openly, and with great conviction. While clearly a first try, I consider it a promising beginning to two culinary careers.”

“Ugh. You really commit to a joke, don't you dad?” Asriel groaned, but he was smiling.
Asgore got down on one knee, and both children closed in for hugs. “All kidding assigned, after so many delays and last minute hiccups in construction and transportation, and endless, endless meetings? This was definitely the highlight of my day. Thank you both very, very much.”

The children let go, and Asgore stood up with a grunt.

“Uh... dad, are you okay?”

“Fine, fine, Asriel. Just... hahaha. Thinking about it. I probably should have let the pie made of sugar cool down a bit before I tried to eat it.” Asgore smiled, but it was slightly pained. “Nobody to blame but myself for that, though.”

The king turned towards Toriel. “Tori, my dear. I know we still have some... ugh. Some paperwork to sort through, but I think I'll take a walk to let my dinner settle. Just to the garden and back.”

“Alright. Be sure that this walk does not become an extended gardening... Gorey? Are you absolutely sure that you are alright?”

Asgore was no longer smiling, and his breath was labored. Chara stared, their own smile long since vanished. In the pit of their stomach, it felt like something was wrong.

“...actually... no. Maybe I should just. Lie down for a few minutes...” Asgore took a few hesitant steps towards the door to the entryway, and then stopped, one paw clutching his chest. “Oh... that's probably not good.”

The king fell to his knees, and then onto his stomach. The queen darted towards him in an instant.

“Gorey! Asgore! What has happened?! Can you hear me?!”

The king replied with a long, pained groan, and Toriel held up both paws, green light radiating from them.

“It is... not working... how... wait. No.” Toriel looked up at the children, and for a moment Chara's heart stopped. “That pie. What did you put into it? What ingredients exactly?!?”

“...d-dad? Are you... are you...” Asriel seemed to have recovered from whatever shock had struck him upon seeing his father collapse, and Toriel turned to Chara, who was still staring at the king with a dazed expression on their face. The queen stood up and ran into the kitchen, and a few moments later...

“CHARA!”

The queen marched out, and Chara managed to tear their gaze away from the king. They instantly regretted doing so; Toriel's eyes were glowing, and her lips were pulled back showing many of her very sharp teeth.

“I found flower stems on the kitchen counter. What did you put in that pie?!?”

“I... I... I couldn't find butter, and. And the recipe called for four cups of butter. So I put in four buttercups instead-”

“You served my husband a pie made with poisonous flowers?!”

Chara's jaw dropped. They had done what?

“Tori...”
The queen's head turned instantly at the sound of Asgore's voice, and she ran over to the fallen king.

“You need. To calm down. You are frightening them.”

“Gorey. They should be frightened. You were poisoned and-”

“Tori. If we focus on blame. We get nowhere.” Asgore slowly pushed himself upright. “I will be fine in a few-”

Asgore stopped talking suddenly, and then bent over, mouth open and retching. Something red and steaming poured out of his mouth, staining the floor. Chara heard Asriel clap his paws over his mouth and start to whimper in fear... it was a sentiment they could relate to, even if they were dumbstruck and paralyzed with shock.

“On second thought...” Asgore managed to say, “perhaps you should call Dr. Aster.”

The skeleton held up a hand, and purple light swept over the king, back and forth.

“Hmmm. Can I get you to hit the bulls eye here?” Dr. Aster held up some sort of instrument with a flat surface painted to look like a target, and Asgore raised a hand to send a fireball slamming into it, rocking the Royal Scientist back on his heels for a moment.

“Ugh. Sorry.”

“Hey, at least we know it's not messing with your magic. Stats are coming back... Seventy and Seventy. You and the queen are usually around the Eighties, aren't you?”

“Yes.”

Dr. Aster nodded.

“Right. Okay. Well, it's not hard to figure out based on what you told me. This is definitely a Poison Effect. When the buttercup blossoms were chopped up, they released a compound that mixed into the rest of the batter. Some of it was probably neutralized chemically by the other ingredients, but anything that hadn't been affected yet... well, when Asriel started baking the pie, he was turning that poison compound into magical food.” Dr. Aster sighed and turned to look at the children. “I'm not blaming either of you, by the way. Nobody is born into the world automatically knowing everything. We all make mistakes when we run into blind spots.”

Chara stared at the doctor's shoes, unable to meet his gaze, while Asriel sniffed beside them. Standing behind both of the children, Toriel cleared her throat.

“What can we do to help Asgore, doctor?”

Dr. Aster shrugged awkwardly. “Unfortunately, not much. Just wait and don't be stingy with the healing magic. The body naturally tries to remove any substance that is harming it, so the poison will wear off, but there's no known way to accelerate the process. That's the bad news. The good news is that once your system is cleared out, Asgore, you will be good as new.”

“Actually. I think. My sweet tooth. Has already been. A casualty.” Asgore tried to grin to show he was joking, but the pained expression on his face impaired his attempt to ease the tension in the room.
“Well. Can't be helped then.” Dr. Aster turned towards Asriel and Chara, and walked over, kneeling down to get closer to their level. “Hey. Don't worry. This is mild Poisoning. And no matter how potent a Poison, it can never kill a monster, only bring them down to one HP. Your dad has higher Healing Potential than any other monster in the Underground so believe me, it's not going to come to that.”

“Dr. Aster. Thank you for attending to my husband on such short notice. I am... I am very relieved to hear that he will recover.” Toriel looked down at the children. “Asriel. Chara. Go to your room. We will discuss what has happened today at a later time.”

The two children nodded and walked down the hallway to the shared bedroom; inside, Chara immediately went to their bed and curled up facing the wall, while Asriel started pacing on the floor.

“Chara... I can't remember mom ever getting that mad before. I think we're really in trouble this time. I mean, really-really. Not like when stuff got broken during the move, or that thing with the Snowdin dogs. We'll be lucky if the worst thing that happens to us is no desert for the rest of the decade.”

From Chara's bed came a sudden, high pitched giggle.

“...Chara? What was that?”

“It's so funny.”

Asriel blinked. “Wait. What's funny? Like... like the part where we were worried about dad but he's going to be fine? Or...”

'I climbed Mt. Ebott expecting to die. There was no place for me with other humans so I came here. I thought I was going to die, and I fell, and I panicked and called for help and you found me and you and Toriel and Asgore were so kind, and you let me be a part of your family, and now that I finally want to live again I'm going to die for poisoning the king. It's so funny.'

Chara's thoughts were running circles in their brain again, and couldn't be parsed into words. So they just nodded.

“...I don't think it's funny. Dr. Aster said dad would be okay, but... I'm still worried.”

“Sorry... I didn't mean to-”

Hurt you. The words died on Chara's tongue. They had hurt Asriel. They hadn't meant to. But they still hurt him. And Asgore. And Toriel...

Chara raised their hand and stared at the blisters on their fingers.

'Monsters can only be hurt by killing intent. Asgore was hurt by the pie. I didn't mean to hurt him... but if he still got hurt from something I made for him...'

Chara closed their eyes and clenched their fist in frustration, aggravating the blisters.

Chara stared at the buttercup patch in the garden, extremely aware of every movement that Asgore made standing next to them. On the king's opposite side, Asriel was probably equally nervous, but for a different reason.
“I brought you two out here today so I could talk to you about what happened the day before yesterday.”

'Of course you did.'

The king got down on one knee and carefully picked one of the buttercups, turning it back and forth in his hand.

“You know now that buttercups are poisonous. But... that is not the fault of the flower. There is a specific part of it that is poisonous. A chemical. It's very energetic and decomposes into more harmless chemicals if it's left to dry out. So ironically the pie would have been perfectly fine had you two gotten distracted and ended up leaving everything out on the kitchen counter for a while.”

Chara said nothing, and continued to stare at the flowers. On Asgore's other side, Asriel was tearing up. Of course.

“I wanted to talk to you both about this... because I know how much it has affected you. And I want you to know that everything is going to be okay.”

'No it isn't. Nothing will ever be okay again.'

Chara stared at their feet as Asgore led the children back to the castle living quarters, thoughts slotting into place one by one.

'Now I understand.'

'Monsters and humans are too different.'

'We can never coexist.'

'As long as I'm down here, no monster is safe.'

'As long as the Guardians exist, no monster is safe.'

'As long as humans exist anywhere in the world. No monster is safe.'

'I have to...'

'I have to make the world safe for monsters.'

'I have to make this world safe for Asriel.'

Red light arced off of Jordan Cater's body, and he let go of the child's neck in shock at what he had seen and heard and felt, reeling and unable to focus. Magical energy sparked off of his body, without aim or purpose, until his eyes focused on Frisk again.

No.

Not Frisk.

They had collapsed on the ground but scrambled to stand up again. For a moment, a pair of purple glowing eyes stared at a pair of red glowing ones, as the rain poured from the sky.

“...Chara??”
It came out as barely a whisper, but the child heard him and snarled.

“All of this could have been avoided.” The human child's voice echoed slightly, as if two people were speaking the same words, slightly out of sync. “No matter what you say. No matter what you think. You really did have a choice. And this is the result. I die and I die and I die, and it will never be enough for you. So for my own sake. For the sake of everyone I care about. For the sake of everyone I love. This ends now, once and for all!”

“...I just... I didn't want this, I didn't want to... I just wanted you to be strong-”

“YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT STRENGTH IS!” The child spat the words, eyes flaring red almost too bright to look at. “Everyone has given so much to make this happy ending work! Asriel gave up everything that made him who he was so monsters could go free! Those humans were willing to sacrifice their lives to protect everyone from you! You've never had to give up anything for anyone! You take and you take and you take, and you give nothing back! Well you can't take them! I told you! YOU CAN'T TAKE THEM!”

Light arced from the child's hands, solidifying into bullets. Bolts, hex nuts, gears, hinges, angular shapes of varying sizes. The bullets started to converge, slotting into place as if something was being built from a kit of parts by a pair of invisible hands. And when the last part fit into place... Jordan Cater was staring at a shape that looked almost like one of the giant skulls that the skeleton had been fighting him with, outside the hospital. Only this one had curved, tapering horns like a goat or ram.

One empty eye socket flickered with cyan light. The one next to it flickered with orange light. The mechanical skull opened its mouth, produced a sound that resembled distorted laughter, and Jordan tried to bring up a shield, some sort of defense, anything, but the magic was slow to respond. The clarity of purpose that had let him wield the energy with precision and focus was gone.

“Chara stop, I don't want to fight y-”

“You made your choice long ago, YOU DIRTY BROTHER KILLER!”

The beam of light shattered the shield that Cater tried to form and knocked the man off his feet, sending him skidding along the rain soaked grass until the beam cut out a split second later. Energy arced along Cater's convulsing, shaking body, and then dissipated as the man became still, laying face down in the grass.

For a few moments, nobody moved. The human child turned, looked at the glowing knife where it had fallen, and pointed. The mechanical blaster opened its jaws again, and the beam pulverized the weapon, snapping the blade, warping the handle. When the light receded, there was only scrap metal, without any red glow. The red light from the child's eyes faded away, and with it the mechanical blaster.

All eyes were focused on them, the only sound that of the pouring rain.

“That's my girl.”

Officer Carmichael snapped out of the trance he seemed to be in, and turned around to see the man who had shot Cater earlier standing next to the police cruiser, one hand clutching at his chest. Whoever he was, he was smiling.

That was short lived, as the child swayed in place, stumbled and was just barely caught by Undyne.

“Frisk?” The fish woman jostled the child, hoping for some reaction. “Come on, punk, wake up...
Undyne jogged towards the school, and Jason Taylor lost sight of Frisk as the king and queen crowded the gym teacher in order to see what had happened to the child. There was a coughing noise from next to him, and Taylor looked down to see a short skeleton in a soaked jacket standing nearby.

“Hey. What with the rain and all. You said something but I couldn't hear it.”

“...that child they just carried inside. She's my daughter. Biologically, anyway.”

“Huh. Will wonders never cease.” Sans pulled one hand out of his pocket, holding up a card with the All Fine Labs logo and a phone number for Taylor to take. “The name's Sans. Sans Aster. We should talk. Later, obviously. We're all going to be pretty busy for a while, I think.”

Jason Taylor looked around at the police breaking out of their stunned paralysis and taking action, trying to revive some of the fallen combatants and secure Jordan Cater's unconscious form. In the distance, he could hear sirens that could be police, but were just as likely to be ambulances.

Ideally, they were both.

“You got a real knack for understatement, Sans.”

Chapter End Notes

The previous two chapters were written at the same time, with great haste, and often as not under the influence of extreme sleep deprivation and the My Hero Academia Second Season OST. Spelling, grammar, and syntax errors maybe be higher than normal as a result.

On a completely unrelated note. I have a tumblr now: https://ebottswake.tumblr.com/ Sorry about the lack of an html link; please refer to my above mention of sleep deprivation.

I try to post updates there, and once this story reaches its conclusion, I am likely to post exposition on the story that was not explained satisfactorily within the narrative itself. Also perhaps stuff that ended up in my Cutting Room Floor file. Oh, and when I get the spinoff, prequel, and related one-shot stories done, I'll post updates to that effect as well.

Also chickens. I cannot stress the chicken thing enough. You have been warned.

EDIT: Went in and changed the URL to a dedicated sideblog, as a lot of people were (justifiably) annoyed by the surplus of chicken related posts on my main blog, among other things. Still not an HTML link because it will violate the covenant I made with the Dark Powers. (Actually I just don't have the mental energy to spare, but the Dark Powers thing sounds funnier.)
“Welcome back to KEBT FM. Our coverage of the attack on Dreemurr Elementary continues. Once again, the Ebott's Wake Police Department has asked us to remind people not to swamp the school or the police department with phone calls asking about your children. As we mentioned earlier during Winston Devinter's interview with Captain Undyne and Officer Carmichael, no students were harmed or injured during the attack. Jordan Cater was stopped before he ever got inside. Police are following procedures made specifically for situations like this and you can rest assured that your kids will be home safe in your arms as soon as possible.”

“Brett, Jeff says we got another dozen calls asking about the whole magic thing.”

“Add them to the pile at this point. Ugh. My kingdom for a newspaper from the future.”

“hey Alph, can you turn the radio down? i can barely hear myself sleep.”

“SANS THAT IS A STATEMENT THAT DOES NOT FOLLOW LOGICALLY AND I'M ALMOST CERTAIN THAT YOU HID A PUN IN IT SOMEWHERE!”

'Voices.'

'People are talking.'

'So I'm not dead. Probably.'

Frisk's eyes opened, a decision they immediately regretted as light stabbed them in the skull via their eyes. The child groaned and brought a hand up to block the light.

“They're awake! Frisk's awake!”

Asriel's voice, it sounded like. He was quickly drowned out by other voices and the scraping of furniture across the floor.

“Oh my g-god I can't keep doing this! Frisk you have t-t-to stop passing out on us!”

“You know what else you need to stop doing? Putting yourself in harms way! I told you not to do the thing and as soon as the school gets attacked you're I'MA DO THE THING! NGAAAAAAAH!”

“Can everyone just calm down for a minute?” An authoritative voice that sounded way too much like Cave Johnson rang out. Frisk risked opening their eyes just the barest sliver, and saw blurry shapes that might have been a tall skeleton in a white lab coat walking over to them. “First things first. Frisk, how do you feel?”

“...what?”

“Anything feel broken, aches and pains you can't quantify, headache, stuff like that?”

“...yeah. Light hurts my eyes. And.” Frisk hesitated as a laundry list of physical complaints all tried to get their attention at once. “There's. Some other stuff. Where is this?”

“The queen's office. Your parents are in up to their necks trying to coordinate with the police to
make sure every child is safe and accounted for and everyone can get home.”

“Yeah. Toriel wouldn't leave your side until I promised her I'd decapitate anyone that tried to get in here without permission.” Undyne grinned. “So far it hasn't been a problem. It's amazing how far you can get with a winning smile! And thirty magical spears out of nowhere!!”

With Asriel's help, Frisk managed to sit up, and realized they were lying on one of the benches that normally sat outside of the office for visitors to use if Toriel was in a meeting of some sort. Someone had brought it inside the office and had the foresight to place a blanket on the hard wooden surface to make it more comfortable. Where the blanket had come from was not at all clear, but that was hardly the most pressing mystery Frisk was faced with.

“...Cater. What happened to him? Is he...”

“Still alive, so far as any of us have heard. For better or worse,” Dr. Aster muttered. “We're not sure how much of his magical abilities remain, but after you hit him with the Red Magic he seemed to be having trouble with it. Whatever you showed him must have been really distracting. Oh, and speaking of which. I know I'd love to hear how that happened.”

Frisk tensed up and looked down at the floor, not that they could see much of it through their hypersensitive eyes. Asriel's paw squeezed their hand, and a lump formed in their throat that they tried to speak around.

“Uhm. This is going to sound flippant. But it's genuine. I was hoping you could tell me that. Now that you know about it. I mean. Today. Uh. Nothing about today went how I expected. I was going to...” Frisk trailed off, swallowed, and started again. “Asriel knew about it since the day he came back. And I told mom this morning. And dad figured it out by himself before anyone said anything. I was going to tell everyone else after I told them, but... well. Things happened.”

There were footsteps as somebody crossed the room, and Frisk's eyes opened enough to focus on Dr. Alphys, who looked even more nervous than normal.

“Uhm. I have. A confession to make. You know. The night that. That you and Asriel and your parents went back to the Underground? And all the stuff that happened after that? Uhm. I stayed with Asriel at your house. So I could talk to you after school. I know how it is. When you have a secret eating you from the inside out. And I was trying to let you know that it was okay to share. B-but. Without actually saying I knew what you were hiding. Because I know what that's like too, being afraid that somebody will find out what you're trying to hide.”

Frisk swallowed. “...the Soul Link test. With Asriel. You must have seen something then.”

“No, no.” Alphys shook her head. “I was heading towards you two to talk about what I wanted to try next and... I heard you talking to him. Sorry.”

“...oh.”

“I was going to send a letter with Asriel last night. To let you know that I knew, and that everything was okay. And that kind of flew out the window when Thomas O'Dell and his rag-tag b-band of misfits broke into the lab. I thought if I could convince you to talk about it, and you and I were on the same page, then maybe we could...” Alphys started to mumble, “break the news... to Undyne... and everyone else.”

Undyne coughed. “Actually, I already knew too.”

Alphys and Frisk both turned to look at the gym teacher. “What?”
The tall, muscular fish woman blushed. "Uhm. Alphys... you know how I told you that you sometimes talk in your sleep? Well. I've known about Frisk using magic since the day you found out, I think."

"THAT IS A THING THAT HAPPENS! IN FACT, I HEARD YOU MENTION THIS FACT WHILE I WAS DRIVING YOU BACK HOME AT UNDYNE'S REQUEST EARLIER THIS WEEK! AND OF COURSE I KEPT THIS SECRET FOR BOTH OF YOU, COOL AND TRUSTWORTHY FRIEND THAT I AM!"

"Yeah! What he said! C'mere!" Undyne grabbed Papyrus and started to run her knuckles over the tall skeleton's skull. "Trust Noogie!"

"THAT'S NOT HOW THIS WORKS!"

"hey. long as we're keeping the confession train running." Sans voice could be heard again, and Frisk saw him get up out of Toriel's chair, which explained why they had not seen him before. "Frisk, you remember when you were hanging out at Asgore's place a week before the first address, and I came by to talk shop?"

"...yes?"

"And when we had the backyard to ourselves while your dad was checking on the tea, and... Asriel was off doing his own thing with a different name because of reasons?"

"...I do remember, yes."

"okay. do you remember the part where you pulled the same trick i did when we were at Grillby's in the Underground and i wanted a moment to talk privately?"

"What??" Frisk's eyebrows shot up. "When did that happen?"

"Around the time you started messing with your phone's key chain, you used Energy magic to give us both more time to talk, like I did back then. Sort of like a beginner's pocket dimension. And I'm not surprised you don't remember it. Because I realized pretty quickly that you had no idea you were doing it." Sans closed his eyes and chuckled. "That's the real reason I gave you that book, you know. Liking dad's science lectures, that was a convenient cover. And a bonus."

Frisk blinked, and then stared at their hands.

"...wait. That means you knew about this before I knew about it. Because I didn't even think it was real until last Tuesday when Asriel was coming back. I thought I was hallucinating from the drugs and maybe a bit from freaking out over being shot and almost dying."

"Sure seems like it. Don't get me wrong. It came as one heckuva surprise. But after I got to thinking about it some more, it was obvious that the best move I could make would be to give you that book. You weren't born with this, you didn't have any parents to show you the ropes, and now that you did have parents who could teach you, they probably didn't even know that was even an option. Especially if you didn't."

"...oh."

"Yeah. Once I heard that you took to dad's science models better than human models, it was like a light bulb switching on. Even if you did have somebody to train you, you'd naturally gravitate to a system like this anyway, just like monsters end up forming bullets that are most comfortable for them. The book just cuts out the middle man."
“So... everyone knew about this except me.” Dr. Aster sighed. “Why am I always the last to know these things?”

“because you fell into your own creation and traveled to the future and missed a lot of stuff?”

“Besides that, I mean.” Dr. Aster waved one hand dismissively. “So... safe to say, you never used Stanton's prototype or the upgraded model because it didn't exist before this week, and your abilities predate that entire branch of research. So... I got nothing. Don't suppose you know if you were descended from one or more of the original seven magicians?”

“Uh... I really don't know that much about my human family tree. And by 'that much' I mean anything, really. I put myself down as 'Other' on standardized tests every single time it comes up.”

“Alright... do you know if you were exposed to some sort of compound that interacts with the human body to produce magic?”

“If I had been, I wouldn't know what it was.”

“Right, right. Obvious. Did you get bitten by a radioactive magician and end up with the proportional strength and magical power of a magician?”

Frisk stared at Dr. Aster.

So did everyone else in the room.

“Yes, I know I'm grasping at straws here, but it's not like I have a lot to work with right now.”

“Uh... how is everyone else who tried to fight Cater? My memories are fuzzy in some areas but I do remember seeing him hurt a lot of people.”

“Lotta police down and out for a while. Cater didn't pull his punches.” Sans held up his smartphone. “Justin Carrow and Joe are in the hospital. Officer Steve's back on his feet though. that guy doesn't stop for nothin' or nobody. Van Garrett's up and about again. Hal's going a mile a minute, of course. Eli came through without a scratch, unless you count extreme confusion as an injury. oh, and there were a bunch of people who pitched in to try to wear Cater down, too. that's why the KEBT traffic helicopter is grounded, Gary Welkin took a couple of bullets aimed at Tsundereplane.”

“Oh my god!” Alphys shrieked, causing everyone else in the room to either flinch or jump up in alarm. The scientist seemed oblivious to this fact, as she was still staring at her own phone. “Somebody got pictures of Gary and Tsundereplane hugging after the crash!! Unless it's been shopped. I don't think it's been shopped. Oh. I'm going to need to take some mint chocolate chip nice cream over to Catty and Bratty's apartment tonight. I, uh. I don't think they're going to take this well.”

“probably not. oh, speaking of people pitching in, not sure if you noticed but Dwayne Riley decided to bury the hatchet. in Cater's guts, but still. progress is progress.”

“IT WAS LESS ABOUT STANDING UP FOR WHAT WAS RIGHT, AND MORE ABOUT REVENGE, BUT AS A GREAT PERSON ONCE SAID, IT'S BETTER TO HAVE PEOPLE DOING THE RIGHT THING FOR THE WRONG REASONS THAN TO HAVE THEM DO THE WRONG THING FOR ANY REASON!”

“Well that's a start.” Frisk rubbed their forehead. “With Cater out, and Riled Up Riley not so Riled Up anymore, maybe I can get my number of archenemies down to zero again soon.”
“Ooh! One of the students must have b-been recording the fight on their phone when the teachers weren't looking! It's already up on YouTube! And... been remixed with air horns... here's one where it was dubbed with Yakety Sax... oh, a Metal Gear Rising remix playlist! I'll save you for later.”

“Already?? How long was I out?”

Alphys shrugged. “Maybe twenty minutes? That's like two weeks in internet time, though!”

“How long before he comes around?”

“No real way to tell. Some people go under easy and take forever to come out of it, some people fight going under and fight coming back, some people it's a struggle to get them to stay under at all, and so on and so on... no matter what category Mr. O'Dell falls under, he was sedated for a while even after he was healed. So his body has to process what's left first. And every person's metabolism is different.”

The words came to O'Dell as if he was underwater, or on the opposite end of a long hallway.

“Well, it's not like I'm going anywhere. Kinda wish I brought a book, though.”

“...I have a radio you could listen to if you want.”

“Thanks, but The Brett and DJ Pantz can't tell me anything I don't already know right now right now.”

“Suit yourself.”

Memories flickered to life, of an annoying skeleton and then a world of super-heated flame. Thomas flinched at the recollection, and tried to open his eyes.

“Oh. Looks like we won't have to wait that long after all.”

Thomas tried to bring up his hands to shield his eyes from the onslaught of light, but only one arm made it all the way. It didn't take much to figure out that it had been secured to the hospital bed. Blinking, Thomas tried to take stock of his surroundings; a hospital room, obviously, with a nurse and a police officer standing near the foot of the bed.

“...Steven Ward.”

“Officer Steven Ward, actually. But close enough. And you're Thomas O'Dell, known associate of Jordan Cater and Guardian sympathizer. Or actual Guardian. The naming conventions need work. I was hoping to ask you a few questions, if you're up for it.”

“Am I under arrest? I'm assuming yes because of the handcuffs but I want to hear it from you.”

“Yes. You are under arrest. We have you dead to rights for breaking and entering, vandalism, theft, conspiracy, assault, three separate counts of attempted murder, and operating a wind powered vehicle within the city limits of Ebott's Wake.”

“...wait, what was that last one?”

“That kite you made to get the climbing line secured on the roof of the lab. It's not what people think of when they think of wind powered vehicles but it technically qualifies under the wording of
the law as it was written in 1922.”

“You gotta be shitting me.”

“I know. I was surprised too.”

“...if I'm under arrest. I want a lawyer. I refuse to answer any questions without a legal advocate present.”

“As is your right. Do you have one on retainer you want us to contact?”

“...no.”

“Alright. I'll make some calls.” Officer Steve walked out of the room, and the nurse walked up to check on Thomas's IV and assorted vital sign measurements.

“The last thing I remember was being set on fire. But it doesn't look so bad now. How long was I unconscious?”

