This time make your purpose

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This time make your purpose

by Rainbow_Sprinkles

Summary

So I should act like this is really happening, because it probably is, which means I’m actually groping a stranger’s arm to ascertain the veracity of the statements of an androgynous ten-year-old.

Monsters come out of the mountain. Nobody said this was going to be easy.

Notes

Raise your hand if you were emotionally violated by Undertale. Everyone. Is that everyone? I think that’s everyone.

This can be read as a sequel to Don’t you have anything better to do? but that can be read as a prequel to virtually any canon-compliant post-pacifist story, so. Do what you will. I don’t require that you read that one before this.
There is some smex later (way later). I wouldn’t call it smut, because it isn’t really anything you can fap to. Just... those of you who try will spend more time laughing than fapping, probably. There is no in-chapter warning for the sex, or for anything else. Make sure you keep the tags in mind as you read.

This story features a chronically ill/medically disabled character and some medical gore and jargon relevant to that. Health of all kinds is a theme. Take care of yourselves, readers.
This moment means everything for their future and Frisk has no idea how to handle it.

They knew enough to stop everyone from running off after they got out. They know they can’t just show up in a human town trailing monsters of various appearances. People would panic.

Chara remembers what happened to Asriel and scowls in Frisk’s head.

It is obvious Frisk has to tell somebody. Then that somebody can meet their friends and decide who to tell next because Frisk doesn’t know how that works. How it will work. Neither of them has memories of making it this far. That doesn’t mean it never happened, in another time, but... remembering has been a blessing and a curse.

The first obstacle is to find a suitable human adult to tell. There are several problems with this. Frisk doesn’t talk unless they have to. They... don’t like it. They also have no idea what the correct human adult will look or act like. Frisk has not had good experiences with human adults, but Chara’s had worse, so asking Chara to speak to one for them is out of the question.

Toriel was worried about letting Frisk go alone, but they aren’t alone, not really. Not with Chara. Sans promised to be nearby. He is the one Frisk will introduce first. If they get a violent reaction, Sans can take a shortcut and get them out of danger. And anyway, the rest of their friends are just inside the forest past the field of flowers at the base of the mountain. They aren’t far at all.

Frisk makes it to the little shelter near the road. It’s a bus stop, but it looks like it hasn’t been used in a long time. There is a town a short walk down the road in one direction and an open expanse of fields in the other. Frisk isn’t from the town. All they know is this bus stop. This is where they were left... was it really only two days ago?

They aren’t stupid. They know nobody will come. They know what a lie looks like.

They sense Chara hesitantly lean against them in their shared head. Chara still does not trust themselves to comfort someone else. Some of their earlier attempts always ended in angry outbursts, even if the anger wasn’t directed at Frisk.

They sit on the bench. They can take a little break. They need to brace themselves for what they have to do.

Instead, their mind just kind of blanks out. They realize they are tired. They wonder how big the Underground actually is, how far they must have walked.

Do you think Asriel has done what he needed to do? Frisk asks Chara.

Chara’s desperation to save Asriel was the reason for a portion of the RESETs after the barrier fell. Chara wanted him to come with them. Frisk wanted that too, but Asriel refused, every single time.

This time, Chara said something vague about Asriel refusing because he has something to do. Frisk didn’t push. There is a lot Chara still needs to talk about, but there is no rush (Frisk hopes there is no rush).

I don’t know, Chara replies curtly. Frisk’s thoughts are drifting, but Chara is very attuned to their senses right now, constantly scanning their surroundings for any sign of a threat. Or a human adult. The two are equivalent to Chara. Before you ask, I don’t know how long it will take him to change
Frisk goes to hold their left hand with their right – Chara is left-handed, Frisk is not, so they each tend to use their dominant arm – but Chara brushes them off. Frisk is hurt for a moment, but then they catch some of Chara’s thoughts and it’s something like *might need both hands for self-defense* and they understand.

The sun is almost completely down now. Two joggers and five cars have passed the bus stop. Nobody has looked at them twice.

*Maybe try for someone small,* Chara says. They aren’t entirely comfortable with Frisk’s silence, so they do most of the talking in their head. *Someone we might be able to FIGHT off if we need to.*

Chara, that’s why we have Sans keeping watch, Frisk reminds them. Chara does not reply to this. They don’t trust Sans. Frisk wants to, but they do know they can at least trust Sans to put forth the effort to make sure this goes as well as possible. After Sans and Frisk split off from everyone else, Sans told Frisk it would be great if there were no more RESETs. He said it very casually, but Frisk knows there was more to it than that.

They didn’t promise him anything, though. They couldn’t. They never had total control over the RESETs and SAVEs and LOADs. There was Chara, but... they also felt compelled, if they are being honest. As if it wasn’t just them and Chara.

Frisk’s phone buzzes. It’s a text from Toriel: *Dear Frisk, I hope you are well. Papyrus has asked me to tell you he believes in you and that you should keep his lazy brother out of trouble. L-O-L!* *I know this is a big job, but we know you can do it. You are very good at making friends and I have no doubt you can help us befriend the humans. Good luck!*

*Sincerely, Toriel*

*P.S. If you get hungry, do not hesitate to tell Sans.*

Frisk feels a smile sneak onto their face. It’s going to be hard, but they can do it. They have people they love now, and they can do it for them.

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Ha. I seriously overestimated myself this time.

I stop on the side of the road, almost wheezing. It’s no surprise that my piece-of-crap body isn’t cooperating with my attempts to get healthier, but I never thought it would be *this* hard.

I lean my hands on my knees, head bowed. The sun has almost set. For how bad I feel right now, it’s a good thing I decided to wait to make an attempt at running. It’s summer, if I’d gone this afternoon I would have passed out from the heat.

By the time I’ve made a dent in my body’s oxygen debt, I can stand up straight again. Too fast. My vision swims. Ugh. I guess I’m walking home.

Five minutes and I see the kid is still sitting at the abandoned bus stop. That makes my decision for me. I cross the road and jog to the bus stop. The child sees me coming from a long way off. They
are perhaps nine or ten. Their gender is just as ambiguous as their race: short, straight, dark brown hair, dark olive skin, half-closed eyes, skinny.

I stop in the doorway to the shelter. The child curls up more, knees pulled up to their chest, gaze darting around, measuring the space they are in. Oh. Oh, that’s not good.


They (at least if or until I am corrected) stare for a while longer, then nod hesitantly.

I wait for another moment, but they don’t say anything. I walk into the shelter. The kid stiffens, but I pass them to sit on the other end of the bench. I don’t want to be right about this kid, but if I am they probably won’t volunteer much information and I can’t afford to spook them.

“What’s your name?” I ask, looking out at the road.

I count. Eight seconds pass before they speak. Their voice is quiet and slightly raspy. “I’m Frisk.”

“Frisk. How old are you?”

Another pause. They put both hands up, all fingers extended. “You’re ten?” A nod. “Are you waiting for someone here? Do you have someone nearby?”

Another nod. The kid lowers their legs and scrapes the toes of their dirty sneakers in the soil. They sit up straight and open their mouth to speak. Close it. They try again, then raise their right hand to cover their mouth.

I know what a traumatized kid looks like. I saw one in the mirror for years.

I did not specialize in children and adolescents, but I have confidence in my ability to handle this. I just need to keep in mind that kids take things more literally than adults and cannot process abstract ideas as easily.

Frisk steals a glance at me. “It’s okay, take as long as you need,” I tell them. “I’ve got time.”

I think I’m going to regret my sorry attempt at jogging tomorrow. My knees already feel swollen. Better sleep with my painkillers in case I can’t move when I wake up. That is one of the worst everyday things that can happen: waking up, realizing you’re almost in too much pain to move, then remembering you left your pain pills in the bathroom. When I lived with my parents I could just yell for one of them, or my sister, but I’ve been living on my own for almost ten years.

Well, that’s not entirely true. I stayed with my parents between semesters, but most of my college years were spent at school.

“I...” Frisk says, clearly struggling. “I have some friends who need help. We...” their voice cracks, but it seems to be from disuse, not emotion, “we need to talk to somebody. They... aren’t human.”

I blink. Must have misheard them. Their voice is quiet, after all. “I’m sorry?”

“They aren’t human. They’re... magical creatures. They call themselves monsters.”

I cock my head to one side. Alright. I’ve got a traumatized kid who uses fantasy and escapism as coping mechanisms. Or they hallucinate. I suspect they were abandoned here, because this bus stop has been abandoned for decades, according to the locals. I’ve only been here for a month.
“You don’t believe me,” they say with obvious sadness. They hunch back up, making themself small again.

“I can help you,” I reply, instead of confirming or denying their statement. “I’m willing to help, if you’ll let me.” Because I have no idea what kind of trauma this kid has been through, and if I call the cops and have them taken to a psychiatric hospital against their will that could make it so much worse. I’m not stupid. People become disconnected from reality because reality became impossible for them to deal with. The solution is to make reality easier and not harder by lying to them and locking them up and immediately drugging them up without first assessing their symptoms and the possibilities of drugless interventions.

“What if I showed you?” Frisk asks. “What if I showed you one of my friends?”

Perfect. I’ll either see nothing or it will be an animal of some sort and I can slowly draw this child back with logic and then maybe we can get somewhere. I don’t have enough information, but I don’t think I want this kid returned to whoever is legally responsible for them. There is a lot of folklore surrounding Mount Ebott. I have heard stories about bottomless pits that swallow lost travelers and beasts that shamble into town to steal children. The stories are probably utter bullshit, but everyone seems to agree that anyone who climbs the mountain never comes back down, and if everyone knows it then Frisk’s guardian or guardians were assholes for choosing to leave them here.

Frisk pulls out a phone and types something. Then they slide off the bench, slowly, watching me out of the corner of their eye. They don’t beckon me – I wait to see if they do – they just stand in the doorway of the shelter and wait for me to move on my own.

I stand and follow them when they walk behind the shelter. To my surprise, there is someone already back there. I didn’t hear them approach, but—

Slippers. This person is wearing slippers. And. And above the slippers are a tibia and fibula. Nothing else. No muscles, no tendons, no skin. And my gaze goes up and – yeah, that’s a skull. Bone with no skin on it.

I immediately begin to methodically eliminate possible explanations for what I am seeing. I pull out my phone, begin to read my latest text from my sister – I can read, not dreaming. I take my pulse – it’s normal again, despite my lung-stabbing run. No heatstroke. My arms are free of needle marks, fortunately – I never reached that point, even at my worst, but me shooting heroin still seems more likely than whatever this is. The last non-magical option is a schizophrenic break, which is unlikely, given my lack of risk factors and the fact that Frisk can see this skeleton (right?) too.


Um. He wants a handshake, right? But what if an outstretched hand during a first meeting means something else for skeletons? What if I unknowingly commit a faux pas?

Too damn bad. I don’t think I can be blamed for not knowing skeleton social norms. I reach out with my left hand to accept the handshake.

As soon as he grips my hand, a drawn-out, wet fart noise breaks the awkward silence. Frisk instantly scowls at him.
“Sorry,” he says, dropping his hand to reveal a small whoopee cushion in his palm, not sounding sorry at all. “Couldn’t resist.”

He’s grinning, but he’s been grinning since I rounded the corner. Hasn’t stopped. I decided not to carry weapons when I went for my run (if I run again. This was an experiment, and my body protested very loudly). If someone else is going to hurt you on a jog, you’re most likely to get hit by a car, and what good is a pocketknife against that?

I usually feel safe enough with just the knowledge that I can incapacitate someone with my hands, but I don’t know if that’s true here. This is a skeleton and he doesn’t have lungs, right, so I couldn’t choke him out. Actually, does he have a brain? Is it possible to knock him unconscious? He obviously has bones I could break, but I don’t actually know if I could break them, because from where I’m standing his tibia and fibula look a lot thicker than I know humans’ to be, what if all his bones are like that—

“Kinda shocking, I know,” Sans continues, tone very casual, like this isn’t a big deal. “So you offered to help Frisk. Real nice of ya. But, uh, I think you get the gist of why we need to talk to somebody.”

Almost forgot about the ten-year-old who is clearly very comfortable with the skeleton. It’s kind of jarring, since they acted so wary of my approach. I’m not scary, I’m five-three and one-ten, on a good day. Sans might be five inches shorter than I am – maybe less, since I get the impression that he’s slouching, not that I know what skeleton posture is supposed to look like – but he’s wide. I have muscle and skin and vital organs and a bunch of other squishy body stuff I’m assuming he doesn’t have, but even if I’m denser than he is, he’s bigger than me, and I have no idea how to take him down.

But I probably shouldn’t assume I’ll have to take him down. Frisk, who came off as a scared kid when it was just them and me, is far more relaxed now and appears more concerned than afraid. Concerned about my reaction. Sans has not done anything objectively threatening, since I’m not about to count showing up because I’m not some closed-minded prick who automatically hates people who are different from me, even though defying the fucking laws of science is about as different as you can get.

“This is a prank, right?” is what comes out of my mouth. “You got a camera crew hiding somewhere?”

Frisk shakes their head. “Nah,” Sans replies. He pushes up a sleeve of his hoodie and offers his arm to be inspected. “I’m real. See? Bare bones and all.”

I reach out and poke his radius. It’s solid. I slide my fingers in the space between his radius and ulna (I was right earlier – the gap isn’t as wide as it is for humans) fingers curling around the bone. It’s warm. That’s weird. Right? I don’t know the rules that apply here.

So. This is officially Real. Or at least Real For Now. I’ve never hallucinated sober before, but I don’t think I’m hallucinating, which leaves Real. So I should act like this is really happening, because it probably is, which means I’m actually groping a stranger’s arm to ascertain the veracity of the statements of an androgynous ten-year-old.

I thought me going for a jog was as weird as today would get, but. Proven wrong.

“Okay,” I say, pulling my hand back. I’m mostly numbed out from shock, but there is a part of me that wants to get a biology textbook and get the skeleton out of his clothes so I can diagram the differences in structure. Another part of me wants to be therapist for Frisk because their fear of me
is an enormous red flag.

...I never actually told Sans my name. Might be a good place to start. “Um,” I say instead. Come on, brain. “I’m Isla. I live in town. I, uh... need more information before I figure out what I can do to help, but...” Fuck it. “Actually, I need to sleep on this. So you can both crash at my apartment for tonight, and tomorrow, after my joints are done yelling at me for my pathetic attempt at a run, we can talk like adults who have no idea what the hell is going on, because I have no idea what the hell is going on.”

Frisk looks inappropriately delighted at the swearing, which is weird because I usually have a great mouth-filter. There are tiny white lights in Sans’s eyesockets, I realize. Pupils? He blinks. He’s been blinking. He blinks, how does his bone-face do that...

“Great,” Sans says lightly. “There are, uh, more of us.”

“Right.” Someone unhooked my mouth from my brain. “I suppose you’ve got a living scarecrow or jack-o-lantern, too. How many?”

Frisk points one finger at Sans, two fingers at themself, then tacks on five more before holding their hands out.

“All right,” I agree without really thinking about my apartment’s spatial compatibility with eight... people. “Sure.”

There is a sudden awkward silence. Sans keeps looking at my twitching fingers. Frisk nudges him. Sans looks at the child and apparently they can communicate like that because the skeleton turns back to me and says, “Do you want... to see some magic? Would that help?”

I must be obviously struggling. “Um,” I say. “No. No, I don’t think so. Maybe tomorrow. If you’re still there.” If I haven’t gone totally nutters. My brain can be a little... unreliable. Even so, I can usually pinpoint triggers, and I can’t think of anything that might have brought this on.

“So, uh,” I articulate, “Where are your... friends?”

It goes well, considering.

None of them had any idea of what to expect – well, perhaps Toriel and Asgore did, but neither of them shared. They were the tensest out of the six monsters, even compared to Alphys, who gets nervous over everything. An attack would have been the worst possible reaction, but running and screaming would have been a close second. This human went directly into shock, which is fine. Not ideal, but Sans knows better than to expect ideal. He knows better than to be optimistic at all.

She hesitates but ultimately agrees to follow them just into the woods, where Sans gladly lets Toriel take over. He isn’t sure he likes the knowledge that everything he does actually matters now. He craved it during the loops, wanted nothing more for time to stop turning back, and now that it has, he isn’t sure how he’s supposed to feel or react. He wants to keep doing as little as possible and kinda hates himself for wanting that.

One thing he definitely has to do is tell Toriel about Frisk’s behavior. The kid was fearless wandering through the Underground, but they almost acted scared of this other human. Sans half-
expected Frisk to trot right up to the first human they saw and explain things, but they waited for someone to approach them. None of that can mean anything good.

During introductions, the human (Isla, right? He can work with that. Vision puns shouldn’t be too hard) stops them almost immediately and, expression deadpan, apologizes and asks if she’s supposed to bow or something because she doesn’t possess the social script for this situation. Toriel, naturally, immediately dismisses that suggestion and requests that she simply address everyone by their names. Asgore has no protests, but Asgore always kinda disliked decorum. He preferred walking around and getting to personally know his subjects to waiting in the throne room for people to report to him. Hell, even when he did wait in the throne room, he was always gardening.

Isla makes exactly zero promises after Toriel provides the general explanation as to why they were under the mountain and why they are here now. Sans couldn’t see Frisk’s soul color until he fought Frisk – no. He didn’t fight Frisk. Not this time. And even in the other times, he has doubts that was Frisk—

But that’s a tangent. He cannot see the color of a human’s soul unless he fights them or draws it out for some other purpose. No one can. Sans can see other things (LV and EXP, for example) more easily than others can. Almost all monsters can sense if someone has malicious intent towards them. Papyrus can’t. Sans loves his brother more than anything, but damn if a little cynicism wouldn’t have saved his life in some timelines.

But the fact that his brother sees the good in everyone and wants everyone to be great like him is why Sans loves him so much. He doesn’t need to change, ever, and Sans would be lying if he said he wasn’t worried about the impact surface life and humanity might have on Papyrus’s idealism.

The human reacted okay to his brother. An initial wariness – she actually flinched at his volume – and then a small smile. It’s only a short interaction, but she takes his childlike innocence into account without talking down at him.

He can’t see her soul color, but he’s pretty sure he already knows what it is. He’s good at guessing that sort of thing.

While Toriel gives a brief overview of magic and its capabilities, Sans glances at Frisk. They see the look and come to stand by him.

“I’m lacking that sense of déjà vu,” Sans says quietly, so no one else hears. “How ‘bout you, kiddo?”

Frisk tenses up and shakes their head.

“So we’ve never made it this far before?”

A shrug. They don’t know either. Sometimes knowing about the timelines without actually knowing what happened in different ones was beyond frustrating. Sometimes Sans had the sense to acknowledge that if he had that knowledge, real memories, he probably wouldn’t want them. He doesn’t want some of what he already (and now irreversibly) knows even though it’s better that someone knows and it’s better that someone is him.

Frisk leans towards him and wraps him in a side-hug. “I can’t say for sure, but I think it’s over,” they say. They pull back before Sans remembers to put an arm around them or pat their back or something. Shit, did he really forget how hugging works? That’s sad.
He tries to salvage it by squeezing Frisk’s shoulder. They shoot him a smile like they know this physical affection thing isn’t something he does often. Then he realizes that maybe they do know that and he almost sighs. “I hope so, kid. I really hope so.”

So my brain isn’t retaining information like it should.

I don’t have a near-eidetic memory anymore. I lost that after the PTSD caused my amygdalae to swell and my hippocampi to shrink to eighty percent of their original size. But I still have a damn good memory compared to the general human population and I’ve asked Toriel to repeat herself three times now. Is this what stupid people feel like? I really hope it’s the shock and my intelligence comes back soon. It’s kind of the only thing I’ve got going for me.

I had an oh shit moment when I saw everyone and I realized Sans is a lot smaller than some other monsters, I guess. His brother’s almost seven feet tall and Undyne and Toriel both hover around seven-and-a-half feet. Asgore easily clears eight even without taking the horns into account. He looks like he’d be capable of tearing apart a car with his bare hands (and horns), let alone a human.

Only Alphys and Sans are shorter than I am and they still both have more mass than me. Well, maybe not in Sans’s case, but I’m not willing to bet on that. He looks thick, with the clothes, but Papyrus’s attire makes it obvious they really are just skeletons. Skeletons with a handful of weird magical quirks, yeah, but when it comes to body parts I’m used to, they’ve just got bones.

When Frisk saw Toriel, they immediately ran to her and hugged her. She smiled down at them with something like maternal affection, though I couldn’t be sure. I’m obviously not very good at reading the expressions and body language of creatures with snouts and horns and fins and without skin and noses and maybe I am beginning to freak out just a little bit.

It helps that these people do seem nice, though that might be more situational than indicative of their true personalities. They kind of have to be nice if they want to come out of the mountain.

Then again, Sans tainted his first impression with a fart joke. Maybe I’m reading too much into absolutely everything. That seems likely. I have some trouble separating my professional life from my personal life.

“I can call my dad,” I say. “He’s a dentist. I know he’s got at least one politician for a patient. After that... I don’t really know what they will do.”

Right then I understand it’s not going to be easy. My brain does tend to have hyper-reactions to anything that can be perceived as a threat, but once I get past that reflexive reaction, I am generally very open-minded and empathetic (it’s a job requirement). Not everyone is like that. It’s not right (convenient, but not right) to apply stereotypes to individuals, but I am under the impression that a good portion of politicians are assholes, and they will likely be the ones these monsters need to speak with.

And then there is Frisk, who is a minor. That’s going to cause some issues.

My brain moves too quickly in too short a span of time and suddenly I’m talking. “I presume the goal in the short-term is to obtain legal rights for your people. Whatever direction you go with that – whether you want to be recognized as an individual kingdom or as citizens of this country – it’s going to take a while. The magic is going to be a problem. That is the biggest reason I suspect a lot
of people won’t believe you exist, and that’s an acknowledgement you need before you can do anything else. Regardless, you need a plan of what you’re going to do if it goes wrong, since I can guarantee you’re outnumbered.” As long as ‘under the mountain’ means under the mountain. Mount Ebott isn’t very big. “And none of you will be allowed to legally care for Frisk until you get rights. Instead of going into foster care, I’d expect the government would want to keep them around for questioning.”

Oh, I really touched a few nerves with that one. Frisk stiffens. Undyne scowls and says, “If ANYONE tries to take Frisk from us, I’ll punch them in the face!!” For emphasis, she smacks a closed fist into her open palm.

That’s another thing. “Assuming this works, none of you can raise a hand against a human, even to defend yourselves. Which presents a problem, because I’m sure you’ll need to.”

Papyrus looks confused, then happy. “We won’t need to defend ourselves! We just want to be FRIENDS!! I’m sure once we explain that, the humans will want to be friends too!!”

I’m not. In fact, given the option between the two, I would bet on the opposite happening, but in the short time I’ve been here I have found Papyrus incredibly likable and I don’t want to smash his happy-world fantasy.

Frisk leaves Sans’s side to go to Toriel. “I wanna stay with Mom,” they say, voice clear, if quiet. Then they turn to Asgore. “And Dad.”

Toriel looks sharply at Asgore in response to this. He drops into a crouch when Frisk nears him and wraps them in a hug. Alphys tries and fails to hide an “Awwww!” behind her hand. Frisk whispers something to Asgore that has him tearing up, which surprises me.

Toriel’s gaze softens and she turns back to me. “We understand that there will be problems integrating into human society,” she says. “We thank you for your advice and for offering to get us in contact with the people who can help us and I hate to ask more of you, but would you be willing to meet us here again tomorrow?”

“Tori?” Sans says unexpectedly. “I don’t think that—”

I cut him off before he can point out that they have no idea if I’m trustworthy, even though he would be right. “Don’t be ridiculous,” I say, which maybe I should not have said because even if she’s not insisting on being treated like a queen, that was still kind of rude. “You’re all coming back to my apartment. You need to write... something. A treaty, or something like that. You need to make plans, and you need to write them down, because there are countless situations to consider.”

I stop talking when I finally notice that Papyrus and Undyne have taken to staring at the sky. The stars are just beginning to show. The awe belongs on Papyrus’s face, but Undyne has been half-glaring at me since I walked into her line of vision and it’s kind of strange to see her looking like a toddler playing in the snow for the first time.

They aren’t the only ones, either. Asgore, still holding Frisk, stands, and Frisk points out Polaris to him. My brain latches onto near stars and distant stars and stellar parallax before I can force myself to pay attention to the body language of the people around me instead. My head does that sometimes.

Alphys is alternatively watching the sky and Undyne, for whatever reason. Toriel’s really the only one paying attention to me. She nods slowly, also looking around at her friends. “I suppose you are
right,” she agrees. “Perhaps it would be wise to plan as much as we can right now.”

Her gaze keeps flicking upwards too. “We should probably wait until it’s completely dark to start walking,” I say. “Less chance of anyone seeing you.”

“Way ahead of you,” Sans says. He walks twenty feet into the flower field and promptly lies down on his back.

Papyrus marches over to him, puts his hands on his hips, and looms over him, blocking Sans’s sight of the sky. “Sans, I feel very strongly that your presentation of stargazing is merely an excuse to lie around and be lazy.”

“Nah. I’m stargazing right now, see?”

“I am in your way!”

“And you’re a real star, aren’tcha, Paps?”

Papyrus’s face does this thing that makes it look like he’s trying to smile and frown at the same time. “I still don’t approve of your puns, but you are correct to point out my very conspicuous brightness, so I will let this one slide. JUST THIS ONCE.”

Alphys is telling Undyne, “I think we’re in the Northern hemisphere, I recognize some of these constellations from b-books I’ve read,” and Frisk has fallen asleep, head on Asgore’s shoulder. He holds them one-armed and bends down to examine the flowers with his free hand. Toriel quietly sits on a half-rotted stump, glancing periodically at Frisk.

We’ve got a bit of time, so I stretch. Maybe this will deter my muscles from hating my guts in the morning.
Grief: mental suffering or sorrow in response to affliction or loss.

The town I live in is small and hardly anyone is outside or paying attention to what is going on outside after dark, so the walk home is not a problem. The phone call is the problem.

My parents are overprotective. It’s well-intentioned and loving and not entirely unjustified. I almost died twice in the span of a few months when I was twelve, and after that they watched me spiral into PTSD-hell. They had no idea how to handle me when I was refusing to sleep and going into screaming fits whenever someone slammed a door just a little too hard and carrying knives (because that was the next-best thing) around everywhere. They did the right thing and stuck me in therapy, which worked, but we were all struggling pretty badly for a little while.

I’ve got six people calling themselves monsters and a human child in my apartment and my cat has leapt onto the counter, bristling. I step around Toriel so I can let him know these people are friendly. I tell him, in my command voice, “Bean, down.” He stops posturing, but doesn’t exactly relax, since they must smell strange to him.

I am unsurprised when Papyrus darts forward. “Hello surface animal! I am the GREAT PAPYRUS!!” Thankfully, he understands that my cat cannot talk and turns to me, smile about to break his face. “What is this furry critter called!?”

“His name is Bean and let him sniff you before you pet him,” I reply. Papyrus reaches out a gloved hand carefully, which Bean sniffs suspiciously. Apparently finding nothing offensive, he leans out and rubs his head against Papyrus’s hand. I scoop him off the counter and dump him into a delighted Papyrus’s arms.

I gesture around vaguely. “So... you guys can sit where you like. Bathroom’s down the hall.” Maybe they don’t need it, though. At least in the skeletons’ case, though asking someone if they excrete and how isn’t something you do to anyone you met a couple hours ago. “You can help yourselves to whatever you want in the kitchen.” Not that I know what kind of food they eat. “I’m gonna call my dad.”

I flee into my bedroom. This turns out to be pointless, because as soon as I close my door and turn around Sans is somehow standing there in the middle of my room and I almost shriek because what the hell.

Instead of asking him how he did that, I say, “Do you need something?” in a totally neutral tone.

“Just wanna make sure you’re doing what you said you’d do,” he replies.

Oh. He wants to hear me call my dad and not the cops or someone else. Understandable.

I don’t call my dad, though. I call my sister. She answers the phone with, “Fuck you, I was asleep.”

Unlike me, Shannon likes to do active things and routinely works out in the morning. I’m not offended or guilty because this is a damn good reason to wake her up. “How soon can you get here?” I ask.

That wakes her up. A slew of questions comes from her end of the line. “Are you sick? Are you in the hospital? Have you been sleeping? How old do you think you are right now—?”

It’s good Sans can’t hear her. “Shut up,” I interrupt. “It’s nothing like that. I’m fine. Everything’s fine. I...” should absolutely not tell the truth on an unsecured phone line. “I, um... I got roommates.
You need to meet them."

A beat of silence. Then, “You woke me up and freaked me out over roommates? Also, roommates as in plural? I thought you had a two-bedroom apartment.”

“I do. Just... I can’t really explain over the phone. I need you and the parents to come out here as soon as possible. So how soon can you get here?”

“Are you drunk? On drugs?”

Not an unfounded speculation. Still good that Sans can’t hear her. He’s watching me, body relaxed, but something about his face has me watching him, too. He’s not actually going to pull anything, but I feel like he wants me to feel threatened by his sudden (magical?) appearance and presence.

“No, Shannon.” For effect, I roll my eyes. “There are some extenuating circumstances that were completely unforeseeable to anyone who thinks the laws of sciences are actually laws. All I can tell you is that I’m fine and I need you and the parents here. You first, though. And when you tell them, try not to worry them. I am fine.”

“Wish you could’ve extended me the same courtesy,” she grumbles. “Alright. I’ll see what I can do about driving out tomorrow. If not, it’ll be the day after. I’ll text you.”

“Okay. Love you.”

“Mmhhmm,” is the only reply I get because I woke her up. I end the call and look at Sans.

“I don’t think that was your dad,” he says.

“It wasn’t,” I respond. “That was my sister. Any objections? You already know where to dump my body?”

“I’m not gonna kill you.”

“But you haven’t ruled it out yet, have you?”

“No, but you have done everything right so far.”

I expected this, though not from him. Based on the very little amount of time I’ve had to judge everyone so far, I expected this from Undyne. Or Asgore or Toriel, but just because they are in charge and monitoring everything I do right now is one of the smartest moves they could make. Is Sans acting on their orders?

I turn around and open my door – and when I do, Sans is already there, trotting into the living room. I glance back over my shoulder just to make sure he’s not still in my room. How is he doing that?

Frisk and Papyrus are both crouched in the middle of my living room lavishing attention and pets on my cat. Bean is purring like a lawnmower and lying on his back, paws kneading the air. Undyne and Alphys are sitting on the couch, but Undyne looks like she’s ready to jump up at any second.

My apartment is decent-sized for a two-bedroom, but with eight people it’s still difficult to get any privacy. Still, Toriel and Asgore are in the kitchen, speaking in hushed voices...

Or not. Now that I’m watching the body language, I can tell things are tense. Toriel is doing most of the talking. Arguing. Whatever it is.
I walk into the living room. Frisk looks at me when I approach, but doesn’t seem to be afraid of me this time. Undyne’s uncovered eye narrows and she crosses her arms. Only Sans doesn’t acknowledge me, and that seems to be because he has fallen asleep in my therapy chair.

I take a seat in the smaller armchair. The apartment came furnished. Nothing is mine except the bookcase my sister made me in woodshop when she was in high school and my therapy chair, which is a ginormous and super-soft armchair and doing a great job of making Sans look even smaller than he actually is. My therapist had a home office for a long time, but when he and his husband decided to adopt a third child they moved into someplace bigger and he began practicing out of a local office with a few other psychologists, like I’m doing now. I bought the chair off him when he moved because I’ve never fallen in love with any other inanimate object as quickly as I did with it.

“What are they fighting about?” I ask quietly, so only Alphys and Undyne hear me.

“They’re not fighting,” Undyne replies instantly.

I glance at Toriel and Asgore again. “That is not a friendly conversation they are having.” I say. “Do they do that a lot?”

Confusion mixes with Undyne’s irritation. “Oh,” Alphys peeps, sounding sheepish. “You h-have it wrong... They’re, um, not married.”

It’s no surprise I came to that conclusion, since they were introduced as the king and queen and nothing else was said about it. And then Frisk referred to them as their parents. I raise an eyebrow. “But they were.”

Undyne scowls at my prying and Alphys nods. “Yeah. They’re separated.”

I know it shouldn’t matter, but it will. It will make things harder for them, because people will want to know why, and apparently the why hasn’t been fully resolved yet.

“So what do you do?” Undyne asks me suddenly. It’s not really a question. It’s more of an overly aggressive demand in a highly suspicious tone.


She frowns even harder. “I dunno what that is. D’you know, Alphys?”

Alphys flushes. She’s shy, that one. “K-k-kind of. It has to do w-with mental health.”

I nod at her. “That’s right. People who are psychologically distressed or displaying disordered or dysfunctional behavior come to me. My job is to help them understand, minimize, and prevent their distress. It involves a lot of talking. I teach people how to monitor their thoughts and understand the impact automatic thoughts and assumptions have on their emotions. The idea is to promote psychological well-being.”

“So, what, people tell you their problems and you find the cause and try to get rid of it?” Undyne says, tone blunt but obviously interested, for some reason.

“That’s... the gist of it, yes,” I say slowly, noticing that Sans is, in fact, not asleep and is paying attention. “I specialized in anxiety disorders in school, but I’ve seen people with all sorts of psychological issues.”

The conversation is interrupted when Toriel enters the room, Asgore trailing her and looking a
little wounded. Hm. Wonder if someone will tell me what that was about.

“We figure it would be best to begin planning after a good night’s sleep,” Toriel says, looking at me. “Is that acceptable?”

She’s polite. Almost too polite. She’s a freaking queen and she’s asking for my permission because it’s my house. Royalty trumps residence, in my opinion, but if she’s going to keep doing this I should just agree to everything she suggests. I nod. “Fine with me. I’m taking a shower.” Because I’m sweaty and gross from almost popping my lungs during the jog. “Feel free to go anywhere and use anything you need. If you can’t find something, ask me.”

I suck at hosting. There is nothing fun here, but they don’t need fun, they need a plan – and I’m good at planning.

I wake up in the armchair.

Undyne ended up carrying the mattress out of the spare bedroom last night (carrying, not dragging. It was objectively impressive). Papyrus declared it a sleepover. He and Undyne and Alphys are all still asleep on it, Undyne sprawled out in the middle. Papyrus snores. Bean is sitting on his chest, purring loudly. That would explain why he didn’t wake me up. This is the first morning in over ten years that Bean has not woken me up.

I ended up insisting that Frisk and Toriel take my bed – but privately, to Toriel, because Frisk obviously needed to sleep, even after the short nap they had while Asgore carried them here. And because it was polite. And maybe because I wanted to make it easier for Sans by sleeping in the same room as him. He’s right to be suspicious, but I’m going to give him as few excuses to be creepy as I can.

Toriel’s already up, though. She is cooking something. I don’t see Frisk. Asgore’s on the couch and Sans is in my therapy chair.

I move off the chair, slipping a leg over the arm so I don’t step on Alphys. I need to get my pills from my bedroom—

My knee caves instantly. I bash my elbow on the coffee table shoved up against the wall on my way down.

The loud thud has Undyne leaping to her feet. Asgore and Sans jolt awake immediately, too.

I briefly press my face into the carpet. That’s what I get for not checking myself. That was stupid, though I suppose I can forgive myself just this once. Considering... the circumstances. Circumstances that I never could have dreamed up even after doing my rotation in the psych ward.

“Oh, dear,” Toriel says. I hear her quickly walk over to me. “Are you alright, Isla? Let me help you.”

I do because I still haven’t checked myself and I don’t know how my body is going to be today. I’m still not used to how big some of these people are, and the ease with which she leverages my weight from the floor back onto the chair is another reminder of that.
“Thank you,” I tell her, and promptly begin bending my elbows and knees and rolling my shoulders and shifting my hips.

My organs are fine, but as far as my musculoskeletal system goes, it’s not good. Left knee and hip are hovering at a four. Lumbar vertebrae at a one, maybe. The muscles in my legs are sore and at a two. Despite doing just as much as my left leg, all the joints of my right leg are fine. My right femur is fine, too. And, even though it did no work during the jog, my right elbow is swollen.

I am used to this. My autoimmunity means that my body often does things that make no sense.

Not good, but it’s been much worse. I won’t take analgesics until I hit a six, and that’s only if I need to focus on something. If I’m sedentary and doing nothing important, I’ll endure it until it hits an eight. I don’t go to the hospital anymore unless I’m reasonably sure that one of my organs is malfunctioning or I have internal bleeding, which hasn’t been an issue for... six or seven years now.

“What’s wrong with you?” Undyne asks gruffly. “You sore from working out, or something?”

“I have bad joints,” I reply, standing with most of my weight on my right leg. Bad joints is a huge understatement when it comes to my health. “It’s fine; it just took me by surprise. I deal with this all the time. Is Frisk still asleep?”

Toriel frowns, but nods. “Yes, they are. Do you need anything? We would be happy to help you.”

I need my pills. “Thank you, but I can manage.” I’m an expert at limping and making things look a lot less painful than they really are. I head into my room, making sure to be quiet.

Frisk is sleeping like the dead. I take a closer look at the kid now that I’m over ninety percent sure this is actually happening and I’m not just hallucinating everything and I’m starting to come out of the shock. Nope, I was right yesterday. Can’t tell their gender or ethnicity just from appearance. Their skin is a lot darker than mine, which isn’t much of a feat, since I’m big parts Irish and I look it. They’re tall for a ten-year-old, but they might be underweight.

Purple pill case for the morning, pink one for night. I eat all the pills from purple Saturday and swallow them dry. I don’t bother with the as-needed arthritis meds.

I grab an empty notebook before I slip back out of the room without waking Frisk up. Everyone else is awake now, including Alphys and Papyrus.

My whiteboards come out of the spare bedroom. Bean meows at me when I emerge. He knows better to get underfoot when my gait is stiff, but he’s hungry, so he meows again. I feed him in the bathroom, and while I’m in here, I brush my teeth and put my contacts in because I can’t be expected to read anything without corrective lenses. My hair is messy, but... meh. I’ll deal with it later.

I barely get out of the bathroom before Undyne is in my face, exuding menacing intent.

“So,” she says without preamble. “Let’s just get one thing straight: you do anything to hurt my friends, you’re beyond dead. Got it?”

I knew displaying fear was not the way to go with Sans, but it might be right for her. If I show fear, she will be appeased and quickly decide she has done her job here.

Nah. I think I can get more information by behaving in a way she doesn’t expect.
She’s looming over me, leaning into my personal space, so I tilt my head back to look her in the eye and say, “Don’t bother threatening me. Sans beat you to it already.”

Surprise for a second, then annoyance. “That lazy ass actually did something? Huh.”

“He wasn’t as direct as you.”

“Doesn’t mean mine doesn’t stand.” She glares at me. “Monsters have been wronged a lot by humans, so yeah, I’m gonna expect it to happen again. You seem okay so far, but all you’ve proven is that you were curious enough to not run and smart enough to avoid pissing any of us off. One step out of line, and...”

She draws a finger across her neck and stalks away before she can see my mouth twitch. What, was she trying to emulate a villain in some children’s cartoon?

Obviously I’m supposed to act as though that exchange never happened, so that’s what I do. When I rejoin everyone, it’s to find that my cat is better at entertaining people than I am. Papyrus is on the couch next to Asgore and Bean is on the skeleton’s lap, occasionally head-butting the king’s hand to bully pets out of him. Toriel is making pancakes and flicks the back of Sans’s skull when he attempts to drink straight out of the syrup bottle. He gets into my ketchup instead, squirting a generous amount into a glass and drinking it.

Eleven hours ago, I would have been shocked at anyone doing that. Now I have no surprise left and I take it at face value.

I still wouldn’t do that. I’m a ketchup lover, but ew.

Undyne shoots me a very pointed look when I sit down and I give her a very pointed smile. The way she moves and sits and keeps tabs on her environment makes me think she can fight. She has been trained. She’s probably good at it.

That’s not all that matters, though. She reminds me of my sister. Shannon can be overly aggressive and hotheaded too.

I check my phone. The text from Shannon says B there 2morrow.

She knows I hate textese. She’s punishing me for waking her up last night.

I don’t take notes on a laptop when I have sessions with patients. I use a notebook because I draw and write. I try to sketch facial expressions and body language when my patients have emotional moments. Images are more informative than descriptive sentences.

These people are not my patients. I don’t know if any of them would benefit from some psychological tweaking, but that doesn’t mean I can’t sketch and note personality traits. If anything, it will make me feel better because it’s familiar.

While I do so, a flurry of questions is abruptly thrown at me about humanity and the world in general. As we eat and talk, it becomes clear that there aren’t really any consistencies to their knowledge and that all of what they know from recent years came from whatever fell into the Underground. Asgore says the castle has a number of books in varying conditions, depending on how well they were protected and how long they sat in the water of a garbage dump before someone picked them up.

Frisk wakes up but does no talking when it comes to answering the questions of their friends and adoptive parents. They interact, certainly, but whenever they mean to convey something, they do
so with nods and head-shakes and gestures. I make a page for them in my notebook. If I need to treat anyone, it’s going to be them. As uncomfortable as I’m sure it will be, I have to obtain some answers about their origins.

That can be addressed later. Practical matters first, like what they want and what they should say they want. Toriel starts making lists on the whiteboards and moves back and forth in front of them like an elementary school teacher. When they tell me they use gold for currency – and a lot of it, apparently – I recommend they insist upfront that they be granted legal ownership of the Underground, so they can keep mining the gold. Money will make things much easier, even though this will still be difficult.

They talk a little more about magic and Asgore holds a small flame in his palm and Undyne, with far more exuberance, manifests a glowing magical spear that almost has me diving behind my therapy chair. They also explain the concept of souls to me and how that tied into the war. I find this overwhelmingly fascinating and get off-topic asking questions about the relation between one’s soul and their mental health. They apologetically admit to a lack of knowledge and I hope that they can successfully integrate and perhaps we can participate in collaborative research.

It is when I tell them what the local humans have to say about Mountain Ebott that silence falls over the room. Frisk, wedged between Undyne and Alphys, is stiff as a board. Toriel stares at the marker in her large hands. Papyrus looks at Sans, bemused, who is watching Toriel, then Asgore.

Crap. What did I say?

Toriel looks at me, expression pulled tight, a crease visible between her eyebrows. “Are there... records of monsters coming down to this town?” she asks.

I am looking around at faces, bodies, trying to figure out where this is going before it gets there. “I wouldn’t know,” I reply, tone laden with apology. “I just moved here recently and all I’ve heard are folktales.” I pause. “Are they based in truth?”

Another pause. Then Undyne shoots to her feet, holding Frisk under one arm like a football. “Hey, PAPYRUS!” she half-shouts. “Why don’t we have an extra-special COOKING LESSON, huh!? We can use NON-MAGICAL INGREDIENTS!!”

“YES!!” Papyrus stands with more of a flourish. “That is an EXCELLENT idea, Undyne! I must expand my repertoire of delicious recipes now that we have access to different kinds of ingredients and cooking techniques!!”

Undyne bounds into the kitchen with Frisk still under her arm, closely followed by Papyrus. Alphys looks at Sans in abject terror, who only shrugs. Then she stands up and, on her way past me, mutters, “I’ll try to keep the damage to a minimum! Don’t worry!!”

Wait, what? I’m torn for a moment between pursuing that and asking more questions. It’s obvious Undyne got up so suddenly to give those of us still over here some privacy, even though they will likely be able to hear everything we talk about anyway.

I wince because apparently cooking with non-magical ingredients means throwing the cupboards open and banging pots together and Papyrus hooting about how he wants to learn how humans make spaghetti. Maybe not, then.

Toriel and Asgore share a look devoid of the animosity I saw between them last night. It lasts maybe two-and-a-half seconds before they both glance away. Her expression is drawn, tense, and his is sad.
It is Toriel who takes a breath and turns to me. “I ask because approximately a hundred years ago, our son came to the surface. To this town.”

They tell me. Toriel does most of the talking. They aren’t sure when it happened, even when I give them the current date. They haven’t been keeping track of how much time has passed since the war. Apparently it was too depressing.

At least a hundred years and it’s clear both of them are still grieving. Toriel has gone the emotion-numbing route, her voice grows more and more monotone as she speaks and she is stiff, unmoving. Asgore, on the other hand, wipes his eyes a couple times and Sans hands him the tissue box on the end table. “Thank you,” the king rumbles. He handles a tissue with more delicacy than which I thought him capable, considering the size of his hands.

“That’s tragic,” I say softly once they are done. “I’m sorry.” I let about five seconds of silence trickle by before talking again. Well, silence on this side of the apartment. There is still a racket going on in the kitchen. “You know what happened up here because your son told you before he died. If there are records of his visit, you need to prepare yourselves that they might not match up with what he told you.”

“Asriel would have had nothing to gain by lying to us,” Toriel replies firmly. “He was about to die and he knew it.”

“Yes, but things could have gotten blown out of proportion on the surface. You said that he told you the humans thought he had killed Chara. That’s not too far away from someone reporting that they saw him kill Chara. Or someone reporting that he attacked them. If this is the case – if you find statements that are untrue – I encourage you to insist that the record be corrected. I believe you, but making sure the humans know that Chara died of an illness and Asriel was a victim will be essential to negotiations. It will also be a good way to explain your separation. Many human couples break up after the loss of one child, let alone two.”

Toriel and Asgore look at one another again, then immediately look away. It wasn’t a question, but Toriel says, “Yes, well. That was certainly part of it.”

But not all of it. Toriel glances at Sans, who shrugs and snuggles into my therapy chair like he’s actually going to take a nap after waking up not three hours ago.

We are interrupted when the smell of something burning reaches us and I end up running around, throwing open windows and hoping desperately the smoke alarms don’t go off because not only will I have flashbacks, but my landlady will be here and where the hell am I going to hide six monsters, four of which are larger than the largest of healthy humans, in this tiny apartment?

The smoke alarm does not go off. Undyne sheepishly apologizes to me despite her earlier threat, but no real damage was done. Just a pot full of scorched pasta noodles that are thrown away.

We need to talk about Frisk, but I wait. It doesn’t matter who or when or where or what or why or how. Dead kids are always sad. They need a break from emotionally heavy topics.

I get my laptop out and hand it to Alphys to use because I’m still doodling and writing in my notebook and her first reaction is to squeal, “Can we watch anime on the human internet!?”
I blink. “I’m sure you can. I don’t, but if it exists, there is little the internet is incapable of finding. First, though, I figured you would want to draft a treaty, or whatever you want to call it. I’ve actually temporarily disconnected from the internet as a precaution, even though there is no reason anyone would want to hack my personal documents.”

She blushes so hard it’s a wonder she doesn’t pass out. “Of course!! You’re right!! L-let’s do that right now!!”

Toriel does most of the dictating and Alphys gets down what we have discussed so far. Meanwhile, Undyne talks with Asgore about whether there should still be a Royal Guard and Papyrus adds that he should be in it. Sans actually naps.

During the Royal Guard discussion, Undyne says, “Well, I’ll have to whip them into shape, they couldn’t even stop Frisk,” and I’m instantly suspicious.

Frisk notices my expression and waves their hands at Undyne. She shuts up. Frisk turns back to me and says, speaking for the first time today, “It’s not... It was a really long time since a human was in the Underground, I think, because most monsters didn’t even know I was human. They just... knew I was different. Some of them were scared, and... some greeted me the way monsters greet one another. Nobody meant any harm.”

They just made it worse. As calmly as I can, I ask, “Frisk, are you saying you were attacked?”

Toriel’s voice and the clicking of the keyboard in the background stop dead. Frisk bites their lip, shoulders coming up around their neck, retracting from me, and looks at Sans. Who is awake. And looking at me like he wants to know what my insides look like smattered all over the floor.

I could tell him what they look like. If he does end up killing me, I hope he has the decency to make it quick. And anyway, if he doesn’t kill me right away, I’ll probably stand back up and end him.

“Yeah,” Undyne finally says. She is the only one who looks calm. “Punk’s being generous, though. Yeah, a lot of folk were frightened, and a bit of combat is typical if you haven’t met someone before – it’s a way to bare our souls a little so we can get a measure of one another’s intent and personality. I tried to kill Frisk when I first met them. I tried to chase ‘em down.” A grin splits her face. “The little nerd’s fast.”

Frisk smiles back at her, actually appearing to relax somewhat. That... is not the correct reaction. Shit, do I just throw all my training out the window? It’s the only thing that kept me from going into utter shock over this whole thing.

“I am guilty of the same thing,” Asgore admits. “For the same reason.”

“U-um,” Alphys peeps. She clears her throat. “M-me too. It was m-m-my fault Mettaton attacked Frisk, so it’s my f-fault he tried to kill Frisk.”

“Alas, but I, the GREAT PAPYRUS, am also guilty!” Papyrus exclaims dramatically. Really? Another one? “Though I did not attempt murder, I did fight the human! The fight was actually quite fun! I believe Frisk had fun as well, if their... behavior was indicative.”

For no apparent reason, Sans puts a hand over his mouth and snickers and Frisk goes bright red.

Okay. So I’ve got this child who was afraid of me at first. Comfortable around their monster buddies, which suggests that their initial fear had to do with my humanity. They were sitting at an abandoned bus stop, they’re underweight, they have difficulty speaking... that all points to a
troubled childhood. Neglected, at the very least. But they were attacked – occasionally with killing intent – by these creatures, and Frisk still clearly prefers them. What the hell?

“I also engaged Frisk in battle,” Toriel says after a moment. “I did so to keep them safe, but... that does not excuse it.”

Frisk goes over to where she is standing and hugs her leg. She smiles and pats their head, the love so obvious in her face and the gesture I can’t believe I didn’t see it sooner. No, seriously, what the hell?

The child suddenly whips around. “I’m glad I fought all of you,” they announce, scowling stubbornly. “I’m glad some of you tried to kill me. ‘Cause that’s how I got to be friends with all of you.”

Alright, then.

Undyne lurches to her feet and snags them in a crushing hug. “Aw, PUNK! I’m glad I tried to kill you too!”

Papyrus lets out a choked noise and throws his arms around Undyne and Frisk. “I am glad too! NYOO HOO HOO!”

No, seriously. WHAT THE HELL.

I don’t have a reaction for this. I just don’t. I look at Sans. “What category do you fall in? Did you try to kill Frisk, or just fight them?”

Abruptly he doesn’t look so amused. He stares at me for too long, like he has to think hard about the answer. “Neither,” he says at last. “I never fought Frisk.”

Frisk turns and looks at Sans. Sans gazes squarely back at the child. Undyne has Papyrus in a noogie and everyone else is focused on that, but I see it. Sans knows I see it, too, because he sends me a sideways look that makes me feel like I shouldn’t have seen it and I should forget about it.

Alright, then.
Posttraumatic stress disorder: mental disorder caused by exposure to a traumatic event and the brain’s following shift in neuroanatomy that prevents proper extinction of fear memories and conditioned responses.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s around three in the afternoon when the treaty is drafted. I hook my laptop up to my printer and hand the physical copy and a pen to Toriel. She and Asgore sit at the table. They do better with one another as long as they can both focus on an impersonal goal. I haven’t seen any looks and the body language isn’t as tense as it was earlier.

I show Frisk how to use my shower and tell them they can get into whatever of my clothes they want. My clothes will be big on them, but I’m pretty small so it won’t be too ridiculous.

I do not know how magical creatures maintain good hygiene, but I suspect they don’t have to physically clean themselves as often. They are mostly magic, humans are mostly physical matter. That makes logical sense, but... my sense of logic might require some shifting now that magic is going to be a thing. I don’t feel like I can ask, though.

My joints are behaving now. They’re usually at their worst when I wake up in the mornings. And —

Wait. The bruise on my elbow is gone. I poke the area, confused, only to find there is no pain. That’s weird. I can bruise if someone nudges me too hard and I’m a slow healer, thanks to my immunosuppressants.

Sans is... sleeping again. Or faking. I don’t know.

Papyrus and Undyne are on either side of Alphys on the couch, who is on my laptop. She has world and continental maps pulled up. I stop in front of them. “So,” I say, “I had a bruise earlier. It’s gone.”

“You ate food Toriel cooked,” Undyne grunts in response, not looking up at me. “That healed it.”

I’m still frowning. “We must have forgotten to mention that!” Papyrus says happily. “Monster food will heal injuries! Monster food is grown magically and/or made magically, and the queen uses magic to cook!”

I stare. Has it not occurred to them how valuable that could be? “How... can it fully heal severe injuries?”

Alphys adjusts her glasses and glances up at me. “No. It c-can fully heal minor injuries, b-but moderate and severe wounds will only heal to a point. A-a-and it’s better at healing monsters than humans. B-because of their different compositions.”

Still valuable. She clicks on something and her eyes light up. She turns the laptop around so I can see it. “L-l-look at this, Isla.”

She found a mention of Mount Ebott on one of those sites filled with urban legends. There is barely anything written about it, only a paragraph-long tale of a giant beast coming into town and killing a child. Great. The final sentence says that those who climb the mountain disappear, which was one
of the first things I heard via word-of-mouth when I moved here.

“Keep that up so I can print it out later,” I tell her. “Do the same for anything else you find pertaining to monsters or magic. If it’s online, there is no hiding it from anyone, so we might as well see what’s out there.”

I warned them as much as I felt was necessary. One of the first things I did was to tell them that although it is very likely nobody would want to get in an all-out war over this, different countries and different humans will attempt to use it to their advantage. Even when (when because it has to be mentioned in order to explain why the monsters lost the war so badly) the humans are told that monster souls are much weaker than those of humans, they will not believe it completely. Nobody will be sure of the fighting capabilities of magic and even if they want to find out, they won’t want to find out through another war. This country and others have enough problems to deal with without a conflict with a population of magical beings.

(That isn’t even getting into how specific communities will react, like scientists and organized religion, but their reactions come second to those of ruling bodies of major countries and the general populace.)

I tell Toriel and Asgore that I know nothing about laws revolving around agriculture but magical healing food is another thing with which they can negotiate. I can already imagine stocks of it in emergency rooms and... places where mass shootings are likely to occur.

While I’m on the subject, it is likely we will have to deal with people with guns soon enough. And I probably won’t be allowed to kill any of them, even if they shoot. Damn.

Wait, when did this become we? Probably when Toriel and Asgore were talking about their (dead) children. Andy warned me that I have a tendency to get emotionally involved with my patients. He never had anything against it as long as I could retain my objective pattern of thinking (which I do almost all the time, even when I’m not working) and it didn’t affect me negatively. I do have to be a little careful. I can’t let something trigger me if I see the trigger coming from a mile away and I have multiple chances to divert or avoid it. That would be unacceptable.

The thing I’m beginning to notice, though, is that I like these people. They’re generally nice. I can excuse Sans and Undyne for not trusting me because in their position, I wouldn’t trust me either. Hell, Papyrus is basically a walking antidepressant. We absolutely need more people like him in the world.

Frisk comes out of the bathroom, clean and dressed in a University of California T-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts that closely resemble Sans’s. My skin is sensitive (thank you, lupus) so I spend almost all my free time wearing loose, non-irritating clothing, so most of what I own is like that. The shorts are actually from Shannon. I was done growing at fifteen, but my sister grew four inches and put on twenty pounds of muscle between her sixteenth and eighteenth birthdays, so I got a lot of her hand-me-downs.

Frisk goes over to Toriel and hugs her. “Hello, my child,” she says, smiling at them. “You smell like... cucumbers.”

That would be my shampoo. She’s got a good nose.

The rest of the afternoon is much of the same. When Toriel and Asgore are done editing, Alphys puts in the edits and makes a few of her own. I print out everything she found that could be construed as related to magic or monsters and spend more time scribbling and sketching in my notebook. Undyne wrestles Papyrus into submission no less than fourteen times on the floor, but
his optimism never wavers. Bean curls up on Sans and they both nap, which makes me wonder if the skeleton has a medical condition or if he just hasn’t been sleeping, but then I also wonder why he needs to sleep and what the sleeping requirements of monsters are and if they vary from those of humans and then my brain is whirring too quickly, so I stop thinking about it.

I am roped into putting together a list of every human war, the countries involved, the duration, and the number of casualties. It’s... sad. But I don’t leave anything out, because they deserve to know, and they know some of it already, anyway. The holes in their knowledge mean that it is simpler to compile all the information they request together and allow them to skim over what they already know.

Toriel starts cooking again and allows Frisk and Papyrus to help, which lets me go over the list with Asgore and Undyne. Undyne’s eye is sharp as she looks over the dates and death tallies. Asgore just appears tired.

His guess is that it has been between three and five hundred years since the monsters lost the war. Then Undyne asks, “Do you remember any of these wars?”

Asgore shakes his head. “Before we were imprisoned, monsters kept to themselves. We stayed out of humans disputes, until we couldn’t.”

I stare. Brain’s not working. What did she just say? And why didn’t he ask what she meant?

The obvious question is, “How could you possibly remember that if it was hundreds of years ago?”

Asgore blinks as if surprised, then his expression rapidly drops into something pained. “Most monsters have lifespans comparable to human lifespans. Toriel and I... our species only ages when we have children. When we lost Asriel, we... stopped aging.”

Crap. Foot, meet mouth. “I’m sorry,” I say, because what else do I say?

“Only most monsters, though,” Undyne says in an attempt to change the subject. “Old Gerson’s been around for as long as you two, hasn’t he?”

Despite her obviousness, he looks grateful. “That’s right. Ghosts age much more slowly, too.”

Something in me itches. I could probably have him managing that grief and feeling much better in a matter of months, at the most, and I hate to let it sit but I think I have to. Making sure they integrate with as few issues as possible is the priority, right? And Asgore is king, he is likely accustomed to setting his feelings aside for the sake of his people.

I kick a table leg. It’s not right, damnit, because it isn’t just Asgore, or Toriel, I have to put Frisk off, too. I don’t know anything about Frisk, but I do know something is wrong. Ten-year-old kids aren’t just afraid of a weaponless, hundred-pound woman. This is the kind of thinking I have been fighting against. I’m making the world better by helping my patients get better, one person at a time, because every person matters. I hate it when I see headlines like ‘Hurricane decimates town, leaves hundreds homeless’ or, even better, ‘7 killed, 19 injured in shooting’ because it’s just the fucking media trying to make money and it sucks to see a number and know—

Damnit.
This would never be easy, even in a different time, even in a different place. Maybe it wouldn’t even be easier.

I explain that the present time is a relatively peaceful era in humanity’s war-riddled history. Humans are now more accepting of one another’s differences than they ever have been in modern times. This was largely the result of dwindling natural resources and a handful of zoonotic antibiotic-resistant pathogens that killed about eleven percent of humans and nearly a quarter of the world’s livestock a few decades ago. Scientists collaborated from over eighty countries in order to make sustainable energy economically feasible. Medicine made huge advances (autoimmune diseases didn’t quite catch that windfall, so I’m still stuck with immunosuppressants and steroids and painkillers). Many, many people stopped eating meat and began using fewer animal products. Probably close to a fifth of the world’s population is vegetarian or vegan. Science and hard evidence became much more prominent in politics rather than the empty promises and primitive posturing that was the standard practice in the early twenty-first century. Religion became more of a personal endeavor and is no longer corrupting many of the world’s governments.

When nations shifted their focus from outdoing one another to solving worldwide problems, much more was accomplished than anyone initially predicted. Since that went so well, many countries opened their borders, making it easier for people, knowledge, and technology to move internationally. It is likely humans’ increasing tolerance of one another will work in the monsters’ favor.

It’s almost good they got out now. If they’d gotten out even a hundred years ago, let alone further back than that... they probably would have been killed on the spot. I am fairly confident that isn’t going to happen. Not when they present with peaceful intent and an utter lack of hostility.

It’s also good that they are here. I can imagine a few places that would be kinder to them than I know the United States government will be, but out of everywhere in the states, this place has some advantages. This part of Wisconsin is not heavily populated. It’s largely woodlands sprinkled with small lakes, farmland, and towns and cities. The forests make it a popular tourist destination in about every season except winter. There is plenty of room for them to grow here, if they want to stay here. If they don’t, well, it’s not far to Canada, and I believe the Canadians would be slightly more receptive to monsters.

It won’t be easy, but it could be much worse.

I wait until after dinner to address one of the more sensitive subjects we have left to go over. I think I like this monster food stuff. It... feels a little different, I guess, though not in any way I could describe. My intestines have reacted well to it, and by that I mean I haven’t had pain or shat blood (haven’t pooped at all today, actually).

Best to just go for it. “We have to have a conversation about Frisk.”

Frisk looks up at me from where they are seated on the floor with Papyrus and Bean. Nobody knows where this is going. “What about them?” Toriel asks.

“Frisk is a minor,” I say. “Minors have very few legal rights to themselves. If Frisk has been reported as a missing child and we knew that and didn’t come forward with them, we would be breaking the law. Well, I would be,” I amend. “I doubt you have proper citizenship, so I suppose that means you can’t really break any laws. Then again, it also means you don’t have any rights. So if that comes up – if someone with the authority to asks me whether I thought Frisk might be missing – I’m saying no. I will deny that we had this conversation.”

Toriel frowns a little, but looks otherwise unbothered. “Frisk said they had nowhere to go.”
A quick glance at the child tells me more than I should know and less than I need to know. I look at them directly. “Frisk. Did you live with someone before...” I’m about to say before you were left at Mount Ebott because that’s my guess, but I don’t know for sure.

I don’t have to finish, either, because Frisk nods, wide-eyed and hesitant.

Everyone is watching them now and everyone – save Sans, whose expressions are so minimal they are nearly nonexistent – looks concerned. “My child, if your human family is looking for you, we must let them know you are safe,” Toriel says. “They have been missing you for nearly two days.”

Hold on a second. These people descended from the mountain last night.

“You broke a centuries-old magical barrier in a day?” I ask Frisk.

They shrug, uncomfortable. Holy crap. This kid is something else.

A moment in which Toriel tries to exchange a concerned look with Sans, but Sans tilts his head at her in a manner that lets her know he’s not participating, so Toriel glances at Asgore instead, who has his eyes on Frisk. They are trying to speak. Nothing is coming out. They raise a hand to their mouth.

Then, abruptly, the hand comes down and they say, tone short, “I’m not going back to them. You can’t make me. I’ll run away from them if you let them take me, which they won’t, because they don’t want me anyway.”

There it is. Papyrus and Undyne blink in surprise. Alphys covers her mouth. Toriel and Asgore can only stare and now Sans is paying very close attention, so much that he’s leaning towards Frisk, looking as though he expects... something.

That isn’t the strangest part. The strangest part is Frisk’s reaction of slapping both hands over their mouth and eyes going so wide the whites are visible all the way around their brown irises. They are more shocked they said that than anyone else.

“Did you run away from them before?” I ask.

It’s a visible struggle for Frisk to get their hands down, but when they do, their voice comes out just as clipped as before. “No. I—”

They grab their head suddenly, hands over their ears, fingers pulling at their hair. A chill shoots right up my spine. I don’t know what I look like when I can’t stand to let any noises into my head. Do I look like that?

Asgore and Undyne both say Frisk’s name, and Sans says, “Hey, kiddo,” in a tone that is strangely sharp and unconcerned. I shoot him a look but he doesn’t even glance at me.

Another three seconds of inner turmoil and Frisk stands and walks over to one of the whiteboards. They pick up a red marker, uncap it, and put it to the board.

Their hand shakes crazily. They draw a line, grimace, wipe it away. They put the words I was down, then angrily erase those, too.

Toriel goes to stand. I put a hand up, palm out. When she looks at me I shake my head.

Frisk switches the marker from their right hand to their left. In crisp, clear handwriting, they write, I was left at that bus stop by myself the night I Fell. They don’t want me, and if anyone thinks I’m
going back to them just to be ignored and have bottles and cans thrown at me they’re full of shit.

Shocked silence in response to this. Well. There we have it.

Frisk caps the marker, sets it in the tray with a click, and turns around. Instantly, Sans rears back in my therapy chair, eyesockets going wide and gripping the arms so hard his phalanges disappear into the creases of the cushions.

Frisk abruptly bursts into tears. They go to Toriel, who lifts them onto her lap and begins to softly soothe them.

Even though it’s an appropriate reaction to the situation, I don’t think the shocked, crestfallen look belongs on Papyrus. Neither does Bean, apparently, because he climbs onto the skeleton’s lap for pets and cuddles.

Frisk is a quiet crier. From this angle they aren’t doing much more than shuddering in Toriel’s arms.

“The good news is that it is easy to revoke the rights of unfit guardians,” I say once I’m sure I can speak calmly. “You’re not going back to them, Frisk. I promise you that.”

I stand, take out my phone, and take a picture of what Frisk wrote. Then I erase it.

I am officially in too deep, but I can’t think of it as a bad thing anymore.

Frisk is understandably withdrawn and upset after this, even after reassurances, but to be fair, so is everyone else. Papyrus is unusually quiet and lavishing attention and affection on Bean. Sans is leaning back in my therapy chair, limp, staring without seeing anything. I was focused on Frisk, but his reaction was kinda weird.

Undyne slowly leans towards where I am standing next to the whiteboard and hisses, “You got any games, or something?”

Right. Cheer up the ten-year-old. I do not have games. I’m a twenty-four-year-old psychologist who lives by herself and had zero desire to form social bonds with other people when I moved into this apartment. I have a couple of retro video games on my laptop, but those are single-player. I spend most of my free time reading research articles or textbooks or fantasy novels, trying different recipes and keeping the ones that are nice to my scarred, irritable intestines, and talking over video chat with my parents or sister.

I snap my fingers. “Bean.”

He perks up. When I make eye contact, he darts over to me and sits in front of me. Everyone tells me my cat acts like a dog. He doesn’t. He acts like a trained cat. It’s not his fault hardly anyone else trains their cats.

I point to the candy bowl on the counter. “Candy. Fetch.”

He does. He doesn’t hesitate to hop on the counter, but I’ve never been strict about keeping him off furniture. He delicately picks up a caramel in his mouth, hops back down, and trots back to me.
I dip my head to him and point to Frisk. “Give.”

Everybody watches, fascinated, as Bean jumps on the couch and sits patiently next to Frisk until they hesitantly present their palm. Bean drops the caramel in their palm, then sits back and watches Frisk with big yellow eyes.

Frisk pulls the golden wrapper off and pops the caramel in their mouth. “Thanks,” they tell Bean, who turns to climb onto Asgore when the king scratches him behind the ears.

“That was IMPRESSIVE!!” Papyrus declares. With his jubilant shout, some of the tension in the room disperses. “Human Isla! Why on earth would you train your tiny fuzzy companion to bring you things?”

Definitely lying here, because the correct answer is that I trained Bean to fetch just in case I’m in so much pain I can’t move and my analgesics are out of reach. You’d think after twelve years of recovery and pain meds and surgery and more pain meds and surgery and more pain meds and more surgery and more pain meds and lupus and more surgery and more pain meds and more other meds, I’d never misplace my medication. You would be wrong. It’s the worst when the PTSD and lupus or my scars act up at the same time. Then I am stoned from the analgesics and my brain’s going a billion miles an hour and I have no attention span. I lose crap all the time when that happens.

The lie I choose is, “So I can be lazy. I don’t have to get up to get something if it’s small enough that Bean can get it.”

Sans snickers. “Told ya it wasn’t only me, Paps.”

Papyrus shoots Sans a dirty look. “Bean’s also a therapy animal,” I add. “So I had to train him.”

Bean puts his front paws on Toriel’s leg, getting up high enough to lick Frisk’s chin. Frisk giggles.

They still aren’t okay. Not after that. But maybe I won’t put them off. If they are going to be involved, they have to be able to speak with and to human adults and remain calm doing so. And I am certain some of those adults will not feel obligated to be nice to other people.

Later I ask Toriel and Asgore if I can speak with them privately. Undyne frowns a little at this, but quickly goes back to watching whatever cartoon Alphys pulled up on my laptop. Frisk is wedged between the two of them and Papyrus is on Undyne’s other side. He keeps stage-whispering questions to her and she keeps saying, “Just watch the show, Papyrus.”

Sans doesn’t take issue with my request for privacy, either. He’s been... staring into space for some time. His face is different, obviously, what with the lack of skin and muscles and eyes and nose, but I recognize that look. He’s not seeing anything in front of him. He’s stuck in his head. His left hand automatically and repeatedly strokes down Bean’s back.

My cat might be better at his job than I am at mine, and I like to think I’m a damn good psychologist. If Bean is not being spoiled with attention for being fuzzy and adorable, he typically goes to the person he thinks will need him the most, and thus far he has gravitated towards Frisk, Asgore, and Sans.

“I don’t know what will happen when you two claim Frisk,” I tell them. “You can’t adopt them
until you have legal rights and you obtain paperwork that confirms your existence. I’m concerned whomever you speak to will insist that Frisk be temporarily placed with a foster guardian until you become legal. I can make a case as to why they should stay with you and I will be listened to, so long as we say I’m Frisk’s psychologist.”

“Why only say it?” Toriel asks. She’s tired and it’s obvious. “Would you be willing to treat Frisk?”

“Yes.” I was going to suggest that anyway. “If they agree, I can’t promise to tell you everything. Only whatever Frisk says I can share.”

I think I can pass on the paperwork bullshit. It’s not like they have health insurance, anyway. They both nod.

I have another question, and it’s the last potentially-sensitive topic I can think to address. “How many humans other than Chara and Frisk fell into the Underground?”

Yep. Struck a nerve or two or twenty. Asgore flinches and can’t look me in the face. Toriel goes very, very still but fire blazes behind her eyes. Her hands twitch.

She is still the one who lies to me. “No others. It was just Chara and Frisk.”

“You’re a pretty good liar,” I say. “You look like you want to tear someone’s head off. If it’s mine, at least make it quick.”

It’s not mine. I think her repressed rage is directed at Asgore, but I can’t be sure. They are separated and were physically separated Underground, since they have no idea how to behave around one another, so their experiences Underground during their separation were different. It is plausible their reactions to this have nothing to do with one another. The opposite is also plausible, which is a problem. That creates a situation in which people see what they want to see, so I remind myself to remain objective.

“There were – others,” Asgore says, audibly strained. He looks at Toriel and she stares straight ahead, stone-faced. “But the fall killed them. Frisk and Chara were the only ones who survived.”

“You are a crappy liar,” I tell him. “I don’t care what happened to those other humans. I don’t even care if you killed them, or for what purpose. But someone might care. Someone might remember a friend or family member who went missing on Mount Ebott, and they might demand to know what happened to them. Saying the fall killed everyone else is fine, but you have to make it sincere, even if it’s not.”

This is absolutely not the time to say hey, you two have dead kids and issues with each other and I can help with that. Later. I clearly rubbed salt in an open wound with that single question.

“You’ll be saying it, Toriel,” I say. “You’ll be doing the lying, at least until I can teach him how to lie properly.”

She inhales slowly. Her hands clench, then relax. “You are right,” she replies, only a hint of tension in her voice. Yeah, she definitely represses. “I will... consider what other information may need to be... hidden.”

And, so calmly, with all the regality anyone could expect of a queen, she returns to everyone else to tell Frisk it is time for bed.

I watch her, deconstructing her every movement in my head. Asgore watches her, too.
“You can’t tell me you never lied to your people,” I say when it becomes clear Toriel is going to reveal absolutely nothing more via body language. “You’re the king. They have to at least pretend to believe what you say.”

“That is untrue. I expect my people to be honest with me and speak up when they disagree with me. The least I can do is return their honesty.” A pause, then, with a touch more melancholy, “Sometimes I wish I had lied to them. And to myself. Sometimes I wish...” he trails off. Shakes his head. “Never mind.”

He does not repress. I’ll crack him long before I crack Toriel.

Chapter End Notes

This fic focuses on Frisk at a bus stop and you should read it! The original abandoned quiche theory can be found here.
Race: socially constructed category based upon somewhat arbitrarily-chosen phenotypes.

Chapter Notes

So I'm surprised at how well-received this has been, since it's incredibly self-indulgent on my part (I just want everyone to be happy). Thank you to everyone who is reading and has left kudos. Big hugs to those of you who have left comments.

Oh, and since her name is uncommon: Isla is pronounced Eye-la.

While I brush my teeth, I go over everything I’ve written and sketched. Definitely going to be writing more about Frisk. And Asgore and Sans, if I go with Bean’s judgment.

I spit and rinse my mouth out and when I turn around Sans is standing in the middle of the bathroom, in my personal space and looking scary as fuck. I don’t scream, but I do jump, and nearly climb onto the sink in an effort to put a little more distance between us.

It takes a moment to place why he looks creepy. His eyesockets are pitch black, the lights gone. He holds out a hand. “Give me the notebook.”

Ooooohh. That’s what this is about. I hand him the notebook without protest. “You know,” I say acerbically. “You could have asked without trying to make me crap myself.”

He pages through it leisurely. “You’ve been eating Tori’s cooking all day,” he says without looking up. “You certainly look pooped, but you’re not going to poop.”

What. “What?”

He looks up, lights back in his eyesockets, tone normal again. “Monster food is converted entirely into energy thanks to the magic stored inside it. It’s also why monster food can heal minor injuries. Yes, it happens in humans.”

He opened the subject. I can ask. “So monsters don’t excrete.”

“They would if they ate food that was neither grown nor made with magic.”

“So... how would you excrete? You’re missing organs.”

“Magically.” I scowl at that answer. He grins at my expression. “I doubt I’ll ever try human food. Sounds like such a waste.”

He’s making. Poop puns. In my bathroom.

He closes the notebook and holds it up. “Who were you going to give this to?” he asks. He sounds nice again, but there is something sharp edging his eyesockets and mouth.

“Nobody. It’s for me. I told you, I do that for a living.”

“You’ve noted behaviors and personalities. This information would be worth a lot in a conflict.”
“You think I’m spying on you? What, did you think I was on patrol or something at Mount Ebott? What exactly about my disposition and reaction made you think I was the slightest bit prepared to meet creatures like you? Maybe I needed something that felt familiar and real so I fell back on something I do all the time. Something I like to do. Also,” I point a finger at him, “you’re being an asshole right now. Should I write that down, too?”

He blinks, then starts laughing. “What?” I demand, failing to see what’s so funny.

“Really? I thought you did it on purpose.”

“Did what?”

“Call me an asshole. Y’know, after all those poop jokes. It was... relevant.”

My mouth twitches. No it didn’t. There was no twitch. “Sans, get out of my bathroom before I punch your shit-eating grin off your face. Maybe I won’t poop, but I need to pee.”

His grin widens. All traces of that scary edge he had earlier are gone. He looks small and friendly but like he notices way, way more than everyone around him wants him to notice. He hands the notebook back to me. “Sure. No need to get pissy.”

Damnit! My gaze only flicks down to my notebook for a brief second, but when I look up he’s gone.

Seriously, how is he doing that?

I smack myself in the face with the notebook when I realize I said shit-eating. Damnit.

Shannon shows up the next morning. I go outside to head her off. I cringe when she comes at me because usually she wants to wrestle or box or something equally humiliating so usually I wind up running away from her until she tackles me, which will satiate her energy.

This time, though, she grabs me in a rib-crushing hug, easily lifting me off the ground. Despite being four years younger, she has four inches and almost thirty pounds on me. That weight is all height and muscle. She has her usual summer slathering of freckles all over her face, shoulders, and arms. I only get them on my face, but that’s because I’m more of an inside person.

She sets me back down and puts her hands on her hips. “You doing alright?”

“Yes,” I reply automatically. Am I doing alright? Actually... yeah. My joints weren’t even mean to me this morning for sleeping in a chair. “Come over here and I’ll tell you what’s going on.”

We stand outside in the shade. I can tell instantly that she doesn’t believe me, but she listens anyway. The condensed version only takes ten minutes, but this is leaving out the depth of my involvement in the planning and Toriel and Asgore’s non-relationship and dead kids and the other possible dead humans and Undyne and Sans getting up my butt. Shannon is protective. She’d kick down my door and go at them both if I told her that.

“You talk to your shrink lately?” is her first question after I’m done.

I frown at the word shrink. “No.”
“Mom and Dad?”

“No. I was hoping you and I could talk to Dad about this together, and then he could use his connections to give us an in on the government.”

“You been sleeping? Abusing your meds again?”

“Yes and no. Look, I’ll make you a deal.” I can totally understand her disbelief. “We go inside. If they aren’t there, you can call our parents and tell them I’m hallucinating.”

“Okay.” She turns towards the house and practically barges in. And stops dead in the doorway.

From inside, I can hear Papyrus’s joyful greeting. Damn, I really hope no one heard her ask me about my meds.

I shove her into the house so I can close the door. “Isla, you fucking with me?” she asks.

Toriel sends a frustrated look at me. “I’ve got a ten-year-old in the house,” I tell my sister, though Frisk isn’t awake yet. “Can you watch your language?”

Papyrus darts over to us and sticks his hand out for my sister to shake. “HELLO!! I am—”

She slams the heel of her hand into his sternum, dropping into a defensive stance. “Shannon!” I cry out, though I’m not particularly surprised. That was more of a check, not a strike meant to hurt or cripple.

Papyrus falls back onto his tailbone, hard. “Ouch!” he exclaims, holding where she hit him. Then he smiles. “I apologize, I was under the impression that humans use a proper handshake to greet one another! Shall we try again!?”

Shannon sends me a what-the-hell look, but I am more concerned about the malice I can sense coming from Sans. He does not look happy about his brother getting hit, even though Papyrus is fine with it. Well, he’s smiling, but I can tell he’s pissed.

Undyne, on the other hand, just snorts in laughter. She gives Sans a friendly slap on the back that almost sends him face-planting into the floor. “Come oooonn. Papyrus is tougher than that. AREN’TCHA, PAPYRUS!?”

Shannon looks at Undyne, sizing her up. Yeah, no. Undyne’s seven-and-a-half feet tall and she can fling my furniture about like it weighs nothing. Shannon’s not that stupid, even when her temper flares up.

Papyrus pops back to his feet. “YES!!! YOU ARE CORRECT, UNDYNE!!! Though I do have to ask you to be careful with my brother. He is very fragile!”

Well, Frisk is definitely awake now, between the two of them shouting.

Shannon makes the non-choice of not challenging Undyne. She stares at Papyrus, and after eight seconds sticks her hand out. That was fast.

And Papyrus gladly accepts the handshake and proceeds to enthusiastically introduce everyone present. Toriel, Asgore, and Alphys are the only ones who appear vaguely concerned about this new human. That is the correct reaction, and it is good I’m seeing it in the people who are in charge.
Shannon exhales loudly. “Okay.” She takes ten seconds to stare at Toriel, Alphys, Sans, and Asgore. Twenty for Undyne because they are both doing that stupid dominance posturing that usually only human men do.

“Okay,” Shannon says again, and apparently that’s all it takes, because she turns to Papyrus and asks, “Are you the younger brother, or older one? I’m younger, but since I’m bigger I call Isla my little-big sister.”

Papyrus laughs hard. “NYEH HEH HEH! That is an EXCELLENT idea! I, too, am younger, so I will call Sans my little-big brother!”

Sans relaxes, indifferent to this. He shuffles back over to my therapy chair. Bean follows him, winding between his legs.

I put a hand on my sister’s shoulder. “Let’s all sit down and... talk. We have a lot to discuss.”

Shannon warms up to everyone more quickly than I did and it is mostly mutual. She gets off-track when she makes a comment about her latest tournament and Undyne says, “Wait, you fought in a tournament? FIGHTING IS A SPORT FOR HUMANS!?!?!” and Shannon says, “Hell yeah!” and goes on a tangent about her endeavors in mixed martial arts.

Frisk will not go near my sister upon meeting her. They won’t make eye contact or talk to her. They cling to Asgore and largely refuse to interact with her, but after perhaps fifteen minutes, they slowly begin to unstick themself from their adoptive father. They start paying attention to Shannon and by the time a couple of hours have passed, they don’t appear to be afraid of her. They are clearly more partial to me, but they have known me longer and I’m a... less intense presence than my sister.

It makes me wonder if they are going to be like this with every human they meet. It makes me wonder how much work I’ll have to do with them.

When I tell Shannon she won’t poop after eating magical food, her response is to loudly ask, “Will I still fart?” Everyone overhears. Sans and Frisk look at one another and they both go into laughing fits.

Our parents don’t arrive until three in the afternoon. They live two-and-a-half hours away in Chippewa Falls, but it’s only been about four weeks since I moved here and they haven’t seen me since then.

I do the explaining right next to their car. They don’t believe me, even when Shannon supports my assertions, but that’s going to be the norm. They let me finish talking and agree to come inside because they were never stern enough with me when my psychological symptoms got out of control and they think that is happening now. When I was really bad, it took Shannon throwing a tantrum about my behavior making me unable to spend time with her before our parents took me to see my therapist.

Or maybe they think this is a joke. I don’t know.

Shannon impatiently gestures them inside. When they cross the threshold they both stare. “Celeste,” my dad says tonelessly.
“Nope,” my mom replies, recovering first. “I see them too.” She marches over to Toriel, who is closest, and sticks her hand out. “Hello. Celeste Reilly. I am Isla and Shannon’s mother.”

Yeah. That’s my mother. Totally unflappable.

My dad’s still in shock half an hour later, responding to questions on autopilot. When we were outside I thought I saw blond hair amongst all the red, but now I see that they’re white, not blond. When I look at my mother, I see some silver around her hairline. Huh. My parents are getting old. That’s weird.

Frisk warms up more quickly to my parents than they did to Shannon. I hope this is experience teaching them that not all adult humans are assholes and they will be able to interact much more freely from now on. What doesn’t help is that I am sure they will have to interact with some assholes in the immediate future. Politicians and reporters. I may end up punching someone in the face.

An hour in my dad’s on the phone outside with his politician-patient. I strictly instructed him to insist on a meeting and not to say anything about what it will be about. He’ll listen. He knows better and tends to defer to the women in his family when they give him reasonable orders. Usually Shannon’s the only one who does unreasonable things.

When he comes back he has his phone pressed against his shoulder. “Poates is willing to meet with you tonight,” he says. “Nine o’clock. Where at? He’s willing to drive here.”

“Tonight?” I repeat. I’m only startled for a second. After that, my brain picks up speed and starts moving, considering possible scenarios. “How did you get him to agree to that?”

“I made it sound urgent. Because it is urgent. He also knows one of the senators. Can he bring her?”

“In the flower fields at the base of Mount Ebott,” I decide. “Behind the abandoned bus stop. Have him bring the senator.”

I am looking at Toriel and Asgore to make sure they agree and they are both nodding almost immediately. If something goes wrong... they can warn their people quickly. If something goes wrong there will be no bystanders, no witnesses.

If something goes wrong, I can hide a body.

I’m in too deep now. I’m dedicated. These people are kind and genuine and I truly believe that, given a chance, they can make the world a better place. They can make humanity just a little bit better, and then maybe what happened to me won’t happen to some other kid.

My dad repeats the location into his phone. “Yeah, I know it’s a weird place,” he says. He goes back outside, likely so he can convince this politician that this is a real thing and not a prank or some sort of scheme.

I turn on my printer and Alphys prints out a copy of the drafted treaty so it can undergo another round of editing. I know little about politics or law so I focus on grammar and syntax and how to best word things to generate sympathy and diminish fear.

My mother and sister both send me looks over the next few hours. Did you tell these people? Do they know what you’ll do if something triggers you?

I ignore them. This won’t become violent. All the precautions we’ve taken should ensure that,
presuming everyone involved prioritizes logic over instincual fear and other stupid emotions.

Which they won’t. Nobody does.

Sans has my father laughing hysterically in no time after the call ends. I cringe at that. Papyrus agrees with my sentiment and shrieks irritably at whatever Sans is saying and stomps over to Frisk. My mother and sister are more social and enjoy talking – they are more alike in personality. I am more like my dad, though I am high-strung and he’s as laid back as a parent can get.

I strap two knives to the small of my back before it’s time to leave. My mom knows I’m doing it because she walks in the bathroom without knocking.


I might be a lot like my dad, but I get my cool head and stubbornness from her. “Mom,” I reply.

“You’re doing the right thing,” she continues, as if my tone wasn’t warning enough. “But this is dangerous. Are you going to be able to handle it if it becomes violent?”

“I’ll be fine.”

She arches an eyebrow. “You may literally be bringing a knife to a gunfight. And... I’m more worried that you will interpret something nonthreatening as a threat and hurt somebody.”

I scowl. “Shut up, Mom.”

“You haven’t told them.”

“I met them two nights ago, Mom. It took me a year to tell Natalie and Spencer. Six months to tell Lucas. I’ve thought of everything and addressed everything I could, given our time frame. Nothing will surprise me.”

“You can’t predict everything.” A pause. “But, I trust you. I hope it goes well.”

My loose T-shirt easily masks the weapons. “I hope so, too,” I say. And hopefully I won’t have to use the knives.

This is the only way forward. It still feels like a bad, bad idea.

It’s dark and they are waiting at the base of Mount Ebott. They are opening with Toriel and Asgore. Probably the best choice. Undyne is too scary and Alphys is too shy and apparently skeletons are associated with death in human culture. The royals are big, but that’s really the only intimidating thing about them – presuming neither of them is pissed off. Sans hasn’t seen it, but he knows better. He knows what he’s capable of, at any rate, and he knows anyone who knows him would be shocked to discover his true capabilities.

Sans still got dragged along. He’s the contingency plan. He was always the contingency plan, even though he never did his job unless he absolutely had to. Probably owes Asgore an apology for that.

He gets to hide just inside the woods with Frisk until it’s time for Frisk to talk to the new humans. Who have just rolled up in a car. Papyrus wants a car. He should get on that, presuming this goes
They left Isla’s mother and sister at the apartment. Undyne and Alphys and Papyrus are about halfway up the mountain. If something goes wrong, they are to head back and warn the rest of the monsters. If Toriel and Asgore are both killed, Undyne will take charge.

Most of these precautions and situational tasks were Isla’s ideas. She certainly knows how to plan, that one. Too bad it will probably be unnecessary.

As soon as Sans is alone with Frisk he asks them about the time anomalies. They pale. They won’t talk until he assures them that he just wants to know. He’s not mad. He... wasn’t even that mad when it was all shot to hell. How can he be mad now that things seem to be going well and Papyrus is alive and happy?

Frisk calls them ‘resets.’ They mumble through a hurried explanation that confirms what Sans suspected: they did not have complete control over the time anomalies, they do not fully remember what happened in other timelines, and they believe they would have to go back to the Underground to regain their powers.