“Maybe fifteen hours in total. The burns were much worse than that when you came in. That was why we had to keep you sedated.”

“How... how bad?”

“A mix of first and second degree burns over pretty much the totality of your skin. Fortunately there was no tissue penetration from the heat, so there's no nerve damage and your eyes didn't get hard boiled. Don't ask me why not. You were never looking at skin grafts if that was what you were worried about. And what damage did exist was healed by the magic.”

Thomas swallowed. “What magic?”

“Officer Steve asked me to let him explain that part. Oh, speak of the devil.”

“Called it in. You'll be getting a visit from one of our public defenders within the hour. Which probably means you're going to clam up now, which is well within your legal rights to do. Not that I was actually planning on interrogating you here, or possibly at all. The physical evidence and eyewitness accounts are overwhelming, and when the doctors give you the green light to leave, you and your attorney and whoever ends up collecting any statements from you can deal with the Miranda Rights then.” Officer Steve grabbed a chair, pulled it closer to the bed, and sat down.

“Since you're not going to be doing any talking without your advocate present, I guess it's up to me to fill the silence. So... tell you what. I'm just going to go through this timeline we've compiled from everything and everyone else, and you can start thinking about how to set the record straight later if I get anything wrong. Sound good?”

Thomas stared at the policeman, who shrugged and pulled out a small notebook he started flipping through.

“Okay... we know before Jordan Cater even entered the picture, your whole network was run by some guy named Marcus. Also a couple of other names too. He got messed up pretty bad when the Bureau decided the Guardians had to go, so he needed more or less constant medical attention. And there was a sympathetic registered nurse named Claudia Moore who somehow managed to keep him going for over a year and a half. When Marcus finally succumbed to his injuries, Claudia wasn't needed in your safehouse network. She wasn't in your notes or records, so she couldn't be traced back to you if somebody found them. But she was still on your side.”
Officer Steve looked up to see Thomas O'Dell sporting one rather impressive poker face.

“Fast forward a week or so. Joe Stanton puts together a little gizmo to try and figure out the whole human magic thing by seeing if it’s actually possible for a human to manipulate magic at all anymore, and it succeeds way too well. He's hurt so bad the paramedics want him overnight for observation, even after the green magic fixes up everything else. Claudia Moore hears the rumors from the EMTs that were actually involved, because that's a hell of a story to just sit on. She has a burn phone and a number and passes on the information to you, and as far as she's concerned, it's back to business as usual. But your work is just beginning. You sit down in that fallout shelter and you think and you plan and you solve every problem you can think of long before it comes up, including how to keep from being chased after you steal what might very well be the most dangerous piece of technology on planet earth. Specifically, you delegate that responsibility to another member of your crew, while everyone else sticks around to make a mess and keep everyone's attention aimed at you, and not the guy running away from All Fine Labs.”

O'Dell's face betrayed very little, but that wasn't the same as betraying nothing at all.

“Zeke Thompson hands off the machine to Claudia Moore, and then he tries to go to ground. Emphasis on tries. Now nobody knows where the Phase Integrator is. It could be somewhere in the lab. It could be broken to bits in the fighting. It's a big old question mark. And something else nobody knows is that Jordan Cater, nominal leader of the Guardians or Sages or whatever name is in vogue this week, he's in the hospital where a Guardian sympathizer still works. So... Moore is a good nurse. Not a good spy. She panics and goes for broke just getting the machine to Cater because it's burning a hole in her pocket, metaphorically. Drugs the officers assigned to keep an eye on Cater. Classic, but not exactly subtle, and she did not cover her tracks at all. Cater can use the machine because it was never intended to leave the lab and Joe never thought to password protect the thing. So Cater ends up with powers that previously only Joe Stanton and his research team were supposed to be messing around with.”

Officer Steve thought he saw signs of reduced tension from his discussion of Cater's powers, but that could just as easily have been from boredom.

“There's something else, by the way. Instead of just heading for the hills, or trying to go for a high body count right out of the gate, he stopped by to visit you first. That's why you don't look like a bucket of Colonel Sanders' Extra Crispy right now, in case you were curious. I wonder why he did that. And I wonder why you were so set on getting him out of here, when you could have taken that machine to a news station and spun some yarn and rallied a whole lot of people who want a cause to be angry about to gather under your banner. Or you could have just vanished entirely with a completely new set of skills at your disposal, to plot and scheme until you had a fool proof way to spring Cater from the hospital or prison or wherever he ended up by then, and the resources and manpower to make it happen. Don't get me wrong. I'm glad things turned out this way. There was a fair bit of property damage and a lot of bruises and scrapes and broken bones, but no fatalities. Just like every other time this happened. Not sure if somebody up there likes us, or what. Anyway... Jordan got his magical lights punched out. So your master plan, while admittedly impressive, was all for nothing in the end.”

“Officer Ward.”

Steve looked up from his notebook.

“Like you said, you have me dead to rights on breaking and entering, and assault, and attempted murder on top of all that, and you probably have enough to get me for a few other things you didn't mention. You don't really need me to fill in the blanks except to give you something you might be
able to use to nail other people you think might be involved, but can't prove for sure. And I'm certain that you or one of your colleagues is going to try really hard to make that happen. But at the same time, I think I know you well enough that you won't try to falsify what you need to get the result you want... you've been telling me a story. Let me return the favor. I'll tell you two stories. And you can decide for yourself which one is more likely to be true.”

Thomas cleared his throat.

“A man low on time, friends, and resources gets desperate and reckless. He's not thinking clearly. So he starts making mistakes. But he hears good news from an old friend. Something that could completely turn the tide, in the right hands. He knows those hands aren't his hands. But he knows who does have the right hands. So he builds his plan around that. And maybe it's not just because his friend has what it takes to change everything. Maybe he knows his friend needs closure. And this is the closest he can ever get to it, after all that's happened. Whether or not his friend actually got closure before he was incapacitated, the man had to try.”

The man cleared his throat again.

“Or. A man low on time, friends, and resources gets desperate and reckless. He hears some interesting news from an old friend, but he has no idea what to do with it. He still has some mystical or spiritual stuff he learned from another friend, even if he doesn't have the complete picture. So he gets what he needs for some sort of ritual or meditation exercise or whatever it is. Hoping that will give him some insight, or inspiration, or at least take the edge off. And somehow or other. He ends up so blitzed that he thinks he's talking to some Lovecraftian horror that can't exist in our dimensions of reality so it just looks like a hole in the universe. And as far as Lovecraftian horrors go this one is actually pretty approachable. Asks the man how he's doing. Sympathizes with his troubles. Discusses music. And when asked for advice, it comes up with a plan that might work. So when he comes down from whatever it was, the man starts putting that plan in motion. And, in the end, it doesn't pan out. Not because the plan was faulty. But because life is complicated.”

Thomas leaned back in the hospital bed and closed his eyes.

“And those are my stories. Sorry if they're not as long or as nuanced as yours. But in my defense, I've been set on fire recently and it's really fucking distracting.”

There was a scraping sound of a chair scooting on the floor which had to be Officer Steve standing up.

“That's fair. Anyway. If I tried to use what you just said, your attorney will likely be able to get it thrown out. So I won't try. I'll be busy putting out fires somewhere else by the time they get here, but another of Ebott's Wake's finest will be around to do things by the book. Or as close as possible, under the circumstances. If you'll take some advice from somebody like me, I recommend you rest up while you have the opportunity.”

Officer Steve sighed as he vanished through the doorway.

“I sure wish I could.”

Despite everyone's best efforts, the hallways were crowded. Children were lined up to get a headcount and verify their presence and safety, which posed problems both from the sheer number of students, and the variety of shapes and sizes that the majority of the student body came in. And
with this crowding came noise, exacerbated by the extraordinary circumstances that had preceded it. The best efforts of every available teacher were still just barely adequate.

“ALRIGHT NERDS, SETTLE DOWN!”

Undyne's voice carried down the hallway and into branching, adjacent hallways, and the background noise dropped dramatically. The gym teacher grinned a grin that was all teeth, and turned to see a teacher walk up to her.

“One day you have got to teach me how to do that,” Danny said.

“See me during the summer. I do personal trainer stuff. Do you know where Toriel is?”

“I think in the cafeteria with a few officers, trying to figure out what just happened and how to deal with it. I know there are procedures for when an armed lunatic tries to attack a school but I don't think they were written with these specific circumstances in mind.”

“Probably not.”

“Excuse me, Miss Undyne?”

The gym teacher looked down to see a bat monster rubbing her wings together nervously. “Oh, hey Casey. How are you holding up?”

“Uhm. I'm okay. We're okay. I'm just worried is all. We saw Frisk go outside and, uh, are they, you know, gonna be okay?”

“Yeah. They're awake. Don't worry about it.”

Undyne started moving down the hallway, and Casey began to follow.

“But, uh. We saw what they... what's gonna happen to them?”

“Casey I'm sorry but I really have to talk to Toriel right now okay?”

Casey stopped in her tracks as Undyne continued onward, and turned back to return to her previous spot in the hallway.

“Yo, what did Undyne say?”

Poncho's question caught Casey by surprised and she jumped a bit. “Uhm. She said. Frisk was awake, and that was it. She's looking for the queen right now.” Casey seemed to shrink in on herself as more children crowded around her. “She didn't say anything else.”

“Well, that settles it. Undyne doesn't mince words ever.” Mary held up one hand and punched it with the other. “They're up to something.”

“Or, she's distracted because some jerk tried to attack a school and the police are involved and there are a whole bunch of things that all have to be done.”

Mary stared at Douglas with a dismissive look on her face.

“It would have taken Undyne less than a second to say that everything was alright. Casey, what were her exact words?”

“Uhm... when I asked about Frisk she said 'Yeah. They're awake. Don't worry about it.' And when
I asked about... okay, well, maybe I wasn't specific enough but Undyne didn't even ask for me to fill in the blanks, but when I tried to ask about what would happen after Frisk's fight that was when she changed the subject.”

“Exactly.” Mary nodded. “If Undyne isn't in on it, then maybe she doesn't know, but something's going to happen to Frisk unless we do something.”

“You don't know that.”

Mary turned to Douglas again.

“Adults are a cowardly and superstitious lot.”

“I thought that was what Batman said about criminals.”

“That too.” Mary pointed in the direction of the main entrance. “Everybody saw that Jordan Cater guy use magic, and everybody saw Frisk use magic. Not sure how either one of those things happened but that's not important right now. Even though Frisk and Cater were fighting each other, that's not what adults are going to care about. They're going to see something new and they won't be able to fit it into their heads and they're going to panic like somebody pulled the rug out from under them, and they'll do whatever it takes to feel like they're on solid ground again.”

“Yo, how do you know all this?”

“My father's a career politician, and he points out all the little psychological cheap shots during debates and speeches, so I know when something's up. Making people scared and then selling them a fix is based on that, and it's used so much that people think it's a normal part of life. This looks exactly like a setup for that.”

The circle of children was silent for a few moments, until a hovering propeller driven plane spoke up.

“So what do we do? Even if we break Frisk out, where would they even be able to go after that? The whole world knew what they looked like before any of this happened because of the Barrier breaking and everything.”

“...I dunno. But we gotta do something,” Mary tapped her chin. “Frisk is in Mrs. Dreemurr's office. That's on the second floor, above the lobby. We need to know what's going on up there before we can make any plans.”

“The teachers are going to notice if we disappear. And that's probably a really bad idea anyway.” Douglas pointed a thumb at some of the other students. “Everyone's either super hyped or super freaked out about a crazy man showing up trying to attack the school.”

The children abruptly became silent as Undyne and Toriel both walked rapidly past them in the hallway.

“Yo, whatever we're going to do, we need to do it soon.”

“Right... okay, gimme a minute.” Mary scratched the side of her head. “I think I can come up with a plan.”

Dr. Aster started to write, then grumbled and clicked his pen so that it would actually transmit ink
to paper, and looked up at Frisk again.

“These aren’t ideal circumstances, but the Soul Scanner at All Fine Labs has been powered down since Wednesday’s lab accident, and even if they could get it all the way up and running today, Joe would have to walk us through calibrating all of his add-ons. Which we’ll need to overhaul anyway if we’re going to expand Soul Research to handle human magic elements. So we’ll start with basic benchmarks. Sound good?”

“Uh. What kind of benchmarks?”

“Bullet shapes and patterns first, then running along the spectrum.”

“Oh. Alright then.” Frisk rolled their neck around, working out some tension and soreness that had come from lying on the bench before. “Just tell me what you need me to do.”

“First, let’s get a handle on the bullet situation.” Dr. Aster reached out a hand and several light blue bones shot out, floating in midair and arranged almost like a targeting cross-hairs. “First things first, I want you to attack this target in whatever way makes the most intuitive sense to you. Whatever pops into your head first.”

Frisk stared at the target, breathed deeply in and out a few times, and then held up their hand. Red light glowed briefly and something shot towards the bone target, disintegrating before it got there. Dr. Aster started writing while Frisk stared at their hand.

“That didn’t seem to have a stable form, but that’s still data. Let’s try something else next. Let’s see... I want you to try to hit the target with a fireball, like your parents or brother would use.”

“Okay.” Frisk raised their hand and once again, red light burst from their palm and fingertips. A swirling trail of fire passed through the air, crashed into the target, and was disrupted by the wave magic.

“That was better. Interesting.” Dr. Aster held out his hand and another set of bones appeared in front of the first set, rotating slowly in place. “Next, try to make the bullet follow a pattern that will take it around or through this obstacle and hit the target.”

Frisk frowned and stared at the obstacle for a few moments, before raising both hands. One fireball curved around them and struck the target, while the other one spiraled through the obstacle in a corkscrew path until it hit the target.

“Hmmm. Alright. And you seem to default to Communications magic. This doesn’t... really surprise me, to be honest.” Dr. Aster gestured and the target disappeared, leaving the obstacle of ordinary white bone bullets. “It looked like your blaster simulacrum, if that was what it was, exploited Wave / Force Collapse as a working principle, so you can use those... Sans’ anecdote demonstrated Energy magic... the readings All Fine Labs picked up last Tuesday indicated healing magic, guess that really was from you....”

Dr. Aster turned to stare at Sans, who winked at his father.

“ey, what’s life without a little mystery? oh, Asriel. your poker face was actually pretty good. anyone else but me would have believed you. heck, one person did.”

“What?” Frisk turned towards Asriel, who slapped a paw onto his forehead and grimaced.

“Oh god, I forgot about that...”
“I, uh, I turned off the microphone and video camera when I thought that F-Flowey was going to die and you two needed to be alone. Everything else was still running. Including all our magic sensors.” Alphys started to sweat. “Uh, obviously I knew what the Green Magic spike was about after I overheard everything, b-but I didn't know that Sans knew, so....”

“Dimensional magic was obvious from the bridge and from disarming Cater. To be honest, I'm less surprised about you pulling that off than I am about Jordan Cater being able to bridge. I don't know what he did before he became a professional thorn in this town's side, but I doubt he was a physicist used to thinking in six dimensions. So that just leaves Pattern Magic... okay.” Dr. Aster pulled one hand behind his back. “I want you to try to determine how many fingers I'm holding out right now.”

Frisk narrowed their eyes and stared at Dr. Aster for a few moments, before the office door opened to reveal the queen, followed closely by Undyne. In less than a second, Frisk was whisked up in massive arms.

For a few moments, the office was silent except for Undyne closing the door behind her, and then the silence was broken by the queen sniffling.

“Frisk... Frisk, what am I going to do with you? When, when will you stop running headlong into danger whenever it appears? This has to stop, Frisk. I...” Toriel sat down unsteadily on the bench next to Asriel, one arm coming free to pull her son into her embrace. “I cannot lose another child. I cannot.”

“...I know, mom... I know. I'm sorry. I just. I saw the lightning and I saw Undyne and...”

“Hey, Frisk. I could have taken Cater. He was running on fumes by the time he got to the school, and every time somebody attacked him it just kept adding up. Even if I ended up with my bell rung, I guarantee he wouldn't have anything left to fight back with when Asgore chopped his head off, or Toriel turned him into a pot roast.” Undyne grinned. “So unless you still want to trade jobs and let me be the Ambassador from now on, you gotta start playing it safe. Inexplicable magic or not.”

“It's not inexplicable,” Dr. Aster grumbled, scribbling more notes. “We just don't know what the cause is. Yet. On that note, your majesty? I don't know what anyone's plans are for the weekend or how today's events modify them, but I would like to get Frisk in at All Fine Labs to try to figure out what's going on as soon as possible.”

Toriel did not seem to hear the scientist, and the office became silent waiting for a reply that wasn't coming.

Which made it that much easier to hear movement outside the office door. Undyne turned to face the door, a confused expression on her face, and opened it to reveal... two children.

“...Poncho and Mary. Guess if the whole gang tried to sneak up here at once somebody would notice.”

“Dude I told you,” Poncho said to Mary, with no shortage of accusing undertone in his voice.

Undyne rolled her eye. “You're here to see Frisk, right?”

“Yeah! Frisk, you okay in there?!”

“...kinda busy here Mary.” Frisk tried to say, despite the queen's hug squeezing much of the air from their lungs. “Try again later.”
“Not until we know you're going to be okay!” Mary pointed up at Undyne's face. “I know how these things go down! It's in every book, every movie, every TV series and every video game! As soon as there's somebody who can act outside the existing system, they instantly become the enemy, and they either get attacked or locked up and experimented on! And we're not going to let that happen to Frisk! At least not before the whole thing between them and Skate gets resolved!”

Poncho blinked. “Wow. You're a worse shipper than Casey.”

“It's not a ship! It's scientific inquiry!”

From inside the office, there came an exasperated sigh. “That is not how science works and what the heck is this kid talking about?”

“there's a lot of media aimed at human children and teenagers by appealing to the idea that grownups are useless or hostile or too set in their ways and it's up to kids to use their imagination and creativity and sometimes fancy powers to save the world. most dystopian fiction is aimed at them actually.”

“Really? That's weird.”

“eh. guess there's something about being subject to the arbitrary rules of people much bigger and stronger than you without any recourse to change them that makes kids think of dictatorship for some reason.”

“What Sans said.” Mary furrowed her brow. “Pretty sure that was Sans. Sounded like him. But yeah. It's in The Tripods, it's in The Hunger Games, it's in Divergent, The Giver, National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation.-”

“wait what?”

“-and we're not going to stand idly by when our friend is in trouble!”

There was a muffled noise that sounded almost like “Mom, can you,” and the sound of footsteps. Frisk, Toriel, and Asriel appeared in the doorway next to Undyne, with Frisk stepping out in front of the gym teacher.

“I'm fine, Mary. Unless you count that Rathburne kid from James Madison Elementary, my archenemy count is down to zero again. Which is a huge improvement.”

“...wait, Tim Rathburne? Why is he your archenemy now?”

“I dunno. I think because he wanted to check a book out from the Library and I got to it first and he never got over it. That's my best guess. Anyway. Things got straightened out. We'll probably be going to All Fine Labs during the weekend to figure things out, but I want to go there. And as soon as the tests are done we're heading back home.” Frisk furrowed their brow and turned back towards the office. “That is the plan, right? I'm not going to end up stuck in a test chamber with one way glass windows, right?”

“pffft. you have any idea how much those cost? our budget's stretched tight enough as it is.”

Frisk turned back to Mary.

“See? Straight from the skeleton's mouth.”

“...okay. But if anything happens to Frisk, if they drop out of sight-“
“Actually I think I'm probably grounded for at least a week after giving Toriel a heart attack by getting involved in the fight.”

“That is... a fair assessment.” Toriel had composed herself and her expression betrayed nothing, though the tracks of tears through her fur could still be seen here and there. “Kid, Mary. Your concern for Frisk is admirable, but please return to the ground floor before anybody thinks that you are missing and starts a panic. The situation is complicated enough as it is.”

Mary frowned, then looked at Frisk. “You sure you're going to be okay?”

“Yeah. Maybe the best I've been in a long time. This isn't how I wanted to tell anyone. Let alone the whole world. But at least I don't have to lie and hide and worry about what will happen if anyone finds out.”

“Well, somebody has to worry about things, so I guess that's my job now.”

Poncho tried and failed to keep from snickering, and Mary rolled her eyes.

“Alright... if you really are okay. Then we'll head back downstairs. But this isn't over. If anything else happens, find a way to let us know. And we'll be keeping an eye out for you. An insanely complicated plan to break you out of wherever you end up is still not off the table.”

“Thanks, Mary. That...” Frisk paused and swallowed, and when they resumed speaking, their voice sounded choked up. “That really means a lot to me. Uhm. Oh. When you see Skate. Ask her if she's tired.”

“Because she's been flying through your head all morning? That's an old one.”

“Respect the classics,” Frisk retorted with a grin.

“...okay, fine. If you're really okay. Then we'll go. Take care of yourself and we'll see you later alright?”

“Yeah.”

Mary and Poncho turned away and headed back towards the stairs, occasionally looking back behind them. Mary held up her index and middle fingers, pointed at her own eyes, and then pointed them at Undyne. In response, the gym teacher held up a single finger, pointed it at her good eye, and pointed it at Mary.

“Well. That was peculiar,” Toriel said, guiding her children back into the office while Undyne shut the door.

“Wow. Your dynamic with your friends is really strange.”

Frisk grinned at Asriel.

“Bro... you have no idea.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Undertale Anniversary, everybody! Next time, more community radio! Second
servings of exposition! Hal and Riverperson sing a duet!

Okay, maybe not that last one.
“Welcome back to KEBT FM, this is Brett Brinkmann with DJ Pantz, hope you enjoyed the break because we really needed it here. If you’re just now joining us, here’s a summary of the pivotal events of the last few hours. Jordan Cater, last known survivor of the Guardians of the Legacy of the Magi, managed to escape custody yet again, and this time he somehow had access to magic. After causing considerable damage and injuries in the Rita Belle Thurman Memorial Hospital where he was still recovering from last Friday’s altercation, he proceeded to tear a nearly random path across the municipality of Ebott’s Wake, leaving a trail of unconscious people and property damage. This ended when he attempted to assault Dreemurr Elementary School, where he was apprehended by multiple police officers, bystanders, and at least one student. He was rushed to Rita Belle Thurman, where his condition is listed as critical.”

“According to sources within the police department, no additional threats were identified, but as a precaution they are remaining on a heightened state of alert until further notice. As of forty minutes ago all students at Dreemurr Elementary have been reunited with their families. Captain Undyne of the Royal Honor Guard has gone on record stating that no students were in danger at any time, as Cater was incapacitated before he could enter the building. Although how he was incapacitated has people just as agitated as the fact that he was on the loose again.”

“You said it, Burgie. According to eyewitness accounts and multiple smartphone videos, after an onslaught of multiple people attacking him and wearing him down, Jordan Cater was ultimately neutralized by Frisk Dreemurr, who was also capable of using magic.”

“You know, this wasn’t exactly how I was picturing it but this is exactly what I was talking about before. If humans could use magic, and apparently they can now, we would need Frisk to have it too just in case. I just didn't realize it was already a thing. How long has that been going on?”

“That question definitely seems to be the one on most people’s minds today. There has been no comment from the monster royal family, Dreemurr Elementary, or All Fine Labs on the matter, which is only fueling speculation at this point. When questioned, the Ebott's Wake Police Department simply stated that under the circumstances, Frisk’s actions are justified as self-defense based on the reports of officers at the scene, statements from eyewitnesses, and the video evidence of the fight. Speaking of questions, we have... ugh... yet more callers calling in. Hello, this is Brett Brinkmann and you are live on KEBT FM!”

“It’s about time! I’ve been on hold for ten minutes!”

“Well, you are on the air now, like I said. What do you have for us caller?”

“I don’t have anything except common sense, which you two chuckle-*BEEP*-seem to be sorely lacking! Between that so called accident at All Fine Labs and the attack today, it's obvious that the monsters have been lying to us from the moment they came out of the ground! Feeding everyone a line about how only monsters have magic so they can keep a monopoly on it and use it for leverage so they have an advantage over humans!”

“Thanks for the save, Jeff. Caller, can you please be more careful with your language?”

“No! I'll save whatever I *BEEP*-ing have to say in order to get people's attention! We demand to know what's going on with magic and who can use it and why it's been kept secret from us!”

“Caller, language, please. And while I can't speak for your experiences, I know that my life hasn't
been drastically impaired in any way by not having magic. So I'm not sure what leverage you're talking about.”

“Economic leverage! They have food that can cure diseases and heal injuries and they're making everyone reliant on them so they call the shots!”

“Caller, this is DJ Pantz.”

“I have nothing to say to you, hairball!”

“...well, at least there was no swearing that time. Caller, are you really, honestly accusing us of trying to take over the world with ice cream and sparkly hamburgers?”

“Don't try to make me sound crazy, dammit!”

“Pretty sure I don't need to. Quentin, if you're out there listening? A challenger appears. You might need to step up your game.”

“Don't you lump me in with him-”

“Okay, that's enough of that, we have many more callers and Burgie could you please not antagonize the next one thanks. Hello, you're on the air with Brett and DJ Pantz!”

“Hello, I'd just like to preface what I'm about to say by saying I don't agree with the caller before me? But this whole thing still has me worried. If somebody like Jordan Cater can get magic powers, or develop them or evolve them or whatever, what are we going to do if somebody worse learns the same trick? If All Fine Labs really does know something, they really need to let everyone know so we can take measures to protect ourselves!”

“We can definitely agree on wanting to hear from All Fine Labs on this. Do you have anything else to add?”

“No. I mean... uh. No. That was it. Thank you for your time.”

“And thank you for calling in. Moving on to our next caller, hello! You're live with Brett and DJ Pantz!”

“Hey Brett, hey DJ Pantz.”

“...Quentin? Is that you?”

“Yeah, it's me.”

“...are you alright? You sound like you just got out of bed.”

“I just... how do I...”

“Take it easy. One word at a time.”

“I didn't even see this coming. I mean. If Jordan Cater could use magic, why didn't he use it before now? Like when he was fighting Flowey? I mean, Asriel, sorry. But that would have been the time to do it. What changed between last Friday and today?”

“Well... something, obviously, but I understand what you mean.”

“It's just... I've never been sidelined by something like this before. I can tell you why the CIA had
JFK assassinated, I can tell you why Fleischmann and Pons faked faking cold fusion using the wrong metals for the catalysts in order to discredit it, I can tell you which presidents were descended from Atlanteans and which presidents were descended from Lemurians and which presidents weren't directly related to either bloodline but married into them instead... but I can't explain what happened today!

“It's a big club, we should get T-shirts. Actually, if you're listening Dr. Alphys? That would be almost as good as some explanation of what the heck happened.”

“Burgie...”

“What? I didn't antagonize anybody!”

“Ugh. Quentin, you gonna be okay?”

“I... I need a drink.”

“You and me and everyone else in town... Quentin? I think he hung up... wait, what was that? ...oh hey! Attention listeners! Jeff has informed me that Dr. Aster of All Fine Labs is on the line! Hello Doctor! You're live on the air with Brett and DJ Pantz! I'm really hoping you brought some answers because the questions keep on coming!”

“Hello Brett, hello DJ Pantz. I do have some answers and I'm hoping that will tide everyone over while we wait for the test results to come back for the rest of them.”

“Better than nothing at this point, doctor.”

“Quite right. Okay. First things first. Jordan Cater was not the first human to develop magical powers in this town.”

“...are you talking about Frisk, or is this something else?”

“Frisk Dreemurr's capabilities have been made not only public, but immortalized in video form. However, I was specifically referring to another human entirely: Fellow scientist Joe Stanton of All Fine Labs. His most recent project was a follow up on a branch of Soul Research, testing my theories of why human magic use seemed to have declined. It worked a little too well, resulting in the mishap on Wednesday. Mr. Stanton constructed an apparatus that functioned as an intermediary between sub-light energy fields in human physics and supra-light energy fields in magical physics, which saturated his body with magical energy. Unfortunately because that was not the intended outcome, there were no safeguards in place and the device destroyed itself in the process.”

“And that caused the explosion.”

“Correct. Mr. Stanton attempted to rebuild the device in a more streamlined form with the missing safeguards in place yesterday, in order to verify that this wasn't simply a freak accident. Unfortunately somehow the last of the Guardians found out about it, broke in, stole the device and delivered it to Cater. We all saw the results. The device is back at All Fine Labs now, or at least what's left of it. For safety's sake, we all agreed that it needed to be rendered inoperable before we tried to stop Cater, in case somebody else came along to try to steal it. When Joe gets out of the hospital, he'll be able to repair it if we decide to continue that line of research. Which right now is a very big if.”

“...holy... so... if I understand this, there is, or was, a machine that could give a human access to magical powers?”
“That's the core idea, but that is not all that was involved.”

“...I'm almost afraid to ask, but what else is happening with this?”

“Mr. Stanton's original approach dealt with the exchange of energy fields through matter, which is doubly important for solving the human magic question because human bodies have more physical matter than monster bodies do. He ultimately ended up using a model based on early radio technology, which is why previous statements from All Fine Labs mistakenly referred to the device as a communicator or communication system. Because that was what the schematics resembled, and Joe wasn't around to correct anyone. What's significant is that the technical framework he used explicitly invoked the physics of early crystal radios. At the risk of getting ahead of myself, I'm starting to speculate that the association between crystals and human mysticism had its origin with some sort of materials science, and specially cut crystals of the right material were used as training aides for human magicians, or perhaps the very reason humans became able to manifest magic in any form.”

“...huh. I'm not an expert by any means but I guess that makes sense.”

“Also, this is important and in hindsight I probably should have lead with this, but based on Joe Stanton's experiences, there is zero chance of Jordan Cater ever reaching the same level of power he had today, assuming he survives his injuries at all. I'll repeat that for emphasis. Jordan Cater will never again be as strong as he was today. Human magic appears to default to the band of the magic spectrum that corresponds to their Soul's Chromatic property. This magic is relatively simple to grasp and use while requiring a minimum of effort. All other types of magic are far less intuitive, require a greater effort to use, and once the original influx of power has been used up, must rely entirely on a human's innate energy reserves to function. Both Joe Stanton and Jordan Cater come up as Magenta, which is Pattern Magic on the spectrum.”

“What exactly does that mean? I remember the different magic bands coming up during your testimony before the Senate committee, but it's kind of hard to think back on that in light of all the crazy stuff that happened today.”

“I was just about to address that. Pattern magic involves the analysis and manipulation of the connections between different parts of larger systems. Joe is a scientist. Pattern magic is a natural compliment, and I'm told he spent most of yesterday using it to try to develop a Unified Field Theory. Jordan Cater is far more aggressive and combative, which is not an ideal compliment to Pattern Magic even if it has its tactical applications. He was probably using it to find weak points and vulnerabilities, and maybe predict outcomes of events. Frankly I doubt the latter was ever within his power or he would realized that assaulting the school would end in his defeat.”

“So we don't have to worry about another attack like that.”

“If he survives, the worst he can do is try to pick out details to unnerve people psychologically. Granted, he does seem to have close quarters combat training of some kind, so that would make him dangerous up close. But that is easily mitigated with ranged attacks. It doesn't matter if the bullets are made of metal or magic, he won't be able to construct shields to protect himself without Green or Cyan magic.”

“Well, that's a relief.”

“Hey, Doctor Aster. DJ Pantz here, sorry for interrupting, but there's one thing I don't understand. If that magic machine doohickey was broken at All Fine Labs, how did you get it to Frisk Dreemurr to give them the power to fight back against Cater?”
“We didn't. Frisk's abilities predate the entire project.”

“Wait, what?”

“We don't know or why at this time. Frisk has agreed to a series of tests in the future that we hope will shed more light on the subject.”

“...man, just when I thought I knew what the hell was going on, everything turns upside down again.”

“Welcome to the wonderful world of scientific research.”

“Not to interrupt this exchange but Jeff says our switchboard just lit up like the fourth of July again, so Dr. Aster... where do we go from here? What happens next? What can you tell the people of Ebott's Wake, of Lost Eagle County, about what has changed?”

“Well... in a very real sense, all that's changed is that people know that human magic use is possible once again, and that Jordan Cater broke out of custody again. That's it. Nothing is really different. He and the Guardians could have attacked with explosives or firearms or poison or disease or malignant software. They ended up using magic, put all their eggs in one basket, and that didn't pan out. If anyone out there is still afraid of Jordan Cater, well... that's reasonable. Despite the best efforts of law enforcement he has a habit of getting loose. If any monsters out there are afraid of humans getting magic again, that also is understandable, but let me say this: The Barrier was produced by the strongest magicians humanity had at the time, and humanity is having to start from scratch on the magical front. Not only would it take decades for any hostile human magic user to achieve that level of competence, to say nothing of seven, but we have a lot more than seven humans on our side. In the unlikely event that another Barrier was created, breaking it would be a foregone conclusion. This is not a matter of us versus them along species lines.”

“Suppose there's that. And if anyone does start something, Frisk can finish it.”

“Frankly, I think that if you're relying on a ten year old child to bail you out, you need to try harder. But by the same token... if there's anyone out there listening who is afraid of a ten year old child for whatever reason, whether you're a human or a monster, you should probably take a close look at your life and what you're doing with it because something is wrong.”

“Suppose there's some good advice there. We've got to let you go and move on to other callers now, but we really appreciate you calling in and filling in some of the blanks.”

“Happy to help.”

“Alright, that was Dr. Aster everybody. Some answers, and even if some of those answers raised more questions, that was better than nothing. Moving on to our next caller, hello, you're live on the air with Brett and DJ Pantz.”

“Uh. Hey.”

“Hello caller.”

“Hey. I just. I just called to say sorry about trying to order pizza and bread sticks that one time.”

“...oh.”

“Yeah. I was trying to study for finals and there's only so many hours in a day and my sleep cycle just went right out the window, and well, one thing lead to another.”
“Well, I know what that's like. No harm, no foul. Thanks for calling in.”

“You betcha.”

“...well. That was a refreshing change from routine. Moving on to the next caller. Hello, you're live on the air with The Brett and DJ Pantz!”

“Hoi hOi Hoi!”

“Uh oh.”

“Hello guys. Just wanted to let you know that I managed to record the interview with Mrs. Valiantine for the Arts Council plans when we couldn't do a live transmission and you should find the mp3 files in the cloud.”

“Oh... hey, Bob. Sorry. We literally haven't had a spare moment here.”

“I suspected as much. If you need me again, call me up, I'm back in New Tem Village.”

“Yeah, we can tell.”

“GravY Tee is juss a TheORY! TEM FLY THRU SKY oN WiiiiNGs oF ReD bULL!”

“Wait, Temmie, don't- Guys I have to call you back!”

“Alright Bob. Good luck. That mercifully brings us up to the next break so we'll pause for station identification and... when we come back... we'll continue our coverage. Of today's events. Stay tuned.”
Even though the skies were still ominously silver-gray with clouds, the rain had stopped, or slowed to such an intermittent pace that it barely qualified anymore. The gutters were filled with rushing water as the town's storm drain system struggled to handle the influx of moisture.

The Dreemurrs only noticed that when they appeared outside the queen's house in a flash of blue light. Asgore looked around at the not-quite empty street, and relaxed when he didn't see a crowd of reporters similar to the one outside of Dreemurr Elementary.

“It seems we are clear. At least for now. Despite this, I am very tempted to call Undyne and ask for a favor at this point.”

“Perhaps that would be for the best,” the queen agreed, and looked down at Sans. “Thank you very much for your assistance, Sans. This day has been complex enough as it is.”

“yeah, i’m all in favor of freedom of the press but you gotta draw the line somewhere.” The skeleton turned to face the two young children. “how you guys holding up?”

Asriel and Frisk both shrugged, too tired (or distracted) to provide spoken responses.

“welp, guess that's the best we could have hoped for under the circumstances. Don't worry about calling Undyne, big guy. I've got some friends who owe me a favor or two. Gotta head to the lab now to help dad herd cats and put out fires, but if you need anything gimme a ring.”

The skeleton vanished in a flash of light, and the Dreemurrs headed towards the front door. Inside, Frisk's muddy shoes were removed before they tracked into the rest of the house, and everyone slowly gravitated towards the sofa and chairs around the coffee table.

Once she was seated, Toriel's paws came up and covered her face, slowly sliding down as she sighed.

“Frisk. Asriel. While today's events could have been... worse. Much worse. I had given you both instructions to stay safe and out of the conflict. Whether or not you directly entered harms way, or interfered from a distance, you still involved yourselves and...”

Toriel trailed off, swallowed, and opened her mouth again.

“I can understand why you did what you did. Why you felt that you had to. But this cannot continue. Frisk, you said to Mary that you were likely to be grounded after the events of today. You are correct. Both of you... for this next week. You are not to leave this house, except when accompanied by Asgore or myself or both of us, for trips to All Fine Labs and for other, similar reasons. Do you understand?”

Frisk and Asriel both nodded.
“Good.” Toriel stood up, walked around the coffee table, and knelt down next to the children. Her arms reached out and pulled both of them into a hug.

“This changes nothing. I love you both more than any words in any language can say, and I am so glad that you are both alright after what has happened. I am... I am not angry. I am not even disappointed. Not really. But I am frightened of what will happen in the future, if you continue to be so reckless in the face of danger.”

Frisk and Asriel hugged back, and a few moments later, Toriel let go and stood up again.

“Given all that has happened, I will be making a late lunch for everyone. You should both wash up, and Frisk, it would be advisable to change clothes entirely. You were positively rain soaked when Undyne carried you in, and I do not wish to see you succumb to illness again.”

Frisk sniffed. “Yeah... I think everything dried out a bit while I was passed out, but it's not great.”

“Precisely correct-”

Toriel was interrupted by a knocking at the door, and Asgore stood up.

“I'll get it. It doesn't look like reporters, I would have seen more activity through the windows.”

The king opened the door and immediately noticed two hooded figures, both wielding large axes.

“Dogamy? Dogaressa?”

“That's us.”

“(That's us.)”

“Well, it's nice to see you, for certain, but why are you here?”

“Sans called with a mission.”

“(To keep nosy reporters from sniffing around.)”

“We'll keep guard in case they try anything.”

“(And even if they don't, too.)”

“I see. Thank you very much. I'm hoping it doesn't come to that, but better safe than sorry. And it's not like we could really tell them anything.”

“Right.”

“(Of course.)”

Dogamy and Dogaressa took up positions on either side of the front door as Asgore closed it, turning back to Toriel and the children.

“Well... how did Alphys put it? This is a thing that has happened?”

“Yeah. Something to that effect.” Frisk nodded. “Uhm. If that's everything we needed to discuss. I'll head upstairs and get changed now.”

“I'll wash up too,” Asriel added, standing up.
“Alright.” Toriel rested a paw on each child's head. “I will let you both know when lunch is ready.”

“Thank you.”

“Thanks, mom.”

The two children proceeded up the stairs, and had almost reached the second floor when Frisk turned to Asriel.

“Hey, how did you know that Golden Flowers would hurt Cater?”

“Chara loved Golden Flowers. They told me once that they felt safe in the flower fields. That what they were afraid of couldn't find them there. And I knew they were afraid of Cater. So it seemed like...”

Asriel's words were lost as a door upstairs was shut, and Toriel drew in a long, shuddering breath. Asgore turned to look at the queen.

“Tori? Are you...?”

The queen brought both paws up to cover her mouth, but they could only muffle the sounds of distress. Asgore quickly stepped towards her and Toriel turned and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his mane.

“I can't- I can't- ...I can't lose them. I can't let Frisk go off alone again. I can't spread Asriel's dust again. I can't.”

Asgore's arms came up and returned the embrace, and tears began to seep from his eyes, trailing down into his beard.

“I know. We won't lose them, Tori. We won't. We'll keep them safe. I promise.”

There was a muffled thud as Frisk fell out of the bed, tangled in the sheets. One shaking hand reached up and felt their forehead, and came away slick with sweat. They feverish and disoriented, like they had after getting shot; it took a few moments to wake up all the way. The light levels outside the room still meant a cloudy day, and looking at their cell phone in its charger, they saw that less than half an hour had passed since they had changed clothes and crawled into bed to try to make some headway against the exhaustion that had overtaken them after the fight.

In the other bed, Asriel was still sleeping. Even from their vantage point on the floor, Frisk could occasionally see movement beyond simply breathing.
They hoped his dreams were a lot less disturbing.

Finally untangled completely from the sheets, Frisk picked them up and piled them on the bed again. Their natural impulse to smooth out the sheets and remake the bed lost against the realization that they'd end up in it again soon, to say nothing of the feeling in their head that made complex multi-step processes hard to concentrate on.

Besides, they had something else that they had to do.

One of the drawers to their desk was pulled out, and Frisk removed a blank spiral notebook, single subject, college ruled, with a red cover. The notebook was opened to the first page and placed on the desk, and two pencils were removed from another drawer.

One for each hand.

Frisk sat down in their chair, and began to write.

Hello?

Are you there? Are you awake?

During the fight, I saw some stuff. Some memories. Not mine.

And there's only one person I know of that they could belong to.

And when I started yelling, that wasn't just me was it?

Are you okay?

If you're not I understand.

I know what it's like.

To love somebody but all they do is h

Frisk's right hand moved.

Greetings. I am Chara.

The child stared at the words on the page. They had been written with their hand, but that was not their handwriting; their right handed penmanship was not nearly as legible.

Hello Chara. Nice to finally meet you.

Their right hand was still, and for a moment there was a stab of anxiety in Frisk's chest, wondering
if they had just imagined it, or if they were going crazy from the stress of having somebody try to kill them over and over and over again.

Nice to meet you too. And no, you're not crazy.

Well, let's put it this way:

You're as sane as anyone could be after all the stuff that's happened to you.

Good point.

So. How did you know that I was here?

Nice to meet you too. And no, you're not crazy.

Well, let's put it this way:

You're as sane as anyone could be after all the stuff that's happened to you.

Good point.

Those memories. And what we were saying to Cater during the fight.

How long have you been here?

Since you fell. But I don't remember it very clearly in the beginning.

How did you get here?

I don't know.

I was with Asriel, and then I died.

And then I was part of Asriel, and we died.

And then I was part of you.

It's very confusing.

Yeah, no kidding.

I'm guessing that was you in the CORE, with the knife.

Yes. That was my doing.

There was a surge of anger, and Frisk swallowed.

Sorry. I didn't mean to

That wasn't meant for you.

What?

That anger. That was for Jordan.

I suppose no matter what I did, he was still going to be a thorn in our side.

And everyone else's too.
Seems like it.

Both hands were still, and Frisk stared at the words, trying to organize their thoughts. After a moment, the child turned to a new page.

Chara, if you were here all this time, why didn't you say anything?

Because the last time I took the initiative in somebody else’s body it did not end well.

Besides, I can feel that stab of panic when your hand moves and you aren't telling it to.

And that’s with you setting all this up and giving me a pencil.

Pretty sure it would be a lot worse if you didn’t know what was going on.

Okay that makes sense.

Chara are you okay?

I died twice and now I’m stuck as a voice in somebody’s head.

Define okay.

Maybe that could have been worded better.

But still, I have to ask.

I’m better now that Asriel is back.

Thank you for that.

For what? I didn't do anyth

Determination is the power to change fate.

There was more than enough in your Soul to change Asriel’s fate.

I did a lot behind the scenes but you established the foundation.

Your magic connected to him, so I could reach him even without the Soul Link.

And put the two of us back together again.

Turns out that when we died, there wasn’t a clean break.

I had to work on that first.

But it was worth it, in the end.

Frisk turned to look at Asriel, the bed covers still rising and falling with every breath. Tears began to form in their right eye, and Frisk turned back to the notebook.
Chara is that you? What's wrong?

He thinks that I hate him.

Do you mean what he said when we were at your grave?

The moment I fell into the Underground, I ruined his life.

I got him into trouble, I was mean to him when he cried because I was a stupid kid raised by stupid human parents who

Frisk's right hand shook, and moved down the page a line.

I poisoned the king of all monsters.

I got my best friend killed because all I could think about was revenge.

I got him stuck as a soulless flower trapped in a time loop until he went crazy and started killing people.

And when it was all over, I couldn't do anything to help him.

All I can do is watch.

When you were crying yourself to sleep at night during the first days on the surface.

That was me too.

The child's right hand shook again, and turned the page to start on a blank sheet.

Asriel said he wished that he had a friend like you, back in the Ruins.

I wish he had too.

If you had run away when you were younger, all that stuff with Jason Taylor.

It wouldn't have happened.

You both would have been safe and happy down there.

Frisk swallowed.

But what would happen to you if
Knitting needle through the heart.

I thought about it a lot.

In hindsight I should have done more than just think about it.

Frisk stared at the notebook, and watched as their right hand turned to another new page.

Sorry. That is probably not the most comforting thing to hear from somebody sharing your body.

Chara I have a question.

Then ask.

Why buttercups? I know you killed yourself so that Asriel could take your Soul, but why not use your knitting needles like you said? Why drag it out?

For almost a minute, Frisk's right hand was still, fingers clenched tightly around the pencil. When it finally moved, the penmanship was rougher and the motions faster.

It was the right thing to do.

How?

Asgore suffered because of my stupidity.

Asriel was the smart one. He knew we were in over our heads. He tried to stop me.

I didn't listen. And Asgore got sick.

I swore that I would protect the monsters, and any human who hurt them, I would make them pay.

I was the one that hurt them.

Cause and Effect.

I saw that memory Chara. It was just an accident.

It doesn't matter. I hurt Asgore and scared Toriel and Asriel. I had to die.

I know for a fact that every single monster would disagree with you on that.

The child's right hand did not move, and Frisk took a deep breath.

Chara. I think I know what you're going to say next, but I'll say this anyway. Asriel misses you.
Asriel needs you. Maybe we

Frisk's right hand shook so much that the words were barely legible.

Nobody can know.

Everything that went wrong is my fault.

They will hurt you to get to me.

Nobody blames you

WELL THEY SHOULD

The pencil was thrown down, and the right hand came up, the air shimmering around it from the heat. Frisk dropped their pencil and grabbed their right hand, pulling it back, willing it to listen to them, and held it close to their chest.

“Please stop. Please. I'm sorry.”

The strength went out of Frisk's right arm all at once, and they carefully let go, moving it back and forth experimentally. A page was turned, and both hands picked up pencils again.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you angry.

The child's right hand was still for a while, before it started to move again.

That wasn't anger. I panicked.

I tried to destroy the evidence.

I didn't think about collateral damage.

I am the one who should be sorry. And I am.

But I hope you understand now why they can't know that I am here.

I have caused so much suffering.

And even if you were right, and they accepted my presence and survival.

I would cause more suffering just by being there.
Frisk turned to look at Asriel, still sleeping in his bed, before returning their attention to the notebook.

Don't you miss him?

Every moment of every day.

But it's better this way, for him and everybody else.

I don't need to be part of Asriel's life, Frisk. All I need is to know that he is going to be okay.

And with me out of the way maybe he'll finally be okay.

You and I both know that he will never be okay without you.

And I can feel some of what you feel.

I know you won't ever be okay without him.

Frisk turned to a blank page to start again.

Besides.

You know me well enough, Chara.

Even after everything Asriel said, I never gave up on trying to help him.

Now that I know you are here.

How can I not try to help you too?

Frisk's right hand shook again, and even before the first letter was written, they knew that they had won.

Even if I said yes, how would we even make this work?

How would we convince anyone that I'm still here?

Same way we convinced Cater. Assuming he wasn't just projecting like crazy.

That's not a possibility we can effectively rule out.

But if showing somebody a memory you couldn't possibly have doesn't convince anyone, nothing
Frisk's right hand was still for a while, before writing again.

This is going to suck.

Sorry. If you want I can probably come up with a better plan before tomorrow.

Somehow I doubt it.

Frisk's mouth tightened into a frown.

Sorry. That was not intended as a slight against you.

But Toriel didn't even believe Asriel was Asriel at first when he was standing in front of her.

On that subject. I would like to apologize.

I wasn't handling things too well myself.

Toriel got angry with me when everything went to hell in the Underground. So that didn't help.

But when you freaked out and ran and left Asriel there I lost it.

I don't remember what I was screaming at you but I know it wasn't constructive.

I am sorry.

So that was you, and not a part of me. I was wondering about that.

Yes.

Guess I deserved some of

No you didn't. I know why you freak out when people start to yell and scream.

And you know I panic when Toriel loses her temper.

Between the two of us there was no chance of keeping a clear head.

I had no right to push all the responsibility for that on you.

Frisk turned to look at Asriel as he rolled over in bed, and then back at the notebook again, turning to a new page, they began to write again.
Chara, I love Asriel. But how much of that is me, and how much of that is you?

I don’t know.

Frisk stared at the page, and barely noticed when their right hand began to move again.

Hey. Don’t get too caught up in the whole philosophy of identity thing.

I’ve seen enough anime to know how that ends.

How?

Either you somehow become part of the internet backbone, or the entire human population turns into orange juice. And those were the series I actually understood.

I mean, I like most anime, but Japan is to Earth what Florida is to the United States.

Frisk snorted in suppressed laughter.

Only most anime?

I never really understood the appeal of sports anime and manga. And the first season of Mew Mew Kissie Cutie was lackluster. Everything got solved by the end of each episode. There was no dramatic or romantic tension despite what the writers were trying to imply and the pacing was all over the place. Same with the first OVA when they did the Maid Cafe arc from the manga. It wasn’t until they did the second OVA that the series really worked. It showed the real world results of having somebody run around in cat ears and mind control powers tampering with people’s heads. I don’t care what Alphys says having Mew Mew backslide into her old habits of trying to kiss her problems away was the most realistic thing that

A sharp pain lanced through Frisk’s right hand and they dropped the pencil with a hiss, clutching the hand to their chest and trying to massage the ache away.

“Owowowow. I don’t think my right hand is used to writing anime critiques.”

“Mmm? Who said that?”

Frisk froze in their chair as Asriel sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“Is it lunch time already? Feels like I just closed my eyes a minute ago... Frisk?”

The human child was staring straight ahead, breathing getting faster and faster, until their left hand reached out and closed the notebook in front of them.

“Asriel.”
“What’s wrong? You sound like you're having another-”


The monster child raised an eyebrow. “Like... a note, or a diagram, or a picture?”

Frisk's hands began to glow red. “Another memory. And. It's important. That's why it's so scary. It might. Take a few tries.”

Asriel stared at the human child and crawled out of bed.

“Whatever it is, can't you just tell me? Or is it like with your human family?”

“Even if I told you. I don't know if you'd believe me. I don't understand it, and I can't explain how it happened. So. This is all I can do.”

“...okay.” Asriel walked up next to Frisk. “If it's that important.”

“It is. It. It might be the most important thing I ever do. Are you ready?”

“...yeah.” Asriel nodded.

“Good. I wish we were.”

“We?”

Before Asriel could ask any further questions, Frisk brought their hands up and grasped his paw.

“Wahahaha! Well look who walked in to say hello! How ya doing, Asgore?”

“Howdy Gerson! Glad to see you, you ornery old rascal!”

“Hey, them's fightin' words! Don't make me send ya back to the missus with my foot up yer butt! It's liable tah get stuck up there and I'm too old to be hopping around on one foot all the way to Home!”

The king and the elderly turtle monster both broke out into laughter; the king with deep belly laughs, and the monster the king had called Gerson with a high pitched cackle.

“All kidding aside, it's always good to see ya, your majesty. Toriel busy catching up on paperwork?”

“That is the case. In fact, the paperwork situation has gotten much more complex.”

Gerson leveled a beady eye at the king. “This wouldn't happen to be related to your plans to build a new city on the outskirts of Hotland and move everyone closer to the Barrier, would it?”

“I see rumors travel as fast as ever. Yes. A lot has changed in a very short span of time.” Asgore turned his head to where Chara and Asriel were both waiting behind him. “Chara, would you care to meet Gerson? He is one of our oldest friends!”

“Literally!” Gerson cackled again and squinted one eye at Chara as they stepped out of Asgore's shadow. “So you're the one that's got the whole Underground talking.”
“Y-yes. That seems to be me. Hello Mr. Gerson, sir. I am Chara.”

“And polite, too! That's a nice change of pace. All these whippersnappers running around with no manners, it's shameful. Back in my day kids minded their elders, their manners, their mouths, and a couple other things too! Course back then we were on the Surface so a lot was different no matter how you cut it.”

“Actually that is why we are here, Gerson. I need to see some of the historical records you have, including the Prophecy of the Angel, in its original and untranslated form.”

“Sure thing.” Something in the old monster's expression and voice changed, and Chara had the impression that the “curmudgeonly old rascal” personality was all an act. “You might have to do some digging, though. Had to race to save a lot of stuff from a flood a few months ago and I still haven't gotten all of it organized again. Back room, bookcases on the northwest side probably. Wish I could help you search but the Blooms are sending somebody down to get some crab apple cores for the snail farm, so I gotta mind the shop till somebody comes by and picks up the shipment.”