He knew. It was why he gave them the key to his room. “Kid,” he says. “If it... goes bad. Are you gonna go back and reset it?”

Frisk is staring anxiously at his feet. As he watches, waiting, they begin to shake.

He scratches the side of his skull, exasperated. “Aw, Frisk. I’m not mad. We didn’t... heh. We didn’t fight this time. We’re buddies, aren’t we?”

Frisk looks worriedly at him, but nods.

“I was going to ask you. To reset, I mean, if it goes bad. I... know I wasn’t crazy about your time-shifting abilities while we were... well. But... can you tell me? Before you do? I want to take as many precautions as we can, before you do, to try to make sure this comes back to us. So we know what not to do next time.”

Some of the fear leaves the child. They nod again, more determined now.

There are two new humans. They’re both taller, about the same height as Brian. One is female and dark-skinned, with thick hair and a walk that reminds Sans of Undyne. The other is male, light skin and hair, and greets Brian like a friend.

At first he was unsure about Isla’s family. He thought she might be pulling one over on them. She’s smart, that much is immediately obvious. But they look like her. The sister’s red hair comes from their father, and Isla’s brown hair comes from her mother, but Isla’s is lighter and redder. Everyone but her mother has those weird darker flecks on their skin that Frisk doesn’t have.

Seeing these new humans, he’s starting to get an idea of what average size is for a human. Isla is small, not much bigger than Frisk. He suspects it has something to do with her health, since he went snooping and found all her medications. He knows enough about human biology to know someone would only be taking those meds if they had to.

She still took knives, though. He almost called her out on it, but... if it’s going to go bad, it will go bad, and Frisk will reset.

...Or perhaps this is just another example of his tendency towards inaction. He hates himself for it. He feels like he should be doing stuff, helpful stuff, but he will probably just fuck it up so usually
it’s better to just remove himself from the equation and observe, right? He knows his part. If it goes bad and neither Toriel nor Asgore can get a signal up, he has to signal Undyne. Then he will teleport Frisk to the Underground so they can reset.

There would be no point in attempting to save the royals if they are attacked. Right? If the humans attack, that’s that, it’s the prelude to another war, and the best thing to do is to go back and try again. Or can such a misunderstanding be remedied, if, ultimately, nobody is hurt?

Ugh. Decisions suck.

Sans is close enough to hear the man shriek and grab onto the woman, who says clearly, “Holy shit,” and nothing else.

Isla is talking, then Toriel is talking. The woman’s head is cocked to one side. The man doesn’t scream again, but he still looks afraid.

Two minutes in Sans decides it’s going to be okay. From where he’s standing, he can’t see the humans’ faces, but he can see Toriel and Asgore, and neither of them appears to be worried. They are tense, sure – a lot’s riding on this going well, and that’s putting it mildly.

Ten minutes and the artificial lights the humans are using are eclipsed by the king lighting a fireball in his hand. The new humans jump. Fifteen minutes and Isla turns towards them and gestures. Frisk inhales deeply, holds their head high, and prepares to go out.

This is stressful for the kid. It has to be. Even if they hadn’t said anything – written anything – their initial reactions to Isla and her family were enough to alert him.

He still isn’t entirely convinced Frisk was doing the talking and writing, though. That – the cadence with which they spoke, their – their eyes—

Nope. Not this time, he said. They didn’t fight this time. This time.

“Hey, kid,” he says just before Frisk leaves the trees and heads into the field.

Frisk turns around. “What do you and a good pair of shoes have in common?” he asks.

Frisk blinks, then shrugs.

“You both have nice souls. Heh. Get it?”

A giggle escapes the child. They smile at him and he doesn’t know what he was thinking. That person who fought him, who killed his brother and everyone else, he can’t see a trace of them now.

Frisk turns around and marches into the field. “Go get ‘em, kiddo,” Sans says, fondness rising in his soul.

Frisk is brilliant. They instantly put Poates and Greenfield at ease. It’s... not entirely smooth. I have to insist several times that Asgore and Toriel not answer some questions and at the same time insist that the politicians withhold questions that are unnecessary for getting the king and queen to see... whoever it is they actually need to speak with. Both monsters are so relieved they are being asked questions instead of attacked (as their son was) that their impulse is to answer them, so I end up
interrupting the both of them several times.

For no explainable reason, after telling their (edited) story, Frisk looks at Greenfield, winks, gives her finger-guns and says, “Nice legs.”

My dad immediately busts up laughing in response to this. Toriel snorts, too, but quickly smothers it. I exchange a shocked glance with Asgore.

We are lucky Greenfield has a sense of humor. She laughs and pats Frisk on the head. “Aren’t you adorable.” She peers up at the king and queen. Her initial reaction was curiosity and maybe some apprehension. “I’ll make some calls. See what I can do.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” I say firmly. “Anyone who wants to see them and talk to them needs to come here.”

“I figured.” She glances at Poates. “What have you got here?”

He blinks rapidly. His initial reaction was fear, but after he calmed down, he’s been... relatively benign. Jumpy, but that’s it. “I beg your pardon?”

“Buildings, Avery. Where can a meeting be held? Where can we have a press conference?”

“Oh! Well, there’s a town hall.”

“I haven’t been in there,” I say. “I’ll check it out tomorrow.”

“It’s likely anyone who believes me will want to make it out here as quickly as possible,” Greenfield says. “You will have visitors tomorrow.”

“I’ll make it fast,” I say.

There is a brief pause. Poates shoots my dad a look. “Brian, you weren’t kidding when you said this was going to change everything. Sheesh. I thought you were exaggerating.”

My dad grins easily. “Now you know better.”

“We’ll need a... method by which to contact you,” Greenfield says.

I give her my phone number. “I don’t know if either of us will be there tomorrow,” she tells me. “We’ll probably be up all night.” She turns to Poates. “Any nice hotels nearby?”

“Yeah.” He’s still shocked. It takes him a moment to figure out that wasn’t a yes-or-no question. “I know there are a few in Wausau.”

“Good. Call and tell them they’re about to get an influx of business. I need to call my wife and tell her I’m not going to be home tonight.” She looks at Toriel and Asgore, cocking her head a bit. “Usually people say ‘it was nice to meet you’ because manners dictate they should. Screw manners. It was actually nice to meet you. You seem like nice... magical people.”

Toriel beams. “Thank you. It was lovely to make your acquaintance as well. We hope to see you in the upcoming negotiations.”

There are polite goodbyes and then the politicians are leaving. That went well. Much better than some of the alternatives I considered.

Asgore turns to Toriel. “I believe I should return to the Underground and inform the people of this
new development. They have been waiting patiently and they deserve to be kept up to date.”

“Agreed,” Toriel replies immediately. “Take Undyne with you. You may want to have her bring some of the Royal Guard tomorrow. Just in case.”

“Wait here tomorrow for someone you recognize,” I tell Asgore. “If I can’t come myself, I will send my sister or parents.” I turn to Frisk, raising an eyebrow. “And, Frisk... I don’t recommend flirting with any other politicians.”

Frisk shrugs unapologetically, palms up. “No promises.”
Prejudice: unfounded beliefs and attitudes about a person based on their perceived group membership that are resistant to facts or rational influence.

What happens over the next few days is... interesting.

The town’s small number of cops have blocked off all the roads. There are state troopers here, too. Some of them are armed, but I anticipated this. I keep three blades strapped to me at all times. Nobody shoots, but I repeatedly tell myself that I’ll cut off fingers or slit a throat if someone does, depending on the damage they do.

Frisk wants to come with me to meet Asgore and Undyne and whoever else is accompanying them at the base of Mount Ebott. They happen to bring a couple of... dogs, I guess, in cloaks, and two large, armored monsters who move weirdly in sync with one another. They are not physically armed, but I’m not sure they need to be.

There is law enforcement posted at certain intervals along the roads from Mount Ebott to the town hall. They stare as we walk by. I go first and I make eye contact with every single one of them. Asgore carries Frisk, but it isn’t because they are tired.

Toriel is already at the town hall. Sans and Papyrus and Alphys are back at my apartment with my sister. My parents got a hotel room up north somewhere, but Shannon wanted to stay with me.

This town isn’t very big. The town hall’s conference room isn’t very big. We pass by tons of people trying to make themselves look as important as possible but who weren’t important enough to get past the lobby.

We head into the conference room. The two big armored guys and the dogs stand just outside of it, looking much more intimidating than the human security. The dogs look at one another (or they turn towards one another, at least; I can’t actually see their faces) and disperse amongst the crowd, sniffing. I hope they’re making sure nobody is armed.

What we get is over a dozen of humans in suits and perfectly coiffed hair. All these people are in business formal and sure, the king and queen look royal enough, but I’m in a T-shirt and basketball shorts to hide the knives I’ve got strapped to my back and thighs (and I’m not even wearing a bra, though nobody can ever tell) and Frisk is in their striped sweater and jeans that I washed for them and their dirty sneakers Toriel attempted to clean but didn’t get very far because they’re that filthy.

I don’t really care, but we do get some raised eyebrows.

There are four long tables set at right angles to form a square and chairs along the outside of the square. We take up a whole side thanks to the size of the king and queen. They sit in the middle, Frisk next to Toriel for comfort purposes and me next to Asgore so I can exert some control over his tendency to be too nice and his poor lying capabilities. I have to do it because I don’t want anyone to see that there is some resentment between Asgore and Toriel. We are planning to be honest about their separation, but I’m hoping their dead kids will be reason enough for other people and nobody will question it beyond that. I’m worried that if someone suspects there are unresolved issues between them they will exploit it and draw the subject away from more important things.

Undyne stands on the wall behind the king and queen, glaring over their shoulders. She is in full armor. She looks badass as all get-out. I just hope she remembers her job is to stand there and look menacing and not to say anything.
A small, thin man sits in a corner of the room opposite to us, a little laptop balanced on his knees. He’ll be recording what happens here in words. We probably won’t get the cameras until later.

I have the folder with everything in it. I take out the copies of the proposed treaty and pass them to Asgore, then remove my notebook so I can take notes, which I will do even though I don’t know whether it’s allowed.

We begin with introductions. I write down everybody’s name and title. We have politicians of all levels here – three are on the town council, three are state-level, and four are national-level. There is a judge present. Greenfield is here, but not Poates.

When I announce my name and job, an older man frowns and asks how old I am. I assure him that I understand the confusion and that I have a Ph.D. so young because I started college early. I get that a lot. Depending on what I’m wearing and how sick or tired I am, I look like I’m a teenager or I look forty.

It’s boring. The treaty is passed around and gone over and then there are questions. I let Toriel and Asgore do nearly all of the talking. They both remember everyone’s names perfectly, which I find impressive. Frisk can respond without issue when directly asked a question, but is quiet otherwise. I mostly sketch and take notes on the temperaments of the attendees.

There isn’t much arguing, but when it happens, it’s the humans arguing amongst themselves. Some of them want to see the use of magic. Some refuse until they know more about it. I point out that the only way to come to decisive conclusions about anything is through the scientific method, and that making observations is the first step. Toriel ends up lighting a fire that Frisk deliberately sticks their hand into to show everyone that magic isn’t dangerous unless the user intends it to be.

There is more discussion and a bit of arguing over who should see the treaty, who needs to be here, who didn’t believe this was true, how this should escalate. Nobody has called for violence or said the monsters should go back where they came from, but there is no protocol for what to do when a race of magical creatures comes out of the earth. They aren’t entirely sure of who should be making the decisions.

I elbow Asgore and he says that they want the proposed treaty to be public. They want everybody to be able to see it for themselves. I pick up where he leaves off and explain that the general public will be understandably afraid if they feel as though they are deliberately kept in the dark about monsters and their magic and I subtly hint that if anyone uses this to spread fear and misunderstanding it will not end well for that person.

There is some dissent to this in the form of not yet, not yet, we need you to wait, and Toriel insists that the information be put out there as quickly as possible because I’m right and they have nothing to hide. That’s a lie, but I did tell her she’d be doing the lying.

Asgore actually tears up when we reach the part involving dead children and how Asriel made it into the town’s folklore. It’s likely he feels vulnerable with all the strangers here providing the foundations for decisions about his people’s future and damn, dead kids, dead kids are sad no matter what and I can only imagine they would be saddest if they were yours. And, naturally unused to expressions of emotion, the politicians look surprised at this. I consider offering comfort, maybe a touch on the arm, but I know if I do that it will get blown unreasonably out of proportion and someone will accuse me of sleeping with him because humans are that obsessed with sex.

Frisk, however, can basically do whatever they want and nobody will think much of it because they’re a child. They get out of their chair and climb onto their adoptive father’s lap. Nobody likes to talk about death, let alone dead kids, so Toriel glosses over their separation, mentioning it
without comment, and moves onto saying that they’d like to adopt Frisk.

And the humans jump on the subject because come on, dead kids. The judge says that it wouldn’t be possible until the monsters are given basic rights, and even if that happens, it will take some time, and Frisk will need a legal guardian between now and then.

I can’t say I didn’t consider this. I am not surprised when the judge suggests me. I’d introduced myself as Frisk’s psychologist, and I’m sure some of these people have made the assumption that I’m also treating the king and queen for their grief. We’re going to let them make that assumption, because I’d like it to eventually become a reality.

But, of course, someone says, “Why not find the child’s real parents?” and Frisk shrinks in Asgore’s lap and clings to him.

I briefly put my pencil down, folding my hands in front of me. “Everyone local knows that those who climbed Mount Ebott never returned,” I say. It’s important that I sound as academic and articulate as I can. “We now know it to be because of the barrier. But if all you knew was that you would not come back if you made the climb, why make the climb?”

Nobody answers. They shouldn’t. It’s rhetorical. “Frisk was abandoned at the base of Mount Ebott by their so-called real parents,” I continue. “It was for the better. Their former guardians were neglectful and abusive. I am treating them for issues stemming from that.” I look at the judge, nonverbally telling everyone that discussion is closed. “I would like to get the paperwork for obtaining temporary guardianship filled out as soon as possible.”

He nods and says, “See me after this.”

Frisk can’t talk for some time after that, which doesn’t exactly help the doubt directed at Asgore when he says he wants Frisk to function as ambassador. There are obvious points against this: Frisk is ten, they know very little about politics and law, simply being peaceful isn’t enough to secure peace.

When someone implies Frisk’s selective mutism and psychological symptoms will make them unable to do their job, I go on a tirade about how people with mental illnesses are perfectly capable of doing many of the things mentally healthy people can do, albeit with more difficulties. I tersely point out that I’m the only one here qualified to decide on a plan for symptom management and I believe that serving as ambassador will push them in a good way. I keep my voice level, but hell, I would have thought anyone would know better to say something like that in front of a clinical psychologist. Damn.

Overall, it goes well. There still isn’t a solid plan because the humans aren’t sure who to contact. I tell them a copy of the treaty and the monsters’ story will be online by the end of the week, no matter how slowly the government moves. Maybe that will kick their asses into gear.

Next the king and queen have to answer questions and give more talks on a hastily-constructed stage in the lobby. It’s the only place big enough to contain all the people who have flocked here. There are two cameras. I stay out of their view and talk to the judge about what I need to do to get guardianship of Frisk. Then I pause and ask how I can get Frisk’s legal name changed.

People are bolder in a crowd, and there are a couple of rude questions and comments directed the
monsters’ way. Some loser asks if they eat humans and Toriel snickers, covering her mouth.

What kills it, though, is when Undyne removes her helmet, grins with super sharp teeth and says, loudly enough to be picked up on the microphones on the podium, “Only if you decide to be a bigoted racist,” which, while awesome, is not the correct answer.

It’s silent for a moment, then some people let out nervous laughs. Asgore’s ready with damage control, though. The podium is too short for him. He leans down and says, “Actually, monsters eat less meat than humans. We will occasionally indulge in things like snails, but we will not eat animals that possess backbones.”

Frisk seems to be okay now. They flirt with no fewer than three people, which has me groaning every time. It’s not... doing any harm, but it’s just better not to do anything that might be considered inflammatory right now.

I frown when, after the questions wind down and Toriel and Asgore have said all they can think of, Frisk taps the podium and looks meaningfully at their parents.

“Would you like to speak, my child?” Toriel asks warmly. Frisk nods. Toriel looks around, but after two seconds some nice human has gotten Frisk a stool and is putting it in place for them.

Frisk climbs on the stool. Toriel adjusts the microphone, then steps back to stand besides Undyne. Asgore leaves the stage and comes directly to me. One of the two cameras follows him, the other stays on the stage and Frisk. “It was fine,” I murmur, because he been anxious all day about this going well. He’s comfortable with public speaking and talking about important things with strangers, as far as I can tell. He’s insecure about the chemistry he once had with Toriel when they used to do things like this that is lacking now.

“Was it?” he asks, following my lead and speaking quietly. People are staring at us. I meet the gaze of anyone who looks judgmentally at me because of how I’m dressed. I would not be able to hide weapons in formalwear. That is the most important thing.

I nod again. “We wanted to thank you,” he says. “This – may have gone much differently without your influence.”

“You deserve it,” I reply. “Anyone who doesn’t think so is a prejudiced moron. And I’m not backing out after this comes to a conclusion. I may have legal guardianship of Frisk, but I expect they will still want you to act as their parents.”

Frisk begins to speak then, voice clear. “I can understand if many of you are surprised. I never thought this would happen, not even after I fell into the Underground and met all these nice monsters. I never thought I’d be able to bring them all out. They really wanted to come out here, you know, and be with all of you. They wanted to see the surface.

“I – didn’t have a very good life on the surface.” There is a pause. Toriel’s face is a mask of concern, and I shake my head at her, hoping she represses her motherly instincts to go to Frisk. They need to say this.

They briefly lower their head to swallow, then look up again. “I didn’t really understand why the monsters wanted to come to the surface at first. I – I thought humans were mean. I thought it was human nature for the strong to prey on the weak. I didn’t want to go back at first. I just – I wanted to help these people who were so nice to me, even when sometimes they didn’t understand that I wanted to help. My mom—” they turn around to look at her, and she smiles at them, eyes shining, “—was the first person who was really nice to me.”
There is total silence in response to this. Frisk turns back to the podium. Their expression suddenly pulls into something much like stubbornness. “And everyone else was nice to me too!” they say insistently. “Maybe not always, not at first – but they thought I was going to hurt them. I was a human, and humans had killed so many of their kind and imprisoned them in Mount Ebott. Humans...” they pause to swallow. They might be tearing up. “Humans killed the prince, Asriel, when all he wanted was to fulfill his adopted sibling’s dying request to see the flowers from the surface. Asriel was my mom and dad’s first child. And – and Chara was their first adopted child. They would’ve been my siblings.”

I don’t care who sees me now. I put a hand on Asgore’s arm. He’s weeping silently, trembling with the effort of preventing himself from making any noise. Toriel’s eyes are watering, too – and Undyne grips her shoulder in support.

Frisk grips the podium. “And – and the humans who killed Asriel were only afraid. They didn’t know. And that’s why I’m here to help humans understand monsters. Because they need to know. They need to understand. That way they won’t be afraid. Nobody else has to get hurt. I don’t want anybody to get hurt, human or monster.

“I think the humans can do it, too. I – didn’t know many good things on the surface before I fell. So I want to ask for the humans’ help – your help – to show the monsters all the good things the surface has to offer. They deserve a chance to live here, too. They deserve a chance to make the world a better place. And when they do, it won’t be because of their magic – even though they can do a lot of cool stuff with magic – it will be because of their kindness.”

Three seconds slither by. Frisk hesitates, then says, “That’s all,” in a small voice into the mic. They step down off the stool. Toriel comes forward immediately.

I don’t see who, but someone bursts into applause, and the crowd is quick to conform. Embarrassed, Frisk ducks their head. Toriel gets down on one knee to hug them.

“Go,” I tell Asgore, and shove his elbow to get him moving (because I can’t reach his back). He goes. The crowd parts for him as it did on his way here, and when he makes it back onstage Toriel is already stepping back so he can embrace Frisk.

The cheering increases in volume. Somebody whistles. It hits me that some of these people are politicians – sure, the majority here are townsfolk, regular citizens who were curious about what was going on – and they are cheering for a child. I don’t know whether they are applauding Frisk’s impromptu speech out of respect or if they actually agree with the content, but the point still stands.

I check my phone. I have over ten missed calls and a text from Shannon that says *Ur on TV!*

Yeah. I need to update some people about my life.

I don’t personally have any issues until we go to head back to my apartment. We step outside the town hall to see the reporters have arrived.

They – along with a curious crowd of onlookers – are held back by a police blockade to keep the roads clear. They start yelling questions. I stop dead and Undyne has to nudge me into moving again. I keep my gaze straight ahead, ignoring the cameras and the microphones and the cops. At
least there aren’t any ambulances. At least there isn’t screaming and sobbing from scared kids and aggrieved parents and—

Undyne gives me a harder push this time. “The hell’s your problem?” she hisses at the back of my head.

Frisk can somehow sense my increased heart rate and that I’m struggling to stay in the moment because they come over to me and hold my hand. It’s a small, kind gesture, but it grounds me all the same, and I squeeze their hand in gratitude.

The vast majority of the reporters and crowd seems content to stay behind and ask the politicians and people who were in the lobby what’s going on, but some stragglers do attempt to follow us. They are politely dissuaded by the cops and, in one instance, a growl from the two cloaked dogs.

When we reach my apartment it’s to find many of my neighbors in the nearby houses have come by and are still coming by to drop off food at my place. Shannon tells me Papyrus has been loud and cheerful and just plain wonderful and practically every human who has interacted with him seems to like him. Alphys had news coverage of the meetings and the live stream of the king and queen and Frisk’s speeches up all day. Sans, I’m told, mostly napped with my cat.

It’s a little violating to have all these people I don’t know in and out of my apartment, my space, but everything feels so surreal right now I don’t think much of it. I call my parents and they inform me they’ve called my grandmother and my mom’s brothers, so I’ll leave it to them to call my cousins.

My second call is to Andy, my therapist and mentor. He wants to make sure I’m alright because he knows everything. He correctly guesses that the arrival of the press was the most stressful part of the day for me. I assure him I’ll give him a call if I’m having difficulties.

The third call is to the office I work for. I need to take a sudden leave. I don’t know when I’m coming back or if I’m coming back. My boss – well, she’s not really my boss, she’s a fellow psychologist who happens to own the office she and I and three other psychologists work at. She understands that I couldn’t have seen this coming and offers to get my patients set up with our coworkers. I figure that should be okay, since I’ve barely been here a month and I’ve only had my patients for three weeks. They should have no difficulty adjusting to someone else. She tells me my job is there if I can come back, but asks that I get in official paperwork when I know what I’m doing and I have time.

The fourth call is to Natalie and Spencer, at the same time. They are pretty much my only friends, aside from my sister. They attended undergrad with me but, since I started early, they are both a few years older than me and graduated a year after me. I’m not sure what drew them to the sick fifteen-year-old (I had three of my seven surgeries during my undergrad years – those and biweekly therapy sessions were the reasons I took four years to graduate), but Spencer took pity on me when we had some classes together and he introduced me to Natalie. They were childhood friends and both grew up in a suburb of Appleton.

Natalie is visiting her grandparents in China, but she’s due back in a few weeks. Spencer went to medical school following undergrad and is doing his internship or residency in Minneapolis. I can never remember the difference between the two. He didn’t watch the broadcast; Natalie did, and she immediately called him before they both tried calling me.

They understand why I can’t just reveal certain things over an unsecured phone line, but they want to know things, things I’d tell them in person because they’re my friends. Spencer and I manage to talk Natalie into not coming home early. In fact, there’s no point in either of them attempting to
make a visit because I’m going to be insanely busy for a little while.

My last call is to Lucas. He saw the broadcast and he offers to help before I can even ask him. He’s a computer programmer, so I expect we’ll need his expertise soon.

He offers to fly out here for a couple of weeks – he still lives in California. I met him when we were both in graduate school at Stanford. He’s got a wife and a two-year-old son, but he brushes it off when I suggest leaving might be hard on his wife. Leaving to see me, no less. I went to their wedding and I flew out to California when their son was born. I know his wife’s almost as tough as my mother, but kids are still hard, and I think she works part-time.

He’s still insistent and he would know best, so I concede. He says he’ll text me when he finds a flight.

The second and third days are much more crowded than the first. Now that there are videos – both from news crews and average citizens – of the monsters all over the internet, people believe this is happening. Not everyone does, I’m sure, but why the hell would the government or anyone else fake this?

Discussions have to be moved outside to accommodate the surge of people. I teach Frisk a signal they can use if they feel like they need a break, but they do remarkably well.

Conversations with the politicians and other officials happen in the mornings. What amounts to press conferences occur during both afternoons. Even when the press is kept away, they still have cameras on them all day. I participate more in the mornings and step back during the afternoons, though this has more to do with the fact that microphones being shoved in my face make me feel like I’m twelve years old again.

The treaty is being put to an emergency vote. I find the judge whom I spoke to the first day and give him the paperwork. I stayed up late to finish it. I assured Frisk I didn’t need to know their legal name, but I had them write it down so we could get everything processed properly. They want to be Frisk Dreemurr and that’s their call to make.

The judge tells me he will get it processed as soon as possible. Once I get guardianship, the next step will be to take Frisk to a doctor. I’m sure there are vaccinations they will need and if there is medical evidence of abuse, it’s better to find that now, just in case their former guardians recognize them on television or the internet and decide to do something about it.

It will also help me – and Frisk – if I know exactly what I’m working with. They aren’t comfortable talking a lot and people are usually uncomfortable talking about their traumatic experiences anyway. I know I am.

Papyrus comes the second and third days. He endears himself to a lot of people because he’s endearing. He confuses a lot of people, too. Many humans come away from listening to him or interacting with him with puzzled expressions. Sans and Alphys elect to stay out of it, though Alphys always follows along on my computer.

It goes as smoothly as I could have hoped. No huge issues crop up. The general attitude is curious apprehension. People don’t know a lot and they don’t like that, so they want to know more.
There are, of course, a couple of angry, closed-minded people I have to disarm because it’s better that the monsters aren’t mean to anyone. It is alright if I’m a bitch, though. Usually a sarcastic comment about their lack of knowledge shuts them up.

Usually.

One guy, though, will not shut up. He interrupts Frisk to accuse absolutely everything of being a lie, including Frisk’s story and the monsters’ version of history.

Honestly, I’d stay out of it if he didn’t open his tirade with the words “Shut up, brat” angrily directly at Frisk. They wither. You don’t have to be a psychologist to guess that a troubled child fully capable of speech might have discomfort speaking because they were repeatedly told that.

It’s a good thing I step in because the look on Toriel’s face makes me think she’s gonna set this jackass on fire. One hand goes over the mic, the other goes on Frisk’s shoulder. “You’re here,” I tell them quietly. “You’re helping your friends. Your family. Whenever, wherever, you’re starting to go, you aren’t there.”

Their gaze snaps up to mine. They blink. Nod.

Lacks-a-cerebrum is loudly blustering, “Excuse me—” at my interruption so it’s only fair to interrupt him.

I whip around, using the microphones to my full advantage. “Am I the only one who thinks humans are crap at winning wars?” I say, voice demanding but also like I’m about to do some stand-up. “Our ancestors defeated the monsters – outright massacred them, in fact, and yet they still came to us peacefully – and nobody said, ‘Hey, magic exists. We might wanna write that down somewhere so later generations know.’ I pause. “Or maybe they did and it was classified and now the government feels like a giant collective moron for hoarding that information. Either way.

“A common saying is that history is written by the winners. We won, but we kept no records of the war, of magic, of an entire race of people. The monsters lost, they were slaughtered, and they still kept better records than we did. Oh, and humans used to have access to magic – and now they clearly don’t, or it would have surfaced in the pandemic of the 2070’s. We lost that and it died out with no mention in our history. We couldn’t even keep the most valuable resource the monsters had to offer. Ergo, we suck at winning wars, and even if it’s just so we don’t look like colossal IDIOTS, we should be welcoming these people into society and offering to attempt to undo the wrongs we have wrought upon them.”

I haven’t blinked the whole time I have been speaking, though I desperately need to. Have to look as unsettling as possible. I arch an eyebrow. “Would anyone else like to make accusations impervious to rational thinking and sound like a blithering imbecile? No? Good.”

I put my hand back over the mic and turn back to Frisk. “Do you want to stop? We can transition easily if you need a break. Nobody will think less of you. You’re being very brave and patient with this.”

For just a second, they put their hand on mine resting on their shoulder. Then they shake their head, something flooding back into their gaze, mouth twisting stubbornly. “I’m okay.”

I nod and leave the stage the back way so I can avoid the press and civilian onlookers. I need to know who that man was. I need to know who everyone is, actually; at the least I need to keep track of who displays antagonistic behavior.
After that, the press starts asking about me, though I’ve been ignored in favor of the monsters and Frisk until now. Even Frisk has been somewhat sidelined by magic and the fact that almost ten thousand people are below the mountain.

I stay out of the spotlight, which means that I spend the rest of my time here with Papyrus, because when I’m with him people pay attention to him and not me.

Papyrus spends a lot of time hanging off me and yelling his delight with seemingly random things. “I LIKE THE STAGE!!” he exclaims. “It would be very cool to watch Mettaton perform on an outside stage like this!” Whoever the hell that is. “Undyne is very good at her job, isn’t she!? She’s the most intimidating monster there is!! And she’s a very demanding trainer!!” I don’t doubt that. “These pol-eece officers are sort of like the Royal Guard! Maybe I could join them once we are permitted to acquire surface jobs!”

I talk him out of that one. His optimism wouldn’t last long as a cop.

By the end of the third day, parts of the treaty have been passed into law.

The monsters do not have citizenship. They are considered to be refugees with special allowances. This wasn’t unexpected. We have to be patient. People need more time to adjust.

They have been granted ownership of the Underground and the land on Mount Ebott. They are allowed to build on several square miles of land at its base easily five times the space encompassed by the mountain, but they are expected to purchase the land they use. I am under the impression that will not be an issue.

The monsters will be expected to reside in whatever city they build long enough to complete an education program on humans and surface life. That was Toriel’s idea. An embassy will be built to house foreign diplomats and politicians and provide a place for them to meet. Once that is built, discussions will be reopened on things like taxes and rights that extend past the basic level.

Right now the goal is to get the monsters to the surface and get them paperwork so they can eventually get jobs and licenses and certifications and apply to schools or whatever else they feel like doing.

It’s a start. It is by no means finished, but it’s a start.
Phobia: persistent and irrational fear of or aversion to an object or situation.

Chapter Notes

Soul color reveal next chapter.

Building begins immediately. Temporary housing goes up in the span of a day and then my apartment suddenly feels empty because it’s just me, my sister, and Frisk. We go shopping to get Frisk clothes and shoes and other things ten-year-olds need. They don’t want to spend my money. When I tell them it’s their parents’ money, their attitude doesn’t change and we have a quick reality check on how allowing other people to take care of them will make those people happy. Frisk doesn’t completely believe it, but it’s normal for habits developed in the interest of survival to fade away slowly (and in some cases, not at all).

I have temporary guardianship. It is contingent upon Frisk residing with me and getting a full medical work-up. The judge wants records of physical evidence of abuse. Even if Frisk’s behavior hadn’t been putting up red flags, I would have gotten that done anyway. Kid probably needs vaccines their former (asshole) guardians skipped out on.

That does not need to happen immediately, though. I walk Frisk to the site every day and we spend hours there. There are already working toilets in the half-built Embassy, which is good because my bladder control is decidedly poor. Apparently monsters are well-versed in construction: they had issues with overpopulation, so they know how to make the most of their space, and I’m told they created entire rooms and buildings that could be switched or altered at the drop of a hat.

When I ask why, Papyrus tells me, “For PUZZLES, of course!” I don’t ask again.

Frisk opens up much more around the monsters. They speak more and seem comfortable expressing emotions. They are okay around me and my immediate family (even though I tell my parents I’ve got this, they are skeptical and won’t go home), but they could be better.

I don’t throw them headfirst into therapy. Therapy may not be necessary if I can successfully adjust their expectations of human adults. I make a point to cook for them and my old Pixar collection comes out and we watch those together and I touch them frequently, always affectionately, even though I am not a very touchy person. They do cringe the first few times I go to touch them, but they want to believe I mean it. They crave affection, though they seek it more with their monster family – more specifically, their adoptive parents, who are of course very busy.

Aside from Frisk and me, there are usually no other humans at the site. It’s still all over the internet and the news, but everything is reported in a hands-off manner. Somehow, my address escaped notice and nobody comes knocking at my door to make interview demands of Frisk.

By the third week of construction, my parents and sister have finally gone home and I’ve communicated with my cousins enough to sate their curiosity. Some brave news crews have ventured close to what Asgore is calling Newer Home. They talk to the king and queen and, at one point, a tall, glittery robot with objectively fabulous hair. Frisk tells me it’s Mettaton and he was the Underground’s only celebrity. He has good things to say about Frisk, which is all I care about.

I get my period, which is a problem because I didn’t start taking painkillers before it started. I wake
up with stained underwear and the feeling of my insides twisted around one another. It’s hovering around a seven-point-five. I could get up and risk worsening the pain, but I already don’t want Frisk to see me like this, so I certainly don’t want them to see me if it gets worse.

I order Bean to get help and he goes and meows at Frisk until the child peeks into my room. I tell them to come in.

They look confused and apprehensive until they see me. Then, very hesitantly, they touch my forehead. “Are you sick?” they ask in a whisper.

“Sort of,” I reply. I’m not sick (or I’m always sick, take your pick), but my periods are nowhere close to normal because I have one ovary and my uterus is scarred so badly all of my doctors were surprised when I started having periods at all. “I need you to get me some medicine. I’m in a lot of pain.”

Their apprehension at my unfamiliar behavior fades and they nod. They follow my instructions perfectly and in half an hour I’m functional enough to get cleaned up and on the couch, a heating pad on my belly, a bowl of chocolate ice cream in one arm, and just a little bit stoned.

I tell Frisk what’s going on because they might have to deal with it when they’re older (though I honestly have no idea) and even if they don’t, they should know anyway. I don’t tell them this much pain isn’t normal because I don’t want to explain why I have it. I only say that sometimes people get bad cramps and sometimes they don’t.

We can’t go to Newer Home for three days because I aim for bringing my pain down to about a four. I could take it down further, but then I would be stoned out of my mind and I’ve got a kid to take care of and my family to reassure and cameras are sometimes at Newer Home and I should absolutely not be stoned in front of the cameras.

I text Toriel. I can because one of the first things they did was put up a network so they have working cell phones (somehow, Papyrus and Sans’s names and texts show up in their respective fonts. When I asked Sans how they managed this, he just smirked). She comes by later with a pie. Sans comes with her, probably to get out of whatever work he’s expected to do.

Menstruation isn’t a topic of choice when speaking with any queen, but I should tell her because Frisk is going to be living with her once Newer Home becomes habitable for humans and I have to live with Frisk, at least until Asgore and Toriel can formally adopt them, so she’ll be seeing this multiple times a year. Sans overhears and doesn’t know well enough to act grossed out. I don’t care because after seven surgeries and dozens of procedures that involved doctors sticking various instruments in various orifices, I am utterly unapologetic and unashamed about anything my body does or how it looks.

Frisk’s name change comes through mid-July. They are ecstatic to get their new identification and we have to go to Newer Home immediately so they can show everyone.

As soon as they run off, I am beset upon by Mettaton, whose primary role has been to keep spirits high. He often goes around singing and sometimes dancing and shouting encouragement. It’s effective, so I presumed it was a good use of his time.

Cajoling me about a makeover is not a good use of his time. I give him the flattest, most disinterested look I can muster and he politely enquires about my attire whilst subtly suggesting I change it.

I say, “The purpose of whatever I wear is to mask this,” and quick-draw the knife I have strapped
to my right thigh after checking to make sure there are no other humans around.

I don’t point it in his face or anything. It would be a high reach, anyway, since his height is comparable to that of Toriel and Undyne. I just hold it and raise an eyebrow.

He stares for perhaps two seconds and then exclaims, “Oh, is that it!? I can certainly take that into account, darling! It’s understandable you would want to carry one around, since humans cannot magically manifest weapons!”

“Do you have an off switch?” I deadpan, only to hear a nearby chuckle.

It’s Sans. He nods at my blade. “Why don’t you put that away,” he suggests with a subtle arch over his eyesocket that tells me I’d better put it away right now or it might end up stuck somewhere in my body.

Maybe I’m reading too much into it because when I sheath the knife and look back at him he’s gone.

Mettaton flicks his wrist dismissively. “He always does that. Now, you must at least allow me to assist you to achieve a professional edge when you appear alongside Their Majesties or our adorable ambassador. You have done so much for us, dearest human, this is the least I can do in return.”

I’m already sensing I’m going to regret this. I’m not bothered by the pet names because he does that to everyone – he’s loud and I’ve been down here often enough so I ought to know.

Buuuuut I do kinda owe it to the monsters to represent them professionally. That includes my attire. It also includes my language, which has been a bit of a struggle. I have been successful, so far, but damn have I wanted to let loose on a couple of jerks.

I nod. “I get veto power. You said you wanted to help, so you’ll help. I make all final decisions.”

He claps his hands together, then abruptly grabs the hair resting on my shoulders and lifts it out away from my head. “Excellent! Can I cut your hair, too!?”

He runs at a thousand miles a second. I use both hands to smooth my hair back down, pulling it from his loose grasp. “If you know how to do it, sure. I don’t give a damn.” I start to back away. He’s persuasive. I shouldn’t talk to him for longer than necessary because I don’t want to agree to anything else. “Later, though. Everyone is busy with more important things right now.”

It’s early August, and it’s hot.

The Embassy is finished. Mettaton’s giant resort is halfway done, which is to say the hotel part is finished. He has other amenities he’d like to add, but this gets more monsters to the surface and working because it gives them a place to sleep. Because they need to sleep. Papyrus has claimed he doesn’t, but he does.

The area has been closed off to humans without special access. Anyone who doesn’t have legitimate business in Newer Home is disallowed entry and this is enforced by the National Guard. Thankfully, their... blockade, or whatever it’s actually called, has a radius so large it encompasses
my town so I don’t have to walk by armed humans every day.

Human surveyors come in to make sure the buildings are up to code. Cops will occasionally make unnecessary rounds. And, of course, reporters are getting braver. Every human who steps into Newer Home is promptly swamped by offered food and drinks and directions to bathrooms and snow spells (I still don’t know if that’s the right word, I haven’t heard monsters use the word spell) for cooling off. Most are visibly overwhelmed by the hospitality and, in the case of the reporters, have positive things to say about the monsters.

Residential areas are beginning to crop up, but it becomes clear that what will be the center of Newer Home will look a little more urban. The temporary housing is converted into nice-looking apartments. A library goes up, as does a sign over its door that reads ‘Librarby.’ Construction begins on a hospital, and next to it, a building intended to be a lab goes up. When Alphys talks about it, she stutters less and sounds more excited than nervous. Land for a park is set aside and next to it, construction on a school begins. Toriel claims more land next to that and when I ask she gushes at me for ten minutes about how she wants to be a teacher and how she hopes to add onto the school someday and teach both human and monster children here. That’s a good plan for integration. Aim at the younger generations. I make sure to remind Toriel and Asgore that enough of the public buildings need to contain toilets for humans. And monsters, if they plan on eating non-magical food (which I wouldn’t. Not being required to poop was awesome while it lasted, and I’m looking forward to more of it).

I’m able to recognize a lot of monsters and I start to feel like I’m here less to watch Frisk and more to see these incredibly friendly people. Frisk and I and sometimes somebody else who isn’t busy will occasionally grab lunch at a little bar run by a monster made of fire. His name is Grillby and he doesn’t comment or stare when I slather my fries in ketchup, so it’s a good place.

Frisk is... improving. They don’t really want to talk about anything specific that happened to them, be it before or after they fell into the Underground. They do tell me in a tiny, tiny voice that they knew about Mount Ebott before making the climb and that after being abandoned they figured they would disappear to save anyone else the trouble. They have a habit of trying to take up as little space as possible. We do exercises in which they have to leave messes for me to clean up. It’s anxiety-inducing for them at first, but gradually they become comfortable with being loud, being expressive, and just being there.

On our walk to Newer Home one morning, a bee flies around Frisk’s head. I swat at it and Frisk flinches so hard they end up cowering, crouched on the ground in half a second, shoulders up, arms over their head, knees up to protect their stomach.

I want to strangle whoever was responsible for them before. We sit in the grass on the side of the dirt road heading into Newer Home. Frisk can’t talk or touch me for twenty minutes, so I spend all that time reassuring them and trying not to cry. When they can talk, the first thing they say is, “I’m sorry I’m really sorry it was an accident I didn’t mean to do that,” all in one breath. They finally let me hug them and then we do both cry a little bit.

I tell Toriel and Asgore everything Frisk okays. They’re scared at first, scared their new family won’t want them because they perceive themself as defective, but I don’t even fix that. They claim a headache and go to bed early one night and when they wake up, all their worries appear to have been eased and they say I can tell not only Toriel and Asgore but their friends too, if they ask. I don’t know what happened. Usually issues like that are not resolved by sleeping on it.

Neither the king nor queen is surprised and neither behaves as though this will be a big deal. I question Asgore about it because he’s easier to read than Toriel, and he hesitantly tells me Chara
had some issues, too, but doesn’t go into detail. They both love Frisk, that much is obvious. They both light up every time I report obvious progress.

There is housing on the surface now, but despite this, a majority of the monsters working on the city are traveling back and forth to their homes under Mount Ebott. I can imagine it’s easier for a lot of people to commute and then make one big move instead of two smaller ones. I know they aren’t idle Underground, either; they are preparing and helping one another and mining gold and perhaps doing other Magic Things I don’t know about.

The treaty was posted online a week after the monsters emerged, as promised. Lucas calls me almost shrieking in joy and explains that his wife is pregnant again, so he won’t be out as quickly as we’d hoped. Once Alphys sets up the computers in the Embassy, I get Lucas up on video chat and he helps her program the security and he designs a website for the Embassy, all from his home in California.

Most of my time is spent keeping track of who says what on the internet and during interviews. The public is largely confused and curious. My words are online, but there isn’t much speculation about me. There are, of course, a handful of people who feel as though they are entitled to protest against every change society undergoes without their blessing. I write down names and all the information I can find on anyone who has anything excessively negative to say. We need to keep track of this.

The king and queen are extremely busy. They seem much less tense when not in one another’s company, so it... works, I guess. They are able to communicate civilly as long as the topic is impersonal. It works, but it’s not ideal.

It’s September when the building begins to slow down. Newer Home is beginning to look less like a massive construction site and more like a city. In the center are the Embassy, Mettaton’s resort, apartments, the hospital, the lab, restaurants (including Grillby’s), various shops, and some other things typical of human cities, and some that are not. For example, there is an enormous building across the street from the Embassy that Alphys tells me will be utilized in powering the city. She calls it ‘CORE II.’

I wait until there is a lull in the conversation to ask. “Is there any chance you’ll be studying souls when you get the lab up and running?”

“Oh!” she squeaks. “Well, m-m-maybe... but the lab isn’t only meant for me. I-I’d hoped to collaborate with human scientists, an-and other monsters, of course! B-b-but I figured it would be best to allow someone else to choose a c-c-course of s-study... You know, to f-foster goodwill and all that.”

She’s wringing her hands. “The concept of a magical soul seems to be a point of curiosity for humans,” I say after a moment. “It’s a hot topic for the general public online. Would examining a soul be a simple process?”

“Y-yes, but... even if we g-gathered data on human souls, we wouldn’t know what the d-d-data meant...” she looks thoughtful. “Though, I b-bet if we had enough volunteers, w-we could create an accurate scale, get an idea of w-what we’re measuring...”

She mutters a few others lines to herself and I grin a little because I become lost in thought like this, too, when I think about something I’m interested in. “When you have the staff, let me know,” I say, bringing her attention back to me. “As long as the procedure isn’t physical, I’d have no issue volunteering.”
“Nah, it’d be magical.” I turn around to see Undyne behind me. She’s forgone the armor due to the heat and is wearing tight clothes that show off her muscles, which are impressive no matter what you think of her. Well, that explains the sudden blush that attacked Alphys’s face. They’ve been together for a couple weeks, at least, maybe months. They have been trying to keep it on the down low, both focused on other things at the moment, but Frisk positively crows about it whenever it’s semi-relevant, claiming to have had a hand in getting them together.

Undyne coughs. “So, human...” Some of the intensity fades out of her good eye. “...Isla. I kinda... wanted to apologize. You know, for being a total jerkface when we first met.”

I didn’t expect this. Her behavior hasn’t been the slightest bit hostile towards me since I told off that moron – and basically the entirety of the human race – outside the town hall. “It’s fine,” I assure her. “I would have done the same thing in your position.”

She laughs, crossing her arms. “I bet. You’re kinda a tough little shit, huh?” Not even slightly surreptitiously, she looks around for Frisk because Toriel will give people mom-glares for swearing around Frisk. “But, seriously, I gotta own up. You helped us and you haven’t stopped helping us. Frisk likes you. So you’re cool.”

I feel myself smiling. Papyrus was quick to declare friendship – with me and my cat, and he still stops by every few days to see Bean – but I figured that was just a Papyrus thing to do. Everyone else took more time. I’ve been communicating with Toriel and Asgore more than anyone, since I’m basically a full-time babysitter for Frisk. Until today, everyone else was lodged firmly in the acquaintance category.

I nod. “Thanks. Now if you could get Sans to trust me, we’d be set.”

She frowns. “He givin’ you crap?” She punches one fist into her other palm with a loud smack. “Need me to rough him up a little?”

I snort. “Papyrus has me under the impression that Sans couldn’t take a lot of roughing up. And no. He’s not bothering me. I just... haven’t seen him.”

That isn’t entirely true. I think Sans follows me around when I come here. I usually see him once or twice per visit, from a distance, seemingly doing something else. I don’t know if he’s got a problem with me, with humans in general, or if he just takes a little longer to trust others than most people. I mean, Undyne’s as stubborn as they come and she just approached me. I would have expected Sans before her.

“He’s been b-busy,” Alphys says apologetically. “He’s been h-h-helping me with some st-stuff with the lab.”

“Well, YOU tell him to stop being a lazy nerd, Alphys!” Undyne says. “Aren’t you the boss? Doesn’t he have to listen to you? Or,” she grins, “we could tattle on him. Asgore will play the king card if I ask him to.”

I very much doubt that. Asgore has been almost anxiously careful with how he handles his power. I shake my head. “Don’t bother. I think he just moves more slowly than everyone else.”

Undyne chortles, then stands up straight. “Hey. I asked Frisk earlier, but they said no, so I’ll ask you too. Since you’re a tiny nerd and you’re going to be pissing off jerk humans, you wanna learn how to fight? I can teach you. I mean, I kinda whipped the whole Royal Guard into shape, so even if you’re small and scrawny I think I can handle teaching you.”
Undyne is... extremely high-energy. I have witnessed her sprinting across Newer Home, shouting encouragement at people doing work, and bellowing messages across large distances because nobody else’s voice carries that far (except for Papyrus’s when he shrieks in annoyance at his brother’s jokes). I am certain she will simply be too much for me in the role of what probably amounts to a drill instructor.

“I’m already trained,” I inform her, with no small satisfaction at her surprise. “Thank you, but that would be unnecessary.”

“Oh yeah? Show me!”

She abruptly drops into a stance, fists up and feet spread and knees bent. I blink. “Ready?” she asks. “I’m gonna—”

Luckily Alphys is here to save me. “Undyne!” she protests. “She’s t-t-trained to fight humans, not monsters! It’s d-different...”

“Oh.” Undyne stands up straight again, frowning. “I guess you’re right. Huh.” That stubborn expression I’ve seen on Frisk again and again surges up on her face and she punches the air with both fists. “NGAAAAHH! IT NEVER OCCURRED TO ME THAT HUMANS WOULD FIGHT DIFFERENTLY!! I HAVE TO FIND ASGORE AND MAKE HIM SHOW ME HOW HUMANS FIGHT!!!”

Hoo boy. She takes off, but before she gets too far away, she turns around and yells, “AND DON’T THINK I’VE FORGOTTEN ABOUT YOUR TRAINING, ALPHYS!! WE’LL BE GETTING BACK TO THAT ONCE WE’RE DONE BUILDING A CITY!!!”

Alphys squeaks and covers her face, flushing harshly. Was... that code for something sexy, or is Alphys just embarrassed because everyone within earshot is staring at us now?

I don’t ask. Maybe we’re friends, but not that good of friends yet.

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Frisk and I are having a nice, quiet evening the day before my twenty-fifth birthday. They are watching something on my laptop and I’m reading a paper one of my former professors just published.

My front door bashes in with a shout of “HELLOOOOOO BEAUTIES!!!” and I’m immediately rolling under the table, then shooting up and lunging across the counter for the knife block.

I stop with one hand gripping the edge of the counter, the other fisted tight, arm stretched towards the only weapon I know how to use well that I’ll touch, psychogenic pain twisting my belly and leg, feet not touching the floor. I hang there limply for a few seconds, breathing fast, shallow, waiting for my head to come back. When it does, I slide back onto my feet, stiff.

“Oh no!” Papyrus rushes towards me and lifts me into a rather aggressive hug, which isn’t uncommon for him. When he sets me back on my feet, he bends down so he can look me in the face. “I apologize, human Isla. I did not warn Mettaton that you do not like loud noises.” Then he turns towards the open door. “Mettaton, this human does not like loud noises! I know you are amazingly great, almost as great as myself, but I must ask you to tone down your greatness in this human’s presence, for greatness can be loud!”
Wait, when did he figure that out? Granted, Papyrus is a noisy person, but I’ve never said anything.

Mettaton appears stricken, and behind him, Sans looks down almost guiltily. Then I blink, and Sans is in my living room and sitting next to Frisk, who is looking worriedly at me.

Mettaton closes the door behind him and struts into my apartment. “I am quite sorry, darling,” he says almost mournfully. “I, ah, didn’t know.”

He knows that was an over-the-top fear response. So does Sans. So does Frisk. Papyrus has no clue, yet he was the one to pick up on my phonophobia. Maybe he’s less oblivious than he lets on.

I try to raise an arm. Papyrus sees and moves into position, one hand lightly gripping my elbow, the other on my back. He’s had to help me walk exactly twice before when my joints decided to be nasty to me. He’s the only one who comes around regularly, so statistically he would be the one who happened to be here during one of my minor flare-ups.

My right femur aches. The pain deep in my abdomen and pelvis is leaving, but my femur is only getting worse. My legs feel a bit jellified and shaky.

Papyrus helps me into a chair. “You need your medicine?” Frisk pipes up. They have scooted over to sit against Sans and he doesn’t look entirely comfortable with it.

I shake my head, deliberately slowing my breathing. “No. Just... a moment.”

Bean hisses at Mettaton. “Bean, down,” I say absently. I’m okay. I’m not trembling so hard anymore and everything sounds less tinny. I glance up at Mettaton. “Why are you here?”

He strikes a pose for absolutely no reason. “We discussed this! I’m here to cut your hair and see if I can salvage anything from your wardrobe.”

Oh, that. Damn. I inhale and exhale slowly one more time. “Alright.” Might as well get this over with.

Mettaton beams and, before I can stand up, suddenly drags the chair I’m sitting on to the middle of the kitchen. My hair comes out of its usual ponytail. He says, “Frisk, sweetheart, find me a towel, would you?”

Frisk grins and goes to do as bid. Papyrus picks Bean up and sits with the loudly purring cat next to Sans.

When Frisk returns, Mettaton flings the towel over me and immediately starts taming my hair with a comb he has manifested from nowhere. My hair is sort of nondescript. It’s just a medium brown with a reddish tint. It can’t even be called auburn, like my dad’s and sister’s. It’s a little wavy and doesn’t feel very healthy, but I’m not healthy, so that’s normal for me.

“How much can I take off?” Mettaton asks in a cheery yet demanding manner.

I shrug. “I don’t care, as long as I can pull it back.”

He combs some of my hair into my eyes. “I should give you bangs like Frisk! Wouldn’t that be great, darling? You could match!”

Night terror: sleep disorder occurring during NREM sleep in which a sufferer partially awakens to uncontrollable feelings of terror and dread.

Shannon goes back to school at the end of August. I see her and my parents twice before then. My parents make day trips, but Shannon always stays with me for a couple of days. She fits right in with Undyne and Papyrus – the three of them kind of feed off one another’s energy. Chaos tends to ensue, but it’s good chaos.

Natalie and Spencer don’t show up until late October. By that time, the military blockade around Newer Home has been removed. Humans are allowed in the budding city.

That almost immediately brings curious tourists and more reporters. I avoid the reporters and don’t mind the tourists. Frisk wants to avoid the reporters, too, so it works out.

Natalie arrives first. She was always the boss in our friend group. She’s five feet tall, weighs a hundred pounds, and is almost as tough as my mom. She has three younger brothers, one of whom is in law school. While she’s here, I need to ask her to ask him to take a look at everything we’ve done and written. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to run everything past a lawyer. I want to cover all of our bases.

Natalie has pink streaks in her black hair this time. Her sense of style is a little loud. “Love the hair,” she says when she comes through the door. She brought her violin with her, though I have no clue why. “Did you lose weight?”

“No,” I reply. I probably did. My weight can fluctuate ten pounds in a matter of months and that’s normal for me. “How was China?”

“It was fun.” Bean head-butts her leg and she bends to scratch his ears. “We went on an art museum trip and my grandfather knew a guy so I got to play at this little place not too far from where they live.”

“Play what?”

“Cello.” She plays nine or ten different instruments. She plays professionally on occasion, but mostly she teaches little kids.

She is about to ask me another question, but then she spots Frisk. “Frisk,” I call, and they turn. “This is my friend, Natalie. I went to college with her.”

Frisk only hesitates for a moment. They come over, but stop next to me, before they are close enough to touch Natalie. “Hi,” they say. “I’m Frisk.”

Natalie grins. “Yeah, I’ve been keeping up. I know who you are.”

Frisk blinks owlishly. “I like your hair. It has pink in it.”

Her grin widens. “I could put pink in your hair, if Isla lets me.”

“That is absolutely not my decision,” I correct. “You would have to ask the king and queen.”

Frisk tugs at a strand of hair in front of their ear. “I dunno.”

“Whatever floats your boat,” Natalie says. She sets her violin case on the counter and opens it.
“Wanna hear some music?”

Frisk’s eyes light up in interest and they nod. Natalie’s a lot better with kids than I am. I used to be good, but... well.

Natalie drives her car to Wausau to pick up Spencer from the bus station two days later. Frisk does better with Spencer than they did with Natalie, probably due to the fact that Spencer is softer-spoken and moves in a way that suggests he is conscious of everything around him rather than just going and expecting the world to fall into place in his wake.

My friends are fine with crashing in my living room, even though I bet I could get Mettaton to put them up in the resort. They both come to Newer Home when I take Frisk, and as we are getting ready to leave, Frisk finally spots Spencer’s prosthetic leg.

They realize they shouldn’t stare because when Spencer notices them looking, they jerk their head away. But Spencer was lucky enough to escape his random traumatic event without PTSD, so he’s fine talking about it. “Do you want to see it?” he asks Frisk, tone warm and welcoming. He’s going to be a neurologist, but sometimes I think he should have gone into pediatrics.

Frisk nods hesitantly and Spencer pulls up his pant leg. The metal stops just below his knee.

He sees the unspoken question in Frisk’s face. “My family was hit by a drunk driver when I was eight,” he tells them. “I’ve had this ever since and it’s been nineteen years. Had to get a new one every so often when I was growing.”

He didn’t just lose his leg, he lost his sister, too, and his parents nearly lost their relationship when she was killed, but he knows better than to say that to a ten-year-old he just met.

Natalie looks disinterestedly at his leg. “You should paint flames on it,” she comments. “Might make it look like you’re limping faster.”

Frisk giggles, then slaps their hands over their mouth, then giggles again when Spencer laughs and they realize it’s okay.

When we reach Newer Home, Toriel meets us immediately. Sans is with her. I introduce everyone and she explains that she wants us to follow her to the lab because Alphys and Sans got some machine working and they want to try it out.

Alphys is there and so are Undyne and Asgore. There are more introductions and then Frisk is ushered into a small room separated from the one we are in by a wide glass window. Alphys stands at a station with a single keyboard and two monitors.

“Do I have to do anything?” Frisk asks from the empty room. Somehow they sound like they are not separated from us by the glass panel. Probably magic.

“No,” Alphys replies, focused on typing something in. Sans is standing next to her. “Just wait a moment. I-it should... there.”


“We got readings on your soul,” Sans tells them. “Right now a lot of the data’s a buncha numbers we don’t know the meaning of ‘cause we’ve got nothing to compare it to. Pretty much the only obvious thing is your color.”

“My color’s red,” Frisk says. “I know that.”
“Yeah, we know. But if we compare your numbers to the numbers from other humans, we might be able to understand what they mean.”

“Cool!” Natalie exclaims. “Me next.”

I look at her. “Just like that, huh?” Though that is typical of her.

She waves her hand at Frisk. “The kid’s obviously not in any pain. All it takes is standing there. I can stand there. And they need more data.”

“O-oh!” Alphys squeaks. “L-let me get you a release f-f-form...”

“Get three,” Natalie says. “Spence and Isla are doing it too.”

“We could take bets,” Undyne says cheekily. “Anyone want in?”

“I am not sure that would be appropriate,” Toriel says. She opens the door so Frisk can exit the little room. “This is an experiment with human subjects, after all.”

Natalie signs off on the paper Alphys hands her without reading it. Spencer and I look at each other, then start to read.

“If you’re gonna make bets, do it now,” Natalie says. “I’m going in.”

“Can a human soul be any color?” Spencer asks. “Do the colors mean something?”

I listen as I read. When they explained souls to me, this was left out. If it was intentional, it was probably because this isn’t as important as what they did tell me, and what they told me was the relative strengths of human and monster souls and I don’t see how anything could be more important than that.

“Yep,” Sans replies as Alphys starts typing away again. “The color means something. Human souls can be one of seven colors. The color indicates their dominant trait, the thing a human will rely most upon when they have a bad time. Frisk’s soul is red, and red indicates determination.”

“So what am I?” Natalie asks.


“It’s up!” Alphys says. “You’re purple! Th-that means perseverance. Uh, congrats?? I guess???”

Sans takes the forms from Spencer and me. Spencer goes first. He registers as green.

“Kindness.” Undyne nods as Spencer exits the room. “Makes sense, if you’re a doc. So what’s Isla gonna be? My bet’s on green.”

“Yellow,” Asgore says. “Yellow is justice.”

“Orange is bravery,” Frisk adds. “Blue is integrity.” Their face peeks into the window. “Maybe blue?”

I don’t know if this has working or if it’s even started. I don’t feel anything. And I have no guess. I haven’t heard them mention a trait that I immediately know is me.

Sans chuckles. “You’re all wrong. She’s light blue. Or cyan. Whatever you wanna call it.”
Undyne looks at Sans, eyebrow raised. There is a pause. “Y-you’re right,” Alphys finally says. “Light blue.”

“Well, what’s that?” Natalie asks.

Sans looks at me through the window. Nobody says anything until I leave the... actually, now that I think about it, it might not be a room. It might be a scanner or something to that effect.

Alphys looks at me. Looks at Sans. She rolls her eyes. “Just answer. You don’t need to prove a point, Sans. We already know it’s light blue.”

Another beat, and Sans grins when I don’t demand an answer. “It’s patience.”

Apparently Mettaton does music – singing, dancing, that sort of thing – so I make sure Natalie talks to him and an adorable little ghost named Napstablook before she leaves. Maybe Natalie has some connections in the music industry or something.

When I tell Shannon what I learnt about human souls and colors and traits she complains that the lab wasn’t ready when she was here. I tell her I don’t know why she’s whining because it’s obvious which she is – and she yells at me not to spoil it. I roll my eyes, but I don’t ruin it for her.

Spencer has to leave soon, too, but Toriel and Asgore and I are in Minneapolis not even a week later so he can do Frisk’s medical workup. The drive is three hours long and awkward. I play music the whole time because small talk is clearly off the table.

People stare when we walk inside the giant teaching hospital, but I’ve got four blades on me and Asgore and Toriel lived through the war, so they must know a thing or two about fighting humans.

It is unnecessary. People just stare. Most are so surprised that it doesn’t occur to them to start whispering until we’re long gone. Presuming almost everyone has been keeping up on the monsters’ progress, it’s impossible not to recognize Toriel and Asgore since they are in more pictures and videos than any other monster. They’ve both ditched the royal-looking garments in favor of casualwear, but I have yet to see either choose to wear shoes.

That applies to Sans, too. He’s been in slippers every single time I’ve seen him.

We go to the pediatric wing. I had to get permission from the hospital for Toriel and Asgore to visit. The dean was hesitant at first and explained that they couldn’t know if monsters could transmit pathogens to and from humans, but I scathingly pointed out that the two races’ compositions are so different from one another that the chances of them exchanging pathogens (or breeding, now that I think about it) are astronomically low. She agreed quickly because she didn’t want to sound like a dumbass.

If the drive took a while, the examination takes longer. Bloodwork first so they can get some of the results back before we leave. X-rays next because Frisk nods when Spencer asks if they’ve ever had broken bones. Those reveal an improperly set left index finger. It was broken at one point in time and Frisk never received medical attention for it.

There isn’t an indication for other imaging. Frisk is thin, but they have been gaining weight since people have actually begun taking care of them. Frisk denies any severe head injuries and doesn’t
know anything about the health of their biological family, so there’s no point in looking for genetic disorders.

There are no problems until Spencer goes to do the physical examination. We go to leave because clothes have to come off, but Frisk verbally protests this.

I stay. I don’t watch and Spencer is quick and efficient. He’s done and Frisk is dressed again in less than five minutes.

He inputs his observations into the laptop he has to cart around the hospital before he turns to Frisk. “Would you like to talk about what I found with me?” he asks. I’m grateful to him for this. Frisk is independent for a ten-year-old and they deserve to be involved in making decisions when those decisions impact them.

I’m a little surprised when Frisk says, “No,” and immediately wants to see their parents. When they reach them, they climb onto Asgore’s lap, settle, and close their eyes.

Spencer turns to me. He doesn’t look worried, but he is a little concerned.

I inhale through my nose. “I don’t really want to hear this, either, but what did you find?”

He goes into doctor mode. “No signs of sexual abuse. I didn’t see anything that was obviously self-harm, but there were some scars on their hands you usually don’t see on kids their age. There’s something that looks a hell of a lot like an old cigarette burn on their right shoulder.” He opens the laptop. “Lab results are in. They aren’t malnourished, but they could stand to gain some weight. Their titers are... yeah, they need six vaccines today and later they will need more for the ones that are administered in series.”

I hate that my first impulse is to be relieved. Physical scars are almost never the whole story. “Six shots?”

“No. Some are combination vaccines.” He closes the laptop. “I’ll get the nurse to bring in a release form so I can send the medical records to your address.”

I think for a moment. “Don’t do that. My address will be changing soon. I don’t know what it will be.”

“Send it to me, when you know it.” He looks at me, dark eyes serious. “I’m assuming you’ve got the psychosocial aspect of the kid’s health handled.”

“Yes,” I reply immediately. “I’ve seen drastic improvement in that area.”

“Good. Before I go, how are you doing? I didn’t want to ask in front of Frisk. I didn’t know whether you’d told them or not.”

“They know I have lupus.”

“That’s not your biggest issue. That’s not even your biggest physical issue.”

Yeah, well. “It’s been six years since my last surgery. Almost four since my last major flare-up. I’m doing as well as I can expect to be. If I have problems, I’ll call you.”

Frisk waits until they get needled up and we’re in the car to admit they have a raging headache. I offer Tylenol, but they claim they just need a nap. They wrap their arms around themself and promptly fall asleep.
The drive home is just as awkward and quiet as it was there.

It happens during the first week of November.

It’s night and I’m sleeping and Frisk is sleeping in the spare bedroom and it’s just us so I know it’s them when a scream jolts me awake.

Another and for a few seconds I forget how old I am, where I am, and my hands fly to my stomach, up my baggy T-shirt, fingers feeling along skin and scar tissue. No blood. No wounds.

Once I’m back I throw open my closet to get at the shoebox in the corner and get out my smelling salts. I move as quickly as I can to the spare bedroom.

Frisk has stopped screaming in order to whimper repeatedly I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry and my heart twists in my chest. They look awake, but they won’t respond when I touch them and murmur their name. I shake them. Still no response, so I use the smelling salts.

They stop moving, stop whimpering. They blink watery eyes open, which immediately fill with fresh tears.

Then they are sobbing loudly on me, gasping for air, small body heaving. I’m holding them but I’m wondering if I should call and wake up Toriel or Asgore because I have never seen Frisk like this. Even when they admitted to their abandonment, they were calmer than this.

It’s a while before they begin to calm down. We go to the living room so they can sit in my therapy chair. I put Bean on their lap and the candy bowl on the arm of the chair and crouch down in front of them.

“Hey.” Their left hand is stroking Bean, so I take their right. “Do you feel better? Want me to get you anything else?”

A quick head-shake. I cannot, in good conscience, leave them like this. Their eyes are wide and wet, though their tears have dried on their cheeks. Other than that, they are utterly expressionless.

“Frisk,” I say, to get their attention. “Do you want to know what that was?”

Their brow furrows a little. They nod.

I start off explaining night terrors too technically, so I have to backtrack and use language I can expect a ten-year-old to understand. Some of the life has returned to their eyes by the time I’m done, but they still look small and scared.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask. My knees are beginning to hurt from crouching for – actually, it hasn’t been long at all. Fuck my body, I’m ignoring it. Frisk is important right now.

Frisk shakes their head and lets go of my hand to wipe their eyes with a sleeve. “I need...” they sniff. “I want to go back to the Underground. For a visit.”

“Are you missing the Underground, or a particular person?”

Their gaze flicks down to the floor. “I dunno.”
I think that was a lie. “Okay. We can go tomorrow, if your parents say it’s okay.”

“I don’t want them to know about it.”

I frown. “Frisk, we can’t just sneak into the Underground. I doubt we’d be capable of it, and even if we were, that would not be the right thing to do when I’m sure we’d be allowed to visit.”

“I didn’t mean that.” Another sniff. “I meant the... night terror. Don’t want them to know.”

Oh. “Alright. That’s your call. I won’t tell them about it.” I wonder what makes this different than everything else. Maybe Frisk will give me permission later. “Do you want to go to the Underground tomorrow?”

“Maybe. I dunno.”

“Okay. We’ll see how you feel in the morning. Do you want to stay out here or go back to bed?”


“Sure. Should I make some popcorn?”

A small smile. “Yeah.”

I walk into the kitchen, but I keep an eye on them. I see them exhale heavily, close their eyes, and grab their left hand with their right, as if they are holding someone else’s hand and not their own.

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Frisk does not want to go to the Underground the next day. We bake cookies instead. They seem to be in a better mood.

I get them to talk a little more. They were ignored a lot in their past, but when somebody did pay attention to them, it was almost always to call them names or let them know they weren’t valued.

I’m upfront with them. I tell them that even as they get better, happier, they will likely continue to have self-deprecating thoughts for a while. Years of being called worthless, ungrateful, a mistake – that doesn’t go away immediately. Hell, I still have flashbacks and nightmares and extreme fear responses if triggered, and it’s been twelve-and-a-half years for me.

But they are determined to try. They think they owe it to their loved ones to get better. I hope that, with time, they will see they owe it to themself, too.

It snows, but doesn’t stick. Construction is going to be put to a temporary halt soon. The Underground didn’t have weather, least of all wind. Even if they can work with it and in it, the monsters aren’t sure of how they would go about doing that.

Toriel runs the numbers. She estimates that they can have two-thirds of their population living comfortably on the surface before winter. Not everyone will want to move now. There are enough of them that it’s likely some people won’t want to ever leave the Underground.

We move in the third week of November. Toriel’s house is on a little street in the residential area that surrounds the urban center of Newer Home on three sides. It’s a seven-minute walk from the school that is finished, but still empty.
The house is two-story and gorgeous, but not as big as I expected. The huge and numerous windows is a norm for monster residences – they want to let in the light they spent so long without. High ceilings also look to be a necessary monster standard. There’s a fireplace surrounded by shelves I’m sure she will fill with books. A bathroom upstairs and downstairs. The kitchen is off the dining area and not visible from the front door. It’s an open floor plan other than the bathroom and a smaller, separate room that Toriel tells me will become Frisk’s space, once she gets the furniture and entertainment to go in it. There are four bedrooms upstairs, which is something that makes my heart hurt, because I’m wondering if her dead kids played a part in that decision.

Her yard is probably an acre or so. Fairly large for a residential area. I’ve noticed a lot of the houses are smaller in favor of having bigger yards, so maybe people were outside a lot in the Underground.

Sans and Papyrus are right next door and Undyne and Alphys are across the street. They help us move. Well, Sans only does one thing. Bean is old and cranky about having his environment changed for the second time in six months, so Sans sits in Toriel’s chair and holds him and naps with him so he doesn’t get underfoot. Everyone else helps. Undyne single-handedly carries in my therapy chair, which goes into the room downstairs set aside for Frisk. Bean’s litter box goes in the downstairs bathroom because he’s getting old. Often he’ll use a toilet, if I remember to keep the lid up, but sometimes he decides he doesn’t want to jump that high.

I’m tired and my bones ache after we get everything inside. I have cleaning and unpacking left to do, but when Papyrus excitedly asks Frisk and me if we want a tour of their house I can’t say no. It’s smaller than Toriel’s, but still two-story – only three bedrooms; Papyrus claims the third is for sleepover purposes.

After we’re done, Papyrus drags us over to Alphys and Undyne’s. He doesn’t have their permission, but they take it in stride when we show up unannounced and Undyne shows us around. It’s single-story, small but open, and they have separate bedrooms for now. This fact goes without comment, but I think it’s smart to try living together as housemates before jumping ahead and sharing a room when they have never lived with one another. Undyne gushes excitedly about how she’ll get exercise equipment to put in the basement and Alphys watches her, a rather stupid grin on her face, and they are so obviously in love it’s adorable.

It takes a couple of days for some people to get completely moved into a new place. Not me. I won’t stop until I’m done. If my stuff isn’t in its place, it bothers me.

Frisk is much more relaxed about it than I am, but they have fewer possessions than I do so they take just as long. I’m sure they will accumulate more material goods now that their parents and friends aren’t nearly as busy. They will want to spoil the child, and frankly Frisk could use a little spoiling.

I text Asgore once we’re moved in because Toriel is unlikely to do it. He’s staying in a suite at the Embassy (which looks like a freaking castle) and I know he’s planning on staying a week per month in the Underground throughout the winter. It’s a good idea. He still has people there and he seems to genuinely like all of his subjects.

He comes over and Toriel lets him in with little fanfare. Frisk shows him their room and Bean head-butts him until the king bends down and pets him. While he’s here, he and Toriel ask me if I will work at the Embassy. They suspect that even with a human education and the temporary segregation the transition will be difficult for some monsters. They want to know if I will be available to counsel them.

Obviously I’m available. Frisk is my only patient right now, the rest of my life has been parenting
them during the construction spree over the past five months and researching online to see what humans have to say about their new magical counterparts. Toriel and Asgore have been paying for my cost of living. I didn’t feel bad about taking their money because I had their kid and money isn’t even close to a concern for them.

I do hesitate, though. “My training was in human psychology,” I say. “It was based heavily in neuroscience, and I know monsters don’t have organic, physical brains like humans do. I can’t guarantee I have the skills to perform to your expectations.”

“It would be much the same as what you do for humans,” Toriel assures me. “Sans researched your career and read several of your textbooks. He gave one to me, and honestly it looked as though you would be better prepared to treat monsters than humans. For monsters, mental health is arguably more important than physical health, since we have such little physicality to us. Our emotions directly affect our soul, which directly affects our state of being. Those connections are a little more indirect for humans.”

“Okay,” I reply. Sans read my textbooks? What the hell? I didn’t ever notice any of them missing. “If you believe that and you want me to give it a shot, I’ll do it.” It’s what I love to do, anyway.

“We also want you in the Embassy to keep you close to political matters,” Asgore adds. “At least, for a little while. You can read humans almost as well as we can sense their intent. And I’m sure some, if not most, will be more likely to listen to another human, and may not listen to Frisk due to their age.”

I had that thought, too. “Sure. Do I have your permission to punch jerks in the face?”

“Certainly,” Toriel replies without missing a beat. “At your discretion. And expect that we will publicly rebuke you and celebrate it privately later.”

Asgore looks at her, surprised. “Tori,” he says. “You can’t be serious.”

She shrugs, smirking a little, fangs poking out above her bottom lip. “Isla’s a patient soul. By the time she strikes someone, I will already want to immolate them and you’ll be holding Undyne back so she doesn’t strike them.”

He considers this. “Oh, yes,” he agrees. “You’re right, of course.”

I pay close attention to this. I think they may have just fallen into a pattern of communication from when they were together. When they are in one another’s company, Toriel is usually tenser, colder, and displays more hostile body language. Asgore is withdrawn, quieter, and often only talks to her when necessary. What just happened wasn’t like that. They almost seemed friendly.

The moment ends when Frisk tows Asgore across the street to Alphys and Undyne’s so they can have hot chocolate with marshmallows. Toriel falls into a bit of a mood afterward, so I go upstairs to make sure I have all my books.

The snow finally sticks the third week of December. Frisk has indicated Christmas isn’t important to them and it’s not that important to me, either, so I mail little gifts to my immediate family and Natalie and Spencer. The monsters are removed from humans and human culture here, but not entirely. Apparently they already have a Christmas-like tradition, but the most that happens is
Papyrus puts lights up on his and Sans’s roof. Toriel says it might be nice to begin observing human holidays and traditions next year, once Newer Home is closer to being finished.

I think I’ve waited long enough. I pull on boots but don’t bother with a coat and head next door. I knock, shivering in my sweatshirt, but I don’t have to wait long.

Papyrus throws open the door. “HELLO, ISLA!!” he greets at typical Papyrus Volume. “You look cold, COME IN!! Would you like some delicious spaghetti to warm you up!?"

I’ve had Papyrus’s spaghetti. He had some interesting ideas about what kinds of ingredients to use. I gently nudged him in the right direction with the excuse that my stomach is sensitive, which is true, but only during some flare-ups. It became edible after that, but I tend to love all monster food for the simple reason that it doesn’t make me poop.

“Not today, Papyrus,” I answer. “Is Sans in his room?”

“Yes, indeed!!” Papyrus’s ever-present grin drops a few levels in intensity. “Did he do something to offend you?”

“No,” I reply, though I don’t know. I’m already climbing the stairs. “Thanks, Papyrus. I’ll bother him and then get out of your hair.”

Papyrus acknowledges this though he doesn’t have hair. I knock on Sans’s door – and knock, and knock some more.

I don’t know what Sans does, besides sleep. I don’t know what he does for a job and I don’t know what he does in his free time. I know almost nothing about him for the same reason why I’m here.

Finally, he opens the door. He’s rubbing his face, but the movement stops and he suddenly looks more awake when he sees me.

Just like that, the reaction is gone, and back is his easy grin. “What’s up, neighbor?”

I stare at him without blinking. “You’ve been avoiding me. I want to have a conversation about it.”

He blinks. “Um.”

“Let me in.”
He stands aside and lets me in. I turn the light on. What I notice first is the... tiny tornado in one corner. I say tiny because it’s tiny for a tornado, but the thing is taller than I am, and it seems to have swept various objects into its funnel. The sheets and blankets are a tangled mess on the bed, there are papers strewn across the desk and some on the floor, unpaired socks on the floor, and the pillow is only halfway on the bed.

There is also a treadmill in the middle of the room, when one of the few things I do know about Sans is that he’s lazy.

I choose to pull the chair away from the desk and turn it around. I sit on it. Sans leaves the door half-open and stands next to the treadmill.

I begin without prompt. “I consider everyone who is close to Frisk a friend. Except you. I don’t dislike you. I would like us to be friends, but I don’t know you very well, because you’ve been avoiding me. I want to know why.”

I look at him expectantly, and when he doesn’t reply, I keep talking. “If you don’t want to be friends, that’s perfectly fine. We can be friendly neighbor-acquaintances who love the same kid. But even if that’s the case, there is no need to avoid me.”

He doesn’t speak for another moment, then he rubs his skull. “Shit. You’re right. I’m avoiding you because I screwed up.”

I frown, eyebrows coming together. “I don’t follow.”

He makes eye-to-socket contact with me. I can tell he’s forcing himself to hold it. “When we first came out to the humans and you were at all those meetings with Toriel and Asgore and Frisk. It was just me and Alphys and your sister at your place. Remember? I still didn’t trust you. I went through your stuff.”

“I expected you to do that,” I reply. “I’ve got nothing to...”

Wait. Yes I do. I have something to hide.

“Yeah.” He winces when he sees my face. “I, uh, saw your medical records.”

Both my arms go across my stomach without input from my brain. I can’t stop my initial reaction to tear up. Shit.

“I figured out pretty quick I shouldn’t have been lookin’ at that,” he continues, finally glancing away from me. He laughs, but it’s a self-deprecating sound. “And then I couldn’t even tell you I screwed up. You had to come to me. I’m sorry.”

Come on. Come on. I can talk around the lump in my throat. “So what do you know?”

He makes himself look back at me. “I know you were. Um. Shot. That you almost died. They couldn’t even get all the shrapnel outta ya when they tried to fix you up. It... wasn’t clear at first, but I quit reading when I realized.”

I can’t talk around the lump in my throat anymore and the tears are coming and I’m leaning my
face into my hands. It’s different when I choose to tell someone. When I feel someone earns my trust.

“Um...” Sans says cluelessly. “Do you... want me to do something?”

I would be within my rights to demand he comfort me, or hug me, or something, and I kind of want to because he obviously doesn’t know how and I sort of viciously want to watch him flounder. Instead, I come back up, wiping my face because I cannot let Papyrus see me crying when I leave.

“I hope...” I pause to swallow. “I hope you understand that was a major violation of my privacy.”

“I do. I feel like a moron for not trusting you. I trust you now.”

“I don’t trust you,” I say, and he nods. “You might as well know that my current health problems stem directly from my injuries. My immune system reacted to the metal still inside me and went out of control. That’s what triggered the lupus. That’s why I have to take all those medications you probably saw every day.”

Another nod. I wipe my eyes again. I’m done, I think. I am still upset, but I’m done crying.

“What I said still stands. I would like to be friends. I live right next door and I’m friends with your brother and a number of your friends, so there’s no point in avoiding one another. But I’m pissed at you right now.”

He still looks clueless, but more concerned now. I could tell he meant that he regrets going through my personal shit. That is literally the only thing I don’t want just anyone seeing.

He nods again. “I get it. Do you need anything?”

“No.” I stand and move towards the door. “I’m pissed, but don’t hesitate to come over. Frisk and Bean and Toriel aren’t angry with you. And Toriel likes your puns, for some reason.”

“I’m cool with one out of four. I’m not gunning for one-hundred percent satisfaction.”

There is a moment in which we stare at one another. Sans cracks first. “I’m sorry. That was too soon. I am so—”

I snort in laughter. I make callous remarks about my dysfunctional body a lot. Only Natalie and Shannon will laugh at them. Most people just look at me awkwardly, but sometimes laughing is the only alternative to crying.

“I’m still pissed,” I inform him. “Less so, though.”

“Two out of four isn’t so bad, either,” he says as I’m leaving.

The main entrance to the Embassy opens into a massive atrium. It’s gorgeous. In the center, a spindly, leafless tree glitters with small blue crystals in lieu of leaves that give off a soft glow. Small waterfalls cascade down its sides and sometimes drop off branches to fall ten or twenty or fifty feet into the fountain below. Lanterns hang down from the ceiling, but they are currently unlit. Tall windows rise above the main doors and in the back, where the elevators are. There are rooms hanging out into the atrium from the back of the building. The ones on the second and third
floors look to be meeting rooms because the wall facing me on each of them is made entirely of glass, but I can’t tell what the others are. The floors are polished and there are flowers everywhere.

Five floors. I know there are rooms and suites on the upper two floors. My office is in the east wing on the second floor, so I hook a right to find the stairs.

Once I get out of the atrium, it looks much more like a regular office building. This place is crawling with monsters who are here to get their paperwork. This started last week. The first floor must be for processing paperwork and phone calls, because as soon as I get to the second floor I see fewer people.

My office is small, but bigger than I need it to be. I get to work arranging it. We’re due to receive a handful of Canadian diplomats in two days and Asgore’s supposed to get back from the Underground tomorrow. Frisk will be here. I don’t expect to have to do anything because I researched all the Canadians when we got their names and none of them have said anything inflammatory online or to reporters, but I still want to be nearby.

Toriel has been homeschooling Frisk since we moved in. Living with her hasn’t really changed things for me. Frisk still respects me as an authority and has taken to calling me ‘Aunt Isla’ (and I did not tear up the first time they said that). Toriel mothers me a little more than I’m okay with, but she does that with everybody. I let her do all the cooking, though, because I don’t have magic hands and I enjoy not pooping. I wash all the dishes so she doesn’t have to get her fur wet.

Toriel has briefly stepped out of politics in order to begin surface classes for the monsters. It’s a four-week course and everyone, from adults to children, has to complete it. She spent a good portion of the fall educating herself on human culture and history and universal and local laws in order to come up with a broad but comprehensive curriculum. She posted it online in order to solicit opinions from regular humans. She thought that was important. Some nice internet people gave her good suggestions (and some rude people had some unhelpful troll-y things to say, too, but they were blocked from commenting after their third offense and second warning). She had to run it past the government and it took them almost as long to approve it as it did for her to put it together.

She teaches at the school during the day and homeschools Frisk at night, so I get Frisk during the day sometimes. Alphys and Undyne are taking the class now, so sometimes Papyrus and Sans will get Frisk if I’m busy and Frisk doesn’t want to tag along with me.

My sister comes for a visit during her winter break. Alphys is busy, so she goes next door and demands that Sans accompany us to the lab. Surprise, surprise – she throws orange. Bravery.

She calls our parents and they come up for a day trip. Sans gets readings on their souls, too. My mother throws orange, my father light blue.

“Huh,” Sans says after we’re done. “I wonder if color’s heritable.”

I look over his shoulder at all the numbers I don’t understand. “When you get a large enough sample size, you could see if the readings are significantly similar for family members. Have you been able to get data from anyone else?”

“Yeah. If someone’s here who knows how to work this thing, we’ll ask for volunteers. Some of the tourists jump at the chance.” He pulls up four windows, comparing my readings to those from the rest of my family. “Though I think we’ve been getting biased results from the tourists. What kinda people immediately come to the monster city before it’s finished and before other humans have scouted it out?”
“Orange and yellow,” I answer.

He nods. “Exactly. But we dunno if human souls are split evenly among the seven colors. Maybe one color’s more abundant or rarer than the others. We just need more data.”

Sans has... well, he hasn’t been trying hard. He never tries hard. But he’s been expending a bit of effort here and there to be nice to me. I think it’s his version of trying hard. I appreciate it, even though I still feel my guts strangle themselves sometimes when I look at him and I know that he knows.

But he doesn’t know. He knows I was shot. He doesn’t know the other half of it. Being shot was easy. Almost dying was easy. Every single medical procedure I had to go through afterwards was easy.

Everything was easy, compared to what I can’t remember.

The UN convened the week everything blew up. They don’t necessarily convene again, but we do get some representatives from the UN at the Embassy.

As far as I know, none of them are jerks. They just ask a lot of questions the monsters have already answered. Of the people who believe monsters exist, most are fine with them living in their city doing their thing. I have a feeling some people might change their tune once the monsters begin to explore the world. There are no official laws keeping them segregated, but Toriel and Asgore have encouraged everyone to stay for the sake of convenience. They are requiring people to have their paperwork and to complete Toriel’s course before they go out into the human world, but those are the only official stipulations. There are some people who are able to leave now, but as far as I know, nobody has.

Asgore calls me on my office phone and I go to the second floor meeting room. I was told the lanterns are for fire magic. The king usually lights them up when human dignitaries come through.

They want to ask me questions. Or, one question. That question is, why am I still here?

That’s too easy. “Given half a chance, these people can make the world better,” I reply as though it’s obvious. It is. It is obvious. “That’s why I went into clinical psychology in the first place. I wanted to make the world better by making individual people better.”

Blank faces. I am not in the mood for this right now. I got three hours of sleep last night due to nightmares. I don’t get them often, but when I get them they won’t leave me alone. “I’m going to say this as bluntly as I can,” I continue. “Generally monsters are better people than humans. They are eagerly learning from us, but we can learn from them, if humans aren’t so arrogant as to disallow it.”

That elicits some frowns, but nobody has questions for me after that.

Later, as I am researching the representatives, there is a knock on my open door. I glance up. “Can I come in?” Asgore asks.

I save my document and close the laptop. “You don’t need to ask. You’re the king.” Even though his legal status is no different from that of any other monster, the monsters still all act as though
the monarchy is in place.

“Yes I do. It’s polite.”

He hasn’t moved. I’m amused by this. “Sure. Did you need something?”

He comes in and closes the door. “I have an... enquiry, if you will.”

“Fire away.”

“You have hinted at it in the past, but today is the first time you have said anything explicit. Do you truly believe monsters are better than humans?”

“If you’ll permit me to make sweeping generalizations, yes. In a moral sense.”

A pause. He looks bemused. “Why?”

What, this isn’t obvious to him? “It’s been almost eight months and I have yet to see any instance of a monster committing a violent crime. I’ll allow that they may have been on their better behavior around me, since I’m an outsider, but what I have observed leads me to believe that monsters are generally more agreeable, conscientious, and empathetic than humans.” I’m qualified to say that. “Perhaps the heightened sense of community and the simple fact that monsters appear to value the lives of other living creatures more than humans are reasons for the absence of violent crime, but the fact still stands.”

He looks uncomfortable. Instantly I want to know why. What did I say? “Unless, of course, you’re covering up every bit of violence committed by your people,” I add casually.