“Of course, of course! That's quite alright! I don't suppose I could impose upon you to watch the children while I search?”

“Sure! Matter of fact, I got a really interesting story about the last time I was watching kids... actually it isn't so much interesting as it is long!”

Asgore laughed again and disappeared into the back room, and Gerson's eye trained on Chara once more.

“Well, well. Gotta admit. Never thought I'd see another human in my lifetime.”

Chara blinked. “You... you met humans before?”

“Well. Met ain't really the right word-”

“Gerson's a hero from the War between Humans and Monsters!” Asriel spoke up, excited. “He fought against a whole bunch of humans all at once, and he actually survived!”

The prince's grin faded as he noticed that both Chara and Gerson were staring at him. “Awkward?”

“Awkward.” Chara and Gerson spoke at the same time, then looked at each other in surprise before laughing. Chara tried to muffle their snickering, while Gerson cackled wildly.

“Ah, well. No sense beating around the mulberry bush or however the saying goes. Asriel is right. I fought in the war and made it out with my shell in one piece, so I got that going for me.” Gerson's smile faded away and he stared at Chara. “If Asgore's going after the records of the Prophecy... hmmm. That's interesting.”

“Uhm. Why is that interesting? If I may ask?”

“...we've been down here a long time, Chara. People have been trying to bring down the Barrier since the day it was created. But a long time ago... Asgore and I agreed it was pointless to try to leave so soon after the end of the war. The humans would just try to kill us again. And they'd probably be more thorough the second time around.”

“Sorry to interrupt. But I thought the Royal Scientist was trying to break the Barrier and had been for a while.”
“Yeah, the Asters and such. With the Barrier destroyed, we can send up scouts, organize groups to
get resources that are scarce down here, and of course knowing that we can leave will give morale
a good old shot in the arm. But if Asgore's flipped on this... he must think we actually have chance
up there.” Gerson grinned. “I guess if you and I can have a civil conversation without trying to rip
each other limb from limb, that's a good a start as any! Wahahah-”

Asriel recoiled from the human child, eyes wide.

“...what... how did....”

Frisk felt more tears seep out from their right eye, and raised a hand to wipe them away.

“If you're confused right now, so was I. So now you know why I couldn't just say it. How do you
explain something like this...?”

“I don't...” Asriel's voice came out as a hoarse whisper. “I don't understand...”

“When I was... when I was in the Underground. And you thought that I was... when you thought I
was Chara. I guess there was a reason for....”

‘Wait. Let me talk to him.’

Frisk stared at their brother, and relaxed. Their eyes unfocused, and their hands dropped to their
sides... and a moment later, the human child's eyes began to glow red. Their posture changed, their
facial expression shifted, and a hundred other details jumped out at Asriel because only Asriel
knew the significance of those details.

The monster child took a stumbling step back, making a strangled noise of shock, and the human
child stepped forward and wrapped their arms around him, holding him up and resting their chin on
his shoulder.

“I don't hate you Asriel. I could never... if only one of us could get a second chance. I'm glad it was
you.”

Slowly, Asriel's trembling arms came up and wrapped around the human child.

“Chara.”

“Yes. It's me.”

Chara felt the trembling in Asriel's arms spread to his whole body, and heard his raspy breathing as
he started to tear up.

“I told you this before. I was wrong. Crying isn't weakness. You are not weak. I should never... I
thought if you were crying. People would hurt you. Just like what I saw on the surface. Just like
what happened to me. But I was wrong. Everything was different in the Underground. Everything
except me. I was stuck in the past and in my own head and all I did was hurt y-”

Chara stopped, choking on the words that they had almost said.

“How...“

“I don't know. I woke up when Frisk fell, and... I've been here ever since.”
A pained sound tore itself out of Asriel's throat. “Then... you were. You were. There. When I-”

“Everything that happened. Happened after you were killed. And that was my fault.”

“I'm...” Asriel squeezed Chara even tighter, his choice so choked up that he could barely speak above a whisper. “I'm so sorry...”

“...Asriel. I have to go now.”

“What?? No, Chara, please-”

“I'm not used to... to steering, like this. And it's not my body or my life. I'm just borrowing it for a little while. But I'll still be here. So. We'll talk later. Okay?”

Asriel tried to slow down his breathing and nodded. “Okay. Chara. I. I love you.”

“I love you too, Asriel.”

The red light faded from the human child's eyes, and they slumped forward onto Asriel for a split second before their legs and arms jerked, responding to conflicting signals that smoothed out as one set of instructions took precedence. Frisk shivered for a moment and shook their head, clutching Asriel even tighter.

“Chara is... okay. Are you okay?”

Asriel nodded.

“...we're going to figure this out, Asriel.”

The monster child nodded again. “Uhm. Thank you. For... you know-”

There was a knock at the bedroom door and both children jumped.

“Frisk, Asriel, lunch is ready.”

“Okay mom,” Frisk called out with a mostly steady voice. “We'll be right down.”

Two pairs of ears strained to hear the sound of Toriel's footsteps heading back towards the stairs, and then relaxed. Frisk broke the hug first and turned towards their desk, grabbing the notebook on top and placing it in one of the drawers.

“We're going to have to tell mom and dad, probably the same way. But not tonight. I don't think they can handle any more shocks today. And I don't know if Chara can steer for long enough to answer all the questions they'll have.”

“...right.”

Asriel breathed in slowly, and then let it out in a rush.

“Okay. Okay. I'm... okay. Let's go eat, and then we'll...”

Asriel frowned and lifted one of his ears, then turned towards one of the windows.

“What is that sound?”

“What sound?”
"Not sure." Asriel opened the bedroom door and Frisk followed him out, down the stairs, and into the living room. Asgore was standing by the front door, and from outside, the sounds of voices and the growling of dog monsters could be heard.

"Dad? What's going on outside?"

Asgore held up a paw. "Stay back, children. And stay away from the windows, to be safe. There is some sort of crowd out there."

"So... reporters, or angry people that want to burn me at the stake?" Frisk asked, a bit too casually.

"I think mostly reporters. Not sure if that makes us lucky or not."

There was a sound of cutlery being slammed onto a counter top in the kitchen, and Toriel charged out, air shimmering near her paws as she rolled up her sleeves.

"It's not enough that my children have to struggle for their very lives, no, these simpletons must pester them with questions even when they should be resting and recovering," the queen muttered, pushing past Asgore. As the front door was opened, Toriel carefully adopted an expression of disinterested curiosity.

"Excuse me, what is the meaning of the noise outside?"

"Mrs. Dreemurr! Your Majesty! Just a few questions! What is your response to the claims that you've been hiding human magic from the world?"

"Is it true that you and the king have been teaching the Ambassador?"

"Did you really threaten to torture Jordan Cater to death when he attacked your school?"

"If humans can use magic, does this mean another war is inevitable-"

"AHEM." Toriel said in full blown Teacher Voice, and most of the people in the crowd stopped speaking out of learned habit. "I cannot, and will not, answer all of your questions at this time, with one exception. Jordan Cater threatened the lives of both of my children directly, and was willing to assault the school and put the lives of all the students and faculty there in jeopardy. Against any threat to the children under my care and the teachers in my employ, I will not hesitate to use any means necessary to keep them safe. You may quote me. Now. We are about to begin lunch, such as it is, and do not wish to be disturbed. Please leave now."

"Mrs. Dreemurr! Mrs. Dreemurr! If humans can use magic after all, doesn't that-"

Dogamy and Dogaressa snarled at the reporter, who stepped back abruptly. Others were not so easily discouraged.

"Mrs. Dreemurr, do you intend to maintain a monopoly on human magic or will others be allowed to learn-"

"Is the Ambassador injured? Why haven't they made a statement regarding today's events-"

"Are there any plans to incorporate magic based classes into your school's curriculum-"

"Golly, these people really don't know how to take a hint," Asriel muttered, before raising his ear with one paw again.

The prince's expression suddenly became surprised.
“Asriel? What's going on...” Frisk trailed off as the sound reached their ears as well. Through the open front door, from down the street... there was a sound of brass horns.

Asriel and Frisk rushed to the living room windows, despite Asgore's warning; a few reporters noticed their presence but most of them had already turned to watch the spectacle of a wooden boat drifting down an overflowing street gutter, with a cloaked and hooded figure at the prow and a man wearing oil-stained coveralls and a one-of-a-kind musical instrument along for the ride.

As the boat drifted closer to the queen's house, Hal grinned and transitioned from scales and other warm up exercises into a proper song. The mechanic's foot tapped the boat in time with the beat, and the Riverperson's head bobbed in sync as Hal opened his mouth and began to sing.

“We're no strangers to loooove
You know the rules, and so do I!
A full commitment's what I'm thinking of
You wouldn't get this from any other guy!
I just wanna tell you how I'm feeling!
Gotta make you understand!”

Another voice joined the mechanic's during the chorus, and it did not take any effort at all to determine that it was coming from beneath a black hood.

“Never gonna give you up!
Never gonna let you down!
Never gonna run around and desert you!
Never gonna make you cry!
Never gonna say goodbye!
Never gonna tell a lie and hurt you!”

The Riverperson stopped singing as they focused on slowing the boat as it drifted past the crowd of reporters, many of whom covered their ears from the close proximity of the brass horns. Hal Greene, however, had no such distractions.

“We've known each other, for so long...
Your heart's been aching but, you're too shy to say it!
Inside, we both know what's been going on,
We know the game and we're gonna play it!
Aaaaaand if you ask me how I'm feeling,
Don't tell me you're too blind to see!”

With the boat more or less at a standstill outside the queen's house, the Riverperson joined in for
the chorus again.

“Never gonna give you up!
Never gonna let you down!
Never gonna run around and desert you!
Never gonna make you cry!
Never gonna say goodbye!
Never gonna tell a lie and hurt you!”

The mechanic closed his mouth as he played the bridge; in fact, his entire face was devoid of anything resembling emotion as he stared at each member of the crowd of reporters. A hooded face turned towards the crowd as well, and two lights could be seen in the darkness.

“Tra la la. Don't you have anything better to do?”

Not long after the Riverperson's boat drifted away (with Hal still claiming to all within earshot that he would never give them up) the crowd began to disperse until the only people standing outside the house were the queen and two honor guard dogs. Toriel shook her head in resignation, walked back inside, and closed the door behind her.

“Well... ah, yes. I have made us all some hot soup with toasted bread to warm up after chill of the rain. Frisk, Asriel, if you will set the table, I will make sure everything is ready to serve.”

“Okay mom... you know. I'm really glad Hal and I are friends,” Asriel mused on his way to the dining room. “If we were enemies, I don't think I'd ever sleep again.”

Asgore scratched his head. “While I am glad the reporters have left, I am confused about who Hal was never going to give up.”

Frisk sighed.

“Alphys needs to show you more of the internet. I can't believe I had to say that sentence just now.”
Chara stared very carefully at the table.

They could see Asgore's paws at the top of their field of vision, and Toriel's paws to the side. Asriel was standing next to them, his paw in their hand.

There was no way around it this time. They were going to be interrogated about why they had come and what the surface was like and sooner or later they would let something slip and that would be the beginning of the end, if it wasn't the entire end then and there. The monsters had not pressed them for answers the previous night for... some reason. But their luck couldn't hold forever. With breakfast out of the way (what little of the pancakes and hash browns that Chara had been able to eat had dissolved in their mouth much like the soup from the previous night, but if it hadn't it would have sat in Chara's stomach like a stone) the Dreemurrs were getting down to brass tacks.

"Chara, do you think perhaps you can answer more questions for us now? We understand that last night was quite the ordeal for you, but there is much that we need to know."

Chara closed their eyes and nodded. Toriel's tone was soft, but that could change at any time. Appeasement and cooperation seemed like the best strategy for now; answer harmless questions with no resistance, deflect or lie when the questions addressed sensitive or dangerous topics, and... well, if they got insistent, maybe it would be possible to goad them into losing their tempers and get them to kill them outright rather than... drawing it out to make Chara talk. Running away was not an option, and fighting was certainly out; the only person they had a chance of beating in a fight was Asriel, but he had gone out of his way to try to help. Just thinking about trying to attack him or use him as a hostage or a shield made Chara want to throw up.

"Yes. I can answer some more questions for you. Uh. Thank you for being patient."

"It is no trouble, Chara... you said last night that you are ten years old. And it is obvious that you are human. I suppose the next logical question to ask is how you came to fall into the Underground."

Chara swallowed. They had come with the intent of fighting a war that was clearly beyond their capability. Fighting and killing an army of monsters with nothing but a kitchen knife was insane. But insane or not there was no way that they could tell anyone that.

"On the surface... in the... the village, that I came from. There are legends and rumors about Mt. Ebott. Travelers who climb the mountain never return. I... I wanted to know why. It never occurred to me that if I did find out, I would also never be able to return. Even though that was obvious from the beginning." Chara cleared their throat. "So. The answer to your question, in a word, is Foolishness."

"I see... this village you came from. Where is it?"
“Right near the base of the mountain. Part of the outskirts are built on the foothills.”

“Not far, then.”

Chara shook their head. “No, not far. I was able to walk from there to Mt. Ebott in less than a day.”

“You have only been gone for a day, then? I thought that... I apologize, I am getting ahead of myself. I will wait for your answer.”

Toriel waited for Chara's response, and the human child thought back before answering.

“Actually... I spent the night on the mountain, before I ended up in the cave and falling down that hole. So it has been at least two days. Well. Three, now.”

“Oh dear.”

Asgore's voice seemed concerned, and perhaps that, more than anything else, motivated Chara to speak up.

“Mr. and Mrs. Dreemurr, I, uh. I appreciate what you've done for me after I fell. I don't wish to impose on your hospitality any longer, and... my absence has definitely been noticed by now. If at all possible... I would like to go home now.”

The human child had looked up, rather than continue staring at the table, and saw the pinched expressions on the two large monsters' faces. The Dreemurrs turned to look at each other, and then back to Chara; it was Toriel who broke the awkward silence.

“We are truly sorry, Chara. But that is not something that is within our power to do for you. Unfortunately, you cannot go home right now.”

Chara nodded, looking back down at the table. Some part of their mind managed to be annoyed at the fact that their hands (and the rest of their body in fact) were shaking, but mostly they were filled with a sensation of resigned dread.

“I... had a feeling you were going to say that.”

“Young one...” Asgore's deep voice filled the room, but it was far softer than Chara had expected. “I assure you, if leaving the Underground was possible at all, we would gladly escort you back to your home right away. Unfortunately there is, at this time, no means of escape from this place, for any of us. It would seem we are all in the same boat, so to speak. If and when the possibility does become available, you have my word as King of the Underground that we will do everything we can to reunite you with your family and friends on the surface.”

Chara's hands still shook.

“It's alright. I understand. Like I said before. I should have known that if I found out why nobody ever came back, I wouldn't be able to come back either. I... have nobody to blame but myself.”

In the human child's peripheral vision, they saw Asgore and Toriel look at each other again, before standing up from the table.

“It occurs to me,” Toriel remarked, “that there are some things which are most easily explained with a visual aid. Gorey, did you not say earlier that you planned to meet with Dr. Aster today?”

“Yes, in just a few hours... my dear, are you thinking of taking Asriel and Chara on a ‘field trip' I
Toriel snickered. “You could say that. Asriel, why don't you look through your wardrobe and find a sweater for Chara, for when we travel through Snowdin? And as we travel through the Underground, you can explain to them all of the key details you know... it will also be an excellent opportunity to test just how much your have retained from my lessons.”

“Moooom! Why do you always have to make everything into a quiz like this??”

Chara tensed up, waiting for the backlash... and was caught off guard by Toriel's giggling.

“Because that is the only way to make sure you are paying attention, my child. Chara, how are your feet? Do you feel up to walking? I must warn you that we will be traveling a fair distance, to the other side of the cavern in fact.”

“Uhm. My feet are okay. And my shoes are pretty broken in. So that will help.”

“Excellent.” Toriel smiled, and Chara's eyes were immediately drawn to the monster's fangs, or canines, or whatever they were. Their apprehension lasted only a moment as Asriel pulled on their hand and brought them back to the present.

The red glow around Frisk's hands subsided, and Toriel and Asgore let go as if the child's hands were red hot. The queen's paws came up to cover her mouth in shock, while the king simply stared, eyes bugged out in an almost comical expression. Frisk's eyes dropped to the coffee table, and one hand reached out for Asriel's paw next to them. The prince's fingers meshed with Frisk's fingers, and the human child was able to breathe easier.

“...whatever questions you have. We can try to answer them.”

“Frisk.” Toriel's voice sounded calm, except for the slight tremor. “I am not sure that I understand. That memory... that was a memory, correct? Asriel, you did not tell them about when Chara first fell?”

Asriel shook his head.

“...then you have... a memory, from Chara. And... more, I am guessing. But I still...”

Toriel breathed in slowly, and let it out in a rush.

“Frisk. Asriel. I know that you would not fabricate such a story, for whatever reason. So I know... whatever you are trying to tell me. It is the truth.”

'I don't like this plan anymore. We should have waited until tomorrow like you said earlier. Or better yet, next year.'

Frisk furrowed their brow in confusion.

'The only way we can explain is if I... you know. Again. And the whole time I feel what you feel and that overtone of panic and I'm not even supposed to be here and I don't understand why she's not angry unless she doesn't understand yet and-'
"...okay. Fine. Just. I need a second.'

The human child breathed in and out slowly, eyes closing. When they opened again, the irises were glowing red and the child's posture, facial expression, and the tilt of their head all changed.

“When I died and Asriel absorbed my Soul, I still existed as a part of him. When he died, we both... we stopped. Alphys woke Asriel up with her experiments. I didn't wake up until Frisk fell on my grave.”

Toriel and Asgore both reared back in their seats, more out of shock than fear. Chara looked down at the coffee table, trying to talk around a lump in Frisk's throat.

“I didn't know what had happened. When I was. Dead. I had no awareness of the passage of time. So I had no idea what was going on until much later. I know now. When I was buried in the ruins, the golden flowers must have become some sort of vessel for me, the way they did for Asriel, and when Frisk fell onto them and crushed them. I became a part of Frisk instead, and their DT Energy woke me up again. I don't know how. I don't know why it happened with Frisk, and not any other fallen human. But I've been here ever since. Sometimes I would try to pass along information to Frisk, if I thought they needed it to survive. But. I never told them who I was. Or tried to take control of the body... at least. Not until the fight with Jordan in the CORE. It wasn't Frisk that stabbed him. It was me. And it wasn't Frisk that wanted to keep stabbing him until there was nothing left to stab. That was me too.”

“...Chara.” Asgore stared at the human child with wide, glistening eyes. “It's really...”

Next to Asgore, Toriel blinked rapidly. “Asriel. You knew Chara better than anyone...”

“It's them, mom.” The prince nodded, answering the question the queen couldn't bring herself to put into words.

“...oh... oh my....” Toriel faltered, before standing up unsteadily and walking around the coffee table recklessly, bumping into it without realizing it and kneeling down.

“Chara, I... I am so sorry. I did not...” Toriel wrapped her arms around Chara and pulled them close. Chara could feel the vibrations in the floor as Asgore stood up and walked around from the other direction, and knelt down next to Toriel.

“Chara... I think... I understand. Why you said nothing. But I must ask.”

“Because... I had my chance. And I didn't just screw it up for me. I got Asriel killed. I got those six humans killed. And all of those people in town that got hurt because Jordan lashed out. The only thing I'm good for is hurting people. Jordan. Asriel. You.”

Chara felt Asgore's massive paw rest on Frisk's head.

“That is not true.”

“I made you sick. Because I was human. Monsters can only get hurt if-”

“No. I got sick because of a simple mistake. The kind that anyone can make. If... Chara. I don't know if... if you have seen all that Frisk has seen. But... our friend, Undyne. She does not handle heat well. It is the same thing. There is no intent to harm behind the weather. It is just part of the world. And so it was with the buttercups. I... I wanted to try to explain to you and Asriel. That I knew it was just an accident. But I see now that... I am sorry, Chara. I should have made absolutely sure that you understood. And I did not do that.”
“The fault... lies with me, as well.” Toriel whispered. “I let my temper get away from me. I should have...” Toriel let go and looked at Chara’s eyes. “Whatever has brought you back to us. I promise. We will not fail you again. Not this time.”

“You didn't fail. It's not your fault the first human you adopted was... defective.” Chara sniffed. “You might have missed it. In that memory. I came to the Underground for stupid, selfish reasons. To fight the monsters, so... so Jordan would accept me as his child again. An impossible task with an impossible goal.”

“You are not defective, Chara.” Toriel's voice was firm even as it shook. “You were a child who knew only what you had seen and heard. You had no reason to believe otherwise, until you fell into the Underground. Like everyone else. You did the best that you could, with what you had to work with. It is not your fault that... that Jordan Cater made the choices he made.”

Something in Chara’s posture seemed to shift.

“...he knows I'm here. After the fight. That was the only way we could beat him. To throw him off balance. Keep him from concentrating. But he knows now. Just like he knew about the magic, after the fight in the Underground. He... he might try something else. He never cared about me until I wasn't there any longer, but now that he knows that I'm here there's no telling what he'll do.”

"We will address that when the time comes,” Toriel said, as firmly as she could. "...I need to stop. I can't... do this kind of thing for very long.”

“Chara... you will still be there, correct?” The queen's smile vanished, replaced by a worried expression. “If this is all the time that we have-”

“I'll still be here. I don't know how, or even if, I can go anywhere else.”

“Then... thank you. For coming back. And for letting us know you are there.”

“We promise, Chara. Everything is going to be okay.” Asgore smiled and reached up to wipe the tears from his eyes and beard.

Chara brought up their arms to hug Toriel and Asgore, still holding onto Asriel's paw with their right hand. The red light faded from the child's irises... and Frisk trembled, dropping their arms and letting go of Asriel.

“Eeaugh. I know I said it was okay, but I don't know if I'll ever get used to that.”

Toriel sniffed. “Frisk, that is you, correct?”

“Yeah. I'm back in the driver's seat again. Chara is... they're still here. They see what I see and they hear what I hear, so if you need to tell them anything. They'll know.”

“That is... good to know.” The queen sighed and let go of Frisk, running her paws over her face. Next to her, Asgore slowly stood up and walked over to the wall, reaching out one arm to steady himself.

“Are you guys going to be okay? I know that was, you know, a lot to take in all at once.”

Asgore nodded. “I cannot speak for your mother. But I may need a few minutes.”

“Likewise.” Toriel nodded. “I am afraid to ask, but... do you have any more surprises for us
today?”

“No. That's it. I just, you know. We were going to wait until tomorrow, but then I started thinking... I wanted to get it out of the way before it took on a life of its own. Like Asriel's identity and the magic and stuff like that.”

“I see... this will take some time to come to terms with. But... thank you. All three of you.” The queen looked at her trembling fingers and sighed. “I am afraid dinner will be delayed until I can trust myself to handle the ingredients and utensils without dropping them. In the meantime... I feel that I could use some air. Pardon me... I will be back shortly.”

Toriel slowly made her way to the back door, and Frisk shook their head.

“It's just stress. We dropped a major bombshell on them. That's all.”

“...Chara's worried about how mom and dad are taking it, I guess?” Asriel stared down at his feet.

“Yeah. Personally under the circumstances I think things went about as well as we could hope.”

“Definitely.”

Outside, Toriel breathed in and out slowly, and pulled out her cell phone.

“Amputation, concussion, and now pneumonia. The fucking hits keep on coming,” Joe Stanton's grumbling trailed off into a coughing fit as a nurse changed his IV bag. At the foot of the bed, Dr. Ross smirked and marked Stanton's chart.

“As long as you don't go picking any more fights for the next few days, you'll be okay. It's bacterial pneumonia, so between the antibiotics we're dumping into your system and the monster food you've already had, you should be out of here some time tomorrow.”

“And just in time to walk us through the Soul Scanner Upgrades.” Dr. Aster snorted. “For the record, daisy chaining thirty nine sticky notes together doesn't cut it when it comes to documentation.”

“I wrote forty notes. The missing one must be the index.”

By the door, Sans chuckled. “hey, Joe. you want us to pass along anything to your pals? or your family?”

“Yeah. Anybody who touches my stuff gets their ass kicked once I ge-” Joe's threats of reprisal turned into another coughing fit.

“will do. should be getting along pretty quick. tomorrow's going to be another busy day.”

“Jay, do you think you can handle it from here?”

“Sure thing.”

“Alright. Mr. Stanton, we'll talk later. Dr. Aster, Sans, I'll walk you to the lobby.”

“...okay.” Dr. Aster agreed, oblivious to Sans' increasingly cheeky grin next to him. Out in the hallway, the shorter scientist stepped slightly behind his father, watching as the two doctors stepped into a common rhythm without apparently realizing that they were doing so.
“As chaotic and just plain frightening as today's events have been, I think they could have been much worse.”

“Agreed. Almost every police officer that tried to fight Cater was injured in some capacity, with the exception of those outside the school as I understand it. Fortunately it seems like Cater was just trying to stall and slow everyone down while he ran away, rather than kill everyone and everything in his path.” Dr. Ross shrugged. “That's just a guess though. Not really my area of expertise.”

“Nor mine, even though my father made doubly sure I understood the fundamentals. We had the advantage of numbers and reinforcing sight lines at the school. If Cater tried to attack us directly we could have caught him in a crossfire of bullets, both metal and magic. Trying to avoid us by using dimensional magic came out of left field but it was probably the smartest move he made since he woke up this morning....” The scientist shook his skull. “Frankly I'm more concerned about the well being of my friends than my foes. I know Officer Steve is back up and about, but what about Justin Carrow?”

“He was released about an hour ago actually. Something about Hal Greene going on a concert tour.”

“What?” Dr. Aster blinked his sockets in confusion. “I understand all of those words individually, but they were combined in such a way that I don't know what the information content of the sentence is supposed to be.”

“I'm just telling you what I heard... anyway. It's a little strange, isn't it? This is the third time something like this has happened in a month, and nobody has died. I don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth but that this point I have to wonder if something else is going on.”

“You and me both. Like you said, I'm not complaining about it. But it runs contrary to everything you'd expect to happen with three different violent attacks in public venues.”

“Exactly... well, even with what has happened, I'll be busy all weekend and probably through Tuesday.” Dr. Ross paused and cleared her throat. “But when I get a spare moment, do you... want to get some coffee again?”

“Uh... yes, actually. Yes. That sounds good. Great even. Something to look forward to while I'm trying to figure out the whole spontaneous human magic thing.”

“...is that going to involve running experiments on Frisk?”

“With their informed consent and that of their parents, and nothing invasive. They're going to stop by the lab tomorrow and we'll run them through some more tests. Same things we use for monster check ups in fact. Well, except the ichor sampling. Don't think humans have that.”

“...ichor??” Dr. Ross frowned. “No, pretty sure that never came up in med school. What is it?”

“Ichor is the closest thing monsters have to blood, in the sense that it's a medium of energy within the body and can be removed for diagnostic purposes under specific conditions. If there's an injury severe enough to cause major structural damage to the body but not enough to kill outright, it can be lost, although it evaporates pretty quickly unless it's in a Green Magic Field.”

“Oh. Learn something new every day, looks like.” Dr. Ross blinked and looked around; the trio had walked outside of the hospital and along the sidewalk outside for about thirty feet. “Uh, I better get back inside in case they need me. One last question though, since this has been bothering me since I heard some of the stuff on the radio.”
“Sure, go ahead.”

“Do you think Jordan Cater went after Frisk at the school because he knew they could use magic, and saw them as a threat because of that?”

“Hmmm.” Dr. Aster crossed his arms and stared at the sidewalk. “I have reason to believe he knew about what Frisk could do, but I think his actual reasons for attacking them were more mundane. I think that Cater felt that Frisk’s very existence was an insult to his belief system. A human child living safely and happily with monster parents for over a year, and working more or less constantly to foster goodwill between species so that there was not a second war. Additionally... I think when he looked at Frisk, he was reminded of what he lost when his own child died. He definitely seemed to be skirting the borders of sanity at the end of the fight, for whatever reason. I thought I heard him call Frisk ‘Chara’ just before the end.”

“Yeah, that’s not creepy at all.”

“I wasn't specifically thinking along those lines, but since you mentioned it... I did know Chara in the Underground. I was the resident human expert, so of course they brought them to see me on a regular basis. And frankly, Chara was the only person in the entire cavern who wasn't excited when there were new developments in our work to destroy the Barrier. They really didn't want to go back to that man. A part of me is curious just what happened between those two, but I have a suspicion that if I did know what happened I’d have a hard time sleeping at night for the next year or two.”

“I know what you mean... I want to know, but at the same time, I don't want to know.” Dr. Ross shook her head. “Well... in any event. Let's hope that the third time is the charm, and he can't hurt anybody else after today.”

“That would be nice.” Dr. Aster nodded. “Well, Sans and I better get going. It's been an absolute pleasure talking with you. And walking. Uh. Walking and talking, both.”

The scientist reached up and scratched his skull.

“You would think that somebody who didn't have a tongue couldn't get tongue-tied. But here we are.”

Dr. Ross snickered, but not unkindly.

“Good night, Dr. Aster. Good night, Sans.”

“night doc.”

“Yes.... good night.”

The surgeon headed back into the hospital, and the skeletons began to walk down the sidewalk.

“well, that went pretty well, don't you think?”

“What do you mean?” Dr. Aster stared at his son for a few moments, but the shorter skeleton just grinned.

“just sayin, things seem to be looking up.”

“...I suppose you're right. Let's enjoy it while we can, then. Who knows what new and terrible discoveries we will end up making tomorrow.”
“...you're not still worried about Frisk, are you?”

“I'm a scientist confronted with a mystery. I can't really stop thinking about it. But if there's any human to be worried about in all this, it's not Frisk Dreemurr or Joe Stanton or even Jordan Cater.”

“...you saw it too, huh.”

“Yes.” Dr. Aster nodded. “When Hal Greene was going after Cater, and got hit with the Cyan bullet, it reacted like a Wave Force Collapse. Meaning he was somehow generating Force Magic.”

“...Hal Greene. Mechanic, Musician, and all around Wild Card. Now with magic. That's... well, that's probably how the world is going to end.”

“Seems like it.”

The two skeletons walked on in awkward silence.

“but you know. if we're all going to die anyway? might as well throw caution to the wind.”

“What do you mean?”

“...nothing. just thinking out lo-”

There was a beeping, electronic sound from one of Sans' pockets, and he pulled his cell phone out to peer at the screen.

6:03 PM Mrs. Momedian: Sans, if it is nott oo much of an impositn may I call you?

6:03 PM: go ahead

“What is it? Or who, I suppose.”

“Tori wants to talk.”

“I still can't believe you can get away with calling the queen by a nickname-”

The cell phone began to beep and Sans tapped the screen.

“Hey Tori.”

“Hello, Sans. I apologize if you were otherwise occupied.”

“Don't worry about it. I saw you were making typos and I figured, this has to be super important.”

“Ah. Yes. I did not even notice.”

“Is everyone alright over there?”

“I... nobody has been injured or harmed, if that is your concern. In fact... Gorey and I. We have received... very, very good news. But in the process...”

“...Tori? You okay?”
“Yes. I am... some very old wounds have been opened again.”

“Do you want me to come over there?”

“...no. No, I do not believe so. But, thank you Sans. For the offer. I suppose... I just needed to hear a friend's voice right now.”

“Well, that's easy enough to do. Hey. Today was pretty rough on everybody, but we're all okay. I'm not sure if that has anything to do with it, but just remember. We're okay.”

“...yes... we are all okay. Sans. Thank you for your time, and your help.”

“Not exactly sure how anything I did helped, but if all I had to do was answer the phone, I'm okay with that.”

Toriel laughed, but her heart did not appear to be in it.

“Sans, I must go to prepare dinner. But before I hang up. I have a personal question to ask, if I have not imposed too much.”

“Nah, go ahead.”

“When... Wing Ding. When your father came back. How did you feel when you realized what had happened?”

Sans looked up at his father, who noticed his gaze and replied with a confused expression of his own.

“...confused. At first. And then worried. And then... I guess I'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop for a long time, and it finally did, and then I was able to relax for once. I mean, really relax. Not just slack off. Hey, is this about Asriel coming back? You had a heck of a shock, Tori. It makes sense if you couldn't tackle the implications all in one go. And if today knocked a couple things loose, that makes sense too.”

“Something... to that effect.” On the other end of the line, Toriel sighed. “I... I feel a little better, now. Thank you, Sans. You have been... you have been of tremendous help.”

“...hey. Tori.”

“Yes, Sans?”

“Knock knock.”

“...who is there?”

“Hey, you're the one who called me.”

The line was silent for a few moments, and then Sans heard sputtering laughter on the other end.

“Hee hee... I certainly needed that,” Toriel said, when she had regained her composure. “Thank you very much, Sans.”

“I aims to please. You gonna be alright? I got a few more waiting in the wings.”

“As appealing as that sounds, I think I will be okay... and I have dallied long enough. Dinner will not prepare itself. We will see you tomorrow at All Fine Labs. Nine in the morning, correct?”
“That's right. I called Undyne to be ready in case you guys needed an escort tomorrow. I heard about the reporters.”

“Ah, yes. There is a story behind it, but that will have to wait until tomorrow. Good night, Sans.”

“Night.”

The call ended and Sans put his phone back into his pocket.

“What was that about?”

“Just friend things.”

Dr. Aster blinked, then shrugged and returned his attention to the sidewalk. “Alright then.”
“WELCOME, BEAUTIES, TO TODAY’S QUIZ SHOW!”

Mettaton rolled into the lab on a single wheel, a generic soundtrack of a cheering audience playing from one speaker.

“YES, IT'S TIME AGAIN FOR ANOTHER EPISODE OF YOU! BET! YOUR! SOUL! SPONSORED BY ALL FINE LABS, PIZZAGEDDON, AND THE WANTON WONTON ALL YOU CAN EAT CHINESE BUFFET! WHAT DO YOU SAY WE MEET OUR CONTESTANTS?”

The cheering increased in volume as one of Mettaton’s arms reached down and adjusted a knob on his chassis.

“THAT SOUNDS LIKE A YES TO ME! FIRST UP, IT'S THE MONSTER AMBASSADOR AND RETURNING CHAMPION, FRISK! DREEMURR!”

Frisk flinched and shielded their eyes as the spotlight above them switched on. Between their fingers they could see Mettaton, and behind him, a gigantic multi-panel screen in his likeness that was currently showing a camera feed of three bar stools. Frisk was sitting on one, but the other two were shrouded in darkness.

“OUR NEXT CONTESTANT, A VITAL LIFELINE IN THE PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE BOTH UNDERGROUND AND IN EBOTT’S WAKE, IT'S! A! BIRD!”

Another spotlight clicked on next to Frisk, and they saw a yellow bird monster they recognized from Waterfall.

“FINALLY, OUR LAST CONTESTANT FOR THIS EVENING! YOU KNOW HIM! YOU REMEMBER HIM! THE MAN EVERYBODY IN THIS TOWN LOVES TO HATE, IT'S JORDAN! CATER!”

The last spotlight clicked on, and Frisk had just enough time to notice that there was nobody sitting on the bar stool underneath it when they felt hands wrap around their neck, squeezing and cutting off both air and blood.

“Oh my! Jordan Cater comes out swinging with the lightning round opener! Okay Frisk, question one. How long can the human brain maintain conscious thought once the air supply has been cut off? Remember, answer correctly, or you die!”

Frisk's mouth opened, but only panicked choking noises came out.

“Hmmmm! Looks like this one will have to go to the judges!” Mettaton gestured and Frisk managed to see a table with Sans, Dr. Aster, and the Riverperson sitting behind it, arranged next to the massive screen. Sans appeared to be asleep, while Dr. Aster frowned and shook his head. The Riverperson's hood nodded, and Mettaton waved his arms about in exaggerated excitement.

“The judges are locked in indecision! In accordance with a tradition as old as the Kingdom of Monsters itself, we're going into a double over-tie-breaker! Bird, if you can answer the following question...
CORRECTLY, YOU WILL WIN AN ALL EXPENSES PAID TRIP TO SCENIC BRITISH COLUMBIA! WHAT IS THE AIRSPEED OF AN UNLADEN SWALLOW?”

The bird jumped into the air, flapping its wings, and flew over Frisk. After a few moments, their neck was released and they fell to the floor, coughing and gasping. Above them, Jordan Cater swore obscenities as he was carried away.

“OH MY, THIS JUST WON'T DO! VIOLENCE AND ATTEMPTED MURDER IS ALL WELL AND GOOD, BUT IF WE BROADCAST PROFANITY THE FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION WILL PULL OUR LICENSE! I'M AFRAID JORDAN CATER HAS BEEN DISQUALIFIED! IT'S TIME FOR A WORD FROM OUR FABULOUS SPONSORS, BUT DON'T GO ANYWHERE! WHEN WE COME BACK WE'LL HAVE MORE DRAMA! MORE BLOODSHED! AND MORE QUESTIONS!”

Mettaton rolled away and the screen began to flash “Happy Breaktime!” before all the monitors went dead.

The sun was beginning to make its way through the windows when Frisk's eyes opened, and they looked around in confusion for a moment. The orientation of the ceiling was different... and there was something very warm and soft next to them. Frisk turned to see Asriel's fuzzy white head next to them, nested under the blankets, still fast asleep.

'Sorry. I couldn't sleep, and I heard Asriel having a nightmare.'

Frisk shrugged and closed their eyes again, concentrating on Asriel's warm fur. The events of the previous day, when they did filter into the child's mind, felt like the sharp edges had been sanded off. Cater was incapacitated. Everyone was safe. Nobody had freaked out about their magic. They had been grounded, but it was only for a week, and under the circumstances...

'Yeah. Congratulations. It took you a year and a half but you finally got mom to put her foot down.'

Frisk grumbled something unintelligible and snuggled closer to Asriel, and began to drift off again....

There was a light knock on the door, followed by the slight creaking of hinges as the bedroom door was opened. Toriel saw Frisk's empty bed and managed to turn to look at Asriel's without panicking, and saw brown hair and white fur next to each other, as they had been so many times before.

“Good morning, Toriel.”

Toriel blinked as Frisk rolled over in the bed to reveal two red glowing eyes.

“...Chara?”

“Yes. Frisk is still asleep. They don't always wake up when I open their eyes. And they and Asriel both had some bad dreams last night. So they're pretty out of it. Uh... don't tell them I told you that. It's bad enough that Frisk doesn't get any privacy as it is.”

“...I see.”
“Is it time to go to All Fine Labs yet?”

“No, that is not for a while yet.” Toriel walked over to Asriel’s bed and knelt down next to it. “Chara... there are many things that we will have to discuss over the next week, but one in particular should be addressed right now. Do you... are you... when we go to All Fine Labs, is it permissible to you that we inform Dr. Alphys and Dr. Aster of your presence?”

Chara rolled over on their back and stared up at the ceiling, blinking.

“...we kind of have to, don't we? For them to get an accurate picture of what's going on with Frisk and where the magic came from. Maybe... maybe they can use it because I'm here, and I have it because I was... combined with Asriel.”

“That is a possibility... but you did not address the question that I asked. Chara... do you want anyone else to know that you are here? I know that you were reluctant to speak to any of us until you had to. But I also know that... you must have been very alone, for a very long time. I do not want to assume anything. And the choice must be yours to make, no matter what else happens.”

Chara closed their eyes and held their right hand over them.

“...Frisk says it's okay. Frisk insisted that I talk to Asriel, and to you, and to Asgore. But... whenever their body does something and they aren't the one telling it to do it. They freak out. And they have to... not hold still, but not try to override what I'm doing. And... it's hard for them, and on them. If we do tell anybody else. We'll have to do that again. And... I can't make that decision for them. It doesn't matter how I got here, or how long, or why. This is Frisk's body. Frisk's life.”

“...I suspect that Frisk has already made their decision.”

Chara nodded, slowly.

“...missed Asriel... so, so much. And I missed... you... and... and dad... mom. When...” Chara sniffed. “When Asriel came back. Frisk and I ran. We both panicked. And... you tried to talk to to them, in the backyard. I wasn't steering, but a lot of that was me. Angry at being forced to watch everyone move on and recover and me... just stuck.”

Chara's hand came away from their eyes, and they blinked up at the ceiling, strobing the bedroom in soft red light as they did.

“...I haven't had anyone to talk to for so long, except... Frisk, and Asriel. I had to be careful to make sure Frisk didn't know there was somebody else here. And Asriel, I could only reach him in his dreams. Using Frisk's magic.”

Chara felt Toriel take their hand in both of her massive paws.

“I am so sorry, Chara. But it is okay now. We know you are there. We know you have been suffering. We will not let you suffer in silence anymore.”

“Might as well. Not much of a life left to have. Riding along in another person's head, stealing moments for myself here and there.”

“Chara, do not-” Toriel's mouth snapped shut abruptly, and she spoke again, slowly. “I will never tell you not to say something. After so long without a voice, or thinking that you could not speak to anyone else. But please do not think of it like that. You have been hurt. Badly. You deserve to get better, just as Asriel and Frisk deserve to get better as well.”
Chara’s head turned away from Toriel, and they looked at Asriel, still sleeping.

“I... hurt Asriel. The one person. That. I wanted to protect more than anyone else. He died. Because of me.” Chara's hand shook in Toriel's paws. “I thought... I thought that there was no way out, except through blood. I would have killed, and I would have made Asriel a murderer. I would have wiped out... my entire race. All the humans that hurt me. And all the humans that didn't. Because I thought that was the only answer. Kill or be killed. But monsters and humans are living side by side. I was wrong. There is no place for somebody like me in this world.”

One of Toriel's paws let go of her child's hand, and rested on their head.

“You will always have a place in this world, just as you will always have a place in this family. Everyone will be there for you, Chara. No matter what happens today, or tomorrow, or any of the days after that.”

The red light vanished as Chara squeezed their eyes closed, moisture running down the side of their face onto the pillow.

“Mom. Did you... when you and Frisk were walking home. Last Friday. You said you would have... well. It sounded like-”

“Yes, Chara. I wished that I could have had three children in this household. You, and Asriel, and Frisk. Happy and safe and far away from everything that has hurt you in the past. And while this was not quite how I imagined it, I have gotten my wish. I have been blessed once again.”

Chara said nothing.

“...my child. I remember something that Asriel said. That same Friday. When we went to... where I buried your remains. Asriel said... he said that he wished that you could both move on from what happened, together. He has not said anything. But I know my son. He also feels blessed that you are here with him, no matter what.”

“...I think Frisk is starting to wake up. I'm heading back to the backseat. But mom. Thank you.”

“I love you, Chara.”

“I love you too.” Chara closed their eyes, and some of the tension in the child's body faded. Toriel moved the hand she was holding over to rest on Frisk's chest.

“Mmmph. Where did Lesser Dog go...” Frisk's eyes fluttered open, looking around before focusing on Asriel next to them.

“Oh. Right... Chara, are you-?”

Frisk froze, then turned their head to see Toriel; their eyes widened and they reflexively pushed themselves away, bumping into Asriel.

“Gah! Oh...”

“Oh dear. I am sorry, Frisk, I did not mean to startle you.”

“It's alright. I was warned and I still got caught off guard.” Frisk reached up to rub their eyes. “Is it time to head to the lab yet?”

“Not quite. I was just... checking on you all.”
“…yeah. Chara said you guys were talking. Fair enough.”

Next to Frisk, Asriel mumbled and lifted his head, looking around.

“Wha... oh. Hey.”

“Morning sleepy fuzzy person.” Frisk scooted over to Asriel and kissed the monster child on the end of his muzzle, causing him to recoil.

“Augh! What the-” Asriel's exclamation was cut off by a sneezing fit. Toriel clapped on paw over her mouth and tried to suppress her laughter, with limited success.

“Frisk why are you so weird?!”

Dr. Aster stared at the screens, and then looked at the printouts in his hands, and then at the screens again.

“...there's got to be at least six different scientific papers on this phenomena alone.”

“Alright then, i'll get started tonight.”

Dr. Aster rolled his eye lights. “That was an observation, not an instruction. Not even a suggestion.”

“Still. Challenge accepted.”

The stepladder by the Soul Scanner shook as Alphys climbed down to ground level again.

“You know you might actually get a paper published if you didn't type them up in the Comic Sans computer font.”

“and turn my back on my skeleton heritage?”

“That's not how it works and you know it,” Dr. Aster grumbled.

Alphys pulled out her phone. “Undyne said they'd be here in ten minutes, and that was fifteen minutes ago... I'm going to text her again.”

“you're gonna feel awful silly if it turns out they were just in the lobby getting their guest badges.”

“We'll see.” Alphys' claws began to tap the screen as the door to the lab opened; all three occupants turned to see Justin Carrow walk in.

“...what?”

Alphys sighed. “Nothing Justin. Just worried. Undyne was supposed to escort the Dreemurrs and they were supposed to be here by now.”

“Oh.” Carrow scratched his head. “Well, O'Dell's in custody, Cater's still in that coma thing... guess that leaves the fourth estate.”

“If you mean news reporters, then yeah, probably.” Alphys narrowed her eyes as her phone chimed and the reply came in. “Actually that's exactly it.”
Alphys held up her phone to show everyone else the photograph of microphones, cameras, and presumably intrusive questions. The phone chimed again and Alphys looked at the screen.

“...she says they're still about five minutes out.”

“bet you a bottle of ketchup she loses her temper and shoves a spear up somebody's ass before they get here.”

Alphys shrugged and put her phone back in her pocket. “Justin, how's the outside look?”

“About thirty people. Ten with signs and slogans, ten with cameras, and ten who I guess just had a Saturday morning free to do whatever.”

“So business as usual then. As soon as the Dreemurrs arrive, can you got to the break room and grab Joe?”

“Sure... I'm surprised they let him out of the hospital so soon. He lost an arm, and got a concussion, and pneumonia. I'm actually kind of scared that he's going to lose an eye before the day is out.”

Alphys waved a claw dismissively.

“It'll grow back. He did it before.”

“...oh. Man, you leave town for one week and suddenly everything changes on you.”

“That is literally what happened, when you think-” Alphys stopped abruptly as her phone chimed again and she looked at the new message. “Oh, they're almost here! Justin! G-go get Joe!”

“Alright, I'm on my way.” Justin walked out of the Soul Scanner Lab and navigated his way to the break room, where Joe was sitting at a table and staring at an empty coffee cup.

“Hey. Everybody's supposed to be here soon. Time to step up to the plate.”

“...right.”

“You don't sound like you're all there.”

Joe let go of the cup and stood up.

“Caffeine withdrawal. The doctors don't want me taking too much of it in case it messes with the antibiotics. Or something like that. I was too tired to give them my undivided attention.”

“Guess that makes sense. You've been drinking it for so long your body probably can't survive without it.”

“Yeah. Also every time I remember that I have to use my left arm for shit now I get really angry at O'Dell all over again.”

“...probably not the healthiest attitude to have but you did lose a body part so health is one of those catch as catch can kinda things, I guess.”

“Yeah. Alright, let's get this science party started.”

Joe walked out of the break room with a sudden burst of energy, and Justin had to walk a little faster than normal to catch up. By the time the pair had reached the lobby, a group of monsters and one human child were signing in and pinning badges to clothing.
“There you are, Joe.”

Joe turned to see Dr. Aster walking up to him.

“We need you to get in to Soul Research and run through the final checklist one more time. Getting accurate readings right now is extremely important.”

“Hmm. More of the same. Alright.”

“Are you okay? You seem kind of-”

“I'm missing part of an arm. I am definitely not okay.” Joe snapped, causing various people in the lobby to stare at him. After a few moments of awkward silence, Joe marched off towards the Soul Research Lab. Justin looked around at the various staring faces, and raised his voice.

“The doctors at Rita Belle told Joe to take it easy on the coffee.”

As if a switch had been flipped, all the employees of All Fine Labs relaxed and returned to business as usual. Dr. Aster walked up to the Dreemurrs and Undyne.

“So, Alphys said that you were a little bit delayed.”

“Tell me about it!” Undyne waved her arms around in an attempt to express her frustration. “How many times do you have to tell a reporter to go away before they get the hint?! Some of those... people,” Undyne said haltingly, her eye glancing at the children nearby, “are really lucky Asgore told me no spears allowed. Like, you have no idea. If it hadn't been for Hal we might not have gotten here until lunchtime!”

“Wait, Hal Greene? He's here?”

“Uh... yeah. Outside.”

“This is fortunate. Justin, could you go grab him and tell him his presence is needed?”

“...okay.” Justin navigated past the receptionist and security desks and walked out of the main lobby doors... and immediately understood why the Dreemurrs had made better time with Hal tagging along. One hand reached out and a single finger tapped Hal on the shoulder; the mechanic turned slightly, then stopped playing the tuba in his arms.

“Hey Justin! Got any requests? I'm kinda getting tired of playing the same five notes over and over again.”

“Yeah. Dr. Aster requests that you get inside the lab for some reason.”

“Oh... I don't know that one. Lyrics or melody or nothing.”

“It's not a song request numb nuts. It's an actual request for a specific course of action.”

“But if I leave, who will make an impenetrable din every time somebody says something stupid?”

“They don't need your help for that. Come on.”

“...alright. Fine. I was getting tired of carrying this thing anyway.”

Hal followed Justin through the doors and stopped by the receptionist desk, where he placed the tuba.
“Hey, park this in a good spot, will ya?” The logbook was signed and Hal followed Justin with his temporary security badge while the receptionist stared at the musical instrument in confusion.

Inside the Soul Research Lab, Asriel was already standing inside the targeting box, and Hal made a thumbs up gesture and grinned as he walked through the doorway. At the workstation, Dr. Aster blinked and looked up at Asriel, then back at the monitors.

“...hmmm. Well, doesn't matter for our purposes today. Logging results... printing hard copy... clearing station. Okay Frisk. You're up.”

Asriel walked out of the target box and Frisk took his place, shuffling awkwardly. Dr. Aster typed on the keyboard stared at the monitor.

“...your numbers are higher now. HP 30 over 30. AT 15, DF 20, SPD 15 and INV 18. EXP still zero. Guess that blast that hit Cater was more of a knockout punch than anything else. Activating the imaging upgrades. This should be interesting.”

Dr. Aster clicked on something using the mouse and narrowed his eyes at the screen.

“What the... oh. Okay, Wasn't sure what I was looking at for a moment. Okay, recording this for a loop... and done.” A bony hand waved the Dreemurrs over. “Hey, check this out. Especially you Frisk. Think you'll get a kick out of it.”

On the monitor, a short video segment was looping, showing a bright red light in the center of Frisk's torso constantly emitting and absorbing smaller motes of light.

“Before anybody asks, we have no idea what any of that means. Under Joe's Image Enhancement System, even Souls with the same chromatic seem to behave differently. Could have a physiological component to it. Could be something connected to your personality or your mood. Could be any number of things. But that's another research program altogether. And today we have very specific goals... Okay, saving, printing... clearing... Hal Greene, can you stand in the targeting box?”

“No thanks doctor, I already got a shirt.”

“Wait.” Asriel held up a paw. “Why do you want to look at Hal's Soul?”

Dr. Aster looked at Asriel, then the rest of the Dreemurrs, and the other humans in the room. The scientist sighed.

“This is half speculation and half observation, but during the fight outside the school, when Mr. Greene was trying to punch Jordan Cater... there was a lightning attack that was completely negated. And when Cater did manage to get Mr. Greene to stop, he did it by using a cyan bullet. There was a minor explosion, like a Wave Force Collapse. We know where the Wave magic was coming from, but the Force... well. That's what we're trying to figure out.”

Joe stood up straight, turning to stare at Hal.

“...no.”

“No what?”

“Just... just get in the scanner targeting space, Hal. We need to disprove this theory or I'm never going to sleep again.”
“Okay, fine, but I better get some exposition after this. Or a second T-shirt. Either or.” The mechanic walked in front of the scanner, and Dr. Aster stared at the monitor.

“...recording... okay, come and have a look.” On the monitor, an orange light seemed to vibrate in place at high speed, leaving waves of alternating brighter and darker orange light that radiated outward.

“...yeah, that looks about like what I expected,” Justin nodded. “So how do you test for the Force Magic thing?”

“Well... honestly, at this point, I'm not sure.” Dr. Aster held up his hands in confusion. “Looking at Frisk didn't show us any sort of pattern, signature, or phenomena that differs from other human souls we have on file. So there's no real way to tell just from scanning what humans can naturally use magic and which ones need outside help.”