He winces, though it’s more in his expression than his body. I’m on my feet, tension in my muscles. “Don’t say anything. Not in a public place.” Humans with politically important jobs have been in and out of this building for a couple of months. I can’t say with certainty that the Embassy has not been bugged. I feel my mouth press into a thin line. “You must understand that if you somehow covering up the true nature of your people, you should not allow me to continue speaking about the moral supremacy of monsters. Right?”

Maaaaaybe I shouldn’t talk to the King of All Monsters in that tone. It’s just the principle of the matter. I’d have to do something unjustifiable for him to bite my head off. I have yet to see him experience anger to a greater degree than ‘slightly annoyed,’ and that was with a particularly close-minded human who would have gotten a new asshole, courtesy of me, if Frisk hadn’t stepped in and been such a sweetheart they made the human look like the jackass they were.

When he nods and makes no motion to leave I keep pressing. “Do you think I’m wrong? Do you think humans are just as morally good as monsters?”

Visible hesitation. That is already not the correct answer. “From what I have seen... I can’t say. We are all capable of terrible things, though you are right in that violent crime is... rare... for monsters. I don’t know how common it is for humans.”

My hands curl into fists. I got back up. Twelve of us went down in that first round. Four of us got back up. Everyone else who went down stayed down. It was random. No reason to it.

“It happens all the time,” I say. I have no hope for controlling the bubbling rage in my voice. “Humans are constantly hurting one another intentionally, sometimes for selfish purposes, and sometimes for no reason at all. Compared to monsters, humans are terrible.”
Asgore blinks and it’s like he just fell into the conversation, because sadness replaces the tension in his face and body and he says softly, “We understand why you might believe that, Char—”

He cuts himself off, eyes going wide. I’m frozen. What.

Before I can react, he says, “I’m sorry, Isla,” emphasis on my name, as though he has to remind himself, because apparently he does, “I have to go.”

He flees. Holy shit.

Toriel has an extraordinary amount of self-control. The best way to get a reaction I can read from her is to drop something on her suddenly.

She picks up her knitting after Frisk goes to bed. I look at her and say, “Asgore accidentally called me Chara today.”

Her hands jerk and she almost drops her needles. She looks at me in shocked concern.

I slump back into the ginormous sectional. Bean takes this as an invitation and hops on my lap. “Well, he cut himself off. But he was definitely about to call me Chara.”

Within three seconds she has schooled the surprise out of her face. The concern remains, though. “What was the... context?” she asks delicately, as if she doesn’t want my answer but needs to hear it.

“I was making a case for the moral supremacy of monsters. I said humans are terrible and he instantly went into parent mode. I saw his whole demeanor shift as soon as that came out of my mouth.”

A heavy, heavy pause. Then, “Yes, well... Chara said things like that.”

Now that gets my attention. It shouldn’t. I know it shouldn’t because I won’t get any more information because it would be rude to ask questions about that. Oh, hey, can I psychoanalyze your dead child for fun? God.

“And... you look like them, somewhat,” Toriel continues.

I tilt my head to the right. “What?”

She sets her knitting aside, stands, and goes up the stairs. I am unmoving, barely breathing. Should I follow her? She didn’t look upset, but here we are discussing one of her dead kids and her ex, so being upset would be understandable. Expected, really.

Before I can decide, I hear her descending the stairs. She comes to me and shows me an old photograph.

I say ‘old’ but it looks new. Monster magic (that’s my new answer to everything for which I cannot imagine an explanation). Two children. One human, one white-furred with drooping ears, laughing and placing a crown made of blue flowers on the human’s head. The human’s face is turned aside, half-hiding it from the camera, but I see a small smile.
“Asriel and Chara?” I ask quietly.

Toriel nods, a bit solemn. “Yes. Do you see the resemblance?”

Well... I suppose. I think they look more like Frisk, but that might just be because they are both children. Chara had the same hair and skin color I have, though they look like they lacked freckles. I can’t tell what color their eyes were. Mine are mostly green with a brown ring around my pupil. Not too uncommon.

Oh, damn. It’s the new haircut I let Mettaton give me months ago. I’ve got the same hair as Chara, albeit longer. Mine is a bit wavy like theirs was. And then there’s the fact that I’m as skinny and uncurvy as human females come. I definitely look like a kid sometimes, depending on what I’m wearing.

“Oh. I guess.” I lean back and scratch at the base of Bean’s tail, instantly turning him into a puddle of happy purring cat. “How old were they?”

“Oh.” She turns the photograph back towards herself. As she stares at it, a sad smile creeps onto her face. “Nine. They were both nine. Chara was a little older than Asriel.”

I keep talking quietly, as though the dead children might hear us if we get too loud. “What were they like?”

The smile grows. “Asriel was such a happy little boy. A bit timid, but always well-intentioned. He had trouble making friends in school, so he was just delighted when Chara became a part of the family.” Her smile fades a little. “Chara was... they had been hurt, on the surface. It took some time for them to adjust. They were new to loving, but they loved us all the same, Asriel most of all.”

I wait. I have to give her enough time to process what she is feeling, let her realize that talking helps, but not so much time the conversation closes itself. So I wait.

She inhales deeply, closing her eyes as she does so, and as soon as she opens them again I say, “You should know that I am capable of grief counseling, if you’re interested. It could help.” I pause. “I could also serve as a mediator between you and Asgore. You both—”

Her expression hardens. “That will not be necessary.” Tone curt, short. “At any rate, between the school and Frisk, I am simply too busy.” She goes back to her chair and picks up her knitting. Conversation closed. “I do appreciate the offer, though.”

Yeah. Even patient souls jump the gun sometimes.

Asgore is more receptive to my suggestion of grief counseling, but seems hesitant for no reason I can readily identify. The only clear answer I get from him is not now.

The adoption finally goes through in March. Toriel and Asgore have shared rights, but Frisk bounces around frequently between their parents and friends. Their self-worth is fairly stable now – they can take some demoralizing from human adults who think anyone else gives a shit about their opinion on Frisk’s living situation. I contemplate moving out, but Toriel tells me I’m welcome to stay as long as I want and she would like me to stay at least a little longer, for Frisk’s sake. I despise having to change environments and what space I consider to be mine, and where would I
move to anyway, so that’s that.

Humans have begun moving into Newer Home. Nobody expected this, so it surprises us all. They want to be here, so we don’t get any racist jerks. Almost all of them are willing to go to the lab and get their souls read. It’s looking to be a good thing, for now.

It’s been nine months since this whole thing started, but the reporters don’t get around to me until now. One tries to corner me in my office and I impassively kick her and her cameraman out. I hate the human media and anything associated with it.

All it takes is word to get around that one reporter was denied an interview. Then everyone wants an interview or a comment or anything at all. I don’t want to understand it, but I know it has something to do with ratings and dramatization and that would be perfectly fine if they didn’t go about dehumanizing people in order to make money, but they do.

I talk to Mettaton about it (well, I complain about it) because all he has to do is basically flounce about in public and the reporters flock to him because they sense he knows how to act in front of a camera. He informs me that avoidance and distraction will only work for so long. I despise procrastination, but this is one thing I have no trouble putting off.

My role at the Embassy does not change. I see a lot of monsters whose problems amount to “The human world is so big! How do I decide what to do with my life?” so I feel more like a high school guidance counselor than a psychologist but that’s alright. I’m there with Asgore and Frisk whenever anyone important enough for Asgore to call me comes by. Throughout the winter we mostly get diplomats from foreign countries who merely want to see the monsters and what they have built for themselves. That’s easy, but Asgore still has to call me because he’s shit at lying and if lying needs to happen, I’m the one who has to do it in Toriel’s absence.

Frisk’s night terrors, unfortunately, get worse. This is part of the reason why they alternate where they sleep so often. We’re trying to figure out if being in a particular place or with a particular person makes Frisk less likely to have sleep disturbances.

So it is no surprise when I’m woken up by my phone once again.

It’s Sans: you up? frisk wants you

I punch out five minutes and send it. Frisk usually wants me, for some reason. It isn’t because of my expertise. They refuse to talk about their nightmares and night terrors, even when I push them.

I roll out of bed. I’m in sweatpants and an old T-shirt. I throw on a hoodie and go. There is a key to the skeleton house on the hooks right next to the front door, so it’s no trouble getting in. Apparently a lot of monsters don’t lock their residences at night, even though a handful of humans live here now, but Sans keeps everything locked up, including his room and the basement when he’s not home.

Frisk and Sans are both awake. Frisk is mechanically shoveling vanilla ice cream into their mouth and Sans is sitting idly next to them. Neither of them looks at me.

I sit on Frisk’s other side. They give Sans their bowl and climb onto my lap even though I’m almost too small for this, head on my shoulder and arms around my neck. They are out in two minutes.

I keep holding them, but I shift them to get their weight on the couch instead of my legs. “How bad?” I ask.
San shrugs. “Not too bad, compared to what they’ve had. I caught ‘em whimpering and woke ‘em up before they started talking or screaming.”

I advised Frisk to allow us to let them go back to sleep when we notice they are having sleep disturbances, but they insisted that they be woken up. They were stubborn in that, just as they are stubborn in refusing to talk about what they see while they are asleep. Sometimes people will not remember nightmares or night terrors if they are not woken up. Part of me wants to go against Frisk’s wishes because it looks like it would be the best thing for them, but I won’t. It’s important they have this bit of control.

“I’m not sure what to do,” I admit. “Frisk won’t talk. I’ll prescribe them medication as a last resort, but I really don’t want to. It’s been months and they’ve only gotten worse.”

Sans’s usual grin is absent. His teeth look almost bared. Smiling is his default. When he’s got a neutral expression on his face, something is wrong.

“I wish I could get them to talk about it,” I continue when he says nothing. “It doesn’t have to be with me. Talking has helped with their other issues.”

Sans makes a noise like a sigh. “Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe it’s best if they never say a word about it.”

That was unusually dismissive. I glance at him, but he won’t look at me. “You’re full of shit,” I say.

He grins a little. “I can’t be full of shit. Not everybody poops.”

“Metaphorical shit,” I clarify, not wanting to let the subject drop. I lean over so I can lie horizontally on the couch. Frisk is still half on top of me. “You know, if there’s something you need to talk about, you can talk to me.”

He doesn’t reply for a long time. So long I end up falling asleep on the couch, Frisk curled against me.

It doesn’t last long. Something shattering yanks me out of sleep.

I carefully ease Frisk off me and back down on the couch. I go up the stairs and press my ear to Papyrus’s door. Snoring. Not him, then.

A dull thump. Sans’s room. If it were just that sound, I’d leave it unless he kept making noises, but I think something broke.

I knock softly on the door. Only a balcony and open air separate me from Frisk, so I don’t want to knock loudly. I turn the doorknob.

He’s up, oddly enough, and is slowly creeping towards his window. A lamp is on the floor next to the treadmill, the lightbulb shattered. I hear him mutter, “—winter no matter what—” but that’s all I catch. He does not respond to the door opening or the light from my phone.

“Sans,” I call clearly.

He whips around to stare at me and then, faster than I have ever seen him move, he takes a step, then he’s completing the step in front of me – teleportation, I knew it, this is the first time he has used it in front of my face – and I’m stepping back so quickly I almost trip myself because I’m expecting – an attack, I guess, because that’s how my brain works—
His arms come around me and his chin rests on my shoulder. “I know you,” he says, unreasonably relieved. “If it’s you, we can’t be down below. We gotta be up above. Gotta be.”

I’m kinda shocked at the surprise hug. Sure, at this point, I’ve exchanged comforting touches with everyone else (though Undyne’s hugs tend to cause physical discomfort at the expense of relieving emotional discomfort). Not Sans. Sans doesn’t even touch his brother that often. If they have physical contact, it’s because Papyrus initiated it.

I frown. “You thought you were back Underground?”

He freezes. Slowly, he spreads his arms and steps back. He stands there for a moment, eyesockets wide, and I know he’s vulnerable, but for some reason my ability to read people abruptly vanishes and I’m standing there, too, with zero guesses as to what he might be feeling and what I should do about it.

Then he stuffs his hands into the pockets of his shorts, his shoulders come up, his grin snaps back into place. I can practically hear the string securing the mask to his face twang.

“Have dreams about it sometimes,” he says far, far too casually. “Being grounded isn’t pleasant.”

One beat. Two. “You don’t want Frisk to talk about their nightmares so you can feel justified in keeping silence about yours?”

Something around his eyesockets tightens. “Maybe I know how it is. Maybe I want them to avoid something that didn’t work for me. You know where the guest bedroom is, don’tcha? Paps showed you around.”

“You’re avoiding the—”

“I’ll put Frisk in there. They’d probably like it if you camped out with ‘em tonight. Turn that guest bedroom into a rest bedroom.”

“You don’t—”

He’s gone. I dart past the upstairs balcony and down the stairs as quickly and quietly as I can. Frisk is no longer on the couch, the door to the guest room is open, and before I can process anything else, I hear the click of a door closing upstairs.
Guilt: a feeling of responsibility and remorse due to belief or realization that one has violated one’s own moral standards.

Sans avoids me after that. I ask Toriel if she ever wakes up and believes she’s back Underground. Her response is of course not like it’s obvious.

Maybe it is. Maybe I’m missing something.

The first week of April, humans employed by the government begin working at the Embassy. I’m under the impression the national government looked at Wisconsin and said “that’s your problem,” and the state responded by assigning humans to the Embassy and saying “take care of it.” We did have politicians and people in the national government here and we will likely continue to get them, but usually they just visit and look impassively at everything and pussyfoot when we attempt to ask them questions.

I kind of wish the Canadians would come back. They were the nicest. Compared to diplomats from other countries, they’ve been here the most, since we’re hours away from the Canadian border.

The humans have offices in the west wing. I avoid them even though I’m told at least four individuals came looking for me in my office to talk to me. I won’t speak with anyone until I research them and I haven’t had time to do that yet.

Some of the humans are commuting from the town I moved to and from in a matter of six months. I drive over on a whim only to find that the town has nearly doubled in size since the barrier broke. Hotels and gas stations and restaurants have sprung up.

It can’t be for tourism. There still aren’t many humans who are willing to wander through the monster city as tourists. The important people who come to the Embassy tend to stay at the Embassy, so it can’t be for them.

I don’t know. I’ll bring it to Toriel and Asgore’s attention and consider my job done.

I spend all my free time pouring over recently published research papers on pediatric psychology and night terrors. I have to do something about Frisk. I’ve been where they are. I got to the point at which I refused to sleep because that was better than subjecting myself to whatever my sleeping brain would throw at me. I can’t let that happen to them.

Toriel’s classes are almost over. She wants to involve herself at the Embassy because she thinks I’m overworking myself to make up for Asgore’s inadequacies. She doesn’t say that, but she does imply it. And yes, I do a lot for Asgore, but most of it is stuff that I would also have to do for Toriel, if she were in his position.

When I tell her this, she is... unhappy, but concedes to my logic.

Frisk is having sleep disturbances on the order of two or three times a week. They still always want me, especially if it was bad, and I still don’t know why. They are more comforted by their monster family in every other aspect of their life.

The sleep deprivation throws my body off-kilter. My period comes early. I didn’t take preventative analgesics. I tell Asgore I’m not coming in and to call me if something comes up. I try to stay home with Frisk, and Toriel, when she’s done teaching, but her mothering becomes smothering. I lie and tell her I’m going across the street to see if Alphys has any ideas.
Alphys knows enough about human biology to know what’s up, but Undyne squawks, “YOU’RE BLEEDING FROM YOUR WHAT,” when I explain it to her. “HUMANS DO THAT!? I’M SO GLAD I’M A MONSTER!!”

She makes me chamomile tea when Alphys does some googling and recommends it. Things that are good for healthy people don’t always work for me, but at least it tastes good. Not as good as the stuff Asgore makes at the Embassy sometimes, but it’s okay.

I’m on self-prescribed bedrest and a heating pad when Asgore calls. I yell for Toriel and Frisk to come in the room and put him on speaker. He explains that we’re finally going to have a rally. It’s going to be a much bigger live audience than we’ve ever had before. The date is still up for debate.

We settle on the fifteenth of June. Gives us two months to plan.

I’m happier with a project, and it doesn’t feel right to think of Frisk as my project, even though they kind of are. I love that kid and I want to help them because I love them. That’s all there is to it.

The more I think about it, the more I think I love all these people, too. I rolled with it at first because it was immediately apparent that change was going to happen and I saw an opportunity to steer the change in the direction I believed would improve the world. I turned out to be right.

Too late I realize we didn’t build an outdoor stage in Newer Home. Construction has not yet started up again in full force – some smaller projects are underway, but that’s it. I made Mettaton give me his private number, so I call him and tell him and he shrieks in agony about this grievous oversight. I roll my eyes and tell him not to hurry, because I’m not sure I want a giant human crowd coming into Newer Home. He concurs and asks whose job it is to make sure none of the humans try to kill somebody.

He’s smarter than I thought he was. I tell him it’s my job.

There is an outdoor stage built just outside of the nearby human town, on the Newer Home side of the town near the bottom of a natural, gentle slope. A fence is erected around the area. The day before, I tell Undyne she needs to have the Royal Guard check the ground. Anything that looks freshly dug needs investigated. Someone may have buried a weapon prior to the fences going up.

When Mettaton revamped my wardrobe, I judged everything based on how comfortable it looked, if it would make me look like a little girl, and what undergarments I’d have to wear with it. If I can get away with it, I usually skip on undergarments, because my skin is sensitive and likes to be an ass to me.

So I mostly commissioned knee-length dresses with flowy skirts. I can strap knives to my thighs and reach them easily. I have to wear underwear, obviously, but depending on the design, I can skip out on wearing a bra.

I put on a light blue dress that Frisk picks out because, according to them, it’s the same color as my soul. It’s solidly colored except for the hem, straps, and a section running around my waist, which are patterned in grey-and-white. I wear sandals that won’t come off if I have to kick somebody in the face.

I waste five minutes being clueless over how to fuss over my appearance. I guess most people can
look in a mirror and judge their attractiveness. I look in a mirror and my first thoughts are how sick
do I look today, do I have a butterfly rash, am I this pale because I’m on my period or I’ve been
shitting blood (not that one so much because I don’t poop anymore), is my hair falling out, are my
scars irritated. I am objectively not sexy or beautiful. I can fall on the spectrum of cute or pretty if I
don’t look too sick or tired, and I almost always look sick or tired or both.

At least a third of Newer Home’s population is at the rally. I’m sure some monsters came up from
the Underground, too. By the time we get there, we find the monsters mostly separated from the
humans, who are greater in number, because there have already been two altercations. They were
instigated by humans, who were promptly kicked out. Some of the officers here are the same ones
who were occasionally in Newer Home as it was being built, so they are friendly with the
monsters. There are dozens of food stalls and carts, some close to the entrances through the fence,
others closer to the enormous throng of people gathered in front of the stage. It’s hot today and the
line in front of the nice cream stand is long.

There are probably around five thousand people total here. And we have issues immediately.

I’m with Toriel and Frisk. We have to pass through the outer edge of the crowd to reach the stage.
The humans do double-takes at first, then some are yelling greetings at Frisk, referring to them as
‘Ambassador.’ Frisk smiles sweetly and gives anyone who speaks to them a little wave.

Then, out of nowhere, some guy hollers something and tries to stick Frisk with a pocketknife.

I shove Frisk with one hand and try to catch their attacker’s wrist with the other. I miss and grab the
bottom of his hand and the knife digs into my skin.

Adrenaline shrieks through my veins as my world narrows down to this. Threat, my brain helpfully
points out. Do something about it.

I punch him in the face with my other fist, yank him back to me by his weapon hand, and slam a
knee into his crotch. He goes down and then suddenly I’m taking a step forward, his knife in my
injured hand, snarl etched on my face.

My foot comes down on his throat. His eyes bulge. I don’t come back into myself until I hear Frisk
gasp.

I take two abrupt steps back, still clutching the knife, blood smeared all over my hand and down
my arm. Toriel and Frisk are both staring, eyes wide. I wipe the snarl off my face.

Members of the nearby crowd are tittering anxiously. A few people scream, but that stops when
the cops show up. Frisk’s attacker is spouting stupid racist shit as he’s detained and removed. I
drop the knife into a plastic bag when one of the cops holds it open. They take that, but I still have
mine.

I’m shaking and I can’t remember where we were going. Toriel finally steps forward and says,
“Isla, please let me see your hand.”

She’s healing me as a couple of paramedics arrive. The nearby crowd sees the glow from Toriel’s
hands and I hear “Is that magic?” and “What is she doing?” and “Look at that, look at that!”

Toriel pulls away and I allow the paramedics to examine my hand. They wipe it off and blink.
“What did you do?” one of them asks Toriel uncertainly.

“It was healing magic,” Toriel explains. Some eavesdroppers gasp. “It isn’t quite sufficient to heal
anything beyond mild physical damage, but it can help even with severe wounds.”
Frisk takes my uninjured hand. My head jerks so I can look at them. They smile at me, a little nervously, but they squeeze my hand anyway. I breathe deep. I’m not going to kill anyone today. Not unless I have to, and I didn’t have to.

The paramedics deem stitches unnecessary. They clean and put gauze on the laceration, which looks as though it’s been healing for weeks, and wrap my hand to keep it in place.

Undyne is pissed when we reach the stage and tell her what happened, but she looks interestedly at me when Toriel says that I “handled the situation.”

“I punched him in the face and kneed him in the balls,” I clarify, deadpan.

Undyne’s face splits into a grin. “Aw, hell yeah!” Toriel glares at her because Frisk is in earshot and the grin shrinks a little. “Um, I meant – yeah. You did say you were trained.”

I pick at the gauze until Frisk grabs my uninjured hand to stop me. “I did. I am,” I reply. “It wasn’t even a challenge. I had him on the ground in two seconds.”

“We should spar sometime,” Undyne suggest cheerily. I shoot her a look of pure terror. She laughs aloud at this. “Nah, seriously. We have virtually no experience fighting humans. And,” she suddenly looks more serious, though she snatches Frisk in order to deliver a noogie upon their head, “we obviously need it.”

Mettaton warms the crowd up. Humans and monsters alike seem to love him. He hands the mic to Frisk when it’s time for them to speak. They march out there with their head held high and I feel a swell of pride for them.

In an effort to make all the human adults with whom they interact use the correct pronouns, Frisk has taken to wearing robes on formal occasions, similar to what Toriel will wear. Unlike Toriel, Frisk wears red to match their soul. It never occurred to me how outrageously gendered human formalwear is until I saw their robes.

The reporters ask questions Frisk and their parents have answered a dozen times already. I’m supposed to be patient, but this annoys me. It’s a total waste of time.

Asgore and Toriel talk, too. It’s more casual than any of the other speeches they’ve had to give. Mettaton engages them in brief conversation sometimes, like a host. He even occasionally responds to the reactions of the audience to keep them involved.

I stay with Alphys backstage. She has Mettaton’s portable charger in case he needs it. She tells me she optimized his body’s energy consumption rate, but the battery is still a work in progress. Mettaton still has to charge every couple of days and she would like to get it down to the order of once a week.

Alphys spends a lot of time staring at Undyne in her armor and blushing. I spend a lot of time monitoring whatever is happening onstage and the audience’s reaction. In the first hour, I head into the crowd and walk around to listen to what humans have to say. I stay away from the reporters.
Most of what I hear are curious, off-handed enquiries. Maybe we should put a monster FAQ page on the Embassy’s website. There are some negative grumblings, a few snapped-out remarks, but I say nothing. I see Sans working a hotdog stand, but what he’s selling doesn’t look like hotdogs. He doesn’t notice me, so I don’t bother trying to get his attention. Papyrus is with him, though he looks to be distracted by the sheer number of humans who turned out. I’d bet Sans convinced him to stay there to keep him from intermingling and possibly getting hurt. I wouldn’t blame him, either, since there have already been fights and Papyrus is... wonderful, but he’s also loud and has a tendency to disregard the concept of personal space.

I’m not scheduled to speak and I wasn’t planning on it, but after I return backstage there’s a human woman yelling who won’t shut up, despite the other humans around her looking at her like she should, and I decide to do something about it.

I head out onto the stage. Toriel sees me coming and looks calmly at me. Mettaton tilts his head at me in a what-are-you-doing gesture, but gives me his mic when I gesture for it.

“You.” I point at the woman. “Onstage, now. You can yell at people much more efficiently from up here.”

The people part around her. She hesitates, but makes her decision and marches up onto the stage. I hand her Toriel’s mic. She looks cluelessly at it.

“Well?” I stare at her expectantly. No blinking. “Go ahead.”

More hesitation, then her face turns red and angry. “These – these things—” she points at Toriel, who merely raises an eyebrow, regal and elegant as ever, “—have been running around for months, acting like they’re people, when we don’t know the damage they’re capable of! They—”

“There have been zero recorded acts of violent crime committed by a monster,” I cut her off. She turns and stares at me. I mimic Toriel, raising an eyebrow. “What, are you unfamiliar with the concept of civil debate?”

“They’re not civil!” she shrieks into the mic, causing everyone onstage and in the front three or four rows in the audience to wince. “They’re beasts! And – and I don’t just mean personal damage, I mean – economic damage, damage to the land!”

I nod like I give a shit about what this moron has to say. “Humans have no room to point fingers when it comes to environmental destruction. Could you expand on what you mean by economic damage?”

She looks bemusedly at me. “You could, I don’t know,” I say condescendingly, “provide evidence for your claims? Unless you think everyone here is so stupid they’ll take you at your word.”

She shakes a finger at me and walks towards me. Toriel and Mettaton let her pass. “Now, you listen here—”

“Uh, no. There are three things for which I’d like to mock you. First: an increase in volume is not an adequate substitution for a well-timed, witty retort. Second: you called them things? Really. It’s unfortunate that you lack creativity in addition to general intelligence and self-awareness. And third: this kind of hate-speech is unacceptable. You only feel this way because you think the world needs your approval to change. Guess what? It doesn’t. It needs nobody’s individual approval, least of all yours. Get off the stage.”

She looks livid and for half a second I expect her to attack me. As soon as someone begins
clapping, I address the audience, snapping out, “Don’t you dare applaud. That needed to happen. I didn’t enjoy it.”

That stops it before it can start, though there are a few stray cheers and whistles. She makes her first smart decision all day and slinks off the stage. I inhale through my nose, then look into the cameras. “That was underwhelming. This is a good time to put this out there. Any academics who would like to conduct a study – especially those in economics and sociology – may fill out an application I will be posting later on the Embassy’s website. Complete it and send it to the email on the application.”

I hand the microphone to Mettaton and walk offstage. Alphys’s mouth is hanging open and Undyne is bouncing in place, grinning from fin to fin.

“Don’t,” I tell them both.

Undyne nods, still grinning. “Fine. I won’t tell you that was awesome.”

“M-m-maybe something g-good will come of it,” Alphys adds. “It m-m-may deter other people from b-being jerks.”

When they both turn and look, I do too. Asgore is approaching. I brace myself for a dad-lecture about being nice, since he’s done that to me once before, but I pause when I see how frazzled he looks. I thought something was off.

He pulls me aside and says, “After this is over, I need to speak with you privately. It’s important and it can’t wait.”

I frown, concerned. “Did something happen?”

“No. Nothing new. It’s just about time you knew the truth.”

The rally started at one and it doesn’t end until around eight. Overall, it went well. Sans high-fives me for ‘dunking on’ that bitch. I tell Toriel I’m going back to the Embassy with Asgore to finish up a few things.

At this point I have slept everywhere Frisk sleeps regularly, so I have been in Asgore’s rooms. The last time I was here things were neat and orderly. That is not the case now.

“Forgive the mess,” Asgore says, sounding indifferent to the state of his residence. His demeanor is urgent, desperate, like his head’s about to explode. “You have helped us so much, Isla.” No slip on my name. “I would hate to lose your assistance and your friendship, but I cannot in good conscience allow you to remain in ignorance. Not about this.”

Bad feeling about this. “Whatever you’re about to tell me—”

“You already warned us, back when you hardly knew us,” he interrupts me. “And... we decided you were right. You may still be right, but you have to know.”

“Alright,” I reply. “Can we sit down, first?”

We do. He doesn’t offer me tea, which is a giant red flag. He’s only half-here. I can tell just by
looking at him that he’s struggling to free himself from something in his head.

Asgore takes a deep breath and says, “It’s about those other humans you asked us about. The ones who fell into the Underground between Chara and Frisk. After Chara and Asriel, I – the entire kingdom had lost hope in the span of a night. You know about how a monster’s soul and health depend upon their emotions. Monsters can literally die from feeling too much negativity. I – I hadn’t seen the kingdom suffer like that since we lost the war. I had to do something.”

I already know I don’t want to hear this, but it’s not as though I could stop him if I tried. His voice is hollow and pained. He shrinks in on himself as he speaks.

“And I was so angry. Poor Chara had already suffered so much, and for them to be taken from us so slowly and painfully – and Asriel, Asriel who would never hurt any living creature, he was so distraught when Chara died, and I – I declared war. Toriel left, and when the others came, I killed them to harvest their souls. There were six of them. Children, all of them. And I killed them.”

He stops talking. He can’t look at me. Is he done? He has to be done. There cannot be anything else on top of that.

Something is wailing inside me. I realize I’m pissed. “Shit,” I say. And again, “Shit.”

He winces when I stand, but all I do is walk to the door. I raise a hand and pause. Turn back around. “Were you going to just let me leave?”

He blinks, confusion edging into the pain in his expression. “I’m sorry?”

“If any other humans found out about... this, everything we have all worked for would fall apart. You don’t know who I’m going to tell. You – you should have stopped me. You are laughably outnumbered by the humans, you would never survive another war, and whether it’s a war or your people being forced back into Mount Ebott you’d better damn well bet the humans would do something in response to six dead kids.” I stomp on the floor instead of punching the door or wall. Less chance of hurting myself. “Damnit, six dead kids, Asgore!”

I’ve seen more than that. More than six. And I—

“I know.” His head is bowed. “I’m willing to submit myself to the human authorities. I—”

“No you fucking aren’t,” I bark at him. His head snaps up and he stares at me. I glare back. “Were you not listening to me? If anyone else finds out about this, it will annihilate any chance your people have for a peaceful life on the surface. I am not telling anyone. You are not telling anyone. End of story.”

I stand there, snorting like a bull. He goes to say something and I hold up a hand and he remains silent. Shit. *Shit.*

A minute or two passes by. My adrenaline rush begins to fade. The anger calms from white-hot rage to bitter disappointment. I stomp back to the chair across from him and sit back down.

“Get me some fucking tea,” I say, and he springs up to follow the order. “Then we’ll talk about this.”
There’s a lot of talking. A lot of me swearing. He even cries at one point.

It’s clear he felt like he had to do it. It’s clear he hates himself for it, which is the thing that stops me from hating him for it. And anyway, it isn’t like I have any room to—

I have to leave when Toriel calls me to tell me that Frisk had another nightmare and is asking for me. It’s not even eleven yet and now Frisk probably won’t want to go back to sleep. Great.

I inform Asgore I’m telling Toriel about this conversation. She’s going to sit down with him and me and we’re going to talk about it, whether she likes it or not. This is so messed up, but it’s clear neither Toriel nor Asgore has handled the aftermath properly, so. I guess I’m doing it.

In hindsight, the monsters wouldn’t have gotten out if Asgore hadn’t killed six kids and kept their souls. The power of seven human souls was needed to break the barrier. Nobody really knows how Frisk did it, but there were six souls there, and Frisk’s made seven.

I leave still mad, but I’m not really mad at Asgore. I don’t know what the anger is directed at, but it’s there.

People definitely saw me leave the rally with Asgore and now I’m leaving his rooms after dark. I’m disheveled from the unfun conversation we just had. Of course I am swarmed by reporters the second I step out of the Embassy and they all want to know if I’m having sex with the king. Holy fuck. That would require some serious creativity. I’m like a quarter of his size.

I’m pissed and just done. I take out my phone, put it on speaker. The questions cease when it stops ringing. “Hey, Isla. What’s up?”

He sounds puzzled. We usually don’t just call one another out of the blue. “Hey, Lucas. I’ve got a couple obvious questions I would like you to answer out loud.”

“Uh, sure.” He probably recognizes my tone of voice. He knows it means someone’s about to get humiliated. “But what exactly are you doing?”

I grin. “Making some asshole reporters look like morons, not that they need help in that department. Now, what are you to me?”

“I’m your friend.”

Yeah, that’s how I categorize him in my head, too. “No, the other thing.”

“Oh. I’m your ex.”

“And what is my sexuality?”

“You’re asexual. Wait, did they accuse you of having an affair with somebody?”

“Yep.”

He bursts into laughter over the phone. “That’s a – that’s a good one. Are they shooting live? Can I watch this on the internet later?”

“If not, I’ll make sure to post a firsthand account online myself.” I glower at the reporters. Some have the audacity to look offended, but most are just dumbfounded, unsure of how to react. “Thanks for helping me bash these idiots over the head with the obvious, Lucas. I’ll talk to you later.”
“Anytime. Bye.”

I hang up and treat a couple of people to a glare that should have their cameras and microphones exploding. “I’m disappointed with your heteronormative assumptions. You should have asked if I was sleeping with the queen. I’m living with her; that, at least, would have made an iota of sense. Does anyone have any other stupid questions or unfounded accusations? No? Good.”

When I leave, nobody tries to follow me.

When I get home, I convince Toriel to go upstairs and possibly to bed (though she claims she won’t be able to sleep knowing Frisk is like this) so I can take care of it.

Frisk is inconsolable. Quiet, but inconsolable. As soon as Toriel disappears, they come to me for a hug.

I say, “It’s okay now. You’re allowed to be upset, but you’re safe now. I love you,” and they abruptly stop crying and stare at me in shock.

“What?” I ask, worried.

They blink. Sniff. “You love me?”

Oh. Is this really the first time I said it? I’ve known for a while and I thought I was expressing it clearly in my actions, but dumbass me didn’t consider that Frisk wouldn’t know what love from a human adult looks like.

I squeeze their shoulders. “Yes. I have for a while. You’re like my... I don’t know what a gender-neutral term for a niece or nephew is. But you’re like that.”

Their eyes flood again and they hug me so hard my ribs creak. When they pull back, they say, “I... wanna talk about it. My nightmares.”

“Okay,” I reply. “I’m here to listen. If it gets too difficult, you can stop.”

“You can’t tell Mom or Dad about this. You can’t tell anybody. It’s important.” Their gaze slides away. “Well, you can tell Sans. He already knows.”

Did they already tell Sans something? Is that why he suggested they might be better off not talking about it? “Okay,” I say again.

“You’re...” another sniff. “You won’t believe me. You didn’t believe me about the monsters until you saw Sans.”

I take their hands. Most of the time, they’re a toucher. Occasionally they act like they hate physical contact, but most of the time they enjoy it.

“That was before I knew magic existed,” I point out gently. Frisk is deflating. Have to bring them back up. “I’ll believe you, I promise.”

Shouldn’t have promised that, but I love this kid. I don’t like to make promises I might not be able to keep.
They chew on their lower lip again. Slowly they remove their hands from my grasp and clasp them together. And they begin to speak.
Memory: process in which the mind encodes, stores, and retrieves information.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When I was twelve, I was a fucking prodigy. I had an eidetic memory and I regularly scored in the high one-fifties on IQ tests. I was going to be a junior in high school, but I figured maybe I could get bumped up one more year and start college even earlier.

That was what was important to me. Proving everyone who held me in such high esteem correct. I planned to get a handful of degrees (because I would definitely go to college for free), quickly work my way to the top of whichever field I liked best, and be an expert authority. I’d churn out research papers or make revolutionary discoveries or invent something that would change the world.

I was a camp counselor the summer before my junior year. I was twelve. The other counselors were sixteen or older and of course we had some adults actually running the show. I was good with kids and I was a genius, so nobody thought much of my age.

I don’t remember it. I know I was with two fellow counselors and our group of two dozen kids. First graders. Five- and six-year-olds. Someone walked in with an automatic and just started spraying. I was at the front of the group. I was shot first.

I went down. And then—

I do remember when they brought me out to an ambulance strapped on a stretcher. People were screaming. Crying. Parents of the campers had heard and were there already. I passed out to sirens blaring in my ears.

The hospital became my second home for months. I had emergency surgery. I got an infection because they didn’t get all the shrapnel out. I had another surgery. They’d waited too long and my bones had started to heal around the bits of metal, so they got everything out of my softer tissues and left my femur and pelvis alone. I became septic and they blasted my system with antibiotics. Once again, I survived, though at that point I wished I hadn’t.

When I finally got to go home my parents were so focused on my physical health (to be fair, so was I) that they missed the obvious signs. I was fine, for a little while. I went back to school, took all my new meds, kept seeing doctors, kept sleeping twelve hours a day because I was tired.

I was fine. And then I wasn’t.

PTSD is like something living and horrible bores into your head and makes its home there. Sometimes it sleeps. Sometimes it plays. And sometimes it chews on your neurons and shits all over your brain and sharpens its teeth on the inside of your skull. Trying to evict it results in immediate and terrible backlash.

The PTSD stole my eidetic memory and it definitely made me stupider. I’m still a genius compared to most people, but compared to what I was before, I’m forgetful and stupid and compassionate.

I didn’t know how to relate to people before. Now I do. It was awful and it made me worse in some ways, but it made me better in the ways that matter.
I slam down enough coffee to wire the engine of a truck. It’s bad for me. My liver is busy processing the medications I have to take and one of my kidneys was damaged when I was shot, so that kidney is basically half-functional. Drugs of any kind, even caffeine, are hard on my body, but I have to stay awake and alert somehow.

I didn’t sleep. Frisk did, but only after they told me they went through the Underground multiple times. Too many to count, they said. And sometimes, they weren’t so nice.

I understand. I do. And I told them how and why I understand and I lifted the hem of my shirt and showed them all the scars on my belly, from bullets and surgeries, and I told them what I did, and then they cried for me, and I knew that whatever happened to make them kill everyone is no longer a possibility. That child doesn’t exist.

Not in this timeline, anyway.

I need answers and I can’t push Frisk. They’re a child and they are still fragile where this is concerned and I don’t want to push them.

I text Alphys to make sure he’s not at the lab. She says he’s not, so I go next door. Papyrus is assisting with the construction. He’s not home. I go upstairs and bang on his door. I don’t stop until he answers.

“Downstairs,” I say. “Then we talk.”

Apprehension. “What—?”

“You avoid everything. No more avoiding. No more distractions. Get the hell downstairs.”

I turn and go and, as expected, he’s already slumped into the couch by the time I make it there.

I stand between him and the television and cross my arms. “Frisk told me about the timelines.”

That gets his attention. He isn’t slouching anymore. “What,” he says.

The lights in his eyesockets have gone. but I don’t look away. “Frisk told me about how they were able to redo their journey through the Underground. They said they don’t know how it worked, but it was some kind of time magic. They said they killed all of you and everyone else many times over. They said they freed all of you many times, too.”

Sans’s eyesockets are pitch black. He’s not smiling so widely anymore.

“They’ve been having nightmares about killing all of you,” I continue. “And about all of you killing them. Apparently Papyrus is the only one who never killed them. I believe them, but I need more information. They said you already knew, and it’s obvious by your reaction that you do. The important thing is Frisk, but... can you try to explain this to me? If I understand more about how it works, I’ll do a better job with Frisk.”

Sans doesn’t say anything for a long time. I wait. And wait.

Finally, he says, “Frisk told you...?” very quietly.
For no reason in particular, I’m suddenly aware of where and how far away the front door is. “Yes,” I answer, because that is the answer.

More silence, which is broken by my phone. I pick up without looking at it. “What?”

“Howdy, Isla.” It’s Asgore, and he sounds worried. “Is Frisk coming to the Embassy today?”

I frown, momentarily forgetting all the crap Asgore and Frisk dumped on me in the span of six hours. “Yes. They should have been there an hour ago.”

“They’re not.”

“They left almost eighty minutes ago. They said they were going to the Embassy.”

“I checked before I called you. They are not in this building.”

This definitely falls into the category of Not Good. I think fast. “Contact Toriel and Undyne. I’ll make sure they aren’t in the neighborhood. I’ll call Alphys and Papyrus and Mettaton. Sans is already with me.”

“All right. I will see if the Canine Unit can sniff them out. All without alerting any humans in the area.”

“Especially the ones at the Embassy. I’ll call if we find them.”

I hang up. “Frisk is missing,” I tell Sans. “Let’s go.”

I start for the door, scrolling through my contacts. Alphys and Mettaton first. I’m not sure if Papyrus will be able to search for a missing child stealthily—

There is an uncomfortable tugging from within me and then something else and it feels weird and unfamiliar and almost wrong. I go down on one knee, pulled to the floor. I feel heavy.

I glance over my shoulder. A small, valentine-esque heart is directly behind me, resting point-down on the floor. Sans told me my soul was light blue, but if this is my soul, I would say that blue is more dark than light.

Sans’s left hand is out, palm-down. His eyesockets are still dark. “No,” he says. His left eyesocket suddenly lights up blue, then flashes yellow, and keeps flashing. I swear I almost piss myself. “You’re not going anywhere.”

They haven’t seen him at all.

He’s here. He has to be here. But if he is here, then he has kept himself confined to the Ruins, and Frisk doesn’t think that’s healthy behavior.

Chara snorts in their head. You know I’m right, Frisk tells Chara.

Chara doesn’t reply. Frisk wonders if they’re okay with this. They said they were, but Frisk isn’t sure. Since they made this decision, Chara has been short with them.
I’m fine, Chara snaps, proving Frisk’s point.

Eavesdropping on Frisk’s thoughts again. It doesn’t matter. They are used to it. Frisk does it to Chara, too, albeit unintentionally. That’s why they understand how Chara is around humans. They understand better, now. Isla has taught them a lot about thinking and feeling and how the two interact. She’s good. She has displayed ruthlessness, the capability to be violent, but so have almost all of Frisk’s monster friends.

*Humans aren’t good, Frisk. If they are, it’s only after a lot of effort. You’re the best human there is.*

That isn’t true, Frisk replies. I’ve done awful things. We’ve both done awful things.

*But you never enjoyed it.*

Frisk does not want to think about what they were feeling when Sans while trying to tear them limb from limb. It didn’t happen. Not this time.

They head into Toriel’s house. In the kitchen, they find dog prints in the remainder of the pie. Chara insists it was the Annoying Dog even though there’s no way to prove it.

They walk down the hallway. Frisk looks in the mirror. It feels like it’s been a long time since they were led here by this bemusedly welcoming woman who seemed to be trying to mother them. She was, but Frisk didn’t fully realize it at the time. Other than Toriel, no one has really mothered them.

*Still just you, Frisk,* Chara says softly.

They go into Toriel’s room next. *Who knows what the future holds for Chairiel,* Chara quips, and when Frisk glances at the cactus, they say, *It’s not like this cactus was waiting for you to come back or anything...*

Frisk smiles, but the light mood doesn’t last when they enter Asriel’s room. Someone has dusted off the empty photo frame. Chara’s sadness prickles at the edges of Frisk’s mind.

Frisk slowly walks to the bed and lies down. They turn their face into the pillow. It’s stupid to think that they can still smell Asriel, and the thought isn’t fully theirs. It’s mostly Chara’s and it’s mostly Chara who thinks it’s stupid. No scent would linger for a century.

Chara, it’s okay, Frisk says, wrapping their arms around themself. We’re gonna get him, Chara.

*It felt strange to lie in the bed,* Chara replies. Frisk almost sighs. Sometimes they narrate when they want to distance themself. *It feels entirely too small for you now.*

They don’t mean it in the way that Frisk has grown taller and gained weight. It... makes Frisk sad. Sad that they are growing and Chara and Asriel are not. They have been stuck as children for so long they might not ever really get to be children again, but they aren’t adults, either, so... what are they, exactly?

Chara is ignoring them and their sympathy, so Frisk stands. They leave Toriel’s house and backtrack through the Ruins. They are utterly deserted. Almost every monster that has not left for the surface now resides in New Home. There is nobody here and there has not been anybody here for a long time.

But he’s here. He has to be here.
Frisk firmly holds onto that hope as they walk. Finally they leave the Ruins. They descend a flight of dirty stairs.

They pause before entering the cave that contains Chara’s grave. Are you ready? they ask.

*I should be asking you that question,* Chara replies. *Are you ready?*

I was ready even before he refused to come with us. But the world wasn’t ready. Now it is. I hope he’s ready, too.

*Fair enough. And... I hope so too.*

I’ll do my best, Frisk promises, and steps into the cave.

“Sans, what the hell!” I protest, forcing my way back to my feet. “This is—”

A sound like warped static and he’s standing in the middle of the room and his left hand moves and the world *tilts* and I fall, sideways, and I hit the back of the couch so hard it *thumps* against the wall. It didn’t hurt, but that’s not the point. Something shifts again, and I’m pulled down. I drop onto the cushions.

Gravity. He’s controlling *fucking* gravity. I twist and wildly grab at the edges of the cushions as if that can somehow keep me there.

“What do you know,” he says, and it isn’t just the eye that’s terrifying, it’s his voice, too, because he doesn’t sound right.

This is nothing, I realize. This is just to keep me in place. This isn’t even an attack. All he’s done is restrain me and I can’t get away. I don’t even have a weapon.

My brain is insistently pointing out the *threat*, but as much as my instincts are urging me to, fighting is stupid.

“I’m not gonna fight you.” It comes out in a pathetic squeak.

“That wasn’t the question.” Something starts materializing behind him. It looks like a floating skull with a long snout. Another warping noise and the thing’s mouth starts filling with light.

I press my back into the couch. I start hearing it, the sirens, the – the gunshots and the screaming and my stomach hurts and my leg hurts and I know where I am, I know that what I’m seeing is real, that what I’m hearing and feeling isn’t, but I’m having a hard time believing I’m not exsanguinating, I’m not about to—

“Oh god,” I’m wheezing. I still know where I am. And the last person who— “I’m gonna kill you if you keep this up, Sans. I’m gonna kill you and I won’t remember it and I’ll have to explain to Papyrus what happened and I don’t wanna do that, I don’t wanna kill you, so please *please* stop.”

There are several seconds of silence broken only by my hyperventilating. I’m not dying, I know I’m not, but I feel bloody, I feel the tiny flecks of metal in my bones, I can feel air moving through my body because it *breathes*, all flesh will breathe if you open it up just right—
The levitating skull vanishes. Sans puts a hand over his left eyesocket and when he removes it, the flashing iris is gone and his little white pupils are back. “Shit,” he says.

For some stupid reason, I try to stand up, but my right leg won’t support my weight. Sans catches me and tries to dump me back onto the couch, but I can’t let go of him because he’s solid, so there’s some awkward half-hugging and him supporting my weight until he decides to sit down with me. He goes to move away, but I’m still latched onto him, so he leaves his arm curled around my back.

“Did you kill the person who shot you?” he asks.

I’m staring at nothing. All of me is in my lungs right now. I nod.

Ten or twenty seconds trickle by. Then he says, “Look, I – suck at this. I’m sorry. Want me to get someone who can actually help you?”


“I keep fucking up. It’s almost been a year and I’m still waiting to wake up trapped Underground. I don’t know how permanence works. All I know is to gather as much knowledge as possible so that next time maybe I’ll remember something.”

Come on. Come on. Come on. I’m not bleeding. I’m here. I’m twenty-five and magic exists now. I do this sort of thing for other people, so why is it so much harder to do for myself?

The silence is grating. “Keep talking,” I say.

There is a lot of movement on his face. Something above his eyesockets that makes me think he might be frowning. “About what?”

“Don’t care. Just talk so I stop hearing past sounds.”

I can see him freeze. At least he doesn’t crack a joke.

He’s right, he does suck at this. “Magic. Talk about magic. How it fits in with science.”

“Um. Okay. A long time ago, some of our scientists wanted to define magic as something exempt from the so-called ‘laws’ of science. It’s not entirely accurate, but it’s a good guideline as long as you don’t take it too literally. You know Asgore and Toriel can use fire magic. They produce fire without the involvement of a combustion reaction, essentially bypassing the chemistry science assumes must be present for fire to form. I teleport by magically manipulating the space of and between my to and from locations. Humans don’t know much about magic because they can’t use it and have no way of measuring it, even accidentally, so your scientists have consistently missed it.”

I have always been able to focus well, so I focus on his voice. My respiration rate is slowing.

“What about the humans who trapped all of you? Weren’t they able to use magic?”

“Yeah. That was hundreds of years ago. By then mages were already a dying breed. But they – and Boss Monsters, really – are evidence that humans and monsters were able to crossbreed a long time ago.”

“Boss Monsters,” I repeat.
“Toriel and Asgore. They’re the only two left. Their souls are slightly more powerful than the rest of ours. A little more like the soul of a human.”

“And the mages.”

“If they could use magic, then they weren’t made of as much physical matter as present day humans. They wouldn’t have been able to house souls as powerful as present day humans, either. They would’ve been somewhere in between.”

“Oh,” I say calmly. Just to see the look on his face... “How does monster reproduction work?”

His expression is priceless, but I don’t get to listen to him struggle through a response because the front door opens and in comes Papyrus, humming loudly. He stops when he sees us. “HELLO, Isla!” he greets cheerily. “How are you this fine afternoon? Did you drop by for a snack!? I can cook while you finish canoodling with my brother!!”

I cringe and ease myself off Sans, whose face goes a nearly neon shade of blue. I’m no better. My head’s gonna catch fire if I blush any harder. He didn’t even question it. He acted like me snuggling his brother (and Sans snuggling anyone) is normal. What the hell?

“We’re not canoodling,” I tell Papyrus. “Sans made a loud noise and scared me so I made him comfort me.” Close enough.

Papyrus rushes over. “SANS!! I TOLD you to be quiet around this human!!” He leans down for a hug. I pat him on the back. “I apologize for Sans’s lack of volume control during his deliverance of whoopee cushions and incidental music. Do you feel better now?”

Sans shrugs. “Sorry, bro,” he says meekly.

“I’m fine, Papyrus. I...” Oh my god. Frisk. Yeah, Sans basically attacked me, but the ten-year-old is still the priority. I stand up quickly, checking my phone to make sure I don’t have anything from the others. “Papyrus, Frisk is missing. You didn’t see them on your way home, did you?”

Worried Papyrus makes me sad, but missing Frisk makes me anxious and the anxiety is winning. “I did not,” he answers. “We must get a search party underway immediately!”

I nod. “Yes, but we need to keep it quiet from the humans, especially the ones working at the Embassy, though I’d bet Asgore is doing his best to keep them busy. Do you think you can do that?”

He nods and poses. “This mission greatly resembles a puzzle, and I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, am a master of puzzles and puzzle-like things!”

I suggest that he find Undyne and coordinate with the Royal Guard and he enthusiastically agrees. He requests that I keep Sans from napping on the job before sprinting full-tilt across the room and diving through one of the front windows.

I stare. I look at Sans. He doesn’t react to this, so I choose to let it go.

“Any ideas?” I ask.

“Frisk can wait,” he replies. “This is important. What did they tell you?”

“No. We’ll talk about this later. I don’t know whether it will be before or after the conversation I need to have with Toriel and Asgore, but it will be after we find Frisk.”
“You don’t think it’s a coincidence they disappeared after they told you.”

“Sans, I don’t care. I...” My brain does shit like this sometimes. It gets a little laggy when my symptoms get bad. “They’re in the Underground,” I say. “The first few times they came out of their nightmares and night terrors, they said they wanted to go Underground. They always felt differently after they calmed down.”

Sans’s expression is edging towards something that might be horror for him. “If the kid wants to reset again, there’s nothing we can do,” he says. He shrugs and grins. “Well, that’s that. It was nice knowin’ ya.”

“What are you talking about?” I demand.

He looks carefully at me. “I dunno how much they told you, but we’ve gotten out before. If they go back, we’ll all be back Underground. Nobody will remember anything. You won’t remember anything, either. Everything will be as it was when Frisk fell.”

I’m an idiot. Frisk told me that. They told me nobody remembered anything after they went back. It never occurred to me that I would forget if they did that now.

And I don’t want to forget. These people... I don’t believe in fate, I don’t believe that things happen for a reason. I can’t. Not after watching six-year-olds run for their lives. Not after seeing the ones who didn’t make it. Not after slipping in a dead child’s blood. I believe in making one’s own purpose.

“That’s not happening,” I tell him. “I don’t know what Frisk would be doing back Underground, but I don’t think that’s it. If it is, we can talk them out of it. Teleport us there.”

“Oh? There’s no——”

“The point is what you make it, Sans,” I snap. “You can teleport another person along with you, can’t you?”

His eyesockets are a little wide. “Yeah.”

“And you can teleport from here to the Underground?”

“Yeah.”

“Then do it. Or I leave you here and start jogging.”

He only waits a second. “Okay. But, um, it requires physical contact.”

I walk to him and firmly loop my arm through his. “Don’t you dare act shy now. Not after your brother saw us canoodling on the couch.”

He goes blue again. “He only likes that word because it has noodle in it,” he mutters, and—

And something nearly indescribable happens. There’s this... ripple through reality, and I simultaneously get a sense of moving very quickly and immobility, and my stomach does something terrible, and—

And my feet are on hard ground and it’s dark. Or at least darker. I can’t tell anything else because I’m on my knees and retching.

“I’m better at it when I’m using familiar to and from locations,” Sans says nervously. “I haven’t
teleported a lot on the surface compared to the Underground. And the physical distance was greater
than I’m used to. It can, uh, be a bumpy ride, even if you’re holding onto me.”

“That sucked,” I whine. Anytime I vomit or even have nausea, it’s bad because of all the scar tissue
I have in my abdomen. I glance around, registering the cavern ceiling far above (I should put an ad
out for geologists on the Embassy’s website) and the sunlight filtering down. There are gold
flowers everywhere and they look similar to the ones that bloom in the fields at the base of the
mountain.

I’m glad I didn’t puke. It would have been a shame to hurl on the flowers.

Behind me, there is a large chair upholstered in plushy purple fabric. It doesn’t take a genius to
guess it’s a throne.

“This is the throne room,” Sans says, confirming my thoughts. “We’re close to the exit. You can
stay here. I’ll check behind us real quick, then I’ll start teleporting. Frisk would have to come this
way to get out, so it’s better if you stay.”

Yes, it is, considering that it would hurt to move quickly right now. I should have at least tried to
sleep last night. My body tends to fall apart as soon as I do something to offend it.

Then again, it might be the teleporting it didn’t like. Who knows what that actually did to my cells.
To my atoms.

I nod and sit in the flowers. Sans is gone when I blink. At least I can blame him if someone sees
me and wants to know what I’m doing here. Humans technically aren’t allowed in the
Underground right now. I’m sure the rule doesn’t apply to Frisk, but I don’t know about me.

I send a group text out to let people know we’ve got the Underground covered, but I don’t get a
reply. They are probably too busy searching to reply. I’m not surprised I get service down here.
The monsters made sure they had a way to quickly communicate with their friends Underground.

It doesn’t take long. Less than an hour. Frisk comes into the throne room alongside Sans, who
appears to be more relaxed than he was earlier, when he was trying to feed me to his floating pet.

My head feels like it’s stuffed with cotton. I probably won’t be able to talk to him until I get some
sleep. Wait, did I remember to take my pills this morning?

I stand up. My stomach feels better, but still achy. Frisk is carrying a small clay pot in their hands.
There is a rather large golden flower in it. Their face is stubborn, but their eyes are puffy, like
they’ve been crying—

The flower has a face. The flower is a person and that person is frowning at me.

Okay. I’ll get to that in a moment. I go to Frisk, setting a hand on their shoulder. “Are you okay?”

They nod. They lift the pot, holding the plant closer to my face. “This is – he’s my friend. I want
him to come back with us.”

Okay. I’ve got no brainpower. I’d probably agree with just about anything right now.

“Is that what he wants?” I ask, focusing on the flower.

A sour look briefly crosses his face. He nods. “Howdy,” he says, tone bored and monotonous. “I’m
Flowey. Flowey the flower.”
TITLE DROP (probably won't be the last time, either)

Also Floweypot, though that is the one thing I gave away in the tags. Golly, wonder how that's gonna turn out.

We are now moving into the middle of the story, but there is definitely a long ways to go. I wanted to say thank you to those of you who have stuck around. It's gratifying knowing that people actually like my brain-vomit enough to keep coming back (you could say it fills me with DETERMINATION to write more)

Anyway, thanks to all you lovely people. I appreciate feedback and I enjoy communicating with my readers, so drop a comment or two or as many as you like (I'm not about to pull monster candy bowl on anyone).
Empathy: the capacity to understand or feel what another being is experiencing from within the other being’s frame of reference.

Some texts and phone calls are exchanged. Everyone ends up rushing to Toriel’s.

Most of them recognize Flowey. There are a lot of frowns directed his way, but the flower kind of slouches in his pot and scowls at the floor. I sit on the sectional with pillows under my knees as Toriel applies healing magic to them.

“I don’t think that’s doing anything,” I tell her. “Inflammation is more of an illness than an injury.” And if magic could heal illnesses, Toriel would have one – two – fewer dead children.

“Perhaps, but walking could have injured you,” Toriel replies. It’s not like I have the energy to protest again, so.

Frisk is sitting on the coffee table, holding Flowey on their lap. Everyone else is standing around them or sitting on the sectional with me. Mettaton was here earlier, but he left after seeing Frisk. His little ghost cousin was with him.

“U-um,” Alphys pipes up. She’s looking at Flowey, expression a mix of fear and dread. “Are you... I m-m-mean, were you—”

“Yep,” Flowey replies. “I’m your little experiment.”

Alphys looks like she’s about to pass out. “Oh,” she squeaks. “I – I’m s-s-sorry.”


The scientist wrings her hands. “I... d-d-don’t really know, b-but I’m sure I m-messed up s-s-somehow.”

Undyne’s mad. That’s her default response to anything that upsets her. “Just because something doesn’t turn out how you expect doesn’t mean you messed it up,” she says hotly. “The amalgamates couldn’t be happier now. They’re with their families and their families are bigger than ever since the relatives of the monsters who make them up came together.”

Does she mean those big white blobby monsters? Huh.

“Flowey doesn’t have a soul,” Frisk announces. “He has trouble feeling certain things because of it.”

Flowey turns around and hisses, “Frisk!” Alphys is shaking so badly that Asgore, concerned, puts a hand on her shoulder to steady her.

“Maybe that’s why we were all tied up the last time we saw him,” Sans quips. He’s still tense. I can’t tell if it’s from the flower’s presence or from freaking out over my potential knowledge. Maybe it’s Flowey. Papyrus was the only one who looked happy to see him.

Frisk nudges Flowey, who scowls at the floor. “I’m... sorry for attacking all of you.”

“Flowey was the one who broke the barrier,” Frisk informs us all. “He absorbed the six human souls and almost all the monster souls.”
Toriel shoots a look at Frisk and Flowey. Undyne flings both arms out, fingers spread. She almost smacks me in the face. “And he wouldn’t have been able to do that if he had a soul! Humans can’t absorb human souls and monsters can’t absorb monster souls, right, Alph?”

She stutters, “W-well, y-yes, but—”

“What emotions are you lacking?” I ask Flowey. There is a pause. Serious lag time there. “Sorry,” I say. “I didn’t sleep last night. It makes me slow.”

Toriel finally lets my swollen knees be and stands, looking expectantly at Flowey. The flower's scowl deepens when Frisk does their best to hug him.

“Flowey can’t feel love or compassion,” Frisk answers for him. “He’s tried, but...”

“MONSTER SOULS ARE MADE OF LOVE, HOPE, AND COMPASSION!!!” Papyrus abruptly yells. He pauses to process his words and Frisk’s. “I am sorry, my friend,” he tells Flowey, bending at the waist to look the flower in the eye. “That must be terrible! Don’t fret, for I, the Great Papyrus, have more than enough love for the both of us!! OUR FRIEND QUANTITIES SHALL NOT REMAIN STAGNANT!!!”

Flowey looks at Papyrus with dull hostility, then sighs, resigned. “Sure, whatever,” he mutters.

Alphys steps forward. “I-I’m r-really s-s-sorry,” she manages to get out. “I d-d-didn’t know th-this would h-happen, I-I—”

She breaks down in tears. Undyne immediately jumps up and hugs her, murmuring reassurances.

Flowey looks surprised for a second. His expression settles back into a bored scowl. “Yeah, well. Of course you didn’t know. It’s done. Can’t do anything about it now.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I say. “Frisk, did you bring him here with the intent that I treat him?”

Frisk nods. “You helped me,” they say, voice quiet. “I thought... maybe you could help him too. It’s not exactly the same, but I thought if anyone could, it would be you.”

Alright. Need to talk to Frisk later about how I don’t have the ability to fix every broken person I see. “If he’s willing to cooperate, I’m willing to try.”

“My child,” Toriel says. She’s a little worried. “Is this... what you want? You want him to stay with us?”

“He’ll stay in my room,” Frisk responds. “I’ll take care of him, Mom.”

Flowey hisses, “I don’t NEED you to take care of me, Frisk,” and Toriel nods gravely and says, “Alright. You’ll have plenty of time to do that. I regret I must confine you to the house for a few days as punishment, Frisk. You do understand you shouldn’t disappear like that, right? You could get hurt if nobody knows where you are.”

Frisk pouts a little but nods. That’s better. Even months ago they were terrified of displeasing their new family in any way. Now they trust adults – or at least adults they care about – to be fair with them.

My brain is fuzzy. I might feel bad ditching while Alphys is still distressed, but Undyne’s got it covered and I’m useless like this, anyway. “I need someone to help me upstairs,” I say. “My skeleton hates me.”
Papyrus poses. “Well, there are two skeletons right here who don’t hate you and, in fact, like you very much!! SANS!!! Help me help our friend!!”

Soliciting Sans’s assistance is unnecessary because Papyrus scoops me up without difficulty and bounds up the stairs. His brother trails along obediently behind him. Papyrus wants Sans to read me a bedtime story, but I tell him Alphys probably needs cheering up and I can sleep without one.

Sans hangs back after his brother runs out the door. “Three of my neurons are awake right now,” I tell him. “Say what you need to and go.”

“Just wanted to make sure you weren’t gonna tell anyone. Nobody else needs to know that Frisk... that they killed and were killed by a child. Least of all Toriel.”

I burrito myself in the blankets. “I agree with you. I won’t say anything. Frisk told me I couldn’t say anything and I’m not about to betray their trust.”

He exhales and it whistles between his teeth. “Good. And, uh, sorry. ‘Bout freakin’ you out earlier. I overreacted.”

“You did, and it’s fine. We’ll talk about it later.”

Several things happen over the course of the next week.

A video of me telling the reporters where to stick it is up within a day. Asgore is mortified when he sees it. So is Toriel when, at the end, I tell the reporters it would have made more sense to ask me if I’ve been sleeping with her. Sans laughs his ass off and high-fives me.

Sans hangs around me for a couple of days even though I repeatedly reassure him I’m not going to tell anyone. He doesn’t really want to talk about it or fill me in – all he tells me is that he doesn’t really remember previous timelines, he just remembers some things, and those memories feel more like dreams than memories. He has nightmares, too, but will not say how often or how bad. He tells me I should focus on the flower when I ask if he wants to talk about it in a more professional setting.

I ask him just how powerful he is. He reluctantly tells me the way he fights is different from other monsters, but he’s up there.

The big construction projects start up again. Toriel splits her time between the Embassy and planning a curriculum for the school and looking for teachers. I was able to get the government to let Frisk have a year off in order to focus on their mental health and politics, but they are doing much better now. I think they would be fully capable of attending public school, but I suspect they’d be a victim of bullying due to their living conditions. It will be better for them to attend school with the monster kids.

June 22 is the anniversary of the destruction of the barrier. Frisk wanted that to be considered their birthday instead of whatever is on their birth certificate, so we’ll celebrate their eleventh birthday that day, but I don’t think anything else is planned.

I stay home with Frisk and sometimes Sans for three days to wait out Frisk’s grounding. Flowey fluctuates between making an effort and being hostile and uncooperative when I try to be his
therapist. He’s willing to talk about what he can and can’t feel, but as soon as I enquire about his past he snaps at me and tells me he’ll rip my legs off. Straight-faced, I say, “Well, at least my knees won’t bother me anymore,” and Frisk giggles and Flowey stares at me before pouting and ignoring me for the rest of the day.

Frisk is not willing to leave me alone with Flowey. They tell me that there is some stuff Flowey wants to keep secret and they can’t tell me. What they do tell me is that Flowey used to have control over the timelines before they went to the Underground, so he knows about them and how... varied they were.

It’s clear within minutes of watching them interact that Frisk feels terrible about Flowey’s state-of-being and tries hard to make him feel as good as possible. What isn’t immediately clear is that Flowey, while often belligerent and sardonic with everyone else, is slightly nicer to Frisk. He seems to like Papyrus’s company, too, and Papyrus talks to him like they know one another. Flowey also likes Bean, who does not try to chew on him despite Bean’s history of eating plants whenever I let him outside and then coming inside and throwing them up.

A few days before Frisk’s birthday I send Frisk outside with Flowey and Bean to play and I finally get Toriel and Asgore in the same room. It’s awkward, so I just go for it. “Toriel, Asgore told me about the six humans who fell between Chara and Frisk.”

She goes stiff. I’ve seen Toriel look annoyed plenty of times, but I’ve never seen her like this. Cold rage settles onto her face and despite that, I swear the ambient temperature increases.

She glares at Asgore. “We agreed to keep our silence on that.”

He can’t hold her gaze. “I thought Isla deserved to know. All of our other friends know.”

“You’re right, for once,” she growls. Her lips are drawn back, fangs bared. “And what would you have done had she made to tell another human?”

“Absolutely nothing,” I say. “Which was a problem. Toriel, sit down.”

She looks at me. “Do you finally understand?” she demands. “Frisk isn’t my third child. They are my ninth.”

I did some family therapy while I was in school, but that was not my focus. “Tell me what happened, Toriel.”

“Are you trying to counsel us? That’s a pointless endeavor, Isla. The past—”

It’s not like her to get so worked up in her own feelings that she disregards logic. “You wouldn’t know a pointless endeavor if it bit you in the ass, Toriel,” I interrupt.

Shock breaks through the anger on her face. “Excuse me?”

“There is no point in hating him. You couldn’t possibly hate him more than he hates himself. And you left, didn’t you? You left when the kingdom fell into despair. You couldn’t bear to do the one thing that gave them hope and they needed hope.”

“There were other—”

“Sit down.”

Finally, she does, looking at me a little wide-eyed, like this is the first time she is seeing me.
Asgore called me Chara once. I can tell he thinks it sometimes. I wonder if Toriel ever does. She certainly tries to mother me occasionally, but she does that to everyone, so I can’t be sure.

“Here are the facts,” I say. “You lost both of your kids. That blows. If you’d actually had access to the surface, declaring war on humanity would have been stupid, considering how outnumbered you’ve always been. That’s not even taking into account the relative strengths of human and monster souls. As it was, it was probably worth it to make that gesture to your people and restore hope. But it wasn’t just a gesture.” I glance at Asgore. “You had to kill humans. Kids. Kids who were probably lost and unwanted and scared. And you did.

“If their souls had not been harvested, none of you would have gotten out. Both of you obviously realized that whatever shit there was between you, it would be inappropriate to burden your people with it. Neither of you did a good job burying it. You’re co-parenting Frisk now, so you have to resolve it. For their sake, if nothing else.”

I stand up when all I get in response to this is silence. “I don’t have to be in the room, though I imagine my presence would deter the urge to burn the house down.”

Asgore chuckles. Toriel and I both look at him. “Sorry,” he says, eyes glassy but smiling slightly. “That reminded me. Undyne burnt her house down back in the Underground. Frisk told me about it.”

“They mentioned that to me as well,” Toriel replies. She still looks irate, but it’s gone from her voice.

I climb over the sectional so I can back off and observe. I stand next to the large dining table and glance out the sliding doors. I can see Frisk in the yard, slowly creeping up on a butterfly. Flowey and Bean are on the deck, both napping, the cat curled around the flower’s pot. I am so taking a picture of that.

The silence is broken by Asgore. “Tori—” he starts.

“I’m still angry, Dreemurr,” she interrupts him. She sounds forlorn instead of mad. “I don’t know if I’ll ever stop being angry. I don’t know if I can and right now I don’t particularly want to. You were no better than those humans who took our son from us. You killed those children for coming to the Underground, just as Asriel was killed for going to the surface.”

He nods. I can’t see his face from where I am.

“I know you didn’t want to kill Frisk when they faced you,” she continues. “I could see that. You hated what you were about to do. But you were still going to do it.”

Another nod. He’s hunched in on himself. “I love them, Tori. I know I do.” The words sound torn from him, like he’s about to cry. “I never thought I could again, not after – after Chara and Asriel. But I do.”

She closes her eyes, eyebrows coming together. “I know.”

“Monsterkind still needs you. You’re so much better at this sort of thing than I am. You always were.”

“I know. This time, I am not leaving them. They deserve better from me, even if you don’t.”

There is a long pause. I quietly walk to the glass doors. Maybe I can see if Flowey will be more receptive to questions after his nap.
“Tori.” Asgore’s voice has dropped to a whisper. “I still—”

Toriel’s eyes snap open. “Don’t. Just... don’t. I know.”

I should not stay to hear more. I slip through the door, shutting it firmly behind me.

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We celebrate Frisk’s eleventh birthday as planned. It’s nice to relax after how busy we’ve all been. Sans pushes Frisk’s face into their cake and Toriel takes dozens of pictures. We skipped human winter holidays this year, so Frisk isn’t familiar with the idea that people might want to buy them presents. They’re a little overwhelmed, but in a good way.

Afterward, Frisk wants to walk around and say hello to all their monster friends and acquaintances. Undyne and Alphys volunteer to escort them since Frisk’s parents aren’t keen on letting them go out alone after they ran off to Mount Ebott. It isn’t that Newer Home is dangerous (there have been two studies done, by humans, evidencing the opposite), but it’s bound to get more dangerous as humans move here and to the growing human town nearby. So far, there haven’t been incidents other than a few quickly-resolved misunderstandings, but if someone snaps and becomes violent, it’s better if Frisk isn’t in that person’s vicinity.

I use the opportunity to take Bean and Flowey out back. I’ve talked with Flowey alone exactly twice, for maybe ten minutes each time, before a worried Frisk showed up. I’ve never witnessed Flowey do anything violent. Sure, he makes plenty of threats, but he obviously doesn’t mean them. He’s quiet and broody a lot. When he speaks or engages in conversation, it’s usually to make sarcastic comments and gripe about... well, just about anything. He is almost always annoyed. If a reason to be annoyed isn’t immediately apparent, he actively looks for one.

It’s nice out. Breezy and cloudy. I’m too Irish to enjoy the sun properly. I watch Bean walk around the yard and occasionally chase the birds brave enough to land near him. He won’t ever catch them, so I let him have his fun.

Even though everything within Newer Home was built within the past year, there are grass and gardens and trees in the residential areas that look as if they have been growing for a decade. The advantages of magic. I take a seat at the base of an oak and set Flowey next to me.

Some people respond well when I help them set clear goals for themselves. Frisk was, and still is, like that. Flowey didn’t really take to that. He didn’t react negatively, he just... didn’t react much at all. He doesn’t have goals. I think he believes he isn’t capable of anything worthwhile, but every time I approach the topic of his self-esteem he gets snarly. He doesn’t want to appear weak.

Usually just sitting in someone’s company in silence is a last resort, but that’s because appointments only last so long and people have to pay me for that appointment (or they used to – I’m on the Embassy’s payroll now). Toriel and Asgore have insisted on overpaying me, so I’ve basically been treating Frisk and Flowey for free.

It’s all of ten minutes of enjoying the weather and watching Bean do a half-assed job stalking birds before he says, “It’s not going to work.”

I have a guess as to what he’s referring to, but instead I glance at him like I don’t know. “Hm?”

“The humans. They’re not going to keep playing nice with the monsters. Eventually they’re going
to kill them.”

He sounds bitter. I look at the clouds. Maybe he’ll talk more if he thinks I’m not paying attention. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because it happened already.”

Oh. I didn't expect it to go in this direction. “To Asriel, you mean?”

Flowey frowns hard, posture slumping. He flicks a piece of soil in his pot with a leaf. “Yeah. To him.”

“Those were very different circumstances. I’m under the impression Asriel just walked into town carrying a human child’s body. Without any sort of preparation or explanation, that could obviously elicit strong assumptions and reactions on the part of the humans.”

Flowey’s lip curls. “Yeah. Obviously.”

Weird. He usually doesn’t take things personally. He perceives the world as on the wrong end of the moral spectrum and that’s just the way it is and if you want to get ahead, you’re probably going to crack some heads doing it.

“It’s good he decided not to fight his attackers,” I continue. “Well... it’s good in that peace now would have been much more difficult to attain if he had. Not so good he died. It’s tragic.”

Flowey’s face softens into just a small frown. He flicks another piece of soil.

I lower my volume a bit. “You claim not to be able to feel love or joy or compassion. Are you able to feel a sense of accomplishment? When you finish something you really wanted to do, are you glad you did it? Do you feel fulfilled?”

“Yes,” he replies without hesitation. Some questions are that easy, as long as I use enough terms and word it different ways so he understands what I’m asking. The first day of their grounding, Frisk told me Flowey is about their age. In response to that, Flowey snapped, “I’m WAY older than YOU, Frisk,” and chucked a little white pellet at the kid. Frisk sidestepped without even looking at it and raised an eyebrow at Flowey, which cued his petulant moping. Even if Frisk hadn’t said anything, I’m sure Flowey’s behavior would have clued me in.

“When you do something you like to do, are they always solitary activities, or do they involve another person?”

“It’s usually just me. If it involves someone else, it’s... it was me one-upping somebody else.”

Switch to past tense there. Interesting. “I’m starting to form a theory, Flowey. Would you like to hear it?”

“Sure,” he mutters.

“It seems to me that the emotions you lack...” I pause for a moment, rewording it in my head because I was about to say something too technical. “The emotions you lack have social functions. If you had them, they would help you form and maintain mutual, loving relationships with other people. Love, compassion, and empathy are defined by how you feel about another person. You have emotions, but you lack positive emotions for other people. Does that make sense?” I wait for his nod before continuing. “You can feel negative things for other people, but most of those emotions are based in survival instinct. Most of them come down to fear at their core.”
“I’m not afraid,” he protests instantly. “I’m not – I’m not some crybaby.”

“Everyone has fear,” I say. “Fear is good. It helps us avoid things, people, and situations that have the potential to harm. It keeps us alive. Frisk said you’re very determined. They said you have a very strong will to live.”

“That doesn’t mean I’m scared!”

“Of course not. You misunderstand me. I don’t mean to say you’re fearful all the time. I mean that... fear inspires other emotions, like caution and anger and hate. Those are the emotions you notice. Would you say you feel those three things?”

He glares at me, then looks away, sullen. “Yeah.”

I reach over and carefully brush my fingers along his petals. He turns sharply to look at me, but lets me do it. The only other time I tried to touch him he jerked away and glowered at me. This is better. He’ll let almost anyone carry his pot, but so far he has only let Frisk touch him.

And now me. I’m not one of those psychologists who thinks you should never, under any circumstances, touch your patient. Touch can be very healing, depending on the patient, but it must be done correctly.

I suspect half the reason Flowey likes to be around Papyrus is because Flowey enjoys puzzles. I smile. “Flowey, would you like to guess what color my soul is?”

He finally ducks away from my hand. “Gosh, I’ll probably get it wrong,” he says sarcastically. “You told me I wasn’t good at reading people.”

I told him that during our initial discussion of what psychopathy is and why I think his condition is similar to it, but not the same. That was when I really had to tone down what Undyne calls my ‘nerd-speak.’ She says the same thing to Alphys when Alphys gets on a rant about mechanical engineering or soul science (or anime).

“You’ve only got seven options,” I say. “You don’t want to take a guess?”

He makes a big show of rolling his eyes. “Anyone else would have thrown me out a window by now. It’s obvious. You’re light blue.”

A heat wave rolls in a few days after Frisk’s birthday. It’s hot and humid and gross, so of course when I open the front door to let Sans and Papyrus in for a visit (Frisk wanted to play games), Bean shoots between my legs and takes off down the street to chase a small yippy white dog.

“Damn!” I take off after Bean. Papyrus emits a shocked squawk when I do.

I don’t have shoes on and I’m running down the street repeatedly yelling my cat’s name. I am literally a crazy cat lady right now. It’s not my best moment. Not my worst, either, but definitely far from my best.

Bean only runs for thirty seconds before he decides he’s tired and stops. By then it feels like there are pins being shoved into my ankles and I’m drenched in sweat and I’m breathing so hard and fast
I’m almost sure my lungs have tiny holes in them because I can’t catch my breath, ugh.

After I gasp enough oxygen back into my brain I stand straight again and glare at Bean. “Bean,” I say sternly, gesturing. “Come.”

The joys of having a trained cat. Bean scowls at me, but he comes. He comes with his tail and nose stuck in the air, yes, but he comes. I grab him, set him over my shoulder, and grab his back feet so there will be no more canine chases. He knows better than to meow for help and pouts the entire way home.

When I get there everyone is already playing cards at the table and Flowey is saying, “If you’re cheating, Smiley Trashbag, I’ll pull your arms off,” to which Sans replies, “Aw, c’mon, Flowey. What in carnation are you talking about. I know I’m berry good at cards, but you’re doing just vine —”

Flowey shrieks and chucks a pellet at him. Sans very casually moves his head out of the way. He makes it look like he decided on the movement before Flowey threw anything at him.

I put Bean on the floor. He immediately runs upstairs before I can order him to the basement. Damn cat.

I lie down on the floor because it’s siphoning my body heat. “ISLA!!” Papyrus says. “Would you like to play with us!? There is always room for another friend!!”

“No,” I groan. “Too hot. It’s sweltering out there. Bean chased that obnoxious dog until we were in view of the park.”

“I know the feeling,” Papyrus assures me. “That meddling canine frequently stole my special attacks Underground! It is good to know your feline will protect them. Special attacks are not meant to be chewed on!!”

I stare at him from my spot face-down on the floor. This will be one of those Papyrus Moments I never question.

Frisk gets up, heads into the kitchen, and returns with a glass of water. I’m about to push myself up and accept it and thank them and tell them how sweet they are—

They upend it over my head. They just. Totally dump it on me. Blank-faced.

I sputter, quickly sitting up. “Frisk!”

Flowey begins laughing hysterically. Frisk blinks at me. “It worked on Undyne in the Underground,” they say.

They manage to keep a straight face for about three more seconds before a corner of their mouth twitches. “Don’t be mad, Isla,” Sans says. “Ya gotta cool off.”

I give Sans my best laser eyes. He’s grinning. Papyrus laughs because Flowey is cackling and Frisk begins to giggle, too, which is what does me in. “Okay, okay,” I say when I’m able to stop. “Very funny.”

I shake my head rapidly, spraying Frisk with droplets from my hair. They squeal and run back to the table.

Something occurs to me as I’m sitting there, water dripping down my face and neck. “Frisk, you
just gave me an idea.”
Fun: the enjoyment of pleasure in activities that are often leisure or purposeless.

It’s difficult to get all the things we need, but after a ninety-minute drive and three supermarkets we manage it. Between Sans’s teleportation and Frisk using something they call a ‘dimensional box’ on their phone, we transport much more than we ever could in my car.

I end up spending a lot more money than what I was expecting, but oh well. It’s going to be worth it.

We spend more time getting everything prepared. It’s almost three in the afternoon and hotter than hell when we arrive at the biggest construction site. It’s a new residential neighborhood right next to the one we live in. Monsters build fast (and, though I know little about construction, it looks safer than the way humans build things), so there are about three streets of homes being built at one time to maximize the number of people working. There still aren’t many cars in Newer Home: as far as I know, no monsters have learnt how to drive, and there still aren’t many humans here.

So it’s no problem to play in the street. This is why we move everything directly into the middle of the construction site, on the street that intersects the two where most of the building is happening. I decide to start things off by shooting Sans in the head.

It’s different with water guns. They don’t make that horrible noise real guns make. I’m fine and I’ll stay fine.

The jet of water catches the side of his skull. He turns sharply to stare at me.

I smirk. Papyrus emits a “NYEH HEH HEH,” and lobs a water balloon at Frisk. It bursts across their chest. They laugh and return the favor by shooting Papyrus with their water gun.

I run when I notice a water balloon in Sans’s hand and a grin on his face. Just as I think I’m clear, it bursts on my back.

It picks up surprisingly quickly. Monsters make sure they stop their work at a safe point and either grab a water gun or water balloons from the big barrels (that Sans found from nowhere) and then they’re shooting and flinging cold water at one another and laughing and finally not feeling the heat quite so much.

I make a quick detour back to Toriel’s. Flowey didn’t want to come on our impromptu shopping trip, but he won’t want to miss out on this.

“Why would I wanna do that?” he scoffs when I tell him. “It’s air conditioned in here. I’m not the idiot who agreed to work outside in this weather.”

“We’re spraying each other with cold water. It’ll cool you off.”

He scowls at me. Maybe he exceeded his daily niceness quota already. I mean, he only threatened Sans once, and usually he slings three threats or derogatory nicknames at Sans for every pun the skeleton tosses back.

“Come on,” I wheedle. “This should appeal to your competitive nature. It’s a pseudo-fight, but everyone has fun.”

He turns to look at the wall. “I don’t have arms or hands, stupid. How would you expect me to join
“I could carry you. You could throw your little projectiles at incoming water balloons and make them burst over the enemy.” I may have taken a shot of some fun monster drink with Sans before we started the water fight. I’m not usually this playful. “Or you could command our forces. Your voice is so high-pitched it carries pretty well.”

At this he looks thoughtful. “Okay,” he says hesitantly.

I beam at him and start to slip a hand under his pot. “No, you idiot!” he tells me. “Not like that. Just – hold still.”

There is some almost-creepy wriggling and shifting as Flowey uproots himself. They don’t even look like real roots. They just look like thin, bright green vines. He wraps them around my left arm as he frees himself. I stand stock-still, half-worried I’ll spook him if I move or say something.

Thirty seconds and he’s wrapped around my upper arm. His head is a little higher than mine when he stretches himself upwards. “Onward,” he commands, voice facetiously regal. He doesn’t see me roll my eyes.

As soon as we get back, I see that almost everyone in the immediate area is participating instead of working and people are laughing and hooting and hollering and having a great time. I pump my water gun and shoot at a couple of monsters with their backs turned. They shriek and scatter and Flowey’s face breaks out into a huge (slightly scary) grin.

Frisk appears to have made some allies. They suddenly tear around a corner down the street, followed by half a dozen kids who are screaming happily and Papyrus, who looks terrified. An armless monster child with their tail wound through a bag of water balloons falls and Frisk stops to pull them up before resuming their sprint. Two of the kids with Frisk are human and they look like siblings.

The reason for their flight makes itself obvious in the form of Undyne, who skids around the corner, a water gun in each hand. “NGAAAAHHHHH!!!” she bellows. “STOP RUNNING AWAY!!!”

I don’t want to get caught up in that. I skirt around the edge of the battlefield, shooting a few other people on the go. Flowey exclaims “We should do this every year,” just as I turn a corner and almost smash into a wall.

Not a wall. It’s Asgore. Doesn’t matter. Running into him would have still resulted in me on the ground and him not budging an inch.

He’s in casualwear, so he wasn’t at the Embassy. “Oh, hello, Isla,” he says, as if a good portion of his subjects aren’t merrily dousing one another nearby.

I do so much explaining to him that I automatically start doing it. “Frisk and Sans and Papyrus and I started a water fight. We figured it’d be a good way to cool everyone off—”

I cut myself off when Asgore smirks because I’ve never seen him smug before. Suddenly I’m being blasted with water. He’s got a fucking hose.

I shriek and Flowey shrieks and I run. While powerful, the hose is short-range, and I get off the front lines long before we hear Asgore’s laughter fade away. “Oh my GOSH,” Flowey screeches. I’m soaked. He’s soaked, but he’s smiling. Like, actually smiling. “I never thought the old man had it in him!”
Neither did I. We come up behind a group of monsters who have taken refuge in the frame of a new house. Flowey wants me to shoot them, but I point out this is a good time to gather an army, and it takes Flowey exactly ten seconds to smile sweetly and convince them that an alliance is a good idea. We start expanding our forces. We get Frisk and their group of kids and Papyrus on our side and everyone seems content enough to follow Flowey’s orders. We end up with an adult human, too, whom the human kids refer to as ‘Dad.’ He seems to be having just as much fun as his children. I’m still a little buzzed and I’m happy to act as Flowey’s vehicle and weapon.

Undyne quickly sees what’s going on and gathers an opposing force with a motivating, dramatic, shouted speech we can hear from halfway down the street. She gets Asgore, who cheerfully follows her orders, and the hose he has. I make a point to shoot him in the face when I get a chance. Sweet revenge.

We’re in the street, so we’re mostly taking cover behind hastily-erected magical barriers and sometimes the tubs of water balloons. Flowey makes the opponent’s water balloons near-useless with how many he takes out before they reach us.

We’ve been at it for a good hour when a voice rings out. “What is going on here?”

It’s Toriel. She appears to have walked onto the scene from the side, from the direction of the school. She looks around, a little puzzled.

I stop and so do the people in her vicinity. I’m panting too hard to speak, but a bunny monster smiles cheerily and goes to explain what’s going on, but—

But Toriel is suddenly sprayed with water that stops as soon as it starts. She jumps and shakes her head a little, shocked. I whip my head around to see the culprit is Asgore. He is wearing an expression that is slowly edging into panic.

“Oh no,” Flowey squeaks on my shoulder. Everyone else continues the water fight without interruption, but those of us closest are silent and unmoving.

The silence is broken by a deep laugh, then a thinner jet of water gets Toriel in the shoulder. Sans is next to Asgore. He gives her his best shit-eating grin. “Water you lookin’ at, Tori. Gotta go with the flow.”

He raises a hand towards the king, who continues to look terrified even as he accepts the high-five.

Toriel blinks. She straightens up and turns to the bunny monster next to her. “May I have that, dear?”

The bunny hands Toriel the gun and she immediately shoots Sans and Asgore. Headshots, both of them. She gives the water gun back to the rabbit, smiles, and says, “Thank you. I will find my own.”