“So... does that mean that there is a difference that you know has to be there but can't see yet?” Frisk asked. “Or does that mean there isn't a difference at all?”

“Well, at this point it could be either one. To be honest at this point I'm running out of ideas to....” Dr. Aster trailed off, narrowed his eye sockets, and walked away from the monitor.

Hal pointed at the scientist. “is he gonna be okay?”

“D-don't worry, this is normal for him when he gets an idea.”

The tall skeleton paced back and forth, occasionally opening his jaw as if he was about to speak but then closing it again. After nearly a minute, Dr. Aster suddenly stopped, slammed both hands on his skull, and closed his eye sockets.

“OH MY GOD I'M AN IDIOT!”

“D-d-doctor? Are you-”

“First law of thermodynamics! Energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed. No matter what we did to the Barrier it kept regenerating. I never even thought about where the energy was coming from! It was coming from the outside world! Everywhere but inside the Barrier itself!”

“...because the people that made the thing wouldn't leave the off switch inside for Monsters to use. Or the power cord I guess in this case.” Justin nodded. “I mean, I don't know what that has to do with human magic but I see where you're-”

“That's just it! It has everything to do with human magic! For thousands of years the Barrier was using up magic energy to sustain itself! Now that the Barrier is destroyed the ambient magic levels are returning to what they were before the Barrier was created. That's why humans can start to use magic now, because there's finally enough magic for them to use again!”

The room was silent for a few moments after Dr. Aster's exclamation.

“...wow. I just thought that was the eight cans of Red Bull.” Hal held up the hand he had used to punch out Jordan Cater's lightning attack and stared at it. “But I guess your theory does make more sense.”

Justin slowly turned his head to look at Hal. “Eight cans?”
“Yup.”

“How are you still alive?!”

“Monster soda chasers after every can except the last one. Come on man, I'm not stupid.”

Frisk's eyebrows shot up, and they turned to face their parents.

“Dr. Aster, if being exposed to ambient magic energy is enough to let humans use magic again, then why didn't Chara end up with magic?”

“Whatever process naturally exists in human bodies to allow them to use it must have atrophied, so it took cumulative exposure to reactivate the trait. Chara probably wasn't down in the Underground long enough before... well. Unless they did develop powers and didn't realize it, like what happened to you. Not that I expect we'll ever know for sure.”

“Actually we might get an answer to that at some point...” Frisk swallowed. “That's a side issue though. The real issue is what happens next. If humans are going to start recovering magic, what do we do about it?”

“Start a school here at the lab teaching Magic 101? I mean, I'm not exactly an expert in the field but I did understand the part where different types of magic put together can explode.” Hal shrugged. “There's probably other important stuff like that, stuff monsters grow up knowing but humans don't because it's literally never come up before now.”

Everyone in the room turned to stare at Hal.

“...what? Do I have something in my teeth?”

“heh. sorta. guess we're not used to hearing stuff that makes sense come out of your mouth.”

Justin shook his head. “That's how he gets ya. Every now and then he sneaks in a good idea so you keep listening to him, rather than learning to never trust a single thing he says. If he did it on purpose he'd be some sort of evil mastermind manipulator but apparently that's just how his brain works when he's not tripping the balls fantastic.”

Dr. Aster looked at Toriel. “As surprised as I am to say this... Mr. Greene, that actually might be a good idea. Both for matters of public safety, and for sociopolitical and economic reasons. Your Majesty, I don't mean to impose, but in your estimation how long would it take to compile a primer on magical education, suitable for humans?”

If the queen's eyes had sparkled any more, they would have been launching magical lights into the air around her head like some sort of anime character.

“As a matter of fact, I have been working on such a curriculum for Frisk in my spare moments, once I understood what they could do....”

“Aaaaand we've lost her.” Undyne snickered.

Dr. Aster poked his skull into the meeting room, saw that it was empty, and gestured as he walked in. Sans, Dr. Alphys, and the Dreemurrs followed him in and he pulled out a chair to sit down in.

“Pardon me for taking a seat, now that the scientific problem has been solved, the implications of a
large number of humans suddenly gaining access to magic again have started to hit me with their emotional impact... so. What did you want to discuss?”

Toriel cleared her throat.

“I am not entirely sure how to explain this, or even where to begin... perhaps you have the best idea, and we should all sit down.”

“Whatever works.”

There was the shuffling of steps and the scraping of chairs along the floor as various people sat down, and soon most of the meeting table was occupied.

“That is... this is better. Alright... Dr. Aster, Dr. Alphys, Sans... we have asked to speak to the three of you privately because we have a matter of considerable import that we need to discuss, but which is not... suitable to be public knowledge, in light of the events of the last few days.” Toriel turned to Dr. Alphys. “We are not asking you to keep secrets unnecessarily, or from Undyne, Dr. Alphys. But for the moment we need to speak to the three of you in your capacity as experts in matters of science and magic.”

Toriel paused, and Dr. Alphys nodded.

“O-okay.”

Dr. Aster and Sans also nodded, a few moments later.

“Thank you for understanding.” Toriel breathed in slowly. “It seems that... the circumstances that brought Asriel back to us... either had secondary effects, or reproduced themselves. I am personally unclear about the forces involved, so I do not know which statement is more accurate.”

Dr. Alphys blinked and looked at Asriel, who swallowed.

“When. When Chara died. I absorbed their Soul, and... control of our body was split between the two of us. Chara was dead, but they were... they were alive in me. And then when I died... when I came back from the experiments that Dr. Alphys did on the Golden Flower. It was... it was just Asriel. Or I guess... mostly Asriel, with a little bit of Chara.”

“When I left for the Ruins,” Toriel picked up, “I took Chara's body with me. While much of Asriel's dust landed throughout the garden, including the flowers and the seeds of flowers upon his clothing... much of it also landed on Chara's body. I... I buried it, with some of those seeds, at the spot in the Ruins of Home where they originally fell.”

Frisk sat up straighter in their seat.

“When I fell into the Underground, those flowers broke my fall. And they in turn were broken from the impact. And, from time to time, when I was making my way from the Ruins to New Home, I would know something about the monsters I met that I couldn't possibly have known beforehand. Before yesterday, I chalked all of that up to a mix of deductive reasoning and really lucky guesswork. Now we know better.”

Dr. Aster narrowed his eye sockets, and Frisk sighed.

“So, all that was leading up to this statement, and when I say it you'll understand why we decided to lead up to it, instead of leading with it: Chara's spirit, or consciousness, is in my head.”
Dr. Aster raised a brow ridge over one eye socket, then turned to look at his colleagues. Sans simply looked confused, which was fairly telling on its own, and Alphys... looked more surprised than anything else.

“that look on your face... is the look of somebody telling the truth. or at least they believe they are.”

“We didn't make this up!” Asriel snapped, before Frisk's right hand reached out and rested on one of his paws. Frisk turned to look at Asriel... actually, their gaze focused on where their hand had gone.

'Guess the only way out is through...'

Frisk breathed in slowly through their nose and closed their eyes.

When their eyes opened again, they were glowing red, and... their posture was different. Their hands came up to rest on the table in front of them and they stared at Dr. Aster.

“Hello Doctor Aster. It's been a while.”

Next to him, Dr. Aster heard a screeching noise as a chair was pushed back, and turned to see Sans standing up, staring at... the human child, with empty eye sockets.

“What the F U C K.”

Despite the gravity of the situation and the tension in the room, Toriel still made a sharp “ahem” sound.

“...Sans? You alright?”

“That's not Frisk.”

“...well. Considering my son has mastered the art of reading faces and interpreting body language to the point where he can guess somebody's LV and EXP without using a bullet analyzer... I'm inclined to believe that much. Still...” Dr. Aster tapped his lower jaw thoughtfully. “...when I was first examining Chara at the queen's request, I said something, off hand. What did I say?”

“If we're thinking of the same moment, then you had a stethoscope on my back and you muttered 'Your body is seventy percent water but you can still drown, how the hell does that even make sense.' And I said 'Is that a real question, or another rhetorical one?' Because you'd been mixing real questions with rhetorical ones since the moment I showed up, it seemed like. And then we just stared at each other for three or four seconds.”

Dr. Aster blinked his sockets, and then relaxed.

“Well... I guess I'm convinced. Welcome back, Chara. Damned if I know how or why, although the Dreemurrs have presented the most likely theory I can think of.” The older scientist turned to his son. “You still need a minute?”

“...maybe.”

“I am sorry for startling you like that, Sans,” Chara turned to face the still alarmed skeleton, “but Frisk, Asriel and I all realized if anyone could confirm that this wasn't just Frisk going crazy or making stuff up, it would be you.”
“...right.”

“Uhm. Excuse m-me. I have a... I have... I would like to ask something.” Alphys swallowed. “Is Frisk... still there, or-”

“We share experiences and sensory input. It is something like driving a car. Frisk is the driver, and I sit in the back seat, watching the world go by. Right now we are switched around.”

“Oh. I... I see.” Alphys swallowed. “That. Uhm. That doesn't sound... you know. Not very good.”

Chara shrugged. “It's not great.”

“Dr. Aster, Dr. Alphys, Sans.” Asgore rested his paws on the table. “We... we have had a tremendous stroke of good fortune. Two children we had lost, returned to us... golly, good fortune doesn't even come close. 'Miracle' is the only word that fits. While the science and magic involved may prove to be very important in the future, we have come to the three of you today with a very specific goal in mind. As things stand now, Chara and Frisk have almost no privacy from each other, and Chara doesn't even have their own body. We know that what has happened recently, especially this revelation on the subject of human magic, will occupy everyone's time and attention, but we wish to enlist your aid in improving Chara's quality of life, in whatever ways you think will work.”

“Keeping in mind that I've already died at least twice, and probably more if we count all that stuff that Jordan did to Frisk. So quality of life is less of a confusing issue than quantity. But hey. No pressure.”

Dr. Aster pinched the bone between his eye sockets.

“Dammit Asgore, I would pay my weight in Gold if just once, just one time, you came to me with a simple problem like fixing your air conditioner or something.”

Asgore grinned.

“Sorry old friend.”

Dr. Aster shrugged. “Well... I have some ideas related to my plans to help the amalgamates. Construct a magical field, find a way to make it self sustaining until we can integrate it with a Soul... I'm not sure how to get around the lack of a Soul yet, since I only saw the one on the scanner.”

“Wait, if Chara is... soulless, like F-” Alphys closed her mouth abruptly with a sharp clicking noise. “Sorry, like Asriel was. If Chara doesn't have a Soul, then-”

“If you're asking what I think you're asking, I'm basically tapped into Frisk's soul. Like leeching off of an unsecured wireless network. So this is something we need to figure out sooner rather than later.”

“Maybe we can reproduce what happened to Asriel? Ugh, I wish I'd been paying attention and following proper procedures then, so we'd have more to work with!”

“Calm down, Alphys. Let's not go off before we're ready and get stuck spinning in circles. We'll solve this one problem at a time.” Dr. Aster tapped his fingers one by one as he checked off elements of a mental list. “Body, Soul, Transference, everything.”

Toriel smiled.
“Thank you, Dr. Aster.”

“Your Majesties. You do need to understand that this is going to take time. I can't possibly compile a timetable for a project based on a phenomena I didn't even know existed when I got up this morning.”

“We understand. We are willing to wait, no matter how long it takes. And money is no object when it comes to this.”

Alphys shook her head back and forth. “There is absolutely n-n-no way we could charge you for something like this. If All Fine Labs goes under I swear I will work on this in my spare time in between b-building websites and fixing people's appliances, or whatever jobs I end up picking up.”

“Do not be absurd, Alphys. We cannot possibly ask such a monumental task of you and expect you to do it for free-”

“Uhm. Can you guys not haggle over the value of my life? I. Uh. I have issues with that.”

“Oh... I am sorry, Chara. I did not even-”

“It's alright.”

“Uh, actually.... Chara...” Alphys rubbed her claws together. “There was a question I was going to ask, after everything was explained. But I got sidetracked. It might be... I dunno. I guess maybe insensitive.”

“Go ahead. Only one way to find out.”

“Okay... uhm. When. After...” Dr. Alphys shook her head. “Chara. When you were. D-d-dead. What was it like?”

“Better than I expected.”

Chara looked around at the various worried faces of their family.

“Actually I probably need to provide context for that statement. In the Guardian compound, where I grew up. They taught us that... when somebody dies. Barring exceptional circumstances which, in hindsight, were means of ensuring loyalty to the group... but yeah, for everyone else, the cause of death and the condition of the body dictates the form taken in the afterlife. So... if somebody dies in a fire. Then they're burning forever. If they drown, then they're suffocating. Forever. The best anyone can hope for is that they die in their sleep. And... even though I knew everything else I had been taught was either inaccurate or a complete lie... I still expected the symptoms that killed me to follow me for eternity. So having that not happen... that was a pleasant surprise.”

The meeting room was silent, until Asriel leaned back in his chair.

“Golly, that's fucking up.”

“Asriel!”

Asriel cringed at his mother's outburst. “Well it is!”

“Oh, Alphys. It just occurred to me you might be thinking of something else when you asked that question. To clarify. I had no concept of the passage of time when I was dead, so from my point of view it was Asriel running, everything going dark, and then waking up really disoriented in
somebody else's body.” Chara scratched their head. “Also, if you're wondering if I was conscious between dying and Asriel absorbing my Soul... I don't think so. Asriel, how long before you did that?”

Asriel looked down at the table.

“...it was... uhm... about half an hour. Mom and Dad were... they didn't want to leave. And. I thought they would try to stop me if they saw me trying to... so yeah. It was... a while.”

“It didn't feel that long. I wasn't even really aware of anything except the pain fading away, and then... it was sort of like waking up, and in the process of waking up, realizing that I fell asleep. And the first thing I saw when I woke up was, well, my original body. So... I didn't have any awareness of the passage of time then.”

Alphys nodded. “I see. Uhm. Not sure if that will be useful for what we need to do. B-but! Thank you for answering!”

“...I need to step back. But before Frisk gets in the driver's seat again. Just one thing. If Undyne knows, that's okay. If Papyrus knows, that's okay. But beyond that. Maybe I should stay secret for a while. Especially from Hal Greene and his friends. I know they lost somebody close to them to the Guardians, and Jordan has caused a lot of grief and fear in this town... I have enough problems dealing with the consequences of my own choices, without Jordan's getting dumped on me through guilt by association.”

“...fair enough.” Dr. Aster nodded. “The situation is already complicated enough as it is.”

“One other thing Frisk just reminded me of. The prolonged exposure theory. I never noticed anything like that when I was in the Underground. But with Frisk being in the Underground before the Barrier was destroyed, and it being over a year and a half later, they probably have the highest levels of ambient magic exposure, so the theory checks out that way. Not that I have any idea how you'd measure that to prove it.”

“eh, we'll come up with something.”

“If you say so... okay. I can't keep this up. Talk to you guys later, probably.”

Chara stared at the table, and their face went slack, the red light fading from their irises... and the child's entire body seemed to flinch.


“welcome back kiddo. you doing alright?”

Frisk ran both hands over their face. “Every time we trade off, I think I'm going to handle it better. I never do.”

“how many times have you... uh, traded like that?”

“Guess this was the third time. Twice yesterday to explain to everybody, and then just now.”

“huh.”

“While I'm not writing off this project before it begins, I definitely recommend you both work out some sort of compromise or stopgap solution as soon as is practical.” Dr. Aster shrugged. “Like I said, there's no way to predict when we'll have discovered anything useful.”
“We will. Uhm. Thanks for hearing us out.”

Dr. Aster stared at Frisk for a moment, then slowly stood up; everyone else in the room took that as a cue to stand up as well.

“Well. This is not what I expected when I walked into this room earlier, but if I didn't want to be constantly surprised by new discoveries then I definitely chose the wrong career. Guess its back to the grindstone for the three of us. Matter of fact, Frisk, if you're not going to be busy for the next ten minutes, I could use your help phrasing what I'll need to say when we announce our theory and results to the world.”

“Sure.”

“Good timing. got a text from Papyrus that the pizza was on its way before we all came in here.”

“Good! I'm starving!” Alphys made her way to the door almost immediately, and Sans chuckled as the meeting room emptied.

When he was the only one left in the room, the smile on his face vanished and he pulled out his cell phone.

10:46 AM: toriel bring asgore back to the meeting room
10:46 AM: dont tell the kids
10:46 AM Mrs. Momedian: What do you mean? What for?
10:46 AM: just trust me for a minute
10:47 AM Mrs. Momedian: Very well, we will be there in a moment.

After a few seconds, the door opened again and Toriel and Asgore walked inside.

“Alright, Sans. What is wrong? I know that this subterfuge can only mean something of considerable importance.”

“You're right.” Sans reached up to scratch the side of his skull. “Yesterday. During the attack on the school. There was a certain somebody that put a big hole in Jordan Cater's shoulder. Not police, and not one of the Shop Class guys like Justin or Joe. Seems that he had a child going to the school and decided to take matters into his own hands in order to keep them safe.”

“...I would be an enormous hypocrite if I did not empathize with his choice. Why is this coming up now, and not yesterday?”

“Because I gave him one of my business cards yesterday, and he left a voice mail I just heard when I checked the system this morning.” Sans sighed. “His name is Jason Taylor.”

Sans could tell exactly when Toriel put the pieces of the puzzle together, because that was when the ambient temperature in the room began to rise.

“Jason. Taylor.”
“Yeah. After Frisk... or I guess Chara, or maybe both of them... well, after Cater got dunked on, I was close enough to hear him say something. He said 'That's my girl.' Like he was proud. And he did tear Cater a new one. That is the only reason we are having this conversation, by the way. If he'd shown up out of nowhere instead of making a good first impression like he did, there's a better than average chance I wouldn't be in for work today, and neither would he, if you catch my meaning.”

Toriel and Asgore nodded, and the queen raised a paw to rub her forehead.

“It never ends. We deal with one threat. Another takes its place.”

“That's the thing. I'm not sure Taylor qualifies as a threat in the same way that Jordan Cater, Thomas O'Dell, or even Dwayne Riley did. At least, not at this time.”

Toriel blinked in surprise, then frowned at Sans. “What do you mean?”

“Just the fact that he was willing to risk his life to protect his kid. It doesn't make up for all of the other stuff. But if he just wanted Frisk back he could have waited to see if Cater could actually take any of us out, and then step in to kill him when he was running on empty. Thinning the competition, so to speak. So his priority seems to be Frisk's safety. That doesn't make him an ally, but he's not an enemy either. He's a wild card.”

The king and queen considered this information for a moment.

“What was the content of the message that this Jason Taylor left?” Asgore finally said.

“...he says he wants to talk to Frisk, but under the-”

“Absolutely not,” Toriel spat. “Either he is responsible for Frisk's overwhelming fear of abandonment and low self worth, or somebody else is responsible, and he stood by and did nothing to protect them. It does not matter to me which. If he comes within twenty feet of Frisk it will be the last thing he ever does in this life.”

“...but under the circumstances he recognizes now is not the best time, is what I was saying. Guy's got a solid grasp of the obvious, I'll give him that much.”

“I must agree with Toriel in this. Even if he is attempting to make amends, Frisk has demonstrated a marked aversion to anything related to their life before the Underground. That aversion exists for a reason. And if he has an ulterior motive or hidden agenda, we would be putting two children in danger, when one is too many. Jason Taylor cannot be allowed to see Frisk. Not after what has happened.”

“Works for me. Just figured I'd kick this one up the chain of command to make sure everybody's on the same page. Or in case he shows up uninvited and unannounced.” Sans reached inside his jacket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. “As if things weren't complicated enough, turns out he came in during Soul Research. For the record, and I might have said this before, sharing a volunteer's data without their consent is against company policy, so I'm only showing you this because the stakes are just that high.”

Sans unfolded the paper to show a black and white picture of a man with an orange light shining inside his chest.

“For comparison, Justin fought in one of the human wars recently. He's LV 3. Cater was LV 4, but he also capped out at 4. Jason Taylor is LV 6.”
Toriel took the paper from Sans, narrowed her eyes at it, and moved it so Asgore could see it better. The King nodded, and the paper burst into flame in the queen's paws, scant ashes falling to the floor below.

“Thank you, Sans. If he should show his face... we will know what to do. Please offer my apologies to the custodial staff.”

Sans grinned.

“hah. you kidding? fires are the least of our problems here... oh hey. in case anybody asks when we head back out there, we were all discussing policy changes and new measures for security at the school next year.”

“That seems... plausible.” Toriel nodded. “Undyne will be suspicious that she was excluded, though.”

“My dear, just remind her that policy meetings do not need war cries, and all will be well.”

Toriel snorted. “Well. That much is true.”

The trio left the meeting room and made their way back to the lobby... where a large crowd of people were enjoying a large number of pizzas. Several boxes had Monster Food scribbled on the lid in black marker, including the one in the center of a circle that included Asriel, Frisk, Alphys, Undyne, Papyrus, Hal, and... a police officer just sitting down on the floor with everybody else.

“Officer Steve?”

Officer Steve looked up at Toriel's voice. “Yep, that's me. Just got here less than a minute ago. A little bird told me that Hal was throwing his pizza party here at the lab instead of at the mini golf course.”

“Cater's stunt yesterday messed with all my plans for the next four days so I'm having to improvise.” Hal raised a fist and shook it in the air angrily. “A pox on all his houses! And his car! And magazine subscriptions, hernia trusses, hearing aids, cookbooks, et cetera, et cetera. Anybody want anymore pineapple and ham? Because if not I'm taking the rest.”

“How can you even eat that?” Officer Steve shook his head. “That's an abomination unto God and man.”

“Ah, but which God?”

“All of them.” The policeman reached out and grabbed a slice of Supreme for himself. “Oh. I also heard some pretty scary rumors through the grapevine that Hal got access to that gadget Joe built somehow and now he can use magic, so if somebody wants to set me straight on that, any time's fine. Ideally before evening. I'd like to get at least some sleep tonight.”

The circle suddenly became very quiet, as did some of the people nearby in earshot. Officer Steve looked around the circle, eyes widening.

“...wait.”

“Sorry buddy. No sleep for you tonight!” Hal grinned.

“...my God. It's happened. It took almost a hundred and fifty years but it finally happened. Ebott's Wake has officially Jumped The Shark.”
“Jumped... a shark? I do not understand.” Asgore scratched his head.

“THAT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE BRILLIANT DOCTOR ALPHYS! NYEH HEH HEH!”

Alphys and Undyne both choked and turned red in response to Papyrus's outburst, but while Alphys shook with mortification and hid her face behind her arms, Undyne shot to her feet and lunged at Papyrus.

“THAT'S IT! YOU'RE GOING IN THE TRASH CAN!”

In a matter of seconds Undyne picked up Papyrus, sprinted towards one of the large plastic barrels used to collect the refuse of the pizza party, and dunked him into it head first. The entire lobby became silent, until there was a thud followed by hysterical laughter as Sans fell over.

“SAAAAAAAANS!” A muffled voice yelled from beneath assorted paper plates and plastic cups and the occasional unfinished slice. “STOP PLAGUING MY LIFE WITH INCIDENTAL LAUGHTER AND HELP ME OUT OF THIS!”
Human / Monster / Magic Integration Program

Objective: To accelerate adoption of magic and magic based peripheral sciences and technologies before human magic competence is capable of creating another Barrier, and in the process making the opportunity cost of turning against monsters greater than the vast majority of humanity is willing to accept.

1. Educational Program
- Magic Primer
- Training Methods
- Safety Protocols
- Magic Technology Fundamentals

2. Agricultural Program
- Magical Adaptation Primer
- Supplementary Photosynthesis
- Climate Manipulation / Adaptation
- Public Relations: Possible backlash from both traditional agriculture and organic farming initiatives

3. Food Program
- Magical Preservation
- Magical Food Prep and Cooking
- Mass Production and Distribution Expansion
- Branding and Licensing?

4. Healing Magic Initiative
- Program to test healing magic, including monster food, on as many human injuries and diseases as possible
- Compile information into reference primer for magical medical assistance
- Workarounds for conditions not affected by magic directly
-Green Magic based technology distributed with medical equipment?

5. Magic Technology Foundation

- Energy: Miniaturized Nuclear Reactors with Energy Magic Converters (Like Mettaton)

- Materials: Magic infused construction materials for fireproofing, flood resistance, superior insulation


- Communication: Dimensional Modem (Dr. Aster and Sans working on it)

- Transportation: Dimensional Magic and Gravity Control, also Teleportation through Dimensional Bridges

6. Obstacles

- How to keep Wave and Force magic technology from being jury rigged to explode

- Keeping human magic use from being discouraged or penalized socially, legally, or economically

- Monsters still aren't officially recognized at the federal level as United States Citizens or Nationals which complicates any sort of legal or lawmaking predictions such as safety regulation or product standards

- Original Anti Monster League membership bolstered by people thinking monsters and monster businesses impacted their lives and incomes; large scale magic will do that on a state, national, and even global level

Frisk stared at the sheet of paper for a few minutes, re-reading the text over and over to be sure they had forgotten nothing, before finally reaching out and carefully tearing the paper along its perforated edge to remove it from the notebook. Several other papers were gathered together and Frisk headed towards the doorway, glancing at Asriel's bed where the monster was reading; the monster child noticed the attention directed his way and looked up.

“Hey. What were you guys working on?”

Frisk held up the papers.

“Long term planning. Dr. Aster didn't say it outright but it's obvious when you put the pieces together that if another Barrier is created, humans will lose access to magic again. So if we get everybody hooked on it the rest of humanity outside of Ebott's Wake will have a vested interest in no Barriers being created.”

Asriel sat up, his legs dangling over the edge of the bed.

“That makes sense. And even if somebody did try to trap monsters, they'd be trapping a lot of humans too. We should have more than enough to break it again. And if they can use magic, they could do it themselves, without any of the... you know. Stuff. That we had to do in the Underground.”

“...right. We can also plan against contingencies where an isolated Barrier is created purely as an
energy sink to drain the rest of the world's magic, or to try to create magic free zones, or stuff like that. Not sure what to do specifically because I don't know enough about the field yet, but Dr. Aster might be able to fill in the blanks.’

“If anyone could, it would be him.” Asriel's gaze returned to the book in his lap.

'Hey. Ask him if found what I was trying to hide in the book.'

“...okay. Uhm. Asriel? Chara wants to know if you found what they hid in the book yet.”

Asriel looked up in surprise.