Just like that, it starts up again. We get Toriel so she can keep trolling Sans and Asgore. Alphys must be around here somewhere and she must have helped Undyne out, because the next time I see the Captain her water guns have a range far greater than any water gun should. Papyrus is carrying one of the human children on his shoulders. My left ear is ringing a little due to all the yelling Flowey has been doing right next to it, but I’m still grinning like a moron. It’s probably the wildest thing I’ve done in years.
It takes us almost four hours to use up all the water balloons and water in the guns. By then it isn’t so hot.

I tell Asgore that Flowey said we should do this every year and Frisk overhears and excitedly agrees. Asgore nods and proclaims that the anniversary of the barrier’s fall shall be known as ‘Surface Day,’ and this is how we will celebrate.

A ripple of laughter spreads through the crowd. Undyne in particular howls. Toriel shakes her head, smiling.

“What’s so funny,” I whisper to Flowey.


“I get the place names. Too literal. What about Asriel?”

“Gosh, aren’t you supposed to be smart? I dunno what you and the skeleton did to make you all stupid and giggly before we came here. Just think about it for a moment.”

All my blood rushes to my face because he says it like Sans and I bumped uglies or something.

“We took a shot,” I inform Flowey. “Some magic monster drink. It was delicious. It tasted like... like unicorn tears.”

“I don’t think humans are supposed to have monster drinks, idiot.”

“You’re a kid, what do you know about alcohol?”

“I know enough about humans to know that you don’t react to magic the same way we do. Duh.”

I frown. “Why did you say ‘we?’” I thought you weren’t a mons – OH MY GOD ASRIEL’S NAME IS LITERALLY A COMBINATION OF ASGORE AND TORIEL’S NAMES. HOW DID I MISS THAT.”

“Shhh!!” Flowey hisses at me when Frisk turns to stare at us. We walk home shortly after that.

Alphys went back to the lab and Undyne went with her and Toriel and Asgore stayed when the reporters showed up, so it’s just the skeletons, Frisk, Flowey, and me. We get Flowey into his pot and head next door. Papyrus begins clambering around the kitchen to make spaghetti while the rest of us sit down to take a breather.

I sit right on a whoopee cushion. Frisk cackles like a little madhuman, but they’re not responsible. I lift up a buttcheek to get at the whoopee cushion and wing it at Sans, who lazily ducks under it.

“Get some new tricks, Trashbag,” Flowey scoffs.

Papyrus puts his fists on his hips. “Sans!! You are a terrible host, pranking our guests like that!! Good hosts cook for their guests!! Come assist me at once!!”

Sans always caves to his brother. “Sure, bro,” he agrees.

He takes his sweet time standing up. The table is round and it’s in a nook well-lit with natural light. He has to walk by me to reach the kitchen.
I take my T-shirt off and snap it like a wet towel. It whips him in the ass. The back of his pelvis. Whatever.

He practically hits the ceiling. He turns and stares at me. Frisk and Flowey are both howling with laughter. I smirk and accept a high-five from Frisk.

“I know,” I gloat. “I’m a pain in the ass.”

“Swear!” Flowey cackles. “You just said a bad – whoa.”

He’s staring at me. So is Sans. At my stomach. Because my abdomen is a fucking mess.

I freeze. Papyrus keeps on bumbling around the kitchen. I scramble to get my shirt back on and I’m shaking so badly Frisk has to get up and help me. They are the only one who has seen my scars.

“Oh my gosh,” Flowey says, surprised. “What happened to you?”

“What happened to who!?” Papyrus yells over the sound of boiling water.


He pulls out the chair next to me and sits. Frisk wraps their arms around me from the opposite side. I’m fine. I don’t care what I look like. I don’t have that luxury. But when people see my stomach, they might ask, even if it’s absolutely none of their fucking business, and even if they don’t, some people have enough brains to see it and know that I was injured, at least, and I can’t stand the pitying looks and then there’s the, “Oh, you were just in the wrong place at the wrong time,” when that’s utter bullshit because if I hadn’t been there, the death count would have definitely been higher than eight, it—

Sans hesitantly touches one of my fists balled on the table and uses both hands to loosen it. His thumbs press into my palm and the pressure feels good, but he almost immediately pulls back.

“Sorry,” he says. “I’m still bad at this.”

I reach for one of his retracting hands. “Lemme see.”

It’s not weird to examine his hand, right? I’ve spent time looking at everything visible on him and Papyrus and comparing it to my knowledge of human anatomy. Their long bones and spines are a lot thicker than those of humans. Their skulls can move like muscles and skin and they aren’t proportioned like human skulls. Based on what I’ve seen of Papyrus, I think they have fewer than twelve pairs of ribs.

Sans’s fingers look like what I’ve seen in biology textbooks. All three sets of phalanges: proximal, intermediate, and distal. Instead of having carpals and metacarpals, he just has a bigger, flat, vaguely square-shaped bone that connects (somehow, I still don’t know how their joints work) his fingers to his arm. Papyrus almost always wears gloves, but I’ll assume his hands are the same.

By the time I release him, I’m calm, even though I’m having some pain. It will go away soon.

Flowey is looking at me strangely. It’s like he has recognized something and found it unpleasant. Frisk squeezes me. “Better?” they ask.

I slip an arm over their shoulders. “Yes. Thank you.”

Sans shrugs when I glance at him. Frisk smiles sweetly, then grabs Flowey’s pot and attempts to drag him into the hug. “Shove off it, Frisk!” Flowey exclaims, leaning away, but Frisk is
determined and Flowey’s head ends up smooshed against theirs.

It’s adorable, especially with Flowey’s scowl and averted gaze. Sans ruins it by saying, “Don’t be thorny, Flowey. Frisk was just hoping thistle make you feel better.”

Frisk and I have to hide under the table from the onslaught of Flowey’s shrieking and little white pellets thrown around the room. Just as it stops, Sans says, “Iris my case,” and it starts up all over again.

There is Papyrus scolding Sans for provoking Flowey, Frisk flicking one of Flowey’s petals for losing his temper, going back over to Toriel’s, changing into dry clothes, a hardcore nap (because I don’t even remember the last time I attempted anything resembling physical activity), and then the sun is down.

Frisk snuck into bed with me while I was asleep. I wake them up and we get Flowey and go downstairs.

Everyone else is here. The news is on the television and the reporter is covering Surface Day. In the background are monsters packing up all the water guns and picking up the remains of water balloons. For a moment I feel bad about not helping with the cleanup, but then I see the monsters are using magic to make the job a hell of a lot easier than it would have been otherwise.

The report is lighthearted. This will be a good thing for people to see. It might be the only time so far the news and reporters and journalism have done us a favor.

I wait until the program is over before turning off the television. I turn around to face everyone. “I have something to say.”

There is some confusion. Frisk wedges themself between Asgore and Undyne and leans into their adoptive father when Undyne gives them a greeting noogie.

“I need to apologize,” I continue. “I’ve been idealizing all of you. I’ve said, on-camera and off, that I believe monsters are morally superior to humans. And maybe you are, but that doesn’t make you incapable of making mistakes or doing wrong. You’re just people. We’re all just people.

Considering my career, I’m a colossal moron for taking so long to see that. I got overexcited when I realized your crime rate was practically zero. And maybe that will go away once full integration and immersion is successful. I don’t know what will happen, but I’m sorry for having such a thick skull.”

“Ya don’t have a thick skull.” Sans raps on his head to demonstrate. “If you did, there wouldn’t be any room in there for your big brains.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Isla,” Toriel says. “You have done more for us than we could have ever asked for.”

That’s not a good excuse. “I only did the right thing. The fact that you legitimately couldn’t expect that is infuriating.”

Undyne stands, grabs me, and nearly breaks five of my ribs in a hug. My feet are dangling. “Then we’re lucky Frisk found YOU!!” She drops me back on my feet, grinning toothily. I have to remind
myself to breathe, now that I can.

“I think I’m the lucky one.” I pick up Flowey from the coffee table and put him on my lap when I sit. “What are we watching?”

“Not the news,” Undyne snorts, throwing herself back in her seat. “Hey Alph, don’t we have the Mew Mew reboot box set?”

“YES,” Alphys shouts. She claps her hands over her mouth, embarrassed. “I-I-I m-mean yes, we do. Sh-should I g-go get it?”

“Is this some of the fabled anime?” Asgore asks, which makes Frisk snicker into his arm.

Undyne nods. There is general agreement. I don’t really care what we watch, I’m just happy to be here, with these people.

Papyrus leaps to his feet. “WHILE YOU RETRIEVE OUR VISUAL ENTERTAINMENT, I SHALL PROCURE SNACKS!!” he declares. He sprints into the kitchen.

Alphys leaves to make the thirty-second trip across the street. Undyne yells, “Papyrus, lemme help you!!” and chases him into the kitchen.

Sans smirks at Toriel, who begins to look increasingly worried. Papyrus and Undyne have been conversing and banging about in the kitchen for all of ten seconds before Toriel stands and says, “I must... supervise Undyne and Papyrus. Asgore, would you mind making tea? ...And, perhaps, assist me in keeping an eye out for fires?”

He has seen how Undyne and Papyrus cook, so his surprise must be because she asked for his help. “Sure,” he says. He waits for Frisk to detach themself from him before standing up. Frisk scoots along the sectional so they can cuddle Sans instead.

The anime is painfully cliché, but I get Flowey and Bean to fall asleep on me by scratching the backs of their heads. Frisk snaps a picture of us with their phone.

Over the past three or four months I’ve been keeping a careful eye on what people are saying online. Governments everywhere have been meeting amongst and between themselves to figure out where the monsters are going to legally stand. The national government basically dumped everything on the state government to give itself more time to respond. They – and several other governments around the world – are supposed to put out a new set of legislations about monsters and magic and what they can do and where they can go.

There is a... party, of sorts, at the Embassy. It’s going to be more of a gathering of politicians and officials and diplomats and we are going to watch the announcements of the new laws.

I wasn’t sure about this. If it doesn’t go the way it should, I wanted to be free to curse and be pissed off, but at the same time, if the monsters get the rights they deserve I can watch for anyone who reacts negatively.

There will be monsters other than Toriel and Asgore there. I know Undyne and some of the Royal Guard will be there just in case anyone totally disconnected from rational thought tries something.
Some of the monsters who work at the Embassy will be there, too, and I think Grillby is going to be catering so I’ll have to ask Sans what the name of that shot we took before the first Surface Day was because it was freaking delicious.

I wake up late the day of. It’s Bean’s fault. He has served as my alarm for the past fifteen years.

I walk downstairs to see Sans is the problem. Bean is in his lap, purring, while the skeleton rubs his belly. Undyne, in full armor, is ready to go. She’s talking to Alphys and Papyrus. Asgore is standing next to Frisk while Mettaton crouches in front of the ambassador to comb their hair.

I’m nothing if not efficient, but I need some fuel first. I get into the pantry to stuff a sugary cereal bar in my mouth. I have to eat with my meds or I’ll puke.

I’m barred from exiting the pantry by Mettaton, standing there with his hands on his hips. “I certainly hope you’re not going anywhere like that,” he says, scandalized by the mere thought.

“I just woke up,” I protest. That’s totally not fair. Or maybe it is, because I probably would go somewhere like this after wiping the goop out of my eyes and finger-combing my hair. I frequently attended college classes in my pajamas.

“I’m sure you won’t mind some help, then,” he says, and proceeds to drag me back upstairs.

He digs into my closet while I do hygiene things like wash my face and brush my teeth and put my contacts in. I return to find out he’s laid out four dresses. “I’m not sure what to put you in,” he says. “I think it would be best to... soften you up, a little.”

I take my shorts off so I can strap my knives to my legs. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean we should contrast your appearance to your reputation.”

Oh, he means my tendency to only draw attention to myself in order to scathingly insult racist jerkwads. I laugh. “You want to make me look nice? I’m not nice. Not to people like that.”

“And I absolutely want to encourage that behavior, which is why you should look harmless.” He tosses a strapless, dark green dress to me. “Put that on.”

I do, but I turn around so he can’t see my stomach. When I turn back around, he stares at me for two seconds, then snaps his fingers and says, “Flowers! You’ll look younger, but it should work.”

He beelines out of my room and down the stairs, calling, “ASGORE! WHAT KINDS OF FLOWERS ARE IN BLOOM RIGHT NOW!?"

I go into Frisk’s room. “Hey,” I say. “We’re about to leave. I think you should come.”

Flowey looks dubiously at me from his spot on the windowsill. “I don’t think I should come,” he replies. “I don’t really care where you’re going.”

“Mettaton’s going to drape flowers all over me and make me look like a little girl,” I say. I might be whining a little. “It would be nice if I could talk to one of those flowers. We could stand in the corner and insult pretentious humans the whole time. Toriel never lets you stay home alone anyway.”

“Hmm,” Flowey says. I think I’ve got him. His designated babysitter would be Papyrus, but that would mean he’d be in Sans’s company too, and Flowey isn’t fond of Sans. “If anyone tries to touch me, I’ll bite them.”
“I’d love that. I would absolutely love it if you bit some egotistical asshole.”

“Really?” He grins nastily. “Alright, then. I’ll come.”

Mettaton arranges my hair into a work of art in a matter of five minutes. He picked sunflowers to match Flowey, who isn’t a sunflower but he is big and yellow so it works.

Toriel questions the wisdom of bringing Flowey so I question the wisdom of bringing me when all I really do is insult people at gatherings like these. She is quick to point out that my main function is to watch and write down the names and actions of anyone who behaves negatively or strangely later on. That’s so automatic to me I forgot that I do that.

There is a large, open room in the Embassy with massive screens mounted on the walls that will be utilized for this. Last time I was in here, there was a stage set up, but it’s gone now. There are tables along the walls filled with drinks and various appetizers. I hear people call them hors d’oeuvres, but that’s just them attempting to sound sophisticated. They’re hardly even appetizers. More like fancy snacks.

Flowey directs me to a drink called Triple Layer Juice and I stick a straw in it and hold it in my left hand so he can drink it. Apparently it’s a common beverage for monster children. It’s got a layer of lime green at the bottom, pink in the middle, and yellow-orange on top and it looks... fizzy isn’t quite the right word. Magically fizzy, I suppose. Frisk has one too.

I go for the booze. I’ll probably just drink one. I’m a lightweight because my liver is always busy processing my medications.

There is an immediate problem in the form of a nervous Frisk. They are perfectly fine in political situations. They are fine with public speaking. It’s the alcohol that’s the issue. Frisk associates human adults and alcohol with unpleasant things and I usually don’t drink, so I’ve been unable to break them of that.

I give a quick, murmured explanation to them about what alcohol is and what it does. I tell them that anyone who was an ass to them drunk was just an ass. Intoxication does not absolve a person of their actions. I know that and I occasionally abuse my narcotics.

Frisk is better, but still nervous. They stick close to their parents, though I doubt Toriel would allow them to wander off with so many human strangers around. Greenfield and Poates are here, as is the judge who granted me guardianship of Frisk and assisted us with the adoption. I say hello to them before retreating to a corner, as promised. Flowey and I spend time making fun of the people I know are stuffy narcissists. I’ve only seen about a fifth of the humans here. It’s more casual than formal, so some people brought their politically unimportant spouses and children.

The screens come on. Someone appearing very official and prim announces all the new laws that have been passed pertaining to monsters and their new rights. There is some sober (and buzzed) cheering in response to this. I memorize the faces of everyone who looks displeased with it.

Monsters aren’t allowed to use magic on humans or a human’s property without consent, which is common sense, anyway. A lot goes unsaid. Certain measures of discrimination are still very legal, and I am sure we will see some of it. Monsters are allowed to apply for whatever licenses or certifications they are qualified to obtain, they are allowed to adopt human children, they can
obtain passports, they are allowed to go to participating universities and have their knowledge in a particular subject area evaluated so they can be awarded official degrees. I don’t know how useful that will be. I know there won’t be any colleges able to evaluate Alphys’s expertise in soul science.

One point does get knocked down: interracial marriage. A reason why is not given. As far as I know, there are no human-monster couples in existence. I think all the monsters are in Newer Home and the Underground and there still aren’t many humans who live in Newer Home. I’ve spoken with almost all of them. We have three young families with a combined total of eight kids, an adventurous older couple whose adult children don’t live at home, and four single adults, two of whom are college-aged and living with one another as roommates.

I mention as much to Flowey. “If there are any, they’re keeping it secret, if they’re smart,” he responds. “I mean, if I liked some dumb human, I wouldn’t want all the nasty, violent humans knowing about it.”

Good point. Frisk is frowning, but the monsters and their human supporters seem happy. Once there are interracial couples, people will no longer be satisfied with that.

My good mood is ruined when a young man stands in front of me. “Isla?” he asks excitedly. “Isla Reilly?”

He’s maybe nineteen or twenty, brown hair, average height, white. I raise an eyebrow. “Do I know you?”

“It’s been a while!” he smiles. “I’m Riley Sanders.”

“I don’t know you,” I say, because I don’t. “You have me mistaken for someone else.”

“Oh.” His brow furrows. “You are Isla, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You don’t remember? You were my favorite counselor. Everyone called us Riley and Reilly.” He pauses, but continues when none of that rings a bell. “Camp Wendell,” he says, and that’s all he has to say.

The world just tore itself out from under me. Riley was six the last time I saw him. He was six and he was lucky because my body stopped all but two of the bullets that would have struck him. I don’t remember anything. I don’t. But I was told I stepped in front of him. He was my favorite, I remember suddenly. He was my favorite camper, and I was his favorite counselor, and that was why he was walking in the front with me.

He looks over his shoulder and gestures at somebody. “Hey, Dad!” he calls. His face falls when he turns back to me. He steps forward again but Flowey hisses at him. “Oh,” he says softly. “I... wasn’t thinking. I should have—”

“What is it, Riley?” a man asks, coming over to us. He’s taller than his son and his hair is darker, but they look alike. He frowns when he sees me. “Is something the matter?”

I’m probably crying. I probably look terrified. I know I’m shaking. Pain lances deep into my belly. Again—

“This is Isla Reilly,” Riley mutters, aware that people are starting to stare. “I mentioned Camp Wendell and I think I triggered something and—” he tries to step forward again, but Flowey snarls at him to back off, “—and the... flower won’t let me help—”
“We need to move,” Flowey hisses in my ear. “Do this elsewhere. You need to move!”

He’s right. My mouth has to work. My legs have to work. Just long enough for me to get away.

“I need to go,” I say, and I flee.
Psychogenic pain: physical pain that is caused by, increased, or prolonged by psychological factors.

Chapter Notes

If you guys find any errors in spelling or grammar, please yell at me and I will fix them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I leave through the doors and turn down another hallway so I can be alone. Alone with Flowey, who suddenly sinks his teeth (he has teeth??) into my left wrist.

I let out a high-pitched, surprised noise and drop that wrist down. Flowey scowls. “You couldn’t hear me. I was telling you to sit down. So sit down.”

I couldn’t hear him because my hands were over my ears, which means it’s bad, it’s bad when I block out sounds—

“I’m gonna count and tell you when to inhale and exhale and you’re gonna do it,” he insists. “If you don’t, I’ll bite you again.”

I am not capable of arguing right now. I nod. When was the last time I blinked? I’m supposed to sit here, in this hallway, where someone could approach without me seeing? I’m—

“Inhale,” Flowey says, and my crazily shifting attention latches onto that.

He counts as promised and sounds unusually nice as he does it. It might just be all the fear-inducing neurotransmitters currently drowning my brain, but he starts to... look different. His eyes get bigger and I see a protrusion beginning to resemble a nose.

It must just be the panic, because the changes are gone by the time it’s over. I’m still shaking and my stomach still hurts, but I’m not hyperventilating and my thoughts are reordered and mostly rational and not sudden and painful.

We sit there in silence for several minutes before I try to stand back up. My right femur hurts, too, so I put my weight on my left leg. “How did you know what to do?” I ask.

I don’t really expect him to answer. When he does, it’s hesitant. “I had a... friend once who had the same problem.”

“Oh.” I get a good enough grip on my phone.

“Are you gonna tell me what that was about?” Flowey asks. He’s being a little demanding. “Does it have to do with those scars all over your stomach?”

Nausea hits me suddenly. I lean my right shoulder against a wall and breathe through my nose. I endure it without vomiting, but it leaves me a bit dizzy and sweaty.

“Yes,” I reply, out-of-breath. “I... I survived a mass shooting when I was a kid. The scars you saw – some are from the bullets, some are from the surgeries I had to have after the fact.”
Flowey stares at me for a moment. Then, in a strangely affectionate gesture, he leans his head against the side of mine.

“Guns suck,” he says in a small voice. “I don’t like them.”

“Me neither. That’s why I learned how to use knives. I can’t touch a gun, not ever again.”

He pulls back. “Again?”

More nausea. “I really don’t want to talk about it. And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk about it, either.”

“Okay.” That was a quick agreement from him. “I...” he hesitates, then says aggressively, “You can’t tell anyone about this, got it? I’ll strangle you if you do.”

I punch out a text: I need you to come and get me. “Frisk will tell you I don’t share information without their consent,” I say. “I promise I won’t tell.”

“Good.” The bravado fades. He looks like he’s bitten into something sour. “I... wasn’t always this way. I used to be a monster. I used to have a soul.”

“I figured as much,” I tell him. “I could tell you knew what you were missing. You would only want to feel love and empathy and compassion if you’d felt those things before.”

I surprised him. “You knew?” At my nod, his face twists into something demonic. I’m so startled by it I jump. “What else do you know?” he demands, voice deeper.

“What do you—?”

“Frisk told you, didn’t they!?”

Do I handle this like he’s being a misbehaving child, or do I handle this like I believe he could kill me? I think he could. I don’t think he wants to, but beneath the anger he’s afraid. Fear makes people do things they wouldn’t normally do. I know that better than anyone.

“Frisk told me you’d like to keep some things secret,” I say. “That was all they said. And, by the way...” I lean forward and kiss him between the eyes. “Thanks for helping me out earlier. That was nice.”

He immediately squeaks and his petals fold inward. “Gross!” he exclaims, expression normal except for being unusually pink. Oh, is he blushing? That’s adorable.

My phone buzzes: where

Hallway on the east side of the lecture room.

“I mean it,” Flowey says crossly. “Frisk didn’t tell you... who I used to be?”

“Of course not. They care deeply for you. If you don’t want them to tell, then they won’t. They wouldn’t betray you like that.”

He must believe me, because he relaxes. He still looks pissed off at the surprise kiss, though. And maybe a bit pleased, too.

“I wouldn’t tell anyone, either, if you didn’t give me permission,” I say. “I take that part of my job very seriously.”
Before Flowey can reply, there is a casual, “Hey,” from down the hallway.

I push off the wall. I’m obviously wobbly, so Sans comes to me. I lean heavily on him when he wraps an arm around my waist.

“Why’d you call him?” Flowey asks nastily.

“Because he can teleport,” I answer.

Sans doesn’t teleport immediately, though. “You sure? You didn’t have the best reaction the last time.”

“I can’t walk home. I’m sure.”

“I’m gonna hate this, aren’t I,” Flowey groans.

Sans grins. “Aw, don’t worry. We’ll be just dandy-lion, Flowey.”

He activates his magic before Flowey can glower at him.

Sans gets Flowey’s pot so we can put him back in his spot on Frisk’s windowsill. He helps me to my bed, apparently expecting me to take a nap, but I make him stay to get all the flowers out of my hair.

While he does, I tell him what happened. I do it mechanically, with a flat affect. I hear myself talking like that and I know it’s not good.

He doesn’t speak right away. “You should tell everyone else.”

“You know it’s not that simple.”

“Yeah, but do you really wanna keep relying on me when something happens?”

“You would be able to reach me fastest.”

“I need to text Toriel so they know where you are. You probably made them worry.”

“Damn. You’re right.” I pause. For not having hair, he knows enough to not pull mine. He’s doing a pretty good job. “I’m going to call my therapist. I might need to start seeing him again.”

A pause. “Is that normal?”

“Yes. It’s perfectly normal to have ups and downs. I’ve been okay for a really long time. Every couple of years I’ll hit little bumps like these, but...” I shake my head. “I never expected to see someone from Camp Wendell again. It closed. Couldn’t bounce back after eight dead kids. And we moved halfway across the country to get me in a new environment.”

“Maybe he knew you were here and came to you. You did save his life.”

I do not want to go there right now. I’ll end up reopening my own wounds if I get into that. So I keep my mouth shut.
I see Riley and his father much earlier than I was expecting. They are at one of the meetings we have following the new laws.

Sans was right. Riley’s father is a senator from Massachusetts and his son convinced him to come out here for political purposes because he saw my name on the internet. The very first thing Riley does is apologize to me. He really didn’t do anything wrong, but he says he could have been more tactful in approaching such an obviously traumatizing subject.

I actually want the meeting to start so he’ll stop talking about it. Sans is in Toriel’s office just in case I need him. I think I’ll be okay.

Riley’s father clasps my hand and thanks me for saving his son’s life. Other people definitely overhear. I mutter “You’re welcome,” even though that is not the correct thing to say.

“You’re a hero,” he continues. Maybe I won’t be okay. “Most people would have stayed down. But you, you got back up and ensured the safety of the other would-be victims...”

He talks for a little longer but his voice turns to static in my ears. Riley stops him by suggesting he go talk to the king and queen.

“Man, I’m sorry,” Riley says, scratching his head. “Do you... need help? You’re swaying a bit.”

“No, I’m okay.” It’s an automatic response. “I just... I have pain. When I’m reminded.”

“Oh. I do too, sometimes.” He touches the left side of his chest. “And I’m not fond of loud noises. Half the time I have to skip Independence Day fireworks.”

It makes me want to laugh, but all my body allows is a small smile. “I have phonophobia, too.”

“It’s obvious you don’t want to talk about it, but I want to tell you that it was the reason I decided to major in political science. My dad’s political career went in a different direction, too, after it happened. I feel like I should do something about it, you know? Try to turn the world into a place where kids don’t get shot at. Like maybe the reason I survived—”

“Don’t say that,” I interrupt, speaking more forcefully than I intended. “There was no reason for it. No reason for your survival or mine. No reason for it to happen at all.” I make myself take a breath. He looks startled. “Sorry,” I say. “I... believe in making my own purpose. If there was a reason for it, then my whole life is already decided for me, no matter what I choose, and that’s total bullshit. I have my life. You have yours. What you make of it now is your decision.”

I probably laid that on too strong. People telling me that it happened for a reason is one of my trigger phrases, just like wrong place, wrong time, but the worst was when all the doctors and medical personnel repeatedly told me I was lucky. Lucky because I’d been shot eight times and there was so much shrapnel in my tissues and organs and bones and yet none of my major arteries had been touched. Lucky I survived, when at that pointed I wanted to die.

Riley’s face breaks into a smile, surprising me. “You’re right. I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

Good. This hasn’t been easy, but it’s been... good.
I tell Toriel and Asgore I’m not going to stay. I’m still having pain and that will make me far more likely to lash out at someone. They would probably deserve it, but I could use a break. I haven’t been feeling that well.

However, because the universe seems to think I shouldn’t get breaks, I find a small crowd of monsters when I walk into the lobby. Undyne is easily recognizable. When I walk to her, I see Sans next to her.

“What the hell’s going on?” I ask, trying to see what they’re looking at outside.

Undyne scowls. “Protestors. They aren’t technically doing anything illegal, so I can’t bust their heads.”

I walk to the glass doors. There are perhaps two dozen of them, all human, obviously, all adults. “How long have they been out there?” I ask.

“Only about half an hour,” Sans answers. “They came over from the human town.”

“Has anyone told Toriel and Asgore?”

“Not yet,” Undyne replies. “We were going to wait until they were out of their meeting. If we tell them they’ll run down here to take care of it when there isn’t anything they can do.” She growls. “But I’m not letting any monsters leave until they disperse. What if they attack?”

I shoot her a sharp grin. “I’ll take care of it.” And I push the door open just as I reach into my bag.

Sans is there instantly, hand on my wrist. “I’m not letting you pull a weapon,” he says, tone low but audible to me over the uncreative chanting.

“It’s not a weapon,” I reply. “Look.”

He stares. “You can’t be seri—”

“Hey!” The chanting dies out as one of the voices climbs above the others. “Take your hands off her, you filthy monster!”

I turn away from Sans and walk towards the assembly. I stick the earplugs in, raise the air horn, and let it rip. I’ve been waiting to do this. I didn’t specifically expect protestors, but I’ve been wanting to cut off a racist jerk with an air horn. (Sometimes I’d like to stab someone, too, but I can’t actually do that.)

I count in my head. I keep it going for at least a minute. Nobody moves to stop me, but everyone’s hands are busy protecting their ears. There are two news vans here. Both crews were in the process of disassembling their equipment for transport. They probably already did their interviews with some of the protestors and expected nothing else worth recording would happen.

My arm actually hurts from holding the air horn in the air for a minute. That’s kind of pathetic. I drop it to my side, using my other hand to remove the earplugs. “I thought I smelled manure out here,” I say, as if I’m commenting on the weather. “Farmers usually don’t spread fertilizer this time of year. It’s always been difficult for me to tell the difference between racism and bullshit.”

Sans snorts from somewhere behind me. I wait for one of the protestors to open their mouth, then I say, “All you are accomplishing here is demonstrating how pathetically intolerant and ignorant you are. You’re making everyone around you stupider for hearing what you have to say, myself included. I may have brain cells to spare, but you imbeciles certainly don’t. You should get lost.
before the cameras catch your faces and your families and friends recognize you on television and are subsequently shamed beyond belief to know you.”

They all just kind of stare at me, blinking. They didn’t expect that from a human. They clearly didn’t do their homework if they didn’t recognize me.

I’m bristling, not blinking even though it makes my eyes hurt. The protestors do disperse, but that might have something to do with Undyne coming outside and laughing uproariously in a way that shows off her very sharp teeth. She’s super intimidating in her armor.

I don’t feel good about this. That this happened at all makes me want to rip something apart. I eye the two news vans, the reporters talking in front of the cameras. My outburst will be online in a few hours. I’ll have to text my parents and sister and let them know I’m alright and no, nobody has hurt me for refusing to be a bigoted moron.

One of the reporters rushes over. Before she can talk, I say sweetly, “That camera looks expensive. You’d better get it out of my face if you don’t want to buy a new one.”

I turn back towards the Embassy. I’ll get Sans to teleport me home once we’re in private.

He high-fives me on our way back inside. That makes me feel a bit better.

I get sick.

I mean, I’m a little sick all the time. There is always something. Always a swollen joint or my bladder is uncooperative or my scars or the scar tissue inside me acts up or my pelvis and femur get irritated because they are studded with little flecks of metal.

When I say I’m sick, I mean something is incapacitating. I live with bodily issues and mild-to-moderate pain almost every day. Occasionally my damaged kidney will become infected or my intestines will become so inflamed I can’t eat or I’ll have a bad period and forget to take my pain meds or my psychological symptoms will get bad enough that I willingly stop sleeping. This is looking to be a gastrointestinal issue.

It happens gradually. I feel kind of shitty for a couple of weeks. I’d probably sleep more, if I had time to sleep more. Flowey is frustrating me because he likes and trusts me, as much as he can, anyway, but he still refuses to tell me anything more about his past, when it’s clear that’s where his problems lie. Frisk’s night terrors have all but disappeared and they rarely have nightmares anymore, but now that I know about the timelines they are talking a bit about them. It’s as hard for me to sit and listen to them as it is for them to talk about how they have killed everyone they love. Everyone we love.

I start having abdominal pain intermittently on a daily basis. I eat less. Toriel notices and asks and I have to tell her this happens sometimes. It’s probably just a minor flare-up and it will go away on its own as long as I baby my intestines and eat bland, easy-to-digest food.

I’m wrong. Usually I’m okay. I can function without issue. Sometimes the pain gets so bad I can’t move without analgesics. It occurs to me that since I don’t poop, I’m not seeing blood in my stool, but I brush the thought off as soon as I have it.
Frisk and Flowey start school in August. Toriel is excited. There are ten human children other than Frisk attending her school and she really wants to prove that cooperative education is good for both humans and monsters. Frisk is excited for school, too, since they will be with Flowey and some other friends they made here and in the Underground.

Flowey is less excited. He wants nothing to do with humans who aren’t me or Frisk. He says he already knows everything, anyway, so he doesn’t need to go to school.

Toriel doesn’t believe him (neither do I) and administers a test that shows Flowey is highly advanced in some subject areas and what we expected in others. He tells me he had a lot of time during his control of what he calls ‘the resets’ (Frisk and Sans have used that term, too). Flowey claims he’s read every book to fall into the Underground many times over, which explains his varied knowledge. Toriel lets him out of some classes, but still makes him attend others, which results in me or Papyrus going to get him after a half-day.

In addition to counseling monsters and Frisk and Flowey and keeping an eye on the political crap and being on-call all the time for Asgore now that Toriel is at the school full-time, I manage the research applications and interview anyone who wants to do a study I think we need. I send several child psychologists and sociologists Toriel’s way because we want studies done on her school by people who are unaffiliated with us.

I lose hair in the shower, I know how many pills I’m taking just to get through a day, I feel fatigued constantly, I can tell I’m getting paler and thinner, and I still lie to myself until I pass out at work.

I faint in the lobby because I’m just arriving. I freak everyone out because I don’t know what ‘fallen down’ means. Someone panics and gets Asgore. I am awake and giving a droning explanation about blood pressure and the brain’s oxygen supply when he shows up. He calms and disperses everyone and insists that Alphys take a look at me when I make the mistake of admitting I’m sick.

I agree, figuring I’ll just leave and go home and sleep for a day or two and then I’ll be better (I know that’s a lie, too, but I don’t want to admit it to myself yet), but Asgore goes into dad-mode on me and calls Alphys. Turns out she’s at home today. He insists on walking me there just in case I pass out again. He offers to carry me and I refuse because I would be horribly embarrassed to let anyone other than Shannon (and Papyrus, Papyrus has carried me before) do that. On our way there, he tells me about monster death and how it usually works and why everyone panicked when I fainted. I knew about the dust, but not about the preceding coma.

Alphys knows more than I expected about human biology, but it won’t be enough. One human doctor isn’t even enough for me. I have a team of them and I drive to Madison at least once a year to see them.

There is no point in claiming to be fine now. I admit that I’ve been in pain for almost a week and I’ve been stupidly waiting for the problem to resolve itself.

Asgore tells me he’s enforcing time off and goes to make tea. I lie down on the couch so Alphys can examine me, which would just involve her pushing on my belly in different spots, but I can’t let her see my stomach or she’ll ask why I’m so scarred up, so I’m lucky the nausea hits when it does.

“Nope,” I grunt out. “Gonna puke. I am gonna puke.”

She runs to the kitchen and returns with a huge glass mixing bowl, of all things. “She s-says she’s
nauseous!” she calls back over her shoulder to Asgore in explanation.

I push myself up on one elbow and vomit as soon as she gives me the bowl. She holds my hair away from my face for me. “M-m-maybe you’ll feel better after…”

She trails off. I open my eyes. Sonofabitch.

I spit. “It’s been a while since I’ve done this,” I say weakly.

She’s frozen. “This has h-happened b-before?” she squeaks out.

I swirl the bowl to stir up its contents. No food. Water. Stomach acid. Mostly blood, though. Everywhere from clotted and almost black to bright red and fresh.

“Shit,” I groan, and puke again.

Right on time for Asgore to walk in, a tray in his massive hands. “I read somewhere that peppermint tea helps settle the stomach,” he says. “Perhaps…”

He stops dead. I’m busy, but I hear the crash when he drops the tray. My second bout of vomiting is almost all bright red and my abdominal pain has graduated to agony. I might have torn something when I puked the first time.


I lie back, sweating and shaking and just trying to ride it out. I stick my right hand under my shirt and try to palpate to figure out if I’m bleeding into my abdominal cavity or just into my stomach, but my hands are clammy and cold and shaking and there is no feeling in my fingers. Fucking hell.


Direct an ambulance to the monster city? I can’t imagine an ambulance has ever been called out here before. They’re likely to get lost. I shake my head. Somehow that makes everything hurt worse, even though the pain is in my stomach. “Sans,” I get out. He’s the only one who knows. Frisk and Flowey know, but they’re kids.

“Okay!” Alphys sounds like she’s panicking. The next thing she blurts out is, “Sans, g-g-get over here r-right now!! Isla’s r-really sick a-a-and I d-don’t know what’s wrong w-w-with Asgore!!!!”

I must pass out again, or retract into my head to ride out the pain, because the next thing I know Sans is in my face. He’s kneeling by the couch, bracing my gory puke-bowl against me. He actually looks worried, but I’m throwing up my insides and if that can’t make him look worried then nothing can.

“Alphys is calling an ambulance,” he says. “What do I do?”

I force myself to talk. “My medical records. They’ll need those.” It comes out in a whisper. “It won’t be—”

My body hates me, so I have to stop to vomit again. Sans gets my hair out of my face. When I’m done, he wipes the blood off my lips with his sleeve. “I-it won’t be my usual doctors,” I continue. I’m almost crying reflexively now. It’s been a while since I’ve had pain this bad. I can still talk and I know what’s happening around me, so it’s not a ten, but it’s getting close. “So they won’t know. You’ll have to come with me so you can tell them.”
“You’re sure—”

“I don’t have a fucking choice. Their first idea will be an endoscopy, but they might start with emergency surgery. I’m already – th-this is already too much blood.” I pause, gritting my teeth. My parents and Shannon won’t get there until after emergency care. “Call m-my parents and sister. Once you know, tell them where I’m going. Tell the doctors my blood type is A positive in case they’re too lazy to look in my records. I h-have an advanced directive in the same binder my records are in. It’s in the back. That’s important. M-make sure they get that.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“It tells them what they can and can’t do if I’m incapacitated or dying. Just in c-case, you’re coming with me and you’re going to tell them you’re my boyfriend.”

His expression goes blank. “What.”

“That will give you the legal right to make medical decisions on my behalf if my parents and sister aren’t there.”

“But I don’t know anything about human medicine—”

I grip his hand. I don’t remember when he grabbed my hand. With my other hand, I pull out my phone. “You’re g-going to consult my parents, Shannon, and Spencer. Whoever you can get a hold of. D-do whatever Spencer tells you to. What the hell is wrong with Asgore? I can’t see him.”

Sans glances over the couch. I can hear Alphys talking frantically to someone over the phone. “I don’t know, but I’m guessing seeing you like this triggered a flashback of... you know. Dying kids.”

Oh my god, I’m horrible. “What’s he doing?”

“You do not need to be analyzing people like this. He can wait. You’ll die if you wait.” He grimaces. “Isla, I dunno if I can do this. I’ll just end up killing you.”

“You’re the only one who knows. The only adult who knows. You don’t have a choice.” I grab his hand with both of mine. There are claws in my brain, squeezing. I don’t want to look at the bloody bowl next to me because I know what’s too much and that’s too much, but something in my brain is preventing me from quantifying exactly how much blood I’ve lost. I twist, stomach seizing, panting and wheezing and sweating, but all that comes up this time is a mouthful. Still bright red.

I’m hurting and bleeding and breathing too fast and it’s too close, too close. I let go of Sans’s hand so I can feel my belly and make sure it’s not riddled with holes.

Sans has a hold of my face. He’s saying something, but I lose his words before my brain can grab onto them. He turns to say something to someone else. He’s the only one I can see, so I try to focus on him because seeing a magical skeleton means I haven’t been shot and I’m not about to shoot somebody, but I have no focus. There is no focus when all of your brainpower goes into surviving the next second.

I sink into myself and lose time. I don’t even have it in me to panic when they turn the sirens on.

Chapter End Notes
For the record, Isla mentions her blood type here because she does not know that medical professionals will not take your blood type out of medical records. They will always do a type and screen if they suspect they might have to give a patient blood, and once units are ordered they do a crossmatch, too. If a patient was typed at one hospital and is transferred, the second hospital will do their own type.

Since this testing takes time, in emergency, patient-needs-blood-right-now (usually traumas and sometimes newborns) situations they give the patient unmatched O neg blood and do the testing as soon as possible.
Nihilism: philosophical doctrine that states life is objectively meaningless.

When I wake up, I can tell I’ve had anesthesia. Seven surgeries and dozens of other invasive procedures have enabled me to tell the difference between sedatives and full anesthesia.

My parents are both there. They already have a copy of the surgical report because they knew I’d want one to go in my medical records.

A peptic ulcer. That sounds so trivial. Sure, it was a bad ulcer – it almost ate entirely through the wall of my stomach and certainly would have, had I not been forced to seek care by the fountain of blood coming out of my mouth. It was located right on a knot of scar tissue where one of the bullets pierced my body. Between that and my immunosuppressants, my body’s natural healing process couldn’t keep up with the damage, and I ruptured my stomach when I started vomiting, so there was no avoiding surgery.

I have a new scar. It’s small, compared to some of my other surgical scars.

My mom doesn’t like beating around the bush. “Was this stress-induced?” she asks me.


My dad winces. My mom’s eyes flash. “What are you going to do about it?”

“I might not have to do anything. Asgore told me he’s enforcing vacation time and Toriel will agree with him, so it’s not like I can even play them off one another.”

“You’re fine for a couple of years, then you overwork yourself,” my mother says. “A pattern is emerging, Isla. You haven’t found a routine that works for you.” She paces back and forth. “You should keep working with the monsters, but you can’t make yourself sick doing it. It’s the right thing to do. They all clearly care for you. The king was actually crying.”

“Not because of me,” I say. It can’t be for Asriel, since Asriel dusted. But hey, Chara died in front of him and he killed six kids afterwards. It seems likely to my drug-addled brain that at least one of them produced bloody vomit as they died.

“Perhaps not,” my dad says. He has the nerve to sound a bit cheerful, but the reason why is made obvious with his next statement. “Are you actually dating Sans? I like him. We had a conversation while you were in surgery.”

Oh my god. “No, Dad. I gave him very clear instructions while I had hematemesis. I told him to say that so he could make medical decisions for me in case you couldn’t get here fast enough.”

“He seemed to be the only one aware of your injuries,” my mother says.

Anesthesia’s great, but it makes me stupid. “Wait, who’s here? Don’t tell me everyone’s here. Who’s watching things if Asgore and Toriel are here and I’m a drugged-up idiot?”

My mom scowls. “I’m forbidding you from concerning yourself with anything work-related. When they come in here, you are not allowed to ask them.”

“Go to hell, Mom. I can do what I want.”
She rolls her eyes and my dad snickers. Some parents would go off if their child, adult or not, talked to them like that. My parents know that I only say stupid crap like that if I’m either high or extremely sleep-deprived. Altered brain chemistry. And when I do that, I’m acting like a child so they treat me like one.

“The queen said she can take you home,” my mother says. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes.” Because the other option would be to go home with my parents and let them take care of me post-op and that will only remind all of us of how they had to take care of me when I was traumatized. I’ll pass on that.

She nods. “We’ll be calling periodically for updates. We’ll call you, but we’ll also be calling one of your friends for an honest answer.”

“Sans gave me his number,” my dad announces, grinning. “We’ll call him.”

Great. I bet Sans is super annoyed with me now.

“We’re going to get some lunch and update your sister,” my mom adds. “We’ll tell your friends you’re ready to see them.”

Good. Can’t be worse than having my parents here.

Undyne is the only one quick enough to restrain Frisk from jumping on my bed. “Hang on, punk,” Undyne says, voice soft for once. “You can’t go hugging people who have had surgery.”

Frisk frowns, but says nothing.

I glance at everyone else. Asgore and Toriel look the worst. Asgore has clearly been crying, but I don’t know about Toriel, and that I can’t instantly tell she hasn’t is a bad sign. Papyrus is holding Flowey, who is quiet. Sans has my medical records.

Everyone’s so serious. I twist slowly to test the limits of my new incision and to get to my bed’s controls. I put the head of the bed up. “I’m alive,” I announce loudly. “Did anyone think to bring my laptop?”

Toriel’s eyes narrow. “You will most certainly not be working while you are recovering. I thought your parents informed you of that.”

“They did, but I wanted to see if I could pull one over on you.” I do not like the slightly sad look on Papyrus’s face. I hold my arms out. “Papyrus, get over here and gimme a hug. Then help me sit up.”

Papyrus processes for a moment, then abruptly beams and darts to my bedside. He hands Flowey to Toriel and bends down and very gently hugs me.

“Sh-sh-shouldn’t you s-st-stay in bed?” Alphys asks. “I d-don’t know much about human medicine, b-b-but you have to heal before you c-can move normally, right?”

I throw the blankets off. Papyrus does far more work than I need him for, but I let him. He gets me sitting on the side of the bed. “Yeah,” I reply, “but that’s moving normally. Not moving at all
delays recovery and gets you a blood thinner. They like humans moving a little bit post-op.”

Alphys has questions about what exactly was wrong with me. My parents told them but didn’t think that monsters might not know enough about human biology to understand everything, so I give them a detailed explanation. This does wonders in calming Asgore and Toriel down, though Asgore just begins to look depressed, so I don’t know if it’s much of an improvement.

This is the hospital in Wausau, so we’re about forty-five minutes away from Newer Home. Sans came with me in the ambulance, but I’m told some of the humans living in Newer Home offered to drive everyone else down when the ambulance came tearing into the city and disturbed everyone because sirens aren’t a thing that happens in Newer Home. I’m going to be here for a few days at least – they will want to make sure I can get down soft foods before they discharge me. I don’t want everyone sitting around waiting for me. I don’t even want to sit around and wait to recover, but that’s my problem.

When the surgeon comes to see me, everyone thinks it will be polite to leave. I have to remind Sans to stay. Don’t want the hospital to think we lied about being in a relationship.

The surgeon is professional and treats us like I expect she treats unmarried human couples. The residual effects of the anesthesia make me unfortunately honest and I tell her I’ve had problems with misusing opiates and managing my workload. I am the type of person who doesn’t know what stress feels like until it eats its way through my stomach and makes me puke blood, apparently. She acknowledges this and includes Sans in the conversation more. She behaves as though she expects him to manage my recovery plan. He looks clueless, but she doesn’t call him out on it. She tells him she will give the nurse detailed instructions to give to him to take home with us, so obviously she’s assuming we’re living together. She’s not far off. He’s right next door.

After she leaves, I ask him what I need to know. “Who did you end up telling?”

“I got here first, so just the docs,” he answers. He sets my medical records on the foot of my bed and stuffs his hands in his hoodie pockets. “I got to your parents first, told them you, uh, hadn’t really been open with the fact that you’d been shot.”

“Then they tortured you with questions about our nonexistent relationship.”

He grimaces. “Um. Yeah. Was kinda surprised at how enthusiastic they seemed about it. I told everyone else ‘bout it when they got here so they wouldn’t accidentally correct anything I’d already said to somebody else.”

Good call. “Toriel and Asgore looked like hell. What happened there?”

He shrugs. “Dunno. Both were more affected than I thought they’d be. Not that it wasn’t bad, it was, that was... I mean, it sounds like it really wasn’t a big deal, as far as emergency medical situations go, but it looked like a big deal.” He shakes his head once. “Flowey’s been real quiet, too. Toriel and Asgore acted like they thought you were dying. And Frisk...”

He trails off. “Frisk what?” I prompt.

He hesitates before replying. “They were just actin’ weird, is all.”

“Go get Toriel and Asgore. I need to talk to them. And you stay, too.”

“Why do I need to stay?”

“Because I’m stoned out of my mind and it’s making me stupidly indiscriminately honest, I was
just cut open again, I’m still having abdominal pain, and if something happens you’re the only one who knows.”

A heavy pause. Then he says, “When are you going to change that?”

“Not today.” I will, eventually. I’ll have to. And I do love these people and I think they love me, too, but we’ve all just been so busy. I like to be busy. I like thinking about pragmatic things because other things are too hard to think about sometimes.

Sans wordlessly does as asked. “Did you need something, Isla?” Toriel questions.

She’s not in control here. “Once I’m well enough to resume counseling, you will both begin having sessions with me,” I tell them. “I’ll use the first to determine how frequently we should see one another in that manner.”

Asgore says nothing. Toriel frowns. “That is unnecessary, dear, and could be harmful to you. Your parents have us under the impression that too much work contributed to your current illness.”

“They weren’t wrong. But you both need grief counseling. You’ve both pushed it off.”

Asgore nods. “Chara had bloody vomit before they died,” he says, so quietly I wouldn’t be able to hear him if his voice weren’t so deep. “When I saw you, I…”

“I know,” I tell him, voice warmer. I know better than to apologize for that, even though it’s my instinct. “I figured it was something like that.”

Toriel looks at him for a long time. Then she looks at Sans, who shrugs. When she turns back to me, her expression is serious. “How would this work?”

“I would meet with you individually. In the future, if I think it would be beneficial, I could meet with you both at the same time. And later, we could include Frisk.”

She shakes her head automatically. “Frisk does not need to concern themself with this.”

“They’re already involved. They’re your child. You don’t think your relationships with your dead kids are going to affect your relationship with them?”

Asgore comes to sit in the chair by my bedside. It creaks under his weight. It’s kinda funny to see him using it after Sans. He looks lost. He absent-mindedly runs his fingers along the tubing of my IV.

Toriel stares somewhere in the vicinity of the foot of my bed for a while. She inhales deeply and lets out a sigh. “I’ll make you a deal, Isla. I will heed your judgment on this matter, but in return, you must allow Asgore and myself to evaluate your current workload and reduce it as we see fit.”

No, says my brain instantly. I think about it before I talk. “You know I’ve been trying to get you to allow me to counsel you.”

“Yes. That is the reason it makes a good bargaining chip. Your mother said that you have gotten into a cycle of working yourself sick. We want to break that habit.”

I don’t. I’m convinced my body could handle my workload if I were healthy. I chew on my lip. “It’s not a bad habit if I’m productive.”

She gets a mom-look on her face. “It’s a bad habit if you’re hurting yourself.”
“I can try. You need grief counseling, so I’m willing to try. But it’s not just a habit. It’s a coping
mechanism.” That’s not really giving anything away. Everyone has coping mechanisms.

Out of nowhere, Asgore says, “Obviously Sans will have to teach you how to relax.”

Sans looks surprised. “Me?”

Toriel sends him a copy of his own shit-eating grin. “That is an excellent idea. And Isla can teach
him how to work hard.”

Sans starts to sweat. “That’s a joke. I love a good joke. Right, Tori?”

“That sounds like a terrible idea,” I tell them.

They exchange a glance. “It’s our price for allowing you to counsel us,” Toriel says.

“You suck,” the anesthesia lets me say. “But fine.”

When I’m discharged, Sans offers to teleport me, but I let my parents drive me home instead so
they can feel useful. They and Shannon stop calling and texting everyday once it’s obvious I’m
recovering optimally.

I immediately get into it with Toriel and Asgore because without me there, they’ve discovered I’ve
been doing enough work at the Embassy for three people. That’s not even including my initial job
description as a psychologist. Toriel’s annoyed with Asgore for allowing it even though he didn’t
know because I picked up all those administrative and political responsibilities without saying
anything.

They want to hire people to take over those duties. I want to keep working because I’m smarter
than most people (that’s a fact) and I can condense the number of hours a task takes because of my
talent at multitasking and things get done more efficiently and accurately when I’m the one who
does them.

I’m expecting to argue with Toriel, but Asgore simply looks at me and says, “No. You may be the
one to hire the people who will take over your responsibilities. You are giving up those
responsibilities. That is not up for debate.”

It stuns me for a moment. Asgore has never argued with me. He asks me a lot of questions, but he
has never gone directly against something I have told him to do. “I—” I start.

He bashes a fist on the table. The thud makes me jump. Toriel does, too. “No. I can’t do it again,
Isla. I will not once more be the cause of suffering, even indirectly or by inaction. You cannot ask
me to do that. You can’t ask me to allow you to self-destruct so you can feel better about whatever
it is that keeps you up at night. It isn’t pragmatic and I can’t do it.”

My mouth is hanging open. It takes a few moments to regain my composure. “Asgore—”

“You have to stop antagonizing people too, no matter how bigoted or racist they are.” His voice is
weak now. It sounds like he’s fighting off tears. “It’s just as risky. Someone will eventually hurt
you for that.”
I rise and step around the table. Even sitting down, the king is taller than me, not counting the horns. I lean into him from the side, wrapping my arms around his neck. He rests his forehead against my bony shoulder, one hand coming up on my back. The size difference makes platonic hugging difficult, but it’s necessary right now.

“You’re right about everything,” I say, “and I’ll do what you want.”

“I apologize for yelling,” he replies thickly. “That was unsightly.”

“No, calling me out on my bullshit was good. I keep forgetting that what I do reflects on all of you, even though I’m human. I’ve been horrible to some people lately. And maybe they deserved it, but…” I sigh. “I can’t be doing it every time.”

“Yes,” Toriel agrees. Her hands are clasped in front of her. She has stood for no particular reason. “That is another thing we wanted to discuss with you. You can be quite… aggressive with people who are opposed to change. That aggression was necessary at first, but it is not anymore. People around the world know of us. They believe we exist, they believe we are peaceful, and some of them are even eager to help us acclimate to the surface.”

“I know,” I say. I do know, even though it can be hard to see past the racists, because they happen to be louder than the supporters. “I… just love you guys. I want to do all I can to help.”

Toriel smiles. “We know, Isla. You have already been an immense help. It isn’t that we don’t want your help, we simply want you to do it in a healthy way, because we love you, too.”

I’m nodding. Asgore shifts, posture straightening, so I release him and step back. He’s calm; he beat out the urge to cry.

Toriel looks at him and seems like she very much wants to say something. She hesitates, then settles on, “Asgore, Frisk is not in the house at the moment, but I will set you on fire if you ever fail to restrain your temper around them. They would be very frightened,” which is not what she was thinking about saying at all.

He nods, agreeable. “I am sorry, Toriel.”

She turns to me. “Isla, I must insist you allow me to care for you while you recover. You will be able to get back to work more quickly if you rest now.”

I’ve got absolutely no room to disagree with either of them right now. “Yes. Of course.”

This is a mistake. Toriel doesn’t handle me like a post-op adult. She handles me like a child.

I have only been treating Flowey and Frisk and I don’t even do that every day – Frisk talks to me in that manner a couple of hours a week now and Flowey’s tolerance for my therapisting varies. I’m already antsy with nothing to do and stoned because I’m on analgesics. Not a good combination.

So when she says, “Isla, you look tired. Why don’t you take a short nap? I’m sure you will feel much better after a rest,” my sleep-deprived, stoned brain flicks the filter off and I snarl, “I’m not Chara, Toriel. I’m not your kid. Stop treating me like I am,” and she stares at me for two seconds before her eyes tear up.
Shit. I majorly fucked up. “I’m sorry,” I say. “That was uncalled for. That was disgusting. I’m supposed to help you with your grief over your kids and—”

She brings a hand up to the side of her muzzle and shakes her head. “No, you’re right. This has… I’ve been… Since we met it’s been in the back of my mind, that if Chara had grown up they would have looked like you and been like you, and then you got sick, and—”

She breaks down. This is the problem with emotional repression. Eventually, it just becomes too much to keep inside.

It’s Saturday. That means Frisk is at the Embassy and Flowey is upstairs. This gives us time, which is good. I have needed to have this conversation with Toriel for a long time.

It’s never easy for me to get everything dumped on me like this, but it’s also when I can have the greatest impact. I haven’t cried at all in front of Flowey during sessions and I’ve always tried not to in front of Frisk. I do now. Sometimes a few tears can help, even in a professional setting, because it reminds the patient that they are with another person and often someone’s bond with another person can be more healing than any words spoken by either party.

This is not a professional setting. Toriel is my friend, despite what confusing motherly feelings she has towards me, and she has been putting her own feelings of grief and sorrow aside in order to care for other people for over a century. The one time she acted in her own self-interest, she left Asgore, she abandoned the monster kingdom, and she is terrified of what will happen the next time she acts selfishly. She’s been concealing everything so effectively even Bean didn’t single her out for prolonged suffering.

She starts with Asriel and Chara and something itches the rational part of my brain, something small and insistent that tells me I feel like I know these kids who died a century ago, but I shove it down because that’s not important right now. I don’t think Flowey can hear us crying upstairs, which is good. If he could, he might say something unsympathetic to Toriel later. He does that sometimes. He says insensitive things he knows he shouldn’t say and is unable to regret, then he gets frustrated because he can’t be remorseful.

Toriel is easily the rock of the group, the one we can all depend on to be there for us. She takes care of everyone else. An unhealthy majority of her self-esteem rests on how the people under her care are doing. She perceives her need to be taken care of for a change as a failure. I can defuse this with logical reasoning quickly, but even when someone knows they have no rational reason to feel a certain way, the feeling doesn’t always just go away. We still have work to do.

We manage to get to a calm enough place to talk about our living situation. I tend to be Frisk’s default guardian whenever their parents are unavailable. Toriel hasn’t treated me like a co-parent or a babysitter or a roommate. She treats me the way my parents treated me when I lived with them between semesters. I’m perfectly fine with letting her run the household – I think of it as her house, and Frisk is her kid, and Flowey just kind of goes where Frisk goes (even though he’s been particularly un receptive of Toriel’s subtle attempts to parent him), and I’m like a live-in babysitter-therapist.

We come to the conclusion that I may have to move out for her to stop perceiving me as a child. We have to talk to Frisk and Flowey first. I’ll crash with either Undyne and Alphys or Sans and
Papyrus until I figure out something permanent. I can’t move into the Embassy – Asgore’s got a weird dad-complex towards me, much like Toriel’s mom-complex, and I don’t want to make one relationship healthy at the expense of another, since I at least have Asgore treating me like an equal and an adult when I’m healthy. I don’t think I run the risk of anything like that with the other four. I can always bully Mettaton into putting me up in his resort as a last – ha – resort.

Toriel laughs when I say this, even though it was bad. As painful as this was, I’m glad it finally happened. I debate telling her, but immediately decide against it. If I tell her I was shot and it tanked my physical and mental health and that’s where all my problems come from she might think I need to be taken care of again when that’s the last thing that should happen now.

Later that week I drive to the airport to pick up Lucas. He is finally going to take a firsthand look at our computers. Sans comes with me, but it’s just so he can nap the entire car ride there.

Lucas hugs me and immediately shows me pictures of his son and his new baby girl. It’s good to see him. I wish he could have brought his entire family along. I really like his wife, though that might just be because her personality is similar to mine.

When we get back to Newer Home I leave him with Sans because I’ve got several interviews lined up so I can decide who I’m going to train to pick up my work. After that Toriel and I need to talk to Frisk and Flowey about the conversation we had. Some people wouldn’t talk to their kids about that sort of thing before making a decision, but those people are idiots who forget children have feelings about things that happen in their lives and they don’t always bounce back quickly just by virtue of being children.

I pause to frown at myself. I’m supposed to be taking it easy, and I’m not overbooking myself by any means, but I automatically went ahead and made sure I’d be busy, even though I could be giving Lucas the tour. Everyone was right. That is something I need to work on.

“And this,” Sans says, “is the most important place in all of Newer Home.”

Lucas looks around, then grins. “I’ve always wanted to try monster food.”

They walk into Grillby’s. Lucas laughs with the rest of the restaurant when Sans pulls the whoopee cushion prank on him. He doesn’t use ketchup, so Sans has to let that one slide.

He seems like a good guy. A good soul. Sans can usually tell as much just by being in someone else’s company.

He was a little apprehensive about going to get Isla’s ex – he has no experience with exes and after watching Toriel and Asgore interact he half-expected it to be awkward or hostile or otherwise unpleasant. It wasn’t. Isla introduced him as her friend. It wasn’t because she was trying to hide anything. Everyone who has seen that video of Isla telling off all those reporters can put two and two together and figure out this was the guy on the phone. It’s obvious to Sans they are genuinely friends to one another.

Lucas is a little older than Isla, which makes sense because they met during graduate school and Isla got all her degrees young. He resembles Frisk a bit, with darker hair and eyes and skin, but all humans tend to look similar to Sans anyway. One thing he did notice is that Lucas is almost six feet tall. He doesn’t know why it keeps bugging him. Everyone’s taller than he is. Even Frisk is
almost taller than him and it’s not like the kid’s gonna stop growing.

After Grillby’s they head over to Main Street (to be fair to Asgore, practically all human cities have a Main Street) and Sans lazily gestures at buildings and talks as they walk by. He wishes Papyrus was here. He’s better at this sort of thing.

Their next stop is the lab. Alphys shows up after Lucas gets in the soul scanner and throws yellow. His brightness is fairly high, for an adult. LV 1, EXP 0, not that they’ve seen anything other than that. He inputs the data into the system while Alphys explains soul color to Lucas. They know what some numbers mean. HP, LV, and EXP were obvious, ATK and DEF took maybe a dozen volunteers before they could be identified.

He looks for one specific number. Nope, it’s a 0, which only reinforces his suspicions. They have had just under two hundred volunteers come in. It’s still not a big enough sample size, not when there are seven possible colors. The people they have been getting are obviously almost all good, open-minded people. For that particular stat, everybody has a 0 except for Isla.

Sans thinks it indicates she killed another human. It makes sense. LV and EXP are exclusive to monster deaths, so none of the humans who willingly come in here to get their souls read have EXP. Killing someone else is a big deal – he knows that – so it only makes sense that killing a human would leave some sort of mark on the soul, too. He might know more if he adjusted the scanner to read monster souls and got Asgore in here, but he isn’t sure of how to adjust the scanner and he isn’t about to explain his motivations to the king when Asgore already hates himself enough for killing those kids. He does want to know, but it’s not like he would tell Isla. He doubts she would want to know.

After Sans gets the data in, Lucas checks out their system. Sans sorta stands back and watches Alphys and Lucas ‘talk nerd,’ as Undyne would say. He knows computers and mechanical engineering well enough, but Alphys knows both better and it gives him an excuse to be lazy.

They go to the Embassy next. They talk security and cost-effectiveness and other things Sans doesn’t have to pay attention to because he won’t be involved in the final decision-making process. He wants to go home and nap, but Alphys will kill him if he leaves her with a near-stranger. She does okay with a friend present as a buffer, but she still experiences social anxiety with strangers.

Isla shows up when Lucas and Alphys have been in the system for an hour. “S’up?” he asks because she has that look on her face that means she’s thinking about ten things at once.

She rubs her forehead. “I just had a bunch of interviews. We’re going to have to hire three people to take over the duties I agreed to give up.”

“That’s one way to know you were doin’ too much.”

“It’s how I handle stress.”

“You handle too much work by working more?”

“Well, yeah. My head starts and it gets impossible to put the brakes on. As long as I keep feeding my brain tasks, it can’t… you know.”

No, he doesn’t know, because he goes the opposite way. It’s been a while since he’s crashed, though. Good thing. Papyrus is not fully convinced he’s just being lazy when he can’t get out of bed.

“I’ve got a question,” he says, then thinks, no I don’t, but it’s kinda already too late because if he
tells her to forget about it she’ll look at him and get so much more out of that than he would ever want her to.

She makes a noise of acknowledgement. Well. “Lucas is nice. He’s a good soul.”

She nods, nothing in her expression indicating that she disagrees.

“I was wondering why you broke up. You seem to get along really well.”

“We do. We always did.” A pause. Lucas and Alphys are too far away to hear them. “The main reason was he wanted kids and I didn’t. I don’t. My doctors are almost certain I’d be unable to carry a pregnancy to term. They were shocked when I started having periods. We talked about adoption, but I’ve never wanted kids. There were other things, too, like… it’s sort of hard to explain. He asked me out and I figured I’d conduct an experiment, see how it went, even though I knew I was close to asexual and aromantic. We weren’t very compatible, but we got along so well it lasted longer than it should have.”

He still doesn’t understand why humans have to label themselves. It’s a convenience with how many of them there are, sure, but monsters rarely use terms like that. He supposes monsters do have the advantage of being able to immediately sense aspects of someone’s identity when they meet someone new. “How long did it last?”

“About two years.”

Yeah, that’s too long for knowing there is no future. That’s why he never did anything that expended too much energy Underground. It was always going to be reset, he was going to wake up one day in Snowdin, and… and he can’t make himself crash, that would be stupid. Stop. Isla’s a good thing to focus on, but only if she’s a little distracted, because she’s—

Her phone goes off. She picks up, there is a pause, and then she says, “I’m sorry, what?” in a tone that makes him turn and look at her.

“Okay,” she says after a moment. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

When she hangs up, she stares at her phone for several seconds. She doesn’t do that. She doesn’t waste time. She didn’t even waste time when she was spewing up blood and in agony.

“What’s up?” he asks, light-hearted because he always seems to think that helps, for some reason.

In a too-calm voice, she replies, “That was one of my former patients. He’s apparently having a crisis.”
Maladaptive coping: a technique that reduces symptoms while maintaining and strengthening the underlying disorder, ineffective in the long-term.

Chapter Notes

Reminder that the PTSD tag is there for a reason.

Sans comes with me. I wonder if he thinks he’s babysitting me. I certainly hope Toriel or Asgore didn’t tell him to watch me. I thought I came to an understanding with the two of them.

Maybe I’m overthinking it. Maybe he just really likes to sleep in cars, because that’s what he does.

It’s not a long drive, though. My former patient lives on the edge of the human town in a tiny house.

When I knock I don’t get him. I get his daughter, a little towheaded girl with a bright smile.

“Hello, Kalene,” I say.

“Isla!” She throws her arms around me, which kinda hurts because my surgery wasn’t even two weeks ago and I heal slowly. She pulls back and looks at Sans.

“This is Sans,” I say. “He’s—”

“He’s a skeleton!” she screeches excitedly. “He’s a skeleton, right!?”

Sans blinks at her enthusiasm. “Uh, yeah. Caught me.”

She begins to bounce in place, smiling hugely. “I’ve never meant a monster before!”

“I live in the monster community, so I’m friends with a lot of monsters,” I tell her. “Is your dad home, Kalene?”

She turns around and shrieks, “DAD!! IT’S FOR YOU!!”

Ezra does not look good when he comes to the door. He’s a tall guy, but his posture is slumped. His skin has a grey pallor to it. He looks like he’s going to fall over at any moment.

He blinks slowly. “Isla? What are you doing here?”

I frown. “You called me.”

“I did?”

I frown harder. “Are you drunk?”

“No, I just…” His voice is very soft and slow. “Haven’t slept in six days.”

“I’ve been trying to get him to take a nap,” Kalene puts in, “and to eat something, but he won’t.”

I stare at Ezra. “Is this true?”
He shrugs. “Keep forgetting things.”

“His boss sent him home from work yesterday,” Kalene says. “He won’t eat any of the food I make him.”

Okay. A seven-year-old is making food for her father and he still won’t eat. “We’re going to the hospital,” I tell him. “Pack whatever you need. I don’t know how long they’ll keep you, especially if they find something.”

I wait for him to try to argue with me, but his head bobs up and down. “Do you have any family Kalene can stay with?”

He slowly shakes his head. “Then I’ll take her,” I decide. It’s for the best, right? “Are you okay with that?”

Another slow nod. Ezra’s left arm jerks abruptly. He grabs his left wrist with his right hand, tension in his grip. “I tried others,” he says. “I did. You were the only one who ever worked. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, then I’ll take you on as a patient again,” I reply. Sans looks at me, but I ignore him. “It’s that simple. But only after we get you physically heathy.”

Ezra does not want us coming into the hospital with him. He calls later to say he’s been admitted for severe dehydration and sleep deprivation. He does not want Kalene to visit. He says he’s not staying longer than three days, which means he’ll check himself out against medical advice if the doctor doesn’t want to discharge him.

“You picked up more work for yourself,” Sans points out, keeping his voice low so Kalene doesn’t overhear.

“What was I supposed to do?” I ask. “I’m allowed to be a psychologist.”

“Maybe I don’t want to take care of you when you overdo it.”

I stop on the walkway to Toriel’s front door. Sans stops too. Kalene trots right up to the massive door and gives it a knock.

Sans rubs his cervical vertebrae. “Sorry. I – don’t mind it. I mean.” His gaze drops. “It’s the least I can do, with how much you do, and I can manage—”

He’s right. He has probably had to deal with me more than Toriel and Asgore have, except, unlike them, he can’t make himself stand up to me about it.

“Sans,” I interrupt. “I’m sorry. If I ever overwhelm you, I want you to tell me, okay? We have very different personalities and preferences for the speed at which we move through life. Tell me if I have expectations of you that throw you off.”

As I speak, he hunches, and by the time I shut up his shoulders are around where his ears would be if he had ears. He vaguely resembles a turtle and I can’t figure out what I said to make him feel… defensive? Is that defensive? I’ve always had a hard time reading him. He’s good at concealing his emotions. Better than most people.
He does not call me out for not telling everyone else what happened to me when I was a kid. He should. He should tell me that isn’t fair to him, because it isn’t, and I thought he would be relieved at the prospect of not having to keep my secrets.

He chuckles and says, “Yeah, we don’t have much in common, do we,” and I don’t have time to reply because Toriel opens the door.

Instead of being suspicious, she smiles at the human girl on her doorstep. “Greetings, young one. Who might you be?”

“I’m Kalene Dyre,” Kalene replies, in clear awe of Toriel and her height and fur and fangs peeking through her smile.

Toriel stands aside. Her gaze flicks to Sans and me, acknowledging us. “Well, please come in. Make yourself at home.”

Toriel understands when I explain the situation to her. She’s happy to have another child in the house and she is particularly happy to see Frisk interacting with another human child.

It doesn’t happen right away, though. Frisk is used to monsters and somewhat wary of this other human child occupying the same space they do. When Kalene runs right up to them to introduce herself, they recoil, but they take the hand she offers them, allowing her to pump their arm up and down.

“I’ve seen you on TV!” she chirps. “I like your name. Are you a boy, or a girl, or… the people on TV get it wrong sometimes, don’t they? Unless you’re both.”

Frisk blinks. “I’m neither,” they say.

“Okay,” she replies, just like that. She sees Flowey and runs over to him. “Hi! I’m Kalene.”

He looks offended by her presence. He sends a look at Frisk, like do I have to, and Frisk sends a yes you have to look back at him. “I’m Flowey,” he mutters grudgingly.

She giggles. “That makes sense. You smell good!”

Flowey’s surprise rapidly fades in the wake of what I think is his version of blushing. He sneers and doesn’t reply. Frisk takes the opportunity to distract Kalene from the grumpy plant.

“Isla,” Toriel says. I turn to her. She looks concerned. “I understand that this is a human and she knows you personally, but I must ask you to allow me to do the temporary parenting. You are supposed to be going easy on yourself and you keep acquiring new tasks to do.”

“As long as you understand it’s temporary,” I reply. “Keep in mind that her mother’s dead. I don’t know how she will react if you try to mother her.”

Toriel gives Kalene a long look. “Yes. I will.” She raises an eyebrow at Sans. “You were supposed to help Isla learn to relax, not let her find jobs for herself and the rest of us.”

“Thought you wanted me learnin’ how to work hard,” Sans replies. “I learn by observation.”

“Sans, I have serious doubts you will ever work yourself to the bone, no matter how much learning you do.”

I roll my eyes while Sans and Toriel laugh. I glance at Flowey to see if he shares my sentiment. He
catches my gaze and sticks his tongue out.

I surprise him by mirroring the gesture right back at him.

I grab dinner with Lucas so we can catch up without company. It’s no issue for him. He’s staying in Mettaton’s resort so we go to the restaurant underneath the hotel. Not pooping is great, but the fact that monsters don’t really eat meat is also great because I almost always conform to a vegetarian diet. After eating, we spend an hour on the phone with his wife.

I decide to talk to Sans and Papyrus first. I’m operating under the assumption that Undyne and Alphys have a sex life and I’d rather not impede on it by crashing at their place. I’m okay, but I’m not mentally in the best place right now. It just so happened this time that my body shorted out before my brain and brought my attention to how bad of a job I’ve been doing taking care of myself. Papyrus is basically a loud, lovable antidepressant, so he’ll be good for me.

I barely hint at it before Papyrus shrieks, “OF COURSE YOU CAN STAY WITH US!!! WE CAN HAVE SLEEPOVERS ALL THE TIME!!!” and sweeps me into a rib-creaking hug. Sans just grins and nods, unable to disappoint his brother. He’ll be convenient to have around too, what with the teleporting.

Everyone found out my birthday when I was in the hospital and it was on my wristband. I don’t think it’s a big deal. Adult birthdays have never been a big deal in my family, but Toriel insists on making me a cake and having everyone over to share it. Mettaton is busy because his new TV show premiers tonight, but everyone else comes over.

Kalene is delighted with all these new faces and runs around with energy rivaling Papyrus in order to meet everyone. Her dad is getting discharged tomorrow, but she’s taken this sudden change in environment rather well. She understands her father’s issues because I met with her, too, while I was treating Ezra. We both wanted her to understand the impact her mother’s death had. Frisk plays with her, despite being older, and Flowey tolerates her without making too many snide comments so her presence here has gone as well as possible.

We play loads of games and after the kids go to bed Undyne grins wickedly and produces a bottle of rum. Papyrus is the only one who doesn’t partake, but Asgore only takes one drink and I bet he doesn’t even feel it.

Then I take one sip and find myself near-buzzed. Maybe I was wrong.

Undyne doesn’t go lightly, though, and when I mention my state-of-mind to Alphys she points out that my body has to process both the alcohol and the magic and human bodies aren’t good at processing magic. Maybe that’s why I’d be sloshed if I drank the whole thing, so I quit halfway through. My doctors would be unhappy if they found out I was drinking while I’m on antibiotics.

We turn on the television and watch Mettaton’s new show for a while. Undyne and Sans take a drink every time he calls someone a pet name. They both end up giggling stupidly at every not-funny thing someone says or does, so Alphys takes away the booze and we stuff ourselves with more cake instead.

Asgore gets a hold of the remote to check the big news stations quickly, though Undyne complains at him as soon as he does. They’ve got some sharply-dressed human called a “political expert”
discussing the monster presence with a news anchor.

I ignore it for two seconds until I can’t. “Are they talking about me?” I ask, surprised. I’m almost never the topic of discussion, even when I blast air horns at protestors or verbally abuse racist jerkwads. I’ve only ever gotten headlines in articles, nothing more.

“Actually, I feel sorry for them,” the political expert is saying. “Think about it. They had so little knowledge before coming to the surface.” That is not true. Their knowledge had holes in it, but they knew a lot. “Reilly could have easily manipulated them through her position as the ambassador’s psychologist.”

I laugh and fistpump. “Oh, I like this. Turn me into the villain, I dare you!”

“It is a fact that she is in the king and queen’s inner circle,” the anchor allows. “There have been rumors that she has been involved with one or both of them.”

Sans and Undyne cackle. So do I. Asgore flushes, visible under his fur, embarrassed. For her place behind the sectional, Toriel flicks the back of my head and says, “Let’s not forget you were the one who started the rumor with me.”

“But – I was, I was being glaringly sarcastic,” I barely get out around my laughter. “If people are too stupid to get it—”

“Doesn’t matter,” Sans says snarkily. “Ya made people think you were boning the queen.”

Undyne howls and Alphys stuffs her fist in her mouth to muffle her laughter. Despite her attempts not to, even Toriel laughs.

Papyrus levels a stare at Sans and says, “I had hoped the alcohol would cure you of your pun-based humor, but alas, it seems as though it has doomed your puns into making NO SENSE WHATSOEVER. Why must I put up with this!??”

Undyne and I die over that. I lean over so I can whisper to her. “Undyne, i-if Sans hasn’t given Papyrus ‘the talk,’ I think that duty falls to you.”

“No!” she barks out, still laughing. “Nope, nope, that is a no-go—”

“That is unlikely,” the political expert responds. “Reilly is too smart for that, and therein lies my concern. She gained a lot of power when the monsters were formally recognized by the government. I thought it was a good thing, at first, because she has only argued rational points, which is why everyone who has attempted to argue with her has lost. Unfortunately, it has become clear that she is incredibly quick to violence. The last I had heard, she physically struck two people who did not agree with her, one of whom had to receive emergency medical attention to fix a broken nose.”

My jaw drops. Someone misinformed him. Someone deliberately misinformed him, because—

“Er – one of the people she hit attempted to stab Ambassador Dreemurr,” the news anchor says awkwardly. “It doesn’t seem out of the realm of possibility that she was defending herself or the people around her.”

“I was unaware of that, but that only explains one incidence. I know it’s a fact that she killed a man when she was twelve.”

My stomach drops through the floor.
“Supposedly that was in self-defense, too – Reilly was at the shooting at Camp Wendell thirteen years ago and killed the shooter with a rifle after he killed eight children and injured many others. When you examine each individual event, she might appear blameless, but when a person repeatedly harms others in self-defense, a common denominator emerges—”

The television clicks off. The remote is in Sans’s hand. It’s a good thing he stands when I do because my right leg instantly crumples. He catches me and lowers me to the floor.

Hot tears are dripping down my face and my eyes are wide because there are tiny explosions going off in my brain. ‘I’m – bleeding.’ I get out.

“You’re not bleeding,” he says.

I cling to him. “Bleeding, ‘m gonna die, ‘m—”

“You’re not gonna die. You know me. You know me and I’m here and that means you’re not there. Stay with me.”

The explosions get louder. I put my hands over my ears and start to wheeze.

I’m not okay until Sans sends Papyrus to get my noise-cancelling headphones and shoves them on my head. I crank up the music and don’t make eye contact with anyone while Sans tells them. I’m still shaky and in pain by the time I take the headphones off. But I still stand and pull up the hem of my shirt so they can see my mess of a stomach.

Undyne is the one who breaks the silence. “Shit,” she says. “No wonder you didn’t want to show us your surgery scar.”

I pull my shorts up my right thigh, too, to display the bullet scar there and the surrounding surgical scars. The headphones have to go on again after that. I ask for my whiteboards and they are brought out not two minutes later and I begin to write. I can’t drink because someone hides the alcohol (and the remote to the television) but I take opiates with my night meds and those do just as well.

——

I wake up on the sectional. Someone put a pillow under my head and a blanket over me. Nobody put Bean on me. He just climbed on my chest himself after everyone went to bed.

Falling asleep with my contacts in was a bad idea. I take them out, put my glasses on, and come back downstairs, moving slowly because I feel kind of sick from the combination of booze and pills last night.

I was all over the place. A quarter of one of my whiteboards is taken up by a sketch of Bean. I also drew and meticulously labelled a human brain. From there I slid into three-dimensional calculus and vector physics. No attention span.

I have missed calls from my parents and sister and Natalie. I send them texts because I’m not sure if I can talk to them without crying.

Frisk wakes up and instantly knows something is wrong. I tell them to ask Toriel. After breakfast, I get in my car to take Kalene home. Ezra comes out and Kalene runs right up to him and jumps into
his arms. I make an appointment with him for next week, then call Andy.

Roughly two hours later he’s letting me into his home. His older two kids are in school, but his youngest is there.

“Have you been avoiding news programs since last night?” he asks me. In response to my tired nod, he says, “We’ve got a few videos to watch. We’ll do it together.”

Riley Sanders and his father have both made public statements. Riley is far too passionate when he points out that Calder – the name of the “political expert” who technically didn’t lie but twisted the truth to make it sound horrible – forgot to mention I was shot eight times at Camp Wendell and that I stepped in front of him and likely saved his life. When he says, “I’ve got two scars, and I have them because two bullets went through Isla before they struck me,” I need to turn it off.

I text Toriel so she knows where I am. I’m not home until later that night and I just need to sleep.

Lucas is worried about me, but I convince him not to change his flight. It was only a matter of time before my name rang a bell and someone dug up the old stories. He says he’s only comfortable going home because he knows he’s leaving me with good people. Guess Sans made a decent first impression.

It’s harder than I expected to convince Undyne I want to spar. She’s skeptical because I just had a meltdown and surgery not that long ago. I tell her exactly, I lost all that weight in the hospital and before, when it hurt to eat, and my body ate what little muscle I had before eating what little fat I had. I need to rebuild muscle. I need to not look like a little girl because I need to be taken seriously, but I don’t tell her that part.

Undyne agrees. Alphys tries to dissuade us, but she doesn’t try very hard.

We go in their backyard. Undyne starts off slow, assuming I’ve never been in combat with a monster before.

She pulls my soul out of me. That’s light blue. When Sans panicked and nearly attacked me, it was darker—

It turns green and a magical spear manifests in my hands. Oh. I guess the darker blue was Sans’s magic. He only had one HP, too. Undyne has more. I have more. What’s the norm there?

I balance the spear and swing it and thrust it and find it doesn’t weigh too much. I prefer knives – they can be hidden more easily – but my self-defense lessons incorporated long weapons like this, since it’s possible to improvise with common household items like brooms in a pinch. She sends more spears at me and I bat them aside without blinking.

“I told you, I’m trained,” I call, choosing not to move.

“You still gotta warm up,” she replies, and sends another volley at me. I spin the spear, stepping to widen and narrow my stance to swing it around me and maybe showing off a little.

“Come on,” I goad. “Don’t bore me.”

Undyne’s face twitches and then it gets fun. The spears come faster, more frequently. I’m spinning and stepping and using the spear I’ve got as an extension of my arm.

She does catch me with a spear that comes at me from the front but somehow moves when I swing at it to deflect it. It slams into my back, and my soul in front of me flashes briefly. That felt like a
blunt hit, not a stab. I’m fine.

Eventually, the spear I have vanishes and I’m free to move again and I run at her, sidestepping and ducking under attacks and watching, always watching, determining the trajectory of each attack and moving with the perfect timing. Dodging is important for someone like me. I’m so small that if someone else did attack me, they would very likely be much bigger than me and they might be able to incapacitate me with one solid hit. I’m like a monster in that way, I guess.

Undyne grins and puts up a block for me to hit into. She’s too tall – I can barely reach her face with a fully extended punch and you never want to totally straighten your knees and elbows in a fight. I aim for her stomach instead and her knees and ankles if I’m using my legs to strike.

She doesn’t hit back. She doesn’t even throw a punch to check how fast I am. I get impatient and I jump so I can actually swing at her face and when I come down my foot turns on its side and sends zings of pain up my left ankle, knee, and hip and of course I collapse.

Undyne ends the fight immediately. My soul zooms back to me. She crouches down. “Are you alright? You land funny?”

I punch the ground. Damnit.

Maybe I’m trying not to cry as Undyne carries me inside. Alphys wants to call Toriel because I have clearly injured myself, but I tell her no. Toriel does not need this excuse to baby me. I’m upset with myself for being a fucking idiot, so I would probably let her.

They give me ice and I put it on all three of my joints. I lean the chair back and lie in it like a lump. We watch a few episodes of anime, but I can’t get into it. My head will not focus, so it keeps spinning, latching onto thought after thought after thought and eventually it will reach something that makes me feel horrible, so I can’t let it go on like this.

Even though everyone else knows now, Sans still comes to my rescue when Undyne and Alphys get embarrassingly snuggly during a just-as-embarrassing love confession from one of the anime’s main characters. He probably feels like he still owes me for being an ass to me. I don’t know whether I should correct him or not.

He helps me hobble across the street. I don’t know what I’m going to do when my right femur bothers me again. Then both my legs will be useless.

He hesitates for a moment, then says, “Can I check something when we get inside?”

I shrug. Frisk does not come to instantly greet us when we open the door. Maybe they’re upstairs with Flowey. Sans says, “Be right back,” and pops out of existence.

I stand with my weight on my right leg. He’s back within fifteen seconds and he has something in his hand. It’s too big to be a phone, but it has a screen. “What’s that?” I ask.

He points it at me. “Portable soul scanner. Alphys just put it together. Now’s as good of a time as any to test it.”

I wait. It doesn’t make any noise, but after a few seconds he draws it back to him, looking intently
“Does it work?” I ask.

He looks up and nods. “I’m gonna pull your soul out for a sec. No combat, I promise.”

He does. I feel a bit unsteady and I have to put a hand on the door to balance.

“You see it?” he questions.

Well, yeah, I see my soul. But I’m guessing that’s not the question. “See what?”

“Your brightness has gone down. Your soul is pretty average as far as human adults go. You had t – uh, one deviation. The first time we scanned you, your brightness was high. We could have seen it, physically, if we pulled it out of you at the time, but right now, it’s not as bright as it used to be.”

I stare blankly at him. “What does that mean?”

“I’ve got a theory. You’ve, uh, been pretty impatient with yourself and everything else lately. Expecting too much to happen too quickly. But you’re a patient soul. You’re refusing to allow your dominant trait to help you.”

“Oh,” I say. I feel like I’m… coming back into myself a bit. “So… can you quantify brightness?”

“Yeah, it’s one of the numbers we get. One of the handful we’ve figured out so far.”

“And in my case, it appears to be correlated with my mental health.”

A pause. “Yeah. I s’pose you could put it that way.”

“So brightness could be correlated with psychological well-being in humans. It’s a possibility.”

He nods slowly. “We’d have to test it. But it’s a possibility.”

“It sounds like you will need a psychologist to determine the mental health of your volunteers.”

Sans blinks. “Isla. Did you just weasel another job out of me…”

He trails off when my soul brightens visibly. He stares, then raises the scanner and scans it again. He looks at the results, then back up at me, nodding. “It, uh. Looks like you’re right. Shocker.”

I smile. Science is great. “I do enjoy figuring things out.”

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He’s been really moody lately. Frisk knows they aren’t the only one who has noticed. He’s mean to their parents, he won’t banter with Sans and Undyne, he’s even been impatient with Papyrus.

Asking him what’s wrong has only resulted in nasty glares and “Nothing’s wrong, FRISK. Nothing YOU could understand, anyway.”

So Frisk asks him if he wants to talk to Isla, if he’s been talking to Isla about it, and he gets impossibly snarlier and snaps, “Why would I want to talk to HER? If anything, she’s only made things WORSE.”
They know that isn’t true. It’s so confusing. Chara cannot decide whether they like or hate it when Flowey is mean and nasty and as not-Asriel as he can possibly be. They are confused and they resent their confusion and they resent Flowey for not being Asriel and they resent Frisk and everyone else for being unable to do something about it.

_I don’t_, Chara protests when Frisk thinks that. _Well, I do_, they admit after a moment. _But it’s not your fault. We tried and tried and tried, Frisk. You put up with all those RESETs from me because we couldn’t save him. I’ve got no right to blame you at all. If anything, it’s my fault, because I can’t_…

But that’s just it. Chara resents a lot of other people, but that resentment pales in comparison to their self-hate. They still refuse to let Frisk tell anyone about them. They are convinced it would make everyone else’s lives worse, even though Frisk thinks there is a chance that might be the thing that helps Flowey move past this sulky-angry mood he’s stuck in.

Frisk is getting tired. They won’t ever let themself become hopeless. They won’t ever lose their determination. But at this point, there is only one thing they can do.

_I love you, Chara_, they think, and Chara automatically replies, _I love you too, Frisk_, but what they’re thinking is _you shouldn’t and I don’t know why you do._

Out loud, they say, “I love you, Flowey,” just like they do every day and they won’t feel hurt that he can’t say it back because they know he can’t feel it. They know that. They wouldn’t want Chara to say it, either, if they didn’t mean it but they can tell Chara means it just like Chara can tell they mean it with all their heart.

Flowey scowls in a way that is almost pained. He turns away from them so they can’t see his face.

Frisk sighs inwardly. They don’t know how much longer they can keep this up. They want to help their friends, but they’ve both been stuck for so long. Chara got better, for a little while, when the monsters’ move to the surface went peacefully enough and Frisk went back to get Flowey and Flowey seemed like he wanted to try again when he saw the humans weren’t killing monsters and some of them actually support the monsters, but…

But it’s been so long for both of them. And Frisk doesn’t know what to do, because when they didn’t know what to do in the Underground they always called for help.

But they made separate promises to Flowey and Chara they wouldn’t tell anybody. So what are they supposed to do?
Calder issues a public apology to me stating that a friend of his dug up the old stories about Camp Wendell and didn’t give him every detail. He claims it was his fault for not doing the research himself. He might be lying. If he had all the information, he did the smartest thing he could to make me look violent and impulsive.

This is the first time I’ve been personally and publicly criticized to this extent. Toriel, Asgore, and Frisk have borne the brunt of irrelevant personal attacks thus far. People have expressed doubt about Toriel and Asgore’s ability to care for Frisk since they lost two children and many humans have gone ahead and called Frisk a traitor with no knowledge other than ‘Frisk is a human and they’re also the Monster Ambassador.’ That was definitely a reason I combed through the internet every day. I wanted to make sure everyone’s attention was elsewhere when something hurtful like that came up so they wouldn’t see it.

I have to call my mom because she’s ready to tear Calder’s head off. It’s not like she can. I know nothing about the guy other than what that interview told me. Looking up his information isn’t my job anymore.

I see Andy half a dozen times over the next two weeks and after that I’m… okay. It’s October now and Sans and Papyrus are a little miffed at all the ‘naked skeletons’ decorating human homes. I laugh my ass off the first time Papyrus asks me about it in a scandalized whisper.

I’m moving my stuff into their guest room. Slowly, this time. Sans was right about my soul. I’m patient, but I don’t really know how to relax. I usually keep a handful of projects going at any point in time so I have something to do while I’m waiting for the results of something else. Now all I have to do is function as a psychologist. I’ve stepped out of politics. The only side-project I’ve picked up is that I evaluate all the human volunteers who come into the lab to get their souls read. Alphys and I set up all sorts of experiments: one over time, one in which we’re going to deliberately make the subjects feel positively or negatively about themselves, one for which we put an ad for subjects with diagnosed psychological conditions. We have to put together an IRB quickly so they can make sure we aren’t violating legal or ethical standards.

Frisk is… stressed about something they won’t talk about. They try to distract me by talking about little things that are bothering them. I see through it but I don’t call them out on it yet. Flowey’s attitude and behavior are somehow getting worse. I’m not sure what his problem is, but he’s not horrible only to me. He is still the nicest to Frisk and Papyrus, but relative to how he was treating them a couple months ago, he’s worse.

Toriel opens up slowly. I don’t dig or pry because that’s unnecessary, but I have to gently nudge and point her in the right direction. Asgore, on the other hand, is able to immediately identify and talk about what is causing his suffering. No monster with the exception of Toriel disagreed with the deaths of the six humans who fell before Frisk. For a long time, nobody was harder on him than he was on himself and he readily admits that it was something of a relief when I yelled at him about it. We have to check with one another before we’re able to talk because I’ve seen a bunch of kids die and I killed the person who was responsible for it and he didn’t know that when he told me he killed six kids, so. Kind of awkward and horrible at the same time.

Mettaton is now incredibly popular with the humans. He’s got an album out and his show has gotten him an established fanbase alarmingly fast. His show doesn’t really have a focus. He does a little bit of everything, but one of the first things he did was to get Frisk for an interview and Frisk was wonderful, as usual.
It’s been long enough, so I talk to Mettaton about it. He is agreeable and encouraging and after a moment looks at me shrewdly and says, “Would this be the reason loud noises scare you?” and I nod because it is and a week later I’m on the show and fucking nervous, how does Frisk do this sort of thing? I have no problem with public speaking as long as my topic isn’t personal. I can present logical points to an argument and tell off irrational asswipes and explain a subject from my hoard of knowledge without issue, but this is hard.

I hang out with Napstablook in the back before it’s time to go on. They seem awkward and shy but I know how to deal with that. I put them at ease with my tone and words and we’re talking about how they ran a snail farm Underground before a monster tells me I’m on in sixty seconds and I start freaking out all over again.

“I’m sure… you’ll do great…” Napstablook says.

It’s not public speaking or an audience or – ah shit, I knew Sans was going to be here, but I didn’t know about everyone else. I assumed they’d watch it later. Frisk even brought Flowey. Don’t they have anything better to do right now?

“This is my story.” My mouth is dry. “I feel like I’ve got a right to tell it, even though it’s been told in pieces. I’d – like to preface this by saying I appreciate Councilor Calder’s apology and, um, thank you to Senator Sanders and his son Riley for standing up for me and making sure people knew the truth.”

The robot crosses his legs, which is a surefire way to take the attention off everyone around him for a beat. “Go on, darling.” He smiles encouragingly.

I cough. “Camp Wendell used to be in Massachusetts. It was an outdoorsy type thing for gifted children. In 2084 a black bear mauled three kids, and the camp was almost shut down. Instead, the owners got a rifle – we called it the bear rifle – and I opted to learn how to shoot it.

“So, uh. When…” come on, “I don’t actually remember a lot. I remember some stuff from flashbacks, but…” nope, too much, that wasn’t necessary, “but most of what I know I’ve been told. Some guy walked into the main lodge. There were three councilors and twenty-two first graders heading out. I was in the front, with Riley Sanders. I don’t remember this, but apparently I stepped in front of him when I saw the gun, so… I was shot first. Eight times. Two bullets went clear through me and struck Riley.

“I don’t remember this either, but… I think about a dozen of us went down from that first round. While I was on the floor, I mean. A portion of the group escaped into a side room and the shooter went after them. I think that was when I got up again, and I went over to the reception area, and I – I remember the phone and the safe for the bear rifle were right next to one another, and I dialed 911 with one hand and unlocked the safe with the other, and I took out the bear rifle. The shooter was getting ready to break down the door to the side room, but – I shot him.” I raise a hand and tap two fingers behind my right ear. “Right here. Severed his brainstem. He was dead before he hit the floor.

“I was in the hospital for months, but they couldn’t get all the shrapnel out of me. I got better eventually, but I’m still sick sometimes – I lost a couple of organs and lost function in others, so it’s kind of a surprise I have the guts to sit up here and say this now.”

I just about slap my hand over my mouth. The hell was that.

Mettaton blinks and the audience laughs. “I mean,” I continue, “I’ve got the stomach for it, but some things I’d bladder not talk about.”
What am I doing. I have to stop hanging out with Sans. This is all his fault.

The audience laughs harder (having all received a general education on human biology) and Toriel is so loud I’d know she is in the audience even if I hadn’t seen her. Mettaton chuckles too, but probably only because his audience is cracking up.

I’m not done yet. I didn’t essentially invite myself on here to talk about my stupid dysfunctional body. “It obviously messed me up,” I say once the laughter dies down. “Physically and psychologically. It was why I went into psychology in the first place and it was why I decided to help the monsters in the first place. It’s part of the reason why I’m still here.

“Humans have had dozens of wars since the beginning of recorded history. Humans will kill one another for the stupidest reasons. Monsters have had one war, it was with the humans, and we started it. The monsters have never had a war amongst themselves, even though they were dealing with limited space and resources Underground. Even though they were still touched by the humans’ violence when the prince, Asriel Dreemurr, was killed. Even though they lived in near-hopelessness following that, they still didn’t fight one another.”

“Oh, we’re not perfect by any means,” Mettaton says, beaming perfect showbiz at one of the cameras. “We do argue amongst ourselves on occasion.”

“Which is my point,” I reply, far more comfortable with this now that it isn’t about me and my trauma and now that Mettaton’s helping. “You have disagreements, but you have always managed to resolve them without bloodshed.”

“I think you mean dustshed, darling,” Mettaton amends, and the audience giggles.

I nod agreeably. “Exactly. You can tell a lot about the culture of a society by looking at its children. And—” and sorry, Asgore, Toriel, but dead kids can really drive the point home, “—Asriel’s behavior serves as a good example. No questions were asked. No words were exchanged. He walked into the village with his sibling’s body because their last request had been to see the golden flowers one more time. Humans saw him and they attacked him. He could have easily destroyed all of them, but even as they were killing him, he ran away and died rather than fight back to save himself. It says a lot when a child ignores fear-based instincts to do the right thing.”

I pause because Frisk suddenly stands up and edges out of their seat to walk quickly up the stairs next to the tiered seating and through one of the doors in the back. I can’t hear anything from where I am, but Flowey appears to be hissing at them the entire way.

“I suppose it does,” Mettaton says softly.

“Which brings me back to my original point,” I say, pleased with how concise this has been. “Monsters know how to peacefully resolve disagreements. They can teach humans what it is to actually be peaceful and non-violent, and maybe someday we can all live in a world, together, where kids – human and monster – don’t get shot at. That’s all I want, and that is something we are working towards.”

As soon as I get off the stage, before the applause can even die down, I send a text: You are the worst influence ever.
An immediate response: *I’m just shocked you kept the vocabulary to a point where those of us without brains could keep up.*

*Sans if you start making organ puns I will end you.*

*Come on Isla have a heart*

*You were pretty punny up there*

*This was your plan. You tell puns so often even Papyrus does it sometimes. Now you’ve got me doing it.*

*I’m just ribbing you. Tibia-nest you did good. The puns just made it more humerus*

*The worst, Sans. You’re the worst.*

I look around for Frisk and Flowey, and when I don’t find them I text Frisk. They reply, letting me know they are heading home with Toriel. They say Flowey wasn’t feeling well, which is weird because Flowey has never complained of anything illness-like before. Just his soullessness.

Halloween is kind of awkward, what with all the humans dressing up like how humans have perceived the word ‘monsters’ for centuries, so we skip it. Asgore immediately looks into getting pumpkins for the greenhouses and gardens behind the Embassy. He’s always looking for new stuff to put back there because when the monsters gained more rights this past summer, they were allowed to start farming. I thought it was too late to start this year, but Asgore had greenhouses put up and began cultivating immediately. They aren’t big relative to the population of Newer Home – three-quarters of the city’s food still comes from the Underground – but they’re a start.

I see Andy a few more times and I’m in a much better place after disclosing everything on air, even though I had doubts. Every relationship I have feels better and realer to me because now all the people I love know. It’s not all of me, it never was, but it’s still a part of me and it always will be, and it’s just a nice feeling, to know everyone I care about isn’t treating me differently because of it. They are a little more mindful now, but it’s not a bad thing.

I worry a little about allowing myself to have public vulnerabilities. I decided in the beginning that I would have to be The Bitch. Whenever someone needed a verbal lashing, I was the one who did it. On the rare occasion that physical posturing or even punching needed to happen, I did that too. I was known almost solely for my sharp tongue and how unsettling I could be. I worry that this will soften my reputation and that people who wouldn’t have been assholes in my presence will now, but I guess we’ll have to deal with that when it happens.

I make a lot of progress quickly with Toriel and Asgore. They both carry a lot of guilt. They are both rather dismissive of the war, but so am I, because that isn’t where their problems are. These two will be lucky if they ever stop being haunted by dead children. Asgore is easier; he is more willing to tell me anything that comes to mind and can start a session telling me something Asriel and Chara once did, smiling wistfully, and can end it crying as he speaks about a tiny bloody corpse. Toriel is better at lying to herself and we usually end up working through an obstacle course of her defense mechanisms and coping techniques to reach anything substantial.

The only time I get uncomfortable is when they talk about one another. They need to, so I tell
myself I’m doing this as their friend and I’m not violating professional boundaries. Asgore tells me readily that he still loves Toriel, but at the same time, he’s terrified of her. He tends to describe things in simpler terms and phrases, which is something I find kind of condescendingly endearing. Toriel is more confused, angrier, and more likely to want to avoid the subject of her ex. She doesn’t like how he makes her feel and she doesn’t want to explore exactly what that is.

It’s clear that whatever they had died with Asriel and Chara, but they can have conversations that are almost friendly now. They are able to talk to one another without requiring an obvious, shared goal to talk about. They aren’t uncomfortable around one another all the time anymore. It’s progress.

Undyne actually makes Alphys talk to me a few times. The scientist admits to having issues with self-esteem but insists that she’s getting better. I don’t know how she was before, but I know how these things go and I tell her she can always call or text me if she’s having a bad day. Bad days happen even after recovery.

If Toriel and Asgore are getting better, Flowey is getting worse. Frisk backslides a little, talking less and occasionally acting depressed, but it’s nothing compared to Flowey’s demeanor. He refuses to tolerate things and people he willingly put up with weeks ago. He always finds something that can piss him off because he wants to be angry all the time. If he’s not angry he’s reclusive and antisocial and he doesn’t want to do anything or go anywhere. He might be his psychopathic version of depressed.

I attribute Frisk’s downshift in mood to Flowey’s relapse, but I can’t do much about it because every time I even approach Flowey he gets irrationally enraged. He screams at me a couple of times and then becomes very, very sad afterwards and for once in my life, I’m at a loss for even a guess at an explanation. I only try to ask him about his past once and when I do he attacks me and chases me from the room by flinging little white pellets at me. Sometimes he will throw those about to get somebody’s attention, but these ones hurt.

Frisk just shakes their head tiredly when I try to get answers out of them. That was my last resort.

I start seeing Ezra and Kalene again, too. They come to my office at the Embassy all wide-eyed and in awe. Neither of them are prejudiced, but they’ve never really been exposed to monsters despite living in the city next door.

We get interesting results when they get their souls read. Kalene throws a super-bright yellow, but Ezra throws a dull, greyish-blue. His brightness is the lowest Sans and Alphys have in their database yet, which lends credence to my theory, given that he had a crisis not long ago. I have him go back to the lab every week to get that number checked. He’s willing to do whatever I prescribe because he still claims I’m working when nobody else has.

It finally cools off enough that I can go outside comfortably. I did not weigh enough when I got out of the hospital post-op, but I do now. I feel better, less tired, but I could stand to be in better shape. I take a day trip to see my team of doctors in Madison to get fitted for braces because Undyne refuses to spar with me again until I reinforce my joints. They suck, but when I get stronger I probably won’t have to wear them anymore. Everyone except Papyrus thinks I’m crazy for wanting to spar with Undyne, though. Even Alphys thinks I’m crazy for that.

My appearance on Mettaton’s show mostly did good things for the monsters. Most of Newer Home’s population is much friendlier with me all of a sudden. Many of them were quite distant with me before and I can’t figure it out until Asgore tells me a lot of people found me intimidating. I look disbelievingly at him because we work together quite a bit and when we are in the same room, I’m the scary one, which is ludicrous, given the size difference between us.
He admits he’s intimidated of me too, sometimes, and we both have a good laugh over that (I know he’s being serious).

I pitch in with the remaining construction in order to get to know some of the locals better. It’s kind of sad I busied myself so much with their politics and public relations that I never really got to know anyone outside of Frisk’s inner circle. I can’t do much, since I lack bodily strength and magic, but my small size and sturdiness (I can carry more than the little monsters who fly, for example) make me an ideal candidate to send up ladders.

And I do great. Right up until the moment I have to come back down.

I look down and it’s like someone drilled a hole in the side of my head and all my brains slop out. I’m upside-down, or sideways, or something, and all I can do is cling to the ladder and clench my eyes shut.

I breathe heavily through my nose for several minutes, unmoving, but that doesn’t fix it. So I call for help. “Papyrus!”

I came with him, so of course he’s been checking in on me and he’s there immediately. “WHAT IS IT, ISLA!? DO YOU REQUIRE ASSISTANCE!??!”

“I’m having a bout of vertigo,” I reply. I had no clue I had a problem with heights. Until today, I’ve never been anywhere up high, like this, with empty space beneath my feet.

“I… do not know what that is. How can I help you!??”

My hands are claws and all the muscles in my body refuse to relax. I can move my mouth. “I… don’t know. I can’t get down on my own and I need to come down.”

“Would you like me to come up!?”

As he says it, he grabs the ladder. Everything already feels like it’s moving and that tiny jostling is enough to make me feel like I’m spinning, or everything around me is spinning. “No!” I squeak out loudly, eyes still closed. “No, you stay down there.”

“If you let go, I’ll catch you!! The GREAT PAPYRUS will not allow a friend to come to harm!!”

I know I should be able to loosen my fingers without falling off. I should. But I can’t tell what direction I’m going to fall. I’ll fall down, obviously, but I don’t know which way is down right now and anyway I’m more than thirty feet up and that’s too far to drop even if I’m generous and say that Papyrus is seven feet tall.

“I don’t think I can,” I say when I can’t move.

“Okay,” Papyrus answers, sounding a little puzzled. “Just… hold on a minute. I will return with help!”

Hold on, he says. Too bad Sans isn’t here. He’d have a heyday with—

“How’s it hanging?”

“SANS!!! YOU’RE HERE TO HELP OUR FRIEND, NOT TO TORTURE HER WITH YOUR TERRIBLE PUNS BECAUSE SHE IS INCAPABLE OF ESCAPING!!!”

“Sure thing, Paps.” A familiar tugging that is definitely my soul being pulled out of my body. “You
can let go now. I got ya.”

I find my voice. My equilibrium is stabilizing, but I know if I open my eyes it could happen again, so I don’t. “If this is that gravity magic, explain to me how this will work, because the last time you used it on me it was fast. If I fall to the ground at that speed, you’ll be scraping me off.”

“Sans, you’ve sparred with our human friend?” Papyrus asks disbelievingly, because Sans would be too lazy to do that.

A pause. That’s right. Nobody else knows about that. “Nah,” Sans replies casually. “Just showed her a bit of magic a while back.” Then, to me, he says, “Last time I changed gravity in one direction at a time. This time I’ll be pullin’ ya in multiple directions. I know you’re familiar with vectors. You’ll move away from then ladder, then down. I’ll keep the opposing forces nearly equal so you move slowly, not at breakneck speed.”

“Not helping, Sans.”

“You can let go now. I gotcha.” My hands won’t move. Granted, I don’t try very hard, because if I’m gripping the ladder at least I know where I am. “Isla. You trust me, right?”

Yeah. I do now. I made him earn it, but I do. I let go. When my feet come off the ladder I curl up. It’s doesn’t feel like I’m moving at all, so he was honest about moving me slowly. I’m not about to open my eyes and look.

Fifteen seconds later Papyrus says, “Almost there, Isla!!” He sounds much closer. Good.

Then, a bellow: “PAPYRUS!!!”

I flinch. I hear Papyrus let out a startled “NYEH!?” Sans definitely flinches because suddenly I’m in free fall.

My eyes go wide but I don’t even have time to scream. I fall the last three feet onto Papyrus. My right foot clocks Sans’s skull on the way down and we all collapse in a heap. Papyrus is too startled by Undyne’s sudden appearance to make an attempt to catch me.

Undyne laughs. Loudly. I squirm, more worried about myself than them. This was an accident; it takes intent to hurt monsters, which means monsters are often comically unharmed by accidents that would hurt humans. Papyrus broke my fall, but one of my feet is lodged between Sans’s clavicle and scapula.

I’m fine. I didn’t hurt anything. “Papyrus, you – you’re late,” Undyne says with no conviction because she’s almost crying from laughing so hard. “You said you were gonna spar with me today.”

I’m such an out-of-shape weenie that Undyne barely breaks a sweat with me, but I do know how humans fight. Our bouts are a workout for me and a learning experience for her. She has been using the knowledge to teach the Royal Guard and apparently Papyrus because at least some of the monsters have to know how humans fight.

Papyrus stands, lifting me in the process. He sets me on my feet and dramatically clutches his skull. “YOU ARE RIGHT!!! HOW COULD I HAVE FORGOTTEN!!!” He grabs her arm and begins to pull her along. “COME ON, UNDYNE!!! ALLOW ME TO REMEDY THIS TRAVESTY AT ONCE!!!”

I look at Sans, who is still lying on the ground. He shrugs, winks, and sticks his arms behind his
head. He obviously intends to nap there. And when he’s ready to get up, he’ll probably teleport rather than physically stand.

Even though I’m just moving next door and we all see one another on a near-daily basis, Toriel gets surprisingly emotional. Frisk is fine and Flowey refuses to admit he has any feelings about it. Bean is naturally grumpy about it and will probably let me know it until he gets settled in properly.

Bean is the last thing to move to the skeleton house. Once he’s there, he proceeds to ignore me and goes about the house to decide where he’d like to sleep and sit. Toriel pulls me into a hug, which doesn’t happen very often with her – she’s not much of a toucher with other adults.

“I know you’re only twenty seconds away, but I will miss you,” she says, voice quavery.

Due to the height difference, I rest my chin in the crook of her arm. “I’ll make sure to come over to do your dishes sometime,” I reply, which is the right thing to say, because she laughs.

She’s still a little misty-eyed when we break apart. “At the very least, I’ll be over for sessions with you and Frisk and Flowey,” I continue. “But we both know we’ll see each other more often than that.”

“I know, I know.” She pauses, then smiles, but the set of her eyes and eyebrows makes it sad. “We’re all kind of messed up, aren’t we? We are lucky Frisk chose to talk to you that day.”

I’m the lucky one, but I don’t say that because I can sense she is not done. “While you are here… I know I may be overstepping by asking you this, but do you have sessions with Sans?”

I blink. “No.”

“Perhaps you should. I have not known him as long as some of our friends have, but… sometimes the jokes seem like a front.”

She would be the one to notice. She and Sans are best friends. I nod, guarded, because I know the timelines are partially responsible for that and Sans might just kill me if I tell anyone about them. “I know. They are. I’ve talked to him about it, but he’s not ready yet. Forcing the issue almost always hurts short-term, so unless it becomes necessary, I’m going to wait for him to come to me.” I shrug. “He might not even need me. Sometimes people just need time.”

She smiles again. “You have always struck me as wise for someone so young. You’re good with people.”

I’m good with people who deserve it. “Now you know why.”

Another prompt hug. “Yes. I do wish you would have told us sooner, but I’m glad we know now.” She pulls back. “Take care of yourself, Isla. And take care of Sans and Papyrus, too.”

“Oh, I will. Everyone tells me Bean acts like a dog.” I smirk at her. “I just hope he won’t live up to the gossip and start chewing on my new roommates. He didn’t eat Flowey, so. I have high hopes.”
Insomnia: chronic difficulty falling or staying asleep.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans either picks up various jobs all over the place or he’s making up something new every time I ask him where he’s going or where he was. I don’t ask every time he’s entering or exiting the house. That would be weird. I make the occasional enquiry like a normal roommate.

Whatever he’s doing, he’s bringing in enough money to buy Papyrus a car. Very few monsters have gotten their driver’s license because the vast majority of them haven’t left the city and don’t want to. Papyrus doesn’t want to leave. He just wants to drive.

We’re lucky he doesn’t shatter all the windows of all our neighbors when he sees it in the driveway and shrieks, reaching octaves generally only achieved by sopranos in opera. It’s red, low to the ground, and a convertible. I don’t know cars, but I know this is a midlife crisis car and I can’t help but wonder if that was on purpose or if Sans just based his decision on what his brother’s racecar bed looks like.

Of course I’m supposed to teach him how to drive and take him to get his permit later. I’ll do that gladly. I have the time for that sort of thing now.

I drive it up and down the street to get a feel for it, then Papyrus and I switch after we go over the different parts of the car and what they are used for. Papyrus has clearly been studying. Sans lounges in the backseat.

“THIS IS WHY WE BUILT A GARAGE!!” Papyrus yells, running his hands all over the steering wheel in the manner of a child getting their first pet. “NOW YOUR CAR WILL NO LONGER BE LONELY, ISLA!!”

Even if I were a callous bitch (which I am sometimes) I would tolerate Papyrus simply so I could be amused by whatever he has to say. He’s—

—not the best driver. Nope. He burns rubber and jerks the wheel around and stays on the road, but still just about makes me pee myself.

He stomps on the brakes and turns to me, beaming. “How was that, Isla?!”

My fingers are latched onto the armrest and door. I slowly loosen my grip and work blood back into my hands.

I take a deep breath. “Papyrus. You are innately great at many things.”

He grins all wide and happy and adorable and nods. “That makes sense! I am very great, after all!!”

“Driving is not one of those things.”

His smile falters and why don’t I just rip my own heart out and tell Undyne it’s her new training dummy, shit. I touch his arm. “But with a lot of practice, I think you can become great at it. You have a lot of potential, we just have some roadblocks to get through first.”

Sans snickers. Papyrus waits a beat, then nods. His smile isn’t as wide, but it’s realer. “You are right! Even someone as great as me cannot be innately great at everything. However, I am an
excellent learner, so I will LEARN to be a great driver!! On that note,” he gives me a shifty, sideways look, “I will forgive your terrible pun if you teach me how to be a great driver.”

Sans snickers again and I agree immediately. As he is now, there is no way I would allow Papyrus to drive in the snow. It’s November, so it has snowed, but nothing has stuck yet. I think this year we got everyone to the surface who wanted to be on the surface. There is still work to do Underground, but there are also monsters who will never want to leave the Underground, so it works out. This year the big projects were the urban aquariums and the greenhouses, both behind the Embassy and on the school grounds.

Papyrus loves living with me because I’m anal about the cleanliness and order of my environment and so is he. Bean and I are a package deal, which gets me points too. I let him cook because I can’t use magic and not pooping is awesome, but I will often stand there and tell him what to do. He’s grateful for the learning experience and very accommodating of my dietary needs (which Undyne calls my ‘wimpy stomach’). I’m grateful he’s not putting glitter in my food anymore.

Even though I’m not in charge of the academics coming to Newer Home to do research, I’m still unofficially involved because I’m a human academic and I speak their language. The team of geologists we let into the Underground (with monster escorts, of course; we couldn’t have them hurting themselves on their unfamiliar magical surroundings) end their expedition excited.

“See here?” the team leader asks, directing our attention to a point above Lake Superior. Asgore and I are with the team in one of the meeting rooms and they have a marked-up map on the table. “It’s called the Devil’s Kettle. Half the Brule River drops into a pothole and disappears underground. Its outlet remained undiscovered until yesterday.”

I can see where this is going. “It empties into the Underground?”

The man nods, grinning. To each their own, I suppose. I can’t see what is exciting about geology, but a lot of people think I’m nuts for practicing psychology. Several members of my family can’t see the appeal.

“We dropped marked ping-pong balls into the Devil’s Kettle, and they followed a path under the lake and turned up in the Underground!” he says. “We found them in the garbage dump in Waterfall.”

Asgore looks at the distance on the map. “Golly, that sure is a long way. I can’t believe the pathway for the underground river has remained open all these centuries.”

“Neither could we,” the team leader replies enthusiastically. “And, um, we still have to write the paper and get it published, so we’d appreciate it if you kept this on the down low for a little while.”

Asgore returns the smile. “Of course. When the paper comes out, let us know. I know a number of us would love to read it.”

We still have a lot of people coming to us at the Embassy, but finally Frisk and their parents are invited to go to DC to meet important people and to get a tour and other shallow crap I don’t care about. I’m not happy until I hear that they will be allowed several opportunities to speak. This will be a good time to bring up the topic of equal rights again. Not in an aggressive manner. Just a reminder.

Around the same time, our PR department gets an invite from an annual recycling conference. It’s being held in Canada this year. They want a monster representative to come and give a
presentation, given that monsters survived for centuries on what was already under the mountain and whatever human trash came down. The obvious choice is Alphys; she and Undyne got their passports already in anticipation of an eventual trip to Japan and she was constantly at the dump, reusing and recycling things for her pursuits in mechanical engineering. She is nervous about public speaking, but Undyne is going with her so she should be okay. I tell her to call me if she needs a pep-talk that isn’t delivered at eardrum-shattering volumes.

I decide to go to DC just in case I need to end the careers of any jerk politicians. It’s a pain because we fly and I’ve got metal in my body and that always makes airport security fun.

I don’t do much. Mostly I sit in the hotel and babysit Flowey, whom I make no progress with. Well… I can’t tell anymore. I stay patient, but it’s hard sometimes, especially because he’s getting more and more violent.

We end up watching bad cartoons. I dig into our nice cream stash to make milkshakes and if I stick a straw in one I can set it in front of him and he can drink it himself. He’s indifferent when that happens, and indifference is the best I get from him. He has always avoided questions about his past, but he used to tolerate and even show an interest in my questions about emotions. Now if he even senses I’m starting to analyze him, he snarls at me and threatens to kill me. I didn’t believe him months or even weeks ago, but that was before he started physically harming me.

When he is halfway done with his milkshake, I say, “I want to help you. Are you taking issue with something in particular I’m doing or saying, or do you just want me to stop altogether?”

“Just stop,” he replies shortly. “You’re not helping at all.”

“How am I not helping?”

He turns to scowl at me and I shut up. I’ve never had this much trouble with a patient before. I don’t know why. I’m doing everything right. My soul’s brightness is hovering around the numbers from my very first readout. I’ve been getting it checked. (“You’re patient with your patients,” Sans said, and Alphys looked at him like she was going to kick him out of the lab if he uttered one more pun.)

I have just about exhausted all my options, but I know Flowey won’t accept anyone else. Something that hasn’t changed is that he never wants to meet other humans. He wants nothing to do with my sister when she visits. He wants nothing to do with Newer Home’s human residents. The only other human he sort-of tolerates is Kalene Dyer, who frequently wants to play with him and Frisk.

I thought I was beginning to get through to him, but he abruptly turned around and went the other way, and now he wants nothing to do with me. He wants nothing to do with anyone, and I can’t figure out why.

I figure out why after we get home.

Frisk and Toriel and Asgore did well in DC. Toriel fielded most of the negativity that came their way, so my interference was unnecessary. All three of them feel good about it and believe something might eventually come out of it. Alphys’s appearance at the recycling convention gets more public recognition because suggestions from her presentation are already being discussed at
many major recycling companies. She can hardly believe it.

She and Undyne both say that Canada is too cold and they will not be going back during the winter. They want to go to a beach instead.

I babysit on a Saturday while Toriel goes into the school for a few hours to do teachery administrative things. I try, one last time, to talk to Flowey, this time with Frisk present.

Frisk encourages him to talk to me, and he yells, “I. Don’t. Want. To! Gosh, Frisk, are you BRAINDEAD? Why is that so hard to understand!??”

“Maybe if you told us why you don’t want to talk, we would understand,” Frisk tries.

“NO!” Great, his voice is approaching a shriek. “There’s nothing TO understand, Frisk! The real question is why you’re both trying so hard!” He pauses to glower at Frisk. “I know why you’re trying. So is that it!?” The fangs come out and his face and voice turn demonic. “She KNOWS, and THAT’S why she’s trying so hard!?”

Losing my patience. “Frisk didn’t tell me, Flowey. They wouldn’t do that unless you wanted them to. I’m trying so hard because I lost you a few months ago. You were doing well, I felt like you were making progress, and then suddenly you wouldn’t talk to me anymore. I can’t think of what I could have done wrong and I’ve analyzed my behavior and yours every which way and it’s really unlike me to not know the answer to a problem like this.”

Flowey frowns, normal expression back in place. He turns away. “Just leave it.”

“Flowey…” Frisk says. “Please. She already knows about the timelines.”

“Yeah, and whose fault was that?” Flowey replies snidely.

“I mean she knows and she hasn’t told anyone. You’ve tried everything except telling somebody.”

“I tried that back when I had control over the timelines, Frisk! You know that! It didn’t work!”

“But that was before we went through all that stuff together, that was before you—”

“SHUT UP, FRISK! I swear, if you—”

I drop my notebook. It hits the floor with a loud smack disproportionate to its weight. Both kids – because that’s what they are, kids, time-manipulation abilities notwithstanding – turn and look at me. Well, Frisk looks. Flowey glares.

“Flowey, you’ve been flinging those stupid pellets you call bullets at me for over a month,” I say. “I allowed it. I’ll probably still allow it. But if you hurt Frisk, you will not like my response. Are we clear?”

Frisk hurriedly drags the sleeve of their sweater across their eyes. “I’m fine,” they mumble.

I’m locked in a staring contest with Flowey. “You’re full of it,” he says. “You’re a patient soul.”

“That doesn’t mean I’ll keep taking your shit,” I snap. There it goes. I don’t lose it very often, but I just did. “We’ve all tried, Flowey. You can’t ask us for more than that. Why should we keep trying if you won’t?”

He blinks, surprised. “You’re supposed to help me.”
“I can’t fix you, Flowey. Is that it? Are you just realizing that now? I can’t give you a soul. I barely know anything about souls. But did you consider that, even if you’re soulless, you could still get better? You were getting better. If something happened, you need to tell me, or I cannot help you. It’s as simple as that. And I will, if you give me something to work with.”

Flowey scowls. After a moment, Frisk says, “Flowey?” in a tone that makes me look at them.

The hostile plant bares his teeth. “Shut up, Frisk.”

“Are you—?”

“Shut up, Frisk!”

Tears abruptly begin to stream down Frisk’s face, but their voice is steady. “Flowey, this is serious. If you’re feeling things… that’s great! That’s the goal, isn’t it?”

Flowey’s expression twists in pain and anger. He turns away so I can’t see his face. “I’m not. Get it out of your stupid head, Frisk.”

“What are you feeling?” I ask quietly. Maybe that was it. Maybe he felt something distinctly negative and is scared to feel anything else.

“Nothing,” he insists, turning back to scowl at me. “Why are you acting like you don’t know? You’ve mocked me with it! You’ve said things about him in front of me to see how I’d react!”

My gaze slides to Frisk, who gives nothing away with their expression, despite the obvious tear tracks. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t even know who you’re talking about. I never mocked you intentionally, but if I have I’m—”

Flowey makes a noise of disgust. “You know what’s worse? I can’t tell whether you’re lying or not. Frisk is terrible at lying. Or they’re so good at lying to themself that they actually believe all the hopeful crap that comes out of their mouth. But you’re good at it.”

“Flowey, we’re not lying,” Frisk protests. “I never told her, and I can prove it.”

The flower glares suspiciously at the human. “How?”

“Let me tell her now, and you’ll see she didn’t know. You’ll see.”

I don’t like that. Frisk is expecting me to react a certain way, but how can they predict how I’ll react? They’re eleven. They don’t have the experience I have reading people and analyzing behavior and predicting future behavior.

Flowey scowls, but spits, “Fine. DO IT. It’s not like it matters anymore. It’s not like it could get worse.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Who Flowey was – who he is when he has a soul,” Frisk replies. “His true identity is Asriel Dreemurr.”
Frisk talks and cries and eventually gets Flowey to talk, too, and then I’m crying. Flowey’s face goes blank with shock when I wrap an arm around his pot and rest my head on my hand.

And then I’m coming up to cry and profusely apologize because I have talked about Asriel in front of him. This is insane. Alphys doesn’t even know the depth of the consequences of her actions. Toriel and Asgore have no clue that their son is alive. Soulless, but alive.

I say, “I suppose you don’t want me to tell anyone.”

The flower’s eyes go flat. “If I think you will, I’ll kill you. I know I say that a lot. I mean it this time.”

I choke on the sob working itself up in my chest. “Okay,” I force out. “I won’t.” Because I can’t help him if I’m dead and Frisk and I are the only ones who know.

I talked about him in front of him without realizing it. He’s been in the company of his parents and they don’t know.

“I won’t,” I repeat, “but why?”

He’s quiet for a long moment, looking at Frisk and me with an expression of dull surprise. Frisk pulls on my wrist and leans their head against my arm. “Because if they knew, they’d be happy,” Flowey finally says. “They always were, when I told them before. They’d be happy and they’d think of me as him, and they’d be so loving and patient and caring and I can’t reciprocate that, I can’t love them back, but that wouldn’t occur to them at first. I’ll hurt them, eventually, even if I’m on my best behavior. Because my best isn’t as good as Asriel’s worst. Because Asriel felt so much love and compassion and he was weak, he was a stupid gullible crybaby, but he still had love and without it I can’t be Asriel.” He ends the tirade abruptly, then makes a gesture like a shrug. “Better to not get their hopes up. Better if I – if Asriel stays dead.”

I… don’t know if I can handle this. I have to, I don’t have a choice, but instead of automatically mapping out a plan to deal with this my brain is just drawing a blank. “What you did—” I have to stop. Start again. “You returned everyone’s souls. You sacrificed yourself. Sacrificed yourself again.”

He turns away. “I could feel stuff then.”

This is the only explanation he offers. This is fucking nuts because I know things about Asriel, I know the things his parents have told me and shit I’m going to keep having sessions with Toriel and Asgore and I’m going to be dreading the moment they talk about their son because they don’t know.

Something I’ve heard from both of them: Asriel was physically affectionate. He liked hugs.

I try to swallow the lump in my throat and reach out a hand. “Asriel—”

“NO.” He whips around and glares at my hand like he’s going to bite it. “I’m NOT Asriel! I’m NOT, got it!? Not like this! Asriel was dumb and whiny but he was still better than me, so don’t call me that!”

This has wrecked several of my perceptions and the reasons for them. Everything is always lined up so neatly in my head that when one thing gets jostled out of place it destroys the order of everything around it. I have to clean up, to get my brain reliable again, but as good as I am at helping other people do this I’m crappy at doing it for myself.

He sneers, but it’s half-assed. “Fine. Go ahead. It’s not like it could get any worse.”

This is the second time he has said that. I should write it down, but I can barely keep myself together. Frisk is anchoring me. I should be the one comforting them, but they are anchoring me.

I consider asking them if they have any other bombs to drop on me. I don’t because I don’t think I could handle another. Not right now.

The month of November floats by. My parents call me and demand to know how all my doctors’ appointments went. My gastroenterologist wants to do another colonoscopy, but I’ll put that off as long as I can. Imaging techniques have improved recently, but there aren’t many people in the world who have injuries and health problems like I do. Getting shot seven times in the abdomen can’t be standardized the way Crohn’s disease or colon cancer can be standardized. My doctors will use imaging, but they often need to see things with their own eyes.

I’m past the point of caring. By now I’ve have cameras and tubes shoved in every orifice a porn star would worry about and some they wouldn’t.

My parents call Sans, too, which is an awkward affair for everyone involved except my dad, who does almost all the talking. Sans has… ‘accepted’ isn’t the right word. He has resigned himself to being the designated monitor for my health. Every time I limp or grimace or otherwise move in an abnormal way and he sees it, he’s asking me what’s wrong and before long I have him trained to respond to numbers. If I say five or six, he asks if I want my analgesics, if I say seven or above, he gets them and watches while I take them without asking. He’s not hiding them from me, but I know he’s counting my pills because the few times I use them for off-label purposes, he asks about it.

Every time Papyrus and I have an overlapping free moment we’re in his car because he’s a good distraction. He is improving. Slowly. Sans wakes up faster than Papyrus’s driving is getting better, but it’s happening.

I was wrong about one thing. Listening to Toriel and Asgore talk about Asriel is just as hard as I thought it would be, but it’s not the only thing. Interacting with them at all is hard because I want to tell them. I feel like I should. I believe I can explain it in a way that will get us around Flowey’s concerns, but there will be no avoiding the emotional pain that comes with hearing your dead son isn’t dead but can’t love you.

I talk to Frisk about it because how could they have kept this a secret for so long and they end up crying some more and climbing onto my lap even though they’re almost too big for my lap. We end up talking about things we almost forgot. They tell me nearly all of their night terrors had to do with leaving Asriel behind, which explains why they stopped when Flowey finally came to the surface. They tried, repeatedly, to do something, anything, to either make Asriel stay Asriel or convince him to come with them, but nothing worked, and they feel inadequate because nothing worked. They reset so many times after getting everyone out because of this.

Flowey is still reluctant to talk about his past, but he does it. If Frisk is there, they squirm until
Flowey gets fed up with their fidgeting and yells at them. Three-quarters of what Flowey says is Chara this and Chara that and “Chara puked blood just like you, are you happy you reminded me of that,” and a mildly disgusted look and “You even kind of look like them. I thought Frisk was them at first, but your skin and hair are the same color and you’ve got the same sickly look.”

(Excellent. The ten-year-old flower knows I constantly look ill.)

I retract socially. Just a little. Asgore has been vigilant about monitoring my workload but he can’t monitor my internet usage. Should we have another event this winter? Where would we hold it? Maybe it wouldn’t have to be another rally, but… something. Something where humans can come and meet monsters and the monsters can be so nice and friendly that any racist thoughts evaporate on the spot. I know that, like me, the humans who live here have had some of their friends and families over. The more humans we get exposed to monsters, the better.

I end up staying up late with Sans watching comedy routines and old movies for kids more often than I don’t. Sometimes he falls asleep and wakes with a start, slapping both hands over his suddenly-flashing left eyesocket. Sometimes I fall asleep and I wake up covered with a blanket and pillows propped under the joints that usually give me problems.

He doesn’t want to talk about anything important. Neither do I. For some reason that is exactly what we end up doing.

He starts it. “You alright? Your eyes kinda look glazed over.”

I snap out of it. “I’m fine. I was thinking.”

“No you weren’t. You almost ‘looked like an idiot just now.”

“I was thinking about something without a good solution. So it was making me feel like an idiot.”

He shifts a bit and turns his attention back to Monsters, Inc. “Okay.”

“Maybe you should watch the movie instead of me.”

“Okay.” Indifferent. I start to sit up, frowning, abruptly feeling a surge of repressed frustration at my apparent inability to help Flowey. Asriel. Whoever he actually is.

“Before you say something else,” Sans says just as I was about to say something else aggressive and near-baseless, “can you not pick a fight with me? I won’t get into it and then you’ll end up pissed at me for not participating.”

I frown harder. “How’d you know I was gonna do that?”

“Monsters can sense some aspects of the souls of nearby people. They get more sensitive the more familiar with the other person they are. I’m really good at it with strangers, let alone friends.”

Yeah. I think he’s right. “Sorry.”

“No problem. So, uh, is something wrong?”

I glance at him. “You’re joking, right?”

He shifts again. It’s unlike him to be fidgety. “No. You do that sort of thing for everyone else. Figure someone’s gotta do it for you.”

I look back at the television. “Sans, you can quit trying to make up for threatening me. And
attacking me. You don’t owe me anything.”

A pause. “Is that what you think I’m doing?”

It’s mostly indifferent, but I catch something that makes me realize dismissing his concerns that quickly was kind of bitchy. I turn fully to face him at the other end of the couch, bringing my feet on the middle cushion. “That’s what you were doing at first,” I remind him. “You’re lazy. It was the only explanation for your behavior at the time. I know we’re friends. The line between ‘Sans is being nice to me because he was a massive douche recently’ and ‘Sans is being nice to me because we’re friends’ is blurred. I couldn’t begin to guess when it happened. And, um, I’m kinda going through a rough patch right now and whenever that happens I tend to assume the worst of other people. So I’m sorry.”

Two apologies already. I’m on a fucking roll.

He breaks the eye-to-socket contact first. “S’fine. What’s bothering you?”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me.”

“Nothing’s wrong with me.”

“Total bullshit, Sans. Three nights ago you almost kicked me off the couch coming out of a nightmare.”

He stares at the movie for a while. He’s silent for so long I begin to think he won’t respond, but then he says, “You first.”

Okay, then. “I know logically why I had to cut back on my workload, but it’s grating on me. I need to feel like I’m accomplishing a lot, constantly. If I don’t, then why the fuck did I survive?” I repeatedly tap my toes on the cushion. “If one of those kids who died could have done more than me, then they should have survived. I’m not an idiot. Things don’t happen for a reason and life isn’t fair. I lived and I feel like I owe the world to do as much as I can to make it as good as possible. That’s irrational, but I still think it, all the time.” I stop. I have told Andy that dozens of times over the years. We have worked on it and worked on it but it will likely never completely leave my head. “Your turn.”

Sans is staring at me. He blinks. “Isla. You’ve done enough for several lifetimes. You know how much you’ve done for us, right? I don’t just mean ‘us’ as in your friends. I mean ‘us’ as in monsters.”

I shake my head. “It’s not enough.”

“So our feelings are childish and irrelevant?”

I physically pull back a bit at that. Hell, I didn’t think he’d be good at this. “Childish? No. Irrelevant to what my brain does? Yes. As long as I can do more, it won’t ever be enough. That is the only criterion.”

“Oh.”

Maybe not as good as I thought, but this isn’t meant to be a session. We’re just sharing. “Your turn,” I prompt again.

He can’t quite look me in the face. “Um. You know about the timelines. About the difficulties I have with… permanency.”
I nod because he seems to require acknowledgement to go on. “I know it would take something big to make Frisk want to reset. I know it’s very improbable. It’s still kinda hard to care sometimes when it can all be redone. Sometimes I… would barely even react to Paps gettin’ killed.”

The television’s eye recognition program has paused the movie. We’re not watching it anymore. “But…” he stuffs his hands in his hoodie pockets. “You’re a problem, too. If everything gets reset, even if we get out again, even if things go well, they could be different. I don’t remember everything. I just get bits and pieces and it’s… they aren’t real memories. They feel different. But what’s the point in being friends with you if there’s no guarantee we’re gonna see you even if we get out and aren’t slaughtered instantly? I might remember you, Frisk might remember you, but nobody else will and you won’t remember us. If it goes well, I’ll walk out with everyone else, but you might not be there.”

This is why he was so distant at first. It’s only taken a year, but I finally have an answer.

“Frisk has told me they won’t reset again,” I say after a moment. I decide not to say that Frisk talks about it sometimes like it’s not entirely in their control. “If something happened that made them want to reset, I have a feeling we would all want them to reset, too. But as things are, I believe they won’t.”

I can’t tell Sans that Frisk reset a ton before to try to save Asriel. I absolutely cannot do that. “How has getting out and integrating with human society compared to your expectations?” I ask him instead.

“Better than I ever could have hoped. Thanks in no small part to you.” He scratches lightly at the arm of the couch. “Not that I’ve ever shared an ounce of Papyrus’s optimism.”

“It won’t ever be perfect. But if it keeps going well, there is no reason for Frisk to reset. They’ve been talking to me about it.” Maybe they should talk to Sans, too. Maybe it would help them both. But I don’t think Sans is ready for that suggestion yet.

He doesn’t look convinced. I can see him begin to get lost in thought, so I throw a pillow at his face. “Sans. I’m not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me.”

He grins easily. “Good. Papyrus and I would be so bonely without you here.”

I wrinkle my nose. “That one kinda came up short, don’t you think?”

“You makin’ fun of my height?”

“How dare you say that. I can’t believe you think so little of me. Making fun of your height is beneath me.”

Nailed it. I cackle and he throws the pillow back at me. The couch is huge, so there is more than enough room for us both to sleep here, though I do have to carefully remove my foot from between his tibia and fibula in the morning.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the overused height puns. They didn't quite measure up to Papyrus's standards.
Anhedonia: inability to experience pleasure.

Chapter Notes

I am Not Sorry. I cannot emphasize how So Unsorry for this chapter I am.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I thought knowing Flowey’s past would help me treat him. I’m wrong. Or ineffective. I haven’t decided which yet.

The first and only time I accidentally call him Asriel he absolutely freaks and shrieks at me and flings pellets at me and I stand firm through that even though it is impossible for my voice to reach over his so I can apologize, but then a vine bursts from the soil beside him and he tries to hit me with it and I’m out of there. Frisk has to go in and calm him down and I put on a giant turtleneck sweater and leggings and socks to cover all the bruises from the pellets.

He confuses me by later rubbing his head on my arm. It’s an affectionate gesture, one of the only ones he is physically capable of giving. He doesn’t try to hide why. He tells me I should wear big sweaters and keep my hair down and maybe cut it a bit so I look more like Chara. And while I’m at it, I should curse more (I do curse, but I try to keep it to a minimum in front of the kids) and not talk as much and not walk around like I know I could kick someone’s butt.

This is disturbing. It makes me wonder, too. He talks about them all the time; they are one of the few things he will talk about that doesn’t require prompting or repeated questioning until I make him mad. Half the time he speaks with a strange reverence, like Chara could have never done anything wrong, but the other half he’s angry and acts like Chara was the cause of all his problems.

Frisk isn’t present all the time, but they always have to leave when he gets insulting like that. I have asked them why, but they won’t tell me.

I have gotten bits of information about Chara from counseling Asgore and Toriel and I feel terrible using that information and using them, but I keep telling myself it’s all in an attempt to help their son. I’m failing, repeatedly, but I have to keep trying.

I try to differentiate myself from Chara as much as I can in terms of appearance and mannerisms. Appearance isn’t difficult – I have seen pictures of Chara and yes, they looked a hell of a lot like I did when I was ten, but all I have to do is pull my hair up and wear clothes that aren’t baggy and I no longer look like a ten-year-old. I end up in a lot of sportswear and use my sparring sessions with Undyne as the excuse.

My mannerisms are more difficult because apparently Chara shared many of the automatic, environment-monitoring habits I have thanks to the PTSD. I don’t even bother trying to turn those off. Instead I make an effort to be louder and to move around a lot.

I don’t know if it does anything. Flowey’s mood gets worse when the winter holidays roll around simply because everyone else is happier. He pulls away from Frisk. He either wants me nowhere near him and is willing to become violent to enforce that or he wants me to hold his pot so he can have physical contact with me. Talking about his experiences as Asriel doesn’t help him because he is unable to integrate his emotions from those experiences. He can remember feeling a certain
way, but he isn’t even able to empathize with his past self.

I have already tried almost every technique I know. I read new research papers and look into different branches of psychology. Even when I use new information to tweak what I’m doing, his responses are the same. I know he can’t feel love, or joy, or anything socially positive, but I thought I could get him feeling content. Satisfied.

I want to tell everyone who he is. Toriel and Asgore deserve to know. Alphys and Sans might be able to come up with a solution to the soullessness problem. I know I certainly won’t.

Every time I so much as hint that someone else might be able to help, Flowey reminds me that he’ll kill me if I tell anyone. Sometimes he does it with a glance. Sometimes with pellets. Sometimes he yells.

He can’t feel anything good for other people. That’s not his fault. He’s an asshole, but it’s not his fault. I try to be patient and I manage it, but the empathetic pain winds itself into me and won’t let go because he’s suffering. He sacrificed himself twice for the sake of others.

He brings it up before I do. He brings it up almost right away. He scrunches his little face up and says, “I can’t believe I’m stuck with you.”

“I’m sorry,” I reply tiredly. “You won’t let me—”

“I’m not. I want you.”

“Why?”

He watches me. Then he says, “Because you were shot, too.”

My skin instantly breaks out into a sweat. I don’t know why that never occurred to me. Asriel was killed a hundred years ago. Guns were just as deadly and common then as they are now.

“Pick me up,” he demands. I automatically do so.

He doesn’t finish the thought, but my head does.

He died. I lived. It probably should have been the other way around.

The snow usually sticks from late December to the middle of March. We get a blizzard early this year.

Toriel is in a good mood. She, Frisk, and Flowey have almost three weeks off from school. Toriel bakes a number of holiday-themed treats and has everyone over more days than not. It exhausts me because sometimes when I look her or Asgore in the face I feel like it’s going to burst out of me or I’m going to start bawling or both. I can’t stand this.

Toriel quietly mentions to me that she has noticed Frisk seems a little depressed. I chew on my tongue so I don’t spit out anything that will get me killed. I say something vague about seasonal affective disorder and promise to look into it. I’m a better actor than Frisk. The only person who notices my shift is Sans and that is only because he knows my sleeping habits because he has shitty sleeping habits, too.
I end up going into his room one night because I hear the telltale thuds of his magic acting up which means he just woke up and it was bad. He sees me and is instantly relieved because I mean he’s on the surface and that means there was no reset.

We go downstairs to eat some reheated spaghetti. “I’ve got a question,” I say. “If it takes me to realize you’re up here, does that mean your room is the exact same as it was Underground?”

“Yep.”

I blink. I didn’t expect that. “But… why?”

He shrugs. “How was I s’posed to know I’d have nightmares? It was laziness.” He flicks a tomato with his fork. “Or pointlessness. I can’t tell anymore. The house is modeled after the one we had Underground. The downstairs is bigger, but the upstairs is almost the same.”

“So if you slapped new paint on the walls and got some new furniture, you’d be able to tell where you were as soon as you woke up.”

“I guess.”

“So why not do it?”

He gives me a flat, slightly amused look. I roll my eyes. “Yes, I know. That would require actually taking the initiative to do something. The horror.”

“I’m not like you, Isla,” he says quietly. “I don’t seek out work when the shit hits the fan. I shut down. I stop. I watch bad things happen instead of trying to do something to prevent them.”

That makes me feel bad about my sarcasm. I guessed that, a while ago, but this is the first time he said anything. “You know Papyrus would help you,” I point out. “Hell, he’d probably do most of it himself. I’d help, too.”

“If you wanna… get me started, I won’t object.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Just keep in mind I won’t be doing a skele-ton of work.”

“How could I forget?”

He grins and it seems like less of a mask now. “Do you know what you like?” I ask. “Or what you hate? The carpet and walls are both so dark-colored. Maybe we should lighten one or the other up.”

Another shrug. “Don’t care.”

“Bullshit. You have some opinion about something.”

“Nah. I don’t care. You can decide.”

“On what? The walls and floor?”

“Everything. Walls, floor, furniture. You decide on everything.”

“You’re joking. It’s your room. You really want to let me redo it?”

“I’m pretty sure your choices aren’t going to be extreme. And anyway,” his gaze drops to his half-
eaten plate, “when I try to make decisions, I take too long. You’ll get mad at me when I take
forever, so you can just do it.”

I’m skeptical. “You’re sure?”

He nods. “Yep.”

He eats another forkful of spaghetti. I wait for a moment because I haven’t sensed that it’s the end
of the conversation, but he doesn’t say anything else, so I rinse my plate off in the sink, tell him
goodnight, and go back to bed.

Something is bothering me.

Flowey is withdrawing. He’s still pissed, but not as often. If anything, I would say he is depressed.
Frisk can’t really cheer him up and he ignores Kalene on the rare occasions he sees her. He never
wants to go to the Embassy with Frisk or me anymore. He just wants to stay in his and Frisk’s
room.

I make an awkward enquiry about sunlight I should have made much sooner. Flowey
condescendingly points out that he survived Underground, where there were only pockets of
sunshine, and yes, he likes the sun but that’s only a preference and apparently I’m an idiot.

He cannot tolerate me some days and others he clings to me. He snarls at me when I ask questions
and listens attentively when I explain cognitive-behavioral theories to him. It makes no sense.

I was shot too, he said. He wants to stick with me because we share an experience. The reason
people seek out others with similar experiences is so they can validate their feelings about that
experience.

Flowey doesn’t have feelings about getting shot and killed. I think, I can’t tell anymore because I
need to help him and I can’t and I just about choke on my own failings every time I’m around him.

If he doesn’t have feelings about being shot, why does it matter so much to him that I was shot,
too?

December rolls into January. The Embassy gets an invite to tour the UK.

I call my sister and Natalie so she can call her brother because I’ve only been paying attention to
laws pertaining to monster rights in this country. It’s a long shot that any other country is going to
allow the monsters more rights than the one in which they are residing simply because there is no
demand for such laws. I can think of half a dozen countries off the top of my head that possess
lawmaking processes far superior to ours in terms of speed and fairness and everything else, really,
and many more countries with residents who would just be nicer, but there is still no point in
discussing laws with no certain need.
Frisk has to stay here. That comes up rather fast. There is no guarantee other countries would acknowledge the adoption. I cannot tell whether they are annoyed with this or not. I know they want to go in order to act as ambassador. They love their job since their job mainly consists of explaining to people why they should love and support their friends and family and community.

On the other hand, Frisk doesn’t want to leave Flowey right now. I agree with them on that. Flowey is bipolar with me, but he has remained steady in his tolerance of Frisk. If Flowey were left with me, he’d be bouncing back and forth between clingy and furious every other hour. At least with Frisk he gets some constancy.

I’m not going because I can’t leave Flowey either and I hate airport security. Asgore and Toriel surprise me by deciding they will both go. They have both been getting better, but they aren’t quite ready to civilly discuss all the shit that went down between them with one another, so it is unexpected for them to agree to go on a trip that will likely keep them in close quarters. Undyne is going, too, as their guard, and I know they are bringing four other monsters as a sort of retinue and to get some hopefully non-political opinions about travel and other countries and whatever else comes up.

I don’t know the exact details. That’s not my job anymore. They are going to be gone for a week, so I figure I’ll pick up their duties while they are gone. I’m not going to work myself sick in a week. I practically ran the Embassy when Toriel was busy teaching all the monsters about the surface and humanity and Asgore was still relatively clueless about how things work up here. I did all the substantial work. The one thing he did was to use his niceness to soothe the hurt feelings of anyone who said something profoundly stupid or bigoted and needed to be yelled at.

Instead, Toriel gives me Frisk and Flowey and Asgore tells me that they have people who will keep the Embassy going in their absence but they will be calling me if they have questions. I don’t argue, even though at this point I’d rather run the monster community than repeatedly fail at helping Flowey.

Papyrus is excited because this means sleepovers every day for a whole WEEK. Sans produces sleeping bags and camps out in the living room with his brother and the kids. I don’t because if I don’t sleep on a good mattress my joints will be more likely to hate me in the morning.

Papyrus has not had official work since the move to the surface. He has been continually picking up jobs around the neighborhood and doing them for free because he just loves helping people. Everyone knows and loves him and Sans encourages this behavior. At first, Papyrus seemed unrealistically optimistic to me. I didn’t expect that to last long, not once he was exposed to humanity and how nasty it can be, so – yeah, I tried to shelter him a little. I think everyone did, even Frisk, because Frisk knows.

But he proved us all wrong. Papyrus hasn’t received filtered information. He understands the general idea of what happened to Frisk and he knows what happened to me. He knows that humans are capable of hurting everything living around them to an extent that can be considered downright evil. He has taken this knowledge and strengthened his unfailing (occasionally irritating) optimism with it. To him, the fact that there are terrible people who do terrible things he never even heard of until the monster integration is another reason why everyone should try their best to be good.

It’s unprecedented when I compare him to how depressed I am realizing Sans is.

He doesn’t deny it, but he doesn’t want to talk about it. He says I’ve got enough to do and doesn’t say that I’ve been relying on him to monitor my psychological and physical health for… a year now, actually. Fact is, he has seen my vulnerabilities more often and more directly than anyone else. He has handled nearly every symptom I can throw, so maybe I shouldn’t be surprised he
doesn’t want me trying to treat him when from his end it looks like I’m barely holding myself together.

I have failed enough. I’m not allowed to quit, but I have to make progress with Flowey. Maybe it will be easier with his parents away.

The next day everyone sleeps in late. Papyrus goes on his merry way to shovel sidewalks and say hello to everyone and do whatever he can find to do on a Sunday. Alphys is at Mettaton’s penthouse in his resort, presumably for a mechanical checkup and then a dramatic anime marathon or whatever they watch when they spend time together, since I don’t know Mettaton’s feelings about anime. Sans is asleep or pretending to be. He never even really woke up today. He does that sometimes.

Toriel talks to me first, then hands her phone off to Asgore, who goes on despite that fact that there isn’t much to talk about since they have been gone for just under twenty-four hours.

After I end the call I stall until about four, but I can’t dawdle much longer than that because Flowey is used to seeing me every day. Frisk comes and gets me just as I decide to get this over with. We go to – my room, I suppose, even though my living situation is too new for that thought to feel natural.

“What do you want?” Flowey asks grumpily. He could go either way. The either meant why did you leave me alone for so long or get the fuck away from me right now. I can’t tell which.

I have my notebook even though I don’t expect to use it. “I don’t lie to kids,” I say. “So here it is, Flowey: I don’t know if I can help you. You have been unresponsive to every method and technique I have tried.” If anything, he may have gotten worse because he’s transferring whatever miniscule feelings he has for Chara onto me. “I’m once again going to ask you a question you have avoided repeatedly: what are your goals?”

He gives me a flat expression, so I keep talking. “What do you want from me? What do you think I can do for you? After you answer, we can discuss how realistic your expectations are.”

Frisk’s fists clench and their lips twitch. I was worried about that, but I need them not to cry right now. They love Flowey; they were telling me that before they told he who he actually is. They were hoping my expertise could somehow bypass Flowey’s soullessness and allow him to feel something.

That isn’t going to happen. Not unless Flowey admits it already has happened.

Instead of answering, Flowey looks at me and asks, “What are you going to do with me if you can’t help me?”

I am too tired for this. “I’m sorry?”

“I’m not stupid, you know. The only reason any of you tolerate me is because you thought I could get better. That I might have FEELINGS. It’s going to be ‘see you later, Flowey,’ if you idiots finally realize I can’t feel what you want me to. Then you’ll all forget about me.”

“Flowey, that’s not true!” Frisk protests. “We want you here!”
The plant sneers. “No you don’t. Even the patient soul is fed up with me. Everyone else probably hit their limit ages ago.”

“I’m not fed up with you,” I say, but Frisk talks over me, tone distressed, “That’s not true, Flowey, it’s not. Even if it was, I wouldn’t let anyone get rid of you.”

“Shut up, Frisk,” Flowey hisses. “You’re the biggest idiot of them all.”

“I don’t care.” They step towards him. “I love you. You know that. If that makes me an idiot, then I’m an idiot.”

“No you DON’T. You didn’t listen to me.”

“I had to come and get you, I couldn’t just leave you all alone—”

“You know something, Frisk?” His eyes turn black, his fangs are suddenly much more conspicuous. “You should have let me DIE. Bringing me along with you wasn’t kindness, it was cruelty. You were cruel to let me continue in this wretched existence, and you should have killed me when I TOLD YOU TO.”

Woah. What? Did that just happen?

I look at Frisk. They stare at Flowey, eyes wide, chin trembling, and then they burst into tears.

Yep, that just happened. “Flowey.” Toriel’s mom-voice is in my mouth. “You didn’t mean that. Apologize.”

“Of course I meant it,” Flowey sneers. “Staying here, like this, is repugnant and I’d rather be DEAD. How is that for a goal!?"

“No you wouldn’t. Fear of death is one of the few things you can feel—”

“No WAY. It’s true, and—”

My blood is starting to boil and my volume is climbing. “Flowey. You hurt Frisk because they are the only person who loves you unconditionally. Do you really think that’s a good—”

“Don’t interrupt me! You don’t know anything! I don’t have to—”

“Yes. You. Do.” Frisk is still crying and I’m just getting angrier. Why can’t I do anything about this? Why did all my usual methods, which work with literally everyone else, fail? “You are depressed and projecting and you need to apologize and calm down so I can actually do something about—”

The flower turns the volume up to shrill. “SHUT UP! I’m tired of your idiotic attempts to—”

I am out of patience.

I snap. I don’t care if Flowey’s actually a child or that I know I’m not handling my stress well or if I’m neglecting my soul’s primary trait. I throw the notebook down, stand up, and I fucking snap.

“NO, Asriel!” My voice comes out powerful. I never sound like that. “You shut up, shut up and look at—”

“DON’T CALL ME THAT!” he screeches, vines bursting from the soil around him. “I’m FLOWEY! Flowey, do you under—”
“NO!” He’s pulled me into a fight. There is my soul, and he flings a few pellets at it for good measure. I ignore it. Frisk shrinks away from us. “You ARE Asriel, and you fucking know it! That’s why it scares you so badly! You were Asriel, Asriel is still inside you, and you can be Asriel again—”

“SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP!” I fight the vines when they close in. One whips me across the face, cracking hard across my soul, but I hardly feel it. “I’LL KILL YOU, I SWEAR I WILL! IF YOU DON’T SHUT UP, I’LL KILL YOU!”

One wraps around my neck, pulling me to my knees, and another strikes my soul again. The door slams open. Sans is there, magic flaring. Must have woke him up. “Don’t you dare!” I scream at him, and he stops dead. Frisk runs to him, hugging him hard.

Sans goes to say something, but the vine tightens around my neck. I’m bellowing despite it. “SO DO IT ALREADY!”

This surprises Flowey. He stares at me, demonic expression sliding from his face, vines suddenly freezing, pellets spinning in the air behind him.

I’m in no pain. The adrenaline makes me feel like I can do anything. “You’re all talk and no action, Asriel! You say you’re gonna kill me, then DO IT!”

The flower mouths what, but his expression hardens and the vine tightens, but he doesn’t attack my soul again. I am struggling so hard I can barely breathe. Somehow, I am still shouting.

“Kill me, ASRIEL! Do it and see what happens!” I’m pretty sure blood is dripping down my face and I look utterly deranged but I am done. “I’ll give you a hint, Asriel: nothing will happen! NOTHING WILL CHANGE!” I’m screaming, putting emphasis on his name whenever it leaves my oxygen-deprived lungs. “YOU WILL STILL BE A FLOWER, ASRIEL!” I think I’m crying now, tears stinging the laceration on my face.

“SHUT UP!” He’s screaming too, he’s crying too. He hits me again, across the face, directly underneath the first wound. Sans makes a noise and steps forward, but I hold up a hand in his direction, palm out, to tell him to stop. “SH-SHUT UP, I’m not listening to you—”

I have no idea how I can still talk, let alone scream, but I’m screaming, alright. “YOU WILL STILL BE SOULLESS, ASRIEL! YOU WILL STILL BE MISERABLE! You will still hate yourself more than anyone else ever could, even if you kill me! B-but...”

The flower is sobbing and my peripheral vision is blackening. I fucking have to say this. “Most importantly,” I manage, struggling to get the words out, “Frisk will still love you, Asriel. They will never stop loving you. Nothing you do will ever change that, Asriel.”

My left arm drops first, then my right. My hands feel numb and tingly and cold and I can’t feel my legs. The vine doesn’t constrict, and, more importantly, he sends nothing else at my soul. In fact, it is released entirely and begins to float back to me. Does that mean...?

Asriel is still sobbing, but he calms down just enough to ask Frisk, “I-is that true...?”

Frisk lets go of Sans and walks over to him. They touch Asriel’s petals gently. “Of course,” Frisk answers. They are still clearly upset, but their tone is nothing but affectionate. “I tell you I love you every day. I mean it every day. And I’ll tell you now: I love you, Asriel.”

This only makes him cry harder. Between sobs, he gasps out, “Frisk, I... I love you, too.”
And then I am released and something crashes. I gasp air on all fours, sucking in oxygen, seeing the blackness at the edges of my vision recede. My soul is back with me.

Sans is at my side immediately, kneeling down. He puts a hand on my cheek, wiping away blood and tears. “Shit, Isla, are you—” he suddenly freezes, staring at something else. “Holy hell,” he whispers.

The flower pot is on the floor in front of the window, broken, soil spilled out around it. Flowey is gone. Instead, Frisk is hugging a small, white-furred child who is sobbing, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” over and over again.

Asriel.

Sans manages to grab my head before it hits the floor when I pass out. I’m gone for a few seconds. When I come back, my head is in Sans’s lap and he is stroking my hair. His hands are shaking a little. Frisk pulls a blanket off the bed and wraps it around Asriel because his transformation didn’t come with clothes. Frisk just embraces him, gently telling him it’s okay, it’s okay, while Asriel continues to cry.

I’m crying, too. I reach up, struggling to get both my arms around Sans’s neck. He helps me and then I’m sitting on his lap, crying on him. Both of his hands clench in my hair, then relax. I think he’s caught up in all this emotion, too, and he just holds me. I haven’t cried this hard in years.

Soon enough, though, I burn out. I try to match my breathing with his faux breathing because his is a lot calmer than mine. I pull back. I’m still practically on top of him, but I don’t care. He detangles a hand from my hair and sets his fingertips on my face. They come away bloody.

“Lemme get something for that,” he says suddenly, but when he goes to stand up, I tighten my arms around his neck. “Um,” he says. “You should probably stay with the kids. I dunno if I can carry you anyway.”


I stand, wobbly, and get myself seated on the bed. I wipe my eyes. When I look up Asriel is in front of me. His eyes are dark brown and watery, tears matting the fur underneath. Sniffling, he reaches up and caresses my face, gently touching where he injured me as a flower. “I’m s-so sorry!” he wails, and promptly bursts into full-blown sobs again. He throws his arms around me, knocking me back onto the bed, crying into the side of my neck.

His crying makes me start crying again. I hug him back, hard. Sans teleports back into the room, some kind of first-aid kit in hand, but he stops when he sees me. Frisk wipes their eyes on their sleeve and gives me a watery smile.

I mouth how at Frisk. Frisk just smiles. “Monster souls are made of love, hope, and compassion,” they say, as if that explains everything.

Maybe it does.

Chapter End Notes
Go read this. It's amazing. Read it and give me more fics with this premise.
Trauma: damage to the psyche that occurs due to an overwhelming amount of stress that exceeds the ability to cope.

Chapter Notes

At this point important-ish things are going to be happening about every other chapter. On a completely unrelated note, I am Unsorry for this chapter, too.

Asriel sobs on me for a while. His weight makes it difficult to breathe because I’m not much bigger than he is, but it reassures me because he definitely weighs more than a flower. I soothe him whenever I’m not crying too hard to get words out. I lose all sense of time.

When he goes from bawling to sniffling, Sans comes forward and touches his shoulder. “Sorry, uh... Prince Asriel. Could you—?”

Asriel flinches hard, crying out. Sans looks stricken. I can guess what’s going on.

“Asriel, Sans means you no harm,” I murmur. I try to sit up, but he’s holding onto me too tightly. “He didn’t know you were Flowey.”

Frisk approaches and taps Asriel’s shoulder and murmurs something to him. Asriel turns his head, ears flopping across my face. I try to keep them from touching the sticky mess of blood on my right cheek. Dear god, he’s just like a little version of his parents.

Abruptly, Asriel lets out something that sounds suspiciously like a bleat and springs backwards. He crouches down on the floor and holds his face in his hands. I sit up, alarmed. “Asriel, what’s wrong?”

“Heh,” Sans chuckles. I glare at him because what the hell nothing is funny right now. He grins at me. Asriel won’t even look at me and I think he might be turning red under all that white fur.

Frisk wraps Asriel in the blanket again. Oh. That wasn’t fear, that was embarrassment.

Oh, shit, I just let a naked child cry on me for... an indeterminate amount of time. Damnit, I should have said something, or grabbed the blanket. Not for me, I really didn’t care, he’s beyond traumatized and he needed comfort and he still needs comfort, but he’s obviously humiliated now, and he doesn’t need humiliation on top of all those other awful things he is feeling.

Frisk leads Asriel out of the room, presumably to get into their bag to get him some clothes. Sans climbs on the bed next to me. “That will be such a good story ten years from now,” he says cheekily. “I wondered when he was going to realize he was buck naked.”

I look disbelievingly at him. “You are not punning right now.”

“I’ve never been one to kid.”

“Sans!”

“Heh heh. Okay. Here, lemme take care of that.”
I turn towards him. He starts ripping open alcohol wipes and scrubbing all the half-clotted blood off my face. “You don’t do healing magic?”

“Nah. Tori’s been teaching Papyrus. He’ll love it if you let him take a crack at you.”

“Still bleeding?”

He swipes over one of the lacerations and it stings. “Oozing a little. Not gonna lie, it looks bloody bad.”

I give him a look that could boil acid. In response, his shit-eating grin softens into something genuine. “You did good, ya know that, right?”

“I lost my shit and screamed obscenities and horribly painful things at a child,” I say flatly.

“And if you hadn’t, we’d still have that thorny little bastard to deal with.”

“What makes you say that? It was Frisk who brought him back to us. Who saved him.”

“Not entirely. Monster souls are made of love, hope, and compassion. But all three of those things had to come from Flowey. The love and compassion were for Frisk, but the hope was because of you. You made him confront the worst possible scenario and forced him to acknowledge Frisk would still love him.”

The bony bastard’s right. We both briefly glance over when Frisk and Asriel reenter the room. Frisk’s clothes look like they fit well enough. Pants are a little long, but I’m more worried about the tears that start leaking from his eyes again. He clamps his jaws and eyes shut and stops walking and Frisk pulls him into another hug, murmuring to him. Tears are leaking out of Frisk’s eyes, too.

Shit. I look forward again, swallowing the lump in my throat. “Sans.”

“Hmm?” he grunts, still working on my face. I probably made the mess worse by crying.

I have no idea what I want to say to him but my mouth is opening anyway, then it’s closing because Asriel and Frisk are climbing onto the bed in front of us. “I wanna—” Asriel pauses to hiccup. He crawls forward, towards me. He briefly glances at Sans and I see terror flash over his face. “I wanna help,” he mumbles, then inhales deeply. He flinches, again overtaken by the pain I know is crushing his mind. He sits on his knees and puts one hand on my cheek and the other on my neck. Closes his eyes, swallowing.

He is barely touching me, but when I feel the cool flow of healing magic, I lean into it. Frisk pats Asriel on the back, silent support.

When he pulls away he sets his balled-up hands on his thighs and bows his head shamefully. “I can’t believe I did that to you…” he whispers. “I am so sorry.”

Damn, he’s gonna make me cry again. I look at Sans. He has moved off the bed in order to make Asriel less uncomfortable. He gives me a thumbs up. When I touch my face I feel that he’s right, the lacerations have shrunk somewhat in size and are scabbed over. The bruises are probably better, too.

Breathe deep. If I have a meltdown now, he’s only going to hate himself more for upsetting me. I reach forward, taking both of Asriel’s hands in mine. “Asriel.” That sounded calm enough, and he looks up at me, eyes glistening. “I forgive you. Completely. I want to apologize too, for saying all those horrible things to you. I could tell my words hurt you. I wanted to hurt you. I’m sorry. But
I’m also glad it happened. I’m glad I yelled at you and you injured me. If that hadn’t happened, we might have not gotten you back, and that’s more important than anything else.”

Tears are streaking through his fur, but he doesn’t throw himself on me again. He moves forward slowly, arms out, offering a hug. I embrace him, pulling him against me. “Oh,” I mutter. “And no one tells Toriel I dropped the f-bomb in front of Frisk and Asriel. Got it?”

Sans snorts and Frisk laughs aloud. Even Asriel lets out an amused (if watery) sound. I pet his head, loving the feel of fur. It’s so much better than petals.

No one is due back for six days. This is on us. I call Ezra to tell him I had an emergency and I can’t see him this week. He says he can wait. I text my parents and sister to let them know I am alive and fine with the hope that they will not bother me and I can dedicate all of my time and energy to Asriel.

There is no brief reprieve of shock. He immediately bears crushing amounts of terror, horror, and grief. He is terrified that he could change back and become unfeeling at any second, even after I explain Sans’s monster-soul reasoning to him and even after he says he can tell there is a soul inside him. He is horrified by the things he has done as Flowey and fears losing the love of his parents once they find out. He had no time to grieve his adopted sibling before – Chara’s death directly preceded his own and the time Frisk helped him feel again was too short for him to do much more than break the barrier, return to the Ruins, and wait for his transformation. He grieves his own death and Chara’s and how it all broke his family.

During a brief period of calmness, I make him soup. On a practical note, I don’t want to expose his new (magical) digestive system to anything too difficult to digest. He gets it down and keeps it down without issue.

He finally falls asleep snuggled up to Frisk on my bed. Sans and I leave them like that because Frisk is drifting off too and we need a freaking plan. We collapse on the couch to talk. Holy shit, when did it get to be three in the morning? I thought it was eight-thirty.

“Where’s Papyrus?” I ask. Papyrus hasn’t even occurred to me until now.

Sans rubs his face. “During all the crying I called him and convinced him to go initiate a sleepover with Alphys and Mettaton. Then I texted Alph and played it off like a favor to me.”

Something is off about that. Normally I would ask for more detail, but that slots in pretty low on my current list of priorities.

Before he can ask, I slowly tell Sans what Frisk told me about Asriel dying and becoming Flowey. He listens intently. He usually looks and sounds fairly tired, but he seems alert right now. More alert than I am. My head feels like it’s stuffed with cotton and there is a quiet, continuous ringing in my ears. My brain needs sleep.

After I finish, Sans sits there, thoughtful. I ask the question, hoping he can do the thinking for the both of us. “How do we tell everyone else?”

He shifts uncomfortably. “We wait until they get home. Tell Tori and Asgore as soon as they’re here.” He pauses. “Alphys and Undyne right after. And I... I’m gonna tell Paps now. Uh,
tomorrow. The first free moment I get. There’s no hiding it from him, anyway.”

“Can you be sure he won’t call them?”

“Yeah. This is the best news Tori and Asgore will ever get, but it isn’t all good. He’s traumatized.”

“It’s fine,” I say automatically. “I can handle it. He has the capability of emotion now and that was a major roadblock in dealing with Flowey.” I groan because different parts of my brain are working at different speeds. “It’s not fine. Why the fuck did I say that? All that shit happened to him right before he died, and then everything he did and experienced as Flowey, he has been unable to integrate the emotions from any of that. It’s all hitting him at once. It’s going to take years for him to recover and I’m not sure if he will ever recover fully. Shit, he’s just a child, Sans!”

Sans closes his eyesockets. “Between the resets and the actual time that has passed since his death, he’s lived for centuries... but you’re right. He’s just a kid, and this sucks.” Without thinking about it, I reach over and take his hand, squeezing. Maybe I can leech some of his strength via hand-holding. He opens his eyesockets. “But you can do it. You can get him—”

A shrill, terrified scream. Nothing matters but that, so we are both up and on the scene as quickly as possible.

Asriel is inconsolable. He is sitting up, sobbing. Frisk’s arms are wrapped tight around him but that doesn’t seem to be making a difference. I check him, then I’m crying, too, because he’s having a night terror the very first time he has gone to sleep as himself and now he’s going to be scared of sleeping and that on top of everything else is beyond unjust, and we can’t wake him up, he’s still asleep, still screaming intermittently and terrified of something only he can see, and he only wakes up when Sans pulls a gravity attack on him and this is horrible too because he wakes up more afraid than ever because he’s pinned to the bed and thrashing until I confirm he’s awake and Sans is able to stop. After that, even Sans is upset.

He only gets decent rest with both Frisk and me next to him. The first night, we sleep intermittently. I jerk awake every time Asriel or Frisk moves, worried one of them needs something. We wake up tired the next day, but day is still easier than night. Asriel does have occasional crying episodes, but it’s nothing like the night he gained a soul and changed back, when he couldn’t stop. The crying and panicking diminish in frequency and duration over the span of the week. When he isn’t crying, he looks haunted and scared. He is never relaxed.

Asriel can hardly be in the same room with Sans and he can’t interact with him at all without fear. This hurts Sans more than he lets on. He is there throughout the day to check on Frisk and me. He tells Papyrus and convinces him it’s better to leave me and the kids alone as much as possible. Papyrus finds things to do elsewhere, but he usually comes home to make meals and then leaves the food for us alongside encouraging notes (written in his font, naturally). I catch him one morning as he’s leaving. After he’s done attempting to break my ribs in a hug, I tell him the kids really enjoy his notes, because they do. He is following my directions on Asriel’s diet to progress him from fluids to soft foods to no restrictions, too.

I try to play therapist, but it’s hard. It’s hard to see Asriel get impossibly more upset than he already is, it’s hard to hear him utterly tear himself apart when he talks about everything he has done, it’s hard to not be able to confront his demons for him. Not many things look good right now. One good thing is that he is extremely physically affectionate and not shy about seeking comfort. Throughout the day he spends more time holding Frisk’s hand than not, he requires physical contact at night or he has night terrors, and he has to be touching me when I actually do get him to talk about his fears and regrets and his crushing, towering guilt and remorse. He never cries alone, he always goes to Frisk or me, and we make it easy for him because at least one of us is with him
at all times.

If this is hard on me, then it’s harder on Frisk. They have trouble sleeping even when Asriel doesn’t. They might be just as frantically anxious he is going to vanish as Asriel himself is. I try to talk to Frisk, too, when I can, but it doesn’t happen often, since we both focus so heavily on Asriel. Frisk is far too empathetic, but they do admit helping Asriel try to deal with his past actions brings up regrets of their own. Whenever either one of us is upset, though, Asriel just becomes upset that he is making us feel bad, so we both try to stay calm and supportive around him. I try to support Frisk, too, because they are a child and they are amazing and doing an absolutely phenomenal job with this mess.

I make sure I do the best I possibly can with these kids, which results in me totally neglecting my own emotional needs. I have a nasty flare-up on Tuesday, so I do a steroid burst, which means I have to take a sleeping tablet in order to get any sleep at night. I’m worried sick before I go to bed, because I know Asriel should be fine as long as he has contact with my unconscious body, but I know there’s a chance I will sleep so hard that I won’t wake up if he needs something and I will hate myself if I do that to him.

Sometimes Frisk sits with Asriel while he talks to me and sometimes they don’t, to give him a chance to say things he might not say in front of them. I encourage them to nap as much as possible. They sleep with Asriel every night, even when I’m there.

When I’m not, I end up crawling into bed with Sans. I spend a lot of time crying into his pillow and keeping us both awake. He knows I can’t do this in front either of the kids, so he allows it. He spends a lot of time stroking my hair and rubbing my back and telling me no one could be doing a better damn job with those kids until I start to believe it. He knows his role is to support me while I support them, and this is one job he doesn’t shirk.

On Thursday Toriel calls me and tells me she and Asgore have not been feeling well. She thinks perhaps they both caught an illness (which would have to be magical), but she isn’t sure what. They will be home tomorrow instead of Saturday. Asriel’s terror outweighs his desire to see his parents again. I let him know we are going to tell them about him but he does not have to see anyone else until he feels ready. Asriel was nervous about Papyrus hearing about him, so it’s no surprise he is reacting like this. It doesn’t matter to him that no one except Frisk and Sans have memories – unclear memories, at that – of what he did in alternate timelines. Every single one of his actions weighs heavily on him.

I reiterate that he does not have to see anyone until he feels ready. I mean it. I will put myself between him and his parents if they are belligerent about this. He falls asleep with his head on my lap. He’s warm, so I fall asleep, too.

Frisk is there when we wake up. They hold Asriel’s hand while he tells me about how he killed himself after he realized his emotions were gone. He cries. I do, too.

It takes over an hour to convince him he has to keep talking and opening up, even if it makes Frisk and me sad. Frisk talks for a solid ninety seconds when they tell Asriel how important he is to everyone and that if he locks everything in he’s going to feel a lot worse and he’s finally, finally making progress and we need that to keep happening. After they go to bed, I sit on the couch, staring into space, head empty. I have no idea how long I sit there.

Sans has to come and get me. “Let’s see if we can get you to sleep more than five hours tonight, okay?” he says.

After two hours I wake up, heart rate elevated and shaking and scared because my brain is stuck
halfway in nightmare-mode. I fight Sans for a few seconds before I remember where I am and who
he is and he’s just trying to help me. I want to hold onto him, but I’m tired, so I pull him down on
top of me.

I’m not sure who starts it, but then I’m hugging him, fingers brushing down his shirt, along his
vertebrae, and kissing his skull and cheekbone and his hands are going under my clothes and
sliding along my legs. My rational brain stutters and stops so I can stupidly convince myself that
whatever the hell is happening right now will make everything better. He keeps trying to mumble
something but I shush him, mouth against the vertebrae of his neck now, trying to keep him close
to me. I get my hands under his shirt and find his ribs. I slide my fingers into the gaps, touching the
tips of the floating ribs and finding the cartilage that connects the upper ribs to his sternum. He
groans lowly against the side of my face and just barely brushes his fingers over the seam of my
underwear.

That’s when I start crying. He freezes, then pushes himself up with his free hand, holding his own
weight. “Am I hurting you?” he asks, concerned. “Damnit. I know bone isn’t the most comfortable
—”

I laugh, shake my head, and try to wipe away the tears. More come. “Shit,” I say. “I can’t stop
fucking crying. It has nothing to do with you. I think I’m going to cry no matter what you do. Even
if you stop.”

He rolls off me. “Probably not the best idea anyway,” he says. “We’re all pretty emotional right
now.”

He’s right. What the hell was that? Stupid, for one thing. We’re both literally so starved for good
feelings an orgasm seemed like a good solution to that problem. “I haven’t seen much of an
improvement in Asriel,” I whisper. “He’s unhealthily attached to Frisk and me.”

“That kid has decades of trauma to work through. It’s going to take more than a few days.”

“But every day is so painful for him. He doesn’t even get a break a night. He has nightmares all the
time, even if we’re right next to him. If he’s alone, he has full-blown night terrors.”

“I know. You and Frisk are amazing. I wish I could help you two, but he’s scared of me and I’d
fuck something up.”

“Help us?” I repeat. My voice is steady, for the most part. I wipe my eyes and push myself up on
my elbow so I can look at him. “You already help us. You’re the reason I’m so good with them.”

“You and Frisk aren’t exactly in good places right now.”

“Frisk has been talking to me about that. They’ve accepted they have to put some things off until
Asriel gets a little better. They are doing well, considering how horrible the situation is.”

His gaze locks with mine. “What about you? You’re always crying when you come to me. I know
you and Frisk have been going gradually downhill, but it doesn’t get more obvious than that.”

“That’s my point. You let me do that and keep you up and sleep here. This keeps me from breaking
down in front of them every day.”

There is a heavy pause. We’re lying side-by-side, shoulders touching, which is how it has been. So
far. Until tonight. Damnit.

“Look,” I say, right before I realize this is embarrassing and I don’t want to talk about it. “Shit.
That was stupid. I’m stupid. I’m sorry.”

He closes his eyesockets, well-aware of what I’m talking about because what else could I be talking about. “S’fine. You do need taken care of right now.”

His smirk vanishes when I elbow him in the ribs. “That was a pun, wasn’t it? I need emotional support, you bonehead, not sexual release.”