“Uh... well. There were those cards in the back pocket with the color list and the star data. There was a third card with holes cut out of it. Still trying to figure that out.”

'Does he want any help, or hints?’

“Chara wants to know if you want some help figuring out the solution.”

Asriel shook his head. “I'll figure it out. Eventually. Actually it's nice to have puzzles to work on that I haven't seen before.”

The right side of Frisk's mouth twitched as if it was about to smile.

“Okay then. I'm going to take these down to mom to have her look them over.”

“Alright... hey,” Asriel added as Frisk stepped towards the door. “When you get back from that, do you... I don't know. Want to play a game or something?”

“...yeah. That sounds like fun. What kind of game?”

Asriel blinked, and a red coloring could be seen beneath his white fur.

“I. Uh. Don't know yet. I didn't think that far ahead.”

“...I guess we can figure that out when I get back up here.”

“Right.” Asriel looked down at his book again, and after a moment turned it right side up. Frisk carefully repressed their laughter or any sign of amusement, and headed out of the bedroom.

Once downstairs, Frisk made their way into the kitchen, where the sounds of vegetables being chopped could be heard.

“Unacceptable, absolutely unacceptable... at our weakest moment... hate him so much...”

“Uh, hey. Is now a bad time?”

Toriel jumped as they heard Frisk's voice, and turned to see the child holding some papers.

“Oh! Frisk, you startled me.”

“Sorry. That wasn't part of the plan. Is everything alright?”

“...yes. Everything is perfectly fine.”

Frisk stared at Toriel, and the queen sighed.
“I suppose I should not be surprised that you would not believe me.”

“Well, you sounded pretty angry. And I think those onions are starting to caramelize.”

Toriel turned to see that the onion on the cutting board, held in place by her claw tips, was starting to brown from the ambient heat and fill the room with a delicious aroma.

“Yes... earlier, Sans talked to your father and I about... well. Distressing matters that needed to be discussed. Pertaining to the events of Friday and the attack upon the school. We will need to develop some sort of countermeasures or enhanced security policy to put in place, in case something like this should happen again. And, naturally, thinking about any threat to you, or Asriel, or Chara, or any of my students... I find it difficult to control my temper.”

Frisk walked up next to Toriel and placed a hand on the queen's arm.

“Guess that explains the angry mumbling. Kind of wish I'd thought about it, I would have added it to the list.”

“List?”

Frisk pulled one sheet of paper out of the stack under their arm and held it up. Toriel set the knife down on the counter top and reached out to take the paper from Frisk.

“...I know that while you are grounded your recreational opportunities are limited, but you do know what a vacation is, do you not?”

“Yeah, it's that span of time between school years.”

Toriel snorted, trying not to smile.

“Well. This list seems fairly comprehensive. I can think of some other areas that would need addressing, but most of them will need to wait until these foundations have been established.”

“Like what? What did I miss?”

“You did not miss anything, Frisk, with the possible exception of health advisories for recognizing the symptoms of magical ailments in humans, an area about which almost no information exists anyway.”

“...oh. And that was on the agenda for both addresses too... well. Better to get it out of the way now, instead of having it catch us off guard later.”

“Quite so. And everything else I can think of could only be addressed once all of these fundamentals had been established. Going over them now would be... I forget the specific human expression, but it would be addressing priorities in the wrong order. With your permission, I will have Asgore look over this list later.”

“Yeah. Sounds like a good idea. The more eyes on this the better. By the time we actually start anything the outline should be at least twice this long, bare minimum. Speaking of which,” Frisk held up the rest of the stack of papers. “I explored some of the areas on the main list in greater detail here but I don't have enough information to plan very far ahead.”

Toriel stared at Frisk for a few moments after accepting the other sheets of paper.

“...Frisk. Is there something the matter?”
Frisk shrugged.

“I know that for you guys, yesterday was... a lot to take in all at once. And that was true for me too. Working on stuff like this, it's familiar. I kind of need that right now.”

“I can understand that.”

“Also... if I'm thinking about stuff like this, I'm not thinking about all the bad stuff that's happened over the last three Fridays.”

Toriel slowly nodded, and got down on one knee.

“Frisk... and this also applies to you, Chara. What has happened to you should not have happened. And the fact that it did is indicative of a fault in the world that must be remedied. If you feel disturbed, frightened, angry... that is the proper way to feel. And if you need to discuss those feelings with me, or Asgore, or any of your friends, we will be here for you.”

“...thanks, mom. I think I'll be okay, though. I don't know if Chara wants to talk-”

'When it comes to Jordan, there is nothing to say.'

“Uh... Chara says they're good. Although they put it more eloquently than that.”

Toriel raised an eyebrow.

“I... see. Well. I suppose I should be getting back to preparing ingredients for dinner. When Asgore comes back inside, if you should see him first, please tell him to see me so I can show him your list.”


“Whatever for?”

“...you know. Just in general.”

“Well. In that case. You are very welcome, in general.”

Frisk snickered and let go, and a moment later, Toriel did as well, standing up.

“Before you leave, I don't suppose that either of you have made any progress coming up with a... compromise, as Dr. Aster put it?”

“Well... we've crossed off some options from the list that we know won't work. Process of elimination. Closest we've gotten so far is...” Frisk paused, their eyes going slack, and then refocusing and nodding. “When we were first talking, I got a notebook and pencils out. I'm left handed. Chara is right handed. So we were able to do a sort of dialog using the written word. Incidentally, if you happen to run across a red spiral notebook written with two different types of handwriting, that's ours. Please don't read through it. That was a private conversation neither one of us is ready to share with anybody else.”

Toriel nodded.

“I can understand that, and I will respect this boundary... would something akin to that work outside of the realm of text? Left side, and right side?”

“Maybe. We'd still have to experiment with it. It's our best option so far.”
Toriel smiled.

“That is good to hear... Chara, after what has happened before. I want you to be able to live your own life, when Dr. Aster and Dr. Alphys and Sans have found a way for that to happen. But, just as much, I want you to be able to share in all our lives, our struggles and our triumphs and our hopes and dreams for the future, both before and after. You have waited a long time, and should not have to wait any longer. And Frisk, I appreciate how much strain you are under right now, and I am very proud of you for doing so much to make that dream a reality.”

Frisk's face started to turn red, and they stared at the kitchen floor. “That's. Uhm. That's a lot of praise for not even having an answer yet.”

“I am a teacher. And every good teacher knows the essence of good education is actually teaching students how to ask questions, not answer them.”

“...guess there is that.”

The sound of the back door opening could be heard, and shortly after, Asgore's heavy footsteps. The king shortly appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, running a paw across his forehead.

“Well, the good news is that the backyard's bare spots are all reseeded again. The bad news is that the humidity is staggering outside.”

“This does not come as a surprise, with all of the rain yesterday. Come in, help yourself to something to drink.” Toriel held up the stack of papers Frisk had given them before. “I would also recommend you look at these outlines Frisk compiled. Frisk, would you mind helping us go over them?”

“Sure.”

Toriel nodded.

“Excellent, let us all go into the living room and what are you doing?” The queen's voice turned sharp as she looked up to see Asgore drinking straight from a pitcher filled with iced tea.

“...I wasn't going to just put it back in—”

“See that you do not.” Toriel sighed. “Sometimes I feel like the only adult in this family... that was not intended as a slight, or a precursor to an argument, Frisk. In case you were worried.”

Frisk relaxed, and only in the process of relaxing realized how they had tensed up.

“Oh.”

Seats were taken around the coffee table and Frisk's notes were stacked in the center. The pitcher of iced tea was placed on a series of coasters as Asgore picked up one of the papers.

“Hmmm... education, agriculture, economic and industrial development... wow. You're really trying to cover all the bases here.”

“Well... to be honest, I see this as like the internet. It's allowed a lot of people to connect with each other with common interests in spite of distance and time zones, and it's made information accessible on a level that's never happened before in human history. It's revolutionized business, shopping, communication, education, and everything else. The downsides are stuff like identity theft, persecution, spyware, ransomware, and attacking industries and businesses electronically.
But as bad as that other stuff is, only crazy people would say that we should just shut down the internet. I know that there are a lot of Jordan Caters out there who would treat getting the ability to hurt people with magic as the right to hurt people with magic. So we need to make all of the good stuff accessible to as many people as possible, as soon as possible, so any time anyone says 'we need to get rid of magic' they have so many people pointing out how that would do more harm than good that we don't have to.”

Frisk's face started to turn red again as Asgore and Toriel stared at them.

“Well... can't argue with any of that... for multiple reasons.” Asgore coughed. “This is a good solid outline for a course of action. Although... there is a related issue that we do have to address before anything else is done.”

“Okay, what is that?”

“Well... actually your mother and I were talking about this before Friday, so the timing is, well, peculiar and perhaps ironic. Your mother and I... we both agree that for you to use magic safely, you need to have an education in the fundamentals.”

Frisk nodded. “That makes sense. I suspected there were a lot of things left out of Dr. Aster's book because it was an advanced reference book, and was written with the assumption that whoever was reading it had a grasp on the fundamentals.”

“Precisely correct,” Toriel nodded. “Sans considered you capable of... I suppose the proper expression is 'jumping in at the deep end' and you have certainly vindicated him in that respects. And while I wish that he had said something to me at the time... I can understand in hindsight why he would not. He must have known you were already under considerable strain, and recognized that our attempts to help could do more harm than good. Especially if, as I understand it, you were using it instinctively and had no idea that it was happening.”

Frisk blinked, turning the thought around in their mind, examining it from every possible angle. Being called into the living room, or Toriel's office, without knowing why had always raised the question of why, and was followed by a frantic review of the previous day, week, month, and possibly year trying to find the offending incident or behavior. Being accused of being able to do something they couldn't, or did not think that they could, would not help at all.

“Yeah... the only way I wouldn't completely freak out in a situation like that would be if you ended up phrasing it like wanting to teach me magic to see if it was possible for a human to learn it. And I still would have been really worried about the implications, and anybody else finding out.”

The queen nodded.

“You jest, but you make a valid point. This is an opportunity I am very interested in making the most of, which is why I wish to enlist your help. While I and everyone else is teaching you about
magic, you also need to be teaching us what methods, models, expressions and exercises are working, which ones are not working, if some are working better than others, and why. In this way we hope to have a completely viable curriculum for use the very instant that All Fine Labs is capable of offering courses.”

“That does sound like a good idea, but what works for me specifically may not work for everyone. I'm a visual learner, that's why I could teach myself so many different subjects just from books at the Library. To get a wider variety of workable teaching methods, you'd need to be teaching more humans. Even if they can't use magic yet, it's only a matter of time, so there's no practical reason not to cover at least the safety stuff now.”

Toriel frowned, and for a moment Frisk's heart stopped, but very quickly the frown vanished and Toriel sighed.

“With the benefit of hindsight, I realize that this should have occurred to me much sooner, long before you had to bring it up. I appear to be making mistakes and getting lost in my thoughts more than I realized today.”

“Well, we're all doing the best we can under the circumstances. You and Asriel and Chara might have to drag me out of bed next Friday with a crowbar or giant shoehorn or something.”

“Let us hope it does not come to that. But your point is well made. I will attempt to find other humans who would be willing to join our trial educational initiative as students, to help refine our methods. However, this leads us to another issue. We will be attempting to cover the accumulated magical education, both formal and informal, of almost a decade into just under three months. The time and energy commitments will be substantial for anybody, but especially for somebody with a full schedule or other obligations that need to be met.”

Toriel stopped talking and turned to Asgore, who sighed. “That is why your mother and I have been talking it over, and we think it would be best if you took the summer off as Ambassador.”

“...oh.”

“You aren't fired, Frisk. And the position is still yours, if you wish to retain it after this summer. We are not forcing you out, we cannot stress that point enough.”

“Nobody in the world, we suspect, could have done what you have, especially when we were first moving up to the surface. We would be fools to ignore that, and I would like to think that we are not fools.” Toriel smiled. “We simply wish for you to take a sabbatical for the summer, so that you can devote as much time as possible to your education.”

“...oh.” Frisk nodded. “I guess. When you put it that way. It makes a lot of sense.... Okay. I can do that. Or, I guess, not do it.”

“Excellent.” Toriel claps her paws together. “Our first official lessons will begin Monday, and I will see who else is interested in participating tomorrow. Of course, when it is time to cook dinner this evening, you are more than welcome to watch, learn, and participate.”

“Okay.”

The bedroom door opened, and Asriel looked up to see Frisk shuffle through the doorway, a dazed look on their face.
“...um. I would ask how things went, but... you don't. Well. You look tired and distracted.”

Frisk sat down on the edge of their bed and shrugged.

“Outline was... it worked. It's just. Toriel and Asgore. They want me to take a break from ambassador stuff. All summer. While I learn magic stuff.”

“That makes sense, I guess.”

“I know it does.” Frisk stared down at their feet. “They... they still cared about me when they knew about the magic. They want me to learn even more about it. They were willing to fight to protect me, you, and everyone from Cater. And... and mom is right about me not knowing when I'm in over my head. And the job will still be there when summer is over. I know that this was the right thing to do.”

Hands came up and grabbed on Frisk's hair and pulled.

“So why does it feel like the bottom just fell out of my world?”

Asriel blinked, closed the astronomy book and put it on his chest of drawers. The claws of his feet tapped against the floor as he walked over to Frisk's bed and sat down next to them.

“...because you've been doing that since monsters moved to the surface. And it's something you love to do.” Asriel reached out and rested a paw on Frisk's shoulder. “And I know... from hospital. You put everything you have into trying to fix things. Saying you have to give that up, it feels like being told that you can't make anything better. But you have made things better. And now you need time for yourself... Frisk? This isn't the end. Not for you, or me, or anyone else.”

Asriel raised his paw and Frisk felt him pat them on the arm.

A gesture that meant everything.

“Frisk... don't you have anything better to do?”

Frisk blinked, and dropped their gaze to the flowers, as Asriel did.

Had they missed something? There had always been a way out. Always a way forward. Toriel, Papyrus, Undyne, Mettaton, Asgore... everybody. And now, monsters were finally free.

Asriel had given up his second chance for the sake of his family, his friends, and everyone in the Underground. Even if Frisk could manage to start all over again... he'd remember. Just like he did the second time. Frisk did not know what would be worse to see on Flowey the Flower's face if they tried. Anger, disgust, or just sadness.

Maybe there was no way forward from here. Not for Asriel, anyway. Maybe not everything could be fixed. Maybe not everyone could be saved.

Frisk bowed their head, and turned and walked away from the Golden Flowers, shoving their hands in their pockets-

Their pockets were full.

'You think about why you're here now... you can feel the empty space in your inventory getting smaller and smaller!'
Frisk pulled their left hand out of their pocket, fingers wrapped around something hard and spherical and warm to the touch. It looked like... like the stars in the Underground, pulsing with light, but separated from the rest of the world by some sort of obstruction or field.

Frisk stared at the sphere, and knew with unshakable certainty what they held in their hand. Slowly, they placed it back in their pocket, careful and gentle as if the fate of the world depended on it. Because for at least one person it might.

Asriel stood up straight as Frisk's hand reached out and landed on his arm.

“This is not the end. Not for you, or for me, or for anyone. No matter what I have to do. No matter how long it takes. I swear I will make everything right.”

Frisk gave Asriel's arm what they hoped was a reassuring pat, willing him to remember, to believe, to not lose hope, to not give up, even when he transformed back into a flower... and turned back towards the rest of the cavern.

'There's a limit to what you can do today.'

It was time to think about tomorrow.

Frisk began the long trek back to New Home and the exit to the Surface, with a Soul bursting with Determination and a pocket full of Dreams.

Frisk sat up straight, and turned to face Asriel. With his white fur that always stuck up on his forehead and his paw pads and his little claws and his gentle eyes and his smile and yes, his snootle that stuck out that Frisk was constantly tempted to mess with.

It had taken a while. A year and a half. But Frisk had been more than willing to spend the rest of their natural life trying to make it happen.

And since it had, maybe what was important wasn't the year and a half before, but the years yet to come.

Maybe success was more important than speed when attempting the impossible.

'Maybe you have literally anything better to do than sit around and make yourself feel bad.'

Frisk smiled, and leaned over, wrapping an arm around Asriel.

“Yeah. It's not the end... oh.” Frisk grinned. “You said you wanted to play a game but didn't have one in mind. Usually on the weekends the guys at KEBT do a call in quiz. Want to test your knowledge?”

“Sure, sounds like fun.”

“Awesome.” Frisk hopped off the bed, walked over to their desk, and flipped on the radio, adjusting the dial to try to avoid the static.

“so don't bother bringing your umbrellas unless you want to block the sun as well. Or you just carry an umbrella everywhere for unrelated reasons. Like it's part of your work uniform or religion or something like that.”

“Now that raises a question. Are there human religions that require umbrellas?”
“Uh. None that I know of, but I'm hardly an expert in comparative theology. Didn't come up when I was getting my Journalism degree. In any event, we're going to be starting our call in trivia show Trivial Concerns just after the break, and if you are going to call in, please limit yourself to answering the questions we ask on the air. There is a time and a place for more questions about human magic and what happened yesterday and according to these papers in front of me it's still about forty minutes away so please, please save them until then.”

“In the meantime, enjoy this musical interlude courtesy of the Spooky DJ himself, the one and only Napstablook, branching out into the world of Spookstep! Keep it tuned here for more KEBT!”

Chapter End Notes

I was going to do another quiz thing here but I am really sick for some reason so that's not likely to happen any time soon. Sorry.
“Hey welcome back to the Morning Rush, we are almost ready to hand things off to Beanpole's Request Line featuring Clutch McGee, but there is the matter of the final round of Trivial Concerns. Before we touch on that, though, here are the answers to the last round's unanswered questions because almost everybody decided to pester us about stuff we already told you that we don't know. Thanks for that. Burgie you wanna do the honors?”

“Sure. Okay. Answer one is 'The Hypotenuse.' Answer two is 'The Montgolfier Brothers.' Answer Three is 'A Grinder.' Answer four is 'The Portuguese Man O' War.' Answer five is 'Gerald Ford.' And the final answer, number six, is 'Robin Hood: Men In Tights.' Which brings us back up t-”

The sound cut off as Dr. Aster's hand reached out and flicked off the radio, then picked up a pencil and started tapping it against the side of his skull as he stared at the clipboard in his other hand.

1. The man who appeared on the video in the CORE, who was he and why was he there?
2. The energy in the time loop in the CORE when it shut down, where did it go?
3. The human magicians that created the Barrier, did they know that it would drain magic from the surface world?
4. Frisk was seriously hurt by Jordan Cater's firearms attack; was that because they were already saturated with magic and it responded to his killing intent?
5. How does the fractured Soul connect with Frisk's ability to use magic? Is the fractured Soul unrelated to magic use entirely? If it is unrelated, how did it happen and what does it mean?
6. Sans says Frisk told him there is another “star” on the surface now. How do we detect and study it?
7. Is there a way to insulate Frisk from anti-photon interference so we can continue that research without hurting them?
8. Need a wider cross section to accurately scan magic energy gradients on the surface; can I add something to the satellite? Can the satellite's mission be modified?
9. Can we launch the satellite ourselves without using human rocketry? Is that economically feasible? Are there legal obstructions?
10. How, exactly, did Asriel's magic field get rebuilt, and can we reproduce the phenomena for the amalgamates?
11. How do we establish a link between a monster soul and an external magic field? Can we induce field generation inside the Soul itself?
12. Asriel appeared to absorb a fragment of Frisk's Soul and use that as a base for his new Soul, can we reproduce that phenomena for Chara? Is it possible to create a Soul artificially using the resources we have on the Surface? If not, can we reproduce the transplanting effect?
13. If we combine a transplanted, regenerated Soul with an artificial magical field, Chara will be
reborn as a monster. What kind of monster will they be??

14. Memoryheads are made of rejected elements of the amalgamates. Can we reconstruct the original monsters with new fields without the elements that make up the Memoryheads? If not, how do we separate each bad memory from the Memoryhead for proper integration?

15. If we can, what happens to the Memoryheads when their monster progenitor is rebuilt without them?

After a few moments, Dr. Aster stopped tapping his skull with the pencil and added to the list.

16. Why the hell can't I stop thinking about Dr. Ross?

“So, Lars. Elijah tells us you work at the Exchange Trust! That must be very exciting!”

A plump, smiling woman with a hint of gray in her hair poured some coffee into a mug, and a large, three fingered reptilian claw carefully picked it up.

“Well, when you work security, exciting means that your job just got a lot harder, but there have been a few times when protesters would gather outside. Those were, well, interesting."

“Security, you say?” A man with a shock of red hair and equally red sideburns and mustache tapped an old, hand carved pipe out and stared at the dragon monster. “When my son said you worked at the Exchange Trust I thought you were working in finance, or possibly politics. But I suppose a large organization needs all manner of different jobs done.”

“And don't dragons always guard treasure anyway?”

“Oh my god mom stop,” Elijah mumbled, covering his face in both hands. Lars the dragon coughed awkwardly, causing a puff of smoke to come out of his mouth.

“While that has been traditionally true, it's not necessarily a, uh, it's not a mandate. I have two sisters that both work for Mettaton, one as a graphic designer and one as part of his filming crew.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun!”

“Yeah. They're, uh. Full of stories.” Lars carefully put down the coffee mug. “So, uh, I've kind of monopolized the conversation, such as it is. What do you folks do?”

“Oh, you know, typical old folks stuff.” Mr. McGraw lit his freshly reloaded pipe. “Putter around the house and the garage, feed ducks by the river, write angry editorials about how all the youngsters are doing everything wrong despite our generation doing everything right trying to raise them up. Anything to keep busy so that dementia doesn't set in.”

“Oh, and baking! Pies and cookies and brownies and cookies... did I say cookies already?”

“You did, Mrs. McGraw.”

“See?” Mr. McGraw pointed at his wife with the stem of his pipe. “That's the dementia, right there.”
A coaster flew through the air and bounced off of Mr. McGraw's head. The man did not seem to notice or care.

“You seem... awfully cavalier about that.”

Elijah sighed. “Yeah. Full disclosure. The McGraw family DNA is mostly Scots-Irish. Without going into detail on how human genetics works, that's where we get our stubbornness, our dark sense of humor and our alcohol tolerance.”

“...oh.” Lars blinked and looked at Mrs. McGraw. “So that was just, like, an affectionate act of violence.”

Mrs. McGraw grinned. “Exactly! See, you get it! I have to say, Elijah, I don't understand why you were dragging your feet all this time on bringing your new boyfriend over for coffee. He fits right in!”

“Well, at least as well as a seven foot winged lizard can fit in to a house this size.”

“Seriously dad?!”

“I'm not making a value judgment, I'm just stating a fact.”

“Are you sure?”

“Course I'm sure, I'm the one saying it. Who else would know what I'm saying better than me?”

Elijah stared at his father. “That question is not even wrong.”

“Well there you go.”

“Lars, dear,” Mrs. McGraw interceded, “do tell me you will be able to join us for Little League this year? We always go to all the away games to cheer on our grand nieces and grand nephews because somebody certainly isn't trying to make us grandparents.”

“Seriously? You're going to do this now.”

“Oh, ease up on Elijah honey. We both knew we were never gonna get grand kids outta him a long time ago.”

“For the last time dad, I'm not gay, I'm bisexual. I do not have to 'pick a side', and anybody who says otherwise is an idiot.”

“That's not what we're talking about son.” Mr. McGraw blew a smoke ring into the air. “I knew when you were a kid and you kept rewinding The Great Mouse Detective and watching that scene where the cartoon mouse does a burlesque show over and over again, that you were... eh. Different.”

“Ugh.” Elijah let his head drop to the table, causing everyone's drinks to shake. “I'm in hell. I'm dead and this is hell.”

“So... you look good.” Hailey flinched. “I-I mean. You look like you're doing okay.”

“Yeah. Monster food in a nutshell. So. How's. Stuff. At the radio station and... stuff.”
“It's okay. Stuff's... okay.”

Hailey and Joe both relaxed as a flaming green waitress brought their menus.

“If you two need anything else, just let me know. Oh, is everything on one check?”

“Uh, yeah.” Joe started to raise his right arm, gritted his teeth, and held up his left hand instead. “I got this.”

“...okay.”

The waitress walked away and Joe sighed. “Once Dr. Alphys finishes my new arm, first thing I'm going to do with it is wring Thomas O'Dell's neck.”

“...wouldn't that be murder? Since he's no longer a threat?”

Joe shrugged. “It's not a perfect solution.”

“It never is. Even if you could get away with it.”

“Yeah, but what're you gonna do.” Joe turned his menu over. “Huh. I actually can't remember the last time I was able to sit down for a normal meal... I mean. One that wasn't for a special occasion. I can remember Thanksgiving.”

“How are you still alive?”

“Eh. Hand to mouth mostly. Stuff in the vending machines at work. One of my old college student recipes when I get home at night. Sometimes somebody will get takeout from a restaurant and bring it to the lab.”

“...that doesn't sound safe.”

Joe shook his head. “We keep actual food and drink out of the test chambers and workshops. Or try anyway.”

“Oh. Good. I wish everyone at KEBT could be as careful as that. I've had to clean more than my fair share of microphone wind guards and somebody's been leaving peanut shells in Studio B for the last week or two. No idea who, though.”

“Wow. Mystery peanuts.”

“If you want to put it that way.”

The waitress returned and pulled out a pen. “So, is everyone ready to order?”

Joe looked at Hailey, who nodded. “Uh. Yeah. I'll just have the special, but no guacamole. I don't like avocados.”

“Alright, Sancho Supreme with no guac, and you sir?”

“I'll have the, uh, the combination plate with rice.”

“Alright, Combo Plate with rice. Do you guys want anything cooked monster style?”

Hailey nodded. “Yes, everything.”
“Same.”

“Okay. Everything monster style. I'll be back soon!”

The waitress hurried back into the kitchen, and Joe stared out the window.

“...Joe? You there?”

“Yeah. Sorry. My mind's going in odd places. So... so, I got this thing in the mail a couple weeks ago about a class reunion. I wasn't going to go but I figure a robot arm and revolutionizing several fields of science might be something I can rub in a few faces. How about you?”

“...ah. I. Thought you might be going with Crystal Wiseman actually.”

“Who??”

“...Crystal Wiseman?” Hailey raised her eyebrows in half surprise, half emphasis. “The girl who asked you out to the Y2K Sadie Hawkins dance?”