“Maybe that’s what I meant. Just go to sleep, ‘kay?”

I roll my eyes. Of course he’d joke about it. It’s easy to fall asleep after that.

It’s not really a morning after, since we only groped one another a little. It’s still awkward.

It probably wouldn’t be so awkward if we didn’t wake up at the same time, but we do, and I’m certain we both have the oh shit that happened thought and then there’s the awkward.

I talk first. “Look. I’m asexual.”

Baaaaad start. That was terrible. That is only slightly relevant. “I mean, I don’t do casual sex. I don’t have much of a sex drive. At all. It’s been at least… actually, it’s been over a year since I’ve even masturbated, so.”

So shut up now. Sans snorts and promptly begins snickering. “Me neither. Too lazy to be boning all the time.”

Oh my god. “We, uh, shouldn’t do that again.” Backtrack and qualify. “I mean now. We shouldn’t do that now, while we’re dealing with all this shit. If we were, um, in a romantic relationship it would be different, but we aren’t so right now, while we’re all struggling with Asriel’s trauma, we should not do anything like that. And frankly I don’t trust myself right now, so I’m trusting you to keep me from chasing situations in which my brain will pour pleasure-inducing neurotransmitters into my synapses because I don’t need that right now.”

Did I really just say that. He laughs again. Apparently I’m hilarious when my brain turns off my mouth-filter.

He looks at me, grinning easily, and asks, “You still going to be sleeping here?”

One-word answer. I can’t fuck up a one-word answer. “Yes.”

“Okay. I definitely like sleep. Let’s just try to keep it holesome, huh?”

Oh. My. God. I slap his arm. “Sans, you ass!”

He laughs harder, almost unable to hold himself upright. “Come on, that one was good. Don’t take it personally.”

It was good and I’m trying not to laugh. “You’re right, but you should have stopped at the first,” I tell him. I leave while we are both in a good mood.
I sleep with Asriel and Frisk that night. It is morning far too quickly. I make a phone call and send one of the few monsters who has a driver’s license to the airport with the Embassy’s van – bus – whatever the vehicle actually is. I just know it’s large.

I leave Asriel with Frisk at the skeleton house and we go next door. I text Toriel and tell her to make sure Asgore comes here and don’t reply when she asks why. Papyrus looks nervous and I’m pacing and Sans is quiet and Alphys definitely knows something is going on but she doesn’t say anything.

They arrive around two in the afternoon. They are glad to be home, but everyone quickly picks up on the tense atmosphere. Sans directs Papyrus to tell Alphys and Undyne five minutes after we begin talking to Toriel and Asgore. We sit down in the living room, leaving Papyrus in the kitchen.

“Everyone should be careful for the next few days,” Toriel says. “I am not certain if we were actually ill, since nobody else was symptomatic, but better safe than sorry.”

I am terrified. Sans closes his eyesockets. “You’re not sick. Neither of you.”

They look perplexed. I can’t hold it in and I start crying quietly, which alarms them.

“Isla?” Asgore asks. “What’s wrong?”

“Asgore, Tori...” Sans says. “Your Majesties. Your son is alive. Asriel is here.”

Confusion, then Toriel begins to look irritated while Asgore stays confused. “Sans, this is a terrible thing to joke about,” she says sternly. “I encourage you to stop now.”

Sans’s expression turns serious. “I’m not jokin’. Asriel’s alive.”

He tells them. He starts with the timeline junk and Frisk but leaves out just how bad some timelines were. Then he talks about Asriel’s death and how he became Flowey and how Flowey’s power over the timeline was eclipsed by Frisk’s. Asriel’s absorption of all the souls, allowing him to regain his true form, Frisk’s battle with Asriel, Asriel breaking the barrier, Asriel giving everyone their souls back. Asriel returning to the Ruins, alone. Staying there. Transforming back into Flowey. Resigned to being there, alone, until Frisk returned and refused to leave him behind a second time.

Asgore starts crying halfway through. Toriel does not. She stands up and paces around. “You must be mistaken,” she insists. “Asriel turned to dust before our very eyes.”

Sans explains Alphys’s experiments with determination again. It seems to sink in a little this time.

“But...” Toriel falters, then picks it back up with more vigor. “If this were true, then that would mean Frisk knew Flowey was Asriel and did not tell us. It would mean Frisk knew for twenty months without telling anyone.”

I grab a tissue with my free hand. “Frisk told me about two months ago. Keeping that secret from you was killing them. But when he was Flowey, Asriel wanted desperately for that information to be kept from you.”

“Tori...” Tears are streaming into Asgore’s beard. “It m-makes sense, Tori. We weren’t sick... that w-was our souls responding to our son’s rebirth. G-golly, our son. Asriel.” He holds his face in his
hands and starts to sob.

Toriel slowly sits back down. She looks at us in turn as sadness slowly begins to crawl across her face. Asgore reaches for her and she takes his hand in her own rather than pushing him away. “Where is he?” she asks. Her voice cracks. “P-please. We want to see him. We need to see him.”

Toriel crying is a rare sight. “He’s not ready yet. He—”

“What do you mean?” Toriel demands, voice high-pitched, tears matting her fur. “We’re his parents! He needs us!”

“Tori, Frisk and Isla have been taking care of him,” Sans says. “He can’t see me either.”

“Asriel is severely traumatized,” I say, trying to sound steady. “You kn-know about Chara’s death, his death... but he was a flower for all those timelines. He was soulless. He couldn’t feel some of his emotions. Now he can, and he... he’s just crushed by how he was and what he did as a flower.”

Toriel puts a hand over her mouth. “Why doesn’t he want to see us?” she asks pitifully.

“He doesn’t want to see anyone he hurt repeatedly during his manipulation of the timeline,” I reply. “He... he hurt Frisk and me minimally, compared to the rest of you. He doesn’t associate us with his painful memories of being a flower for so long and hurting the people he once loved and loves again. He’s so full of love, Toriel.” I give her a watery smile. “That’s why he feels so guilty and horrified with himself.”

Toriel bows her head and cries harder. Asgore squeezes her hand and leans into her. She responds to the gesture by turning and crying into his shoulder. “Will he get better?” Asgore asks. “You’ll help him, won’t you, Isla? And then we can see him?”

Deep breath. “I have been doing everything I can, and I promise you I will keep doing everything I can to make sure he gets better. It is going to take a long time. I can’t and I won’t predict a timetable of his recovery. I will keep you informed, but only if he wants me to tell you what we talk about. I do believe that he will want to see you again. I just don’t know when.”

I pause. There is an exclamation from Undyne from the kitchen right before she bursts in here. “Asgore! Toriel! Do you—” she cuts herself off when she sees them. She shakes off the surprise, walks over to them, leans over the back of the couch, and gives them both a giant hug. Papyrus is in the doorway. He smiles and shoots Sans a thumbs-up even though he looks sad.

I stand up. “I should go check on the kids. Would you like to talk to Frisk?”

Asgore nods. I look at Sans. “Tell Alphys if she needs to talk, I will be available later.”

“Alright. I’ve got her for now. You just focus on Asriel.”

As if I could focus on anything else. That kid has been my project for months. Now that he actually has the capability to get better, there is no way I can quit on him.
Affection: a gentle feeling of fondness or love.

Asriel does start to get better. It’s painfully slow. But it happens. His mood improves, he starts to forgive himself, and, most importantly, he begins to see himself as someone worthy of love again.

Sometimes I have double sessions with him and Frisk and they talk about all the people they killed and how they killed them in alternate timelines. This was Frisk’s idea, as a way of impressing upon Asriel that he is not alone in this. It isn’t easy to listen to, especially when they describe the deaths of the people I have come to consider my closest friends. But they need to talk, so I listen. I help them understand their actions and identify what they are feeling so they can integrate and move on.

Weeks later Asriel is still terrified to sleep alone. Frisk and I take turns because he still is not ready to see anyone else. He’s a cuddler, which I’m fine with because when I can sleep, I sleep like a corpse. I wonder how long he will continue to need someone with him. Despite our constant presence, he still reports intermittent nightmares.

I am glad he immediately knew he was traumatized and needed help after he was reborn. When I first started displaying symptoms of PTSD, I denied it and pushed everyone away and tried to deal with it on my own. Asriel never does that and I make sure to remind him every so often how smart he is for letting the people who care about him help him.

He smiles more often now and will occasionally play with Frisk. Despite all they’ve been through, their play is normal. I fill up two notebooks in a month taking notes on Asriel and just drawing them while they play. They are remembering how to be children again.

I keep Toriel and Asgore updated. Asriel usually tells me I can tell them what we talk about, but sometimes he won’t give me permission. He wants to keep his suicide – and Chara’s – between the three of us. I think that he will allow them to know someday. Just not now. Not while everything is still so raw and he is still so scared and his parents still cry when I show them one of my sketches of him playing and being happy for a little bit.

Asriel remains deeply attached to Frisk and me. I think this will become healthier in time. Even if it doesn’t resolve itself with his trauma, I am far more worried about his trauma than I am about his dependency. I assure Toriel I can handle him alone, so she makes Frisk go back to school. Asriel clings to me while they are gone, but I have the time so I give him my attention. He tells me he loves me for the first time about five weeks after his rebirth. He says it nervously, like he is worried I don’t reciprocate, but he blushes and smiles delightedly when I say it back to him.

When Frisk sleeps with Asriel, I sleep with Sans. I cry less and sleep more. We start watching mind-numbing movies again and we often fall asleep on the couch. It’s probably situational. Just a need for closeness because of all the tragedy having its way with all of us over and over and over.

Once Papyrus catches me in bed with his brother and demands to know why he wasn’t invited. We put the pillows and blankets on the floor so we can have a proper sleepover. Papyrus chats at us and himself for hours before he falls asleep and Sans and I listen intently to him, trying to soak up his good mood. It must work somehow, because I’m not the slightest bit sore the next day from sleeping on the floor.

Alphys finally talks to me about Flowey and her other failed experiments and how she blames herself for Asriel’s imprisonment inside that flower. She feels terrible, but she says she’s felt terrible about things before and is cautiously optimistic things will get better. She wants to personally apologize to Asriel. When I relay this to him, he points out that he wouldn’t be here as
he is if Alphys hadn’t screwed up. Like her, he is still exhibiting quite a bit of self-blame.

It’s April when Asriel decides he wants to see his parents. I don’t know if he is actually ready, because he feels bad about making them wait. The three of them just burst into tears when they actually see each other, even Toriel. There is a lot of hugging involved. It’s exhausting and sad, but it’s good too. Asriel can’t even talk, only managing to stutter out apologies, even though his parents have no clue what he’s apologizing for.

Getting their son back has done more to improve Toriel and Asgore’s relationship than time or sessions with me ever could. They aren’t back together by any means, but they both want to be there for him and each other while this is happening. I know they are talking about what happened, how it all suddenly ended for them. Asriel wants them to know the truth, but he is terrified they will stop loving him if they know, and he can’t tell them, even though he tries to.

He asks me to tell them because I have heard this at least a dozen times from him. It is one of his greatest sources of pain. So I tell his parents of the plan he conceived with Chara and how that plan involved Chara’s suicide, which led to Asriel’s death. It definitely reopens old wounds, but no one is angry, just sad. It also brings up questions about Chara. At one point, Toriel quietly asks me if she could describe Chara’s mannerisms and behavior to me and I could tell her what was ailing her adopted child, because with this information it is obvious there was something. I tell her to wait. Living traumatized children take precedence over dead ones.

It’s slow, but it happens. Eventually Asriel is able to interact with his parents and everyone else without breaking down. Even Sans, who was apparently Flowey’s only obstacle in some timelines. Even Alphys, who also bursts into tears the first time she interacts with him. Eventually Frisk and I are able to leave him with someone else while we leave the house. He still sleeps with Frisk, and me, sometimes, and he's still clingy, but it’s getting better.

Explaining the timelines to everyone else makes Sans visibly nervous, but he has to help me because I don’t understand it completely. Once more, we leave out the timelines in which Frisk wasn’t so nice and nobody questions it because between this and Asriel there is already too much information for anyone to process.

Undyne is more interested in Asriel’s return than the timelines. She dropped to a knee and formally introduced herself the first time she met him, calling him ‘Prince,’ then proceeded to give him a ‘welcome noogie.’ It made him smile, at least.

Alphys takes the timeline junk like a scientist, but notices Sans doesn’t particularly want to discuss it, so she lets it drop. It is Papyrus who accidentally goes right for the jugular. So to speak.

He frowns, squinting, and says, “I do not fully understand this, but why is this the first time I am hearing of it, Brother? Unless – perhaps you told me before and I… forgot. Is that what happened?”

Sans freezes, eyesockets wide. He clears his nonexistent throat. “Um. No, bro. That’s not really… not really…” and bright blue tears begin slipping down his skeletal face.

We are all shocked. Papyrus is the quickest to respond. He gets down on Sans’s level and hugs him, patting his back. He says, “There, there, it will be alright, Sans,” in the quietest voice I’ve ever heard from him.

“I’m – I’m sorry,” Asriel says, but does not move from Frisk’s side. He is beginning to blink rapidly, expression pinched.
I step in before his parents can tell him it isn’t his fault. That almost never works with people who have severe guilt issues. “We’re going to go watch TV,” I decide. Sans probably doesn’t like that this is happening in front of everyone.

Before I leave the room, I stop behind Sans, squeezing his shoulders and leaning closer so I can talk quietly next to the side of his head. “If you need me,” I say, because that’s all I have to say. He’s been my support for months when he was not totally okay. I have the energy to help him now, but he has to make that choice himself.

Despite the progress, there are occasional difficulties. Asriel is uneasy when Frisk and I are not in reach. He has a couple of panic attacks, so I train his parents on how to calm him if it happens when I am not there. He still has nightmares, but not all the time anymore. He is finally beginning to accept that his soul is real and it is there to stay and he is not going to be a flower ever again, so he worries about the future instead of the immediate present. He still talks to me, but it isn’t so gut-wrenching to listen to him anymore. He and Frisk have basically been living with me with frequent trips next door to get whatever they needed, but they both move back in with Toriel full-time just before the beginning of May (which means I can stop sleeping with Sans. Not that I don’t fall asleep on the couch with him occasionally). Asgore has been staying in her guest room most nights. They are both so focused on their son they don’t have time to be awkward with one another.

Going outside is difficult for Asriel. He can do it for short periods of time, but he was attacked the last time he saw the sky as himself. He is anticipating that some sort of announcement will be made to the monster community and the whole world about him, and that makes him nervous. He and Frisk get bunk beds and share a room, but they always end up in the same bed. If they don’t, it’s because Asriel still sometimes crawls into bed with me, which means we have to leave our door unlocked.

We do have to tell the monster community. The how is not hard to agree upon. We will have Mettaton interview Frisk and Asriel together on his show. Asriel might be nervous with an audience there, but I’m pretty sure the live audience is almost always uniformly monster. I have doubts he could face human crowds, given that one killed him, but he’s alright with all our monster friends.

The what is where the trouble comes up. The advantage to telling the truth is that we will not be caught in a lie later, but I don’t know if I want to tell humans everywhere this monster child died and came back to life. That could have terrible ramifications I haven’t thought of yet. We certainly cannot tell humans about six dead kids and their souls being used in the experiments that ultimately gave Flowey life. Even when I was pissed at Asgore about it I knew better than to let that get out.

We’re going to have to lie to the monsters, too, even though they know about the dead human children and some of Alphys’s experiments. They would understand and nothing bad would come of telling them, but statistically the more people who know a secret the less likely it is to remain a secret, so for Asriel’s (and the entire monster community’s) safety, the truth is going to stay between the nine of us who already know.

We brainstorm. I try to predict how humans might respond to each suggestion. I can’t see how this could possibly go well. We’ve already told everyone this kid was dead. I have certainly used his death in political arguments – which, now that he’s alive, makes me feel like a manipulative jerk.
Alphys comes up with the best cover story. My biggest worry is that some asshole human will spread terror of monsters that come back to life, but she works around it. We are going to stress how the uniqueness of Asriel’s death played a part in his rebirth. Particularly the fact that he refused to kill anyone. I’m sure we can spin some ‘pure soul’ shit and the monster sympathizers will eat it up.

Toriel dictates. I type it up so everyone can memorize it later.

I make some poor choices regarding my medication because I’m almost out and end up laid up one day, the joints of my legs and lumbar vertebrae and hips and even my arms so swollen and painful I can barely move.

I text Sans. He’s in my room not five seconds later. “What are you at?”

“Maybe a six,” I reply, blinking because he turned the light on. “It’s like an eight if I move, but I’m not willing to try again and give you a more accurate report.”

That meant it’s bad and I’m not telling you exactly how bad and he sees right through that crap, but he doesn’t call me out on it.

He vanishes and returns with my pills. “You’re almost out,” he says, something like disapproval in his tone. “You never told me how you get more.”

This is the fun part. Sitting up to take my pain meds when it hurts to move. To be fair, Sans does most of the work. “I’ll have to go to a pharmacy,” I say once I get the pills down.

“We don’t have one of those.”

“It’s maybe a ten-minute drive. Aren’t you supposed to be at work? Whatever you’re doing for work this week, anyway.”

“I was. Teleported back when you texted.”

“It’s like the universe enabled your laziness by giving you that ability.”

He grins. I stare up at the ceiling for two seconds. “Damn. I had an appointment with Ezra today. I don’t suppose you’d be willing to teleport me to the Embassy.”

“Just call him and cancel. You know how much Paps hates watching you make yourself do stuff when it hurts you.”

He hates it too, not that he’ll admit it out loud. I can’t cancel. I feel like I’m missing something with Ezra. Something important that I shouldn’t be missing. I move my arms slowly, but bending my elbows still feels like fire. “Help me to the couch. I’ll call and tell him to come here, if that’s alright.”

He shrugs. “I don’t care.”

He goes back to work and after half an hour I’m okay moving around. I limp and I’m stiff and it’s ugly, but the pain is ignorable. I have to take more meds later. I’ll have enough for maybe one more flare-up after this. I tend to have a few flare-ups a year. I have minor flare-ups and joint pain multiple times a month, but that’s just my life and not even something I consider sick.

Ezra and Kalene are both comfortable with monsters. They don’t blink an eye getting out of their car in a monster neighborhood. I’m at the door so they know they’re in the right place.
Frisk wanted to investigate the car and whatever humans it was probably carrying because they are at their front door, too. When Kalene sees them, she smiles and calls, “Frisk!” and runs over to hug them.

Ezra calls her back and we go inside. I start by asking them if they’ve gotten crap from other humans for coming over here or seeing me, but they both deny it, which means they haven’t told anyone.

It is exactly forty-five minutes before there is a knock at the front door. Toriel lets herself in. “Greetings,” she calls. She stops when she comes into my line-of-sight. “May we come in, or should we wait?”

Frisk casually walks towards us. Kalene jumps up and runs to them. Toriel knows how I like to do things because she timed it perfectly. “We’re just about done,” I say. Even with intensive therapy, it’s often better to have lots of smaller sessions than a few long sessions. When I was treating Asriel literally all day, we took frequent breaks. We still do. “You can come in.”

Asriel is hiding behind Toriel, pressed against her side. Kalene sees him and approaches – quickly at first, but she slows down when he draws back. “Hi Miss Toriel,” she chirps. She sticks a hand out, thinks better of it, and waves. “Hi. I’m Kalene. What’s your name?”

Toriel puts a hand on Asriel’s head. “A-Asriel,” he squeaks, and promptly goes scarlet at the squeak. He clears his throat. “I’m Asriel. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Hello Asriel,” I tell him. “I know she’ll be fine. She’s…” a smile twitches onto his face. “She’s already taken charge.”

And she has – I hear the back door open and her cry of, “Come on!” Frisk laughs.

“I will watch them,” Toriel tells us both, and follows them.

Even when we are finished, Ezra is in no hurry to leave. “She doesn’t have friends outside of school,” he says. “She’s often busy taking care of me. I’ll let her play for as long as you’ll have us here.”

They don’t stay outside for long. Asriel tires quickly. When they come back inside, he acknowledges Ezra by making eye contact and climbs up next to me. He takes my hand and leans his head against the side of my arm.

Frisk sits next to Ezra on the smaller couch and Kalene sits in front of them so Frisk can tame her white-blonde curls into a braid.

“You should bring her over more often,” Toriel tells Ezra. “My children and I live right next door.
We would love to have her over to visit.”

“Yes!” Kalene exclaims. “Dad, can I!?”

Frisk grins at Asriel. “It’s nice to finally play with someone else’s hair.”

Asriel picks at some fur on his face. “I’ll grow a mane eventually,” he says. “And I’ll be way taller than you, Frisk. You’d better watch out.” Frisk sticks their tongue out at him and Asriel returns the gesture.

Ezra nods. “If that’s what you want, Kalene.” He looks at Toriel, and says, a bit more awkwardly, “I don’t… know much about monsters. I tend to avoid the news. Is there anything I should be aware of?”

Toriel smiles kindly at him. “Aside from our magic use, there is nothing in particular I can think of. Our daily lives are actually very similar to those of humans.”

“They’re nicer, in general,” I supply, because Toriel won’t say it. “Their magic food heals minor injuries, too. And it doesn’t make you poop, so that’s a plus.”

Kalene giggles at the word *poop*. “Oh,” Ezra replies, expression and tone totally neutral. “That’s… interesting.” He looks at his daughter. “How can I contact you?”

“Isla, dear, text him my number, would you?” Toriel asks. She pauses, then adds, “And Asgore’s, for good measure.”

I get out my phone. “We would also appreciate it if you didn’t mention to anyone that you saw this little guy,” I say, gesturing to Asriel. “He’s… not exactly public knowledge yet.”

Ezra nods. “I’m not little,” Asriel mumbles. Bored with me, he slips off the couch to sit on the floor in front of Kalene.

She lets out a loud squeal. “YOUR HANDS!”

Asriel blinks at her. “What about—?”

She grabs one of his hands and flips it over. “You have PAW PADS, like a cat! Or a dog!” She begins poking at his palm, bending forward and almost pulling her hair out of Frisk’s reach.

Asriel looks confused at her fascination, but endures it without pulling his hand away. “I guess?” he says. He glances over his shoulder at me for a cue, but I just shrug at him.

Kalene releases Asriel and leans back. Her smile disappears. “I have a question. Where’s Flowey?”

It’s like all the air is suddenly sucked out of the room. Frisk, Toriel, and I all freeze. “I sometimes saw him when I saw you,” Kalene continues, tilting her head back towards Frisk. “But then I didn’t see you for a while and now that I am seeing you, you don’t have Flowey with you. Where is he?”

Toriel looks at me, gaze searching and a little pleading because she isn’t sure on how to proceed. Before I can decide what to do, Asriel inhales – and exhales in the same second. It comes on fast, and then he’s crying and hyperventilating. Ezra freezes, too.

“Oh,” Kalene peeps. Toriel takes a step forward, but I hold a hand out because Kalene stands, half-done braid pulling from Frisk’s loose grasp. I want to see what she does.

She walks around Asriel, sits down behind him, and hugs him. She starts off humming, but then
she opens her mouth and starts to sing, something quiet and hopeful and totally new to me. Ezra relaxes almost instantly. I look at him and he briefly glances at me and I can tell this is what she does for him when he has panic attacks.

It’s kind of ridiculous, how quickly it works. Even I can’t get Asriel to calm down that quickly and I’m his therapist. And – his third parent. Sort of.

But he calms down. By the time she stops singing he is still a little shaky and scared-looking, but he’s in the present and out of the attack. Frisk is sitting in front of him, holding his hands. He squeezes theirs tightly and leans back against his new friend.

Before I deal with this, I text Natalie: *Found you a new music student.*

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I help Alphys put the data she and Sans have obtained on souls thus far into a format academia and other research institutions will accept. We begin the publishing process just before she and Undyne leave on their trip to Japan.

It’s May and Asriel still doesn’t want to go outside, even with the spring weather. I preemptively advise Toriel to keep flowers out of the house because I don’t know how he will react to them. She wants him to start school when the new year rolls around after this summer. I don’t know if he’ll be ready by then. We’ll have to see.

We start desensitization exercises. This has the side effect of increasing his clinginess. I wonder if Toriel and Asgore aren’t contributing to this because they are babying him. It’s fine, for now. I’m babying him a little, too. I just have to make sure his parents gradually let up on the babying as he gets better.

My sister graduates, so I take the weekend and go to her ceremony. It would be a ten-hour drive, so I suck it up and fly instead. At the airport, the person who checks my ticket does a double-take at my name and looks at me, surprised, but fortunately does not say my name aloud. I pull the hood of my hoodie up and leave it like that for the entirety of the trip.

I have to refuse to answer my parents and sister’s questions because they want to know what the hell I’ve been doing for the past three months. They just want to make sure I’m not stressed or sick or abusing my medication. I tell them I’m working with a difficult patient, even though it feels weird to talk about Asriel so formally.

When I get home he tears out of Toriel’s house and jumps on me when I’m not even three steps inside the front door. Literally. It’s painful and I sprain my wrist trying to break my fall. He scrambles off me and starts crying when he realizes he hurt me and we have to have a session immediately because he sobs out, “All I do is hurt people,” and that’s a red flag if there ever was one.

Asriel has seen me every day since his rebirth. Toriel and Frisk and Sans all tell me right away that he did not handle my absence well. Lots of crying. Toriel only let him text me once each day and wouldn’t let him call me – she wanted me to have those two days with my family. He clings to me for a week after I get home and sleeps with me every night, which cuts down on my couch time with Sans, but Asriel is beginning to show hints of new symptoms and I need to pay attention to him. He still has grief and sadness, but they’re not as severe anymore. He seems to have fixated on
his guilt and self-loathing. He starts to lie to me – or to himself – about how he’s doing. He gets angry sometimes, though I suspect it’s more intense than he lets on.

I anticipated something like this. The last few months were an acute reaction to feeling again and processing everything at once. This is what we will be dealing with in the long term. A core issue that emerges readily is that he agonizes over how he identifies with Flowey. He is also unhealthily attached to me because I helped him feel better. Anyone could have helped him because he was rock bottom, but he doesn’t care.

Undyne and Alphys spend two weeks in Japan. They don’t even take a day to settle in when they get home. Undyne runs across the street and nearly punches holes in our front door and Toriel’s when she knocks and yells at us to come over. While she does that, Alphys calls Asgore and Mettaton and Napstablook.

Everyone shows up confused. Toriel wonders aloud whether she should have brought a pie. Undyne doesn’t let her finish the thought.

She grabs Alphys’s hand and they grin at one another and both darken to varying shades to indicate blushing: Alphys goes an orangish-pink (not reaching the bright red she gets when she’s really embarrassed) and Undyne goes violet.

“WE TALKED ABOUT IT AND WE’RE GOING TO GET MARRIED,” Undyne bellows while Alphys nods so hard she knocks her glasses askew. “WE’RE GONNA HAVE A BIG FAT MONSTER WEDDING AND ANYONE WHO DOESN’T LIKE IT CAN SUCK IT!!!”
Denial: a defense mechanism in which confrontation with a situation is avoided by denying the reality of the situation.

Chapter Notes

As usual, if you find grammar or spelling errors, kick my ass.

Most of the following overjoyed shrieking is produced by Mettaton. After congratulations are doled out, he demands what their plans are. “There are so many options open to you now!” he exclaims with much unnecessary gesticulating. “You could incorporate human traditions if you want – on that note, how do humans marry!”

He whips around and looks at me for an answer. I’m the token human adult, after all.

I shrug. “They sign a piece of paper.”

I get a lot of confused blinking in response to this. More detail, I suppose. “It’s still something that can only legally occur between two people. They both have to be of age, they have to present identification to prove they are signing for themselves, and they can’t already be married to someone else. I think those are the only requirements.”

Sans starts laughing for some reason. Mettaton levels an are-you-kidding look at me. “Darling, I was referring to marriage traditions. The ceremony. The celebration. Not the legal garbage.”

Not sure I’ve ever heard Mettaton say garbage. “W-well, that’s important too,” Alphys says. “Have any monster couples b-been recognized as legally married?”

I shake my head. I would remember such an important social event. “I don’t believe so,” Asgore adds. “You would be the first.”

“Maybe not,” Undyne replies, still grinning toothily. “We’re gonna take our time. Plan it. Make sure it’s safe, even though any bas – uh, jerk who doesn’t like it can eat my fist.”

“We should research human t-traditions, too,” Alphys muses. “See if th-there’s anything w-w-we want to incorporate.”

Undyne punches the air with the hand not wrapped tightly around Alphys’s. “YEAH!!! Then we’ll get married in a BLAZE OF GLORY!!! NGAAAH!!”

She winds up Papyrus who, for no particular reason, joins her in her happy-bellowing. “This country made the switch from licenses to certificates embarrassingly recently,” I say. “I’ll start thinking of eviscerating speeches should they find some reason to deny you yours.”

“It shouldn’t be an issue,” Toriel says, frowning a bit. Asriel is holding her hand, quiet, but Frisk is standing next to Mettaton, grinning. “Monsters have the right to marry other monsters. Just not humans.”

“Which is still on my agenda,” Frisk says with a just-detectable feral hint to their grin.

“Kiddo, I don’t think anybody needs that law right now,” Sans points out.
Frisk, naturally, explodes in idealistic indignation. “But we need to have it in place for when we do! The refusal to pass that law was a dig at my family, anyway. It was a way to say mixed families shouldn’t exist.”

I… never thought of it like that and I think of everything. Huh.

Undyne abruptly scoops Frisk up with jealousy-inducing ease. Frisk, who is now almost my size. “TOO BAD!!!” she yells in their face. “WE EXIST!!! WE’RE AWESOME!!! RIGHT, PAPYRUS!?!?!?”

She’s got him trained. “NO ONE IS GREATER!!!” Papyrus responds and, like Mettaton, moves his arms about unnecessarily.

Frisk’s face twitches in a smile. Undyne sets them down and noogies them so hard it’s a wonder half their hair doesn’t fall out. “Who wants some food!??” she yells to the room at large.

This induces reactions ranging from glee (Papyrus) to muted horror (Asgore and Frisk). Alphys jumps in to save everyone. “I-I’ll call and order pizza!!” she says. “What d-d-does everyone w-want?”

It’s relaxing in spite of the buzz of conversation. Sans mostly hangs around Napstablook after the pizza-massacre comes to a saucy end. Seriously. Undyne leans over and licks a fleck of sauce off Alphys’s cheek, which causes the scientist to spontaneously combust and Frisk and Mettaton to wolf-whistle and cheer respectively and everyone else to awkwardly observe. Toriel promptly reminds them that there are children present, to which Frisk complains and Asriel gets embarrassed and hides his face behind his ears.

Hard to believe Napstablook and Mettaton are related. He hasn’t interacted with either very much. Napstablook is quiet, seemingly content to just float in the background. Sans seats himself next to them and waves off Frisk’s attempt to get him involved in whatever game is beginning. Napstablook elects not to join, too.

Surprisingly, Mettaton ducks out and he and Napstablook inexplicably lie down on the floor, heads inches from one another, bodies pointed in opposite directions, and say nothing.

That’s his kind of activity. He doesn’t need a reason to do that. They don’t protest when he joins them, so he lies down and closes his sockets.

Toriel wakes him up sometime later. Mettaton and Napstablook have since moved. He’s surprised Papyrus didn’t yell at him as soon as he noticed Sans sleeping. “S’up, Tori,” he says from the floor.

“Not you,” she replies, smiling so her fangs just barely poke into her bottom lip. “Why don’t you remedy that and come help me clean up.”

He groans as he stands, maybe secretly glad she pulled him out of himself before he could sink too far down. Everyone else is playing some kind of board game. “S’not your place, Tori. That generally means you don’t have to clean it.”

She smirks a little, as if amused someone would tell her that. “I am only going to do some dishes. And so are you.”
Welp. Not like he can argue with that. Not that he’d argue with Toriel, anyway. He’s so pathetically weak he’d probably dust if she glared at him too hard.

She puts him to washing while she rinses, dries, and puts away. Of course she moves with a briskness he can only marvel at while he slogs through his job, the way he always does. Sometimes he wishes he could finish tasks quickly, but when he thinks about it the why even bother creeps up so it’s better to ignore it and just slog away.

“I know I’m being nosy,” Toriel says after a mere thirty seconds of work. “And I understand Asriel has taken up much of Isla’s time. Have you spoken with her about having sessions? Or has she spoken to you?”

She made him blink. “What, for me? Nah, that’d just be a waste of her time. We’ve… talked a couple of times. ‘Bout the timelines. I don’t need more than that.”

“I think you do,” she replies, not unkindly. “I refused Isla’s brand of help for a long time. But once we started, I was surprised by how… educational it was. Humans and monsters alike may profess the importance of mental and emotional health, but parents and schools fail to teach children how to deal with situations that are… overwhelming. The things that happen that all of us would like to pretend never happen because even contemplating their possibility is painful.” She pauses. “I know Isla did not get as much time with Asgore and me as she would have liked, but I feel like I can expand on what she taught me on my own. Does that make sense?”

He is reluctant to encourage this conversational direction. He scrubs a plate for slightly too long. “Yeah. I s’pose.” He lets the pause go on too long, too. “So… you feel better.” About your dead kids and traumatized not-dead kids. Not that he can say it.

She nods without hesitation. “Absolutely.”

Oh, she can’t want him to talk about how he’s doing. Nope. “You and Asgore are getting along better.”

He expects it to distract her, and it does. She frowns. “That would be… accurate,” she responds, tone a bit perplexed. “I’m still angry sometimes. Less often, but I am. And Asriel needs both his parents close to him right now. I’m sure Frisk does, too, though Frisk isn’t as likely to let us know.”

…Yeah. He doesn’t really want to go there, either. He doesn’t feel like it’s his place to mention how obviously awkward and tense it was at first. He has a lot of Best Friend Privileges, but talking about Toriel’s ex with her has never been one of them. He wants to avoid the subject, too, because he likes Asgore. He’s a good guy and he’s shouldered a lot more shit than Sans ever has. Those six kids are staying dead. Maybe Frisk didn’t, but they all killed Frisk. Except Papyrus. Most of the shit in Sans’s head technically never even happened. His soul is unmarked but for his stats, which is why he never lets anyone check them. Papyrus hasn’t even seen his stats since he frowned really hard at Sans’s HP.

That might have been a different timeline, but Papyrus called off the impromptu sparring match and began involving Sans in his shenanigans more often. He wonders if Papyrus knows, subconsciously, and that’s why his brother never insisted on sparring in this timeline.

He can barely even remember what happened in what timelines. He can’t really remember the other timelines, but sometimes life just feels so unreal it’s just like those hazy, dreamlike memories of Frisk with dust in their sweater, or Undyne coming to power after Asgore’s death, or standing in that hall, asking Frisk why—
There are too many options. Were too many options. And not a damn thing he did ever made a difference, so why do anything at all?

Toriel seems to be expecting him to say something. What comes out of his mouth is, “D’you think we have a shot, Tori?”

She frowns. “I’m sorry?”

“At... this. Just – everything. Even knowing that the timeline might be reset, that the humans might find an excuse to wipe us out – d’you honestly think we have a shot?” Because I don’t know how to live like we do, he thinks, but doesn’t say.

Toriel senses there is more to it and puts a hand on his shoulder. She looks right into his eyesockets and says quietly, “Of course I believe that. Frisk and Asriel were the ones with the ability to reset the timeline, and though I will admit I still do not fully understand it, I am under the impression the ability was under their conscious control.”

She waits to see if he will correct her. He doesn’t because he thinks that is true, but her use of past tense is wrong.

“They are both getting better,” she says firmly, daring him to deny that. “They will both continue to get better. If things keep getting better, for them and everyone else, then they will not use their ability to reset the timeline. At this point, there is no reason for the humans to attack us. We’ve had no violent crimes since coming to the surface, although — she grins, “—that may have something to do with the fact that Undyne would be responsible for bringing any criminals in and nobody wants to risk even the chance of having her come after them.” She stands up straight, hand falling from his shoulder, grin disappearing. “We might have problems if the humans ever found out about the fallen humans, but... Isla has assured me nobody will ever find out.”

Which means Isla has thought about it and nothing escapes once it’s in her brain. Isla’s foolproof. Sans knows he doesn’t have to worry about anything as long as she thinks of it first, and she thinks of everything. He was never much for worrying, anyway. He was always far more likely to lie down and quit. How many times has he let the world end around him already, and never raised a finger to stop it, until it was already too late?

None. Not in this timeline. Damnit.

“I’m going to be nosy again,” Toriel says with an air of false regality. “How has living with Isla been?”

Sans shrugs. The water has cooled off by now, but his hands still feel burnt clean. “Not much different than when she was living with you. She’s been alright. It was tough on her, with how Asriel was at first, but it’s better now.”

“That isn’t what I meant, Sans.”

Oh, great. Her tone has turned teasing. He wonders briefly if Isla told anyone — he certainly didn’t. It wasn’t – it didn’t mean anything, of course, it was kinda bad for a little while there, and he could hardly stand to hear her crying every night, and she only came to him because he was there when the flower finally had enough love, hope, and compassion that he needed a soul to contain it. Right?

“Not you too,” he mutters, because Papyrus has been hinting that he wants a sister with decreasing subtlety (not that Papyrus is capable of subtlety in the first place) and Undyne and Alphys shoot
self-righteous, knowing glances at him all the time.

Toriel’s grin widens. “Well, if multiple people are telling you the same thing…”

“Nah. Isla’s aromantic. I don’t want that sort of thing anyway. With anyone.”

He can’t put his issues on anyone else anyway. It’s bad enough that Papyrus has to deal with his crap sometimes. Isla said it was situational and she was right. Sans has been inconsequential for so long that to have someone actually need him, to place importance on his actions, felt so damn good and terrifying simultaneously and now he’s gone and associated Isla with that and it’s nothing, anyway. He needs to take a hint from her and be patient because jumping the gun and asking her out would be disrespectful because she’s aromantic, and anyway, her time is better spent treating Asriel while Sans struggles to reconcile that psychopathic little plant with their sensitive, prone-to-tears, guilt-ridden prince.

He isn’t going to do anything about it. He doesn’t even really feel the need to talk to Asriel about it. The kid’s shown remorse and even if Sans wanted him to suffer a little in recompense, and he doesn’t, the prince’s guilt has torn him apart more than enough to make up for his sins.

For good measure, he adds, “A relationship would be a lot of work. I’ll pass,” because it would be, and he should pass because he’s shit at work, no matter what that work is, and Isla’s got a perfectionist streak and he’s so far from perfect he can’t even see the tail-end of the word.

“Isla has an ex-boyfriend,” Toriel says instead of letting it drop. “She might not be as opposed to the idea as you think.”

He snorts. “She told me that was an experiment.” Which sounds like something Gaster would say, which is horrible and should have killed his apparent infatuation on the spot, but he’s not that lucky.

“You could be good for one another. She needs to learn how to slow down, you need to learn how to get yourself moving.”

“Tori, no offense, but you’re being ribiculous right now.”

As expected, she lets out a peal of laughter, and his soul feels lighter for hearing it. “Alright, Sans. I will stop, so long as you’re not telling me a fibula.”

He grins. “Don’t you mean patella you a fibula?”

They throw puns at one another for the next fifteen minutes. Thankfully, Toriel finally lets it drop.

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It finally happens.

I get the phone call from Asgore. I pick up because he knows when I have sessions with Asriel and neither of Asriel’s parents ever interrupts us.

I wipe my expression clean when he tells me. “How many of the Royal Guard did you send?” I ask, and Asriel starts to look worried.

“Undyne took two of the canine unit,” he replies. His voice is a little thick. “You don’t need to—”
“I’m coming down.”

“But you’re with Asriel—”

“It’s fine. I’m coming down. Don’t let the cameras near the scene if you can help it. And don’t cry in public. Wait until I get there, at least.”


“I’ll be down as soon as I can.”

“What happened?” Asriel asks as soon as I hang up.

I stand up and head towards my room. I need longer shorts. Asriel follows me.

“Someone got dusted on the northwest side of the city,” I answer. I don’t lie to kids just because they’re kids. “Your dad’s on his way. Undyne’s already there.”

“So why do you have to go?”

“Because if someone planned to use dead monster dust to lure people into a massacre, I might be the only human there. I might be the only one who can take a hit with killing intent behind it.”

I change my shorts. The longer ones help to conceal the knives I strap to my legs. Actually, these might not be mine. They might be Sans’s. Wouldn’t be the first time Papyrus has mixed up the laundry. Not that Sans and I don’t both dress as lazily as possible.

Asriel is silent in response to this. I approach him, smoothing a hand over his head. “Papyrus is upstairs in his room. Go hang out with him until Frisk and your mom get home from school, okay?”

On my way over, I text Papyrus to alert him to Asriel’s presence downstairs. I don’t expect Asriel to disobey me, but he’s been occasionally having issues believing other people might want his company and I know Papyrus will run right downstairs and refuse to give Asriel a choice in the matter.

I get there just after Asgore. He’s talking to Undyne now.

I am not the only human here.

There is a crowd of them. It’s not large, but it’s big enough to be called a crowd. They are being held back behind a three-foot-tall magical shield. Most of them look curious, but there are a few anti-monster signs popping up from the mob. Greater Dog and Lesser Dog are here, facing the crowd, looking very much like they would like to be pet or play fetch but both are holding their posts ten feet away from the shield.

I call Sans.

“I need you here,” I say. “There’s—”

“Sure thing,” he replies “Where?”

I tell him. I try to explain the situation again but he hangs up before I can get two words out.

I frown at my phone for a moment. That… wasn’t practical. He should have waited for an explanation. Maybe he could have thought of something I didn’t or maybe he knows someone
who’d be better at the job I want him to do.

Now that I think about it, Sans always comes running whenever I call, no matter where he is or what he’s doing. I shouldn’t be surprised, considering my track record. I’ve had everything up to bloody vomit and panic attacks and he’s had to deal with all of it. He probably just developed the habit of coming to me immediately for preventative purposes.

He attracts a lot of attention from the human crowd when he steps into existence thirty feet behind me. He pauses for a moment, walks ten feet, sees the pile of dust, and freezes. His perpetual grin becomes abruptly strained.

I quickly walk to him and he turns so we can stand side-by-side, backs to the crowd. “I was trying to tell you,” I say. “Dead monster. Human crowd. You told me you were good at seeing aspects of the souls of strangers.”

His face isn’t quite right from seeing the dust. “I… I am.”

“So you can see if any of these humans have EXP.”

“Right.” He deflates a bit. I wonder if I touched a nerve with that request.

I turn around first. I don’t want anyone to notice him and wonder what he’s doing.

I don’t have to be the scary human this time. The crowd just… watches. There is some murmuring and talking. A few people even seem concerned. I suppose curiosity is normal since this is the first public monster death since the barrier’s fall. It any other monsters died, it was a natural, private affair and I didn’t know about it.

I don’t get to stay the whole time because Asgore spends five minutes on the phone with Toriel and pulls me aside. “Frisk really isn’t taking this well,” he tells me. He looks tired. “Toriel wants you there as soon as possible. They are not talking to her.”

“Is it safe for me to leave?” I ask.

He looks at me for a moment. He knows what I mean. I’m human. Every hit I take could prevent a monster’s death, if that strike is delivered with killing intent. All that matters for me is where I’m hit. It doesn’t matter if someone wants to cut my head off if they hit my arm instead.

“I believe so,” he replies. “Correct me if I am wrong, but the crowd seems more… curious than anything else.”

“No, you’re right. But there’s no guarantee it will stay this way.”

“We will not be much longer. Undyne contacted human law enforcement. Hopefully we will be through before the reporters and journalists show up.”

Yeah, I don’t want to deal with them either. Not after this. “We don’t really have an equivalent to a police station. Where will you be taking the dust for identification?”

His expression turns confused. “Sorry?”

Oh my god. “Don’t tell me you don’t have a way to tell who the dust used to be.”

“We do not have a way,” he confirms. He hesitates, then says, “Unless they are killed, monsters fall down before death. It is easy to identify them when they fall down. They do not look
differently. And… monsters were not killing one another in the Underground. Everyone who died fell down. Except for…”

I put up a hand. I know what he means. I need something to fill the sudden uncomfortable silence. “There is one good thing about this happening now.”

“Which is?”

“We haven’t told anyone about Asriel. He can’t rationally blame himself for this.”

Asgore is quiet for a second. “He may try to anyway,” he finally says. “He… does not hold himself in high regard at the moment.”

“No, he doesn’t. His guilt issues will likely be long-term. But I’ve got him.” And I get it. Asriel might be the most difficult patient I ever have, but he was shot to death and he killed people, and maybe I can’t understand the timelines or actually dying but I can understand almost dying and killing.

“You do. And I have the utmost confidence in you.”

He kind of has to. I go to Sans because he can just shortcut us back home. “I need to leave,” I tell him. “Frisk knows and they aren’t handling this well.”

Something dark flits across his eyesockets. He obviously saw nobody with elevated LV or EXP or he would have told me immediately. “I’m coming too. If the kid resets, I want them to at least tell me beforehand.”

That is still his first reaction. Every time something goes wrong, he wonders if Frisk is going to reset the timeline. It’s been almost two years.

Maybe Toriel was right. Maybe I should start having sessions with Sans.

Frisk is crying when we get there. They are in their and Asriel’s shared room, both sitting on the bottom bunk. Asriel is unusually stoic for being as prone to tears as he is.

I convince Toriel to wait downstairs with Papyrus. Sans won’t wait.

And that turns out to be a good thing, because Frisk seems to want him, not me. “Sans, I’m scared,” they get out.

He doesn’t frown. He never really stops smiling. But his face does move in a way that suggests a frown. “How come, kiddo?”

“I don’t – I don’t want to reset. Not right now. It’s too early to decide that. But I don’t know… if I can.”


“I mean I feel like I might not be able to!” Frisk wails. “I’ve never felt like this before. Usually when I think about the times I reset or just r-resetting in general I know I can still d-d-do it but I don’t know that right now!”
He still doesn’t stop smiling, but Sans’s expression slowly edges into horror. Asriel’s eyes are wide. “But – I haven’t felt like I could do it since you Fell,” he says. “You’re not – did something happen?”

They wipe their face with their hands. “Nothing happened. I haven’t thought about it in a while, and – and maybe the last few times I thought about it I knew it would be harder, and now it feels almost impossible and I just…”

They go silent for almost fifteen long seconds. Their eyes actually unfocus. Then they come back and swallow hard. “I just – don’t know. I’m worried because what if something really bad happens and I have to reset and I can’t?”

That’s my cue. I crouch in front of them so I’m not standing above them. “Frisk, that’s how it is for everyone else. You and Asriel have been the only ones with this power. Nobody else can understand it very well, but… do you think it would help you to review the plans we have in place to prevent bad things from happening?”

“Someone died already,” Frisk sniffles.

“I know. Honestly, I’m surprised it took so long. We did try – you remember all those recommendations your parents announced after most people settled on the surface? Don’t leave the city alone, don’t walk outside after dark alone, that sort of thing? We were anticipating a human eventually testing us by coming here and attacking somebody. But your parents couldn’t enforce their recommendations without seriously impeding on the freedom of their people, could they?”

“I… I guess not.” They look down, eyes shadowed. “If I can do something about it, and I don’t, does that make me a bad person?” they whisper.

Sans comes forward before I can say anything. “Kiddo, look at me,” he says. He waits until Frisk looks up to continue. “I know we’ve kinda been pretending those bad times never happened. We haven’t told anyone who doesn’t already know. We don’t need to. I’ve seen you at your worst, kid. I’ve seen you cranked on EXP and LOVE and… not yourself. I sat there and waited for you and judged you, so trust me when I say you aren’t a bad person. You’re one of the best people I know, Frisk.” He winks. “And if you think I’m wrong, you must think I’m a bad judge. D’you think I’m a bad judge?”

Frisk lets out a shuddering breath and shakes their head. They wrap their arms around themself first. They make self-comforting gestures like that occasionally. Then they stand up and hug Sans, and if he waits a beat too long to take his hands out of his pockets, if he’s so hesitant returning the embrace it’s almost like he’s worried he will hurt them, Frisk says nothing and stands there and waits for him to hug them back.

Asriel, apparently unable to watch affectionate touching without participating in some way, reaches towards me. I raise a hand for him to hold.

“Sans?” he says after a moment. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothin’ to apologize for, kid,” Sans replies.

“Yes there is.” His tone is somber. “There’s no excuse for what I’ve done.”

Frisk steps to the side, facing us, keeping one of Sans’s arms over their shoulders. They have two inches on him now. Sans shoves his other hand in his pocket. “Technically all you did was follow Frisk around like a creeper and take everyone’s souls,” Sans says. “But you gave them back.”
Asriel opens his mouth and Sans shakes his head. “Look, I get it. I’m not tellin’ you you’re not allowed to be messed up by what… didn’t happen. How you’re doin’ now is the consequence of your actions, even if none of the other consequences survived the timelines. But, kid… jeez. If soullessness can make someone as nice and sensitive as you be a nasty little asshole, I woulda hated to see what it woulda done to somebody who wasn’t as good as you.”

“I’m not good,” Asriel says in a small voice.

As often as I hear this sort of thing from him, it still makes my heart hurt. Sans offers him a hand. Asriel stares for a second, then releases me and reaches out to take it.

The prince levels what can only be described as a glare at Sans when a sloppy fart noise erupts from their linked hands. “It’s not funny when everyone knows it’s going to happen,” he says.

“It’s always funny,” Sans corrects. “Ain’t my fault if it doesn’t float your goat.”

Asriel forces a scowl, mouth twitching. Sans pulls him to his feet and loops his other arm around his shoulders.

I sit on the lower bunk. “Frisk, would you like your mom and dad to go over prevention plans with you?”

They think for a second. “I guess it might help. It can’t hurt.”

“I want to know, too,” Asriel says. “I should know about that sort of thing.”

He’s right, and some of those plans may need to be altered now that he is back in the picture. “I’ll talk to them about it. Now, could you two leave for a moment? I need to talk to Sans.”

Frisk inexplicably grins, deliberately elbows Sans, and happily skips out the door. Asriel follows more demurely.

Sans will avoid anything that isn’t light-hearted and casual to a fault. Might as well get right to the point. “Are you okay with the possibility that Frisk may not be able to reset?”

His grins falters and he immediately looks away. After a few long seconds he shrugs. “I want to be.”

“But you’re not.”

“I’m… not sure I know how. I don’t know how to… not expect that one day it’ll all turn back.”

“Do you want to talk with me about it?”

“Um.” Still no eye-to-socket contact. “No.”

“Are you opposed to talking to me, or anyone? I can always set you up with another psychologist. I won’t be offended.”

He’s starting to sweat. “Well… nobody else can know about the timelines. You just need to focus on Asriel right now.”

I frown. He is always brushing himself off like he’s not important. I let a pause float by. I don’t think it’s time to push yet. “Okay,” I say at last. “I’m also proud of you for… basically doing my job. You say you’re bad at it, but you didn’t hesitate to comfort Frisk and Asriel, and you did it well.”
“They’re kids. They’ve both suffered enough for multiple lifetimes.”

He almost mumbles it. What’s his problem? I expected at least one shitty joke by now. Why is he so nervous?

I stand. “Let’s go downstairs. Check on them.”

Just like that, it’s gone. He grins. “Make sure Toriel’s mothering isn’t smothering?”

Actually, I just want a snack. I get hangry pretty easily. “Something like that.”
Violence: intense physical force intended to hurt, damage, destroy, or kill someone or something.

Chapter Notes

The title is a warning, and this is not the worst it gets.

Mettaton takes one look at my list. “You’re joking. Right, darling?”

I level a stare at him, refusing to blink because that tends to make my words sharper. “Asriel is in a very delicate place right now. Frisk will be next to him. That will help. It will not guarantee anything. He absolutely cannot become so distressed I have to pull him offstage. If he does, he will develop fears related to public speaking and being in front of crowds of monsters, and he’s their prince.”

“Of course I want His Highness to be at ease,” Mettaton says frettingly. He waves the four pages I handed him. “This just seems a little much, even for the… severity of the circumstances.” He raises a perfect eyebrow. “Even for you.”

“That’s the edited version,” I say bluntly. “I cut it down from seven pages.”

“I’m only going to have him for twenty minutes. It won’t even be consecutive. There will be a commercial break in the middle.”

“Then you’d better read carefully. That’s a lot of time to screw up. And if you think I won’t interrupt the show if I feel it’s necessary, you are dead wrong.”

“Oh, no. I would never doubt that.” He eyes me. “I must say, we are quite lucky to have you on our side. I shudder to think of what it would be like to have you as an enemy.” He puts a hand on his hip. “That said, I will read your frankly ludicrous list of demands and follow them to the letter. I want the young prince to consider this a good experience.”

“You do that,” I say sweetly. I head around back, where Asriel and Frisk are getting ready.

Their parents are both fussing over them. It’s not formal, both children are in stripes, but Toriel is attempting to groom that little tuft of fur that always sticks up on Asriel’s head and Asgore is standing by, nervously tapping a foot and telling Asriel to hold still for his mother.

“You two, go sit down,” I say when I get close enough. “Quit mauling him, Toriel. He’ll be fine.”

“Of course he’ll be fine.” She leaves the stubborn fur alone and surveys him, looking for imperfections. She smiles at him. “He will do wonderfully. We will be right there.”

Her reassuring words only appear to increase Asriel’s anxiety. “I was serious,” I say. “Go sit in the audience. You’ll do more good out there, where they can see you. I’ve got this.”

When did I get so comfortable ordering centuries-old royalty around? They go, both of them looking worriedly at their children the whole way. Frisk seems fine, but Frisk is better at concealing their emotions than… nearly every other kid their age, actually. Asriel comes right up
to me and locks his arms around me and tucks his head under my chin.

“I must have hurt so many people in the audience,” he says in a small voice. “I killed them.”

I return the embrace. I’m not sure he’s ready for this, but he really wants to participate in Surface Day and obviously he has to go public before then. It’s next week. We waited as long as we could.

“You didn’t this time,” I say. I start to rock, still holding him. “They are here, on the surface. You gave them that. They’re going to love you, even if you feel like you deserve their hatred.” We have talked about this. “Twenty-five minutes, Asriel. That’s it. You’re going to feel like you’re faking it, and you’ll be worried, because Flowey was good at faking it, but you’re going to do it for as long as you’re out there. If you don’t think you can, stand up and come right back here to me. If that happens, it’s okay. We planned for it, just in case. You won’t be ruining the show. Just promise me you won’t wait. You’ll leave the set as soon as you need to, not a second after.”

He doesn’t say anything for a while. I wait, still rocking. He gets to decide when to end the hug. He needs to know he is in control, that he can monitor himself and walk away if we misread the situation and it’s too big of a leap after all. He should not force himself to do something when he’s on the edge of a meltdown. It’s still too early for that.

“Okay,” he finally says. “I promise.” He pulls back without releasing me and very casually tilts his head up to bump his nose against mine. I almost flinch, still unused to that. I’ve seen him do that with his parents, but this is only the second time he’s done it to me. Toriel and Asgore do it to Frisk, too, but they usually touch Frisk’s forehead instead of their nose.

Asriel goes to Frisk, and they hug and have a short, murmured conversation I can’t hear. When they pull apart I set a hand on Frisk’s shoulder. They know what I’m asking with my expression and they smile and give me a thumbs-up.

My worries turn out to be largely unnecessary. A hush falls over the audience when Asriel is introduced by name. Excited chattering breaks out. Mettaton, naturally, has the audience wrapped around his dainty pinky finger in a matter of seconds and Frisk is wonderful, as always, and things flow nicely. Asriel doesn’t really know which camera to look into and when, so he spends a lot of time looking at Frisk or Mettaton or his parents.

My phone starts blowing up after the commercial break because Mettaton asks Asriel about me and he embarrasses himself by gushing about me and giving me too much credit. Shannon immediately sends me a slew of texts:

> u have 2 stop pulling these groundbreaking stunts. Treating dead kids now?
> srsly im never gonna catch up 2 u so u have to involve me in ur mischief
> btw he’s so fluffy & adorable i cant take it does he like hugs?

I roll my eyes and turn off my phone. I’ll field my personal life later.

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The press conference is a mess.

But it was necessary. They didn’t even make it home. There were news vans and reporters all
along the street in front of their home. Toriel called Asgore and Isla turned the car around and then they entered the Embassy through a side door on the east wing. They were lucky to be in a vehicle in the first place. Asriel had to make it to the studio without being seen, so it was either a car or one of Sans’s shortcuts, and Asriel was excited about riding in a car for the first time as himself.

Frisk is under the impression the press conference was called mostly to get all the reporters off their front lawn. Chara thinks a couple of fireballs or knives could have done the job just as well. They are sulking a little because Asriel is in Isla’s office with Alphys and Papyrus.

*I’m not sulking,* Chara says sulkily.

Often Frisk has been the center of attention at meetings and conferences like these. Not this time. This time their parents are being drilled with questions about Asriel’s rebirth. For once, they don’t look so awkward standing next to one another. A few people have already insinuated that everyone lied about his death in order to gain sympathy for the monsters. When that happened, the temperature on the stage rose with Toriel’s suppressed rage and Asgore looked as if someone sucker punched him. It made Undyne break her silence. She threatened to kick out anyone who was going to be an insensitive jerk. She’d *literally* kick them out, she said.

The reporters are unhappy because Frisk’s parents aren’t giving them a lot of details. Three people have asked when Asriel will be here. When the fourth person asks, Isla tells them they don’t have the right to talk to him and if they think they do, they’re entitled idiots who are divorced from the reality of how unimportant they actually are. She reminds them that the last time Asriel was faced with a human crowd, it killed him, and—

Wow. Someone – Frisk can’t see who – yells “monster bitch” at her. Toriel very deliberately sets a hand on Frisk’s shoulder. Asgore’s posture changes. Chara is quiet.

Isla laughs. “Who said that? I suppose it doesn’t matter, because whichever coward opened their fat mouth doesn’t matter. But you should know you’re only half right.”

A reporter up front raises her hand, brow furrowed. “So… you identify as a monster?”

Frisk sometimes wishes they were a monster. They certainly would have had a better childhood. But they know their humanity is the only reason they can do anything for their family and friends. And… if it comes down to it, they can take a hit that might kill somebody they love.

“What. No,” Isla says, straight-faced. “I’m human. Obviously. But the other part of the half-assed insult was accurate, so is anyone else so stupid they need to repeat a question we’ve answered or refused to answer three times already? No? Good. Would anyone like to rub together a few brain cells and ask us something that *might* pass as near-intelligent? I’d also like to add that anyone attempting to dig into the privacy of a traumatized ten-year-old may end up removing Undyne’s armor-clad foot from their rectum. Choose your questions carefully.”

Undyne sends an appropriately terrifying grin out towards the reporters, who seem to cringe as one away from her.

Chara is more than satisfied with that. *We’re lucky we have her,* they say. There is a pause. *I’d never thought I’d say that about a human adult.*

Frisk is surprised, too. Chara, Asriel is back and he’s getting better, they say. Do you think—

*No. He’s getting better but he’s still in so much pain and it’s my fault.*

It might help him, to know you’re here. And it’s not your fault.
It won’t, and it is. And you’d have to tell Asgore and Toriel and everyone else and Isla will want to treat me because she’s been talking to Toriel and Asgore and Asriel so she must know I’m fucked up and do you really want to have that conversation with Sans? He will want to kill me.

No he won’t.

You don’t know that.

You don’t know he will.

He looks at you sometimes. When you’re interacting with me, or... when I have some measure of control. I feel like he sees me. And he... he always freezes. He doesn’t look at you the same way when he sees me.

He... doesn’t know the whole story. I’m sure with an explanation, he’d—

No, Frisk, Chara snarls. That is off-limits. You were never supposed to know about that shit.

Frisk wrinkles their nose. They know they’ve always gotten a little desperate where Chara and Asriel are concerned. It might help them all understand, they reply. Especially Sans.

It’s a moot point. We are not telling anyone about me. Not... not until Asriel’s better, at least. Maybe never.

Frisk sighs mentally. They tried to talk to Chara about this when they left the Underground and Chara practically begged them to help Asriel instead. Now Frisk has to wait to ask again when Asriel is better. At least better is a relative term. They know Asriel will probably have problems for the rest of his life. And that’s okay. Frisk plans to be there to help him with it for the rest of their life.

It’s just… when they think about growing up, they don’t want Chara in their head for the rest of their life. They want Chara next to them, and next to Asriel, too, in their own body. Frisk feels bad sometimes because Chara gets dragged along in their life and they want Chara to have their own life. They deserve a second chance.

No I don’t, they mutter.

Well, Frisk replies, jaw set, we’re just going to have to disagree on that.

I get a lot of crap over Asriel, which is better than him or his parents or the monster community getting crap over him. A minority, but a vocal minority, of journalists are painting me as the mastermind behind everything. Apparently I’ve been manipulating the monsters since the beginning and getting their prince and ambassador, their future, to respond to my authority is supposed to put me in power or something. Oh, and it differs from journalist to journalist, but apparently I’m having sex with Toriel or Asgore or both of them.

It’s kind of hilarious, but it will only remain funny as long as that minority stays a minority. The vast majority of reporters and journalists have pointed out our refusal to go into detail. We are accused of hiding something. I release a scathing statement pointing out that airing every detail of Asriel’s life in order to provide entertainment for people who lives are so boring they’d love to re-
traumatize a child will do just that. He will speak and take questions when he is ready, not a moment before.

One of the biggest immediate issues is the “so monsters can die and come back to life” question. I’ve said it, Toriel has said it, and even Alphys has released a detailed statement explaining why the answer to that question is no. Asriel’s death was unique. He is the only monster known to have ever absorbed a human soul, which is what we focus on because we’re not explaining dead kids and their harvested souls as the source of the determination that created Flowey. We also emphasize that, given what happened to Asriel, no monster wants to absorb a human soul. I think this is true. It wouldn’t be practical. If that ever happened and it wasn’t immediately rectified, it would likely be seen as a violent act and could trigger another war.

Despite all the shit, we manage to have a good Surface Day and Frisk has a good twelfth birthday. The population of Newer Home is over seven thousand. Obviously, not all monsters are okay with being splashed with water. There are perhaps fifty humans living in Newer Home now. Participation runs at about two thousand, so we split into ten teams and acquire even more water guns and balloons. We add in hoses, too, and some monsters are able to instantly rig up sprinkler-based traps that are activated by motion, magic use, tripwires, and other things I don’t really understand.

It quickly dissolves into chaos. Everyone comes out of it totally soaked. When it’s over, I recommend putting someone in charge of a supply list and having participants sign up beforehand. Asriel says we should all wear color-coded bandanas according to which team we are on and we can use paint instead of water and we can all wear white and whichever team puts the most paint on the other teams wins. Frisk tells him rainbows are becoming a theme of his and he complains that he’s only seen one his entire time on the surface and that was when he was Flowey and couldn’t care about it.

I’m glad he went public. He needed this.

The monsters seem delighted to have him back, too. The way he and Frisk get along enhances the possibility of full integration in the near future.

Unlike the reporters and journalists, the general public takes to Asriel immediately, thanks in no small part to how objectively cute he is. Most people reject the notion that a shy ten-year-old could be part of whatever scheme some people say I am cooking up. The majority accepts I am treating him and doesn’t think I’m sleeping with his parents.

Surface Day kicks my ass. I wake up the next morning with sore muscles and angry joints. I overestimate myself and limp out of my room. I have to stop and lower myself to the floor via the doorframe in a controlled fall. Bean trots up to me, sniffs me, plants his ass on the floor, and practically yowls.

Papyrus comes to investigate. “ISLA!!” he exclaims, rushing to me when he sees me. He gingerly reaches under me and lifts me. I try not to grimace at the way my legs and back bend. “You mustn’t push yourself,” he scolds on our way to the bathroom. “What do you need?”

“Hydrocodone/paracetamol. The 5-325’s. Two of them.”

He shifts me to one skinny arm. I feel like an infant and I tighten my grip on his shoulders, trying to better take my weight off my back.

He deposits two pills on the counter and shakes the bottle. “You only have three left.”
That will get me through today, but I have to get a refill. I can’t put it off anymore. I can’t risk waking up like this and not having my meds. I could stand it, I have a high pain tolerance, but I wouldn’t be able to do anything and I’m not about to make my friends watch me deal with that much pain.

Papyrus takes me back to bed after I pee (he doesn’t help. I make him wait outside because I can at least manage that), gets me a glass of water, makes me breakfast, and is generally amazing. He asks me to rate my pain, which is… sad. I didn’t feel bad about training Sans to respond to my numbers, but for some reason Papyrus getting into the habit makes me sad.

I can’t control having days like these, but the least I can do is make sure I have the meds to deal with them. I’ll get a refill sometime today.

I can’t move properly until that afternoon, so I put off Asriel until about three because if he sees me moving the way I am he might cry. He’s done it before. He has tried to heal my swollen knees and cried when I was honest and told him it wasn’t doing anything. Toriel did the same thing once, minus the crying.

It turns out to be a long day and I don’t leave for the pharmacy until after ten. Sans asks if I want him to ride along, but I shouldn’t be gone for more than twenty minutes.

I drive to the human city. It is definitely a city now. Its population exploded when Newer Home started to go up and it hasn’t stopped. It’s just as big as Newer Home, if not bigger.

It takes a little longer than usual to reach the pharmacy because new development occurred on the other side of the street. It looks more urban here, too. A lot of concrete and not a lot of green.

Unfortunately, some old lady shopping for groceries recognizes me, addresses me by name, and proceeds to talk to me for half an hour about what living in Newer Home is like. She isn’t hostile at all. She says her grandson is considering moving there and says she wants him to research the city first and that she’d insist he research a human city, too.

She says leaving home for the first time is a big deal. We stand to the side of an aisle so we aren’t in the way of anybody else. I don’t mind talking to people who are curious, but I kind of don’t have a choice because right now, all this old woman knows of the monsters is me and I have to be a good reference.

It’s still a problem. I’d like to believe she isn’t in on it, but I can’t be sure, because I’m unlocking my car when I’m attacked in the parking lot by people who without doubt overheard our conversation.

They’re morons because when they are only twenty feet from me, one of them yells, “Hey, monster bitch!”

I whip around. Three of them. All humans, all men. The smallest has four inches and forty pounds on me. The other two are both just over six feet, but one must weigh over two-hundred pounds.

My brain snaps into battle mode. I drop everything I am holding. When the biggest charges at me and lunges, I step towards them and aside, knock the nearest of his arms in towards him, grab the fabric on his chest, and yank forward and down. His head smashes into my car door. Somehow I
doubt my car insurance is going to cover that.

To drive the point home, my knee comes up and collides with his forehead. He drops, limp, without a sound, but I have to move because the smallest is almost on me.

I leap on him and his arms instinctively draw inward, but he’s too late to get a block up and instead he flails his arms, one smashing into my side and the other fist haphazardly hitting me in the face. My head is jerked to the side, but I ignore it and clench my abdominal muscles to steady myself and focus on another part of my body. I slam my knee into his stomach and try to catch his temple with an elbow, but he moves and my aim is off and it hits his cheekbone with too little force to do anything more than bruise.

He doubles over from the stomach shot, no grip on me. I tear backwards once I land on my feet, shoving him to the ground.

Too late. The third hits me. His aim is off, too, because his punch isn’t solid and halfway glances off the side of my head. I grab that arm, find his hand, and yank back on his pinky. He shouts and I put a foot in his crotch.

The smallest is back up. I turn in time to sidestep him, but he doesn’t overextend or expect that I’m going to be easy, and he’s still facing me with a block up even though his strike missed. I attack him with a flurry of jabs. It’s not supposed to touch him, the punches aren’t hard enough to do damage anyway, they are meant to overwhelm him until he can’t keep up and—

There. I slug my right fist into his ribs with more force, use the second in which he’s wincing to step in close, one hand grabbing the back of his knee and jerking that leg up. I step on his other foot so when I shove, his ankle twists. He falls and I step back.

I notice the biggest one is up again, but holding his head. Quickly, I turn towards the third, still on the ground but beginning to get up, and bring my foot down on the back of his head, using enough force to knock him out without killing him. His forehead bounces off the cement and he doesn’t move after that.

Even if he’s down, his bigger friend is up. I’m ready, but I freeze when I notice a glint of something in his right hand. A knife. Oh fuck.

“Die quietly like a good bitch,” he snarls, and I turn tail and run like hell when he comes at me.

A glance over my shoulder tells me I’m not going to outrun him. I lower my hand to my pocket and flick out my pocketknife. As practiced as I am with that movement, it still slows me down the slightest bit, and—

And out of nowhere, a bright beam of light cuts through the dark and hits my pursuer. He goes down, no visible injuries except the abrasions from falling, but his soul is already being yanked out of him and it’s already blue.

He’s screaming, from fear, not pain, but that ends when his body is jerked up about six feet and then is promptly slammed into the concrete. He goes limp and quiet.

Sans is thirty feet away from me, left hand outstretched, left eye socket blazing blue. He looks pissed. He lowers the hand and the flames in his face gutter out.

I stopped moving when Sans shot him with... whatever that was. My head is still buzzing. When the buzzing goes away, I start shaking. It takes several tries to properly close my pocketknife. By the time I do, Sans is next to me.
“Are you—” he starts.

“Shut up and get in the car,” I interrupt him. I have no idea what my voice sounds like. I feel detached, like I’m not operating my body.

When we walk past the bastard with the twisted ankle, he whimpers and throws his arms over his head. We ignore him.

I calmly grab my keys and the bag my meds are in, get in, and buckle up and wait until Sans is in and buckled too and then I floor it out of there.

It’s a solid ten minutes before I say anything. “Have you been following me when I go somewhere alone?”

He hunkers down, shoulders coming up. “Yeah.”

Every muscle in my body is stupidly tense, but I hardly feel it. “Why?”

He doesn’t answer for a moment. Then, “I was worried. Everyone was. You leave Newer Home the most relative to everyone else and I get that sometimes you need to get human stuff for you and Frisk, but it put you at risk, and sometimes you say no when I ask if I can come with you. And I wasn’t… keeping tabs on you, or anything, but if you mentioned you were leaving and I knew nobody was going with you then yeah, I followed you.” A pause. “And I’m glad I did.”

Suddenly it’s all too much, and I’m back in my body and I can feel how hard I’m shaking and I must have bit my lip when I got hit because it’s bloody and I’m pulling over, practically slamming on the brakes, breathing way too hard and fast.

I pound my fists on the steering wheel and get out of the car.

I don’t get very far. Sans stops me with hands on my shoulders. I might be crying. He looks concerned and he’s never really concerned about anything and I’m abruptly grabbing him in a hug, dropping my face to his shoulder.

He hesitates, but he still brings his arms up around me. He awkwardly pats my back.

When I can stop gasping for more than two seconds, I ask, “Did you kill him?”

“No,” he replies immediately. “No. I wanted to, but – no.”

“I was going to. When I – when I pulled out the knife. He had a weapon and he was bigger and faster and I was going to kill him.”

“I know. I’m glad I got there in time. But if I hadn’t been there, I would’ve wanted you to kill him, if it kept him from hurting you.”

“I don’t know if I can do that again. If I can kill someone. It was so hard the first time. I mean, I could do it, easily – too easily. I don’t think I would survive it. Not again.”

“I know.”

I think I’m done hyperventilating. I’m still trembling and I don’t want to let go yet, but I think those feelings of being out of control have passed. Sometime during all this, Sans moved his hands up to rest on my shoulder blades. He needs to wash his hoodie, but it’s soft.

I let out a snort of watery laughter into his hood.
A beat of silence. “I hope you intend to let me in on the joke.”

“It’s just – did you see that dent in my car? That was from the big guy’s head. After I did it and he was still reeling, I thought, ‘this will drive the point home,’ and I kneed him in the head. After I slammed him into my car.”

He chuckles. “That’s so bad.”

“You like bad.”

He pulls back, and so do I, because it was getting to be about time. I’m still upset, obviously – getting attacked will upset anyone, but I’m no longer panicky. I’m starting to get pissed, to think – I wonder if that was spontaneous or planned.

“Thank you,” I say. “For saving me. For stopping me from killing him.”

“That’s super unnecessary,” he replies. “If I hadn’t knocked him out, he was dead no matter what. Either you would have killed him or he would have hurt or killed you and I would have killed him.”

I hug him again, briefly, exhaling.

“Alright,” I say, pulling back and turning around. Unsurprisingly, he’s already in the car and buckling up. I get back in the driver’s seat. “Think Toriel will make me a pie tomorrow?”

“After that? You’d butter believe it.”

“Sans.”

“Just make sure not to milk it too much. She’d make you egg-cellent pies for the next three weeks if you play it right.”

“You’re naming cake ingredients, not pie ingredients.”

“Don’t be salty—”

“Sans, stop it or I’m crashing the car.”
Trust: the belief that the trusted can be relied upon and will do what is expected or right.

Sans has never disagreed with any of my decisions. He doesn’t disagree with anyone’s decisions. He’s too lazy to argue and finds that resistance takes more effort and energy, so he doesn’t do it.

So I’m confused as to why Toriel is awake and in the kitchen when we get home.

“Toriel, is something wrong? It’s late,” I say. Papyrus is probably asleep upstairs, or he’d be here, tending to our guest.

“Sans texted me,” she replies, standing up. “Come here, Isla. Let me heal you.”

I don’t. I turn to Sans. “We never talked about who we were going to tell. Why didn’t you wait until tomorrow morning?”

“’Cause you woulda convinced me not to tell anyone,” he answers, leaning against the counter. “We need to know so we can do a better job protecting you.”

“Who’s going to protect me? You?” I feel a sneer pulling at my mouth and I don’t like it. “With your single HP, Sans? Good luck.”

He freezes. My brain catches up to me and I realize I should have let him explain what he meant. I’m supposed to be patient, aren’t I?

Toriel is looking at him, eyes wide. “Just… just one, Sans?”

His shoulders come up and he doesn’t look at either of us. “Don’t worry ‘bout it.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry ‘bout it, Tori.”

I inhale deeply through my nose. “It occurs to me that I may have just committed a social faux pas.”

“Stats are generally private,” Toriel tells me. “If the topic comes up, stating your own stats is acceptable. Stating those of others is not without prior permission. It is considered rude.”

Of course it is. “Sans. I’m sorry.”

“No big deal,” he mutters.

“Yes, it is, and you know it,” Toriel says. She looks at me. “HP is an acronym for hope. It’s indicative of mental health. It decreases right before a monster falls down.”

“We saw that trend in the lab,” I say, thinking. “Dull-colored souls, low maximum HP, and poor mental health were all significantly correlated. It never occurred to me that it would hold for monsters.”

“How long has it been like this, Sans?” Toriel asks softly. She gestures to me again, and this time I go to her to let her heal my bloody lip and whatever bruises I have.

He is turned to one side, not looking at either of us, obviously wanting to escape. He shrugs. “I
don’t have an accurate idea of the passage of time.”

“Was it this low before Frisk and Asriel broke the barrier?”

He moves a foot, rubbing the floor with the toe of his slipper. “Yeah. Can we focus on those bastards attacking Isla now?”

This makes me feel incredibly defensive. “Can we talk about you following me, Sans? Has anybody ever told you that’s creepy?”

His jaw sets, and he turns to look at me. “It’s a good thing I did. You could’ve died.”

“You can only say that in retrospect.”

“Someone attacking you was the obvious progression.”

Wait. He did not. “Progression from what? How long have you been following me?”

“You never told anyone about getting crap almost every time someone recognizes you, I had to make sure—”

“Sans.” Higher pitched and I hate it. “How long have you been following me?”

The pause winds up the tight ball in my chest. Toriel’s brow furrows.

It’s like all the air rushes out of him. His clenched hands relax. “About a year,” he admits.

Holy shit. The tension in my chest works itself to something else in my throat. “What’s your problem with me?” I surprise myself with how quivery my voice is. “You go through my medical records and find out about the shooting and you couldn’t learn your damn lesson? You violate my privacy again by monitoring the interactions I have with other humans?”

“Yeah, okay, this sounds bad.” He’s sweating and nervous but I can’t tell whether my stupid wavery voice or Toriel’s stare is doing it to him. “I don’t have a problem with you, I was just trying to protect—”

No, this is all wrong. “I don’t need to be protected!” I yell.

Sans’s hands ball up into little bony fists again. “You needed it tonight. I never intervened, not when people called you horrible names, not when they threw stuff at you—”

“I gave back worse than I got, every time! Half the time the person who insulted me ran away in tears!”

“Isla,” Toriel breaks in seriously. “You’ve been harassed and you never told us?”

Sans nods. I barely even look at her. “I wouldn’t call it harassment. Anyone who comes at me and doesn’t expect to get destroyed is a top-tier idiot.”

“It’s harassment,” Sans says flatly. “She’s been threatened, too.”

“Which you wouldn’t know about if you trusted me to take care of myself and didn’t follow me around,” I hiss.

“I can’t deny that.” He sounds mad. He never sounds mad. “I don’t trust you to take care of yourself because you don’t, Isla. Yeah, you’re better about takin’ your meds right and not
overworking yourself ‘til you puke blood but you’ve been makin’ enemies of everyone who’s got a problem with us. You’re good at handling it and we let you do it – we let you do everything you can think to pile on yourself – because even when you’re run-down and exhausted and sick you’re still more productive and efficient than anyone else, but that’s shitty of you to do to yourself and shitty of us to let you and it ends *now.*”

For several long seconds I can only stare. Then I clench my fists, scowling at the floor. I always expect myself to be objective and that is not a realistic expectation. “I’m going to bed,” I say.

“Isa—” Toriel starts.

“I’m pissed off, for more than one reason,” I interrupt. “I’m not arguing now. I’ll be less angry tomorrow.”

Sans says nothing, so I scoop up Bean and go.

I think about calling my sister, or Natalie or Spencer, but they don’t know Sans well and without the whole picture I can’t trust their judgment.

I don’t know why this… feels like a betrayal. It’s easy to counsel other people, but it’s always been hard for me to acknowledge any intense emotions I have. People do not act and react solely based on logic. That is what gives me a career. It’s what drives me. It’s also counterintuitive for me because I try to look at everything logically.

When I’m at the Embassy during lunchtime, I usually eat with Asgore, which has done absolutely nothing to deter the media-fueled rumors about us having sex. I think it helps people be less intimidated of me, to see me getting along with their king, even though that’s not a good indication of my friendliness because Asgore gets along with everyone (even Toriel now. Most of the time).

Before Asriel took up virtually all of my time, when I had sessions with Asgore, he always knew exactly what was bothering him. Getting to the why never took a lot of digging on my part. He’s fair and he has watched me cut mouthy jerks to ribbons with my tongue without getting involved or worked up over any of the racist crap they said.

So I tell him and he waits patiently until I’m done talking. He only interrupts once, and that is to ask if I was injured.

I’m worked up again by the time I’m done. Aside from the PTSD, my mood has always been stable, but this is doing something to me I don’t really understand.

Asgore mulls over and says, “Well, Sans has some good points. Don’t glower at me yet, Isla. You should not leave Newer Home alone.”

“Are you *joking*?” I can feel a snarl coming on. Why can’t I calm myself down? I cross my arms and shut up because he’s watching me, waiting for an outburst or for me to choose not to have one. He’ll take it either way. It won’t change whatever he’s about to say or how he will say it because that’s how he is.

“It’s not safe,” he continues. “I imagine you have been recognized and heckled for some time now, or Sans wouldn’t have… felt the need to watch over you for so long.”
That’s true. He would have quit if I wasn’t recognized. I think. “People have yelled at me. I’ve verbally eviscerated everyone and nobody came back for round two. It’s been somebody different every time.”

“Well, much of that was your own doing. You direct any negative attention we receive onto yourself by… being less-than-nice to the humans who aren’t so open-minded. Which is something we have talked about, but never made you stop doing.”

“Sometimes mean needs to happen, and it’s better if it’s me.”

“Not if you refuse to take the necessary measures to protect yourself from the backlash. Isla, what would have happened had Sans not been there?”

It’s hard to say out loud. “I would have killed someone.” I scowl. “I’m glad he was there last night. But he was there last night because he’s been following me for a fucking year.”

“Oh, that is unacceptable, of course,” Asgore says as though that’s an afterthought. “Although I am impressed Sans managed to stick with something for that long.”

“He doesn’t trust me. He said he doesn’t trust me.”

“Is that what has you so upset?”

“What?”

“Honestly, when I noticed your demeanor, I thought your story was going to be a lot worse. You aren’t easily rattled. You don’t even seem too shaken up by being physically attacked, which is my main concern. Instead you are bothered by Sans.”

“Obviously. Where the hell does he get off saying I need to be protected? If anything, I’m the one who needs to be doing the protecting.”

Asgore cocks his head to the side, just slightly. Asriel definitely picked up that confused gesture from him. Asriel does it when I get too technical while I’m explaining something to him. “What do you mean, Isla?”

“I’m human.” And I’m getting angry again. “Every hit I take is a hit that has the potential to kill a monster if it’s delivered with killing intent. It’s better if I’m the recipient of all anti-monster violence. I survived eight gunshots, Asgore. Eight!” I bang on the table with a fist, causing at least a quarter of the cafeteria to turn and look at us. “That’s eight people.”

It always comes back to this. I deflate and the king pats my closed fist with a massive hand. It’s still nuts that I’m the scary one between us. It’s nuts that Asriel is someday going to be as big as his parents, when now he fits on my lap.

“You tend to take responsibility for whatever happens around you,” he says after a moment, voice quiet. “It’s admirable, in most situations. But you have lived through some horrible things. None of them were your fault.”

“I know that. Logically.”

“It isn’t enough to know. And gosh, I understand. I know what it’s like to wonder if things would have been better if only you had done more. Or less, in my case.”

I kick a table leg. “I’m lucky monsters will use a therapist with psychological problems.
Sometimes I can’t believe you let me near your kids.”

He is surprised by this. “You helped both of them to something approaching normalcy in a matter of months. You were willing to work with them full-time. I don’t know what we would have done with Asriel without you there.”

“Yeah, I know.” I was never the best at handling the fallout from that. Sometimes the transference worked a little too well and then the kids were better but I was a mess and Sans was always the one who kept an eyesocket on my well-being and took care of me when I needed it. He never complained about that. Not once.

And maybe following me was just a physical extension of his habit (which I just about pushed on him, really) of supporting me. Yes, it was creepy. Objectively. But…

“So I’m in the wrong here,” I say, annoyed that this seems to be a fact. “I… know I shouldn’t leave Newer Home alone. I guess that’s a price I have to pay for being here and having the privilege of speaking on your behalf.”

“You are both wrong,” Asgore says cheerfully. He frowns abruptly. “Just… be careful with Sans. He seems unflappable and apathetic, but… don’t be too hard on him.”

I have to remind myself that Sans’s single HP is a big deal and it’s not my place to tell people about it. I nod. “I know.”

Toriel called me twice this morning. She left one message almost begging me to be careful. She seems to think Sans is going to fall down any minute. I’m not worried about that. I saw his stats when he freaked out over my knowledge of the timelines and it’s been a year and nothing has changed. The only time he got any worse was when Asriel gained a soul and everybody got worse until Asriel could process some of what happened to him.

Undyne calls me, too. She has the phone on speaker and Alphys is with her. Undyne’s pissed that I got jumped, but she’s also annoyed with me for not saying anything. Toriel told her, so I finally call Toriel back and she says she has only held off on telling Frisk and Asriel.

If she’s gone and told everyone else, I’m not about to keep it from the kids. Frisk does exactly what I expect, which is to say they are sad and angry and above all, fiercely glad I’m alright.

I expect Asriel to cry. Instead, he becomes furious to the point at which the temperature starts shifting and I can see the air wavering over his palms. He snarls something halfway indiscernible about idiots and should have killed them and he sounds like Flowey and then he realizes it and looks horrified and then the waterworks come on and I can’t let him sit on this. He is not ready to process how he identifies with Flowey, so it’s not really a session, it’s mostly hugs and promises that we will get there.

Frisk stays and helps, but I am tired when I’m done fielding that. When I get home, I’m ready for an early bedtime, but Papyrus has other ideas.

Right. Toriel probably told him, too. He’s wringing his hands, Bean winding around his legs. “Isla?” he asks, more quietly than I expected. “Are you angry with Sans?”
My reaction was, while understandable, impractical. It has been hard for me to not be angry, but only because I’m closer to Sans than I am to anyone else right now. I might have feelings for him, but that’s so low on my priorities list and half the time I don’t notice it and yes, I’m rationalizing, but I experience any kind of attraction so infrequently and mildly it’s never at the forefront of my mind.

“A little,” I answer. “I know he meant well.”

Papyrus is silent for a beat too long. “I have a confession to make.”

I frown. “If something is bothering you, you can always talk to me. I’m good at listening.”

“I had an ulterior motive when I invited you to be super awesome amazing roommates with us. Sans… isn’t always happy. And that’s okay!! That’s normal. But some days he just can’t seem to do anything. Some days he can’t get out of bed or talk to me. It doesn’t happen very often but when it does it concerns me greatly. He won’t even make terrible puns those days!”

Lovely. I’ve never seen Sans crash, but I picked up on enough to know. “Papyrus, I think Sans is a bit depressed. It’s fairly—”

“I know,” Papyrus says. “I wasn’t done.” He pauses for a moment, thinking. “I was hoping you could help him. I know you’re very busy with the prince! I understand. But when you moved in, Sans got a little better, and then you started lazing about on the couch together late at night and watching movies more suitable for somebody Frisk’s age, and he got a little better again. And despite what he says on the matter, I know he…”

Papyrus trails off, flushes a pinkish-orange color, then utters, “UM. That is. Something you should talk about with him because the GREAT PAPYRUS also happens to be great at – at respecting the privacy of others!” That is just blatantly untrue. “HE IS UPSTAIRS NOW!!” he shouts abruptly. “YOU SHOULD GO SEE HIM!!!”

He suddenly takes off out the front door. It’s a good thing I left it open or he might have used one of the windows again. I watch him zip across the street and disappear into Alphys and Undyne’s house.

Well. Alright.

I don’t even bother knocking. I just go into Sans’s room and flick on the light. That doesn’t wake him, so I go to him and shake him. “Hey. Get up.”

His arm snaps up and he grabs my wrist with a strength I wouldn’t have expected from him. His other hand comes up to cover his left eyesocket. “Isla,” he says. “Wh-what are you—?”

“Toriel called me today and conveyed the importance that I be nice to you because of your single HP,” I deadpan. “Undyne’s ready to kill whoever jumped me. So is Asriel. Asgore was the only one who could talk some sense into me. So you were right, I shouldn’t go waltzing around like a normal human being because I’m not, I’m living in the monster community and the whole world is paying some degree of attention to us and I have to take that into account. And I’m glad you were there because I really don’t want to kill someone again. But you know you could have said something to me, right? It probably would have taken less effort than following me.”

“You have a tendency to disregard your own safety,” he mutters, relaxing his head back and prying his fingers off my arm. “I thought you’d dismiss it.”

Well… yeah, actually, that’s exactly what I would have done. “Okay,” I say. “You’re right. I’m
going to start taking precautions, so you’re not going to follow me anymore. If I want you to come with me when I need to buy pads or get more meds, I’ll ask. And we’re going to start having sessions."

Blank face. “Um… what?”

“Your brother knows you’re depressed.”

This is all I have to say, because his expression falls and he turns onto his side, his back facing me. “Damnit,” he mumbles. Then, “Don’t worry ‘bout me. I’m not about to fall down. I’ve been like this a long time.”

I sit on the edge of the bed. “That doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to feel better. Papyrus is worried about you. He wants me to help you.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Nobody else can know about the timelines. Not even any other monsters.”

“Okay, but why won’t you let me help you? It’s… you wouldn’t even have to talk a lot or give me details. A lot of cognitive behavioral therapy is the therapist teaching the patient techniques for monitoring and exerting indirect control over emotions.”

He lies there for a little while. “I wasn’t totally in the right. Followin’ you was just wrong. And I shouldn’t have snapped at you. I was – scared you’d put yourself at risk again. Frisk might not be able to reset.”

I didn’t think about that because I’ve never had to think of that. I don’t know why he won’t look at me.


I feel myself break into an ironic smile. It scares me sometimes, how I have trained myself to respond violently on reflex in certain situations.

It is silent for a few seconds. Then he says, “I have to tell you something,” and it sounds like he’s forcing it out.

“Me first,” I say. “Yeah, I did kind of kick their asses, considering that there were three of them and they were all bigger than me. But I’m mostly bark. I only bite if I have to.”

He turns to look at me, confusion edging his eyesockets. “I insult a lot of people,” I explain. “I’m nasty to a lot of people. I can see confrontations coming before they start to simmer and I throw my weight around to defuse them before they blow up. Within certain parameters, I will say what I have to in order to stop a potential physical fight or verbal explosion. I got really, really lucky last night. They were uncoordinated. Probably untrained. And you were there. If they had known what they were doing, one or both of us might not be alive. When it comes down to it, I talk a big game, but only because it decreases the likelihood of having to follow through.”

“Oh.” He moves a hand up to stuff it under his pillow. “I think I knew that already.”

I nod. “What did you want to tell me?”
Fear blooms suddenly on his face, in his eyesockets, and my phone goes off.

I’m annoyed until I see the caller ID. It’s Asgore. I already saw him today, which means this is important.

Sans turns to watch me take the call. When it ends I lower my hand to his shoulder. “Someone else was dusted. We should go.”

Over the next three months, two more monsters are killed, bringing the total up to four.

I don’t deal directly with the families. I don’t even know who exactly was killed. Asgore tells them I am available if they need me, but I wonder if my humanity keeps them away. Then again, maybe monsters don’t view death in the same way humans do. I know their funerals are a little more celebratory than ours, but working with Asgore and Toriel has made it obvious monsters grieve when someone dies unexpectedly and long before they should.

Whatever the case, a human or group of humans is killing monsters and that is unacceptable. After the third death, I go back on Mettaton’s show to talk about the psychology of prejudice and discrimination. Mettaton is annoyed with me because I give the censor a bit of a workout because I’m mad monsters are being killed and it shows.

Human law enforcement tries to help, but their tools are for a different job. Monsters are made of magic. They try to find human DNA at the scene of the crimes, but without a body post-mortem they can’t do much more.

Frisk gives an impromptu, emotional speech in front of a couple of cameras because they insist on being taken to the scene of the fourth murder. If I could have reached them fast enough, I would have pulled them from in front of the cameras, but I think the speech ends up doing more good than bad. Almost everyone does not support the killing of random monsters. Calder, the council member of the city next door who let loose about Camp Wendell on air, points out that this is bad even for those carrying anti-monster sentiments because killing four monsters isn’t going to convince the rest of them to move back Underground and in fact might make them dig in.

He’s right about that. Toriel draws up a simple, cohesive list of facts and recommendations about humans and how they fight and how to best protect oneself. I read over it, Undyne reads over it, then Toriel gives it to Asgore so he can make the announcement because the people are more likely to listen to him than she has.

School starts again in August. Asriel is bumped up to Frisk’s grade mostly so he can be with them all day. He could have feasibly moved up another year or two, but I want him to take it easy and so does Toriel. He still sees me every day because if I’m busy, he seeks me out. We don’t have sessions every day, but being away from me for part of the day is harder on him than I’d like.

When he sees Frisk’s speech, he decides he wants to speak, too. He wants to do something because nothing the rest of us have done appears to have made a difference. It’s hard to tell with a sample size of four, but I’m not willing to wait for more people to die to gauge the effectiveness of our efforts.

I tell him what speaking will entail and what he will have to do. He wants to do it, but he knows he isn’t ready yet. The only humans he has been exposed to since he was killed by a group of them are
Frisk, me, and Ezra and Kalene Dyre. Even though his primary playmates are Frisk and sometimes Kalene and I’m his third guardian and therapist, it isn’t enough.

Alphys has been monitoring monster sympathy and support amongst casual internet users, whom I largely ignore when I comb through the internet. I expected mostly indifference, especially since the integration really didn’t affect the vast majority of people in this country, let alone world, at all. I’m right. Alphys finds that most people are virtually shrugging and saying, “Sure, why not?” but another large portion of the population is… I suppose concerned is the right word. Nobody knows for sure what is going to happen and that is scary for some people.

The blatant racists are a minority, but they are a verbal minority. Despite how often they make their opinions known, nobody really has any good points yet. The only valid concern for the future is the “how is magic going to affect everything,” question. From what I’ve seen, most magic use is casual and used for boring daily tasks. Asgore makes tea at the Embassy with fire magic. Sans teleports. Alphys works on machinery and technology in the lab with hers in a process I don’t understand at all. Magic does for monsters what a lot of common tools and technology do for humans.

Every once in a while, we will get somebody who tries to spin our firm retention of privacy in our personal lives as an attempt to hide something. And yes, we are hiding a few things – the biggest being six dead kids and how their souls helped destroy the barrier and revive Asriel – but it’s necessary. I’ve been mean enough that nobody will ask me to violate patient confidentiality laws anymore. Honestly, I’ve been mean enough I’m surprised anyone thinks to ask me anything at all. To a very small minority of people, I am what is wrong with the so-called ‘Monster Movement’ (a name Asgore likes and adopts almost immediately, to Toriel’s annoyance). These are the people who actually believe I’m sleeping with the king and queen. Everyone likes to speculate because humans are sexually-minded and it’s juicy gossip, but most people know better.

Monsters have the firm support of those with deviant sexualities and genders, thanks to Frisk (and me, a little). Monsters don’t gender people and things nearly as much as humans and they aren’t likely to say they identify as a particular sexuality. They judge potential partners on a case-by-case basis and they more readily accept those with deviant identities and interests. To me, humans have always seemed unreasonably driven to explore their romantic and sexual interests, but that is because I don’t really have those. Monsters seem slightly less driven in that.

Magic is also proving to be good for the environment. It doesn’t create waste discernible by human standards and monsters are very good at using space and recycling. We get a lot of support from environmentally-minded humans because of this. They were amongst the first humans who really wanted to learn from monsters.

I have spent vast amounts of time during this year either treating Asriel or just being with him. Newer Home is, for all intents and purposes, complete, but cities are always growing and changing, and I missed many of the changes that took place this spring. Even with the major construction done, everyone seems to have found something to do. Gold for currency has certainly helped cushion everyone’s lives in the meantime. The only major project going on is plans for a university.

The hospital, while small, is fully staffed. Young human physicians and nurses and technicians and others flocked to it this summer, around the same time Newer Home’s human population exploded. We’ve got about seven thousand monsters and almost a thousand humans here now. I know some monsters have begun travelling, but I don’t know if anyone has tried to move into human settlements yet. If they have, no news is good news.
There is a lot of support out there and almost no way for anyone to express that support. We decide to have another rally. If the killer (or killers) sees the number of people who come together to call for an end to the hate crimes and racism, maybe they will stop.
“I told you I don’t care. You can pick.”
“Can you pretend to look at it and approve? It will make me feel better.”

For not having eyes, Sans manages to do a good impression of rolling them. He glances at my list. “Fine,” he says, bored. He goes to look away, then does a double-take. “Hang on.” He takes the list from me, looks at it for three seconds, then hands it back. “Just – one thing. If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Nothing is too much trouble.” Because I was an ass to him and I’ve put this off for long enough.

“Get me a double-sized bed. Maybe Paps will let me take double the naps.”

“That’s not how multiplication works. You double the bed, you have to halve the naps.”

He chuckles. “You can nap with me. Or Frisk can. Paps doesn’t nap.” Frisk looks up from their homework to raise their eyebrow at him. “Double the people and the naps stay the same, right?”

“I don’t nap either,” Frisk deadpans, even though they fell asleep on Toriel three days ago watching television. Asriel looks at us, leans over, and whispers something to Frisk. Frisk lets out a snort and nods. Neither of them is impressed with our fake math.

I ignore that and look over my list. “I’m going to order everything today. I’ll have it delivered to the Embassy. That way I won’t have to go pick it up and whatever human delivers it will be able to find the place.”

“Okay,” Sans says without looking away from the television.

“Papyrus said he’d help paint and carry stuff in when we get the furniture.”

“Okay.”

“I CAN HELP TOO!!!” Undyne shouts from the kitchen. She and Papyrus are running around in aprons. Toriel said she’d let them help as long as they followed her every command. Frisk and Asriel, who are at the table and between her and us, wince at her volume.

“You’re not allowed to paint,” I reply, raising my voice enough to be heard.

“WHY NOT!?!?”

“Because you’d paint by throwing the bucket at the walls or taping sponges to your fists and punching holes in the walls because they don’t want to change colors or something equally ridiculous.”
Undyne stares at me over Frisk’s and Asriel’s heads, shrugs because I’m right, and goes back to being Toriel’s kitchen slave.

“C’mere,” Sans says. “Watch this with me.”

I suppose the ordering can wait. I climb over the sectional to sit next to him. “What are we watching?”

“Bambi II. Look at how cute that little deer is. Look at how his dad fawns over him.”

I give his foot a kick. “Knock it off.”

“Hey, Asriel,” Sans calls. “You’ve got competition. Look at how adorable this deer is.”

“I like how you think to compare me to every animal with hooves,” Asriel replies acidly. “I don’t even have hooves.”

“You ungu-let me do it. Sorry if it doesn’t get your goat.”

“I’d rather listen to you flirt with Isla than make bad puns,” the prince shoots back. “You can just go back to doing that.”

I look over my shoulder. “We’re not flirting.”

“You should,” Frisk says. I don’t like their grin. “Then you could be my uncle Sans and my antler Isla.”

I look at Sans. He only shrugs, says, “Good one, Frisk,” and turns back to the television.

“Frisk!” Asriel says, betrayal clear in his voice. “You aren’t even watching the movie!”

“I’ve seen it,” Frisk responds. “It’s adorable. You should watch it, Asriel. You’re so sensitive, such a deer, it’ll make you cry.”

“It probably will!” Asriel agrees hotly. “Make another pun and I’ll bite you. I don’t have deer or goat teeth, either. I have fangs.”

“Oh, Azzy, I think you’re lion.”

Asriel makes a low hissing noise. He looks at Toriel and realizes he can’t complain to her because she will appreciate the puns, so he looks at me. I give him a sympathetic shrug. Frisk smirks to themself the entire time.

The rally is happening mid-October. That gives me six weeks to prep Asriel.

He goes to his dad for public speaking tips. Asgore is generally at ease and very likable while speaking. He only gets nervous when he has to lie, which is why Toriel and I have done nearly all of the lying. Asriel is just nervous. He’s worried about speaking in front of people and potentially messing up, but his biggest problem is going to be the humans who are going to attend and be in the crowd.
He is fine with individual humans. He interacts with his human classmates without issue, even though they are older than he is. His closest friends are probably Frisk and Kalene and they are both human. He can interact with Ezra now without anxiety. It is the mere idea of human crowds that strikes a fear in him that leaves him trembling and at risk of being caught in that horrible memory. His human classmates at school are still too few in number to form anything close to a crowd.

I talk him through visualizations and he sits there with his eyes closed and holds my hand. He squeezes and I squeeze back and as long as he feels that, he has some connection to the present. I don’t want to lose him in a flashback and re-traumatize him.

Everything is going smoothly right up until my twenty-seventh birthday. I’m at the Embassy and one of the receptionists calls me and asks me to come to the lobby.

When I get there I see my parents, sister, Natalie, and Spencer. Shannon turns around and shrieks my name and charges. I run because I do not want to embarrass myself in front of everyone by wrestling and withstanding a humiliating loss, so she chases me around the lobby and we’re both yelling at one another and everyone stops to watch. It takes forty seconds for Asgore, Undyne, and Mettaton (they were probably discussing security for the rally) to show up, at which point Undyne starts yelling encouragement at me and Shannon catches me and I lose.

I’m tapping out on the floor before I’m even pinned. “Spoilsport,” my sister says from on top of me. She doesn’t pull my joints in painful directions. She never does, even if I’m having a rare day of no pain or swelling.

She gets up and helps me up. “Guess who’s gonna be staying with you for a little while?” she asks, grinning wickedly.

I turn to look at our parents and my friends, eyes widening. She cackles. “Nope! Everyone’s just here for your birthday. I’m staying, though. Once I figure out where.”

“Wait. You mean…”

“Yeah, I’m moving out of the parents’ place. They let me bum off them for four months. That’s plenty of downtime.”

“But… what are you going to do? You have a bachelor’s in law and society.”

“Exactly. I’ll do whatever the hell these nice people need to get full rights. It’s total bullshit they don’t have them yet.”

My head is still buzzing. I haven’t really lived with my sister in well over a decade.

“Okay,” I say. Natalie appears to be in a deep and very flamboyant discussion with Mettaton presumably about one of their shared interests. Asgore is talking to my parents. I hope he doesn’t feel like he has to assure them they shouldn’t believe the rumors in the media. Ergh. That is not a conversation that ever needs to happen with my parents.

“We’re all staying the night at that fancy hotel.” Shannon cracks her knuckles for no particular reason. “But everyone else is leaving tomorrow. So I figure we can get smashed tomorrow night for your birthday.”

“I’m not getting smashed, Shannon.” I pause. “Though from what little exposure I’ve had, I know monster drinks are fun. Maybe we could sample a little.”
“Aw, hell yeah! We’re celebrating. You have to. You missed my twenty-first, you asshole.”

She doesn’t mean it. She knows I was treating and caring for Frisk at that point in time.

Shannon is still talking. “We have to invite your monster friends, too. Man, I’d pay to see Papyrus drunk. He already acts kinda drunk.”

Somehow I doubt Papyrus will partake in any alcohol consumption. “Fine. I’ll let them know. Now quit hogging me. I’m sure the parents and Nat and Spence want to talk to me, too.”

Asgore tells me to take the rest of the day off. I’m doubtful because my family and friends are perfectly capable of checking into their hotel and entertaining themselves until I’m done, but he threatens to melt my office door to the doorframe if I try to go back today and Undyne is smirking in a way that has me believing him.

We stop by the lab so everyone can get their souls read. I don’t know if any of the data can be used in any studies Alphys and I have going, but more data can’t hurt. I’ve been getting mine done every couple of weeks. We know certain aspects of souls can change. Color seems to be an exception to that rule. Brightness can change, but Frisk isn’t about to go purple and I’m not about to go green or something.

Having my family and Natalie and Spencer here at once has never happened before. It is such an anomaly I forget to communicate with anyone. Sure, Asgore, Undyne, and Mettaton know I’m with them, but around four I get a text from Asriel that reads I went next door and you weren’t there, when are you going to be home? which isn’t bad. It isn’t good, either, but I’ve gotten texts from him along the lines of I needed you ten minutes ago come get me right now.

He has some separation anxiety when it comes to me. I’m going to go out to dinner with my family and friends, but I can see him for just a little while before then. I can figure out what he needs. Maybe he’ll be alright until tomorrow after everyone leaves.

We stop at home because my parents want to see where I’m living. Papyrus gives them the grand tour, so they are distracted when Sans comes home and freezes at all the humans in his house.

“They’re using my birthday as an excuse to see me,” I tell him so he’ll relax. “We’ll be out of your nonexistent hair in a minute.”

“Cool,” he says. “I’m gonna go hide.”

He vanishes. I frown until I remember the last time he saw my parents was at the hospital after I made him lie about being in a relationship with me. I don’t blame him for wanting to avoid that awkwardness.

I text Asriel as Papyrus finishes the tour in the living room to tell him I’m home and I’ll be over soon. The only place he avoided was the basement. Shannon egged on whatever quirky thing to come through his Papyrus-filter and Natalie and my dad chuckled the entire time.

“Thanks, Papyrus,” I tell him. “We’re going now. I don’t know when we’ll be back—”

Asriel turns around the door and stops dead. Shannon says something to me but I’m already striding forward. I push Asriel towards the kitchen, hands on his shoulders, and even when we turn the corner and my friends and family are out of sight he still looks terrified and he’s still shaking and breathing too loud and fast.

“Asriel.” I take his face between my hands, tapping one cheek. “I need to know if you’re with me.”

He makes eye contact with me. “I wanted to see you and I can’t remember why,” he breathes.

“You’re having a panic attack. What’s my name?”

“Isla.”

“And where are we?”

“Your place. And Sans, and Papyrus. So – s-so why were all those h-humans—”

“Nope, not yet. You are here with me and you are safe. I—”

He cuts me off by throwing his arms around me and squeezing me ridiculously hard. I have seen monsters evidence strength that should be impossible, even taking into account the variations in their sizes and bodies. Asriel could probably carry me around and he is definitely smaller than I am.

He tucks his head under my chin. He lets up on the pressure and the hug doesn’t feel like something coming from Undyne anymore. I return the embrace and he lets me hold him. “I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, Asriel.”

“You said you’d come to me, and I—”

“I didn’t communicate enough, that’s all. Try to relax. Focus on breathing, okay? I’ll count for you.”

It takes maybe five minutes for him to come down. This is quick, but I removed him from the problematic stimulus right away. He is still scared, still can’t really let go of me, but he is no longer panicking and in danger of having a flashback. Kalene can calm him down faster and more effectively by singing, but singing does not fall in the category of Things I Am Good At.

“Okay,” I say. “Do you feel better?”

“Yes.” A pause. “I don’t… if I can’t even handle a small group of humans, there’s… no way I can speak at the rally, is there?”

“As of now, no, you’re not ready. But we still have a few weeks. That’s a lot of time.”

“Then… I need to try, don’t I?”

“Only if you feel like you can. Don’t do it because you feel like you have to.”

“I wanna speak. So I want to try.”

“Okay. Should I go explain what’s going on?”

His grip tightens. “Or not,” I say. “Let’s walk out, okay? Then we’ll see how you feel.”
Asriel shifts behind me, but refuses to let go of me. It’s slow and awkward, but we manage to turn the corner. I’ve got one of his hands in mine; the claws of his other are pricking my waist.

“There he is!!” Papyrus exclaims when he sees us. “That’s Prince Asriel Dreemurr. Um. Behind Isla, there.”

Either Papyrus explained a thing or two or someone figured out what was going on and passed the word around because nobody looks particularly surprised or confused to see Asriel cowering behind me. Spencer asks a question about the hospital to give everyone something else to focus on. We stop about ten feet away and just stand there. Everyone does their best to ignore us while I occasionally check in with Asriel, murmuring to him to make sure he is still in the present.

By the time there is a knock at the door, he has stopped crushing my hand. He is still tense, nothing close to relaxed, but he isn’t trembling so crazily anymore.

The door opens and Toriel’s voice calls out, “Greetings!” She rounds the corner quickly, Frisk right on her heels. Her eyes widen a bit when she sees her son latched onto me. Frisk comes right to him. “Oh. Hello, everyone. We did not intend to interrupt.”

“NONSENSE!!!” Papyrus cries out joyfully. “Join us!! The more the merrier!!”

Asriel is mumbling, “I’m fine, I’m fine,” to Frisk’s worried enquiry. Toriel looks at me and I nod at her, trying to get my confidence across in a glance. I’ve got him. He’s alright.

“Our course,” Toriel says gracefully. She stops to squeeze her son’s shoulder on her way past. I move the hand linked to his outward and he allows me to draw him out from behind me.

“I’m very proud of you,” I say, volume under the conversation happening feet from us. “How do you feel?”

“I’m okay,” he replies reflexively. After giving it some real thought, he adds, “I, um, know nothing is going to happen. But I’m still a little scared.”

“That you’re afraid and did it anyway is a sign of bravery. What do you want to do now?”

Frisk is on his other side, flanking him. “This is your family, right?” Asriel asks me, speaking quietly. “Maybe I could talk to them? You love them, so... I want to know them.”

Frisk smiles and takes his other hand. “That’s an excellent idea,” I say. “Come sit and I’ll introduce you to everyone.”

Shannon is one of those women who feels the need to coo over cute fuzzy things. Asriel falls into that category. It embarrasses the hell out of him, but he handles the entire ordeal well.

I get Alphys to show Spencer around the hospital because she knows some of the people who work there. I introduce Kalene to Natalie. My parents want to talk to Sans about how I’ve been doing. It isn’t because they don’t trust me. It’s because this is my life and I’m biased about it. I will tell people I am doing fine as long as I can function, even if my pain is at a six, because that is fine to me. It’s still awkward because I just had that fight with Sans three months ago and things haven’t... quite been the same between us. Not in a bad way. The shift has been barely perceptible,
but it’s there and I can’t even say what kind of shift it is.

I’ll have to do something nice for him later. He shouldn’t be expected to deal with my parents. He at least agrees to wait until they are back home to tell them I got jumped on a pharmacy run.

The next day Shannon apparently goads Sans and Undyne into getting their hands on a bunch of monster drinks and those of us who are irresponsible and don’t have children get smashed at Alphys and Undyne’s. Toriel and Asgore want to keep their kids out of it, obviously. Toriel insists that they are available in case something happens.

In case I get sick, she means. Sans gets it because, despite being shitfaced himself, he keeps checking in on me.

The funnest monster drink is one that reacts to soul color. Monsters have white souls, so it does nothing for them, but when Shannon downs it the air around her gets hazy and orange, almost like there is heat coming off her. When I try it, little sluices of bright blue light come off me (from my soul, technically). The actual appearance of the magic, Sans says, differs from human to human, even those with the same soul color. Grillby has seen it at his bar and he told Sans about it.

Papyrus turns out to be a sleepy, cuddly drunk and spends most of the time half-snoozing on the couch, a pillow clutched to his chest. Undyne and Shannon get impossibly louder and more energetic. Alphys and I are constantly following them around, coaxing them into several games of beer pong to vent their energy and competitiveness.

It’s fun. I don’t regret the hangover the next morning even though I can’t eat anything until evening.

My sister does not want to settle into suburban life. She moves into an apartment in the center of the city. I don’t know what she is capable of doing or what she wants to do. We’ll deal with it after the rally because I don’t want to bother anyone about anything else until then.

Everyone else has been handling the administrative stuff and planning. I have enough time to throw an impromptu celebration when Papyrus gets his driver’s license the first week of October and finally put together Sans’s room. My only jobs for the rally are to write whatever I want to say and help Asriel mentally prepare.

Facing down my family and friends was a breakthrough moment for him. He becomes more willing to face his fears and doesn’t need to look for cues from me as often. We make decisions about what step to take next together rather than me deciding for him.

He makes admirable progress in the weeks and even days before the rally. It’s more than I was expecting, but I am not sure it’s enough. But if he wants to try, I am absolutely not about to tell him he can’t, not when he may actually be able to do it.

The rally is crazy. Human law enforcement has to refuse entry at the perimeter because there is simply no more room for people between the three thousand monsters and ten thousand humans here.

Mettaton opens and the crowd goes wild because it’s Mettaton. Toriel and Asgore both speak. Senator Greenfield is here to speak, too, as are a few other politically-inclined humans who want to
express their support, but they don’t stay onstage. Mettaton will be onstage the entire time, acting as host, but the Royal Family and me will remain onstage after we speak because people need to see faces. Sans and Undyne are offstage with us, but neither is going to speak. My sister is with Papyrus and Alphys in the crowd.

Mettaton makes some small-talk with the crowd before Frisk, in their red robes, goes on. As they walk out, they smile encouragingly at Asriel.

“I still don’t agree with you going last,” I tell him.

He nervously grabs one of my hands. He’s wearing robes like Frisk, but shorter because he was worried about catching his claws on the hem and tripping in front of everybody. They are that deep blue-violet color favored by his parents. White pants underneath and a simple silver circlet on his head. When he got ready and Asgore put the circlet on his head, he protested that Frisk didn’t have one, but it was Frisk’s idea.

“It makes sense,” he says, repeating phrases from his parents and me and Mettaton because we had this conversation three times as we tried to strike a balance between what is best for Asriel and what is best for the Monster Movement. “I’ve never spoken before. I was... dead. Wh-what I have to say will make a big impact. It makes sense for me to go last.”

I could go last. I could walk out there after him and go off-script and utterly destroy the logic of anti-monster sentiments.

I do that anyway, even though I don’t go last. I don’t look impressive. I’ve never looked impressive. I’m in my light blue dress and I took off my sandals when I got onstage because they were rubbing the skin on my ankles the wrong way. Mettaton made me paint my toenails. My knives are strapped to my thighs.

I’m supposed to prep the crowd for Asriel, so I try to strike a balance between light-hearted and serious because almost everything so far has been light-hearted with a dash of sentimentality thrown in (unavoidable with Frisk and Asgore speaking, really).

Apparently I’m funny, though, so I’ve got everyone laughing at several points. My sense of humor is kind of twisted and offensive, but if you deal with chronic pain and you don’t laugh at the fucked-up shit around you, you’re not going to be laughing much at all.

When I’m done, I sit in one of the chairs lined up on the back right side of the stage. Frisk fist bumps me.

Mettaton has the mic again. “And now for our last speaker!” he announces, smiling showbiz and looking offstage.

Sans gives Asriel a little nudge, but he takes five steps and freezes, eyes wide and unseeing. From that angle, he can only see part of the crowd.

I very casually stand and walk offstage. I put a hand on Asriel’s shoulder and his gaze snaps to me and his arms go around me. He rests his forehead against my shoulder. I squeeze him, the fingers of my right hand carding through the fur on the back of his head.

“I’m sorry—” he begins, but I shush him. Mettaton says something onstage. I’m not listening to it but I expect he will expertly hold the audience’s attention until I indicate to him what’s going to happen.

I hold Asriel until he lifts his head, pulling back just enough to look at me. “All those humans...” he
says in a whisper. “There are so many of them.”

“If you don’t feel like you can do this, we don’t want you to force yourself,” I say. “Remember what we talked about. Little steps are usually better than big steps, and this is a giant step. If you need to leave, I’ll take you somewhere else. We planned for the possibility. You won’t be ruining anything by leaving.”

“I want to.” His eyes are filling. One of his arms detaches from me and he rubs his sleeve across his eyes. “I want to stay. I want to speak. But I don’t – I don’t wanna go out there and have a breakdown.”

“Do you want me to stand with you?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t want to look weak, I...”

“Asriel, it is a strength to know when you need help and to ask for it. You’ve never been before a monster crowd this big, let alone a human crowd.”

He fidgets. “Maybe – maybe you could sit behind me and hold my hand so I know you’re there. I do want to do this.”

“Okay. I can do that.” We separate and I take one of his hands. “Are you ready?”

He bites his lip and nods. I walk backwards slowly, leading him onstage. Frisk gives him a thumbs-up and his parents look at him encouragingly.

Someone begins clapping and the audience gradually picks up the applause. Asriel goes scarlet but resists the impulse to hide behind me.

Asriel steps up to the podium. The mic is adjusted for me, so he pulls it down just a little. He might be the only one who really uses it. The rest of us walked back and forth onstage a lot. I hook a foot around one leg of my chair, dragging it closer, never letting go of his hand. “Prince Asriel Dreemurr!” Mettaton announces, giving Asriel a genuine smile when he looks over at him.

I sit just behind Asriel and to his left. He’s got my hand in a death-grip. “Golly, there sure are a lot of humans out there,” he says. His voice is soft, but the microphone picks it up. “I’m glad that so many of you decided to come. We really appreciate the support. I, um, appreciate that we can be around humans without... violence. We’ve all come a long way—”

I see it. Of course I see it.

I don’t move instinctually. It’s a decision. It is the easiest decision I have made in a long, long time.

I’m up and I take a step forward. Asriel stops talking when he notices me, a fraction of a second before the gunshot rings out and the bullet strikes my left shoulder, which is apparently between the shooter and Asriel’s head.

I’m unbalanced, so the force of the shot pushes me over and I fall on the young prince.

On my way down, I finally remember.
I was the youngest counselor there – hell, we even had some campers my age – so I got the first-graders along with two other older counselors. We were exiting the main lodge to go work an obstacle course down near the lake.

He walked in. I remember what he looked like now. He was... exceedingly average. Just a man.

He opened fire.

I was in the front with Riley Sanders. I didn’t think. I sidestepped in front of him, and then I was on the floor.

The next few moments were full of confusion and screaming and that horrible, horrible sound of gunshots. I was vaguely aware of the crowd escaping into a side room.

Some didn’t follow. Some froze in place and cried. Some were too slow. Some scattered and ran in various directions.

The floor under me was red and sticky and wet. Smelt like copper. My hearing became muffled and I couldn’t understand why I couldn’t move properly. I was functionally out for several long seconds while the world ended around me.

I inhaled, and the rest of my body inhaled too, the new orifices in my abdomen and leg shifted and bled and took in air.

The shooter had moved past me. I stood up.

I couldn’t hear anything. There were bodies on the floor. Not all of them were dead. These kids had been five and six years old. If they got back up, they would still be five or six, but they wouldn’t be children anymore. Not really.

I grabbed the key. I unlocked the cabinet. I took out the bear rifle. With my other hand, I dialed 911 and left the phone off the hook.

The shooter was at the door of the side room, which was closed. Probably barricaded.

He aimed at the door. I aimed at his head. I pulled the trigger first.

He fell. I did, too, but he wouldn’t get back up. I would. I did.

I got back up, so I could do it again.
Mercy: benevolence or kindness shown to an offender.

Chapter Notes

I'M NOT SORRY.

Now would be a good time to review the tags so you can be sure you know what you're in for.

It’s an effort to scramble to my knees. Asriel’s hands are on my wounded shoulder. He is already sobbing, trying but unable to focus enough to produce healing magic.

I grab him, one arm wrapped around his head, keeping him tight against me and swinging around on my knees, sandwiching him between me and the podium. As soon as I reposition him, another bullet sinks into my right thigh, where he was a second before.

The shooter is on the stage. I turn so I can see, wishing I was bigger, wishing my body had more surface area.

Another gunshot. In my peripheral vision, I see Undyne leap in front of Asgore and Toriel, who are standing, horrified looks on their faces, eyes only for their son, Toriel’s mouth open in a shout of his name. The Captain of the Royal Guard jolts in midair and doesn’t land on her feet. Her armor clangs loudly when she hits the stage.

Another shot. Toriel yanks Frisk towards her, turning, then reels, dust flaking off her left arm. Asgore catches her as she stumbles. My breath hitches. That was meant for Frisk and it came from the crowd. Maybe the shot that took Undyne down did too. How many of them are there?

And another thought that makes my blood boil: are they targeting Asriel and Frisk? The children?

From offstage, Sans’s left eyesocket bursts into blue flame and he vanishes.

The female shooter onstage aims at Asgore. He levels a stare at her and sends a single fireball into her shooting hand. She swears, dropping the gun. As she reaches for it with her other hand, the Dogi attack her, sweeping her feet out from under her. Dogaressa rests her axe at the shooter’s throat and Dogamy picks up her gun.

The audience is screaming. I lean upwards, which is difficult enough after being shot, but it’s even more difficult with Asriel’s arms wrapped around me. I yank the podium over so it falls between us and the crowd. Another shot, but I don’t see anyone jerk or fall.

There is another human onstage. I scramble, pulling a knife, and wing it at him. It sinks into his right arm and stays there, lodged between his radius and ulna. He shouts and his gun discharges. Dogamy yelps, going down on one knee, a cloud of dust poofing from his leg. That shouldn’t have been fatal. The shot was a reflex to my attack, not an intent to kill in that very second, even though these humans clearly intend to kill.

RG 01 darts over to Dogamy to check him so Dogaressa doesn’t have to leave the first shooter. RG 02 is close behind to take out the male shooter. A wall of fire bursts up around them to protect them, and I turn to see Asgore standing, hands raised, wearing the coldest expression I have ever
seen on his face. Toriel is crouched behind him, applying healing magic to herself, haggard. Frisk is holding onto her, their mouth moving.

Someone else comes up behind them. I’m doubled over and Asriel’s arms are around me and he’s half on top of me. He keeps saying, “Isla, Isla, you’re hurt, you need healed, I can help,” but he seems to be trying to convince himself of that fact and he’s bawling so hard he can barely get it out. This quickly slides into a chorus of, “Chara, I’m so sorry, Chara, I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry,” and that’s bad but I can’t pay attention to him until the immediate threat has been dispersed.

I wrench out of Asriel’s grasp, turn around, and slap him. “Wake up,” I snarl, then shove him back into the hollow part of the podium when he stops crying and stares at me in shock. “Stay in there. Hide. Protect yourself if you have to. You hear me, Asriel? These people are not innocent. They’re not afraid of you. They want to kill you because they hate what you are. Understand?”

I’m half-yelling as I stand. Asriel desperately says, “Wait!” but I don’t have time for that right now. I wing another knife at the human aiming at the back of Asgore’s head. It misses, but it makes them stop and whip their head around to follow it.

Whatever projectile follows my knife doesn’t miss. It disperses when it hits them, leaving no visible wounds, but they double over like they were punched in the stomach. I follow the trajectory back to Mettaton, who has one hand outstretched and the other flickering with what looks like white lightning.

I’m running to make sure that human stays down when another climbs on the front of the stage in my path. Mettaton shouts, but how could I not see him, he’s twenty feet from me.

He raises his gun and shoots me twice before magical fire and more lightning knock him off the stage. I turned, so one of the three bullets missed, and my first impulse is to make sure Asriel didn’t get hit by the stray. He didn’t stay in the podium, but he’s still on his hands and knees so the shot must have gone over his head. He’s wide-eyed, terrified as he looks around, at his wounded mother and the murderous demeanor of his father and Undyne heaving as dust pours from her side and me, bleeding from four gunshots, somehow standing and in no pain.

I intend to move towards the human Mettaton hit earlier, but Asgore is striding towards them. They are still clearly hurt but when they see the king approaching them, they do not look the least bit scared, which is what I would have expected. Instead, their face twists into a nasty snarl.

“Asgore!” I scream. I vaguely wonder where all this energy came from. “Don’t kill them, you idiot! Detain them!”

Because it’s a concern with the purposeful way he moves towards them. He pauses mid-step, almost stumbling, so I know he heard me, and when he reaches the human he hits the side of their head hard enough to knock them unconscious without killing them. I’ll kill them if I have to, I will, but I can’t let any of the monsters kill.

When he turns back around he goes to Undyne, who has slumped onto her front. She’s still solid, but she’s not moving. I turn to go back to Asriel, but I take one step and finally feel the pain from my injuries. Not yet. I’m shaking, still hyper-alert, nowhere close to fainting. I’m fine, even though my breathing isn’t right.

Asgore has allowed the protective fire around the Royal Guards and the first two humans to fall. RG 01 & 02 have them both disarmed and detained. Dogaressa is moving her husband offstage. The audience is still screaming, but there is such a large crowd that the majority of them are still present, stuck in place, unable to run.
Suddenly, Frisk looks up from their place next to Toriel and screams my name. The man who fell offstage earlier has climbed back on and is coming at me. No gun this time. This time he has a knife and his face is twisted horribly in anger.

I draw my own knife. He lunges. There is the terrible rendering of metal on metal and I try to move to the side to get a better angle, but my leg doesn’t want to cooperate and neither does my right lung, actually, and I end up lurching harshly, almost falling over. Ignore it. Have to ignore it.

Weight on my left leg. I knock the terrorist’s knife aside with my own when he tries to stab me. He doesn’t let up, he’s relentless, hacking at me with an anger that makes me think he hasn’t been trained. The only thing saving me right now is my training and when I see an opening I’m depositing lacerations on his arms and hands because with my slower speed I can’t find a safe opening to stick my knife in his chest or neck. He’s broadcasting whether he’s going to jab or slash and I can redirect his attacks or dodge as necessary, though I am trying to move as little as possible because something is wrong and I can’t let myself figure out exactly what that is because I’ll end up focusing too much on my injuries and I can’t do that right now, I’m already at a disadvantage, but I’m trying to slowly back towards the center of the stage to get this knife-swinging jackass as far away from everyone else as possible and—

My right leg goes out and I fall to my left knee and his knife leaves a burning trail from my left temple to my jaw. It happens in a matter of milliseconds and yet it seems as though everything is in slow-motion. He overreaches in anticipation of me going down. As I redirect the stab, I twist in a way that unbalances him and he falls on top of me.

Something’s wrong, something new, but the next thing I know is I have to grab his wrist with both hands because he’s driving the knife down to kill me, hand fisted around its hilt, expression snarling and furious and deadly. I don’t have enough leverage. I’m pushing but I’m losing. We’re both shaking with the effort, so the knife shakes too, and it is slowly, slowly descending towards my neck.

Just before it can touch me something hits my attacker and he is lifted sideways off me before slamming into the stage. His feet are right next to my side and his neck is caught between two tines of a red trident. I follow the trident to look at the king.

I have never seen him this livid and it is fucking scary. I almost flinch when he bends down and, without releasing his grip on the trident, which is longer than I am tall, he slides a huge hand under my uninjured shoulder and easily lifts me to place me on my feet.

Asgore stops glaring at my now-unconscious attacker and looks at me. He goes to say something, but suddenly looks horrified. “Oh, Isla,” he says, and when I follow his gaze there is blood nearly gushing from a horizontal stab wound in the lower left quadrant of my abdomen.

I look up, staring at nothing. I vaguely notice Sans has returned with two more unconscious shooters and their guns twisted into a ball of destroyed metal. Asgore keeps his forearm parallel to the ground in front of me so I can hang off it.

Once more, I see it. Of course I see it.

I release Asgore, taking two lurching steps to scoop up the gun Dogamy took from the first shooter because I just now realize I no longer have my knife. Sans and Asgore both say my name, both move to help me, but I’m somehow running across the stage. I don’t have to go far, which is good because I almost collapse when I stop. I plant my feet, facing Toriel and Frisk and Asriel, who has joined them, and shoot the person aiming at them in the leg.
They yelp and drop their gun. This is the human I told Asgore not to kill. I know they heard me say that. I shouldn’t have said anything. I should have let him tear them limb from limb.

They’re limping, trying to move towards the back of the stage, and I’m limping, and we both look ridiculous, injured and trying to move quickly but I manage to catch them and I hit them and knee them and strike them with the gun and punch them in the stomach and they are cowering by the back wall, hands over their head.

They do not, however, appear to be panicking. Were they in charge? Were they the one who planned this? Their path of entry was from the side on which Toriel and Asgore and Frisk were sitting.

I level the gun at their bloody, bruised face. Their eyes harden and their lip curls.

“Why?” they demand, as if they have the right to demand anything from me. “They’re monsters. Why would you take their side?”

Oh hell no. I swing my free hand at Frisk and Asriel. “They’re KIDS!” I scream. “You tried to KILL THEM! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA OF WHAT TRAUMA YOU’VE INFLECTED ON THEM!? DO YOU!”

This horrible, horrible human’s lip curls in disgust. “They’re monster kids. Monsters are a plague upon the world and I’m trying to help remedy it. Why would you kill me?”

I’m still yelling, breathing too hard and yet not enough, and now I’m spitting blood when I shout. “I don’t need a reason to kill you! You need a reason why I shouldn’t.” I make sure the safety is disengaged and the chamber is filled. “And you need it NOW.”

They have nothing to say. The blood drains from their face.

I am about to pull the trigger when someone wraps their arms around me from behind. I’m expecting Frisk or Asriel. I do not expect to hear Sans say, “Please,” into my hair.

I pause, surprised.

“Please don’t do this to yourself. This waste of life isn’t worth your suffering.”

He knows. He knows what killing did to me, what it still does to me. My arm starts to tremble, finger shaking on the trigger.

“Please, Isla.”

It’s hard, but I engage the safety and pitch the gun to one side. Just as I turn around and collapse into Sans’s arms, I see Frisk run to the side of the stage and cut a rope with a knife. The curtain falls, hiding us from the audience’s sight.

Sans is holding up all of my weight. I’m shaking and cold and going numb. I cough blood onto his hood and inhale wetly. Something literally bubbles in my chest and it burns. There is blood all over my stomach and trickling down my legs. It’s all over the stage. Dust is all over the stage.

Toriel seems to be alright now, as her priority appears to be consoling a hysterical Asriel. Frisk is trembling over by the front of the stage, back to us, fingers gripping the knife in their left hand (where did they get that and why do they have it). Mettaton is trying to revive Undyne alongside Asgore. The Captain of the Royal Guard is unconscious and the wound on her side is much larger and still dusting.
My arms are around Sans’s neck. One of his is around my waist and the other is wedged between us so he can press a sleeve over my still-bleeding knife wound. “You’re gonna be okay,” he says, eyesockets wide, face inches from mine.

He might be lying to me. Asriel suddenly pulls away from his mother. He stumbles away from her, towards us and Undyne and Asgore and Mettaton, head in his hands. Horror cuts through me deeper than any knife or bullet. Was he hurt? Did I miss something?

His pained crying rapidly shifts to indiscernible snarling. “Asriel!” Toriel calls, clearly shocked at this.

I can’t stop staring as black tendrils slowly creep towards Asriel’s fingers. They look to be no more than a change in fur color, but the magic surrounding him is so powerful even I can sense it. And I don’t need to sense it. I can see it, a thin rainbow mist swirling around him.

His hands fall from his face, balled into fists. There are black markings on his face, too, starting under his eyes, which are screwed shut. His teeth are bared.

The colorful magic shoots towards him, condensing around his small body, then blasts outward with a sound like a plane takeoff. Sans tries to swing me around to put himself between me and the shockwave, but he moves too late. It doesn’t hit us that hard, more like a push than a blow, but we both end up on the stage anyway.

I gasp as my injuries are jolted – but the pain isn’t going away. It begins to get worse and it isn’t only the injuries I fell on, it’s all of them, they’re all burning, and it’s building towards something unbearable.

I thrash, whimpering, vaguely recognizing Undyne’s pained scream in the background. “Isla!” Sans calls, tone panicky, trying to keep me still. “Stop, you’ll hurt yourself—”

As quickly as it came on, the pain begins to dissipate. As it fades, I still, sweating, almost panting with how hard I’m breathing—

Wait. I’m breathing. I’m breathing and it doesn’t feel like fluid is in my right lung. And... I’m hurting less now than I was before... whatever that was.

My hands come up on my abdomen. Nothing. My dress is still sticky with blood and there are holes in it, but underneath the rips there is no knife wound, no bullet wounds. I touch my shoulder, my thigh, my face. No injuries there, either.

“Holy shit,” Sans breathes, raising a hand to the left side of my face. “He healed you.”

We both sit up. Undyne is awake and okay, blinking tiredly, held in a sitting position by Mettaton. Asgore and Toriel are both crouched near Asriel, who is unconscious. After a moment, Frisk throws their knife to one side and runs to them.


“Completely healed,” Toriel replies, placing glowing hands over her son’s unmoving form. Those black markings that were on his face and hands earlier are gone. “Asriel is okay. I believe he has succumbed to exhaustion.” Softer now, she says, “I have never seen magic like that in my life.”

“Neither have I,” Asgore says. When Toriel’s hands stop glowing, he cradles Asriel in his arms and stands. Frisk looks relieved, eyes wide and... red?
It takes a few minutes for human law enforcement to show up. I lose it and scream at them, calling them useless pieces of shit and other various names until I pass out from blood loss and the adrenaline crash. Sans catches me before my head hits the stage.

I wake up in the monster hospital. Asriel is in my bed, on top of the blankets, cuddled up to my side with an arm thrown over me.

I shake him gently. “Asriel. Wake up.”

He sniffs and blinks his eyes open. When his gaze focuses on me, his eyes widen. “Isla!” He tries to get both arms around my neck, but it doesn’t work very well since we’re both lying down.

Unsurprisingly, he begins crying. I rub his back. “I’m so sorry,” he wails. “Y-you got in the w-way and you g-g-got hurt—”

This poor kid. “Hey. It’s okay. I’m alright. And you should know by now I’d take a thousand bullets for you.”

“I – I couldn’t do anything, n-n-not to protect you, or Mom, or anyone—”

“Asriel, nobody expects that of you. It’s not a realistic thing to expect of anyone. We can’t even expect your parents to be able to protect every single monster out there at every single moment, can we?”

He sniffs, calming down a little. “No. I – I guess not.”

“And you healed everyone who was hurt. I don’t know about your mom, but it would have been a close call with Undyne and me. You saved us.”

“Yeah.” His voice is still so small. “I guess I did.”

He lays his head on my shoulder. His circlet is gone, so I run my fingers through the fur on the crown of his head. His eyes close. He’s been getting better, but I should expect backsliding, if not a relapse, with this. This is a second reason to associate a crowd of humans with violence.

Asgore comes into the room five minutes after Asriel has fallen asleep again. When he sees I’m awake, he speed-walks over to the side of the bed his son isn’t occupying, sits in a chair that creaks under his weight, and takes my free hand between his giant paw-like ones. “I could sit here and thank you all day and it still wouldn’t be enough,” he says, on the verge of tears. “But thank you. If you had not acted...” his voice falls, hushed, “Asriel...”

“You don’t need to thank me,” I reply. “I’d do it again.”

When I speak, Asriel stirs and raises his head. “Howdy, Dad,” he says tiredly.

“Howdy, son,” Asgore responds. He circles the bed. “Would you like to go see your mother and Frisk?”

“Sure.” Asriel turns onto his back and raises his arms, lazily reaching for his father. The king picks him up, and once he’s settled in his father’s arms Asriel is almost instantly asleep again.
“He’s very tired,” Asgore tells me quietly. “None of us is sure of the kind of magic he used. The power... I’ve never seen anything like it.”

I suspected as much. Usually healing magic is pleasant and soothing. Whatever Asriel did to heal us, it healed me fully, and I was injured severely. And it hurt, badly. I’m glad he did it, but it certainly wasn’t typical healing magic.

“How is everybody?” I ask.

Asgore begins to gently rock in place. “You and Undyne had the worst injuries. We... may have lost Undyne had Asriel not done what he did. She’s been admitted. I know Papyrus and Alphys are with her now. Dogamy was admitted, too, but he should be out within a few hours. Tori was admitted since she was shot, but she’s already been discharged. She is with Frisk and Mettaton to handle the press coverage.”

Damn. I should be doing that. “Did they happen to tell you how long they plan on keeping me?”

He coughs. “I may have played the king card to get them to bypass patient confidentially laws. They will keep you and Undyne overnight for observation. If everything looks good, you’ll be discharged tomorrow. I was told you were completely healthy.”

I roll my eyes. “That’s a bad joke.”

“They meant it. Your soul looks great, as usual, but we cautioned them to be aware of your physical health. I was told that imaging picked up on nothing. Not even... remember when you told us you still have shrapnel inside you from when you were shot as a child?” I nod. “Well, by golly, they couldn’t see it. Whatever Asriel did, it seems to have removed anything harmful in your body – old and new.”

That has my attention. I’m squirming, sitting up. Aside from the soreness from having not moved in some time, I am in no pain. I push the blankets off me and tug my gown up so I can see my stomach.

I gape. Not only are there no scars from this morning, but my old ones look better. I can’t believe this, but I’m seeing it.

I know better than to hope. I’ll need to get copies of my medical records before I believe it fully, and even if that old shrapnel is gone, that doesn’t mean the lupus is going to go away. I might get better, somewhat, but I shouldn’t expect to be suddenly and totally healthy after so many years of being sick.

I let the stupid hospital gown fall. Nice monster hospital or not, I’d still rather be in my own clothes. “Did they catch all the terrorists?”

Asgore’s expression hardens. “Every human who attacked us was detained. They have been charged with attempted murder, amongst other things.”

“I’m wondering if we should have killed them,” I say.

“So am I. But... perhaps it is better that we did not. Not like that, at least.”

I sigh. “What about Sans?”

“I am... under the impression that he will be avoiding you now that you are awake.”
What the hell does that mean? “What?”

Asgore confuses me further by grinning and shifting Asriel to one arm so he can pull out his phone. Once he pulls up what he wants me to see, he hands it to me. It’s more like a tablet than a phone in my hands.

On-screen is a picture, angle making it obvious it was taken from the audience, of Sans embracing me from behind.

“There are videos and pictures all over the internet,” Asgore says. “The shooting is the main subject, of course, but there is some talk about you and Sans.”

“People are stupid.” I give him back his phone. “I was bleeding out and I could hardly stand up on my own.” I pause. “If you have time and you can, find Sans and send him in.”

“Gosh, I’ll find him. Not even he can laze out when his king summons him.”

That shouldn’t be funny – I and many people I care deeply about were attacked and shot at – but it is. We’re going to be fine. In all likelihood, we will come out of this stronger than ever. We’re going to fucking dig in and win, damnit.

I smirk a little. “Don’t let anyone find out you’re abusing your power for personal purposes.”

“You do need to speak with him. And, as Alphys would say,” Asgore shrugs, “I ship it.”

I snort at that, trying not to laugh loudly so I don’t wake Asriel. “Shut up, you doofus.”

He’s moving towards the door. “In all seriousness, I hope you feel better. You lost quite a bit of blood.”

“I’m fine. Just tired.” As he’s leaving, I call, “See what you can do about reducing my inpatient time!”

“Absolutely not!” he replies cheerfully.

I sigh, annoyed, and rest back against my pillows.

As promised, Asgore sends Sans to me almost immediately. “Hey,” he says. “How are ya feelin’?”

I gesture for him to come closer. “I’m alright. Asgore told me Asriel basically disintegrated all the shrapnel I’ve had in my body for fourteen years.”

He comes closer and stops, then approaches again when I keep gesturing. I only stop when he’s right next to my bed. “Kid used magic unlike anything any of us thought possible,” he says. “But yeah, he did. I even went and got your medical records so they could see the pictures of your bones with metal in them. The docs showed Alphys and me the new pics. No metal, and your bones were healed like it was never even there.”

I believe it more now. “Wow,” I say softly. “I – don’t know. I don’t know how to feel about that.”

Sans’s expression shifts to something reminiscent of sympathy. “It’s a big change. Big changes are
never easy, even if they are for the better.”

“I’m going to be busy once I get out of here. This was upsetting for a lot of monsters. I’m worried about Asriel relapsing, too.” I pause. “When I woke up he was in bed with me.”

Sans chuckles. “I think the kid’s got a monster crush on you.”

That’s not true. He’s deeply attached to me, but it’s a guardian-based attachment.

I look at Sans. I have been ignoring it and making excuses for it and I don’t even know why. I want something, I don’t believe it’s unreasonable, in fact, I think it may be very welcome.

So I say, “So do you.”

He blinks, then flushes blue. I maintain eye-to-socket contact until he looks away and rubs the back of his skull, shoulders coming up. “Well... yeah. But... I think we both know it bypassed crush a long time ago.”

I take the hand hanging limply by his side so he can’t run away. “You’re a dork. It’s mutual.” I tug his arm. “Sit down.”

He does, sitting on the side of the bed by my legs. I keep a hold of his hand. “When did you know?” I ask. “I...” I smirk, unable to keep a straight face. “When you had to peel me off that ladder because I had vertigo... that was when I started falling for you.”

He laughs reflexively. “Good one. Good one...” He glances away. “It was earlier, for me. When you blasted an air horn at those protestors.” He laughs a little. “You made that manure joke. It was hilarious.”

I squeeze his hand. “Sans, look at me.” He does, but he still looks defensive, shoulders hunched up and expression guarded like I’m going to hurt him. “Asgore showed me pictures of us plastered all over the internet.”

He winces. “Yeah... sorry ‘bout that. I wasn’t sure what else to do. I just knew... heh. But I shouldn’t’ve touched you like that. I’m sorry.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I ask, deadpan. “If I have my way, you’ll be doing a lot more than hugging me.”

His eyesockets widen. I roll my eyes. “Sans. We have feelings for one another. The general public seems to think we’re already together. What do you want to do about it?”

“Um...” Did he really just say um? “I... don’t think we should do anything about it.”

Alright. Not what I expected. “What are your concerns?”

There is a pause. “Isla, you were just shot four times. And stabbed.” He looks pissed. “You’ve been attacked and targeted when you were alone. You almost died for your association with us. How can I expect you to be with me when it could kill you?”

“That’s my risk to take, and I’m willing to take it.”

“I’m not comfortable putting you in danger like that. We’ve never even heard of an interracial couple before. If any exist, they’re not public because they know what kind of backlash they would get. It’s dangerous.”
Anger surges and I want to snap at him, call him a coward, but I inhale through my nose and wait until it isn’t so intense. I am patient and he’s scared. “Sans. You’re right. People have already tried to kill me. So what would you have me do? Cut ties with all of you and leave?”

“No!” He leans towards me, grabbing both my hands in his. “No...”

“That would be the one thing that could ensure my safety.”

“I know... but... everyone would be devastated. You’re so valued and you do so much for us. We’re your friends. We love you. I love you.” He raises his hands and mine and leans his forehead against my knuckles. “I love you,” he says again.

“I love you too, and I know you’re scared. You think I’m crazy about the media coverage we’re going to get? And we’ll have to tell my family. My dad will be so annoyingly smug about it.”

He slowly lowers my hands back to the bed, peering at me. “You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

I shift, throwing back the blankets. “Come snuggle with me. Asgore told me they’re keeping me overnight. You’re going to stay, at least until I fall asleep.”

He gets in next to me without protest. He doesn’t seem to want to touch me, so I drag him over to me, slipping an arm behind his head. “You good?”

“I think I’d be better lying down,” Sans says. “And taking a nap.”

“Sounds good to me.” After some wiggling, we’re under the blankets. He’s on his back, but I’m facing him. I hook a foot around his leg.

“Paps is gonna freak,” he says after a moment. “He’s been trying to get me to ask you out for over a year.”

“He’ll get his wish. You’re taking me to Grillby’s when I get outta here. You’re paying.”

He chuckles. “Only if you call me your bonefriend instead of your boyfriend.”

“That makes it sound like we’re fuck buddies.”

“It’s a skeleton pun.”

“It’s a pun and a double entendre. We’re not using the word boyfriend anyway. That has connotations that don’t apply to us.”

A pause. Then, “Can we kiss?”

I nod, but before I can ask how it’s supposed to work, he’s turning towards me. I hesitate, take a guess, and draw my lips back to press my teeth against his.

He snorts into the pseudo-kiss and he’s laughing before we even separate. “Hey!” I protest. “How else was it supposed to work? You don’t have lips!”

“No, but – but—” he’s laughing so hard he can barely get it out, “you do. What the hell was that.”

I scowl, but before I can say something he leans in quickly and presses his teeth against my closed lips. “There,” he says smugly, pulling back. I feel one of his hands rest on my hip.
I lay my head back down. A nap sounds fabulous right now. “We’re going to have to work on that.”
Consequentialism: a normative ethical theory stating that the morality of an action is to be judged by the consequences of that action.

Even after I get out of the hospital, my parents are high-strung. They call Andy, which irritates me because I was going to call him anyway. I feel great in a matter of days and they only agree to go home because Shannon is living here now and she'll keep an eye on me.

Asriel is almost as bad as my parents. It’s not a total relapse, but he got so attached to me because I wasn’t involved in what happened Underground. He didn’t have much guilt concerning me before. Part of him thinks I shouldn’t have stepped in front of him because then he would have got what he deserved.

The news coverage is relentless and dramatic, but support for monster rights skyrockets in response to the shooting. Many theories about my ‘true motives’ are shot down because it would be stupid for me to risk my life if I were brewing up long-term plans. We keep Asriel’s weird healing magic on the down low, which means Undyne and I have to stay out of the public eye for a while because we’re supposed to be recovering.

Undyne was very likely mortally wounded, but she brushes this off. Alphys is anxious enough for the both of them. I don’t see them for a few days because neither of us is supposed to go out and we are both legitimately tired, but Papyrus tells me Undyne is restless in a matter of about twelve hours.

I talk to Frisk, too, and it’s… weird. They admit they’ve been carrying a knife for some time, refuse to say where they got it, and pace a lot. They seem like they want to tell me something but can’t get it out. They yank on a fistful of their hair a few times. I get little out of them aside from the fact that they are concerned about what this does to the monster community.

Their concerns aren’t misplaced. The shooting sparks a sense of otherness amongst a minority of monsters. Barriers of ‘them’ and ‘us’ pop up, with humans being automatically placed in the ‘them’ category unless otherwise noted. Asgore tries to dissuade this kind of thinking early and brings to attention the overwhelming support – emotional, political, and otherwise – we are receiving right now. I’m kind of pissed it took assholes shooting at a couple of kids for people to mobilize and express their support, but at this point we need all the help we can get.

All the shooters refuse to talk. They went in knowing they would either be incarcerated or killed by law enforcement. They went in done. We won’t get anything out of them.

We’re busy handling the fallout, so we don’t talk about it for over a week. Then we are all at Toriel’s one Wednesday night and after the kids go to bed, I say, “We need to talk about the possibility that the terrorists were hired.”

Undyne scowls and crosses her arms. Toriel sighs. “We must also acknowledge that Asriel and Frisk seemed to be the targets. It seems as though they were attempting to start another war.”

Undyne rubs her face. “Yeah. If you’d all been killed I might’ve… gah. I dunno. I don’t wanna think about it.”

A long silence. Asgore breaks it by saying, “That isn’t what she meant, Undyne. If Frisk and Asriel had died, I…”

“I don’t know what I would have done, either,” Toriel admits. “I was referring more to myself than
“It didn’t happen,” I say. “Let’s talk about what did happen and what might have preceded it.”

I’ll have to talk to Shannon individually later. It isn’t that I don’t trust her, it’s that I have been discussing and planning and keeping secrets with these six people for over two years and my sister hasn’t been around and doesn’t need to know. And… she is already at risk just by being related to me. So far we have been lucky. The media has ignored my family.

“D-d-do you think th-there’s something m-m-more in play?” Alphys asks quietly. “An organization?”

“I don’t know,” I reply. “Those people were committed. They planned it, but not well. They didn’t have the right weapons and the weapons they had were used ineffectively.” If the targets were Asriel and Frisk, multiple shooters should have opened fire on them simultaneously. I don’t say this. It would upset Toriel and Asgore too much.

“The four murders were leading up to this,” Sans says. “I bet they were testing whether monsters could be killed with physical weapons.”

He’s probably right. “We need to increase security the next time we do something like that,” Undyne says decisively. “That can’t happen again.”

“We should allow the humans who want to support us to do so,” Asgore adds. “I’ll talk to Mettaton. See if he can contribute to public relations.” He looks at Toriel. “And… Frisk and Asriel…”

“We have to let them continue to help, if they want,” Toriel says softly. “But we have to keep them safe. We can’t let them be hurt. Not again. This world has hurt them enough, and if it keeps trying, then the world has to change.”

Undyne nods firmly. Toriel briefly pats Asgore on the shoulder, then sits in her chair. She’s a pacer.

“Are we done discussing serious things?” Papyrus asks. “If not, that is okay! But Sans has something to say.”

Sans looks at him. “Whatcha talkin’ ‘bout, Paps?”

Shifty eyesockets. “You know.”

“I don’t.”

Papyrus very pointedly looks at me. I roll my eyes. He is occasionally so astute I can’t believe he’s oblivious most of the time.

I lean back. I doubt anyone will be surprised. I wasn’t. “Sans and I are kind of a thing.”

“A ROMANTIC THING!!” Papyrus bursts out excitedly.

Sans winces. “Calm down, Paps.”

“Calm down!!” Undyne repeats loudly. Toriel shushes her. Undyne proceeds to whisper-shout, “It’s about damn time! You two make me SICK with your nerd-flirting!!”

“But d-d-don’t stop!” Alphys exclaims, flushing. “It’s r-really cute!!”
“Yeah!” Undyne agrees. “It makes me wanna puke in my mouth!!”

Sans has gone blue and I deadpan. There is no correct response to that.

Toriel is smiling at us. “Well, congratulations! That is very exciting for the both of you.”

“Actually, it’s boring,” I say. I exchange a glance with Sans. He’s already nodding. “We’re romantically boring. We’re hesitating to even call it romantic.”

“That doesn’t matter!” Undyne hisses. “You don’t have to fit in some definition of a ‘proper relationship.’ Do whatever you want! If someone thinks it’s their business to tell you what to do they can shove it!!”

“Gosh, it just occurred to me that you can’t marry,” Asgore says after a moment. “We will have to work on that as soon as possible.”


“What benefit would that have, anyway?” Sans asks. “We aren’t about to do it without practical reason. If it’s just to force other people to acknowledge us, it’s a waste of energy.”

“It would make filing taxes easier,” I reply.

“Oh.” He grins. “If that’s the case, wanna get hitched before next April?”

“Nope.”

“BUT ISLA!!” Papyrus exclaims, eyesockets wide in dismay. “You could be my SISTER!!!”

“Shit, Papyrus, we’re barely together,” I say. “Give it a while.”

“What kind of proposal was that,” Undyne mutters to Alphys.

“A nerdy one,” Alphys replies in a whisper. Toriel snorts and covers her mouth to muffle her laughter.

Okay. This is embarrassing, but I can let my friends have a laugh at my expense. “Let’s be honest. If any proposing goes on I’m going to be the one doing it.”

“So I don’t have to make any decisions?” Sans asks, grinning. “Isla, you’re spoiling me.”

“Isla!!!” Papyrus scolds. “You’re supposed to make him work hard, not let him off easy!! Maybe he’ll actually expend some effort for you!!”

I nudge Sans. “He’d better.”

Frisk shrieks in joy when we tell them. Asriel just smiles at me, takes one of my hands, and asks, “Does he make you happy?”

“Still here, kid,” Sans says. “Ya gonna ask me if she makes me happy?”

Asriel smiles sweet venom at him. “She obviously makes you happy. That hasn’t been up for
debate since I could process *happy* as an emotion again.”

It’s not really about happy for me. Sans has seen and handled practically all of my vulnerabilities. The only reason he ever wanted to quit was because he thought he wasn’t adequate for the job. He thought I needed someone who could do it better than him. Getting shot and almost killed in a random event screwed with my ability to trust people. I make people earn it, and until then I assume all of their behavior is selfish. Even with my friends and family, I assume some of their behavior is selfish, as loving as their actions can be.

Yes, he’s fucked up and crossed lines that should have been obvious. Everyone fucks up. I’m far from a perfect therapist or friend. I muddle professional and personal boundaries. That’s fine. I trust Sans like I haven't trusted anyone since I was shot. I still thought about how I’d disable him when I first met him, but he was a stranger then.

And let’s not forget the mutual groping that went on when we were all emotional after Asriel’s rebirth. I don’t do stuff like that. Ever. I was with Lucas for almost eight months before I let him touch me like that. I should have realized something was up after that happened, but I rationalized it, because I rationalize everything.

“Of course he does,” I answer simply. “I was the one who brought it up.”

Frisk nudges Sans, grinning. He shrugs. It should be obvious to anyone who is even acquainted with us that I’m in charge and he prefers that way.

“My mom’s my mom,” Asriel says awkwardly. “But…”

I get it. I pull him into an embrace. “I know. I never wanted kids, but I don’t regret how any of this turned out. I love you.”

“I love you too.” His voice sounds a bit watery.

“We can have four parents now,” Frisk says decisively, using their superior height to lean on Sans.

“We can be your backup parents,” Sans replies.

“Can we call you our aunt and uncle?” Frisk asks.

“Call us whatever you like. As long as you refer to Undyne as ‘Auntie Undies’ sometime. And make sure I’m there to witness it.”

Frisk cackles in response to this. Asriel pulls away from me, but keeps holding my hand. “Just give Sans enough time to write his will first,” I say. “She’ll know where that came from.”

Asriel looks at Sans. “In conclusion, I’ll kick your ass if you hurt Isla,” he says in his mother’s no-nonsense tone.

“Asriel,” I say, surprised. “You swore. And do you really think I’m not capable of kicking asses?”

“You’re both incapable of kicking my ass,” Sans says, “considering I don’t have an ass.” Asriel glares at him. “I hear ya, kid. You got nothin’ to worry about. Promise.”
My sister is a smug asshole and mocks me relentlessly with, “You gonna bone the skeleton, Isla?” (the worst part is when Sans high-fives her for that), but she agrees to let me tell the parents. Which I am not going to do. Yet.

We haven’t talked about the long-term. If we stay together, eventually this is going to get out. I am more famous than Sans, but he hasn’t entirely avoided the public eye. When this gets out we are going to end up representing interracial couples, at least until someone more suitable comes along. It won’t do if we end up breaking up right away because we haven’t talked and realistically gauged our compatibility.

I drop it on him after Papyrus goes to bed and we’re watching The Lion King. Neither of us really feels the need to cuddle, so we don’t. We sit there and eat and maybe if one of us falls asleep we use the other person’s shoulder as a pillow.

I say, “So I don’t want kids.”

He looks at me. “Where did that come from?”

“We haven’t really talked. And not much has changed.”

“You want stuff to change?”

I shrug. “No? I’m indifferent. I’m still aromantic and asexual. Or demi. Or something. I love a lot of people platonically now, more than I ever thought I would. It’s something more with you, but I doubt it’s conventional romantic love.”

He shrugs, too. “Okay.”

When he says nothing else, I nudge him. “Your turn. Distract me from Mufasa’s death.”

“I want you to move into my room.”

I jerk and almost spill the bowl of pretzels in my lap. “What?”

He’s staring at the screen. “I want you to move into my room. I wanna sleep with you.” A grin. “Literally. Literally for now.”

I recover. I don’t know why I was surprised. “That would be the logical next step. We have been living together as roommates for almost a year.”

“Is that a yes?”

“That’s a yes.”

Another silence. Onscreen, the hyenas chase Simba. “Sans,” I say. “I’m trying to define the relationship. I’m still waiting on your input.”

His shoulders start to come up. Uh-oh. “Are you actually serious about this?”


“Even though we kinda got together in the hospital. After you’d been shot.”

I frown. “You think it’s situational.”

“Well, you’re right. Nothing has changed.”
I resist the urge to say something defensive. What is the actual problem here?

I slip an arm around his shoulders and pull him against me. “You’re good enough for me. And the resets might not even be a factor anymore.”

“I’m not worried about a reset.”

“Then what?” There is a long silence. “Sans, talk to me.”

He doesn’t pull away, but he does tug his hood up. “You can’t be my therapist. I can’t date my therapist.”

Wait. “This whole time… you refused to talk to me because you had feelings for me?”

The hood nods. I’m frowning again. “I’ve parented and treated Asriel and Frisk. I’m friends with Toriel and Asgore and Alphys and they’ve all used me when they needed it. What’s the difference between asking your mechanic friend to work on your car and asking your psychologist friend to do some talk therapy with you? That’s not the setup for a joke, by the way.”

Another long period of silence. Finally, he says, “It… would be hard for me. I know when it comes to your job, Asriel is your priority, and he should be. I don’t want to be another difficult patient and make you overdo yourself.”

Oh. “I know you’ve got some serious baggage. I know you deal with a lot of mental pain and I know you haven’t adjusted. I’m not trying to minimize that, Sans, but Asriel was entirely nonfunctional for a few weeks. He couldn’t eat without prompting and he needed Frisk and me all the time and even with us there, sometimes all he could do was cry his eyes out. You’re functional, and trust me, I know how hard it can be sometimes to run at normal speed, but that means you can have time between sessions. You’ll make it to the next one. Do you understand?”

“Yeah. I just… don’t wanna make more work for you.”

“Don’t you think it would be worth it? Toriel and Papyrus have separately asked me if I’ve had sessions with you. Papyrus seemed worried.”

His brother’s his weakness. “Yeah. Nobody needs to worry about me.” Sans looks at me when I pull the hood down. “If… you’re serious about this…”

“I am.”

“I’m gonna be bad at it. I’m still not used to permanence. I might never be used to it. I’ve never had to commit to anything and it sounds like a real pain, but you make me want to.”

“Okay. Was your invitation to move in serious or were you trying to chase me off?”

“It’s serious. I was… doing better, when you were sleeping with me before. Not as many nightmares.”

“We’ll sleep there tonight. Move my crap in tomorrow. Is that why you let me redo your room?”

A hint of a grin. “Maybe. Maybe it’s also why I requested the larger bed.”

Sneaky bastard. “What do you want to call us? Romance doesn’t… that’s just blah. But quasiplatonic doesn’t sound entirely right either.”

“Just blah?” he repeats. “Why do we need a word for it?”
“What?”
“Why do we have to label ourselves? We can do our thing. We don’t need a word to tell us how to
do our thing.”

He’s right, but I’m still feeling a compulsion to find the right word. It’s baseless, so I do my best to
set it aside. Change the topic. “Okay, but do you want to get married? Is that a thing you want?
Obviously not anytime soon, since it’s not even legal.”

He shrugs. “I’m indifferent.”

I think we should, if only to pave the way for others like us, but should is different from want to.
“Same. It’s just a piece of paper, when it comes down to it. We wouldn’t be any different before
signing it than we would be after.”

We’re silent for the entirety of Hakuna Matata. We kinda suck at this, but after we get the serious
shit outta the way it’ll be great.

“Asgore told me most monsters have lifespans comparable to those of humans,” I say. “Is that true
for you?”

He hesitates. “Yeah. It’s true for skeletons.”

“I have to warn you. My lifespan has likely been slightly reduced due to my illnesses and injuries.”

“Same. You know. ‘Cause of the. Depression thing.”

Wow. He is not ready to talk about that. Even so, acknowledging it always has to happen before he
can choose to do something about it.

I change the subject. “You never said anything about kids. I have to tell you upfront it’s a deal-
breaker for me.”

“I don’t want ‘em either. I pretty much raised Paps. I love him, but I don’t really want to do it
again. It was a lotta hard work. And anyway, we’ve got Asriel and Frisk. Or you’ve got Asriel, I
don’t think he’s warmed up to me very much.”

“Give him time. But, uh, you told me once humans and monsters were capable of breeding. Is
that… possible? Or will we need protection?”

He looks at me. “You… want to have sex?”

“No. Papyrus could walk in on us down here.”

“I don’t mean right now. I mean at all. I thought you wouldn’t want to.”

“What, are you forgetting we’ve already groped one another?”

“Nah. How could I forget that? I think about it all the…” He fake-coughs, going blue, and I’m
grinning. “I mean – not all the time. Just – just occasionally.”

“Is it after Papyrus and I go to bed, when you’re all alone—”

“Shaddup. Can we get back on topic? Or is that a touchy subject?”

As he says it, he lays a hand on my thigh. “Fine,” I say. “I’ll bestow mercy upon you because that
one was pretty good. Yes, I’m assuming we’ll have sex, at some point in time, if you want to. I had sex with Lucas, you know. I don’t know exactly how we’ll go about doing it, but we’re not doing anything until we know whether we need some sort of birth control.”

Sans taps his index finger against my leg, thinking. “I can’t give you a hundred-percent guarantee,” he says. “But you told me once you can’t have kids because your organs are too damaged. Monsters are mostly magic, but we do have some physicality to us. Any short brainy hellspawn we’d hypothetically conceive would be part human, so it would have to grow in you for some time. If you couldn’t carry a human pregnancy, you wouldn’t be able to carry a hybrid pregnancy, either, presuming they’re even possible. And I don’t think they are, or we would’ve seen one by now.”

Short brainy hellspawn. Blunt, but probably accurate. “We can talk to Alphys,” Sans continues. “Or Toriel and Asgore might remember something. I don’t know who would know.”

Me neither, but those are the best places to start. “Okay. That’s a good idea.”

“I hope you didn’t wanna do anything tonight.”

“You watched me take painkillers two hours ago. I’m on my period. I will never have sex with you when I’m on my period.”

“You tryin’ to cramp my style?”

“Don’t you dare, Sans.”

“I’m kidding. That doesn’t sound a-peeling.”

I kick his foot and he smirks. As much as I like The Lion King… “Can we stop the movie and go to bed? I just want to sleep.”

He lurches off the couch faster than I expected him to. “I’ve been waiting for you to say that.”

My parents, naturally, drop the bomb on me the third week of November. They are heading to Boston to my grandmother’s for Thanksgiving and they want Shannon and me to come. The rest of the family wants us there, probably on account of, you know, me getting shot. Again.

I give them a twenty-minute lecture about giving me adequate planning time for these things. Of course I will go. It’s been years since I’ve seen my extended family. But the last time I was gone for only two days, Asriel did not do well.

I tell him right away. My relationship with this kid is likely going to be unhealthily dependent for the rest of his life (or the rest of mine, since I’ll hopefully die before him), but that’s fine because he is probably going to need therapy for the rest of his life. Tends to happen when you commit horrible atrocities for what amounts to hundreds or thousands of years and have to emotionally process them all at once.

He is unhappy, but he understands. I will be gone for three days, so I tell him he can text me as often as he likes and we will do a video chat the second day.

Shannon is obviously coming with me. Sans wants to come, too. He doesn’t necessarily want to
meet my family and be introduced as my partner because that scares the metaphorical shit out of him. He wants to keep me safe, which is... something I can indulge, because if we’re honest, I can take far more damage than Sans can, even if his magic is scary as hell.

Of course Papyrus has to come too. He is a little disappointed we aren’t taking his car to Boston, but he’s excited to fly.

The science checked out, but it still sounded like a big metal deathtrap and he wishes his shortcuts reached that far so they don’t have to get on the thing for the return trip, but of course they do. Sans can barely teleport from one side of Newer Home to the other without straining himself. He didn’t get much practice with large distances Underground. Honestly it was mostly just that one step to dodge.

But if he thought the plane takeoff was scary, this is worse.

Papyrus exuberantly greets everyone, as expected. Sans doesn’t even have to introduce himself or be the one to break the news that Isla’s with a monster.

He isn’t worried about Isla’s parents. He gets along well with Brian, even though he knows there will be some added expectations to their interactions now that he’s with the man’s daughter. Celeste is less friendly, less laid-back, but she likes him, too.

No, the problem is the stony-faced old woman in front of them now. Celeste’s mother, if he remembers correctly. And he doesn’t because all he remembers is that this is Isla’s mother’s family because her dad’s family is dead, their family name is Veneto, she has four uncles and thirteen cousins, even though all those cousins aren’t the same type of cousin or something, and Sans is blanking on every first name she told him and why the hell do all humans have like three names anyway? One name serves most monsters just fine.

Isla’s grandmother is his height and has dark eyes and steel-grey hair. She, Brian, and Shannon are the only ones here with a hair color other than black or brown. Humans already look the same to Sans, but everyone here actually looks the same because they’re related. Some of them, like Isla, have lighter hair and eyes and skin, but the majority of them are darker-colored than she is. Isla’s short, too, her grandmother and Sans are the only adults here shorter than she is. Nobody comes close to Papyrus’s height, but some of the men make Shannon look short and Shannon is not short.

“She looks like Sans,” Isla says. It’s been so far, so good. Isla’s family isn’t a bunch of closeted racists, but they are loud, kinda unfiltered, and curious. He was asked at least six questions as Isla towed him over to her grandmother and he’s pretty sure at least two of them were inappropriate.

The old woman looks him over critically. Ah, shit. This isn’t going to go well, is it? He should have definitely gotten a degree or two of his accredited. Alphys got hers done immediately after the opportunity arose, but what did he do? He kept worked unskilled, odd-end jobs because… well, now he doesn’t know why. Isla got her Ph.D. at twenty-three, the very least he could do to earn his place next to her is to have a degree of his own.

He realizes far too late that Lucas must have met her family, too, and how unimpressive he must look compared to him. Lucas is tall. It bothered him. Now he knows why it bothered him.

The old woman scoffs, “Well, it wasn’t like I was getting great-grandchildren out of you anyway,”
and Sans freezes, unsure of what to do.

Then Isla laughs and her grandmother smirks. It was a joke. It was a freaking joke.

“What do you do, Sans?” the old woman asks, and no, he is not imagining the slightly interrogatory tone, that is definitely there.

“I work in a lab,” he answers, both because it’s the most impressive thing he does even though he just gathers data and files it and because it’s a good way to get on the topic. “We study souls. As a matter of fact, I’ve, uh, got a portable scanner, if you don’t mind.”

He expects to have to do some more explaining, but Isla’s grandmother arches an eyebrow and says, “I don’t.”

“Alright, then.” Scanner in hand, he points it at the old woman.

“We’re beginning to look into the hereditary aspects of souls,” Isla says. People are watching. Papyrus has drifted closer, probably to shoot him encouraging smiles and thumbs-ups because Papyrus is the best brother ever.

“You’re orange,” Sans says when the results feed into the screen. “That means bravery.” No surprise there.

Two of Isla’s younger cousins come right up to him and peer over his shoulders. “What do all those numbers mean?” the boy asks.

“We’re not entirely sure,” Isla answers for him. “We know what some of them mean. More data will help us figure out what the rest mean.”

A girl who can’t be older than eight stands on her tip-toes and leans on Sans’s arm to try and see the screen. He stays stock-still. “You need more people?” she asks. “Then scan me too! I wanna know what color I am!”

“Hang on,” Isla says. “Make a line.”

There is much clambering and chatting. Isla has a notebook to write down the results, since only one person’s results can be seen on the scanner at a time. Papyrus loudly explains colors and aspects of souls as Sans goes through the line, scanning and tilting the screen so Isla can see and announcing a color.

Nobody has any EXP, but seriously, how could they when they live here? He and Papyrus are the first monsters these people have ever interacted with.

Nobody has any of that number Isla has, either. That number that didn’t change on her with the terrorist attack. He is almost certain it indicates a human kill.

The results are interesting. Nearly half of them throw orange. Two of the uncles throw orange. One throws yellow and the other throws green. Of the cousins who aren’t orange, half are yellow, but there are a few other colors in the mix. The only two missing are the blues. Isla and Brian are the only ones who are light blue. The little girl who grabbed his arm earlier throws red, but it’s not nearly as bright as Frisk’s. That’s not really a fair standard, since Frisk has the highest brightness of anyone he’s ever seen and they are almost five standard deviations above the mean.

“This looks like a paper,” Isla says as she looks over the results with him. “Or it would, if we had enough data from the general population from which to draw a large enough random sample.”
“We’ll have enough eventually,” Sans replies. For some reason he’s actually a little excited about this. Science hasn’t been genuinely fun for him in a while.

While everyone else is talking, Isla pats his arm, smiling at him. “You did well,” she says. “Nonna can be a hardass.”

“That’s where you get it from.”

She raises an eyebrow, smirking. It’s time for dinner after that. It’s pasta, so Papyrus is very glad he came.
The snow falls thick in December and January. The freezing weather only becomes an issue when Toriel and Ezra show up a lazy Saturday afternoon.

Papyrus is over at Alphys and Undyne’s exercising with Undyne in the basement. She gets restless and grouchy when she can’t run around outside. I answer the door in pajama pants and a T-shirt that is big enough to be Papyrus’s but isn’t because he hasn’t mutilated it into a crop-top.

“Hi,” I say, wondering what Ezra is doing here. “Come in. What’s going on?”

“Greetings, Isla,” Toriel replies. “Ezra is here to pick up Kalene. Could you tell her and Asriel it is time for her to return home?”

Ezra has been bringing his daughter around on the order of five or six times a month. I still have weekly sessions with him and he has been doing better. He has occasional symptoms and ups and downs, which is fairly normal. I still feel like I’m missing something, though, and I’ve been unsuccessful in finding out what.

I blink. “Asriel and Kalene aren’t here.”

“They said they were coming over here,” Toriel says, brow furrowing. “They wanted to ask Papyrus if he had any puzzles for them.”

“No,” I call. “Any kids come in the house without me noticing?”

“Asriel and Kalene told Toriel they were coming over here.”

“They ain’t over here, Tori. Paps isn’t even here. Hasn’t been here all morning.”

Toriel briefly presses a hand to her muzzle. “Damn. Can’t I trust my children to at least go next door without wandering off?” She turns to Ezra. “I am so, so sorry about this.”

He shrugs. “You don’t need to apologize. I’m sure it was Kalene’s idea.”

I’ve got my phone out. “Hang on. Maybe they just went to see Frisk.”

Frisk picks up on the second ring. “S’up, Aunt Isla?”

“Hi, Frisk,” I respond. “I don’t have much time. Asriel and Kalene seem to have disappeared. Are they with you?”

“No.” Frisk doesn’t sound so relaxed anymore, and I can hear them running somewhere already. “I can – go ask Dad. If Asriel brought Kalene to the Embassy, he’d come to see me or Dad.”
Sans is next to me. “Bad news?”

I shrug. Twenty seconds later, there is talking, then Asgore’s worried voice in the phone: “Howdy. Frisk says Asriel’s missing?”

I hand the phone to Toriel. “It’s Asgore.”

She takes it from me immediately. “Greetings, G – Asgore. He’s not there? They left over an hour ago.”

A pause. Sans nudges me. “I heard it too,” I mutter to him. “But that’s low on my priorities list right now.”

“He’s with Kalene,” Toriel continues. “You remember her, little blonde girl, blue eyes, very friendly? She sings a lot. She’s a bright yellow if you need to verify her identity. I’m only glad I made them bundle up, even though they were supposed to be going next door—”

I hear the back door open, and there they are. Asriel stops to look at us, but Kalene takes off her boots and winter gear like nothing is wrong.

“Oh, never mind,” Toriel says, putting a hand over her chest. “They just showed up. Yes, they’re fine. Goodbye, Asgore.”

She hangs up and hands me my phone. She approaches Asriel just as Kalene runs across the floor and throws herself at her father, giggling.

Even though he wasn’t worried, he puts her down. “How about you go stand with your friend,” he suggests calmly, without a hint of expectation in his tone.

Kalene finally looks around. “Are we in trouble?” She looks back at Asriel and Toriel crouching down next to him. She runs back. “It was my fault, Miss Toriel, don’t get Asriel in trouble!”

Asriel’s eyes have gone glassy. Toriel sighs and spread her arms and he falls into them, hands meeting at the back of her neck. He is not wearing gloves or a hat. Just a coat and oddly-shaped boots to accommodate his paw-like feet.

Toriel embraces him. “I am very glad to have you home safe,” she murmurs. “Where did you go?”

“We went to Mount Ebott,” Kalene answers immediately. “It was my fault, Miss Toriel. I’ve always wanted to go there. I had to go there. Asriel said he’d walk me to the base and back but we couldn’t make the climb to go to the Underground in the winter and that’s all we did, promise!”

Toriel pulls back, still holding her son. “Asriel, you know that was dangerous,” she chides gently. “We were very worried about you. And what if one of you had been hurt outside?”

He sniffs. “But M-Mom, I really thought about it. I kn-knew we couldn’t climb in the snow and it’s only a fifteen-minute walk to the base. The trip only goes through monster dwellings, I knew there wouldn’t be h-humans who wanted to hurt us. And we came back right away.”

“True,” Toriel allows. “But it’s freezing outside, Asriel. What if Kalene had slipped on some ice and gotten hurt? Humans don’t have magic. They are more affected by the physical properties of weather than we are.”

“I could’ve kept her warm,” Asriel mumbles. “I could’ve carried her.” He grimaces suddenly. “I was on my own for a long time, Mom.”
Yeouch. I can see the heartbreak on Toriel’s face, too. That one really hurt.

She pulls Asriel back in for another hug. “I know, my child. I know. But you aren’t alone anymore. I promise.”

Kalene and Ezra both look confused, so this is a good time to address this. “Kalene, what do you mean when you say you had to go to Mount Ebott?”

The girl frowns. “I don’t know. I just had to go.”

“You felt like you had to go?”

“Yeah. I still feel like I have to go. I really wanna make the climb. I want to see the Underground!”

“Did you want to climb the mountain before everyone knew about the Underground and the monsters?”

Sans looks at me sharply. Kalene thinks about it, then nods. “Yeah! I think I’ve always wanted to climb it. We’ve lived here forever and I’ve wanted to climb it forever, but I didn’t want to go by myself and worry Dad and he told me he wouldn’t go with me until I got older.”

“How long is forever?” I ask Ezra.

“I’m not sure,” he answers. “I remember my grandmother telling me our family has lived in the village – well, it’s a city now – for centuries, but that seems unlikely.”

Sans grips my forearm. When I look at him, his grip tightens. No more questions.

That’s fine. I don’t need more answers. Not from them, anyway.

When they leave, Sans asks, “Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?”

“I think all the kids who fell into Mount Ebott felt that same need to climb it,” I reply. “I think they may have been…”

But that’s way too far of a leap. That’s not scientific. Focus on what I do know.

“You think all of them were descendants of mages and that’s why they felt drawn in the first place?” Sans finishes for me.

“I don’t know. Maybe? We need to talk to Frisk. They’re the only one alive.”

“Chara felt drawn there.”

We both look over at Toriel and Asriel. He is holding her hand. She touches his head with her free hand. “Asriel?”

“They told me about it,” he continues, quieter. He couldn’t shut up about Chara when he was Flowey. Since he gained a soul, he has barely mentioned them. “They were… running from something. Th-they. Um. I don’t know if I should tell you…”
Toriel’s expression is torn. I go to stand in front of Asriel. “Chara told you they felt drawn there?”