“...Oh. I remember that, or at least the planning and setup. I never ended up going. I was kind of hoping you would ask me, but that never panned out, so I ended up playing Command and Conquer Red Alert most of that night.”

“But... Crystal stopped me in the hall after Trig and said she'd already asked you. So I didn't... oh my god. She said she asked, she never said you were going oh my god I'm an idiot.”

Joe blinked. “Wait. You were going to ask, but you thought that...?”

Hailey sighed and nodded.

Joe leaned back in his chair and reached up to rub his forehead with his remaining hand.

“Why, that snooty, stuck up bitch.”

“Hmmm.... 'Dear Mr. Van Garrett, we regret to inform you that we cannot accept your manuscript A Shower Of Sparks at this time. Victorian and Edwardian Steampunk has fallen out of favor in terms of reader demographics, and to attempt to publish any work in this genre will result in a loss for the foreseeable future. By all means, please apply again in approximately six years time, when our projections indicate the genre will see a resurgence.' Well, that might or might not be bullshit but at least they're polite about it.”

Michael Van Garrett pulled open a filing cabinet, pulled out a very thick manila folder labeled Rejection Letters And Notes and slipped the letter inside. The folder was placed on the man's desk as he opened another envelope.

“Okay... 'Dear Mr. Van Garrett. We will not be accepting your manuscript for publishing at this time, for the following reasons. Steampunk is ultimately a projection of the future through the social customs and technology of the past, and A Shower Of Sparks inverts this format, projecting historical technologies and customs into a world with a social and political landscape defined by more modern concerns than politicians were concerned with in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Additionally, the use of colloquialisms and informal language runs directly against the genre convention of erudite conversation. Ultimately, you cannot simply include airships, steam engines and dragons in a modern conspiracy thriller novel and call it steampunk.' ...wow. Rude.”
The second letter joined the first in the manila folder, and the librarian moved on to the third envelope.

“Third time's the charm... 'Dear Mr. Van Garrett. We will not be accepting your manuscript for publishing at this or any other time. We have contacted a hazardous materials team to dispose of it safely and urge you to destroy all of your remaining copies, as well as any and all tools that were used in its creation up to and including your own hands, for the sake of future generations so that they may never again be menaced by the mistakes of their ancestors.' Oh. That's real funny.” The librarian glared at the letter. “Bet you wouldn't be such a dick if I knew who you were. Oh wait. That's right. I do.”

The filing cabinet was opened again and Van Garrett pulled out another manila folder with *People I Am Going To Punch In The Dick* on the label. The rejection letter was placed inside, and both folders were returned to their original locations just as a crashing noise was heard from elsewhere in the house.

“The fuck!!”

The filing cabinet was closed and Van Garrett grabbed the fire ax leaning against his desk, slowly walked out of his office, and into his bedroom there was a repetitive knocking noise coming from the closet door. Carefully, Van Garrett reached out and slid the door open, to reveal...

“Hey Mike. Little help?”

“Hal... why are you in my closet?”

Hal looked up (or perhaps down) at where his left foot was somehow tangled up in assorted clothes hangars suspended from a rod in the closet, leaving the mechanic hanging upside down by one leg.

“I don't... know.”

Mike stared at his friend for a few seconds, then sighed and slid the closet door shut. A few seconds later, after Mike had walked out of the room, a muffled voice called out from behind the closet door.

“Hey Mike, can I have this shirt?”

Justin picked up a piece of metal that resembled part of a boss monster's horn, then immediately dropped it.

“Damn. It's still crazy fucking cold. What is that, the magic at work?”

Sans shrugged and held up one hand, causing the horn fragment to glow blue and float up and into a plastic bag with a label written on it in black marker.

“don't think he was trying to infuse ice magic into the metal like that. or at least, can't think of why he would want or need to do that. probably a side effect of fumbling around with stuff he couldn't do yesterday.”

“That makes sense.” Justin walked over and tapped another piece of metal with his boot. “I'm not complaining but it was like the guy completely lost what little competence he had as soon as he got magic.”
"I dunno, buddy. I saw what he was doing at the school. He may have been all over the place but he was able to outmaneuver and overpower quite a lot of people."

"I'm not arguing that. I'm just saying before he got there, it looked like he wasn't firing on all cylinders. I mean, even when I was trying to wreck his shit during the ambush with Joe and Steve he was going back and forth between devious and dumbass."

"how'd he get ya, anyway?"

"Oh, that was all my own fault. I started talking when I should have just kicked him in the face until he stopped moving or his teeth reached escape velocity, whichever happened first. Used up both charges in the watch to dodge his attacks and once I lost the advantage of speed... well. He who hesitates is lost."

"maybe not. you're still here."

"I am. Not sure why or how. I know he tried to stab me in the chest. I don't know why he didn't follow through."

"if he ever wakes up, maybe somebody can ask him." Sans shuffled over and picked up another piece of metal, frost spreading on his glove as he did. "he sure went to town on the flowers. guess that makes sense if he was allergic, but if he was allergic why come to where the flowers were in the first place?"

"The statue's here. Or it was before it got scattered everywhere."

"right, the answer is in the question... man. that puts what Chara was saying in a whole new light."

"Hmmm?" Justin's eyebrows shot up, and Sans shrugged.

"apparently back when Chara was getting sick, they started talking about seeing the golden flowers again. they really liked them for some reason... gotta wonder if that was related to their dad being allergic to them."

"...yeah. Hmmph. If Jordan Cater was my dad, I'd like anything that could hurt him too. And climb a mountain nobody returned from to get away from him."

The sound of frozen grass and flowers crunching underfoot prompted Sans and Justin to turn around to see who had joined them. Justin immediately looked back at the icy park.

"Hey Steve. What do you know?"

"Cater's still unconscious. O'Dell's done something smart for once and decided to lawyer up. Triton wants in on some of the action, apparently a few of the New Guardians were doing some unsocial stuff on their turf first. Far as I'm concerned there's more than enough assholes to go around, but I get the feeling the guys above me in the chain of command are going to get territorial."

Justin shrugged. "Bigger the brass, smaller the brains."

"Pretty much. What's the ETA on getting all this, uh, magic ice stuff cleaned up?"

"Gunther's bringing a truck and a shovel. once we have some samples to look at we'll try to get the worst of it out of everyone's way. probably take a few hours."

"Any health risks from stuff you miss?"
“Yeah.” Justin held up his hand. “Stuff's cold as hell. Not sure if it's enough to cause frostbite on contact but it really stings.”

“Alright. Guess I'll call that in after a bit.”

“...a bit?”

“Yeah. We're the only people anywhere near here. Where's the fire? I mean, come to think of it. Would fire reverse this? Or just make it worse?”

“depends a little bit on if it's magical fire or a chemical fire but mostly things would probably get worse.” Sans moved another piece of metal with blue magic. “there's still a lot of Cater's intent to harm in the magic infusion, and that always makes things more complicated than anybody wants them to be.”

“Alright. You're the scientist.”

“yup.”

The trio stared at the park again, until Justin pulled out his phone.

“It occurs to me that I haven't heard from Hal in about half an hour, and that's making me nervous as hell.”

“Me too.”

“me three. oh and when you get a hold of him, tell him we still have that tuba at the lab since he forgot to take it home with him. or left it there on purpose for some reason.”

Officer Steve shrugged. “I wouldn't rule it out.”

“Wait. If you're two different people, but you're sharing the same body... what do you do when you have to go to the bathroom?”

'Ah, yes. Undyne. What she lacks in tact she makes up for in boorishness.’

Frisk snorted in suppressed laughter even as their face turned red. “Mostly we try to think about something else. Anything else, really.”

Undyne nodded. “So, how does this work? Frisk has the right side, Chara has the left side? Or is it the other way around?”

'...hey. That's not a bad idea. We should try that.'

Frisk's right eye began to glow red, and their right hand came up, opening and closing their fingers.

“Something like that.”

Undyne stared at the human child.

“Oh. Okay. That's new.”

“It takes some getting used to, apparently. You're handling it better than Sans did at least.”
“Really?”

“Yeah.” Frisk nodded. “He looked like he'd seen a screamer video on the internet.”

“Huh. Well, at least the voice thing means I can tell you two apart. So...” Undyne turned to Papyrus. “How you holding up after that bombshell, buddy?”

The skeleton scratched his skull.

“I AM NOT ENTIRELY SURE WHAT IS GOING ON. I MEAN I GRASP THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THE PHANTASMAGORICAL COEXISTENCE EASILY ENOUGH, BUT... WHO EXACTLY DID I MAKE FRIENDS WITH AGAIN? WAS THAT ALL FRISK, OR ALL CHARA, OR AM I HALF FRIENDS WITH BOTH OF YOU? OR IS IT A PERCENTILE FUNCTION? THE MATHEMATICS ARE NOT AT ALL STRAIGHTFORWARD!”

The human child's head turned to face Papyrus.

“While I was present during and observed your interactions with Frisk, I was not participating in any significant way. Having said that, if you are open to the possibility, I would like to attempt to become friends with you as well.”

“FRIENDSHIP INVITATION ACCEPTED! WE CAN ENGAGE IN ALL MANNER OF SPAGHETTI, ROBOT, AND PUZZLE RELATED ACTIVITIES TOGETHER!”

“Robots are more Frisk's thing, but I am always interested in new puzzle developments. And I have watched your culinary skills grow and expand over the past year and a half, so that is definitely something to look forward to. And maybe if I can borrow both of Frisk's hands for an afternoon, I have a lot of recipes I would love to share.”

From the lowest steps on the staircase, Asriel and Dr. Alphys watched the spectacle of Papyrus enthusiastically planning out means of becoming friends with Chara at high volume.

“Papyrus really is great, isn't he?”

“Huh?”

Asriel nodded at the skeleton. “Nothing ever throws him, or even slows him down.”

“That is... an accurate assessment.”

Asriel yawned and shook his head.

“You alright, Asriel?”

“Tired. Didn't get much sleep last night.”

“...bad dreams?”

“Yeah.” Asriel sighed. “The, uh. The worst thing I ever did as a flower, I did to Frisk... so I ended up doing it to Chara as well. So... I'll be lucky to only have nightmares every night for the rest of my life, under the circumstances.”

“...oh.”

“Yeah.”
Alphys tentatively put a claw on Asriel's shoulder.

“Asriel... I don't know what it is you did. I'm not sure I'd want to know, even if you were willing to tell me, which I doubt. But... I do know what it's like to be so filled with regret you start to choke on it. So. If you need to talk about. Call me, or text me, or stop by the lab or the house. Any time, day or night. Okay?”

“...okay.” Asriel managed to smile. “Thanks, Alphys–”

“THAT! IS NOT! HOW MATH WORKS!” Papyrus declared, and Asriel and Alphys both turned to watch Undyne laugh herself into the fetal position. Toriel took that moment to appear through the kitchen doorway carrying a tray filled with multiple dishes. Asgore trailed behind her with a teapot in one hand and a pitcher of iced tea in the other; both king and queen took in the spectacle with a certain amount of confusion.

“Ah... dinner is served, everyone. Papyrus, will your brother and father be joining us?”

“THAT IS AN UNLIKELY CIRCUMSTANCE! BOTH ARE UP TO THEIR CERVICAL VERTEBRAE IN SCIENCE!”

“Well then, in that case I shall be sure to send home plenty of leftovers. While I am not an expert in the field, I do not think it is easy to do science on an empty stomach.”

“THAT IS VERY GENEROUS YOUR MAJESTY, AND I THANK YOU ON THEIR BEHALF!”

A peanut shell was cracked open between various fingers, and the peanuts themselves extracted with practiced ease as their owner watched the doors to the radio station. Eventually, a cat monster in a leaf-patterned T-shirt and tan cargo pants walked out, stretching and popping his back and showing off a long pink tongue inside a mouth filled with sharp teeth.

“Hey Burgie.”

The cat monster stopped in mid stretch, looking around until he spied the person eating peanuts.

“Lindsey? You're the Peanut Vandal?”

“Okay, first, that is a stupid name and Clutch needs to try harder in the future. Second, yes. It's me. Apparently women in my family have pregnancy cravings really early on.”

“What? What are pregnancy cravings?”

Lindsey shrugged and crushed another peanut between her teeth.

“They're these things where the body doesn't have enough chemicals to make everything for a baby, so it starts sending out signals for the most obscure foods and food combinations. Pickles in ice cream is like the classic example, but I'm not that far gone yet.”

“...wow. Weird.”

“Yeah. Hey, can we walk and talk?”

“Sure thing. What's up?” Burgie jogged over to join Lindsey as she began to walk down the street.
“Well. I've been thinking a lot lately. About... this kid. And what happens next. And I've decided I really do want to have it.”

The monster heard the incomplete sentence despite Lindsey's lack of inflection. “But...?”

“But... I'm not... a hundred percent sure I would make a good mom. I mean, you've heard the stories about my mom, and how crazy she was. The whole town has. I don't make a secret of it, and a third of my radio career is built on it. The thing is... if any of what messed her up is genetic. Then that means I have it. And for all we know, so will the kid. That's... that's not really fair. But even if it isn't genetic...” A shelled peanut fell out of Lindsey's hands without her noticing. “I don't... really... know what a good mother looks like, or how to be one. I have a lot of experience in what not to do in a given situation, but that doesn't mean I know what to do in that situation. I could still screw up hugely. And that wouldn't be fair to the kid either.”

“...so do you-”

“I don't want to put them up for adoption. The social services and child welfare departments in Lost Eagle County were not there for me when I was younger, and I wouldn't trust them with any child of mine even if they have improved, since they got swamped with all the Guardians' kids before and after the raid.”

“Wait, what happened?”

“It was in that paper that Dr. Stanton published, the timeline of events.”

“Oh. Haven't finished it. Or... started it.”

“Right. But... what I'm saying is... I don't know what the kid's going to be like. I don't know what this pregnancy is going to do to me. I don't know if I can raise the kid right. I don't know if the kid's already got two strikes because of my crazy DNA. I don't know what will happen if word gets out that a human and monster are having a baby, but I'm guessing a lot of people are going to start arguing about shit that's not any of their damn business and do it really loud.” Lindsey sighed. “The only thing I do know is that... I can't imagine having anyone else by my side trying to do all this. I just... wanted to know if you felt the same way.”

Burgie stared at the road in front of him for a few seconds.

“I'm not going anywhere, Lindsey. I was just... I freaked out because I didn't even know this was possible. But... I want to be by your side for the rest of my life. Even when we're panicking because we have no idea what we're doing. Although if I'm honest I really hope Google can help with that.”

“Yeah, me too.” Lindsey took one hand off of the bag of peanuts and grabbed Burgie's paw, and the cat monster grinned.

“Wait, what's with that look?”

“I can't believe you're worried about the future like this, Lindsey. Think about it. You got me to quit smoking. If you can do that? You can do anything.”
Footsteps echoed on the tile of the corridor, the orange light where sunlight should not, could not exist casting peculiar shadows. Jordan Cater looked behind him; he couldn't remember how he had gotten into the Underground. In fact, the last thing he could remember was... being shot. And then, the treacherous child. Telling him... something.

“So... looks like you're going to live after all.”

Jordan's head whipped around so fast it probably should have snapped from the forces involved. He remembered that voice easily enough.

“Chara? Where are you?”

Part of the shadow cast by one of the pillars moved, stepping forward until the tips of its shoes were in the light.

“The doctors and the police are working together to keep you alive and safe, so that you can stand trial in a court of law. Judged by a jury of your peers. That's then. Now... Byron Thorton... Dr. Roger Thompson... Herman Harrison... John Cobb... the list goes on and on. Why?”

“...they were in our way. They had to be... removed.” Jordan swallowed. Before he had lost hope of ever seeing Chara again, when he saw his child's body in the clutches of a terrible beast... he certainly didn't imagine a reunion like this.

“...well. That's your opinion. I won't Judge you for it. That's not my responsibility. Not now. But... consider this. All the lives you've taken. All the lives you've ruined. Every single one of them was somebody else's Chara.”

Jordan blinked, and stared at the shadow. Slowly, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“Do you understand now? Look inside yourself. Have you really done the right thing? And, considering what you've done... what will you do now? Take a moment to think about this.”

Red.

That was what Jordan Cater had forgotten.

What part of him had wanted to forget.

Red eyes. Red light. Words that cut deeper than any mere physical weapon could. And then... then everything went black.

“What I did... I did... because I had to. My family was gone and my world hanging in the balance.

“In the end, it doesn't matter what you say to me. All that's important is that you were honest with yourself. What happens next....”

Chara sighed, and Jordan could see the child's shoulders sag.

“I thought that my survival was some sort of cruel punishment, forcing me to see all the lives I'd
ruined, all the people I hurt. I was prepared to say my apologies, and my goodbyes, and spend the rest of eternity here, fighting you, trying to stop you from hurting anyone else.”

The shadowy figure seemed to stand straighter and taller.

“But that's not what happened. I don't understand why. But the people I care about... want me around. Even... even in this state, between life and death, leeching off the life of another. I don't understand it... but maybe that's okay. Maybe I don't need to understand them. Maybe I just need to trust them. And... thinking about it some more... I might as well. Even if they did hurt me, the worst they could do would still be better than your best.”

“How can you... Chara. Whatever has happened to you. You're still my daughter. I know you remember that.”

“...I remember a lot of things, Jordan. Like having hot stones thrown at me, and being called a demon child, and being told that I belonged with the monsters. I suppose even a broken clock is right twice a day.”

Jordan sighed.

“...I did not enjoy any of that, Chara. The world outside the compound is always hostile to people like us. You needed to... you needed to know how to deal with hostility and adversity. I thought I was preparing you for the outside world. If I'd known you were going to end up fighting the monsters, I would have... I don't know. I could have taught you how to fight. I should have.”

“...all this time and you think that was what you should have done different.”

Chara walked forward, out of the shadows, and Cater finally saw their face.

Or at least, what was left of it.

Chara opened their mouth; desiccated lips pulled back from their teeth, and black ichor spilled out with each word, just as it streamed out of their hollow, lidless eye sockets.

“If you really care about me... then you won't come back. Leave us alone. Let Asriel, and Frisk, and Toriel, and Asgore, and me... let us live our lives. Because if you don't, if you come after us again, you are really not going to like what happens next. Don't say I didn't warn you.”

Chara turned, walked into the shadow of the pillar, and vanished.

The door slid open with the slightest of sounds and Toriel scanned the room; Asriel in Frisk's bed this time... eventually they would need to get a third bed, but there would be plenty of advanced notice from All Fine Labs. Also the spare room would need to be converted into another bedroom. Either Chara or Frisk would need more privacy than their, well, unique condition allowed previously... probably Chara, as they had nothing to really call their own for a long time.

Toriel tried not to let herself think about what the child's experiences must have been, as an observer too afraid to speak up and make their presence known. Instead, she tried to focus on balancing all the plates in her arms. Two slices of pie on Frisk's desk, and one on Asriel's chest of drawers; trying to put them all on the floor would result in at least one being dropped, waking everyone up.

“Good evening mom.”
Toriel jumped slightly, then shook her head.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. And I know my influence does strange things to Frisk’s voice.”

“It is alright.” Toriel turned and smiled at Chara. “I was simply preoccupied. How are you faring, my child?”

“Okay. Still going over what happened today in my head.”

Toriel nodded. “Undyne was a little bit... energetic.”

“That was alright. I always admired her enthusiasm, even when she was chasing Frisk through Waterfall. I was thinking more generally.”

“Ah. Well. Today was rather busy, even when compared to the excitement of yesterday.”

“That is true.” Chara held up their right hand and stared at it. “I. Uh. I did something that was very foolhardy earlier.”

“Hmmm?”

“I tried to reach Jordan. To tell him to leave us alone.”

Toriel blinked.

“...you used Red Magic?”

“Yes. I think he was dreaming, based on what I saw. I don't know if what I told him made any impact. Or if my challenging him made him angry enough to try again later. But I had to try... well, actually, no. I didn't have to try. I just wanted him to listen to me, for once in my life. Or his life, as the case may be.”

Toriel walked over to the child's bed, and took their hand in her paws.

“Whatever happens, we will deal with it when the time comes.”

“...mom, do you think even the worst person can change? That anyone can be a better person, if they just try?”

Toriel looked down at her children, and closed her eyes. Behind her eyelids, a memory played out of a photograph bursting into flame in her fingers. And then, another memory. One of a young human child dodging back and forth, trying to avoid fireballs, but adamantly refusing to surrender, retreat, or retaliate.

“I do not know. But I do know that the only way anyone can find out is if that person tries.”

“...that makes sense. I guess all we can do now is wait and see... thank you. Uhm. It's late. I'm sorry for keeping you up.”

“It is quite alright, Chara.”

The child closed their eyes, and Toriel let go of their hand, and watched it seek out Asriel's paw. The young monster made a mumbling, snuffling noise, and scooted closer to Chara. Slowly, Toriel walked back towards the door, turning to look at her children one more time.

“Mom...”
“Yes?”

“I don’t remember if I said it before. So I’ll say it now. Thank you for giving me another chance. Thank you for letting me be your child again.”

A massive paw came up and rubbed at the fur around Toriel’s eyes.

“You will always be my child, Chara. And it is I who wish to thank you, for coming back to us.”

“Do you think maybe that was the purpose of my... reincarnation? So I could be with you guys again?”

“If there was a reason behind it, then that was as good a reason as any. And better than most.” Toriel smiled, her fangs reflecting what little light was in the room. “Even if I am biased.”

“...yeah. This is good.” Chara smiled and shifted in the bed, snuggling closer to Asriel. “Good night, mom. I love you.”

“I love you too, Chara. Good night.”

A long time ago, a human fell into the Underground.

Toriel, the queen, found them in the Ruins and took them into her home.

The queen feared that if she let the human proceed to the rest of the Underground, they would die.

Monsterkind had been trapped underground for ages, and all that stood between them and freedom was a single human Soul.

But the human convinced her to let them go.

The door to the Ruins opened, and the human stepped out.

Across the frozen trails of Snowdin Forest.

Across the dark and lonely tunnels of Waterfall.

Across the burning stone of Hotland.

At every step, every turn, monsters struck the human with bullet after bullet.

But...

The human would not fight back.

With words and deeds, they turned enemies into friends.

Finally, the human made their way to the King’s Castle, in the city of New Home.

King Asgore Dreemurr, who had lost his son, Prince Asriel, to the humans.

King Asgore Dreemurr, who had lost his adopted child, the first fallen human, Chara.

King Asgore Dreemurr, who had sworn vengeance and declared war.
The human spoke to King Asgore.

And the King stayed his hand, and the human theirs.

The War was over.

Suddenly, the cavern was filled with a brilliant light.

Prince Asriel, who had died to the humans on the surface, had been brought back.

But Asriel was without his Soul, and his body was that of a flower.

His existence was one of misery and torment.

Using what power he had, he stole the human Souls that the king had gathered.

He prepared to steal the final human's Soul, to become godlike.

But the human recognized the prince from the stories.

They reached out and called his name.

With the souls inside of him, Asriel could feel once again.

And with the power of the human Souls... he remembered.

Together, with everyone's power, with everyone's determination...

With the hearts of every monster beating as one...

The Barrier was no more.

The human led their new friends out of the Underground, into the sunset.

On the Surface, the human spoke to other humans about matters great and small, working tirelessly to bring all monsters to the Surface.

And the Underground became empty.

Even the prince, who had transformed back into a flower without the power of the Souls, joined the human on the surface.

And one day...

The prince returned. With a new Soul, and a new body.

This is the Surface world now.

Monsters and Humans, living in peace.

Monsters and Humans, working together.

Monsters and Humans, side by side.

So remember.

When you are sad. When you are lonely. When you don't know if you can go on.
Remember that no darkness lasts forever.

Remember that you have people who care about you.

Remember that anything can happen.

And no matter what happens today, or tomorrow, or any of the days after...

* Stay Determined.

Chapter End Notes

It's the end.

Of THIS story, I mean. There's still more to tell.

If I could wax introspective for a bit... Ebott's Wake started as an idea for an art based ask blog that was destined to never happen, because I'm not an artist. But the ideas I had for the slice of life stuff and my theories about what a Post Pacifist world would actually look like took over my brain until I gave them form in the written word. (Happens all the time.) And one day, I was talking to my best friend, LadyAnatares, who had already been writing her own Undertale stories, and she convinced me to share my ideas.

We all know how THAT ended. :P

The original plan for the story was for about sixty chapters, and the focal point of the main arc was a custody dispute between the Dreemurrs and the Taylors. Yeah, those were simpler times. A lot of stuff changed when Jordan Cater showed up; there's a reason that he is called the Usurper. But despite his meddling... here we are.

As for where we go from here, I have a few ideas:

A. The Prequel Fic. All about what happened to Frisk, the monsters, and the people of Ebott's Wake in the immediate aftermath of the Barrier being destroyed.

B. The Spin Off Fic. Actually I have several spin offs in the works now, but this is the oldest and so far largest. It explains the deal with all the energy in the time loop when the CORE was shut down, and what happened as a result. But first, we have to talk about parallel universes....

C. One Shots. A series of otherwise unrelated events that all happened in the Ebott's Wake timeline. Including but not limited to the time that Frisk was asked what time it was and proceeded to explain how a clock works.

There are other things in the pipeline, but those are the big three. And for better or worse, I am likely to end up writing all three at the same time. Juggling multiple projects appears to be my default state of being. So... if you like the sound of any of those things, then... those are probably things that you might like.
See you soon, Partners. :)
The Stinger

The whine of the electric motors cut out, and Bob the Temmie hopped off of the cart. Limbs stretched out impossibly, removing plain brown cardboard boxes from the stack behind the seats, lifting them up and carefully placing them on the monster's back along with a clipboard. Bob proceeded up the sidewalk to a house practically festooned in antennas, satellite dishes, and cameras.

“Third time's the charm,” Bob grumbled, and one leg stretched up to press the doorbell.

From inside the house came a surprised scream, and scant seconds later there was the sound of breaking glass as a skinny man with thick glasses jumped out of a window and started running down the street.

“YOU’LL NEVER GET THAT PROBE ANYWHERE NEAR ME, RETICULAN SCUM!”

In moments, Quentin Forsythe had disappeared into the distance, and Bob sighed, reaching up towards the clipboard in order to fill out a *Sorry We Missed You* note.

“I hate this job.”

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 Works inspired by this piece: [It's as Easy as Riding a Bike (Ebott's Wake AU)](tg) by [tigertigertigger](tg)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](tg) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!