“Well… they said they felt like everything would be okay. If they could just climb the mountain.”

“Asriel,” Toriel says. He looks up at her. “There is something you are not telling us.”

He fidgets. “I just… Chara wouldn’t want me to tell.”

“Asriel,” Toriel says again. That’s not the mom-voice. She knows she has to be gentle with him. “It is not difficult to figure out, given what we know now. Was Chara’s fall into Mount Ebott a failed suicide attempt?”

Asriel swallows, eyes immediately brimming with tears. He doesn’t have to say anything. Toriel leans down to pick him up and he cries against her shoulder. She’s getting teary-eyed, too. Holy shit.

I step forward. “Do you want me to—”

Toriel shakes her head. “No, dear. It’s quite alright. I think we’ll go home. If you could call Asgore and Frisk, I would appreciate that. You can ask whatever questions of Frisk you need to before they talk to us. Just… make sure they know it is not an emergency. I don’t want to worry them.”

Asriel leans away from his mother long enough to bump his wet nose against mine. As they go, I say, “Call me if you need me.”

First things first. I call Asgore to relay Toriel’s message. He agrees to bring Frisk right away.

“Holy shit,” I say to Sans after I hang up. “He’s never mentioned that to me – Sans? You okay?”

He’s not smiling, his eyesockets are dark, and there is something twitching on his face that almost looks like fear. “I’m fine,” he says automatically, pasting a smile on that’s even faker than his usual.

“Bullshit,” I say.

He lets the fake grin drop. When he speaks he sounds distracted. “Isla, I… you need to let this go, okay?”

“If we can find a link between the mages who created the barrier – we know they were here, at one point in time – and the fallen humans – maybe—”

“It won’t help anyone. In fact, I don’t wanna think about what it might do to Asgore. He’ll never stop beating himself up for those kids. We don’t need to remind him.”

“We don’t have to tell him. We can just do our research and present the findings.”

He visibly jerks away from me in response to this. “What about Frisk? If Chara tried to kill themself by falling into the mountain, you really gonna remind Frisk of their fall? What if it was the same?”

“I’m Frisk’s therapist; don’t you think I’ve had that talk with them already? If there are descendants of mages… you told me mages and Boss Monsters were proof humans and monsters could once interbreed. We could find magical genetic markers, or… something like it. That could carry some weight in getting monsters full rights if we prove that they were once related to humans. Or not, it’s kind of irrelevant, but it’s interesting. Monsters kept far better records of the
war, but even you guys don’t know a lot about the mages, right?”

He is standing there, looking a little lost. “Was Chara a red soul?” he asks. “Were they…?”

He doesn’t finish. “That… was never mentioned,” I say. “I don’t know. I can ask Asriel, I guess, when he’s feeling better. Are you okay? Are you going to protest if I say I want to take this idea to Alphys?”

“Nah. I don’t really care about that. You’re right, it sounds… interesting.” He sounds confused. “I’m gonna go take a nap upstairs.”

“Okay?” I say. He goes to climb the stairs this time instead of teleporting. “Sans.”

“Hmm?”

“You’re not okay. Will you tell me what’s wrong?”

“It’s nothin’. I just had a thought that probably isn’t true. I’m gonna go to sleep and when I wake up I’ll have a clear head and I’ll realize why I’m wrong. Love you.”

I stare at his retreating back. “Love you too.”

She asks if they felt drawn to Mount Ebott, and their immediate answer is yes.

They’d never been to the town – now city – at the base of the mountain, but they didn’t live far. Close enough to know the legend. And they knew what was happening, but they were told to get out of the car and sit and wait for somebody to come – they knew nobody would come, but it didn’t matter, because they turned around and looked at the mountain and they had the unfamiliar feeling of coming home.

Frisk didn’t care about the legend when they climbed Mount Ebott because they were home. And even if the legend had been true for them, as it had been true for others, it didn’t matter because they didn’t have anyone. Nobody would come for them.

They know Chara felt the same, though Chara had been more focused on what was behind them than what was in front of them. So focused on running that when they saw the hole they didn’t see whatever tripped them. And anyway, they’d been limping, injured, so their gait wasn’t steady in the first place.

Frisk spent the first part of their childhood alone. They remember walking in front of the people who were supposed to… supposed to take care of them like their real family does now and they felt practically invisible. It was like nobody could see them. And later, towards the end, they remember wanting to be invisible, because as horribly painful as the all-encompassing loneliness was, alone at least meant they didn’t have to be afraid of getting yelled at or having to dodge thrown objects. When they Fell, they knew it was possible to touch other people without hitting or shoving them, and when Toriel gently took their hand in hers and for a second they expected her to pull on their arm but she didn’t, and even though she tenderly held their hand so many times before and they knew it was coming they still expected it, every time, and that feeling of home just wouldn’t go away.
Chara… wasn’t the same. Sharing a head means Frisk knows more than Chara would like them to know, but they don’t know enough. Chara is their reflection, their twin and opposite. Frisk was ignored, so they want the company of others, but Chara was forced to interact with people whose attention meant pain and with that came the expectation that they be someone they aren’t and never were. Chara likes to be alone and hates being touched. Even the muted experience of physical contact through Frisk’s body is too much for them sometimes. Frisk feels bad because Chara is stuck in their head, stuck with their company every second, awake or asleep.

But if Chara had their own body—

No, Frisk, they say, annoyed because they have this non-conversation multiple times a week and Frisk doesn’t even bother to hide the thought from them anymore. Don’t bother.

Frisk thought that watching Asriel get better would convince Chara it’s time to focus on them, but they won’t budge. They have asked them if they want to do whatever actual dead people do (because whatever that is, Frisk knows dead people don’t go latching onto the living like this) and in the same thought have begged them not to go anywhere.

And Chara won’t go anywhere. They still hate humanity. As long as there is a miniscule chance they could protect Frisk or Asriel or the monsters, they will stay. And Frisk is glad, because even though they finally feel they are home, they wouldn’t feel like that without Chara here. The only improvement that could be made would be Chara gaining their own body, and failing that, if their family knew about Chara, and Frisk would be more than willing to let Chara use their body to interact with the ones they both love.

But Chara thinks knowing they are alive will only hurt their family. They saw how hard it was when Asriel came back. And Asriel is the other thing, because he doesn’t know about Chara’s past to the extent Frisk does. The time Chara spent in Asriel’s body was all Asriel’s scared apprehension and Chara’s white-hot rage and once they were out they were so focused on fighting one another and then Asriel was dying and there was no time for Asriel to see what Frisk has seen. And Chara doesn’t even want Frisk to know, but there was no avoiding it, and now it’s holding them back from revealing themself to the people they love.

So they say, “Yes. I had to make the climb, once I saw it.”

Words are easier now. Some days are hard, some days it takes so much energy to produce sound, but they can make their friends and family happy by talking with them, and that’s important.

“I had a thought,” Isla says. She had a murmured conversation with Asgore as soon as they showed up and then sent him over to Toriel’s. Frisk doesn’t know what that was about, but they suppose they’ll see when they go home themself. “Kalene apparently convinced Asriel to walk her to Mount Ebott. She said she has always felt a need to climb it. Asriel didn’t let her go that far, but they went to the base, and she still wants to go. I wonder if all the children who made the climb felt driven to do it. You did, and Asriel indicated that Chara made some allusions to feeling like they had to climb.”

Frisk stiffens a little. Of course I felt like I had to, Chara mutters. It was the only place I could go where I could be sure nobody would follow me.

“I think all of you could be descendants of the mages who created the barrier,” she continues. “It’s… something of a stretch, but you are the only human known in present day to evidence magic as defined by monsters.”

“But I don’t know if I can do that anymore,” Frisk says, because it’s true. In the Underground,
their abilities to RESET and SAVE and LOAD were never far. They felt almost natural. Now they feel like they would have to reach for those powers, and they don’t know if their arms are long enough.

Sometimes they want to SAVE, just to see if they can, just to exercise the ability, but… if they SAVE here, on the surface, will they be able to RESET back to the Underground? They don’t want to, but if something bad happens, to not have the option…

They have to calm down. Everyone is working together to prevent bad things from happening. They have to handle it just like everyone else does and they have to trust that they and their friends and family can do it, because if they can’t do it, there was no point in coming to the surface and Frisk has to believe that this was the right thing to do.

“But that you could at all is unprecedented,” Isla says. “Some humans may be capable of it. A few centuries might not have been enough time for evolution to knock off a dormant attribute.”

They don’t fully understand that, but that is the case for most things Isla says. “What can I do to help?”

She hesitates. “Nothing as of now. We may take a genetic sample from you later, but I don’t know how much good that will do, because all we have to compare you to is Kalene and her father. I’m not about to track down your biological relatives. It wouldn’t be worth it and they probably wouldn’t consent to giving us a DNA sample because I’d probably punch them in the face.”

Chara snickers and Frisk lets out the breath they were holding to smile. “I don’t know the identities of any of the other fallen humans,” they say quietly. “It wouldn’t… be good to draw attention to them by searching for their families, would it?”

“No, it wouldn’t. And I don’t want to bring this to Asgore’s attention, either. But I am going to talk to Alphys about it. Thank you. You’ve been a big help.”

When they get home, they find the entirety of their family solemn. Asriel’s crying, but calmly, quietly, leaning against their dad’s leg.

Frisk feels something twist in their chest. “Is everything okay?”

Toriel smiles when she sees them, but it doesn’t quite touch her eyes. She walks to them and bends to embrace them and Frisk resists the urge to tighten their arms around her neck and lift their legs off the floor so she’ll carry them. Chara stays back, even though Frisk likes Chara to be in their body as much as possible when these hugs happen.

“Everything is fine, my child,” Toriel replies when she pulls back. “We were just discussing something rather sad, but we’d rather not make you sad too. What would you like for dinner? And you’ll stay, won’t you, Asgore?”

He nods. “Of course. Thank you, Tori.”

She doesn’t object to the nickname. Frisk tries to catch Asriel’s eye but he keeps staring at the floor as their parents talk over them.

Frisk goes upstairs to change into comfier clothes. They have to look sharp while doing ambassador stuff. Really, Isla’s the only one who can get away with coming to the Embassy in her pajamas. She could come in naked and everyone would still take her seriously.

Chara’s attention doesn’t shift. Body modesty is an impossibility in their relationship. Chara is
there when Frisk showers and goes to the bathroom and changes clothes. Chara knows what they look like naked and neither of them care now, even though it was a little awkward at first. Frisk never really cared – they are Chara’s home for now, so it’s kind of Chara’s body, too – but Chara did not want to infringe on Frisk’s privacy like that, even though it was unavoidable. For a while, Frisk had to repeatedly tell them it was okay.

When they are done, they go back downstairs, but they run into Asriel on the stairwell. They go back up with him and into their shared room.

“What were you talking about?” Frisk asks. “You can tell me, but you don’t have to.”

Asriel sits on the bottom bunk. He plays with his fingers. “No. It’s okay. We were just talking about Chara.”

Oh. Uncomfortable. Chara is feeling something they don’t want Frisk to identify, so Frisk politely keeps their attention on Asriel. They sit next to him and pull him down on the bed. Asriel does the rest of the work getting them comfortably situated to snuggle. Frisk wishes they could help Asriel by helping him talk about Chara, but Chara’s right here and Asriel doesn’t know, and it kind of drives Frisk crazy sometimes.

“How did Lena talk you into going to Mount Ebott?” Frisk asks. The nickname was Asriel’s idea. It just kinda came out of his mouth one day and of course Kalene beamed and said she loved it.

“She just talked,” Asriel says. “And talked, and talked. I like listening to her, ‘specially when she sings. It’s… distracting. I wish she could come around more.”

They are both in school now, both too old for the grades Toriel teaches and anyway, Asriel got moved up to Frisk’s year. He’s the youngest one, and nobody’s necessarily mean to him – he’s still the Prince of All Monsters and only big jerks would be mean to someone like Asriel. That doesn’t mean their classmates understand when Asriel has to step out to do breathing exercises or call Isla in the middle of class. It’s happened before. Unlike most people, Kalene understands, and she doesn’t just understand, she helps, and that means so much.

“Me too,” Frisk says. “I love you, Asriel.” Because saying it is just as important as hearing it. That… is not something they remember hearing before they Fell.

Asriel clings and says, “I love you too, Frisk.”

Chara both can hardly stand this and can’t get enough of it and Chara likes to avoid intense emotions, so it’s probably time to stop. Frisk shifts, loosening their grip, and Asriel gets the hint and lets them sit up. “Wanna go see if Mom will let us help cook?” they ask.

Asriel nods. “Sure.”

They get up, and it’s quiet, barely there, but Frisk thinks they hear I love you, too, in a tiny, whispered voice in their head.

Sans doesn’t get out of bed for three days.

The first day I’m not worried. He has shitty sleeping habits, so he occasionally has to catch up. He
sleeps all evening and through the night and I still wake up first the next day.

I spend a large part of Sunday afternoon with Asriel because he finally asks me if his parents are going to get back together. I have to tell him I don’t know, because I don’t, and that it won’t likely happen anytime soon. I try to explain a little about where his parents’ heads are right now without making him worry or infringing on their privacy, even though I know they would give me permission to tell him what I’m saying.

When I get home that evening Papyrus is twisting his hands, not paying attention to the water boiling over on the stove. After I prevent a house fire, he says Sans is still in bed and he can’t get his brother up and that’s when I start to think something is wrong.

I go upstairs and turn on the light to… our room. Still kind of weird thinking that. “Sans.”

No response from the lump on the bed. I walk over and shake him. “Sans.”

He grunts. Doesn’t move.

I crawl in with him, spooning up behind him. It takes him twenty minutes to mumble something. “You don’ have ta stay.”

“There you are,” I reply quietly. “Of course I’m staying.”

“Waste of your time.”

I pull him closer to me. It won’t do much good to logic things out with him now. I should wait. “I love you.”

He grunts again. It sounds disapproving.

He continues to try to push me away, to get me to leave, but his attempts are weak and lazy because he has no energy. Papyrus brings us our meals in bed. Sans doesn’t eat at first, but he can’t stand the worried look on his brother’s face and chokes down enough to make Papyrus happy. Papyrus also comes to read him bedtime stories.

I call Asgore and tell him I’m not coming in on Monday. I don’t tell him why, though he already seems to know. After school, Toriel comes over with Asriel and Frisk. Toriel comes upstairs first. She asks if I have everything under control and I do. Then she says, “I hope you feel better, Sans,” and pats his head. He doesn’t respond and she exchanges a glance with me, nodding, that I later realize was her indicating she sensed that his soul is okay.

Frisk is next and climbs in bed with us both. I take the opportunity to go downstairs and see how Asriel is doing. He’s a bit antsy from not seeing me yesterday, but he’s alright. We go upstairs while Toriel talks with Papyrus to find Frisk has taken over in the cuddling department.

Asriel goes over and kneels at the side of the bed so he can look Sans in the face. “Sans? If… if this is because of me or something I did when I… I’m sorry.” He reaches out to hug the skeleton around the shoulders. “I really am.”

“It’s probably me,” Frisk says, resigned. “And I’m sorry too. Is there anything we can do to make you feel better?”

“He’s been pretty unresponsive,” I say when Sans says nothing. “I think the best thing you two can do is go downstairs and entertain Papyrus for a little while. I’ve got it up here.”
I don’t say that I don’t want Sans to come out of it and have a magic flare and attack either one of these kids. He’s almost done that to me before and he’s got better reasons to reflexively attack Frisk or Asriel than me.

They go and I get back in bed. Once I’m situated, I pull Sans comfortably against me.
I read and get on my laptop sometimes, but I can’t do much else because I’m in bed for upwards of eighteen hours a day. I spend a lot of time sleeping and cuddling. Papyrus is in and out. He sits with Sans when I can’t be with him, which is basically my showers and bathroom breaks. He mutters to me in the hall that this is the worst Sans has ever been, which makes me worry we are handling this incorrectly and only worsening his symptoms, but Sans isn’t in the right frame of mind to explain what will help him, so we continue as is.

Sans barely does or says anything. He only mumbles self-depreciating things when Papyrus isn’t there. Papyrus and I both try to be as loving and worry-free as we can. It’s harder for Papyrus, who doesn’t have my patience. He wants to do something, take some action to make his brother feel better, but I always manage to talk him out of it.

It ends Tuesday afternoon. I wake up from a nap to realize I’m the little spoon, which almost never happens. Sans never touched me during his episode, so I know it’s over before he says anything.

“Hey,” he murmurs, making no move to release me.

“Hi,” I reply. “Feel better?”

“Yep.”

“Good. We don’t have to talk about it now, but I’m not letting you blow this off. Okay?”

Instead of replying, one of his hands reaches down to grab my ass. The other comes around me to cup one of my breasts. He’s a little off-center at first because my breasts are that small, but he quickly adjusts.

“Sans,” I say.

“What?” he replies playfully. He tugs at the fabric of my T-shirt. “Mind takin’ this off? I’d love to meet a couple of new breast friends.”

Yeah, he feels better. “That was horrible.”

He nuzzles into the crook of my neck and uses the hand on my butt to yank my pajama pants down my hips. It kind of surprises me, considering he usually moves so slowly in everything he does. We’ve groped each other a little before, sure, exchanged kisses, snuggled in bed, but he’s never done or said anything that indicated he wanted to do anything sexual.

So I say, “This is absolutely not happening right now unless we have a talk first. You just had a depressive episode.”

“Exactly. I just slept for days. This is the most energy I’ve had in years.”
That… is not a valid argument. Shit, am I actually reacting? It’s kind of exciting to think that I might be, because usually foreplay is required before I want to have sex, and sometimes even after the foreplay I don’t really want to.

“And why will this make you feel better?” I ask.

A moment of silence. Then, “Please don’t go therapist on me while I’m touching you.”

“We’re not going to be having sex often. I don’t want you to associate it with a crash.”

“I hope we’re going to be screwing way more often than I crash. This was my first one in years.” A pause. “I’m not blowing this off. I know it freaked a lotta people out, and damn, I hate seeing Paps worry like that. I’m past it, but I want things to be back to normal before I talk. Does that make sense?”

Yes. It’s what I would normally advocate for, if not for his hands on me. I rarely think about sex, let alone want to have it, but I expected this. I expected him to indicate his interest and for lots of explaining to go on during foreplay because I have no idea how his body works and I’m sure it’s the same for him, and maybe we would get tired doing that or maybe we would actually have sex if we both still want to.

But maybe I’m a tad interested right now, which is weird, and I feel like I should act on it because even if he’s lazy, I’m sure there will be many times in the future when he wants to have sex and I don’t.

So I sit up and lift my shirt over my head. I lie down on my back. He sits up so he can see me and slowly pokes me in the ribs.

I give him a bland expression. “I’m not ticklish.”

He looks fascinated. “How come I can see your bones clearly here, but it’s not as clear anywhere else?” He grabs one of my hands and runs a finger over my knuckles, then comes back to my ribs.

I shrug. “You’d be able to, if not for organs and muscles and fat.”

“Hmm,” he replies, and his hand finally closes on one of my breasts. Kinda funny that I took my shirt off and he went right for my ribs.

“Soft,” he utters, sounding a bit surprised.

“It’s fat. I’m actually not that soft, for a human.” I’m skinny and bony compared to other women, but maybe not compared to skeleton monsters.

He turns so he can reach me with his other hand. He makes the mistake of touching my stomach and I flinch violently, almost elbowing him.

“Sorry.” He takes his hands off me immediately. “I should’ve thought more before… heh. Who the fuck am I kidding.”

He falls back onto the pillows and rolls away from me. What just happened?

I sit up and touch his shoulder. “That was just a reflex.”

“You don’t have to stay here. I’m fine. I’ll be fine. If you want to go—”

I cut him off right there, because he isn’t referring to leaving the room, or the house. “I’m staying.
You have – Sans, look at me.”

He doesn’t, so I throw a leg over his pelvis and sit on him, straddling him and putting myself right in his line of sight. My hands push his shoulders into the pillows. “You were handling my panic attacks and flashbacks long before we got together,” I say, noting his startled expression. “Of course I want to take care of you when you need it. I know sometimes you think it would be better if I’d just leave, because you can’t trust that this will be permanent when nothing was Underground. I know you don’t think you’re good enough for me—”

“Because you do so much, all the time—”

“I move too fast. You help me slow down and when I don’t, you always catch me when I fall. So let me help you speed up. We don’t have to talk now, and you don’t have to think of me as your therapist. I hope you’d trust me without all that paperwork anyway. I love you, dammit.”

I lean down to press my lips firmly to his teeth, then pull back. “It’s not really fair I’m the only one half-dressed here. Let’s make things even.”

His eyesockets light up and his smile gets a little more genuine and he moves his hands to my legs – or he starts to.

Papyrus is loud. We hear him coming. He’s also fast, so when I freeze, Sans grabs a pillow and shoves it at my chest to keep me from flashing his brother.

He barges in, announcing, “SANS!!! ISLA!!! I HAVE A VERY GOOD FEELING ABOUT TODAY—” he cuts himself off. Stops and stares at me half-naked on top of his brother and – great, I forgot that Sans started to pull my pants off so he can see my underwear, too. Papyrus goes bright orange, averts his gaze, and tugs at his scarf like it’s choking him. “NYEH. I – JUST REMEMBERED SOMETHING I MUST DO. SOMETHING THAT IS. NOT HERE. IN THIS ROOM. OR IN THIS HOUSE FOR THAT MATTER, IN CASE THE BED IN THIS ROOM TURNS OUT TO BE. NOT OPTIMAL.”

He turns on his heel and leaves, slamming the door behind him. Two seconds later he opens it again and shouts, “THOUGH I VERY MUCH EXPECT MY COOL RACECAR BED TO BE EVEN LESS OPTIMAL. MY FLOOR TOO. AND – ANYWHERE ELSE. IN MY ROOM.”

The door slams again. This time we hear him run across the loft and down the stairs. The front door slams.

I clutch the pillow to myself. “Did Papyrus just ask us not to fuck in his room?”

Sans groans and puts his hands over his eyesockets.

No sex happens that day. Apparently traumatizing Papyrus is a mood killer.

Asriel’s rebirth occurred exactly a year ago on January thirtieth. His parents want to treat it like his birthday. I’m told monsters didn’t do birthdays in the Underground, because each one was just another reminder of their time spent trapped, but more of them are paying attention to them now that they are on the surface.
True to form, Asriel cries when we surprise him with a party. He blubbers on Frisk for five minutes before he’s remotely coherent. After that, though, he’s able to have fun, other than a terrifying moment in which Undyne suplexes him.

It blizzards three times in February. The monsters are very efficient at clearing roads and driveways, even though most of the residents of Newer Home don’t drive. Their magic often makes everyday work a bit easier for them than it would be for a human, which is fair because existing in general is a little harder for them.

Of course it gets out. We don’t deny it and the media spends a week speculating about interracial relationships and whether they have any business existing. After three segments like this I release a scathing retort online. It’s uncensored. Social media blows up about how hilarious it is.

I want to maintain our privacy, but the tipping point is when Frisk of all people is asked about our relationship. They give the camera a deadpan face and say, “I don’t know. They’ve been sort of like my aunt and uncle long before they got together. They make each other happy. Isn’t it that simple? I’m twelve, why are you asking me this?”

I tell Sans we’re going on Mettaton’s show to talk about it, if only so the reporters stop asking our friends about it. He is unhappy about this, but understands the necessity.

It’s not as awkward as I thought it would be because Mettaton (at my demand) keeps the focus on the social and political aspects of our relationship and why couples like us can and will exist. I do most of the talking. Sans is more of a reluctant participant, especially when the questions get a little personal. Like: do we wish we could legally marry? Well, yeah, but I have doubts we would do so, even though that’s not the point. The point is having the right at all, and just because neither of us really cares about marriage does not mean others like us have the same feelings on the subject.

Nobody has accused me of faking this to start another social movement. Yet. I explain that yes, I’m still on the asexual and aromantic spectrums, this doesn’t change that; yes, our relationship is romantically deviant, Sans isn’t exactly a hopeless romantic himself; yes, we are certain we will be harassed and possibly the target of violence because some assholes are so insecure about themselves and their own relationships they feel unjustifiably entitled to control the relationships of the people around them.

We escape the sex question on-air because Mettaton’s show is family-friendly. He makes a slightly unsubtle enquiry backstage and I look right at him and say, “We haven’t had sex yet, and when we do, it’s going to be the most boring, vanilla sex ever.”

Egged on, Sans adds, “If we get tired, we might stop halfway through.”

“And we’ll have to be careful with my joints.”

“We’ll buy more pillows. Then we’ll have the best naps – I mean sex ever.”

Mettaton rolls his eyes. “I wasn’t asking to be perverted, you know. This is simply a question other people will have. Especially other interracial couples. There are so few monsters compared to humans in the first place that there will be even fewer interracial couples. It will be difficult for them to find others to relate to.”

He’s right, because we are almost immediately contacted by no fewer than ten interracial couples who were not out prior to the episode and dozens of humans and monsters who have feelings for someone of the opposite race. Most people just want to feel validated and want to connect with other people like them. Frisk takes it upon themself to start a forum linked from the Embassy’s
website so we can make people feel as safe as they can get online.

We get a lot of crap, too, but it’s easy to ignore. I advise my parents to keep their relation to me on the down low. Shannon is safer because she lives here – so long as she doesn’t go to the city next door and let everyone know where she lives.

We are seeing more and more evidence that the people who moved into the human city when Newer Home went up fall into two categories: some humans were curious about the monsters and have since become supporters and others thought they were going to ‘protect’ the world from the monsters and have decided to be hateful assholes. The polarized atmosphere has driven the crime rate up and is reflected in the constant, vicious arguments the city’s council has. Apparently the amount of arguing and the crime rate has decreased since Calder was elected to the council, so even with my personal bias I have to admit he seems to be good for something.

I finally meet the man in-person mid-March. The governor of all people wants to meet with the council and our political leaders for… he calls it an ‘informal discussion,’ but that likely won’t describe it at all.

I tell Toriel and Asgore to push to hold it at the Embassy, but they don’t have to push. Everyone is fine with that. I’m not expecting a lot from the governor because he’s been kind of a pussy with regards to the monsters. He has never dealt directly with any issues and instead always assigned people to us who were clueless and had never been given enough information and never made important decisions, anyway.

Everyone and their families are going to be there in order to mingle. Asgore and Toriel want me there to keep an eye on Asriel so they aren’t distracted worrying over him. Papyrus tells Sans he has to go with me even though it’s informal, but showing up with my monster partner might be inflammatory in just the right way. This is looking to be the next step to take for equality.

I forgot how boring most humans are.

I am sitting at one of the circular tables along the walls. Asriel is on my right. Sans is on my left. Asriel is okay, but nervous because of all the humans present. Sans is distinctly uncomfortable in formalwear. He barely even chuckled when I told him it didn’t suit him. I am stuffing appetizers in my face as the governor gives a boring speech. It’s not even a real speech because he’s not really saying anything.

After that’s over, people get up for awkward introductions. Asriel looks at me for a cue and I gesture with my head towards his parents. He stands and hurries over to his mother before she gets too far away. He’ll be alright.


I brace myself as I turn. And surprise, surprise, one of the council members is standing ten feet away from us and is glowering at us. Mid-fifties, maybe, average height, slightly overweight, hair gone completely grey. He’s white, but most of the humans who have issues with monsters just happen to be white people. Or maybe white people are louder with their racism.

I’m wondering if I should start the inevitable argument, but then he barks, “Congratulations.
You’ve made your point. I don’t want to see anything nasty from you two.”

I give him a deadpan look. “What are you talking about.”

“This,” he sneers as he gestures at us, “unnatural interspecies relationship.”

I snort. Sans is watching me, ready but relaxed because I’m staying calm. “Come again?”

“You heard me. My boy doesn’t need to see this filth.”

From maybe fifteen feet behind him, a teenager hisses, “Dad,” between his teeth. The kid’s already taller than his father and doesn’t look much like him, save for eye color. He looks more like his mother, a skinny, wide-eyed woman next to him who has appeared perpetually anxious since she walked into the room.

I look the councilor dead in the eye. “What’s your name? Walder, or something?”

He puffs up all hostile. He looks constipated. “Wallace Vance. Councilor Vance to you.”

I don’t blink. I stand up slowly, and then there is a blur of motion to my right and Asgore’s hand comes down on my shoulder. He exerts more force than necessary in his grip because this is the only way he can grab me without actually grabbing me and why is he here, anyway, he’s just someone else I have to protect because king or not, one good hit and he’s dust and—

And a hand falls on Vance’s shoulder, too. “Wallace, could I speak to you for a minute?” Calder asks, and, grip firm, steers his colleague away from me.

When they are gone, I say, “What are you doing.”

“This is good practice,” Asgore replies, releasing me. “You cannot go off on every person who offends you. They are wrong, and others can come to that conclusion on their own without you telling them what they should think.”

From his seat, Sans takes one of my hands. “You’re in battle mode,” he says softly. “Try to relax. Can you turn it off?”

I exhale through my nose. How embarrassing. Have I really been overreacting to slurs and hate-speech and coming down on people for doing no more than showcasing their ignorance and close-mindedness? I totally have. I’ve trained my brain to seek out and shut down potential threats as quickly as possible, and most of those people weren’t threats. They were all assholes, yes, but not threats.

Asgore looks at Sans, then me, and I get the feeling he’d give me a hug if we weren’t in public and surrounded by politicians and people wouldn’t make such a huge fucking deal out of platonic comforting contact but we are. I nod at him, trying to smile.

He returns the gesture and turns to walk towards Frisk. He ruffles their hair when he reaches them. Toriel is watching, concerned, but she doesn’t move. Asriel does. I make myself calm down before he gets to me.

I am here for him. I am not here to force people to acknowledge my (semi-quasiplatonic) relationship with Sans or to verbally destroy people who think their comfort and convenience are more important that what’s right. I am here to help Asriel overcome his fears.

His jaw is clenched and as I take his trembling hands in mine, I can feel the heat coming off of
them. “It’s okay to be mad,” I murmur. “Being mad doesn’t make you Flowey. You can be Asriel and still have a temper.”

“I am mad,” he hisses. “Why do you get so much hate when all you’re doing is loving?”

“People – humans – hate what they don’t understand, and it’s amazing how many people think they already understand everything important in life. When met with something outside of their knowledge, they close their minds and shun that thing for its deviance.”

Asriel goes to say something else, but then his eyes lock on something behind me. I turn.

“Doctor Reilley,” Calder says, extending his hand. “Pleased to finally make your acquaintance.”

“Likewise,” I reply, taking his hand and almost not allowing him to finish speaking. I nod towards the people behind him. “Who are they?”

He steps to one side. The woman is beautiful (which is easy when you have money) and the boy is about Frisk’s age.

“My wife and son—” Calder begins.

He’s cut off by his son, who steps forward, sticking his hand out towards Asriel, gaze not at all friendly. “Gavin Calder.”

Asriel is surprised for a second, but he accepts the handshake. He doesn’t misread the human boy’s expression, though, because they both do that stupid male thing in which they try to crush one another’s hands. I raise an eyebrow at Asriel, which makes him end the handshake. “Asriel Dreemurr,” he says clearly. He almost chirps it. It’s a very Flowey tone. “Golly, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Don’t you mean Prince Asriel Dreemurr?” Gavin says with no small amount of sarcasm.

Asriel chuckles. “Gosh, you don’t have to call me that. It’s so formal.” Definitely channeling Flowey there.

Gavin opens his mouth to reply, but much like earlier, with Vance, Calder sets a hand on his shoulder. “That’s enough, Gavin. Why don’t you go talk with Ryder?”

Gavin scowls. His mother comes forward and guides him away, teetering expertly on too-tall heels. She’d never be able to run in those shoes. And they would fly off if she had to kick somebody.

“I apologize for my son’s crassness, Prince,” Calder says with perfect politeness. “He tends to get very competitive with boys his age.”

Asriel puts his hands on the back of my chair and smiles sunnily. “Oh? I hadn’t noticed.”

Something flickers across Calder’s gaze. I exchange a look with Sans, struck with the realization that Asriel might end up better at this political crap than his parents.

There has to be a balance. He can’t act like Flowey every time he has to deal with politicians for the rest of his life. He’ll hate himself for it, and I’m not always going to be around to help him with it.

“Did you want something, or would you like a recommendation as to what appetizers to try?” I ask. I surprise myself with how tired I sound.
“I would like a word with you, Doctor Reilly,” Calder says. “Privately, if that is agreeable to you.”

I look at Sans. I’m not asking for permission. I’m asking if he’ll be alright.

He nonchalantly waves a hand. “See ya in a minute. I’ll hang out with Az. C’mere, Az. You gotta try this with ketchup. You’ll just relish it.”

Asriel shoots him a dirty look. I get up and walk with Calder.

Solomon Calder is far more visually impressive than I am. He’s just over six feet tall, fit, and has dark blond hair with only a few scattered silver hairs. The way he holds himself is self-assured, but unimposing. He’s forty-four, but I know he has held political offices since he was twenty-nine.

We go out on the balcony for some privacy. It’s cool, but warm for a March evening in Wisconsin. March is basically an extension of winter here.

“Can we cut the shit?” I say. “The governor was too cowardly to even imply it. Eventually, our cities are going to grow together. When the boundaries are indiscernible, we will have to merge. That’s what this goalless get-together was about. To force us to interact with one another because the governor wants us to get along perfectly and do all the work so he won’t be forced to intervene or even have an opinion on what we do.”

Calder simply looks at me and nods. His expression, his posture, everything about him is politely neutral.

“So? I’m assuming you have something to say to me pertaining to that.”

“I do. I want to say that the growth needs to stop.”

I look at him without blinking. “Elaborate.”

“If our cities were to merge tomorrow, or even within the next couple of years – it would be chaos. It is no secret that many of my residents are racists. We already have issues due to their clashes with monster supporters. That crime will only intensify should our cities combine. Neither of us wants that.”

“And your solution in continued segregation. For how long, exactly?”

“As long as it takes to ensure the transition is as easy as possible. My best guess would be decades. People are not used to the idea of having magical neighbors. It would be unsafe to force the two races together at this time.”

“Unsafe? And you’re forgetting the humans who have willingly moved to Newer Home. They sought out their community.”

“I apologize; I didn’t clarify. I meant it would be unsafe for the monsters. There is quite a bit of anti-monster sentiment in my city. The things they do to monster supporters could kill a monster.”

A pause. “Make no mistake, crimes have been committed against racists by the supporters, too. I simply would not expect the monsters to thrive in such an environment.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek for a moment. “Why did you come to me?”
“I’m sorry?”

I look at him, gaze narrowed. “Why did you come to me about this? Why not the king or queen?”

He blinks, then lets out a small, self-satisfied smile that is half-smirk. I dislike it. “I would have thought that would be obvious.”

“It’s not.”

“You are perceived as the true power behind this movement, Doctor Reilly. It is presumed that every important decision requires your approval. The king and queen both look to you for advice, though I would expect them to because of your humanity alone. You have made no secret of treating the ambassador and prince. You are even friendly with their celebrity, since you have appeared on his show whenever it was convenient for you. To the outside eye, everything seems to be under your firm control.”

I immediately open my mouth to retort, but I stop myself. Think. Start again. “It’s impossible for any one person to be in complete control of something this big. But you’re right.”

I surprised him. He looks as though he wasn’t expecting me to admit to that.

“Everyone respects my advice and they almost always follow it. I am frequently asked to look over things before they happen. I’m not always the ultimate authority, but I do have much more power than I should.” I draw myself up to my full height, which is a useless gesture, considering the ten-inch height difference between us. “It’s probably more power than anyone should have. But I’m the best person for it. I love these people. I can’t fathom living anywhere else anymore. I’m just trying to do the best I can.

“I think you’re trying to do your best, too. But you’re asking us to wait. You’re asking us to wait for equality and integration.”

“It would be for the best in the long run,” he replies. “It’s not perfect, but it will never be perfect. I believe it is optimal.”

I glance towards the sunset, then towards the blue-violet sky and the smattering of stars beginning to show over Mount Ebott in the east. “Have you heard of soul colors and their corresponding traits, Councilor?”

Calder frowns, just barely. “I have.”

“Mine is light blue. My brightness is on the higher end of average, which means I’m in touch with my trait. I let it help me and I use it in my interactions with others in healthy ways.”

“Your point?”

“Light blue is patience. You are asking a patient person to wait.” I do not need to think too hard about this. I have always known this answer. “And my answer is no. These people waited under the mountain for centuries, and that is long enough. Asriel died for this.” I look him in the eye. “I know you have a city to settle down. My advice is to hurry up, because we are not waiting. We shouldn’t have to wait for the convenience of morally bankrupt racists to obtain equality. It should be obvious in this case what the right decision is, and it’s cliché, but the right decision often isn’t the easy one. We’ll take the right way. Every damn time.”
Hope: an optimistic attitude of mind based in an expectation of positive outcomes related to events and circumstances in one’s life or the world at large.

Chapter Notes

I think I broke my record for greatest number of puns in a chapter. Also I did not sit here and laugh at my own jokes what are you talking about.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We talk about it as soon as we all get home. “You did the right thing,” Asgore assures me immediately. “You probably said it better than any of us could have said it, too.”

“Oh, I know,” I reply. “I just… sorry if this is insensitive of me, but it felt like, just a little, I was starting a war.”

“We have been fighting,” Toriel says quietly. “We will have to keep fighting. I do worry that when the councilor said integration wouldn’t be safe for monsters… that sounds like a veiled threat.”

“I couldn’t get a good read on him,” I say, which is unusual. I’m very good at reading people. “I don’t think he’s your typical overt racist. I’m not even sure he’s racist at all. We can hardly fault him for wanting to put his city first, since that’s exactly what we’re doing.”

Neither Asgore nor Toriel seemed particularly disturbed when I told them Calder believes I have some serious sway over them. It’s true and they both know it and they don’t care because we care about one another and they trust me. They should. Trust is an essential part of love.

I have so much more power than I realized. Asriel and Frisk will likely be the monsters’ political future. I might be the first human adult Frisk ever trusted and there is no denying the attachment Asriel has to me. I’ve been the go-to for any human questions Frisk couldn’t answer. That’s not even taking into account the plans I have for Mettaton when he starts going on tour this summer, which I have yet to mention to him.

I’m not going to stop. I need to help in any way I can.

My doctors are very disappointed in me. They wanted a scope months ago. I finally find the time during the first week of April to go to Madison and get it done.

Sans, Toriel, and Shannon are coming with me. Sans because he has to, Toriel because I think she’s still worried about Sans and his single HP, and Shannon because she has done this before. Asriel wants to come, too – he’s very worried until I explain that having a medical procedure does not mean anything is currently wrong with me, it just means they need to check every so often because my health is generally poor. And then I explain to him that I will be having a camera shoved up my ass and air pumped into my colon and the face he makes is pretty funny.
Colonoscopies aren’t common anymore. Imaging is first-choice and can be used to make firm diagnoses. Nobody – patient or doctor – wants to do a scope unless it’s absolutely necessary. Actually, this might be my last one, since Asriel somehow dissolved all the metal in my body. It interfered with imaging before. That shouldn’t be an issue now.

At least the prep isn’t hell because of my diet of monster food. Not pooping ROCKS.

I get anesthesia instead of conscious sedation because sedation doesn’t work on me (guess how many times it took them to figure that out). As usual, I come out of it raring to go and craving an entire carton of ice cream.

“Why do I feel like I need to poop?” I complain. Everything feels weird. That’s expected, but still. “I don’t have anything in me to poop!”

“She’s always like this,” Shannon tells Toriel and Sans. “Give it fifteen minutes or so.”

I throw the blankets off me. “Where’s the doctor? I wanna go home. I want one of those fake burgers from Grillby’s. I want three!”

“You’re a lot more fun like this,” Sans comments. “Remind me to come to all of your colonoscopies.”

I point a finger in his face. “Shut up.” I stand before any of them can stop me, taking a few steps towards the curtain separating my recovery area from whatever’s behind it. “Where’s the doctor? I have to talk to the doctor before I can go—”

Sans moves more quickly than I’m used to and is suddenly in front of me. He puts his hands on my shoulders and carefully pushes me back to the bed. He makes me sit on it.

Toriel has her hands over her mouth and looks as though she’s about to choke on her restrained laughter. Shannon is smirking wide, not bothering to hide it.

“What?” I ask, annoyed. “You assholes gonna tell me what’s so funny?”

“I was gonna say something like that,” Sans says, still standing in front of me. “Why do you gotta steal my jokes?”

“What the hell are you talking about.”

“No need to get so cheeky. I just asked you a question.”

Toriel slaps a hand over a mouth to muffle her snicker, but fails. My sister cackles and high-fives Sans, who looks proud of himself. There was a motif in there.

Right. I just had a camera shoved up my butt. No underwear. Hospital gowns open in the back. I just mooned everyone when I tried to leave.

Toriel grins. “I don’t think she’s going to answer, Sans. She does not appreciate being the butt of your jokes.”

“Heh,” Sans replies. “At least my jokes crack you up, Tori.”

Toriel and Shannon howl. I want to say something witty but my drugged-up brain keeps firing blanks. I have this childish urge to stick something in Sans’s eyesocket.

“Really,” I say acidly. “The night after we meet you use poop jokes and now we’re in a relationship
and you’ve moved on to ass jokes. Glad to know we’ve come so far.”

“Aw.” Sans leans forward and hugs me. “You’re the best. When it comes to my hilarious jokes, you always grin and bare it, Isla.”

I roll my eyes as Toriel and Shannon keep laughing at my expense. He’s a dork, but he’s my dork.

Life finally begins to normalize again in April. The shooting is there, it happened, but it’s not at the forefront of everyone’s minds anymore. The media has moved on from talking about Sans and me, thanks in no small part to how unromantic we are.

My sister has started doing secretarial-type things at the Embassy. It’s not what she wants to do, but it’s a good place to start. She loves being at the Embassy and she says her coworkers are great and her apartment’s rent is cheap, even if she has to pay a little extra for a working toilet. She gets together with Papyrus and Undyne to jog or lift weights or do other exercise things sometimes and everyone knows when it happens because half the city can hear them shouting.

I know something is up when Sans tells me he’s coming to work with me on a Monday morning. Asgore meets us and we go to one of the meeting rooms.

It’s full of humans. Young adults, most of them in their twenties. Close to two-dozen of them.

Asgore leaves, but Sans stays. The only one I recognize is Riley Sanders. “I didn’t know you were flying in,” I say, because he asked for my number and has been periodically texting me and I’d think he would have let me know that. “What’s this?”

Everyone is looking at me. There are a lot of smiles and it’s sad I’m not used to seeing humans smiling at me.

Riley smiles, but it’s tense. “This is everyone who could and wanted to come. All of us were there.”

I don’t follow. Sans puts a hand on my back. It’s unlike him to initiate physical contact in front of other people. “Camp Wendell, Isla,” he says gently. “Some of them contacted the Embassy. Some contacted Riley.”

Oh. Right. Everyone… is the right age.

A dark-haired woman an inch shorter than me steps forward and hugs me. She is one of the few who is over thirty. She was another counselor. “Carmen?” I ask, dazed.

She pulls back, smiling brightly, the slightest hint of sadness in her expression. “Hello, Isla.”

It’s absolutely my fault, but I can’t stop it and then I’m sobbing, shaking with the force of it. Sans takes more of my weight, pulling an arm over his shoulders. He’s the perfect height for this.

It’s like a damn chain reaction because Carmen starts crying, and she isn’t the only one, either, and then at least half of us are sobbing our eyes out and needing to sit down.

And then I start laughing, too, and then I’m laugh-crying and that spreads in the exact same manner and even those who had to sit down are able to get up, leaning on one another. My legs
hold more of my weight, even though Sans keeps an arm around my middle. Carmen hugs me again.

After we calm down, we eat the food lying around. Apparently Riley planned a potluck. Sans produces some of Papyrus’s spaghetti out of nowhere to add to it. It was made in mind with my dietary restrictions, so I know it will be good.

There is a lot of catching up to do. Camp Wendell was fifteen years ago. Some of these people were barely five years old at the time. We compare jobs and families and identities. Some of us compare scars. Riley talks about the kids who died that day and others join him, after a moment. Nobody calls me a hero. Nobody says we were lucky or in the wrong place at the wrong time.

More tears are shed, but everyone also laughs at how silly we were when we were kids. We talk and eat and cry and laugh for hours. Before it ends, Riley takes down everyone’s contact information so we can do something like this again.

Nobody mentions what I had to do, but this is the first time I have ever felt good about it. In all likelihood, I saved some of these lives, and seeing what they have become, even though we’ve all faced a similar struggle, lifts something from my shoulders I didn’t even know was there.

As we are leaving, I can’t stop smiling. Sans can’t either, which is usually a moot point, but right now it matters because it’s real.

It happens the first week of May. It’s nothing special. We’re downstairs after putting Papyrus to bed, about to start a movie, and Sans asks, “Wanna go upstairs and bang?” and I answer, “Sure, whatever,” without really having to think about it.

He climbs right into bed and lies down. I know he’s lazy, but… “I can tell you right now I am not doing all the work. My body’s a piece of crap, you know that. I’ll need to rest.”

“I know. You multiorggasmic?”

I shrug and walk over to the bed. “Dunno. When I touch myself I’m always too tired to keep going past one.”

He stands. “Can I say it?”

I scowl. “No. You can say it right before it happens, because until then, I’m not convinced you aren’t going to laze out on me. And if you have sex with me just so you can say—”

“Naw, don’t ruin it.” A pause. “I’m not sleeping with you just to make a pun. I make puns all the time. I’m a punny guy.”

I drop my pajama pants and step out of them. “You are so lucky I’m a patient soul.”

He grins. “Heh. I know.”

Shirt comes off next. I’m standing here in my panties and he hasn’t moved. “I hope you’re never expecting lace,” I tell him. “It irritates my skin.”

“Is that some kind of kink?”
“Lots of humans think lace is sexy.”

“Meh.” That’s about how I feel about sex in general.

Still hasn’t moved. He’s looking at me. Not in any particular way. Just looking, because even though we’ve been together for seven months this is still new for us. We aren’t handsy enough to know one another’s bodies well and we haven’t talked in detail about how this is going to happen. He doesn’t stare at my bullet scars, though.


He takes the hint and shrugs off his hoodie. Shirt next, then shorts.

I’ve never seen him with the shorts off. His femurs are thick, thicker than my arms. His pelvis is smoother than I know humans’ are, and the gaps and concave dips are smaller.


He waves a hand. “Nothin’ much. I can just tell you’re comparing me to whatever human anatomy diagram you’ve got stored in your head.”

I shrug. Can’t turn off the scientific curiosity. “It’s not that I don’t want to do this. I tend not to express lust, even when I’m feeling it, and I’ve kind of wanted to make comparisons since—”

Oh, shit. His grin widens. “Since when?” he asks teasingly. “And I’m not offended. I expected this from you.”

Well. “Literally within the first two minutes of meeting you. My brain said, ‘huh, wonder how his structure differs from a human skeleton. His clothes are in the way.’”

Sans laughs, not bothering to hide it. When he straightens up, he gestures, and I go to him.

“So. How is this going to work? You’re lacking genitalia, which, while unnecessary, is what I’m familiar with. Do you have erogenous zones?”

“I have a dick,” Sans says casually.

I very pointedly glance down through the small space between our bodies. “I don’t see it,” I tell him, straight-faced.

“Maybe you better look a little harder.”

I pull back a little, glaring suspiciously at him. He makes a gesture with his hand, shit-eating grin plastered on his face.

Fine. I think he’s messing with me, but fine. I drop down to my knees, face about a foot from his pelvis. “Is it located is the same place it is on a human male?”

He snort-laughs for at least ten seconds. “Thought you were patient?”

“I am, but I hope you realize this is hard on my knees and I will need to move soon.”
“Sure, sure. Just gimme a moment. And look harder.”

I shift, trying to get comfortable on the stupid joints in my legs. It puts me closer to him, and then I glance up when I see a flare of blue from his left eyesocket, then—

Then I’m reeling backward because *something* just poked me in the eye and Sans is practically howling with laughter and he did *not* just do that—

Um. Yep. That’s... phallic-shaped, anyway. It’s also light blue and glowing a bit and a little translucent.

It’s not the point here, though. I glare up at him. “If that was on purpose—”

But he’s laughing too hard for it to have been on purpose. “Jeez, *Eye-la,*” he cackles. “When I told you to *look* harder, I didn’t mean look *this* hard.” He grasps himself for emphasis.

My eye is fine. It watered a little, but it’s fine. “Sans, quit being such a d—”

I cut myself off too late. “You were gonna say *dick!*” he crows. “Ha, I’ve got you doing it, too!”

I roll my eyes. I’ll give him this round.

When I take another look, though, I reconsider.

“Sans?” I say. “Can you alter its size?”

The grin blows out into a smirk. “Ya want it bigger?” he suggests, not without a lewd undertone.

I scowl. “I haven’t done this in *five years.* I want it smaller. We can work our way up, but I don’t want to limp to Toriel when we’re done and ask her to heal me. Or, better yet, ask Asriel if he wants to practice his healing magic. Do you?”

He winces. “Uh, no thanks. Yeah, I can make it smaller. I could go bigger, too. Different shapes, whatever.”

I look at him curiously and he keeps talking. “Not all monsters just have the parts for this. We do reproduce sexually – which is more proof we were related to non-magical creatures a long time ago – but it’s easier for some kinds of monsters to change their bodies on the spot. Like skeletons and slimes – our bodies require more magic to stay together, so we can use that magic to adapt to a partner.”

“Oh.” That... makes sense. As much as anything about magic has made sense to me so far. “So you could make a vagina?”

“Yeah. Don’t have as much practice with it, though. Could make other things, too, but I’m not creative.”

“You have more experience with this because of your gender identity?”

“No. Dicks are just easier to make.”

Oh, so it’s about him being lazy. “We can talk later,” I say. “Figure out what else we can try. If it... you know. Doesn’t take too much effort.”

He shrugs indifferently. “Safe vanilla stuff for now?”
As he talks, his cock shrinks. He loses maybe half an inch off length, which wasn’t the issue. The issue was girth, and now it looks far more manageable. Manageable for me, anyway. I’d rather err on the side of caution. I have daily pain as is and I’d rather not add to it.

I reach out and touch it. It’s... not vibrating, not humming. There’s no physical movement, but I can tell this isn’t an inanimate toy, even though it looks like one. If I closed my eyes, I’d be able to tell it’s attached to somebody.

His face relaxes when I wrap my hand around him and slowly stroke down his length. One more question first. “Do you ejaculate?”

His mouth twitches into a smirk. “Why don’t you cum and see?”

I shoot him an irritated look. It only goads him on. “I know. My puns suck, don’t they? You know who else should suck?”

I chuckle and shake my head. “That is the worst proposition for a blowjob I have ever heard.” Not that I’ve heard many.

“Sorry. It was bad. Kinda hard to swallow.”

That one was better, and I snort at it. “Sans, holy shit.”

“Got you choking in laughter now.”

“Sans.”

“I’m not tryin’ to blow you off, I just want you to blow me—”

“Sans! Answer the damn question and I will.”

He looks down at me. “That was the plan. Unless you don’t want me to.”

I pause, considering. “You’ll give me warning right before?”

He shrugs. “Maybe. If I remember. It’s not gonna hurt ya.”

“I don’t expect it to, but if it’s going to make my tongue glow for days, I need to know that now.”

He lets out a bark of laughter. “Aw man, that would be—”

And he sucks air in between his teeth when I take the head of his dick in my mouth. Doesn’t taste like much. I kinda expected a fruity, artificial blue-raspberry flavor. I have no idea why. Still, human penis doesn’t taste the greatest, so tasting like nothing is still objectively better.

He rests a hand on my head. “I won’t pull your hair,” he mumbles, eyesockets drifting closed as I go down on him.

Just before my lips touch the bony surface of his pelvis, I pull back, releasing him from my mouth. “Another question,” I say, grinning at the way his eyesockets snap open. Payback for all the puns. “Are you able to reciprocate? I mean—”

I shut up when he opens his mouth and a glowing blue tongue slides out between his teeth. It’s much larger than a human tongue, wide and long, holy shit.

My jaw drops. Sans, the filthy opportunist, attempts to casually reinsert his cock into my mouth,
but I’m already shooting to my feet. His tongue retracts into his mouth but I chase it with mine when I press my lips to his slightly-parted teeth. He quickly gets the hint and penetrates my mouth with his tongue, hands settling on my hips. I grip his ribs for leverage.

This should be gross. Logically, having a mouthful of tongue should be gross, and I’m sure I’ll think about it later and know that it is, but right now it’s not because hey, I’m actually getting aroused because of it and this happens like three times a year so it’s totally GREAT if I’ve found a predictable trigger for it.

I’m still human, though, and I need to breathe, so I cut it off, gasping a little. One of my hands comes up to wipe away the thin trail of saliva on my chin.

Sans looks aroused after that, too. His pupils – left one blue, right one white – are blown out, larger than I have ever seen them. His fingers are digging into my hips and even though he doesn’t really breathe, not in the same way, at least, his chest is heaving like mine.

Oh, and his cock is twitching against my groin. Forgot about that when I saw his tongue.

I grab him by the ribs to spin us around and shove him back onto the bed. I climb on after him. He immediately arranges himself comfortably, pulling his feet up and putting his hands behind his head.

“So...” he starts to say, then stops abruptly when I take my underwear off.

I move up towards his head. “Think you can put that tongue to work?”

“Y-yeah.” I smirk widely when I hear the stutter. He flushes blue and clears his nonexistent throat. “You wanna sit on my face? That means I get to lay down, so, yeah.”

I decide to withhold my teasing for his brief flustered stammering (for now) and move so I can straddle his head and lean down over his body. He’s touching me almost immediately, more curiously than anything else. I hover, holding my ass in the air so he can look before taking the plunge, because I doubt (I don’t know, but I doubt) he’s ever seen female human genitalia in this manner before and, well, he should get familiar with it.

He’s the one who decides it’s time to go for it. He puts a hand on my butt to push me down and I settle, pulling my hair over one shoulder so I can suck him off without getting hair in my mouth. He doesn’t even lick or really touch me in any way before his tongue’s inside me and holy shit. My legs are quivering already and I’m jealous he’s on the bottom because I want to lie down, too. It’s been over a year since I’ve touched myself, so I’m coasting towards orgasm way too fast.

Me moaning around his dick is making him let out some interesting noises, though. Noted. For next time. Because there’s going to be a next time, because this is fun.

I unbend my knees, lifting myself off his face, simultaneously pulling back so he pops out of my mouth.

“You wanna finish like this?” he asks before I can say anything. “If I do, I’m not gonna be up for anything else.”

“Me too,” I admit. “I’d like to switch it up. What do you think? I haven’t used those muscles in over a year.” Because all I really know is that I’m wet and things feel awfully nice down there, I don’t know how open I am and he’s right there, so he should be able to tell.
He slips an indiscernible number of fingers into me without warning. My legs almost collapse. “Think you’ll be fine,” he says. “I’m up for it if you are.”

Consent obtained, I crawl forward, pulling myself off his fingers so I can reorient myself. I turn around. Nearly his whole skull is flushed blue and I can still see the flash of his tongue inside his mouth. I move slowly, making sure my legs will hold me, and straddle his pelvis on my knees. I grasp him, guiding him to enter me.

He smirks. “You’re about to get boned.”

I give him an audible eye-roll that his brother would approve of. I sink down onto him, slowly at first, but more quickly near the end when I realize he was right, I’m fine.

He groans loudly, hands going to my hips. I raise an eyebrow at him. “Sh-shut up,” he mumbles when he sees me looking at him. “Feels good.”

“Keep being that loud if you want Papyrus to know it feels good,” I say. “And, for the record, I sometimes have pain when I orgasm. If it happens, it’s not your fault. It’s because of all the scar tissue.”

I rise up, nearly removing him from me, then come back down again. I lean over him, putting my hands above his shoulders, on either side of his head.

Ten seconds and I know my knees are not going to last. I sit on him, letting him take my weight. I try to work my muscles around him, but I never use those muscles so of course I’m bad at it.

“What’s up?” he asks.

“Stupid knees,” I say. “They’re going to hurt if I keep this up. You want to get on top?”

“I can. I could also move you in this position with my magic.”

What, would he lift me up and do the thrusting? Or would he move me up and down? Either way, that’s him doing most of the work. “I need more control than that,” I reply. “You get on top, I’ll adjust my legs to something that doesn’t hurt.”

“Okay.” Sans leans up and grabs me in a hug. He pulls both my legs around him, and it does hurt when he straightens my knees. He rolls, depositing me on my back, femurs under my thighs, still inside me. “Better?”

I shift. So much better. “Yeah. Don’t stop.”

He doesn’t, and if I was surprised that he was able to switch positions without help from me, I am more surprised with his pacing. There’s nothing lazy about the speed and depth with which he’s thrusting into me, or the way he’s grunting, or how his fingers dig into my thighs.

I focus on the heat coiling inside me, his touch, his voice. I don’t make a lot of noise – it’s mostly gasps and sharp inhales from me. His expression – wow. Never seen him make that face before.

“Hey,” I get out over the sound of his low groaning and the bed creaking gently. “I’m – close.”

“Mmkay,” he grunts in reply, and increases his pace. Holy—

My hands automatically shoot up to grab his ribs. He leans over me, pressing his face in the junction of my shoulder and neck. I suck in air between my teeth as my orgasm hits me, clenching
my eyes shut, white stars bursting on the backs of my eyelids.

He bites my shoulder, hips moving with absolutely no rhythm, giving a couple weak thrusts as he finishes. He slumps, settling his weight on me, head resting under my chin. I shift after ten seconds, at which point he tugs himself out of me. More curious than anything else, I slip a hand between my legs to get a little of his ejaculate on my fingers. Whatever it’s composed of (magic, my brain helpfully supplies), it’s gelatinous and, of course, glowing blue.

I taste it. Also tastes like nothing. Maybe he can change that.

I only give him thirty seconds. I’m not willing to give him more because he’ll fall asleep on top of me and I need to clean up and get some clothes on before I go to bed. I rub his skull. “If you left a mark on me, I’m gonna chew on you like Greater Dog was going at that log at the park last week.”

He turns his head, rubbing a thumb over the place he bit me. I know he didn’t break skin, it didn’t hurt enough for that. “S’fine,” he mutters. “Just a little red. Won’t even bruise.”

At least I’ll be able to cover it with a T-shirt. Don’t need anyone seeing that. I push at him. “You gotta get off now.”

He smirks. “I just did.”

I wrinkle my nose. “I mean it. I cannot fall asleep with your... whatever your equivalent for semen is dripping on the sheets. And I don’t sleep naked.”

“I might.”

“Do what you want. Just move so I can use the bathroom.”

With an exaggerated grunt, he rolls off me. I get up to take care of business, cupping a hand over my crotch to prevent any leakage because I am not cleaning up a trail of glowing blue fluid from the floor. Sans won’t clean it up, either, which would mean that Papyrus would see it eventually and that is not a conversation in which I will be participating.

When I’m done, I get clean underwear and a big T-shirt. He’s already asleep, so I climb in next to him and pull the blankets over us.

Chapter End Notes

I expect exactly nobody to get off to this, but if anybody manages they... don't get anything else. Isn't an orgasm its own reward?
Love: a profound feeling of warm personal attachment or deep affection.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Undyne and Alphys are getting married in the gardens next to the Embassy. Asgore keeps sneaking out during working hours to get them ready. Toriel smiles and rolls her eyes and she and I both pick up some of his responsibilities so he has time to prepare them.

School got out the first week of June and the wedding is on the twenty-first. Undyne and Alphys are waiting until after Surface Day and Frisk’s thirteenth birthday to leave for their honeymoon. They are touring Europe. I’m on-edge about it because monsters have not done a lot of travelling, but Undyne pointed out that if someone attacks them it’s better if she’s there, and she’s right.

Frisk has been at the Embassy more often since they don’t have school. They will be appearing on the last episode of Mettaton’s show – it’s ending so he can take Napstablook and Shyren on tour to promote his second album. He already agreed to my plans, though now we have to find people who are both capable and trustworthy enough to carry them out.

Toriel has been splitting her time with the Embassy and directly assisting Undyne and Alphys with the wedding, which is the hardest job because both are nervous about how they will be received by humans at large, even though Undyne won’t admit it. I have already spoken with the official who will be supplying their marriage certificate. He was polite and informative and very helpful and terrified of me, so that’s covered.

There is no telling how those who are anti-monster will react. They tend to protest everything because they obviously have nothing better to do with their boring, miserable lives. Toriel’s presence is generally calming. It’s good for the brides-to-be.

Asriel is also frequently at the Embassy. He wants to know what Frisk and his parents do so he can be better informed and figure out if he wants to go into politics, since his parents seem to be expecting that of him. He comes to me because he’s used to me teaching him. It’s nice because the topics are a lot lighter than what I’m usually teaching him.

For weeks, we have been taking walks outside to look at the flowers. Flowers are still a problem because he occasionally has nightmares about being Flowey again. Some days he’s okay, but others we will look for his father in the gardens and he clings to me the whole time, anxious but wanting to push himself. A couple of times I lie and tell him my joints are starting to stiffen up so we can go in early.

Between the wedding, Surface Day, and Frisk’s birthday we’re all running around like lunatics trying to get things done and always feeling like we’ve forgotten something. Two days prior to the wedding, Toriel foists Asriel, Frisk, and Kalene onto me because she forgot about the scheduled playdate. I take them to the park while I mooch off the school’s internet and check on the delivery status of some of the wedding goods.

I don’t see what happens. I hear Kalene yelling, but it’s far away and doesn’t last long. By the time I pack up my laptop and stand to find the kids, they are already coming to me.

Asriel’s eyes are watering and his palms are flaking grey, glittering dust. Frisk has an arm over his shoulders and Kalene is stomping along in front of them, curly flyaways wild around her face.
My gaze lands on Frisk as I take Asriel’s hands, examining them. “What happened?”

There is a brief moment of silence. Then, “Three humans came up to us while we were playing. One of them pushed Asriel down.”

“I’m okay,” Asriel says. There is only the slightest trace of a waver in his tone. He gently pulls his hands out of my grasp so he can focus on healing them.

“Were they kids?” I ask, because if human adults wanted to bother a monster child I doubt they would just push him and call it a day. “Did you recognize them?”

“They were kids. My age,” Frisk replies. “They… weren’t from Newer Home.”

I stare at them. It only takes them a few seconds to start looking uncomfortable. “But did you recognize them?” I ask again.

Asriel shakes some of the dust off his hands. “Yeah,” he answers for Frisk. “It was Gavin Calder. I didn’t recognize the other two. He was mean. And then Lena—”

He cuts himself off abruptly, casting a sideways glance at his female friend. She holds up a fist. Her knuckles are bruised. “I punched him in the face!” she exclaims. She seems more pissed than Frisk or Asriel. “He called Frisk a traitor and he shoved Asriel and he called me stupid, so I punched him and that made him run away!”

“Lena!” Asriel grabs her raised hand. “You didn’t say you were hurt!”

He starts healing her. She scrunches her nose. “It’s just a little bruise. Stupid Gavin’s bruise is a lot worse. I got him in the eye!”

She’s clearly proud of herself. I look at Frisk. “You’re okay?”

They nod. I glance again at Asriel fussing over Kalene. It’s kind of adorable. I think he’s more like his father in personality, but that behavior is all Toriel. “Alright. Let’s go home.”

I call Calder. He asks after Asriel’s and Frisk’s well-beings and is silent for a few seconds when I tell him a nine-year-old girl is responsible for his thirteen-year-old son’s black eye. He assures me Gavin will not be allowed to go to Newer Home’s park without supervision from now on and calls me ‘Doctor’ the whole time.

I hang up after I’m done. I came to the Embassy to use my office phone instead of my cellphone. Calder does not need my cell number. I go back to the lobby only to see Undyne with the children. She’s grinning from fin-to-fin, bent down on the kids’ level. “Right in the face?” she asks.

“Right in the face!” Kalene declares. She makes a punching motion.

…An in-form punching motion. Somebody taught her how to do that. I’ll have to ask Ezra when I tell him about this.

Undyne straightens up and mimics her. “Yeah!!” she yells, startling the whole lobby. “ONCE MORE!!!”
Kalene is surprisingly quick to jump on board, but Undyne sees me coming before she can get too riled up. “Hey, Isla,” she says quickly. “Did you—”

“Lights and speaker parts are due tomorrow morning.”

“Cool. Great.” She grabs Kalene and noogies her. The girl just giggles and squirms. “Why have you never introduced me to this little punk!? She’s great.” She drops Kalene and crouches down to look the child in the eye. “You’re coming to my wedding, nerd!” she declares. “It’s the day after tomorrow!! And Surface Day, you’re coming to that too!!”

“Yes!” Kalene answers. Asriel and Frisk look a little confused as to why they are practically shouting in one another’s faces. “I’ll ask my dad!”

Undyne stands, grinning, and noogies her again. “Tell him to come too!!”

Asriel suddenly lights up and runs right past me. There is soil on Asgore’s hands and clothes, but Asriel pays no mind and hugs his dad. Asgore goes to pat him on the head, but refrains. “Careful, son,” he says. “Don’t get yourself dirty.”

In the five seconds I was turned around to see what Asriel was running at, Undyne grabbed Kalene and Frisk and now has one of them under each arm. She spins around suddenly, grinning. Kalene laugh-shrieks in joy. Frisk raises a hand to wave at Asgore and Asriel and they wave back.

“Is everything ready?” I ask Asgore.

“Oh, it has nothing to do with the gardens. I was….” he trails off. Inhales and starts again. “I wanted to put something together for the humans whose souls helped to break the barrier. A… memorial, of sorts. I wanted to run it by you first. You tend to know immediately if something is a good idea or not.”

I stop him. We are on the edge of the lobby, behind the massive tree, but we can still hear Undyne playing with the kids. “Will it help you find closure?” I ask. “Will it help you forgive yourself?”

He spreads his hands. “I don’t know. Even if it doesn’t, it would be nice. To do something for them.”

“Then you have my support. Let me know if I can do anything to help. My only stipulation is that a human can’t look at it and know it’s for the dead.”

There is loud laughter that sounds like Asriel. Undyne lets out a whoop. “Of course,” Asgore says. His eyes are bright. “I will bear that in mind. And thank you. It means a great deal to me.”
“It’ll work,” Isla replies. She’s in light blue. Something other than what she was wearing during the shooting, obviously, but he likes the color on her.

They are cutting it close when they enter the gardens and find their seats. Toriel raises an eyebrow at them.

“We were doing something worthwhile,” Isla tells Toriel. “Just wait until the—”

She sits and the whoopee cushion deflates with a long, sloppy fart, causing a sudden, total silence to fall over the guests. She whips it out from under her butt and smacks him upside the head with it. Another short *pththbb* escapes the pink air sac.

“You ass!” she hisses, but her eyes are dancing. Papyrus turns around to give him the evil eyesocket. Sans leans over Isla and Asriel to high-five Frisk as the quiet murmur of conversation starts up again.

“Legendary Fartmaster,” Frisk whispers, and Asriel claps his hands to his mouth to muffle the snorting laughter that escapes him.

He knows the bullet opener is coming, so it doesn’t surprise him when a spear collides with a bright ball of light overhead and sends sparks showering over the guests that die out in midair. It does surprise Isla. She jolts, hands flying to her ears, and he feels like shit because he should have told her about this.

He grabs one of her hands. On her other side, Asriel does the same, murmuring, probably explaining what Sans should have already explained hours ago.

The guests erupt into applause just in time for the music to start. Undyne and Alphys walk, arm-in-arm. Undyne is in her armor, helmet-less, but Alphys seems to have taken inspiration from human ceremonies with her choice of a white gown. The skirts are layered and Sans thinks he sees glitter on the hem and the rims of her glasses (Mettaton’s idea, no doubt). Much like Undyne’s, her smile is about to crack her face. It’s nice to see her looking happy. There were a lot of timelines in which Alphys… he doesn’t remember.

It’s another moment before he places the music. That’s the theme to Mew Mew Kissie Cutie. Come on, Alph.

Sans grips Isla’s hand. He still occasionally has the *kill this before it gets ripped away* thought but he wants to have a future so damn badly he hates himself for letting something like hope overcome rational thinking. It’s better to expect the worst, right, and preemptively make himself unhappy because then at least it’s his choice, and it can’t be taken away from him.

But that’s no way to live. He glances past Isla to look at Asriel. He’s holding Frisk’s hand. He looks happy.

If the kid can do it, so can Sans, damnit. There was Frisk and Flowey and… and… two others? One other. Two others. He doesn’t know. He isn’t sure.

Mettaton abruptly bursts up from behind the podium in an explosion of confetti. “HELLOOOOO, BEAUTIES AND GENTLEBEAUTIES!!! IT’S TIME TO CELEBRATE THE VERY FIRST SURFACE MONSTER WEDDING!!! I’M YOUR HOST, METTATON!!!”

He somehow drapes a long leg over the podium and the guests applaud and whistle. From across
the aisle, Sans spots Catty just about swooning onto Bratty’s shoulder.

As soon as the applause dies out, Mettaton starts speaking again. “This,” he says dramatically. “This is more than just a wedding. This is more than just an important step forward for monsters. This is a celebration of TRUE. LOVE.”

He withdraws his leg and bashes his fists on the podium on the last word. He looks between Undyne and Alphys. “I am – so proud of you both,” he says, almost choked up and clearly going off-script. “If there is any amongst us who deserve to be the first to have their love recognized on the surface, it is you.”

Alphys beams at him, tearing up a bit. Undyne goes violet and blinks rapidly, swallowing. Wait, her eyepatch is white and glittery too. Sans wonders if she knows that.

Mettaton kicks a leg into the air. “WE MUST FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF ALPHYS AND UNDYNE AND BE GOOD, LOVING PEOPLE!!!” he yells. “YOUR MAJESTY!! PAPYRUS, DARLING!!”

Sans is a little irked at the ‘darling’ but he still feels a swell of pride watching his brother take part in the display. Asgore and Papyrus stand. Asgore shoots a fireball into the air. Like a firework, it splits into many smaller fireballs that careen in different directions. Bones shoot up from the torches lining the aisle and guests’ seats, all just the correct height for the torch to catch the fireball that comes its way.

When the last torch is lit and deposited in place, Papyrus beams and hugs one of Asgore’s giant arms. Smiling gently, the king pats him on the head and they sit back down.

“And now for the vows,” Mettaton says. “Alphys, darling. You may begin.”

Vows are common to monster and human weddings, though they bear more significance in monster weddings. Monsters are most sensitive to the souls and therefore the general well-beings of those they love. It isn’t foolproof. Sans has always been able to keep some aspects of his soul hidden from his brother and friends, but hiding it takes intent. Usually marrying monster couples are able to tell that their spouse-to-be is being completely honest during their vows. They can tell their love is real and shared from the very depths of their souls.

“U-U-Undyne, I—I—” Alphys blurs. She flushes and stops, then starts again, calmer but no less earnest. “Before I met you, Undyne, I… wasn’t a very honest person. I didn’t think I was good for anything. When you tried to get to know me, I put up a front, because I was convinced you wouldn’t like the real me.” A smile quirks across her face. “I’m a scientist. Generally I don’t like being wrong about things. I’m glad I was wrong about that.”

Murmured laughter rises from the guests. Sans nods. Atta girl, Alph.

“I’m not perfect,” Alphys continues, looking at Undyne with nothing short of pure love and adoration. “Yet you love me in spite of my flaws. You support me through my failures. You’re so inspiring you make me want to better myself, to be proud of myself. You make me believe I can better myself, even though I’ve had trouble believing that in the past. I’m ready for a lifetime of becoming better alongside you.”

Undyne and Mettaton are both crying openly. Papyrus begins patting Asgore’s arm and Asriel leans against Frisk’s shoulder. Both king and prince have sprung leaks.

Frisk sees Sans looking their way, grins, and mouths, “I totally hooked them up,” with a justifiably
proud expression.

He winks at them and turns his attention back up front. Undyne gulps and says, “I thought I had everything I wanted in life before I met you, Alphys. I worked my butt off to become Captain of the Royal Guard, and it’s a wonder it’s still attached to me, because Asgore kicked it every day for years on end before my appointment.”

More laughter. Sans appreciates the humor.

“When I met you I couldn’t believe how passionate you were about all your nerdy hobbies!” Undyne’s volume is climbing. “It was AWESOME! It’s STILL awesome!! You say I’m inspiring, but you pour your whole soul into everything you do and that’s inspiring to me!! And you know what!? In wanting to match your passion, I became passionate about YOU!!!”

Alphys is bright red. Undyne gulps air and calms down a bit. “And I know we can overcome ANYTHING, so long as we face it head-on, together. I wanna be by your side, forever, so we can do just that.”

He can hear people crying elsewhere in the audience. It isn’t just the prince and king. Papyrus has opted for excited instead and is almost bouncing in his seat.

Mettaton wipes away a tear (how the hell did Alphys give him the ability to cry) with a dramatic flick of his fingers. “Thank you for those beautiful vows. And now…”

Apparently Asriel told Isla about this part, because she chants, “Smooch the bride! Smooch the bride!” along with all the monster guests. Frisk practically screams it.

Undyne lifts Alphys off her feet, Alphys grabs Undyne around the neck, and then they’re totally making out in front of everyone while the guests stomp and cheer and whistle.

“I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU WIFE AND WIFE,” Mettaton yells over the din. More confetti explodes over the smooching couple.

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Monsters don’t call it a reception. They call it an afterparty. I like their word better.

Alphys has spent most of this week working with Napstablook and Mettaton to rig up all the tech required for entertainment. A slightly elevated floor has been constructed for the purpose of a flat surface and speakers have been positioned around the area so the sound is perfect no matter where you are on the floor. It’s covered by a pavilion. A square in the center part is sectioned off via color: the tiles are white, not brown.

Tables are scattered around it. I wasn’t sure we’d be able to cram everything into this little space in the gardens, but we did it and it doesn’t even feel that crowded. The wedding ceremony was easier, even though there were more people at the ceremony than there are now. Alphys and Undyne are well-loved, it was a huge turnout.

What’s important are the screens mounted on the corners of the pavilion. Alphys and Undyne are reluctant to let me get the news onscreen, but they do it anyway.

And there is coverage of the protestors who gathered in the human city when they heard a pair of
monsters was getting married. Somehow, all their signs ended up with pro-monster messages written on them. One says, geeetttttt dunked on!!

The protestors are pissed off. Undyne laughs the loudest, but it’s an absolute uproar for a solid twenty seconds. Sans and I high-five.

We stuff our faces. Monsters and humans both have an appreciation for good food.

It’s lighthearted. Some people are practically playing musical chairs as they move from table to table. My sister piles her plate high and proceeds to eat like a pig. “You know, the one thing I never learned how to do is cook,” she tells me. “Do you know how to cook?”

I shrug. “Yeah, but I don’t anymore. Can’t use magic, so I can’t make monster food that isn’t pre-made.”

Sans returns with two shot glasses. He hands me one and when he sits we link arms and drink.

“I do most of the cooking in the house,” Papyrus informs Shannon. “I’m sure you know why!! You have tasted my delicious post-training lasagna!!”

When he thinks I’m not looking, Asriel takes my empty shot glass and sniffs it. I guess he’s too young to associate shot glasses with alcohol, but the way he wrinkles his nose indicates he knows what it was now.

“What about you, Sans?” Shannon asks. “You do any cooking?”


I whip around to stare at him, only to be met with the shittiest shit-eating smirk ever. Shannon absolutely howls, choking on whatever’s in her mouth and causing the guests sitting at the nearest tables to glance over.

I slap his shoulder. “I can’t believe you!”

“You were thinkin’ it too.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t gonna say it in front of Asriel!”

“But I don’t get it,” Asriel says, snout scrunched up. “That was a joke, right? What’s it mean?”

Papyrus looks distinctly uncomfortable. He rolls his eyesockets. Somehow. “I’m quite alright with that, Brother. After all, Isla is not the loud one. You, on the other hand, apparently require a busy mouth to be quiet.”

Sans goes bright blue. Shannon wheezes and bashes on the table and repeats, “I can’t — I can’t—” and I’m cackling, too.

“Oh my god.” Sans reaches for a hood that isn’t there to hide in. “Paps. I am so sorry.”

Papyrus shrugs, also blushing but maybe looking a little smug for one-upping his brother like that. “I think you should get me some noise-canceling headphones, Brother.”

“I will,” Sans promises. “I’ll get’cha the best pair I can find.”

Asriel tugs on my arm. “Isla, what are you talking about?”
He’s whining, but he probably feels left out. Eye contact will be awkward, so when I turn to him, I focus on his left ear. “It’s about sex, Asriel. Evidently the walls and doors aren’t quite as soundproof as we’d hoped.”

“Oh,” he mumbles, and pulls his plate closer to him so he can stuff his face and pretend he can’t hear anything around him. It’s a good thing Toriel is circulating amongst the guests with Frisk and Asgore is with Undyne and Alphys. Asgore tends to defer to my judgment over everything, but I think even he would disapprove of dirty jokes occurring within earshot of his eleven-year-old son.

Mettaton’s voice suddenly carries over the area. The sun is beginning to set, so the torches will soon be necessary. “BEAUTIES AND GENTLEBEAUTIES!!! PLEASE TURN YOUR ATTENTION TO THE DANCE FLOOR FOR THE FIRST DANCE!!!”

I’m personally grateful for the topic change. Undyne and Alphys step onto the floor, but once they reach the square of white tiles, they separate and stand fifteen feet apart, facing one another.

Asriel taps my wrist to get my attention. “It’s not really a dance. More of a sparring match,” he says. “First one to land a hit on the other wins. It’s never dangerous, obviously, because they’re always in love with each other and they don’t wanna hurt each other.”

“It is a way for the couple to bare their souls to one another and their guests without it being weird,” Papyrus adds. “It is one of the most important events at a monster wedding.”

Which makes me wonder how that would be possible with Sans, since I’m human. I couldn’t just try to punch him, right? That would be boring.

Suddenly, Alphys has a remote in her hand and Undyne’s magic materializes in spear form. Some of the tiles around and between them light up, and white balls of light float up.

Undyne sends the spears at the lights, and when they collide glittering sparks are sent over the floor, floating and moving as if in a breeze before dissipating. The guests clap.

It happens again, with different tiles lighting up. This time, the lights fly at Undyne and she takes a spear and deflects them, creating more sparks.

They are both moving, both dodging and throwing attacks at one another. I’m used to seeing Undyne grinning and enjoying herself while sparring, but Alphys has a nearly-feral smirk on her face I’m glad to see. Spears and white lights are flying everywhere, throwing sparks into the air when they collide.

We stand up and walk over to get a closer look. I catch a glimpse of Kalene over at Napstablook’s station. They appear to be explaining something to her. Nearby, Ezra is talking to Asgore.

My sister has vanished. I see her with Frisk and Toriel. She’s probably telling Toriel about Sans’s inappropriate pun. We’ll have to hide from her.

I glare at him. “You’re gonna dance with me at least once, right?”

He grins back at me. “Not much of a dancer.”

“Me neither. I’m only coordinated when I’m trying to punch somebody. But you’re still going to.”

He chuckles. “Alright. Can we wait ‘til the music gets fun, though?”

“What, do you have more butts to put whoopee cushions under?”
Another chuckle. He bumps me with his shoulder. “Great idea.”

I bump him back. The first dance ends when Undyne takes a ball of light straight to the stomach. She is knocked onto her ass with a loud “OOMPH!!”

She sits up, staring at Alphys in shock and delight.

Alphys looks surprised, too, but she thrusts both arms in the air. “VICTORY!!” she shouts. Around the edge of the arena, every single member of the Royal Guard is staring, dumbfounded, jaws on the floor.

After a beat, the guests applaud again, Undyne clapping the loudest after she gets to her feet. She darts forward and sweeps Alphys into her arms. A couple of people whistle when they kiss again.

Mettaton grabs the mic. “Now, everyone please make your way to the dancefloor!! Our DJ Napstablook is about to provide some tunes that will get you moving!!”

The music increases in volume and the dance floor is flooded with guests. I look at Sans. He shrugs at me and wanders off, so I offer a hand to Asriel, grinning. “Well, Your Highness?”

He returns the smile, takes my hand, and I let him lead me onto the floor. When we stop and he turns towards me, it hits me like a fucking brick to the face. I’ve got maybe an inch on him. He’s… getting wider. Is he bigger than me? I think he’s bigger than me.

He blinks at me. “Isla? Are you okay?”


“You’re crying.”

I grab him in a tight hug. Stupid brain. I don’t know who put these maternal affection-inducing neurotransmitters in my synapses. “You’ve just grown so much. You probably can’t even sit on my lap anymore.”

“Gosh. You’re probably right, but hugs will never be out of the question, even when I’m all grown-up.”

Another body presses against me from behind. Frisk leans over my shoulder to plant a smooch right on Asriel’s nose. He squeaks in shock.

Frisk actually is taller than me. Not by much, by they are. I’m sandwiched between two kids who are bigger than I am. “You both have to stop growing,” I grumble, which gets a giggle out of Frisk. I wouldn’t consider myself a primary caregiver, but both these kids are mine, in a way. They’re mine and they’re so big and it’s making me sad.

Still, it’s hard to be sad surrounded by such happiness. My mood picks up with the music. Frisk flies around the floor, exaggerating their silliness and making everyone laugh. Papyrus grabs Kalene and puts her on his shoulders. Everyone is careful of the skeleton’s long limbs. He moves with such enthusiasm he could knock someone out by twirling around too fast.

It’s not long before Mettaton is coaching the kids on a dance move that looks impossible to perform without his noodly arms. Frisk keeps deliberately screwing it up, but Kalene gets it instantly.

Hands on my hips. “Hey.”
I turn around, hooking my arms around his neck. “You done terrorizing people with practical jokes?”

“For now.” A pause. “I want to… start talking.”

“You’re going to have to elaborate.”

“You know. ‘Bout the resets and stuff. But I don’t want to feel like you’re my therapist.”

“I can just be your partner who’s good at listening and making you feel better.”

“There wasn’t innuendo in there, was there?”

“Not a chance.”

The music slows. The lights dim. We are looked at, but nobody is staring at us like we’re a couple of freaks. If anything, people are happy to see us together.

“I’m really proud of you,” I murmur. “It’s hard to make that decision if you’ve never had help before. I’m glad you trust me.”

“Also – we’re doin’ this as soon as it’s legal.”

“What, getting married?”

“Yep. You wanna do the white dress?”

“I look like a corpse in white.”

“That would be fitting, since you’d be marrying a skeleton.”

“Nope. Sweatpants and elopement?”

He chuckles. “Yeah. Wanna go get more booze?”

“Absolutely.”

We make our way off the floor. “Just remember my jokes get worse the drunker I get.”

“My standards get lower the drunker I get, so it works.”

We’re both cackling loud enough for people to glance nervously at us. I bet they’re wondering whether they’re going to sit on a whoopee cushion the next time they take a seat. It’s a legitimate concern. I am hoping Sans involves me in more of his shenanigans.

But what the hell. I can focus on real life later. I just want to get smashed with my skeleton partner right now.

You okay? Frisk asks.

I’m fine, Chara replies. Frisk can tell they are being honest. Keep having fun. You deserve it. A pause. But get another piece of cake before you go embarrass yourself again on the dance floor,
they command. A chocolate one.

Frisk sends a mental sigh at them, but does as bid. They don’t have much of a sweet tooth, but Chara does, and eating their favorite foods is one of the few things they can actually do for Chara.

Asriel approaches and sits with them. Frisk tries to wave him off. “You were having so much fun,” they say. “I’ll be done with this in five minutes.”

“I know,” Asriel replies. “I saw you taking a break and I thought I’d join you. I don’t want to be tired tomorrow for your birthday. We’re already doing Surface Day and that’s always tiring.”

At least Undyne and Alphys will be able to sleep on their flight, Chara muses.

Kalene runs over to them. “Frisk! Asriel!” She stops next to their table. “You have to come back and dance! I asked Blooky and they said the next song isn’t going to be so mushy.”

Frisk lets their eyes wander over to the dance floor. It’s nice to see people embracing and loving and not getting crap for it.

They do kind of want to gag a bit, though. That might be Chara.

It might be, they agree. This is frankly embarrassing.

Frisk can appreciate it. Isn’t it nice to see? they ask. They all feel safe enough to do this.

I guess, Chara grumbles. Still gross, though.

Asriel lets himself be tugged to his feet. He looks at Frisk, who shoves cake in their mouth.

“Frisk, will you come when you’re done?” Kalene asks.

They nod and give them a thumbs-up. Kalene drags Asriel back to the dance floor.

She’s not bad, Chara says after a moment. For a human, I mean. She’s naïve, even if she... gets some of it.

Her dad’s nice, Frisk replies.

Chara sends them a sense of acknowledgement. Neither of them has to say it. That it’s nice that some human parents aren’t terrible.

They look for everyone. Alphys and Undyne are still spinning around as one on the floor, eyes only for each other. Napstablook appears to be explaining their synthesizer to Papyrus with Mettaton’s help. Sans and Isla are sitting at one of the tables, talking and occasionally laughing uproariously. Asgore has directed Toriel’s attention to Asriel and she, wielding a camera, has proceeded to embarrass him by cooing and snapping pictures of him and Kalene.

“Mom!” he complains, blushing so harshly it’s visible under his fur. Kalene, in contrast, giggles, apparently enjoying the attention.

Frisk shoves the rest of the cake in their mouth. I’d better go rescue him, they say to Chara.

Just how are you going to do that? Chara asks dryly. By making sure you look like an even bigger fool out there?

Frisk grins and stands. Yep. You know me so well, Chara.
I would certainly hope so.

They have peace, but it’s unsteady. There are still battles to fight. Equality is still just a goal.

That can take a backseat for now. Frisk thinks this moment is indicative of what the future holds for them. They know they have to enjoy it, so they run back to their family and friends.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to say thank you to you all. Writing this was a lot of fun and you made it even more fun. Undertale punched me in the face with my own emotions and I'm so happy I can come here and scream about it and write about it and you scream back and I love it.

For funsies here is a list of the soul traits in order of their relevance to Isla:

Patience>Bravery>Perseverance>Determination>Justice>Integrity>Kindness

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